

Edinburgh: exploring how older adults make use of their local high streets

“When I came here first, I was quite frightened of them, but now I don't stop in the middle of the road if a car comes, because if I do and I lose my balance. So I look carefully and make sure it's clear, and if something comes for that crossing I ignore them completely and keep going and I don't look at them, because if you look at them they think they've been seen and might come on, and most cars have been alright I just put my head down and keep going and they really have to stop”
[Fay, 87]

“I'm registered blind, I find difficult to get on to the bus. To see the bus numbers... The only time I really get to the bus is when I go to the doctors, the doctors just along the road. And I get on the bus from there. I use it very seldom. My wife and I usually get a taxi when we go anywhere.”
[John, 90]

In Edinburgh local Town Centres (the local high streets) have traditionally been at the core of everyday life, contributing to a vibrant public realm and supporting sustainable patterns of local mobility and consumption. According to research carried out by Edinburgh City Council in 2013 more than 40% of the population of Edinburgh live within 800 meters of a local Town Centre where many retail, leisure, commercial and community services are clustered. The proposed Local Development Plan (LDP) defines local Town Centres as *“focal point for their local communities providing a diverse mix of shopping facilities and other commercial and community services”*¹ which are also locations easily accessed by walking, cycling or public transport.

84 people took part in a research aimed at exploring how older adults living independently make use of the local highstreets on every day basis. Whereas the approach was mainly appreciative and less targeted to highlight barriers and difficulties, several issues related to access and accessibility emerged throughout the interviews, focus groups and walking interviews. Participants commented how much they appreciate and enjoy an urban environment that can sustain their autonomy and independence, providing opportunities to remain connected to the community, accessing services and facilities and to participate in local civic and social life. However, the quotes above provide just a hint of the variety of strategies by which people negotiate with an urban environment often considered hostile because of

¹ Edinburgh Council, 2014, Second Proposed Local Development Plan, p. 29. Available at:
<http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/localdevelopmentplan>

the traffic, the poor quality of the streetscape in general, and a commercial offer that is not tailored to their needs. Changing shopping habits, vacancy rates and empty homes, anti-social behaviour, also put the popularity of local Town Centres under pressure. Following the National Review of Town Centres in 2013 the Scottish Government acknowledged the need for a revitalisation strategy which could realign policies and resources to ensure these locales become more vibrant places².

The research on local Town Centres in Edinburgh revealed at least three main areas of intervention to improve these locales for an ageing population that broaden those proposed by the Scottish Government Town Centres Action Plan, and in which access and accessibility become essential. Access and accessibility can be indirectly promoted by providing more affordable new and adapted housing choices, in close proximity and co-located next to high streets. "Town centre living" should be promoted as a shortcut to greater personal autonomy and independence by facilitating access to existing infrastructure, facilities and services and to improve streets' footfall. Furthermore, land use policies and business improvements should consider incentives in order to achieve adequate clustering of mixed uses, increasing the reachability of shops, public services, community spaces and a variety of informal settings like cafes and other spaces for social interaction and civic engagement. Finally, all the above cannot be achieved without promoting a new culture of pedestrian friendly and walkable environments which should consider how sensory and cognitive changes can be integrated into transport infrastructure, streetscapes, and premises. As Alison (89) said when asked how she would make the local town centre more age friendly: *"I'm trying to think how you could improve it to make it more accessible to older people like us, and the only thing I can do is, pedestrianise it!! Take all the traffic away from the main road"*

Taking Alison suggestion perhaps we should start thinking in a more holistic and bold way, bringing together people with transport and planning departments in local councils in order to envisage and put in practice solutions that actually should not be reinvented from scratch -they have been long tested and implemented elsewhere - and start thinking collaboratively how to adapt them to local conditions. At the end an age-friendly environment will be a friendly environment for all.

² Scottish Government, 2013, Town Centre Action Plan. Available at: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/11/6415>