
AGE FRIENDLY OKOTOKS

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FINDINGS

2022

Contents

Key Messages.....	3
What We Heard.....	4
Findings by Dimension.....	7
Outdoor Spaces & Buildings	7
Social Participation	9
Respect & Inclusion.....	10
Civic Participation & Employment.....	12
Transportation.....	13
Communication & Information	16
Housing.....	17
Community Supports & Health Services.....	19
Summary of Community Priorities.....	23
Next Steps.....	25
End Notes.....	26

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: WHAT WE HEARD

Key Messages

Throughout the consultation process, the engagement team heard from a number of residents and service providers. The following synopsis highlights key messages heard across engagement activities.

Okotoks offers a range of municipal, community and health services for older adults but greater awareness and communication is needed in knowing what is available and how to access the many programs and services. This was a common theme expressed by stakeholders across many of the eight World Health Organization (WHO) dimensions of an age-friendly community that were explored in the engagement activities. Generally, stakeholders agreed that Okotoks offers a wide and diverse range of community supports, program and services. However, many stakeholders expressed concerns about lack of awareness and knowing how to access existing programs and services such as housing, health, and social supports, especially when new to Okotoks.

Okotoks is a great place to live. There was general agreement among stakeholders that Okotoks is a great place to live, work, play and learn, providing a good quality of life for its residents with a range of program and services, outdoor spaces and opportunities that support age-friendliness. However, many stakeholders expressed strong affordability and accessibility concerns around housing and housing options, transportation to and from communities in and around Okotoks including Calgary, as well as in home and yard maintenance services. Furthermore, some noted that recreation and local transportation services are too expensive, even with fee subsidies.

Social Inclusion and feeling connected is an important consideration. Generally participants agreed that the Okotoks community provides many opportunities for older adults to connect and participate in community life. However, stakeholders emphasized that for some older adults, particularly newcomers and individuals living alone, social isolation and loneliness are areas of concern.

There are many age-friendly partners. Many of the service providers who participated in the focus groups knew each other and identified both current and future ways they could work together to support older adults and their families. The engagement process highlighted how age-friendliness impacts older adults and their families, community, municipal business units, social and health support service providers, recreational, and service club organizations and groups. The importance of the local businesses as partners was also highlighted.

There are new ways to improve age-friendliness in Okotoks. Community engagement participants highlighted many thoughtful ideas on how to improve the current age-friendliness of Okotoks (e.g. seniors' expo, on-line/in-person central communication hubs, increase time for crossing at traffic lights, increase intergenerational opportunities, etc.).

Continue the conversation: Diverse community voices and experiences are important to ensure the accuracy of the data in assessing how well people are aging in Okotoks. While participants in focus groups and conversations were happy to provide input about the current level of age-friendliness in the town, limited data was collected and therefore reported on in this report from older adults and persons with disabilities from various gender and socio-economic backgrounds. Hearing from older adults with diverse lived experiences helps to better understand how different people engage and participate in community life.

What We Heard

The community engagement findings present a baseline of current strengths and highlight strategies to improve and advance the vision of an Okotoks age-friendly community. Throughout the process, residents, key stakeholders and staff explored each of the eight World Health Organization (WHO) dimensions of an age-friendly community including:

- Outdoor Spaces & Buildings
- Social Participation
- Respect & Inclusion
- Civic Participation & Employment
- Transportation
- Communication & Information
- Housing
- Community Support & Health Services

Focus groups and conversations with local service providers (e.g. Alberta Health Services staff, not for profit agencies) and residents took place from November 2021 to March 2022. During this time, six focus group sessions were held with 48 total participants representing approximately 25 service organizations. Additional conversations with the Age-friendly Okotoks Subcommittee (AFOSC) members and Town of Okotoks staff from various business units took place.

Discussions drew on professional and personal experiences, observations and knowledge of the community around three main questions:

1. *How age-friendly is Okotoks right now?*
2. *In what ways could Okotoks improve its age-friendliness?*
3. *What are the key priorities Okotoks could focus on to improve age-friendliness?*

The results of these findings are presented, by age-friendly dimension, in the following sections.

Description of the WHO age-friendly dimensions are from WHO, *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A guide*ⁱ and Alberta Government: *Primary Health Care – Community Profiles*ⁱⁱ

The list of *Indicators* for each dimension was taken from Alberta Government: *Building Age-friendly Communities: Accompanying Materials*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Common Barriers and Ideas/Suggestions to Improve Age-friendliness were identified by focus group participants and interviewees. Comments recorded were summarized with duplicate comments removed for report purposes.

Current Age-friendly Supports and Initiatives were acknowledged from a review of local policy documents; a review of age-friendly programs and support services available to Okotoks residents; and input from focus group participants, Town of Okotoks staff and key stakeholders.

Every effort was made to categorize comments per dimension; however, due to the interconnected nature of these eight dimensions, there may be some comments that overlap in one or more sections.

Generally, participants reported that Okotoks is a respectful, friendly and vibrant community with parks, outdoor spaces and a beautiful pathway system that is accessible at many points throughout town. These comments are in line with the results of the Town of Okotoks 2022 Budget Survey, where the vast majority of the 582 respondents reported that of the many municipal services offered, they most appreciated the Town's parks, pathways and facilities during the unprecedented challenges of the past year^{iv}.

The Town of Okotoks has an engaged community of residents, volunteers, agencies and organizations that are keen to explore ways of making their community more age-friendly. Okotoks offers a range of services, programs, activities and events including volunteer opportunities and alternative transportation available to older adults residing within the town. Many service providers know each other and work well together to support older adults to age in place, socially participate and stay connected in the community.

The 2020 Social Wellness Framework (SWF): 10-Year Progress Report^v and other Town of Okotoks plans and strategies including the new 2021 Municipal Development Plan (MDP)^{vi} support elements

of an age-friendly community and provide strong foundational pieces that position the Town of Okotoks to be an age-friendly community.

Findings by Dimension

Outdoor Spaces & Buildings

A safe and accessible outdoor environment and public buildings, remove barriers that limit opportunities for people with disabilities, including older adults with age-related impairments, allowing for outdoor activities or engagement in community life.

Indicators:

Sidewalks, pathways and trails are well lit, accessible, well maintained and cleared of snow and ice

Public restrooms and rest areas benches are accessible and accommodate people with diverse disabilities

Safety and crime prevention programs are in place

Public buildings and businesses are accessible, with room to move about within and to park easily near the building

Services are grouped together and located in close proximity to where people live

What we heard:

Common Barriers

- Lack of accessible parking spaces located closer to building entrances in places that older adults/persons with disabilities (PWD) frequent (e.g. Okotoks Health and Wellness Centre) and at larger Town sponsored events (e.g. Show & Shine)
- Misuse of existing accessible/emergency parking spaces
- Lag timeliness of residential snow removal, removal of windrows created by snow plows on streets, removal of snow on pathway connectors
- Reduced quality of private business snow removal at store front entrance and in parking lots
- Limited accessibility and moving around inside downtown and/or older business buildings for people with mobility aids due to barriers such as steps at entrance, small doorways and/or narrow/crowded aisles
- Difficult access to the river for people with mobility aids
- Short supply of mobility accessible gathering spaces, both indoors and outdoors for older adults
- Concern for safety when on multi-use pathway system (e.g. walking/cycling/skateboarding)
- Many uneven, damaged/cracked sidewalks and high curbs
- Insufficient number of benches/seating in business areas and parks/pathways

Current Supports and Initiatives

- Budget 2022 Survey indicates majority of residents appreciate parks and pathways and are satisfied with park maintenance
- The 2021 MDP and Land Use bylaw policy directions, developments and designs prioritize safety, well-being and connectedness. The MDP looks at all aspects of development through an equity-lens. New developments will look at elements of accessibility including making wider sidewalks, locating amenities within certain distance, mixed use, pathways, and infrastructure that supports increased use and accessibility for all users
- Existing developed areas will also consider these priorities. For example:
 - Plan to add sidewalks in front of Museum as part of downtown street improvements.
 - New library building is accessible and easy to move around in. It includes an elevator, comfortable seating on all floors, water fountain, public washrooms.
 - Outdoor “bookable” gathering/plaza space planned to be built between old and new library, to incorporate a play space and peace pole with power outlets provided.
 - MDP, new policy directions and 2021 Downtown Revitalization, What We Heard Report,^{vii} guiding initiatives currently underway to improve accessibility and connectedness for all residents (e.g. expanded sidewalks, wayfinding signage, and balance parking with people moving about safely).
- Strong agreement that Okotoks has a beautiful pathway system accessible across multiple locations in town and that snow removal on pathways is generally cleared well & in a timely manner
- Volunteer snow clearing program for residents 70 years is available
- Calvanna Village is a good example of an older adult building in close proximity to amenities and health services
- Okotoks is a growing community, with many newer buildings built with easier access when both entering and moving about inside the building
- Pathway Trail Map notes parks, playgrounds, municipal buildings, public washrooms, parking lots and emergency services; a separate internal map notes bench locations throughout town

Ideas/Suggestions to Improve Age-friendliness in Okotoks

- Increase available & accessible parking and/or public transit closer to events
- Closer monitoring and enforcement of disability/emergency parking spaces is needed
- Reduce barriers to Adopt a Sidewalk program by opening up the eligibility requirements, current eligibility is age 70+ with moderate income level
- Increase/expand availability of snow shoveling services at private homes

- Increase connectivity of pathways and sidewalks throughout town
- Update Pathway Trail Map to include current location of benches in addition to public washrooms, rest areas, etc.

Social Participation

Social participation, determined by level of interaction with other members of their community and the extent to which the community itself makes interaction possible, is strongly associated with good health and well-being throughout life.

Indicators:

There is a range of accessible and affordable events and activities to engage in with people of all ages and culture including leisure, recreational, social, cultural, spectator sporting, spiritual and school related opportunities

What we heard:

Common Barriers

- Social isolation and loneliness
- Reduced drop-in community activities and winter friendly activities for older adults
- Affordability of programs for low-income older adults, even with subsidies, programs may be unaffordable for some people
- Minimal community awareness of the many recreational services and activities for older adult services and programs
- Few intergenerational opportunities and ways to engage people from all backgrounds (culture, ethnic, economic); language supports and resources, connecting people with same language together
- Lack of initiatives to encourage neighbors to connect with neighbors

Current Supports and Initiatives

- Budget 2022 survey showed residents place very high value and are satisfied with municipal community events, recreation programs and indoor/outdoor recreation facilities
- The Town of Okotoks Recreation, Parks and Leisure Master Plan prioritizes implementing strategies that reduce financial barriers to participation, increase program awareness and prioritize social inclusiveness
- Wide range of indoor and outdoor recreational, spiritual, arts & culture, social/community events, service clubs (e.g. Rotary) and activities (e.g. fitness, health, computer, dance, yoga, gardening club, language and art classes, etc.) are available for older adults and persons with disabilities

- Social connection opportunities via phone support program are offered and increase connection with isolated persons
- Some service groups offer intergenerational programs connecting older adults and youth
- Seniors club & library provide safe, welcoming accessible spaces for older adult programs and services
- Financial supports are available for recreation programs for eligible residents
- Some restaurants cater to older adults - provide quiet atmosphere, smaller portions for less cost

Ideas/Suggestions to Improve Age-friendliness in Okotoks

- Encourage programs that enhance informal “neighborhood” community connections, (e.g. Dementia Friendly neighborhood programs; neighbor watch programs; wellness check-in programs; “adopt a resident program”). These are key to supporting older adults and their families to be aware and connect to programs, services and events
- Increase peer support/social visiting/volunteer programs where younger seniors assist older seniors. The Volunteer Driver Program (VDP) is a great example
- Create more intergenerational opportunities where older adults can mentor and share their skills with younger generations e.g. Seniors Club connecting older adults with youth to share their skills with youth or “adopt a grandparent” program where an older adult is matched with younger child- initially the older adult more supportive, attends events etc. and as the child grows support is exchanged where the older child/teen does small chores, helps the older adult with yard, home maintenance, etc.).
- Offer programs/information sessions for adult children to help them better understand dementia and changing needs of aging parents
- Resume social times after older adult recreation programs (e.g. Social time was offered after 55+ Aquafit programs pre-pandemic).
- Physicians to promote “Social Prescriptions” that includes referring patients to community based meaningful activities (e.g., community exercise or bereavement group) to increase social connectedness
- Create more community/social connection opportunities for diverse groups (e.g. Men’s Shed)

Respect & Inclusion

That “sense of community”, feeling valued, respected along with recognizing and embracing diversity within the older adult population are critical factors for establishing an age-friendly community.

Indicators:

All citizens are treated respectfully

Children and youth programs focus on how to treat other members of the community with respect and empathy

Citizens of all ages and abilities have the opportunity to provide their input on community matters, encouraged to participate in community dialogues and conversations

People who provide services to the public (including health care, commerce, and public services) are courteous, helpful and attuned to the needs of citizens with varying degrees of physical and cognitive abilities

Community-wide settings, activities and events are accessible to all citizen

What we heard:

Common Barriers

- Service providers do not always appear to be aware, have knowledge or understanding of the aging process and how to interact with people with slower mobility, hearing/vision deterioration, dementia, or other cognitive impairments
- Older adult programs tend to be offered during the day, which excludes many older adults 55+ who are still working
- Lack of recognition and understanding of diversity and how people can help them engage and participate in the community
- Insufficient outreach to new (older) residents
- Gap in connecting individuals who are isolated
- newcomers employed in the service industry may be required to work long hours which increases social isolation
- Newcomers do not always know about and/or where to access programs, services and various ways to become engaged in community life
- Increase awareness of Indigenous Peoples knowledge and ways of learning

Current Supports and Initiatives

- Strong agreement that generally Okotoks is a respectful community where people and service providers are friendly and helpful
- Respondents in 2022 Budget Survey indicated family oriented, community focused, respectful and kind as most important attributes in their desired community
- Service organizations provide inclusive programming for diverse groups, employment supports for older adults and persons with disabilities and programming to help newcomers from diverse backgrounds connect and increase sense of belonging
- Newcomer club is a dedicated, safe and welcoming place for new female residents.

- Parking placards are available for people who are unable to walk 50 metres
- Town of Okotoks Civility Charter^{viii} highlights the Town’s commitment to respect, civility and dignity in working collaboratively with citizens and all users of its services and facilities
- Town recognizes Seniors Week as an opportunity to honor and recognize the importance of older adults in the community and their contributions
- Town recognizes World Elder Abuse Awareness Day^{ix}
- Town of Okotoks participated in Dementia Friendly Community Pilot project, part of developing, *A Guide for Creating Dementia Friendly Communities in Alberta*^x

Ideas/Suggestions to Improve Age-friendliness in Okotoks

- Continue to find ways to connect the care facilities (Heartland, Tudor Manor, Sandstone Lodge) with the community, “Residents are our neighbours and we need to include them”
- Dementia Friendly Community: implement action plan strategies from pilot project and *A Guide for Creating Dementia Friendly Communities in Alberta*
- For isolated older adults, home care is a good way to connect if they have health care needs
- Identify ways to welcome, engage and support all newcomers to our community

Civic Participation & Employment

Community provides options for older adults to contribute back through volunteering. Flexible employment options that fit older adults’ interest and abilities supports economic security for older adults and benefits employers who recognize the experience and commitment older adults bring to the workplace.

Indicators:

Civic Participation includes a range of flexible volunteer opportunities

Employment includes flexible scheduling in work places, willingness to adapt worksites to meet needs of those with disabilities and limited mobility, employee development and training opportunities, hiring policies encourage diversity in age, ability, skills, experience

What we heard:

Common Barriers

- Covid-19 pandemic led to fewer opportunities for volunteers of all ages.
- Challenge to accommodate the diverse interests and skill level of the older adult volunteer sector
- Lack of employment and skill building opportunities for ‘younger’ older adults and those re-entering the workplace, including computer/technical skills training/upgrading

- Increase education and awareness of what being an “inclusive employer” means including removing physical barriers in buildings for employees with mobility aids and providing additional support when required
- Older adults are not specifically and formally recognized for their meaningful community contributions
- Inadequate communication and awareness of services available to support older adults looking for volunteer and employment opportunities geared specifically to their interests and abilities

Current Supports and Initiatives

- Strong agreement that Okotoks as a community should be very proud of its plentiful volunteer opportunities and contributions that make Okotoks a great place to live, work, learn and live
- Town of Okotoks - Volunteer Resource Centre provides assistance and facilitates meaningful community volunteer opportunities
- Volunteer Driver Program (VDP) promotes older adults connecting with each other
- Town of Okotoks administers the Community Volunteer Income Tax Program (CVITP) available to eligible residents with low income and a simple tax situation.
- Town of Okotoks Volunteer Awards Recognition Program provides opportunity for older adults to be nominated and recognized for their volunteer contributions
- Employment, advocacy, skills training and related support services are available for the pan-disability community, their family/guardians, and older adults age 60+ who are seeking employment and specific work programs

Ideas/Suggestions to Improve Age-friendliness in Okotoks

- Find ways to increase recognition, visibility of older persons’ strengths and meaningful community contributions
- Provide education and tools for employers to become an inclusive employer. Provide training for employees regarding best practices to serve customers with disabilities such as mobility restrictions, hearing loss, dementia and English as a second language, etc.

Transportation

Access to reliable, affordable alternate transportation becomes increasingly important as driving becomes more challenging and stressful as people age and the percentage of people with driver’s licenses decreases. The condition and design of transportation-related infrastructure such as signage, traffic lights and sidewalks impact personal mobility.

Indicators:

Accessible, affordable and convenient public transportation options are available.

Public transportation services are clear, with well-marked routes and vehicles.

Public transportation services are reliable and frequent, and meet the needs of citizens

Vehicles used for public transit are clean, well-maintained, and accessible, not overcrowded and have priority seating that is respected.

Where public transportation is limited, volunteer and/or private transportation services are available

Affordable and accessible community transportation services (e.g. shuttle vans) are available to take citizens to medical appointments, shopping excursions and community events

Affordable and accessible community transportation services are available to take citizens to appointments and events in larger centers

Taxis or similar options are available, accessible and affordable to citizens who need them

Accessible transportation for persons with a variety of disabilities, including mobility challenges, is available across the range of transportation services

What we heard:

Common Barriers

- Results from the Town of Okotoks Budget 2022 Survey cited that majority indicated On Demand Transit is important while less than half indicated satisfaction with the way the program is currently offered
- Transportation related infrastructure issues:
 - Speed bumps are a hazard for people on motorized scooters
 - Poor traffic signage on roads – “great if know where you are going, but not so clear if new to town”
- Improve standards around street lighting, fading road markings, traffic light timing (e.g. at Northridge Dr./Southridge Dr. lights change too fast with not enough time for pedestrians to cross)
- Insufficient number of accessible crossings for the visual, hearing impaired and mobility challenged, with only one located downtown
- No “Handi-bus” operation with lift in Okotoks
- Exclusivity of Community Access Program (CAP) closes off options for some people; not affordable for longer out of town trips and/or multiple in town trips
- On Demand Transit – booking request depends on availability; not always available; drivers education /awareness of slower movement; more time required for people with mobility restrictions as it takes longer to get to door

- General lack of affordable, accessible and assisted transportation to medical appointments, employment or social purposes located in Calgary or outside Okotoks
- Volunteer Driver Program (VDP) offers curb-to-curb transport to/from medical appointments only, but no assistance/support to help navigate inside building at appointment

Current Supports and Initiatives

- Overwhelming response in the Town of Okotoks 2022 Budget Survey said traffic and pedestrian safety is important with approximately two thirds of respondents reporting satisfaction with safety of the current traffic and pedestrian related infrastructure measures in place
- The MDP highlights equitable and integrated transportation systems in line with the Okotoks 2015 Active Transportation Strategy xi. Current Engineering and Planning Business Units are working together to implement municipal policies around “people first” when it comes to improving transportation related infrastructure
- VDP is an essential and well used program that allows any resident 18+ to get to medical appointments locally and/or in surrounding areas like Calgary
- CAP (\$5/ride in town/additional cost for out of town trips) is affordable for most. Accessible transportation needs can also be accommodated for residents using this program
- Some participants expressed satisfaction with the On Demand Transit Service, citing that it is a “great system”, easily accessible online or by phone, affordable, good hours of service, on time, available long hours during the day, with friendly, door to door service

Ideas/Suggestions to Improve Age-friendliness in Okotoks

- Need more awareness regarding how the provincial driver fitness and monitoring program works
- Consider feasibility of traffic circles
- Develop a transportation program that provides additional support to accompany people in and out of appointments when needed
- Expand transit to include accessible, affordable and available transportation in and out of town and specifically to take older persons to medical appointments located in Calgary and/or surrounding Okotoks communities
- Sustainable “Handi-bus” type service (wheelchair accessible), something that serves the whole community and possibly collaborate with organizations like “Dreams” in Calgary that has 100 buses to increase program affordability and efficiency
- Separate use of sidewalks/pathways for pedestrians from cyclists, motorized scooters etc.
- Implement more speed bumps to slow high traffic areas
- Allow longer time to walk across road at all traffic light cross walks

- Designate parking stalls for older persons (similar idea to the ones for parents with young children)

Communication & Information

Staying connected with events and people and getting timely, practical information, readily accessible and in formats that are appropriate for older adults is vital for active aging.

Indicators:

Communication and information is accessible and available through a variety of mediums and venues, disseminated in places where residents conduct daily activities and provided to socially isolated older adults from service providers

Written communication is clearly printed written communication in large letters, easy to read and available in alternate format

General literacy programs including computer literacy programs are available.

Phone navigation to service providers is easy and leads to a real person

Access to computers and the internet is available at a local public centre (e.g. library)

What we heard:

Common Barriers

- Lack of awareness of range of existing programs and services (housing, health, social support), especially when new in town
- Need for repetitive messaging in multiple media formats that is easy to find/located in places older adults regularly frequent (e.g. doctors' offices, grocery stores or with realtors to give to when people move to town)
- Insufficient understanding of how older adults are accessing information
- Increasing trend towards digital vs print communication, which leaves out some older adults as many still prefer print to digital
- Lack of access to information in different languages and in appropriate locations/platforms for diverse backgrounds
- Lack of a central communication system – one stop to get information and resources. There is too much information and people do not know where to look

Current Supports and Initiatives

- Free access to computers and Wi-Fi is available at the Okotoks Public Library. Some coffee shops also have free Wi-Fi access

- There are numerous locations and mechanisms that disseminate information about community events including online social media, local paper, Town of Okotoks Community Guide, event boards at grocery stores, churches, local radio stations, as well as the outdoor LED screens posted at Southridge Drive, Emergency Services, Operations Centre and Okotoks Recreation Centre, of which all the LED screens can be seen when driving by
- Covid-19 pandemic has made information more digitally accessible with older adults turning to online social media sources to access information
- Okotoks Seniors Club and Okotoks Family Resource Centre provide in- person/by phone information and referral services for older adults
- Accessibility improvements have been made to The Town's website

Ideas/Suggestions to Improve Age-friendliness in Okotoks

- Make sure people know about Okotoks Family Resource Centre: central hub for information, referral to service providers, provides help with forms and connects clients to supports
- Increase awareness and communication of available services/programs (e.g. partner with library to conduct information night/overview on services/benefits available for older adults)
- Distribute pamphlets at hockey games or set up information booths at places older adults go (e.g. Hockey games, Okotoks Recreation Centre, seniors club, grocery stores; put info packs in grocery home delivery way to reach out to isolated seniors)
- Target communication directly to older adults and not "through" family; include in tax assessment notices/utility bills or other mediums that older adults receive directly
- Increase awareness of community programs in care facilities as many older adults living in care facilities are active and want to be part of community
- Develop partnerships with local radio stations and services such as Meals on Wheels (MOW) and Home Care to increase social connectedness/reduce isolation (e.g. - MOW could deliver library kits, Home Care could deliver print resources).
- Host a "seniors' expo"
- Promote and encourage informal community connections as neighbors and family are often key communication messengers for older adults
- Establish a central communication system to find any and all supports provided in Okotoks - a ONE-STOP SHOP, e.g. create a 1-800 information line and/or "Okotoks Services" website that lists all services and supports available

Housing

Living arrangement is a determinant of healthy aging and predictor of vulnerability.

Indicators:

The availability of appropriate, affordable housing with a choice of styles, locations and support creates conditions that allow people to age comfortably and safely within their community.

What we heard:

Common Barriers

- 2020 Affordable Housing Strategy + Action Plan (AHTF Strategy)^{xii} cites that affordable housing is a huge issue facing older adults as fewer rental subsidized units are available and there is an increase in waitlists for limited units
- Lack of affordable housing availability for older adults with pets
- Inadequate range of housing options for older adults:
 - Need for supportive living arrangements that allow older adults to remain together when differing levels of care may be required.
 - Need for long term care beds in Okotoks, so residents aren't required to go out of community to High River, Black Diamond (Diamond Valley) or South Health Campus
 - Significant gap in transitional housing (e.g. there have been situations where older adults are living in cars in winter)
- It is hard to attract developers
- Limited aging in place options with lack of affordable, accessible home maintenance services and fewer bungalows for rent/own
- Even with subsidies there is significant cost for home modifications
- Existing by-laws need to be modified to support change towards more affordable housing

Current Supports and Initiatives

- 2020 AHTF Strategy provides an action plan to address affordable housing needs for current and future Okotoks residents. Policy and Land Use Bylaw have been updated to permit secondary suites. The approval process is streamlined and adjustments have been made to provisions in order to make it easier for people to develop these in their homes
- Some affordable housing (Sandstone Lodge) is considering allowing pets
- Affordability is key. There is a variety of housing available for older adults with varying levels of support required from independent to fully supported living IF residents can afford them. Fee for service resources are readily available for older adults to remain living in their own home
- Town of Okotoks participates in an Alberta Government, "Seniors Property Tax Deferral Program"^{xiii} for homeowners 65+

- The Alberta Government offers the Seniors Home Adaptation and Repair Program (SHARP)^{xiv} - a low-interest home equity loan program to help senior homeowners finance home repairs, adaptations and renovations. It also offers a Residential Access Modification Program (RAMP) that provides grants to help lower-income Albertans with mobility challenges to modify their homes for improved access

Ideas/Suggestions to Improve Age-friendliness in Okotoks

- Build integrated housing communities that support independent living through hospice care (e.g. Crossmount in Saskatchewan, a 55+ community with resources on site, aging in place)
- Affordable housing - build smaller detached bungalow houses 800-1000 sf with small yard; include options that allow pets; and get developers on board. There are some smaller bungalow homes (villa community) in Drake Landing and other new areas, but they are very expensive
- The community needs a plan to address:
 - Housing shortages
 - Affordable housing, various types, ownership and rental options
 - Housing options that accommodate different levels of care
 - Increased educational opportunities about aging in place safely, and how to ensure older adults remains safe, socially connected and engaged
 - Home and yard maintenance supports that are affordable and accessible for all older adults

Community Supports & Health Services

Access to appropriate and timely health services is a determinant of healthy aging. Age-friendly communities are characterized by a continuum of easily accessible, affordable services and programs that support physical and mental well-being and the availability of health promotion/awareness that supports healthy behaviors and life choices.

Indicators:

Home and health support services are fully accessible for all levels of mobility, adequate range, affordable, available health, community and home support services including meal options to meet special dietary restrictions and delivery services for those without transportation. Health and social service facilities are conveniently located and accessible by all means of transportation; housing options, long term care and supportive living near key services. Citizens are kept well-informed through variety of media of the services they may be eligible for and how to access, information is provided directly to older persons and families who are or will be caring for others.

Community emergency planning takes into account the vulnerabilities and capacities of all citizens.

What we heard:

Common Barriers

- Lack of knowledge, coordination, and delivery of current support services between health and service organizations.
- Identify and ensure vulnerable older adults (e.g. isolated, lonely, experiencing elder abuse, living with dementia) receive information about available health and support services/programs and community events available to them
- Include long term community care homes in community collaborations
- Demographic gap – Okotoks Family Resource Centre cites increasing number of single older adults age 50+ with complex/multiple challenges (social isolation, housing, income) and older adults with dementia living on their own with no support systems in place
- Lack of access to affordable in-home supports and maintenance services
- Consistency in care. Urgent care provides one time service, unsettling wait times, and clients are rushed out with no follow-up
- Not enough doctors in Okotoks. Need to revisit Physician Attraction and Retention Program
- Gap in available, affordable and accessible transportation to medical appointments and other services located in Calgary or surrounding communities
- Limited dietary options available from community food and in-home meal programs for older adults with special dietary requirements
- Lack of awareness of currently available informal supports services (e.g. meal programs, volunteer driving, places for social interaction)
- Systems navigation is needed to connect older adults and their families who care for them to the services they need when they need them
- emergency management planning for older adults living independently and people with pre-existing barriers

Current Supports and Initiatives

- Post-Covid-19 resumption of full services and programming across all areas (recreation, community events, culture etc.) was identified as one of the top three budget priorities in 2022 budget survey with the majority of respondents indicating the importance of funding for community programs to enhance social well-being

- Okotoks is still small enough that service providers work together really well informally to support older adults to age in place, socially participate and stay connected in the community
- Foothills Interagency meetings and Seniors Interagency meetings encourage connectivity between Foothills health, social and non-profit groups
- Okotoks Health and Wellness Centre (OHWC) is a hub of services including Urgent Care, Okotoks Family Resource Centre, Public Health, Home Care, Mental Health and range of other health services. Patients seen at Urgent Care can be connected to AHS home care services, Okotoks Family Resource Centre and to AHS mental health services directly and as needed
- Urgent Care fills some gaps providing health services locally that are otherwise only provided in Calgary.
- AHS provides a mental health program that is available 7 days per week and accessed through Urgent Care
- Agencies, organizations and businesses across the community provide a number of support services such as meals, grocery delivery, homecare, adult day support programs, mental health, grief/loss, education/information sessions/programs on a variety of topics (computer literacy, fall prevention) and Christmas support programs
- Okotoks Family Resource Centre provides support for residents who need information, referrals, assistance completing forms and connection to supports.
- There is a regional coordinated response to elder abuse accessible to Okotoks residents
- AHS provides domestic violence support through the Domestic Violence and Response Team (DVRT)
- Alberta Seniors Financial Assistance^{xv} provides financial, health, and personal supports to eligible adults 65+

Ideas/Suggestions to Improve Age-friendliness in Okotoks

- Expand Foothills Seniors Interagency to include an organized community collaborative strategy for reaching out to isolated older adults and PWD, including home care service programs and churches
- Expand Meals on Wheels (MOW) to include more diverse dietary options, e.g. renal diets, gluten free or low gluten such as offered by Heart to Home (for-profit-business offering frozen meals)
- Require a physical space to seek guidance, information and support (e.g. an information/resource hub, somewhere for seniors to gather informally, socially, and receive community resource information). Important to maintain the human element and avoid going 100% online - does not work for everyone

- A seniors' advocate to help older adults and their families navigate the healthcare/support system and help the healthcare/support system understand and better accommodate older adults' needs
- Designate an Emergency Duty Social Worker position and create a service HUB based on other models that includes a multidisciplinary team of police, health care workers and social workers
- Explore/research how other towns/municipalities are able to offer home maintenance programs (e.g. The Towns of Cochrane and Strathmore offer this service through their FCSS programs)
- Implement a Social Prescription program
- Having local doctors help identify our isolated older adults would be one way to reach them
- Increase awareness that the local fire department will do home fire prevention inspections (e.g. change smoke detectors and help mobility impaired to do other things like change light bulbs)

Summary of Community Priorities

The focus groups and conversations indicate that both individual residents and organizations who serve them want to be engaged in the discussion about active aging and creating a more age-friendly community. The responses present valuable information about Okotoks' current state of age-friendliness including strengths, challenges, and opportunities to help guide the development of the Okotoks Age-friendly Action Plan.

As highlighted in this report, positive initiatives are already happening in Okotoks to support age-friendliness. With these positive steps, the feedback received from the age-friendly community engagement process points to some emerging priorities. These include:

Respect and Inclusion: Engage older adults who have lived experience with inequity to contribute their unique experience and needs in making Okotoks more age-friendly.

- Develop a plan to:
 - Identify people/groups that need to be heard (e.g. Indigenous Peoples, women, LGBTQ2S+, newcomers, caregivers of and people living with dementia, disabilities or with mobility challenges, mental illness, addictions, people with low income, and those who are homeless/in precarious housing)
 - Determine how best to reach out and engage these people/groups to identify barriers and gaps, age-friendly action planning and implementation (e.g. connect and partner with organizations that serve those populations to help identify and administer survey tools, focus groups)

Social Participation and Social Connection: Enhance engagement initiatives.

- Explore age-friendly best practices and approaches from other jurisdictions for older adults who are socially isolated and underserved.
- Explore more intergenerational opportunities and informal ways neighbours can get to know one another and connect more with each other.
- Expand and provide more coordinated outreach to new residents and individuals living alone, living in care facilities, and residents from a range of cultural and economic backgrounds.

Civic Participation and Employment: Recognize older adults' strengths and meaningful contributions.

- Find ways to formally recognize older adults for their meaningful community contributions
- Provide education and tools for employers to become an inclusive employer. Provide training for employees regarding best practices to serve customers with disabilities such as mobility restrictions, hearing loss, dementia and English as a second language, etc.
- Increase communication and awareness of volunteer and employment opportunities for older adults to explore based on their specific interests and abilities

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings: Continue improvements to accessibility of buildings, mainly older downtown buildings and outdoor spaces including parks and trails.

- Explore ways to increase timeliness of snow removal on residential sidewalks, business front and parking lots and pathway connectors.
- Look at ways to increase/expand snow shovelling services at private homes (e.g. increase accessibility to Adopt a Sidewalk program by expanding eligibility criteria).
- Explore ways to increase availability and accessibility of parking and/or public transit closer to community events.

Communication: Improve awareness of existing programs and services across all eight WHO dimensions of an age-friendly community.

- Identify how residents currently access information and look for ways to target communication directly to older adults (e.g. inserts in utility bills, host a seniors expo, at sporting events, grocery stores, online). Create a centralized communication hub listing available services
- Ensure information is readily accessible in a variety of ways, formats and languages relevant to older adult diverse needs and consistently disseminated in places where older adults go
- Explore ways to expand partnerships and collaborations to disseminate information to people living alone and in care facilities who are active and want to be part of the community
- Raise awareness and understanding of the importance of an age-friendly community

Community Supports and Health Services: Improve navigation of existing programs and services and enhance/create new partnerships.

- Look for ways to better advocate for and support older adults and their families to navigate the community and health care system; help the system understand and better accommodate older adult needs
- Explore ways to connect, coordinate and network with health and service organizations, local businesses and academic partners to enrich partnerships, identify service/education gaps and ensure older adults with barriers and their families receive information about available health and support services and formal and informal programs.
- Explore and research feasibility for new, alternate approaches to assist older adults and their families facing complex challenges (e.g. designated older adult advocate, older adult Hub service type model, and solutions navigation collaborative approach)
- Confirm emergency planning policies and practices are in place for older adults living independently and people with pre-existing barriers who face increased challenges accessing needed resources in emergencies

Housing: Continue improvements to affordability, accessibility and range of home ownership and rental housing options available to older adults.

- Increase education and awareness of available programs and services to assist older adults to age in place safely (e.g. tax deferral program, financial support for home modifications)

- Explore ways to make in-home and yard maintenance supports affordable and accessible for all older adults

Transportation: Continue improvements to transportation related infrastructure.

- Improve affordable, accessible and assisted transportation to medical appointments, employment and social activities located in Calgary and surrounding areas
- Expand volunteer program to provide additional support beyond just driving to accompany people in and out of appointments when needed

Next Steps

Creating a more age-friendly community means listening to the voices and messages of older adults and members of the Okotoks community, and then acting on these results. With that in mind, the AFOSC is committed to:

- Sharing the results of this report with residents, key stakeholders and service organizations who participated in the focus groups and conversations
- Developing an Okotoks Age-friendly Action plan that identifies recommendations for action related to the eight WHO age-friendly dimensions. The action plan will be based on the priorities and the many thoughtful ideas and suggestions outlined in this report that were suggested by participants throughout the community engagement process.

End Notes

- ⁱ World Health Organization. (2007). Global age-friendly cities: a guide. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43755>
- ⁱⁱ Alberta Government. (2019). Primary health care: community profiles. Alberta Government. [Community profile: High Level health data and summary - Open Government \(alberta.ca\)](#)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Alberta Government. (2012). Building age-friendly communities: a guide for local action. Alberta Government. <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/9780778583653>
- ^{iv} Town of Okotoks. (2022). Budget survey: what we heard report. Town of Okotoks. [Budget 2022 Survey | The Town of Okotoks](#)
- ^v Town of Okotoks. (2020). Social wellness framework: 10 year progress report. Town of Okotoks. [Social Wellness Framework 10-Year Progress Report.docx \(escribemeetings.com\)](#)
- ^{vi} Town of Okotoks. (2021). Municipal development plan. Town of Okotoks. [Municipal Development Plan | The Town of Okotoks](#)
- ^{vii} Town of Okotoks. (2021). Downtown revitalization what we heard report one. Town of Okotoks. [Downtown Vitalization What We Heard Report One | The Town of Okotoks](#)
- ^{viii} Town of Okotoks. (2022). Civility charter. Town of Okotoks. <https://rb.gy/xe6gjk>
- ^{ix} United Nations. (2022). World elder abuse awareness day June 15. United Nations. www.un.org/en/observances/elder-abuse-awareness-day
- ^x The Brenda Stratford Foundation. (2019). A guide for creating dementia friendly communities in Alberta. The Brenda Stratford Foundation. www.dementiafriendlyalberta.ca
- ^{xi} Town of Okotoks. (2015). Okotoks 2015 active transportation strategy. Town of Okotoks. <https://rb.gy/tzrnxz>
- ^{xii} Affordable Housing Task Force. (2020). Affordable housing strategy + action plan. Town of Okotoks. <https://www.okotoks.ca/your-government/publications-forms-and-documents/publications-forms/affordable-housing-strategy>
- ^{xiii} Alberta Government. (2022). Seniors property tax deferral program. Alberta Government. [Seniors Property Tax Deferral Program | Alberta.ca](#)
- ^{xiv} Alberta Government. (2022). Seniors financial assistance programs. Alberta Government. <https://www.alberta.ca/seniors-financial-assistance.aspx>
- ^{xv} Alberta Government. (2022). Seniors financial assistance programs. Alberta Government. <https://www.alberta.ca/seniors-financial-assistance.aspx>