

# Living it Up Later in Life:

# 2023

What does a good later life look like  
and what do people need to live well  
in Greater Manchester?



The Greater Manchester Older People's Network

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# Introduction

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The Greater Manchester Older People's Network (GMOPN) aims to be a representative voice for people aged 50+ living and working within Greater Manchester. We want to make sure that people can influence policy, strategy and services that will affect them and that people can use their experience to have a positive impact. The network includes voluntary members and organisations that represent older people. We meet, act and work on projects, using our experiences to make things better for everyone. We challenge ageism and campaign for change.

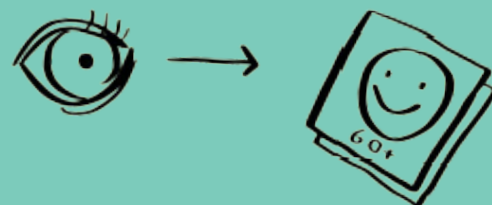
The event was designed by our members as a celebration of the contributions that older people make and a varied and interactive showcase of the diverse and engaging opportunities and activities available for people aged 50+ in Greater Manchester. It was also a chance to hear about some of the challenges that people face as they grow older – including financial hardship and ageism.

The event included a workshop where our members discussed what making the most of later life meant to them as well as the barriers and challenges they faced.

The event was also attended by illustrator, Tom Bailey, who recorded key points of the workshop with cartoon illustrations. These illustrations are featured throughout the report.

We worked with Talking about My Generation, the UK's first older people's-led newsteam to produce a video record of the event that can be viewed [here](#).

What does a  
**GOOD**  
later life  
look like?



# The workshop and findings

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Participants in the workshop discussed the following questions:

- What does making the most of later life mean to you?
- Who or what helps you to live a good later life?
- What are the challenges and how do we overcome them?

Participants were encouraged to talk from their own personal experience, but also to think more widely about challenges that might apply to particular groups or communities less represented at this event. This report brings together the key themes arising from this workshop and makes recommendations for changes that will help people live a good later life, wherever they live in Greater Manchester.

## What does “making the most of later life” mean to you?

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Participants discussed how for many people, their later years provided more free time than earlier stages of their lives when work, family commitments and other responsibilities had limited their time.

*“Life is now less restricted”*

*“I’m more flexible now – I’m more able to do what I want, when I want”*

*“It’s a time to take stock – now I can do things my way”*



# Doing things that interest me

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They wanted opportunities to make the most of the potential for more flexibility and to get involved in activities and projects that interested them. *“I want to make the most of my skills.”* For some, later life was seen as an opportunity to *“make time for me”*. It was also seen as essential that quality time was spent with friends, family and community.

Specific interests and activities were diverse and wide-ranging including writing, poetry, choirs, filming, music, circus arts, DIY projects, travel, animals and cookery.

People talked about the importance of new experiences; exploration; learning; and trying things they had not had the opportunity to try before: *“I want to continue to grow.”*



## Staying active

Much discussion centred around the theme of staying active – both physically and mentally. Staying active was understood as an essential aspect of maintaining physical and mental wellbeing.

*“With physical and mental wellbeing you can live a good life.”*

Participants shared a huge range of activities that they took part in. Some activities were more traditional ways of staying fit and healthy, such as swimming, walking, cycling, strength and balance exercise, dance and yoga. Others mentioned activities such as acting and travel as ways to keep active. The journey to and from an activity or group was also mentioned as part of remaining active and participants discussed how during lockdown, when face-to-face activities were stopped, this had a huge physical and psychological impact.

## Social connections

Socialising, connections and companionship were, for some people, the most important aspect of living a good later life.

Social connections were highlighted - for some this was about maintaining connections with family or friends; for others it was about new connections made in later life.

*“Meeting people helps your self-esteem and you gain confidence.”*



People discussed how good connections and friendships were made through shared activities and common interests. Learning from shared experience through talking with peers was a key idea. However, it was also seen as important to spend time and make friends with people of different ages, both older and younger.

*“Younger people bring different perspectives.”*

## Having a voice and making a difference

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Participants also talked about the importance of having agency and power in later life. Democracy and being able to get your voice heard was seen as an essential part of maintaining agency.

*“I want the opportunity to express myself”*

*“I want to use my skills and knowledge to make a difference”*

*“It’s important to feel like people are really interested in what you think”*

## Helping the community and supporting each other

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Helping other people was a key theme, which for many took the form of volunteering. “I want to help others to be the best they can”. Some were focused on supporting particular marginalised groups to get their voices heard – for example being a voice for the Chinese community or raising awareness about living with dementia, advocating for those without a voice.

Participants discussed how for many people, neighbourhoods and community became more important as they grew older.





They felt that these community connections were best when they were two-way: where you could both contribute to making things better and help others; receiving the benefits from that support yourself where needed.

*“The area, neighbourhood and neighbours are important and bring back memories of friendships that have been created. For the past 20 years I have been volunteering in various groups and enjoyed every minute.”*

# What or who helps you live a good later life?

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## Opportunity

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One of the main factors that participants highlighted to support a good later life was opportunity. People talked about the importance of information and knowing what was on offer. Libraries were mentioned as a fantastic resource, providing information about groups and activities within the community as well as venues for activities. Various community hubs and centres were also mentioned in this context, but participants highlighted that sometimes these centres were not widely known about. For more people to take advantage of them, hubs and centres could be more efficient at sharing information about what they provide.

People talked about a wide variety of groups and organisations that they engaged with that supported them to connect socially, stay active and access activities that interested them.





Community groups were often the key to social connections and friendship circles - “knowing people care about you in the community is so important”. Many of these were longstanding groups connected to particular communities, whether of place or identity. Special interest groups and political groups were also important. Some groups were targeted at older people or focused on a community of identity. Many purely advertised an activity or area of interest such as line dancing, bowling, friendship groups, gardening, quizzes, creative activities, walking, indoor curling, exercise classes, theatre trips and days out. The range of groups mentioned emphasises the importance of a diverse and varied voluntary sector and the need to shift focus away from age toward offering a range of accessible activities.

Churches, mosques and other faith groups were extremely important for some people: “religion gives me a structure”; “it’s a community”; “trust is always there.”

## Places

Places were seen as important in the broadest sense. This could be in relation to homes or neighbourhoods, social meeting places or age-friendly infrastructure, such as benches, toilets and well-maintained pavements that made neighbourhoods walkable and accessible. Parks and green spaces were discussed, not just as places to visit but as key to communities and neighbourhoods. Friends of parks groups were mentioned as ways of connecting with your area and the people there, as well as giving something back by maintaining and nurturing spaces. Litter-picks as a way of connecting with people and their neighbourhood.



*“We need our neighbours and community – Covid helped us reconnect with our close neighbours again – we need to hang onto that”.*

Pubs and cafes were often mentioned both as spaces to meet people informally and as venues for activities:

*“Wetherspoons is great – you can get hot drinks too and it’s a place to meet people. There’s no music so you can hear each other and talk”*

*“There’s a café round the corner from me where they do creative workshops”*

## Transport

Transport was discussed as an essential element in helping people to live a good later life.

*“I use public transport most days and I’m lucky that there are good bus routes and the tram. Not everyone has this. If I lived somewhere without this I’d be quite limited in what I can do as I don’t drive.”*

Other people talked about experiences of having local bus routes cut, meaning they couldn’t get to groups they’d previously attended.



## Positive role models and encouragement

Participants discussed the importance of role- models and being inspired by others. “You need to see others doing things, and think “I want to do that too”. Role models needed to be relatable so that participants could imagine themselves doing similar things. “Videos can be a good way to give you a better idea what something’s like – it’s good to hear others talking about their experience.”

Peer support and mentoring was also mentioned as helpful when trying something new. “It can be hard to go along to something for the first time and then it takes a while to get to know people; it’s easy to get put off. If there’s someone to go with you and make you feel welcome that helps.” Participants discussed how

peer support didn't need to be formal. "It's just about feeling welcome." "Sometimes groups are cliquey".

## Additional support for people with particular challenges

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Additional support for people with particular challenges was seen as essential. Participants mentioned people with Learning Disabilities and Mental Health challenges, as well as carers. The Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise sector was seen as key in providing this support and participants mentioned many groups that helped provide this additional support.

## What are the challenges and how do we meet them?

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Participants discussed a wide range of challenging factors in later life. These ranged from exclusion, homes and neighbourhoods, transport, ageism and personal challenges such as bereavement or learning to live with a disability.

Participants discussed how things which were a mild irritation when they were younger became real hazards and barriers in later life. Homes, neighbourhoods and transport were referenced particularly in relation to these challenges.

*"I've found I spend more time in my home and my local area than I used to when I was working. But at the same time it's got harder to get around. I know people who've really hurt themselves falling over because of dodgy pavements and now they're worried to go out at all".*

*"I used to be able to walk a long way but now I need to sit down and rest.*



*If there aren't any benches I won't go there way because I'm not sure I'll manage it."*

*"They cut the bus route that stopped outside my retirement flats."*

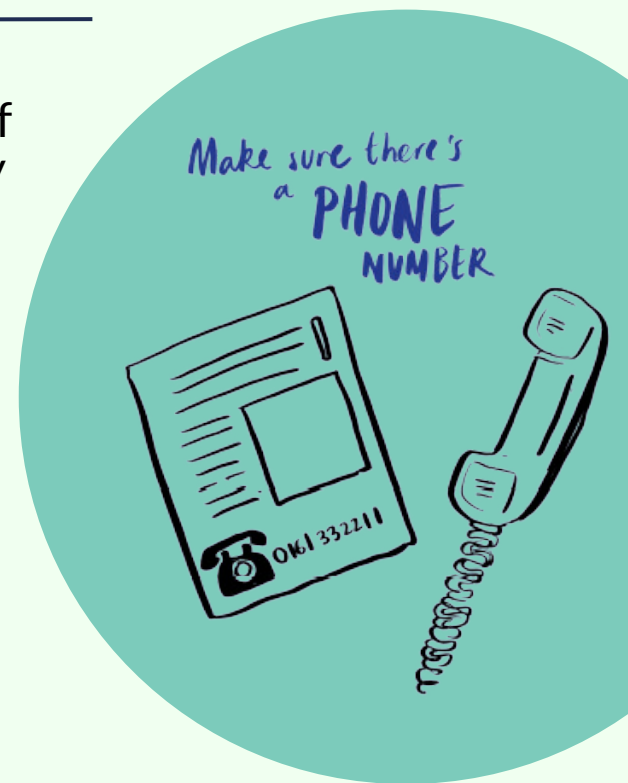
*"Toilets can be a major problem. In some areas all the public toilets have gone now."*

## Ageism and access to services

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Some participants shared experiences of not feeling listened to or taken seriously as an older person. Participants discussed the fact that counselling and talking therapies weren't offered to older people, as much, and the possible reasons for this.

*"I think some people just expect you to have problems and feel depressed. Sometimes I think people get fobbed off in a way they wouldn't if it was a younger person. Or they just stick you on medication because it's easier."*



Others talked about internalised ageism and the need to challenge societal expectations about later life being somehow less important and meaningful.

*"I think our society has a really negative view of ageing and older people."*

*"You need to have a sense of meaning and purpose and when society is constantly making jokes about getting old and you see these wrinkly hands images everywhere it's depressing. It's harder to feel good about yourself or to think positively about the future."*

*"Sometimes we erect our own barriers to enjoying later life – "I'm too old", "I can't do that".*

*"We need to say "Yes" more and challenge ourselves"*

# Retirement

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Some participants shared the challenge that their transition into retirement had been, and thought that more support should be available for people to think about a new phase in life without paid work.

*“It took me quite a few years after I’d retired to find my place again. I felt a bit useless for a while.”*

*“You have lots of friends and colleagues at work – when you retire you can lose this. It’s difficult.”*

*“Work gives a structure – you need to find a replacement”*

Participants discussed the need for many people to work for longer due to financial strains. This resulted in more people leaving work because of health reasons, creating additional barriers to engagement with the things that were important to them.

## Financial challenges

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Financial hardship was discussed and the need for more work to be done to make sure that people were getting the benefits and allowances that they are entitled to.

*“Lots of older people don’t know about benefits because they’ve not claimed before. They just know they’re struggling and don’t realise that they’re entitled to something”.*

Participants also highlighted the importance of low and no-cost activities and for people’s expenses to be paid.

*“At the moment it’s a postcode lottery – people need accessible activities and opportunities wherever they live in Greater Manchester. ”*





Participants discussed how health was impacted by people's financial situation and what could be done to improve this. They discussed how and the 'leisure offer' across Greater Manchester differs between boroughs. "Some areas offer free swimming if you're over a certain age, some don't – it should be fair". The health and wellbeing benefits of physical activity were a key priority for living a good later life and participants wanted this to be open to everyone.

*"Some people are choosing between heating and eating – they're not going to do something extra that costs money, even if it seems like a small amount"*

Participants recognised that financial hardship was an issue for organisations as well as for individuals and a lack of funding often meant that activities were time limited or one off. Some participants had experience of setting up groups themselves and suggested that it should be easier for people to set up groups and activities themselves, based on identified personal or community interests and needs. Establishment of new groups should be made easier and individuals should be able to apply for small amounts of funding to provide something for their community.

*"Lots of older people would be happy to give up their time to do something that they enjoy and would benefit others but it's hard for individuals to get funding."*

## Lack of information

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Participants were aware that a range of support was available to help people with challenges in older age but discussed how there was a lack of awareness about this.

*"People often don't know about services until something happens"*





Participants discussed that it was important to be “*armed with information*” before a problem occurred. “*If we could think about the, 'what ifs?' before they happened and know what support was there it would be easier.*”

“Losing your independence can be embarrassing. It’s difficult to ask for help and often you don’t know what would help.”

Participants recognised the variety of enriching activities and opportunities available, but were concerned that these weren’t as well known about as they should be.

“Once you’re connected to an organisation or network you find out about lots of other things and see what’s out there. But lots of people don’t know. People don’t advertise enough.”

## Social isolation and loneliness

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Participants discussed social isolation and loneliness as a challenge for many people. It was felt that more should be done to make sure that people were aware of opportunities to do things that might interest them.

*“I often see the same people at lots of different events and activities. It’s good for me and the people I know but there are people who don’t get the chance. Maybe they don’t want to but do they even know about these things?”*

Participants discussed how social isolation could exacerbate mental health problems or depression.

*“The television and the internet are addictive but not very satisfying – people need face to face activities and opportunities to meet people.”*

*“You can get out of the habit of making new friends. It just gets harder and harder.”*

Participants also discussed how those living in care homes could become isolated from their communities and lose opportunities to meet people.

# Digital exclusion

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The fact that so much information was online was seen as a barrier for many people. The importance of digital support and access was highlighted but participants were also keen to point out that non-digital options were essential.

*“Some people aren’t online at all. The internet’s not part of their lives. What about them?!”*

Participants discussed how there had been a general move away from posters and leaflets in favour of digital information but felt that physical information could be more useful and accessible.

*“You don’t always take in all the information when you first see it. You can go back to a booklet or leaflet. You’ll pick it up again and think about it more the second time.”*

## Preparing for challenges

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Participants agreed that thinking about problems and challenges before they occurred could potentially help make things easier.

*“If you’re in the middle of a crisis, it’s not a good time to make decisions”.*

*‘It’s important for people to plan for the challenges that come with later life. If you’ve thought about them before it’s easier.’*

Although this was seen as an important factor across a range of issues, participants felt that many people avoided planning for things that would be difficult. Participants discussed various projects that they’d come across that helped plan for difficulties -



ranging from “Death Cafes” that created welcoming spaces for people to share stories and talk about loss, death and dying, to projects based around later life and retirement planning.

*“If these kind of projects were more usual then it would encourage people to think and talk about some of these things.”*

However it was noted that the set-up of support and services often meant that people had limited opportunity to plan and prepare. For example, in 2022 the GMOPN engaged in a project about housing options information, where they found that information was limited for people trying to plan for the future – they were often told to contact again when they actually needed a service.

In a context where funding is extremely limited, participants acknowledged that it was more difficult for non-crisis services to compete or receive funding. However, they felt that a focus on prevention and supported planning would have a lot of long-term benefits.



# Commitments and Recommendations: Creating the conditions for a good later life in Greater Manchester

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On the basis of the themes emerging from the workshop discussions, the GMOPN makes the following commitments and recommendations:

- As a network we are committed to being Age-Proud and positive about ageing. Our members recognise what a good later life looks like for them and the potential challenges. We will continue to find and create opportunities to show that a fulfilling later life is a realistic expectation that we should all share. We know this looks different for different people and will share diverse perspectives in relatable ways.
- We will continue to recognise the personal challenges we are likely to face as we grow older and look for opportunities to explore these through discussions, creative projects, campaigns and sharing best practice wherever we find it. We will not shy away from topics because they are difficult or challenging.
- Older People's voices need to have parity in our society. We will continue to look for diverse ways for people to have their voices heard and have a real impact.
- We will support and work with other organisations who are campaigning to get older people's voices heard and highlight important issues.
- We will continue to look for diverse ways for people to get their voices heard and to have a real impact.

- We will provide and share opportunities for people to become involved in engaging and creative activities that challenge stereotypical ideas about “older people’s activities”.
- We will look for opportunities to bring older and younger people together, where we can learn from each other and explore issues from different points of view.

## **What we will ask and recommend to others:**

- We will continue to support the campaign for a Commissioner for Older People and Ageing in the UK to raise awareness and work to meet the diverse challenges that people face in later life.
- We know many older people are in financial hardship. We also know that many people are not receiving their entitlements around pension credit and attendance allowance. We ask that our local, regional and national leaders address this and continue to focus on resolving this issue, with clear targets and strategies for improvements.
- People aged 50+ in Greater Manchester often have different opportunities depending on where they live. Instead, there should be a more level playing field. We ask that GM Leaders work together to formulate a timely and realistic strategy to achieve equality of access.
- We ask that access to physical activity is prioritised and that some free access to leisure facilities is made available for older people everywhere in Greater Manchester.
- People need access to information. We ask that local councils and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority work with the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector to make sure that people can easily find out a range of different ways to engage with their communities, take part in activities or volunteer in later life.

- We encourage organisations and providers to share their information, activities and services in different ways, acknowledging that not everyone engages digitally.
- We ask commissioners and funders to focus on supporting people to plan for their later life, with a particular focus on holistic retirement planning and community engagement.
- We encourage leaders and funders to recognise that a good later life requires an accessible neighbourhood and ask for real commitment to maintaining pavements, benches and toilets, without which many people become excluded from their neighbourhoods.
- We ask commissioners and funders to explore more options for individuals to fund small projects or low cost activities. Greater Manchester should make it easier for people to make a difference where they want to.