

## ***Ages and Stages: Policy Brief***

**Compiled by: Jackie Reynolds, Consultant;  
Michelle Rickett, Research Associate; Miriam Bernard, Principal Investigator.**

This policy brief is an outcome of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) funded research project entitled *Ages and Stages: the place of theatre in representations and recollections of ageing*. The project (2009-12) was a collaboration between Keele University and the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire. Combining literary, cultural and historical analyses with qualitative interview work and research-led practice, *Ages and Stages* provided both theoretical and practical understandings of the role that theatre plays in the lives of older people and in the wider community. The research was drawn together to create a new documentary drama *Our Age, Our Stage* and the associated *Ages and Stages Exhibition*. *Our Age, Our Stage* toured schools, colleges, retirement communities and local councils and was performed to a capacity audience of 500 people at the New Vic Theatre on July 11<sup>th</sup> 2012.

Our research findings have policy implications that may be viewed in the context of what is often referred to as 'active ageing', as well as a growing interest in older people's arts engagement. This briefing identifies key policy developments relating to older people; reviews their implications and those of our research findings; and makes a series of recommendations for policy makers who might be interested in developing and including intergenerational theatre/drama in their policies and (inter-professional) practices.

### **Key Recommendations:**

- Policies need to reflect the fact that participation in creative activities can be an important aspect of 'ageing well'.
- It is necessary to join up policy agendas on 'arts, health and well-being' with those addressing the needs of 'an ageing society'.
- Policies to promote social cohesion should recognise the potential of intergenerational theatre and drama as a medium for the inclusion of older and younger people.
- Opportunities for intergenerational groups to work creatively together should be included as part of Age Friendly Cities and Communities initiatives, and should contribute to planning processes.
- Better and more widespread information and publicity is needed to encourage the participation of older and younger people in creative activities.

## The UK Policy Context: Arts and Ageing Policies

Our main contention is that much ageing policy of the last fifteen years has ignored the arts/cultural dimensions, and much arts policy has not addressed the needs of older people. The New Labour Government (1997-2010) developed a plethora of policies relating to older people, social exclusion and active ageing. Since the Coalition Government came to power in May 2010, they too have introduced a range of new initiatives - notably the 'Big Society' - with an ever-increasing emphasis on volunteerism. The table in the centre pages of this briefing summarises developments, policies and reports over the last fifteen years in two key arenas: in ageing and in the arts.

Broadly speaking, ageing related policies have been oriented towards the health and/or social care needs of older people, sometimes including a health promotion perspective. This has led to calls for policy makers to engage in a broader debate about ageing, which recognises the diversity of issues that older people face and avoids inappropriate 'one size fits all' public policies (Centre for Social Justice 2010). By contrast, very few government policies have taken account of the cultural/artistic dimensions of ageing or, if they have, these are usually subsumed under discussion of 'social and leisure activities', 'opportunities for social participation' and 'volunteering'.

Throughout the UK, some of the more recent policies have tried to address older people's needs and inequalities in a comprehensive manner, and have called for a change in attitudes and expectations about ageing across all sectors of society; this includes shedding outdated stereotypes and challenging assumptions about what growing older means. Although the policy drivers are similar, there are also notable differences between the situation in England and that of the devolved nations: for example, Wales has strategies for ageing and for intergenerational practice and was the first nation to appoint a Commissioner for Older

People. However, whilst there is some recognition in policy initiatives of the contribution that older people make to their communities, there is still a lack of insight into how such deep-rooted cultural change might be effected. Moreover, although it is recognised that older people already make positive and disproportionate contributions to their communities, their involvement is nevertheless often overlooked and undervalued by government (Cox 2011).

In a similar way, government policy increasingly recognises positive links between the arts, health and well-being (DoH & ACE 2007; DCMS 2012), but then fails to relate this to experiences of ageing and potential health benefits for older people. As can be seen in the table, it is also younger people's participation that tends to be given greater priority in policy documents published by, for example, Arts Council England. This is despite the fact that recent reports from the Baring Foundation (Cutler 2009) and the Mental Health Foundation (2011) assert the value of participation in the arts for older people and point out that this is often overlooked in policy and service provision. Similarly, a report released by the Third Sector Research Centre, states that grassroots arts activity makes a 'very significant and positive contribution' to the development of civil society (Ramsden et al. 2011), and contains numerous examples of projects involving older people. Linked with this, it is important to recognise the significant contribution made by volunteers, many of whom are older people.

One arena in which arts and ageing initiatives might be expected to come together is around the development of intergenerational policies and practices. As yet, the UK does not have an 'intergenerational policy' even though beliefs and evidence about the benefits of intergenerational practice can be found in policies relating to education, health and social services, and employment (Melville & Bernard 2011). In 2007, a report commissioned by the

Department for Communities and Local Government recommended intergenerational programmes as a vehicle for enhancing community cohesion (CIC 2007), and support and investment was forthcoming from the now de-commissioned Department for Children, Schools and Families (Statham 2009) and through the 'Generations Together' programme. Whilst intergenerational programmes and activities might, on the face of it, seem to fit well with the Coalition Government's agenda around increasing localism, in a context of drastic budget cuts they are often in fierce competition for scarce resources.

In terms of practice, the Centre for Intergenerational Practice based at the Beth Johnson Foundation in Stoke-on-Trent identifies three categories:

- members of one generation supporting one another;
- people from different generations working together to address community issues;
- people from different generations learning together.

Benefits of intergenerational working across all age groups - in cultural arenas as well as in welfare settings - have been identified as 'increased understanding, friendship, enjoyment and confidence', and outcomes specifically for older people have been 'related to health and well being, reduced isolation and a renewed sense of worth' (Springate et al. 2008: v).

### **The Local and Regional Context**

North Staffordshire is an area with a long history of heavy industry (ceramics, coal and steel) that, over the past sixty years, has undergone considerable social and economic change and decline. These changes have had marked effects on the expectations and opportunities of local people; as in other communities, it is also impossible to separate the ageing process from its social and cultural

contexts, or to divorce the experience of older people from those of the community's other generations. Key local and regional policies and developments that can be linked to ageing and the arts include:

- 1997: Stoke-on-Trent City Council's *Healthy City Initiative* - aimed to 'improve health and well-being of residents of Stoke-on-Trent'.
- 2007: Stoke-on-Trent City Council's 10 year plan, *Ageing Well Living Well* - objectives include 'recognising the vital role that older people play economically, socially and politically in the city', 'encouraging healthy lifestyles and promoting independence', and 'breaking down the barriers to employment, occupation opportunities and volunteering'.
- 2007: Staffordshire County Council's *Ageing with Opportunity* strategy - focus is on reducing health inequalities by 'promoting social networks to reduce isolation and loneliness'; 'community involvement and volunteering'; and 'promoting positive ageing and de-stigmatising ageing, creating positive images of older people'. These aims may be supported by providing opportunities for older people to become involved in social and artistic activities.
- 2007: Manchester's Valuing Older People 'Cultural Offer Working Group' was established with the aim of improving quality of life for older people through opportunities to participate in cultural activity and to express themselves creatively. Activities and resources were to be targeted at areas where such cultural experiences are less likely to take place.
- 2008: Staffordshire Arts and Museum Service three-year Arts Policy included 'encouraging arts opportunities for older people' as one of its objectives.

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## Key developments, policies and reports

Ageing	Year	The Arts
	<p><b>1997</b></p> <p><b>1998</b></p> <p><b>1999</b></p> <p><b>2000</b></p>	<p>Department of Culture, Media and Sport established – responsible for government policy in arts and culture.</p> <p><i>A New Cultural Framework</i> (DCMS) – promoting wider access to the arts.</p> <p>Social Exclusion Unit <i>Policy Action Team 10 report</i> – argues that participation in arts and sports could improve communities' performance in health, crime, employment and education: arts seen as an important aspect of regeneration and addressing social exclusion.</p> <p>Publication of Scotland's <i>National Cultural Strategy</i> (Scottish Executive. 2001).</p>
<p><i>National Service Framework (NSF) for Older People</i> – focus on promotion of health and active life.</p> <p>Welsh Assembly Government launches its <i>Strategy for Older People in Wales</i>. It provided an integrated framework for all statutory bodies to plan for an ageing society and improve services and included a specific funded commitment to develop intergenerational work.</p>	<p><b>2001</b></p> <p><b>2002</b></p> <p><b>2003</b></p> <p><b>2004</b></p>	<p>Free entry re-introduced at national museums in England, Scotland and Wales.</p> <p>Creative Partnerships Programme established: the Government's flagship creative learning programme for schools.</p> <p><i>Research into Lifelong Learning, the Arts and Older People</i>, (Richard Gerald Associates) – commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to inform spending of the Lifelong Learning Fund.</p> <p><i>Ambitions for the Arts</i> (Arts Council England manifesto) – emphasises the importance of the arts for young people, prioritising the Creative Partnerships initiative; brief mention of extending initiatives to older age groups.</p> <p>Local Area Agreements established as part of the neighbourhood renewal agenda. They include the theme 'healthier communities and older people'; and a focus on increasing opportunities for older people's social activities, including arts and culture.</p> <p><i>Arts Education: A Lifelong Learning Strategy</i> (Scottish Arts Council) – emphasis on engaging learners of all ages; one action was to organise a conference on arts, lifelong learning and older people (p9).</p>
<p><i>Opportunity Age</i> – first cross-government strategy; focus on 'active ageing', 'healthy ageing', challenging attitudes and stereotypes about older people.</p> <p><i>Ageing in an Inclusive Society: Promoting the Social Inclusion of Older People</i> (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland) – focus on cultural change, joined up policies on ageing, and addressing social exclusion.</p> <p><i>A Sure Start to Later Life</i> – focus on exclusion, poverty and social isolation.</p> <p><i>LinkAge Plus</i>: pilot initiatives to develop innovative partnerships and joined up services between local authorities, health, and the voluntary and community sectors.</p> <p>Comprehensive Spending Review – included a Public Service Agreement to 'tackle poverty and promote greater independence and wellbeing in later life'.</p>	<p><b>2005</b></p> <p><b>2006</b></p> <p><b>2007</b></p>	<p><i>Theatre Policy 2007-11</i> (Arts Council England) – strong focus on access to theatre for children and young people; no specific references to older people.</p> <p><i>The Arts, Health and Wellbeing</i> (Arts Council England) – first formal national strategy for arts and health, with the aim of integrating the arts into mainstream health strategy and policy making.</p>



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- 2010-date: Age Friendly Communities - Manchester is currently the only World Health Organisation endorsed age-friendly city in the UK. Stoke-on-Trent, like a number of other cities, has also begun to explore initiatives based on similar principles. A shadow UK network of cities has been established – including Stoke - which is in the process as being recognised as a member of the WHO Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities.
- 2012-15: Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire Theatre Trust Ltd will administer the new *Creative People and Places Programme* in the area. £3 million from Arts Council England has been awarded to a local consortium including B Arts, Brighter Futures, the New Vic Theatre, Partners in Creative Learning and Staffordshire University to develop a programme designed to empower communities to take the lead in shaping local arts provision. It is one of seven awards to date that have been targeted at parts of the country where people's participation in the arts is significantly below the national average.

### The Research Evidence

Drawing on the recent Mental Health Foundation (2011) review and other sources, the key benefits of **arts engagement for older people** can be summarised as follows:

#### Individual benefits

- Positive contributions to mental wellbeing (e.g. improved confidence and self-esteem).
- Contributes to positive identity and life role (Hays & Minichiello 2005).
- Helps people to deal with periods of transition and loss (e.g. retirement, widowhood) (Cooper and Thomas 2002; Hillman 2002).
- Positive effects on physical wellbeing (Staricoff 2004; Cohen 2009).
- Enables participants to learn or refresh skills.

#### Group benefits

- Develops stronger communities by offering meaningful social contact and opportunities for friendship and support (Bungay & Skingley 2008; Clift et al. 2008; Paulson 2009; Reynolds 2011).
- Challenges age-related stigma and discrimination (Fisher & Specht 1999; Cohen 2006).
- Provides a forum for the exchange of skills, knowledge and experience.
- Provides opportunities to play, experiment and be creative together.

The review (Mental Health Foundation 2011) also identifies specific benefits from **theatre/drama participation:**

- Intergenerational drama can challenge stereotypes of older people within a safe space and help to address power imbalances between professionals and older people.
- Drama can improve cognitive skills by requiring active (rather than passive) participation and problem solving skills.
- Opportunities for increasing skills and confidence.
- Increased social connections.
- A sense of individual and collective achievement.
- Social support for bereaved people, and sometimes a temporary distraction from grief.
- An audience's appreciation can reinforce positive benefits.
- Community theatre can raise the profile of the local community and contribute to a sense of belonging and community identity (Feldman et al. 2011).

### *Ages and Stages*

The *Ages and Stages* project operated from within a critical gerontological/citizenship framework. It too highlights the value of engaging older people in a variety of creative activities, and emphasises the importance of the arts in challenging stereotypes of decline and deficit in later life. Our focus was on recognition of what older people have to contribute, and of their capacity for (continued) creativity and participation. This reflects an assets-based approach to working with older and younger people; it challenges ageism, promotes participation and addresses social exclusion.

The findings from the *Ages and Stages* project both support and develop the benefits identified above. Our research demonstrates:

- The importance of **challenging stereotypes** that creativity declines/ceases in old age.
- **Connections** between identity, belonging, well-being, self-esteem and self-confidence, and how they are **enhanced** through theatre and drama.
- The importance of **participation** – through volunteering and involvement in creative activities – particularly at times of transition and bereavement.
- The role that theatre and drama can play in the **inclusion** of older and younger people.
- **Positive health outcomes** and a sense of well-being for both older and younger participants.

### **Recommendations**

Drawing together the policy overview with the (as yet fairly limited) UK evidence base, we offer a number of recommendations for policy makers at both national and local/regional levels.

### *National*

- It is necessary to join up policy agendas on ‘arts, health and well-being’ with those addressing the needs of ‘an ageing society’.
- A range of strategies are needed to promote the positive impact of arts and drama engagement on general well-being, for example offering arts and drama engagement on prescription.
- There needs to be greater recognition of both the diversity and the commonalities between older people and younger people; policies and rhetoric that involve pitting generations against each other must be avoided.
- It is important to create opportunities for intergenerational groups to work creatively together, and for people to participate in arts activities throughout their lives.
- Capacity building is needed to support voluntary effort, including training for individuals, community groups and professionals.

### *Stoke and Staffordshire*

- *Ages and Stages* has now secured follow-on funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council until July 2013. We aim to: establish an intergenerational theatre company at the New Vic Theatre; tour new performance pieces around the region; run an inter-professional training course; and hold a scoping event for a ‘Creative Age Festival’. This will provide opportunities for joining up policy agendas and practices on arts and ageing at a local level.
- There needs to be better and more widespread information and publicity to encourage the participation of older and younger people in creative activities, e.g. through local media, on public transport and in local community facilities.

- The arts are an important medium for engaging with, and promoting the participation of, excluded groups. Creative drama-based approaches could be used more widely to consult with local communities, to represent their views and experiences, and to involve people of all ages in policy and planning processes.
- It will be valuable to learn from Manchester's experience, especially in terms of ideas around joining up 'cultural offers' for older people and engaging 'cultural champions'.
- The new *Creative People and Places Programme* needs to actively engage with both older and younger people and learn from the outcomes of the *Ages and Stages* project and similar research initiatives, as plans to shape local arts provision are formulated.

[References and links are available upon request]

#### **The *Ages and Stages* project team:**

Miriam Bernard (PI)  
Professor of Social Gerontology

David Amigoni  
Professor of Victorian Literature

Lucy Munro - Senior Lecturer in English

Michael Murray  
Professor of Social and Health Psychology

Jill Rezzano  
Head of Education, New Vic Theatre

Michelle Rickett - Research Associate

Ruth Basten - PhD student

Tracey Harrison - Administrator

#### **Further information**

An *Ages and Stages* resource pack is available which includes:

- A 20 page souvenir brochure
- A DVD of the performance of *Our Age, Our Stage* at the New Vic Theatre and documentary footage about the exhibition
- A script of *Our Age, Our Stage*
- Project information sheets
- A policy guidance paper

For copies, please contact our Project Administrator, Tracey Harrison, at [t.l.harrison@keele.ac.uk](mailto:t.l.harrison@keele.ac.uk) or on 01782 733845.

Further information is available on our website – [www.keele.ac.uk/agesandstages](http://www.keele.ac.uk/agesandstages)

We also have a blog - <http://www.agesandstagesproject.blogspot.co.uk/>

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