

# Irish Public Libraries as safe, social spaces for older adults; a Case Study of Kildare Library and Arts Service

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## Abstract

Public Libraries represent a welcoming, social environment for many of us, but for none more so than our older adults who place significant value on their library visits and interactions. This case study examines the effectiveness of Kildare Library and Arts Service's Age Friendly practices in creating safe, social spaces for older adults. The research objectives include critically examining library accessibility, appraising programming, exploring staff opinions on service and investigating digital inclusion for older patrons.

A literature review was carried out to place the topic in context (down to a local perspective) and to provide an initial overview for the case study. Following on from this review, the data collection methods included conversational group, librarian and mobile librarian interviews, gathering of observational data in-branch and statistical analysis.

The findings indicate that both patrons and staff feel their libraries are safe, social spaces while over 90% of branches checked returned positive responses. Analysis of programming data indicates a need for more Age Friendly events to be scheduled, especially in part-time branches.

The research findings would be of interest to stakeholders as an 'on-the-ground- investigation' into the safe and social nature of Kildare Library environments. Although the lack of formal, structured KLAS policies was highlighted, this research is a good starting point for any library service, including KLAS, seeking to critically examine their older adult service provision.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Research Question

What does your local, public library mean to you? What phrases come to mind when you hear the word 'library'? Books? Knowledge? Community? Or perhaps, as for many, the word 'library' conjures up images of a peaceful, safe, relaxing, space where the outside world can be shut out for awhile and day-to-day problems left at the door to be collected on the way out. According to Freyne (2017), "Irish people love their libraries. They use them to access books, DVDs, music, free courses, book and film clubs and performances. According to figures from 2017, the Central Library gets an average of 1,563 visitors a day and has 24,682 active borrowers."

More importantly, a community library can offer companionship and a sense of 'togetherness' to patrons of all ages but, most especially, to older adults who often make visiting their library a priority; in fact, for many, this daily/weekly routine is their only opportunity to connect with others. From a global perspective, people are living longer lives. According to the World Health Organisation (2022), "People worldwide are living longer. Today most people can expect to live into their sixties and beyond. Every country in the world is experiencing growth in both the size and the proportion of older

persons in the population. By 2030, 1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 60 years or over. At this time the share of the population aged 60 years and over will increase from 1 billion in 2020 to 1.4 billion". This is mirrored on a national level in Ireland with the Department of Finance stating "The scientific evidence is clear and unambiguous: people are living longer, while fewer babies are being born in Ireland; in short, Ireland's population is ageing. This natural process is set to accelerate over the medium- and longer-term. (Government of Ireland 2021). Locally, the '65+' cohort now represents nearly 10% of the total county population - according to the Kildare Age Friendly County Strategy (2023-2027), "Kildare is a county with a sizeable older population (over 22,000) living in both large urban centres and sparsely populated rural areas".

In Ireland, each of the 31 local authorities (County Councils) is responsible for delivering an effective Public Library Service. Regarding meeting the needs of the older demographic, each county council leads a local 'Age Friendly Programme' under the aegis of 'Age Friendly Ireland' whose guidelines are followed by all council departments, including public libraries – "Age Friendly Ireland operates as a shared service centre of local government hosted by Meath County Council. The shared service centre supports a network of 31 local Age Friendly Programmes which are led by local authorities and which involve many stakeholders from other public bodies, universities, community/voluntary and private sector partners. The shared service supports a number of strategic national structures and provides technical guidance to its networks." (Age Friendly Ireland 2022).

Kildare Library and Arts Service operates a network of 15 libraries - 7 Main branches, 8 Part-time locations and 1 Mobile library serving 26 locations on a 3week timetable (See Appendix 1). With clear evidence of an ageing population comes a responsibility at local government level to rise to the challenge of ensuring that requirements of older adults are taken into consideration, including the broad objective of ensuring that libraries throughout the County are inclusive, welcoming, safe and social spaces. To this effect, KLAS' Age Friendly Programme has been in operation since 2014 and each branch includes specific AF 'Key Actions' for staff in their annual Library Team Development Plans - management/staff are required to familiarise themselves with these plans as part of their own PDP. However, despite the existence of these 'Key Actions' and in order to investigate the reality of older patrons' experiences, it is necessary to question if checks are in place to ensure that AF recommendations are carried out and if staff themselves feel that branches are warm and welcoming – are the Kildare branches safe, social spaces for older adults?

## 2 Rationale

This case study investigates the current reality of how Kildare libraries 'feel' to older patrons with a view to determining if they are safe, social spaces. As we steadily emerged from a two-year pandemic, recently embracing the re-opening of Irish libraries, it has never been more essential for libraries to deliver on their promises to our older generation, many of whom were cocooned for long periods, awaiting the re-starting of community life. According to Dalmer and Mitrovica (2022), "A rapidly growing and changing older adult population presents both opportunities and challenge for public libraries as they responsively adjust their programming, services, materials, and spaces to maximize and emphasize feelings of social connectedness among this age group. Older adults were the final demographic to return to libraries and now, more than ever, library spaces should be welcoming and trusted.

This case study serves as a timely opportunity to critically examine several aspects of the library from older adults' standpoints – from outreach to accessibility, staff training to programming, accessibility to digital inclusion. It is hoped that by exploring all aspects of AF practices through observation and

conversational group/staff interviews that rich, qualitative data will emerge around the value and impact of libraries, over and above what statistics and numbers reveal – “Statistics are for sure important and over years they say something about the use of libraries. But they far from cover the whole picture when it comes to the impact and value that libraries create in communities. The numbers don’t show us how libraries connect people and foster social infrastructure” (Lauersen, 2020). A literature gap exists, locally and nationally, around the topic of libraries as safe, social spaces for older adults. This research would be beneficial to KLAS as it offers an insight into issues surrounding their older patrons. The importance of this case study is underpinned firstly by personal observation and secondly by the need to appreciate that the ‘requirements’ of older patrons should be seen as an opportunity to appreciate all that this generation have contributed – our societies, communities, families and shared wisdom – “Older people have a wealth of knowledge and experience, and they contribute in critical ways to their families and communities. Of course, wellbeing in later life can be affected by declines in health. Our ageing population is linked to an increased need for services that promote and protect health, well-being, and quality of life in older age” (ALONE, 2022). Preliminary inquiries show that a research gap exists on a local and national level with regard to the effectiveness of AF practices in Irish public libraries; this study presents an opportunity to explore the relationship between the narrative and reality.

### 1.3 Aim and Objectives

The aim of the research was to examine the effectiveness of Kildare Library Service’ Age Friendly practices in creating safe, social spaces for older adults.

The research objectives are as follows –

1. To examine critically the accessibility of library buildings and assess whether this measures up to policy recommendations.
2. To investigate the provision of Age Friendly library programming.
3. To explore staff opinions on the suitability of service offered to older patrons.
4. To appraise digital inclusion for older adults in Kildare Library Service.

### 1.4 Value of Research

In terms of the value of this case study, the research would be useful to the management of KLAS; it is the first of its nature since the introduction of the AF initiative in 2014 thereby filling a research gap. It provides up-to-date information/statistics regarding AF practices in all branches and the results of both accessibility checks and in-branch observation may have a practical application when reviewing AF library practices.

This research provides a snapshot of current AF service provision in Kildare Libraries and its recommendations may be assessed when preparing future service delivery plans. These findings may also be of value to other local authorities insofar as they relate to their own practices. It is hoped that, ultimately, this research will benefit both library staff and older patrons.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a comprehensive review of existing theory and evaluates the current state of research regarding libraries as safe, social spaces for older adults. Moving from a broad overview of older adult needs to defining the community library, to examining the global, national and local standpoints, the literature examined was chosen to establish context and build an understanding of the importance of the topic. Given the absence of current academic literature from an Irish perspective, emphasis has been placed on strategy documents, government reports and national programmes to collate the most relevant information in addition to the international perspectives.

### 2.2 The needs of older adults

As humans, we all have basic emotional, physical and psychological needs that we attempt to meet either alone or with aid from others. These needs vary, depending on our stage of ageing, personal circumstances, relationships, financial status, physical/mental health. According to Age Action Ireland's 'State of Ageing in Ireland' Report (2022 p. 8), "More than one in four adults in Ireland is aged 60 or older, representing 1.04 million people. Older persons are highly diverse in their capacities and circumstances".

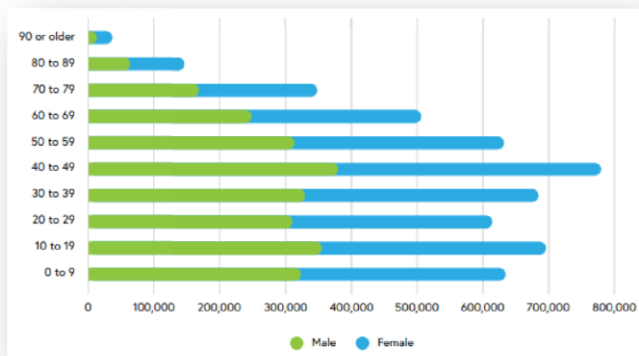


Fig. 1 Age Action Ireland - Estimated Population of Ireland, 2022

In its 'Principles for Older Persons' resolution 46/91, The United Nations General Assembly (OHCHR 1996-2023) encourages governments to incorporate independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity into their national programmes for older adults. Humans are social animals by nature; we also have societal needs – a sense of belonging, recognition from our peers, acceptance and respect and as we age, we can improve our quality of life and protect against illness by satisfying these needs. In order to enjoy healthy ageing, personal wellbeing comes into focus as we may require increased levels of care – "Wellbeing is a wide-ranging concept when used in relation to the concerns of older people. It refers not just to the absence of disease or infirmity, but also to meeting critical emotional and psychological needs and optimal functioning, both individually and socially" (St. Patrick's Mental Health Services, 2019). This is notable in the context of the services libraries can provide around wellbeing.

Similarly, the UK Government's Mental Health and Wellbeing JSNA Toolkit (2019) suggests that productive healthy ageing is about enabling improved health and wellbeing, increasing independence, and resilience to adversity. It also includes having the ability to be financially secure,

engaging in social activities, being socially connected with friendships and support, and enjoying life whereas the Irish Government's latest 'National Positive Ageing Strategy' (2013 p. 13) placed emphasis on creating a shift in mindset to place ageing firmly on the national agenda - "Particular attention should also be paid to the needs of more marginalised, vulnerable, hard to-reach and minority groups of older people such as the frail and the oldest old (aged 80 years and over); people living in rural areas; persons with impaired mental capacity or dementia and those who care for them; older migrants and people from different ethnic backgrounds; older people with specific physical and intellectual disabilities; Travellers; and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older people". This is particularly relevant to the inclusivity of public libraries.

Participating in society, interacting with others and feeling safe in their surroundings are primary needs of older adults. Supporting this view, Gallagher (2012) notes that linking aspects of place and social ties suggests the importance of social values and communal interactions in contributing to well-being. Relationships in socio-spatial settings may have particular significance in the lives of older people amidst the multiple and layered relationships of their individual lives and life histories.

On a global level, the Vision of the World Health Organisation's 'Global Strategy and Action Plan on Health and Ageing' (2016-2020) is 'a world in which everyone can live a long and healthy life', with Strategic Objective 2 'Developing Age Friendly Environments' stating "Environments are the contexts in which people live their lives. Environments that are age-friendly help to foster Healthy Ageing in two ways: by supporting the building and maintenance of intrinsic capacity across the life course, and by enabling greater functional ability so that people with varying levels of capacity can do the things they value" (p.18).

<b>Vision</b>	<b>A world in which everyone can live a long and healthy life.</b>
<b>Strategic objectives</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Commitment to action on Healthy Ageing in every country.</li> <li>2. Developing age-friendly environments.</li> <li>3. Aligning health systems to the needs of older populations.</li> <li>4. Developing sustainable and equitable systems for providing long-term care (home, communities and institutions).</li> <li>5. Improving measurement, monitoring and research on Healthy Ageing.</li> </ol>
<b>Action plan 2016-2020 Goals</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Five years of evidence-based action to maximize functional ability that reaches every person.</li> <li>2. By 2020, establish evidence and partnerships necessary to support a Decade of Healthy Ageing from 2020 to 2030.</li> </ol>

Fig. 2 WHO – Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health - Vision, Strategic Objectives and Action Plan 2016-2020 Goals

The literature suggests that psychological wellbeing is the primary need of older adults and that society has begun to further tune into the requirements of its older generations due to the recent exponential growth in their numbers. It can be stated that public libraries should prioritise this need when developing older adult service plans.

### 2.3 Defining 'The Public Library'

In lieu of providing strict clarification on the term, much of the literature on defining the public library pays particular attention to what is provided, the services/benefits available, in addition to emphasising libraries' contribution to society.

Ireland's public libraries story begins at the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the foundation of Marsh's Library in 1707. Later, and signalling the advent of the municipal public library, Dundalk Library, County Louth, was the first public library in Ireland to open under the Public Libraries (Ireland) Act 1855 which allowed local authorities to establish a library and levy a maximum rate of one penny to support it (IFLA WLIC 2022). Over 300 years later, Ireland's public library service is provided across the 31 local authorities. Hunt (2023) writes that from Buncrana to Bandon, Inisbofin to Inchicore, there is a place to go and to be where you don't have to spend a thing. You'll find books, information, wifi, a place to study and to work, and also a place to meet, to learn and to play. Sometimes it's a place to keep warm. This is consistent with the requirement for wellbeing support.

The term 'public library' evokes images of a communal, accessible, free, educational, safe space – Wexford Library Development Plan 2020-2025 (2020) suggests that public libraries are a valuable resource for our communities. They provide free, open and democratic public spaces for the citizens of our county. They allow people to come together for a common purpose, to connect and to collaborate. This is echoed in the 2019-2023 Strategic Direction Plan for Dublin City Libraries (2019) where, responding to ongoing social digital and economic shifts, it is suggested that library spaces are changing to become multi-purpose community facilities that contribute to place-making and community connection, providing a space for creativity and participation, where people come together to share ideas and create new knowledge. This emphasis on 'community' is reflected in the last two National Library Strategy documents (2013 and 2018) and in the newly-launched 2023-2027 Strategy.

In 'Opportunities For All – 2013-2017' (2013), public libraries are described as attractive and welcoming spaces where all members of the community can access knowledge, ideas and information, and where people can reflect, connect and learn.

Similarly, 'Our Public Libraries 2022' (2018) suggests the ethos of the public library is to serve the people and the community, through its civic presence and provision of information, learning and culture, providing a safe, democratic space, integrated into the local community and accessible to all. In the same vein, the current Strategy outlines how, through 330 branches, 23 mobile libraries, and multiple digital channels, our libraries provide accessible, friendly, and truly civic spaces. They help people to go on voyages of reading and escapism, attend interesting events and activities, or engage with new technologies and learn new skills (The Library is the Place: Information, Recreation, Inspiration - National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027, p.5).

Echoing the Irish context, CILIP (2018) maintains that libraries provide a range of benefits to individuals, communities, wider-society and the economy by improving literacy, health and wellbeing, developing skills and supporting economic growth. Similarly, according to Libraries NI (2020), libraries are free, inclusive, shared, accessible, and trusted spaces, embedded in communities and used by people of all ages, cultures and background while James (2018) suggests that as communal institutions, they offer access, not just to literature and information, but the company of other people. Long seen as places offering solitude and quiet study, libraries are now more likely to be central hubs for people in the local community to interact.

From the Danish perspective, a 2021 survey carried out by Roskilde Central Library found that public library services are complementary and impactful in multiple ways – "Denmark's public libraries are a haven in which users can immerse themselves and experience well-being" (The impact of public libraries in Denmark: A haven in our community, p.16).

This is consistent with the view of the South Australian Public Library Network (2019) who claim there are multiple benefits to be gained from a dynamic and innovative network of public libraries based in the heart of communities. These include a more literate society, social cohesion and tolerance, informed decision making and a best start in life for our children while the American Public Library Association (2022) have a clear, succinct vision in their Strategic Plan 2022-2026 – ‘A Dynamic public library is the heart of every community’. Overall, the literature collectively points to the overarching themes of community, trusted, accessible spaces and wellbeing.

## 2.4 Libraries and older adults – Safe, Social Spaces – the Global Viewpoint

The Oxford English Dictionary (2023) defines a ‘safe space’ as a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm; a ‘social space’ is defined as space available or intended for social interaction. In respect to public libraries it could reasonably be expected that, given their role as a trusted, local hubs, community libraries embody the ‘safe, social space’. As Reid (2023) suggests ‘Public libraries are, however, first and foremost, about safe and accessible spaces: free, trusted, safe, neutral, communal, public spaces where no expectations are placed on those who walk through the doors’.

From an older adult standpoint, Horton (2019) examines what specific resources libraries need to put in place as this demographic becomes a more noteworthy segment of overall public library visitor numbers (USA), including space resources, budget allocations and most importantly, respect and consideration. Taking a more all-embracing view and from the perspective of the Covid-19 pandemic (USA) and its aftermath, Lenstra et al (2021) found that focus needs to be more firmly placed on ensuring that public librarians are more involved in supporting older people from a broader ‘ageing’ perspective while Barbakoff (2023) proposes that libraries support social connection and a sense of belonging at every age. This is especially important for older adults, who are at higher risk for social isolation.

This view is supported by Breevoort (2020) who writes that the 21st century library is an intersection of people and purposes. As national health data highlights a critical need for connection, the social role of libraries should not be overlooked. However, additional research is needed to evaluate the impact libraries have on the overall social wellbeing of patrons and the untapped potential for the wider—lonelier—public. This view is worth noting as it connects with the ‘social spaces’ element of our topic.

This is echoed in the UK (from a digital inclusion standpoint) by the charitable company Age UK (2021) whose recent study found that more support is needed to assist older adults get online as the pandemic did not encourage this cohort to either go online for the first time or rejoin the digital world.

In their “Library Services for Older People – good practice guide” (UK), Sloan and Vincent (2009) explore all aspects of how libraries work with older adults; strategy development, policy context, case study examples and practical library checklists are included. This guide remains valuable in 2023; the checklists provide an adaptable template for any public library seeking to improve their older adult service. Also noteworthy in the UK is the “Living Libraries” blog of the University of Roehampton (2019) that makes the case for public libraries offering a safe place to go for all demographics, somewhere to go for help, out of the cold and the rain. Into the twenty-first century, as we face ever more challenging times, the space offered by the library – social, physical and virtual – remains

urgently necessary for our communities. Similarly, OUP Libraries (2021) see libraries as social hubs which contribute to societal wellbeing. This builds on the sense of renewed community spirit which many communities experienced during the pandemic and creates space to address the isolation which has resulted from the pandemic.

Lo, He and Liu (2019) examined the effects of Shanghai Libraries as social, community spaces and found that senior citizens are often reported to be one of the most active user groups amongst public libraries, as they function as a safe meeting face that contributes to their social lives. Luyt et al, also cited in Lo, He and Liu (2019) looked at elderly reading clubs in Singapore, and found that many of the users joined groups such as these, so that they could expand their social circles. As part of a wider study on social capital in Sydney in 2000, Cox et al (UTS and SLNSW) reported that the most important finding in their study was that most libraries are felt to be safe places where high levels of trust operate. This perception was present in all libraries, but at different levels. This feeling of trust was reciprocal between staff and users and between different groups of users themselves

## 2.5 Libraries and older adults – Safe, Social Spaces – the National Perspective

From a national perspective, the Irish Government, through the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) and the Department of Rural and Community Development set out a strategy (2018-2022) supporting the development of the Irish Public Library Service in strengthening and connecting Irish communities over a 5-Year period (2018). Promoting the vision of an enhanced, connected, integrated and accessible library service for all, the plan details the strategies/programmes to meet this aim. The vision includes “A bright, attractive, trusted, welcoming, civic space.....attracting users of all ages in large numbers”. This covers all demographics (as is required). The focus is not on one cohort, with only one reference to supporting Lifelong Learning and its benefits for older adults (p.27). Further research is required to establish the crossover between this strategy and the Governments’ AF Programme (a shared service with the LGMA).

The follow-up strategy, launched in July 2023, contains one reference to ‘social space’ (p. 41), under the strategic objective ‘The Library as the Centre of the Community’ – “We will ensure that meeting, study, and social space is freely accessible for individuals, local organisations and groups”. Similarly, there is only one mention of ‘Age Friendly’, under the strategic objective ‘Libraries for All’ – “We will work with Age Friendly Ireland to make every library in Ireland achieve age friendly recognition by the end of the strategy period”. This ‘strategic action’ is one of many that inform the Library Development Plans of all 31 LAs that, in turn, form the basis of the PMDS in place in all libraries.

Most of the literature concerning Irish public libraries and older adults relates to Age Friendly Ireland and its National AF Programme that commenced in 2009. “Age Friendly Ireland is the organisation responsible for the national Age Friendly Programme, affiliated to the World Health Organization’s [WHO] Global Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities. The programme involves a multiagency, multi-sectoral approach to age-related planning and service provision. Age Friendly Ireland supports cities and counties to be more inclusive of older people by addressing their expressed concerns and interests under the eight pillars of the World Health Organization’s global programme”. (Age Friendly Ireland, 2022). The strategic aims and actions of this programme filter down through the 31 Local Authorities, who, in conjunction with multi-agency alliances, work to create the kinds of communities in which older people live autonomous, independent and valued lives. (Age Friendly Ireland, 2022). For example, in the context of promoting digital inclusivity in public libraries, the “Age Friendly Digital Ambassadors Programme” (2021) was launched. Originally



introduced to combat 'physical library exclusion' during the pandemic, this Programme is ongoing in 2023 and links librarians with older people by telephone/online, offering tutoring sessions around online library resources. Forty-eight AF Ambassadors were appointed and continue to offer this free training.

The National Age Friendly Libraries Recognition Programme was launched in Dublin in 2019 with 48/330 libraries initially achieving Age Friendly status. According to Catherine McGuigan, Chief Officer of Age Friendly Ireland, "Making the built environment and public spaces age friendly for people of all ages to enjoy is a key objective of the Age Friendly Programme and the local government sector". (Fingal County Council, 2019). This programme is ongoing, aiming to ensure that Ireland's public libraries are accessible, safe, social spaces for older patrons.

AF information guidelines are adapted to suit the needs of each local authority. One such example is Kilkenny Library Service who have been working toward achieving an AF status for each of each of their 8 libraries and mobile library service (Kilkenny Library Service, 2023). Similarly, Cork County Council is committed to supporting older people who live at home; the mobile library serves rural areas including those who are housebound, while the branch library network provides a vast range of cultural and educational services which enhances the life of the older person (Cork County Library, 2018).

The Older People's Councils (OPC) are one of the principal strategic partners of Age Friendly Ireland; they include local representatives from older persons groups who carry out investigative 'walkabouts' or 'before and after' tours of libraries in the process of becoming AF. The Programme for Government (20112016) committed to the establishment of Older People's Councils by Local Authorities so that older people can raise concerns or issues of importance at a local level (Age Friendly Ireland, 2022). Age Action Ireland's paper on Digital Inclusion and an Ageing Population (2021) highlights the steps needed to meet the challenge of digital exclusion among older adults in Ireland and considers the barriers faced by this demographic. This paper is relevant as it provides an understanding of why 65% of older Irish people experience online exclusion and lists recommendations for addressing same. Online criminality and the impact of the pandemic are also explored in this context.

From an Irish standpoint, the premise of public libraries as 'safe, social spaces' for older adults is closely intertwined with their AF status and this benchmark dominates the literature. "Age Friendly Libraries are enhancing the services and facilities and making sure that we are meeting the needs of

older people in our communities” (Irish Independent, 2019).

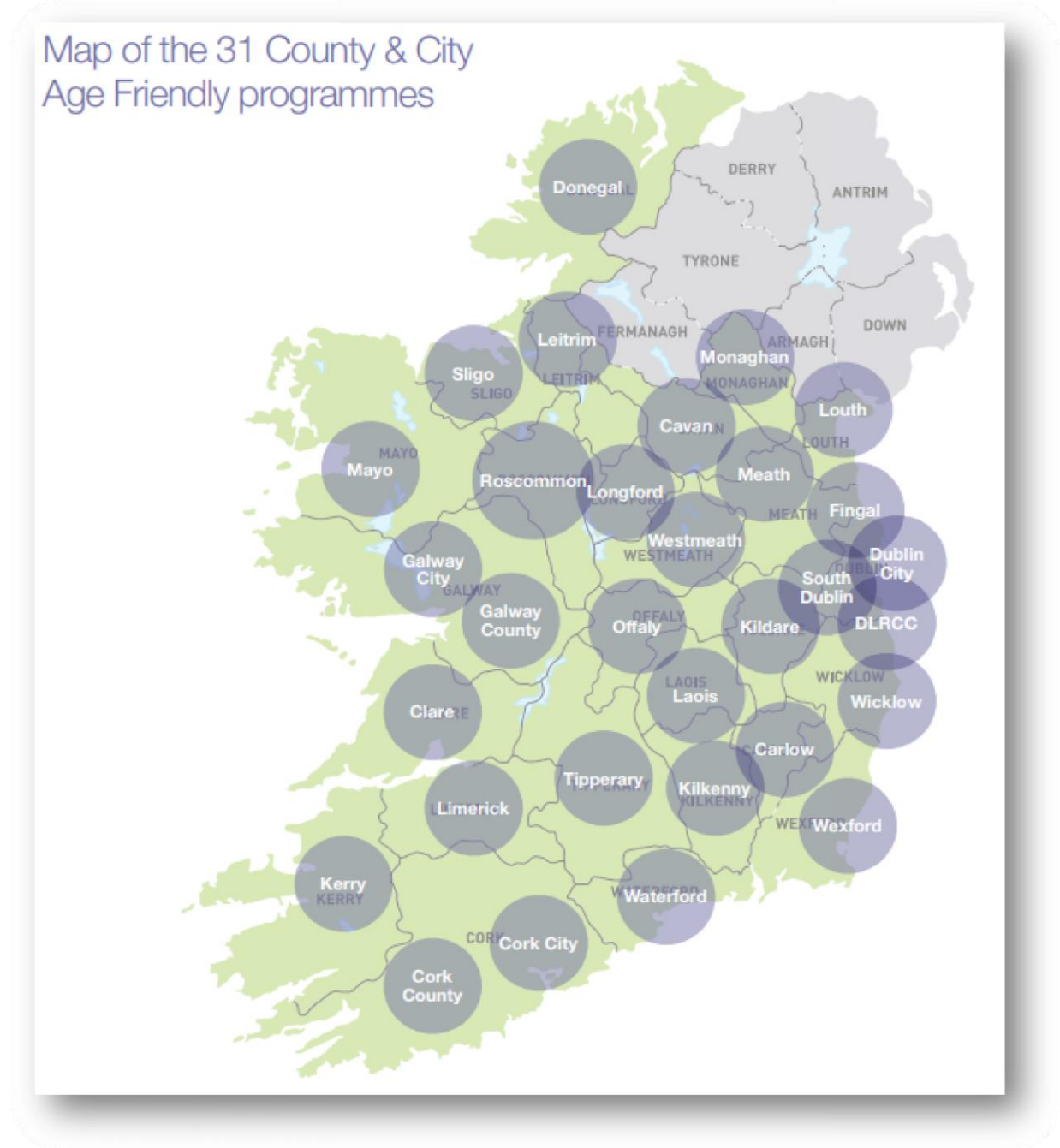


Fig. 3 Irish City/County Age Friendly Programmes Map

## 2.6 Libraries and older adults – Safe, Social Spaces – the Local Position

The literature surrounding Kildare libraries, older adults and safe, social spaces is primarily centered around AF practices filtered down from National Programme to patron level. Progressing from global and national approaches to local perspectives it is noteworthy that these were, until May 2023, centered on the “Kildare Age Friendly County Strategy 2019-2021” (2019). Setting out the vision, values, aims and objectives, this KCC strategy focused on meeting the requirements of the 20,000+

older adults county-wide. The new AF Strategy 2023-2027 (May, 2023) is the umbrella document (from an AF perspective) for the 15 libraries. The Programme is led by the Kildare Age Friendly County Alliance - older adult representatives/key senior decision makers, one of whom is an Executive Librarian. KLAS is one of the strategic partners who tailor the key actions to support our older generations from a library perspective. In this strategy, KLAS is mentioned on 3 occasions as both a lead partner and a partner.

The aims/objectives of this County Strategy filter down to the library service and ultimately to patrons as – “A yearly programme of Age Friendly workshops and talks organised by Kildare Library & Arts Service” (Kildare County Council, 2023). However, no detail, examples, schedules or further information is available to the public online, with interested parties instructed to ‘Sign up to your local library monthly events newsletter to hear about Age Friendly Programme events in advance’. The Kildare Age Friendly Programme has produced a guidance document to help libraries become AF; a walkability checklist with to aid staff/AF Champions with the AF recognition process. It advises checking parking, accessibility, toilets etc. – “Q.14 – Is there an AF reading area and is it well-lit and suitable for reading and is the seating Age Friendly? Rate out of 10” (Kildare County Council, 2021, p.3)

KCC’s ‘Corporate Plan 2019-2024’ lists the ‘Kildare Age Friendly County Strategy 2019-2021’ as one of the strategies that influences local government in Kildare and one of its performance goals is to lead and support the Kildare AF County Programme which is being developed and overseen by the Kildare Age Friendly Alliance supported by Age Friendly Ireland (p.60). The Kildare OPC work in tandem with Age Friendly Kildare to support our older demographic. Their Information Booklet contains articles, advice and supports for older adults, giving details regarding Kildare Libraries’ AF services/workshops/events – “To be informed about future Age Friendly workshops and other library events in Kildare Libraries, subscribe to our newsletter at [kildare.ie/library/newsletter/subscribe](http://kildare.ie/library/newsletter/subscribe) OR call into your local library for assistance” (Kildare OPC Information Booklet, 2021).

As part of Kildare County Council’s PMDS framework, each library sets out a Team Development Plan the contents of which are adapted by staff members in preparing their PDPs. In this way, any AF recommendations/tasks can be undertaken by individual staff members thereby allowing the national policies to reach the library floor e.g. “Continue to support all Age Friendly programming and promote Age Friendly in branch resources e.g., Magnifying glasses, magnifying sheets and reading glasses” (Leixlip and Clane Library Team Development Plan 2023, P.6). This is one example of a ‘Key Action’ where any individual librarian could choose to work on behalf of older adults in ensuring branches are safe, social spaces.

The literature suggests that locally, objectives and recommendations are in place, however it remains to be assessed whether these translate into action(s). This literature review has provided an understanding of the topic as it currently stands; linking global, national and local perspectives. The recurring theme of ‘social wellbeing’ dominates the narrative and public libraries are presented as welcoming, community spaces for all demographics.

The most notable literature gap identified is research on public libraries as safe, social spaces for older adults in particular. The existing research also lacks evidence of measuring the impact and value of public libraries on older adults’ lives – internationally, nationally and locally. From an Irish perspective, the review highlights the need to assess AF library activities on the ground to evaluate

their merit. The KLAS' narrative promotes an ethos of 'Age-Friendliness', however this has not, to date, been measured. This case study works towards filling a local and national research gap; further, extensive research is needed to understand the global perspective.

### 3 Methodology

The following presents the research philosophy and approach, including the methods used for data collection and analysis. The benefits and limitations of the approach, ethical considerations, data management and analysis are also outlined.

#### 3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

The research philosophy for this study is an interpretivist paradigm as it was essential to understand the meanings and explanations given by individuals to their life experiences. Human experiences are subjective and according to Saunders et al. (2019, p. 149), "The purpose of interpretivist research is to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts". Inductive reasoning was employed; this involves deriving general conclusions from specific observations, rather than starting with preconceived theories or hypotheses. This approach allows for the emergence of new insights and theories grounded in the data. (Ar Rachid, 2023). Similarly, Gabriel (2013) suggests that an inductive approach is concerned with the generating of new theory emerging from the data and will use research questions to narrow the scope of the study.

It was decided to adopt a qualitative mode of enquiry to identify patterns and explore what interviewees think and feel; subjects can speak for themselves and as a smaller sample size is used, the researcher can be more selective about who/what is explored. It is essential, however, for the researcher to be aware of their own limitations/biases otherwise the framework/theories may be distorted. This view notwithstanding, Mehra (2002) maintains that the qualitative research paradigm believes that researcher is an important part of the process. The researcher can't separate himself or herself from the topic/people he or she is studying, it is in the interaction between the researcher and researched that the knowledge is created. So the researcher bias enters into the picture even if the researcher tries to stay out of it.

#### 3.2 Research Strategy

As this study concerns gaining as holistic a picture as possible of the participants in their real-life environment, an ethnographic approach was considered to align with the interpretivist paradigm. According to Brewer (2000), ethnography is not one particular method of data collection but a style of research that is distinguished by its objectives, which are to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given 'field' or setting, and its approach, which involves close association with, and often participation in, this setting. However, although observation is a key component, the researcher could not spend the time needed to be group-involved nor would individual cases be examined in great detail therefore a case study method was more suitable; this approach still has an ethnographic component while allowing for more data collection tools.

This strategy was selected as the requirement was to examine individuals in their own, particular setting, allowing for the collection of comprehensive, qualitative information. According to PressAcademia (2018), "Case studies are analysis of persons, groups, events, decisions, periods, policies, institutions or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods". This is consistent with Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg (1991), who suggest that a case study is defined as an in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon.

The study is conducted in great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources. The sources of information used in this case study are interviews, observation, statistics and checklists.

## .2.1 Case Study Research – Benefits and Limitations

The focus of this study is on real-life library experiences and scenarios, in context. An advantage of case study usage is the potential results hold to address real-world issues and be of benefit to patrons, staff and management. Yin (2003) suggests that case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context. Case studies also offer flexibility in that research can be conducted by various means – observation, focus groups, questionnaires - as Lucas, Fleming and Bhosale (2018) note – “Irrespective of the type of case study, it is clear that case study provides the researcher with the ability to explore a phenomenon through “a variety of lenses”. Case study also has the flexibility to delve into and unpack more complex experiences and circumstances which may not have a specific or singular outcome”.

This method can also serve to identify an organisation’s unique traits, features and systems. Researchers aim to show how these systems interact and how the organisation works. According to Bell (2014), case study researchers aim to identify such features, to show how they affect the implementation of systems and influence the way an organisation functions. These processes may remain hidden in a large-scale survey but could be crucial to the success or failure of systems or organisations. Due to the nature of the research, case studies can also uncover unusual and valuable ‘stories’ that may otherwise remain hidden. This view is supported by Hodgkinson and Hodgkinson (2001) who suggest that case study investigations permit the examination of the exceptional as well as the typical. Such cases are often excluded from other forms of investigation, which concentrate upon common patterns and themes in the data.

Other writers have argued the weaknesses of case study approach. Gagnon (2010) claims this method has significant shortcomings when it comes to the generalisability of the results; the specificity, diversity and narrow focus of a case study are not readily compatible with attempts to achieve a universal scope while Murphy (2014) maintains that less partisan researchers might wonder whether the case study offers the time and finance-strapped researcher a convenient and pragmatic source of data, providing findings that, given the nature of case studies, can neither be confirmed nor denied, in terms of utility or veracity – who is to say that case studies offer anything more than a story to tell, and nothing more than that? However, it can also be said that stories have a vital role to play in research and their value should never be underestimated.

As this approach relies on personal interpretation of data, care is needed on the part of the researcher to avoid undue influence. According to Hassan (2023), case studies rely on the interpretation of the researcher, which can introduce subjectivity into the analysis. The researcher’s own biases, assumptions, and perspectives may influence the findings, which may limit the objectivity of the research. The case study approach can be both an expensive and time-consuming method due to the sometimes large amounts of data to be analysed.

Yin (2018), discusses the sometimes ‘unmanageable level of effort’ associated with this method, noting that case studies can potentially take too long and result in massive, unreadable documents. However, Yin does concede that this is a concern based on the way case studies have been carried out in the past. They continue by suggesting that good case study research is still difficult to do as the skills for doing good case study research had not yet been formally defined. In spite of this, it could

be supposed that the content and value of the study would depend on the experience and life skills of the researcher.

### 3.3 Data Collection Strategy

The data collection schedule is outlined below –

1. Conversational group interviews x 4 were held between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2023 in 4 main branches.
2. Staff interviews x 12 were carried out between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2023 in 4 main branches and 8 part-time branches.
3. Mobile librarian interview was held on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2023.
4. Branch checks were carried out between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2023.

“A sample refers to a smaller, manageable version of a larger group. It is a subset containing the characteristics of a larger population. Samples are used in statistical testing when population sizes are too large for the test to include all possible members or observations. A sample should represent the population as a whole and not reflect any bias toward a specific attribute”. (Kenton, 2021). Purposive sampling was employed with the aim of finding information-rich cases; the groups were deliberately identified as sharing certain characteristics. Robinson (2013) notes that purposive sampling is intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept or phenomenon.

1. A representative sample of librarians were chosen for interview across branches; the main librarian from each part-time branch and one staff member from each of 4 main branches.
2. Conversational interviews were held with 4 older adult groups chosen from all branches.

It was decided that Age Friendly checks would be carried out in all 15 libraries in the interest of thoroughness.

### 3.4 Data Collection Methods

#### 3.4.1 The Case for Conversational Group Interviews

It was decided to hold group interviews in 4 main branches in March 2023. Four older-adult groups were chosen; each group meets once-weekly and the numbers vary, however the minimum number at each gathering was 10. The setting was a regular library activity – crafting, men’s shed, knitting etc.

Conversational group interviews were chosen to encourage open, free discussion where relevant themes would present new, fresh queries and give rich feedback. Understanding the ‘human nature’ aspect of this research is essential; patron experiences are based around human interaction. With no rigid outline, the aim was for the discussion to commence as an unstructured ‘warm, welcoming chat’. The researcher sat with the patrons for approximately one hour in each library; a set of 10 questions, designed to steer the interview and elicit the required information was prepared (See Figure 4 below), however these were used for guidance only and were not used with all groups. The interviews were not recorded to help patrons feel at ease and open to speaking freely; detailed notes were taken.

## Safe/Social Spaces – Conversational Questions for Groups

Branch –  
Date –  
Time –  
Librarian –

1. Do you 'feel' that your Library is a 'safe' and 'social' space? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Do you feel welcome/respected when you come to the library?
3. Are there sufficient events here for older patrons? Women/Men? Any suggestions?
4. Has any library staff member ever approached you to see if you needed assistance?
5. If you could be branch manager of your local library for one week, what changes would you implement?
6. Have you ever had a positive/negative experience of note in your local library?
7. Do you use any of the online/eservices? How are they for you?
8. How could the staff make your visit more enjoyable?
9. Do you think that the 'library experience' is different now than it was before the Covid-19 pandemic?
10. Do you have any suggestions on how to encourage more older adults to visit the library?

Fig. 4 Conversational Questions, Groups

According to Burgess-limerick and Burgess-limerick (1998), conversational interviews are a powerful way of gaining access to an individual's interpretations of their personal experiences (i.e. their social world). In this model of interviewing, the agenda for each interview is established interactively. A recursive process is used in which the researcher's questions build on responses to previous questions, stories told by the same participant in previous interviews, and stories told by other participants. Similarly, Swain & King (2022) argue that these conversations generally create a greater ease of communication (although this is dependent of course on the characters and personalities of the individuals involved) and have the potential to produce more realistic or naturalistic data with less performativity from both interviewer and interviewee. Essentially, they can replace the 'me' and 'you' with 'we' – befitting in-depth communication. This is echoed by Zhang and Wildemuth (2017) who write that unstructured interviews are most useful when you want to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon within a particular cultural context. In addition, they are most appropriate when you are working within an interpretive research paradigm, in which you would assume that reality is socially constructed by the participants in the setting of interest.

### 3.4.2 Librarian Interviews

Wilson (2012) suggests that with unstructured interviews, the researcher will have an idea of the avenues he/she wants to explore, but the interview is more like a conversation - flexible and unrestricted. Unstructured, conversational interviews were held with 12 librarians from a selection of 12 different full-and part-time branches. A set of 10 questions was prepared (See Figure 5 below) both as a starting point (if required) and from which to draw keywords to remind the researcher that certain, specific information was required. Detailed notes were taken. To protect the librarians' identities, coding was used –

LA = Librarian A

LB = Librarian B

LC = Librarian C and so forth.

Safe/Social Spaces – Conversational Librarian Questions

Branch –
Date –
Time –
Librarian –

1. Is your Library an Age-Friendly Library?
2. Have you received Age-Friendly Training?
3. Do you 'feel' that your Library is a 'safe' and 'social' space? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. Have you ever received any feedback on your library facilities from older patrons – positive or negative?
5. Have you chosen to undertake/follow-up on any AF tasks as part of your 2023 PDP?
6. Can you suggest any improvements that would make your library a more 'safe' and 'social' space?
7. Do you feel that older patrons are treated in a welcoming and respectful manner in Kildare Libraries?
8. Do you think there is a sufficient amount of 'older patron' events in your branch?
9. Do you actively approach older patrons on a daily basis to see if they need assistance?
10. Is there anything of relevance, positive or negative, that you would like me to note?

Fig. 5 Conversational Questions for Librarians

### 3.4.3 Mobile Librarian Interview

An unstructured conversational interview took place with the Mobile Librarian and due to ongoing scheduling restrictions on both parts, this interview was carried out by telephone. Guiding questions were prepared (See Figure 6 below) and detailed notes were taken. It was not possible to withhold the mobile librarian's identity however full permission to use the interview data was requested and granted.

Safe/Social Spaces – Conversational Mobile Librarian Questions

Date –
Time –
Mobile Librarian –

1. How many locations does the mobile library visit on a weekly/monthly basis?
2. Do you encounter older patrons on a daily basis? If so, roughly how many?
3. Are your older patrons usually regulars or do you often see new older patrons?
4. Do you often receive feedback from your older patrons? Positive? Negative? Please provide details.
5. As the mobile librarian, do you feel that the mobile library service offers an adequate/more than adequate service to older patrons?
6. Do you feel that the mobile library is a safe, social space for older patrons to visit?
7. Budgets allowing, what improvements would you make to your service?
8. Do fears around the Covid-19 pandemic still affect older patrons?
9. Do your older patrons use eServices? Do they ask for assistance?
10. How restricted is the mobile library service by budget? Does this affect older patrons?

Fig. 6 Conversational Questions, Mobile Librarian



### 3.4.4 Observation – Branch Checklists

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that observation is a research tool when it is systematic, when it addresses a specific research question, and when it is subject to the checks and balances in producing trustworthy results. It makes it possible to record behaviour as it is happening, providing some knowledge of the context or providing specific incidents, behaviours, and so on that can be used as reference points for subsequent interviews. Antell and Engel (cited in May, 2011) maintain that studying the use of space in libraries provides practical information that is useful for evaluating library spaces, but it can also provide information on the role and value of a library as a place itself, independent of the materials held by the library.

Observational research allows for the subject to be analysed in its natural setting where behaviour offers accurate/real-time data. Physical examination of all full- and part-time branches was chosen to critically explore issues regarding accessibility, health and safety, social spaces, seating, signage etc. This took place between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2023; all branches were included, irrespective of opening hours, rural/urban location, quiet/busy branch, affluence of area or socio-economic demographics. Personal experience was drawn upon while taking into account the fact that results gathered only apply to the present setting. Gathering evidence in-person, in-branch also allowed for informal discussion with library staff who are not involved with formal interviews. An AF checklist was drawn up (See Figure 7 below). In order to protect the identity of each library (in so much as this was possible) it was decided to rename each location as Library 1, Library 2, Library 3 etc. Detailed notes were taken.

Safe/Social Spaces - Checklist									
Main Branches	Library 1			Library 2			Library 3		
	Yes	No	Pending	Yes	No	Pending	Yes	No	Pending
<b>SAFE -</b>									
AF Parking									
Comfortable Seating									
Access Ramp									
Lift									
Clear Walkways									
Signage on low/high shelving									
Wheelchair									
Evac-Chair									
Toilets for those with disabilities									
Chair/Stair Lift									
<b>SOCIAL -</b>									
AF Area									
AF Leaflets or Folder									
LP Materials									
Reading Glasses									
Magnifiers									
Braille Map									
Braille Books									
Newspapers									
AF IT Classes									
AF Events									
Inter-Generational Activities									
Housebound Service									
Nursing Home Outreach									
AF Coffee Morning									
<b>BOTH -</b>									
AF Champion									
AF Staff Training									
Staff Digital Ambassador									
Adequate Shelf-end Fonts									
Reader Pen (C-Pen)									
<b>NOTES -</b>									

Fig. 7 Observational Checklist, sample

### 3.4.5 Documentary Evidence and Statistics

In conjunction with the internal/external documents/policies noted in the literature review, internal library documents and guidelines were reviewed to gather background information and traceability including-

- (a) KLAS Team plan (annual document, branch-centered)
- (b) PDP Template (annual document)

AF programming statistics for all branches were collated for the relevant period.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2017 p. 319), qualitative analysis of content involves a process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation. This process uses inductive reasoning, by which themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison. The data generated was primarily examined using thematic analysis, which Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012) note moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes. These themes help us derive meaning from the content and make sense of it by grouping bodies of data according to similarities. This process began when initial interview notes were taken, phrases were underlined, patterns emerged and sometimes illegible scribbles were jotted in margins. Schutt (2019) suggests that the analysis of qualitative research notes begins in the field, at the time of observation, interviewing, or both, as the researcher identifies problems and concepts that appear likely to help in understanding the situation. Simply reading the notes or transcripts is an important step in the analytic process.

Interviews/checklists were analysed based on key themes from-

- The literature examined
- The objectives - The data itself

#### 3.5.1 The Issue of Bias

It is critical to reduce potential sources of research bias given the interpretative power of the researcher. Because of the inherent subjectivity in qualitative research, it was necessary to ensure that any prior assumptions or values of the researcher were set aside at the early stage of data collection so as not to influence the conversations or checklists. Research bias can be minimised by awareness, a view supported by Davies and Hughes (2014 p. 184) – “There are particular risks of ‘researcher bias’ if you are embarking on a project in a field where you already feel ‘at home’. In such a context, you need to be especially careful because of the extent to which you may think you already know what you want or expect to find”. The researcher had to be cognisant of this issue at all stages.

### 3.6 Data Management

A methodical approach to organising/storing data was implemented. Relevant checklists, interview notes and documents were scanned and organized within folders on the researcher's computer. Back-up data was stored on a cloud drive and password protected.

### 3.7 Ethical and Risk Considerations

It is not anticipated that this research will present moral/ethical issues. It was essential to gain permission from interviewees to note the content of the discussions and there was full transparency regarding the research. No recording took place. No personal information was required or discussed,

however, participants' anonymity was protected and the final draft did not contain any traceable personal information. A back-up plan was drafted in case of interviewees revoking permission, interview spaces needing to be changed or the cancellation of interviews due to external/environmental factors. A Research Project Submission and Copyright Declaration Form been submitted.

### 3.8 Timeframe

Interviews/branch checks were carried out between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2023. The statistics gathered from KLAS Library HQ relate to the period 1<sup>st</sup> January – 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2023.

## 4 Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

This research set out to investigate whether Kildare Libraries are safe, social spaces for older adults. To answer this question it was necessary to examine any AF policies, carry out branch checks, examine statistics and speak with patrons/staff. These AF policies consist of the KLAS AF Programme (in place since 2014 and discussed in Chapter 1); a yearly schedule of workshops/talks for older adults. KLAS also decided to embark upon the National Libraries Age Friendly Recognition Programme, aiming to achieve AF Status through a process of actions, staff training and community consultation. By 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2023, 9 Kildare branches had achieved AF Status and the status of the remaining 6 branches was pending and imminent.

Determining whether this translates into 'safe, social spaces' for older patrons was key. This chapter discusses the research findings according to the most prevalent themes; these themes combine together to build a cohesive picture of the views of/around our older persons and their library interactions. Other relevant, recurring themes are also discussed.

### 4.2 Findings of the Group Conversational Interviews

#### 4.2.1 Library Events

Requests for more events was the prevailing theme among each of the four groups. A minimum of 20 activities were suggested, ranging from art classes to dancing, woodcarving to poetry reading, theatre to board games.

Patron A mentioned that the group love having 'their own space' and the fact that each member 'hates to miss a week' as this is their main 'meet-up' – "Older people are just coming out to meet people" (Patron C). These events help to combat loneliness but word needs to spread; not enough older patrons know about the events (Patron F). The emphasis on having more events is closely connected with the friendship/connection aspects of the library setting, with Patron D shouting "This is how we all met!". In keeping with the friendship theme, one 90-year old patron told how the crafts sessions 'bring out the value of company and friendship' and how 'this group can be heard laughing all over the library!' – this patron feels that if only more older people would have the courage to walk into their library they would see that it's not a 'sterile, quiet environment'. In the researcher's opinion, this patron would make an excellent spokesperson for KLAS and the services they offer.

Patron B felt that having more events might get more older males out of their houses, that 'the men like their own stuff and it would take new events such as an oldies film club or a local history group

to get them in'. By contrast, the fourth group were predominantly male and have a longstanding arrangement with their library. This is their 'chance to chat' and talk about local happenings. Patron G told how events help to combat social isolation but that existing events need more local advertising. It was interesting to note that the primarily male group were more quietspoken/serious whereas the mostly female groups were more outspoken/ opinionated.

Health-related events were the most frequently requested. It could be the case that this is because it is of most relevance to these patrons. Workshops/ classes relating to women's health, menopause, chair yoga, diet talks and workshops relating to posture/footwear/balance dominated the discourse. Patron E did realise that libraries do have practicalities to take into account, such as budgets/space concerns but she welcomed the consultation, hoping that feedback would be given to management. Patron I bemoaned the fact that as their particular library was unlikely to be getting a sink for art classes that it was unlikely they would be getting a swimming pool for water yoga.....

#### 4.2.2 The Library as an Advice Centre

A second, dominant topic of discussion was the bigger role that libraries could/should play as 'mini-advice centres'. Whether for advice on banking, allowances, legal issues, finances, community activities, IT basics, health issues, most patrons were in agreement that this would 'fit in' with their library – as weekly/fortnightly clinics or as a tie-in with regular services.

Patron H felt that the library was more suited to offering this service than the community centre as 'it is a welcoming space where we should be able to come to find everything'. Patron N felt that sometimes older people were not availing of services or allowances as they were not getting the information, due to living alone and not 'being able to use a computer or smartphone properly'. However, he felt that they didn't necessarily want to learn how to navigate the online world, that they would prefer to be able to pick up printed forms, make bookings by telephone/buy a newspaper.

Patron P suggested that one new events could be a monthly advice clinic where a facilitator could speak to patrons while supplying forms, leaflets, health information etc.; Patron Q supported this, asking if a link could be forged with the National Citizens Advice Centre ([www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie)). It was strongly felt that these sessions would be very popular, saving time/worry for older persons, who sometimes find it stressful navigating administration/bureaucracy. The researcher agreed, confirming that the numbers of patrons requesting help obtaining forms/grant information etc. is on the rise.

#### 4.2.3 Digital Inclusion?

Patrons in all four groups were keen to point out that they did not necessarily want to upskill their digital abilities, learn the latest technologies and/or be as tech-savvy as younger patrons. Patron B (and many more) asked for more printed leaflets to be left on counters showing monthly events – he was not going to chase an email to locate a link he was never going to use to book an event. 'Paper, not email' was the mantra; while some patrons did use their smartphone/laptop and knew how to navigate digital basics, it was, overwhelmingly, their preference that the researcher inform management of the need to retain paper leaflets/forms and to offer help with booking events/classes by telephone.

Borrowbox? No, thank you. At least not for 75% of these patrons. Preferring physical books, Patron G explained that paper books brought a sense of comfort, with Patron A echoing this, explaining that

the act of picking out physical books was as important as meeting up in the library. Patron E does listen to 'the odd audio book, but only the CDs, nothing on the phone' preferring print copies. Over 80% of those who joined in the conversation around online classes and workshops preferred to attend in person, digital events proving too stressful to navigate. Patron F claimed that while he realised that 'things move on' and 'we are only one group', it is a safe place for them – they just want to read the paper and get out of the house.

Patron B did attend an online monthly BookClub during the pandemic and was very appreciative of being able to avail of the House-Bound service. However, she prefers being able to bring in home-made buns and homemade jam to her library group on special occasions. It was evident to the researcher that the 'home-from-home' nature of the library was of great importance.

#### 4.2.4 Love of Library Staff

A distinct theme during the group interviews was the patrons' love of and respect for library staff. According to Patron C, they go 'above and beyond to help us' and this is echoed by Patron J who felt that 'the staff are always on hand to make things easier, we don't even have to ask them'. 100% of the comments regarding staff were positive. Patron D told how his local library staff are very friendly 'even when you meet them outside – they will say hello on the street and a smile can cheer you up'. Several patrons in one group spoke of their relief at finding a 'spot' for their group that was so 'easy-going and welcoming' following a bad experience in another local venue where the atmosphere was tension-filled.

According to Patron E, 'other libraries could learn from his library, but more people need to know about it! Our group always runs over, you can hear us laughing all over the library! We hate to miss a week, hate it!'. Patron H told how he likes to make suggestions to staff and they always listen, he was a builder and loves to chat to the caretaker about whatever work he happens to be doing. It was interesting to note how patrons were talking naturally and openly on this subject to a researcher they had only just met, they talked over each other, time and again, in an effort to show their appreciation for staff. The value placed on relationships with staff was evident – they saw them as old friends.

Nearly all patrons recognised the value and impact of the staff on the service; being addressed and known by name/greeted on arrival as if they 'were missed', having tea ready/free of charge and just simply chatting away to them. During all four group conversations, it was clear that the attendees appreciated the fact that they were 'left to do their own thing, but not left alone'; the consensus was that older people like to keep busy, to feel appreciated and not overlooked.

#### 4.2.5 Further Themes

Further topics emerged from the group conversations. Subjects overlapped with one subject leading to another, including the issue of libraries combating loneliness/helping to promote wellbeing, as discussed in the literature review. While patrons requested more events, they were also practical and understood that library budgets/space issues had to be considered. Any negative points that arose were mostly outside the control of library management; parking spaces/parking charges and transportation issues among them. Several patrons suggested that library management should work in conjunction with local GPs to advertise the benefits of the library service for older adults' mental health.

#### 4.2.6 Safe, Social Spaces?

From the analysis of the conversational group interviews, including direct questioning and thematic evaluation, the data indicates that according to over 40 group interviewees, Kildare Libraries are indeed safe, social spaces for older adults. In all cases, the respondents reported that they regarded their branches as warm, welcoming, safe, friendly and homely environments. While some areas for improvement were identified, such as lack of events for older adults, irregular events advertising and lack of space/facilities for workshops/classes, these issues did not unduly impact upon how these patrons 'feel' about their library space and how secure/safe an environment they perceive their branch to be.

The researcher's attention was also drawn to the sense of 'wellbeing' associated with the library (as discussed in Chapter 2) and how these older patrons feel that the library is 'good for their health, for staving off loneliness and for combating social isolation'. An important element noted is that while these patrons love and appreciate the social element and the efforts of staff, the responses highlight their desire for the library 'in the traditional sense' to remain; the newspapers, paper newsletters not email, telephone, not online, bookings and comfortable seating where they can feel at home, away from home.

### 4.3 Findings of the Librarian Interviews

#### 4.3.1 Library Programming and Budgets

A recurrent theme in the librarian interviews was the 'double issue' of library programming and budgets. While the programming statistics are discussed further on in this chapter, each of the 12 librarians cited lack of funding as a reason why few events for older adults take place than they would like, especially in part-time branches. Annual Programming budgets are allocated to branches by Library Headquarters and while library managers do have room for manoeuvre, all demographics must be catered for and understandably so. In addition, there is a small AF Libraries Programme budget allocation given to all 7 main branches to facilitate workshops, classes, etc. LB stated 'increase the budget, put on the events and older patrons will come!' while LD claimed that part-time branches are left behind when it comes to programming and especially older-adult programming – this seems unfair/regressive as part-time branches are more rurally located where the social aspect of the library would be more important for older adults.

LF reported that she needed to pay for an AF chair as part of the AF Libraries Recognition Process; she had to pay for this from the stationery budget as the funds were simply not available. LJ told how he only had a budget for children's events (part-time branch) and that his older patrons would love even one monthly AF event. LE admitted that change is difficult as space is limited in her library, budgets are low and owing to KCC VAT regulations, it is too difficult to find new facilitators for AF events. (In order to be approved as a supplier by KCC, facilitators must be VAT registered which is unsuitable for many suppliers, especially smaller traders. The hassle-factor of VAT regulations was mentioned by over 80% of librarians interviewed, with LG stating that events' procurement policy needs amending as it is putting the libraries' reputations in jeopardy – less facilitators equates to less events and less patrons, especially the older demographic who need social outlets.

LH felt that his library is under-utilised and even though he knows all his older patrons by name, they don't come in as often as they should due to the lack of events. LK repeated several times that library management should add the events and watch older people turn up!, that this demographic are asking local groups to be formed – this corresponds to these patrons perceiving their library as a

social space. LC echoed this, stating that the social side of the library is suffering as a result of programming restrictions due to VAT/supplier registration issues.

#### 4.3.2 'The Meet-Up'

A prevailing view was that for older adults, the library is simply a place to 'meet-up'. Each librarian noted that they are familiar with their older patrons and vice versa and this, combined with the 'safe, familiar' space makes it the ideal environment in which to meet existing/new friends.

LD reported that the patrons are missed when they don't come in and they miss each other when they cannot attend their 'meet-up'. In the same vein, LJ claimed that when they meet up, older patrons feel as if they can open up, chat away, as they have someone to listen to them in return. This fuels a comfortable/friendly group dynamic where laughter and fun sees them returning weekly. According to LB, patrons feel included, they have a sense of purpose and are 'building memories'. They like to be welcomed by name, appreciating when the librarian spends time with them. LH told how, when the group meets up, they are actively looking for more events, they love being busy, however they don't like being treated any differently from another library group. LA explained that older patrons love the personal touch and are very 'possessive' of their branch, acting as if they 'own and run the space', but in a positive way.

This love of 'meeting-up' is also mentioned by LE who told of the older adults coming on a Friday afternoon to volunteer to read with children for a Friday Reading Initiative; this branch is rural, yet the older patrons make the effort to come weekly. They also arrange outings and a yearly Christmas Lunch where it is not uncommon to see a large cooked ham with all the trimmings in the library kitchen. This theme was also spoken of by LK who spoke of his 'committed, loyal, older readers' who stay chatting for over 30 mins even though they might have only just met up 2-3 days beforehand. The majority of librarians commented that this demographic is most likely to come in more than once weekly – as they feel safe - and would attend multiple events should they be scheduled.

#### 4.3.3 Digital Inclusion / eServices

The themes of digital inclusion and use of eServices arose throughout the librarian interviews. Similar to the data from the group interviews, the librarians agreed that older adults do not, in general, have the desire to push themselves further towards the digital world. In fact 100% of interviewees spoke of older patrons preferring physical books to eBooks/audio books, paper forms to email newsletters and requesting help with making telephone bookings. While certain patrons did attend 'Age Action', one-on-one IT evening classes in main libraries, the majority prefer traditional library services as they tie-in with 'that which is safe and familiar'.

LB mentioned that 'not many older people use eServices, they love the ritual of coming in, picking their books and chatting'. According to LG, 'placing reservations is very popular among older adults, I always make sure to call them when their books come in, in case one is missed'. According to LH, 'older patrons love events but don't want the stress of having to book online, they just want to give their name and turn up'.

While LI's view is that her older patrons prefer to read the papers than listen to an audio book, LF mentioned that although she does put aside new audio books for one or two older patrons, they much prefer physical books as they are a link to the past and one thing that hasn't changed. This data ties-in with the findings of the group interviews, where it was found that traditional library services were preferred.

LA described how many of her older patrons feel they are being 'pushed' by family members to embrace complicated smartphones and get overwhelmed by the basics – when helping one patron, she found they had 99 browsing tabs open on their phone without knowing the basics of online searching. LJ claimed that libraries should be able to provide both traditional and digital services to all patrons but that our older patrons should not be 'pushed' towards 'going digital' – this is a vital part of the warm, safe, social aspect of library services, the availability of choice, a hybrid service model.

Despite the digital tutoring sessions still on offer as part of the AF Digital Ambassadors Programme (2021) (as discussed in Chapter 2), uptake is slow with librarians reporting dealing with 2-3 requests for digital help from older patrons annually. Although the general consensus is that this is linked to aversion to eServices/the online world, it would be interesting to see if uptake increased if this Programme was actively re-advertised.

#### 4.3.4 Further Themes

When discussing the safe, social aspects of libraries, several other themes arose. Ten librarians mentioned space issues as a factor in the low number of events, while four spoke of change being difficult due to listed library building restrictions. LD spoke of her older adult members choosing to use a nearby community centre as it had a kitchen while LI commented on her library being 'just too cold' in winter. Parking availability was an issue for over 50% of librarians – older patrons find they have to be dropped off/collected. Parking charges are also on older patrons' agendas, with charges of €3.20 p/h outside one branch. Over 80% of librarians interviewed noted that 'most' of their older adult patrons were female. They feel that the most effective way of increasing male footfall is to arrange more 'male-oriented' events e.g. local history talks, men's shed groups, cookery for men, photography etc. While cognisant that library activities are for all genders, specifically targeting older males may help their wellbeing/reduce loneliness. LB spoke of creating more partnerships with outside networks to arrange activities e.g. outdoor walks, tours, lunches etc. but felt that this might be budget-restricted while LJ told how patrons love the weekly AF Coffee Mornings as it 'gets them out in conjunction with their regular library group meet-up'. Three librarians highlighted the importance of speaking clearly/respectfully to older adults as some of their regulars use hearing aids; this helps to promote the environment as a safe, trusted space.

#### 4.3.5 Safe, Social Spaces?

In all cases, the 12 librarians felt that their branches were safe, social spaces for older adults. Despite certain limiting factors – budgets/lack of events/space issues, etc., the data shows that interviewees feel that certain factors combine to give Kildare Libraries a warm, trusted atmosphere – the personal touch, individual attention and time spent listening, retention of traditional services and opportunities for companionship. Having completed the 'AF Libraries Recognition Process' and implemented recommended changes to make their branches Age Friendly, (completed/pending), the physical changes in the branches are noticeable. However, from the researcher's viewpoint, despite changes made to the physical locations, it is staff awareness, training completed and willingness to respond to older adults' needs that make each branch a 'safe, social space'; it is the attitudes/actions of the librarians that create and foster this environment.

### 4.4 Findings of the Mobile Librarian Interview

The conversation with the mobile librarian regarding libraries as safe, social spaces for older adults was dominated by the word 'community'. The data reveals that all points discussed are connected to this theme. Mobile libraries are, by nature, 'social vehicles', extending the reach of the library, a



welcome visitor in rural areas. The librarian reported that older adults who visit are usually regulars but occasionally, new patrons enrol. She revealed that the ‘sense of community’ is prevalent among this generation who attach importance to ordering books, collecting their reserves and returning same. However the most surprising aspect of this data was that although the social aspect is substantial, county-wide, there is little evidence of rural isolation or loneliness. The mobile serves 26 stops on a three-week rota and the librarian meets the regular older patrons at over 75% of these locations. While they love chatting/exchanging news /checking new stock, they are ‘more good readers than arriving with social isolation needs’. These patrons are laid back and ‘happy to have the service’ as they cannot always get to their nearest branch.

One regular patron claims she ‘would be lost without books since her husband died’ and ‘now brings her grandchildren to visit’. There is little evidence of social isolation/older adults wanting to meet new people. From the researcher’s viewpoint, this could be explained by the more transient nature of this type of interaction, space restrictions and lack of privacy in the vehicle for sharing personal matters. The librarian told how the mobile library is not so much affected by budgets as by space but it is expected that a new vehicle will be purchased within one year. She claims the library is ‘definitely part of the community’, that the older patrons are the ‘most interested’ patrons who love examining new stock. The researcher feels that, as an integral part of KLAS, the Mobile Library is a safe, social space for older adults insofar as it is a welcome, trusted, community environment, delivering ‘happiness in the form of books’ to those off the beaten path. While the mobile library has not applied for AF Status, this is a result of the imminent vehicle upgrade. This reflects the position that while the mobile library may not be AF, it can still be perceived as a safe, social space for older adults.

#### 4.5 Analysis of the Branch Checklists

The branch checks took place between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2023. At this time, 9 branches were recognised as ‘Age Friendly’ and 6 branches had positive status pending. In order to receive this status, each library participated in a process of consulting with staff/older citizens before agreeing upon actions to improve library settings and services (See Fig. 8 below).

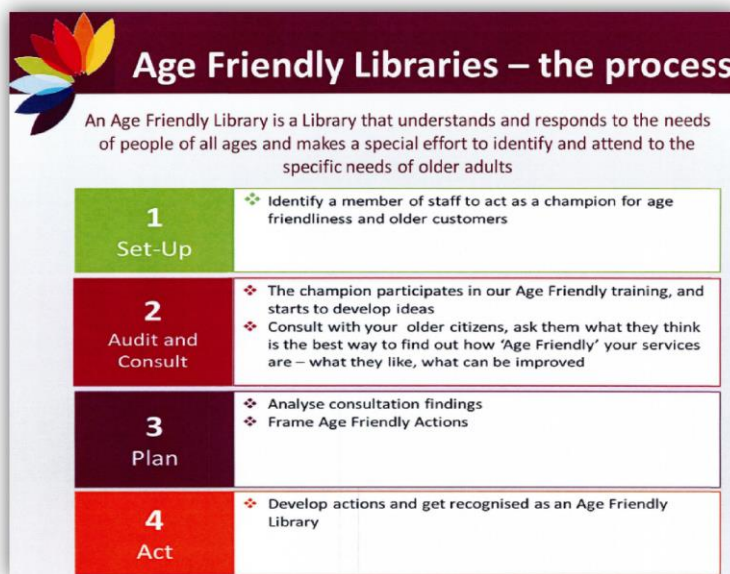


Fig. 8 AF Libraries Recognition Programme, Process

It is noteworthy that at the time of research, because each of the 15 libraries were either already recognised as AF or had this status pending, the staff and older patrons had already committed to the process, attended training, carried out improvements – essentially the ‘hard work was done’. Full credit must be given to all those who contributed to making Kildare Libraries AF. Essentially, it was felt that this research would complement any consultations, inspections/conclusions reached by the AF Champions and the AF Recognition Programme. With this starting point, the researcher was very aware that there was already a strong probability that any AF Library would also prove to be a safe, social space, however any preconceived determinations were set aside.

Twenty-nine ‘checks’ were carried out to critically examine the accessibility of the buildings, fixtures and fittings, walkways, services etc. Significantly, there are no KLAS Age Friendly directives or recommendations in place against which to measure results; the only ‘guidelines’ are the AF Ireland 10-page Resource Guide (not library-specific) and the 15-question walkability checklist given prior to recommending AF status (See Appendix 2). The decision was taken to rank the facilities/services against the checklist criteria. This checklist was generated by the researcher based on their experience as an AF Champion for KLAS.

Criteria -

- Facilities/Services are categorised as
  - a. safe
  - b. social or
  - c. both
- Facilities/Services are
  - a. in-branch/available = YES
  - b. not offered/unavailable = NO
  - c. available shortly = PENDING
- Compliance Levels
  - a. Affirmative response rate of approx. 70% = Highly Compliant
  - b. Affirmative response rate of 50%-70% = Compliant
  - c. Affirmative response rate of less than 50% = Non-compliant

The checklist also shows each Library’s AF status and is divided into Main/Part-time Branches. (overleaf)

Table 1. Safe, Social Spaces Checklist , Main Branches

Safe/Social Spaces - Checklist																					
Main Branches	Library 1			Library 2			Library 3			Library 4			Library 5			Library 6			Library 7		
	Yes	No	Pending	Yes	No	Pending	Yes	No	Pending	Yes	No	Pending	Yes	No	Pending	Yes	No	Pending	Yes	No	Pending
<b>SAFE -</b>	AF=Yes			AF=Yes			AF=Yes			AF=Yes			AF=Pending			AF=Yes			AF=Pending		
AF Parking	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Comfortable Seating	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Access Ramp	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Lift	✓			✓			✓			✓			n/a			✓			n/a		
Clear Walkways	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Signage on low/high shelving	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			n/a			✓		
Wheelchair	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Evac-Chair	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Toilets for those with disabilities	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Chair/Stair Lift	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			n/a			✓		
<b>SOCIAL -</b>																					
AF Area	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF Leaflets or Folder	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
LP Materials	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Reading Glasses	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Magnifiers	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Braille Map	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Braille Books	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Newspapers	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF IT Classes	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF Events	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Inter-Generational Activities	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Housebound Service	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Nursing Home Outreach	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF Coffee Morning	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
<b>BOTH -</b>																					
AF Champion	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF Staff Training	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Staff Digital Ambassador	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Adequate Shelf-end Fonts	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			n/a			✓		
Reader Pen (C-Pen)	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
<b>NOTES -</b>	AF Coffee morning needs further promotion.			Positive/welcoming attitude from AF Champion.			Cosy A/F area, more seating required, however, restricted by			Very active and welcoming older adult groups.			N/Home outreach happened pre-Covid 19. Difficult to include shelf-end fonts in ANF.			Comfortable seating, spacious.			Residents from 1 x Nursing Home visit when possible.		

Table 2. Safe, Social Spaces Checklist, Part-time Branches

Safe/Social Spaces - Checklist																								
Part-Time Branches	Library 8			Library 9			Library 10			Library 11			Library 12			Library 13			Library 14			Library 15		
	Yes	No	Pend.	Yes	No	Pend.	Yes	No	Pend.	Yes	No	Pend.	Yes	No	Pend.	Yes	No	Pend.	Yes	No	Pend.	Yes	No	Pend.
<b>SAFE -</b>	AF=Yes			AF=Pending			AF=Pending			AF=Yes			AF=Yes			AF=Pending			AF=Yes			AF=Pending		
AF Parking	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Comfortable Seating	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Access Ramp	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Lift				n/a			n/a			n/a			n/a			n/a			n/a			n/a		
Clear Walkways	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Signage on low/high shelving		✓		n/a			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Wheelchair	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Evac-Chair	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Toilets (disabilities)	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Chair/Stair Lift	n/a			n/a			n/a			n/a			n/a			n/a			n/a			n/a		
<b>SOCIAL -</b>																								
AF Area	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF Leaflets or Folder	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
LP Materials	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Reading Glasses		✓		✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Magnifiers		✓		✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Braille Map	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Braille Books	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Newspapers	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF IT Classes	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF Events	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Inter-Generational Activities	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Housebound Service	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Nursing Home Outreach	✓			n/a			n/a			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF Coffee Morning		✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓	
<b>BOTH -</b>																								
AF Champion	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
AF Staff Training	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Staff Digital Ambassador	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
Adequate Shelf-end Fonts		✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		n/a				✓			✓	
Reader Pen (C-Pen)	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		
<b>NOTES -</b>	Welcoming atmosphere but very restricted by space and opening hours.			Includes beautiful outdoor space ideal for AIF events/workshop s/classes.			First AIF group meeting scheduled for 14/04/2023 & monthly thereafter - tea/coffee/chat			Welcoming atmosphere, proactive staff.			AIF events planned, space is available.			Family members usually drop older patrons. LP not widely used. Space issues restrict most events.			Very positive, welcoming attitude towards older patrons. Chair yoga, safety morning, knitting classes			New armchair has made AIF patrons feel more welcome. Very welcoming, inclusive atmosphere.		

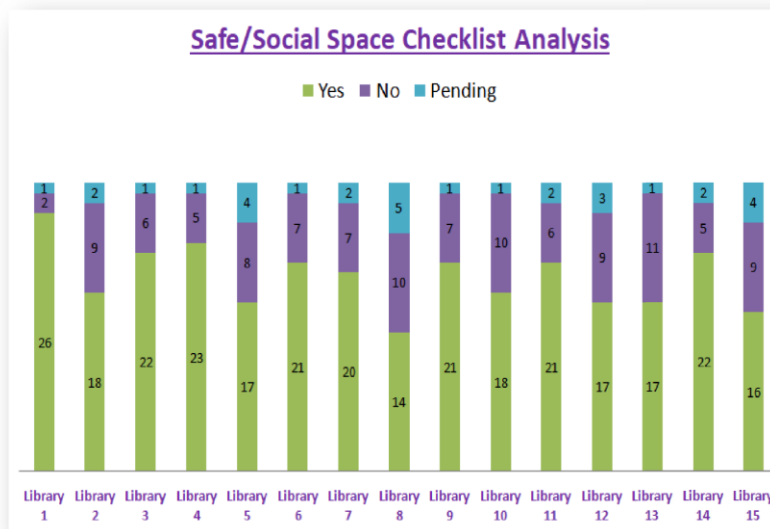


Fig. 9 Checklist Response Analysis

The data indicates:

8 x libraries = highly compliant  
(5 x main branches, 3 x part-time branches)

6 x libraries = compliant  
(2 x main branches, 4 x part-time branches)

1 x part-time library = non-compliant

The majority (53%) of KLAS branches are highly compliant, with 40% of branches considered compliant and 1 branch (7%) non-compliant (See Fig. 9). With over 90% of libraries returning mostly affirmative responses, it can be asserted that KLAS libraries are safe, social spaces for older adults based on checklist standards.

A highly-compliant library would be considered a safe, social space with over 20/29 facilities/services on-site. From a 'safe' point of view, these branches are mostly main branches (5/8) with larger floor spaces and therefore more seating room, wider walkways and access ramps (See Table 1). However it is noteworthy that most of these branches do not have a wheelchair for public use. While only 50% have AF parking nearby, this can be explained by the restrictive locations; this issue will be solved for at least 2 branches with new premises imminent. From the 'social' perspective, highly compliant branches purchase newspapers, have dedicated AF areas with forms/leaflets, supply reading glasses and hold AF IT classes. It is worth highlighting that these main branches would have approximately 7-10 staff, more personnel to run AF events, manage nursing home outreach/housebound deliveries and physically spend time patrons. While 3 part-time libraries are also highly compliant (See Table 2), it is noteworthy that main branches benefit from higher AF/general budgets, the impact of which would have a direct effect on AF facilities/services, however further research is required to clarify figures/allocations.

According to the data, 6 libraries are compliant, with over 14/29 facilities/services available. 2 are main branches; due to their restrictive locations there is no AF parking. They do meet most criteria for safe, social spaces, however they do not have intergenerational activities/outreach to nursing homes which is significant, as they are both located in highlypopulated towns. With large floor areas/staff numbers, this could easily be rectified. Three of the four part-time compliant branches, although safe, social spaces, are extremely small, space-restricted, lone-worker branches with little room/opportunity to make structural/facilities improvements. They are also restricted by shorter opening hours, no AF parking, smaller budgets and in 2 locations, there is practically no room for events.

Nonetheless it is significant that one of these smaller, part-time branches has the most welcoming, warm 'feel'; from observation, it is friendly, inclusive and despite space restrictions, has a cosy AF corner where older patrons love to sit, chat and read. This welcoming atmosphere is the most essential offering any library can offer its patrons, over and above any facilities listed on a checklist.

Based on the checklist analysis, one rural, part-time branch has returned a non-compliant result, with only 14/29 facilities on offer. As this branch is already AF, all improvements in place. The researcher observed that space is inadequate – events held could have limited numbers (10-12 patrons), seating

is minimal/opening hours are restrictive. While there is AF parking nearby, clear walkways, an access ramp and the atmosphere is warm, welcoming and friendly, it is the case that this branch just did not tick enough boxes. Based on the welcoming attitude of the librarian alone, this library is a safe, social space for all ages and is non-compliant due only to constraints and impediments outside of the librarian’s control.

Having visited all branches, it was discovered that while the box-ticking exercise is valuable and leads to further questions around budgets/opening hours/staff training, physical facilities/services available should be considered in conjunction with the atmosphere/librarian’s attitude and the absence/presence of that ‘at ease’ feeling that is an integral part of every safe, social space.

#### 4.6 Analysis of Programming Statistics

KLAS AF Programming statistics were examined while researching the ‘social’ aspect and were obtained from KLAS HQ. As discussed in Chapter 2, a yearly AF programme of talks/workshops is organised specifically for older adults in conjunction with regular events. Workshops take place in the main branches and include painting, crafting, eServices training, exercise classes and genealogy. Aside from the AF Programme, events for older adults take place in all branches, including part-time libraries but are not marketed as specifically AF. In addition, many older patrons attend regular adult/group events and these event attendance numbers have also been captured. All numbers relate to a four month period (01/01/2023 – 30/04/2023).

##### 4.6.1 Programming Statistics – Main Branches

Table 3. Programming Statistics – Main Branches

KLAS Age Friendly Programming Statistics / 1st Jan - 30th April 2023							
Branch -	Main Branches ↓						
	Library 1	Library 2	Library 3	Library 4	Library 5	Library 6	Library 7
Overall number of KLAS events (general)	303	222	215	310	212	264	315
Number of Age Friendly events	29	35	15	39	4	18	15
<i>% of events deemed Age Friendly</i>	9.57%	15.77%	6.98%	12.58%	1.89%	6.82%	4.76%
Attendance at All KLAS events	3988	3499	2180	5536	2227	3787	6295
Attendance at Age Friendly specific events	70	238	75	348	116	417	55
<i>AF attendance as a % of overall event attendance</i>	1.76%	6.80%	3.44%	6.29%	5.21%	11.01%	0.87%
Attendance of older adults at regular events not marketed specifically as Age Friendly	269	322	465	503	151	148	188
Total Attendance at Specific + Non Specific AF events	339	560	540	851	267	565	243
<i>Specific &amp; Non-Sp. AF attendance as a % of overall attendance</i>	8.50%	16.00%	24.77%	15.37%	11.99%	14.92%	3.86%

The most surprising aspect of the main branch programming data is its inconsistency. There is no regular pattern regarding the percentage of AF events with a range from 2% to almost 16% (See Table 3). Library 5 has held over 200 events yet only 4 are AF whereas Library 3 has organised the same number of general events with 15 classed AF – a threefold difference exists yet both branches are of similar size in locations of similar populations. Libraries 1 and 7 have held similar amounts of events (303, 315) yet double the amount of AF events have taken place in Library 1 (29, 15). Libraries 2 and 5 have in excess of a seven-fold difference in the amount of AF events held despite similar numbers of general events.

The reasons for this may be attributed to demographics, local populations, library management decisions and ultimately the need for policy consistency/prioritisation from KLAS HQ, however further in-depth statistical analysis is required.

Generally, attendance at AF events is low and this could be for many reasons, including the above-mentioned factors. When attendance by older adults at non-specific AF events is taken into account, numbers increase dramatically with some branches seeing a seven-fold increase. The question this poses is whether these patrons are attending solely for the event or for the social aspect? Earlier data from group interviews confirmed that older adults are attending these workshops/regular groups for company, the ‘meet-up’/their wellbeing. The reasons for the low AF-specific attendance is worth further examination, however, group/librarian interview data indicate that adequate, targeted event provision is a solid contributor to the social aspect of the library experience.

#### 4.6.2 Programming Statistics – Part-Time Branches

Table 4. Programming Statistics, Part-Time Branches

KLAS Age Friendly Programming Statistics / 1st Jan - 30th April 2023								
Branch -	Part-Time Branches ↓							
	Library 8	Library 9	Library 10	Library 11	Library 12	Library 13	Library 14	Library 15
Overall number of KLAS events (general)	53	145	3	54	34	13	64	284
Number of Age Friendly events	4	0	No Data	0	1	0	0	4
% of events deemed Age Friendly	7.55%	0.00%	No Data	0.00%	2.94%	0.00%	0.00%	1.41%
Attendance at All KLAS events	424	95	49	1323	543	76	763	3742
Attendance at Age Friendly specific events	106	0	No Data	0	6	0	0	28
AF attendance as a % of overall event attendance	25.00%	0.00%	No Data	0.00%	1.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.75%
Attendance of older adults at regular events not marketed specifically as Age Friendly	0	93	No Data	32	0	0	164	71
Total Attendance at Specific + Non Specific AF events	106	93	No Data	32	6	0	164	99
Specific & Non-Sp. AF attendance as a % of overall attendance	25.00%	97.89%	No Data	2.42%	1.10%	0.00%	21.49%	2.65%

Programming data for part-time branches is inconsistent and of limited usefulness in our research context. An extremely low amount of AF-specific events take place in these branches; as discussed in the findings of the group/librarian interviews, this is a result of budgetary/space issues. Nonetheless, each AF event contributes to social engagement in-branch.

### 4.7 Summary

This section presented the findings from this case study, combining data from group/librarian interviews, observational/statistical data to build a picture of how Kildare Libraries ‘feel’ to patrons and staff. The interviews yielded valuable qualitative data from older adults themselves and staff members; together with checklist results, important insights have been provided around the impact of our local library services.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Introduction

This case study aims to determine if Kildare Libraries are safe, social spaces for older adults. Following the data analysis, results indicate that both older patrons and librarians feel their local branches are warm, welcoming, safe, social environments for older adults; this is corroborated by the finding of

the observational data, with branch checks revealing the majority of libraries as safe, social spaces. This section will bring together the key findings in the context of the literature review, overall aim and research objectives.

## 5.2 Review of Aim and Objectives

The research aim was to examine the effectiveness of KLAS Age Friendly practices in creating safe, social spaces for older adults. Four objectives were decided upon to collect data and guide the research process. The key findings will be reviewed in relation to these objectives.

### 5.2.1 Objective 1

‘To examine critically the accessibility of library buildings and assess whether this measures up to policy requirements/recommendations’. An essential element of assessing the safe/social side of Kildare Libraries was completing library visits and checking aspects of the buildings/environments. Cognisant of setting aside researcher bias, it was reasonable to expect that larger, main branches with higher staff numbers/bigger budgets would prove to be compliant or highly so. This was indeed the case, with 8 main branches offering 20+ of the 29 possible facilities checked.

Each branch was assessed on the elements/services that ‘add’ to either the ‘safe’ or ‘social’ (or both) aspects. Because all branches had achieved AF status or had status pending, many facilities were in place. As mentioned in the literature review, according to Catherine McGuigan, Chief Officer of Age Friendly Ireland, “Making the built environment and public spaces age friendly for people of all ages to enjoy is a key objective of the Age Friendly Programme and the local government sector”. (Fingal County Council, 2019). What is surprising is that aside from the statutory Health and Safety documents and the AF checklist document (See Appendix 2), there is no overall, formal, centralised KLAS policy around older persons. While AF guidelines/‘key actions’ are mentioned as part of the PMDS process, a set of structured recommendations for Library staff is lacking. In the researcher’s opinion, this would be beneficial for existing staff and new employees as general, ad hoc, disjointed references to AF library practices do not give the guidance needed. Therefore, while the buildings/services were investigated, it was not possible to assess results against formal documents or an existing framework hence the creation of an original checklist.

Aside from examining facilities, it was essential to evaluate the atmosphere/ ‘feel’ of each branch, assessing the tone and spirit that older adults experience when they visit. An interesting finding is that some of the part-time, loneworker branches (with less space, smaller budgets) ‘felt more welcoming, more cosy, more peaceful and carefree’ than their larger counterparts. This sense of being able to ‘take a break’ in a library was experienced in these smaller branches. Consistent with the literature, the Danish perspective comes to mind – “Public libraries are highly impactful to users in terms of being a haven that allows them to take a much-needed break - the libraries are a place where they can take time for themselves and each other and experience well-being, immersion, and emotion” (The impact of public libraries in Denmark: A haven in our community, 2021, p.7).

It is possible that these safe spaces are the result of the efforts/attitudes of the librarians; they know their patrons by name and welcome them individually.

### 5.2.2 Objective 2

‘To investigate the provision of Age Friendly library programming’.



This research also sought to appraise AF library programming with a view to assessing its adequacy – is there a sufficient amount of events and are these consistent throughout branches?

Analysis of the KLAS AF programming statistics for main branches showed both low numbers of AF events and low attendances. There was also inconsistent event numbers across main branches with no regular patterns. The researcher noted that this could be attributed to local populations, demographics or management policy. Upon reflection, this could also be due to individual library managers and their programming priorities – a certain branch may spend a percentage of their AF budget on one/two individual/more expensive workshops and not a series of 4-5 classes. Several other factors would determine attendance figures. As noted, statistics highlighted the low numbers of AF events held; this is consistent with the feedback of the older adults and librarians .

Indeed the prevailing theme of the group interviews was requests for more events. Workshops/classes/information sessions; their popularity is undoubted however the consensus was that the numbers are inadequate. In the researcher's opinion, these group 'meet-ups' and individual events are an invaluable service in the fight against loneliness. This ties in with the literature, with the Irish Government's latest 'National Positive Ageing Strategy' (2013 p. 27) suggesting that engagement through activity can help to maintain quality of life, promote social contact, combat loneliness and isolation and maintain people as active members of society. Participation in leisure activities is associated with a lower risk of poor mental and physical health outcomes and mortality.

The high number of comments regarding 'the library as 'a home away from home' is testimony to the importance attached to these library visits. This is echoed by the data from librarian interviews where one of the main themes was the importance of 'the meet-up' , with more events being requested. From the researcher's viewpoint, the librarian interview data, alongside group/statistical data, confirms that the 'social' side of the library is weakening due to the lack of AF events.

It is worth reiterating that the AF events are especially needed in part-time branches for their social/wellbeing benefits; these libraries are already one step behind as they are rurally located, however the researcher feels that a small number of AF events could be trialled in each part-time branch with a small proportion of the budget diverted from main branch programming. If adequately promoted, this could be a successful addition to KLAS' AF programming calendar.

The social benefits of interacting with others and fostering social connections are identified in the literature with both Gallagher (2012) and Barbakoff (2023) suggesting that these are primary needs of the older generations. Based on the data collected, the researcher would argue that the adequacy of AF programming provision in libraries directly impacts upon how 'social' the space is perceived to be.

### 5.2.3 Objective 3

'To explore staff opinions on the suitability of service offered to older patrons'. The third research objective involved exploring librarians' opinions regarding service provision. The data indicated that the most prevalent themes emerging were library programming/budgets, the 'meet-ups' and digital inclusion/eServices. While staff attitudes towards the lack of events/budget restrictions were strong and not entirely positive, they were tempered with a level of understanding concerning government funding cuts. The frustration regarding LA VAT regulations that hamper events scheduling was also evident; it was widely felt that KCC should engage with the LGMA to examine LA regulations around VAT registration for small businesses. While the aforementioned factors are negative, the collective comments show that these librarians care about their older patrons' library experiences. It would be

reasonable to claim that these librarians do feel that the service provision is mostly suitable, but these specific issues hindering events scheduling require attention/prioritising. They receive the day-to-day requests/feedback, and are hearing first-hand whether the 'service is suitable'. It can be correctly argued that these issues mostly apply to part-time librarians, however the VAT issue applies in all branches.

The question of suitability of service is discussed in a more positive vein when it comes to older patrons using the library as a 'meet-up' point; referring back to the literature, both James (2018) and OUP Libraries (2021) describe libraries as 'social hubs' which add to the overall well-being of citizens. It could be suggested that the older adults and librarians are equally well-placed to determine the suitability of service offered; likewise, they are equally well-placed to determine whether their branches are safe, social spaces.

While the librarian interview data surrounding digital inclusion/eServices will be discussed in the next section, the findings suggest that older patrons value the physical library spaces over/above digital. It could be argued that the physical spaces represent that which is 'safe and familiar'; this is yet another reminder of the importance of the social role of libraries. This connects with the views of Lo, He and Liu (2019) and Breevoort (2020) as discussed in the literature. The researcher contends that both the physical space and virtual/tech-filled world can easily co-exist in a library setting, however, as regards suitability of service, it may be a case of librarians 'swapping hats' when tailoring older adult services.

#### 5.2.4 Objective 4

'To appraise digital inclusion for older adults in Kildare Library Service.' The final objective concerned assessing digital inclusion for older patrons. The literature refers to the 'Age Friendly Digital Ambassadors Programme' (2021), an AF initiative launched (during the pandemic) to promote digital inclusivity in libraries, connecting librarians with older adults in need of digital tutoring. While still ongoing and a valuable service, this initiative did not prove to be as popular as was originally envisaged. Digital Ambassadors (including the researcher) now connect with only 5-6 patrons annually with branch staff dealing with any general digital/eServices queries that arise. Despite the data revealing that older patrons do not want to be 'pushed' towards eServices, the researcher feels that this project should be revitalized and re-advertised, targeted at those who do want to upgrade their basic IT skills (primarily library eServices), of their own accord, at their own pace.

One librarian mentioned the 'Age Action' IT classes for older adults; these evening IT sessions are a success in main branches with waiting lists at present. This is surprising, considering the findings indicating (from both patrons and librarians) that traditional services are preferable. It could be the case that attendees (who can choose their learning platform – smartphone/tablet/laptop etc.) are taking the classes for a specific reason e.g. to use online banking, book flights or to learn video calling for family abroad. According to Kesselman (2019), libraries meet the needs of individuals of all ages and skill levels of electronic technologies, from children and young adults to their parents, seniors and families. Often it is not about the technology or consumer electronic product, it is about its functionality as an enabler that meets an important need. These two initiatives are valuable, worthwhile older adult services that are available, without pressure, should they be required.

The findings of the branch checklists/interviews indicate that KLAS are meeting their older patrons' digital needs – from free wifi to telephone support, in-branch assistance with pc usage, printing/IT classes – this contributes towards safe, social spaces by supporting a vulnerable demographic. Further

research is required to determine what percentage of older adults can remain remotely connected to library services.

The availability of choice for older adults has been central to this research. Age Action Ireland's paper on Digital Inclusion and an Ageing Population (2021) highlights that currently, approximately 275,000 older people do not use the internet and while some of them wish to do so, others clearly do not. It is essential that KLAS prioritise offering services that complement each other, blending physical and digital, promoting new technologies but not to the detriment of the physical space.

### 5.3 Research Implications

"Life expectancy in Ireland has increased by almost two and a half years since 2007, with male life expectancy consistently higher than the EU average throughout the last decade, and female life expectancy surpassing the EU average in 2017" (Gov.ie, 2019). Several indicators point to increased life expectancies worldwide, especially over the last 20 years. Libraries play a pivotal role in supporting older adults, in particular from a wellness/social standpoint. This findings of this case study, while focussed on and only applicable to the libraries in a single Irish county, are relevant not only to KLAS and KCC but to the 30 other Irish Library Services. The data would also be of interest to not only AF Kildare but AF Ireland as an 'on-the-ground- investigation' into the safe/social nature of Kildare Libraries. Further afield, this research is of value to any exploration of Irish libraries' attitudes towards its older patrons and/or any investigation into AF practices in Irish Public Libraries.

Inquiries indicated a research gap existing on a local and national level with regard to the effectiveness of AF practices in Irish public libraries; this study presents an opportunity to explore the relationship between the narrative and reality. The interview data contributes to research surrounding older adults' viewpoints on blended library environments and their preference for the 'traditional library service' while having the digital option in the background. While not revelatory, reconfirmation can inform local library services on AF policy issues. It is hoped that KLAS use the findings of this research as an opportunity to improve/prioritise the service offered to older persons.

### 5.4 Research Limitations

It can be concluded that Kildare Libraries are safe, social spaces for older adults. This research covers the opinions of 40+ older patrons, 13 librarians and data from checks of 29 facilities/services carried out in 15 full- and part-time libraries. Statistical programming data was also analysed alongside global/national/local literature. One limitation of this study concerned the lack of formal policy against which to compare/contrast data. Upon reflection, should this research be continued, it would be advantageous to arrange interviews with KLAS management and/or library policy makers to further explore this issue. This did not, however, detract from the validity of the findings. The inconsistency of the statistical programming data, especially from the part-time branches could be classed as a shortcoming; analysis of these findings showed anomalies requiring further, in-depth research. It could also be stated that the limited events numbers in part-time branches was an impediment to obtaining noteworthy data, however this data is still legitimate and speaks to a weak link in the AF, safe, social spaces chain. A further limitation is that the findings cannot be replicated, applying only to County Kildare Libraries. This notwithstanding, the findings are helpful for further study within Kildare and Irish libraries and indeed, further afield.

## 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 Recommendations/Future Research

Based on the research findings and while avoiding generalisations, certain recommendations can be made that may be applicable to other Irish Library Services. An initial suggestion would be the creation of a formal, structured AF Policy for Kildare Libraries staff. This would include a framework for service provision for older patrons, accompanied by mandatory AF training for all staff. Consultation could take place between AF Ireland, the Older Persons Council Kildare and Senior KLAS Management. Mandatory AF 'Key Actions' by staff in their PDP would emphasise the importance placed on services to older patrons. A significant number of librarians mentioned the need for more AF events in both full- and part-time branches. This was also requested by older adults themselves. This is noteworthy for KLAS and should be examined in conjunction with a review of programming budgets for part-time branches.

It would also be beneficial for staff to open discussions around traditional library services versus eServices/digital technology for older persons. This could take place at individual library staff meetings, managed by AF Digital champions and feedback given at SMTM (Senior Management Team Meetings). The aim would be to increase staff awareness around the preferences of older patrons rather than direct service provision/policy change.

Regarding future research opportunities, this research was carried out, in part, because of a local/national research gap in the area of libraries as safe, social spaces for older patrons. This research design could be replicated by other LAs who may wish to carry out further investigation into their own AF practices – this could kick-start conversation around how libraries are perceived by older adults. As mentioned above, interviewees emphasised their preference for the physical over digital. It would be worthwhile for library management to carry out similar research within a 5-10 year period; attitudes change as generations age and it would be essential to uncover, once again, older patrons' views on traditional versus digital services and indeed a hybrid model of library service delivery after this time has passed.

### 6.2 Conclusion

Public libraries are for everyone and about everyone; inclusive, safe spaces providing opportunities for all ages to learn, discover and connect. From toddlers to teens, younger adults to older adults, the human nature element of our library interactions is paramount. For older library patrons, the challenges of life in general can be daunting and oftentimes, the library is regarded as a temporary haven from the outside world. "In December 2019 after a decade of work, Ireland was formally recognised by the World Health Organisation as an international leader and the first Age Friendly country in the world" (Age Friendly Ireland, 2022). To date, local government-led Age Friendly initiatives across Ireland have resulted in thousands of older adults leading more connected and healthier lives. Kildare Library Service has enabled all its branches to become AF, ensuring that older patrons' voices are heard.

This research aimed to examine the effectiveness of current Kildare Library Service' Age Friendly practices in creating safe, social spaces for older adults. Based on the analysis of interview, observational and statistical data, it can be concluded that, yes, Kildare Libraries are safe, social environments for senior patrons. This research highlights the value placed on their community libraries by older patrons and their preference for the traditional library service model. It also

identifies and applauds the efforts made by KLAS librarians in achieving AF status for all branches and the added-value this brings for older generations.

Looking to the future, this research is a good starting point for any library service, including KLAS, seeking to critically examine their older adult service provision. More importantly, the process of carrying out the research, speaking to colleagues (some for the first time) and spending time in the company of wise, witty and enthusiastic library patrons has served as a reminder to the researcher of why we should always value both our public libraries and the senior members of our society.

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