



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR FLOURISHING IN OLDER AGE

MARCH 2024 PROGRESS REPORT

THANK YOU

Dear Contributor,

We want to express our heartfelt gratitude for your involvement in the Environmental Support for Flourishing in Older Age project. Your contribution has been invaluable, and we appreciate your time and dedication.

We are happy to provide you with an update on our progress so far. With your help, we have successfully completed data collection and are now analysing the gathered information. Your insights have greatly enriched our research.

Your active participation has made our research possible and has played a vital role in the research outcome. We will continue to ensure the utmost confidentiality and privacy throughout the research process. The anonymised results will feed into recommendations for ways that communities, organisations and public authorities can help make the local environment more supportive and easier to enjoy as people get older.

Once again, we sincerely thank you for your support. We look forward to sharing the final outcomes with you soon.

Best regards,

Dr Caroline Pearce
Ki Tong
Dr Sara Tilley
Prof Catharine Ward Thompson

RESEARCH SUMMARY

The Environmental Support for Flourishing in Older Age research project is part of the Advanced Care Research Centre (ACRC). The ACRC is a multi-disciplinary research programme with an aim of generating high-quality data-driven, personalised, and affordable care that supports the independence, dignity, and quality-of-life of people in later life. This project sits within the 'Understanding the Person in Context' initiative of the ACRC that utilises innovative mixed methods to better understand the contexts and environments that support people to flourish in later life.

RESEARCH AIMS

Access to outdoor environments can have positive impacts on individual health and wellbeing enabling people to remain healthy and active in older age and improving quality of life. Yet as people age, they may experience increased difficulties getting out and about. We sought to improve understanding of the aspects of the outdoor environment that can support people to get outdoors as well as the barriers people face. We invited older adults to tell us about their outdoor activities that are important to them and what enables them to pursue them. Spanning two years (2022-2023) the project has involved 45 participants aged 50 or over, living in five different areas of Scotland.

The research consisted of two key questions:

1. What outdoor activities are important to different people, enabling them to flourish into older age?
2. How does the physical environment (especially the outdoors) support or frustrate achievement of these activities?

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

To answer these questions, we completed three research activities:

- 1. In-depth interviews:**
We conducted over 70 in-depth interviews centred around the activities people do in their neighbourhoods.
- 2. Walking interviews:**
To gain a deeper insight into what makes it easy or difficult for people to get out in their particular neighbourhoods, we conducted 20 'walking interviews', where a researcher joined participants for a walk in their local area.
- 3. Outdoor activity diaries:**
Participants completed over 50 activity diaries that recorded their outings in the course of one week, providing insight into how often people go out, the places people regularly go, and modes of transportation.

Continue reading for an update on the emerging findings.

The study

The importance of getting outdoors

The COVID-19 pandemic has made many of us acutely aware of the importance of being able to get outside and freely enjoy access to our local neighbourhood, whether that might involve a stroll in a local park or meeting friends at a café. Being able to get out and access outdoor spaces, particularly natural environments such as parks and woods, can significantly improve our health and wellbeing and quality of life. As we get older, being able to get out and around our neighbourhoods can help to keep people both physically and socially active, which may have a preventative effect against declining health.



Reasons for getting outdoors

Participants shared a range of different reasons for getting outdoors and it was clear that activities that had a social component and/or enabled people to engage with nature were the most important:

Engaging with people: this included attending a wide variety of local community groups such as groups on local history, crafts and knitting, lunch clubs with mixed activities as well spending time with friends and family.

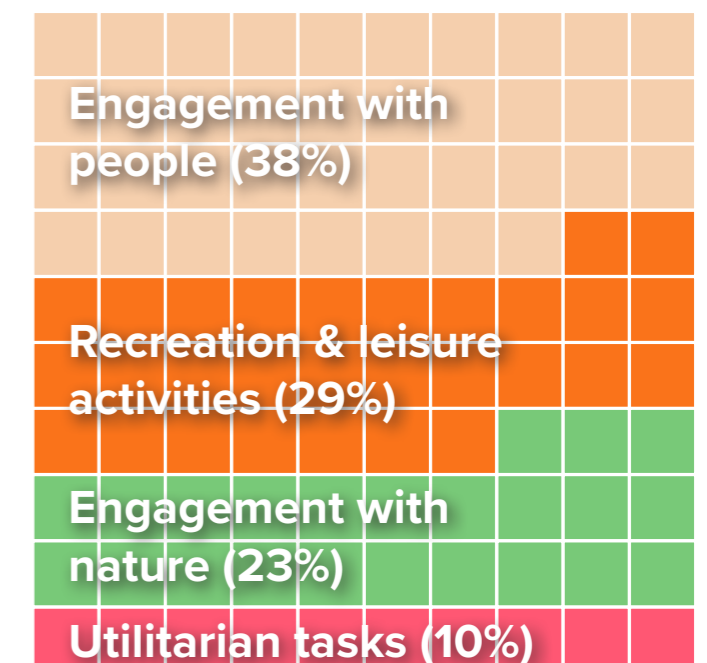
Engaging with nature: going for walks in natural places such as parks and woods, along rivers and beaches, as well as spending time in one's garden.

Recreation and leisure: sporting activities such as bowling and other forms of physical activities, as well as pursuing activities related to music, entertainment, and arts and culture.

Utilitarian tasks: activities also included everyday responsibilities and commitments such as voluntary work, grocery shopping and attending a church service.

Places where people like to spend time

Popular places people go were outdoor spaces including natural environments and walking through streets and built-up areas. Indoor spaces such as social and community centres, libraries, and places of worship were frequently visited, as well as cafes, shops and recreational venues.



What supports people to get outdoors?

We found that the easier it was for people to get outdoors, their higher their quality of life was likely to be. So, what are the features of neighbourhoods and places that make it easy for people to get and about?

1. Paths that are walkable and wheelable

Many people made regular journeys by foot, and some used aids like walkers and scooters. Flat, even and wide paths helped to facilitate people's ability to get around. Having a variety of routes in one's area was also important, as well regular resting places and opportunities to get away from busy roads.



'With a scooter, you've always got to get so far up the road, to find a dropped kerb'



'I'm fortunate that I have places quite close by that are quite flat or level and have benches, or places I know I can rest if I need to'

'Because I have got a disability, I like everything to be on a flat'



2. Places for recreation and socialising

Having places where people could meet others and engage in different activities provided many with a purpose and motivation to get outdoors. Social groups and places whether a walking group or a Men's Shed were key sources of support, friendship and fostered community belonging.

The walking group is very important because it gets you out the house and you're meeting different people

'It was a breath of fresh air to suddenly come to the community café and be accepted as a person. Because you suddenly found there was, in a sense, a community here.'

'The Men's shed was great for me. Last October I was as low as I could go, and I walked in... and the reception I got was brilliant. It's banter, non-stop banter. The kettle's never cold.'

3. Access to natural environments

Having access to natural spaces whether a public park or a private garden, enabled people to engage with nature. Though poor weather could be a deterrent, people reported multiple benefits of engaging with nature including mental relaxation and physical exercise.

'Although you are not far from the house you are still out in greenery. You could still see the bushes flowering; you could see nature even in your wee garden.'

'I just love being in nature, I love walking on my own...yeah, it's quite mindful... just being able to hear the birds and the breeze and actually seeing the grass and plants, being able to see the clouds, see the sky, the trees

'Especially when it's a beautiful day I go out for a walk, I instantly feel much better, even if it is just by myself. And it's that nature, physical activity, seeing nice things, seeing the sunshine and actually reflecting on oh actually I can do this, how good is that.'



What makes it difficult for people to get outdoors?

Depending on individual mobility and fitness people reported experiencing different levels of difficulty getting outside, yet there were many similarities across the responses.



Concerns about safety

A concern about individual safety was the most common deterrent from going to places, whether it was a fear of falling or having an accident, or a concern about crime. Going places alone could heighten these concerns.

'I'd like to be able to go into the woods and everything, but I don't do it, you just don't know who's around...you can be vulnerable in that area, so I wouldn't walk in it.'

Inadequate public facilities

Across the different areas we studied, participants reported insufficient or a lack of essential public facilities which included scarce provision of health care and banking services, a lack of seating and public toilets, and low provision of community activities and accessible places for older adults.

'I can't walk far... I go to the park because I can get a seat twice going round the park so that keeps me going.'

Transport

Reliable and convenient transportation enabled people to get to places beyond comfortable walking distance. Some participants reported avoiding buses due to concerns about getting on and off. The journey to bus stops could also be a deterrent when bus stops were located too far away or involved a difficult walk to get there. For those that had access to a car this enabled people to get much further and to places that they could not otherwise, but suggests shortcomings in the existing provision of public services and design of public spaces.

'Buses, they can be quite jumpy all the time. So, you just stop doing these kind of things because you're scared for the next time; what if I do fall and how am I going to get up'

'I like to keep the garden clear of weeds... I went out the other day to try and I did a wee bit, but I just felt tired, and I had to stop.'



Places that enable flourishing: Key messages



We set out to understand how the places people live can better support them to flourish in later life. What we learnt suggests that:

The desire to get and about does not diminish with age. Participants described wanting to gain new experiences (whether by going to new places, meeting new people, or learning a new skill) and were enabled to do so by places in which they could safely navigate, and that offered participants' a sense of belonging and feeling included.

An unsupportive environment, whether caused by unreliable public transport, inaccessible paths, or insufficient provision of public facilities, can limit the places people feel free to go, leading to feelings of social isolation, and presenting risks to physical and mental health as people age.

An environment that feels supportive can enable people to stretch themselves and pursue new activities and experiences, in turn improving health and sense of wellbeing and crucially their quality of life.



Final words from our participants:

'If I didn't have the places to go, the people to speak to, joining in, I would really be very depressed. I could imagine myself getting very down. Even with that you have days that you are a bit down, everybody is. That wouldn't be life if you weren't. But to be able to get up and do all that is what keeps you going.'

'It's lovely just being out in the fresh air... I'm always in a place where there's gardens and that, where you can see the things growing. It's just lovely to be outside. I've always enjoyed being outside.'

'I can't really go far at the moment, I don't think I'll ever be able to go far, really. As long as I can get out, that's the main thing, you know. But I would hate it if I couldn't go out at all.'

'No matter how I feel, even when I'm not feeling great... I know I need to walk. Maybe the sun's coming out and I'll go out, around the block. And I'll think, oh I'll pop in for a coffee... I feel like a new woman.'



What's next?

Our team are continuing to analyse the research data for future publications and reports. We would like to invite your feedback on what the key messages of the research should be so that we can take your views to decision-makers and advise them on how to improve the places you live. We plan to hold some group sessions in your community in Autumn 2024 and will be touch with more details in due course.



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

www.edin.care
Advanced Care Research Centre (ACRC)
The University of Edinburgh
Bio Cube 1, Edinburgh BioQuarter
13 Little France Road, EH16 4UX