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# Older People, Town Centres and the Revival of the ‘High Street’

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## ABSTRACT

Concern for the future of town centres and their retail cores, the ‘high street’, is not new. Responses to this have often been somewhat one dimensional, focusing on their role as places of consumption, employment, leisure and heritage. We consider the potential multiple roles of older people in helping revive and rejuvenate town centres given the centrality of place for healthy supportive living, community and social participation and ‘ageing in place’. Taking an environmental gerontology perspective, we ask whether the WHO age friendly cities/communities’ framework should be considered further in approaches to reviving town centres in a post-Covid-19 world.

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## Introduction

*It will be the older generations who are setting the agenda for the reinvention of the high street; an agenda which is premised on a community focused environment which integrates new shopping experiences with social interaction, housing, healthcare services, leisure activities and entertainment. (Centre for Future Studies, 2017, p. 6)*

Town centres pre-COVID19 were recognised as not working for many. The situation has been exacerbated by the pandemic. This has encouraged thoughts of “building back better”. In rethinking how and what we do in town centres, we concentrate on the potential of developing age friendly places with older people. Our primary focus in this paper is to consider the roles that older people can play in reshaping town and city centres as vital and dynamic places. In particular, our aim in this article is to consider whether the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) ‘age friendly cities’ model has the potential to answer these questions and establish an enduring basis for including older people in the co-production of spaces and places, and for shaping a longer-term, sustainable future for the high street i.e. the commercial/retail heart of a town. We address three specific questions. First, can age friendly communities/cities provide a framework for planning and evaluating a solution to rejuvenate town centres and their high streets? Secondly, why is it important that we consider the town centre through the lens of ageing and in so doing, what roles of, and activities by, older people will deliver rejuvenation? Thirdly, what are the implications of adopting an age friendly community/city approach in the post COVID19 policy and planning contexts?

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Age friendly cities (a contemporary approach to understanding community environments of older people) is a well-used concept in gerontological discourse for describing the extent to which places are suitable venues in which to grow old (ageing in place). The 'age friendly cities' (AFC) movement emphasized a practical need to make cities and towns more accessible and acceptable to older people. It also helped to stimulate a debate over the extent to which older people can regenerate the economic development of a city (or town). However, the model needs refreshing in the light of rapid urban and demographic change as well as in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although operating at a range of spatial scales (local, regional, country), it has failed to address different types of area such as 'green spaces' or, as examined in the present context, 'the high street', viewing this as part of the local ecosystem rather than a distinct space with meaning and significance, particularly for people who are 'ageing in place'.

Critical reflection on the 'age friendly' cities concept requires admitting a more dynamic approach to the interaction between social and spatial constructs. We seek to advance understanding of town centre revitalisation and ageing in place in a rapidly changing international retail environment by focusing on co-production (i.e. the active involvement of the community in the creation of the solution), addressing the gaps in the AFC model. Older shoppers, rather than being viewed as a 'problem' needing to be solved, are re-conceptualised as part of the solution to the 'crisis of the high street' (Parkinson, 2014) through their multiple roles as consumers, entrepreneurs, residents and workers. This paper explores these issues, incorporating theoretical perspectives from both geographical and gerontological approaches, and mainly in the context of retailing and retail change and the so-called decline of town centres. It focuses on the scope and potential for a re-imagining of town centres (and high streets) based around the needs and wants of our ageing population in a post-Covid-19 pandemic environment. The next section briefly reviews the changing nature of retailing in relation to town centres and its significance for older people, before considering a broader reconceptualization of such areas, emphasising their multiplicity of roles. We draw the discussion to a conclusion by explicitly examining the AFC model as a basis for engaging older people in co-producing city and town centres in the future. In developing age friendly town centres, the high street as the retail heart of the town will become more supported and prosperous. The focus on an age friendly environment with residential living are two aspects of the multi-functional components that are needed to rebalance the current position.

## 1. Retail Change and the High Street

The 'high street' is not solely a British phenomenon, but has resonance internationally, constituting a morphological subset of wider city or town centres, and historically this broader entity has been the focus for residence, work, leisure and social as well as economic interaction. The geographical focus of these different types of activity and functions have decentralised over several years. Towns were hubs of work, residence, leisure, and commerce with the retail 'high street' at its heart. In many places, decentralisation of offices, schools, municipal buildings, cinemas, football grounds etc. has run alongside decentralisation of retailing. In the 1970s and 1980s the location and scale of retailing in the UK began to alter, reflecting patterns seen previously both in the United States (the regional shopping centre) and in France (the out of town hypermarket) exemplified in the UK by the opening of the Brent Cross Shopping Centre in 1976 and of the first Carrefour hypermarket in Caerphilly, Wales in 1972. These developments have been characterised as the first in an overlapping sequence of waves of retail development, moving away from high streets and town centres to occupy out-of-town or greenfield sites (Ferne, 1995, 1998; Schiller, 1986). Towns are often no longer places where

people live or spend their working or leisure days. Concurrently, the development of enhanced communications networks has led to the decline of distance and proximity as key agglomeration forces. The personalisation of transport in the form of the car opened new places for people. More recently the rise of the internet and the smartphone have digitally enabled exchange activity away from set physical spaces. With national lockdown and local Covid-19 pandemic restrictions many people are socially distancing and avoiding public places. City centres in Britain and elsewhere have become almost ghost cities, devoid of all but essential workers, with working from home driving these trends (Grimsey, 2020). Such rapid shifts in the daily pattern of work and home life, with the necessity to be digitally connected, has ramifications for people who are digitally challenged or excluded, many of whom are older people (Matthews et al., 2019).

Both the National Review of Town Centres (Scottish Government, 2013) in Scotland and the Grimsey Review (Grimsey, 2013) in England (focusing on digital towns and places) noted the shift to enhanced digitisation of life generally and the rise of internet shopping with its spatial implications (e.g., Jones & Livingstone, 2018). By October 2018 online retail sales in Great Britain had reached 18% of all retail sales (Office for National Statistics, 2018); during the Covid-19 pandemic they reached a peak of 33% in May 2020, though subsequently reducing by 5 percentage points by the end of August (Office for National Statistics, 2020). The digital world and 'virtual' interchange have become more prevalent in older people's everyday lives beyond commercial retailing, (Rybczewska & Sparks, 2020; Tabassum, 2020). The nature of the population base itself has also altered, both in demographic and in behavioural terms. The ageing of the population is well known, but the implications of this trend on towns, high streets, and other areas, and on the processes of exchange are less well understood. Behavioural changes have been driven by opportunity and necessity; but the intersection of these with ageing populations needs exploration.

The impact of these factors has varied across the UK and internationally, and whilst the vitality of some town centres and high streets has been significantly affected, others have shown greater resilience (Findlay & Sparks, 2012; Wrigley & Dolega, 2011). In most cases however there has been a decline in the retail offer and/or replacement by leisure and other activities. Where town centres have survived this challenge, they have often promoted their role as places for traditional often independent retail businesses, boutique and niche shopping, financial and other professional services, and as destinations for tourist and leisure activities such as entertainment and dining (Powe, 2020). However, the risk associated with these changes has been laid bare by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, with city and many town centres emptying of their habitual daily influx of workers. Furthermore, high streets are experiencing loss of footfall, brand loss and an oversupply of retail space (Powe, 2020); commercial property investments fell by 44% across Europe between mid-March and the end of May (Hernandez-Morales et al., 2020) which has freed up space in town centres, leaving them exposed to decline. The town centre's ability to serve the needs of people without access to private transport (necessary for most out-of-town retail destinations), who relied on public transport or lived within walking distance of a high street, has also been emphasised. Older people tend to experience this form of social exclusion and transport poverty more than other sections of society (Department for Transport, 2018). Layered with limited or no access to the internet some older people have experienced double jeopardy of exclusion during the pandemic, although this may have been mitigated by greater informal support from friends and neighbours.

Maintaining older people's activity and engagement in society is usually considered to have a positive impact on their physical and mental health. Shopping, traditionally involving outdoors travel, has the potential to contribute to social interaction and to avoid shrinkage of older people's radius of movement in later life (Sugiyama & Ward Thompson, 2007). Although a lesser proportion of

retail sales are being conducted in the town centre, retailing still dominates. Other users and workers have moved out of town centres leaving retail as the dominant activity by default (despite its own decentralisation). Additionally, as they have become less of a destination for other activities, so a sense of crisis and dissatisfaction has risen among older consumers. (e.g., Bowlby, 1985; Bromley & Thomas, 1993). In England, the response to this crisis of town centres was to focus on one (traditional) dimension – the retail function of the high street. The Government launched a review into the ‘crisis’ on the high street headed by Mary Portas, which concentrated on changes in retailing. The Portas Review (Portas, 2011) warned of the urgent need to revitalise the ‘high street retail experience’. In Scotland, the National Review of Town Centres (the Fraser Review) was established with a broader focus; seeing high streets and retail as a component of the issue, with reversing place degradation and the decline of town centres and urban spaces seen generally as more vital (Findlay et al., 2018; Scottish Government, 2013). The pressures from climate change and air pollution are already reshaping many high streets (pedestrianised, traffic calming) with sharp drops in pollution and traffic demonstrated during lockdown (Bao & Zhang, 2020) and the recognition of the need for greener spaces in town centres. This has resulted in making them more about ‘placemaking’ than retail alone with a focus on locally sensitive approaches creating ‘space for local experimentation’ (Powe, 2020), being community rather than solely consumer focused.

In summary, retailing has altered significantly over the last 60 years as waves of decentralisation have physically and spatially impacted the sector. This, exacerbated as a wide range of other sectors also decentralised, raises issues most keenly felt in town centres and on their high streets and by consumers who find it difficult to access off-centre locations. Not all town and city centres have been adversely impacted, as these effects have been variable and some centres have maintained a stronger mix and variety of uses. Nevertheless, some town centres and high streets can be disappointing places and in many there is a feeling of crisis of community and place. These centres and high streets however can be reimagined and redeveloped (Wrigley & Brookes, 2014; Wrigley & Lambiri, 2015) through a holistic approach, rather than a singular focus on retailing. Within this there is clear scope to consider the positive role for our ageing population in the regeneration of town centres and the high street, drawing on the AFC model to create places for healthy living and ageing.

## 2. A Broader Re-conceptualisation of Town Centres and the High Street

Hughes and Jackson (2015) examined the factors contributing to locational, economic, environmental and functional obsolescence as causes of the decline in high street vitality arguing that changes in planning policies at the national and local scale were important determinants in all of these areas and the “response, attitude and actions of a local planning authority are [...] key to the vitality of a retail location” (Hughes & Jackson, 2015, p. 249). Gransby (1988, p. 15) argued that “many plans and planners aspire to a healthy high street” and challenged the presumption that “its entire function [is] retailing”. The town centre can offer a supportive environment for the health of older citizens, beyond retailing. A spatial concentration of health and social care, leisure, entertainment, and hospitality services would be useful and relevant across generations and in particular for older people if there is a consideration of ageing in the re-design and accessibility of town centres. There is potential for older people and particularly the ‘high street’ to be mutually supportive of each other, with the former benefiting from the opportunities for intergenerational social interaction and engagement with various forms of service and facility and the latter maintaining an ongoing footfall as successive generations of older people help to sustain the day-time economy even if they avoid

visiting town and city centres at night-time (Lovatt, 2017). Our older population, acting as residents, consumers, workers, entrepreneurs, and active citizens can change our urban centres, attracting retail to the extent that the high street can be a vibrant part of the town centre.

Although planners plan in the interests of all social groups, the ramifications of their work for particular twenty-first century concerns have emerged in the past two decades. One important focus, on connections between planning and health, arose in response to growing concerns with the issues of climate change and obesity (Barton, 2009) and to the effect of population ageing. These connections between health and planning have revived in recent times with an overall concern for how places have developed and maintained health inequalities, and how better understanding and planning of needs, and healthier design of places, can reverse this. We see this, for example, with a focus on the availability of green (and blue) spaces in urban areas (Cherrie et al., 2018; Ekkel & de Vries, 2017) and more recently in the impact of Covid-19 on place-making (Scott, 2020).

These ideas from the planning perspective connect with environmental gerontology's understanding of urban contexts and ageing in terms of ecological models such as person-environment interaction and liveability (World Bank, 2007). The sociological literature has also brought several theoretical frameworks to this area of socio-spatial relations, but this article takes a gerontological lens to the high street.

### *WHO Age Friendly Cities Framework*

'Active ageing' is a concept that has cut across international boundaries in the last decade and has permeated the gerontological literature from various directions. It is based on a citizenship model of ageing that empowers older people to live fulfilling and worthwhile lives rather than feeling like discarded burdens on society. In relation to promoting healthy supportive environments the most prominent framework to emerge in relation to active ageing has been that of the WHO Age Friendly Cities (AFC) movement (WHO, 2007). The framework has been adopted globally; in Europe (examples can be seen in Manchester and Brussels), in the USA and Canada (Portland and Sherbrooke), in Asia (Hong Kong) and Australia (Sydney). Starting with 35 cities in 2006 the movement expanded to over 500 cities and communities by 2017. It is an organising framework to create urban spaces that are 'age friendly'; by 2020 there were 1,100 such places (Torku et al., 2020)

Ambitious in its scope and aim (Golant, 2014) it is structured around eight integrated domains: outdoor spaces and buildings, transportation, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, communication and information, civic participation and employment, health and community services. These domains have been developed to form a checklist of core features which has become the tool for assessing age friendliness of cities and communities (Plouffe et al., 2016). Participating cities are encouraged to use the tool flexibly to accommodate their own needs and local contexts and to continually assess and evaluate progress in a continuing cycle of improvement (Warth, 2016). This article considers whether this holistic approach also has the potential to provide a framework for planning and evaluating a solution to rejuvenate town centres.

The AFC framework has been used successfully across the world covering 20% of the WHO member states: the global network of cities shows some evidence of concentration in North America and Europe, with a notable presence in Asia, Australasia and South America, though there were none in Africa (WHO, 2018). The framework has helped to shape cities and communities and given its focus on local adaptation, it can be a useful vehicle to frame the rejuvenation and sustainability of town centres. In evaluating several initiatives Buffel identified factors contributing to the success of an age friendly city (Buffel et al., 2018): (1) the extent to which they can mobilise a wide variety of stakeholders and associated with this the presence of strong political leadership; (2) the ability to

develop a flexible, local approach; and (3) the extent to which policies for older people are embedded into those focusing on urban redevelopment and management of cities. However, several questions and shortcomings need to be addressed if the framework is to be refashioned to address the town centre and the downturn in 'high street' vitality:

- (1) What populations are AFCs trying to reach? How do they accommodate the diversity of older people and does a universal checklist consider the diversity of ageing populations (or cities) particularly those who are marginalised and disadvantaged, black and ethnic minorities? As Lewis (2018) argues, one approach does not satisfy all and ignores the diversity of older people who use the city or town. A number of cities and towns have developed the concept to be dementia friendly yet there is little data on how effective this has been in enabling older people living with dementia to engage with public spaces such as the high street; an issue considered in the WHO 2018 report on looking back over the decade of AFCs (WHO, 2018).
- (2) As a framework it needs to be sufficiently dynamic to accommodate change over time either in people or in places. For example, the AFC framework can be inflexible and assumes one model suits everyone (across age ranges); it doesn't accommodate or respond to changes over time both in the environment or the person. (Keating & Phillips, 2008) Age friendliness can mean different things to different people depending on where they are in their lifecourse.
- (3) AFC takes a macro approach, concentrating on the city or town as a whole rather than addressing the specifics of different environments and discrete parts, such as the high street and shopping environments. It focuses only on one key environment (the community) ignoring diversity either in location or among older people. The literature has been too general, yet planners need greater specificity and require a more nuanced view of the urban environment (Hockey et al., 2013). The 20-minute neighbourhood concept, giving people the ability to 'live locally' where most of their everyday needs are within a 20 minute walk of their home, is growing in popularity (TCPA, 2020) and provides some specificity, yet a 20 minute walk can be too far for some older people and those with disabilities for example.
- (4) Given the rapidly changing situation of town centres and high streets, a key question has been how sustainable are age friendly cities? There is often a top down public realm, public sector approach to change which underestimates the need for older people to be central to regeneration strategies. Co-production is key to the success of such initiatives over a long-time frame (Buffel et al., 2018). Engaging older communities in redeveloping the high street is critical.
- (5) The AFC lacks a connection with theoretical concepts – for example, person-environment fit – that are within environmental gerontology, but focuses instead on practice. Early theorizing was only about macro, meso and micro levels, which addressed the layers but ignored the specification of environments and an understanding of how people and resources change over time. Lawton and Nahemow (1973) 'person-environment' fit model looked at change in one or the other – the individual's adaptation to environmental pressures (e.g., moving home, changing shopping behaviour from the physical to the virtual environment) and environment adjustment to accommodate the changing needs of older people (e.g., aids and adaptations in the home, shop accessibility).
- (6) Different towns and cities are also at different stages in their lifecourse (akin to an urban development cycle) and this factor is not considered in the interpretation of results. One way to counter this is to directly engage the community of older adults and stakeholders within communities to understand specific issues but also involving them in co-producing solutions.i.e. going beyond consultation or participatory events.



Both environments and individual older people are changing and the synergies between them are fluid and dynamic and often do not coincide in a 'person-environment fit'. The high street epitomises this mismatch. For example, the switch to online retailing has changed the high street which, in turn, challenges older people to adapt by learning how to use new technology; yet the high street is also dynamic and itself changing and evolving with technology. Sustainability and the accommodation of rapid environmental change are areas where the AFC model has been found wanting. Marston and van Hoof (2019) identify gaps in technology in respect of the eight domains. Drawing on their work in Milton Keynes they propose a new smart age friendly ecosystem framework which is adaptable and scalable (p 25). They argue greater acknowledgment and representation is needed of "The age-friendly living environment; age-friendly physical space and technology and associated ICTs' sphere to illustrate how technology can and will play an integral role in contemporary and future smart age-friendly eco-systems". Going further Wanka et al. (2018) argue for a "reflexive turn", intensifying the theorising of the AFC model, delving deeper into sociological theory, critique and particularly reflexivity.

Building on the AFC framework and taking its limitations into account, we argue that a new model of interaction between the environment and the older person is required; one which concentrates on the specific environments of the city/town centre and where older people are empowered as consumers, entrepreneurs, workers and residents able to 'make places' (Rowles & Watkins, 2003). This could provide a recipe for reviving town centres (and thus high streets). Placing older people at the heart of development makes an AFC inclusive and connected community.

### 3. Older People and the Reimagining of Town Centres and the High Street

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (in its OECD (2015) suggested that built up areas in cities need to be reviewed to ensure their urban functions are still relevant in the twenty-first century. Although published some five years ago, the issues raised remain very timely, especially in view of the Covid-19 pandemic which has raised the possibility that the traditional retailing functions, so central to the vitality of towns and cities in the past, may be less relevant in the future. It is perhaps too soon to be sure what the outcome of the pandemic on these areas and in particular the 'high street' will be, but given the changes already set in motion by earlier events, it is timely to consider whether the high street and similar places need to be reimagined for a sustainable future. We suggest there are four components to this reimagining:

- Appreciation that the 'high street' is multi-functional
- Design and plan according to age friendly principles and domains
- Intergenerational co-production of the town centre and 'high street' involving older people with planners and urban designers
- Incorporate flexibility to be more resilient to unforeseen issues, such as Covid-19, as well as longer term ongoing structural changes

#### *Multi-Functionality*

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the fragility of high streets, city and town centres and, in particular, their dependency on two main forms of employment. One of these forms was able to relocate to online working for many employees with minimal loss of productivity and an improved work-life balance. The other form, which depended on discretionary expenditure by a transient



working population commuting in and out of these areas on a daily basis, was able at least partially to transfer their purchases online or locally in their towns and neighbourhoods where they lived. These changes seem likely to result in some city and town centres becoming less relevant for both types of employment post Covid-19. Future strategies should thus focus on adjusting the scale of these employment opportunities and incorporate affordability and accessibility, increase wellbeing and attractiveness, and promote healthier living for all age groups. Bringing older people into urban centres could enable these strategies to be successful as high street functionality is reimagined around a broader range of opportunities including leisure, entrepreneurship, and activities that local older people value. This would expand the employment base and give new meaning to places whose significance and relevance has diminished. In a post Covid-19 environment the town centre could increasingly take on new prominence in tackling loneliness, help develop intergenerational relationships and play a role in meeting government targets on housing, with different age groups sharing the experience of a less mobile and more centralised lifestyle. This in turn would benefit the retail high street.

Older people are developing different images of themselves with varied social relationships, lifestyles and self-perceptions, and this needs to be accompanied by changes in the way other age groups view older people, recognising their continuing active, multifunctional contribution to the economy as consumers, residents, entrepreneurs and workers. If the retail function is to remain as part of the functional mix in the high street, then older people have the potential to support its rejuvenation through their incomes and wealth as consumers (ILC UK, 2010), as well as residents, workers, volunteers and entrepreneurs, playing out different lifestyles and behaviours. Consequently, older people can be re-imagined as valuable **contributors to the economy** of a town and its high street. The Resolution Foundation (2018) describes a 'stark generational divide' with 65–74-year olds holding a greater percentage of total household wealth than the under 45s for the first time, which again signals opportunity for business. Over half of all retail spend already comes from those aged 45+ (Wrigley & Lambiri, 2015). Households with persons over 65 are growing, with their spending twice as fast as those below 50 (CEBR, 2018). Yet companies have been slow or struggle to target older consumers effectively (Yoon & Powell, 2012). Longevity dividends can be realised for older consumers and for businesses that choose to capitalise on the burgeoning market opportunities.

Older people as **workers** can also rejuvenate the town centre. Businesses will need to compete to recruit and retain the best employees in a depleting labour pool, increasingly occupied by older workers (Lisenkova et al., 2010; Purcell, 2009). Before the pandemic the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) projections showed that the number of employed 50–64-year olds will be 10 million by 2020–21 (CEBR, 2017). The number of older **entrepreneurs** has also risen significantly in recent years with older people as entrepreneurs creating employment and driving productivity (CEBR, 2017). Early or enforced redundancy, the abandonment of the statutory retirement age, the demise of the final-salary pension and low interest rates providing incentives may be the trigger to becoming an older entrepreneur (Small, 2011; Smurthwaite, 2012). The probability of being self-employed strongly increases with age (Blanchflower et al., 2001) with the number of over 50s expected to dominate the self-employed workforce in the UK by 2024 (CEBR, 2017). Multifunctionality is therefore not only a strategic direction for town centres and the high street itself, for example, where social care needs can be met in non-traditional surroundings (e.g., coffee shops acting as dementia signposting not just as a coffee shop), for green space, living accommodation, leisure and social activity but also for older people as they increasingly assert their diversity as a dominant demographic group in the twenty-first century.

### Age Friendly Planning and Design

Davis (2002) argued that reengineering of the high street to reflect the diverse needs of older populations can revive ‘dead cities’, with older people transforming both physical and social contexts of the high street. Although ageing may not be explicitly specified as a criterion in the planning process, retirement communities, perhaps inadvertently, may have been located on the edge of urban settlements, reflecting the perception that older people are unproductive. Similarly, in some instances executive housing located near commuter highways and reliant on the car have become ageing estates themselves, with older people locked in unsuitable developments. In these circumstances ageing in place may not be ageing in the right place. Urban regeneration can cause isolation (Lewis, 2018) and, just as in retail, too many things may have been decentralised. Consequently, there is an argument to bring older people closer to urban centres again. There are some examples where planners have devised policies and schemes for high streets and town centres, such as Dementia Friendly East Lothian (<http://dfel.org.uk/>), and the practice advice publication from the RTPI entitled *Dementia and Town Planning* (RTPI, 2017, p. 6) argues that “A well designed high street, housing development or transport network that supports inclusive and active travel and community space makes a significant contribution to staying active and connected. These are good places for everyone, including people with dementia.”

Having shops in close proximity to residential areas that are in accessible, safe and supportive environments, encourages mobility and social interaction, as borne out by the 20-minute neighbourhood (TCPA, 2020). It is important for older people to remain healthy and active, retaining independence and wellbeing if they are to remain active and engaged in society. Outdoor activity is beneficial to physical and mental health and social engagement. Local community or independent convenience shops also play a crucial community or place making role as social hubs (Rybaczewska & Sparks, 2021) that support older people’s needs – interactions that encourage independence. The 2019 National Travel Survey reported that in England 32% of all trips by people aged 60+ were for shopping, which was more than double the second purpose of travel category (personal business at 14%) (Department for Transport, 2020). Shopping is not viewed as a chore or inconvenience but an enjoyable social experience for consumers, providing social interaction, engaging recreation and pleasure for older people (Angell et al., 2014; Zniwa & Weitzl, 2017). Older people are also attached to places through spatial history (Phillips et al., 2013) with collective memories over time of events and activities that took place within specific locations. Rowles (1983) describes this attachment to place, time and memory as ‘autobiographical insideness’ – where place can become a landscape of memories (p14) which can bolster identity in later life and enable a strong sense of identification with the community, even in deprived areas (Scharf et al., 2002).

### Intergenerational Co-Production

Buffel and Phillipson (2016), illustrating how a co-production approach could be developed, drew on LeFebvre’s (1991) work on ‘rights to the city’ to frame action. They argue that the AFC approach can only be successful if it can be embedded in the networks of power; with older people engaged in urban regeneration, rather than being invisible (Riseborough & Sribjilamin, 2000) and with a ‘senior’ lens being applied in planning decisions and policies (Buffel & Phillipson, 2016). In outlining their manifesto for change in relation to age friendly cities and communities, Buffel et al. (2018) call for greater recognition and prioritisation of home and neighbourhood in the lives of older people, extending the range of housing options, rather than developing age specific areas;

engaging older people in the decision making and planning of regeneration and acknowledging the diversity of ageing experiences. The same arguments can be made for intergenerational and marginalised groups, and the AFC Framework gives a blueprint for this to happen.

This demands a recalibration of the purpose and function of town centres and in particular the high street through co-production with a variety of stakeholders. Following the success of the AFC movement at the settlement and higher scales, age friendly approaches should now concentrate on the town centre/high street level taking a spatial ecosystem approach that goes beyond retailing to focus on living environments, cultural and social activities. Many of the familiar examples of age friendly cities (Green, 2012; Van Hoof et al., 2019) are expanding into age friendly regions/countries which changes the scale and purpose of the movement. Given the importance of the local in planning, notably in England since the *Localism Act 2011* (Mace & Sitkin, 2018), there is a need to explore the specifics of the town centre, drawing on high street 'influencers' to reshape and mould the environment in conjunction with older people in order to satisfy the needs of people as they age, and attracting them to the public and private spaces of the high street.

### *Flexibility of Approach*

These changes have implications for land use and planners. The Royal Institute of British Architects' (RIBA) publication *Silver Linings* (RIBA, 2013 October 27, p. 20) argues that by 2030 "The active third age have reclaimed the high street acting as a catalyst for new public amenity, private enterprise and intergenerational exchange to complement existing retail". They see the high street as invigorated "diverse, prosperous and active hubs for new intergenerational communities", where "monetary transactions receded behind social ones". Likewise, the Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) publication *Planning Horizons: Future Proofing Society* (RTPI, 2014, p. 22) argues that built environment responses to an ageing population are "complex as there will be considerable diversity amongst older populations and the experience of ageing will vary from region to region". In 2012 the Department of Communities and Local Government (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2012) produced a report on 'Reimagining urban spaces to help revitalise our high streets' calling for similar, diverse use and activity of streets, pavements and the redesign of spaces in the public realm. Bringing housing schemes for older people back into the town centre can also regenerate the high street, leading to reinvigorating small shops and cafes. Property suitable for older people in the heart of the city can stimulate the high street. Similarly, there are moves to locate 'care hubs' at the heart of the city and on the high street where older people can venture out safely and be connected (Brooke, 2018). Such strategies however need a framework and a theoretical lens in which to develop these activities – an AFC lens, focusing on local engagement, empowerment, etc adding value to the developments highlighted by these reports.

There can be little doubt that whilst the ageing of our population provides challenges, there are also opportunities. At the same time, the changes that have taken place in our town centres and our high streets have also provided challenges, but opportunities to reimagine our town centres do now seem within grasp. Conceptualizing the issue of the town centre as a solely retail one, or simply seeing older people as a solution to a retail issue are dead ends. As we have argued above, the contribution of this expanding older population is as residents, consumers, entrepreneurs, workers, and active citizens, providing life to places in an intergenerational and socially supportive context. If we are to integrate generations and communities then the high street may be one microenvironment in which to do this if the right housing, services, and opportunities are put in place for older people.

## Conclusions

Over the last 60 years our towns have been ‘hollowed out’ as decentralisation has moved economic and social activity away from their urban cores. This has occurred in retailing (along with industries and schools etc.) where the waves of decentralised development have cumulatively outcompeted town centre stores. Such high streets have also been impacted by a removal of population and footfall and a cost/tax structure that has failed to adapt to the modern business environment (both out-of-town and the internet have significant cost advantages over town centre stores). Reimagining and reinventing our town centres and high streets has become a national ambition (Millington et al., 2018). Our primary concern has been to explore the potential for older people’s involvement in reshaping town and city centres, and especially their town centres and high streets as places capable of escaping the ‘doldrums’ into which diverse pressures have driven them for over 60 years. The Covid-19 pandemic, global and local in its impact, is in some respects just the latest in a series of events to beset the high street, although notably its impact goes beyond retailing to the multitude of businesses that service daytime and night-time visitors to these places.

At the outset we posed three questions broadly connected with reconsidering the role of older people in working with planners and other urban ‘influencers’ to reshape or reimagine the high street in town and city centres. It is apparent that the future of town and city centres lies beyond retailing and office-based employment, and the AFC model or framework, though its explicit inclusion of older people’s needs, offers the opportunity to act as a starting point for realising this ambition. Reconceptualization of town centres and the high street also needs a theoretical framework to guide and evaluate practice and policy. The WHO AFC framework with modifications to accommodate a post Covid-19 world is a good starting point. Above all else, reshaping town and city to reimagine the high street demands an interdisciplinary lens being brought to bear on the issue that goes beyond traditional public participation in the planning and development process and engages older as well as younger, disabled and other marginalised members of society in addressing the challenge. The adaptability of the AFC framework to different cultural contexts has already been proved through its application internationally in countries at various stages of development. We argue that it also has the potential to address the challenges posed by town centres on a similar international scale.

We argue that the future of the high street lies in recognition and reinvigoration of the town centre’s multifunctionality and, connected with this, to move beyond regarding an ageing society as a problem to be solved. New cohorts of older people are expected to play an increasing role in consumer culture (Higgs et al., 2009). They understand consumer culture, are increasingly more confident users of technology, increasingly demanding the most up to date products and services. They are challenging the prevailing stereotype of older people as passive citizens within consumer society, hiding themselves away from active engagement in the public realm. They are physically and mentally active, digitally engaged, and aware of their potential contribution to the economy and society. In a post Covid-19 environment older people are likely to be major drivers of eCommerce with the ability to make more discretionary purchases than younger people and increasingly accustomed to online shopping (Mintel, 2020).

Covid-19 has disrupted what is somewhat vaguely referred to as ‘normal everyday living’. However, a positive aspect of the pandemic is that it has helped to clarify the importance of creating a healthy living environment for older and younger members of society. A future town centre needs economic, social, and creative activity. Above all it needs people. Our older population, with the right conditions, can deliver people in place, acting as residents, consumers, workers, entrepreneurs, and active citizens

and thus catalyse our urban rethinking. By so doing, footfall and spend will be attractors for retail and we can begin to see the redevelopment of the original symbiotic relationship of the town centre and the high street. The emergence of ‘strategic localism’ in planning (Bishop & O’Rourke, 2015) offers the potential to engage older people in planning and neighbourhood development, and thus contributing to the devolution of more power to cities and communities (RTPI, 2014).

## Disclosure Statement

Leigh Sparks declares that he was a member of the Fraser Review (the National Review of Town Centres in Scotland) and is Chair of the Board of Scotland’s Towns Partnership, the lead body in Scotland promoting, agitating and energising work in and on Scotland’s town centres. At the time of writing he is chairing a review of the Town Centre Action Plan for the Scottish Government and is a member of the Social Renewal Advisory Board, also for the Scottish Government.

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