

Older Peoples Experiences in Hamilton Central

2025



OTAGO
POLYTECHNIC
Te Kura Matatini ki Otago

DEVELOPED FOR

AGE FRIENDLY HAMILTON STEERING GROUP & HAMILTON CITY COUNCIL



CREATED BY

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY STUDENTS OTAGO POLYTECHNIC



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STAKEHOLDERS

Age Friendly Hamilton, Hamilton City Council, Otago Polytechnic.

PROJECT LEADERS

This project was completed by third year occupational therapy students Leah Wood, Kala Hunter and Safiya Sharif.

COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

We would like to thank the retirement villages in Hamilton that shared our survey with their residents, as their assistance was instrumental in achieving a high survey response.

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Dr Lizzie Martin, Otago Polytechnic



MEET THE PROJECT LEADERS

Kala is a final-year occupational therapy student who has gained experience across diverse clinical contexts, including Te Whatu Ora, private practice involving falls prevention, home assessments, and ACC contracts, as well as supporting students with intellectual disabilities. Kala demonstrates a strong commitment to evidence-informed and client-centred practice, with a particular interest in collaborating with older people to promote wellbeing, occupational participation, and independence in later life.

Leah E tū ana ahau ki runga i tōku waka o Te Arawa, mai Maketū ki Tongariro. Ko Moengahau-o-Tamatekapua tōku maunga, ko Ōngatoro tōku awa, ko Te Arawa, Tainui tōku waka, ko Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Pikiao tōku iwi. Ko Whakaue Kaipapa tōku whare tipuna, ko Tapiti tōku marae, ko Whānau a Tapihana tōku hapū, ko Leah Wood tōku ingoa.

Leah is a final-year occupational therapy student. She has worked in several clinical settings during placements, including acute care at Te Whatu Ora, private practice, and supporting students with diverse intellectual needs. Leah is passionate about working alongside whānau to enable participation in meaningful occupations and promote Hauora. She aspires to continue developing her practice to improve Māori health outcomes and provide culturally responsive, holistic care.

Safiya is a third-year Occupational Therapy student passionate about supporting older people to feel seen, heard, and valued. She brings curiosity, empathy, and strong interpersonal skills to her work, drawing on experience in older adult rehabilitation and community settings. In this project, Safiya contributed her skills in technology, survey design, and data collection, ensuring the research tools were accessible, clear, and user-friendly for older participants.



WHAT IS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY?

Occupational therapy is a healthcare profession that acknowledges the inter-relationship between an individual, the environment, and the occupations that they perform. As occupational therapists, we recognise that engagement in meaningful occupations is fundamental to health, well-being, and a person's sense of identity. Our role is to support individuals to overcome barriers that limit their ability to participate in occupations that are important to them.

Occupations are the everyday activities people take part in. These may be activities they do to care for themselves, hobbies they engage in, or ways in which they contribute to their communities. Occupational therapy supports people to engage in these meaningful activities, using both practical skills and evidence-based practice to promote participation, wellbeing, and independence.

While Occupational therapy aims to promote health and wellbeing, it is also about supporting a fair and inclusive society that enables all individuals to engage in life to their fullest potential. The things that occupational therapists do to help people take part in everyday living are sometimes referred to as 'enabling occupation' (OTBNZ, n.d).

There are strong links between occupational therapy and the Age Friendly Hamilton project initiated by the steering group. Both share common themes that align with occupational therapy values and principles:

01 Community Participation
Promoting opportunities for older people to engage in social, recreational, and self-care activities within the City Centre.

02 Person-environment fit
Recognising how environmental factors can enable or restrict participation and wellbeing.

03 Enabling occupation
Supporting older people to take part in meaningful and purposeful activities.

04 Inclusion and equity
Reducing barriers to participation to ensure all older people can access and benefit from the City Centre environment.

05 Empowerment
Encouraging independence, choice, and ongoing engagement in occupations that support health and social connection.

06 Age-Friendly
Investigating city centre facilitators and barriers supports inclusive, equitable ageing, aligning with local and global age-friendly frameworks.

COMMUNITY PARTNER

The Age Friendly Hamilton (AFH) Steering Group is a community partnership that endeavours to guide the direction of the Hamilton Age Friendly Plan. The group brings together representatives from various older persons' organisations, community agencies, Hamilton City Council, and other local service providers.

AFH was established in discussion with members of the Hamilton City Council and the HCC Advisory Panel on Older People in 2016 (Hamilton City Council, 2018), and in 2018, Hamilton became the first New Zealand city to join the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities network, committing to initiatives that support the wellbeing, participation, and accessibility of older people.

The primary objective of this project was to investigate the current and potential usage of the Hamilton City Centre by older people in Hamilton over the age of 65. This project fits with the steering group's mission and the 2025-2030 plan, highlighting the need for age-friendly business practices and stronger engagement between older people and the central city.





INTRODUCTION

For older people in Hamilton, the city centre is an environment with the potential to support a wide range of occupations. Alongside essential facilities such as shopping centres and medical services, the city centre provides opportunities for civic engagement, social interaction, leisure, and cultural participation. Engaging in these occupations can create a sense of belonging, wellbeing, and inclusion, supporting older people to remain active members of their community.

However, despite these opportunities, not all older people are able to participate in them equally. Understanding how older people experience and use or don't use the city centre is important, as it highlights the gap between what the environment offers in theory and what is genuinely accessible, inclusive, and meaningful in practice. This project recognises the importance of hearing the views of older people so that the city centre can be shaped as an inclusive, age-friendly space which supports participation and quality of life.

PROJECT AIM

This project aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how older people engage with, or chose not to engage with, the Hamilton City Centre. Perspectives were gathered through an online survey and informal conversations with people aged 65 and over. The insights gained were intended to inform future planning and development, providing valuable recommendations to the Age Friendly Hamilton Steering Group and Hamilton City Council on how to create a more inclusive and accessible City Centre environment that promotes participation and social engagement among older people.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project aimed to:

- 1** Investigate the current patterns of utilisation of the Hamilton City Centre by older people, including the purposes, frequency, and nature of their engagement.
- 2** To identify any barriers and facilitators that impact older people's access to and participation within the City Centre.
- 3** To provide evidence-based recommendations to the Age Friendly Hamilton Steering Group and Hamilton City Council to enhance inclusion and participation opportunities for older people in the City Centre



METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was used to gather insights from older people in Hamilton about their use of the city centre. This approach combined both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to capture a broad range of experiences and perspectives.

Survey development and distribution

An online and paper-based survey was created to explore patterns of city centre use among older people aged 65 years and over. The survey included questions about frequency of visits, reasons for engagement, perceived barriers, and suggestions for improvement. The survey was distributed through community organisations and venues such as the Hamilton City Council, St Lukes Anglican Church and the Glenview Community Centre. Responses were collected over a two week period.

Informal conversations

Informal, unrecorded conversations were conducted with older people to gather more detailed personal experiences that could not be fully captured through survey questions. These discussions were guided by open-ended prompts and conducted in different parts of Hamilton's City Centre, including Centre Place mall, Garden Place, the Transport Centre and nearby retail streets. Additional conversations were conducted at St Luke's Anglican Church. The survey form recorded responses from each participant, ensuring confidentiality and accuracy throughout





Ethical and culturally safe practice

Engagement with participants was guided by ethical principles and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Informed consent was obtained through clear written and verbal explanations. No identifiable information was collected, and participants were informed they could withdraw at any stage.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analysed using a mixed-methods approach to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights from older people in Hamilton. Closed questions were summarised using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores for Likert-scale items. Open-ended responses were analysed using keywords to identify common themes and patterns in participants' experiences. All survey data were carefully cleaned and organised to ensure accuracy and consistency when representing older people's experiences in Hamilton's City Centre. The data cleaning process involved checking for duplicate responses, correcting small input errors such as inconsistent formatting, and ensuring all survey answers were coded correctly for analysis.

During this stage, it was noticed that some surveys were missing pages or sections, which affected the completeness of certain questions. Instead of excluding these surveys, they were kept in the dataset and clearly reported to maintain transparency and acknowledge the realities of collecting data from community participants. Although this limited the depth of analysis for some areas, the cleaned dataset still provided valuable insights into accessibility, participation, and well-being for older people within the City Centre. Findings were interpreted using the WHO Age-Friendly domains and occupational therapy frameworks to understand how environmental factors influence older people's participation and engagement in the City Centre.

MĀORI CONSIDERATIONS

This project has actively considered Te Tiriti o Waitangi by embedding its five principles throughout. Of these, the three mainly considered were:

- Tino Rangatiratanga: Māori voices were upheld through engagement with Kaumātua and cultural advisors, ensuring Māori perspectives guided decision-making and maintained mana motuhake.
- Active Protection: Cultural wellbeing and safety were prioritised by integrating Māori ethical guidance, safeguarding taonga tuku iho, and ensuring the research process upheld Māori rights and values.
- Options: Māori models of health, such as Te Whare Tapa Whā, informed the analysis framework, recognising holistic wellbeing and the interconnectedness of physical, social, spiritual, and environmental dimensions.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical principles guided every stage of the Age-Friendly Hamilton project to ensure respect, safety, and inclusivity for all participants.

Key safeguards:

- Informed consent: Plain language introduction and verbal explanation before all participation.
- Voluntary participation: Participants could decline or withdraw at any time.
- Privacy: Only non-identifiable data (e.g. age band) collected; all information stored securely.
- Cultural safety: Guided by Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles and engagement with kaumātua and cultural advisors to uphold tikanga and inclusivity for Māori, Pacific, and migrant participants.
- Accessibility: Multiple communication options to support participants with sensory or cognitive decline.
- Duty of care: Clear process to report elder abuse or harm concerns to Age Concern and connect participants to community supports.



FINDINGS

This paper employed a mixed-method design to examine the experiences and interactions of older people within the Hamilton Central City. Quantitative survey data revealed general patterns in the use of the city centre and perceived accessibility, and the qualitative data obtained through informal conversations provided more details to the results.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

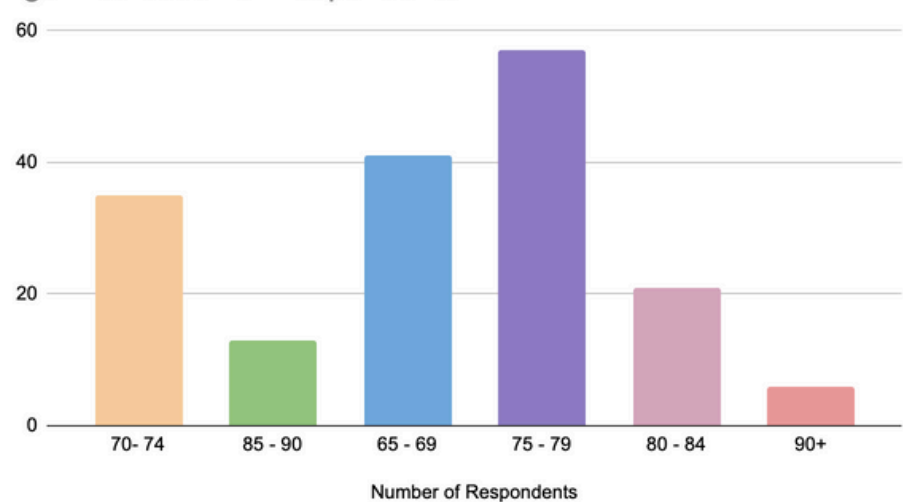
A total of 179 older people completed the survey. Respondents represented a diverse cross-section of the city’s older population.



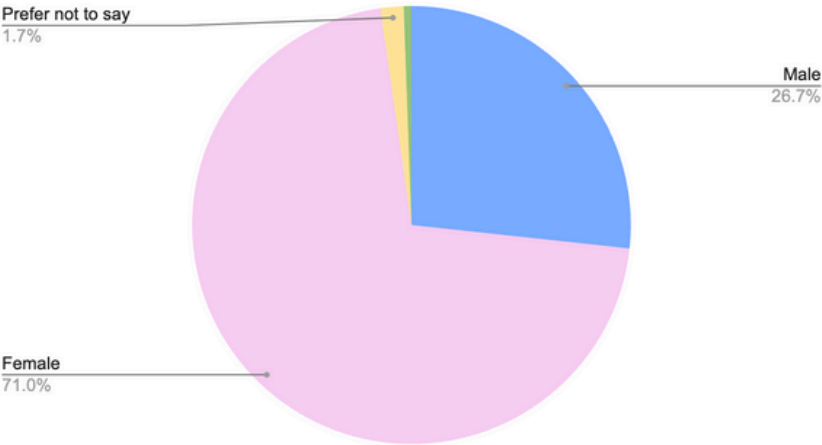
33%

of respondents were aged
75–79 years

Age Distribution of Respondents



Gender Distribution



71%

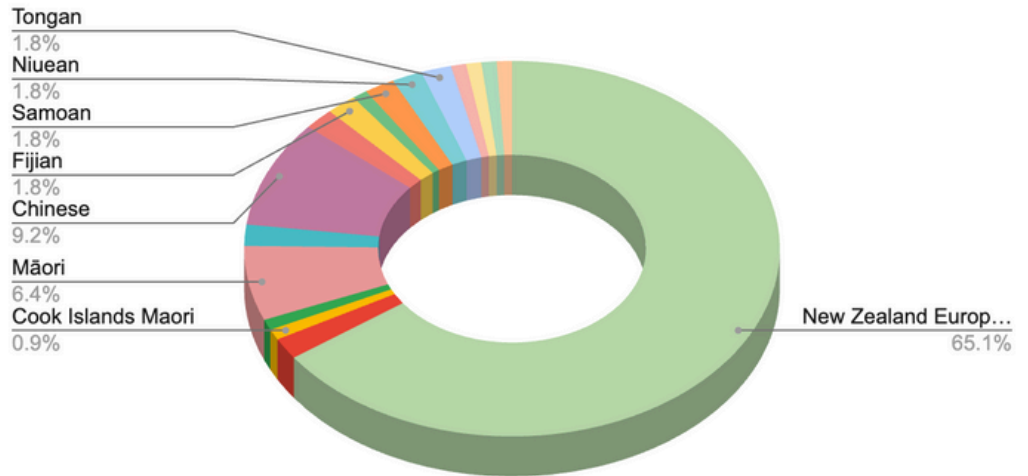
of respondents identified as
female



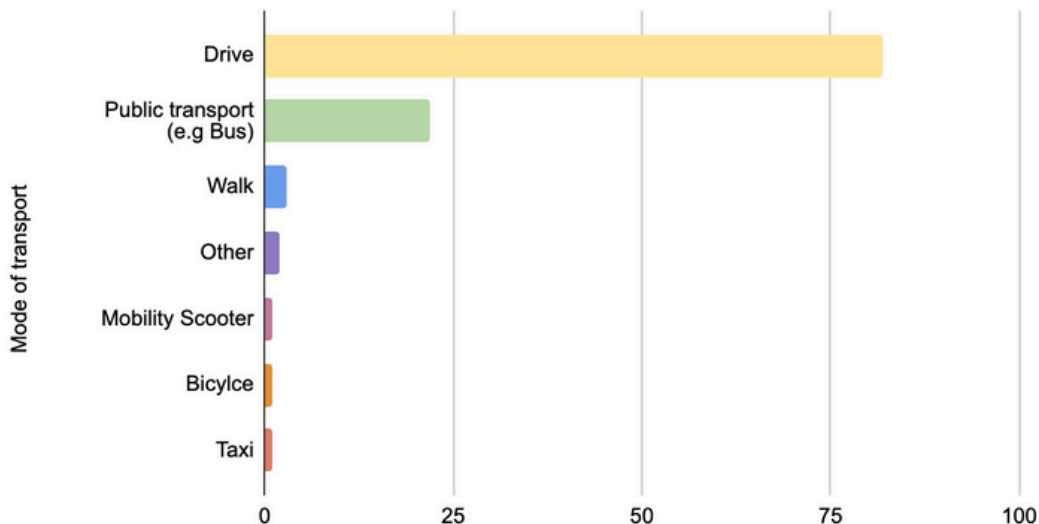
65%

of respondents
identified mainly as
NZ European/Pākehā

Ethnic Group of Respondents



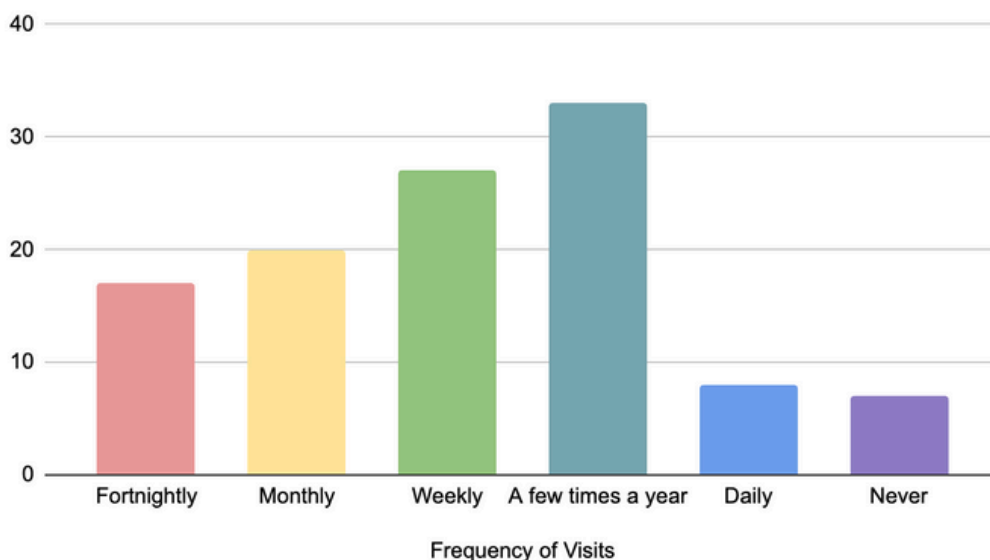
Usual Mode of Transport to Hamilton City Centre



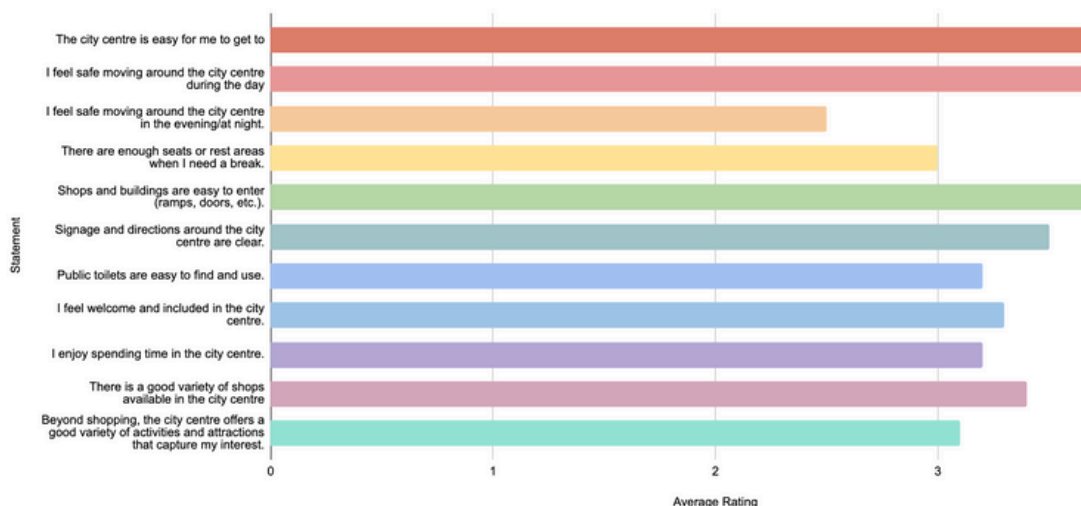
65%

of respondents
accessed the city
centre by private car

How Often Respondents Visit Hamilton City Centre



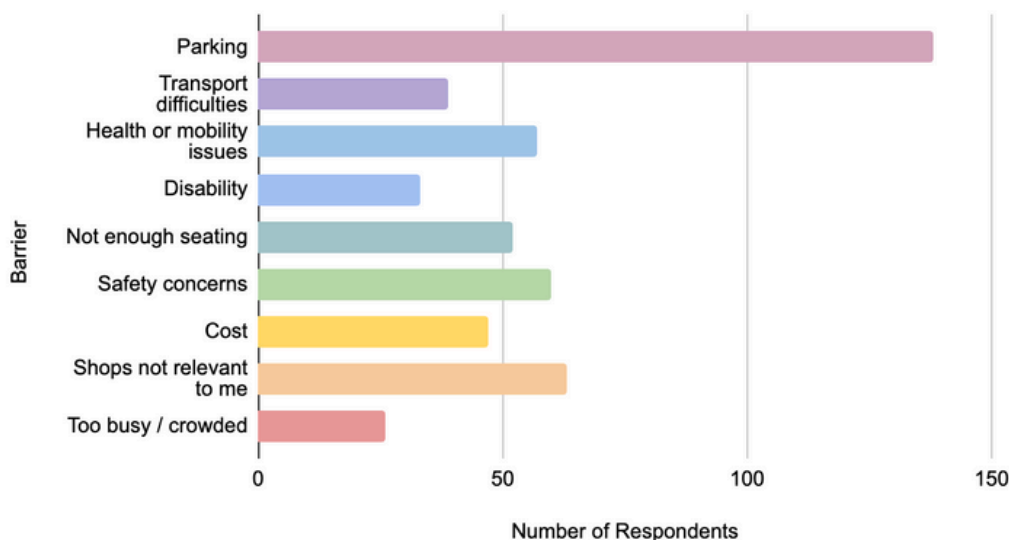
Overall Satisfaction with Hamilton City Centre



Respondents rated a series of statements about the Hamilton City Centre on a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The results show varying levels of satisfaction across different aspects of the city environment

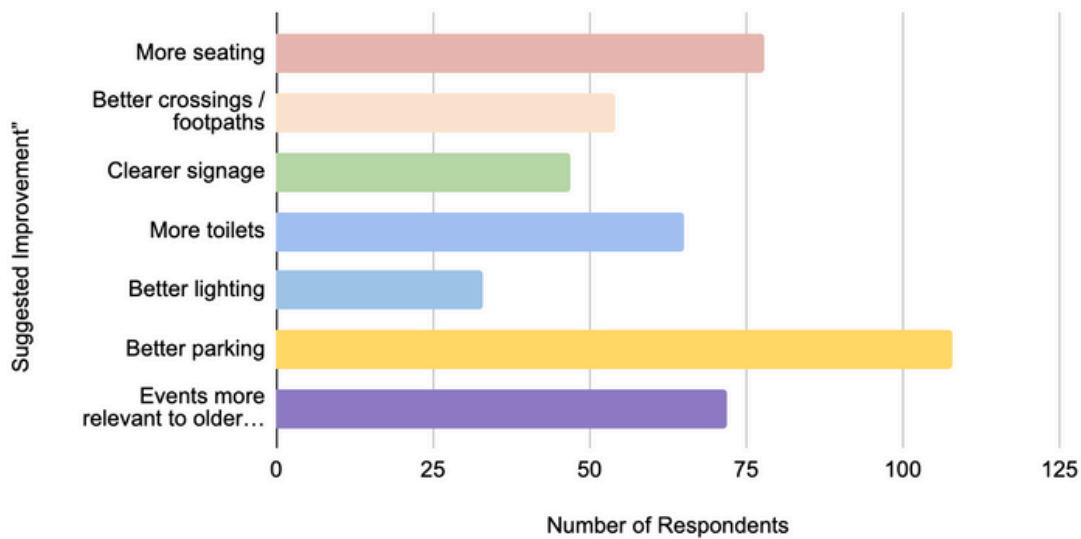


Factors Making it Difficult to Visit Hamilton City Centre



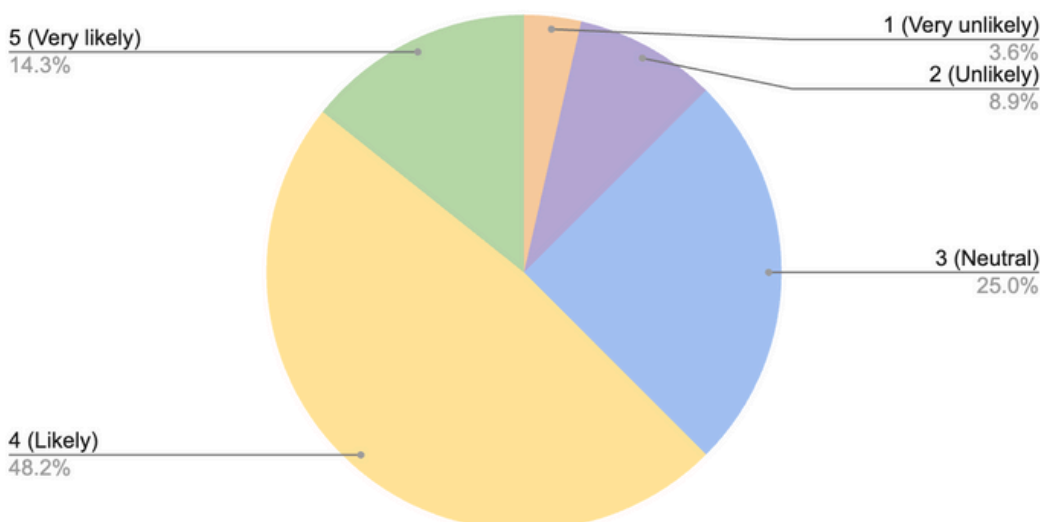
The most commonly selected factors making it difficult to visit or spend time in the Hamilton City Centre were parking, safety concerns, and shops not relevant to me.

What Would Make Accessing Hamilton City Centre Easier or More Enjoyable



The most frequently selected improvements were better parking, more seating, more toilets, and events more relevant to older people.

Likelihood of Visiting Hamilton City Centre More Often if Improvements Are Made



48%

of respondents rated 4 (Likely) on the likelihood scale, indicating a generally positive response toward potential improvements

QUALITATIVE DATA

Open-text survey responses provided deeper insight into older peoples' lived experiences within Hamilton's City Centre. Three overarching themes emerged.

THEME 1

The Need for Restful, Inclusive, and Socially Supportive Spaces

Findings

Participants described a strong desire for accessible, comfortable, and socially inviting spaces within the City Centre. Many expressed that a lack of seating, shaded rest areas, and accessible toilets limited their ability to remain in the City Centre for extended periods. These environmental gaps were associated with physical fatigue, reduced confidence, and social isolation.

Quotes from our findings

There aren't enough places to sit and rest, especially if you get tired walking. I often cut my trip short because there's nowhere to stop."

"It would be nice to have clean, easy-to-find toilets and somewhere to meet a friend without having to buy something."

Discussion

These findings indicate that the physical environment of the City Centre significantly shapes older people's participation and social engagement. Limited seating, shade, and accessible toilets were reported to reduce comfort and restrict time spent in the City Centre, which in turn limits opportunities for incidental social interaction and engagement with community activities. For many older people, visiting the City Centre serves not only practical purposes but also important social functions, such as maintaining connections and a sense of belonging. This aligns with broader research highlighting the role of public spaces in supporting social inclusion and wellbeing among older populations (e.g., WHO, 2018). The results suggest that addressing environmental barriers could enhance opportunities for older people to engage in community life and participate in social events, highlighting the importance of designing City Centre spaces that are both accessible and socially inviting.

THEME 2

Parking and Transport as Determinants of Access and Autonomy

Findings

Transport and parking accessibility emerged as key determinants of older people's engagement with the City Centre. Several respondents highlighted difficulties locating and using parking meters, as well as high parking fees, which often discouraged visits. Limited parking availability and a lack of designated disabled parking spaces were also raised as barriers. A number of participants suggested the introduction of spaces for people aged 65+ and longer free parking periods. These issues collectively restricted older people's ability to spend extended time in the City Centre and participate in social, shopping, and community activities.

Quotes from our findings



"Parking is stressful and too expensive. I'd go into town more if I knew I could find a park close to where I need to go."

"Mobility parking is sometimes too far from shops, or the signs are confusing."

Discussion

The findings highlight that parking and travel arrangements significantly influenced older people's engagement with the City Centre. Participants reported difficulties locating and using parking meters, high fees, limited parking availability, and insufficient disabled parking. Many of these challenges were compounded by the digitalisation of parking systems, which require familiarity with apps or electronic payment methods. Older people with lower digital literacy often found these systems confusing or inaccessible, creating additional barriers to independence and participation. Participants also associated clearer and more affordable parking with feeling welcomed and respected as members of the community. These findings align with the World Health Organisation's (2018) Age-Friendly Cities framework, which highlights accessible and equitable transport as critical for inclusion, wellbeing, and social participation, emphasising that both physical and technological accessibility must be considered to support older people effectively (WHO, 2018).

THEME 3

Safety and Mobility in the Built Environment

Findings

Footpath safety and pedestrian hazards were a recurring concern among older people in the City Centre. Participants frequently reported uneven surfaces, poorly maintained footpaths, and hazardous crossings, which increased the risk of tripping or falling. Footpaths were described as particularly unsafe when wet, an issue noted especially by participants with limited mobility who relied on walkers or walking sticks. These hazards reduced confidence in walking around the City Centre and limited older people's willingness to visit or spend extended time in the area.

Quotes from our findings

"The footpaths are uneven, and I've tripped more than once. It makes me anxious walking in town."

"Crossing the road feels rushed, the lights don't give you enough time if you walk slowly or use a frame."

Discussion

Footpath hazards, including uneven surfaces, poorly maintained paths, and wet conditions, significantly affect older people's confidence and willingness to navigate the City Centre. Those with limited mobility, using walkers or walking sticks, were particularly impacted. These barriers can lead to occupational alienation, where older people are present, but unable to participate fully due to fear or discomfort. Participants highlighted that improved pathway maintenance, longer crossing times, and collaboration with disability groups could enhance safety and inclusivity.

This aligns with national evidence linking environmental barriers to reduced physical activity, higher fall risk, and limited community engagement among older people (REF). Addressing these concerns is therefore essential for creating age-friendly urban spaces that support mobility, participation, and social inclusion.



LIMITATIONS

Several limitations were identified throughout the project. The project was conducted within an eight-week student placement, which limited the depth of data analysis, community engagement, and opportunities for follow-up consultation. Participant recruitment relied on convenience sampling through online responses, partner organisations, and the availability and willingness of people in the city centre. This approach may have introduced bias and limited the representativeness of the sample across Hamilton's wider older population. Although community partners had hoped for an even distribution between participants who regularly visit the city centre and those who do not, this balance was not fully achieved due to the sampling method and time constraints.

Additionally, some paper-based surveys were returned with missing pages or incomplete responses; however, these were retained within the dataset and reported transparently to uphold the integrity and openness of the research process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this project have informed several future recommendations for the Age Friendly Hamilton Steering Group. These recommendations aim to enhance inclusion, cultural responsiveness, and community participation in future planning for the Hamilton City Centre, and are presented as short, medium, and longer-term actions.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Short term

AFH to engage with older people in co-design focus groups to guide event planning and the placement of amenities, particularly within the Outdoor Spaces and Buildings domain, ensuring that public areas are accessible, safe, and welcoming for older people.

Through this project, it became clear that engaging older people directly in decision-making is critical for creating an inclusive, accessible, and culturally responsive city centre. Future recommendations include partnering with older people, Kaupapa Māori organisations, and other culturally diverse community groups to co-design both the physical environment, benches, toilets, shaded rest areas and social and recreational activities that encourage connection and participation. These focus groups build on insights from this project, ensuring planning decisions reflect the lived experiences, preferences, and cultural values of Hamilton's older people.



Engagement with Kaupapa Māori and other cultural organisations ensures initiatives reflect Hamilton’s diversity and uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles, including partnership, participation, equity, active protection, and tino rangatiratanga. This approach aligns with the WHO Age-Friendly Cities Framework (2018), particularly the domains of outdoor spaces and buildings, social participation, respect and inclusion, and civic participation. Evidence shows co-design involving diverse older people strengthens community engagement, accessibility, and social cohesion (Anthony, 2024; Kornblau et al., 2020). From an occupational therapy perspective, it promotes occupational justice and wellbeing, recognising relational and collective health consistent with Te Whare Tapa Wha (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015).

Maintaining these partnerships is recommended to ensure age-friendly planning continues to evolve in culturally responsive ways, reflecting the changing needs of Hamilton’s older population. This aligns with the Office for Seniors’ Better Later Life Strategy 2019–2034 and the Hamilton Age Friendly Plan 2025–2030, reinforcing inclusive participation, equity, and community-led decision-making.



RECOMMENDATION 2

Medium term

Suggest Hamilton City Council reviews parking zones, costs, and signage to improve accessibility for older City Centre visitors

Project findings identified parking availability, cost and signage confusion as the most frequent deterrents to visiting the City Centre. As a result, we recommend Hamilton City Council be requested to review the current parking pricing and zoning structure for the City Centre and explore the viability of establishing a dedicated zone specifically tailored to older visitors. This review should be accompanied by clearer, consistent signage that identifies these parking bays and differentiates them from other zones, helping older drivers avoid confusion and promoting spontaneous visits.

This recommendation is supported by global age-friendly city thinking; creating urban environments that are inclusive and supportive of people as they age (WHO, 2018). The WHO framework identifies transportation as a core domain for enabling older people's participation and mobility: "When transport is adapted to the needs of seniors it enhances mobility and facilitates social participation" (WHO, 2018).

In addition, baseline data from the New Zealand Prospective Older Adult Transport and Health Study found that older drivers' transport needs are predominantly met by private cars with 94 % of older drivers reported using a private car at least weekly (McLean et al., 2025).

Thus, because most older New Zealanders rely on their car for mobility, independence and quality of life, any barrier (including parking cost or parking confusion) may reduce their ability to engage in errands, social visits, or civic participation. Addressing parking cost and clarity is therefore a practical step toward enhancing older people's ability to remain active, socially connected and engaged in the Hamilton City Centre.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Long Term

Suggest Hamilton City Council partner with disability and older adult organisations to audit footpaths and crossings, addressing uneven surfaces and kerb hazards to guide future infrastructure planning

Project findings highlighted that older people find walking and mobilising in the city difficult due to uneven surfaces, slopes, and steep kerbs. These environmental barriers restrict mobility which discourages physical activity and leads to people feeling unsafe. In response, we recommend AFH suggest Hamilton City Council conduct a comprehensive footpath and crossing audit in collaboration with disability and older adult organisations.

The purpose of this audit would be to identify and prioritise areas where kerbs, paving, surface alignment, and pedestrian crossing design require improvement. These findings can then directly inform future infrastructure planning, renewal schedules, and design standards across the City Centre.

This recommendation aligns with the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities Framework, which identifies Outdoor Spaces and Buildings as a key domain supporting older people's safety, mobility, and inclusion. The WHO emphasise that "narrow, uneven, cracked or obstructed pavements are potential hazards for older people," and that well-maintained, accessible walkways are essential for community participation (WHO, 2018).





A recent New Zealand study of pedestrian falls found that injuries in older people are strongly associated with slope, surface condition, and maintenance (Watkins et al., 2021) and another study which surveyed older people in Christchurch reported that fear of falling and reduced outdoor activity among older people is directly linked to the condition of the built environment (Curl et al., 2020). Curl et al. (2020) also outlined the need for a better understanding of relationships between the urban environment, outdoor mobility, fear of falling and falling among older people and makes suggestions for future research in this area.

Undertaking this audit in partnership with older adult organisations, would go some way towards improving pedestrian infrastructure to meet the needs of residents of all ages and abilities. This proactive, evidence-based approach would improve safety, reduce falls risk, and encourage active living and social participation, helping older people remain mobile, connected, and confident in their city.

CONCLUSION

In summary, these recommendations provide a structured, evidence-informed roadmap for enhancing the accessibility, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness of Hamilton's City Centre for older people. By combining short-term co-designed initiatives informed by older and culturally diverse adults, medium-term improvements to parking accessibility, and longer-term infrastructure audits, the Age Friendly Hamilton Steering Group and Hamilton City Council can continue to develop a city that aligns with the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities principles. These actions are also consistent with Hamilton City Council's Age Friendly Plan (2025–2030) and emphasise ongoing engagement and collaboration with community and cultural partners. Such engagement ensures that age-friendly planning continues to evolve in line with the changing needs, preferences, and aspirations of Hamilton's diverse older population, while promoting mobility, social participation, and wellbeing.





THANK YOU

We would like to thank Hamilton City Council, particularly Michelle Rivers, Disability and Older Persons Advisor, and the Age Friendly Hamilton Steering Group for their guidance and support throughout this project.

We also acknowledge the organisations and community providers who contributed to the survey distribution and participant engagement. Finally, we extend our gratitude to our supervisor, Dr. Lizzie Martin from Otago Polytechnic, for her valuable feedback and mentorship.

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