



## Key characteristics of age-friendly cities and communities: A review



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### ABSTRACT

The creation of age-friendly environments worldwide has been promoted by the World Health Organization as a strategy to address the challenges posed by the converging trends of urbanisation and population. This has resulted in an increased discussion of strategies and initiatives which ensure policies, services and products meet the needs of older persons. This article aims to examine the current evidence of approaches and interventions used to create age-friendly cities and communities identified in recent research and practice. This review identified clear characteristics that contribute towards an age-friendly city. Multi-stakeholder collaborations, government commitment, inclusion of older persons and policies that tackled both the physical and social environments were key factors that contributed towards approaches and interventions used to create age-friendly cities and communities. The characteristics of age-friendly initiatives identified provide a promising basis for the development of ageing policy and planning globally to make cities more supportive of older people.

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### Introduction

The world is currently experiencing two demographic transitions: population ageing and urbanisation. By 2050, the global population of people over the age of 60 years is expected to reach almost two billion (UNDESA, 2013). However, ageing populations are not just restricted to the developed world: it is estimated that in five decades, over 80% of the global older population will be living in developing countries compared with 60% in 2005 (UNDESA, 2009). At the same time, there has been a shift towards urbanisation: as of 2007, more than half of the world's population now live in cities (WHO & FUND, 2008). Current trends suggest that the number and proportion of urban dwellers will continue to rise over the coming decades, with growth occurring more rapidly in developing countries (Montgomery & Ezeh, 2005).

As issues involving ageing society in each country are unique, growing older requires a flexible and evolving environment to compensate for physical and social changes associated with ageing (Beard & Petitot, 2010). Therefore, it is important to consider the impact of the urban and rural environments on older people. This is especially relevant in the current economic climate, where service providers face a difficult challenge in trying to provide for the needs of older people in a time of austerity and budget reductions.

As they age, older people's requirements for more specialised and resource intensive services increase. In recent years, there have been a variety of strategies and policies that meet the specific needs of older people. The terms 'age-friendly' and 'active ageing' have been used to describe some of these initiatives. These terms arise from an ecological perspective of ageing that suggests a link between an individual and their physical and social environment. In this review, the term 'age-friendly' encompasses this perspective and is defined as ageing initiatives which are based on the idea that places should enable older persons to be able to participate in their community.

The focus on ageing populations in cities is because in recent years, the urban environment presents a complex setting in which to promote the wellbeing and contributions of older people (WHO, 2007a). As urban living becomes the predominant social context for most of the world's population, it has the potential to both directly and indirectly shape a variety of factors within populations (Galea & Vlahov, 2005). This article will focus on the urban environment and will summarise the current evidence of approaches and interventions used to make our cities more supportive of older persons.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First an overview of the literature review methodology is presented. Next, a summary of age-friendly models and frameworks will be outlined. Then, the key findings of the ageing literature are discussed with reference to specific ageing initiatives and interventions within the urban environment. Finally, the concluding critique provides recommendations for potential future research on older persons within the urban environment.

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## Methodology

The structured review focused on international literature and where possible, included ageing studies from low and middle income countries. Articles for inclusion were identified through a search of PubMed, Web of Knowledge and PAIS international (Fig. 1). Articles were searched from January 1st 2009 to September 31st 2014, including the following key words in the title or abstract field: 'age-friendly', 'older person', 'ageing in place', 'community' and 'city'. A search of the World Wide Web using the search engine Google was used to obtain grey literature such as policy papers, government reports and reports by other research institutions. The University of Leeds library was also utilised to search for literature. Relevant materials were also selected through examining references in review articles and reports.

The search identified 1464 articles. The abstracts and titles were reviewed by one reviewer according to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria that had been decided prior to conducting the article search: English language studies set within the general older population with a focus on community-based interventions or approaches within the city context that are associated with creating an age-friendly city or community. Articles were excluded where the study population did not include adults described as older persons, elderly or senior; studies based in rural areas; conference proceedings; and abstracts without full text articles. If it could not be determined from the abstract whether or not the article met all selection criteria, the article was accepted for further review. Ninety articles were reviewed in full. A total of 64 articles were finally identified. Identified age-friendly models and frameworks found are presented in Table 1.

## Results and discussion

The literature review identified different terminologies were used to describe and define the age-friendly environment. These include 'age-friendly city', 'age-friendly community', 'liveable city' and 'active ageing'. The difference in terminologies is not problematic but illustrates the range of policies and initiatives emphasised by policy makers, local community programmes and researchers. The difference in terminology used is also illustrated in the age-friendly models and frameworks that were identified. Some were designed to guide or 'frame' a topic of enquiry whilst others described a more conceptual process through which age-friendly research enquires could be made. For example, Greenfield, Scharlach, Lehning, and Davitt (2012) provide a process driven conceptual framework which focuses on ageing in place. This framework draws on activities and services provided by two programmes which emphasize and promote ageing in place in the U.S. These two programmes are: Naturally Occurring Retirement Community Supportive Service Programmes (NORC programmes) and Villages. The conceptual framework identifies three categories of activities and services that could potentially lead to different levels of outcomes: initial, immediate and long term. This was completed by summarising the evidence linking the activities and services to likely outcomes (Greenfield et al., 2012).

Elsewhere, Menec, Means, Keating, Parkhurst, and Eales (2011) build on the WHO framework through the application of ecological theory to provide a general framework for understanding the inter-relationships between the environment and the person living within it. In conceptualising age-friendly communities, the authors choose social connectivity as a cross-cutting benefit of an age-friendly community environment. This theme links the policy

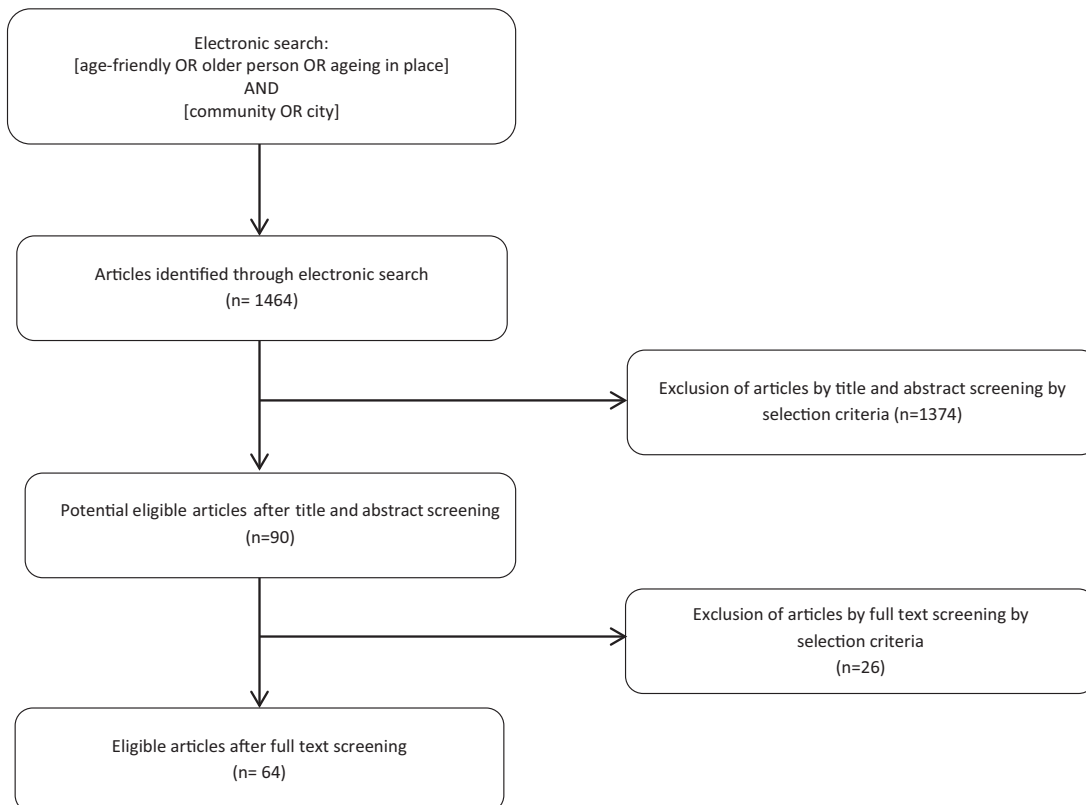


Fig. 1. Flow chart of article selection.

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