

EngAge Rotherham: Connecting with Creativity

It has been a privilege recently to be involved with the Age of Creativity Festival by hosting a creative session supported by arts professionals at our peer led Friday Club in the village of Thorpe Hesley in Rotherham. This was a good opportunity to learn from the experts and become a bit more confident to do more with creativity in the future.

Thorpe Hesley Friday Club is a well established local, peer-led activity and social group meeting in a community centre alongside the local church. Thorpe Hesley is a village in Rotherham and shaped by its coal and steel heritage. There are around 25 members who meet weekly for friendship and a range of activities designed to maintain their physical, emotional and social wellbeing.

The session was facilitated by Chris Rolls from 64 million Artists¹ and by Louise Crowe, a specialist in the arts and dementia from Imagine Me Creative², together with Farrell Curran, Age UK Oxfordshire, Head of Cultural Partnerships. Thank you all for stimulating us in story telling, memory, singing, imagination, 'gratefulness craft' and ideas for future activities. Everyone participated fully and Jane, who leads the group, thanked everyone for their enthusiasm which "created a happy secure environment with excellent support to help us get out of our comfort zone and work as a group."

When people arrive in Rotherham to visit from elsewhere, possibly for the first time, I often ask what they know about Rotherham, what is their impression of the area. Typically people don't know a great deal. Sometimes they are able to sing the song that oppresses us, the one that goes 'dirty industry', 'industrial decline', 'child sexual exploitation' and 'hate filled marches by far right groups'. Indeed locally, many people have been profoundly affected by a kind of grief about all of these.



Following the workshop and reflecting about these conversations, I remain very struck by the importance of groups like this and the volunteers who lead them with love and creativity. Our visitors noted the nurturing environment that has been created and the support people give to each other. Able, to sit amongst the group and participate alongside them it was clear that these simple creative activities are a great way of tapping into people's thoughts and feelings about their lives. Family, friendships, treasured memories; deep feelings become a resource for understanding and coping in our lives. There was a lot of joy and laughter, but also some tears and some difficult losses touched on. We were witnesses to sharing and caring that nurtures the emotional resilience needed to face losses in later life.

Of course as a community development specialist this is no surprise. For us it is a priority to continue these creative adventures and see activities like this happening more often.

*Together we are discovering that our creativity
proclaims a counter narrative about our lives.*

We are singing together, telling stories and imagining together. Our people are knitting hats for smoothies³ and building scarecrows or angels for festivals and running around the Town⁴. We are combining our voices with those of others who believe Love Is Louder!⁵ – louder than intolerance and hate, louder than the struggle and the grief in our lives. We are campaigning for a town that is more age friendly. In Thorpe Hesley that means a petition for a bus service to Meadowhall which was withdrawn.

EngAge Rotherham⁶ is Age UK Rotherham's⁷ approach to transforming our ageing society and meeting the challenges caused by social change. Our vision is well articulated by the Centre for Ageing Better who said in the introduction to a recent report, "Being connected to others is fundamental to a happy later life. We must create places and spaces that enable all generations to feel they belong to their communities and that encourage people entering later life to remain active and connected to others."⁸

Our aim is to come alongside people entering later life to encourage and support them to join with others in their communities, to give voice to what matters most for them and to take action together. The 5 priorities given to us by them are to help people as they meet the challenges of later life to:

*stay safe, reduce loneliness, stay independent, be
healthy, and to have regular contact with other people.*

We agree with the organisation 64 Million Artists who say: "*We believe everyone is creative, and when we use our creativity we can make positive change in our lives and the world around us.*" We are delighted to show that creativity shines through in later life. This includes those who lead our local activity groups in communities around the borough.

By Iain Cloke, EngAge Rotherham Development Officer



¹ <https://64millionartists.com/>

² <https://www.facebook.com/ImagineMeCreative/>

³ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/get-involved/fundraise/the-big-knit/>

⁴ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/rotherham/activities-and-events/10k-2019/>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/LoveisLouderRotherham/>

⁶ **EngAge Rotherham** is an exciting new approach responding to our ageing society. It aims to help people stay connected and engaged within their local communities and Rotherham so that they can make the most of later life and have a full role to play in the lives of their families, communities and in the life of our Borough.

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/rotherham/our-services/engage-rotherham/>

⁷ **Age UK Rotherham** is an independent local charity. We've been working in the local community to help older people for 30 years. We have around 50 dedicated staff and around 100 volunteers helping us to deliver services and activities for older people in Rotherham. We're a local charity working in the community to support older people, their families and carers. We want everyone to be able to love later life. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/rotherham/>

⁸ **The State of Ageing in 2019: Adding life to our years**, <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/state-of-ageing-2019>