

DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

**AGE
FRIENDLY
CULTURE**



AGE FRIENDLY CULTURE: AN INTRODUCTION



The Age Friendly Manchester Culture Working Group includes more than thirty cultural organisations across the city, working 'with and for older people' to share creative approaches that improve quality of life and make Manchester a better place to grow older. Established in 2003 as part of Manchester's Valuing Older People Programme, the partnership aims to reach those older people who participate least in cultural activity.

In 2010, Manchester became the first city in the UK to achieve Age Friendly Community status and become part of a global network established by the World Health Organization to 'empower older adults to participate fully in society and promote dignity and independence'. It champions agency, active participation and work led by older people themselves. Building on Manchester's experience in 2018, Greater Manchester became the first city region to become an Age Friendly Community.

The Age Friendly Manchester Culture Working Group has collectively developed innovative approaches that support older people to participate in creative opportunities; it is the only dedicated partnership of its kind across the global network and continues to be an international exemplar. Supported by Manchester City Council's Age Friendly Manchester and Culture Teams, the group has commissioned a new three-year plan to continue its development.

The Working Group includes city-based theatres, museums, art galleries, libraries and concert halls, as well as university-based venues and organisations that deliver activities in grassroots community settings. Fifteen case studies from Working Group partners have been included in this document, but this is just a small sample of the creative and cultural opportunities on offer for older people across Manchester.

ALL FM

All FM is a local radio station, 'for the community, by the community'. With a long-standing commitment to age-friendly delivery, its Older Voices project won an award at the National Community Radio Awards, and in 2020 it received The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

"Little did I ever think that I would end up, at 85 years of age, doing these radio courses. It is fantastic. The staff and the people here are so helpful with instructions and being understanding for us, and it's just something out of this world."

All FM Radio training participant

**CASE
STUDY**

AGE FRIENDLY CULTURE: CONTEXT

'Creative Ageing' is a term that often describes 'creativity with, for, and by older people'. Age Friendly Culture goes beyond individual projects and organisations to embed this work across a whole city and its communities.

Manchester's Age Friendly Strategy Manchester: a city for life 2023-28 recognises that later life is changing due to a growing population that is both expanding in size and becoming more diverse. This is creating new opportunities and challenges for the city and its communities.

Creativity and access to culture is a fundamental human right at every age; it is embedded within both Manchester's Age Friendly Strategy and the Cultural Strategy for the next decade, and the Age Friendly Cultural Working Group's three-year plan is supported and informed by them.

This matters because older people say that creative and cultural participation is the number one contributing factor to their own wellbeing and arts and culture is important in improving their overall quality of life; however, engagement drops significantly after the age of 75.

Research shows that the biggest barriers to creative and cultural engagement are a lack of local, accessible, and affordable opportunities and not having someone to go with, and other intersectional issues, such as complex health conditions, caring responsibilities and widening inequalities.



There is a growing body of evidence to show the correlation between creativity and health in later life, and Manchester is part of the first Creative Health city region in the world, harnessing the power of creativity, culture and heritage to address health inequities.

It is also important to reflect on the words of David Cutler (Baring Foundation) that: "The field of (...) creative ageing is growing and maturing. With that will surely come more examination of ageism both within creative ageing and as a subject of artistic creation."

The Age Friendly Manchester Culture Working Group has been working at the cutting edge of this evolving space for the past 20 years and is committed to ensuring communities continue to have agency and equity of access to creativity and culture at every age.

DARK BEAUTIFUL AND CHASTE

CASE STUDY

Dark Beautiful and Chaste is an example of the high-quality theatre written and performed by older creative practitioners across Manchester. Nominated for a Culture Award in 2025 for the best performance category, Marie Greenhalgh is the Chair of the Manchester Age Friendly Board

The Age Friendly Manchester Board embodies this ethos, and in 2024 marked the International Day of Older People with a co-created poem, 'They call us Baby Boomers: A manifesto' – reminding Mancunians who they are, where they came from and where they are going.

AGE FRIENDLY CULTURE: KEY CHARACTERISTICS

1. SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Age-Friendly Culture encourages social connectedness. Across the Working Group, there is a shared commitment to reach those who are least likely to participate. A good example of this is older men. There is an increase in men living alone who are at risk of social isolation and loneliness. While improving, Manchester has among the lowest levels of male life expectancy in the UK.

HOUSE OF BOOKS AND FRIENDS

Our relationship with Tony began a few years ago when he became a regular at the House of Books and Friends and began sharing his art with the team. Our booksellers started chatting with him about his creations, his love of making things, and his wish to get out and about more.

On quiet days, booksellers would sit and craft with Tony. He later offered to run free drop-in craft sessions, which we promote on social media. The drop-ins are lovely examples of intergenerational community activity, and he has formed friendships with other regulars and volunteers. We are honoured that Tony shares his creativity with us and love seeing these organic connections grow in the bookshop.

CASE
STUDY



NATIONAL FOOTBALL MUSEUM

CASE
STUDY

The National Football Museum Sporting Memories group was created to reduce social isolation in older adults by bringing people together through football themed reminiscence. The group has a high proportion of men attending and offers a friendly space where members can chat, share memories and connect through their shared love of soccer.

The programme is shaped collaboratively by members, and includes themed discussions, exhibition tours, speakers, and trips to other venues. Members also make a valuable contribution to the museum's work, sharing their passion, experiences and knowledge of football culture to support the development of the changing exhibition programme.

"The strong bond of unity and friendship...
It's always varied and interesting."

"I'm so glad I found the group when I did.
It's been a big improvement to my life."

National Football Museum participants

2. PARTICIPATION

Consultation during the development of Manchester's Cultural Strategy 2024-34, 'Always, Everywhere', reflects that 'around 15% of residents want improved accessibility' and 'more than 20% want to see increased representation in the sector'. Ensuring a diverse and inclusive programme is crucial to support those who are most underserved in current programming.



HALLÉ

Our relaxed concerts take place several times a year at Hallé St Peter's, with a 26-piece ensemble from the Hallé Orchestra. The musicians play a programme of short, popular and light classical pieces. The audiences are usually varied and we welcome people with additional support needs. These concerts offer older people the opportunity to experience good-quality music in an informal environment, as well as close interaction with the Hallé players. One audience member commented: "Fantastic music and lovely to see so many people of various ages enjoying it."

CASE STUDY



PORTICO LIBRARY

The Portico Library have developed a sensory way of reading the historic collection of books. In slow-reading sessions, we consider passages in a group over a cup of tea. The late afternoon timing has made the sessions intergenerational, as people join at the end of work and older people join before it gets too dark and crowded in Manchester. One visitor commented that she "loves attending these discussions and meeting people with different ideas."

CASE STUDY

3. CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS

There is a strong track record of working collaboratively across the cultural sector but also across other sectors; the new Creative Health Strategy for Greater Manchester suggests 'two of the main challenges (...) in working with older adults are engaging people with long-term health conditions and reaching marginalised communities'.

MANCHESTER ART GALLERY

Uncertain Futures is an award-winning art and research collaboration addressing critical inequalities in work, and worklessness experienced by women over 50 in Manchester.

The project engaged 100 women from diverse backgrounds through co-produced narrative interviews, examining intersectional experiences of gender, age, race, disability, migration status, and class in relation to work.

Designated as a United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing case study (WHO, 2023), this project exemplifies participatory research excellence, combining gerontological research with socially engaged art practice to amplify marginalised voices and drive policy impact:

"For women over 50, this is a project that cuts across matters of ethnicity, immigration, economic status – both rich and poor. It makes women over 50 visible in society, particularly those who are from migrant, refugee, and asylum seeker backgrounds."

Uncertain Futures participant

CASE
STUDY



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM NORTH

CASE
STUDY

Imperial War Museum North has established several cross-sector partnerships aimed at enhancing the impact and reach of its initiatives. These partnerships include collaborations with local, national and international organisations to reach new audiences, and develop collections. Their objective is to challenge people of all ages to look at war and conflict from different perspectives:

"I was a child during the war; I was evacuated when I was three years old from Manchester to Clitheroe. I remember living with an older couple who were very nice to me. The house was very dark because they had blacked out the windows, my brother was placed on a farm in the village, and my sister was in another house nearby. I remember being very scared, as I was away from my siblings."

Memories of VE Day Project programme



4. TALENT AND CREATIVITY

Manchester's Age Friendly Strategy 2024-34 aims to '...make culture more accessible and relevant to people in middle to later life (both as consumers and performers), especially those who participate least in culture'. The Age Friendly Manchester Culture Working Group and the organisations it represents play an important role in this by increasing agency, diversity and the representation of older people.

ROYAL EXCHANGE THEATRE

The Royal Exchange Theatre is committed to making the lives of people who are often underrepresented visible in our theatres. As part of the Elders Company programme, the theatre worked with African and African Caribbean Elders, East Asian Elders and South Asian Elders in Rochdale.

Dominoes and Dahlias (+Oware!) engaged ten African and African Caribbean Elders who created a new play with director Cheryl Martin and musician Clive Hunte. They returned to Royal Exchange with a new production for ELDERSFEST in 2024 to celebrate ten years of creative ageing at the theatre. Several members of the original cast continue to make work with us:

"Joining the Elders has now given me wings. I feel confident, I have a voice, I am respected, I have courage, I am strong and I am among friends."

Elders programme participant

CASE
STUDY



WHITWORTH ART GALLERY

The Whitworth Art Gallery has had a long-standing commitment to the Age Friendly Manchester Culture Offer since 2009. HANDMADE is the main culture offer for older people aged 50+ and consists of free weekly sessions during term time. Every session is facilitated by a craft-based artist practitioner and inspired by the exhibitions in the gallery spaces, ranging from printmaking to paper craft. This results in a diverse approach to creating individual responses to the gallery.

"The HANDMADE craft sessions are friendly and interesting. I enjoy using the surroundings and exhibitions to inspire my work. I find the class non-threatening according to whatever the ability, and everyone's art is valued."

HANDMADE participant

CASE
STUDY

AGE FRIENDLY CULTURE: A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE



In 2025, the Age Friendly Manchester Culture Working Group, supported by Manchester City Council, commissioned Farrell Renowden, Founder of Age Friendly Culture CIC, to co-create a new three-year plan. The Working Group were clear: in three years' time they want a new 'culture' of Age Friendly Culture embedded across Manchester.

1. MAKING IT MAINSTREAM

Co-creating accessible pathways for those who are least engaged.

Year 1: We will co-create new Age Friendly Culture Pathways, mapping and signposting accessible creative opportunities for older people across Manchester.

Year 2: We will share our initial pathways and work partners to refine and strengthen our approach, with a focus on diversity, inclusion and representation.

Year 3: We will co-create more pathways, collaborating with older people and cross-sector partners, to explore the themes and issues that emerge.

This theme builds on the Working Group's existing delivery.

AGE FRIENDLY LIBRARIES

CASE
STUDY

Manchester libraries achieved 'Age-Friendly Libraries' status in June 2022, recognising their commitment to a set of age-friendly standards co-created with older people. Standards are displayed in each library.

We will:

1. Ensure you feel welcome.
2. Encourage social engagement.
3. Be accessible.
4. Have places to sit.
5. Offer volunteering opportunities.
6. Have large-print books, talking books and e-books.
7. Support you with your computer use.
8. Provide information.
9. Display leaflets and posters.
10. Have toilet facilities, including accessible toilets.

Following the implementation of the standards, a survey conducted by the library service in 2023 found that 44% of respondents often or sometimes felt lonely, but 73% of these said the library helped to reduce feelings of loneliness:

"The library has helped so much for me meeting people, especially the staff, who are very helpful and friendly and now seem like old friends."

Manchester Library participant

2. MAKING IT REPRESENTATIVE

Co-creating opportunities for experts by experience to share decision-making.

Year 1: We will co-create a new Age Friendly Culture Champions model, as a sustainable approach to increase power-sharing with older people across Manchester.

Year 2: We will review our model and work with partners to refine and strengthen our approach, with a focus on diversity, inclusion and representation.

Year 3: We will co-create more opportunities for power-sharing and decision-making, in partnership with older people and cross-sector partners.

This theme builds on the Working Group's delivery and learning from past initiatives, such as the Age Friendly Culture Champions exemplar, which embeds lived-experience in decision-making.



MANCHESTER MUSEUM

CASE
STUDY

Since being launched in February 2023, Culture Mondays have transformed Manchester Museum's usual Monday closure into vibrant seasonal cultural gatherings for people aged 50+. These special days provide an accessible and welcoming environment to explore both the museum's permanent galleries and its temporary exhibitions, alongside a range of engaging hands-on workshops.

Co-produced with older participants, the programme celebrates lived experience through events such as International Older People's Day and nature storytelling sessions. Partnerships with other Age Friendly Culture Working Group members, such as Martin Harris Centre for Music and Drama, and The Bridgewater Hall, extend engagement beyond the museum.

"I had a wonderful day. Lots of memories to take home. It is so important to have these experiences, and thanks to you and the hard work you are doing behind the scenes."

Manchester Museum Participant

3. MAKING THE CASE

Co-creating compelling stories of collective impact.

Year 1: We will co-create a new Age Friendly Culture Impact model, sharing stories and data to make the case for Age Friendly Cultural delivery across Manchester.

Year 2: We will share our initial findings and work with partners to refine and strengthen our approach, with a focus on diversity, inclusion and representation.

Year 3: We will share more stories and data, collaborating with older people and cross-sector partners, to explore the themes and issues that emerge.

MUSIC IN MIND

CASE
STUDY

Manchester Camerata's Music in Mind programme uses the principles of music therapy to improve the wellbeing of people living with dementia. Manchester Camerata has partnered with researchers at The University of Manchester since 2012 to develop and refine the music therapy-based techniques at the heart of the Music in Mind programme.

Manchester Camerata has UK Centre of Excellence for Music and Dementia status and, collaborating with local partners, including Age UK, Mind and Together Dementia Support, runs 20 Dementia Music Cafés across Greater Manchester.

"...a little piece of heaven
in our week."

Music in Mind participant



This three-year plan reflects the ambition of the AFM Culture Working Group to embed a new 'culture' of Age Friendly Culture through partnership. These three strands of delivery will be our key focus as a partnership; however, ideas for special projects also emerged from the co-creation of the plan. A small number of cross-sector partnership projects will be developed throughout the lifetime of the three-year plan.

BRAIN HEALTH THEME

In December 2015, Alex Shaw at the Martin Harris Centre, based at The University of Manchester, began an initiative called Make our Arts Centre Dementia-Friendly.

Over the past decade, this has grown into a wider ambition to improve the inclusivity and accessibility of both the **Martin Harris Centre** and its performances. The project focuses on reducing inequality, widening reach, and diversifying audiences, performers, volunteers and stakeholders, while strengthening engagement with communities on and off campus.

It also supports wellbeing through cultural participation and provides students, staff, graduates and supporters with opportunities to gain experience, collaborate and contribute through social responsibility-focused activity.

"Thank you! We all felt very welcome and included!"

Martin Harris programme participant

**CASE
STUDY**



NEIGHBOURHOODS THEME

Platt Hall is a centre for creative health serving the neighbourhoods of Moss Side, Rusholme, Fallowfield and Longsight. Housed in a beautiful Grade II*-listed Georgian house, it delivers programmes that use creativity, heritage, museum collections and green outdoor space to support residents' health and wellbeing.

A key demographic it serves is older adults living locally. The Hall provides a welcoming creative space where older people feel safe, listened to and empowered to manage their health and wellbeing, reducing social isolation and giving them a voice.

"I used to think Platt Hall was a costume museum, but now I've been prescribed by a doctor, I see it as more of a place where I can feel better about things. It's a good way to keep going and not feel alone."

Fallowfield resident

**CASE
STUDY**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Farrell Renowden, Founder and Director of **Age Friendly Culture CIC**, was commissioned by Manchester City Council to co-create this resource, which builds upon '**Age Friendly Culture: Some things can't be confined to a box**' produced by Esme Ward, Manchester Museum, in 2015.

WITH THANKS

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to the new Age Friendly Culture Plan and the development of this resource. All content in this publication is copyright © 2026 by Manchester City Council and may not be reproduced without permission. All rights reserved.

GET IN TOUCH

If you are a cultural-sector organisation based in Manchester, or a cross-sector partner interested in any of the themes raised, and able to support our ambitious plans, please get in touch via: agefriendly@manchester.gov.uk or culture@manchester.gov.uk

