



**Creative and Cultural  
Activities and Wellbeing  
in Later Life**

# Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Current activity</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>What is creative and cultural participation?</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>What factors are linked to taking part?</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The relationship with wellbeing</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Conclusion and policy recommendations</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Tips for practitioners</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Further resources</b>	<b>15</b>

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[www.ageuk.org.uk/creativewellbeing](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/creativewellbeing)



**“I sing in a church choir and attend social events at church. I feel fortunate that I can access information on all sorts of creative and cultural activities and choose what I want to do.”**

All quotes in this report are from Your Voice panelists. Age UK's Your Voice panel is a self-selected panel of over 700 people aged 50+. It is not representative of the 50+ population and is particularly weighted towards those aged over 75 and those perhaps less likely to engage with other research or panels. We recruit panellists through a range of sources offering a choice of how to take part online, post or by telephone - whatever their preference. Fieldwork took place in May 2017. 462 panellists answered the question: “In the last 12 months what, if anything, have you taken part in, visited or attended that you would consider to be creative or cultural?” These quotes represent a selection of responses from a variety of panellists and may not be copied or reproduced in any form without Age UK's prior written permission.

# Introduction

What makes later life worth living? That is one of the questions that Age UK has been attempting to answer through our recent research on wellbeing. We used a rich data source (the Understanding Society Survey), combined with state-of-the-art statistical techniques, to construct Age UK's Index of Wellbeing in Later Life.<sup>1</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Index showed that people with good social networks, good health and good financial resources were more likely to have high levels of wellbeing. However, the strongest message from the research was the importance of maintaining meaningful engagement with the world around you in later life – whether this is through social, creative or physical activity, work, or belonging to some form of community group. Taken together, these types of participation contribute more than a fifth of wellbeing, as defined in our Index. Even more striking was our finding that creative and cultural participation was the single factor that contributed the most out of all 40 of the factors we found to significantly contribute to wellbeing.

Follow-up qualitative research that we carried out showed that, even for people with very low wellbeing overall, having something creative to do really helps.

This report delves further into our findings around **creative and cultural participation** – what it is, who does what, and how it differs depending on people's overall level of wellbeing. We include examples of creative and cultural activities for older people and conclude with recommendations for practitioners and policymakers.

“I use my local library regularly and volunteer once a week to keep it open, hence have found hidden treasures.”



## Our research

To create our Index of Wellbeing in Later Life, we drew on data collected from over 15,000 UK respondents aged 60+ in Waves 1-4 (2009-2014) of the Understanding Society (USoc) survey. This told us which factors in older people's lives were important for wellbeing and that creative and cultural activities had the biggest impact.

Wave 2 (2010-2012) of the survey asked about participation in creative and cultural activity. We used these data, based on over 13,000 respondents aged 60+, to analyse the specific relationship between wellbeing, creative and cultural participation, especially how participation

differed between people who had the highest and the lowest wellbeing scores.

Finally, given the strong impact of creative and cultural participation on wellbeing, we wanted to understand the factors that contribute to participation. We analysed the relationships between specific demographic and lifestyle factors, and creative and cultural participation, again based on Wave 2 of USoc. This let us explore the differences between older people who engaged in creative and cultural activities and those who did not.

<sup>1</sup>Read our summary report about the Index, including a description of the Understanding Society survey, and other supporting documents at [www.ageuk.org.uk/wellbeingresearch](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/wellbeingresearch)

## Current activity

The importance of being able to take part in creative or cultural activities in later life is borne out by the experience of local Age UKs, many of whom run activities for older people in their area, and festivals such as the Age of Creativity run by Age UK Oxfordshire, Luminare supported by Age Scotland, and Age Cymru's Gwanwyn Festival.

There is also an active network of other organisations who work hard to involve older people, often using innovative approaches to support older people in creative ways. For example, the Albany Arts Centre in Deptford, South London, runs 'Meet me at the Albany', an arts club for people over 60, and Equal Arts in Gateshead developed 'HenPower', which engages older people in care homes in arts activities and hen-keeping.

However, coverage is patchy and, at a time of pressure on public spending, funding is squeezed, even though the links between wellbeing and being able to take part in activities that you enjoy are increasingly being recognised. In Parliament, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee launched (in January 2018) an Inquiry into the 'social impact of participation in culture and sport.' This builds on a heavyweight 2017 report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, which defines itself as '...working towards fully establishing the arts as a mainstream contributor to health and social care services in promoting good health and wellbeing.' The report estimated that 9.4 million people in England participate in the arts through more than 49,000 amateur arts groups, with many more attending cultural events at galleries, museums, concert halls, theatres etc.

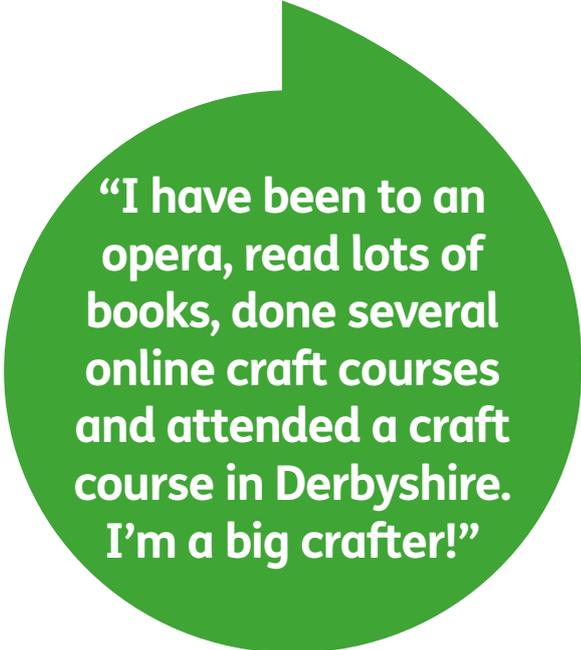
Andrea Sutcliffe, the Chief Inspector of Adult Social Care for the Care Quality Commission, has pointed to the role of the arts in enabling people to live full and meaningful lives, and the Social Care Institute for Excellence has curated a digital resource, funded by the Baring Foundation, to increase the confidence and skills of care home staff in engaging residents in the arts. Arts Council England supports arts and cultural organisations in making health and wellbeing integral to their work, and is consulting on whether this should be a priority in its ten year strategy for 2020-2030.

The Local Government Association also recognises that healthy ageing can be supported by social

prescribing of artistic activity – where GP services refer people to local services and activities. The Social Prescribing Network is a collaboration between the College of Medicine, the University of Westminster and Wellcome, aiming to make the case for social prescribing. For example, dance can help to prevent falls in older people, and group singing in later life reduces loneliness, anxiety and depression. Activity on the ground includes:

- Calderdale Council provides a funded service to stimulate arts activities after local projects had shown significant reductions in loneliness and reported improvements in the health of participants.
- An 'arts on prescription' service in St Helens has shown a social return of £11.55 for every £1 invested.
- Halton Clinical Commissioning Group has a Cultural Manifesto for Wellbeing which describes the interdependence of the arts and heritage, environment and sport in addressing the root causes of health.

However, these initiatives can only flourish if there is support for local activities, such as funding to run them, places to meet and transport to get there.



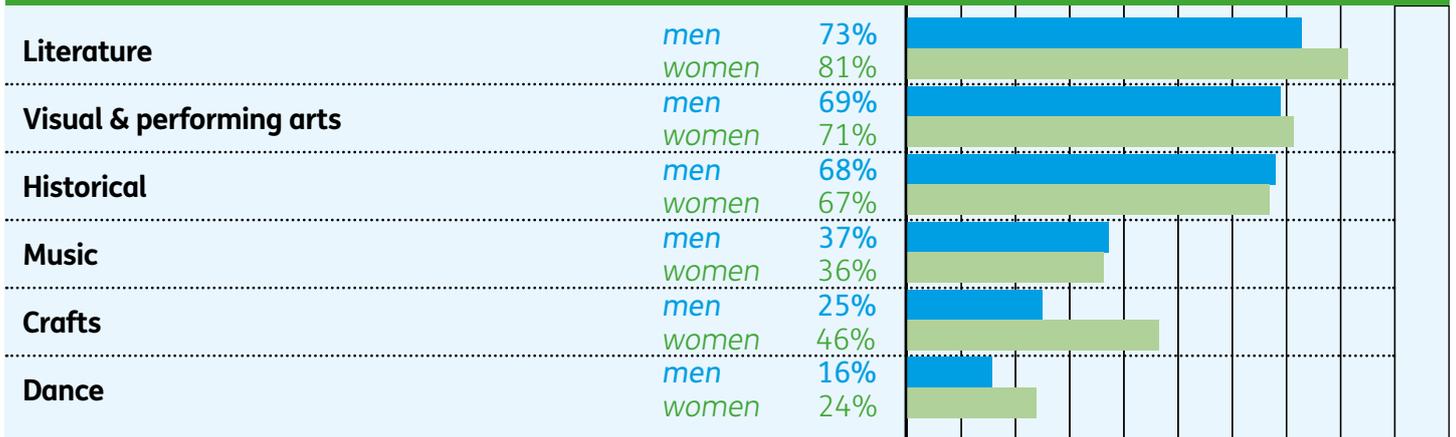
**“I have been to an opera, read lots of books, done several online craft courses and attended a craft course in Derbyshire. I’m a big crafter!”**

# What is creative and cultural participation?

'Creativity' and 'culture' are by definition hard to define. For this research, we based our indicator on the data collected in the Understanding Society survey under the heading of 'cultural activities.' This indicator is composed of two questions from the survey: whether the respondent has taken part in, or has attended, a number of activities. The prompts asked in the survey range from composing music to being a member of a book club, from attending a museum to participating in a Chinese festival, with 38 items in total.

Table 1 (page 6) lists the activities in our indicator of 'creative and cultural participation' and shows what percentage of the 13,467 respondents aged 60+ were involved in each one. Graph 1 shows the relative popularity for each category. This differed for men and women, with women overall being more likely to take part in dance, craft and literary activities, and men slightly more involved in music and historical activities.

**Graph 1: Participation by category and gender**

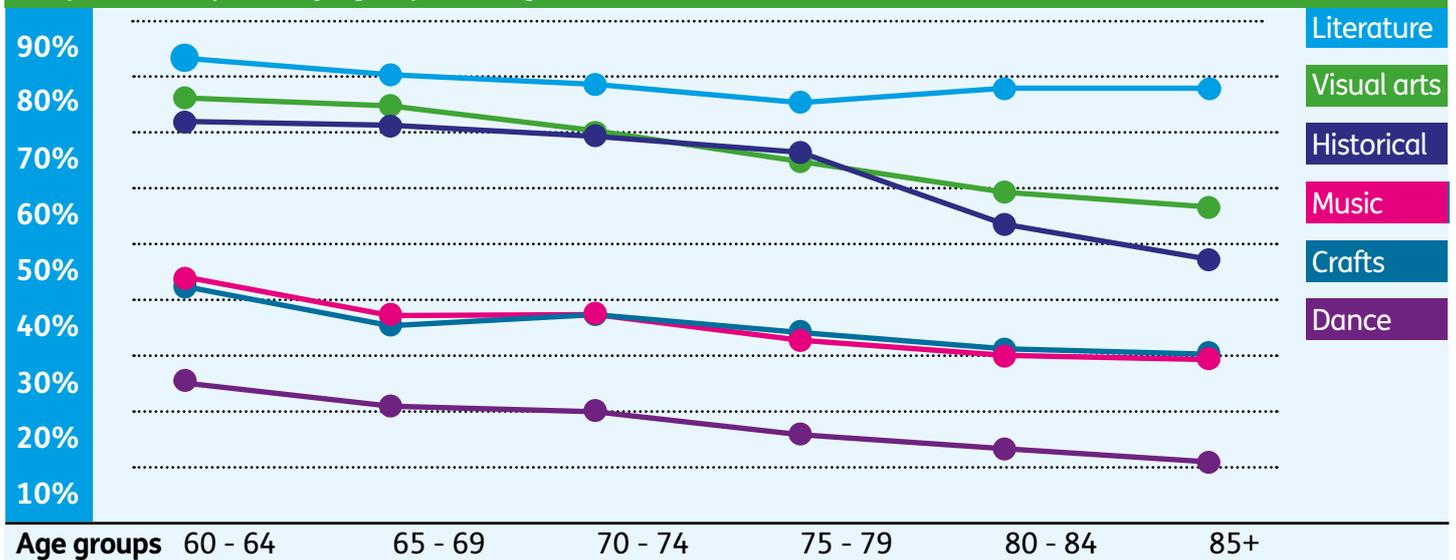


## How do people take part?

More people 'visited' and 'attended' activities than took an active part, such as writing, playing or performing. However, for the people who engaged, it's important to note that they might not see the same clear divide. There are obvious distinctions between some types of 'attendance' versus 'taking part', such as watching a film and knitting, but going to a museum may include taking part in activities as well. In the 'have taken part in' activities, reading came out as the top pursuit, but craft activities were also very popular.

This raises important questions about how people can remain engaged as they age, whether as makers, artists, performers, audiences or volunteers. As Graph 2 shows, participation generally decreased with age, but, while it held up relatively well in the 'musical' and 'crafts' categories, it fell steeply in the 'historical' and 'visual' categories. Not only does this risk excluding many older people from activities they enjoy, it is also a risk for organisations in these sectors: they could be losing a large part of their audience.

**Graph 2: Participation by age – percentages**



# What is creative and cultural participation? (cont)

Table 1: Participation by activity			
Literature 80%*	Read for pleasure (not newspapers, magazines or comics)	74%	
	Used a public library service	40%	
	Event connected with books or writing	7%	
	Written any stories, plays or poetry	5%	
	Member of a book club	4%	
Visual & performing arts 71%*	Visited a museum	42%	
	Film at a cinema or other venue	38%	
	Attended play/drama, pantomime or a musical	41%	
	Exhibition or collection of art, photography, sculpture or craft	32%	
	Photography, film or video making as an artistic activity	17%	
	Attend a street event, carnival or cultural festival (e.g. mela)	8%	
	Used a computer to create original artworks or animation	8%	
	Event which included video or electronic art	4%	
	Rehearsed or performed in a play, drama, opera or musical theatre	2%	
	Attended circus	2%	
Historical 68%*	Visited a city or town with historic character	51%	
	Visited a historic park or garden open to the public	42%	
	Visited a historic building open to the public (non-religious)	40%	
	Visited a monument such as a castle, fort or ruin	37%	
	Visited a historic place of worship (not to worship)	34%	
	Visited a place connected with industrial history (e.g. an old factory)	21%	
	Visited a site of archaeological interest (e.g. Roman villa)	16%	
	Visited a site connected with sports heritage	3%	
Music 37%*	Attended classical music performance	18%	
	Attended rock, pop or jazz performance	14%	
	Attended opera/opera	9%	
	Played a musical instrument	8%	
	Sang to an audience or rehearsed for a performance	6%	
Crafts 36%*	Textile crafts, wood crafts or crafts, such as embroidery or knitting	24%	
	Painting	12%	
	Attend a public arts display	12%	
Dance 20%*	Participation in dance, including ballet	12%	
	Attended ballet	6%	
	Attended contemporary dance	3%	
	Attended ethnic dance	2%	



## Time & Tide

Independent Arts, Isle of Wight

Independent Arts' Time & Tide project celebrates The Isle of Wight's ageing community and its natural and cultural heritage. Funded by Arts Council England's Celebrating Age Fund, the charity has partnered with local museums, libraries and Age UK Isle of Wight to involve older people in an exciting programme of participatory arts. The project increases opportunities for engagement with creative activities and cultural organisations, while addressing social isolation.

The project links sheltered housing schemes and care homes with local heritage partners and artists to deliver a themed programme of events ranging from the natural history of Dinosaurs to the Victorians' literary legacy. In 2018, it will deliver over 200 creative workshops, visits and pop-up exhibitions to inspire and engage older people, culminating in a Time & Tide Festival in October.

Through the Age Friendly Island initiative and in collaboration with Age UK Isle of Wight, the project is delivering a training and development programme to all partners, enabling their museums to become welcoming places to older people.

- **“It takes your mind off your worries – I was in a world of my own.”**  
J - aged 70 - participant at Mosaic Heritage session, Newport Library, January 2018
- **“We loved today, just loved it. Being able to hold the things was really good, almost better than being in a museum.”**  
P – aged late 70s, participant at heritage workshop at Dinosaur Isle, November 2017
- **“Thoroughly enjoyable presentation and wonderful hands on experience. Thank you for the invite to the Roman villa. I hope to get further inspiration to improve.”**  
R – aged 84 – participant at Fresco Painting session, Newport Library, January 2018



© Emily Hall, Arts Facilitator

# What factors are linked to taking part?

To help us understand what might give more people a chance to get involved in creative and cultural activities, we looked at the strength of association between participation in six categories of activity – literature, visual and performing arts, historical activity, music, crafts and dance – and factors such as access to a car, health and marital status.



## Transport

Having transport, especially a car, is strongly associated with taking part across all six categories, but there were some big gender differences. Men with cars are nearly one and a quarter times more likely to engage with historical activities than women with cars, and women with cars are one and a third times more likely to engage with visual and performing arts than men.



## Health

Men with poorer health are more likely to engage in crafts, music, and historical activities, and men in better health are more likely to participate in dance, visual and performing arts, and literature activities. Women in good health are more likely to participate in all activities compared to women in poor health. Poor mental health and mental wellbeing are strongly associated with lack of engagement for both men and women.



## Being a carer

This generally reduces the likelihood of taking part, but particularly in relation to historical activity, music, visual and arts performances, and dance activities.



## Friends

Having friends is also positively related to engagement in all activities, particularly in engagement with dance and visual and performing arts.



## Urban living

Living in an urban area is strongly associated with some forms of engagement, but there are gender differences. Women in urban areas were one and half times more likely to engage with dance and the visual and performing arts than women living in non-urban areas, and men who live in urban areas are one and a third times more likely to engage in literary activities.



## Wealth

Certain types of wealth (housing, income, financial assets) are linked to an increasing likelihood of engagement, although it is difficult to establish how strong the link is. What is clear is that participation is not just a matter of money.



## Out in the City, Manchester

'Out in the City' is a social initiative for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people over 50, run under the auspices of Age UK Manchester. The group meets twice a week for a range of day trips and local activities, from pub trips to art gallery visits. It is designed to support members of the LGBT\* community by building an enjoyable, gratifying social network. The group is diverse and interesting. Members come from a variety of backgrounds, meaning that their meetings are always lively.

Some members say that the group has been a lifesaver as it has given them an opportunity to meet new people and share their stories in a safe and relaxing space. The group has also been involved in many projects with creative venues such as Manchester Art Gallery, the Whitworth and Start Manchester, as well as taking part in the PRIDE parade for the last ten years.

**"I know of one person who believes that being a member of Out in the City saved his life after the break-up of his marriage. It helped him to cope knowing that there were people there who would listen and understand. It's a safe non-judgmental space where people can share their experiences."** - Project leader

For more information: 'A Handbook for Cultural Engagement with Older Men'.

## Sound Resource

Age UK Oxfordshire has been working in partnership with Sound Resource (a local community music charity) for a number of years, developing singing groups and mentoring opportunities across the county. The Side by Side project developed when staff in the Dementia Oxfordshire team requested additional support to deliver singing in a number of their groups.

Side by Side training aims to provide confidence, skills and practical advice to staff members who want to inject singing into their regular groups, as a main focus or alongside other activities. By training the staff, the initiative aims to generate a sustainable way of offering opportunities for older people living with dementia, and their carers, to connect positively through singing. The project is supported by local health innovation funds and the partners hope to replicate the model and provide more extensive training with other teams across Oxfordshire.

**"Singing is an enjoyable activity which is included in many of the Dementia Oxfordshire post-diagnostic support groups. Our skilled team of Dementia Advisers and Dedicated Support Workers find that singing can provide a way for people with dementia, along with their carers, to express themselves and socialise with others in a fun and supportive group."**

- Dementia Oxfordshire



## The relationship with wellbeing

So far, we have looked at the level of participation by older people in different types of creative and cultural activities. But what is the relationship between participation and wellbeing in later life? We examined this question by comparing participation in different activities by older people in the top 20% of the wellbeing spectrum in our Index with those in the bottom 20%. Not surprisingly, we found that engagement in all activities is higher among people in the top 20% of the spectrum. However, Table 2 shows some interesting differences in the types of activity in which people at the two ends of the spectrum take part.

It is striking that using a public library service ranked highly among older people in the lowest 20% of wellbeing. While a higher proportion of people in the top 20% use a public library service compared to those in the lowest 20% (51.9% compared to 26.6%), using a library is much more important for older people in the lowest 20% of the spectrum - for this group, library use was second only to reading for pleasure in popularity. Craft activities were also much more popular among people with lower wellbeing, whereas days out were important to both groups.

**Table 2: Activity rankings, comparing people in the bottom 20% and top 20% wellbeing groups**

	Bottom 20%	Top 20%
Read for pleasure (not newspapers, magazines or comics)	1	1
Used a public library service	2	11
Visited a city or town with historic character	3	2
Textile crafts, wood crafts or crafts such as embroidery or knitting	4	15
Attended a play/drama, pantomime or musical	5	6
Visited a museum	6	4
Visited a historic park or garden open to the public	7	5
Film at a cinema or other venue	8	8
Visited a historic place of worship (not to worship)	9	9
Visited a monument such as a castle, fort or ruin	10	7
Visited a historic building open to the public (non-religious)	11	3
Exhibition or collection of art, photography, sculpture or craft	12	10

Some of these differences might be explained by the accessibility of the activity. Our analysis of wellbeing shows that having more financial resources, access to a car/transport, and friends to do things with, increase the likelihood of older people's participation in creative and cultural activity, whatever their level of wellbeing. For older people in the lowest 20% of wellbeing, living in an urban area increases the likelihood of participation, while having debt is a barrier. The link with long-term health conditions, however, was much less clear - whereas living with a disability might make it harder to take part, for people in the top 20% per cent it actually seemed to increase participation, although it is not clear whether this was just because people took up a more home-based activity such as reading as they became less mobile.



# Conclusion and policy recommendations

At Age UK, it is our strong belief that everybody deserves a later life worth living. For many of us, this includes taking part in whatever creative or cultural activity matters to us. Our research shows a clear link between participation and wellbeing. Supporting people to come together and find a shared interest and purpose, are key drivers of enhancing wellbeing. Beyond that, other research shows, there can be cognitive and physical benefits which flow from engagement. Creative and cultural participation is important to older people: we need to promote it, enable older people to access it, and increase the opportunities to take part.

## Every older person should be able to take part

Our research identifies a number of barriers – location, transport, poor health (mental or physical), poor social networks and low income. Although many activities are free, there are indirect costs such as transport, materials, room hire or simply refreshments. Carers may need respite care, and older people who are on their own may need a friend to go with them – it takes courage to get out and about after a period of isolation. Organisations working in this area need to review their ‘offer’ and consider what they can do to reduce these barriers and make their offer more age-friendly.

## Transport is vital

To follow up and benefit from the opportunities available, people may need help with transport. Public transport outside big city centres struggles during the evenings and weekends, and even older people with access to a car may choose to limit their driving in conditions they consider stressful. Local transport authorities, arts organisations and community bodies should work together to make it easier for people to get to activities – arts organisations should take transport into account in their programming, and consider how they can get their activities out into more accessible locations, including care homes.

## Small amounts of support can go a long way

Funders need to consider how small grants funds could be used to support these activities. Although local authority funding is now very squeezed, authorities need to protect the buildings and services that older people value, such as libraries and community centres. They could also work with the cultural organisations that they do fund to be more age-friendly and enable more voluntary arts groups to flourish by supporting them with the use of public spaces. Local authorities should protect community assets and work with local partners to use innovative approaches to inspire new, sustainable activities.

## Extending the range

Our research showed clear gender effects, with older men at both ends of the wellbeing spectrum less likely to take part than women – and some types of

activities, such as dance, being more popular with women than with men. This will be no surprise – although it may be more surprising that men at the top of the wellbeing spectrum defined themselves as taking part in creative and cultural activities even though they were living with a long-term illness. This begs some important points:

- Does our definition of ‘creative’ and ‘cultural’ reflect how others view these terms? We were limited by what was asked in the Understanding Society survey, but perhaps the definition should be widened: for example, gardening was not included but some people would define it as ‘creative’.
- Are some demographic groups excluded by certain creative and cultural activities? Can more be done to involve them? The ‘Men in Sheds’ movement (men working together, socialising in community spaces) has been a big success, tapping in to their interests.
- Involving someone in a new activity in later life is a big ask, particularly if they struggle with poor health. But can we find activities related to those they’ve previously enjoyed that might be more accessible? As an example, Matisse created paper cut outs after he was no longer able to paint.
- Older people have important roles to play as activity leaders and volunteers. Organisations should ensure that they do not put barriers in the way of those who want to take up these roles.
- Innovation is needed to develop new opportunities for older people who have existing interests but need more accessible ways to continue to take part.

## Linking people up with suitable activities

Many creative and cultural activities may be relatively small-scale and local. This presents a challenge. Where to go, what to look for and how to find it is a problem even in this age of digital communication – particularly for smaller and local activities, which might be the easiest to get to. Resources such as public libraries and post offices, where people might have started looking in the past, have reduced in number. We need to ensure that creative and cultural

## Conclusion and policy recommendations (cont)

activities are included in all local communication networks, and that new networks are developed, harnessing the participation of a wider range of public places - such as convenience stores, churches and faith organisations, local neighbourhood groups, even pubs.

### Health services have a role to play

Our analysis shows that, although health is an important factor in participation, poor health does not necessarily stop older people from taking part, but instead points to alternative creative activities. Health professionals have a clear interest in promoting the wellbeing of their patients, and we'd like to see local health teams raising their support for creative and cultural activities. This could be having a surgery noticeboard or a newsletter that addresses the information gap, and moving more purposefully into social prescribing, which is increasingly being seen as a legitimate way to support good health.

### Someone to share with

A strong finding, for people at both ends of the wellbeing spectrum, was the importance of having friends to share an activity with. Organisations working in this area should consider the findings of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, and build in options for those who may need extra support to join in. This could be as low key as encouraging members to offer lifts to new joiners, or a formal buddy scheme.

### The importance of partnership

Local initiatives will flourish much more successfully if they work in wider partnerships, for example between arts organisations and community groups. Some museums have shown the way in opening up their staff and resources to groups of older people, and dancing or music-making groups need to link up with other local practitioners and experts. One enthusiast seeking to promote an activity single-handedly will eventually step down, and, whilst they may have made a singular contribution, it will not have built the larger structure which we believe is needed. We need a charter of good practice on shared working, which starts from the premise that networks such as the Age of Creativity are the key to building the breadth of support needed for sustainability.

### National leadership

All national arts and cultural organisations have a role to play here - they are the biggest funders and responsible for the outcomes of all the major projects and cultural venues. They need to show leadership and build requirements for age-friendly best practice into their funding rounds. There is also a strong case for a Government post to take ownership of this issue, to provide at least a focal point and perhaps even a budget for pump-priming.



© Angela Conlon, dance workshop

# Tips for practitioners

## Understand the local offer

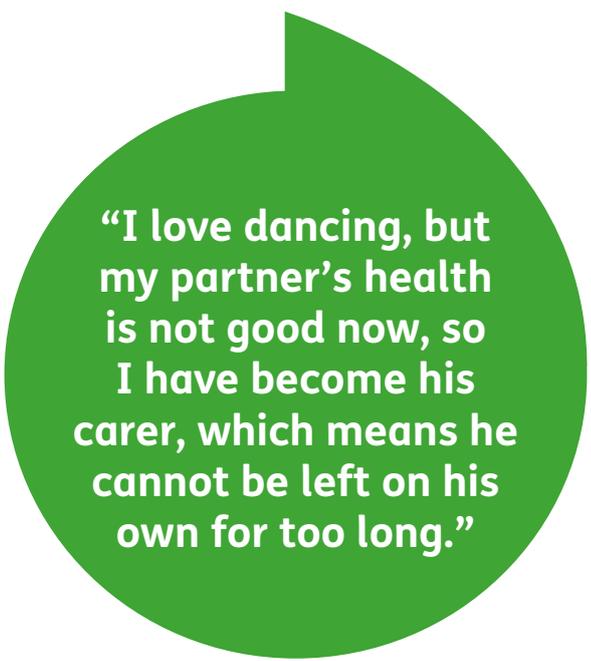
Britain has a thriving cultural industries sector, with a vast array of cultural buildings, specialist organisations, freelance practitioners as well as thousands of voluntary-led groups. There is a rich tapestry of creative opportunities on offer across England and they vary in every local area; Camden and Cornwall, Hull and Hereford, each has a strong creative offer that varies enormously. Likewise, 'older people' are not a homogenous group and respond best to a tailored offer. There are already a huge number of creative and cultural activities that are 'dementia friendly' and 'age friendly' - and many more that could be. The age sector needs to better understand the local creative offer and ensure that the older people they support know where, when and how to get involved. Equally, the cultural sector needs to shape and communicate their offer more successfully by using the networks that exist to reach those older people who are not already taking part.

## Partnership working

If there is a gap in creative and cultural opportunities then partnership working is the best way forward. The age sector is expert in understanding the needs of older people in their local areas and the cultural sector is expert in creative and cultural delivery. So the best way to support older people to experience high quality creative and cultural activities is for organisations to work in partnership and share expertise across sectors. Cross-sector partnership working can be more time consuming to initiate, but building on existing resources, assets and skills is a more sustainable approach to delivery in the long term. Working with partners in other sectors such as transport, academia and housing can also add significant value to the project.

## Models of delivery

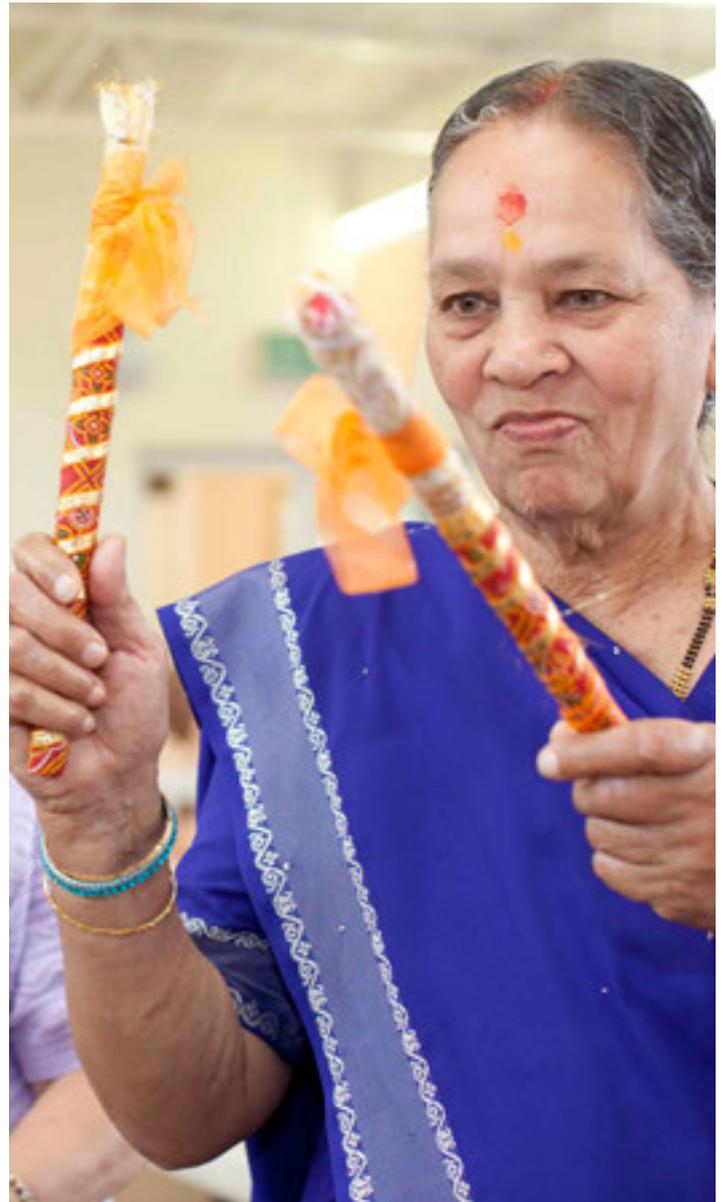
There are hundreds of best practice examples of age-friendly cultural partnership projects across the country, but there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Most partnerships start off small and build, beginning with taster sessions and developing in response to demand. The best models engage older people in the decision making at all levels, as co-producers and artists, as well as audiences, participants and volunteers. The key to long term delivery, as opposed to one off projects, is to build on existing resources and expertise and seek additional funding as required, embedding delivery in the 'day job' wherever possible.



**“I love dancing, but my partner’s health is not good now, so I have become his carer, which means he cannot be left on his own for too long.”**

## Further Resources

- [\*The Age of Creativity network\*](#) is a network of over 1,000 professionals who all believe that creativity and culture supports older people to experience better health, wellbeing and quality of life.
- [\*Arts Council England\*](#) champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives.
- [\*Creative Health\*](#): a short report about the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing Inquiry.
- [\*The Baring Foundation\*](#) has invested funds in creativity and older people for a number of years and has an extensive library of resources.
- A [\*research review\*](#) by Liverpool University found that creative participation improved wellbeing.
- A recent [\*research report\*](#) in the Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health about how belonging to community arts groups increases wellbeing (open access).
- [\*Luminate\*](#), supported by Age Scotland, runs a wide range of creative events and activities across Scotland from care home artist residencies to training for older emerging artists.
- [\*Age Cymru's Gwanwyn Festival\*](#): a national month-long festival held across Wales in May each year celebrating creativity in older age.



## Contact us

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