

OPP: SUSTAINABILITY & CRISIS

Active ageing in a community-based living environment

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Purpose The purpose of this project was to explore a community-based living environment for older adults, located in rural surroundings in Norway called Helgetun. It aims to promote active ageing by facilitating social, mental and physical participation and consists of 31 rental apartments, in addition to several shared facilities and common areas. Residents can partake in arranged activities including gardening, choir, workout groups, hiking, dance and a book club. Additionally, a chef comes once a week to prepare a shared meal, and a personal trainer organizes a weekly workout session. The environment is highly independent, with no external health personal connected, and the residents choose their own house board, and arrange and organize most activities themselves. The aim of our research was to investigate how this living environment functioned compared to theory, by looking at how it has affected residents' activity levels and social engagement and identify factors important for facilitating active ageing. During data collection, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, allowing us to investigate how the participants experienced this crisis. **Method** This was a qualitative research project using an ethnographic approach. Data consisted of observation, informal conversations, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 residents (11 female, 4 male, ages 62-84), and were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Sensor data from three wearable devices (Fitbit Sense, Oura Ring and Empatica E4) were also collected over two weeks as supplementary information about activity levels. **Results and discussion** Most participants experienced an increase in both physical activity levels and social engagement after moving to the residency. According to our analysis, this increase was related to having three fundamental needs covered: maintaining self-identity, experiencing growth and development, and feeling a sense of belonging, see figure 1 (Førsund et al., 2024). These themes draw close resemblance to the self-determination theory, concerning three psychological needs that must be satisfied to foster well-being and enable optimal function and growth (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Another finding was the synergy effect that occurred in the residency, in which the residents themselves became the resource: they created the learning arena by exchanging knowledge, inspired and motivated each other to be active and social, and helped each other when needed. This mutual help was beneficial in their ability to manage the wearable devices provided to them during data collection. Consequently, a self-sustaining environment occurred in which the participants experienced both contribution and mastery whilst potentially reducing the need for external resources. Most were minimally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, partly due to clear information about infection-prevention rules and disease status within the community, as well as the feeling of always having people around, thus preventing isolation and loneliness. These findings suggest that community-based environments can increase resilience among this age group and make them more equipped to handle major changes in society, including the fast development of technology, and could also account for future potential crises. In conclusion, our results indicate that having a flexible structure and adapting to the core needs and individual resources of the residents, can facilitate active ageing in community-based living environments and reduce the need for external resources. These findings are meant as grounding points for policymakers to reflect upon designing future senior living and may be particularly relevant in the years to come, and in countries where older adults are less dependent on family for care.

References:

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Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes of factors facilitating active ageing in a community-based living environment