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Ageing, identity and place: Extending intersectional perspectives in age-friendly urbanism through the lived experiences of mid-older adults with intellectual disabilities and LGBT+ identities

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Abstract

The World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) agenda promotes environments that support independence and participation in later life, yet affords limited attention to the relational and intersectional dimensions of belonging. Drawing on IncludeAge, a multisite study across Great Britain, this study explores how community inclusion and exclusion are experienced and negotiated by two groups often marginalised within age-friendly research and policy: mid-older adults (aged 40+) with intellectual disabilities (ID) and mid-older LGBT+ people. In doing so, it extends age-friendly urbanism through the intersectional place perspective (IPP). Guided by community-based participatory research principles, life-course interviews were conducted with 77 participants with ID and 76 LGBT+ participants, across urban, suburban and rural contexts. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic and narrative co-analysis informed by the IPP. Three themes were developed through collaborative analysis: (1) everyday spaces, micro-interactions and the making of belonging; (2) agency, resistance and claiming space; and (3) digital

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spaces as sites of connection, exposure and mistrust. Across both groups, belonging was negotiated relationally and unevenly across physical, social, service and digital domains. By foregrounding intersectionality, place and life-course trajectories, the study advances a more reflexive understanding of age-friendly urbanism. It extends the IPP within urban ageing debates, illuminates cumulative disadvantage and resilience, demonstrates the value of co-produced knowledge and proposes a conceptual theory of change to support a more intersectionally responsive AFCC agenda.

Keywords
intersectionality, Age-Friendly Cities and Communities, inclusive planning, place and belonging, life-course perspective

摘要

世界卫生组织的“老年友好型城市和社区”（AFCC）议程倡导打造可支持老年人独立生活与社会参与的环境，但对归属感的关系性与交叉性维度关注有限。本文依托在大不列颠全境开展的多点研究 IncludeAge，探讨两类在老年友好研究与政策中经常被边缘化的群体——40 岁及以上患有智力障碍（ID）的中老年人以及中老年 LGBT+ 群体——如何体验社区包容与排斥，并调适自身处境。借此，本文通过交叉性场所视角（IPP）拓展了老年友好城市化。在社区参与式研究原则的指导下，研究人员对覆盖城市、郊区与乡村情境的 77 名智力障碍参与者和 76 名 LGBT+ 参与者开展了生命历程访谈。依托交叉性场所视角，我们采用反思性主题与叙事共同分析开展数据分析。通过协作分析，本文提炼出三个主题：(1) 日常空间、微互动与归属感构建；(2) 能动性、抵抗与空间主张；以及 (3) 作为联结、暴露与不信任场域的数字空间。这两类群体的归属感均以关系性方式调适，并且在实体、社会、服务与数字各领域呈现不均衡状态。通过突出交叉性、场所和生命历程轨迹，本文推进了对老年友好城市化更具反思性的理解。本文在城市老龄化相关论争中拓展了 IPP，揭示累积劣势与韧性，论证共同生成知识的价值，并提出概念化变革理论，助力 AFCC 议程更好地回应交叉性议题。

关键词

交叉性、老年友好型城市和社区、包容性规划、场所与归属感、生命历程视角

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Introduction

Globally, populations are ageing rapidly, prompting renewed attention to how cities and communities enable or constrain older people's participation, belonging and well-being. Over the past two decades, the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) agenda has become the dominant global framework shaping local and national responses to demographic ageing (World Health Organization, 2007). AFCC promotes environments that support older people to live independently and participate fully in community life, emphasising improvements to housing, transportation, outdoor spaces, social participation and access to services (World Health Organization, 2019). Since its

introduction in 2007, the initiative has been widely adopted, with more than 1400 cities and communities across 51 countries participating globally (Rémillard-Boilard et al., 2021).

While AFCC has contributed to important advances in the social and physical dimensions of urban environments, its conceptual foundations remain limited in key respects. In particular, the framework has tended to prioritise functional accessibility and infrastructural adaptation, often at the expense of deeper engagement with the psychological, cultural and relational dimensions of belonging (Buffel et al., 2024). Questions of how age intersects with other social identities, how power operates through everyday socio-spatial environments, and how inclusion is negotiated across the life-course remain under-theorised within mainstream age-friendly scholarship (Holman and Walker, 2021). Moreover, age-friendly "urbanism" is often implicitly equated with metropolitan settings, overlooking the relational dynamics of suburban and rural contexts where service withdrawal, visibility and social surveillance may be experienced differently. These limitations are especially pronounced for older people whose lives have been shaped by long-standing forms of marginalisation and exclusion, including people with intellectual disabilities (ID) and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other diverse sexual and gender identities (LGBT+).

In response to these limitations, this article advances two interrelated aims. Empirically, it develops deeper insight into how community inclusion and exclusion are experienced, negotiated and resisted by marginalised mid-older adults across diverse urban, suburban and rural contexts, attending to the uneven geographies through which belonging is produced. Specifically, in this study, we aim to address the question of: How are community inclusion and exclusion experienced and negotiated by marginalised mid-older adults, and what do these experiences reveal about the conceptual limits and future development of age-friendly urbanism? Conceptually, this work extends debates on age-friendly urbanism through the intersectional place perspective (IPP) (Fang et al., 2023), a theoretical model that brings intersectionality – a framework for understanding how interlocking systems of power shape lived experience (Crenshaw, 1991) – into dialogue with relational and temporal understandings of place, power and belonging. In doing so, AFCC is approached not simply as a policy instrument to be refined, but as a governance framework whose conceptual blind spots must be critically examined if age-friendly urbanism is to respond meaningfully to spatial and social diversity.

Our article draws on findings from IncludeAge Team (2025), a transdisciplinary, community-engaged, multisite study conducted across Great Britain. IncludeAge centres the experiences of mid-older adults (aged 40+) with ID and LGBT+ identities; two populations that remain underrepresented in age-friendly research and policy discourse despite facing heightened risks of exclusion across the life-course (Kneale et al., 2021; Verdonschot et al., 2009). By foregrounding participants' lived experiences of navigating inclusion and exclusion across physical, social, service and digital spaces, our article advances a more intersectional and place-sensitive understanding of age-friendly urbanism.

Age-friendly urbanism as governance: Achievements and conceptual limits

The AFCC framework encourages cities to assess age-friendliness across eight domains, including housing, transport, outdoor spaces, communication, health services, social participation, civic engagement and

inclusion (World Health Organization, 2019). Although it promotes cross-sector collaboration, implementation often takes a technocratic form, privileging domains and indicators over deeper engagement with how ageing is lived across uneven socio-spatial contexts.

A growing body of scholarship critiques AFCC for treating older people as relatively homogeneous, with limited attention to intersections of age with disability, sexuality, gender and class (Holman and Walker, 2021). Infrastructural improvements may enhance accessibility while leaving intact the social relations and institutional practices that shape entitlement to space. For older people with ID, initiatives can reproduce paternalistic service models (McCausland et al., 2022); for older LGBT+ people, they may overlook enduring effects of stigma and the need for affirming environments (Hurd et al., 2022).

These limits reflect AFCC's weak theorisation of place and governance. Despite emphasis on collaboration, implementation is frequently fragmented and uneven (Rémillard-Boilard, 2020). Barriers such as housing precarity, mobility constraints, fragile infrastructure and digital exclusion are spatially patterned across urban, suburban and rural settings (Fang et al., 2019, 2023; Woolrych et al., 2022). These conditions are not simply environmental, but are shaped by planning decisions, service provision, funding arrangements and institutional priorities that influence who can access, occupy and benefit from age-friendly environments. Yet, planning processes often remain detached from the everyday geographies through which inclusion is negotiated.

Place-based research shows that belonging emerges not only through infrastructure but also through routine interactions and relational recognition embedded within everyday environments (Latham and Layton, 2022). Informal settings such as shops, libraries, cafés and community hubs function as social infrastructure sustaining trust and visibility (Buffel and Phillipson, 2016), yet remain underexamined in AFCC research, particularly for marginalised mid-older adults (Alidoust et al., 2019).

Attention to life-course trajectories further complicates static age-friendly models. For people with ID, ageing is shaped by histories of institutionalisation and uneven community transitions (McCarron et al., 2019; Wright and Digby, 1996). For older LGBT+ people, lives have unfolded amid criminalisation and discrimination (McCauley and Brinkley-Rubinstein, 2019). These intersecting histories produce cumulative disadvantage beyond income-based models (Crystal et al., 2017), especially given higher rates of singlehood and reliance on non-familial networks (Kneale, 2019).

Finally, inclusion is negotiated across hybrid physical-digital landscapes. While digital technologies can enable connection (Chadwick et al., 2022; Gilmore et al., 2020), they can also intensify exclusion through digital poverty, mistrust and fears of exposure (Fang et al., 2019).

Extending age-friendly urbanism therefore requires moving beyond infrastructural checklists towards a relational, intersectional and life-course-informed understanding of how belonging is negotiated across diverse settlement contexts.

Intellectual disability and LGBT+ ageing as critical lenses for urban theory

Importantly, if age-friendly urbanism remains conceptually limited in its treatment of difference, then examining the lives of those positioned at its margins becomes analytically generative. Older people with ID and older LGBT+ people offer critical lenses through which the relational, intersectional and life-course dynamics of place inclusion can be more fully understood.

First, both groups continue to experience persistent yet underexamined forms of marginalisation within age-friendly research and policy, despite long-standing recognition of community inclusion as a human right (Salzer, 2021). Universalist models of ageing tend to assume normative life trajectories centred on stable family networks, economic independence and heteronormative social participation. Such assumptions obscure how stigma, scrutiny, institutionalisation and concealment shape everyday negotiations of belonging for those whose lives have unfolded differently. Working alongside these communities surfaces dimensions of exclusion that remain largely invisible within dominant age-friendly frameworks.

Second, bringing these groups into dialogue foregrounds intersectionality as a spatial process. Social identities do not operate in isolation (Hankivsky, 2011); rather, the intersections of age, disability, sexuality, gender and social position generate patterned forms of inclusion and exclusion across physical, service and digital spaces (Fang et al., 2020). An intersectional, place-based lens enables shared mechanisms (such as paternalistic service models, normative assumptions about independence and heightened surveillance) to be identified, while also recognising important divergences in how belonging is negotiated. In this article, we focus primarily on these shared socio-spatial mechanisms, not because experiences are identical, but because they reveal broader conceptual limitations within age-friendly frameworks that cut across policy silos.

Third, empirical research that centres the lived realities of older people with ID and older LGBT+ people within age-friendly agendas remains limited. Engaging both groups in parallel enables cross-cutting insights that challenge policy silos and extend socio-spatial debates on governance, inclusion and the rights to place (Lefebvre, 1966).

Against this backdrop, we draw on findings from the IncludeAge study to advance an empirically grounded critique of AFCC. We argue that age-friendly urbanism must be understood as a relational, socio-spatial and life-course process through which belonging is negotiated across material and symbolic landscapes. To develop this argument, the following section introduces the IPP as a conceptual framework capable of extending age-friendly urbanism beyond its current limits.

Extending age-friendly urbanism through an IPP

Age-friendly urbanism occupies a prominent position at the intersection of ageing studies, planning and public policy, yet its engagement with spatial theory remains limited. Although the AFCC agenda foregrounds the material and social conditions of later-life, it offers limited conceptual leverage for analysing how age, identity, power and place intersect across the life-course. To address this gap, we mobilise IPP (Fang et al., 2023), to extend age-friendly urbanism within broader debates on governance and socio-spatial inequality. In contrast to earlier applications of IPP that primarily examined relationships between identity, place and power (Gutterman, 2022; Holman and Walker, 2021; Osborne, 2018), this article demonstrates its value for interrogating age-friendly governance and planning processes.

Intersectionality provides a critical lens for understanding how age, disability, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and socioeconomic position intersect through interlocking systems of power (Hankivsky and Cormier, 2011). However, within age-friendly scholarship, intersectionality has often remained spatially under-theorised (Holman and Walker, 2021). Ageing is always situated within environments shaped by histories of investment, exclusion and regulation, yet

AFCC initiatives tend to prioritise environmental domains and service access over the lived negotiation of place.

These limitations are evident in the framework's universalist orientation. While designed to promote inclusion, AFCC can obscure how ableism, heteronormativity and ageism are embedded in everyday spaces and service systems (Westwood et al., 2020). Moreover, its domains frequently presuppose urban density and service proximity that are unevenly distributed (Nelson, 2024). For those in rural or peripheral contexts, age-friendliness may hinge less on proximity to services and more on mobility constraints, infrastructural withdrawal or social scrutiny (Keating et al., 2013). Without sustained attention to place and temporality, intersectional critiques risk abstraction, and age-friendly interventions risk reproducing exclusion under the banner of inclusion (Fang et al., 2023).

IPP addresses these gaps by bringing intersectionality into dialogue with relational understandings of place and time, recognising place as socially produced through interactions between people, environments, institutions and power relations. Building on earlier multidimensional intersectionality frameworks (Collins, 2000; Sixsmith et al., 2019), IPP conceptualises place not as backdrop but as constitutive – encompassing physical environments, social relations, cultural meanings and institutional arrangements that are experienced unevenly across the life-course. It foregrounds how earlier histories of institutionalisation, stigma, belonging and mobility inform present-day engagements with space (Hillcoat-Nalletamby and Ogg, 2014).

Rather than treating urban, suburban and rural settings as fixed categories, IPP attends to how individuals move across diverse geographies over time, encountering shifting configurations of opportunity, visibility, constraint and safety. In doing so, it reframes age-friendliness as a relational and life-course process rather than a checklist of environmental features.

In the sections that follow, we apply IPP as an analytical model to illuminate how mid-older adults with ID and LGBT+ identities negotiate belonging across uneven geographies and settlement contexts.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, community-engaged design to explore how marginalised mid-older adults experience and negotiate inclusion and exclusion across urban, suburban and rural contexts. Guided by community-based participatory research (CBPR) principles and the IPP, it foregrounds lived experience, power and place across the life-course to critically examine age-friendly urbanism at both governance and everyday levels.

Research approach

CBPR guided the study to ensure that marginalised older adults and sectoral stakeholders shaped all stages of the research process, from question development to interpretation and knowledge mobilisation (Jagosh et al., 2015). This approach was strengthened by transdisciplinary research principles, integrating academic, professional and lived expertise (Boger et al., 2017). Community Advisory Groups (CAGs), comprising older people with ID, older LGBT+ people and representatives from service and advocacy organisations, met regularly to inform study design, recruitment, analysis and ethical practice. Specifically, CAG members contributed to refining research questions, developing accessible study materials, advising on recruitment strategies, interpreting emerging findings and shaping knowledge mobilisation activities. Their involvement helped

ensure that priorities, language and interpretations remained grounded in the lived realities of participants and responsive to community concerns.

Participants and recruitment

A total of 153 life-course interviews were conducted with mid-older adults (aged 40+), including 77 people with ID and 76 LGBT+ participants. The 40+ threshold supports a life-course perspective and reflects evidence that people with ID may encounter later-life transitions earlier due to lower average life expectancy. Participants were recruited across urban, suburban and rural contexts in Great Britain as part of a broader 40-month programme on inclusive place-making. Interviews were conducted in person or online according to participant's preference and accessibility needs, with the duration ranging from 20 to 120 minutes but averaging about 1 hour.

Using a life-course approach, participants reflected on experiences of belonging, exclusion, safety and identity across important places, relationships and transitions. Recruitment was undertaken in partnership with community organisations using purposive and snowball sampling through trusted networks and targeted online outreach. Accessible information materials were provided, and consent was treated as an ongoing, supported process.

The life-course interviews formed one component of a wider mixed-method study that also included a participatory digital place-mapping exercise using ArcGIS Online (AGOL). Participants completing the AGOL component were offered the opportunity to retain the digital tablet used for data generation.

Participant characteristics are presented in Supplemental Material 1 and 2 and include demographic and contextual information for the ID (n = 77) and LGBT+ (n = 76) groups. Variables were grouped to enhance clarity and protect anonymity, including age range, gender, region, area type, living arrangement and highest educational attainment.

Co-researcher involvement and data generation

A distinctive feature of IncludeAge was the involvement of nine paid co-researchers with lived experience (four mid-older LGBT+ and five mid-older people with ID). Recruited through project partners and community networks, co-researchers received training and ongoing support in research ethics, interviewing, safeguarding, reflexivity, and working with sensitive life-course narratives. Practical supports enabled meaningful participation throughout the project.

Co-researchers contributed to interview development, participant engagement, data collection, interpretation of findings and knowledge mobilisation. Interviews were conducted by academic researchers and trained co-researchers, either independently or collaboratively. Within the LGBT+ pathway, co-researchers conducted interviews independently, while within the ID pathway they were supported by members of the research team. Overall, 12 ID interviews were conducted jointly by co-researchers and postdoctoral researchers, and 36 of the 76 LGBT+ interviews were conducted by co-researchers.

Life-course interviews explored experiences of inclusion and exclusion across time and place. Participants reflected on important people, places, experiences and transitions that had shaped their lives, with discussion grounded in everyday routines and familiar places before exploring broader experiences of belonging, exclusion, safety, identity and place over time. Participants could also bring meaningful objects to

support discussion, and visual prompts were available for participants with ID where helpful. Combining narrative and participatory approaches, interviews examined how biographies intersected with social, cultural and institutional contexts, and how belonging was negotiated across physical, social, service and digital spaces.

Data analysis

Data analysis began with Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis followed by a narrative thematic co-analysis process (Riessman, 2008) as illustrated in Supplemental Material 3. The analysis centred on the question: *How are community inclusion and exclusion experienced, negotiated and resisted by marginalised mid-older adults across diverse urban, suburban and rural contexts?*

LGBT+ and ID datasets were first analysed separately to develop group-specific themes, then compared to identify similarities, differences and emergent insights. While group-specific dynamics were retained throughout analysis, the primary focus of this article is on shared socio-spatial mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that illuminate broader conceptual limitations within age-friendly frameworks. Coding was iterative and collaborative, involving academic researchers and co-researchers with lived experience. Initial coding focused on place-based experiences, identity negotiations and expressions of agency and constraint across the life-course. Through ongoing analytic dialogue, codes were refined into themes capturing shared patterns and group-specific dynamics, aligned with the IPP. Co-researchers participated in guided co-analysis discussions where selected data extracts were reviewed collectively and emerging interpretations discussed. These sessions prioritised transparency, flexibility and dialogue, allowing experiential expertise to shape interpretation while preserving the narrative integrity of participants' life-course accounts. Analysis was informed throughout by the IPP, which shaped study design, interview development, coding, interpretation and theme development through its focus on place, identity, power and life-course processes. Rather than applying the framework retrospectively, the IPP provided an organising lens through which emerging findings were interpreted and discussed. Themes spanned both datasets with differing emphases, and deviant cases were retained to preserve analytic nuance.

The team engaged in critical reflexivity throughout, attending to how positionality, disciplinary background and lived experience influenced interpretation. Reflexive discussions frequently challenged assumptions regarding independence, participation, risk and belonging, helping ensure that interpretations reflected diverse lived experiences rather than dominant normative perspectives. Co-analytic processes generated contextually grounded insights and surfaced assumptions that may have remained unexamined in conventional researcher-led analysis (Hoppania et al., 2023; Littlechild et al., 2015).

Ethical considerations

Ethical practice was integral to the study design and conduct. The research adhered to the British Psychological Society's (2021) Code of Ethics and Conduct, with attention to power, vulnerability and wellbeing. Ethical approval was obtained from the Universities of Dundee, Hertfordshire and Liverpool John Moores. Accessible, ongoing consent procedures were used, including easy-read materials for participants with ID and opportunities for participants to revisit their consent throughout the study. Safeguards addressed potential distress arising from sensitive life-course discussions

through support resources and team debriefing. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and all procedures complied with GDPR, with oversight supported by Community Advisory Groups.

Findings

The analysis revealed three interrelated themes that capture how community inclusion and exclusion are negotiated across physical, social and digital spaces over the life-course. While important differences emerged between participants with ID and LGBT+ identities, the focus here is on the cross-cutting dynamics that reveal how place, power and belonging were negotiated across groups. The themes are presented descriptively while remaining informed by the IPP's attention to place, identity, power and temporality; these dimensions are further developed in the Discussion. Quotations are attributed using anonymised participant pseudonyms and corresponding transcript line numbers. The line ranges indicate the location of the quotation within the interview transcript and are provided to enhance transparency and traceability of the analytic process.

Everyday spaces, micro-interactions and the making of belonging

Across both groups, belonging emerged less through formal age-friendly infrastructures than through everyday spaces sustained by familiarity, repeated interactions, recognition and relational care. Familiar places such as homes, neighbourhoods, clubs, shops and community venues became meaningful not simply because they were accessible, but because they enabled participants to move, dwell and interact without fear, scrutiny or the need to justify who they were. Within these spaces, belonging was continually shaped through micro-interactions: small, repeated encounters that communicated safety, respect or exclusion and accumulated over time across the life-course.

For LGBT+ participants, bodily comfort and identity affirmation were closely tied to confidence in everyday spatial mobility. One trans man described how top surgery fundamentally altered their experience of public and social space:

> Then once I had top surgery, I wasn't worried. It was like, okay, cool, no, no worries at all. Um, never felt uncomfortable. When I was younger, I was worried but after that, I never felt uncomfortable. (Michael, LGBT+, 226–235)

Yet, this sense of ease was not fixed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the same participant reflected on how safety became increasingly concentrated in the home, particularly in the context of chronic illness and uncertainty:

> We had to talk about how Covid had affected us and what it was like coming back and I actually couldn't speak. And I suddenly realised the only place that I really felt safe was home, with the wife and the dogs. (Michael, LGBT+, 244–250)

In terms of people with ID, the home similarly emerged for many as a central site of safety and autonomy, though interdependence was consistently framed as relational rather than solitary. As one participant explained, "I live on my own, but my sister is my key worker" (Robbie, ID, 341–342).

Others described how transitions in housing arrangements shaped their opportunities for autonomy within supported environments:

> Er, and then I was given an opportunity to learn how to live independently, from moving

> from a big home er, home to a smaller, to a smaller semi-detached house. (Martin, ID, 231–233)

Beyond the home, neighbourhood familiarity played a key role in sustaining belonging across both groups. Repeated encounters with neighbours generated a sense of mutual recognition and informal care. One LGBT+ participant described how everyday familiarity fostered reassurance and collective watchfulness:

> it's not a significant event to bump into one of my neighbours because, erm, it happens so frequently, so there's that kind of, erm, er, ease of familiarity … it makes us feel, erm, like we're not just on our own. (Timothy, LGBT+, 313–318)

Similarly, ID participants emphasised continuity and recognition within local environments, often anchored in long-standing relationships:

> I've still got the same friend group as I've had since school. I still know the same neighbours … that's what benefited me. (Bob, ID, 355–358)

Within these familiar spaces, micro-interactions shaped whether belonging was affirmed or undermined, exposing how ageism intersected with sexual identity and other forms of difference in particular socio-spatial contexts. For LGBT+ participants, such interactions frequently revealed how age, sexuality, and gender intersected in public and semi-public settings. One participant reflected on how everyday visibility in local public spaces required subtle negotiation, particularly in expressing affection in routine neighbourhood settings:

"I don't think I'm really visibly gay walking along out there. It's not like- And, erm- But I think if I was, I would be probably a little bit more hesitant. Like, we don't hold hands walking along 'cause we just don't' " (Harper, LGBT+, 129–131).

In institutional contexts, micro-interactions could be particularly damaging, as subtle forms of exclusion persisted despite formal commitments to equality:

> I didn't advertise my sexuality in college, um, especially not midwifery, because I overheard someone being very anti lesbian in a conversation in the ladies toilets one day in college, and I was not happy to come out to anybody in my course. That's the story of my life, in and out of the closet … in and out. (Magpie, LGBT+, 469–474)

Beyond such everyday encounters, institutional cultures more broadly reinforced professional vulnerability and exclusion:

> … midwives aren't very nice to lesbians … They think the sexual predators and we shouldn't be midwives. My life's calling is to be a midwife, and they don't like lesbians … So I stayed in the closet quite a long time as a midwife. It made me too vulnerable not to. (Magpie, LGBT+, 474–479)

Conversely, moments of recognition – often quiet and fleeting – could transform ordinary spaces into sites of belonging. One lesbian participant described a routine high street café encounter as affirming through simple gestures with other older lesbians through a "little nod and a nice smile" and an "'oh, look at them'" (Adele, LGBT+, 493–495).

For participants with ID, micro-interactions were frequently articulated through being greeted, listened to, and treated as an equal. Feeling welcome was often described in simple terms "they always say good morning and hello" (Marie, ID, 36–37) while being listened to signalled dignity and inclusion in that they "were respected, listened to, important" (Martin, ID, 466–467).

By contrast, exclusion was experienced when voices were dismissed or ignored: "they just didn't listen" (Marie, ID, 773).

Returning to familiar community spaces following disruption (such as illness) highlighted the importance of continuity in these interactions:

> … the gyms were a massive part of my life and to be able to go back there and be greeted the way I was, exactly the same … I feel safe, I feel comfortable. (Bob, ID, 515–519)

Meanwhile, across both groups, everyday practices including gardening, shopping, walking, attending clubs and exercising were narrated as expressions of agency embedded within supportive social environments rather than isolated acts of independence. These practices were deeply temporal, shaped by repetition, memory and cumulative life-course experiences from experiences of "finally putting down roots" having "moved 32 times" (Magpie, LGBT+, 835–836) to "I've been coming here … for more than ten years" (Johnny, ID, 315–316).

In essence, these findings demonstrate that belonging in later-life is produced through the interaction of familiar spaces and everyday micro-relations. Rather than being secured through formal age-friendly interventions alone, inclusion is enacted through routine, recognition, and relational care across ordinary places. These accounts emphasise the need to understand age-friendliness as a lived, negotiated and place-based process – one sustained through the mundane but consequential practices of everyday life.

Agency, resistance and claiming space

Agency was rarely expressed through formal activism alone. Rather, it emerged through sustained, often emotionally costly efforts to negotiate exclusion, resist misrecognition and assert belonging within spaces structured by unequal power relations, including the quieter practices in the quotidian lives of LGBT+ people (Fish et al., 2018). Such acts of agency were shaped by place, institutional context and life-course timing, and frequently involved strategic compromises rather than straightforward empowerment.

For many LGBT+ participants, agency was enacted in response to exclusion within spaces presumed to be inclusive. One bisexual participant described marginalisation within gay social spaces that challenged their legitimacy and right to belong. This individual reflected on repeated encounters with biphobia within Manchester's gay scene:

> There's this thing about bisexuality being a phase … the only real prejudice I've had for being bisexual was in the gay community in Manchester … assumption that there is no such thing as a bisexual man, it's a gay man who's pretending or living with the privilege of being married but actually it's a sham marriage … that's why I started, I wear that badge saying, still bisexual you know 40, married 40 years thank you very much and it hasn't changed my sexuality believe it or not um cause why would it. (Ralph, LGBT+, 312–321)

Rather than withdrawing entirely from these spaces, this participant described adopting visible, symbolic strategies of resistance, including wearing a badge asserting his bisexual identity across age and marital status. Such actions reflect efforts to claim space within communities that simultaneously offered belonging and exclusion, challenging fixed identity hierarchies embedded within ostensibly inclusive places.

For some trans participants, agency was often constrained by workplace structures, healthcare systems, and anticipated vulnerabilities in later-life. One participant described how decisions about gender-affirming care were shaped by employment precarity and the threat of institutional retaliation:

> And I remember when I was still working in retail and the appointments coming up at the

> [Place] to look towards full surgery. And it was like, I can't tell my employer and I did take a sick day to go up for an appointment … When I came back, I was told if I had any more sick time, I'd lose my job. (Michael, LGBT+, 114–119)

Here, agency bore the form of strategic compromise, protective withdrawal and later-life advocacy. Some participants engaged in research, policy work and guideline development to influence systems from which they felt profoundly vulnerable, reframing resistance as both personal survival and collective responsibility.

Among participants with ID, agency was most clearly articulated through self-advocacy and collective resistance to institutional power. Many described long histories of being denied choice in housing, care and everyday decision-making. One participant recalled residential care environments as deeply disempowering:

> And, and people with Intellectual Disabilities who lived in residential care in, in where I live we, we were as knowledgeable, as knowledgeable it was just that they, they, they treated us as like kids and it well hurt. (Martin, ID, 271–273)

> We stood up for ourselves and said, 'Enough is enough, we want out' and er, er, where we should have got the right care to support to actually move. (Martin, ID, 276–278)

Following such experiences, involvement in self-advocacy organisations, particularly "People First" (Smiffy, ID, 24), functioned as a relational space where confidence was rebuilt and civic presence reclaimed through the everyday interactions and relationships formed within these communities. Participants described advocacy as a cumulative process through which agency was learned, rehearsed and sustained over time:

> [Organisation] know about my story and that but this, what we're talking about, about indulgent and about the older people, why, why I come on board on this because I know deep down and not enough old people who are learning disabled adults never get the right support. (Victoria, ID, 52–56)

Participants framed advocacy not only as speaking up, but as gaining and sustaining access to institutional spaces:

> You know something to try to but once the door is open I like to try and make sure that they stay open. It's not just a two-minute thing, it can't be, it can't be allowed … as you just said there it's okay opening doors but it's keeping them open. (Bob, ID, 214–216)

Across these diverse narratives, it is clear that agency was relational, uneven and continually negotiated within power-laden places. These accounts challenge age-friendly frameworks that equate inclusion with access alone. Instead, they highlight the ongoing work required to claim, defend and sustain belonging across the life-course, especially for those whose identities and bodies remain subject to institutional scrutiny and exclusion.

Digital spaces as sites of connection, exposure, safety and mistrust

Digital spaces were found to function as ambivalent sites of connection, protection and risk. Online environments enabled forms of participation, identity exploration and community-building that were not always accessible offline, particularly in later-life or under conditions of vulnerability. At the same time, uneven digital access, platform complexity and mistrust of online exposure produced new exclusions that mirrored – and in some cases intensified – existing inequalities. Digital engagement was thus deeply shaped by place, embodiment, support structures and life-course timing.

For some LGBT+ participants, digital spaces offered a sense of safety and control, particularly during periods of heightened vulnerability. One participant described how remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic transformed home into a secure and empowering space, allowing professional confidence to flourish without the embodied risks associated with in-person environments:

> I suddenly felt really, really safe … at home. I was confident doing meetings online, delivering training, writing policies. I didn't have to be in a situation that I'd never before perceived as vulnerable or uncomfortable. (Michael, LGBT+, 236–243)

Here, digital mediation enabled agency by buffering participants from hostile or unpredictable social settings. Yet this sense of protection was not unproblematic. The same participant reflected on how social media environments contributed to the circulation of prejudice within care-sector contexts, noting how algorithmic reinforcement shaped attitudes and behaviours:

> You buy into what you see on your social media feed … the more you look at it, the more you get fed that. So there's a part of it that kind of goes, it's hardly surprising. (Michael, LGBT+, 324–328)

Digital spaces thus simultaneously mitigated and reproduced vulnerability – offering distance from harm while amplifying misinformation and stigma.

For others, online environments played a critical role in later-life identity affirmation and community formation. Participants who came out later in life described digital platforms as providing language, recognition and collective support that had been absent earlier in their lives. One participant explained how joining an online group for "late bloomers" facilitated connection and validation:

> I joined a, an online group quite recently, a Facebook group called Late Bloomers which is specifically for, er, women including trans women who've come out later in life. (Jules, LGBT+, 75–77)

> Being then deluged by huge numbers of women … being supportive and saying … how connected they felt. (Jules, LGBT+, 83–85)

Reflecting retrospectively, the same participant contrasted this experience with earlier life stages marked by isolation and informational scarcity whereby they "didn't have any words to describe it" and "didn't have an internet to find out information or get support" (Jules, LGBT+, 138–139). Such insights highlight how digital spaces reconfigure temporal dimensions of belonging, enabling forms of recognition that were historically unavailable.

At the same time, many LGBT+ participants expressed ambivalence about contemporary digital cultures, particularly in relation to dating apps and the decline of in-person sociality. Several contrasted earlier forms of embodied togetherness with what they perceived as fragmented or transactional online interactions. One participant reflected:

> Because, you know, at that time [1997] when we, we didn't have social media, we didn't have all these, you know – You know the, the only way you're gonna talk to people is you have to go there and talk to people and exchange numbers. That's the only way you have to, can (Int: right), you can talk to people, yeah. And I feel that that is missing today. I feel that, um, that togetherness is not as strong as before. (Tokunaga, LGBT+, 188–192)

Framing this as a shift from embodied, face-to-face interaction to digitally mediated connection, one participant concluded that "the [dating] apps probably killed everything" (Tokunaga, LGBT+, 202).

Others actively rejected app-based dating, citing discomfort with "wham bam thank you ma'am" cultures and preferring slower, relational forms of connection (Andrew, LGBT+, 957–961). These reflections point to generational tensions in how digital tools are experienced, adopted or resisted.

Among participants with ID, digital engagement was even more uneven, shaped by literacy, affordability, rurality, platform design and reliance on support networks. Some participants had little or no access to the internet or smartphones, often due to difficulties associated with, internet connection, financial constraints, ability to manage devices, reading, typing or navigating interfaces:

> Don't have internet at home, don't know how to use smartphone due to not being able to read and type. (Robbie, ID, 907–909)

Others described fluctuating confidence in that of being highly competent on certain platforms while finding others inaccessible or intimidating. One participant explained that "Zoom, she can do great on her own, but Teams … she doesn't know where to press" (Marie, ID, 191–192).

Digital participation was shaped by platform-specific demands and uneven skill transfer, where learning was incremental, scaffolded and seldom formally acknowledged.

Importantly, digital spaces were most meaningful for ID participants when they were relationally anchored and supported. "WhatsApp," in particular, emerged as a preferred medium for maintaining friendships, coordinating advocacy work and checking in on wellbeing (Lisah, ID, 441).

Meanwhile, during the pandemic, online group chats also became sites of informal leadership and care:

> We jumped on the group hub … I was the lead on it … and it was really good because I learned so much about what people's experiences were. (Bob, ID, 107–120)

However, mistrust of online spaces was also evident. Some participants expressed fear of online gaming or uncertainty about who might be listening during digital interactions, preferring face-to-face communication where possible as revealed by one individual:

> Sometimes I-I find-I find it difficult, I find it difficult on, online cause you don't know, you don't know who to talk to do ya, online I'd rather speak face to face really. (Hermione, ID, 360–379).

Others highlighted how digital systems for completing forms online, particularly in health and welfare contexts, created barriers rather than access:

> I'm quite independent when I want to be … because when it comes to form filling in and understanding form filling in, I'm the opposite. (Victoria, ID, 429–430)

Across intersecting identities, digital spaces did not function as neutral tools but as socially and institutionally mediated environments that could enable connection, intensify exposure or reinforce exclusion. Engagement was shaped by support infrastructures, life-course transitions and perceived risks, highlighting how digital inclusion remains uneven and relational rather than universal. These findings complicate assumptions within age-friendly and digitally inclusive frameworks, revealing digital participation as an ongoing negotiation – one that can both expand and constrain possibilities for belonging, safety and agency in later-life.

Discussion and implications

The analysis advances a core aim of IncludeAge: to reframe age-friendly

urbanism through the IPP by showing how ageing, identity and belonging are negotiated in everyday socio-spatial contexts. Drawing on co-produced life-course narratives with mid-older adults with ID and LGBT+ identities, we demonstrate that inclusion extends beyond accessibility and service provision, unfolding within relational and power-laden environments over time.

The article makes four contributions: it extends the IPP as a framework for analysing intersections of age, identity and place; mobilises a life-course lens to illuminate cumulative disadvantage and resilience; underscores the epistemic significance of co-produced research; and introduces a conceptual theory of change (TOC) to inform more reflexive age-friendly planning and governance.

Theoretical contribution: Extending IPP within urban ageing debates

This study advances the IPP by positioning it more explicitly within urban ageing debates and demonstrating its value for rethinking age-friendly environments. The findings foreground everyday socio-spatial negotiations through which identity, power and ageing are co-constituted, advancing a relational intersectional understanding of belonging. In line with Crenshaw (1991), the analysis highlights how overlapping systems of power shape inclusion and exclusion, challenging homogenous constructions of people with ID and LGBT+ identities. Extending earlier IPP work focused primarily on relationships between identity, place and power (Fang et al., 2023), this study demonstrates the framework's value for interrogating age-friendly governance and planning processes, showing how they interact with cumulative life-course disadvantage across hybrid physical-digital environments.

Importantly, place is not merely a physical container but a socially constructed, historically layered and emotionally charged terrain (Fang et al., 2023). Yet, much of the AFCC literature remains oriented towards environmental domains, service access and functional design (Buffel and Phillipson, 2018), often overlooking the psychological, cultural and digital dimensions of inclusion across urban, suburban and rural contexts. Such approaches risk neglecting how stigma and invisibility shape belonging, particularly for mid-older adults whose identities have long been marginalised. As Menezes et al. (2021) note, ageing can render individuals unseen and limit their capacity to effect change within the spaces they inhabit. The IPP addresses this gap by examining how age intersects with sexuality, gender identity, disability and socio-economic status within specific socio-spatial and digital contexts, revealing how recognition and misrecognition unfold across everyday environments.

Additionally, the analysis demonstrates that inclusion is rarely secured once and for all; it is continually negotiated through micro-interactions, institutional encounters and life-course transitions across psychosocial, cultural, digital and health domains (Sixsmith et al., 2025). Spaces presumed to be inclusive, such as LGBT+ venues or disability services, contained internal hierarchies, while ordinary settings (i.e., homes, gyms, community centres) often fostered profound belonging. The IPP thus shifts attention from formal infrastructures to relational practices, revealing how power circulates through everyday encounters.

In extending the IPP, the study contributes to ageing and socio-spatial debates in three key respects: it reframes age-friendliness as a dynamic, relational achievement across urban, suburban and rural contexts; positions intersectionality as foundational to understanding later-life experiences of place and foregrounds temporality, highlighting how cumulative histories of stigma and resilience shape present

spatial engagements. Together, these insights position the IPP as a bridge between intersectional theory and socio-spatial ageing scholarship, illuminating how inclusion is lived and unevenly distributed across the life-course and diverse settlement contexts.

Life-course (dis)advantage, resilience and spatial inequality

A second contribution of this study lies in advancing a life-course urbanism that foregrounds cumulative (dis)advantage and resilience as spatially embedded processes (Dannefer, 2003). By focusing on mid-older adults aged 40+, we illuminate how experiences of exclusion and belonging are sedimented over time, shaping how individuals encounter spaces and places in later-life. This threshold enables attention to formative processes of ageing that are often overlooked within age-friendly research, which tends to focus on older populations at later chronological ages. For participants with ID and LGBT+ identities, later-life was experienced as continuous with earlier trajectories of stigma, adaptation, mobility and resistance, rather than beginning at an arbitrary chronological threshold.

Findings demonstrate that cumulative disadvantage operates through repeated encounters with institutional gatekeeping, misrecognition and structural constraint (Crystal et al., 2017). For LGBT+ participants, early experiences of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (whether in schools, workplaces, religious institutions, healthcare systems or online) shaped long-term strategies of disclosure, withdrawal or selective visibility. Their expressed anticipatory fears about later-life care settings were not abstract anxieties but grounded in decades of navigating hostile or ambivalent environments. Similarly, participants with ID described enduring histories of bullying, being denied choice in housing, education and everyday decision-making. While not a new findings in itself, institutional infantilisation, restricted autonomy and bureaucratic barriers have long affected the lives of people with ID (Safta-Zecheria, 2018). The analysis revealed how such experiences accumulate across the life-course, influencing present-day confidence, trust and expectations of participation.

Yet, cumulative processes were not solely detrimental (Crystal, 2020). Findings also highlight collective resilience cultivated through sustained engagement in community networks, advocacy groups and informal support systems. Participation in ID and LGBT+ organisations enabled marginalisation to be transformed into expertise, fostering confidence, civic voice and relational infrastructures of care. These networks functioned as intergenerational spaces where experiential knowledge was validated and shared. Resilience thus emerged not as an individual trait but as a socially produced capacity (Golden and Petrone, 2021), embedded in relationships and place over time.

A life-course lens unsettles static notions of age-friendly planning. Participants navigated employment precarity, health transitions, caregiving, shifting digital environments and evolving social networks, moving between spaces as circumstances changed. Ageing was experienced not as a uniform stage but as a dynamic process shaped by timing, opportunity structures and prior inequalities. Policies focused narrowly on "older age" risk overlooking the earlier decades in which disadvantage and resilience are formed and carried forward. While the inclusion of participants aged 40+ broadens conventional age-friendly understandings of later life, it also highlights that many of the processes shaping age-friendly inclusion emerge well before individuals are typically targeted by age-related policy interventions.

Conceptualising ageing through cumulative (dis)advantage extends AFCC beyond

late-life service provision, demanding attention to how earlier exclusions reverberate into mid- and later-life. A life-course socio-spatial lens reframes age-friendliness as a temporal project, recognising that conditions for inclusion are built, eroded and renegotiated across decades and across spaces and places, rather than delivered at a fixed age threshold.

Methodological contribution: Co-produced knowledge and epistemic inclusion

A third contribution of this study is methodological and epistemological. The use of CBPR and reflexive co-analysis was not a procedural addition to a conventional design, but a conceptual commitment to epistemic inclusion. In extending debates on age-friendly urbanism, we argue that knowledge about ageing and place remains partial when produced without the interpretive authority of those most affected by exclusion.

Marginalised mid-older adults do not simply provide data; they hold situated knowledge about how power operates in everyday places and spaces (Harding, 2004). By involving CAG members, co-researchers, participants and community partners in shaping research questions, conducting interviews, interpreting themes and reflecting on emerging findings, we were able to disrupt conventional hierarchies between researcher and researched (Littlechild et al., 2015). This approach foregrounded experiential expertise as analytically generative rather than anecdotal.

Importantly, the prominence of themes such as micro-interactions, relational safety, digital ambivalence and the emotional labour of claiming space emerged through co-lytic dialogue. These dimensions are frequently overlooked in technocratic age-friendly frameworks, evident in the WHO (2007) agenda, that privilege infrastructure, service provision and measurable accessibility indicators. Participatory design enabled attention to subtle, embodied and affective dimensions of belonging, that is, how being greeted, laughed at, listened to or ignored accumulates into inclusion or exclusion.

Co-production also reshaped what counted as evidence. Rather than privileging formal policy sites or institutional settings, participants directed analytic focus towards ordinary, routine environments such as gyms, WhatsApp groups, local clubs, bus stops, online forums, public transport, where age-friendliness is lived and negotiated. This methodological stance aligns with the IPP, which insists that power and identity are enacted through everyday spatial relations.

Methodological innovation here is inseparable from theoretical advancement. By embedding epistemic inclusion within the research process, this study shows that extending age-friendly urbanism requires not only new concepts but new modes of knowledge production. In turn, this strengthens the empirical and ethical foundations for making AFCC more reflexive, intersectionally responsive, and grounded in lived realities.

A theory of change for reflexive age-friendly urbanism and planning

The fourth contribution of this article is the development of a conceptual TOC that extends the AFCC agenda through the IPP. The TOC emerged through an iterative process of interpretation informed by the study findings, collaborative discussions with co-researchers and CAGs, and engagement with age-friendly and socio-spatial scholarship. Rather than proposing a new policy model, it clarifies the causal logic linking participatory knowledge production to relational inclusion and longer-term structural change, addressing the "missing middle" between age-friendly aspirations and lived

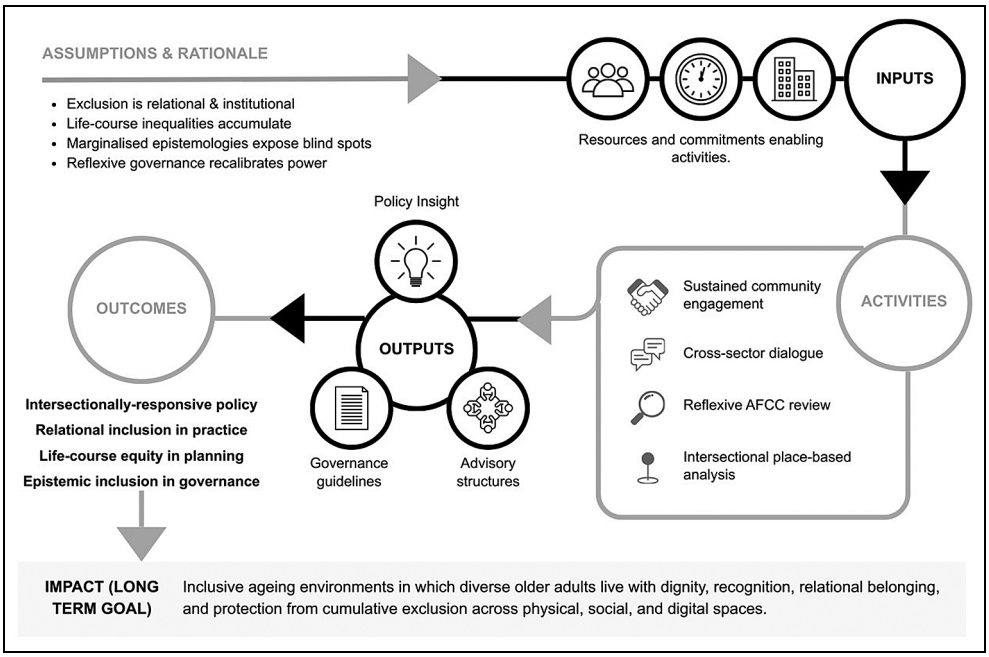


Figure 1. IncludeAge theory of change diagram.

experiences of belonging (Woolrych et al., 2022). As outlined in Figure 1, with practical guidance for planning found in Supplemental Material 4, the TOC demonstrates how age-friendly urbanism can evolve reflexively within planning while retaining its core commitments.

The TOC reorients the age-friendly agenda by positioning relational inclusion, life-course dynamics and epistemic inclusion as central to structural transformation. It recognises that everyday practices of recognition sustain belonging, that cumulative disadvantage accrues across decades through institutional and socio-economic processes, and that effective policy depends on co-produced knowledge that renders these dynamics visible.

This framework is conceptual rather than prescriptive or predictive. It does not replace AFCC but deepens its reflexivity by clarifying inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, thereby strengthening evaluative capacity while remaining adaptable across diverse socio-spatial contexts. For local authorities, this entails moving beyond checklist compliance towards embedding life-course analysis, co-produced knowledge and relational inclusion within planning processes across urban, suburban and rural settings. Evaluation correspondingly shifts from monitoring domain indicators alone to assessing how policies redistribute power, address cumulative disadvantage and sustain belonging over time. The governance shift implied is from technocratic implementation to reflexive, intersectionally informed planning.

In this sense, IncludeAge does not expand the AFCC checklist but recalibrates its interpretive lens. Extended through the IPP, age-friendly urbanism becomes less a set of infrastructural adjustments and more a relational, life-course-sensitive process of negotiating dignity and belonging within power-laden places.

Strengths and limitations

This study has several strengths. It draws on a substantial qualitative dataset of 153 life-course interviews across urban, suburban and rural contexts in Great Britain, enabling insight into both shared socio-spatial mechanisms and distinct experiences among mid-older adults with ID and/or those with LGBT+ identities. Its community-based participatory and co-analytic design deepened interpretation, surfacing everyday spaces, micro-interactions, and institutional dynamics often overlooked in conventional research. Integrating the IPP provides a coherent framework linking empirical findings to broader socio-spatial ageing debates, including the development of a TOC.

Limitations should also be noted. The study is confined to Great Britain, and transferability requires caution. AFCC implementation varies across welfare regimes, planning systems, and political cultures, so the relational and governance shifts identified here may unfold differently elsewhere. While diverse, the sample does not capture the full heterogeneity within either group, with some intersections (e.g., ethnicity, migration status, socioeconomic position) underrepresented. The analysis reflects one phase of a longitudinal project; future waves are needed to examine how belonging and exclusion evolve over time. As with all qualitative research, findings are interpretive rather than statistically generalisable.

Overall, the study is theoretically generative and empirically grounded, pointing to the value of further comparative, contextual and longitudinal inquiry.

Concluding remarks

Age-friendly urbanism requires a more reflexive and relational foundation to respond to diverse ageing populations. Drawing on the IPP, our findings indicate that belonging in later-life is negotiated through everyday spaces, micro-interactions, and constrained acts of agency across the life-course. For mid-older people with ID and mid-older LGBT+ adults, inclusion depends not only on accessibility but also on recognition, power-sharing and the capacity to claim space within unequal socio-spatial environments. By extending the IPP within urban ageing debates, foregrounding cumulative life-course processes and demonstrating the value of co-produced knowledge, this study advances a more intersectional understanding of age-friendly environments. Extending the AFCC agenda therefore requires deeper commitments to intersectionality, life-course awareness and epistemic inclusion, alongside planning and governance approaches that recognise belonging as a relational and ongoing process rather than a fixed policy outcome.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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