

Building a sense of belonging for older people

HOMeAGE Policy Brief Series

No. 5

What is the purpose of this policy brief?

This policy brief is intended to inform policymakers and service providers on the significance of fostering a sense of neighbourhood and community belonging for older adults. It provides recommendations for addressing key challenges in developing interventions for building a sense of belonging, based on the findings of a systematic review.

Why is this topic important?

Sense of belonging is broadly defined as the feeling of being an integral part of one's physical and/or social environment and is recognized as a fundamental human need (Mahar et al., 2013; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Allen, 2020).

For older populations, neighbourhood and community belonging is associated with:

- Better health and physical activity (Michalski et al., 2020; Young et al., 2004)
- Better social well-being (Prieto-Flores et al., 2011)
- Enhanced quality of life (Cramm & Nieboer, 2015)
- Better mental health outcomes (Gonyea et al., 2018; McLaren et al., 2013)

However, factors like poor housing, crime, security issues, mobility challenges, and social disadvantages can make it hard for people to feel they belong (Lewis & Buffel, 2020; Pinkster, 2016; Schlütter & Jensen, 2023). This is in addition to the added barriers and difficulties that changes in the local environment can create, such as relocation, changes in the local population, and expansion or decline of infrastructure and resources. In Ireland, studies show that sense of belonging is integral to sense of security, continuity, and identity, for community-dwelling older adults (Walsh et al., 2012, 2020).

Sense of belonging is highly relevant to major national and international ageing policy. It has been recognised by the WHO as having an important role in ageing in place with preferences for ageing in place strongly associated with older people's belonging to their neighbourhood or community (Gibson et al., 2024; World Health Organization, 2021). In Ireland, there is strong preference of older adults to remain in their own homes and communities (O'Sullivan et al., 2022), and ageing in place is a key policy aim as mentioned in Goal 3 in the National Positive Ageing Strategy, as well as the Programme for Government in 2020 (Department of Health, 2013; Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, 2020).

Key messages

1. Sense of belonging plays an important role in the well-being of older populations
2. There is evidence that community and neighbourhood interventions for older persons can enhance belonging and other well-being outcomes
3. There is a need for better knowledge and measurement of sense of belonging for older people
4. Increased investment is needed in evaluation of existing programmes and development of new programmes targeting belonging for older people



Furthermore, fostering neighbourhood and community belonging is crucial to the creation of age-friendly environments, across domains such as social inclusion, housing, and civic and social participation, and with respect to building a sense of place for older people (Gibson et al., 2024; World Health Organization, 2017, 2007). This is especially relevant in Ireland where the Age Friendly Ireland programme is operational across the country. Reflecting international research and policy recognition of the importance of belonging for older populations, there is a need for greater focus on sense of belonging as a target and outcome in ageing-related policy and practice in Ireland. However, there is limited knowledge on how this can be achieved from a practical standpoint. Our study – a systematic review of international research – aimed to address this gap, by examining existing efforts to foster sense of belonging in community and neighbourhood settings.

What was found?

Interventions for building belonging

Over 3000 peer-reviewed papers were found to be related to interventions for belonging, of which 126 papers were identified as potential studies of interest. However, only five examples of programs were identified that were actually implemented and evaluated were. These comprise:

<i>Networking strategic Initiative (Chow & Yau, 2018)</i> China	<i>Group Outdoor Health Walks (Irvine et al., 2022)</i> Scotland
Outreach program to build social support networks and awareness of local social and environmental concerns in urban neighbourhoods	Group walk along program in national park for older residents of nearby rural communities.
<i>Art hives (Fortune et al., 2021)</i> Canada	<i>Social Activity Program (Kikuchi et al., 2023)</i> Japan
Free and inclusive community art spaces and sessions for older people in urban residential buildings and neighbourhoods	Group face-to-face and online community activities on local culture, history, and environment in rural communities.
The interventions used social, relational, and spatial approaches to develop belonging (Chow & Yau, 2018; Fortune et al., 2021; Irvine et al., 2022; Kikuchi et al., 2022; Yotsui et al., 2016). Social belonging interventions involved enabling positive social interactions and social connectedness among community members. Relational belonging involved increasing a sense of community and enhancing community-building skills,	
	<i>Volunteer Support Program (Yotsui et al., 2016)</i> Japan
	Older people working as volunteers in earthquake-hit rural areas to rebuild supportive communities after their relocation to temporary housing.

What kind of analysis was completed?

A systematic review was conducted, guided by the following aims:

1. Examine international literature on interventions designed to build a sense of belonging for older people
2. Investigate the impact of these interventions in fostering sense of belonging, and other well-being outcomes



building support, concern, and respect for and amongst older people in the neighbourhood and community (Fortune et al., 2021; Yotsui et al., 2016). A spatial belonging approach was seen in interventions that aimed to provide participants with knowledge and awareness of local resources, environmental issues, and events related to their communities and neighbourhoods. These interventions involved the sharing of images and weather updates on their neighbourhood, spending time in local greenspaces, and encouraging discussions on local history (Chow & Yau, 2018; Irvine et al., 2022; Kikuchi et al., 2022).

We did not find studies on the Irish context, despite some potential initiatives and programs that are associated with building belonging for older adults. One example is the Cork Cultural Companions programme that operates through local hubs to create opportunities to engage in local cultural activities and events for older adults who may be newcomers to the city, individuals who are socially isolated or people with limited mobility (Age Friendly Ireland, 2024). Several similar Age Friendly initiatives on social participation are operational, with limited consideration of sense of belonging as a target or main outcome, however.

Impact of interventions

Studies have used quantitative and qualitative methods to identify the impact of the interventions. Various scales and questionnaires were administered to measure a sense of belonging, social support, subjective well-being, locus of control, collective power, loneliness and self-esteem. The qualitative studies focused on the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the interventions, their experiences during the intervention, and the ways in which the interventions fostered sense of belonging.

Overall, community and neighbourhood interventions were found to have resulted in the following outcomes:

- Enhanced sense of belonging
- Greater social engagement
- Neighbourhood/community integration and sense of community
- Increased sense of self-worth and place-based identity
- Increased support and empathy among neighbourhood/community members

The studies found several practical factors that influence participation in the interventions and that impact the effectiveness of the interventions in fostering belonging and other outcomes. These include:

Barriers	Enablers
Distance and accessibility of intervention sites	Close physical proximity of the participant residences, especially in dense urban areas
	Close proximity of intervention sites to participant residences such as common spaces within urban residential buildings
Mobility impairments and frailty, especially for outdoor and physical activity programs	Hybrid delivery of intervention, through face-to-face engagement accompanied with a custom social communication smartphone application designed
	Facilitators who can effectively plan the activity to ensure breaks in between; ensuring a pace that would be comfortable for all participants; inclusion of adequate seating and mobility supports at intervention sites

Key Challenges

Three key challenges and areas for supporting the development of interventions for belonging were identified:

1. **Definition:** Sense of belonging is multi-faceted in terms of its broad range of social, relational, and spatial dimensions. Establishing a standard definition for neighbourhood and community belonging is a key challenge in advancing policy and practice in this area.
2. **Measurement:** Various methods to measure belonging exist across different studies, with no standardised approach developed to evaluate interventions for belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Young et al., 2004). This hinders progress in how we can accurately capture and comprehensively understand a sense of belonging for older adults.
3. **Investment:** There is a lack of investment in the inclusion of belonging as a practical and feasible target for ageing-related policy and practice. Previous research has highlighted that decreased sense of belonging is linked with negative health outcomes (Jaremka & Sunami, 2018). Belonging has also been recognised in playing a role in the effectiveness of health and social care programmes within community settings (Sixsmith & Sixsmith, 2008; World Health Organization, 2020). These factors must be strongly considered within policy and practice to incentivise investment in programs to foster sense of belonging.

Despite these challenges, the interventions identified in the review indicate both potential methods to build belonging in place as well as the positive impact of such interventions on building belonging and aspects of well-being. This warrants more efforts in the development of programs that foster community and neighbourhood belonging for older people.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of our study, and in consideration of current opportunities in ageing-related policy and practice, the following recommendations are presented:

1. **Increase investment on community and neighbourhood programs for building belonging**
 - a. Incentivise evaluation of existing programs that develop sense of community, community and neighbourhood engagement etc. for older people
 - b. Increase funding for community and neighbourhood programs targeting sense of belonging of older people in collaboration with ageing-related organisations, through existing mechanisms such as Age Friendly initiatives
2. **Inclusion of belonging as an outcome/target of health and social well-being initiatives**
 - a. Incentivise research on the connections between belonging and health outcomes in Ireland
 - b. Establish a standard definition and scale to measure sense of neighbourhood and community belonging as an outcome
 - c. Include sense of belonging as an outcome measure of health and well-being programs
3. **Increase investment on enablers of connectedness and belonging**
 - a. Increase investment on enhancing mobility and accessibility within local communities and neighbourhoods, through improved transportation and increased accessibility of public and common spaces
 - b. Increased funding for development and maintenance of community spaces and green spaces

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