



Creative Ageing Living Lab: Fegg Hayes

Evaluation Report produced by Farrell Renowden (The Age of Creativity CIC) with David Amigoni (Keele University)

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Background

Access to creativity at every age is a fundamental human right, according to the World Health Organisation, and national research shows that older people aged over 60 in England value 'creative and cultural participation' as a [positive influence on their wellbeing](#), but there are disparities in access. The least culturally engaged older people are often excluded from many activities due to a ['raft of health, access and resource barriers'](#), but 'place' also plays a significant role in defining who engages, and is represented, in creative and cultural programming.

Stoke-on-Trent is a place that ranks amongst the country's lowest levels of cultural engagement and highest numbers of older people, living in relative deprivation, which is why it was chosen as a pilot for a participatory research pilot for KISI (Keele Institute for Social Inclusion). The 'Creative Ageing Living Lab' we developed was a cross-sector partnership approach to better understand the local barriers and enablers to creative and cultural engagement, and an opportunity explore the systemic barriers older people experience. The purpose of the project was to identify potential opportunities for positive change both locally and nationally, using progressive co-creation techniques.

Fegg Hayes, based in Stoke-on-Trent, is a place that includes this demographic of older people, but it is also a place with important strategic connections, having recently attracted funding to develop a new 'Cultural Quarter'. Building on considerable local momentum, the Creative Ageing Living Lab for Fegg Hayes was formed in partnership with members of KISI, The New Vic Theatre Education Department, and the Ages and Stages Company of Elders, as well as Fegg Hayes Futures Hub, as experts of their own experience. The Living Lab used creative approaches to listen and learn from the community and co-create new creative outcomes.

Our participatory collaborative living lab at Fegg Hayes, Stoke-on-Trent, extended long-standing cultural and societal impact work between cultural gerontology researchers at

Keele University, the New Vic Theatre, North Staffordshire, and the Ages and Stages Company of Elders. The Ages and Stages Company came into existence during 2012 through the Ages and Stages project led by Prof Mim Bernard MBE (Keele University, New Dynamics of Ageing, ESRC/RCUK, 2009-12) and Jill Rezzano (New Vic, Education). Our new living lab participatory collaboration also extended the impact of Prof David Amigoni'sⁱⁱ work on creativity in later life (with Prof Gordon McMullan [King's College, London], 'Late-Life Creativity and the New Old Age', AHRC/RCUK network, 2011-13) and its concerns with the different modes of narrative, storytelling and practice – including literary practice – through which later life can be both expressed and communally enhanced. Farrell Renowden, as leader of the project, developed the collaboration to explore her emerging concerns with older people, creativity, heritage, place and inclusion.ⁱⁱⁱ

Delivery

We began the project by using a storytelling methodology developed by Old Fire station to gather different perspectives from the community. We worked with five residents, all aged 60+, from Fegg Hayes, and asked them the same questions, which were developed in partnership with local colleagues. The purpose of the questions was to interrogate the role of a 'warm welcome' in supporting or preventing engagement:

Storytelling Questions:

1. Can you describe a time when you experienced a 'warm welcome' when you weren't expecting it- can you think of one key thing that made a difference?
2. Can you describe a time when you were expecting a 'warm welcome' and it didn't happen- can you think of one key thing that made a difference?
3. Can you describe a time when you have offered someone else a 'warm welcome'- can you think of one key thing that made a difference?
4. Can you describe a time when you have looked at an activity and thought 'I won't be welcome there'- is there one key thing that would have made a difference?

Each storytelling participant gave consent to be recorded, and the transcript of the recording was anonymised and edited into a series of short stories. Each participant was given an opportunity to edit their story, before giving full consent for their story to be shared with the wider community. Each story has been included in this report, in Appendix 1.

As a co-designed project, we used these stories, and wider conversations with the community, as the basis for stage two in the project, which was used to develop new creative outcomes. Working in partnership with the New Vic Theatre Education Department, and the Ages and Stages Company of Elders, they co-created a script in hand performance based on the themes and issues described in the stories.

Devised and directed in partnership with Theatre Practitioner Julia Gay, the Ages and Stages Company of Elders developed a 30-minute performance that included direct quotes and

scenes described in the anonymised stories, to explore the idea of a 'Warm Welcome'. Working together over several weeks, the cast reflected on their own experiences of a 'Warm Welcome', adding their own perspectives into the performance. Images of the performance have been included in this report, in Appendix 2.

On the 6th March 2025, storytellers and members of the Fegg Hayes Futures 'Warm Welcome Club', along with invited partners from across Stoke-on-Trent, came together to watch the performance at the local community Hub. At the end of the performance, a reflection discussion was held and audience members were invited to share comments both in person, and on postcards. Images of the comments have been included in this report, in Appendix 2.

To begin the discussions, members of the cast were asked about their reflections, from initially reading the stories, to developing the performance. One person described how the process had made them more acutely aware of what a 'Warm Welcome' is, and more inclined to try and offer one in their daily life. Another person reflected that were saddened to hear that wheelchair users in two stories had a poor experience at the theatre and noted how profound it had been on each storyteller. More feedback is shared in the learning section of this report.

Impact

1. Stories

We co-created five community stories that provide a useful insight into what works in Fegg Hayes and the ongoing barriers that exist. These stories can be used to generate more discussion and project development in the future.

2. Theatre Performance

We co-created a powerful and accessible short play, which has the potential to stimulate discussion on the many themes and issues relating to a 'Creative Warm Welcome'.

3. Learning

Local and national learning outcomes were gathered, which have been details in the next chapter of this evaluation report.

Learning

From a vast umber of points raised, the following five outcomes have been highlighted because they add to the general discourse and support future discussion themes:

1. Connections

"It's hard to put a finger on a word that explains how this feels- warm."

The Creative Ageing Living Lab originally began focussing on the idea of a 'Warm Welcome' because anecdotal evidence from wider inclusion projects, alongside the lived and practice experience shared by partners, suggested it was key to engagement and retention. There are lots of toolkits that describe the individual actions that contribute to a 'Warm Welcome', but this project aimed to go further and capture the *feeling*.

Fegg Hayes Futures is an organisation that successfully connects with older people who require support but are unlikely to access other services, which is why their testimonials are so powerful. Their stories are simple, such as offering a smile or a cup of tea, but collectively they tell a deeper story of belonging, connection, and community. Reflections also highlight the impact of *not* receiving a warm welcome when you are entering a cultural space for the first time, which is often profound and lasting.

Provocation for future discussions: Rekindling lost audiences when the trust has gone.

2. Access

“A lot of people see this (wheelchair) before this (face).”

Access is an issue for many older people, but in Fegg Hayes the most pressing issue appears to be physical access, particularly for wheelchair users and those with additional support needs. In two stories, there are examples of inaccessible theatre venues and in every story we hear examples of insensitive staff. On one level, there is clearly a training issue, however many of the venues across Stoke-on-Trent perceive their staff to be well trained and welcoming, which highlights a deeper systemic issue.

To support change, these stories have the potential to add value to existing training for staff in all cultural venues across Stoke-on-Trent. The stories powerfully illustrate how deeply these issues are felt when they do arise, and the way that physical access and perceptions of belonging are intrinsically entwined.

Provocation for future discussions: Where is the lived experience in practice-led training?

3. Collective Endeavour

“All us volunteers have taken the first aid training, so we know what to do.”

The power of this community comes from the people within it. The Fegg Hayes Futures community are a notable example of how to create, build, and sustain a group that can reach pockets of the community that are often under-represented and under-served. Working in partnership with groups, and community centres like this, is an important approach to building trust and reaching new audiences.

Fegg Hayes futures Hub is already a strong community partner developing innovative approaches, such as the new Cultural Quarter project, but there is an opportunity for networks such as KISII and the Keele Deal Cultural Compact to work more closely with these type of organisations, to hear more stories of older people who don't take part in any creative opportunities being delivered locally- and why. This project has begun this process, but there is huge potential to do more.

Provocation for future discussions: How do communities inform communities of practice?

4. Stigma

“Around this area 20 years ago it was a rough area and there was no point trying to make friends here.”

The theme of 'stigma' came out in all the stories, and the wider group discussions, however the community believes the area is improving. People described how new housing and initiatives like the Cultural Quarter were changing the physical and social landscape of the place, but it could go further. For instance, there was still a sense that 'theatres are not for people like me'. The intersection of class, education, and age are key factors in this, as well as health, disability, and income.

Fegg Hayes appears to be in the process of collectively challenging the stigma it has faced in the past, and reimagining the future of the area, which has huge potential. The community have described complex, often entrenched issues, but the sense of optimism and pride is clear to see. This presents a significant opportunity for local creative and cultural partners to build on this and work with the community to continue this 'reimagining'.

Provocation for future discussions: Place/ People/ Power and change.

5. Silos

"We all have problems, we're no different."

Despite the shift in stigma, many people still describe that there a sense of 'us' and 'them', between those who 'have' and those who 'have not', which is widening within the cost-of-living crisis. Fegg Hayes Futures Hub provides a wide range of support services to the community, and everyone is welcome, however several people described the way that 'some people felt more welcome than others'. To tackle this, the group are trying hard to reach beyond the existing group members, in a variety of ways, and in one example, a simple community notice board was enough to start signposting new people.

There is a real opportunity for creative and cultural partners to play a role in supporting Hubs like Fegg Hayes, using their creative offer/ marketing to reach new audiences and engage people in the community who would benefit the most. The new Cultural Quarter is an incredible opportunity to connect and the services on offer to community members, when they do cross the threshold, are hugely supportive in the long term.

Provocation for future discussions: Tipping the point from 'them' to 'us'.

Recommendations

Despite the complex barriers that exist in Fegg Hayes, there is a significant opportunity for the community to connect, and be creative, with the development of the Cultural Quarter. Based on the feedback, here are three recommendations for next steps:

1. Training

Ages and Stages Company of Elders have developed a powerful piece of theatre that raises key points, particularly in relation to physical access and training. There is an opportunity for the cast to perform for a wide range of audience members, in particular those cultural venues that may need to reflect further on their approach to inclusion. It could form the basis of a new co-designed 'Warm Welcome' policy/ guidelines/ training for partners across Stoke-on-Trent.

2. Research

There was a sense, from all partners, that this was just the beginning in terms of storytelling as a tool for creative co-design. There is a need to hear from more older people, however there is also an opportunity to hear from practitioners, academics, policymakers to better understand current approaches, and how they could be developed further.

3. Cultural Quarter Development

This new local partnership and investment is an incredible opportunity for local cultural partners to reach new audiences and develop community connections. With a venue that is well known as a safe space for older people who are under-represented/ under-served there is an opportunity for ongoing programming and outreach.

From a national perspective, three further development opportunities:

4. The [Age Friendly Standards](#), produced by Family Arts, is a national toolkit and framework to support older people in cultural venues, with a section on a 'Warm Welcome'. There is an opportunity to further develop this tool with lived and practice experience.
5. Stoke-on-Trent benefits from a wide range of networks and a focus on cultural regeneration, which could be of great help to the community. There is an opportunity with the new ['Create Place'](#) fellowship to bring wider strategic partners together, to share these stories and generate more cross-sector solutions.
6. [Arts Council England](#) has commissioned a new creative place-making and creative ageing peer learning network to support practitioners in the field, but there is an opportunity to develop a cross-cutting group to support specialised practitioners and respond strategically to under-represented and under-served older people in priority places.

In short, we are confident that our Warm Welcome living lab project with Fegg Hayes Futures will be embraced by Keele's Institute of Social Inclusion for the powerful implications it has generated for cultural and societal impact pathways, and future research and innovation: in particular as the city of Stoke-on-Trent gears itself up to be recognised as an Age Friendly City in which creativity will play an important role in place making and social inclusion.

Reflections on the project from the Ages and Stages Theatre Group:

Reflection 1

My thoughts relate to the transformation of the original 5 stories to the final script. Each rehearsal added more substance to the final script with changes to the cues, positions and words.

My fear (as one of the security guards in the play) was painting the wrong picture to the audience, however I believe and hope that this wasn't the case. I can honestly say I was quite nervous at times

doing a scripted performance as it is totally different to having to learn lines amongst the cues and positions.

I loved every minute and a massive thanks to Julia, who is great to work with, Lynn and Becky from New Vic Education and my fellow cast members.

Fegg Hayes is very lucky to have such a friendly and caring community hub and long may they flourish. It would be great to do something with them again in the future.

Reflection 2:

I agree that the Hub is a super place to do a performance. It is just the right size for Ages and Stages kind of work and everyone there was so positive.

Script in Hand performances are meat and drink to us. It's how we have always worked and I enjoyed the whole thing. The subject matter, the development of the script and the support from everyone was fantastic. I'm looking forward to the next step (hopefully) in the process.

Reflection 3:

From a place and people that oftentimes feels forgotten and very isolated from the larger towns that make up a city, there is a community heart that engages and creates. The community feels so separated from the art and culture minutes down the road that they see it as not for them and cold and uninviting. This project has taken their voice and amplified it to show that what they create every day 'a warm welcome' is in fact something to be shared in both spaces and this is what will allow them to feel like they belong.

Reflection 4:

The recent community performance, which showcased the personal stories of local people of Fegg Hayes and their experiences of being warmly welcomed, was a truly impactful and meaningful project for all involved. This initiative provided a platform for voices that are often unheard, a chance to be listened to and have their stories carefully considered into a moving performance by the Ages and Stages company. The project's strength lay not only in its execution but also in its thoughtful, inclusive process of development.

One of the most notable aspects of this project was the approach to gathering stories. By connecting with local people and inviting them to share their personal narratives, the project emphasised the power of listening and the importance of understanding one another's experiences. This process allowed for a deeper understanding of what constitutes a "warm welcome" and encouraged reflection on how these experiences shape individuals' perceptions of community and belonging. The opportunity for participants to reflect on their own stories, and to see these stories represented on stage, offered a profound sense of recognition and validation.

The performance itself was a dynamic creative representation of the 'warm welcome' stories, that enabled the ages and stages performance group to deeply engage with the community members stories. Through this process, the group was not only tasked with interpreting and presenting these stories but also with reflecting on the broader question of what it means to offer a warm welcome in a changing world. This research and devising process fostered a space for empathy, understanding, and mutual respect for community cohesion.

A key strength of the performance was its ability to represent these individual stories in ways that felt both personal and universally relatable. The stories shared through the performance were rich in diversity, yet there was a common thread of shared humanity that connected them. This was further

enhanced by the creative representation of these stories, which resonated with the audience on an emotional level. Many found themselves reflecting on their own experiences of a warm welcome, considering how they might offer such experiences to others in their own lives.

Importantly, the performance sharing and invited discussions did not shy away from exploring both positive and negative experiences of a warm welcome. While some stories highlighted moments of exclusion or difficulty, the overall tone of the day remained one of hope and possibility. There was a palpable sense of positive energy, with the community expressing a collective commitment to change and to creating more inclusive, welcoming spaces for everyone. This balance of acknowledging challenges while also focusing on the potential for positive change gave the sharing a forward-looking, optimistic quality.

The experience also provided the audience with an opportunity to reflect on their own roles within the community. It prompted individuals to consider how they extend a warm welcome to others and how small acts of kindness and inclusivity can have a profound impact on those around them. The inclusive, supportive environment created throughout the performance encouraged connection, fostering a sense of belonging among community members who may not have interacted before.

In final reflection, this sharing was a testament to the power of storytelling and the importance of creating spaces for people to share their experiences. It allowed for the celebration of diversity and the promotion of inclusion while also encouraging reflection on how we can all contribute to a warmer, more welcoming world. It also exemplified how art and community can come together to create positive change, strengthen bonds, and inspire action towards a more inclusive future. Through the stories shared, together the storytellers, performers and audience were invited to reimagine their roles within the community and to think more deeply about how we can create spaces where everyone feels welcomed and valued.

Appendix 1: Lived Experience Stories from Fegg Hayes Futures

Story 1: Come Through The Door

There's a cartoon show called Looney Tunes that I liked to watch. Daffy Duck comes through the door acting daft and speedy Gonzales says to Daffy Duck "you're silly, I like you." Back in an old job, the way they got on with one another was by being silly, having lots of fun together. Still all doing the work like, but just being silly and not being serious, which would have a detrimental effect. It seems the best way to fit in is to be easy going and yes by being a bit silly.

In the past, I've offered a warm welcome to be friends with people. Offered people drinks, that sort of thing, but it's hard to give people a warm welcome sometimes. Around this area 20 years ago it was a rough area and there was no point trying to make friends here. People try to hurt each other, exploit one another, use one another. So instead. I just got on with my job.

But I remember being offered a warm welcome, I didn't know what to expect at the time. I just walked in. There's a lot of people there and I stopped and went in on my own, bewildered. Looking around, a lady just come up to me and welcomed me in. Most of the time I'm unwelcomed, but this time it was particularly inviting and warming. The tea and cakes were part of the whole thing, but she just had something to offer- kind words.

Another time, I walked into a local place with expectations of some kind of greeting but nothing happened, I'm just ignored. People gather in clicks, they've got their own interests that bind them together. Unless you've got a similar interest, unless you know somebody, you're on your own, with activity going on around you and you're not part of it. It's getting the trust of people, isn't it, being accepted by them. Not everyone wants to know you, they treat you with suspicion. Some are more sympathetic and welcoming when you're sitting on your own, if they're not gathering in clicks, but some look at outsiders as a threat.

There's a place just up the road where I thought I could try to find some interesting things and have somewhere to go but it's got two doors to get in, an automatic door and one to push open. I walk into the first door, but then the second door, I just looked through the window. I thought someone would say Hello because I needed some social support, for someone to open the door, but I thought what's behind the door? There's nothing there.

But before I left, I saw somebody there I knew, so I walked in and started to talk to him. He introduced me to the other people there and I've established myself. It started off small, but after a while, you get to know the place, the area, the people and then you grow into it, you expand and it's where you belong and accept people. It's easy to be defensive but you've got to find people worth getting to know, get to know them properly. Sometimes you think you don't know what you're dealing with but there's a lot of nice people.

But a membership matters, when there's a man on the door, like safeguard sort of thing, it makes me feel safe. The places I go to, you have to be accepted, you have to behave yourself or you are barred out. If I feel like I'm still in a strange place there is a force driving me to find something, be part of something. It means taking risks to discover things, to find some place to be established. It's like a determination to go somewhere, do something. Thinking, I'm going there and if the people don't like me. That's too bad, I'm going there anyway.

Story 2: Everything Was New To Me

I am outspoken and I'll say things as they are. I'll give anything a try now.

Me and my partner, we did everything together and when they died it just became a standstill, time stopped. Everything was new to me, I didn't know where I could go. I needed to do something or just not go out. I would have just been on my own and I'd have been wasting my life away doing nothing.

It was that push to get out, see what was going on, and then it ends up being everything, every day. I just started coming down for bingo and now I'm volunteering -it's a full time job!

I got a warm welcome when I first come down. You've always got somebody that will greet you, say Hello, ask if you're OK and what you want. You can sit with anybody and talk because they're all they're all so welcoming. When I first came here, I was a bit sceptical because I didn't know the times, and I actually walked in halfway through them calling bingo! But they gave me a bingo card because I'd turned up and I don't go anywhere apart from here now, it gets me out. My life is just down here, home, and down here.

I still go on holiday where me and my partner used to go. We made such a lot of friends over the years there and we all meet up, so I'm never on my own. I travel on my own, but I'm not on my own, we all meet up and go different places. It's always a nice day out, but I have to rely on them to keep me with company. I wouldn't go if I didn't know anybody, but it has given me the confidence to do things. I know all the bars, all the people, and where to go, where not go. My partner was the main strong side of us, but now obviously I have to speak for myself.

We're all first aid trained, I've never had to use it, but you never know, do you? All us volunteers have taken the first aid training, so we know what to do. I'd be thinking, oh gosh, how do I do this, but I would still remember it, it would all come back. I'm not a loving person, but I can give that practical advice, from my own experience, keep them calm and they listen to me. It's them things that make a difference, advice makes a difference, that sort of reassuring voice.

One person's partner died and they won't try, they won't go on their own, no confidence. It's that first time, but once you've got that over and done with everything's fine. The first time I went up to the supermarket and I was carrying heavy bags of shopping down, I was crying all the way because I've never done that before. I had to do that for the first time on my own. Everywhere you walk, everything you do, you've done it with them, so everything's a reminder. They thought I was brave to carry on going back on my own, but I thought it's just me now, I've got to do it, or not do anything- so I did it.

Story 3: Trained Properly

We always make them welcome because we have been trained properly. If someone needs to be given a warm welcome, I'll take them round.

Sometimes, you don't feel like they want you there, you get that impression. I'm very conscious of how people look at me and if they treat me differently. A lot of people see this (wheelchair) before this (face). And that's the issue. They think, you must be mentally and physically disabled. But if they take the time to get to know you, see what I've got, not what I haven't got, that makes all the difference. I wanted to get into an activity I saw on TV, but it's the access. I heard all they want is able bodies. It really got me down. There's certain things you can't do, I can understand if it's dangerous or something like that, but I looked up activities in Stoke-on-Trent and there's nothing here, I knew it would be the case.

My worst experience was at the theatre. I went in my wheelchair and felt very put out, it was bad. The set was all around and I needed somewhere to sit, but no-one came to make sure I was happy. I felt like, well, 'sorry for inconvenience'. Especially in a place like that, it's not a small company, I thought they would have had training. It's what you expect. And that kind of thing really plays on your mind. It stays with you, makes you not as confident. I wasn't treated very nicely. Even if there's nothing else they can do, if they just said 'if you need any help we're over there'. But that's why you

don't enjoy things and you're left thinking, am I gonna have the same experience again? I'm not gonna bother, I'll just home.

You can always tell a warm welcome when you go back again the second time and they remember your name. You might not remember theirs, but they make you feel welcome, you're remembered. And you're not just another person, when they still remember you, and that you have black coffee. Things like that. That makes a real welcome, if there's a bit of a gap, like a week, and you go back, and they still remember you. They remember what we were talking about and say, go down and see someone, grab a brew.

My best experience was when they saw me, more than they saw the disability. And now I'm on the board of trustees. If they need to know anything about access, they ask me and I make a warm welcome for other people who are wheelchair users. We have SEN pupils come up and visit, so I have to remember it's not just wheelchair users but think of other people too. I took someone around who was blind and I kept going, 'look at that, look at that', but that's the wrong word, so instead I described it. Words, you've just got to be careful. And I remember their name. I can't put the kettle on because it's a bit heavy, but I always remember people names and what brew they like.

Story 4: Our Community Potential

It meant everything to me to for people to see no one is better or worse than you, we all have problems, we're no different.

I've always lived in this area, but where we live has a divide and a stigma on both sides. These places are 5 minutes away from each other but some people think you are rich and don't need any help and some people think 'look at them.' A few years ago, a very good friend of mine tragically lost someone in her family who was very young. She was such a beautiful person and it destroyed her, so I set up a fundraising event with my friend. We raised about £7500 in one day and that was the beginning of realising our community potential. We came together through our fundraising and it can help us all to realise that we're all equals. You might have some money, they might not, but we're all human beings and we should respect each other.

So, I started to fundraise on our estate. A lot of people were saying we could do with a defib, so I said we'll get everybody to chip in. Only problem was we couldn't have an electric one, we needed a solar powered one at £3000. So, we set up a fundraiser and the whole estate were giving money, everyone helped because it was going to serve everybody. We also had a community notice board put on our estate and eventually, slowly but slowly, people come together. In my own way, I'm trying to get everyone to realise that it doesn't matter if you feel they've got money, and you're struggling.

My friend sadly passed away a few years ago and an Asian family moved into her house. There are no other Asian people on our estate, but there's a lot of ethnic minority on the new estate. So, after four months, I knocked on the door and introduced myself. A little lady answered and she was so excited, happy, and pleased, she invited me in and said 'you must have tea. You must have cake'. That was probably the most warming feeling. I introduced her to people and places because she felt secluded and lonely, but she's actually got a life now. I felt really proud that I introduced myself and we are friends. I must've made it a warm welcome, as opposed to a nice welcome, because she invited me into her house and you could see how much she valued it. It made her feel good and it made me feel good. We've been friends ever since and she's found a lifeline.

But not all welcomes are warm. There's a venue up the road that I've been a couple of times and nobody's got the time of day for you. I went up there to take bags of clothes for the charity and I was probably waiting about 10 minutes as people were walking past. I asked can someone help me and this lady just grabbed them, threw them by the door and walked off. I went up again for something

and the manager said, 'Oh, I don't think we can possibly facilitate' and I've never been since. I've had people and colleagues say that they've got bad experiences with this place too. We won't go up there.

But the worst was this one particular year, when I was in a wheelchair, we went to the theatre at Christmas. We went early to make sure I wouldn't get in the way, but we couldn't find anybody that was interested in showing us where to go. We weren't given any consideration, assistance. It was just pure chaos, there wasn't any room or time or space, it was just like a free for all and the disabled parking was full of cars without badges. I'll always remember it. When I went into the main theatre, somebody came over and said 'you'll have to be moved from there' but we didn't have a clue where to go. So that was that, we didn't go again, it just put me off. And we've never been since.

Story 5: A Comfortable Feeling

I come because I want to do something for myself, but something keeps making me turn up- the people. We're not perfect, none of us are, but they're just kind people.

Coming to this place, I didn't know what to expect, but everybody was so welcoming, I got such a warm welcome. It's a comfortable feeling when you don't have to worry about anything. You don't feel like anything is an issue. It's a calm, a relaxing atmosphere, very informal. So, you don't feel like you are under pressure to fit in, you can do what you want, it's just a unique place. There isn't another place like it, not that I've found anyway. Normally, I'll try something and then think I'm not bothered going again and I never go back, but I've always come back here.

Once, I was telling someone here about my situation and I can't remember exactly what I said now, I felt like I'd occupied them for ages, but they said 'Oh, don't worry about it'. It makes you feel lighter. You don't realise how many people are in the same situation, you think you are the only one, the odd one, until you come to a place like this and it makes you feel like you're not isolated. Everybody's different in their personalities, but everybody's for the good. They want people to feel comfortable and there's always somebody to talk to. There's things I've told people that I've never said to anybody, the things I come out with! You don't realise that you've been putting up a bit of a mask because you put a front up. Sometimes, I'm feeling one way and I put a smiley front up to the rest of the world, but I could come here say 'I feel absolutely dire'. I don't, but I could. It's hard to put a finger on a word that explains how this feels- warm.

But this is rare for me, once I tried a new place. Everybody had said how lovely it was, so we went in for a coffee and do you know what, it was completely different to what I'm expecting. The staff couldn't be bothered with you and were really off putting. First, they said 'you can sit up there', so we sat down, then someone said 'who's told you sit there, you can't sit there.' The way they spoke to us, I'll never go in there again, I was really disappointed. If people speak to you properly, that's fine, but after we'd moved three times this paper cup was just slapped down. I thought it was a really nice place, but I won't be going again. What sort of a welcoming experience is that? They were probably having a bad day, but nevertheless, it was our experience of it.

I do avoid taking part in some things. If I wanted to do something educational, like a course I'd think, well, they won't want me there now at my age, because they would think 'why would you want to learn that now?' I think perhaps it wouldn't be as welcoming to somebody my age because where's it going? I'm not getting started with another career or anything, so I wouldn't feel particularly comfortable if it's more for a younger age group. If I was with my family members I'd be alright, but approaching it for myself, I probably wouldn't go.

But I always like to think I've given a warm welcome, even if I didn't really want to. If somebody just turns up out of the blue, I'll just stop anything I'm doing because I don't like anybody feeling uncomfortable. My favourite saying at one time (but I've realised this is wrong since) is that as long as everybody else is happy, I'm happy. As long as everybody else is comfortable, happy and they've got everything they want, I don't care about myself. That's what I've always said but I've started to realise that I want to be happy as well.

My mum always gave a warm welcome, she'd welcome any anybody in. Making sure everybody's all right, that kind of thing. I feel like I've got to make them feel comfortable. Once, when it was my birthday, they did me a party and said 'sit down, this is this is for you' but I can't seem to. I'm trying to relax a bit, but I'm that focused on looking after all the people all the time. If there was anybody else feeling uncomfortable, I would feel uncomfortable. I would pick up on that. I've got gravitate towards these people.

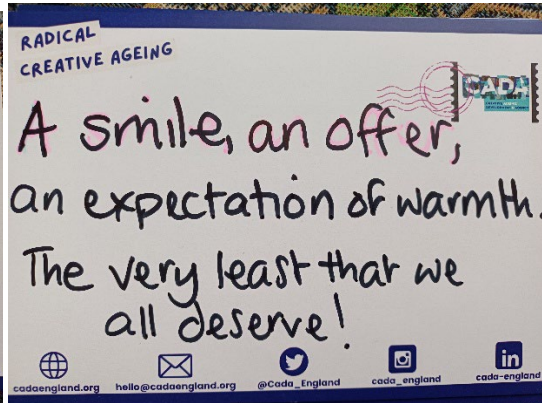
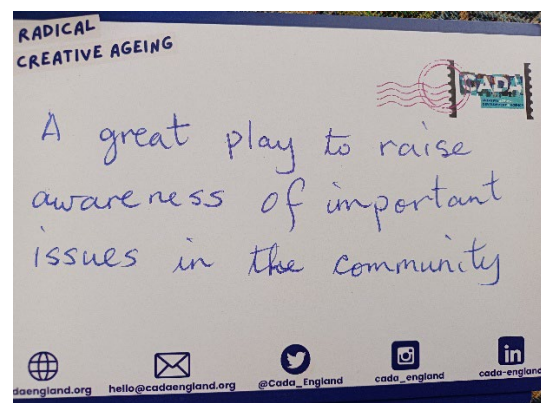
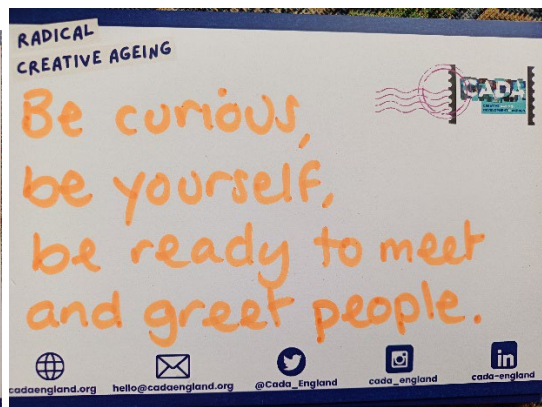
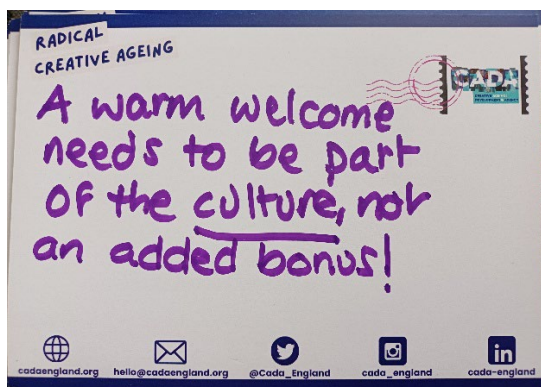
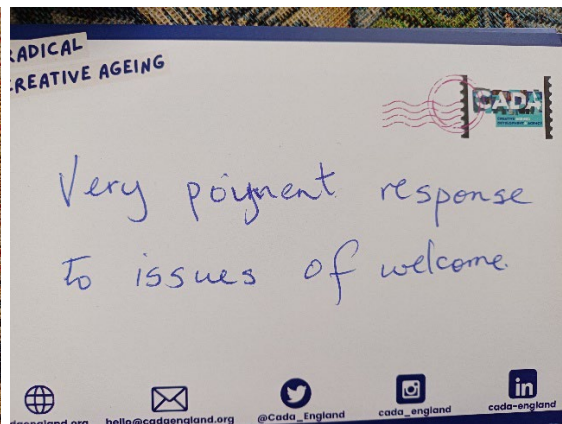
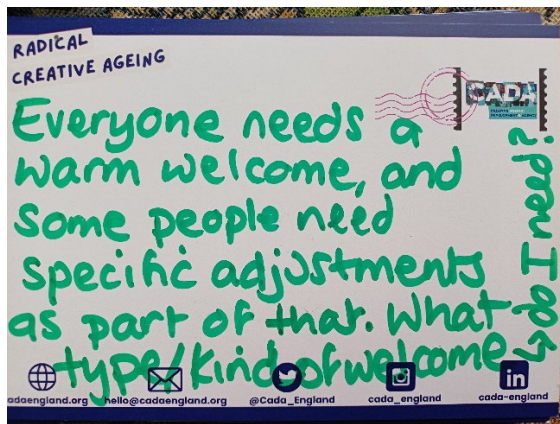
Sometimes I just want to relax, I don't feel the need to take over everything, but if I think somebody feels out of it, I need to make sure they know everything's alright. I don't want to keep being like this all the time, but obviously it's in my nature. And there are lots of kind people. You realise when you listen to all the news, all the bad things that are going on around you, that there are still some kind people in the world. But I think we need places like this, it's a safe space.

Appendix 2: Images

Script in hand performance:



Discussion:



ⁱ Keele Institute of Social Inclusion and Farrell Renowden thank Research England, UKRI, for this award as part of their QR Participatory Research allocation to Keele University (2024-25)

ⁱⁱ Prof Amigoni was also a co-investigator on the Ages and Stages project.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Amigoni's essay, 'Generative Fiction: Structures of feeling, place-making, and intergenerational contact in *The Lido*', in Helen Kingstone and Jennie Bristow (ed.), *Studying Generations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Generations, Transitions and Social Change series (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2024), 107-122. This essay was inspired by the work he did with Renowden, a symposium on place-making for the Age of Creativity Festival, 2022