

PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

Age-friendly cities and lifelong learning

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(This article belongs to *Special Issue: Active Aging and Educational Gerontology*)**Abstract**

This article investigates the modern phenomenon of age friendliness, more particularly the notion of an “age-friendly city,” from both a macro perspective as well as at the level of a localized application of age friendliness in a single city. Much of the rhetoric of age-friendly conceptualization has strong affinity to the themes of lifelong learning, and proponents of each sector can benefit from mutually understanding the respective principles and implementation strategies of the other. Allied concepts of aging (“growing older”) and active aging are discussed before discussion of the main discourses of lifelong learning. A case study of an age-friendly city in New Zealand is presented wherein achievements and challenges are discussed; an argument is presented that as “close cousins,” actors within these two domains can enhance the application of their humanistic principles by closer alignment of policy and practices. Further, challenges ahead for implementation of age friendliness are discussed, some of which are shared by the lifelong learning movement.

Keywords: Lifelong learning; Age friendly cities; Aging in place; Later life learning; Active aging

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1. Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to investigate the modern phenomenon of age friendliness from both a macro perspective as well as at the level of a localized application of the age-friendly city approach in which the author is engaged. Much of the rhetoric of age-friendly conceptualization is profoundly linked to the themes of lifelong learning, and proponents of each sector can benefit from mutually understanding the respective principles and implementation strategies of the other. A case study of an age-friendly city in New Zealand is presented wherein achievements and challenges are discussed. An argument is presented that as “close cousins,” actors within these two domains can enhance the application of their humanistic principles through closer alignment of policy and practices. Further, this paper also discusses the challenges that lay ahead for the implementation of age friendliness, some of which are shared by the lifelong learning movement.

1.1. Origins of the age-friendly movement

The exact origins of the movement for age-friendly cities, universities, and communities are imprecise but ostensibly the leadership of the World Health Organization (WHO), and its support for then emergent initiatives to enhance older persons' well-being was a prominent factor. According to Buffel *et al.* (2022), in response to dominant forces of increasing urbanization, the First World Assembly on Aging held in Vienna in 1982 and subsequent major global milestones such as the 1986 WHO Ottawa Charter for Health

Promotion triggered age-friendly initiatives in both the Global North and South. The establishment of the Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) in 2018 was a trigger event to capture global initiatives of communities around the world.

The upsurge of interest and commitment to the concept and implementation of age friendliness is hardly accidental. Global and societal changes such as rapidly changing age population structures, divergent family living patterns, increasing life expectancies, and greater technological advances (Findsen & Formosa, 2011) have exerted more pressure on national and local level governments, NGOs, and some elements of industry to better consider the needs and aspirations of older adults. In addition, Phillipson & Buffel (2020) argued for the strong inclusion of urbanization into big cities as a dominant factor affecting the potential for elders to live a pleasant life. These authors indicated that “the continuing spread of urbanization, with 55 per cent of the world’s population now living in urban environments” (p.139) pressurises cities to respond to everyone’s needs, regardless of age. As van Hoof & Marston (2021) pointed out, the vast majority of older adults want to age in place. Accordingly, the built and social environments for seniors need to be aligned to their real needs.

The lifelong learning movement, with a longer tradition than the age-friendly equivalent (Wain, 2009), has tried to grapple with similar issues wherein learning, whether as formal (adult) education, non-formal education or at an informal, day-to-day basis, has been the conduit for sustaining the well-being of older people (Withnall, 2010). While the purposes of lifelong learning are diverse and occasionally antagonistic (see below), this movement has also been motivated by maximizing the prospects of people of all ages to enjoy a good life. Hence, what is meant by an age-friendly environment? According to the WHO, “age-friendly environments (such as in the home, community) foster healthy and active aging by building and maintaining intrinsic capacity across the life course and enabling greater functional ability in someone with a given level of capacity” (WHO, n.d. [a]). Further, an age-friendly city “encourages active aging by optimizing for health, participation, and security to enhance quality of life as people age” (WHO, 2007, p.1). These definitions of age friendliness (environment, cities) can be applied to all people regardless of age. In respect to seniors in cities, an age-friendly environment can have considerable benefits including ready access to public facilities such as medical services, cultural and leisure centers, shopping, and other aspects of living where reasonable access to general necessities is paramount (Phillipson, 2011). Nor is the increased density of population from migration into

urban settings necessarily detrimental to liveability, as demonstrated in cities such as Hong Kong where aging-in-place is not often problematic despite high population density.

The question of what makes a community age-friendly is not easy to answer. While the above definitions from the WHO provide guidance, they are insufficiently directive when it comes to planning, implementing, and evaluating strategies that can be adopted by cities. The notion of an age-friendly city needs to move beyond a tokenistic stance by local and national governments. Lui *et al.* (2009) have reviewed the international literature from 32 articles and reports from different city contexts and suggest that an ideal age-friendly community would give equal weighting to physical and social environments on a continuum and encourage governance on a continuum between top-down and bottom-up approaches. They asserted that enhancing a social environment is just as important as giving attention to material conditions in determining well-being in later life.

1.2. Literature review

Allied concepts to age friendliness are important to incorporate into a discourse where the health, security, and participation of older people come to the fore. Since age friendliness is linked to people regardless of the stage of life course they are in, setting the needs of seniors as priorities, as a common refrain, would benefit the rest of the public (Hamilton City Council, 2021). Certainly, kindred concepts of age, such as active aging, aging process, and old(er) age, are all relevant as underpinning ideas related to what age friendliness might mean. This paper does not offer a comprehensive treatment of every conceivably related concept, but a brief analysis of key linked concepts – age, “growing old(er),” and active aging – are presented next. In addition, the precepts of lifelong learning and major thematic concerns from learning in later life have considerable resonance in a rapidly changing world that is supposedly becoming more conscious of the implications of larger numbers of older persons in its midst.

1.2.1. Age and “growing old(er)”

Analysis of age is often treated at a macro level (as in reviewing particular countries changing population structures), meso level (reviewing trends in local communities), and individual level (investigating how a person progresses from childhood to early and mid-adulthood to later adulthood in physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual domains). In addition, many theories of the social construction of aging (*e.g.*, Phillipson, 2013) as well as critical approaches to aging and later life (*e.g.*, Jamieson *et al.*, 1997) emphasize the importance of

understanding how cultural and social aspects underpin much human behavior. Historically and culturally, older age is conceptualized quite differently in varied locations often associated with labor market conditions, government social policies (particularly on retirement), and life expectancy (Chui, 2012). In my experience, many East Asian societies, while having higher regard for elders due to the Confucian tradition, have accentuated that “retirement” is expected by seniors in their 50s and 60s (e.g., the Golden Age Foundation in Hong Kong; the Seoul 50+ Foundation in South Korea). In such contexts, expressive forms of learning are given prominence; instrumental education/training has a lesser priority (Hiemstra, 1976). This reflects a more passive form of aging – leisure rather than work. Regions such as Taiwan are taking significant steps to incorporate active aging in a lifelong learning framework to better balance expressive/instrumental activities (Findsen *et al.*, 2022).

Across the world, the reality of age discrimination takes hold, even when more age-friendly policies promulgated by governments and in regions have been enforced. Of course, the official retirement age is often a marker for employees to leave or reduce work (Phillipson, 1998), while retirement may be legally unenforceable in some countries (e.g., New Zealand), often social pressure means that people beyond pension age of 65 may feel the need to conform to an early departure from paid work. Fortunately, retirement patterns are becoming more variable, at least in many Western countries, so that both workers and employers can enjoy the benefits of continuity of work (Findsen, 2016). A more “age-friendly” workforce is one where organizations as employers can help older workers to thrive, with supports such as appropriate training and development (Beatty & Visser, 2005). Accompanying age discrimination is the phenomenon of the relative invisibility of older people as participants in society. Tuckett (2022) pointed out how this invisibility is related to younger people’s diminished expectations of engagement from the older generation and from seniors’ self-monitoring.

1.2.2. Active aging

Another central concept related to both age friendliness and lifelong learning is that of active aging. As a new element of public discourse, active aging replaces older notions of an aging process where elders have been protected by paternalism and dependence, living more passive lives. As explained by Boulton-Lewis (2012), “it is critical that demeaning stereotypes of aging are challenged and that we accept a new perspective on aging and learning in modern society” (p. 3). The traditional conceptualization of older age as a time of expanded leisure and segregation protected from the everyday trials of society is increasingly

redundant and replaced in part by the advent of the third age of creativity (Laslett, 1989). Yet even this view of aging is subject to critique, given that postmodern life is full of contradictions, tensions, and nuances of living where greater resilience is called for among seniors.

Among many authors on this topic, Braun (2022) has been prominent, especially in the Asia Pacific, in building on the WHO’s (2002) framework for active aging. This framework has emphasized the three pillars of security, health, and participation. While acknowledging similarities to allied concepts such as *healthy aging*, *successful aging*, *productive aging*, and *creative aging*, Braun argued for the distinctiveness of active aging linked to social policies that support “the inclusion of older people in education, employment, volunteering, civic, and cultural activities” (2022, p. 15). Braun also explicitly stated that lifelong learning is an essential component to older adults to achieve their full potential and to foster age-friendly environments.

1.3. Links with lifelong learning

Within the literature of adult education and lifelong learning, there are four main thematic strands to explain the purposes for learning throughout life (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). These strands provide an underpinning rationale for possible engagement for older adults in an age-friendly context.

1.3.1. The economic dimension

At a societal level, it is essential that a nation uses the full talents of its citizens to be financially productive. Individuals, especially older people, as workers need to adjust to the uncertainties of the workforce and to the expectations of government, commercial organizations, and community agencies to maintain economic security and lead a productive life. However, government policy tends to favor the recruitment of younger workers (Lundberg & Marshallsay, 2007), and age discrimination functions to render the older workforce less visible even when COVID-19 has helped to trigger an employment crisis that older people could help to alleviate. As argued by Phillipson (1998), the position of workers in the political economy allocates rewards in accord with age, social class, race, and ethnicity. Amid these interdependent variables, age tends to function as a deterrent for seniors seeking to maintain relevance in the financial realm.

1.3.2. The personal development dimension

Personal development is associated with the liberal adult education tradition of individuals achieving what they are fully capable of. For older adults, this opportunity is heightened in retirement wherein there is purportedly

greater scope for creativity and deferred human potential aligned to Laslett's (1989) third age. This age, amid four from birth to death, focuses on active aging where older adults can flourish, exemplified in the educational area by the work of the U3A movement (Formosa, 2019). In the informal learning sphere, seniors can exercise self-directed and experiential learning to achieve new goals in a learning society (Brookfield, 1986). This dimension is predicated on an ideology of individualism and is humanistically oriented (Knowles, 1980).

1.3.3. The active citizenship dimension

An active citizen is crucial in a democratic and civil society. Older people can engage in communities as active participants in such a society. Welton (2005, pp.101–2) has defined civil society as “a social space with emancipatory potential, influenced by but not completely absorbed into the state and economy.” In a less work-oriented space, seniors have arguably greater opportunity to undertake volunteering in community organizations and actively contribute to society as part of their active aging. Potentially, in later life, citizens can influence the direction of local initiatives through selective choices about where to invest their energies. For instance, in exercising their political rights, older people can seriously influence, through strategic voting, outcomes in local and national elections.

1.3.4. The social inclusion/exclusion dimension

Many nations are grappling with the challenge of how to create unity out of diversity. This diversity may emerge through identity formation related to networks linked to ethnicity, gender, social class, disabilities, and other forms of exclusion away from dominant groups' ideologies and practices. Seniors can readily be marginalized and rendered invisible (Tuckett, 2022). The workplace is a classic example of where the government, through uninspiring public policy implementation, or employers, through enacting ageist practices (e.g., in recruitment), can fail to capitalize on the latent talents of older people (Short & Harris, 2014). In the educational context, the practices of universities do not match the application of inspirational principles espoused by some leading higher education institutions in the age-friendly university network (Talmage *et al.*, 2016). While much exclusion of older people from everyday life may be inadvertent or subtle, it nevertheless often renders individuals as unable to exercise equal opportunity (Wain, 2009).

The above dimensions are not mutually exclusive but can coexist and/or have a partially causal relationship. For instance, the state of a country's economy can have a more detrimental effect on many seniors who may be dependent

on a government pension (if such exists). Static funding for elders in a rapidly rising cost of living crisis renders many in precarious financial situations. It will be demonstrated that each of the above lifelong learning themes is revealed and enacted to some degree in age-friendly practices.

1.4. Contexts of age friendliness

While the focus of this article is concentrated on the age-friendly city phenomenon, there are many other locales which may share many of the same principles and practices as a city environment. According to the WHO (n.d. [b]), as at November 2023, there are currently 1542 cities and communities in 51 countries, covering 320 million people worldwide. Giving special attention to older people's needs and aspirations is hardly new but this relatively fresh initiative of age friendliness globally and locally provides enhanced possibilities for citizen involvement in their daily lives.

In a broader context of case studies concerning AFCC, Remillard-Boilard *et al.* (2021) comment that “little is known about the progress made by cities developing this work around the world” (p. 4). Their purposeful sampling strategy captured 11 cities (all of which had been in the age-friendly program; already members of the WHO's (n.d.) Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities; varied in size; located in different countries). Their findings emphasized the aspects of changing the perception of older age, involving key actors in age-friendly efforts, responding to the diverse needs of older people and the need to improve planning and delivery of programs.

Thus, many of the issues faced by older adults in an immediate locality are included in the projected plans of varied organizations (private sector; non-governmental organizations; and community education agencies), including local councils. This is evident in the case study below which illustrates how conceptualization, implementation, and evaluation (common program development mechanisms employed in adult education and lifelong learning) are presented in one New Zealand city. Further, this case will help to illuminate the achievements and challenges of cementing age friendliness into the consciousness of city dwellers.

2. Methods

In this article, the focus is on age-friendly cities while acknowledging the expanding literature on age-friendly universities (Talmage *et al.*, 2016) and other communities (van Hoof & Marston, 2021). The author is using a selected literature review of salient concepts and learnings from other locations (see Remillard-Boilard *et al.*, 2021) together with his active engagement at an experiential level

in a specific age-friendly city in New Zealand to explicate the promise and challenges of enacting an age-friendly plan. The intent is not to present an exhaustive analysis of potentially relevant studies and reports but to consider sufficiently portray a convincing theoretical background for the more in-depth case study of Hamilton, New Zealand, as an age-friendly city. The author of this paper is the current Chair of the Age-Friendly Hamilton Steering Group operating as a semi-autonomous entity under the auspices of the Hamilton City Council.

3. Case study: Age-friendly Hamilton (New Zealand)

Historically, the people in Hamilton city, situated inland in the upper portion of the North Island of New Zealand with a population of near 180,000, has maintained a solid relationship with the older generation (defined here arbitrarily as age 65+). The current Age-Friendly Hamilton Group (AFHG) grew out of a previous Council of Elders (since 1993) and an Advisory Panel on Older People (2014+). The group has 12 volunteer members who represent varying segments of the older population in Hamilton, which has more than one in 10 Hamiltonians being over the age of 65. In the 2018 Census, the proportion of the total population aged 65+ for New Zealand as a whole was 15.4% and 11.9% for Hamilton. Among the larger cities of the country, Tauranga (a favored retirement spot), has the highest proportion of 19.8%. In the same Census, when the New Zealand 65+ age populations are disaggregated into 65 – 79 and 80+ categories, Hamilton has 75% in the former category and 25% in the latter (*Age-Friendly Hamilton Plan 2021 – 2024*). Hence, the age structure of Hamilton, the fourth largest city in New Zealand, closely mirrors the country as a whole, except for being slightly tilted toward the younger side. Yet, this is not a reason to be complacent.

The author, after volunteering for membership of a reconstituted Steering Group under the auspices of the Hamilton City Council, was appointed the chairperson, and the Group inherited a fairly comprehensive *Age-Friendly Hamilton Plan 2021 – 2024* (Hamilton City Council, 2021). Among the 12 members, four were returnees and eight new. As a consequence, it could not be assumed that there was consistency of agreement among members about what the plan is about and there was a need to examine projections for future priorities. The Group is semi-autonomous as it is informally supported by the Hamilton City Council (principally by a small secretariat) but the Steering Group can determine its own goals and actions. The group members reflect different components of the older population: university emeritus professor in adult

education; a retired Indian academic in management; health practitioners; Māori representation from the Rauawaawa Kaumātua Trust (a major Māori older persons organization to promote well-being); a community house; a business member of the Hamilton Central Business District; Age Concern Waikato; and Pasifika. Meetings are generally held bi-monthly.

Figure 1 shows the overview of the *Age-Friendly Hamilton Plan 2021 – 2024* (Hamilton City Council, 2021) taken from the public document.

4. Discussion of the Age-Friendly Hamilton Plan 2021 – 2024

There are two stipulated goals in the *Age-Friendly Hamilton Plan 2021 – 2024* (Hamilton City Council, 2021), namely, raising awareness within the community of the increasing number of older people in Hamilton, and empowering the community to take action to improve the lives of older people in Hamilton. The newly formed Group decided to not take for granted what the Plan entailed. Although yet to be ratified as a formal change, the first goal was seen to be too innocuous because raising the *awareness of increasing numbers* is hardly aspirational nor sufficiently encapsulating of what seniors might need. According, we sought to replace this first goal, retaining the second, with the following: Raise awareness within the community of *the needs and contributions* of older people in Hamilton. This revamped goal goes beyond a knowledge of numbers to ponder on the (learning) needs of older people (*e.g.*, physical, social, emotional, *etc.*) and what seniors can offer the wider community. In effect, this change acknowledges that aging has an impact on older citizens' changing needs (where aging is commonly interpreted from a deficit perspective) but it also points to the positive features of an informed citizenry, a manifestation of active aging.

The five principles in the plan are based on community development notions and are currently viewed as appropriate. The themes identified in the plan are derived from those of the WHO (2018), complemented by the addition of “safety” from the previous group. There are obvious overlaps amid the themes (*e.g.*, social inclusion in housing; and safety in transport and mobility) and there is no explicit mention of learning in later life which could be incorporated under “social participation.”

The following section of this article looks into some of the early achievements and the conspicuous challenges for the future as this new Group assumes firmer direction and support for its work. It is followed by more general discussion, linking aspects of literature to the realities of practice.

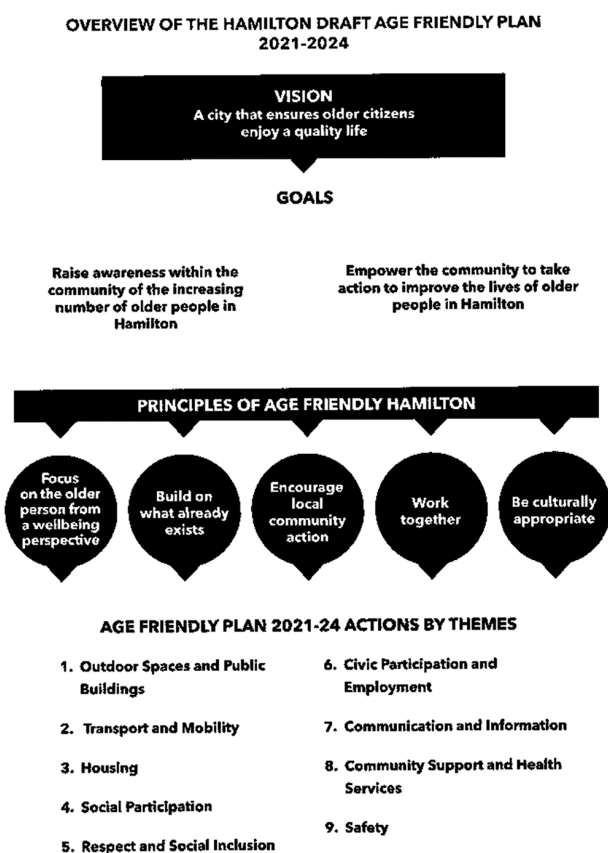


Figure 1. The overview of the *Age-Friendly Hamilton Plan 2021 – 2024*
Source. Hamilton City Council, (2021, p. 9).

4.1. Achievements

Hamilton was the first city in New Zealand to join the World Health Organization’s Global City network in 2018, based primarily on a submission from the previous Group of the 2018 – 2021 Plan. It has been a flagship initiative. Recently, visitors from the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) visited Hamilton in August 2022 to view progress and discuss relevant issues. Hence, the Group is facing some understandable pressure for acting as a leading agency of this type in this country.

The original plan was developed after considerable consultation from varied community organizations throughout Hamilton. During 2020 (despite COVID-19), there were open forums held and ongoing discussions with agencies such as Age Concern, Rotary, churches, the Waikato Indian Senior Citizen’s Association, the University of the Third Age, and neighborhood houses. This needs assessment exercise became the basis for changes to the current Plan. However, needs analysis requires constant revisiting and subsequent action (Wacker *et al.*, 1998). A strength of the Plan is that for each of the nine themes, there are clearly defined goals followed by three columns:

action, status, and responsible agency. For example, under the theme of *Outdoor Spaces and Public Buildings*, the main goal is stated as follows:

The community has places to enjoy and be part of outdoor activities that are accessible and where people feel safe.

Action 1.4: Completion of Phase 2 of the Age-friendly and Dementia Friendly Kaumātua Centre

Status: Enhance

Responsible Agency: Rauawaawa Kaumātua Charitable Trust.

While the usage of key performance indicators (KPIs) might be criticized for excessive monitoring and surveillance, they do provide an indication of what has been achieved and what is yet to be enacted.

One of the themes for the Age-Friendly Hamilton Group, derivative of the WHO’s priorities, is that of housing. From a broader perspective, as noted by Buffel *et al.* (2022), the theme of housing is a more hardened area for age-friendly entities to investigate. They remark that “the argument is that doing ‘age-friendly’ work also means recognizing and challenging the wider inequalities and injustices which affect city life” (p. 157). Given current economic stringency and continuing immigration into New Zealand, the demand for housing has far exceeded supply. For seniors in particular, especially those from relatively deprived neighborhoods, the costs for either home ownership or renting are very high with increasing homelessness. In Hamilton city, there are a range of providers (some national governmental, private agencies, non-governmental organizations, *etc.*) but there is little overt co-operation across providers and the gaps in provision are serious. Accordingly, the AFHG has secured the services of senior tertiary education students to develop a plan for ascertaining exactly who is providing what for whom in the social/senior housing market. We intend to seek further research assistance on a voluntary basis to gather more evidence in this thematic area of housing and in other domains, but we lack the financial resources to do so.

4.2. Challenges

4.2.1. Challenges in task-relationship dichotomy

For a newly formed AFHG, paying attention to both relationship building and task completion is critical, as indicated by group dynamics specialists (*e.g.*, Johnson & Johnson, 1982). Unless individual members see a place for their participation, their commitment may waver. At present, we are revisiting the plan for updating and allocating responsibility for subgroups to concentrate on elected themes and actions.

4.2.2. Funding and influence

The group receives support in kind from the Hamilton City Council (through a Community Development secretariat). However, there is no direct funding from the local government. It is prudent to establish a firm financial base – for instance, from research sources – to provide a sharper edge to our activities. In effect, the Group relies on influencing “significant others” (individuals and agencies aligned to the mission of the AFHG) to carry out its agenda. However, the Group’s indirect influence may be “too soft” to effect significant changes.

4.3. Cultural/Ethnic inclusion

The Group requires Māori (indigenous), Pasifika, and Asian representation to ensure its ethnic diversity. In Hamilton, Māori constitute 8.8% of the population aged 65+ and 6.5% across New Zealand; Pasifika 2.4% in Hamilton and 2.8% in New Zealand; and Asian 8.6% in Hamilton and 6.7% in New Zealand, according to the 2018 Census (Hamilton City Council, 2021). The Rauawaawa Kaumātua Trust, a holistic agency, whose function is to sustain the well-being of Māori elders, has its director as a member of this Group and is well-known nationally and internationally for its considerable work. Yet, the Group needs to commit further to cultural inclusion such as employing more *te reo* (Māori language, an official language in New Zealand) in its communications as well as in recruiting an Asian representative. At present, older Pasifika adults are poorly served in social and health services, and this issue needs remedying.

4.4. Marketing

Despite the Hamilton City Council underpinning the work of this volunteer group, the work itself is not well known amid the public. Communication across agencies and among individuals working for and with seniors needs greater enhancement. Discussions are currently being held about inclusion of the work of the group in a regular page of a well-known public magazine focusing on the well-being of older adults and to bring to Hamilton seniors’ attention the opportunities for access to health services, public events, and the like. It cannot be assumed that older people have confidence and/or competence in digital literacy (Boulton-Lewis, 2012) so some “old-fashioned” methods in publicity still need to be maintained while simultaneously upgrading technological literacy of seniors.

4.5. Action more than words

The plan provides a very good basis for identifying and prioritizing activities to improve the well-being of seniors in Hamilton. However, there is a distinct danger that the group becomes a continuing “talkfest” and actions

are relegated for others to undertake. While ongoing dialog is essential, the goals and actions for the themes need mechanisms for evaluation and accountability. It is incumbent of the group to maximize the aspiration of improving the lives of local seniors and this goal is actually met by actions and accountability. Hence, prioritization of actions linked explicitly to the key issues for local citizens is important so that achievements can be monitored.

The literature review has emphasized the alignment of conceptual components of age-friendly communities, especially in urban environments, and lifelong learning themes. In both the theoretical strands of age-friendly cities and lifelong learning, the fundamentals of active aging and learning in place, the autonomy of individuals to exercise choice in work and leisure, the contribution of seniors to civil society, and the need to include the marginalized in society are to the fore. The nine themes of the *Age-Friendly Hamilton Plan 2021 – 2024* are fully aligned with the four themes of lifelong learning to present a powerful strategy for influencing the well-being of seniors not just in the city of Hamilton but elsewhere too. Socially inspired themes from the WHO framework such as social participation, respect and social inclusion, communication and information echo the lifelong learning impetus for personal development, active citizenship and social inclusion. From the perspective of the built environment (van Hoof *et al.*, 2021), the WHO theme of Transport and Mobility requires an economic base to go forward; its implementation affects seniors, especially those with significant disabilities, in terms of building social capital; active engagement of elders requires ease of mobility; and without effective transport, (older) people can be excluded from participation in societal affairs. The interconnectedness of the physical and the social environments is undeniable.

5. Concluding remarks

The challenges facing the AFHG are intrinsically inward- and outward-looking, but the need to address these challenges is important to achieve the goals of AFHG. While it is inappropriate to extrapolate from this one case study to the hundreds of other kindred groups concerned with establishing age-friendly environments across the globe, this case does provide some insights into what it really means to implement goals that are inspired by both global and local priorities.

The themes from the Plan and the WHO paradigm readily align to the four lifelong learning themes: economic imperatives, personal development, active citizenship, and social inclusion/exclusion, which are very much interlinked and can be colloquially known as “close cousins” in this

realm. While these conceptual paradigms do provide firm bases for strategy, the challenges remain in practical terms to materialize these humanistic aspirations. As observed by Buffel *et al.* (2022), one of several interventions to improve the effectiveness of an age-friendly agenda is to link more closely with other disciplines. In this case, a lifelong learning lens provides further scope for strategy and implementation.

As pointed out by van Hoof & Marston (2021), the risks of tokenism are pervasive. At the time of writing, the local Council to whom the AFHG reports is announcing fresh economic stringencies to constrain spending and to look for possible asset sales. The AFHG has a volunteer base where commitment and aspiration can readily be curtailed by political indecision, research incapacity and financial stringency, which are challenges awaiting to be addressed.

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Conflict of interest

The author is the Chair of the Age-friendly Hamilton Steering Group. The case study directly relates to this voluntary work. It is not possible to exercise impartiality in discussing the theoretical and practical aspects of this article.

Author contributions

This is a single-authored paper.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data

Data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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