

1. About the Arts, Ageing and Activism Symposium

The Arts, Ageing and Activism Symposium is the final activity of the 1001 Stories project, forming part of the LEEDS 2023 Year of Culture. The project was created by The Performance Ensemble in partnership with LEEDS 2023, Leeds Playhouse, Leeds Older Peoples' Forum and Leeds Museums and Galleries. Over 600 older people, from every ward in Leeds, engaged in a mass-participation oral history project preserving their personal histories, songs and poetry through the collection, co-curation and sharing of [1001 Stories](#). The stories were celebrated in a [10-day Takeover of Leeds Playhouse](#) by older people during April and May 2023.

An independent evaluation of the project by the Audience Agency described how older people involved found 1001 Stories and the Takeover to be *“a fulfilling experience where they believed their voices had been heard and used in an authentic way. The project offered opportunities for them to connect with new people, to build their self-confidence, to affirm parts of their self-identity, and to have fun in an environment that celebrated what it means to be an older person. Reactions to the programme were overwhelmingly positive, and its vibrancy enabled them to try new things and develop new shared interests with other attendees”*. This symposium responds to an identified *“strong desire for The Performance Ensemble and the Playhouse to host similar events in the future to ensure the momentum from the project”* are not lost over time.

The Symposium was scheduled to be a concluding activity in Leeds' celebrations for International Day of Older People with the theme of *“The resilience of older people in a changing world”*. As well as an opportunity to promote new connections in a fun and friendly environment that celebrates ageing, the symposium sought to explore what we can do to ensure older people live the best life for as long as possible.



2. Event booking and attendees

The Arts, Ageing and Activism Symposium event reached 12,268 people via online platforms with 867 visits to the Symposium event page with 112 people booked onto the event. Over half of ticket holders described themselves as aged 55 and over with the remainder making decisions and influencing policy at different areas relevant to arts, ageing, community and infrastructure. This included 11 volunteers, 3 event team members, 3 venue team members, 43 different organisations. Within one working day of the event we had a large number of cancellations, mainly due to flu and covid but with bereavements and hospital appointments also described, leaving 82 people signed in at the event on 9th October 2023.

Attendees came from across the UK and from organisations across multiple sectors (see APPENDIX) and from local Leeds communities, with many freelance workers and retirees from a broad range of experiences. From a sample of 20 attendees, who gave a response, 50% described being aged 65-85 years old.

Every ticket booker was asked “**What must be done as a priority to ensure older people live the best life for as long as possible?**” The priorities from ticket bookers largely covered four main themes, which prompted the questions explored at the Symposium -

1. understanding the reality of life for people aged 55 and over in Leeds and the UK,
2. ensuring we hear the voices of people aged 55 and over
3. ensuring creative and meaningful activities are available and accessible
4. understanding and addressing problems with infrastructure e.g. transport.

“The Symposium in its awesomely inspiring venue was I hope a foretaste of what might be achieved in Leeds when committed people from all walks of life can be brought together for creativity and activism”

Comment from attendee

3. Agenda

Attendees were welcomed to the Imagine Leeds space by Jamie Saye at [Sustainable Arts In Leeds \(SAIL\)](#) and Alan Lyddiard from [The Performance Ensemble](#) followed by Leeds Lord Mayor, Al Garthwaite, and stories by John Fox and Sue Gill of [Dead Good Guides](#) and founders of [Welfare State International](#). Two rounds of discussion followed with refreshments then feedback and closing statements.



4. Questions posed at the Symposium

12 questions raised by attendees were explored at the Symposium which covered the following themes:

1. Maximising (health and wellbeing) benefits of arts activities for older populations,
2. Maximising engagement in arts activities including reducing barriers to using public transport (buses) and countering perception of arts as elitist,
3. Improving communication with older populations in Leeds regarding activities available,
4. Improving representation and visibility of older people.



5. Feedback on the discussion

a) 6 key actions from discussion note takers

1. Engage young people in exploring the arts with older individuals - facilitating intergenerational arts as a bridge across generations and break age related stereotypes.
2. Identify and nurture skills and interests of older individuals - connect to arts through other interests.
3. Advocate for better transportation (to arts events).
4. Emphasise benefits like skill-building and socialising in arts for older people.
5. Address affordability and support for arts participation.
6. Overcome psychological barriers to engaging in arts which may be seen as elitist or requiring existing skills, knowledge or experience.

b) Live feedback at the symposium

Attendees asked if older people actually get to cultural events due to challenges with public transport? In exploring issues around public transport there had been opportunity to discuss [local travel campaigns](#) such as Bus Fair but recognised that after several years of campaigning local decision makers had only made so much progress due to limited local control.

There was interest in learning more about what is already happening to make arts more accessible and affordable for older people describing the learning from the work of [Leeds Older People's Forum](#), Leeds' 37 [Neighbourhood Networks](#) as well as dedicated arts provision for older people including Leeds Playhouse's [Heydays programme](#) and [The Performance Ensemble](#).

In the symposium initial questions such as transport were often a jumping off point for a wider discussion... but discussed the power of positive discussion and trying to do the best we can for each other even if we may disagree in places. One of the strengths of the event was hearing other people's voices in real life.



c) Survey Responses

From on-the-day and post event questions to attendees, regarding what they

wanted to happen, next 3 additional key themes were identified:

1. Feedback and Follow-Up: a desire for feedback and follow-up sessions to see the changes discussed taking shape.
2. Collaboration and Networking: between groups and individuals, especially in the context of arts and improving the lives of older people.
3. (Intergenerational) Activities: more opportunities for (intergenerational) activities and connecting with practising older artists, promoting the exchange of knowledge and experiences.



6. Actions to carry forward

“I’d really like to hear more about others’ projects and interests. And help to create a safer space for them where their voices are not only listened to, but heard by all, and people are supported to take on board each others’ perspectives at a deeper level.”

Comment from attendee

How can we collaborate with each other? The Performance Ensemble invited attendees to share further details on current programmes and contact details as appropriate to be disseminated after the event.

“I will hope for approval and support for my interests in better transport, especially for older people.”

Comment from attendee

Alongside a deputation planned to Leeds City Council, attendees discussed interest in collective cross-sector action to improve bus transport. The Performance Ensemble agreed to support creation of a collective letter with Bus Fair campaigners to circulate their principal immediate ask - that older and disabled people in Leeds and West Yorkshire should be able to use their free bus passes before 9:30 am on weekdays for attendees to consider supporting.

“What happens next? Will this event be happening again in 6 months or a year? Or will there be updates as and when they happen? It felt very beneficial to all and a great start for the conversation going forward.” Comment from attendee

Attendees described wanting to know what will happen next... The Performance Ensemble invited attendees to explore how we can carry the conversation forward in collaboration. Alan Lyddiard in closing statement advised “we each have a responsibility to make this happen.” Information gathered from the event will be shared with the Age Friendly Leeds Steering Group to inform work going forward into

2024. The Performance Ensemble followed the event with attendance at the National Creative Ageing Conference in Newcastle on 10th October 2023.



7. Outcomes

On the day of the event attendees suggested three words to describe their experiences: interesting, inspiring and engaging were most common.

Attendees committed to:

1. Promotion, Outreach, Knowledge Dissemination: sharing the message about creative ageing with networks, newsletters, social media.
2. Community Engagement: Follow up new community contacts met through the event.
3. Advocacy for Older Adults: Promoting more diverse older people's voices in intervention design.



A representative sample of 23 participants gave further feedback with 90% agreeing that the Symposium “encouraged making connections with people aged 60 and over”.

66% felt the event created “a platform for the voices of people aged 60 and over” with 61% agreeing this was specifically true for older artists.

A further 47% felt the event reduced stigma and negative stereotypes associated with ageing.

“It’s been super inspiring. I’ve made a couple of contacts and learnt about people’s work and their experiences doing their work. It was very valuable and important to hear people’s stories. It’s motivated me and opened my mind to how to work with senior people. It’s been genuinely joyous.”

Comment from attendee

8. Learning Points

For future events the following suggestions were made: longer introductions, roving microphones and further accommodations for hearing loss, trained facilitators, clearer marking of halal food (confirming vegan food is also halal) and for the event venue additional signage for trip hazard on stairs. Some meetings outside the city centre were also requested.

9. Credits

Photography by [Mike Pinches](#).

Catering by [Relish Foods](#).

Symposium hosted by [SAIL Leeds](#) at Climate Action Leeds' [Imagine Leeds](#) venue.

Arts Ageing and Activism Symposium developed by The Performance Ensemble with support by a steering group with partners; LEEDS 2023, Leeds Older Peoples' Forum and Leeds Museums and Galleries.

The 1001 Stories Project, including the Symposium was made possible through a partnership with Leeds Playhouse; with support from Arts Council England, The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund.

Report produced by Geraldine Montgomerie at The Performance Ensemble with support from Leeds Older People's Forum.

10. APPENDIX

Named organisations booked to attend the symposium:

Organisations

[100% Digital Leeds](#)
 Abeeralzhoor
[Age Friendly Leeds](#)
[Age UK Leeds](#)
[Artlink West Yorkshire](#)
[Arts Council England](#)
[Arts in Care Homes / NAPA](#)
[Ascendance](#)
[Balbir Singh Dance Company](#)
[Belgrade Theatre](#)
[Bradford 2025](#)
[CADA England \(Creative Ageing Development Agency\)](#)
[Canal Connections CIC](#)
[Care Delivery Service](#)
 CHWA
[Dead Good Guides/Welfare State International](#)
[Disability Arts Online](#)
[Full Circle Funerals](#)
 Harehills Action Team
[HOPS \(Neighbourhood Network\)](#)
[LAHWN](#)
[Leeds 2023](#)
[Leeds Beckett University](#)
[Leeds Arts Development](#)
[Leeds City Council](#)
[Leeds Community Foundation](#)
[Leeds Older People's Forum](#)
[Leeds Public Health - Older People](#)
[LS-TEN](#)
[NHS West Yorkshire Integrated Care Board](#)
[Opera North](#)
[OWLS \(Neighborhood Network\)](#)
[SAIL](#)
[Same Skies Think Tank](#)
[Space2](#)
[Split Design Studio](#)
[Spotlight](#)
[The National Lottery Community Fund](#)
[The Performance Ensemble](#)
[University of Leeds](#)
 Workshop Press
[Yorkshire Bylines](#)
[Yorkshire Dance](#)