Age Friendly Towns in Ireland

By Emer Coveney

For more than a decade, the Age Friendly Ireland Program has worked with local governments to ensure their communities meet the needs of all ages from the oldest to the youngest. Hosted and run by Meath County Council, the program was developed initially with philanthropic funding, with local governments taking the lead in developing multi-agency alliance structures in each municipal area.[1] Today all 31 local authorities in Ireland lead age-friendly programs, making Ireland the first country in the world that has achieved full, country-wide membership in the World Health Organization's Global Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities.

This commitment by all local authorities was critical to mainstreaming the program as a local government shared service in 2018. This service is now anchored in four government departments, in addition to the policing service, the Health Service Executive, and the business community via Chamber of Commerce Ireland. The national government buy-in is cited as a critical success factor, supporting cross-departmental work to advance the age-friendly community agenda.

Local Age Friendly Alliance structures are the key delivery mechanism for initiatives to prepare for population aging, with their strength deriving from their inherent multi-sector nature. These alliances comprise senior representatives from the main public-sector agencies in each county and city, the business community, universities, transport companies and elected representatives, working together with representatives of Older People's Councils. This proven multisectoral partnership is highly effective and the program has gained significant traction in recent years, particularly in the development of Age Friendly Housing and the Public Realm, Age Friendly Towns, and integrated service delivery between local governments and health services.

Walkability Audit in Kells town, County Meath as part of the Age friendly Town process.

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Age Friendly Towns

Developing Age Friendly Towns revolves around the ethos that if you design for the young, you exclude the old, but if you design for the old, you include everyone. A significant component of preparing for population aging is the development of Age Friendly Towns, which are smaller, discrete geographic areas such as a town, village, or a suburban community within a larger urban area. An Age Friendly Town plans for the older person's needs, supports active aging, and facilitates older adults to remain living in their own homes and communities.

Age Friendly Towns consider citizens' needs in a holistic way, focusing not just on the built environment but also on access to services, cultural opportunities, safety and security, and residents feeling connected to the community. There are about 60 Age Friendly towns in Ireland at various stages of development, with 29 having completed the process. Hosting Age Friendly Ireland in local government strengthens the ability to implement change, because it provides direct links with planning departments and decision-makers for public realm developments.

The shared service provides a suite of resources to support the development of Age Friendly Towns, including training programs, toolkits and other resources available online free of charge. T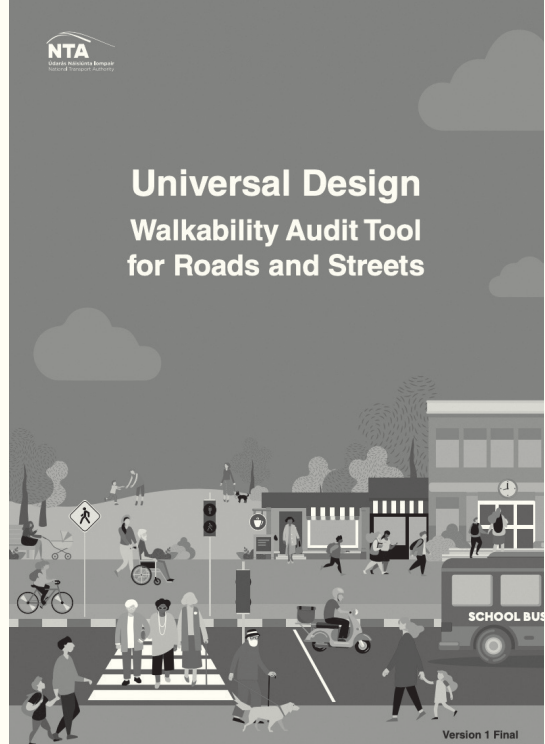he program's training module, 'Housing and the Public Realm,' is delivered to local government personnel, government departments, housing bodies and the construction industry. An Age Friendly Parking Guide and an Age Friendly Seating Guide also recently were published to help focus on specific areas for developing age inclusive features.

Local Examples of Age Friendly Towns

In the picturesque village of Thomastown, County Kilkenny, the Age Friendly Town process resulted in better street lighting for the town, footpath improvements, outdoor seating, community-based classes for older people, age friendly bus shelters, an Information Guide on older people's services, and a drop-in center in the town, among other things.

In the historic town of Trim, the Age Friendly Town improvements include a colorful sensory garden with plants selected to stimulate the senses (i.e., scent, touch, and sound), as well as chimes and a fairy garden. The sensory garden was developed with a disability group called Prosper Meath on local authority owned land, with support from the business community, the Office of Public Works, school children, and community groups such as Tidy Towns and the Men's Shed, which built furniture for the garden.

Joan Carroll, who works with the Age Friendly Program in Meath County Council, explains: "Becoming an Age Friendly Town takes work and

Clockwise: Installation of Age Friendly car parking; New Universal Design Walkability audit toolkit developed by the National Transport Authority with Age Friendly Ireland, An Taisce and the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design; and wheelchair accessible picnic table made by craftsman Paki O'Mahony for the Cork Age Friendly Programme.

buy-in from the local community, the businesses and decision makers."

In Skerries in North County Dublin, the Age Friendly Town process led to the rollout of befriending services in the community. The community behind Age Friendly Roscrea, a town in County Tipperary, was described as a 'beacon of hope' during the pandemic, rallying volunteers to deliver goody bags to older people, and organizing regular check-ins and phone call networking with many older people living in the town.

Cork County took a proactive approach to developing Age Friendly Towns, with a significant program of work and dedicated budgets. For example, in the town of Middleton a talented local craftsman made two beautiful wheelchair-friendly benches that were accessible to people of all abilities. They are universally used by "a person with a wheelchair, or an older person with a walker, or even a mum with a buggy," explained Chairperson of Cork Older People's Council Liz Maddox.

A Focus on Walkability

Among the key tools for local government to modify public spaces so they are accessible for people of all ages is conducting a walkability audit. Reflecting a Universal Design approach, walkability audits are undertaken locally by a diverse group of participants, both young and old,

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parents with buggies, and people with cognitive, sensory, and physical disabilities.

A number of walkability audits have been undertaken in County Meath in the east of Ireland, in the towns of Kells, Slane, Trim, Enfield, Summerhill and Athboy.

In 2019, the town of Athboy undertook a special Walkability Audit with an enhanced focus on dementia. The local Age Friendly Program partnered with the Health Service Executive's national dementia awareness campaign, called 'Dementia: Understand Together' to better understand how to serve its citizens with dementia. Representatives of the community worked with an architect who specializes in designing for dementia to identify issues presenting for people with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairment. In the aftermath of the audit, the local authority has secured significant funding to improve its public spaces. Capital projects are underway, including redesigned public seating, adding bollards to protect pedestrian spaces from vehicles, and resurfacing footpaths.

Walkability studies continue to play a critical role. The original Age Friendly Ireland walkability survey was developed further as a Universal Design audit tool in 2020 by the National Transport Authority. With input from Age Friendly Ireland, the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, and An Taisce (the National Trust for Ireland), the updated tool takes an even broader, more age-inclusive view, including a focus on the walkability of the route to school for younger children.

As a result of walkability studies, the members of Comhairle na n'Óg (Youth Council) participated in dementia awareness training with the

Alzheimer's Association of Ireland, and this program will now be rolled out across the schools.

Conclusion

As the network of Age Friendly Towns develops across Ireland, older adults and generations to come all benefit from improvements. This work is helping Ireland to prepare for population aging in a very tangible way, with marked improvements in the built environment and structures to support the participation of older people in local decision-making about their communities. As the population ages, it is vital that our towns are sustainable and suitable for older people to flourish in their own communities for as long as possible. Joan Carroll from Meath County Council sums up the opportunity and impact of this work in this way: "Once a community understands the Age Friendly concept, the possibilities are endless." ●

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[1] In Ireland, each local government catchment area (based on county or city boundaries) is further subdivided into Municiple Districts.

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