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## Ageing in place, local high streets, and well-being

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### ABSTRACT

As people age, many prefer to stay in their familiar homes and neighbourhoods to maintain well-being, using local services and facilities – an approach known as ‘ageing in place’. Despite the perceived decline of local high streets in the UK, they remain central locations offering essential services that can support this approach. This paper examines three case study high streets in Edinburgh, Scotland, exploring how these locales can influence ageing in place and subjective well-being for older adults. The findings reveal four key dimensions of well-being that high streets provide for the ageing population: social well-being, a sense of place, aesthetic enjoyment from being active outside the home, and a sense of mastery and autonomy in pursuing daily activities. The research highlights the potential of local high streets to sustain older people’s well-being, reinforcing their importance as urban spaces that support later life. Our study emphasises the important role high streets can play in shaping ageing-in-place policies, expanding the concept of ‘place’ beyond the home. This aligns with broader health policies in Scotland, where there is a growing focus on the role of place and communities in promoting strengths and resources they already have to support health and well-being.

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Commercial street; neighbourhood; public realm; older people; well-being; health

## Introduction

In the UK, high streets are a significant aspect of the urban neighbourhoods where people grow older. Although there has been debate about their potential to support ageing and improve the well-being of older adults (Parkinson *et al.* 2013, Phillips *et al.* 2021), exploration of how the everyday use of these locales can enhance older individuals’ well-being has been limited. The following sections discuss the insufficient consideration given to older people in high street debates, policies, and research on the connections between well-being and everyday urban environments. Complementing recently published work (Brunelli *et al.* 2022, 2024), the paper discusses empirical research carried out on three local high streets in Edinburgh (Scotland), also referred to as ‘local town centres’ (City of Edinburgh Council 2016), and provides further evidence of the multidimensional contributions these locales can make to older people’s well-being.

## Ageing in place

In the UK, the population over 75 years old is projected to grow by more than 68% over the next 20 years, reaching 13.7% for the UK and slightly more for Scotland (National Records of Scotland 2021). This demographic shift underscores the importance of policies that support an ageing population, such as ‘ageing in place’. This approach allows people to maintain a degree of independence in the community where they have spent their recent years by adapting housing and providing care and health services at home and in a community of choice rather than relocating them to residential care institutions (Wiles *et al.* 2012). As a key policy driver, ‘ageing in place’ is considered a cost-effective approach that can deliver improved health and well-being outcomes, including in supporting a sense of autonomy, independence, and choice in later life (Rowles 1993, Means 2007, Sixsmith and Sixsmith 2008, Fänge *et al.* 2012, Mitchell 2012, Ipsos-MORI 2015, 2016, Gibson *et al.* 2024). Research across Europe shows that living at home can positively

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impact outcomes in later life (Sixsmith *et al.* 2014), with ageing in place seen as *'fundamental to active ageing as it enables older people to remain physically and socially connected to their communities'* (O'Hehir 2014, p. 5).

Yet ageing involves change, and both people and the places in which they live evolve over time (WHO 2015, Scharlach *et al.* 2016). Homes can become lonely and emotionally negative places, and neighbourhoods can undermine independence, particularly when they do not support everyday decision-making including for those living with dementia or housed in less secure accommodation (Means 2007, Sixsmith and Sixsmith 2008, Golant 2018, Wiles and Coleman 2024). The initial focus on the domestic environment in ageing-in-place research has also been reconsidered increasing evidence links neighbourhood effects to ageing. This highlights both negative aspects – such as a higher presence of environmental hazards or stress factors – and positive aspects, such as ease of access to services and facilities (Glass and Balfour 2003) and a wider understanding which can support processes of adaptation described as *'mediated ageing-in-place'* (Cutchin 2003).

Scholars have increasingly recognised, beyond the limits of home, the supportive role of the neighbourhood and everyday urban settings in which people live (Glass and Balfour 2003, Peace *et al.* 2006, Atkinson *et al.* 2009, Burton *et al.* 2011, Gardner 2011, Gilroy 2012, Hillcoat-Nallétamby 2014, Greenfield *et al.* 2015, Lum *et al.* 2016, Scharlach 2017) and have tried therefore to understand *'what constitutes a "decent" environment in which older people are committed to ageing in place'* (Smith, 2009, p. 2). The neighbourhood can create the environment to support opportunities for caregiving, daily activities, and forms of social participation that enhance well-being in old age (Glass and Balfour 2003, Woolrych *et al.* 2021). Neighbourhoods are where people can *'relish the pleasures and challenges of life beyond the home and strive to maintain for as long as possible [their] independence and ability to get out and about'* (Holland *et al.* 2005, p. 49). They are crucial for supporting older people's mobility in old age and connection to community (Burton *et al.* 2011). Ageing in place depends on a broader understanding of home, recognising its interdependence with the wider urban environment (Rowles 1993, Hillcoat-Nallétamby 2014, Golant 2018, Hand *et al.* 2020). This understanding includes access to neighbourhood facilities that meet changing needs, helping to reduce pressure on home services and family support, while fostering health and active ageing (Gilroy 2012). Ultimately, ageing in place should

be understood as ageing-in-the-right place (Golant 2015), that is living in an environment that supports older adults' evolving needs, well-being, and autonomy by ensuring a suitable fit between people and place.

### **Well-being, ageing, and high streets**

Supported by other studies on people-environment research (Bowling and Gabriel 2007, Nordbakke and Schwanen 2014), this paper defines well-being as the self-reported subjective assessment of what people describe as having a positive impact on their lives. It includes the physical, social, and psychological resources available in places, which have been associated with positive feelings, self-esteem, and the fulfillment of one's purposes and needs (Atkinson *et al.* 2012). In environmental gerontology, well-being has been framed in terms of the functional congruence between individual abilities and the demands posed by the environment (Nahemow and Lawton 1973, Lawton 1999), leading to the idea that a supportive environment can provide opportunities to strengthen individual competencies and contribute to improved quality of life (Phillips *et al.* 2010). In extending our understanding of relational aspects of well-being to place, such as sense of identity and belonging, research has identified the importance of the interdependency between older people's well-being and everyday settings outside the home, including local amenities, community resources, and outdoor spaces (Rowles 1978, 1983, 1993, 2000, Phillips *et al.* 2011, 2013, Woolrych *et al.* 2022, Grippo *et al.* 2023). The literature has identified three inter-related dimensions through which the public realm supports the well-being of older adults: (1) the cultivation of emotional attachment and a sense of place; (2) mobility and access to facilities; and (3) social interaction and connectedness. These dimensions are explored in the sections that follow.

### **Emotional attachment and sense of place**

Attachment to a place which sustains the desire to age in place is linked to well-being through safety, belonging, and identity, which are important in old age as health and functional abilities may decrease (Rowles 1983, Sixsmith and Sixsmith 2008, Wiles *et al.* 2012, Makita *et al.* 2020). The meaning attached to a place is crucial for forming a sense of place and well-being – a concept termed 'place identity' in environmental psychology (Proshansky 1978, DeMiglio and Williams 2008, Seamon and Gill 2014). Place meaning is influenced by activities, physical features, and

personal and collective memories (Relph 1976, Manzo 2005, Lewicka 2011a). Emotional well-being is supported by attachments formed when places accumulate life-course events and memories, leading to autobiographical insideness (Rowles 1983, Marcus 1992). These memories, whether positive or negative, shape place identity, where, for example, a nostalgic sense of place can result from a sense of loss linked to past experiences (Eyles 1985, Phillipson 2007). Autobiographical memories contribute to a personal sense of place but are also shaped by shared social, cultural, and economic factors (Gilroy 1995, Woolrych *et al.* 2020). Activities and events contribute to a ‘social sense of place’, fostering well-being through social ties and a sense of belonging (Rowles 2000, Gustafson 2001). Familiarity and unexpected encounters in urban spaces enhance that social attachment (Seamon 2013). Over time, this collective understanding can create a shared sense of place, enhancing social well-being but potentially leading to negative psychological impacts when people feel excluded or alienated from places, such as through rapid urban change or forced/voluntary displacement from the community (Parry *et al.* 2004, Phillipson 2007, Smith, Stanley *et al.* 2011).

### **Mobility and access to facilities**

Self-esteem and quality of life improve when individuals plan journeys to access transport or assistance (Holland *et al.* 2005, Peace *et al.* 2006), which has been called ‘*motility*’ (Kaufmann 2002, Cuignet *et al.* 2020, Guittou *et al.* 2025). Actual physical movement, or ‘*corporeal mobility*’ (Nordbakke and Schwanen 2014), has been linked to feelings of being active, autonomous, and independent (Holland *et al.* 2005, Oswald *et al.* 2005, Burton and Mitchell 2006, Peace *et al.* 2006, Diehr and Hirsch 2010, Schwanen and Ziegler 2011, Schwanen *et al.* 2012), as well as to people’s feelings of independence and agency in engaging in ‘discretionary travel’ (Musselwhite 2017), non-essential, optional, and voluntary trips to achieve meaningful and social activities including leisure, retail, and religious activities (Carp 1988, Seligman 2002, Gehl 2010, 2011, Schwanen *et al.* 2012).

Physical features of the street environment such as the quality and width of pavement and regulated crossings are essential to support older people’s mobility (Carmona *et al.* 2003, Mitchell *et al.* 2004, Newton *et al.* 2010, Brorsson *et al.* 2011, 2013, Thompson *et al.* 2014, IDGO n.d.) and their relevance for making local high street age-friendly has been previously highlighted by the authors (Brunelli *et al.* 2024). Attractive destinations foster walking as a principal

mode of transport (Dempsey *et al.* 2012). Walking itself fulfills exercise preferences and has a positive impact on well-being through physical activity (Andrews *et al.* 2012, Ettema and Smajic 2015) and through environmental and social encounters (Reis *et al.* 2000, Cold 2001, Moudon and Lee 2003, Gatersleben and Uzzell 2007, Diehr and Hirsch 2010, Andrews *et al.* 2012, Carlson *et al.* 2012, Nathan *et al.* 2012, Lindal and Hartig 2013, Ettema and Smajic 2015). All these factors combined can contribute or be detrimental to both *environmental mastery*—defined as the competence to manage one’s socio-spatial environment – and *personal autonomy*—the ability to make independent decisions without relying on external support (Ryff 1989, 1995, Deci and Ryan 2000, Chirkov *et al.* 2003, Ryan *et al.* 2008, Steger *et al.* 2008).

### **Social interaction and connectedness**

Research has highlighted the social dimension of public spaces and its benefits for people’s well-being (Mean and Tims 2005, Dines *et al.* 2006, Worpole and Knox 2008, Bond 2014, Anderson *et al.* 2017). Social engagement in public spaces in later life has been positively linked to a sense of identity and attachment to one’s community (Berkman and Glass 2000), with a positive effect on well-being (Farquhar 1995, Bowling 2005, Mean and Tims 2005, Dines *et al.* 2006, Searle 2008, Worpole and Knox 2007, Jagger and Brittain 2014). Social interaction and connectedness are also related to emotional attachment and sense of place and are a relevant feature of age-friendly communities which can be hindered by the lack of social spaces, and transport limitations (Emlet and Mocerri 2012). Seminal studies on public life – situated between buildings (Gehl and Svarre 2013) and ‘produced’ through everyday practices and micro-interactions (Lofland 1998) – have highlighted its positive impact on people’s everyday life.

High streets – whether primary commercial streets or secondary centres in towns and cities – have traditionally been key sites of public life and community identity in the UK. They remain a prominent feature of the urban environment – offering what can be described as ‘*persistent sameness and unity*’ (Relph 1976, p. 45), where people experience ageing (Carmona *et al.* 2003; Dobson 2022) and over time they have evolved into places with a diverse offer of services and facilities (Carmona 2021). Historically, high streets have functioned as both movement corridors and destinations (Jones *et al.* 2007). However, their role has shifted towards becoming thoroughfares, diminishing their social, and economic

functions (DCLG 2012). Their decline has been compounded since the late 1980s by the rise of out-of-town retail (Dawson 1988, Jones *et al.* 2007) and, more recently, by the shift to online shopping. The Covid pandemic has underscored the significance of locally available independent shops and services (WHO 2007, Corfe 2021, Phillips *et al.* 2021, Sparks 2021b) and the need for more comprehensive strategies that prioritise holistic community approaches over mere retail-focused strategies catering for specific and higher socio-economic groups (Cooke *et al.* 2020, Mumford *et al.* 2020, Grimsey 2021, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2021, Sparks 2021a).

Research suggests that high streets can become more age-friendly by improving accessibility to services and amenities for individuals with lower incomes and limited mobility, thereby enhancing social interaction, public life, and community spirit (Carmona *et al.* 2003, Griffiths *et al.* 2008, Tibbalds 2012, RSPH 2015, 2018, Dobson 2022, Brunelli *et al.* 2022, 2024). Recent reports have also highlighted the need for more age-friendly high streets that can promote intergenerational interaction (Coca-Stefaniak *et al.* 2018, Grimsey 2018, Millington 2018, Positive Ageing in London 2021). While the Age-Friendly Cities (AFC) movement (WHO 2007) highlights policies in housing, transportation, and outdoor spaces as essential for 'ageing in place' (Van Dijk 2015, p. 19), it often focuses on a macro level (Phillips *et al.* 2021), neglecting the importance of local high streets and retail centres in the daily lives of older individuals (White and Hammond 2018). Overall, discussions on the needs and potential impact of local high streets on an ageing population often lack supporting evidence. To date, no studies have specifically explored how the use of these locales by older individuals can affect their subjective well-being.

### Research design and methods

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore older adults' experiences of local high streets and their impact on subjective well-being. Conducted in Edinburgh, chosen for its well-utilised high streets and low vacancy rates, the research draws on interviews, focus groups, and observations. The methods were described more in detail in a previous paper (Brunelli *et al.* 2024) which focused on the physical features of local high streets. Additional information on the design methods for this paper is provided in the supplementary material available online. This section therefore sets out only a brief summary of the research methods

### Study area selection

From the nine high streets identified in Edinburgh's Local Development Plan, three were selected to capture a range of physical and socio-economic characteristics: Corstorphine Town Centre (CTC), Leith Town Centre (LTC), and Morningside Town Centre (MTC).

### Data collection methods

The study employed a combination of interviews to explore older adults' experiences of local high streets. Walking interviews ( $n = 25$ ) situated participants' narratives within their spatial context. For those unable or unwilling to take part, semi-structured interviews ( $n = 16$ ) provided an alternative, allowing for in-depth reflections on high street use. Focus groups ( $n = 12$ , with a total of 51 participants) facilitated collective discussions on high street experiences and potential improvements. Additionally, structured and unstructured observations recorded patterns of public space use, pedestrian footfall, and subtle social behaviours, offering contextual knowledge for the interviewer to discuss with participants.

### Participants

A total of 84 participants (aged 63–96, mean age 78, 61% female) were purposively sampled with support from local service providers. Screening considered gender, mobility, and socio-economic background to ensure diverse perspectives.

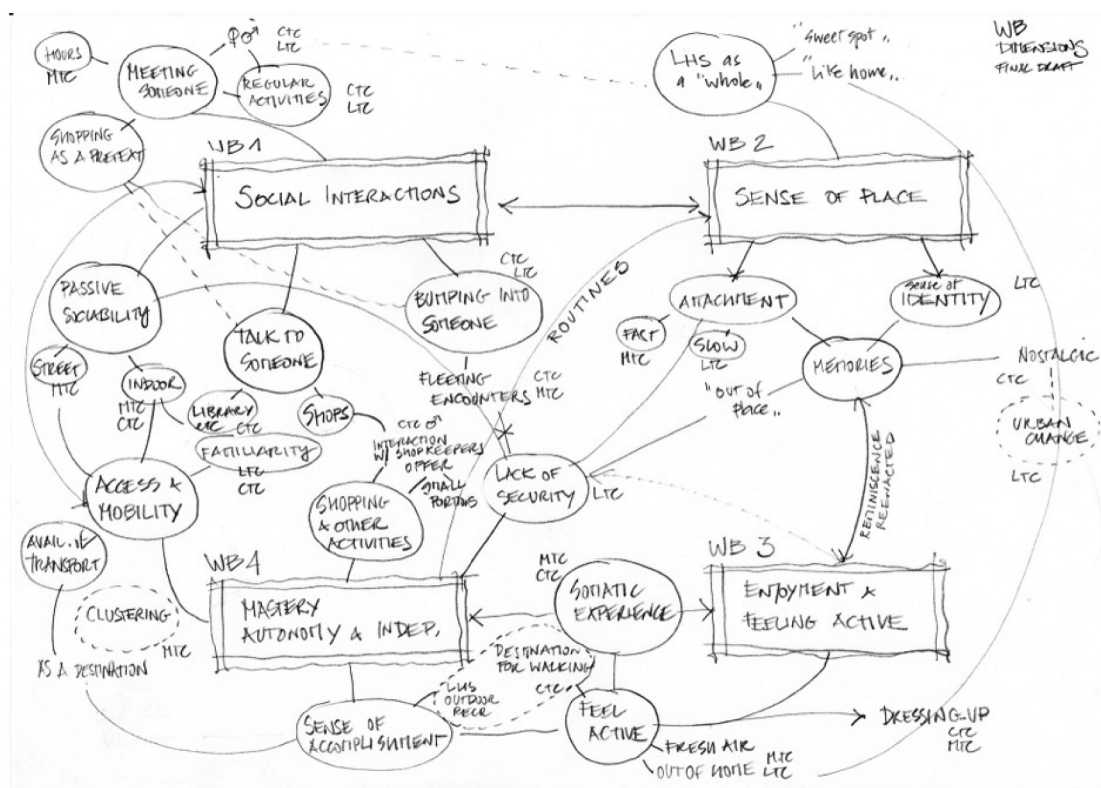
### Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012, Nowell *et al.* 2017), identifying key themes around well-being and high street use. Qualitative software – NVivo 10 and 11 – supported the inductive coding process, while contextual data from activity diaries and observations also provided additional insights.

The research received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Energy, Geoscience, Infrastructure and Society (EGIS) at Heriot-Watt University.

### Results

This section provides a description of the four key well-being dimensions which emerged from the thematic analysis of the data (Figure 1): social well-being (WB1), sense of place (WB2), enjoyment and feeling active (WB3), and sense of purpose and mastery of the environment (WB4).



**Figure 1.** Thematic analysis of well-being dimensions. Source: Main author.

The interview quotes include information about the interviewee's gender, age, and the geographical location (i.e. the relevant town centre – LTC, CTC, and MTC) to keep the description 'grounded' in the reality of each place.

### **WB1. Social interaction**

Participants generally decide freely if, when, and how to interact with others in the public realm, often choosing to use local high streets because they are busy places, with 'busy' mostly referring to the presence of people, which makes them appealing. Four main forms of interaction emerged from the interviews in relation to well-being: '*meeting people*', '*bumping into people*', '*speaking to someone*', and '*feeling the presence of people*' (passive interaction). These categories highlight links to other dimensions of well-being and specific environmental features.

## Meeting people

Shopping often serves as a pretext for social interaction, with participants frequently arranging to meet friends, acquaintances, or relatives for shopping or visiting coffee shops. Women tend to visit

local high streets more often than men, likely due to traditional roles. Ava [84, LTC] remarked, 'That's the story of our lives! Shopping!', while Lucy [67, LTC] described her outings with a friend as mainly social: 'Just going around the shops. Nothing particular! ... I enjoy the company, aye! ... You come and get company, you get a blether, and go and get something to eat [...] Just a couple of hours, in and out and back in again! Like a Jack in a box'. Going out becomes an habit for Lucy in this case to evade home – the box – as she was yearning for company related to her recent bereavement. For many women, the companionship is the main attraction, with a 'blether' – a lengthy chat – being key. Men, however, often had limited use of high streets during their working lives, focusing on tasks like driving for bulk shopping, humorously termed 'donkey work' by Ella [96, LTC]. This pattern shifts after retirement, divorce, or widowhood, when men start shopping more, seeing it as a chore rather than a social activity. Crawford [81, CTC] noted that shopping is something men 'have to do'.

Shopping as a secondary activity for meeting people is a key attraction of local high streets, shaping public life. In the three case studies, social interactions mainly

occur during shop opening hours, with occasional visits to local pubs or church hall events being particularly valued by those living within walking distance.

### Regular activities

Socialisation often revolves around regular activities in community centres and public facilities like ‘coffee mornings’. These events structure the week and promote social connectedness. ‘Coffee mornings’ provide a ‘feeling of community’ and a ‘welcoming’ atmosphere, supported by volunteers. Moira [90, LTC] noted, ‘If we come here [to the local church hall], so many people speak to you!’ Participants share both negative and positive experiences, such as family celebrations, grandchildren’s achievements, or jolly stories from recent holidays, fostering a sense of community well-being.

The LTC church hall, similarly to another community centre in the area, is easily accessible by bus and close to other amenities, making it an ideal stop-over during morning outings and shopping (Figure 2). In CTC, the local community centre on the main street provides opportunities to: ‘Meet. Meet people. To get you out of the house, and have lunch’ [Sheila, 84, CTC]. The ‘Men’s Shed’ that is organised here on a weekly basis offers men an ‘excuse’ to go out and do things together. As Crawford [81, CTC] described: ‘Men together to do things and this is why we come here’. Activities like



**Figure 2.** The ‘coffee morning’ as a stop-over during the morning shopping. Source: Main author.

indoor archery provide opportunities to socialise and have fun, helping widowers like Robert [65, CTC] get out of their homes: ‘It’s good from the point of view of our well-being in that Crawford is a widower, so it gets him out’. Similarly, for Peter [73, CTC], the ‘Men’s Shed’ was his ‘life saver’, pulling’ him out of home every day.

### Bumping into someone

Unexpected encounters with known people on the street, in cafes, libraries, and other amenities strengthen well-being by reinforcing social connections. Ayla [71, MTC] described her local high street as ‘my home, kind of the hub of my life’. Greg [67, LTC] appreciated the community awareness: ‘if you don’t turn up in a shop someone may say “where is he?”’. In Greg’s account, the local high street is the place where the local community becomes visible to itself, contributing to a sense of community and mutual social support.

Fleeting social exchanges make the public realm both familiar and attractive. Rhona [86, LTC] illustrated this: ‘When I’m out with my husband and I say “Oh, hello!” and he says “Who’s that?!” and I say “I told you last time I saw them but I can’t remember!”’. Similarly, Glen [76, MTC] mentioned making ‘very nice connections’ in his new retirement flat. However, older participants like Henry [90, LTC] experienced these encounters ‘very seldom [...] I’m nearly ninety now, so a lot of my friends are gone, very seldom’. Local high streets offer a ‘stimulating’ level of social connectedness, contrasting with shopping centres and large supermarkets, where chances of encountering someone known are lower (Lorna, 91, MTC). Smaller shopping parades lack the opportunities for casual encounters that high streets provide. Morag [89, MTC] noted, ‘We’ve got all the basics, but there’s no ... there’s nothing there you know? You don’t go down there and say, “Oh, I’ll see my friend down there”. It’s just basically for shopping, you wouldn’t say it contributes to your well-being, you’re only shopping there’. This suggests well-being is linked to a place’s sociability. For Ailsa [79, MTC], at the onset of Alzheimer’s and suffering from memory loss, ‘bumping into people’ on her daily walk to a café meant greeting ‘People I know and ... people I don’t know. I’ll say hello to anybody! [LAUGHS] Anybody’s in trouble I’ll give them a hand [LAUGHS]’. Ailsa’s extroverted attitude is rare among participants, though it parallels the behaviour of those who engage directly with staff in shops and other amenities.

### Talk to someone

Brief verbal exchanges, often evolving into longer conversations with shop assistants and staff in public facilities like libraries and community centres, emerged as a reliable source of social well-being. These interactions frequently occur in traditional, long-established shops like cobblers, butchers, and hairdressers. In specialist outlets like hardware or appliance shops, staff expertise was a key attraction. Stuart [79, CTC] noted, *'you could buy a screw or whatever and he would probably tell you how to do whatever . . . give you advice'*. Similarly, Ayla [71, MTC] valued the *'human link'* with a sales assistant, stating, *'I need it, yes I need it and I think other people do'*.

In small supermarkets with permanent staff, customers enjoy casual conversations. Cameron [81, CTC] remarked, *'they will blether away with you'*. Conversely, automated tills are seen as a threat to well-being, as Ava [84, LTC] pointed out, *'living alone, I want to speak to somebody!'* and she seeks out interactions to keep staff employed. Libraries also serve as social hubs; participants often describe staff and other users as *'friends'*. Bridget [80, CTC] shared, *'I meet people, yes. Not friends, I don't arrange. I just come down [to the library on the high street] and see . . . And I talk to anybody who's got time'*. These forms of direct sociability create a network of connections that support a sense of well-being on the local high street, often reinforced by passive interactions.

### Forms of Passive Interaction

Passive social interaction, which does not involve verbal exchange, occurs mainly in two situations: in local

amenities and on busy streets. In libraries, older people often sit next to each other without direct communication, as seen in MTC where the concave bench shape in the newspaper area enhances social proximity (Figure 3).

Passive interaction is also what Hector [78, LTC] seeks while regularly attending a coffee shop, where he feels *'involved'* by observing people: *'I don't speak to them but I'm involved, whereas if I were sitting in the house watching the f\* television!'*. Others look out from inside cafes watching people walking on the street or, like Glen [76, MTC], enjoy observing people from their retirement flat's lounge: *'Our lounge is on the front and it's a lovely window . . . [laughing] We can watch what is going on!'* This visual connection is valued by home-bound residents who maintain a sense of community participation even when physically absent. Participants also appreciate the presence of people on the street, a hallmark of *'busy'* local town centres. Christy [65, MTC] links her well-being to MTC's *'vibrant'* and *'busy'* atmosphere with *'people walking about'*, while Maidie [87, MTC] enjoys the feeling of being part of the community when out on the local high street, stating, *'You feel you are part of a community whether you know people or not'*.

Public life on local high streets, with various forms of social interaction, contributes to a sense of connectedness and well-being. These interactions support other facets of well-being, such as feelings of attachment, belonging, and identity, encapsulated in a general sense of place.



**Figure 3.** Newspaper area in a local library (Morningside Town Centre). Source: Main author.

Overall social well-being in CTC, LTC, and MTC subtly varies with interaction patterns and local context. In LTC, community centres and church halls foster structured sociability, with shopping as a pretext for social encounters, particularly among women. CTC provides similar opportunities but with gendered distinctions, as a locally available ‘Men’s Shed’, supports older men’s social engagement. MTC, with its busier high street, enables both active and passive interactions, where vibrancy sustains spontaneous encounters.

### WB2. Sense of place, attachment, and identity

Participants assert the significant role local high streets play in their daily lives. Robena [LTC, 86] referred to it as a ‘sweet spot’. These streets are valued for individual and collective memories that maintain a sense of continuity and identity. Many interviewees, whether long-standing or lifelong Edinburgh residents, have frequented the same local high street for decades – averaging 30 years for MTC, 38 for CTC, and nearly 60 for LTC. These locales foster emotional connections, making people feel at ‘home’ in the public realm. Abby [LTC, 77] expressed this sentiment: ‘Yes! Yes! Because it’s ... it’s my home! It’s where I’ve always

been!’ Moira [LTC, 90] and Ava [LTC, 84] likened visiting the local high street to ‘going back to see your mother’. Chloe [89, LTC] exemplified this attachment by travelling three times a week from a distant home to LTC, saying, ‘I like it, I like it. It does make me feel good. I remember all, where I used to go and what you had there, I like it’. Most participants indicated they would relocate near another town centre if their local high street disappeared.

However, this attachment is sometimes tinged with melancholy due to changes in the built environment, particularly the turnover of commercial premises. Avril [CTC, 85] lamented, ‘the feel of things when I was growing up is gone’, and Eric [CTC, 83] noted, ‘we don’t like to see change really’. Photographic records show significant changes in LTC compared to MTC and CTC, including the demolition and rebuilding of LTC’s main commercial street in the early 1960s (see [Figures 4 and 5](#)).

Participants recall the vibrant public life of the old street with a sense of loss, and nostalgic memories foster a strong shared identity that enhances social connectedness, particularly during local coffee mornings. Ava [LTC, 84] described an ‘invisible thread’ drawing people back despite changes. However, this nostalgia can alienate newcomers like Hector [LTC, 78], who feel ‘out of



**Figure 4.** The Old Kirkgate (Leith Town Centre) in the 1950s, when most participants were in their 20s and a few in their 30s (Edinphoto, Evening News).

place' due to a lack of shared memories. Immigration and gentrification contribute to feelings of displacement and affect participants' sense of attachment.

Long-standing memories provide an *'invisible scaffolding'* that supports people's sense of place. Some participants actively enhance this by joining local history societies (CTC), contributing to oral history projects (LTC), or attending organised tours (LTC). Glen [MTC, 76] exemplifies this proactive approach by acquiring local history knowledge, reading books, and building social connections in his retirement flat, which motivates him to 'explore' the town centre and use the high street more frequently. In only one case [Carrol, CTC, 74], another newcomer, the well-being benefits of using the local high street were limited to practical aspects – particularly the availability of second-hand and charity shops – with no explicitly reported emotional attachment.

Attachment to local high streets varies across CTC, LTC, and MTC, shaped by memory, continuity, and change. In LTC, where the most change has occurred, long-standing residents still describe it as 'home', fostering a strong sense of identity but sometimes alienating newcomers. CTC participants also express nostalgia for a time when the area felt more like a village, though some, unimpressed by its quality, prioritise practicality. In MTC, some participants, while similarly attached, take a more proactive approach, engaging with local history to deepen their connection

### WB3. Enjoyment and feeling active

Expressions of well-being emerged from the somatic experience of local high streets. Simply 'being out'

fosters feelings of activity and health, offering sensory encounters with the environment. The embodied experience of the public realm was often expressed beyond mere visual delight. For many, *'being out and about'* is an enjoyable practice that allows them to feel active. Morag [MTC, 89] expressed this sentiment: *'So, you come here and then you go out to do some fitness, or ... I sometimes come with a friend to do some shopping, and we sort of stroll down. [...] There are houses, there are small shops, there's boutiques. I think it's got a nice atmosphere about it'*.

Walking, even with mobility aids, allows participants to engage in everyday activities on the high street, enhancing their well-being. Hugh [MTC, 72] observed: *'We moved back, and we just feel it has been such a great move for our well-being ... we've got the morning exercise, because we're walking every day'*. For Hugh, shops provide a reason to go out daily. Other interviewees also viewed their high street engagement as a chance to *'get out'* and *'go around the shops'*. Lorna [MTC, 91], who lives alone not far from the main street, emphasised: *'I'm out every day ... It's so necessary for my well-being ... doing some messages [errands] is an excuse'*. She highlighted that daily outings are crucial for feeling alive, contrasting with staying home alone, which she finds detrimental. Lorna celebrated the opportunity to dress up and enjoy fresh air, using errands as a pretext to wander (see [Figure 6](#)).

For most participants, the *'visual encounter'* with small shop fronts in the town centre is more attractive than shopping centres. Similarly, doing errands was for Carrol [CTC, 74] an excuse to stay active and healthy: *'The motivation for me ... is actually the exercise, walking here ... there's nothing in the*



**Figure 5.** The same place as in [Figure 4](#) in 2015. Source: Main author.



**Figure 6.** Lady dressed up to go out and about in Corstorphine Town Centre. Source: Main author.

*shopping area of any cultural interest. I prefer walking on a high street and browsing ... you can get trades people, and houses for sale ... people like to look in the [shops] windows for that.* Carrol lives near a major out-of-town shopping centre but prefers the local town centre for a weekly walk, enjoying the ‘visual encounter’ with small shop fronts. Not all three places are perceived equally well, however. In LTC, Bridget [73, LTC] expressed dissatisfaction with inadequate street maintenance: *I mean, this Junction Street, and this really gets to me! [...] I’m talking about caring about your environment.* Concerns over the upkeep of the streets are indicative of broader neglect, impacting local identity and people’s well-being.

The use of high streets as destinations to feel active contrasts with open spaces, often associated with contemplative activities like *‘staring at the green’* [Florence, MTC, 91], rather than being active: *‘no, I (don’t see) sitting on the bench [in a park], I just like to be on the move’* [Donna, MTC, 88]. While participants regularly use green spaces, many prefer the high street for walking. Nevertheless, the aesthetic pleasure of ‘greenery’, such as floral hanging baskets along high streets, is appreciated for conveying a sense of aesthetic pleasure, being *‘nice and cheery’* [Donna, 87, CTC], and creating a well-kept environment often associated with a small village atmosphere.

#### **WB4. Mastery, autonomy, and independence**

The participants’ sense of well-being from engaging physically and aesthetically with local high streets for outdoor leisure is closely tied to their mastery and autonomy within this environment. Maintaining independence involves navigating high streets, making decisions about timing, location, and activities. Comments on well-being emerged across three domains: negotiating the physical environment, accessing amenities despite declining faculties, and feeling safe in public spaces.

Long-standing use and familiarity with the local high street encourage participants to go out and assert their independence, as Chloe [LTC, 89] stated, *‘I just like to see things, get where I want, you know.’* Accessing shops and services along high streets provides a sense of accomplishment beyond meeting practical needs, as Evelyn [MTC, 71] noted, *‘I quite like to go to shops [rather than shopping online] when I get it, that’s good, a good job done!’* This sense of achievement persists even when declining faculties force renegotiation of mobility and independence. For example, Leslie [CTC, 72], coping with severe motor dysfunction and relying on an electric wheelchair, described local high streets as her *‘saving grace’* for maintaining social connections and autonomy. Similarly, Lucy [LTC, 67], supported by a council-

funded programme, found the town centre a valuable resource for coping with bereavement and redefining her sense of autonomy.

When day centres are located on high streets, easy access via public transport attracts participants with varying conditions and mobility levels, including those who have stopped driving and cannot engage in weekly bulk shopping. This connection between social dimensions of well-being and feelings of autonomy and independence allows the still-independent to ‘*make the most of being here [...] shopping on the way there [to the day centre, and] kills two birds with one stone!*’ [Jess, 85, MTC], combining tasks to save energy [Ava, 84, LTC]. As Maidie [MTC, 87] noted, ‘*independence is what life becomes about when you’re about to lose it. Or in fear of losing it*’, leading people to adapt their choices to be closer to bus stops to shorten walking distances. This is what Maidie [87, MTC] describes: ‘*I’ve just recently realised it’s an easier bank than I’ve been using, the [name of bank] one. To go to [name of bank] there’s quite a walk to get a bus back, whilst if I go to the [other] one I get off right at the door, and it’s not such a long walk to cross the road and get back [...]*’. Similar calculations are made by those who downsized to live closer to a high street to ‘*future-proof*’ their autonomy before becoming too frail. For Glen [MTC, 76], ‘*It’s basically ... an easy place to live for us ... if we lived ... two or three hundred metres in another direction*

*from where we are then it wouldn’t necessarily be easy*’.

The variety of shops on high streets meets people’s needs and enhances well-being making their effort worthwhile as Derek [MTC, 90] points out, ‘*It’s a bit of an effort for me to get to that street [MTC] and so when I do go shopping it’s better to go to a street like that where there’s a choice of shops and have a post office. So, one trip will do. It makes it worthwhile*. Participants, including those with mild mobility impairments such as Ella [LTC, 96], find running errands in their town centre enjoyable and less tiring than shopping in large supermarkets: ‘*I can’t use big amounts! That’s silly*’, referring to the overwhelming variety and 3-for-2 offers in larger stores, which hinder autonomy and independence.

However, perceived lack of safety in the public realm can diminish these benefits. Anti-social behaviour increases feelings of insecurity, affecting autonomy and leading to place avoidance and altered usage patterns (see Figure 7). Eric [LTC, 79] described ‘*shopping in and out*’ to avoid lingering, while Gloria [LTC, 66] said, ‘*If it wasn’t for those people down there, I would pop down every week*.’ Avril [LTC, 85] avoids going alone, ‘*I would walk round rather than ... unless my husband is with me*’. Perceived lack of safety weakens social practices, diminishes public life, and reduces the overall sense of place. In LTC, the removal of benches from one pedestrian area as a measure to reduce antisocial



**Figure 7.** An example of place-avoidance. Rear access through parking lot to supermarket and Leith Town Centre. Source: Main author.

behaviour was contested by some participants, who would have preferred more seating rather than less, in order to provide greater access for the public.

Well-being and autonomy on local high streets are influenced by accessibility, familiarity, and safety. In both MTC and CTC, participants tend to feel safe in the public realm. In MTC, their focus is on adapting to mobility changes by relocating closer to amenities, safeguarding long-term independence. In CTC, the high street supports social connections and mobility, including for those with disabilities. LTC residents also rely on their high street but express greater concern over anti-social behaviour with some of them feeling unsafe leading to place-avoidance behaviour.

## Discussion

This study set out to examine how local high streets can support the well-being of older adults ageing in place, using qualitative methods across three case study sites in Edinburgh. The findings identified four interrelated dimensions through which high streets influence well-being in later life: (1) social well-being, through opportunities for interaction, familiarity, and community connection; (2) sense of place, grounded in attachment, continuity, and shared memories; (3) enjoyment and feeling active, through sensory engagement and opportunities for movement; and (4) mastery and autonomy, including the ability to navigate, access amenities, and maintain independence. The discussion below situates these findings within wider debates on ageing in place, environmental gerontology, and urban planning and highlights the implications for policy and practice.

### Social interaction

While previous studies have highlighted the relevance of local high streets for an ageing population (Parkinson *et al.* 2013, Millington 2018) and pointed to their social value (Mehta 2013), this research offers new empirical evidence that underscores their importance, with a particular focus on their role in supporting social well-being in later life.

Building on previous work exploring links between well-being, sociability, and face-to-face interaction in public spaces (Holland *et al.* 2007, Cattell *et al.* 2008, Gardner 2011, Francis *et al.* 2012), this research offers new insights into how these relationships unfold in the context of local high streets for older people. The findings reveal that local high streets encourage and facilitate among participants what has been described as

‘mediated ageing-in-place’ (Cutchin 2003), where they adapt to and renegotiate their relationship with their environment due to changes in their psycho-physical condition and personal circumstances.

The study identifies four primary well-being-related social interactions that can be broadly categorised into two main social realms identified by Lofland (1998): the parochial (acquaintances’ network) and the public realm (mostly unfamiliar individuals) as they are both present in the local high streets. These interactions take the form of ‘meeting people’, ‘bumping into people’, ‘speaking to someone’, and ‘feeling the presence of people’ (passive interaction). Interactions within the parochial realm often lead to ‘quasi-intimate’ relationships, such as those formed in community centres or through unexpected encounters with acquaintances, featuring supportive exchanges similar to neighbourly relationships (Buonfino and Hilder 2010). As the results illustrate, shopping frequently serves as a pretext for social engagement, particularly among women. Talking to shopkeepers or staff in libraries become a form of low-key social interaction, while structured activities such as ‘coffee mornings’ and community-based gatherings, including the ‘Men’s Shed’ in CTC, help structure social lives and create regular opportunities for engagement and fulfil a sense of ‘affiliation with others’ (Carr *et al.* 1992), the human need to connect and interact socially in the public realm.

High streets function – and are perceived by participants – as ‘social hubs’ where informal relationships develop over time, providing destinations to go out and evade home, an important buffer against social isolation (Golden *et al.* 2009; Herbolsheimer *et al.* 2018; Ong and Bergeman 2010). The importance of casual sociability is underscored by participants who valued fleeting encounters with acquaintances, interactions with shopkeepers, or simply the presence of others in the public realm. The significance of these interactions extends beyond direct social exchanges, contributing to an overall sense of belonging and sense of place. Spontaneous encounters and public visibility foster mutual social awareness, while ‘grooming talk’ – small, casual conversations that help build and maintain social bonds (Goffman 1971) – occurs occasionally in the street but more regularly when ‘anchored’ to a specific place (Morrill *et al.* 2005). These premises, where participants share both negative and positive experiences, cultivate a sense of community well-being, and reinforce social ties (Carr *et al.* 1992). This research shows that passive interaction within premises and on the street contributes to the perceived vibrancy of local high streets. In this context, the environmental complexity of the high street is experienced by

participants as balanced and manageable – an aspect which, as established in the literature, can support psychological well-being (Geller 1980; Krupat 1985; Moser 2012).

### **Sense of place**

This research contributes to the scholarship that has examined how place attachment influences well-being, particularly in the context of ageing populations (Lewicka 2010, Cresswell 2015, Golant 2018). In particular, the results underscore the strong emotional and historical connections many participants maintain with their local high streets, frequently describing them as places of identity, continuity, and memory supported by habitual social practices. People described them as singular places – a notion supported by urban design literature (Lynch 1981, Griffiths *et al.* 2008, Carmona 2015) – that maintain a recognisable character over time, a quality that Relph (1976, p. 45) identifies as contributing to the identity of a place: its ‘persistent sameness and unity’.

This paper advances ageing-in-place scholarship by demonstrating the importance of local high streets in enriching the definition of ‘place’ – between home and the broader neighbourhood context (Peace *et al.* 2006, Sixsmith and Sixsmith 2008, Lewicka 2010, Cresswell 2015, Golant 2018). The findings highlight local high streets as unique and circumscribed urban features that can afford their own singular sense of place (Eyles 1985, Deutsch *et al.* 2011) and impact older people’s well-being through their emotional and psychological significance (DeMiglio and Williams 2008, Lewicka 2011b, Atkinson *et al.* 2012, Raymond *et al.* 2017).

Town centres are central to public life for most participants, contrasting with the private, sometimes solitary nature of home. Many participants describe local high streets as feeling ‘like home’, reflecting a sense of closeness and ‘inter-relatedness’ between these realms (Andrews *et al.* 2012, p. 1350). These connections foster ageing in place and well-being through attachment, rootedness, comfort, and belonging, encapsulated as ‘insideness’ (Relph 1976, Rowles and Watkins 1983, 2003).

In all three local high streets, attachment and identity are sustained by individual and collective memories, temporal associations between people and places (Deutsch *et al.* 2011). Walking interviews highlighted how memories—‘ghosts of a place’ (Bell 1997) – are enacted through everyday practices, sustaining reminiscences of event patterns (Alexander 1979), contributing to ‘clusters of positive cognition’ that strengthen the sense of place

(Gordon 2010). This study demonstrates how individual memories, shared in community centres and informal meeting places such as cafés, contribute to a collective narrative of place that fosters belonging, aligning with Relph’s (1976) understanding of place as grounded in shared experience. However, this strong attachment can hinder newcomers’ integration, leading for some participants to a feeling of exclusion.

Urban change can also undermine the sense of identity and well-being; the closure of traditional shops, particularly for older participants, is seen as evidence of personal decline, resulting in sadness and a ‘nostalgic sense of place’ (Eyles 1985; Smith). Conversely, the research reveals a proactive engagement with the local high street, directed at both its physical features and social dimensions. This reflects established connections between the built environment and place attachment (Relph 1976, Lewicka 2011b, 2013a, 2013b, Raymond *et al.* 2017) and contributes to a positive sense of place (Andrews *et al.* 2012; Lewicka 2013a, 2013b) and to well-being through the satisfaction of basic everyday needs (Morrill *et al.* 2005, Mehta 2014). These functional qualities bolster older adults’ environmental mastery. Only one participant, a newcomer to the local high street, expressed what Relph (1976) describes as ‘incidental outsidership’ – a detached or indifferent engagement with the place, in which the high street serves merely as a backdrop for activities such as shopping, lacking personal significance.

### **Enjoyment and feeling active**

Local high streets emerged as appealing daily destinations whose location and physical attributes contribute to positive somatic experiences and foster hedonic expressions of well-being linked to physical activity. This finding aligns with research on environments that encourage older people to go out and promote their well-being (Sugiyama and Ward Thompson 2007, Ziegler and Schwanen 2011), based on subjective assessments of ‘*functioning well*’ and ‘*feeling well*’ (White 2008). Here, ‘*functioning well*’ refers to high streets facilitating outdoor activity, while ‘*feeling well*’ relates to sensory perceptions of the environment. Participants in this study, similar to findings on London high streets (Transport for London 2017), recognised the health benefits of physical activity and enjoyed being outdoors for fresh air and to avoid feeling homebound. Younger or fitter participants viewed high streets as attractive walking destinations, supporting their daily exercise. This corroborates

research on active transport showing that attractive destinations encourage walking, positively impacting emotional well-being (Gatersleben and Uzzell 2007), and supports similar findings on grocery markets (Cattell *et al.* 2008). It also provides new evidence that local high streets can be a primary source of outdoor recreation for older people. Many participants perceived walking and lingering in town centres as a positive sensory experience, supporting research on the well-being impact of aesthetic appreciation of the environment (Cold 2001). This was described as a pleasant ‘*atmosphere*’, aligning with recent scholarship on urban atmospheres (Thomas 2008, Griffero 2013, Böhme 2016) and extending beyond visual delight (Cullen 1961) deepening place attachment.

Participants also highlighted the contrast between high streets and green spaces, describing the former as spaces that encouraged mobility and interaction, whereas the latter were perceived as more suitable for passive engagement, such as contemplation. While this finding is consistent with literature emphasising the restorative benefits of active, aesthetically pleasant urban environments (Karmanov and Hamel 2008, Scopelliti *et al.* 2018, Neale *et al.* 2019), it also suggests that local high streets can potentially play a distinctive role in fostering well-being among older adults. At the same time, there is value in moving beyond this dichotomy in the context of high streets. For example, research by Enssle and Kabisch (2020) calls for a more integrated perspective that recognises how urban green spaces and built environments can be planned in complementary ways to support social interaction, health, and well-being in later life.

### **Mastery and autonomy**

This work provides new evidence that local high streets can enhance older people’s well-being through supporting two of its psychological dimensions: environmental mastery, defined as competence in managing the socio-spatial environment; and personal autonomy, which includes the ability to make decisions independently without relying on external support (Ryff 1989, 1995; Deci and Ryan 2000; Steger *et al.* 2008). It also supports previous research on older people’s mobility and use of public space (Burton and Mitchell 2006, Gilroy 2012, Schwanen *et al.* 2012), with a specific focus on local high streets and their access to everyday amenities.

The environment can bolster people’s competences (Glass and Balfour 2003), and the findings show that declining abilities can lead to adaptations to maintain independence. Participants described evaluating the

affordances and barriers of places, especially as their mobility declined. This included assessing pedestrian networks for shorter routes, sometimes crossing outside regulated areas, and reassessing the ‘*accessibility chain*’—that is, the access links between places and activities – based on their functionality (Peace *et al.* 2011, Bevan and Croucher 2012, Nordbakke and Schwanen 2014). The spatial clustering of shops and amenities near bus stops and residences afforded most participants everyday independence, with some making strategic decisions, like opting for more distant locations but accessible by bus. This behaviour aligns with studies showing older adults strive to maintain independence and enjoy life beyond the home (Holland *et al.* 2005). Those with poorer cognitive and physical conditions accessed high streets less frequently, but those living closer persevered in using local amenities despite declining abilities (Marquet and Miralles-Guasch 2015). Participants with severe mobility impairments continued to use local facilities daily with the help of mobility aids, emphasising the importance of pavement quality on mobility and overall experience (Brunelli *et al.* 2024).

The sense of autonomy in these cases was sometimes limited but compensated by a ‘*nostalgic sense of place*’ (Eyles 1985), similar to ‘*agency and belonging*’ where belonging compensates for lost agency (Wahl *et al.* 2012). Participants valued shopping independently on high streets, adapting their purchases to their limited carrying ability, which contributed to a greater sense of autonomy compared to bulk shopping from supermarkets, which can lead to frustration and financial burden (Meneely *et al.* 2009, Age UK 2012, Yin *et al.* 2013, Lesakova 2016). Not surprisingly, large supermarkets were often described as tiring and overwhelming, with smaller outlets providing more gratification (Leighton and Seaman 1997).

Errands and daily activities were generally perceived as safe and comfortable, with participants feeling at ease and unrestricted in their autonomy (Carmona *et al.* 2003, Cattell *et al.* 2008, Gehl 2010, 2011, Mehta 2013). However, in one case (LTC), the presence of perceived ‘*undesirables*’ (Whyte 1980) such as drunk people and drug addicts induced feelings of lack of safety. Participants, especially women shopping in the area, reported being discouraged from using the area or altering their routes, for example, by using public transport to approach local shops from a different street. They noted that LTC no longer served as a communal meeting point, negatively impacting their sense of place and well-being. The literature suggests that making a place attractive to a broader audience can mitigate feelings of discomfort when sharing spaces with other

groups (Whyte 1980). Participants echoed this, criticising Edinburgh Council's plan to reduce seating in the area, and suggested the opposite, more seats, would encourage people to use the space, 'crowding out' (Shaftoe 2008) – or outnumbering – those associated with antisocial behaviour.

Well-being in local high streets was significant for those relocating nearby, reflecting a reassessment of ageing in place. This included proximity to bus stops and a microscale evaluation of the environment, where even minor distances from amenities could affect autonomy and independence. Relocation motivations were consistent with the literature (Oswald and Rowles 2006) and included anticipating future impairments, loss of a partner, or the need to give up driving. Previous research (Oliverly 2007) has found that ceasing to drive negatively impacts lifestyle, reducing the frequency of 'optional' activities such as meeting friends, which detrimentally affects well-being and health (Gehl 2011, Schwanen and Ziegler 2011). Local high streets emerged as supporting the well-being of older adults who no longer drive – particularly men – by enabling continued independence and informal social contact, addressing challenges specific to this group noted in the literature (Sixsmith and Boneham 2003).

## Conclusion

This paper has explored in what ways local high streets can support well-being in later life based on an investigation on three case study local high streets in the city of Edinburgh, UK. The research has provided evidence that local high streets offer a range of social and material resources that positively impact on older people's well-being in four key dimensions: social well-being, sense of place, enjoyment and feeling active, as well as a sense of mastery and autonomy.

The findings highlight the potential of local high streets to enhance the well-being of older adults. This is particularly pertinent given their popularity among this age group (Brunelli *et al.* 2024; see also footfall data in the supplementary material). While existing scholarship in ageing-in place has called for a multiscale and relational understanding of place, this research contributes new empirical evidence by highlighting the specific potential of local high streets to support people to age in their neighbourhood where access to such streets is possible. The findings support the notion that 'ageing-in-the-right-place' (Golant 2015) involves leveraging the broader urban environment's physical and social infrastructure. Local high streets, as part of this environment, offer opportunities

for daily activities that sustain well-being across the four dimensions identified in the findings.

Promoting local high streets as well-being supportive infrastructure aligns with the social determinants and salutogenic 'healthy settings' approach to health and well-being (Antonovsky 1979, WHO 1986, Dahlgren and Whitehead 1991, Wilkinson and Marmot 2003, Barton *et al.* 2006, Dooris 2013, Brunelli *et al.* 2022). This strategy emphasises the role of local physical and social resources in fostering community and well-being, with a preventive, community and place-based focus, as promoted by the Scottish Government (NHS 2005, Scottish Government 2008, Christie 2011, Audit Scotland 2014). Indeed, this research provides empirical evidence that when local high streets are used by older people, they can contribute to 'environmental equity' (Day 2008), a fundamental requisite of an 'healthy place', offering well-being resources across socio-economic conditions (Macintyre *et al.* 2008).

The findings also emphasise the need to think holistically about well-being, ageing, and place in line with a shift in spatial planning strategies and policies in Scotland (Scottish Government 2021, 2023). This shift has led to the development of the Place Standard tool (Scottish Government 2015) for assessing place qualities and identifying areas for improvement, the consideration of the 'place principle' in planning to promote a shared understanding of places and overcome sectoral divides, the provision of 'local place plans' in the Planning Scotland Act (Scottish Parliament 2019), and, more recently, the 'Local living and 20-minute neighbourhoods' planning guidance (Scottish Government 2024). The latter defines local living as aiming 'to provide people with the opportunity to meet the majority of their daily needs within a reasonable distance of their home' (Scottish Government 2024, p. 3). This research has specifically provided evidence that for an ageing population, most of their daily needs can be satisfied by ageing in place and accessing local high streets, thereby improving several dimensions of their well-being. In turn, and as discussed by the authors elsewhere (Brunelli *et al.* 2022, 2024), improvements to local high street can be made to strengthen their potential impact on the well-being of an ageing population.

This study was based on a limited choice of case studies, excluding other more diverse urban contexts where, for example, urban form, density, and greater diversity of participants in terms of ethnicity, abilities, and cognitive impairments may differ from the ones discussed in this paper. The insights gained from this

study can be strengthened by further research on a wider range of high streets in different cities and towns, capturing the experiences of a more diverse population.

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### Ethical approval

The research has received approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of Energy, Geoscience, Infrastructure and Society (EGIS), Heriot-Watt University.

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