



Leeds
Older
People's
Forum

**THE
PERFORMANCE
ENSEMBLE**

Creative Healthy Ageing Programme:

End of Grant
Learning Report



Introduction

Creative Healthy Ageing (CHA) is a partnership between Leeds Older People's Forum (LOPF) and The Performance Ensemble (TPE), funded by Public Health (Leeds City Council). Testing out different ways of delivering 'healthy ageing' messages, it's based on a 'test, learn, develop' ethos. The aim is to develop effective community-based engagement methods to inform a fresh, city-wide approach to Public Health messaging using creative expression. Learning from this programme has already influenced the design of Active Ageing grants, which are funded by Leeds Public Health and Active Leeds.

Funded Projects

CHA funded the following third-sector organisations to design and deliver creative activities to improve the health and wellbeing of older adults.

- [MHA Communities Pudsey](#) & Pudsey Music Makers
- [Yorkshire Dance](#) & OPAL, Touchstone and Chapeltown Community Wellbeing Hub
- [Burmantofts Community Friends](#)
- [Fall Into Place](#) & OWLS

Partners delivered sessions including dance, creative workshops, and social engagement activities. These projects were designed to respond to known and emerging healthy ageing needs, including:

- loneliness and social connections
- physical inactivity
- poor nutrition
- reduced access to community opportunities

Most projects combined creative expression with social interaction, providing safe and welcoming spaces for older adults to connect, build confidence, and improve their wellbeing.

Appendix 1 summarises each project's learning and approach.

The Performance Ensemble created a short film featuring all the CHA projects, bringing the sessions to life and showing their impact on those taking part.



What worked well?

Strong community engagement and partnerships

Projects that worked closely with trusted local organisations, community groups, and existing networks were particularly successful in reaching older adults. Word of mouth and encouragement from trusted people were some of the most effective recruitment methods.

Accessible and inclusive delivery approaches

Flexible, informal session formats helped participants feel comfortable and able to engage at their own pace. Activities adapted to suit different abilities supported wider inclusion, particularly for those with mobility or confidence barriers.

Embedding public health messaging as an integral part of creative activities

The CHA film shows that project participants enjoyed the activities and were also aware of the potential of the embedded messaging to improve health. For example, one CHA participant

interviewed for the film said

“It’s important to eat healthily to keep us all going when we’re older”

”

Positive impact on wellbeing

Organisations reported improvements in participants’ mood, confidence, and overall wellbeing. Anecdotal evidence and stories highlighted increased self-esteem, renewed interest in activities, and greater motivation to leave the house and engage with others.

Skilled and empathetic facilitators

The role of facilitators was critical. Projects with experienced, qualified and approachable facilitators were better able to build trust, adapt sessions, and sustain engagement.



What could be done differently?

Delivery partners identified several ways their approaches and the programme could be improved.

Challenges in reaching new participants

While word of mouth was effective, it often reached similar groups of people. Some organisations found it harder to engage those who were more isolated or not already connected to services. Partnering with a variety of services and organisations can help.

Capacity constraints and the short duration of the programme

Short funding timescales limited the ability to fully embed projects, build relationships, and demonstrate longer-term outcomes. Some organisations would have benefited from more time for planning and development. Work with older people (particularly those experiencing isolation or living with dementia) relies on continuity, trust and relationship-building, which are difficult to establish within short-term funding cycles. Allocating part of the budget for workforce development to enable creative activities to continue beyond the grant period can help.

Monitoring and evaluation challenges

Collecting consistent evidence of impact was difficult for some organisations, particularly when participants were unable to provide informed consent for data collection or where staff capacity was limited. A 'light touch' monitoring and evaluation approach works best. This learning has influenced the 'light touch' monitoring and evaluation approach to the upcoming Active Ageing grants.

Logistical barriers for participants

Transportation, venue accessibility, and health-related issues sometimes affected attendance and the consistency of participation



Legacy and sustainability

There is a strong intention across projects to continue elements of the work beyond the funding period.

Continuation of sessions and activities

Several organisations are exploring ways to sustain sessions, either through securing additional funding, integrating activities into existing programmes, or introducing low-cost participation models.

Strengthened partnerships

Relationships developed during the pilot—particularly with community organisations and local networks—are expected to continue and support future delivery.

Ongoing participant engagement

Many participants have expressed a desire to continue attending sessions and, in some cases, have formed peer networks that may continue informally.

Learning embedded into future practice

Organisations reported that they will apply learning from the pilot to future projects, particularly around engagement methods, inclusive delivery, and partnership working.

However, continued delivery will depend on securing further resources, as most projects indicated that activities cannot be sustained without additional funding or support.

Recommendations for future grant rounds

Based on feedback from funded organisations, the following recommendations could strengthen future creative healthy ageing programmes:

1. Allow more time for delivery and relationship building

Longer funding periods would enable projects to reach more isolated individuals, build trust, and demonstrate sustained impact.

2. Support targeted outreach and engagement

Encourage and resource partnerships with health services, social prescribers, and community connectors to reach those most in need.

3. Simplify and support monitoring requirements

Provide clear, proportionate evaluation frameworks and 'light touch' monitoring tools to help organisations capture meaningful

outcomes without creating additional burden.

4. Invest in facilitator skills and development

Recognise the importance of skilled facilitators and consider funding training, workforce development or peer learning opportunities.

5. Enable flexibility in delivery

Allow organisations to adapt activities in response to participant needs, recognising that flexibility is key to inclusive engagement.

6. Consider sustainability from the outset

Encourage projects to plan for legacy early on, with options such as follow-on funding, capacity-building support, or integration into existing services.

7. Support practical access needs

Where possible, include funding for transport, accessible venues, refreshments and other practical enablers that support participation.

Additional CHA resources

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.

[A Creative Healthy Ageing film](#)

[Yorkshire Dance Creative Healthy Ageing Stories](#)

Additional resources linked to the Creative Health agenda

[National Creative Health Hub at the University of Huddersfield](#)

Creative Health Boards

Leeds Arts Health and Wellbeing Network (LAHWN) recently published the Creative Health in Leeds Report, which highlights the contribution of creative health activity across the city and sets out priorities for strengthening collaboration and impact.

Appendix 1:

Learning from organisations involved in the CHA programme

MHA Communities in Pudsey (by Oli Craven, Communities Manager)

Initially, we partnered with a registered Community Interest Company for weekly music sessions of a carousel of activities that involved experiencing and making music while sharing memories and increasing social interaction. It was geared towards supporting older people living with dementia and their carers and included a smaller contingent of attendees from our wider membership. Sessions included rhythm workshops, live music performance, drum sessions, DJ/mixing sessions, and other tactile, engaging activities to encourage cognitive and physical stimulation for attendees.

This approach was successful because we were able to trial many different activities and sessions with a mixed cohort, while achieving our goal of improving health, reducing loneliness, and encouraging healthy choices through music. However, the elements that didn't work so well were the varied sessions and their applicability/accessibility for all participants. It was also difficult to have a mixed cohort consisting of attendees from residential care settings and the wider scheme membership.

We took learning from our 'broader' first year project and focused our next phase of work on a particular group that we have been able to maximise the impact for. We partnered with dance artists to conduct weekly dance and movement sessions for older people living with dementia and a variety of advanced physical disabilities. These sessions are held in care homes and are again geared towards

addressing social isolation, promoting physical activity and maintaining/encouraging limb coordination and short-term memory.

We found that, to consistently interact and maximise impact for care home residents in particular, we needed to bring the project to them and deliver it in their residential setting. Due to the way we planned these projects, we targeted groups we could easily separate from broader membership and those who were linked via shared residential settings.

We know from our Care Home collaborator that their residents never had these sorts of activities available. They told us their residents have enjoyed sessions, engaged with new things, and were excited to be involved when we announced the dance and movement sessions.

Burmantofts Community Friends (by Damien Gaffney, Community Cohesion Worker and Tom Armstrong, Chief Executive Officer)

Initially, 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 toward tasty, healthy food combinations and is an accessible, simple way to learn to cook. 'Create Your Plate' sessions were centred around a buffet, flavour pairings, and deli-style food. Staff found a format that worked well: start by explaining the theme and asking questions about it as conversation starters. Everyone is encouraged to speak to someone new and 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.

We took the learning from our first year project and focused our next phase of work on promoting healthy nutrition through interactive and engaging cooking sessions. The project aimed to support physical health, cognitive stimulation, and emotional wellbeing by encouraging participants to prepare balanced, nutritious meals within a supportive group environment.

Participants were recruited primarily through word of mouth, although we also promoted sessions in our newsletter, social media and posters. Through hands-on culinary activities, participants developed practical cooking skills, increased confidence in meal preparation, and gained knowledge about healthy eating

habits tailored to later life. The interactive cooking sessions worked particularly well, enabling members to come together in a warm, supportive, and friendly environment to cook collaboratively. However, time constraints during sessions sometimes meant that certain recipes or discussions had to be shortened.

The sessions supported healthier lifestyle choices by providing practical knowledge about nutritious ingredients and how to prepare balanced meals. The group-based format encouraged peer learning, collaboration, and mutual support, allowing participants to learn from one another while building confidence. Members responded very positively to the creative aspects of the sessions, including opportunities to share personal achievements, talents, cooking experiences, and cultural traditions. Additionally, participants had opportunities to share their own personal and cultural food stories, fostering a sense of pride, identity, and community within the group. These moments encouraged openness, mutual respect, and deeper social connection within the group. The project was also effective in boosting confidence and independence. Many members shared feedback that they now feel far more comfortable and confident in the kitchen.

Some participants were initially hesitant to try unfamiliar ingredients or recipes, requiring additional time and support to build confidence and encourage experimentation. Communication outside of sessions was also important, as it allowed us to check in with members and see how they were applying their skills and knowledge in their own kitchens, ensuring continued engagement and support beyond the group sessions.

Fall into Place (by Jen Blacow-Hughes, freelance facilitator)

The CHA grant initially funded Generation Squad, an intergenerational drama group involving members of OWLS Neighbourhood Network (a local community organisation for older adults) and students from Leeds University, led by our experienced community facilitators. Through drama games, improvisation, movement, props and objects, people gained confidence, improved their mental health and worked as a group to shape the sessions as they chose. We followed what the group wanted to do and built on it throughout this project, such as holding a 'dance-off' for those who love movement, and exploring comedy scenes and characters. Group members particularly enjoyed improvisation, as they said being 'in the moment' works better for memory than scripts, and they enjoyed going with the flow.

Our weekly drama sessions encouraged creativity, imagination and some physical activity. Sessions included laughter, fun, memory games, confidence-building activities and opportunities to rehearse and participate in performances.

We took the learning from our first year project and focused our next phase on the continued involvement of established participants instead of recruiting more new people via OWLS. We get consistent feedback that the sessions help improve people's mood, health and wellbeing and that people value the intergenerational connections they have made. It is good for the soul. When asked about the Generation Squad Group, one person said, "This is a family".

Participants have grown in confidence and come out of their shells. Through feedback and group sessions, we know that participants enjoy having a chance to explore new skills or revive old 'dormant' skills.

The Performance Ensemble (by Adie Nivison, Head of Creative Engagement)

In year one, we led a series of four workshops, which were free for older people's organisations and members of the public to attend. Each workshop focused on a different public health message and used a different creative approach. A toolkit was produced based on the findings from the four workshops. This helped to influence the next stage of the CHA programme: distributing grants for organisations to test effective community-based engagement methods to deliver CHA activities in communities.

In year two, our work switched to creating a short film about the programme. We worked with delivery partners to identify people who might want to share their reflections. We entered the space with an open attitude and no preconceived ideas about what might or might not be said. The film shows real participants taking part in creative activities in community settings, helping to challenge people's expectations and stereotypes. As a result, the film feels joyful, respectful, and clearly shows older people being creative, having fun, and connecting with each other during activities that support healthy ageing.

Yorkshire Dance (by Dawn Holgate, Producer of Older People's Dance – Dementia)

Initially, we used CHA funding to create two new 'Dancing Together' groups for people living with dementia & their carers/partners. Sessions were delivered in partnership with OPAL Neighbourhood Network memory support group and

Touchstone's Hamari Yaadin Dementia Café. Both organisations chose different delivery models, giving us an opportunity to review and reflect on differences/variations in delivery. Two dance artists led weekly sessions of creative movement, music, and dance over eight weeks, including one hour of dance and half an hour for social time, tea, chat, and feedback. This project offered a meaningful, engaging and fun activity to help people living with dementia live well and create wonderful moments together.

We built on the learning from our first-year project and focused our next phase on two community dementia settings: Touchstone and Chapeltown Community Wellbeing Hub (CCWH). We worked closely with centre managers to assess their suitability and readiness to engage with the project model. This ensured that each setting could support delivery effectively and that the programme aligned with the needs of their communities.

Rather than recruiting individuals directly, participants were those who already accessed the centres on a regular basis. This approach removed many common barriers to engagement, such as transport, confidence, or awareness, and ensured participants were already in a familiar and trusted environment. It also enabled us to reach individuals who may not typically engage with arts or physical activity programmes. It also enabled staff and carers to play an active role in encouraging participation, which was particularly important for those who were initially reluctant to join.

This method proved highly effective, particularly in supporting people living with dementia, as familiarity and routine are key to engagement. At Touchstone, where participants had previously experienced the programme, there was immediate recognition and enthusiasm. At Chapeltown Community Wellbeing Hub, where the group was new, initial engagement was more tentative, but trust and participation grew steadily over the eight weeks.

One key limitation was the programme's duration. At eight weeks, the project did not feel long enough to fully embed relationships and maximise impact. Artists noted that deeper trust and engagement began to emerge only around weeks six to eight, suggesting that longer delivery periods would allow for more sustained benefits.

Each setting was supported by two highly experienced dance artists, enabling a responsive and person-centred approach. The sessions were designed specifically for older adults, including those living with dementia, and

incorporated carers, staff and peers as active participants within the creative process. Each group had regular attendees with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. Family Carers also attended, but in low numbers for each group.

As in year one, each creative session lasted one hour and included an additional 30 minutes of social interaction, with an opportunity to talk and socialise over hot and cold drinks. Touchstone offered its participants soup and fruit, while CCWH offered its service users set pre-paid lunchtime meals.

The programme used somatic approaches to movement and dance, encouraging participants to connect with their bodies in a gentle, accessible way. Sessions were primarily chair-based but offered opportunities for standing and more dynamic movement where appropriate. Artists incorporated props such as scarves and musical instruments to support engagement, particularly for those with limited mobility or advanced cognitive impairment. Partner work and group dancing were central, enabling participants to connect physically and socially with others in the room.

Music played a vital role in shaping each session. Artists selected culturally relevant and recognisable music, often inviting participants to share preferences, which helped to evoke memory, identity and emotional connection. In both settings, sessions evolved into highly social, joyful experiences, with shared singing, rhythm-making and collective dancing forming a core part of the activity.

Language barriers were present in some sessions, particularly at Touchstone, where many participants spoke English as a second language. While this did not prevent engagement, it required artists to adapt their communication methods, relying more on non-verbal cues, demonstration, and staff support for translation. This highlighted the importance of artists' skills, flexible facilitation skills and strong partnerships with staff. Their ability to read the room, respond to participants' needs and build relationships over time created a safe, supportive and inclusive environment. This enabled participants to feel comfortable, take creative risks and fully engage with the sessions.

Overall, the project created inclusive, vibrant spaces where participants were invited to engage in meaningful physical activity, express themselves creatively, and build connections with others. The work prioritised accessibility, responsiveness and enjoyment, ensuring that all participants, regardless of ability, could take part in a way that felt comfortable and rewarding.

The skill and sensitivity of the artists played a crucial role in this project. Yorkshire Dance has a long history of nurturing a highly skilled workforce in Leeds, with artists who are experienced in delivering sensitive, high-quality facilitation—particularly in care settings. Without continued support, this expertise could dissipate as artists seek more secure or better-funded opportunities elsewhere.

We believe that sustained investment in artist development is essential to ensure that the specialist skills built over time are not lost. Ongoing investment not only protects this existing knowledge base but also enables artists to deepen their practice, maintain quality, and respond to participants' evolving needs. In this way, continued funding safeguards both the workforce and the long-term impact of the work, ensuring that communities continue to benefit from skilled, confident and well-supported practitioners.

Varying levels of staff involvement impacted the sessions. While staff engagement was highly beneficial when present, inconsistent participation made it more difficult to build early momentum. In particular, the absence of a dedicated pre-project meeting with support staff and volunteers meant there were fewer opportunities to establish clear protocols, roles and expectations from the outset. Such a session would have helped staff feel more confident in how to support participants, and in turn enabled participants to engage more fully and get the most from their experience. For example, some staff referred to the sessions as “chair exercise,” which did not fully capture the creative and expressive nature of the work. This sometimes influenced expectations and highlighted the need for clearer communication with partners about the purpose and value of dance-based activity. Strengthening staff understanding and involvement from the outset would further enhance delivery in future projects, ensuring a more consistent and supported experience for all involved.

The funding has made a significant difference to the participants involved. In interviews with workshop participants, many said they had never accessed this kind of activity before. For them, these sessions were their “only opportunity” to engage in structured movement, highlighting the importance of this provision.

We measured the impact of sessions through triangulated artist observations, staff and participant feedback and visible changes in behaviour and engagement. For example, a carer who attended Touchstone with her mother reported that she “really enjoyed attending these sessions and dancing with my mother... I could see mum’s energy and effort increase” as she became more involved with each activity. Artists consistently reported noticeable shifts in mood and energy, with

participants becoming more active, communicative and socially engaged over time. Participants described feeling happier, more energised and more connected to others. CCWH participants stated that sessions “lifted my mood...and was a really nice uplifting experience”. Another participant “enjoyed working as a group; the chairs were all in a circle, facing in towards the centre, and we danced together. I enjoyed that part; it was good to see other people enjoy dance together”

There were also clear examples of increased confidence and physical engagement. Participants who were initially reluctant to join began to take part more fully, with some progressing from observing to actively dancing, and in many cases, standing and moving with others. These changes demonstrate both physical and psychological benefits

One particularly powerful example is the story of a participant who had recently lost her husband, who had previously taken part in the sessions. The Touchstone manager commented that “at the beginning of the project, she was quiet, physically withdrawn and showed limited engagement, often sitting with a curved posture and minimal interaction”.

Over the eight weeks, the manager noticed a gradual but significant transformation. She stated that “through the consistent, supportive environment of the sessions, [the participant] began to engage more, both physically and socially. Her posture became more upright, she contributed verbally to the sessions, and she increasingly joined in with the movement activities”.

The artists observed that during the final weeks, “she was standing and participating in partner dancing, something she had not done at the start of the project”. This shift reflected not only increased physical confidence, but also a renewed sense of connection and wellbeing following a period of grief.

Her journey illustrates the profound impact that creative, social and movement-based activity can have on individuals, particularly during times of loss and transition. It demonstrates how these sessions can support not just physical health, but emotional recovery, confidence and a sense of belonging.