

The COVID-19 pandemic has put not only health systems, but also cities and communities, to the test. Age-friendly environments have played a key role in implementing timely measures to mitigate risks and support citizens. Older people carried a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 deaths and were strongly affected by restrictive measures to contain the spread of the pandemic.

A PROJECT WITH THE HEALTHY AGEING TASK FORCE

The WHO Regional office for Europe collaborated with 12 cities of the Healthy Ageing Task Force of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network to identify the main challenges facing older people and their city leaders during the pandemic. Ideas about resilience and successful ways to adapt were exchanged.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Survival

Pre-existing health problems are more prevalent in older people and increase the risk of death from COVID-19. Cities and communities were challenged to develop quick, effective and flexible protection for those most susceptible to dying from COVID-19 without isolating and stigmatizing older people.

Equity

Neighbourhood-based inequalities deepened during the pandemic, posing difficulties for many low-income neighbourhoods.

Sustainable adaptations

Lockdowns reduced transmission of COVID-19 but led to isolation, eroding mental health. The challenge now is to adapt lives to a so-called new normal.

Voice

The need for quick decisions often led to the voices of older people being overlooked.

MULTILEVEL RESPONSE

WHO

WHO headquarters and the WHO Regional Office for Europe synthesized the science on the virus and vaccines and disseminated results and recommendations to national governments.

Whole of government

National governments and public health agencies partnered city governments to operationalize national responses.

Whole of city

Municipalities and mayors orchestrated the monitoring of problems and introduction of effective city responses and implemented the national response via key agencies from many sectors.

AGE-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENTS

Investment in building age-friendly environments prior to the pandemic strengthened the capacity of cities and communities to adapt quickly and support older people. Age-friendly environments are inspired by the WHO global guide to age-friendly cities,¹ which implements programmes and actions across eight domains (Fig. 1).

The domains broadly fall into actions on adapting physical and social environments and enhancing municipal services to meet the needs of older people. Investment in any of these action areas can support older people and promote healthy ageing over the life-course.

For more information, see: [Age-friendly environments in Europe: a handbook of domains for policy action²](#)

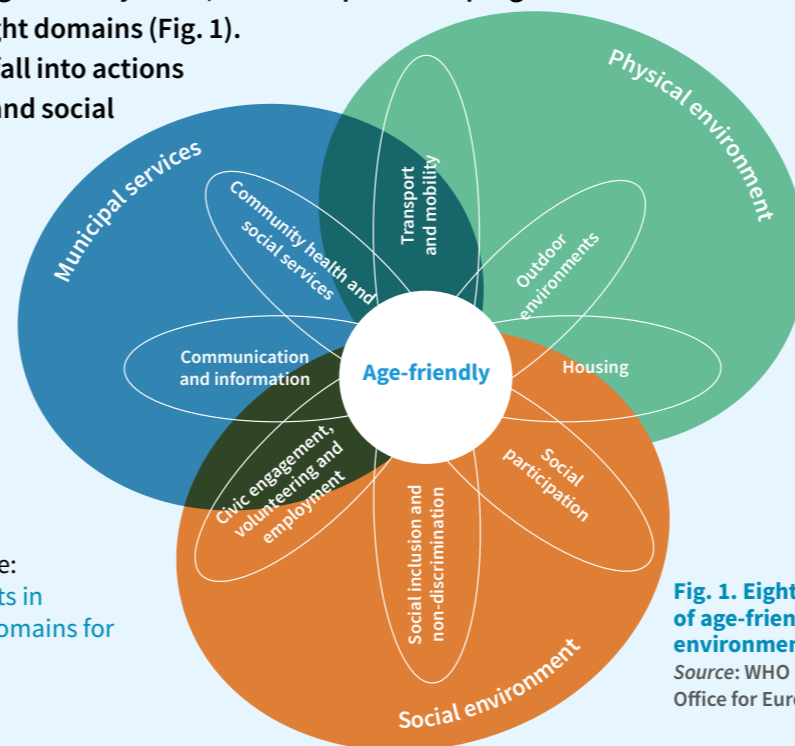


Fig. 1. Eight domains of age-friendly environments
Source: WHO Regional Office for Europe (2).

CITY LEADERSHIP

Age-friendly environments provide a compass for promoting health and equity as enduring core values in city policies and recovery plans. City leaders must: engage and understand; plan strategically; act and implement; and evaluate.

For more information, see: [Creating age-friendly environments in Europe: a tool for policy-makers and planners³](#)

LESSONS LEARNT

- ✓ City leaders have a key role in creating age-friendly environments and resilient communities.
- ✓ Investments in age-friendly environments make communities more resilient when big adaptations are needed.
- ✓ Cities and communities should redouble their efforts to overcome inequities in health that have been magnified by the pandemic.
- ✓ Intergenerational solidarity is vital to the lives and livelihoods of older people.
- ✓ Age-friendly environments support older inhabitants to flourish.
- ✓ The voices of older people should be listened to and acted upon, including in emergency situations.



WHOLE-OF-CITY APPROACH

Partnerships built within municipalities' age-friendly environment initiatives have been instrumental in organizing the COVID-19 response. Collaborative Newcastle, a partnership involving municipal government, two universities and the health and community sectors, is key to success in combatting COVID-19 and planning a way forward in **Newcastle (United Kingdom)**. The Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership in **Belfast (United Kingdom)** works closely with Greater Belfast Seniors' Forum to implement a recovery plan for community resilience – "Building back fairer from COVID-19".



COMMUNICATION

Virtual: cities and communities adapted to lockdowns by switching to virtual communication of messages and online social contact between families and friends.

Trust: cities and communities built trust in the messenger and in messages promoting social distancing and vaccine uptake to increase survival.

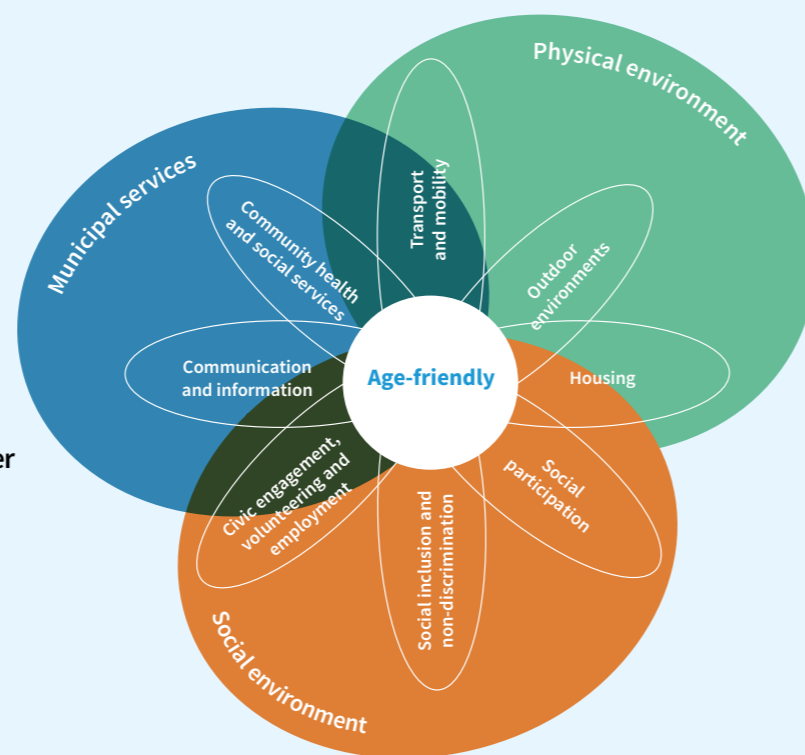
Rijeka (Croatia) demonstrated a high level of preparedness for the pandemic. Pioneering age-friendly communication platforms and training older people helped overcome the digital divide that excludes many older people.

Metamorfosis (Greece) organized online mental and psychological empowerment actions. The "Friendship of all ages" programme combats loneliness among older people through volunteers reaching out via telephone.



OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENT

Neighbourhoods and safe spaces: **Udine (Italy)** developed 15-minute walkable neighbourhoods in which older people can purchase the essentials of life and sustain social interaction with the help of community volunteers. The municipality adapted parks for age-friendly motion and enhanced them as places of social interaction where people could safely avoid contagion while improving their physical and mental well-being.



Strategy: **Barcelona (Spain)** built upon the 2008 Neighbourhood Health Strategy to ensure public protection measures promoted equity of outcome for older citizens from poorer neighbourhoods.



SOCIAL INCLUSION

Outreach: cities reached out to older, vulnerable and ethnic minority populations as priority groups for social support. **Brno (Czechia)** municipality supported volunteer assistance for older adults. The Department of Social Services operated an all-day hotline helping older citizens to solve any problems connected with the pandemic.

The city of **Łódź (Poland)** launched a telecare system for lonely elderly people and provided wristbands for monitoring their health and informing about threats related to COVID-19.



SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Social life: cities adapted platforms and formats to sustain people's participation in social, cultural and leisure activities and enable them to socialize with family, friends and neighbours.

Çankaya (Türkiye) organized online "Forbrain" exercise workshops for older people, supported by studies of daily-life activities, productivity, cognitive competence, support for independent living, lifelong learning and participation in social life.

Several programmes were launched (or continued in a modified form) to support the lives and livelihoods of communities in **Győr (Hungary)**, helping to maintain social contacts. The local Elders' Council communicated online with members during the pandemic.



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Voice: seniors' councils and other civil society organizations influence and disseminate public health messages, build trust and promote solidarity. In **Muratpaşa (Türkiye)**, the Elders' Council ensures that older adults can participate in solving COVID-19 and urban problems, utilizing their experience to create policies and action plans that respond to the priorities of older adults.

Solidarity: the Seniors' Council in **Horsens (Denmark)** reinforced solidarity between senior citizens, communicating via online cafes and fora and expanding into virtual village councils.

For more information, see:

[Age-friendly environments in Europe: indicators, monitoring and assessments⁴](#)

Co-production with the cities of **Rijeka (Croatia)**, **Brno (Czechia)**, **Horsens (Denmark)**, **Metamorfosis (Greece)**, **Győr (Hungary)**, **Udine (Italy)**, **Łódź (Poland)**, **Barcelona (Spain)**, **Çankaya (Türkiye)**, **Muratpaşa (Türkiye)**, **Belfast (United Kingdom)** and **Newcastle (United Kingdom)**

References

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