

SMART HEALTHY AGE- FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENTS

Smart, adaptable and inclusive solutions can help improve and support independent life throughout the course of life, regardless of age, gender, disabilities, cultural differences and personal choices.

A holistic approach that optimizes social and physical environments, supported by digital tools and services, allows to provide better health and social care, promoting not only independent living, but also equity and active participation in society. This approach follows the United Nations' line-up, with the Sustainable Development Goals (in particular Objectives 3 and 11), stating that sustainable environments for all ages represent the basis for ensuring a better future for the entire population and addressing most of the growing issues of the ageing population.

The challenges of different sectors, such as ICT, the building industry and urban planning and the health and social care, as well as those of citizens and their communities are interlinked. Responding to these challenges will foster awareness and support for the creation and implementation of smart, healthy and inclusive environments for present and future generations that enable them to learn, grow, work, socialise and enjoy a healthy life, benefiting from the use of digital innovations, accessibility solutions and adaptable support models in the European context.

The community is the physical, social and cultural ecosystem closest to people, built on relationships of trust, sharing, solidarity and intimacy, where people find social, cultural and identity references, socialise and live their daily lives. The objective conditions of the environment (pollution, accessibility, mobility, safety, comfort) affect the quality of life and wellbeing of citizens, particularly in the context of climate change and thus affect the whole community circle.

Thus, we foster actions that promote partnerships between technological and digital innovation, architecture, urban planning, social studies and health sciences to design and simulate communities of belonging that leverage on the potential of each sector to promote the existential dignity of all persons, regardless of their age, gender, health, social, educational, economic, cultural and identity conditions, as well as the levels of development of the region where they live.

Editors and authors:



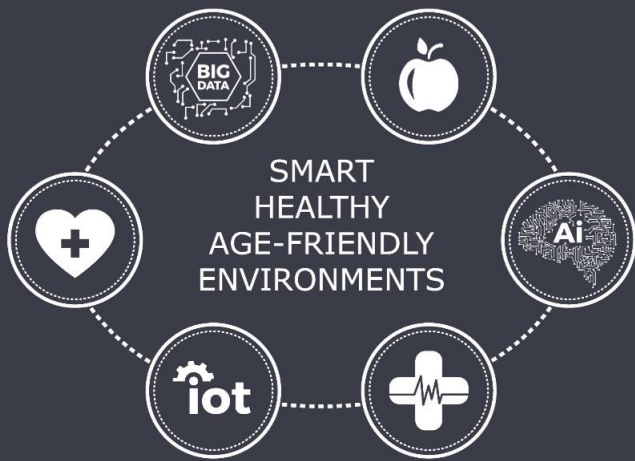
Carina Dantas
carinadantas@shine2.eu



Willeke van Staalduinen
willeke@afedemy.eu

Contributors (in alphabetical order):

Andjela Jaksic
Elizabeth Mestheneos
Enza T
Evgenii Voropaev
Екатерина Щербакова
Florina Coman
Наталья Дмитриева
Maddalena Illario
Nadejda Miteva
Odetta Durmishi
Paula Alexandra Sila
Tamara Sharshakova
Vesna Zegarac Leskovar



STAKEHOLDERS NETWORK

SHAFE

A new concept was created since 2017, based on the desire to implement Smart Healthy Age-Friendly Environments (SHAFE) across Europe, fostering happier and healthier people in all communities. This idea took shape and became a solid movement.

SHAFE began as a Thematic Network, approved by the European Commission, to draw policy makers, organisations and citizens' attention to the need of better alignment between health, social care, built environments and ICT, both in policy and funding and delivered a Joint Statement and a Framing Paper in December 2018 to the European Commission and Member States.

After this, SHAFE evolved to a European Stakeholders Network, which currently has over 170 partner organisations and is coordinated by Carina Dantas and Willeke van Staalduinen.

It is working to achieve better COOPERATION and IMPLEMENTATION, as the major challenges for the next period, as stated in the Position Paper released in 2020, with recommendations that aim to promote healthier environments for all citizens and make environments accessible, sustainable and reachable for all, with the support of ICT.

The pandemic has uncovered the major opportunities and benefits of turning digital. However, single digital solutions are not the panacea to all the societal challenges. Citizens across different age groups also need personal human contact; they need to meet, to talk to each other, to hug and to love. Digitalization cannot replace this human need but can be a powerful vehicle to support people. The scenario during 2021 is an opportunity for the digital revolution to be well thought and implemented, if all the adequate challenges are well considered and tackled.

The Smart Healthy Age-Friendly Environments Network thus focus on the narrative, debate, disclosure and knowledge translation of solutions to optimize the physical and social environments of individuals in a concerted manner.

From the early concept, several projects have been implementing SHAFE in the field: NET4Age-Friendly is one of the most recent.



NET4Age-Friendly
INTERNATIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY NETWORK ON HEALTH AND WELLBEING
IN AN AGE-FRIENDLY DIGITAL WORLD

The main aim of NET4Age-Friendly is to establish an international and interdisciplinary network of researchers from all sectors to foster awareness, and to support the creation and implementation of smart, healthy indoor and outdoor environments for present and future generations.

NET4Age-Friendly further aims to overcome fragmentation and critical gaps at both conceptual and pragmatic innovation level on responsive, age-friendly and sustainable environments in order to address the research-policy future requirements of Europe.

The main approach of NET4Age-Friendly is the establishment of new local or regional ecosystems or by expanding existing ones in each country involved, to work on health and wellbeing in an age-friendly digital world.

The ecosystems will consist of citizens, public authorities, businesses/NGOs and research and will be supported by four thematic Working Groups:

- User-centred inclusive design in age-friendly environments and communities
- Integrated health and well-being pathways
- Digital solutions and large-scale sustainable implementation
- Policy development, funding forecast and cost-benefit evaluations

The outcomes of the five thematic Working Groups will be obtained in the work of a 5th one, creating a synergised output - the Reference Framework.

NET4Age-Friendly will be used as a connector for involving and hosting regular themed sessions with local and regional stakeholders and users' representatives from various countries and backgrounds, as well as for fostering the knowledge creation and sharing among researchers.

Health and wellbeing throughout the life course

To promote healthy and active ageing throughout the lifespan, an integrated and holistic approach on the physical and mental development of children and adults is crucial. It is necessary that there is seamless cooperation between different layers of public authorities and ministerial domains and that the whole society contributes to foster the many aspects of human life, from finances, ICT usage and education, to housing, food, love and leisure. The current focus, responsibilities and organisation of governments and authorities is highly system oriented, and doesn't consider humans at all stages of life as key or focus point into account. This needs to evolve if we acknowledge the importance of better involving all, not leaving anyone aside or turn away from society.

We would recommend the creation and maintenance of local, regional or national ecosystems in which all citizens, researchers, business, NGOs, health and social care professionals and authorities are enabled to cooperate with each other in a safe, learning and inclusive environment. Training opportunities, joint learning of skills regarding healthy lifestyles for all ages, ICT usage, safe housing and independent living, maintained and safe outdoor spaces are all key areas for action, along with financial security, online connectivity, accessibility and inclusiveness for all.

Ecosystems need national and European support to be able to grow mainly by providing training and coaching for their development, financial support to involve people with lower opportunities and less connected and who may already have rejected government. The role of the EC would be to support different elements of the ecosystems, such as training and empowerment facilities (connection to Erasmus+), train-the-trainer provisions, online connections realisation and support to citizen involvement and initiatives. One key aspect is to support the participation of grassroots / no-profit organisations, and their links with international networks, as they are often fragmented and struggle to build capacity and valorise their work, essential to make the voice of citizens heard.

We propose as an overarching challenge of the EC to promote the development and/or sustainability of ecosystems in all EU countries, for example, by initially determining a number of funded ecosystems per country to ensure the participation of a wider range of MS. One relevant condition is connected to which targets and which proven involvement of citizens needs to be accomplished, to ensure participation from several generations and types of stakeholders.

Promoting life-long learning – what are the obstacles?

Since a couple of decades, the living world of most Europeans has been hugely enlarged compared to former times. Social media, games, internet, connects everyone everywhere. Technology is growing at a fast pace and technology is often not looked at through the lens of the older person or person with less capabilities. Another trend are governmental and societal measures to create more efficiency in products and services provisions and to cut spending and to turn completely digital.

Freedom of choice, individual autonomy and independency were the framing keywords for this development. A development many people embrace, but that at the other hand went that rapidly, that many other people cannot follow anymore and get lost. Especially the most vulnerable (people with lower income, lower IQs or very old people) feel left alone and it is impossible for them to know where to find adequate life-long learning opportunities that keep them up-to-date. The first obstacle to adequate life-long learning is the complexity of society.

The other most significant obstacles are: finances, culture, unfamiliarity and unattractiveness. Having sufficient financial means to live and support the household in relation to participating in life-long learning is self-explanatory. In this concern, poverty in age due to breaks in employment, especially amongst women, may aggravate the situation.

Culture and traditions, both individually as also at work may be an obstacle in regions or nations that do not promote lifelong learning: why should one learn more than one is obliged to? “Too old to learn” is often heard. Also, in some countries, even if life-long learning is recognized in national legislation, it is still not fully supported by adequate sub-law acts or the concept of life-long learning is strongly promoted rhetorically, but in fact this process is not implemented in real life.

Unfamiliarity with the opportunities of learning, and perceived unattractiveness of education, is the third reason. Most people know learning and education opportunities only from the time they went to school and don't know that many innovative, attractive and easy-access and informal educational offers are developed since then.

Looking at the future, a lifelong approach with different and targeted measures depending on age ranges is needed and grassroot organisations are the most adequate to provide them. Coaching and guidance involving local and regional ecosystems are a possible implementation route and in that sense, the capacity-building for local non-profit organisations and their connection to internationalisation is also needed.

Improving participation in the labour market

Policy measures to entail lifelong learning approaches are also useful to improve the workability of older workers and self-employed people.

It is not enough anymore to go to school or to the University in the early years of life and to consider that more education is not needed. Especially if digital skills are also considered, continuous personal development and training is needed. There is not a certain point where one can say s/he is sufficiently digitally skilled; developments are so fast that permanent education and training on digital skills is required.

As specific measures to promote a better participation in the labour market, we recommend to enable (virtual) job coaching for life-long learning at work and at home, which may introduce the opportunity to stay longer in the working environment, possibly choosing different time schedules and roles.

One significant measure to implement that can be a real game-changer is to open up the general mandatory retirement ages and replace them to tailor made individual approaches. This should be combined with measures that provide or enforce the opportunities to work at home and online, as well as resilience and mental training at work to older workers with lower skills/qualifications.

Providing opportunities to introduce different time schedules for younger and older people that regards their personal stages of life and habits can also be effective, as well as to offer opportunities for job diversification to enable younger and older workers to perform their jobs according to their skills and maturation. Self-steering groups of professionals can support the distributions of tasks and assessment of results within the group.

Fostering mutual learning between younger and older generations of workers, for example by webinars, roundtables, workshops, etc. are adequate ways to allow knowledge transfers in both directions.

The silver economy in rural areas and less developed regions

Create better infrastructures for families to go to rural areas – with the increase of online working - is an opportunity to promote these regions and their traditional local facilities, as being safer, providing better conditions for young families and people in their mature years (40+). But better healthcare, education and cultural facilities, as well as digital infrastructure are needed.

Job creation – energy, sustainable jobs, agriculture, tourism - can also help to improve this situation and promote the EU self-sufficiency again.

Strengthening the touristic offer of such regions and areas conjugating it with innovative services that have an added value for health (thermal spas, healthy walks, healthy food, cultural attractions for cognitive stimulation, special accessible services, among others) may engage local residents and increase attractiveness, off-season and in season.

Enabling participation in society

NET4Age-Friendly and SHAFE propose ecosystem-based involvement at local/regional level that includes all kinds of older people to jointly work on the realisation of SHAFE – e.g. policy measures and legislation should mainstream and include assessment for older people (like energy-neutral, gender balance checks) when developed, in line with the Council Conclusions on Mainstreaming Ageing in Public Policies¹.

Life-long learning and attractive ways of remaining up-to-date with ICT developments is necessary. Traditional media could be used for this purpose, e.g. quizzes on television, or influencers (older adults) on national television to support, because active citizenship is no longer possible without the support of ICT tools.

A human-centred design approach is needed in terms of policy making, bearing in mind that there are still many older adults lacking skills in using technology and also the technology is not always seen by senior adults as a friendly solution. We keep saying/hearing that older people are not digitally literate but younger people will be prepared once they age. However, will younger people be tech-savvy for the technologies available in 20 years? Who knows how those technologies will be?

Beyond the issue of digital literacy we also need to look at the cost of digital connectivity. For older people on pensions which are below the average wage, the cost of broadband is often one bill too many.

We propose the Green Paper to stress more the concept of evolution and continuously changing needs, as well as concepts of continuous adaptability and personalization of environments (including work environments where this issue is even harder to address) to the evolving needs of all people as they age. The method of community participation as a tool to have continuous feedbacks for adaptability of the built environment is a relevant suggestion to consider.

The relationship between ageing people and the built environment is also essential, including the possibility of integrating spaces in buildings for inter-generational solidarity - crucial especially in view of future pandemics that will force us into residential spaces - but also safety and thermal comfort both indoor and outdoor, especially as we are heading towards an environmental crisis that will cause extreme events, poorly tolerated by sensitive populations.

It is also worth to mention that co-housing can be an example of a successful model that is environment-friendly and can be integrated with digitally supported services for health. Multigenerational living and housing can be a solution for single multigenerational households but multigenerational streets or multilevel apartment blocks, where people (not necessary from one family) can live and support each other are even a better option, that also promotes the resilience and support within neighbourhoods.

¹ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6976-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

Reap the benefits of the digitalisation of mobility and health services

Digitalisation of mobility solutions and healthcare services can provide important solutions to reach people living in rural and remote areas. eHealth can offer long distance monitoring, support at home, telemedicine. Digitalisation of mobility could lead for example to self-automated electric cars that can deliver services and products to people anywhere, without making personnel costs that often are the biggest expenditure.

Besides digital solutions, it remains necessary to provide a broad network of centres for health, social care, basic services and products offer.

To build such a network, it is essential to realise railway connections in Europe everywhere (sustainable, accessible, safe, affordable) to connect the main centres, and from there to many smaller centres at a distance, so that people can reach these different places within half a day. To further connect people, sufficient local transport facilities should also exist.

Additionally, mobile facilities, such as the mobile supermarket, mobile care centres to supply the households in rural and remote areas at a regular level are innovative solutions that may be of help – ad in this sense Europe can have a lot to learn from other countries, such as Australia or Canada who deal with long distances and have invested in solutions that we can benchmark or adapt.

Preventing loneliness and social isolation

Due to the epidemiological situation of COVID-19, isolation substantially increased, with a special focus on older people that were forced to be in self-isolation without live personal communication with each other. The creation of training centers to ensure their connection through digital technologies can provide communication, prevention of senile dementia, socialization in society and, as a result, the absence of loneliness and social isolation. These training centers are applicable not only for coronavirus infection, but also on the post pandemic.

One other aspect to be paid particular attention is that of people living at a long distance from cities or big villages, especially at older ages. Programmes that support funding or procuring of technical devices to health and social workers that provide care to the rural population are a relevant aspect to consider.

Housing conditions can also be an important aspect to improve the perception of loneliness, favouring opportunities for sharing through community spaces, collective gardens, areas for leisure activities, and spaces for socialising. Essential for limiting social isolation is the development of experimental projects for collaborative and intergenerational living that can provide an answer to the loneliness of the older adults by living under the same roof in separate flats but sharing collective spaces, costs of utilities, food, accommodation and home and service assistance, accounting for volunteer hours and reducing payment through subsidised rents.

Opportunities provided to citizens, especially older ones, to work as local communities' members and public and volunteers' organizations; to have concrete ways to communicate to the city public administration; low threshold opportunities to meet, including more diversity and different levels of activities, among others; all of these are examples of the call to provide sufficient support and guidance to people to remain connected to society, with a big focus on the fundamental rights of people in the EU, including older adults.

We thus propose to strengthen the culture of living labs, as places where older adults may contribute to valuable activities, also involving the younger generations.