



INFORM - ADVOCATE - EMPOWER

Submission on the Kāpiti Coast District Council Community Facilities Strategy

Outdoor spaces and other community facilities are basic features of an Age-friendly Community, which the Kāpiti Coast District Council aspires to its Long Term Plan.

They provide opportunities for social interaction, physical activity, and the opportunity to make use of the resources, services and amenities of the community.

With the narrowing-down of movement that can often occur in older age, people's experience of the urban environment in older age may become severely limited. The Age-friendliness of community facilities depends on the physical fabric of the built environment – and the degree to which it supports or obstructs people's ability to get out and about in older age.

A range of environmental obstructions and deficits limit older people's ability to move through a community disabling, frustrating and, ultimately, discriminating against people's everyday ability of staying active by getting out and about.

These range from the restrictive height of a road side curb (that makes crossing a street potentially difficult) to a cluttered footpath (that can impede mobility along a stretch of pavement particularly for those using walking aids, wheelchairs or mobility scooters).

There can be a disproportionate impact of the urban environment on older people's mobility, especially for those with physical and cognitive impairments. It is often the smallest of environmental factors – modulations of ground texture or 'formerly imperceptible changes in levels' – that can start to become 'problematic' in older age where these are not necessarily felt by younger generations.

Moreover, this may involve not only small-scale 'obstructions' that impede movement in a physical sense but the lack of facilities such as free and accessible toilets or adequate public seating, the absence of which can more insidiously inhibit and discourage movement outdoors.

Missing amenities (public toilets, rest stops) can, as significant environmental deficits, negatively impact on older people's use and perception of urban space: challenging and diminishing the 'environmental confidence' needed to get out and about – particularly when there is a (sudden) change in an older person's health status. There are, moreover, significant health risks associated with these kinds of disabling environments and missing amenities. Older people are at a heightened risk of falls wherever:

- there is inadequate distribution of public seating;
- the physical environment is poorly maintained (uneven, badly-maintained paving along a streetscape, for instance);

- new, unfamiliar (confusing) design features are introduced (such as slippery paving or flooring – where stepping around to avoid an unfamiliar surface leads to a greater likelihood of falls).

Features which the Kāpiti Coast Older Persons' Council submits should be available in open spaces and other community facilities include:

- wide and flat tarmac footways and passages;
- easy transition at level changes;
- unobstructed navigation;
- safe crossing points;
- clear, simple, easily visible and understandable signage;
- frequent, warm, supportive seating;
- sufficient bus stops with weather protection and seating; and
- sufficient, well maintained, safe and open toilets

Clear physical and mental health advantages are linked with mobility outside of the home and being in outdoor spaces in particular. These benefits of getting outdoors range from helping alleviate problems with insomnia (resetting the circadian rhythms and routines often lost in older age through walking and being outdoors and sensing the change of daylight and seasons) to encouraging physical activity that supports physical and mental health in later life.

Neighbourhoods that are designed to make it easy and enjoyable to go outdoors is a significant factor as to whether people attain recommended levels of physical activity through walking (regardless of sensory or mobility impairment) and is, more generally, a significant predictor of health and life satisfaction.

Research⁽¹⁾ indicates:

- *Those living within 10 minutes' walk of a local open space are twice as likely to achieve the recommended levels of healthy walking compared with those whose local open space is further away.*
- *Those who perceive their neighbourhood environments to be very or even fairly supportive are more likely to be 'high-level' walkers (i.e. walking at least 2.5 hours per week).*
- *Those living within 10 minutes' walk of a local open space are twice as likely to be satisfied with life compared with those whose local open space is further away.*

1 - Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation 22(3), 2006, pp. 256-267 and N.P. Erber, and S.C. Scherer, 'Sensory loss and communication difficulties in the elderly', Australasian Journal on Ageing, 18(1), 1999, pp. 4-9