



Age-friendly attributes of a rural town in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

The rapid ageing of rural populations has highlighted the importance of ensuring environments are appropriate for the changing needs and preferences of older adults ageing in rural communities. Recent evidence indicates understanding existing characteristics of rural communities may contribute to the successful implementation and sustainability of age-friendly programs. Drawing on a case study this paper explored older adults ($n = 15$), and retail and service operators' ($n = 16$) perceptions and experiences of existing attributes that contribute to the age-friendliness of a small rural town in Aotearoa New Zealand. Four themes captured existing age-friendly attributes: community stewardship, older adults as custodians of their environment, strong social networks and involvement, and community responsiveness to older adults. The findings contribute to what is known about rural age-friendliness and will inform policy makers planning age-friendly programs. Building on existing attributes should facilitate implementation and promote the sustainability of local age-friendly initiatives. To avoid undermining existing community strengths, older adults and stakeholders from rural communities should be actively engaged in planning and implementing age-friendly initiatives from the outset.

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1. Introduction

With population ageing expected to be a dominant demographic trend in developed countries during the twenty-first century (Skinner et al., 2018), policymakers at global, national and local levels are being compelled to contemplate the suitability of environments for the changing needs and preferences of older adults. Enabling environments are known to be more inclusive and promote healthier and more active lifestyles: thus, improving well-being in older adulthood (World Health Organization, 2015). The World Health Organization (2007) *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide* has provided policy direction for nations to create environments that are inclusive of older adults and enable them to age in place in communities of choice. While many countries have started to implement age-friendly programs, most of this work has been undertaken in large urban centres or at a regional level. Less attention

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has been given to the age-friendliness of small towns and rural places. Recent evidence on the success of age-friendly initiatives in rural communities highlights the importance of understanding individual community conditions that support the implementation and sustainability of rural age-friendly programs (McCrillis et al., 2021). What is lacking in the current research is older adults' perceptions and actual experiences of age-friendliness from diverse rural settings. Thus, the study's aim was to identify existing age-friendly attributes of a small rural town in Aotearoa New Zealand from the perspectives and experiences of older adults and local retail and service operators who serve them. The findings will inform rural communities and local and central government in Aotearoa New Zealand and other countries when implementing age-friendly programs.

2. Background

2.1. The age-friendly agenda

The global adoption of the WHO age-friendly agenda following its launch in 2007 responds to the challenges and opportunities of rapid population ageing and a broadening of responsibility for healthy ageing beyond the individual (World Health Organization, 2015). The age-friendly framework reflects attention to more inclusive and enabling environments that support older adults' aspirations to remain connected to their communities (World Health Organization, 2007). The eight domains of the framework (outdoor spaces and buildings; transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; civic participation and employment; communication and information; and community support and health services) were subsequently organised into a checklist of features that reflect barriers and priorities for age-friendliness. While designed to assist communities to implement age-friendly programs, a checklist approach can misrepresent age-friendliness as a standard to be achieved rather than a continuous improvement process (Liddle et al., 2014; Plouffe et al., 2016). The engagement of older adults in assessing community age-friendliness provides a more bottom-up and interactional perspective (Buffel et al., 2019; Menec and Brown, 2022).

Ideally, age-friendly inquiries should capture the dynamic and highly contextual experiences of older adults in their familiar environments (Keating et al., 2013; Plouffe et al., 2016). Geographical gerontologists have illuminated the importance of understanding the contexts of ageing. This points towards understanding the mutually constitutive process where older adults' actions in their environments influence the places where they live and simultaneously shape their experiences of ageing (Winterton, 2021). Place integration theory proposes older adults are continually measuring their changing capabilities with the changing demands of their environment when making decisions about ageing in place. (Cutchin, 2016).

Rural regions in developed countries are experiencing population ageing at a faster pace than urban centres. While increased longevity and declining birth rates are significant factors in population ageing, the in-migration of people during peri-retirement years and the out-migration of younger people in pursuit of education and employment opportunities substantially contribute to the disproportionate percentage of older adults ageing in non-urban communities (Berry, 2021). Further, the rationalisation and centralisation of rural services precipitated by neo-liberal policies, progressively introduced from the 1980's, and disestablishment of core industries in some rural towns has precipitated mass out-migration of working-age adults effecting an increased proportion of older adults (Wiersma and Koster, 2013).

The gradual reduction in infrastructure investment and closure of key services such as post offices, retail stores and public transport in rural environments has impacted access to core services for older adults ageing in rural communities (Halseth et al., 2019; Keating et al., 2013; Skinner and Winterton, 2017). These conditions and the high proportion of older adults ageing in rural communities prompted development of

the *Age-friendly Rural and Remote Communities: A Guide* to provide practical guidance specifically for improving rural age-friendliness (Federal Provincial Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors, 2007).

Some rural areas, including the study setting, are undergoing growth-related pressure on existing services and infrastructure associated with in-migration including older adults in peri-retirement years and older adults choosing to age in place (Keating et al., 2013). Motivation to migrate to rural areas during peri-retirement years is multi-factorial. Although abundant natural amenities are known to attract migrants, lifestyle change, return migration, family connections, and affordable housing are all factors informing decisions to migrate to rural areas (Heley and Woods, 2021). The projected increase in rural ageing as a result of in-migration and ageing in place trends is expected to increase demand for local rural services and draws attention to the age-friendliness of rural communities (World Health Organization, 2015).

2.2. Rural age-friendliness

Rural age-friendly research has highlighted specific environmental characteristics that can both enhance and challenge age-friendliness. Demographic characteristics, such as a small population, restricted the range of services and opportunities to participate (Novek and Menec, 2014; Spina and Menec, 2015; Vidovičová, 2018). Equally, the small-town ambience associated with a sense of belonging and feelings of attachment was valued by older adults ageing in small-scale rural communities and offset some of the service deficits (Menec et al., 2014; Spina and Menec, 2015; Walsh et al., 2014). The composition of rural communities has changed in a relatively short time due to demographic 'churn' from the in-migration of newcomers and out-migration of younger people. While these changes have been positive in increasing socioeconomic and cultural diversity, they have also altered social cohesion and long-established social rituals in rural communities which can negatively impact on age-friendliness (Walsh et al., 2014). Thus, the interrelatedness of rural community characteristics and the heterogeneity of rural communities needs to be considered.

Age composition affected rural age-friendliness. Having a high proportion of older adults in rural retirement communities could increase the range of services that were planned and prioritized to meet local demand (Menec et al., 2015; Menec et al., 2016; Spina and Menec, 2015). These rural communities strived to balance the age composition by focusing on retaining and attracting younger people to ensure their economic sustainability (Spina and Menec, 2015). Achieving this balance could provide opportunities for intergenerational reciprocity which increased age-friendliness. For example, younger people exchanged assistance with outdoor manual work for informal child minding from their older neighbors (Novek and Menec, 2014).

Geographic characteristics impacted age-friendliness. Long geographical distances from larger urban centres and widely dispersed populations negatively impacted on remote rural communities' age-friendliness (Menec et al., 2015). Remote communities typically struggled with some aspects of age-friendliness due to poor access to health care and other essential services. Decisions to age in place or relocate were highly influenced by access to transport options and essential services (Keating et al., 2013). Although it was assumed older adults living in rural communities proximal to larger centres had access to urban services, accessibility may be challenged for these older adults when driving was no longer an option (Menec et al., 2015). To promote age-friendliness in these less remote rural locations, where there was high car reliance, walkability, accessibility and transport options also needed attention.

Climatic and topographical conditions impacted on rural age-friendliness. Older adults living in low lying coastal regions were vulnerable to the effects of climate change such as flooding and erosion (Krawchenko et al., 2016). Equally, extreme weather events were problematic for older adults in remote rural locations (Novek and

Menec, 2014). However, a sense of community associated with strong social ties and shared history in remote communities provided benefits to age-friendliness as residents including older adults were inclined to support each other during unexpected events (John and Gunter, 2016; Menec et al., 2014). Physically checking on older neighbors in remote rural areas in New Zealand was considered essential during critical weather events as phone access was often disrupted (Neville et al., 2021).

Features of the physical and service environments presented the greatest challenges to rural age-friendliness. Lack of or inadequate maintenance of physical infrastructure impacted on accessibility (Hancock et al., 2019), limited transport options reduced opportunities to participate (Neville et al., 2018; Winterton, 2016), unsuitable housing options challenged ageing in place (Novek and Menec, 2014) and inequitable access to health care services disadvantaged rurally living older adults (Menec et al., 2015; Neville et al., 2020). On the other hand, conditions in the social environment counteracted some of the challenges to rural age-friendliness. For example, information networks improved social participation and access to services (Colibaba et al., 2020) and reciprocity enacted within established social networks and impromptu assistance from community members provided informal social support (Anderson et al., 2018; Bell and Menec, 2015; Walsh et al., 2014).

Resourcing and support for age-friendly programs implemented regionwide tended to favor larger urban centres. Additionally, central and local government attitudes towards older adults has a bearing on the allocation of funding and availability of resources in rural areas to support their changing needs as they aged (Phillipson and Scharf, 2005). Rural communities typically had less access to community-level resources associated with age-friendly sustainability such as collaborative partnerships and local council involvement. Local and central government support was identified as crucial in a process evaluation of age-friendly initiatives in New Zealand (Neville et al., 2021). Involving small rural communities had benefits for successful implementation and sustainability when planning age-friendly programs (McCrillis et al., 2021). Collaboration in the early stages could strengthen geographical connectivity and mitigate some of the disadvantages rural communities faced.

Building on existing strengths and considering the unique characteristics of rural communities when implementing age-friendly interventions was highlighted in a recent international scoping review of rural age-friendliness (Montayre et al., 2022). This reflects recent evidence suggesting existing community attributes may significantly impact the implementation and sustainability of age-friendly programs in small rural communities (Colibaba et al., 2020; McCrillis et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2019, 2021). When evaluating the impact of rural age-friendly initiatives, community leaders and committee members identified a sense of community, local pride, shared vision, volunteer capacity, leadership, effective partnerships and collaborations, and local government involvement were key factors for implementing age-friendly initiatives and their long-term sustainability (McCrillis et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2019).

Most of the rural age-friendly research has been conducted in Europe and North America suggesting a need for more place-based evidence from diverse contexts. More specifically, the implications of the current body of research suggest a rural age-friendly agenda incorporating the unique contexts and strengths of rural communities should be the foundation for implementing and sustaining rural age-friendly initiatives. Most rural age-friendly studies have focused on the perspectives of leaders and administrators (Menec et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2014). Few studies have specifically sought the age-friendly perspectives and everyday experiences of rurally-living older adults (Colibaba et al., 2020; Novek and Menec, 2014). Additionally, little is known on how retail and service operators who serve older adults perceive and promote age-friendliness. The current study seeks to address these gaps by providing place-based community level evidence

on rural age-friendliness in a small rural town in Aotearoa New Zealand. Beyond interest to the local community, and local and central government in New Zealand for implementing local age-friendly initiatives, the findings will contribute to international rural age-friendly policy and practice and rural ageing scholarship. Thus, the aim was to identify existing age-friendly attributes of a small rural town from the perspectives and experiences of older adults and local retail and service operators who serve them. The research question posed was, 'what are the perceptions and experiences of rurally-living older adults and the retail and service operators who serve them of the age-friendliness of their community'.

3. The context and setting

Aotearoa New Zealand is in the early stages of age-friendly development, becoming an affiliated member of the WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities (GNAFCC) in 2018 (Blakey and Clews, 2020). Some cities and regions in New Zealand, including Auckland, have initiated age-friendly programs and have joined the GNAFCC. While the Age-friendly Auckland Tāmaki Makaurau Tauawhi Kaumatua program has been implemented regionwide, little is known about the age-friendliness of rural communities within the Auckland region. The town of Warkworth was selected as the study setting as it represents a rapidly ageing community with a high percentage of people aged 65 years and over (27%), compared with 15% for the whole of New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). Further, Warkworth's population (5,586) has been growing rapidly over the past decade; increasing by 37% between 2013 and 2018 and has been earmarked for substantial growth (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). According to population projections, associated with future urban development, the town is expected to further increase by 20,000 people over the next 20 years (Auckland Council, 2018). Warkworth's proximity to coastal areas and accessible beaches attracts a large influx of visitors to the area especially during summer months. Further, the area has become a popular retirement destination. Warkworth is situated 57 Kilometres north of Auckland City centre. It is part of the greater Auckland Council area and the largest and most northern town within the predominantly rural Rodney Local Board area.

Warkworth is one of the oldest towns in New Zealand with the first European settlement recorded as 1843. Māori had settlements in nearby coastal areas and the Mahurangi River provided canoe access to inland resources. The commercial and residential areas of the town have been constructed mainly around the town centre and the Mahurangi river with newer sub-divisions constructed on the outer limits of the town. The topography of the town is predominantly rolling hills with the surrounding area mainly rural land and farms. The river is a central feature of the town with recent improvements to the walkways and green spaces along the riverside. The town has many buildings and sites listed as places of historic heritage significance including a lime works and concrete dam, remnants of a once thriving cement industry in Warkworth. Many of the original buildings have been preserved including the Town Hall, the former Courthouse, the former post office and churches.

Warkworth has developed into an established service town providing a range of services, amenities and retail to surrounding smaller rural towns and villages as well as the farming community. With the expected increase in population, the priorities and opportunities for improving the age-friendliness for older adults ageing in place in the Warkworth area during this time of rapid development should be of interest to policymakers and planners. Further, community feedback following an earlier research project that explored 49 older adults' perceptions of engaging in this rural town (Neville et al., 2021), there was a strong mandate to undertake more in-depth research related to age-friendliness.

3.1. Consultation

Interest and support from the local community was integral to the development of the study design and recruitment process. The consultation process built on relationships established during the earlier research project. Meetings were held with the chairperson of the local board and the manager of the local business association to establish relationships with community leaders and to discuss the study's purpose and aim. The local iwi (extended kinship group) Ngāti Manuhiri was consulted in the early stages, and although interested in the study and the findings, they were not able to be directly involved at that time. A wide range of local community groups including Grey Power, SeniorNet, the Returned and Services Association, the bowling club, a local community liaison group and the local business association assisted with promoting the study to their members and recruitment of participants.

4. Research design and methods

This paper reports on the qualitative findings from a single exploratory case study. Walking interviews with older adults ($n = 15$) and face-to-face interviews with retail and service operators ($n = 16$) provided data on the perceptions and experiences of existing age-friendly attributes of their rural town. Relevant documents were reviewed to provide context and local information. The research question was informed by the WHO age-friendly framework, 'what are the perceptions and experiences of rurally-living older adults and the retail and service operators who serve them on the age-friendliness of their community'. A strengths-based approach was utilized to allow the local context, culture, values and established social networks to be identified. This approach recognizes the resourcefulness and agency of older adults and confronts negative attitudes and assumptions levelled at older adults that may impede development and implementation of health and social policies (Officer and de la Fuente-Nunez, 2018; Sao Jose et al., 2019).

4.1. Data collection

Following ethical approval from Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee, audio-recorded walking interviews with 15 older adults were undertaken. Walking interviews i.e., combining interviewing and participant observation (Carpiano, 2009), enabled direct observation and first-hand insight into the participants' experiences while out and about in their usual environments. Participants were recruited by promoting the study in the local community and to local groups' membership. Inclusion criteria were people aged 65 years and over and residing in a private dwelling (as owners or tenants) including independent-living retirement units within Warkworth or the surrounding area. Participants were required to move around the physical environment either walking or using a mobility device and participate in a 60-min interview while walking. Participants were invited to contact the researcher for information and the opportunity to ask questions before providing oral and written consent to undertake the audio-recorded interviews. Meetings to discuss, prepare and plan the walk took place prior to the interviews. Most participants gave some thought to the walking routes which tended to reflect their usual patterns and activities while in the town.

The interview style was conversational and unstructured allowing flexibility for participants to talk about their experiences as they came to mind or were triggered by cues in the environment. Observations by participants and the researcher provided prompts to discuss places and experiences and to guide further questions. Street names and specific places were recorded to enable locations and landmarks to be identified during the transcription of interviews and the walks were charted on a map of the township. Following interviews, time was allocated to debrief including clarifying any observations made during the walking interviews.

Face-to-face interviews with 16 retail and service operators were

designed to capture perceptions, attitudes and practices that contributed to age-friendliness. Participants were recruited utilizing publicly available contact information from local businesses, services and the Rodney Local Board. Inclusion criteria were being an owner or operator of a business or service in Warkworth and willingness to participate in a 30–45-min interview. An information sheet was emailed to participants with an opportunity for discussion and questions prior to providing informed consent for undertaking the audio-recorded interview. Publicly available documents including age-friendly policies and strategic plans from all levels of government, community consultation documents, minutes from council and local board meetings, national and local news media, and community group minutes and newsletters were also reviewed and analyzed.

4.2. Analysis

Audio recordings of the walking interviews and face-to-face interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and imported into NVivo (12 Plus). To ensure anonymity, participant's names were removed from interview transcripts and pseudonyms were assigned to walking interview participants before importing into NVivo. An iterative analytic process described by Miles et al. (2014) was employed to identify codes, categories and themes. This involved using abductive reasoning with movement between deductive and inductive analysis. The first cycle of coding was predominantly guided by deductive reasoning informed by the eight domains of the age-friendly framework.

Second level coding involved analysis of deeper meanings not adequately accounted for in the age-friendly domains, for example meanings associated with participants strong feelings about caring for their community and local responsiveness towards older adults. Detailed analytic memos were used to record coding decisions and the development of categories and themes. Codes were revised, condensed, grouped and regrouped. As codes were condensed, they were grouped into categories and tentative themes were considered by the research team. This stage involved a process of checking codes, categories and possible themes with the data sources. Thematic maps were created to record development of themes. Eventually, four themes were identified and agreed on.

5. Findings

Fifteen older adults aged 71–89 years (mean age 78.3 ± 4.89 years) participated in walking interviews between April–June 2019. Ten participants identified as female and five as male. All identified with European ethnicity. Most of the participants were able to walk independently. Two participants were reliant on mobility scooters to mobilize. Most relied on their own car for transport and were drivers (11) while four participants relied on other modes of transport that included other people driving them. The demographic data and profiles of the walking interview participants are displayed in Table 1.

Face-to-face interviews with 16 retail and services operators and a local board member took place between June–July 2019. Retail operators were from two supermarkets, men and women's clothing stores, a pharmacy, a recycled goods store, a café, and a combined post shop and bookstore. Service operators were from a private surgical hospital, a retirement complex, an optometry practice, a taxi service, a public library, the Returned and Services Association, and a faith-based organisation.

5.1. Identified themes

The four themes that captured community age-friendly attributes across the physical, social and service environments were: a) community stewardship; b) custodians of the environment; c) strong social networks and involvement; and d) responsiveness to older adults. Direct quotations from participants were used to support and illustrate the findings

Table 1
Demographic data and characteristics of walking interview participants (n = 15).

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Location of residence	Years in area	Mode of transport	Self-perceived health	Mobility	Going out frequency
Jane	Female	75	NZ European	Warkworth	49	Drives own car	Good	Independent	Daily
Bob	Male	89	NZ European	Warkworth	89	Motorised scooter	Good	Uses mobility aids	More than once daily
Mary	Female	77	NZ European	Snells Beach	9	Drives own car	Good	Independent	Daily
Linda	Female	78	NZ European	Warkworth	11	Drives own car	Good	Independent	Daily
Jack	Male	71	NZ European	Warkworth	20	Drives own car	Poor	Needs assistance	Daily
Frances	Female	75	NZ European	Warkworth	10	Walking	Good	Independent	Daily
Sally	Female	87	NZ European	Warkworth	26	Drives own car	Good	Independent	Twice or more a week
Marion	Female	78	NZ European	Warkworth	6	Walks/relies on others	Good	Independent	Daily
Diana	Female	79	NZ European	Warkworth	20	Drives own car	Good	Independent	Daily
Maude	Female	80	NZ European	Warkworth	28	Drives own car	Good	Independent	Daily
Helen	Female	80	NZ European	Rural Warkworth	49	Drives own car	Good	Independent	More than once daily
Philip	Male	74	NZ European	Warkworth	8	Drives own car	Good	Independent	More than once daily
Eva	Female	82	NZ European	Warkworth	4	Motorised scooter	Average	Uses mobility aids	Twice or more a week
Bill	Male	73	NZ European	Warkworth	44	Drives own car	Good	Independent	Daily
Barry	Male	77	NZ European	Warkworth	1	Drives own car	Average	Independent	Twice or more a week

and are accompanied by the data source or a pseudonym.

5.1.1. Community stewardship

The first theme, community stewardship, captured the dynamic and reciprocal relationship participants had with their town and surrounding rural area associated with the past, the present and future aspirations. The rich history and slow incremental development of the town underpinned the strong sense of belonging and pride evident in the various ways participants cared for the physical environment. An acute awareness of how the town was developing and the way infrastructure was being managed was linked to participant's knowledge and pride in the historical heritage.

Walking interview participants talked of how the historic buildings influenced their personal attachment to the town. Over half of the walking interview participants had lived a large proportion of their lives in the area and had a strong interest in the local heritage. Local families were identified as being important in the retention and maintenance of historical features. Philip, for example, noted the development of the riverside exemplified the ongoing community spirit of the town.

One of the jewels in Warkworth's crown is the Mahurangi River down there and there is a walkway along there that was built by the community, funded by the community, you can see all the tablets saying this company donated, provided this section or whatever and that's great. (Philip, 74)

Participants highlighted the river's aesthetic features and their pleasure in walking and sitting along the riverside. Bob (89) stopped to indicate signage and an information kiosk on the riverside displaying Warkworth's history. His demeanor and comment conveyed his sense of pride, "I love this here, the history". The river triggered childhood memories for Helen who remembered when it as a means of transport. "I can remember coming up here as a kid with my father in his boat" (Helen, 80).

Participants remembered the river being fully navigable to small vessels and steamers; however, vessels were now dependent on tidal movements due to problematic sedimentation. Memories of bygone

times influenced attitudes of community stewardship evident in participants' concern for the current and future health of the river. There was unease about deterioration in the quality of the river. Silt, accumulated over many years, had affected water quality and functionality of the river as expressed by a local board representative.

... they remember it [the river] being cleaner, being able to get up there on boats, when it wasn't full of sediment, and they could swim and dive off the wharf and they used to fish there. So, they see the deterioration in the quality of the water so that makes them interested in the environmental impacts of development on the river. (Local board representative)

Geological and ecological changes along the river also inspired stewardship of the river for participants. Walking interview participants shared their knowledge on how the river had changed over time, including the rock formation. Sally (87) expressed interest in the regeneration of the native bush on the far side of the river. "That was all clay all across there because it had been kauri of course and when the early settlers came, they chopped down all the kauri and took it into the city to build houses". The significance of the river as Warkworth's taonga (treasure) was captured in the Warkworth Structure Plan. During the consultation undertaken by Auckland Council in developing the structure plan, local residents reinforced the significance of the river to the established historical character of the town (Auckland Council, 2019).

Buildings of historic and heritage significance were identified as integral to the character of the town. Thus, preserving and repurposing buildings in a way that respected the past contributed to the town's historic and rural identity. The refurbishment and upgrading of the original Town Hall to a modern, fit for purpose Town Hall had brought the past and present together. Bob (89) reminisced about his experiences as a boy attending movies in the old Town Hall and later organizing dances for the Young Farmers Club. These personal memories provided context and infused meaning into places that still had current relevance for participants. The connection between the past and present was explored by a retail operator while reflecting on how change has

impacted his older customers. “The shop has been here for so long. So, they’ve seen the shop change through owners ... they’ve gotten to know me in the shop” (retail operator).

Stewardship was evident in the genuine care for the presentation of the town. Long grass and weeds, overflowing rubbish bins, and duck excrement that sometimes littered the riverside and other walkways bothered many of the walking interview participants. For example, Mary (77) noted practical ways to improve the presentation, “one of the things I feel about down here is that perhaps there could be a few more rubbish bins” (Mary, 77). Participants proposed aesthetical improvements such as tidying flower beds and adding hanging flower baskets to brighten up the main street.

The long-established annual festivals, agricultural and pastoral shows and other cultural events contributed to the strong community spirit and rural identity of the town that had accrued over the years (“Community spirit sustains much-loved festival,” 2019). The success of these traditional events relied on the knowledge and skills contributed by residents of the community, many of whom were older adults ageing in this community. The annual Kōwhai Festival (named for the local native Kōwhai tree) was acclaimed to be the second longest-running festival in New Zealand (over 50 years) and attracted up to 20,000 visitors (“Festival pride to the fore,” 2019). Local events had evolved organically in response to changing demographic patterns including the ageing population. A workshop for older people to write stories for their grandchildren and a competitive gymkhana for mobility scooters, organised by a local retirement village, were reported on by the local newspaper (“Sunset gears up for a fun open day,” 2019). Promoting positive images of older adults with diverse capabilities participating in their community confronted some of the stereotypical assumptions on ageing. Further, the long-established cultural events and rituals enhanced pride in the town and a sense of community.

Strong attachment to the town influenced decisions to age in place as illustrated by the following excerpt.

... it’s a lovely town and it’s a complete entity. It’s still a small town but we’ve got all facilities and everything, it’s sort of a standalone place. ... I find it marvellous; I love living here. Every now and then over the years I thought about going somewhere else, but I couldn’t now I’ve lived here too long. (Helen, 80)

5.1.3. Strong social networks and involvement

Theme three captured attributes of the social environment that contributed to age-friendliness. A myriad of ways to be involved in the community were identified including belonging to groups as organisers or members, volunteering, participating in activities and socialising during everyday activities. Spontaneous socialising frequently occurred during usual outings in the town. This type of social interaction was observed with Jack (71) who arranged to begin his walking interview outside his local café. Several people slowed for a brief casual encounter with Jack as they walked by, and this continued during the walk. The following excerpt illustrates the important role spontaneous socialising had in feeling involved in the community.

I normally come here [name of café] and have a coffee, first thing or I’ll go shopping, go to the bank, the second-hand shops, have a look. Yeah, most of the time it’s just come into town because I’m bored at home, it something, y’know, find a bit of company in town and talk ... after 20 years people get to know you. (Jack, 71)

Although walking interview participants were generally satisfied with their own opportunities to be involved in their local community there were concerns that more socially isolated older people and those with physical and cognitive impairments missed out. A community centre or public space, suitable for older people to meet, especially those at risk of social isolation, was identified as an urgent priority.

The social environment of the town was dynamic and constantly evolving as the needs and desires of the local ageing population

changed. This had manifested in waning membership of some community groups while new groups were being formed. The recently established Men’s Shed, aimed at engaging older men in meaningful activity, filled the need for companionship and a sense of purpose especially for older men in the community.

I’m so passionate about The Men’s Shed, such a massive need for mainly guys, they’ve retired, they’ve probably moved to a smaller place, they don’t have a workshop anymore, they can’t keep their tools anywhere, he doesn’t have any space, so it’s actually come to be recognised recently. (Philip, 74)

The Men’s Shed membership contributed a vast range of skills including technical and leadership expertise. In addition to providing meaningful opportunities for social participation, local collaborations had formed that were beneficial to the wider community. A local second-hand goods store recently established by a group of local retired people had made substantial donations to the Men’s Shed. In return, the Men’s Shed had installed shelving in the store and added value by repairing and refurbishing goods for sale. This reciprocal collaboration highlighted the strong social networks and how they were enriching the social environment of this community.

Feeling respected enhanced the social environment. People stepped aside to allow Bob (89) to pass when he was on his mobility scooter which he interpreted as respectful. Similarly, Marion (78) commented on the respectful attitudes of local people she encountered when out and about shopping and being present in the town. “It’s nice to be here, because a lot of people are like that [respectful]”. Impromptu interactions experienced as respectful and friendly were making a significant contribution to the social environment. Retail and service operators had mixed perceptions regarding respectful attitudes towards older adults. Some associated respect for older adults in the community with the strong community spirit and an advantage of being part of a small close-knit community as a retail operator explained, “because it’s been a smaller rural community, it might look after their elderly better”. Conversely, negative attitudes from some younger people towards older adults had been detected. “I do think people’s attitudes need to change, in general. Like a lot of the younger people, I think, can be quite rude and not understanding of [older adults]” (service operator).

Access to information in a range of formats including newsletters, noticeboards, email, social media and word of mouth supported participation in activities and groups. Most of the walking interview participants utilized the local library service as a reliable source of information. In addition to disseminating information from local groups and a variety of agencies including the local council, the library facilitated access to computers and technological support. There was a feeling that the library connected the community, “the library is a real focal point ... they’re very good at drawing things together and throwing out ideas” (Linda 78). Some local retail and service operators had identified lack of access to electronic devices and the technological skills meant printed information was necessary to connect with their older customers who lacked email capability.

5.1.2. Custodians of the environment

Theme two captured intense interest in the usability and safety of the built environment. Direct observation of individual participant’s actual experiences during the walking interviews enabled insight into the usability of the environment. Walking interview participants were closely monitoring the quality and usability of the environment while spending regular time in the town centre shopping and attending to various activities. This type of everyday custodianship complemented the strong sense of community, deep attachment and stewardship of the history and heritage of their town identified in theme one. Motivation towards custodianship extended beyond participants’ current needs to include their future selves and others, particularly older adults with physical and cognitive impairments.

The high percentage of older adults, many of whom spent regular

time in the town, provided opportunities for monitoring subtle changes and prompted ideas to improve or enhance the age-friendliness of the built environment. Participants expressed explicit opinions on local infrastructure including quality of footpaths, accessibility of street crossings, availability of car parking spaces, appropriate signage, seating, lighting, and usability of public toilets. The quality of footpaths and placement of street crossings were important for getting around the town safely especially for those using mobility devices. The appropriateness of the environment for the changing mobility needs of an ageing population was mooted.

We do have an ageing population that are being attracted into town because of some of the other facilities that are being provided but we are not keeping up with it in terms of our transport infrastructure and our pedestrian friendly areas. (Local board representative)

Fear of falling causing serious injury concerned many of the walking interview participants. Having witnessed the devastating impact of injuries on her contemporaries from falling, Jane (75) commented, “when you get this old, you break a hip it’s good night nurse within a year usually”. Consequently, improving the quality and accessibility of footpaths was highlighted as an urgent priority. Similarly, retail and service operators pointed out potential hazards from uneven footpaths and difficult access around their businesses and had attempted to improve access for older adults with reduced mobility.

Safety and connectivity were identified as priorities the local transport authority should consider when designing future roading and footpaths to meet the changing mobility needs of older adults. Decisions to age in place were heavily influenced by mobility and connectivity. Determined to remain living at home and continue her daily walks in the face of obvious hazards, Linda (78) regularly walked along narrow rural roads proximal to her home. Most of these roads lacked footpaths, had open drains and loose gravel along the edges.

Well-designed road crossings were essential for the safe manoeuvrability of the participants using mobility scooters. Some of the cut-away sections on footpaths did not enable safe crossing. The imperative to design road crossings for all capabilities was reinforced by a local board representative.

Crossing points, some of them have been put in at really awkward angles, for example the one here, on the corner of the RSA, it’s on a really awkward angle and if you are on a mobility scooter you can’t get square onto it. You have to approach it from an angle. (Local board representative)

Having footpaths free of obstruction was highlighted by participants who pointed out footpaths obstructed by rubbish bins, outdoor café furniture and supermarket trolleys. Suggestions to improve access included educating the public on older adults’ mobility needs and incentives to return supermarket trolleys to the designated areas. The everyday surveillance of the physical environment highlighted the importance of older adults’ custodianship of the town. In doing so, they were raising awareness amongst the general population of barriers to mobility in their physical environment.

Increasing traffic congestion centred around a notorious intersection linking the town to the east coast settlements and beaches was a major concern. Despite sustained interest from the local community in the management of traffic flow and attempts to actively engage with the transport authority, participants expressed a sense of powerlessness to effect change. There was a perception that centralisation with the formation of the larger Auckland Council had eroded control of the local decision-making processes participants remembered from the past.

Very few of them [Auckland Council officials] are actually prepared to venture north through the tunnels and come and stand here, spend some time here for half a day, a day, talk to the locals, actually communicate with and actually being prepared to listen and

understand what people are saying and then take that back and respond to that, it is just not happening. (Philip 74)

Poor collaboration between local and central government was perceived as a contributing factor to shifting responsibilities, lack of accountability to the community and subsequent lack of progress on local infrastructure matters. Strong interest and concern about local infrastructure underpinned the community custodianship and active citizenship in wanting to improve the town and surrounds for themselves and others. As Jack (71) explained, he planned to discuss the decision-making process around a specific traffic concern with the local Member of Parliament. “I’ve got an appointment on Wednesday to go and see them, so I’ll see what happens after that”.

Notwithstanding interest in these local matters, participants identified multiple barriers to participating in decision-making and providing feedback at the local community level. For example, local board meetings were sometimes held outside Warkworth in another town 27 km away. This disadvantaged some older adults especially non drivers. Despite difficulty participating in meetings, the local board’s advocacy and leadership was praised. For example, participants spoke of how issues lodged with the council were followed up by one of the local board members. “Thank heavens for [local board member] because she says, “if you give me a reference number, I’ll chase it through” and she does ... she’s excellent at that ... but there’s only a limit to what she can do” (Philip 74).

On the other hand, there was a perception that the large, centralized Auckland Council was too geographically and organisationally distanced. This had led to the perception Auckland Council was disconnected from the everyday issues of older adults in this rural community. Decisions made remotely at an urban level were sometimes inappropriate for the specific needs of rurally living older adults. This disconnection resulted in disempowerment in civic participation with little power to manage local issues. Consequently, greater involvement in local decision-making regarding infrastructure was identified as a priority.

5.1.4. Responsiveness to older adults

Theme four captured a culture of informal local responsiveness towards older adults. The retail and service operators recognised a large proportion of their clientele were local older adults. Despite this recognition only one retailer had formal policies and practices specific to serving older customers. This large supermarket chain retail operator explained how they had a weekly discount day for older customers eligible for a superannuation discount card. “We have ‘Gold Card Tuesday’. So, anybody with a Gold Card, if they come shopping on a Tuesday, they get five percent off their shopping”. Anticipating a larger number of older shoppers on Tuesdays, staff tailored the service towards their specific needs. For example, providing a low stimulus environment, ensuring aisles were kept as clear as possible and having staff on hand to assist. Bob, (89) described how he was regularly invited to go through an express checkout at the supermarket when shopping on his mobility scooter. “I just line up with the other people but there are a couple of lasses in there, especially the one selling lotto tickets, if she sees me, she will often call me over”.

Informal practices described by retail and service operators reflected a caring and respectful culture among their staff. The specific needs of older adults with functional impairments, known to many of the staff were anticipated as explained by this retail operator. “We’ve got an annoying step out the front, so we help people up it in wheelchairs and walkers”. Another retail operator demonstrated how furniture was moved to accommodate wheelchairs. “This centre table, we can just give it a very light touch and it moves right out of the way so a wheelchair can get through and likewise all of these, we can get people to the fitting rooms”. Where retail operators were unable to accommodate mobility scooters within physical spaces, some provided flexible practices and personalised service to counteract the exclusion physical barriers

presented. For example, a retail operator explained how they served people out on the street if they could not get in. “We take the shop to them basically and do it that way”. Walking interview participant Eva (82) experienced this regularly when she was unable to manoeuvre her mobility scooter inside some of the stores and explained, “they always come outside to ask me what I need”.

Retail and service operators regularly served older adults with a range of physical and cognitive capabilities. Proactive assistance was offered to improve access and comfort for older customers. For example, assisting older adults with low vision to complete their electronic point of sale transactions. A low vision support group had recently been formed by a local health service operator with a special interest in low vision. A key objective was to raise awareness of living with low vision to inform local retail and service operators. Extra assistance for older customers with identified needs was embedded in the service as explained by a retail operator. “We put their parcels in the car, sometimes we have to hold their hand and put them in the car even ... one of the ladies who comes in here we always have to call a cab for her”. Another retail operator discussed their plans to install sound baffles across the ceiling to dampen ambient noise for older adults with hearing impairments. “We’re going to put it over the coffee machine and on the wall where the coffee machine is to take all the noise away and it just absorbs the noise”. Yet another retail operator closed her shop to drive an older couple home after noticing they had been sitting outside her shop waiting for a taxi. As she explained, she had become concerned for their comfort when their taxi failed to arrive. “It was a freezing cold wind, and he was sitting out there without a hat, and he was absolutely frozen ... after about three quarters of an hour I went and got my car and took them home”.

A local taxi service was responding to the needs of an increasing older population. First, their service was door-to-door, essential for many older adults. Second, they regularly provided information and guided older adults to access subsidised taxi fares. Third, staff were trained to assist older adults with disabilities to get in and out of vehicles. Fourth, taxis had access to dedicated parking outside the medical centres; taxi staff assisted customers in and out of the car and inside as required. Trusted relationships developed between drivers and older customers and facilitated their continued engagement in the community. Demand for taxi services had heightened; the service was stretched further still during busy times of the year when taxis were in demand by visitors to the area. Increasing the capacity of the taxi service was identified as a priority.

Retail and service operators valued the meaningful connections they developed with customers and recognised this was an important factor in creating the sense of belonging in the town. As one retailer explained, “It is the personal touch of a town like this, you get to know all your customers and the customers get to know the owners” (retailer operator). Although professional and personal relationship boundaries had to be managed, the reality of being a service operator as well as a resident in a small town was acknowledged by this service operator. “It’s a bit of a standing joke, you go down the road at lunchtime and come back with three appointments ... I would see people at the supermarket that I’ve seen here and out in the broader community”. Socially engaging with older adults who just needed someone to talk to was considered a normal part of business. As a retailer expressed, “we have plenty of regulars that pop in just for a natter”. The library had responded to the need for social interaction by cultivating a welcoming space for older adults.

We try to be really approachable. We always keep in mind that sometimes that little conversation you have with someone, they come and plonk themselves down at what we call the help desk, sometimes that’s really important in their day ... it’s a nice warm place to come. (Service operator)

6. Discussion

Walking interviews with older adults and face-to-face interviews with retail and service operators contributed their different perspectives on the existing attributes that contributed to the age-friendliness of their town. The walking interviews were particularly informative on the actual experiences of the older participants in real time. Few studies have utilized this method with older adults (Gardner, 2011) or in age-friendly studies (Carroll et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2021). Four main themes were identified: community stewardship; being custodians of their environment; strong social networks and involvement; and responsiveness to older adults. Attitudes of community stewardship that underpinned the participants’ desire to preserve the town’s historic heritage, care for the natural environment and to visualise the future of the town represented a willingness to share a lifetime of experience and knowledge. These attitudes were deeply rooted in the rich history and rural identity of the town and provide nuance to rural age-friendliness. Although stewardship has more commonly been associated with ecological and environmental sustainability (Junot et al., 2018), the concept has also been used to describe older peoples’ motivation to enhance their local environment for current and future citizens (Warburton and Gooch, 2007). Knowledge older adults have of their environment, the vulnerabilities of the land and historic responses to environmental challenges was recently highlighted in a United Nations report (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), 2022). Future research should explore older adults’ contribution to climate action which has largely been ignored along with the importance of climate change for ageing in place.

Stewardship enacted by older people through care of their rural community, as identified in the current study, illuminates the reciprocity of rural ageing whereby older people simultaneously contribute to and benefit from stewardship of their communities (Yarker et al., 2020). The strong sense of community and sense of pride gained from contributing to rural places reinforced place attachment and decisions to age in place (Burholt et al., 2014; Yarker et al., 2020). Based on this conceptualization, it is proposed stewardship should be recognised as an important strength and community resource when developing age-friendly programs in this rural community and other similar places.

Local festivals and cultural events reinforced the historical and rural identity of the town. Likewise, the importance of place-making practices, such as festivals and cultural events, has recently been recognised for strengthening place attachment and supporting ageing in place in New Zealand (Woolrych et al., 2022). The reorientation of Reefton, a declining small resource town on the West Coast of New Zealand’s South Island, shows how local heritage and amenity promotion through organised events can have a positive impact on the sustainability of rural communities (Powe et al., 2022). The contribution of local events to ageing in place driven by older adults’ commitment to local culture and heritage should be recognised as an ongoing resource as Warkworth expands and transforms.

The continual monitoring of the physical environment during participants’ regular presence in the town reflected attitudes of custodianship. Their attitudes appeared to be motivated by the desire to improve the quality and accessibility of the environment not only for themselves and others less mobile, but also for their futures selves. Participants imagined how their future capabilities would measure up to the ever-changing environment and how they would fare ageing in this community. These findings build on the theorisation of place integration and re-integration where the dynamic relationship between older people and their rural places is continually evolving but the relationship is never concluded (Cutchin, 2016). The everyday attention to the small changes in the environment was underpinned by extensive local knowledge and experience both past and present. Beyond the more obvious need for improved footpaths, safer street crossings and better parking, the participants exercised their agency in identifying priorities for improvement across the age-friendly domains.

The present findings revealed a sense of reciprocity and goodwill underpinned local business and service operators' responsiveness to their older customers. The loyalty of older customers was matched by the operators' caring attitudes and investment in time engaging in social interaction. Encounters between older adults and local business operators supported ageing in place in rural communities by compensating for the lack of formal social services (Colibaba et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2014). Conversely, community-level factors such as disengaged businesses and lack of local leadership were challenges to age-friendly sustainability (McCrillis et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2021). Recognizing the importance of these informal existing relationships should help to mitigate the risk of inadvertently undermining or stifling communities' resourcefulness and natural dynamism that can occur when age-friendly programing from larger urban programs is introduced into small rural communities (Russell et al., 2021). Further, these findings should inform the rural business sector on how to enhance age-friendliness as rural populations continue to age rapidly.

Despite the considerable age-friendly attributes identified, dissatisfaction with processes to share insights and concerns had manifested in a prevailing sense of disconnection between the local community and Auckland Council. The amalgamation of multiple jurisdictions into the large unitary Auckland Council was perceived to be responsible for this geographical and organisational disconnection. Jurisdictional fragmentation that resulted in geographical disconnection has been problematic for implementation and sustainability in rural age-friendly initiatives (McCrillis et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2019). While engagement with local people was usually mandated in planning processes for future infrastructure by local government in New Zealand, participants perceived a lack of genuine engagement and inclusion in decision-making processes at the local level. Tokenistic involvement of older people in rural age-friendly initiatives has impacted on implementation and sustainability (Russell et al., 2019). Authentic collaboration with older people in this community prior to implementing an official age-friendly program could counteract some of the disruption experienced when initiatives were imposed from the top down on communities (Russell et al., 2019).

The ongoing trend for in-migration and ageing in rural communities is likely to be enhanced with the advancement of flexible and hybrid working arrangements put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be important for local and central governments to recognize the impact of inequitable distribution of economic and other necessary resources to rural communities. Centralisation of services resulting in inequitable access to essential services and amenities including health services (Neville et al., 2020), information technology (Warburton et al., 2014), housing options (Morris and Halseth, 2019) and transportation (Neville et al., 2018) can threaten ageing in place in rural places.

As with all qualitative research, the study's findings are not intended to be generalized to other rural communities internationally or in New Zealand. However, the study findings may be transferable and therefore be comparable to similar small rural towns with ageing populations undergoing population growth. International studies of ageing in rural communities have predominantly focused on deficits and the precarious nature of ageing in declining resource towns with shrinking populations. Yet, in New Zealand little is known about the impact of population change and rural sustainability on ageing in place, highlighting the need for place-based rural studies from diverse contexts to inform local planning processes. Recent evidence suggests existing attributes of rural communities have considerable influence on the implementation and sustainability of age-friendly programs in rural communities (McCrillis et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2019). Thus, understanding the existing attributes prior to the introduction of formal initiative should provide a strong foundation for implementing and sustaining a formal age-friendly initiative in this community.

This study was not without limitations. Firstly, data were collected at a single point in time representing a mere snapshot of age-friendly conditions in this community. A longitudinal design would have

captured the impact of changing physical and social infrastructure on age-friendliness in this community. Secondly, the resources required to undertake a participatory research design, considered the gold standard for age-friendly research at the community level (Buffel, 2018), was beyond the feasibility for the current study. Notwithstanding, there was a strong mandate from the community to undertake the study. Thirdly, the perspectives and experiences of older adults from ethnicities other than European were not captured reflecting the current demographics of the population aged 65 years and over in the Warkworth area. Considering the importance of Kaitiaki (guardianship of the environment) to Māori, future studies should be undertaken in rural towns with a higher percentage of Māori and/or Pacific peoples to identify the impact of changing rural contexts on their ageing experiences. Age-friendly initiatives for Māori should be led by Māori where local iwi priorities are captured. The Age-friendly Auckland Tāmaki Makaurau Tauawhi Kaumātua program has laid the foundation for this work by incorporating kaumātua (Māori elder) to the framework to recognize the tangata whenua (the original inhabitants of Aotearoa New Zealand) and their unique identity and world view (Auckland Council, 2021). Finally, the experiences and perceptions of older adults with cognitive impairment were not captured due to safety and other considerations.

Despite these limitations the current findings contribute to existing evidence on rural age-friendliness. While the WHO age-friendly model covers important environmental domains, the conceptual shortfalls related to social, cultural and diversity of people and place considerations have recently been raised (McDonald et al., 2021). The attitudes of stewardship and custodianship expressed by the participants in the current study deepen our understanding of how rural age-friendliness might be conceptualised and should be investigated in other rural settings. Ongoing conceptualization of the age-friendly model will be important for progressing and improving rural age-friendliness. The present findings leverage identified strengths, revealing the organic and incremental nature of these existing age-friendly attributes prior to implementing an age-friendly initiative and provides insight into how existing age-friendly practices can be enhanced or supported.

7. Conclusion

This study employed a strengths-based approach to identify existing age-friendly attributes of a small rural town in New Zealand on the cusp of significant growth and infrastructure development. Warkworth, a long-established small rural town, has a very high percentage of older adults and is experiencing rapid population growth. While a formal age-friendly initiative has not yet been implemented locally, identified attributes indicate older adults and local retail and service operators are contributing greatly to the age-friendliness of this community. The findings provide an empirical knowledge platform for communities and all levels of government in New Zealand and other countries to inform strategies for implementing age-friendly initiatives. Older adults in this town voiced their commitment to improving the town now and into the future, for themselves, other older adults and future generations. Building on existing attributes and collaborating with local leaders and existing networks should facilitate implementation and promote the sustainability of local age-friendly initiatives. This means older adults and stakeholders from rural communities should be actively engaged in the planning of age-friendly initiatives from the early stages to avoid inadvertently undermining existing community strengths and attributes.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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