Older Australians, Community and Quality of Life

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National Seniors
AUSTRALIA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In early 2022, National Seniors Australia surveyed almost 3500 older Australians with a range of questions about community and quality of life.

Overall, the results suggest most older Australians believe community is important to a good quality of life, but Australian communities often do not provide this at present. Older Australians want to be consulted about how that can improve.

Our first survey question noted research that suggests participating actively in the community can improve a person's quality of life. We then asked survey respondents if they agreed, and a large majority of 80% did. Their comments expressed the view that community participation keeps people active, connected and with a sense of purpose. A further 10% disagreed, or said it depends on the individual and external factors such as difficult community dynamics.

We next asked respondents to define their community or communities. Many people struggled to answer the question or described their community's good or bad qualities rather than defining its limits. Around 1500 people did give a definition, with four main ways of doing so: by geographical boundaries, networks of people close to them, formal groups or organisations they were part of including churches, and/or informal groups of people with whom they shared activities. Geography was the most common approach.

Our third question asked respondents whether their community (as they had defined it) offered older people a good quality of life. Around 54% agreed that it did, with some citing a diverse range of activities available, a culture of mutual support, convenient amenities and housing, and/or a welcoming atmosphere with no ageism. Only 13% disagreed, some of whom referenced national or state-level issues such as aged care, pension poverty, housing affordability or healthcare. A large 33% selected 'unsure', some of whom said they do not belong to a community, that a good community doesn't guarantee good quality of life, or that it is up to individuals not communities to determine quality of life.

Finally, we asked what needs to change in respondents' communities to improve their quality of life. Over 19% said they were satisfied with their community, and nothing needs to change while 7% said their community is irrelevant or hard to change. The largest group of respondents, at 61%, offered suggestions for change to improve their quality of life. Their suggestions ranged across 15 themes including the need for better public transport and walkways, more respectful attitudes, a larger range of activities and opportunities to socialise and connect, more or better healthcare services, better communication with older people about what is on offer, more proactive and consultative government processes, and improved local facilities and services. ●

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'Community' is a word that is bandied around a lot in Australia, but its meaning can sometimes remain elusive.

We often use it to refer to geographical areas, especially in times of trouble, for example speaking of 'flood-affected communities.' We may also apply the term to groups defined by aspects of personal identity such as ethnic heritage or sexuality. At the same time, a 'community' can be a smaller group of people who come together for an activity, or the whole of the Australian population when we speak of 'the community.'

Some researchers define 'communities' as groups connected by regular communication (e.g., Mills, 2004), but community members can also be connected by shared experiences even if they are not communicating with other members of their community.

So how do older Australians define their community or communities, and what relationship do they have with them? What kind of community supports, facilities, services and culture do they want? Does their community provide them with a good quality of life, and if not, how could it improve? Do they have a strong sense of community, and do they want one? Who prefers to be left alone?

In this report we present results from the 2022 National Seniors Social Survey, in which we asked older Australians four questions on topics such as these. It is not unusual for Australians to be concerned about older people in their community, especially during the COVID era which we know has contributed to so many people feeling isolated. There is an (often unspoken) assumption that we all need connection, while at the same time an understanding that many of us do not have it, especially when we get older. But is it true? And how can we do better by our fellow community members?

Part of our inspiration for this project was a 2015 US study called the United States of Aging Survey. It reported that 79% of Americans aged 60 or over felt their communities offer older people a good quality of life. This is an impressively high statistic that implies a ringing endorsement of American communities. It prompts us to ask whether this is something peculiar to the US situation, with the strong sense of unified towns and neighbourhoods we so often see depicted in American films and television. Or is it the same in Australia? A 2012 National Seniors survey showed around 92% of older Australians were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with living in the community (Menyen and Adair, 2013). This possibly suggests life is even better here, though the report didn't make it clear what 'living in the community' was being contrasted to.

So let us find out: What does community mean to us as older Australians?

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL SENIORS SOCIAL SURVEY

National Seniors is a member-based not-for-profit research and advocacy organisation committed to representing and promoting the views, values and beliefs of Australians aged 50 and over. Every year since 2012 – except 2020 when focused on COVID research – National Seniors has conducted a survey of older Australians' behaviours and views across a range of topics relevant to lifestyle, health and wellbeing called the National Seniors Social Survey, or NSSS. The 10th such survey (NSSS-10) was conducted in February 2022.

Anyone aged 50 years or over and living in Australia was eligible to participate in the NSSS-10. Invitations to participate were distributed to older Australians via the National Seniors membership database and online networks, and further distribution to other older Australians was encouraged.

As for previous National Seniors Social Surveys, we asked respondents numerous questions on topics of interest plus a range of demographic questions. This report draws on responses to the NSSS-10 'Quality of Later Life' module which asked four questions about respondents' definition and experiences of their community and how it related to their quality of life. Survey responses were collected online via Survey Monkey®.

In total, out of the 3937 NSSS-10 respondents, 3490 people answered one or more of the community-themed questions. Specific numbers for each question are reported in the text.

Analysis methods

We analysed text comments using the thematic analysis framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifying themes via inductive analysis guided by a critical realist approach that aimed for accuracy and objectivity in interpreting respondents' views. The researchers acknowledge the influence of their pre-existing knowledge and understandings on identified themes.

Quotes from survey respondents were selected to illustrate the variety and prevalence of ideas expressed. When possible, we reproduced quotes verbatim, occasionally omitting or altering parts for clarity or anonymity (indicated with square brackets []). Minor typos were corrected for readability (no brackets). All other phrasing idiosyncrasies were retained.

The number of comments comprising any given theme was estimated to give a sense of the prevalence of specific sentiments. However, the data were qualitative and not subject to a cross-coding regime when counted, so those numbers should be taken as estimates only.

DOES ACTIVE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IMPROVE OLDER PEOPLE'S QUALITY OF LIFE?

The first community question we presented to NSSS-10 respondents was:

Research suggests that participating actively in the community can improve your quality of life. Based on your own experiences, do you agree? Why or why not?

In total, 3019 people wrote a comment answering this question. A large majority (around 80%) made it clear that they agreed with the proposition (Figure 1). A small number of these mentioned caveats or conditions to their agreement, but nevertheless it is an impressive rate of agreement. Common reasons included that community participation enhances physical and mental activity, mental health and emotional wellbeing, a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging. Social connection, relationships and 'giving back' were valued by many commenters. A range of quotes illustrating these sentiments are on the next page.

> Yes. being part of community is what life is about; sharing, contributing and in turn learning to receive.

> I have autism and don't like to interact with people unless on safe terms for me. For many people with these conditions the notion that community interaction improves quality of life is not an obvious one.

Only 4% clearly disagreed with the proposition. Many of those who disagreed said they find community activities to be detrimental to quality of life for various reasons, including health and monetary costs, preference, or when difficult dynamics are present.

A further 6% of respondents said it depends: varying from one individual to the next; varying with circumstances at the time such as COVID restrictions and risks; or depending on a person having the health, mobility and money to participate.
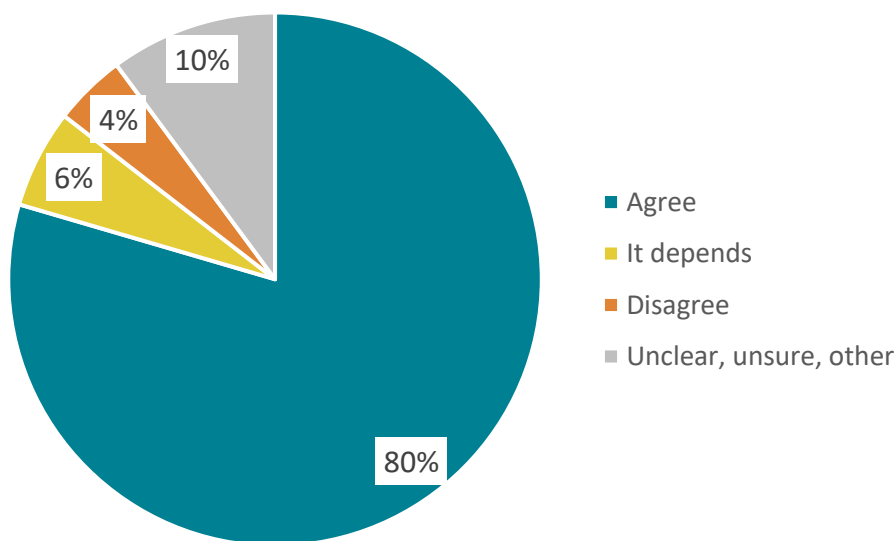

Figure 1 Responses to the question: "Research suggests that participating actively in the community can improve your quality of life. Based on your own experiences, do you agree? Why or why not?" (n=3019).

The consistency of sentiment among those who agree is evident from example quotes:

Yes being involved in the community keeps the spark of life alive. Being able to communicate with others of like mind is inspiring.

Yes very much agree. Staying involved makes you feel you belong and that you matter.

Yes I agree. It is very important to keep connected to people and to keep the body and mind active.

Yes definitely. Being part of something increases physical, emotional and mental health and makes life worth living

Agree. Broadens your horizons. Helps to keep up with what is happening around the place. Meet new people and make new friendships.

This is definitely vital in my quality of life. I live alone and need to reach out to others to be connected and feel valuable

I believe that assisting other is the life blood of society. The satisfaction gain from these activities is of Value to other who appreciate the activity. Their happiness is the payment to you by their praise & thankfulness.

Absolutely. I embraced Zoom & in fact as a person living with a disability this gives me wonderful access to much wider range of activities. Also some activities have moved outdoors which I love. There has been great adaptability amongst organisers. My local U3A moved quickly to online & has been excellent.

Yes, you meet new people find new attitudes and are able to help them.

Yes, it gives some a sense of belonging and of being useful.

Getting out in the community in whatever you do keeps you active, socially involved, your mind working, your body active.

Yes it's everything.

Agree You make a living by what you get and a life by what you give - quote by I think Churchill

yes - even dealing with objectionable people brings insight, even at age 70

Yes - keeping in touch with what is happening in the broader community is good for all levels of health

Yes, I agree 100%. Not only does it provide a social outlet, but it helps give a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging

The range of disagree sentiments were somewhat more diverse:

No. Due to my health

Too many know all's in elder communities.

No, I live in a very "clicky" town, always running people down, I dont want to be involved in that kind of behaviour.

Do not agree for myself. Not as happy socialising. Too much effort. Starting to have panic attacks

Not really I am a real loner

Disagree. It costs money to participate. I found it too stressful in the past being involved in things as people expect you to go for lunch or coffee which costs money. If you keep to yourself you can do things that are free without having to feel embarrassed.

I have NO DESIRE to intermingle with The Public ever again.

I find that many activities in community groups have people that abuse power and are not fun and outweigh the decent folk

WHAT CONSTITUTES 'COMMUNITY' FOR OLDER AUSTRALIANS?

We next sought to characterise what 'community' looks like to older Australians, asking this question:

How would you define your community? (Or your communities, if you belong to more than one.)

In total, 2711 people wrote a comment answering this question. However, among these commenters, around 12% wrote that they did not know how to answer the question, or they gave a generic definition of communities rather than a definition personal to themselves, or their answer was unclear. An additional 32% of commenters described their community's qualities (e.g., "friendly", "good") or the composition of its population ("mixed ages", "middle class"), without first mentioning how this community was defined. This left just 1510 commenters, or around 56% of commenters, who answered the question as we had intended it – with a personal definition of their community. This indicates either that the question was poorly worded and/or that many older people have complex concepts of their community. Both must be taken into consideration when interpreting the results.

Among the 1510 commenters who did offer a definition of their community, there were four primary ways of doing so (Figure 2).
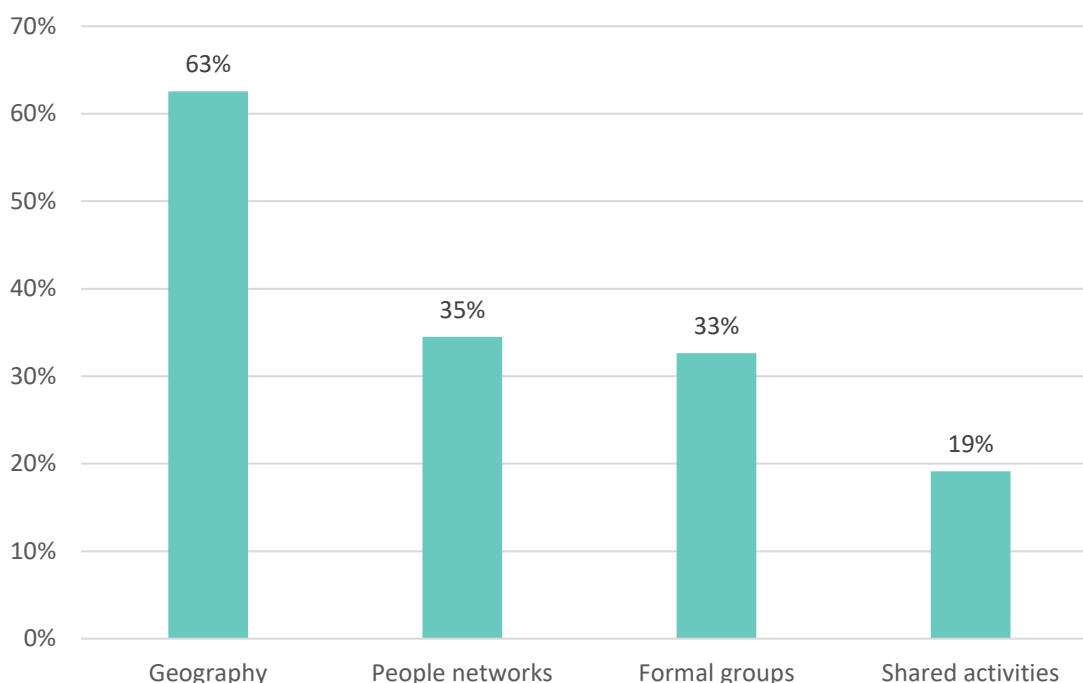

Figure 2 Main ways commenters defined their community (n=1510). The percentages add up to more than 100% because the response types were not mutually exclusive.

These were not mutually exclusive, with many comments mentioning more than one:

- **Geography.** Most commonly, commenters defined their community as their local geographic region, be that their housing complex, street, neighbourhood, town, suburb or local government area. A few mentioned larger entities such as the whole of Australia or even the world, while some rural and remote commenters described their region in other ways. Local shops, businesses and services as well as neighbours also sometimes figured in definitions of community and were classified under the 'geography' theme because of their inherent 'localness'.

- **People networks.** Another way people defined their community was in terms of networks of people close to them. Most often this comprised family members, friends and past or present work colleagues. For some it included networks of online contacts. Others mentioned groups that they were part of defined by ethnicity, culture, sexuality, gender, disability, illness, profession or other aspects of identity and experience. Some wrote about 'like-minded people' with shared values and interests without specifying further. Some commenters included their carers and health providers within the definition of their community, and we classified these under the 'people networks' theme too.

- **Formal groups.** Commenters also defined community in terms of formal groups they belonged to such as clubs, organisations and political parties. Churches and other religious, faith-based or spiritual groups were categorised with this response type too and were mentioned by around 150 commenters (10% of definitions).

> My communities consist of: Family Friends Local neighbours Former colleagues Local artists and fellow glass workers, here and abroad.

> My Town House is in a "community" with varied members - several who cause problems and stress. I am trying to ignore them. My friendship, rotary and Timor Leste communities give me purpose and I rely on them for wellbeing

> I live in a small rural town […] and I greet everyone I see in the street as I feel it lifts me up so I hope it does the same to others   I greet children and young people and it is quite amazing how they respond - I get a real buzz from this. I always acknowledge dogs and again it often starts a conversation with the owner   I am then part of the community where I work - students and colleagues and as a small campus we have activities that I attend and always do a round of meeting people as it is a great way to hear news   I am in a number of organisations: [head of local women's group] and we meet monthly to go out; a number of lesbian groups some of which are run on Zoom; Unionism including women's committees where we engage in things like the March for Justice rallies; International Women's Day etc.

> Our group in this complex are mostly very active and involved in all sorts of outside groups. Our Polio group is now mainly support as we are all getting on in years. Our Access group advise people who have access problems, who to approach or we lobby on their behalf.

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- **Shared activities.** The fourth way respondents defined their community was in terms of informal groups of people who engage in activities together. For example, some included people they regularly met with to engage in walking or other physical activity, or with whom they shared an interest in theatre, books, sport, restaurants and other hobbies. Others felt a sense of community with people they knew from their local gym, dog park, volunteering or travelling.

Most of these definitions imply regular face to face interactions or other forms of interpersonal communication, consistent with definitions of community in the research literature (e.g., Mills, 2004; Hoyle et al., 2016). Only a small number of commenters specified larger bodies such as 'humanity' or 'the world' that they considered to be their community.

I live in a very small community that is within 10 kms of a larger community centre. The larger community provides many opportunities for Seniors to remain involved in community. Sometimes, I think smaller communities provide more support than larger towns and cities.

I love living in my suburb. It is very pleasant with all the facilities I need. It has a wide range of age groups and ethnicities.

Church community, LGBIT community, local community in which I live

A. Retired colleagues B. The church to which I belong C. The local community D. The hospital volunteers E. The Deaf Community

Our community is massive - its an entire world of full time travelers all doing the same thing, exploring Australia. We often find work in small rural communities. As we understand how these communities click, it is easy for us to simply slot into them and are always made to feel very welcome.

Sisterworks, honed my skills in sewing, they bring out my potentials that I'm capable of, bring out the best in me and my level of confidence, it is a safe place that I can come home to as my family away from my family. It is a home for women of diverse culture. [Suburb] womens support group, it is the group where I'm sharing my skills and all the things that I learned from Sisterworks. Filipino community is where I connect and engaged with my cultural fiesta, spiritually, traditions and beliefs. Filipino seniors women more on showcasing cultural dances to pass it on to the young generations.

My community equates to people of roughly my own age group (or a little older) who live in areas fairly close to me and who participate in similar social activities to myself. I don't identify with any particular cultural or religious group.

Humanity.

I keep company with the dog crowd at the off leash dog park. From 7-8am, 6 days a week my sister and I talk with other dog owners. My sister does most of the talking. Sometimes I join in but I prefer the company of dogs.

My street and homeless friends are very welcoming and accept me unconditionally as I do them. If my health would allow it I'd be living with them on the streets, but I need a bed to sleep on.

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DO COMMUNITIES OFFER OLDER PEOPLE A GOOD QUALITY OF LIFE?

Our third community question asked respondents:

Do you agree with the statement: "My community offers older people a good quality of life"?

Respondents were first instructed to answer this question on a 5-point Likert scale while thinking about the community or communities they defined in the previous question. They were then invited to elaborate on their answer in a comment (discussed below).

Figure 3 shows the Likert scale responses for all 3433 respondents who answered the question, and also for the subgroup of 1043 respondents who wrote a comment. As might be expected, those with strongly held views or who disagreed with the premise were over-represented among commenters.

When the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' responses are added together, these data suggest just under 54% of older Australians agree that their community offers older people a good quality of life. Only 13% said they 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree', but a large 33% selected 'unsure'.

A 54% agreement rate is much lower than the 79% of Americans aged 60+ who agreed with the statement in the 2015 United States of Aging study we mentioned in the Introduction. However, that study excluded 'don't know' responses (United States of Aging Survey, 2015, p. 7). If we similarly exclude the 'unsure' responses and those that comprised only a comment, the percentage of older Australians who agree with the premise rises to just over 80% – very close to the 79% that the US study reported.
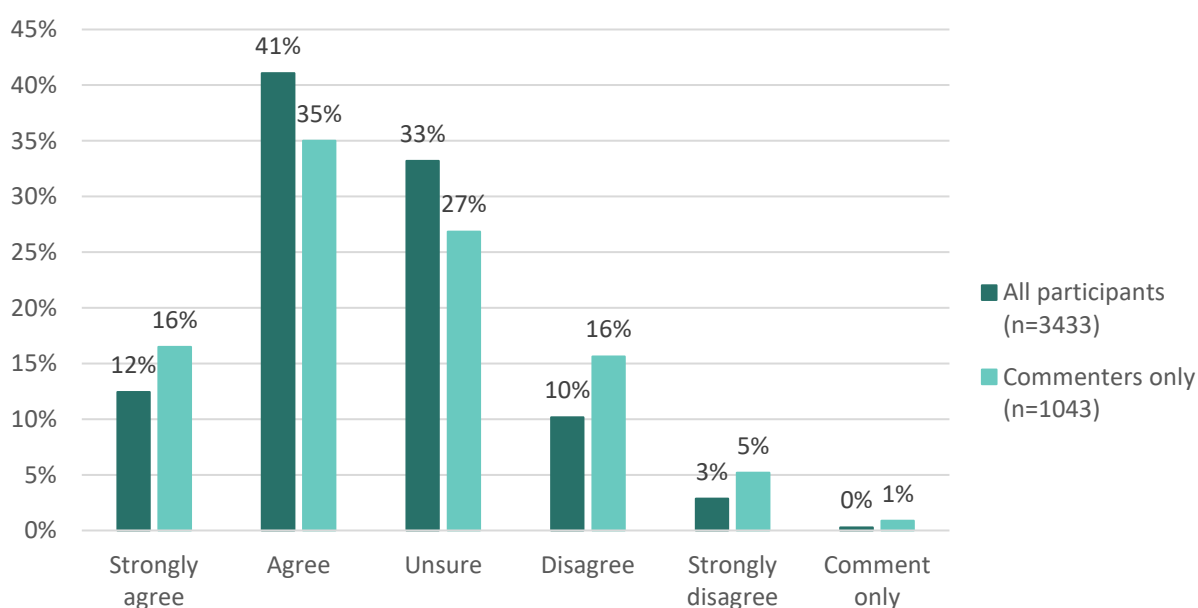

Figure 3 Levels of agreement with the statement: "My community offers people a good quality of life", for the whole sample and for commenters only.

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What traits of communities offer good quality of life?

Almost all the 172 commenters who *strongly agreed* that their community offers older people good quality of life, and many of the 365 who *agreed*, were writing about their local government area, town, retirement village or other geospatially defined community, rather than any other kind of community.

Some common themes among these were apparent. Communities that offer older people good quality of life are those that:

- Have a diverse range of groups, activities and opportunities to participate in on a regular basis. This was the most prominent theme.
- Have a culture of mutual support and checking in on one another. People can rely on community members to help and look out for them.
- Provide opportunities to meet others, socialise, converse and share ideas.
- Have convenient amenities and facilities including health and medical facilities, shops, clubs, other social hubs, public transport and green spaces.
- Offer a range of good quality housing options for seniors of all ages, good discounts for seniors and appropriate support services for ageing.
- Have an inclusive, friendly and respectful culture that welcomes older people, with a population of mixed ages and no ageism.

The services for older people are excellent. Hardly any time to be processed through My Aged Care and other public services. Local medical practitioners bulk bill for people with Centrelink cards and Veterans Cards.

My community has great medical facilities and clubs as well as nice parks etc. for the elderly

There are plenty of opportunities for the elderly in my community. We have a public library in our community plus clubs and Taverns to visit. Also plenty of shopping centres! There is also good Public transport.

Age is irrelevant in my communities.

In my community, I feel that older people are respected, looked out for, and allowed to get on with their lives.

Ability to meet people of similar interests and aspirations is great, no matter what their backgrounds or views are.

It is a mixture of age groups. I don't experience ageism here.

I can do anything I want and find no discrimination

Common local meeting place - to sit and chat with neighbours within 50 mtrs.

In farming communities old dogs or cows are treated with respect and so are old people.

I live in a very well run retirement village which has wonderful facilities and many activities on offer. Everyone here is a joy.

What traits of communities offer poor quality of life?

Among the commenters who *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that their community offers older people good quality of life, there was a greater emphasis on the negative impacts of federal and state government policies and services or general societal attitudes. Common themes included:

- A need to fix problems with the aged care system, pension poverty, housing affordability and healthcare.
- The problem that attitudes towards older people are often disrespectful and isolating, with society treating older people only as a burden who will die soon.

Where local communities were discussed, the common themes were:

- They offer few or no activities appropriate for older people, or the activities are inaccessible in terms of transport and cost.
- Community members are unfriendly and keep to themselves.
- Local facilities and infrastructure are poor.

What was the Royal Commission for, if not to prove that this statement is a hideous lie?

No affordable housing for older adults and no affordable housing for anyone really.

Our local council is selling our two age care facilities to private investors. Once again, profit before people!

nothing for older people [...] hate sport.... so nothing on offer

Too much discrimination in favour of whoever is shelling out the most money. We get whizzed in and out of doctors' surgeries. No one cares about our health.

What is quality of life-it is so subjective. The stereotypes about older people are overwhelmingly negative. Just look at Seniors Week every year. Look at the entertainment - there's always something about WW2 and the music. My generation grew up with the Stones and Beatles. Think about the stereotypes and how older people are just expected to conform. The local nursing home - where are the Lesbians and gays?

Hard to get help and advice when needed No social respect Feel as if older people a pain and then shoved into poor caring Nursing Homes locked in like 'dirty smelly' people Too many lonely people   Help is only available if you have LOTS of money Help Is not offered with respect it's more often 'Letsrip her/him off 'they wontknowthedifferance

Poor health care, no specialists, no hospital, poor Security in your own house.

I really feel that old people are no longer valued in society and instead are viewed as dithering old silly billies who cost a lot to maintain.

There are a range of activities available in the community, but getting to them, being able to afford them and feeling safe at them is a different story!

There is nothing in my community for older Australians and if you don't drive

The first cafe is about a kilometer up a steep incline.

Why so much uncertainty?

Fully one third of the respondents who answered this question selected *unsure*, so it is important to consider why.

Commenters who selected 'unsure' offered numerous perspectives on this point. Their diversity suggests excluding this response type from our statistics is misleading. Some said they were unsure because they do not participate in their community much, were too new to their community to comment, do not identify as 'old' or 'older' or old enough, or otherwise genuinely did not know how to answer. A few didn't understand the question or wanted us to define 'community' for them. Such responses are to be expected from 'unsure' respondents. But other comments included:

- Some people said they do not belong to a community.
- Some said it is up to individuals not communities to determine quality of life.
- Some noted that a good community doesn't guarantee good quality of life.
- Some noted that people are diverse, situations are complicated, and inequities exist, so it is hard to generalise.
- Some said the quality of life offered differs between communities they are a part of, with some providing a good quality of life and others not.
- Some commenters simply described what was good or deficient about their community as indicators of the quality of life provided. For many of these, it is likely that their community is mixed in what it can provide.

All of this emphasises the fact that there is no simple concept of 'community' in many older Australians' lives, as our 'definition' question seems to have suggested too. Multiple spheres of influence come into play including three levels of government, diverse activity and interest groups, personal affiliations such as family and friends, identity-based networks, and housing communities. These may all operate separately, each contributing to a person's quality of life in different ways. It is perhaps most disturbing that some older people have no sense of belonging to a community at all.

> Healthy elder people with close family and friendship groups can do well in this society but this is not the case for a very large number of people. Many elders are suffering physically, mentally and economically and our society puts very little into the support people want as opposed to the support that is convenient and cheap to provide. Elders from CALD communities suffer from homesickness and from cultural dissonance especially if they haven't got supportive family. Elders of indigenous communities have an immense burden of racial oppression. It seems to me that if people have complex needs then they will not be supported.

> I don't live in a 'community' as such. I live out in the bush.

> High rise buildings do not offer community.

> I am grateful for my health and mobility. We live in a lovely house. A good community does not guarantee a good quality life

> How do I access the community assistance which is available to maintain a good quality of life?

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE IN COMMUNITIES TO IMPROVE OLDER AUSTRALIANS' QUALITY OF LIFE?

The fourth community question asked respondents:

What needs to change in your community to improve your quality of life?
If you don't think any changes within your community can improve your
quality of life, please say so.

In total, 2406 people wrote comments in response to this question. Of these:

- 450 (19%) wrote wholly positive things about their community (Figure 4), stating they did not want to make any changes, no changes were needed, they are happy as things are, or similar. Some elaborated on the positive traits of their communities (discussed below).
- 132 (5%) wrote ambiguous responses such as 'nothing' or 'no change' without further context. It was unclear if this meant they would not want to change anything in their community or something else. These 132 responses may group with the 450 expressing satisfaction with their community.
- 176 (7%) said their community was irrelevant to their quality of life or that it would be hard to change their community.
- 190 (8%) said they were unsure, that they did not identify with a community in a way that was appropriate to the question, or otherwise could not answer.
- The largest group, 1458 commenters (61%), made suggestions for change in their community to improve their quality of life or that of other seniors.

Legend:
- Satisfied with community
- Ambiguous (possibly satisfied)
- Suggestions for improvement
- Community is irrelevant or hard to change
- Unsure or not applicable

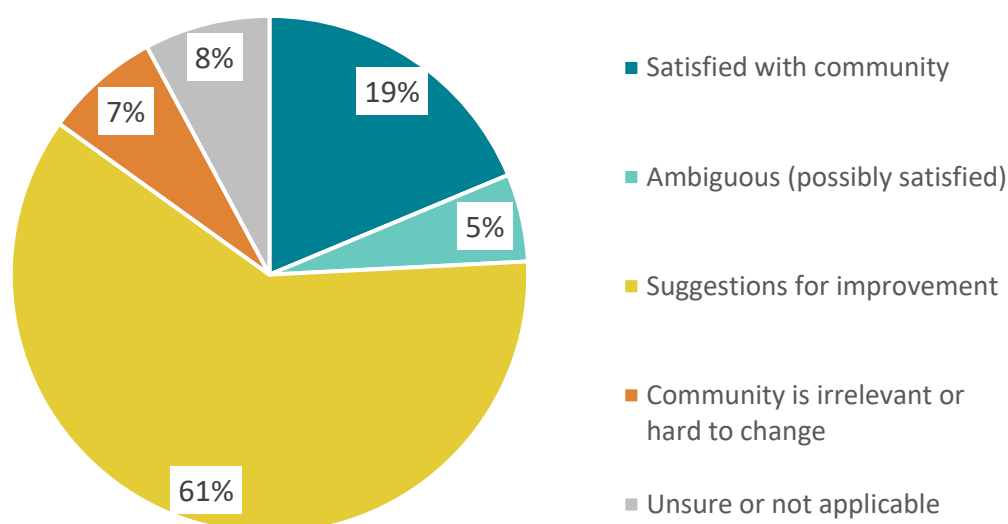*Figure 4 Commenters' thoughts on the need for changes to their community to improve older people's quality of life (n=2406).*

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Positive views of community

At least 450 and possibly close to 600 people expressed the view that their community did not require any change to improve their quality of life. Most commonly, these commenters simply said things like "satisfied", "All good", "nothing at this time". Others waxed lyrical about their community or their quality of life.

It is a loving and supportive community and I hope that I give as much as I receive.

Our quality of life is great - there's not much that could make it any better

Being valued and respected in my community has changed my quality of life as I work with indigenous people. This is mirrored in the people I work with.

[My] town has magnificent walking trails, adequate, great schools, excellent sporting clubs (including one of the best public golf courses in Victoria of which I am a member), regular bus services and train services to Melbourne. I can't think of any changes that would improve our life quality.

Quality of life is what you make of the life you have, and to me, feeling free to move about safely, among friendly people and enjoying each day is quality.

I am pretty satisfied, but that includes always looking for improvement and recognizing initiatives when they arise, e.g. two parishioners lost their husbands in 2021 and then together took up a new project to provide Devonshire teas and chat on Wednesday mornings once a month. It is now well-supported.

I think my local community is doing ok by the older members. I am fortunate to live in an affluent community with plenty of resources

I have everything I need at present and have the physical capability to engage with people, exercise and general have a satisfactory quality of life.

The community is irrelevant or hard to change

On the other hand, 176 people expressed one or more of the following sentiments:

- That a person's quality of life is up to them, not the community.
- That they don't participate in the community, so the community is irrelevant.
- That changes to the community will not improve their quality of life.
- That "lots" needs to change within their community (but not specified).
- That their community will not change.

A few of the latter group said they would have to move to a different community so that their needs could be met, and several of these were planning to move.

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Suggestions for change

A total of 1458 comments included suggestions for changes to communities that would improve older people's quality of life. We identified 15 overarching themes within this set of comments, each comprising 42–264 comments, some incorporating several subthemes. Numerous commenters offered suggestions across more than one theme.

Some comments spoke to issues primarily relevant to federal or state governments or the wider Australian community, or conversely to the much smaller scale of retirement villages or other shared housing communities. However, the majority pertained to local, geographically defined communities such as towns, suburbs and shires. As such, many issues raised were about local infrastructure, services, decision-making processes, interpersonal attitudes and culture.

An overview of the themes is given below, but our companion document, *Changing Local Communities to Improve Quality of Life: Older Australians' Wishlists*, explores in more detail the practical changes older people would like to see in their local areas. That document, available on the National Seniors research reports webpage, is designed as a guide for local councils and similar bodies to use when considering implementing changes to better service their senior residents.

The 15 themes are:

1. **Transport and pathways**. This theme was dominated by calls for better, cheaper public transport, with over 170 commenters mentioning this need. Other comments called for improved roads, traffic and parking; better footpaths and more walking tracks; more bike paths and safer shared pathways; transport services and paths that are safe and accessible; and more locally available activities and services in lieu of improved transport options.

2. **Accessibility**. This theme included general calls for greater community understanding of what people with disability need; improved physical access to community facilities including buildings, public areas and parking; and more low-cost activities, groups and events to be organised for disabled seniors. It also included calls for older people with disabilities (and older carers of disabled people) to have access to more supports including the NDIS.

3. **Information and communication**. Over 85 comments in this theme called for information about programs and services for older people to be more widely advertised, in ways that will genuinely reach seniors. Other comments we grouped with this theme called for face-to-face assistance and support services for older people instead of online help; designated, professional communicators or liaison officers for older people; digital technology training for seniors; and better phone and internet services in the region.

4. **Health services**. Over 100 comments in this theme expressed the need for more medical services and facilities in the local community, or health services that are better quality and more affordable. In addition, just under 90 people commented on COVID, with most stating an end to COVID would improve their community and a minority stating COVID vaccination mandates and restrictions were detrimental to the quality of life in their community.

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5. **Local facilities**. More than 100 comments in this theme highlighted a range of facilities and services that were needed in the local community or required improvement and better maintenance. The facilities and services specified included garbage and recycling collection; community centres; pools and sporting facilities; places to shop, eat and drink; banks; postal services; and education facilities for learners of all ages.

6. **Activities and socialising**. Around 125 comments in this theme sought more community activities for older people, including activities that are more affordable, more accessible in terms of scheduling, or more targeted to particular ages or other subgroups of seniors. Around 90 commenters also sought community opportunities for older people to socialise; measures to counter loneliness or to offer emotional support to isolated older people; and opportunities to make friends or form relationships with others.

7. **Housing**. Dominating this theme were over 70 comments expressing the desperate need for greater housing availability, affordability and security, and for homelessness to be addressed. Just under 30 commenters discussed problems with their existing housing, especially retirement living facilities: problems include managers who don't listen to residents, who exploit residents, or who don't adequately care for the housing complex.

8. **Aged care**. Comments in this theme sought improvements to the quality and safety of residential aged care and home care services; greater access to aged care support within local communities; shorter waiting lists; and assistance with applications.

9. **Development and population**. About 40 comments we grouped in this theme highlighted a desire to end property development and population growth in the local community, especially high rise and other high-density housing. Around 10 comments sought the opposite – an increase to the local community's population, with a couple suggesting more subdivision of land. A few commenters called for greater emphasis on residents' wishes within their community, rather than prioritising tourists.

10. **Green spaces and the environment**. This theme included calls for more public parks and other green spaces with facilities such as seating; less development when it damages biodiversity habitats but greater clean development such as renewable energy; more action on climate change, biodiversity and pollution; and better street maintenance.

11. **Crime and public safety**. About half of the commenters in this theme called for stricter measures to end crime in their community, most commonly mentioning property crimes, drug use or unspecified 'youth crime', and a few mentioning domestic violence, home invasions and muggings. The rest talked about crime prevention in general, better policing or court powers, or the need to feel safe in the community.

12. **Money and discounts**. This theme incorporated comments on the need to control increases to the cost of living; the need for higher rates of income support for pensioners and others; more concessions for self-funded retirees;

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financial changes to better enable seniors to work or volunteer; and increased funding for services and facilities that support older people.

13. **Job opportunities and effort**. This theme includes subthemes that are two sides of one coin: opportunity and effort. Comments expressed a desire for more work opportunities to be made available to older people; and an urge for other people to make more effort to join community activities and to shoulder the burden of running them. In addition, a few commenters expressed a desire to see young people working or in national service or community service; and a few others commented on their general desire for freedom of choice and autonomy in their lives.

14. **Attitudes and local culture**. About 170 comments in this theme called for greater understanding of older people's contributions and needs; more respect, selflessness and care for others; less ageism; or greater neighbourliness and community spirit. We also included in this theme around 45 comments on the culture and composition of commenters' communities: half of them wanted communities to be more diverse, inclusive and tolerant, and half wanted less diverse communities that are narrower in their cultural outlook.

15. **Better government**. Most comments in this theme expressed a desire for governments at all levels to be more proactive and genuine in taking action for older people; or demanded more grassroots involvement of older people in government decisions and greater consultation and transparency, especially for local governments and councils. Some commenters made cynical remarks about government corruption or ineptitude; called for a change of government; or in a few cases asserted the need for less government interference in people's lives.

Example quotes from NSSS-10 respondents illustrating each of these themes are available in our companion document (National Seniors Australia, 2023). The quotes give an indication of the range of improvements older Australians want to see in their communities to improve their quality of life. ●

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Most Australians, if asked, would probably agree that participating in the community will improve a person's quality of life. The responses to our first question indicate older Australians are highly likely to agree with this sentiment. About 10% either disagreed or recognised that it depends on the individual and context, and a further 10% seemed unsure. But the rest – a huge 80% of the more than 3000 respondents – made it clear that they believe community participation is important for older people.

The reasons they gave were surprisingly consistent, with emphasis on staying active, maintaining a sense of meaning, and engaging in social connection and relationships. They are similar to responses given in a National Seniors study of rural seniors from more than a decade before, which also emphasised motivations of social interaction, staying active, making a contribution and more (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, 2010).

These responses would seem to characterise 'community' as a set of meaningful interactions with other people. However, when directly asked to define their community in our second survey question, many respondents encountered difficulties. Around 44% of commenters wrote something other than a definition of their community – either expressing uncertainty, resorting to a generic definition, or describing their community's qualities without defining it. Some of this may be because the question was not worded clearly but it seems likely there are other

explanations too. The overwhelming confidence in community participation expressed in response to question 1 was simply not present in responses to question 2.

Among those who did offer a definition there was considerable variation. The definition expressed by the largest number of people was a geographic one, with 'community' being defined by local boundaries. Other definitions were based on social networks respondents were part of, formal groups and organisations they belonged to, or activities and interests they shared with others. These definitions are consistent with previous studies on this topic (notably Hoyle et al., 2016) but they are nonetheless somewhat disparate in their focus. They show that 'community' is a slippery concept and varies with individuals' experiences and needs.

This point is further emphasised in the responses to our third question, which asked whether respondents agreed with the statement 'my community offers older people a good quality of life'. As flagged in the Introduction, we worded this question based on a study that found 79% of Americans aged 60+ agreed with the statement (United States of Aging Survey, 2015). In contrast, 54% of our respondents agreed with it. If taken at face value, this suggests older Australians have a much less positive view of their communities than older Americans do. However, the US study excluded 'don't know' responses. If we follow their lead and exclude 'unsure' responses, we arrive at a similar agreement level of 80%.

This is not necessarily a sensible thing to do though. The US researchers did not report the percentage of 'don't know' responses they received, but 'unsure' responses comprised a large proportion of our responses – in fact, one third of them (33%). Our analysis of 'unsure' respondents' comments shows that they should not be so easily dismissed as to be discounted from the statistics. Some 'unsure' commenters recognised that people are diverse, situations are complicated, and inequities exist, so it can be difficult to generalise. In addition, when a person's life involves multiple communities of different kinds, it can be hard to disentangle the impacts each has on their quality of life.

The 'unsure' comment set also showed that many older Australians do not feel they belong to a community at all. This is a serious issue if community participation is important for older people's quality of life. It is one thing to actively reject community participation as undesirable, and older people must be granted the freedom to determine their own environment, activities and relationships, including the freedom to lead a solitary life. But it is a different matter if a person doesn't feel that they have any community around them, whether it be local infrastructure or interpersonal networks of support.

On the other hand, these comments may simply be another symptom of how poorly the concept of community is defined in Australia. Indeed, it seems impossible to conceive of a person living without a community, given how mutually embedded our lives are with each other via the day-to-day activities of keeping ourselves alive. Either way it

is surprising to hear this sentiment from older Australians.

The commenters who disagreed with the statement 'my community offers older people a good quality of life' revealed yet another take on the concept of community. Some of them commented on federal government policies and whole-of-society attitudes. This definition equates 'community' with 'society at large' – the collective of Australians who are economically and politically interdependent but are mostly not known at an interpersonal level. The fact that this was primarily associated with comments about older Australians' poor quality of life is telling – it implies a community that has failed to include and support older people, and over which people have little control. It is not a participatory concept of community, but rather a concept built on feelings of disempowerment. The facelessness of a mass society does not possess the positive qualities of smaller, more intimate communities made up of known, like-minded people. This is not to say that all respondents were satisfied with their local community or interpersonal networks – that is not the case. But the comments do suggest smaller communities often play a critical role in helping older people achieve a good quality of life, even when society at large is unsupportive.

Our final question asked respondents what needed to change in their community to improve their quality of life. Around 61% made suggestions for improvement which we grouped into 15 quite different themes. Some components of the 15 themes, but not all, echo the World Health Organization's

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eight domains for age-friendly environments (WHO, 2018) (Table 1).

In many cases, the themes are about facilitating older people's access to support, resources, facilities, services and activities. The largest theme included a need for better public transport or subsidised alternatives, upgraded footpaths and more accessible parking spaces – all issues previously raised in a 2015 National Seniors report (Somenahalli, 2015).

Most of the 15 themes are not directly about improving social relationships, a sense of meaning or giving back – the qualities that respondents said they value about community participation. However, making changes that enable older people to physically access all aspects of their local environment and to survive in a difficult economic climate would undoubtedly better enable them to connect with others and to participate meaningfully as well. In other words, the creation and maintenance of accessible, appropriate, shared spaces and material supports is critical to community relationships for older Australians.

Table 1 Components of our 15 themes that correspond to the eight World Health Organization age-friendly environment domains (WHO, 2018).

WHO domain	Our themes with corresponding components
1 Outdoor environments	1 Transport and pathways 2 Accessibility 11 Crime and public safety
2 Transport and mobility	1 Transport and pathways 2 Accessibility
3 Housing	7 Housing 11 Crime and public safety
4 Social participation	2 Accessibility 5 Local facilities 6 Activities and socialising
5 Social inclusion and non-discrimination	6 Activities and socialising 14 Attitudes and local culture
6 Civic engagement and employment	13 Job opportunities and effort 15 Better government
7 Communication and information	3 Information and communication
8 Community and health services	4 Health services 8 Aged care

But we cannot forget that our quality of life is about more than material wellbeing – it is also about fun. Our commenters called for more green spaces, nice places to walk that are furnished with seating and toilets, fun activities for older people of all stripes, more places to eat and drink, and opportunities to socialise with like-minded others. Those who feel their community already offers them good quality of life emphasised the range of activities and opportunities on offer, the convenient amenities in place, and a local culture of mutual support, friendliness and respect.

The World Health Organization groups its domains into three kinds of environment: the physical, the social, and municipal services. But it also recognises that these interact and come together to create age-friendly environments. Similarly, communities do a disservice to older Australians if they assume that all seniors need is secure housing, quality care and a higher income. Those things are of course vital and too often lacking. But older people, like younger people, have other needs and desires too.

Our communities must work hard to provide living environments that bring joy and pleasure to all, in a rich variety of ways. For most of us, there is no quality of life without this. ●

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