

Dr Hannah R. Marston et al – Written evidence (TGB0036)

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Overview of Institutions

The Open University (OU), The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) - The Hague, the Netherlands and the Mother Teresa University (MTU) - Skopje, North Macedonia, are leading the way in critical thinking, discourse, and innovative research surrounding age-friendly cities, communities, the built environment and technology in the wider societal ecosystem. Contributors of this evidence collaboratively work together and with stakeholders (e.g. The World Health Organization, Middlesbrough Borough Council, the Municipality of The Hague, Social Housing Associations in the Netherlands, and Union of Associations of Pensioners of Macedonia) which ensures the research conducted and executed is in close connection to governance and policymakers (for societal relevance), for implementation takes an inclusive approach through co-production and participatory design workshops; ensuring rigorous methodological approaches are implemented, in addition to the voice(s) of the citizens are heard. All contributors are leading authorities in their respective area(s) and are the next generation of engineers, gerontologists, gerontechnologists and social workers at their respective institutions. All contributors work across both national and international landscapes, through networks, membership organisations and by leading inter/national research projects.

Why are we submitting this research

The evidence presented here is targeting policymakers (incl. local government), researchers, planners, architects, businesses and is representative of marginalised communities and citizens, especially people who are living in precarity, who at times are misrepresented and disconnected from regional and national initiatives. We believe the work we conduct enables greater understanding of diverse communities which is integral for ensuring contemporary and future transgenerational (Marston, Shore et al., [2022](#)) community needs are met. Instilling critical thinking, discourse and implementation of a quantitative based measure can afford local, national and international policymakers, planners, developers, researchers, architects amongst others the ability to assess the age-friendliness of a town, a city or a rural area. This, in turn, will afford strategic decision making at local and national government levels to be conducted, provided by evidence-based research through the voices of residents in the communities.

Body of evidence

The evidence presented forthwith will focus primarily on two specific questions posited in the call for evidence:

Q3. Do the current proposals for identifying Grey Belt land provide local planning authorities with sufficient scope to meet their housing targets and the needs of local communities?

Q5. What infrastructure and local amenities are necessary to ensure that a Grey Belt housing development is a good place to live? We will draw upon existing knowledge and scholarly research to highlight the importance of in providing innovative and alternative modes to delivering applied research to answer these questions.

To date and over the last 15-years there has been substantial discourse pertaining to the age-friendly city (AFC) movement, specifically by the AFC framework set out by the World Health Organization (WHO) in [2007a](#). This framework comprises of 8-domains: 1. Transportation, 2. Housing, 3. Civic participation and employment, 4. Respect and social inclusion, 5. Social participation, 6. Communication and information, 7. Community support and health services and 8. Outdoor spaces and buildings. This framework was only validated psychometrically in 2020 by the research team at THUAS (Dikken et al., [2020](#)) and validated for use in other European countries (Ivan et al., [2024](#); Pavlovski et al., [2024](#)).

The AFC framework has facilitated scholars and organisations from the UK and worldwide to focus on the built environment and societal ecosystems specifically through the lens for older adults. However, the makeup of our towns, cities and communities does not solely comprise of residents in later life (as the documentation accompanying the original AFC framework from [2007a](#) suggests) but of families, people of different ages (e.g., Generation X, Millennials), including people with disabilities, people who are from low-incomes, different socio-economic backgrounds, and ethnicity. Thus, the contributors posit that the current WHO AFC ([2007](#)) is not fit for purpose for several reasons, including the lack of acknowledge relating to technology (e.g., digital devices, Internet usage, social media/communication platforms) (Marston, & van Hoof, [2019](#)), financial status of residents (Dikken, et al., [2020](#)) and broader experiences of residents living within our ecosystems – especially during a cost-of-living crisis (Marston, van Hoof, & Yon, [2023](#); van Hoof, [2023](#)).

Yet, finance is imperative to daily living, whether you are old, middle-aged or younger. This was one of the core findings in the study which validated the original WHO AFC model, which identified a ninth domain that constitutes an age-friendly city or community (Dikken et al., [2020](#)). This new domain was previously concealed as integrated items of the original domains. Whether this is paying for groceries, household fuel bills, leisure activities, health and wellbeing, finance plays a pivotal role in everyone's household (van Hoof, [2023](#)).

However, in [2007a](#) the WHO did not include finance as a domain (similar to transport, housing etc.) to inform the AFC framework. It is unclear how or why this was the case and indeed how the actual framework came to be derived as the gold standard for AFC scholarly activity well into the 21st century given the wide breadth of evidence-based research (WHO, [2018](#); [2015](#); [2007b](#); [2007c](#) [2002](#); Plouffe, Kalache & Voelcker, [2016](#); Kalache, [2015](#); Onolemhemen, [2009](#);

Hanson & Emler, 2006; American Association of Retired Person (AARP), 2005; Keller & Kalache, 1997). Yet, given the current (van Hoof, Staalduinen, et al., 2024; Perek-Bialas, et al., 2024; Özer, et al., 2024; Ivan et al., 2024; Pavlovski et al., 2024; Yamada, et al., 2023; Kim, et al., 2022; Dikken, et al., 2020) evidence based research and discourse (Marston, van Hoof, & Yon, 2023; van Hoof, 2023) findings do suggest that finance does indeed play a pivotal role in AFC but this is not been acknowledge in past scholarly and organisational outputs until now.

Development of the AFCCQ

To present a solution to aid local and national governments, planners, businesses, engineers and architects, the AFCCQ (Age-Friendly Cities and Communities Questionnaire) measure was created by Dikken, van Hoof and colleagues (2020) and it initially needed to go through a validation process in Dutch (Dikken, et al., 2020) prior to further rollout in other European and Worldwide regions, including a version in British English which was also successfully validated for use in New Zealand and Australia in 2024. Throughout the validation processes the AFCCQ encompassed the original 8-domains from the WHO AFC framework and a ninth domain – finance. The initial process was conducted in The Hague, in the Netherlands which is a member of the Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities which was set up by the WHO in 2010 (Extranet – The Hague) and received support from the Municipality of The Hague (one of the leading United Nations cities in the world). Survey rollout in the Hague required residents to complete a 23-item survey covering all 8-domains plus the ninth (finance).

Additionally, and extending this body of work, the City & Co project – externally funded through Horizon Europe⁽¹⁾ – research and innovation programme encourages researchers, urban government authorities, – including cities and municipalities, – businesses, civil society and other stakeholders to build transnational consortia to create innovation and research projects that enable and support capacity building for urban transformations. This project aimed to understand the AFCCQ in addition to sustainability behaviour (Dikken et al., 2023; 2024) within Poland (Perek-Bialas, et al., 2024) and Romania (Ivan, et al., 2024). Through dissemination of research and utilizing respective networks, scholars working within the arena of the AFC movement have become interested in the AFCCQ. This has led to further initiatives been undertaken by van Hoof and colleagues primarily because the initial evidence-based research paper (Dikken, et al., 2020) has not only garnered interest, but has contributed new knowledge and provided a solution to the AFC movement for everyone, which was missing – a quantitative tool to measure AFC at local, regional, national or international levels, and subsequently, provide baseline data that can help steer policy-making.

Since 2022, there has been greater take-up of the AFCCQ across many countries and continents including for use in North Macedonia (Pavlovski, et al., 2024) and is available in Albanian and Macedonian languages, Japanese (Yamada, et al., 2023), and Turkish (Özer, et al., 2024). Similarly, survey rollout, data analysis and journal papers are currently being conducted in Portugal, Spain, Greece,

Germany, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Qatar, Italy, Israel, and the UK (led by Marston) among others.

AFCCQ through a UK lens

Focusing on the AFCCQ deployment in the UK, Marston is currently collaborating with two local authorities located in England, one located in North Yorkshire and the second located in the south. The purpose of these collaborations will aim to understand through the deployment of the AFCCQ whether the respective areas are age-friendly and the level of age-friendliness together with, and which specific domains of the nine require specific attention by the respective local authorities (LA).

It is anticipated findings from the UK body of work will be available in 2025 ascertaining the level of age-friendliness and validation of the survey affording another large dataset to be added to the international body of work. But more importantly, the respective findings will feed directly into the strategic priorities of the local authorities and the wider community partners including businesses, grassroot networks, and third-party stakeholders.

From the perspective of the local authority located in the North of England, this specific LA has ringfenced and ensured age-friendliness is a strategic priority of their planning and resources – aligned to the public health department of the LA, the findings of this work will afford the personnel to identify priorities and ideally appropriate resources to enhance and benefit the residents of the community. Moreover, there are the greater opportunities for the LA themselves to explore whether their specific policies require amending and aligning more so to the needs of the residents of the respective community.

Challenges to existing age-friendly cities research

To date, much of the AFC scholarly activity has been conducted through qualitative data collection and co-creation/co-production practices. However, there are challenges associated to qualitative data and this includes the ability to reproduce the work should another research or community group wish to replicate the study for their own research/community activities. Additionally, qualitative work can be more difficult to compare and contrast across different regions within one country or internationally. Conducting qualitative research can be expensive. Deploying the AFCCQ initially, actors can pinpoint the specific areas (or domains) that need further investigation which can be utilized through qualitative approaches. Therefore, and overall, reducing the costs for policy makers, local governments, and researchers alike. By pinpointing the specific domains which may need further investigation – this too can assist all actors in highlighting areas of interest and make strategic changes within their community for the greater good of residents. Although there are challenges, one of the benefits to qualitative data is the provision of richer insights into specific communities and in some instances individuals. In the following section we posit the benefits of the AFCCQ quantitative measure, affording the clustering and coming up with typologies and personas, which inform policymakers and show the heterogeneity among older people.

Benefits of the AFCCQ

The benefits of the AFCCQ are 2-fold. To date there is no other national or international quantitative measure that can aid planners, developers, policy makers, business, researchers/scholars or local authorities alike to understand whether their community or a proposed new development is viable as either 1. Age-friendly, or 2. As a transgenerational community whereby everyone residing is considered. Thus, the AFCCQ through the Russian validation paper (conducted in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious city of Kazan in the Republic of Tatarstan) has taken an intergenerational approach to demonstrate its viability for communities aged 18-65+years. Similarly, Marston is rolling out the AFCCQ via the networks of colleagues and this too will afford additional insights through the UK lens and lead towards survey validation.

The UK is a multi-cultural country with many communities whereby English is not their first language. As the surveys grow regarding translation there are opportunities for more communities in the UK to be included. For example, the Albanian version of the AFCCQ could be deployed across the UK to reach Albanian residents to ascertain their understanding of living in their respective communities, affording inclusion of broader perspectives in scholarly research, contributing applied and evidence-based research to real-environment concerns and issues.

Recommendations

Based on the existing evidence-based research described here we posit several recommendations which we believe are key for advancing the work in this area and do indeed answer the following questions:

Q3. Do the current proposals for identifying Grey Belt land provide local planning authorities with sufficient scope to meet their housing targets and the needs of local communities?

Q5. What infrastructure and local amenities are necessary to ensure that a Grey Belt housing development is a good place to live?

1. The AFCCQ quantitative measure should be a requirement for all new planning developments to enable the key actors the opportunity to fully understand the needs, expectations and age-friendliness of a newly developed community.
2. The AFCCQ measure should be rolled out by all local authorities and devolved nations to truly understand the level of age-friendliness within the age-friendly cities arena.
3. Employing the AFCCQ will aid all actors responsible in the (new) development lifecycle and beyond the ability to identify what type of **infrastructure** and **local amenities** are important to existing and prospective new residents. Although the 23-item AFCCQ is validated for other countries and will be completed for the UK by Marston in the future, additional top-up questions can be added to the instrument which may relate to leisure activities (e.g.,

- opening hours), or (public) transport connections etc, to provide a more in-depth approach to domains of particular concern to local authorities.
4. In the AFCCQ versions being rolled out in the UK there are additional input boxes allowing prospective survey respondents to provide more contextual answers (qualitative) that can aid all actors (e.g., local government, planners) to **meet the needs of the local community**.
 5. Deploying the AFCCQ across different regions and/or local authorities provides the opportunity to compare and contrast the data to deliver strategic resources, but also aid devolved regions including Mayors the ability to reallocate resources appropriately, based on data collection and analysis. Moreover, lesson's learned can be shared across different regions and authorities which may in turn benefit everyone.
 6. The AFCCQ has the potential to be implemented into long-term data collections enabling a longitudinal approach similar to the English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing (ELSA - <https://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/>). This too would afford researchers over a period of years and decades to assess the changes of age-friendliness within different communities. Likewise, local authorities have the opportunity to take and implement a longitudinal approach with their respective rollouts of the AFCCQ which would indeed afford long-term strategic planning and (re)allocation of resources according to the needs of their residents.

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Footnotes

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