

Ageing is living: building age-friendly communities in the Nordic-Baltic region

Conference report



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Photo: Adam Mørk

Introduction

The conference *Ageing is Living: Building Age-Friendly Communities in the Nordic-Baltic Region* was held in Copenhagen on 25–26 November 2025. It was organised by the Nordic Welfare Centre in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the Centre for an Age-Friendly Norway.

The event brought together policymakers, researchers, urban planners and practitioners from across the Nordic and Baltic region to share knowledge and practical examples of how communities can support diversity, inclusion and social cohesion across all ages. A central concept throughout the conference was age-friendly communities, as defined by the World Health Organization.

An age-friendly city or community is designed to promote healthy and active ageing by reducing physical and social barriers, enabling people to maintain their functional abilities and quality of life as they age. These efforts are closely linked to the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030).

Since 2017, the Nordic Welfare Centre has coordinated a Nordic network for age-friendly cities and communities, which currently includes 26 cities across the Nordic region, all of which are also members of the WHO Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. Within the Nordic network, the members exchange everything from knowledge and inspiration to practical solutions that work in a Nordic context.

The conference focused on four central themes: strengthening social connections and reducing loneliness, building age-friendly environments through urban planning, promoting co-creation in age-friendly communities, and assessing the impact of age-friendly initiatives.

The report summarises the main ideas from the presentations at the conference and aims to highlight both emerging research and concrete examples of practice from across the Nordic-Baltic region.



Photo: Heidi Hakala

1. Opening session

Moderator: Dr Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat, Director, Division of Health Systems, WHO Regional Office for Europe

Welcoming participants to the conference, Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat outlined the event's main themes. Age-friendliness is a broad concept. Strengthening social connections and reducing loneliness, urban planning, co-creation, and the impact of age-friendly communities were all aspects reflected in the conference programme – and top priorities for the World Health Organization.

– Age-friendly living is one of WHO's top five priorities. It is everyone's business; no single actor can do it alone.

Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat noted that an age-friendly environment is one in which getting older is a good thing. It is an environment without physical or social barriers, one that promotes a healthy and fulfilling life, enables the maintenance of lifelong physical and mental capacity, and recognises older adults as a resource.

– When we discuss good health at the WHO we mean physical, mental, and social well-being. We can't focus solely on metabolic parameters; we need to

see people as whole persons.

Azzopardi-Muscat also noted that the conference took place at a particularly important moment, as an increasing number of European countries and communities are recognising the need to create opportunities for their populations to age, physically, mentally and socially, in a healthy way. At the same time, she emphasised that much work remains to be done.

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Although our region has one of the highest life expectancies worldwide, people can expect to spend roughly ten years of their approximately 80 years in poor health. This is not a desirable outcome, and we need to fix this.

Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat, Director, Division of Health Systems, WHO Regional Office for Europe

Following her introduction, Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat facilitated a panel discussion in which the Danish Minister of Senior Citizens, Mette Kierkgaard, and Chitrlekha Marie Massey, Chief of the Rights of Older Persons Section at the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, participated.

Mette Kierkgaard, Danish Minister of Senior Citizens

Minister Mette Kierkgaard noted the changing demographics in Denmark and many other developed countries, shifting towards a growing proportion of older people. While longevity, in many ways, points to great success for our societies, it also requires attention, the minister noted.

In Denmark, there is both a Council and an Alliance for an age-friendly Denmark. The Council consists of 15 representatives with various backgrounds, tasked with forming a vision for an age-friendly Denmark and presenting it to the government.

The Alliance comprises many organisations, research institutions, and other actors in civil society who provide their insights to the Council. The Council will address a broad range of themes in alignment with WHO's age-friendly

societies, which covers a wide range of themes, including transportation, urban design, architecture, loneliness, labour market participation, and digital exclusion.

Minister Kiergaard underscored the importance of involving society at a broad scale.

– It is very important that this is not only planned by the government or discussed in the ministry departments. This is why we have formed an alliance from the bottom up, including architects and civil society. It is vital that age-friendly societies become a public movement.

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It is vital that age-friendly societies become a public movement.

Mette Kiergaard, Danish Minister of Senior Citizens

Denmark adopted a new Elder Care Law in the summer of 2025. The aim of the reform is to increase autonomy and self-determination in older adult care, to increase trust in local managers and employees and emphasise collaboration with civil society. Minister Kiergaard emphasised that the implementation of the new law involves not only legal changes, but also a broader cultural shift.

– The key value of the reforms is that elderly people receiving care are just as diverse as the rest of us, which is why we need flexibility in the care system. Until recently, our system has promoted poor practice in elderly care, emphasising centralisation, documentation, and rigid schedules.

Minister Kiergaard also spoke about her visit to Norway and how she was greatly inspired by the work of the Centre for an Age-Friendly Norway.

Dr. Chitrlekha Marie Massey, Chief, Rights of Older Persons Section, Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights

In 2025, 86 member states of the United Nations Human Rights Council agreed on the need for an international, legally binding UN convention on the rights of older persons.

– This is a historic decision, and a powerful call to action. At the same time, we

must remember that ageing is not homogeneous. The challenge is to make this new, legally binding document meaningful to every person in the world, Chitralekha Marie Massey stated, adding that this presents a wonderful opportunity for Nordic leadership.

Chitralekha Marie Massey also highlighted the success of our societies in promoting long and healthy lives. At the same time, she observed that individuals tend to become less visible in public life after turning 65 and retiring.

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We must change the narrative in our societies that ageing equals decline. Instead, we need to recognise ageing as a time of continuation, achievement, and contribution.

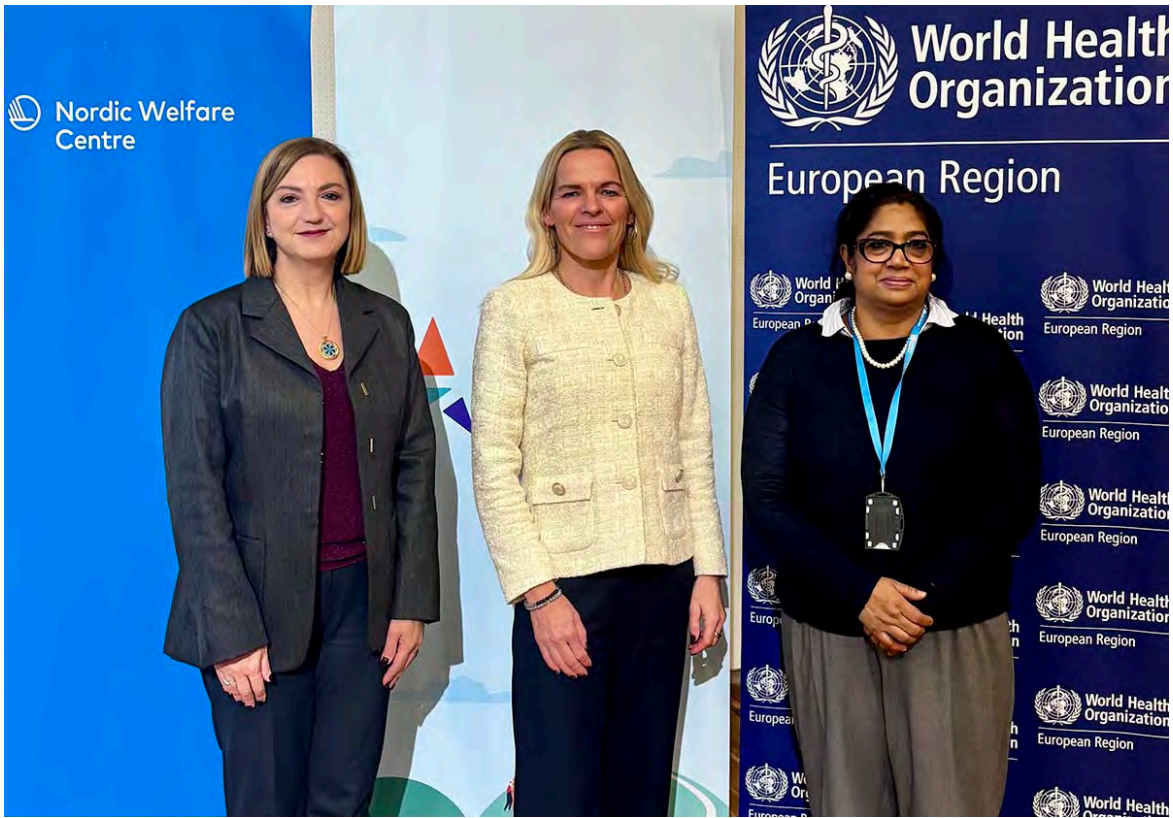
Dr. Chitralekha Marie Massey, Chief, Rights of Older Persons Section, Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights

Developing age-friendly communities depends on intergenerational solidarity, including the active participation of young people. Chitralekha Marie Massey encourages everyone to participate in the discussion about the upcoming UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.

– Everyone needs to think about what they want their own old age to be. We should view this as a period of investment, not only for ourselves but also for the five-year-old child today, who will be an older adult in the future. As we undertake this task, we need to ensure that younger people are equally involved. We are all in this together.

Chitralekha Marie Massey also underscored the need for better data; what we cannot count or measure, we do not act on.

– Our lack of data on older people is a global problem today. No legislation or policy will be effective unless we improve our data collection.



From left: Dr Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat, Director, Division of Health Systems, WHO Regional Office for Europe; Mette Kierkgaard, Danish Minister of Senior Citizens; and Dr Chitralekha Marie Massey, Chief of the Rights of Older Persons Section at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.



Photo: Mostphotos

2. Strengthening social connection and reducing loneliness

The session on social connection and reducing loneliness explored how cities and communities can foster inclusion and create both indoor and outdoor meeting places and spaces that encourage social interaction. In her introduction, moderator Anne Berit Rafoss from the Centre for an age-friendly Norway underscored the need to create and facilitate meeting places.

– Loneliness today is a global health threat. In many ways, meeting places are the most important thing we can do in age-friendly work, alongside housing and transportation. To create more accessible and inclusive age-friendly societies, meeting places must also reflect these qualities.

Meeting places can promote physical activities or social and cultural interactions. When developing meeting places, Anne Berit Rafoss lists several factors to consider. These include communication, accessibility, transport, diversity, and intergenerational spaces. The gatherings may be formal or informal, held indoors or outdoors.

Besides fighting loneliness, meeting places also act as a remedy for a related feeling: uselessness. This is especially evident during intergenerational meetings.



In our conversations with older people, they often express a desire to be heard and seen. But more than anything, they want their skills and knowledge to be utilised and put to good use.

Anne Berit Rafoss, Project Manager, Centre for an age-friendly Norway

In our conversations with older people, they often express a desire to be heard and seen. But more than anything, they want their skills and knowledge to be utilised and put to good use, Anne Berit Rafoss says.

Dominique Hauderowicz, Architect and partner, Dominique + Serena, Denmark: Thoughtful design for everyday encounters

Thoughtful architectural design can encourage daily interactions among different generations. Architect Dominique Hauderowicz shared insights from the transdisciplinary research project 'Places We Meet,' supported by the philanthropic organisation Realdania.

Dominique Hauderowicz argues that ageism is, in certain respects, embedded in urban spaces. Using age to categorise society can be practical, but it may also block the development of shared spaces across generations and age groups. While older individuals are more frequently affected by changes in body and mind that impact daily life, this should not lead to their health issues overshadowing their entire identity.

– People often ask us what a good meeting place for elderly people could be. And you can see how broad a point of departure we could have, Dominique Hauderowicz explains, as she shows some of the projects her company has been working on.

These examples include transforming an old station building into a workshop

with a repair café, creating a cooking school for seniors linked to a local restaurant, and turning a storefront into a community space for residents of all ages.

– When we work on meeting places, it is very important that we do not only consider the specific building or room, but also take a broader look at the neighbourhood.

Dominique Hauderowicz underscores the need to consult local residents during the planning process to determine where people naturally move. It is usually easier to improve an existing place than to invent something from scratch. A key question is also whether the gatherings will focus on specific topics and how large the shared areas of the building need to be.

– We work with this as architects, but we all have a natural instinct for the spaces we inhabit. Usually, we find that institutional spaces don't feel natural; we don't feel at home there. This can often be changed through simple means.

Other key questions concern whether the space is age-specific or age-neutral, and whether it encourages or dictates specific roles.

– It is, for instance, very hard to take ownership of a place if you don't have the keys to all the rooms, or if there is a coffee machine that you don't know how to use. If you want to create spaces in which people exercise autonomy and initiate their own activities, it is important to consider these practicalities.

Some people find that barriers prevent them from using a meeting space. Feeling comfortable is vital for contributing and really meeting other people. Dominique Hauderowicz argues that a good meeting place should address two main themes: agency and belonging.

– Agency is about giving people the freedom and opportunity to engage in their own way. Belonging is about fostering social connection. Our foremost task is to create physical environments in which people can participate in ways that align with their ongoing and evolving wishes and abilities.

Kenny Jansson, Coordinator for Age-friendly Uppsala, Sweden: "Man is the joy of man" – Norse social wisdom in an individualised modern society

Uppsala has been a social space for over a thousand years, playing key roles in politics, religion, and the economy. During Viking times, the value of community for happiness was acknowledged. After Christianisation, the church emerged as

the societal core. Today, Kenny Jansson argues, much of that communal spirit from Nordic life has faded, replaced by modern societal changes that have made our communities more heterogeneous, secular, segregated, digitised, and individualised.

– Our independent freedom from others can foster loneliness, and loneliness is a threat to public health. Loneliness is a sign of societal and communal dysfunction, as social connection is the very fabric of human life itself, no matter your age.



Loneliness is a sign of societal and communal dysfunction, as social connection is the very fabric of human life itself, no matter your age.

Kenny Jansson, Coordinator for age-friendly Uppsala, Sweden

To combat loneliness and foster social inclusion among older persons, Uppsala municipality has created social meeting spots for seniors. Known as Meeting Places 65+, these venues are distinct from other organised gathering spaces for different societal groups. Twenty years ago, these places mainly offered older adults a chance to meet for coffee. Over time, however, the concept has expanded and diversified, as Kenny Jansson describes.

– The meeting places have evolved to offer different kinds of activities for various types of people, ranging from providing social interaction to a wide range of activities linked to diverse interests.

Examples of themes include walks or outdoor gymnastics, knowledge-based lectures, cultural tours, other excursions, and sports activities. The activities are overseen by professionals.

– The personnel are increasingly composed of physiotherapists and other health professionals, and this rise in professionalism has led to more evaluation and collaboration with different actors.

Currently, the municipality, for example, also provides mobile pop-up meeting spaces in rural areas, as well as opportunities to take part in activities both in person and online from home. The organisers are also considerate of reducing

barriers to participation by offering options to familiarise yourself with the activity online before your first visit or by organising welcoming days for new participants. Kenny Jansson says cooperation, mobility and flexibility are key.

Intergenerational activities are also organised, both in schools and elsewhere.

– In Uppsala, we are proud of our senior lunches in municipal schools. The concept is simple: older adults can enjoy a discounted meal at the school restaurant, fostering meaningful interactions between seniors and students.

By reclaiming the historical importance of community, Uppsala is actively weaving a more connected social fabric for its oldest citizens. By bridging generational and digital gaps, the municipality aims to ensure no one has to navigate the challenges of ageing in isolation.

Ramona Jacevica, Senior Librarian, Public Library of Galiņciems, Latvia: Creating Inclusive Library Communities and Age-Friendly Interest Groups Through Provision of Six Additional Services

Ramona Jacevica began her presentation with a quote from American professor R. David Lankes: "Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities."

This philosophy underpins the mission of the library of Galiņciems to ensure that no member of society is excluded. The library was established in 1954 and, for most of its history, functioned in modest premises. But since 2023, the library has operated in a state-of-the-art facility and has implemented additional services specifically designed to foster age-friendly interest groups.

The library actively engages local residents in various cross-generational clubs, events, and activities that emphasise crafts, literature, creative writing, exploring nature and the local heritage, researching family histories, folklore, and folk wisdom.

– Older people are eager to bring us everything they believe needs to be preserved for future generations. The residents of Galiņciems have always felt a strong attachment to their place of living and to the people around them.

The library hosts literature and storytelling workshops focused on cherishing and preserving the local dialect, alongside cross-generational folklore initiatives that celebrate and document folk wisdom.

– Our most beloved events within this category are our traditional culinary

workshops, Ramona Jacevica explains.

The library supports family history research, enabling residents to build their own genealogical narratives. It also provides assistance in learning digital skills.

– We hold tech support sessions for seniors every Friday and assist people with various technological problems daily. We also serve as a meeting and support centre for individuals with visual and reading impairments, Ramona Jacevica explains.

These initiatives rely on a deep understanding of the local community's cultural fabric. By leveraging existing social bonds, the library launched projects such as the award-winning "tree dressing" initiative, in which residents knitted colourful squares to create a public art display around the library. This project received a certificate of recognition from the Latvian Landscape Architecture Association.

Ramona Jacevica listed the library's success factors: fostering a cosy, informal, and family-like atmosphere; maintaining an interest-based database to tailor communication; and a total commitment to co-creation.

– We are aware of our regular visitors' tastes and interests, and we listen to our community's suggestions. We are keen to adapt to what our audience prefers and dislikes. We also keep people informed in a timely manner about events they might wish to attend. Our senior visitors favour direct calls.

By weaving local heritage with modern inclusivity, the Galiņciems library has become a vital communal hub. It stands as a testament to how a library can truly transform into the heart of its community through dedication to its people.

Saija Kultala, Senior Specialist, City of Turku, Finland: Building community and reducing loneliness with "Move close"-groups and Peer messengers

More than one-fifth of Turku's population is aged 65 or older. Over 10% face loneliness, and more than half exercise less than the recommended levels.

Saija Kultala emphasised that traditional communication methods often fail to reach the most isolated seniors. She highlighted the importance of "searching work", a proactive outreach approach. Historically, older adults in Turku have had little influence in planning city communications, which Kultala viewed as an obstacle to inclusion. The resulting solution, created with a broad network of

partners, is the "Move close" (Liiku lähellä) model.

– We decided that we needed open, accessible, free-of-charge, group-based low-threshold physical activity groups that were available close to every residential area in Turku. We also needed to change our marketing strategy, emphasising the outreach work and face-to-face communication; to go where the people are and share the information directly with them, Kultala explained.

The Move close groups are shaped by their participants, who determine their content. The meetings take place once a week in locations near residential areas.

– We have an encouraging and accepting atmosphere. Anyone can participate according to their own abilities and interests. The focus is on the social component, building the community.

The impact on well-being is significant, with participants reporting improved mood, better functional ability, and enhanced physical condition. Saija Kultala highlights the Peer messengers (Lähilähetit) as the key element of the Move close model. These volunteers actively recruit by engaging directly with people, handing out flyers, and visiting neighbourhoods and shopping areas to promote group participation.

The effectiveness of this human-centric outreach work is reflected in the evaluation data: an overwhelming majority of participants learned about the groups through these Peer messengers, compared with only a fraction who found information online or on social media.

Saija Kultala noted that when stakeholders such as housing companies and businesses are approached proactively, they often share similar values regarding senior participation, facilitating essential collaborations that enable the establishment of groups in nearly every residential area of Turku.



Photo: Mostphotos

3. Building age-friendly environments through urban planning

The next section of the conference focused on urban planning and provided examples from research and practice of how we can support age-friendly, accessible environments and ageing in place through planning and housing.

Moderator Yongjie Yon, Technical Officer on Ageing and Health at WHO Europe, highlighted the importance of how physical environments affect our well-being.

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Physical environments are deeply connected with social participation, mobility, mental well-being, and access to health and care services. When cities get this right, we don't just make life easier – they enable us all to be active, stay healthy, and remain connected as we age in our own neighbourhoods.

Yongjie Yon, Technical Officer on Ageing and Health at WHO Europe

Yongjie Yon emphasised that urban design should never be underestimated, as it is a preventive rather than a reactive approach.

Antti Rehunen, Senior Research Scientist, Finnish Environment, Institute (Syke): Developing age-friendly environments in Finnish cities

Antti Rehunen introduced a data-driven approach to urban planning. His presentation emphasised that creating age-friendly communities requires more than just social initiatives; it calls for a sophisticated geospatial understanding of where older people live and how the physical environment either supports or hinders their daily lives.

– The residential environment and nearby services make a significant difference, especially for those over 75 years old. They tend to move within a limited area around their homes.

In Finland, only a small percentage of the older population relocates to a different apartment each year. Since older adults usually reside in older housing stock, both people and buildings tend to age together. Rehunen demonstrated that, by utilising location-based data and time-series data, planners can accurately forecast where future seniors will live based on current demographic clusters, allowing for proactive infrastructure planning.



The proportion of older people is increasing fastest on the outskirts of urban areas. This poses challenges for daily mobility.

Antti Rehunen, Senior Research Scientist, Finnish Environment, Institute (Syke)

In analysing urban areas, Antti Rehunen initially focused on walkability. Factors such as the shape and steepness of the streets are important for people with limited mobility. Infrastructure support, such as adequate numbers of benches and sufficient street lighting, significantly extends the "radius of life" for older residents. On the basis of this kind of analysis, urban planners can find areas to prioritise, Rehunen explains.

The presentation also emphasised the crucial importance of nearby nature for well-being. Since many older adults spend most of their time close to home, access to green spaces significantly influences residential satisfaction.

– We also examined local services, such as local grocery shops. They are not everywhere within walking distance of where senior citizens live. Shops are becoming larger and more concentrated, which creates additional challenges.

Antti Rehunen also underscored the importance of meeting places for social interaction in urban areas. They offer opportunities for intergenerational contact and for feelings of safety and control. Analysing the availability of public transport, Rehunen emphasised the need for joint planning of social and healthcare services and public transport, among other measures.

Analysing multiple factors at the city level enhances tools for developing in an age-friendly manner, many of which also promote sustainability goals. These factors include walkability, short travel distances, access to services, public transportation, safety, affordable housing, a healthy environment, social connections, and recreational opportunities.

– In planning, we need to consider different scales and issues, and how to combine them. The priority is awareness, to recognise these impacts on older people. Several improvements can be achieved with relatively small efforts. Successful pilots in certain neighbourhoods should be scaled up to the city level. Older persons should be involved in all stages of the process.

Using location-based data allows planners to move beyond social theory and

implement practical, large-scale changes that improve the daily lives of older residents.

Sirle Salmistu, Senior lecturer at the Tallinn University of Technology & landscape architect and urban planner at Outsiders LLC Estonia: Aiming for Age-Friendly Communities Through Placemaking: An Estonian Perspective

Sirle Salmistu's talk centred on the idea that public space must be viewed as social space, where the quality of the built environment directly determines the level of social inclusion and well-being for older adults. The context for Salmistu's research is a rapidly ageing Estonia, where 20% of the population is currently aged 65 or older, a figure projected to reach almost 30% of the population by 2050.

Salmistu noted that while Estonia has made significant policy strides regarding age-friendliness in recent years, there remains a gap between high-level strategy and the lived experience of seniors in local communities.

– Age-friendliness largely falls under the responsibility of local governments in Estonia. People are doing a lot of work locally to make communities more age-friendly, but we don't label these initiatives as age-friendly. No local authority is part of the WHO Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities, nor do we have a local network. This suggests a lack of political will.

Sirle Salmistu emphasised that urban design affects public and individual health, well-being, and quality of life.



Urban planning should serve as a prevention tool rather than a reaction. It should help alleviate certain problems instead of merely setting limits. It is sometimes forgotten that we are not just creating physical environments but also shaping emotions, mental health, and social life. This is the ultimate goal.

Sirle Salmistu, Senior lecturer at the Tallinn University of Technology & landscape architect and urban planner at Outsiders LLC Estonia

Sirle Salmistu describes ageing in place, independence, autonomy, and physical accessibility as core elements of age-friendly placemaking. Ageing in place aims to help seniors remain in their own neighbourhoods by providing localised services. Independence and autonomy highlight the importance of co-production and fostering community belonging to reduce isolation. Physical accessibility ensures the built environment is functional and that amenities are accessible to everyone. These principles turn public spaces into inclusive, healthy environments that address diverse needs.

Together with her research colleagues, Sirle Salmistu conducted a study of recently designed urban public spaces in ten Estonian small towns. The study assessed how well these new developments serve the ageing population.

Among the successes, Salmistu highlights that most towns featured clean, well-maintained environments that promoted a sense of security. There were also a variety of seating options and diverse landscaping with greenery. The presence of focal points, such as flagpoles, squares, and fountains, is very important as they form the social core and identity of the urban area.

Among the downsides, Salmistu highlighted a lack of public restrooms and poor information systems, which can create anxiety for residents with memory impairments. She also pointed out that while physical activity is encouraged, there is a distinct shortage of exercise equipment specifically designed for older adults. She also noted that in planning these spaces, older residents were not involved in the design process from the beginning.

– In summary, if we want to promote healthy ageing, it is essential to understand people's evolving needs and translate that understanding into physical space. Let us not forget that we also plan our living environments for our future selves.

Siri Arntzen-Ratnarajan, Leader and founder of Fabric+, Norway: Age-Friendly Communities in the Nordic and Arctic Winter: Insights from older adults Driving Action

A key point in Siri Arntzen-Ratnarajan's presentation was the paradox of the Arctic. Although these regions are typically seen as remote, they are actually at the heart of global developments because issues such as demographic ageing and climate change are progressing rapidly and intensively there.

How does it feel to grow old in a city with seven months of winter? With this

question in mind, Siri Arntzen-Ratnarajan, together with an interdisciplinary team, set out to find solutions for regions characterised by extreme weather and rapid demographic changes. This evolved into the "Ageing in the Arctic" innovation programme, which includes experts in public health, service design, and transport, with a strong focus on co-creation.

– We all worked together from the very beginning, exploring this question. We believe in strengthening the social fabric to enhance the urban fabric. We conducted walking tours, a survey, workshops, and in-depth interviews. Over 300 elderly residents in the community shared their opinions, and they were very diverse.

The innovation programme identified key insights into how winter is experienced, from different perspectives, ranging from transport and mobility to accessibility and architecture. The team found that many ~~elderly~~ older people become isolated due to the weather. Almost half of the respondents said they lack company in winter. Those who live alone say their environments feel more inaccessible, as do those who have experienced slipping and falling on the street.

– There was no good data on falls at the local level. We created a falls mapping tool based on self-reporting, asking residents where they have slipped and what happened. We entered this information directly into the municipal database. This allowed us to target streets and areas where people fall, providing the basis for better priorities in falls prevention.

Siri Arntzen-Ratnarajan provided a powerful economic argument for age-friendly urban maintenance. According to data from the Norwegian Directorate of Health, municipalities could save more than half a million NOK annually by preventing just one hip fracture through better winter maintenance and accessible design. This has sparked many new projects in falls prevention.

One of the new initiatives that emerged from the "Ageing in the Arctic" programme is a scalable solution called "Nabotrim" (Neighbour Exercise), a model that activates volunteers within housing cooperatives to lead exercise groups.

– Instead of developing a complex transport system, we brought the exercise right to their doorstep. This solution was inexpensive, entirely scalable, and the model has spread rapidly. The lesson here is that sometimes we overcomplicate things, but if we genuinely listen to what the elders need, the solution might not be as expensive as we first expected.

Arntzen-Ratnarajan's message was a rallying call for Nordic and Baltic partners to work together in creating a future where "winter is coming" is met with resilient, inclusive communities.



Photo: Mostphotos

4. Co-creation in age-friendly communities

Co-creation is one of the core principles in creating age-friendly communities. It entails engaging people in co-creating their living environments by emphasising listening, participation, and collaborative problem-solving to address actual needs.

In her introduction, moderator Siri Arntzen-Ratnarajan pointed out that the concept of co-creation may sound simple, but in reality, it is often complex, and there is much to learn from successful examples.

Helle-Triin Hansumäe, Tori Rural Municipality Architect, Estonia: Joyful Co-Creation in Jõesuu: Age-Friendly by Design

“Test before you invest” was the overarching idea of Jõesuu Village Day, organised in the small Estonian village of Jõesuu. The idea was to gather the entire village, not just the people who usually show up or express an opinion, to test practical solutions to improve the village's public spaces.

Helle-Triin Hansumäe described Jõesuu Village Day as a living laboratory where all ages co-created. The event broke down barriers and encouraged genuine dialogue between younger and older residents. In uncertain times, age-friendliness is part of strengthening community resilience. Hansumäe cited the Self-Determination Theory, which posits that human motivation and self-determination are strongly linked to feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

– What matters most to me is that these are all ageless needs. Everyone requires autonomy, competence, and relatedness, just in different forms. When we support these needs in urban planning, participation increases, well-being improves, and communal resilience strengthens. Conversely, neglecting these needs causes people to withdraw and become distrustful.

Jõesuu Village Day was organised in a single afternoon. The programme included small think tanks for both active and passive participation. The day also included playful activities for people of all ages, ranging from outdoor gyms and food to live music and workshops with the local firefighters.

– The idea was that people could take part just by being there. They weren't expected to do anything. We also had memory gathering corners where we collected stories about the village's past. We wanted to make it almost impossible for the villagers not to participate; 260 people live in Jõesuu, and 200 participated.

Ideas from local residents were collected on postcards and maps, allowing people to draw or place stickers. They could mark the best spot for a bench or bus stop, or indicate a path that feels unsafe.

– Importantly, people could see and experience potential solutions instantly instead of just hearing about them in a fancy PowerPoint presentation. This is what we mean by "test before invest": we test ideas quickly, cheaply, and collaboratively. We learn what works and what doesn't. And only then do we plan more permanent solutions.

Helle-Triin Hansumäe mentioned that for those who have spent most of their lives feeling that the government makes decisions and they must adapt, this was a new experience. This is especially true for the older generation who grew up during Soviet times, as they tend to feel cynical and doubt their ability to influence government decisions.

– These small choices were very powerful: this is your place, your preferences matter.

Helle-Triin Hansumäe noted that architects often use highly technical language, which can alienate people. This issue was intentionally addressed at Jõesuu Village Day, where the questions were straightforward: Is this bench comfortable for you? Can you move safely from the bench to the bus stop? Hansumäe pointed out that questions like these make people feel more confident and competent in answering questions about planning.

– By arranging Jõesuu Village Day, we told the participants that you are not a problem to be managed, you are a partner in shaping this place.

Helle-Triin Hansumäe said this concept will be used in other municipalities in the future.

Emma Matsson, Development manager for Age-friendly Gothenburg, Sweden: Future developers in Gothenburg - shaping tomorrow's society together

By engaging and involving senior citizens in the development of the city, Gothenburg has gained new and unique perspectives. In her presentation, Emma Matsson explained the concept of “Future developers”: a group of older residents across Gothenburg who voluntarily assist public and civic actors in creating a more age-friendly city and contribute to the city's development.

– The initial idea was to form a group of senior citizens that could follow the age-friendly initiatives and contribute in a more practical way, and support municipal departments, administrations, and companies in this work.

The Future developers were recruited through information meetings, local radio, social gatherings, and at grocery stores and pharmacies across the city. From the 200 volunteers, a group of 30 future developers was formed, comprising people from diverse backgrounds and across all parts of Gothenburg. At the moment, the group has shrunk to 17, but plans to recruit more are underway.

The strategic impact of the group has been to provide user-driven insights into decision-making at all levels. It has also strengthened participation and co-creation and built stronger connections between the older residents and the city administration.

– The future developers are just one way we work with seniors, but it is a great

way for fast and close cooperation. The Future developers are asked for more and more frequently. The Future developers themselves tell us all the time that it feels really good to be useful and that they feel they are doing something important, which is also an important aspect of the project, Emma Matsson explains.

Once a month, the Future developers meet with various city stakeholders to discuss their ideas.

– For example, they serve as reference groups for administrations, companies, and research. They act as test pilots for new and existing services and places, and they are invited to panel discussions and dialogues. They are initiators of their own projects within the age-friendly framework, and a valuable resource for us in our strategic work.

Examples of some projects where the Future developers have been involved include an information campaign for older people on where to find help with digital issues, promoting digital inclusion. They have also visited parts of the city undergoing construction, providing on-site feedback on the development. The Future developers have also been contributing to think tanks, participating in conferences, working with local Pride organisers, and acting as a vehicle for information dissemination among senior citizens in the city, for instance, regarding how to join a free physical or cultural activity.

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I highly recommend working with a group of seniors like this. We learn a lot from them, and they also gain a lot of insight about the municipality. The most important thing is to build relationships, and by doing so, you create a great potential for the whole city.

Emma Matsson, Development manager for age-friendly Gothenburg, Sweden

Sigrun Gaard Steinsøy, Adviser, Torill Håkonsen & Kurt Arne Gimre, Life Quality Project 65+, Sola Municipality, Norway: Life Quality Project 65+

The Life Quality Project 65+ in the Norwegian municipality of Sola began by asking older residents four questions: What is important to you? How do you spend your time? Who do you want to spend your time with? Where will you live?

– Since 2019, the municipality has invited residents aged 65+ to an annual meeting. The municipality shares information on important topics and future challenges. Local activity groups are present. Every year, a new group of “Sixty fivers” is established. They make activity plans for the year to come, based on what is important to them, Sigrun Gaard Steinsøy explained.

The annual meetings give entire year groups of residents a place to meet and engage in dialogue. Torill Håkonsen was one of the members of the first 65+ group in 2019. She is still excited about the project as a way of finding meaningful things to do in life after retirement from the workforce.

– Everyone who attends the annual meeting is introduced to different activity groups, such as outdoor activities and sports, arts and crafts, gardening, senior university, local history groups, and many others. They receive information on where and when to meet.

Torill Håkonsen underscores the project's social aspect.

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– In my professional work, I have encountered many lonely and deeply depressed people. I have also witnessed the magic of doing things together and how individuals gradually come back to life.

Torill Håkonsen, Life Quality Project 65+, Sola Municipality, Norway

The municipality of Sola contributes to the project by providing venues and disseminating information. According to Torill Håkonsen, the project is a success; many activity groups have reported increases in membership, and new groups are being established.

Kurt Arne Gimre heard about the project in 2022. For him, three major factors stood out: the social aspect, the movement and activity component, and awareness of diet and food.

– The essence of the project is quality of life. The importance of meeting people cannot be emphasised enough; we all need someone to talk to. Movement, activity and training are important for all age groups, but maybe even more so when you get older, Kurt Arne Gimre said.

Sigrun Gaard Steinsøy explained that her authority as a representative of the municipality takes a back seat when engaging with the participants of Project 65+. She is very mindful about the language she uses and trusts the process rather than trying to control it.

– In many ways, the process is the goal. I want to spread the message that it is important to connect with this age group. The possibilities are endless when we are in it together.

Paolo Caserotti, Professor, Department of Sports Science and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark: Co-designing interventions to improve physical activity and nutritional habits with older citizens: challenges and possibilities

Co-designing interventions with target groups is a vital approach. In his presentation, Paolo Caserotti emphasised that it must be used cautiously. When involving a target group in creating solutions, strict standards are essential to guarantee genuine inclusiveness and that all voices are equally heard.

Paolo Caserotti heads the EnRICH-HABITS project, which uses a co-design approach to tackle physical inactivity and malnutrition in older adults. Physical inactivity is a significant health risk for seniors, highlighting the need for effective prevention strategies. The project has created a practical framework to identify and evaluate possible biases in the co-design process.

Caserotti identified six main challenges to consider during the co-design process. The first is the risk of hearing only from the “usual suspects”, leading to selection bias and limited representativeness, where only the strongest voices are heard.

– This is a major, major problem. We give enormous democratic power to the citizens. But this power has to be distributed among the different socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic groups.

The second challenge involves a power imbalance in which a highly influential individual, often the researcher, retains the authority to overrule the group's opinions. As researchers, we need to recognise when to step back and let the citizens speak, Caserotti argues.

The third challenge relates to practical physical and cognitive limitations. A frail individual might not be able to participate fully in a demanding research process, raising questions about representativeness. The fourth challenge concerns digital tools.



We often use digital tools, but they require some digital literacy, which can become an issue.

Paolo Caserotti, Professor, Department of Sports Science and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark

The fifth challenge relates to evaluation and generalisability. Once a model is developed, can it be scaled or transferred without needing a new co-design process? Paolo Caserotti gives the example of an outdoor physical activity park that might work in Spain, but as a concept, would need adaptations before being implemented in Denmark.

The final challenge concerns issues related to behavioural change. The co-design group might propose methods that lack scientific support or are influenced by social norms related to ageism.

By highlighting these biases in co-design, the EnRICH-HABITS project has developed a practical framework to support more transparent, inclusive, and robust development of behaviour-change interventions.

– Co-design is a very relevant and powerful democratic tool, but we need to be careful how we distribute this tool so it represents the entire community. We need to conduct internal and external evaluations, also involving citizens who were not part of the co-design process.



Photo: Mostphotos

5. The Impact of age-friendly communities

The final session of the conference aimed to address how we can assess the impact of age-friendly initiatives at both the systemic and individual levels. Moderator Yongjie Yon introduced this session by reflecting on the themes raised so far at the conference.

– We have all already seen plenty of great examples in the Nordic and Baltic communities. I think we all share the same question: How do we know if our work on an age-friendly environment is truly effective, measurable, and actually impacts older persons' futures and the systems that support all of us?

Erja Rappe, Senior researcher, Age Institute, Finland: Quality indicators of age-friendliness in Finland: Current status and development needs

Finland is one of the fastest-ageing countries globally, with 24% of its population currently aged 65 or older. The oldest age groups are expected to grow significantly in the near future. Many of the country's oldest residents live

in rural areas, which are rapidly losing basic services due to urbanisation. Many older people face loneliness and worry about the sufficiency and accessibility of services aimed at older people.

A recently completed research project on quality indicators of age-friendliness by the Finnish Age Institute shed light on the preparedness of municipalities and well-being services counties for population ageing.

– We examined 14 dimensions of age-friendliness based on the WHO framework. In addition to social and health services, these dimensions included, for example, the accessibility of local services, access to information about essential services, and support for using digital services, Erja Rappe explained.

Results show that municipalities report having many assessment methods to evaluate opportunities for older people to socialise, meet others, and engage in leisure activities. However, very few had methods for evaluating housing solutions for older people, and the functionality and accessibility of public transport.

The well-being service counties had many assessment methods for evaluating social and health care services, as they are the providers of those services. They also have methods for assessing older people's opportunities to influence decisions. In contrast, they have few or very few methods for evaluating the accessibility of nearby nature and green areas.

– One positive finding was that, among the service providers, the term age-friendliness was familiar. However, everyone expressed a desire for more assessment methods for age-friendliness.

The key findings of the Age Institute's research project reveal that assessment practices are generally fragmented and inconsistent. Municipalities and well-being services counties do not have standard methods to evaluate age-friendliness. Methods differ, and without common models, comparable data is absent.

– Our findings reveal significant challenges in the current practices for assessing age-friendliness. The practices are fragmented and lack comparability. Furthermore, the methods are used inconsistently, and their support for decision-making is very weak.

Another important finding is that the indicators do not incorporate the perspective of older people; they more closely represent the viewpoint of the

service system rather than that of older individuals.

– These gaps highlight the urgent need for standardised and inclusive assessment methods and frameworks that truly capture the lived experience of older adults and strengthen their voice in decision-making, Erja Rappe stated.

Promoting age-friendliness requires coordinated efforts across multiple sectors, but the results show that cross-sector collaboration is weak. The knowledge base on older people is narrow and primarily focused on diseases and service needs.

Based on these findings, the Age Institute suggests establishing a national framework to evaluate age-friendliness. The set of indicators should be expanded to more accurately reflect and support older people's capacities and resources. Additionally, older individuals should participate in developing and assessing age-friendliness initiatives. The national knowledge base should also be supplemented with local data.

– In my view, the WHO framework for age-friendly environments addresses all these development needs we found. So we know how age-friendliness should be assessed, but the challenge lies in making this knowledge widely used in municipalities and well-being services counties. They must develop age-friendliness to cope financially with the growing service needs of an ageing population.

Natalie Turner, Deputy Director at the Centre for Ageing Better, UK: Understanding Impact: Findings from the UK Network of Age-friendly Communities Impact Report

The UK Network of Age-friendly Communities includes around one hundred cities and towns, with nearly 32 million residents. It spans major cities, small towns, and rural areas at various stages of developing age-friendly initiatives.

In her presentation on understanding the impact of age-friendly initiatives, Natalie Turner reminded the audience that each community is unique, leading to significant variation in goals and measurements across different areas.

Many indicators of change are long-term and difficult to directly link to a single programme. Smaller interventions often lack the specific resources and evaluation skills needed for thorough data collection. Additionally, much of the work focuses on shifting attitudes and ways of working, making them harder to measure. Nevertheless, understanding of the impact is crucial to ensure that

efforts are effectively making a difference.

Natalie Turner gave an overview of the impact the UK Network of Age-friendly Communities has on both local systems and older people themselves, drawing on the key findings in the newly published UK Network Impact Report by the Centre for Ageing Better.

– We divided our results into five impacts for systems, and five impacts for older people, but they are of course interconnected, Natalie Turner explained.

By systems, the report refers to all age-friendly partners across different levels of society. A systems change would involve confronting the root causes of issues by transforming structures, customs, and policies. The five impacts for local systems within the report are briefly described as follows.

Creating partnerships that drive local action and build in efficiencies. This involves developing and strengthening partnerships to coordinate action for priority areas, ensuring resources are used efficiently while avoiding service duplication. For example, local authorities can broker new connections between diverse organisations or establish dedicated age-friendly steering groups.

Supporting evidence-informed decision-making. Local systems benefit from gathering local context and national learning to enable evidence-based prioritisation. Communities often achieve this by creating baseline assessments to choose their specific focus areas and adopting successful practices from the UK or global age-friendly networks.

– The baseline surveys that people do at the beginning of their age-friendly initiatives help to prioritise. Where are the older people in your area? How are they doing, and what are their priorities? Resources should be directed towards what needs to change the most.

Enabling meaningful co-production in policy-making. This involves building strong mechanisms for engagement to ensure that policy outcomes truly meet the needs of older residents. Examples include the creation of older people's forums or ageing well ambassador programmes, where residents provide direct feedback on council plans.

– A prerequisite for joining our network is demonstrating how you involve older people.

Changing policies, mindsets, and language. Initiatives in this category generate a deeper understanding of ageing to shift public attitudes and integrate age-friendly considerations into all local policies. Age should be considered each time

a new policy comes around. This is often implemented by using inclusive language and images in communications or appointing a politician to act as an older person's champion.

Embedding and enabling a preventative way of working. This focuses on encouraging activities that support health prevention through a life-course approach. Systems-level examples include prioritising community-based health initiatives and expanding domains like age-friendly employment and volunteering.

– The determinants of health are not just about clinical services, but also about how people can contribute and be supported in their communities, Natalie Turner explained.

As mentioned, the UK Network Impact Report also focused on the benefits and impacts on older people themselves. Five key findings in this area are as follows:

Expanding older people's access to and use of local spaces. This focuses on making physical environments more accessible to improve residents' independence in their own neighbourhoods. Practical initiatives include conducting walking audits to improve town centres and parks, and coordinating community transport.

Expanding older people's access to support and services. By improving the design and communication of local services, communities ensure support is more accessible and better tailored to specific needs. Examples include offering both online and offline support options and distributing targeted age-friendly newsletters.



Bringing an age-friendly lens to existing services can also have a significant impact.

Natalie Turner, Deputy Director at the Centre for Ageing Better, UK

Increasing older people's connections to and inclusion in society. This involves encouraging activities that foster social participation and strengthen intergenerational or cross-cultural connections. Communities may host creative workshops or specific social activities to mark events such as the International

Day of Older People.

– This is the essential approach to tackling loneliness. Presenting opportunities for people to participate, engage, and build and maintain social connections. I believe this is the foundation of much age-friendly work, Natalie Turner said.

Increasing older people's voice, representation, and inclusion in decision-making.

This impact creates mechanisms for older people to actively shape public life rather than being passive service recipients. Examples include democratic engagement activities, such as targeted "register to vote" campaigns, and the use of ambassadors to represent the community in the media.

Improving older people's health and well-being. These initiatives develop specific opportunities that support the physical and mental health of the ageing population. Examples of such activities include nutrition and hydration information programmes and local walking groups.

– All of these impacts are interconnected, and it is important to tell that story to your local decision-makers, Natalie Turner concluded.



Photo: Nordic Welfare Centre

6. Closing remarks

During their closing remarks, the conference organisers expressed gratitude to the speakers and participants for two inspiring days. Many attendees shared that they felt inspired, discovered new ideas, made new contacts, and reconnected with old friends and colleagues. Many also said the topics discussed during the conference felt relevant.

One of the organisers, Anne Berit Rafoss, representing the Centre for an Age-friendly Norway, invited all participants to the upcoming third World Congress for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities in San Sebastian, Spain, in June 2026.

– We are going to celebrate 15 years of the Global Network and look to the future. There will be a good mix of research, practice and policy, and we will invite people from all over the world.



Photo: WHO Regional Office for Europe

7. Sammanfattning på svenska

Konferensen "Ageing is Living: Building Age-Friendly Communities in the Nordic-Baltic Region" fokuserade på hur vi kan skapa åldersvänliga städer och samhällen i Norden och de baltiska länderna. Mycket av den teoretiska grunden som de olika presentationerna vilade på är relaterad till Världshälsoorganisationens (WHO) riktlinjer för åldrande och hälsa. I takt med att befolkningen i Norden och Baltikum åldras i allt snabbare takt är dessa frågor mycket aktuella.

Konferensen fokuserade på fyra centrala teman: att stärka sociala kontakter och minska ensamhet, att skapa åldersvänliga miljöer genom samhällsplanering, att främja samskapande i åldersvänliga samhällen samt att utvärdera effekterna av åldersvänliga initiativ.

Flera presentationer lyfte fram betydelsen av mötesplatser och sociala aktiviteter för att motverka ensamhet bland äldre. Vikten av att inkludera de äldre och ge dem delaktighet i beslut som berör dem själva underströks också av flera föreläsare. Många underströk att arbetet för åldersvänliga samhällen också bör betraktas som en investering i framtiden.

Flera av föreläsarna gav exempel på lokala projekt och initiativ som kan fungera som inspiration och goda exempel i arbetet för åldersvänliga initiativ. Vikten av

fungerande utvärderingsmetoder underströks också för att kunna urskilja effektiva initiativ.

Konferensen "Ageing is Living: Building Age-Friendly Communities in the Nordic-Baltic Region" ägde rum i Köpenhamn i november 2025.

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