

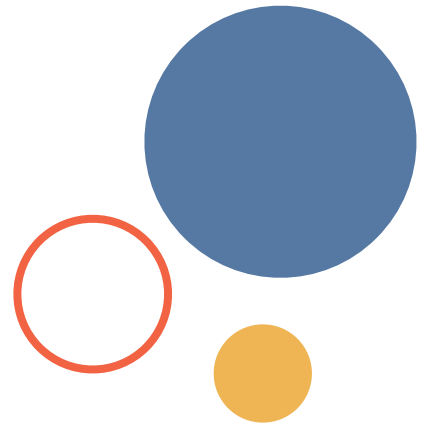
# Living in Old East Village

A report from the Aging  
in Neighbourhoods study



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We gratefully appreciate the people who participated in this study, for sharing your stories and spending your time with us.

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# Introduction



In 2018 and 2019, Western University researchers conducted a study that explored older adults' experiences living in the Old East Village and Argyle neighbourhoods of London, Ontario. We focused on their social activities, community participation, and mobility. This report presents a summary of the stories we heard from the 21 participants who live in Old East Village. It is part of our efforts to share the findings with the older adults who participated in the study and with community members both in London and more broadly.

The findings presented here provide a 'snapshot' of older adults' experiences in a particular time and place. This study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, and some of the places and programs discussed or pictured in this report have unfortunately closed or relocated. Our findings nonetheless identify some relevant

barriers and gaps experienced by older adults, which may have been intensified by the COVID-19 context.

We ultimately hope that this study can help increase understanding and awareness of older adults' lives in their neighbourhoods, including the challenges they face, strategies they use, and actions that can be taken to create neighbourhoods that promote their engagement and well-being.

The study team consisted of Western University Researchers Carri Hand (lead researcher), Debbie Laliberte Rudman, Colleen McGrath, Jason Gilliland, Jami McFarland (research assistant), Andrea Keber (research assistant), and a panel of older adults and other community members who guided the study.





# Study Details

We interviewed a total of 38 older adults living in two London neighbourhoods: Old East Village and Argyle. They offered stories about what they did, where they went, and who they interacted with in their neighbourhoods. Stories were gathered through four methods:



In Old East Village, we interviewed 21 older adults; three of these participants lived north of the area but participated there and one participant lived near the border of Old East Village and Argyle and considered both her neighbourhood. The group consisted of:

**21**

**Participants  
(5 Men &  
16 Women)**

**72**

**Average  
Age of  
Participant**

**22**

**Average  
Years in  
the Area**

In this report, we have included quotations from these older adults to illustrate findings, as well as photos taken by the older adults, labeled with a participant number to protect privacy (e.g., Participant 1).

# Study Findings

## Older Adults' Experiences of Living in Old East Village



Across older adults' stories, Old East Village was described as a historically working-class and industrial neighbourhood.

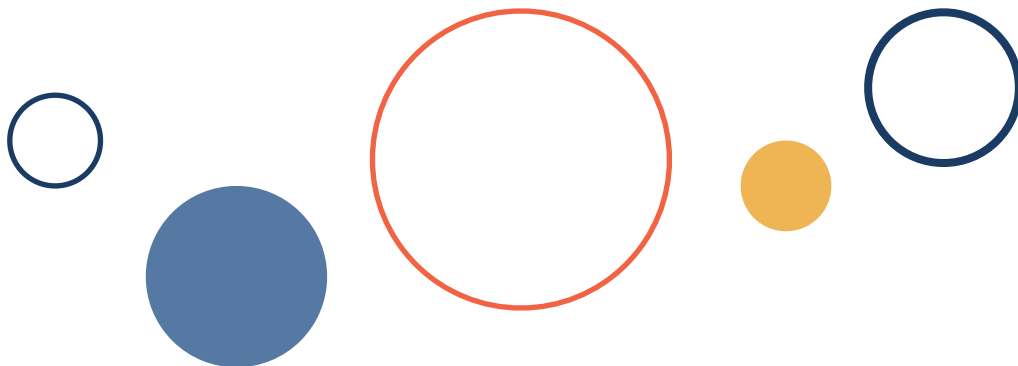
Participants told us that prior to the 1980s, the neighbourhood was a vibrant and bustling retail and social anchor for residents of both East London and London generally with valued independent stores (e.g., Hudson's) and factories (e.g., O-Pee-Chee, McCormick's, and Kellogg's) offering employment close at hand.

Participants also described negative changes in the neighbourhood, including the closure of these places, significant changes to the neighbourhood's infrastructure (e.g., configuring Dundas Street from Adelaide Street to Lyle Street as a winding S shape from about 1975 to 1999), and challenges related to homelessness and substance use.

Due to many revitalization efforts, including designation of a large part of the neighbourhood as an Ontario Heritage Conservation District and a renewed interest in Lilley's Corners (a heritage property at Adelaide and Dundas streets) and other neighbourhood sites, participants described how the neighbourhood has gradually been experiencing a renaissance, which has attracted interest from people across the city.

Though Old East Village has recently experienced rapid development (e.g., high-rise apartment buildings), older adults often described a lack of relevant resources and increasing safety issues as barriers to their full participation in the neighbourhood.

In what follows, we identify five key themes that older adults discussed. The table below provides a summary of what the older adults shared with us.



# Study Findings

## Older Adults' Experiences of Living in Old East Village



1

### Being Out and About

- Location in the neighbourhood and access to a vehicle contributed to older adults' dependence on services in the neighbourhood
- Physical surroundings and social issues shaped how older adults moved around the neighbourhood

2

### Shopping and Accessing Services

- Essential shops and services had moved out the neighbourhood
- Cost and a lack of essential services limited older adults' abilities to shop locally
- New shops and services failed to meet the basic needs of residents

3

### Participating in Leisure Activities

- Need for both multi-generational and senior-specific opportunities for recreation
- Cost limited older adults' abilities to participate in recreational activities in the neighbourhood
- Fitness and exercise programs that do not accommodate various abilities and mobilities restricted older adults' opportunities to be active
- Need for affordable and casual restaurants

4

### Socializing with Others

- Porches and gardens supported older adults' socializing
- Need for deeper relationships with neighbours
- Dogs and children also supported older adults' socializing
- Need for more inclusive and welcoming community spaces

5

### Caring for the Neighbourhood

- Older adults significantly contributed to the neighbourhood
- Need for older adults' contributions to be recognized and valued
- Volunteer expectations need to be age-friendly

# Being Out and About

“

*At night I would stay on the street side [of the sidewalk], away from alleyways or recessed doors.*

**- Participant 15**

”

We heard that older adults move around Old East Village in a variety of ways. Participants told us that getting around the neighbourhood looks different depending on where you live, how close you are to the shops and services, and if you have access to a car. Participants who live closer to the business corridor or who don't own a car often said they spend a lot of time along Dundas Street, walking, riding a bike, or taking the bus to get to where they need to go. Participants who live far from the business corridor or who drive often said that they leave the neighbourhood more frequently, using their cars to do so.

Participants also told us that moving from one place to another is shaped by the surroundings. For example, participants talked about how the condition of the physical environment can make it easier or more difficult to get around the neighbourhood. They said that things like broken sidewalks and busy or fast crosswalks make it harder to get from place to place. Conversely, things like automatic doors and accessible elevators in good working order made it easier to get around.

Shopping in the neighbourhood was substantially impacted by barriers to mobility. For example, one participant who uses a motorized scooter talked about how she avoided visiting one local



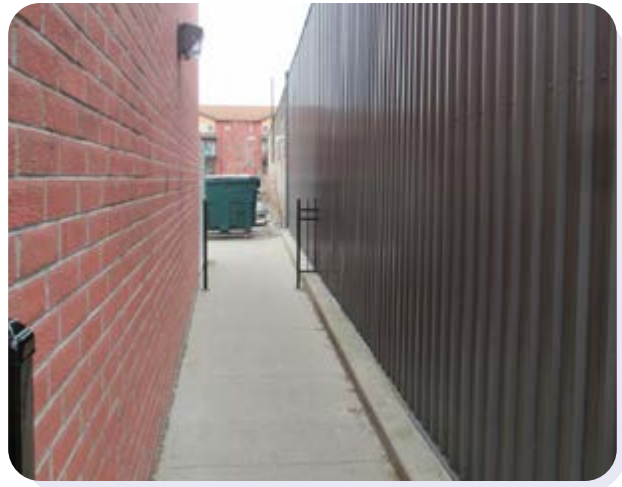
Bike lanes in Old East Village (Participant 5)

shop because its elevator had some limitations that made shopping there more difficult than in places that have ramps or easy elevator access. She said, “I don't like to make a fuss, but I would prefer it if one of the guys that always has the key to the elevator, to get him to open the elevator and just let me stand in it to come up. But because it's five steps, not 10 or whatever, I take them. But it hurts...I just don't like to bother people” (Participant 10). Another participant told us that having a cart to lean on made shopping at some stores more accessible. She said, “It's just as I've gotten older, I just notice it's much easier if you have a cart. You can go through the store a lot longer. So, I would suggest that they get carts” (Participant 16).

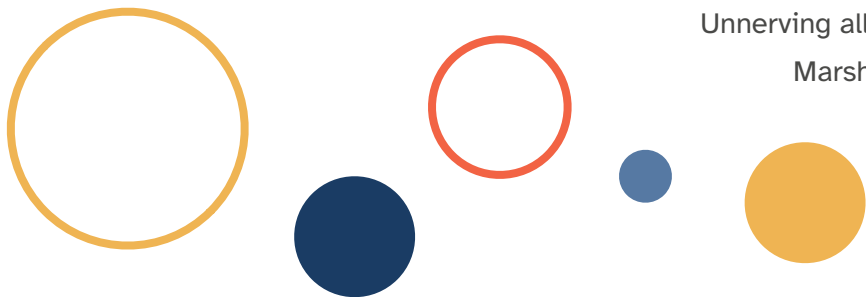
Finally, participants talked about how social issues such as homelessness and substance use in the neighbourhood affected how, where, and when they moved around. In particular, participants said that they often encountered people crowding and camping along Dundas Street where many social services exist. Some participants talked about feeling scared, unsafe, or physically unable to walk on these sidewalks when large and sometimes rowdy groups of people were there. Some participants said they used safety strategies (e.g., avoiding eye contact, being vigilant, changing sides of the street, etc.) when walking along Dundas, while others said they avoided this area altogether.

Participants also talked about avoiding poorly lit alleyways, parking lots, and parks because of hazards in the environment. For example, some described needing to be cautious about discarded needles in certain areas: “You have to be really conscious of...going to McMahan Park, checking for needles, stuff like this” (Participant 3). Another said she avoided walking through a certain alley at night because “it’s really scary. It’s really unnerving to walk through there, and people are always leaving garbage, just—you never know who’s going to go through there” (Participant 8)

“It’s hard because you have to park in the back and then you have to walk around to the front. They’ve talked about putting a door in the back for people just so it would be easier access. And then you can’t—you don’t get a cart to carry your stuff out to the [car]...and I need that, you know? I can’t carry stuff very far or do a lot. I’m very limited, at this time anyways, with what I can do because I just get out of breath...It’s accessible because they do have an elevator. You don’t even have to do the steps. It’s just that you don’t have a grocery cart to take out to your car.”  
- Participant 11



Unnerving alley connecting Dundas St. to Marshall St. (Participant 8)





## Shopping & Accessing Services

Participants explained that the way they shop and access services had changed over the decades and years. They described the neighbourhood’s business corridor as an important shopping district before the 1980s. Since then, participants told us how many valued businesses, like the department store, the bank, and the post office, have closed, making it more

“

*We don’t have any normal shopping in the area, you know, regular shopping.*

**- Participant 8**

”

difficult to run errands; they now often have to leave the neighbourhood to get things they need. One participant said that a new bank was “very badly needed” (Participant 12) and others described the location of the new bank as less than ideal for those living in Old East Village’s seniors’ housing block.

“

*The bank is closed now, but they’re talking about opening a new one next fall...but that won’t be as close. It will be at Ontario and Dundas, which is quite a distance for us seniors. You know, we’d either have to take a bus or get somebody to drive us to the other location where they’re going to have a bank.*

**- Participant 8**

”



The closed bank (Participant 17)



Silk Road Thrift Store (Participant 8)

Participants also told us that businesses like the OEV Grocer, which closed permanently in June 2020, and The Market at Western Fair are convenient, but are also often expensive and do not carry the variety of items that may be found in larger stores.

“

*Any time I've got a car, I do a big shopping. I get the big stuff, but I'll go over to [the local grocery store, since closed] all the time to get fruit. It's more expensive there than, say, Food Basics or No Frills.*

**- Participant 1**

*I've been in [The Market at Western Fair] and picked up a few things, but their prices are way more than...if you went to a grocery store. So I don't tend to, but if I'm walking back and I just need some cilantro or something, I'll go.*

**- Participant 14**

*I usually get my groceries at Giant Tiger or No Frills, or the Dollar Store, which there isn't any in this specific area...There's a market on the weekends but if you need something through the week you have to go out of the neighbourhood to get it.*

**- Participant 16**

*I normally go out to Argyle Mall to do my shopping or I go up to FreshCo. It's cheaper if you go to the major stores than if you go to the small stores.*

**- Participant 8**

”

There were differing opinions about whether the types of shops on the commercial corridor meet the needs of residents. For example, some participants said they appreciated and enjoyed the second-hand stores along Dundas Street, while others felt these stores were impractical and too numerous. Some participants also talked about how trendy shops and services, like a swanky barbershop (since closed) and craft distilleries, were challenging the neighbourhood's village-feel. Described by participants as “boutique-y places that are quite expensive” (Participant 5), trendy shops were thought to be inconsistent with the needs of residents, who were said to be “everyday or

old-fashioned families” (Participant 15). Many participants talked about the neighbourhood lacking essential resources, such as a dollar store.

Finally, participants said that they often must leave the neighbourhood to get a range of needed products; however, they told us that a local pharmacy is a convenient place from which to buy some necessities. Participants also spoke about how their doctors' appointments are frequently outside of the neighbourhood, but noted their satisfaction with pet services closer to home, such as London Alternative Veterinary Services (since closed) and Hairy Barkers.

## Participating in Leisure Activities

Participants told us that there are some opportunities for recreation in the neighbourhood, like playing card games at the community center, listening to music at local pubs, the Aeolian, or at block parties, seeing a show at the Palace, going to the library, or having a drink at one of the many

“

*The block parties that we had always had bands...It would be the music that would bring these people together.*

**- Participant 3**

”

local breweries, such as London Brewing Co-Operative and Anderson Craft Ales. Some participants expressed excitement about the new recreational venues being built in the neighbourhood, notably the redevelopment of the Kellogg’s factory, which includes The Factory and Powerhouse Brewery.



London Brewing Co-operative  
(Participant 18)



The Palace Theatre  
(Participant 9)

However, participants also expressed that opportunities for recreation in Old East Village are limited in a number of ways. For example, some participants told us that they didn’t want to do activities understood to be for ‘seniors’, like playing cards. Conversely, others felt that there were not enough senior-specific activities in the neighbourhood. These participants talked

about how it was necessary to create their own opportunities for recreation, like beginning a book club for older women or organizing a crafting circle. Others talked about needing extra resources; namely, money for things like attending performances at the Palace Theatre or the Aeolian Hall.

“

*[I'm] definitely not involved, and from what I know of the [senior's program at the local community centre], it's not the kind of thing I'm interested in. I don't play cards and I don't want to talk about hip replacements.*

**- Participant 15**

”

Participants noted several local options for exercising and staying active. One participant talked about playing pickleball at Boyle Memorial Community Centre. Another mentioned using the BMO Centre to run laps. Several participants told us that they take free Tai Chi classes at the London InterCommunity Health Centre (LIHC). Others said they go to Huff N Puff classes, like aqua fit and line dancing, at the Carling Heights Optimist Community Centre.

However, some participants said they felt like some of the available fitness programs offered in the neighbourhood, including those meant for older adults, were not tailored to various abilities and mobility levels, which restricted their opportunities for being active. Participants described some recreational spaces as uncomfortable or unwelcoming. For example, one participant described local exercise programs and facilities as designed “for young

people, you know, [those who are] going to give 110% every time they do an exercise,” with instructors who could be judgmental: “I know my limitations, I know they're not good...but she was being very negative about my abilities” (Participant 16). Another participant felt she had to leave some seniors' fitness programs after she started to use a cane. She said, “I just found it frustrating. What I could do and what I can do are different things and it's just not comfortable” (Participant 21).

Participants talked about wanting to see changes that would support their leisure. They wanted an old-fashioned diner and/or a fast-food chain to open in the neighbourhood. Although some participants said that they enjoy the restaurants in the neighbourhood, like the Root Cellar, Unique Food Attitudes, and Momos, others said they feel a more inexpensive, casual restaurant is missing.

“

*[The new restaurants here are] expensive, so we don't go in there. So, just an ordinary family restaurant where you can go and have a sandwich and a cup of coffee, a piece of pie, whatever...that's what's missing here.*

**- Participant 11**

”

“

*We have everything offered, but we would like to have a fast-food restaurant closer, especially for the street people, so they have a place to go in and have a coffee. And, again, they could be seniors.*

**- Participant 12**

”



## Socializing with Others

We heard from participants that East London generally, but Old East Village specifically, is known for being a ‘true’ neighbourhood, meaning that it is a community-oriented place where people know their neighbours. Participants described personal lending libraries, outdoor decorations, historical placards, and plant-sharing as typical symbols of the neighbourhood’s spirit of collectivity. Participants told us that they like having relationships with other residents and enjoy



Community lending library (Participant 13)

*I’ve just noticed that difference with the loss of the front porch and the advent of the back deck.*

**- Participant 2**

being referred to by name when shopping at local stores.

Porches, verandas, front yards, and gardens were described as key places where conversations happen with neighbours. Although some participants said they felt people were spending less time on their front porches in favour of being in their backyards, many felt that ‘front porch culture’ is a central feature of living in Old East Village.



Porch and garden (Participant 9)

*In terms of what it’s like to be in the neighbourhood...it was easy to meet people in this neighbourhood because it’s a neighbourhood that has verandas. So, if you’re sitting in your veranda [with] a cup of coffee or glass of wine or something...you’d say hello and over time you meet people. And I think that’s really important because I have friends that live in other neighbourhoods in the suburbs and they’re always surprised if they come and visit and we’re staying outside, all the people that we know come by. Some of them say, ‘We don’t even know who our neighbours are. We don’t even say hello to our neighbours. We don’t wave at all to our neighbours.*

**- Participant 18**

Participants also reported a culture of helping others. Many talked about feeling they could rely on their neighbours if they were in trouble. However, they also spoke about feeling that their relationships with their neighbours are not necessarily deep; that is, they don't have their neighbours over for dinner or for tea or coffee.



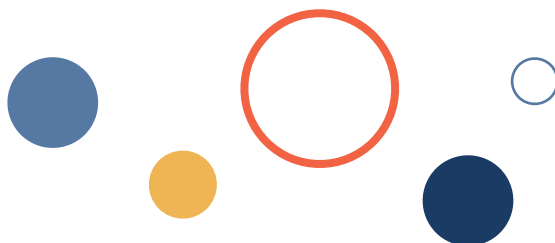
A dog at a local shop (Participant 6)

“I know them [neighbours] well, but not...The neighbours don't socialize with each other a lot. It's more like if you need them, knock on the door; they'd be happy to help you. But they're not going back and forth for coffee or whatever.

- Participant 2

Some participants described feeling a lack of belonging in certain community and public spaces, like in churches or on public transportation. For example, one participant described feeling invisible when riding the bus. “[There is] no interaction whatsoever with the other people,” he said. “I can't even get eye contact most of the time. I call it my time bubble. I'm actually on the bus and they're actually on the bus, but we're just not here in the exact same time slot and that's what it actually feels like—I'm not there at the same time” (Participant 5).

Participants told us about the important roles that dogs and children play in starting and maintaining relationships. They spoke about feeling like dogs and children open the door for conversation. However, some said they felt overlooked by their neighbours unless they had a dog to walk. For example, one participant said, “We have neighbours that we [had] never ever spoke[n] to. And then we got the dog, and suddenly we're good enough to talk to. It was very strange...all of a sudden, everybody knows the dog. Nobody knows you. Everybody knows *the dogs*” (Participant 7).



## Caring for the Neighbourhood

Participants told us that they take care of Old East Village in a number of ways, including volunteering, taking care of neighbours, looking after children, and participating in civic activities like working to make change in the community.

“

*There's a mother [in the neighbourhood], she has a little four-year-old son and I babysit him for a few hours a week, which is kind of nice. And not for payment, I just go in and, you know, get him ready for bed and tuck him in and it's just nice, just nice to have that interaction.*

- Participant 16

”

Participants talked about formal ways of contributing, like volunteering, and some participants noted that they had held volunteer positions for years and even decades. Participants also talked about how they played a central role in developing and leading important initiatives that fostered a sense of community, such as establishing a large portion of the neighbourhood as a heritage conservation district, reclaiming public spaces like Queens Park for public use, and organizing affordable entertainment at Western Fair District, St. Regis Tavern (since closed), and Life\*Spin.

“

*They were going to close Lorne Ave [school]...and the community really, really came together to try and stop that.*

- Participant 3

”

Participants also talked about the more informal ways that they contribute to the neighbourhood. For example, some participants told us how they take care of family members and neighbours by doing things like bringing food after an illness or surgery.

Participants also told us how they organize around issues facing the community, like rallying to try to keep the Lorne Avenue Public School open, listening to and learning from Indigenous community members, supporting local businesses, and buying from, as well as donating to, charitable organizations, such as Life\*Spin's Free Store, Ark Aid Mission, the Mission Store, and the Teen Challenge Thrift Store.



Buying from thrift stores (Participant 10)

One participant said that he shopped regularly at the Market at Western Fair because it was important for him to support “people that are running their own business[es], small business[es]” (Participant 18). Others told us about covering graffiti and reporting safety issues to authorities, calling the City of London to report broken sidewalks and streetlights, for example:

“

*I walk all over the neighbourhood, all over, anywhere from the old Kellogg’s building, as far as Huron Street, as far South as Hamilton, and far West as the west side of the river. In doing that I’ve kind of adopted a hobby of reporting burned out streetlights, both just, you know, being a good citizen and for safety purposes as well.*

**- Participant 5**

”



Covering graffiti (Participant 5)

“

*I volunteer in [Old East Village] ... I’m actually going to talk to [the place where this participant volunteers] about how I’m feeling because I’ve heard other people say similar kinds of things that I’m saying -- that it’s a lot of work for volunteers. And it’s quite hard work.*

**- Participant 4**

”

Although participants could be described as acting as guardians of the neighbourhood, they spoke about sometimes feelings overused and undervalued in this work. Some told us they feel they are being asked to do more than they want or are capable of at times. For example, some participants felt they were worked too hard in their volunteer roles, dedicating too many hours to the work or having to stay out late into the evening.



Reporting safety issues (Participant 10)



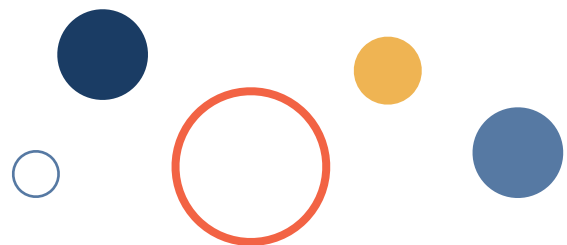
# Moving Research into Action

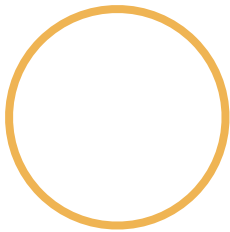


In March 2020, researchers from Western University met with a group of approximately 25 older adult residents from Old East Village at the Aeolian Hall to share these findings and discuss how they could be used to improve older adults' experiences of living in this neighbourhood. Attendees indicated that the findings related to "Being Out and About" and "Caring for the Neighbourhood" were the most important themes for them. In particular, attendees highlighted safety issues such as crowded sidewalks, littering, and disruptive behaviour that they attributed to homelessness, as well as the importance of reporting environmental hazards like exposed needles and broken sidewalks. Attendees made several suggestions for actions that could be taken:

- Develop strategies for safety
- Remove hazards from the environment
- Address the ease of use of public transportation
- Improve the availability of certain goods and services (e.g., dollar store and affordable diner/restaurant)
- Develop opportunities to stay connected
- Help people stay in the neighbourhood as they age

At the end of this event, we agreed to meet again as a group to start addressing some of these suggestions. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our meeting was postponed and our plans and ability to make change as a group were restricted. Nonetheless, beginning in autumn 2020, we held online community meetings to begin to use study findings to create neighbourhood change. In 2021 we developed a resource booklet for older adults in Old East Village, with tips for daily living and staying connected. We also shared study findings with community members through newsletters and reports. In 2022 we distributed a survey to older adults in Old East Village, to find out more about what social, volunteer, and other opportunities they would like to see in the neighbourhood. We continue to meet online as a group to plan achievable goals and take action aimed at making Old East Village more age-friendly.





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