

Artful Ageing

Ageing Better Conference 2018

Chaired by **Dave Martin**, Centre for Policy on Ageing

With **Elaine Unegbu** (Culture Champion, Ambition for Ageing Older People's Network, Greater Manchester), **Janet Morrison** (CEO, Independent Age and Chair of the Campaign to End Loneliness), **Paul Cann** (Founding Member, Campaign to End Loneliness) and **Alan Longley** (artist and Ageless Thanet participant).

How does participating in creative and cultural activities support healthy ageing? Can the arts really impact on loneliness and social isolation?

Format: Panel members talked about their experiences of working and participating in the arts. The session was then opened to the audience to share experiences and ask questions.

Culture Champions have been engaged by Age-Friendly Manchester for the past five years to encourage older people to participate in cultural activities. The project started with five Culture Champions and there are now 150, encouraging and supporting older people to get involved in projects to utilise their skills and reduce isolation. This has resulted in increased involvement by older people in a diverse range of activities and events, improving their own social connections, influencing policies and initiating change.

Successful projects include **Manchester Art Gallery**, where older people shape and guide the gallery's annual programme; **The Philosophy Café**, where discussions are held on a chosen topic and a piece of artwork; the **Royal Exchange Theatre**, where a group called the Elders Company have produced a play challenging negative perceptions of older people; the **Vintage FM** project which places older people at the heart of radio production and broadcasting; and **The Camerata**, a symphony orchestra working with people in the community to write, produce and perform their own music in front of live audiences.

In Margate, **Turner Gallery** statistics show a very high attendance of older people for traditional art, but older audiences drop when it comes to contemporary art. Some research has been done into why this might be and how older audiences can be encouraged to open their minds more. Current research says around three quarters of older adults living in residential care have unmet needs for activity and occupation. The **Campaign to End Loneliness** has gathered research which evidence how cultural participation plays an important role in tackling this.

The **New Economics Foundation** cites the five features of wellbeing for people at any age as keep learning, take notice, give, be active, and connect. Creative arts programmes deliver on a lot of these. A study in Germany analysed brain scans of people taking part in art projects and found positive changes in the neural pathways associated with psychological resilience, the bits that help you resist stress. But activities alone aren't enough in terms of reducing loneliness, social connections are vital and for older people, whose friendship circle is constantly diminishing, meeting new people and having time to form close relationships with them is important.

Different approaches can be needed for men and women. **The Baring Foundation** found that men are more likely to engage with activities that have purpose and require skills, with social connections coming as a by-product of those activities rather than as the main focus. The **Whitworth Gallery** developed a photography, digital photography and filmmaking programme for older men. They made their own life stories and did local history projects. They came along, learned a skill, and by the time they'd been doing the programme for a period of time they'd all become mates, but they had a project, were using their skills and had focus and purpose.

The **Burrell for Blokes** project in Glasgow took a similar and successful approach, using practical activities such as stone carving and carpentry to connect men socially. One of the projects consisted of practical sessions where men looked at the techniques by which medieval furniture in the collection had been made. The men studied it and then built their own reproductions, put the furniture in the collection and then became guides to the collection as well. It was a very positive experience, by working together the men built and developed relationships.

Dance is being used by a number of projects to deliver health, wellbeing and social benefits. For those with mobility issues, seated dance is a meaningful and therapeutic activity. Many arts and dance activities can be delivered in care homes with vulnerable groups such as dementia sufferers, who are unable to get out and attend activities elsewhere, often with transformational results.

Art can provoke discussion and be an agent for social change. A project called Bed, where an 85 years old lady was placed a bed on a high street to talk to passers-by about her experience, is an example of how art can be disruptive, provocative, and challenge perceptions.

Raising awareness of the issues older people face in accessing arts and culture events is important. In Manchester, the **Culture Champions** spoke with the Director of the **Halle Orchestra** about the difficulties older people faced in affording taxis for evening performances. As a result, the Halle now puts on matinee performances, having been unaware there was a large part of the community they were not reaching.

A project in Cheshire run by **Storyhouse**, a library and arts theatre, put on a poetry show with people from all different backgrounds participating. It was the first time ever on stage for some people, including one lady of 89 years old.

There is a huge amount of research to show the massive benefits, enjoyment and fun that art activities bring. Artists have been working in all kinds of settings and intergenerationally. But there's limited evidence of artists being commissioned to focus on the issues.

A few years ago, the **Arts Council** funded a programme looking at commissioning arts for social impact. They wanted to know if different outcomes could be achieved by inviting arts organisations and artists to be involved with the process. They had a really good response, and it's created a great toolkit for commissioning in a very different way.

In trying to make connections for programmes that are looking for opportunities to get impact in a very different way, there are some surprising partners out there that can be interested in getting involved. Kent was one of the local authorities that was part of that programme and they've had a massive impact in waste management by commissioning artists to be involved, who were then able to engage with younger people to involve them too.