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# **A place for me? Older people and the future Northampton town centre.**

**University of  
Northampton**

**UoN**



Picture on the front cover: The Cobblers Last.

Picture on the back cover: All Saints Church.

Photographs by Kim Woodbridge-Dodd

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# 1 Introduction and background

Like elsewhere in the UK, Northampton and its town centre faces the challenges of more people living longer, with a higher number in the range of over 65, as well as a declining town centre as high streets see retailers leaving and shops lying empty. This is at a time when Northampton Borough Council is experiencing continued and increasing financial pressures, decreases in Central Government funding and growing demands on local services<sup>1</sup>. It is possible to view these challenges separately, with separate solutions. However, particularly at a time of limited resources, it seems prudent to consider solutions that will serve to impact positively on them all<sup>2</sup>.

The number of people over the age of 65 continues to increase faster than the rest of the population in the UK<sup>3</sup>. In 2018 there were an estimated total population of 225,146 people in Northampton, of those 32,128 (14%) were over the age of 65 and 8,783 (3%) were aged 80 and over<sup>3</sup>. This project recognises the importance of participatory research, which helps to make clear the complex meanings of spaces and places for older people within their everyday lives and their sense of home. It explores the issues of the town centre through the perceptions of local older people, with the intention of finding solutions and benefits through the inclusion of the voices of older residents in the discussions of urban development. Solutions that can play a part in:

- increasing the vitality and prosperity of Northampton town centre by making the town centre a place older people can, and want to, utilise
- improving older people's wellbeing through reduced isolation and increased autonomy
- reducing the use of health and social care services through the improved wellbeing of older people

There is a fourth potential outcome; many of the changes that would make Northampton town centre a place for older people, would make it a place that others would also want to be, and very likely to attract other people and their families, encouraging future communities and generations to live and stay in this area.

Previous research has been completed at a national level aimed at providing insights into how town centres can be successful in the future. This has sometimes emphasised the importance of the teenage population in regeneration<sup>4</sup>. The research outlined in this report adds to this pool of knowledge, but also brings into focus the perspective of older people and specifically relates to Northampton town centre. The project is a collaboration between the University of Northampton and Age UK Northamptonshire. It took place over the summer of 2019. It was an exploratory study to discover the views of people over the age of 65 about Northampton town centre. This was an important time for the research to take place as it was at a time when the Northampton Borough Council began working on a masterplan for the town centre's regeneration, and had submitted a bid to central government's Future High Streets Fund for £25m to begin the regeneration of the built environment.

Northampton Forward is a board of stakeholders including:

- South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP)
- Grosvenor Centre
- University of Northampton
- Northants Police
- Northampton Town Business Improvement District (BID)
- Royal and Derngate
- Northampton Chamber of Commerce and others

Northampton Forward had launched a consultation on the proposals for the Northampton town centre which was open to public comment during May and June 2019. This focus on the town centre presented a prime opportunity to enhance the participation of older people by giving time and support to their voice as a way of enabling the town to be a place for all ages.

This project is part of the University's ambition to support research that will benefit the community, through social impact and improving health and wellbeing. It originated from a discussion initiated by the lead author within the Research Centre for Health and Health Services which was then developed in collaboration with Laura Graham and Christopher Duff from Age UK Northamptonshire. The study was further developed and completed in partnership with the Health, Education and Behaviour Change research group within the Centre for Psychology and Social Sciences at the University. It was funded by the University's Faculty of Health and Society Seed Corn funding.

The findings and recommendations can be found in this report from Section 8 onwards. They are presented within the context of previous research and guidance in age friendly urban development, and whilst acknowledging,

- that there are a wide range of capacities and resources amongst older people
- a need to respect older people's decisions and lifestyle choices and
- the importance of promoting their inclusion and contribution to all areas of community life<sup>5</sup>.

It is also seen as part of a wider process of including older people and people of all ages in the regeneration of Northampton town centre, and its future.

## 2 Glossary of terms

The table below gives a brief explanation of use of terms in this report.

Place	The understanding of place used in this report is that 'place' is a dynamic concept consisting of physical space, a person's activities within that space and the meanings they have of that space and those activities. Also, that place is inextricably linked with a person's identity and sense of belonging, places are where identity is enacted, and emotional attachments are formed. These personal connections to place can be powerful elements of how people understand who they are and their role in society. Deterioration in their local neighbourhood can have a strong negative impact on an older person's wellbeing, and limit their activity and engagement with others <sup>2,6</sup> .
Age- friendly town	A town that supports older people to age actively. This includes valuing and supporting the presence of older people within the town. Includes considering older people in decisions about the town resources, environment and attractions. A town that provides an environment that supports older people's independence, so they can be active and safe.
Active ageing	An environment that optimises the opportunities for health, involvement and safety, to enable older people to have the best active quality of life for as long as possible.
Ageing in place	Ageing in place has been a key tenet of UK policy for older people in recent years. Supporting people to continue to age in their own homes and local neighbourhood has been proposed as both increasing a person's quality of life and providing a cost-effective approach to managing demands for health and social care for older people <sup>2,7</sup> .

## 3 Why this research is important

The issues of loneliness and social isolation have gained an increasingly high profile over the last few years, culminating in 2018 with the launch of the first cross-government strategy *A Connected Society: a strategy for tackling loneliness*<sup>8</sup>. This recognised loneliness as one of the greatest public health challenges in contemporary society. The impact of loneliness and isolation on health has been linked to increased risk of coronary heart disease, cardiovascular conditions, cancer, as well as a greater susceptibility to infections<sup>9</sup> and accidental death or injury. This is in addition to the adverse impact on mental health relating to depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, suicide, dementia and Alzheimer's disease<sup>9</sup>.

There is now extensive evidence that isolation and loneliness can also increase pressures on services, with lonely and isolated people more likely to:

- visit their GP more often
- have a higher use of medication
- use accident and emergency services independent of chronic illness
- be admitted to adult social care
- make more use of mental health services
- have early admission to residential or nursing care<sup>10</sup>

The health impact of loneliness has been greatest among older people<sup>10</sup>, and the Age UK *Loneliness and Isolation Evidence Review*<sup>11</sup> found a significant pattern of both loneliness and isolation increasing with age, with a steep rise amongst those aged 80+ shown in one study where approximately 50% reported feeling a lack of companionship (p.8). The NHS has its own web page dedicated to *Loneliness in older people*, as they are especially vulnerable to loneliness and isolation and because this can have a serious effect on their health<sup>12</sup>. Findings in another Age UK report, *All the Lonely People: Loneliness in Later Life*<sup>13</sup> showed that it is not only personalised support that can help older people to overcome loneliness, but also neighbourhoods and public spaces which encourage and facilitate people to participate in their communities.

Northamptonshire County Council's Older People's Needs Assessment<sup>14</sup> highlights the significant negative impact that loneliness and social isolation can have on the health of older people and cites the findings of Northamptonshire County Council's Social Isolation Report<sup>15</sup>. This report states that older people living in urban areas are at more risk, and several areas within Northampton were identified as most at risk of isolation and loneliness<sup>15</sup>. The role of urban settings in the health and wellbeing of older people and the potential for high streets to positively impact on their health and wellbeing, has been the focus of Public Health England's *Healthy High Streets Report*<sup>16</sup>. This guidance calls for high streets to be considered as assets that can promote and improve the health of local residents. High streets can provide opportunities, through good quality design, public realm services and furniture, for accessible, safe communal spaces that can be used to create healthier, safer and more cohesive local communities (p.4). The report includes a list adapted from 10 Healthy Streets Indicators<sup>17</sup>. These indicators suggest that for optimum health promotion, high streets should:

- be inclusive of people from all walks of life
- be easy to navigate, including crossings
- provide shade, shelter and places to stop and rest
- be walkable and provide options for cycling
- have low levels of noise and air pollution
- provide things to see and do
- have a health-promoting retail offer
- ensure people feel relaxed and safe
- consider the local context of the high street, its features and current use, and how all these factors interact with one another

This also resonates with the government's strategy for tackling loneliness<sup>8</sup> which calls for local authorities to consider how tackling loneliness can be embedded in their strategic planning and decision making. It also asks businesses to consider how they can support their customers *and* the wider community to build social connections.

## 4 Older people and participation in transforming the town centre

Older people can be particularly sensitive to changes in the physical and built environment given its importance for maintaining a sense of identity<sup>18</sup>. Added to this is the importance of feeling included and being helpful in maintaining wellbeing<sup>19</sup>. As raised earlier, Northampton has a considerable number of older people living alone and many are at risk of social isolation and loneliness. The town centre then becomes an important place for older people, as it has a potential to offer opportunities vital to their quality of life and ability to age well, reducing their need and use of public services. However, older people are often invisible in discussion around the impact of urban regeneration and the last to be actively engaged in the decision-making process<sup>20</sup>. One of the prime intentions of this study was to support the local authority and local businesses by making available to them what is important to people over 65 so this could be included in decisions and planning for the future of Northampton town centre.

Methods were used to enhance participation of those that volunteered to take part; for example, the use of photo-elicitation using photographs taken with participants during the 'snap and chat' to assist the interviews and focus group discussions. This method is particularly useful enabling an understanding the life world of those not usually able to participate in research<sup>21</sup>. In addition to enhancing participation, completing the research proved beneficial in many ways to those who took part and was seen as an enjoyable, meaningful and purposeful activity, one that ensured their perspectives could be considered.

By working with Age UK Northamptonshire, this project has enabled people over 65 to say what is difficult about the town and what they need to make Northampton town centre a place they would feel welcomed, a place they would want to visit, to spend time with family and friends and a place to relax and meet new people. It is acknowledged that older people make up a diverse population and the findings from this research do not represent all the views of older people in Northampton. However, the findings do strongly resonate with those of the World Health Organisation<sup>5</sup>, and the recent research based on UK cities<sup>22</sup>. The intention of the project team is to disseminate the views and recommendations drawn from those participating in the research as widely as possible, to all stakeholders with the hope that they will consider the needs and views of older people, and acknowledge their value and part in the town centre of the future. This report will be circulated to the Northampton Forward Board and Northampton Borough Council. It will also be promoted and made available to local media, and disseminated through the networks of Age UK Northamptonshire and the University of Northampton. It is also intended to publish the findings within research journals and present them at relevant conferences. Importantly the full report will be shared with the Age UK Northamptonshire participants, and it is hoped that further involvement of older people from Northamptonshire in similar research projects will continue to build their contribution to making the important decisions that affect their lives every day.

## 5 Northampton town centre

The Northampton Forward / 5Plus Town Centre consultation document<sup>23</sup> sets out some of the challenges facing the town centre. The regeneration agenda is set within a context of a very necessary transformation which will make it fit for purpose for many years in the future. With a catchment population of over a million the town is neighbourhood and community to many families as well as a retail and commercial centre. There are several other characteristics set out in the consultation document:

- Northampton has grown faster than the national average
- It's the 37<sup>th</sup> largest urban area in the UK
- Primary shopping area vacancy rates have increased to 15.3%
- Footfall has fallen by 15% in the past four years
- Low levels of residential and office users within the town centre
- 6<sup>th</sup> unhealthiest high street in the country<sup>23</sup>.

The issues of the town centre have also been frequently covered in the local press, with headlines reflecting a sense of the town centre in decline and neglected - for example, BBC News *Can Northampton's Dying High Street be Saved?*<sup>24</sup> and Northampton Chronicle and Echo *Cleanliness still major concern for Northampton town centre user in reaction to drastic drop in visitors*<sup>25</sup>. Although there are some distinctive features that give Northampton a unique character, the issues of dwindling and dying high streets is common nationally<sup>4</sup>.

People over 65 are a growing proportion of the population of Northampton which has been consistently reflected in local studies over the last 5 years. The 2015 Joint Older People's Needs Assessment (JSNA)<sup>26</sup> for Northamptonshire stated that there had been a rapid growth in people over 65 in the county, with a doubling of the numbers of people over 80 in the previous 20 years and an expectation that the over 65's population would grow by a further 50% by 2030. Similar figures were used in the Northampton *Borough Equalities Information about the People of Northampton* document<sup>27</sup>, which stated that the proportion of over 65's in Northampton was 14.2% (under 16's was just over 20%), and that it was estimated that by 2035 those aged over 65 would make up 23% of the population of Northampton. The more recent 2019 JSNA for Northamptonshire<sup>14</sup> reported a higher than average increase in the over 65 population for the county overall of almost 26%.

## 6 The importance of Northampton town centre as 'place' for older people

Towns can be places of competing commercial, political and social interests and the voice and perspective of older people may become invisible in the regeneration initiatives in this context<sup>28</sup>. The town centre is very important to older people in Northamptonshire, particularly for those for whom it is their local community and neighbourhood. Research has shown a strong connection between an older person's attachment to place and their social wellbeing, and that older people who had a positive sense of place have better social wellbeing<sup>29</sup>. Significant attention has been given to the impact of place on health and particularly of older people. The push for age-friendly towns and healthy high streets reflects this. The focus on the role of place in the notion of active ageing and

ageing in place can be usefully applied to understand our town, Northampton, and the findings of the research. A sense of place in older people can enable an older person to feel valued and a sense of belonging that reinforces a sense of identity through their attachment to that place. Research in this context recognises that any changes to physical aspects of a place, such as the town centre, will also impact on an older person's connection, familiarity and sense of ownership of that place. When changes do happen, older people may need extra and active support to refamiliarize themselves with the surroundings to maintain their connection and relationship. Examples of this in this study can be seen in relation to the changes made to the bus station, discussed in Section 14.

The following section describes how the information was collected and analysed. The sections from Section 8 onwards consider the challenges that older people have raised that could impact on building attachment to the town as it currently seems to them. This is placed in the context of the evidence and guidance relating to age-friendly towns, urban citizenship and the notion of the rights of older people and their place in urban settings.

## 7 How the information from older people was collected and analysed.

Following approval by the University's Faculty Research Ethics Committee information about the project was circulated by Age UK Northamptonshire to staff and clients in order to recruit participants. There were three possible ways to be involved with the project, firstly by being interviewed and taking photographs whilst walking around the town centre (a 'Snap and Chat' interview). A second way of taking part was to attend a focus group, and thirdly it was also possible to take part through completing a conventional individual face to face interview. The questions were generally the same for all three, for example 'What do you like about the town centre', 'What do you not like about the town centre' and 'What would make the town centre a place where you felt more welcomed?'. See Appendix 1 for the list of data collection questions. These questions were formed to elicit participant's narratives of their lived experiences of the town and what these meant.

Nine Northampton residents took part in the study. They were recruited from Age UK Northamptonshire's clients. All participant's ethnic group was white with their first language being English. The average age of the people who participated in the study was 82 years old, with the range of age from 70 years to 88 years old. There were four females and five males who took part. Over 50% of participants visited the town centre once a week, and all lived within NN1, NN2, NN3, NN4 and NN5 postcode areas, therefore the town centre was local to all of them and had the potential to be considered part of their community and neighbourhood. Of the seven participants who completed the relevant section, all reported having a disability. These included sight problems, arthritis and mobility problems. An Age UK Northamptonshire staff member attended all data collection events. This ensured that each participant had time and support to participate in the data collection. All those participating understood the purpose of the research and had capacity to make the decision whether or not to take part. It was made clear to participants that they could rest, slow down or cease participation at any time. Two participants completed the Snap and Chat interview,

two completed the individual interviews and five participants attended the focus groups. All names have been changed in this report as part of data protection.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis<sup>30</sup> and the themes produced have been used as the section titles to report the findings in this report. The overall title of the report, *A Place for Me?* Was selected as a thread running through the themes identified. It should be noted when reading the findings that older people cannot be viewed as a homogenous group, and it is important to remember the wide range of views and experiences that people over the age of 65 have. This is particularly relevant to Northampton as it is one of the most diverse populations of people over 65 in the county<sup>14</sup>. Although there was considerable similarity of opinion amongst the comments of the participants in this study, it is acknowledged they cannot fully reflect the diversity of local older people and their views regarding the town centre. The project team was respectful of diversity and difference and were keen to engage with as wide a range as possible, however this was a small scale initial project and based on learning achieved from this experience. It is hoped that future research can be completed that will enrich the diversity of perspectives presented in this report.

## 8 Town centre history and memories build a sense of identity

Although participants often initially wanted to talk about what they did not like about the town, as conversations developed many participants recalled fond stories about Northampton, and what they missed. Most participants shared warm memories of Northampton town centre and enjoyed talking about the town. They spoke about the town with fondness and affection:

Jack: *That's the Market Square and particularly this area here. I've got some very fond memories of this shop which was a fishmongers and fowlmongers shop years ago, and I can remember going in there with my mother and buying food that was cut to minimal amounts with great accuracy by the shop assistants. Things like cheese; we were on ration at the time. I can remember all of that.*

Isla: *I like the church. When I was working down the road, I used to come up at lunchtime and go into the church for a quiet time.*

History was important to participants in that they referred to memories that linked them to the town centre and to their own personal history. The experiences, memories and events occurring over a lifetime are important aspects for older people in developing a sense of connection with a place.

Jack: *I was just talking about an aeroplane in about 1941/42 time that crashed and lay here on the ground. It flew up Gold Street and as the wings were passing the houses, it left scars which are still visible now. I can remember the incident very well.*

The history of the town is one of its most positive characteristics, and has considerable potential for achieving and maintaining wellbeing in older age. It seemed with retaining its history and the telling of its stories of the past, not only do older people gain a sense of identity but also the town is brought to life.

This is relevant because spaces are transformed into places of meaning and significance through being in them, and for older people that meaning, and significance is often sustained through their memories of those spaces<sup>31</sup>. The town centre, therefore, not only serves as a community and local neighbourhood for the participants, but also through memories and familiarity with its physical structures it enables a continuity of their identity, and a reminder of who they are and their own history. It is a loss of these reminders, sometimes as a result of urban regeneration, that older people may become disorientated and disconnected with a place such as the town centre.

## 9 A place where older people can take part in life and culture

The idea of active ageing and that older people should continue to have an active part in their community is found in many national and regional policies related to developing age friendly towns. This includes being able to continue to participate in social, cultural, spiritual, economic and civic aspects of their neighbourhood<sup>5</sup>. It was good to find that for some participants the town centre still provided a place for active ageing and overcoming difficulties often associated with advanced years. The reasons participants came into town and what they enjoyed about the town were varied and did not only relate to shopping and the shops. They included other things that they *needed* to do, such as going to the bank and the council offices, and things they *wanted* to do such going to the theatre, using the library and meeting friends. These activities take on an important function in older age, such as preventing isolation, maintaining mobility and maximising physical and mental health and therefore independence.

Isla: [talking about a friend] *We used to go for a coffee every Friday. We would meet in Town and go for a coffee. A little café in the Grosvenor Centre. We used to go in there and have a chat and discuss our problems.*

Charlie: *And I'm a concert goer so the best thing in town really is the Derngate.*

In general participants did not enjoy just spending time in the town centre but would have certain places that they knew and would go straight to.

Mai: *We [interviewee and husband] go for coffee in one particular shop*

Harry: *We [interviewee and wife] only go to the places we want to go to. .... When we go in now, we only go to the banks and ..... the Grosvenor, and even some of the places in there you just don't go into them.*

This is in common with the WHO<sup>5</sup> findings, that older people conduct targeted visits to complete tasks because they do not think of the town centre as a place designed for them. An important question to reflect on is how far will older people's unique relationship with place and spaces be part of any vision of a future Northampton town centre, and what degree will any transformation reflect older people's needs in relation to this urban setting, their neighbourhood?

Participants' comments suggest that there is potential for Northampton town centre to offer older people a lot to support a life of meaning, connection and active ageing. A place where older people can dynamically be part of the town and contribute to creating a thriving town centre. This is not only through bringing their custom to businesses and organisations, but also by building its social

milieu and community. The following sections share some of the barriers and challenges that older people can experience in being a part of Northampton town centre.

## 10 A lost sense of belonging

For some there was a sense of loss and the feeling that the town is 'not a place for them' now. There were many reasons that it was now a place that seems unwelcoming. One of the themes emerging from the participants was a perception of the town as one that was 'dying' or in decline, a 'shadow' of what it had been. This sense of decline reflected a town that they did not feel a part of now. It had impacted on their attachment to the town, loosening their relationship with it as their neighbourhood. The town they had known was welcoming and thriving, the town seemed a place for other people now.

Isla: *All the good market stalls are gone and the ones that are here are very expensive. The market used to be full years ago, but it's no longer any good.*

Oscar: *When I first moved here, the market square then was full of different traders selling, as I used to say 'from a button to a Rolls Royce' almost, there were that many people there and it was a treat to go into town to just walk around the market itself. But of course, over the years it's declined, for whatever reasons.*

Mai: *The market walk could do with improving. Peacock Place it used to be called. It had a lot of nice shops in there, but it hasn't any more. It's lost some of them.*

Leo: *But this town, to my mind, is dying. Why it's been let to go like that I've no idea.*

Jack: *It seems to be a dying area and I don't want it to be a dying area; it's the Town Centre.*

Also, there was a sense that the town's retailers did not cater for older people any more:

Mai: *Debenhams have changed their stock. They don't cater for the older person as much as they used to do. Losing Marks [and Spencer's]. You haven't got anywhere that's got a good variety of stuff for our age group or 50 and over.*

There is evidence that the spending power of older people has grown over recent years, with a substantial proportion of their budget, 14%, in comparison to those under 65 years, spent on recreation and culture<sup>32</sup>. Older people not only have buying power, but they also have the time to spend. However, from the perspective of the participants, who seek quality in a service, there is no evidence that the town centre is a place that looks to take advantage of their spending potential and custom.

## 11 A difficult place to be proud of

One of the challenges older people face in connecting with the town is reconciling a sense of pride and vibrancy with what they see when they visit the town centre. There were frequent comments about the town appearing 'scruffy' and 'dirty', and it is likely that this influences an impression of the town centre as in decline and dying, and possibly the sense of loss experienced by the participants. It was felt by many that by routinely clearing the litter and through regular cleaning, the town's image could easily be improved.

Isla: *It's very scruffy lately in Abington Street. There's no cleaners around. There's a load of cigarette ends down there. There are bins for them, but they won't put them in the bins. When I used to come down here to work in the morning at 7 o'clock, the sweepers would be out cleaning the whole street.*

Jack: *I think that the fountain in the Market Square could do with a little bit more care and attention from Council staff. It always seems to be full of rubbish.*



**Picture 1: The Drapery**

Buildings such as in the Drapery were seen as in need of repair.



**Picture 2: The Fountain**

On the corner of the market square, the Fountain was seen as having its upkeep neglected.

Jack: *[The Drapery]. I am looking at a shop and have been watching pigeons going in and out of the upper floor, where the broken window panes are ..... I think that is a marvellous building and should be retained like that. ....But all these adverts detract from it. Over there is a shop outside the scaffolding above the photo shop and the wall is flaking. It needs plastering and making attractive*

Isla: *I think if most of the shops here cleaned up their act and cleaned the place up, it would look nice*

The importance of a pleasant and clean environment resonates with the other research studies which found that it was raised as a consistent feature of what matters to older people in an urban environment<sup>5,22</sup>. Cleanliness, particularly in an older person's local town or neighbourhood, can strongly influence their attachment to that place and their perception of the area as safe and welcoming. Feeling a sense of pride in their local town can have an influence on their own identity, sense of worth and wellbeing.

## 12 The town is not easy to get around

Trips to town can often involve a considerable amount of forward planning for older people. For example, taking into account which routes are least challenging due to obstacles, uneven surfaces and steepness, which routes will run down the battery on a scooter quickest, and the availability of others, such as a friend, family member or support worker, to assist with a visit. These issues could be seen in the discussions with those taking part in this study in relation to Northampton town centre. Several participants had some problem with mobility and there were aspects of the town centre that made getting around particularly challenging.

The uneven surfaces of the pathways and pedestrian areas were highlighted as a problem for several participants. This also linked to other themes covered in this report including feeling safe (Section 13), repairs and maintenance and good use of money (Section 15). Mia's account refers to her surprise that traffic is driven on the attractive pedestrian precinct which has damaged the surface and appearance, and caused problems with access and is a potential hazard in relation to tripping over.

Mai: *I would think, on the whole to me, traffic and things coming down where they shouldn't be. [is a problem]. They've put all them nice cobbles down [Abington] street and if you are walking on them, there are dips where vehicles have gone through. They should be using outside [street access at the rear] to do the shops, the stock for the shops and not the centre of the Town. They have spoilt that area that was all made nice. If you are walking along, sometimes even with my buggy, I am hitting bricks that are sticking up because of vehicles that have gone through it, that shouldn't have done.*

Even when using a mobility scooter, the problem of constantly bumping into raised edges from maintenance covers, or poor repairs, could result in the scooters battery running down and having to spend a far shorter time in town.

Jack: *Some of them [paving] are a bit raised and some are a bit low. I notice when I use this thing [mobility scooter] that it can jolt the battery. Every bump is a mile off the ability of it to propel the scooter. Please try and level the paving on Abington Street.*

Uneven manhole covers and poor repairs were pointed out as challenges to getting around the town centre. The following pictures were taken in Abington street:



**Picture 3: Maintenance cover**



**Picture 4: Poor repairs**

Circumventing repair works could also be a challenge. They were not only pointed out as unsightly and adding to the sense of the town in disrepair, but also impacting on access. It was recognised that repairs needed to happen, but there were several ongoing at the same time, and they were often in place over what appeared to be a long time.



**Picture 5: Repair works**



**Picture 6: Further repair works**

Examples of repair works that, although necessary, often added to difficulties with access.

Getting around the town centre was also affected by the steepness of some of the streets and a sense of an overall absence of places to rest. For example, Jack liked Gold street but found Bridge street a challenge. This was mentioned in a discussion about getting to council offices in Angel Square:

Jack: *I do think Gold Street is a good street to go down, as opposed to Bridge Street. Bridge Street is very laborious to get up and down.*

The perceived lack of seating was mentioned by several participants, for example as Mai comments below.

Mai: *It could do with more seating down the centre [of town] for people that need to stop and rest.*



**Picture 7: Fountain area of the market square**

The lack of seating next to the fountain on the market square was pointed out during the snap and chat.

The lack of places to sit was highlighted specifically in relation to the fountain, both from the perspective of somewhere to rest, and in relation to gaining the potential benefit from the fountain as an attraction, and as a place to meet and enjoy the town centre.

The importance of pedestrian friendly walkways that have smooth surfaces and are free from obstructions was highlighted in the WHO guidance relating to age friendly urban spaces<sup>5</sup>. These were considered a part of what had a major impact on mobility, independence and quality of life for older people, and affected their ability to age in place. The recent Place-Age research<sup>22</sup> also emphasises that navigating outdoor spaces is often complex for older people, and that community assets can often be precluded from older people due to the difficulties that they may face in accessing them. At a very practical level, this does suggest that the issues highlighted above by participants would need to be addressed to ensure equality of opportunity for them to gain any benefits from transformational changes to the town centre.

## 13 The town does not feel safe

Feeling safe can often be linked to an awareness of an increased vulnerability for older people. For example, the consequences of a trip or a fall may be far greater for an older person. The nature of paving used has a considerable impact on the ability of an older person to walk safely in their local area<sup>5</sup>. There can be real risks to older people from the hazard of uneven surfaces or poorly distinguished edges where there are changes to levels or what is a path and what is a road. Trips and falls can result in hospital admission and the possibility of permanent changes to their levels of independence.

Mai: *They put all those nice tiles all over. It would have been better with decent paving slabs to make it more secure for people to walk on. Not just me; there are lots of older people. I've walked up the street and nearly stumbled.*

Encouraging people to cycle is often part of health promotion and can be seen as an ecological alternative to using cars. But they can also pose a hazard to older people making their way through pedestrian areas<sup>5</sup>, such as the market square and Abington street.

Mai: *Kids go charging through on bikes, I've noticed that quite a few times. From top to bottom. No matter which area of the Town you are in.*

What also emerged from the discussions with the participants was in relation to be able to navigate the town safely: that whilst moving around the town centre, physical spaces would be safe to walk through, and being able to identify where you were in town would be easy to do if necessary.

Another common issue for older people is 'wayfinding' and the importance of orientation signage; there is little evidence of this being considered from the perspective of older people using the town at this time. For example, although trees may be seen as a positive addition to town centres, they may have an obscuring and disorienting effect on older people. Isla found this a particular worry when using shops in Abington street.

Isla: *I went into Waterstones for a book once, because I used to do a lot of reading, and I came out and I just didn't know where I was, because there was all trees ... and it wasn't until I stood and looked at the Cobbler's Last, that I knew where I was.*

Improving signage and wayfinding in Northampton town centre would not only improve the experience of the town for older people but would also be of benefit to many visitors. It is possible that the benefits from improving wayfinding and orientation signage in the town would maximise the general use of services and facilities. However, is only likely to be inclusively successful if their use is also evaluated from an older person's perspective.

## 14 The bus station is a problem

Public transport can play a key role in relation to older people and the town centre, not only for accessing shopping and leisure, but also key services, such as hospital appointments<sup>22</sup>. The new bus station was a common issue raised by the participants and was seen as contributing to the decline in the town centre experience, both in its ability to provide a suitable service and experience for people. Also, it was felt that it could not function as it once had as a meeting place, bringing people together over a cup of coffee or tea. In this context, the old bus station had been particularly important in maintaining a sense of community, connectivity and belonging.

The new bus station, as commented on in this study, not only had difficulty with accommodating people but also the buses themselves. This had implications for the welfare of older people who are particularly susceptible to the effects of the weather on, what may already be, poor health and frailty.

Isla: *Because it's not big enough for all the buses to go through. There's no way of doing it. The buses just park anyway, the drivers don't care. The drivers don't like it. Some buses have never gone into the new bus station; those buses weren't given a place.... [My friend/relative] had to wait out here in the rain to get to her bus. God rest her soul, she died a couple of months ago, she had to wait out here in the rain to get her bus.*



**Picture 8: The Bus station**

There was a sense of loss and frustration with the new bus station.

Jack: *The new bus station, it's not big enough for out of town buses or for the buses that are here. The buses have to stand here in the winter time in the rain, snow or everything, whereas before they used to get to the bus station, when it was a decent bus station. They could have done that up for a lot less money and I don't think half the shops would have shut down then.*

Accessible public transport is seen as a key factor influencing active ageing<sup>5</sup>, and can become a barrier, rather than an enabler, to older people maximising their independence and taking care of themselves<sup>22</sup>. In this study relating to older people's perspectives of Northampton town centre, in keeping with findings from other research, the bus station was very important to participants and it was highlighted as one of the main problems with the town.

## 15 Concern about how money is spent and what is an improvement

Although many participants wanted to see improvements, they were concerned about what they viewed as the negative impact of previous initiatives to improve the town. This was particularly from the perspective that some improvements, from the perception of older people, proved to be a waste of money. As mentioned in the previous section, the new bus station was considered far less fit for purpose than the old Greyfriars station.

Isla: *I remember [the old] bus station and it was good for the Town because it was easy to get to, and they could have done that bus station up for less money than they spent on this one, which nobody likes.*

Another example was the fountain which is on the corner of the market square close to the road where Mercers Row meets Abington Street.

Oscar: *Well I thought it was a waste of money. I think it was a complete waste of money to do it. It might be a nice-looking thing as an attraction for whatever, but I personally think it was a waste of money. There are far more things in this town that need doing than building a fountain.*

There was a general concern by participants that costly improvements were easily damaged and poorly repaired. For example, when damaged by vehicles traversing them for access, repairs to the intended improvements of the pedestrianised area in Abington street were poorly executed.

Jack: *We are speaking about the junction of Abington Street, outside the Casino and Moss Brothers' stores. The pavements have been paid for with a lot of money; many millions of pounds, as I recall, but they haven't been kept in particularly good repair.*



**Picture 9: Poor repairs Abington Street**  
Repairs need improving.

To many participants the investment in a single building seemed disproportionate to investment in the other problems that the town posed for them. See Sections 11, 12 and 13 for examples.

Mai: *The [old council] buildings that can't be demolished because they are all listed buildings. They should have stayed in them rather than build that thing that cost an arm and a leg. They say the Council is skint – no wonder when they build a building like that, that is useless.*

It is interesting that the theme of how money was spent in relation to a previous initiative aimed at transforming the town centre was a consistent concern amongst most participants. It may be linked to several issues such as a sense that their views, if they are being heard, are not being acted on, or are being overshadowed by what could appear to be more obvious stakeholders in the town centre such as business and commerce. Thus, reinforcing the sense that the town centre is not meant to be a place for them. This is in strong contrast to the emphasis of the importance of inclusivity in the *Healthy High Streets* guidance<sup>16</sup>, and the potential that older people have in contributing to the town centre, and the degree to which the town centre could impact positively on the health and wellbeing of older people in particular.

## 16 Discussion and recommendations

When comparing what older people in this study raised in relation to Northampton town centre to findings in previous research and guidance<sup>5,16,22</sup>, there is a considerable overlap on what is a priority and would make a significant difference to their experience and relationship with the town. Also, as with previous research<sup>6,7,18,30</sup>, there was a strong link between personal identity, history, and memories with the town (Section 8). Physical barriers (Section 12) added to problems of wayfinding and feeling safe (Section 13) when walking through town, and were not the only aspects of the town that impacted on older people; there were also emotional and social challenges to connecting with the town centre (Section 11). There was a lost sense of belonging to the town centre, with participants having a sense that it was not a place meant for them, (Section 10). This is in stark contrast with policy narratives that argue the need to support older people to remain active and independent as they age, continuing to contribute to the community and take responsibility for their own welfare<sup>33</sup>.

One feature of the town brought together all these aspects for many of the participants - the bus station was consistently raised as problematic (Section 14). For example, the physical challenges and implications of waiting in poor weather when you are an older person are considerable, added to this was the lost social 'place' of the old bus station's café, which had been somewhere to meet friends and family. Participants wanted to see improvements in the town centre but were concerned how money would be spent (Section 15), that it would be wasted or spent on changes that not only did not add value for them, but could lead to the loss of what they valued, as in the old bus station and covered market. However, all participants talked warmly about the town centre at points in their discussions, and most continued to visit the town, with some regularly enjoying aspects of the town such as the theatre (Section 8).

The following recommendations are offered for consideration with the intention of ensuring that Northampton town centre clearly has an intention to be a place for older people as part of the overall population of the community.

- Review the retail offer in relation to the potential custom and spend of older people. For example, ensuring goods, such as clothing, are targeted for the older customer and offering time for a more personal service to older customers.
- Ensure pathways and pedestrian environments are age friendly, and that consideration has been given to the guidance on what makes urban spaces safe for older people, including for example, providing suitable and strategic places to rest.
- Ensure the design and plans for signage and wayfinding in the town centre includes supported involvement of older people in decisions and agreed changes.
- Review the design and function of the current bus station with specific consideration and supported involvement of older people in the context of the impact on their accessibility, safety and welfare.
- Sustain any planned improvement to cleanliness and tidiness to the town centre, including repairs and renovations, and demonstrably consider what the impact of any initiatives may have on older people's accessibility and safety within the town centre.
- Actively enhance older people's participation in decisions about how public money is used to transform and regenerate urban areas, such as the town centre. Demonstrate consideration of older people's 'voice' and the evidence of what enables age friendly places in any transformation plans for the town centre.

- Complete further local research to capture the diversity of perspectives of older people in relation to the town centre and making Northampton a thriving and successful town.

## 17 Conclusion

The findings from this research demonstrate the power of space in connecting older people, its importance in their sense of belong and their own identity. Critically this was not only the from material and social-emotional perspectives but also the interdependencies of people and place. Although specific individuals might change in the future, the number of older people who have a role to play in the town centre and for whom it can be an important part of their lives, are likely to increase in Northampton. Therefore, the future of the town centre and that of older people are crucially relevant to current plans for urban transformation and regeneration, and it is key to actively engage and consider this perspective in the decision-making process. Research can play an empowering and inclusive part, enabling local residents for whom Northampton is their home, to express their meanings, lived experiences and what is important to them, all necessary validating elements in developing a sense of ownership and belonging in their neighbourhoods and communities.

Sharing this research project with some of the older people of Northampton has been a win-win for all those involved, and it has the potential to benefit not only older people but all those with an interest in the town centre. The project has intended to enhance the agency and expand the opportunities for older people's participation in the regeneration of the town centre, and the plans for improvements. The participants enjoyed taking part and were willing to share their views on how things were and how they could change. The potential for addressing the challenges of an ageing population and those of a declining high street and town centre can usefully be brought together. Older people can contribute to bringing new life to the town centre with their custom and patronage, and value can be added to the life of older people by supporting them by endorsing their full participation and citizenship, and safeguarding the town centre as a place for them to be.

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## 19 Appendix 1: Interview and focus group questions

Not all of these questions were asked and were adapted according to the participants answers and the time available in the interview and the focus group.

Interview questions.

*Welcome to this interview and thank you for taking part. Please take your time answering these questions. Please let me know if you would like a break or a drink during the interview. Please remember that if there is any question you would prefer not to answer, please just let me know you would like the next question please. There are no right or wrong answers. Do you have any questions? Are you OK to start?*

1. What do remember about Northampton Town Centre that you really like?  
*There may be nothing or many things, both are OK.*
2. What do you find stops you from wanting to go to Northampton Town Centre?  
*There may be nothing or there may be many things, both are OK.*
3. What would make Northampton Town Centre a place you would feel more welcomed?  
*You may already feel welcomed, what makes it welcoming, what would make it more welcoming?*
4. What is the worst thing about Northampton town centre?
5. What is the best thing about Northampton town centre?
6. [\[Not used in the snap and chat as the pictures where taken during this exercise\]. I have some pictures of Northampton town centre here, please pick one and tell me about what you see and what the picture tells you about Northampton town centre.](#)

Focus group questions.

*Welcome to this interview and thank you for taking part. Please take your time answering these questions. Please let me know if you would like a break or a drink during the focus group. Please remember that if there is any question you would prefer not to answer please just let me know you would like the next question please. There are no right or wrong answers. Do you have any questions? Are you OK to start?*

1. What would make Northampton Town Centre a place you would feel more welcomed?  
*You may already feel welcomed, what makes it welcoming, what would make it more welcoming?*
2. I have some pictures of Northampton town centre here, please pick one each and tell me about what you see and what the picture tells you about Northampton town centre.
3. What is the worst thing about Northampton town centre?
4. What is the best thing about Northampton town centre?

