



## **Creative Healthy Ageing learning report**

**May 2025**

### **Introduction**

Creative Healthy Ageing is a partnership between [Leeds Older People's Forum](#) and The Performance Ensemble, funded by Leeds City Council Public Health. Testing out different ways of delivering Public Health's 'healthy ageing' messages, it's based on a 'test, learn, develop' ethos. The aim is to develop tested and effective community-based engagement methods to inform a fresh city-wide approach to Public Health messaging using creative expression.

In Phase 1 [The Performance Ensemble](#) - a collective of older performers who produce multi-layered work taking contributions from people of all backgrounds and nationalities - led a series of four Creative Healthy Ageing workshops. The purpose of these workshops was to select different public health messages and apply creative approaches, learning from the experience. A [Creative Healthy Ageing toolkit was published in June 2024](#) to support organisations in their work with people 55 and over, based on our first steps in developing an approach.

We are now in the second year and coming to the end of Phase 2. This phase was focused on awarding grants to community organisations to further 'test, learn and develop' ways of communicating priority public health messages through creative, healthy ageing approaches. The purpose of this short report is to present data collected so far, outline the approaches taken by our four partner organisations and to summarise our learning from Phase 2 in order to influence the design and development of the final phase of the project. Please note that as the projects may work with people who are living with dementia these delivery partners may not be able to obtain informed consent to take photos or collect a full set of demographic data. The figures throughout this report were collected in April 2025 and all names marked with an asterix\* have been changed.

### **Organisations involved in Creative Healthy Ageing**

#### **1. MHA Communities in Pudsey** focused on mental health and social isolation

MHA Communities used the grant to support a new group providing musical activities in care homes for people living with dementia and their carers, as well as interested members of the community aged 55+. This activity was delivered in partnership with Music Box. So far 33 care home residents have taken part and 19 community members. Sessions include musical bingo, singalongs, reminiscence conversations based around musical topics/conversation starters, and seasonal parties such as Halloween and Christmas. The group has a mix of guided singalongs, reminiscence exercises as well as 'hands on' sessions led by external instructors focused on musical instruments and composing. MHA Communities in Pudsey punctuates sessions with questions about how

the activity makes people feel and opportunities to share memories associated with the music. This helps to cultivate conversations about people’s relationships with music.

No. sessions held:	19
No. of attendees (a person may have attended multiple sessions):	152
No. of individuals participating:	52

“We have found that we have existing scheme members who are now meeting care home residents at this music group who they knew before they went into care, or have known for much longer due to work or other community connections. We didn't anticipate at the time of planning the project that we would be reviving connections between care home residents and members of the community.”

2. **Burmantofts Community Friends** focused on food and drink.

Leeds Older People's Forum  
**Burmantofts**  
 COMMUNITY FRIENDS  
 Presents...  
**Create Your Plate Deli Deals**

There's a cheese out there for everyone!

Join us for **FREE** food and conversation!

- Thursday 16th January
- 12 till 2pm
- BCF Office
- FREE

The grant was used to broaden the horizons and health outcomes of members taking part in an established cooking club at Burmantofts Community Friends.

Cooking together and tasting new foods supports and guides the group towards tasty, healthy food combinations and is an accessible, simple way of learning to cook. Sessions have been centred around a buffet, flavour pairings, and deli-style food. Staff have found a format that works well: start by explaining more about the theme and asking questions around the theme as conversation starters. Everyone is encouraged to try to speak to someone new as well as try a new food they haven't had before. People sit, eat, and have conversations together. After eating, the group uses posters and sticky notes to hear about people’s experiences.

No. sessions held:	5
No. of attendees (a person may have attended multiple sessions)	30
No. of individuals participating:	19

“Over the past few months Simon\* has been more and more challenged by dementia. He almost exclusively lives on a diet of fish and chips. After attending all 3 sessions of Create Your Plate so far he has expressed that he feels happier and less affected by his dementia

due to the social interaction and sharing an experience with people Simon now describes as friends. He has also found so many foods he now enjoys including red pepper, cucumber, hummus, beetroot and olives to name a few!”

**3. Yorkshire Dance, in partnership with Older People’s Action in the Locality (OPAL), focused on physical activity.**



This grant was used to deliver two new ‘Dancing Together’ groups for people living with dementia & their carers/partners. Sessions are delivered in partnership with OPAL’s memory support group & Touchstone’s Hamari Yaadin Dementia Café. Both organisations chose a different model of delivery to give Yorkshire Dance an opportunity to review and reflect on any differences/variations and delivery model. Two dance artists lead weekly sessions of creative movement, music and dance over 6 weeks and these include one hour of dance and half an hour for social time, tea, chat and feedback. This project offers a meaningful, engaging and a fun activity to help people living with dementia live well and create wonderful moments together.

No. sessions held:	15
No. of attendees (a person may have attended multiple sessions):	190
No. of individuals participating:	55

The team at Yorkshire Dance collected short stories and photos from a few of the people who took part in sessions, all of which have consent to share this information publicly. A selection of these stories are available in Appendix 1.

"The session was uplifting and energising. It gets you out of yourself and makes you feel joyful. Caring for someone living with dementia can be very isolating but by coming to this group it makes you feel connected to others"

**4. Older, Wiser, Local Seniors (OWLS), in partnership with Fall into Place Community Theatre, focused on mental health and social isolation.**



This grant was used to fund [Generation Squad](#), an intergenerational drama group involving OWLS members and students from Leeds University, led by experienced community facilitators from Fall into Place. Through drama games, improvisation, movement, props and objects, people gain confidence, improve their mental health and work as a group to shape the

sessions as they choose. Staff follow what the group want to do and build on throughout this project, such as holding a ‘dance-off’ for those who love movement, and exploring comedy scenes and characters. The group also created costumes and shared their own arts and crafts work. The group also chose to perform as part of Fall Into Place’s ‘Our Stories’ event in December 2024 to an audience of 60 people. They created a restaurant scene where the audience watched different short scenarios acted out, all created and improvised by the members. Group members particularly enjoyed improvisation, as members stated being ‘in the moment’ works better for memory than scripts, and they enjoy going with the flow.

No. sessions held:	20
No. of attendees (a person may have attended multiple sessions):	153
No. of individuals participating:	26

The group also came together record a radio show on Chapel FM Community Radio in Leeds. The whole group helped create the stories, then some members who could make it

and wanted to perform on radio read them aloud. They did a fantastic job and it was a great experience. The programme is available via [this link to the Chapel FM website.](#)

“When Ruth\* first came, she was very apprehensive. Over time she started to relax and benefit from the group, building her wellbeing. Ruth said she has found her inner child at this group. She says it's the one time in the week that she really laughs, and it makes her feel better.”

### **Recruiting people to take part**

Three delivery partners used Facebook, Posters and Word of Mouth to promote their creative sessions and two delivery partners also used X, newsletters and emails. Delivery partners found that promoting activities in person, or through word of mouth, is often more effective than flyers and posters. Invitations from a ‘champion’ or trusted source can encourage people to take the next step and join a group

### **To what extent do delivery partners think that their creative activities have helped to address known and emerging healthy ageing needs?**

- Staff at **MHA Communities** think that the sessions have helped people to reconnect with their community and created opportunities for people who may be isolated or under-stimulated to join others to take part in something new & exciting.
- Staff at **OWLS / Fall Into Place** think that the sessions have particularly supported people who feel lonely and who have low mood, as when people come to drama it is a big ‘release’ for them and helps to improve confidence, connections, mood and a sense of achievement.
- Staff at **OPAL / Yorkshire Dance** think that dance sessions provide cardiovascular, strength, flexibility, and balance training as well as improve mental wellbeing. Higher intensity phrases and exercises encourage movement memory, coordination, balance, spatial awareness and confidence.
- Staff at **Burmantofts Community Friends** think that the sessions encourage people to have more of an awareness of how food can affect their mental and physical wellbeing and also how sharing food can be a catalyst to conversation. The sessions help members to become more knowledgeable about nutrition and hydration and think about the balance in their own diet.

### **Monitoring data**

Over the past few months, LOPF has gathered data and reflections from funded partners about their projects.

Since the start of Creative Healthy Ageing activities there have been 59 creative sessions, 525 attendees and 152 individual participants. Two delivery partners supplied full postcodes for 41 people. Of these 56% live in IMD 1&2 areas.

Of the 152 people who took part, 66% are female, 24% are male 10% didn't answer. 42% are aged 70+ and 38% have a disability. 24% of people who took part are Asian or Asian British, 31% are White British, 3% are from another White background and 42% didn't answer.

## **Learning and reflections from delivery partners and LOPF**

### **What delivery partners have learned**

#### **1. Community partnerships really matter**

Strong links with trusted local organisations helped delivery partners recruit participants, particularly from groups that might not otherwise engage. These relationships also made projects feel culturally relevant and welcoming.

#### **2. Flexibility and responsiveness are key**

Projects that adapted their content based on participants' needs – for example, simplifying creative tasks or introducing more accessible formats – reported stronger engagement. This underlined the importance of tuning in and being responsive to what works in practice.

#### **3. Emotional connection and belonging are powerful outcomes**

Delivery partners shared many examples of intergenerational bonding, small acts of kindness, and growing confidence. These softer outcomes were often just as valued as the core activity.

#### **4. Clear structure helps, but time limits can be a barrier**

Working around fixed transport arrangements or tight session times sometimes limited what could be achieved. Where possible, delivery partners would have liked more time or flexibility to deepen the work.

#### **5. Being able to plan for the future builds confidence**

Several projects are now looking to sustain their work beyond this funding. Knowing whether or not continuation funding is available at an earlier stage would help with planning.

### **What delivery partners suggest for the next round**

- **Offer longer-term or follow-on funding** for successful pilots, to build on what's working.
- **Clarify how partnerships can evolve** mid-project – for example, whether delivery partners can change activities or collaborators across the year without affecting grant eligibility.

- **Support creative delivery teams** – including live musicians or additional skills – where appropriate.
- **Keep the application and reporting process light-touch** – this was appreciated and helped smaller organisations participate.

### **What LOPF has learned**

#### **1. There is no doubt that all participants enjoyed the activities**

In all projects participants connected socially, moved more, tried new things, had fun and developed confidence and skills.

#### **2. All delivery partners have achieved the grant's purpose whilst people were taking part in activities**

The purpose is to test the impact of creative engagement and interventions that address known and emerging healthy ageing needs.

#### **3. 56% of a sample of participants live in IMD 1&2 areas**

Based on 2 delivery partners supplying full postcodes for 41 people.

#### **4. We don't yet understand the wider impact of creative engagement**

If we want to understand the legacy of the sessions, for example impact on health-related behaviour / choices / social connection outside planned sessions, or how creative engagement can get health messages to a wider audience, more evidence is needed.

#### **5. Sessions require extensive input from delivery partners**

Activities are likely to end when grant funding ends, except for MHA Communities. Most activities will not be replicable without equally skilled / experienced facilitators.

#### **6. Collecting demographic and disability status data can be challenging**

Particularly when working with people who are living with dementia.

#### **7. Unusual, creative case studies may not be appropriate for these projects**

Due to the low confidence and/or cognitive ability of some participants it may be more appropriate to produce traditional case studies and stories.

### **Next steps**

Public Health funding has now been allocated to the existing Creative Healthy Ageing delivery partners, based on their request for follow-on funding, so that they can build on the foundation work for another year, until March 2026.

Based on the learning in Year 2 LOPF recommends that in Year 3 we:

- **Consider whether or not demographic data is essential for reporting to Public Health**

- Consider the legacy of Creative Healthy Ageing funding, what it will leave behind and who will benefit from this work
- Guide the focus of future activities to support individual impact, wider impact on the way in which more organisations deliver healthy ageing activities in a creative way, or both.

## Appendix 1 - Stories from Yorkshire Dance with OPAL and Touchstone

# YORKSHIRE DANCE

### Rashid & Saba's Story | Dancing Together

February 2025



Rashid, aged 73, has always been an active and independent person. He enjoys exercising, watching cricket, and watching musicals with his wife, Saba. Since developing dementia, however, he has found it difficult to maintain his independence and social life.

Rashid and Saba have been attending Yorkshire Dance's pilot project, *Dancing Together*. The project brings people living with dementia and their carers together through dance and

music. Rashid now attends the sessions regularly, travelling independently on the access bus - a huge step in regaining his confidence.

“The best thing about this group is the people,” Rashid says. Although he doesn’t consider himself a dancer, he smiles and waves at Saba, saying, “I’m not a dancer, but my wife is... and I can *move*.” He particularly enjoys using the instruments, adding, “The music is great - Barry White is my favourite, and Johnny Cash!”

For Saba, the sessions have made a difference to both their lives. “He has no social life anymore since losing his independence. Now we’ve found this group, he is really benefiting,” she explains. “He struggles to be away from me, so this group has really helped both of us.”

She has also seen a change in Rashid’s confidence. “He comes home and tells me about all the people he’s met. He even phones me during the sessions in excitement to tell me that they’re doing the dancing and music.” She laughs as she adds, “He never ever used to dance, but now I catch him dancing with our grandkids, and he loves it!”

Beyond the music and movement, Rashid has found a sense of belonging. “He feels comfortable now as he’s learnt everyone’s name. He loves to help people and has started making their teas at the beginning of each session,” Saba shares. “It’s lovely that he takes part as he’s overcoming his barriers. Rashid is usually quite reserved, but now he comes home saying, ‘*They had us up dancing today!*’ The social aspect is the most important part of this.”

*Dancing Together* has also unlocked memories between them. “It has helped him to remember all the music that he used to listen to,” Saba says. “Research shows that listening to music can trigger memories, and it’s true! Each week he comes home and reminisces about old musicals that we’ve watched together. It’s been lovely to remember these happy times.”

For Rashid and Saba, *Dancing Together* has been very important. “We need more culturally appropriate groups like this,” Saba emphasises. “They’re difficult to find. It took us years to find a group, now we finally have, and he loves it.”



# YORKSHIRE DANCE

## Husna & Emad's Story | Dancing Together



Since joining Dancing Together, Husna and Emad have discovered a new way to stay active and social. Emad, who has been diagnosed with dementia, enjoys the sessions, even if he jokes, he's "not good at these things!"

Although they have both never danced before, they've embraced the sessions with enthusiasm. "The dancing is very good," Husna says. "We try to do the same movements at home". She appreciates the warmth of the sessions, adding, "The artists show us with smiles on their faces, it's infectious! It makes us want to smile too."

Emad, a former international hockey player, has noticed a connection between his favourite sport and dancing. "Hockey is very fast. You have to move fast when dancing as well."

Both retired GPs, Husna and Emad understand the importance of staying physically active. "Being doctors, with experience of over 50 years in this country, we know that movement has such an impact on physical health," Husna says. "The dancing is very good because, for the time you are here, we are happy."

Beyond the physical benefits, they both enjoy the sense of community within the group. “We like coming here together,” Emad says. “It’s not just a lot of talk, there are shared ideas which are useful.” Husna explains, “We have got one common goal, and that is we have to keep going. We have formed this friendship. We can let our personality be seen and not feel embarrassed about it, even when we’re dancing!”

After nearly 57 years of marriage, Husna and Emad have experienced life to the full and share a beautiful motto: “Whatever you’ve got, be grateful and celebrate... and dance!” Husna says with a smile. For them, Dancing Together is a time to move, laugh, and share something new - proving that it’s never too late to start dancing!

# YORKSHIRE DANCE

## Denise & Doug’s Story | Dancing Together

February 2025



Denise and Doug are Dancing Together’s resident ballroom dancers. Having spent years waltzing, quickstepping, and cha-cha-ing, they now show us how it’s done at the *Dancing Together* sessions at OPAL.

“It’s something that we look forward to coming to,” says Denise. “And all the dance artists are lovely and lead us into exercise that keep us fit and healthy.” She attends the session with her husband Doug who is living with dementia.

For Doug, who takes pride in being our ‘class clown’, “Making friends is what it’s all about, and having a laugh as well!”

The couple's love of dance began years ago, "We used to go dancing a lot to practice," Denise recalls. "Then we decided to start doing medal tests, so we had private lessons." Doug chimes in: "Waltz, Quickstep, Cha Cha Cha, Rumba, Tango... we've done all the dances!". The pair proudly brought in their trophies and medals this week to share with the group.

Although they don't dance competitively anymore, the *Dancing Together* sessions allow them to keep up their passion. "It's good to do something like this," Denise says. "It keeps our bodies moving." Doug agrees: "That's the main thing - keep the body moving all the time."

Beyond the dancing, they both say that the social aspect is a huge part of why they attend. "It's a social gathering besides just a dance thing," Denise explains. "We get to know other people. She speaks fondly of OPAL, " Since he was diagnosed with his dementia, it's helped us in loads of ways. If it hadn't been for OPAL we wouldn't have been able to meet you."

"On a Monday, we're all sat around the table talking about our lives - what we did when we were younger, where we went to school, what type of housing we lived in. There's always something to learn, and that's what it's all about." Doug taps his head and smiles, "Keeps the brain going... and you keep dreaming - especially when you're dancing!"

Music has always played a huge role in Doug's life. "Music-wise, I've done it all from Rock and Roll to Skiffle. I used to play piano. I've got a guitar at home, got a banjo - I've got it all. Music has been my life." He grins as he recalls hearing Lonnie Donegan's *My Old Man's a Dustman* played at the beginning of the session. "That took me right back!"

Denise loves the song choices too. "The music's lovely because they play things for our generation - songs we know." She and Doug still enjoy live music, with tickets to see an Elvis tribute at Bibi's. "Oh yes, I'm an Elvis fan!" Doug exclaims.

For both of them, *Dancing Together* has become the "highlight of their week". "It's just something to look forward to," Denise says. "Monday, you get up and think, *yay, we're going there today!*" Doug nods in agreement.

The only downside? "We're sad when it's finished."



Special thanks to dance artists Eleni Green and Inari Hulkkonen.

# YORKSHIRE DANCE

## Brenda & Joe's Story | Dancing Together

March 2025



Brenda and Joe have been joining in with *Dancing Together*, bringing their warmth and humour to each session. At 88, they enjoy socialising as a couple and the challenge of trying something new and suitable for them both.

Brenda has always loved dancing. Growing up in St Helens, she would go dancing regularly before moving to Huddersfield, where nights at the local

band room became routine for a Friday evening. She did it all, “Bopping and jiving and everything like that.”

Joe, however, hadn’t had much dance experience before *Dancing Together*. “That’s something new for me,” he says, “but I enjoy it!”

Brenda and Joe met in a pub in Leeds, when she and her friends ended up sitting with him and his friends. “His friend asked me if I’d go out with him (Joe) the following Saturday,” Brenda laughs. They did, and they’ve been by each other’s side ever since.

Despite Brenda’s love for dancing, they never danced together back then. Now, at *Dancing Together*, Joe’s favourite dance style is simple - “Dancing together with Brenda. Not on my own!”

Music plays a big role in their enjoyment of the sessions. Joe says “I don’t have a best song, I like them all! I like *Moon River* they play it in this dance class.” Brenda smiles and agrees.

For Brenda and Joe, *Dancing Together* is about more than movement. “It’s a laugh,” Brenda says. “It’s something positive for us to do. I enjoy the company, I enjoy learning to dance again. I can’t do too much at the moment with my bad arm, but I enjoy watching the others and listening to the music.”

Joe adds, “I like coming here. It gets us out. You’re doing something you wouldn’t normally do - that’s what I like most.”

... And that’s exactly what *Dancing Together* is all about.