
‘Crafting Connections: a heritage for wellbeing toolkit’

Project Report

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Introduction

This report accompanies the Crafting Connections: a heritage for wellbeing toolkit published in 2024 and freely available to download on the Manchester Histories website. The project was a partnership between Creative Manchester at the University of Manchester, alongside the heritage charity Manchester Histories and their partners. Creative Manchester is a research platform at the University of Manchester that connects researchers with practitioners, champions interdisciplinary and creative research methods and work around three main themes:

- Creative Industries and Innovation
- Creativity, Health and Wellbeing
- Creative and Civic Futures

Manchester Histories principal aim is to connect people through histories and heritage.

Academic research and practice-based enquiry were combined through a knowledge exchange fellowship awarded to Dr Erin Beeston. Erin has a background working in heritage and museums, especially collections access, and recently completed a collaborative doctorate with The University of Manchester and the Science and Industry Museum. This project was made possible with funding from Manchester City Council and The Higher Education Innovation Fund.

The **Crafting Connections** toolkit is a pilot project by Manchester Histories and Creative Manchester, which contributes to Greater Manchester's regional priority to reduce health inequalities. This regional priority reflects global strategies on healthy aging, with the World Health Organization's (WHO) Age-Friendly Cities framework and the United Nation's Decade of Healthy Aging.¹

Both international initiatives recognise the aging global population and the ways in which inequalities are exacerbated by ageism, and physical and intellectual barriers to participation in community life. Based on Manchester's Age-friendly Strategy, and wider WHO definitions, the target age group for this toolkit is anyone above the age of 55. However, activities can also be enjoyed by younger adults.

Improving health and wellbeing outcomes through creativity is a growing area of interdisciplinary research. Academic research hubs engaged in creative health include UCL's Centre for Critical Studies and the University of Leeds's Centre for Cultural Value. Several UK regions are concurrently developing wellbeing strategies in response to widening health inequalities. For example, Southampton launched a Health and Wellbeing Strategy in 2017, instating a statutory board comprised of commissioners from Southampton City Clinical Commissioning Group, Southampton City Council and NHS England.² Locally, the championing of the health and wellbeing of older people is supported by research at The University of Manchester. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority launched an Age-friendly Strategy in 2015, updated in 2024 with a vision for the next ten years.³ In 2022, Greater Manchester became the first UK region to adopt a Creative Health Strategy to address the region's stark health inequalities.⁴ The Greater Manchester Local Industrial Strategy also supports the development of an International Centre for Action on Healthy Ageing.⁵

Who is this toolkit for?

The toolkit is for people, whether staff, freelancers or volunteers, embedded in care or community settings wishing to enhance the health and wellbeing of a group they work with. This could range from facilitators of social groups in libraries to art therapists working in areas like dementia or neuro rehabilitation units. The overall toolkit includes ten activities, which are also available as separate downloadable pdfs. All the online resources, including audio and visual clips from North West Sound Heritage and the North West Film Archive, are freely available and can be used by anyone. No prior knowledge of heritage or health and wellbeing interventions are required. There are layers of information available: the activities been developed to be followed step by step, however, for those needing more detail (such a definitions like 'what is an archive') additional guidance is provided in **Appendix A: Further Information** and **Appendix B: Online Resources**.

Collaborative working

Erin Beeston was part of the Manchester Histories team for the duration of the project, attending team meetings, away days, training, and social activities. Whilst the Histories team is small, they shared a wealth of experience. Project Manager, Janine Hague and Community Producer, Anoushka Gordon, gave feedback across the project based on their experiences working with diverse communities. Karen Shannon (Chief Executive Officer) initiated the original idea and provided generous support and especially drew upon her extensive network and knowledge of the sector to aid the toolkit development. Furthermore, a group of Manchester Histories volunteers shared insights into their personal experience of heritage activities and of working with older people.

Creative Manchester provided opportunities for knowledge exchange with other researchers in various disciplines. Through attending events and meetings with other fellows focussed on creative health, Erin learnt about different disciplinary approaches in terms of theory and practice. This included attending a research café on 'Creative Health and Health Inequalities' organised by Dr Simon Parry and Dr Angela Whitecross during the UKRI funded project: 'Organisations of Hope: building a creative consortium for health equity in Greater Manchester'.⁶ Speakers included Dr Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt (who developed the 2017 parliamentary report from which the term 'creative health' derives and wrote the Greater Manchester Creative Health Strategy), health economist, Dr Luke Munford, and historian of medicine, Professor Stephanie Snow.

Background

Health and wellbeing are terms with multiple definitions, understood in different ways across both academic disciplines and professionals engaged in health or social care, public health policy, and within the heritage sector. The concept that supporting individuals' wellbeing is integral to health, both mental and physical, was recognised by the WHO in 1946, and wellbeing was cited as integral to mental health again by the WHO in 2001. Researchers behind the Warwick-Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale surmised that these definitions were focussed on how people function in health and social terms and did not include feelings. Their research show that the feeling and functioning aspects of mental wellbeing are inextricably linked.⁷

The current usage of 'health and wellbeing' in the UK is also strongly influenced by the 2008 New Economic Forum's (NEF) 'Five Ways to Wellbeing'.⁸ Building on the Warwick-Edinburgh research, the NEF report also considers wellbeing as figuring the two main elements of feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement are cited as characteristics of someone with a positive outlook. The emotions and actions align closely with how heritage and wider cultural organisations perceive their social role; Manchester Histories core values are compassion, curiosity and justice. The 'Five Ways' NEF developed: give, connect, be active, take notice and learn continue to underpin public health messaging in the UK.⁹ The 'Five Ways' continue to underpin health and wellbeing projects in arts and heritage organisations.¹⁰

Whilst the terminology continues to be fluid and contextual, by developing activities in **Crafting Connections** to contribute to the 'Five Ways', the toolkit's aims can be clearly comprehended by users with varied professional backgrounds. Creative Health is a growing area of practice and research, which emerged from arts practitioners working in medical settings in the mid-twentieth century and grew in community settings in the 1970s.¹¹ Museums and galleries have taken inspiration from art therapy and creative practice since the early 2000s. Recently, especially during and after the global Covid-19 pandemic, heritage organisations and community archaeologists embedded creative health practices into their public engagement work, virtually as well as physically. Thus, a wealth of toolkits from across the heritage sector, often intended for individual use, were launched throughout the pandemic.¹²

At the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance's 2023 conference, speakers provided insights into how creative health work can continue despite the wider national crisis in NHS funding and staffing. The role of regional strategies was a particular focus, highlighting collaboration between local government, health sector and smaller arts organisations in areas including the host city of Bradford. The conference included a workshop launching the Creative Health Quality Framework.¹³

This tool outlines good practice in creative health based on eight principles:

1. **Person-Centred:** Value lived experience and enable potential.
2. **Equitable:** Work towards a more just and equitable society.
3. **Safe:** Do no harm, ensure safety, and manage risk.
4. **Creative:** Engage, inspire and ignite change.
5. **Collaborative:** Work with others to develop joined-up approaches.
6. **Realistic:** Be realistic about what you can achieve.
7. **Reflective:** Reflect, evaluate, and learn.
8. **Sustainable:** Work towards a positive, long-term legacy for people and planet.

These principles aligned naturally with the Manchester Histories mission: '...to explore the past and shape the future, valuing all voices in the telling, preserving, and celebrating of our stories'.¹⁴ The clarity of the eight principles proved a useful way to plan the toolkit project.

In March 2024, Historic England and the British Council for Archaeology (CBA) hosted their first heritage and wellbeing conference, alongside the University of Southampton and their host, Delapré Abbey in Northampton. Historic England and the CBA are leading a community of practice around health and wellbeing, which includes a working group on social prescribing. Erin Beeston and Janine Hague ran a Workshop at the conference on the application of toolkits where attendees critiqued their audience, use and longevity.

This helped to shape our 'past in the present' approach with delegates (discussed in the next section) and to gain input from heritage professionals on what kind of toolkits have worked for them. A particular lesson from this was downloadable content and ensuring simplicity in online access.

Staff at Manchester Histories, particularly the community producer, will use and adapt activities from the **Crafting Connections** for use with groups in their Hub at Central Library. With support from Manchester City Council's Neighbourhood Investment Fund, a workshop series called 'Come and Chat' has brought together older residents from the Piccadilly ward to participate in wellbeing workshops in the Hub from 2023 to 2024. These involved Archives+ partners, particularly the North West Film Archive, to provide historical resources or peaks behind the scenes, whilst the Manchester Histories community producer leads informal discussions. In essence, an archival version of 'knit and natter.' The toolkit activities will enable sessions to place when partners are not available, as, for example, film and audio clip links to the archives are embedded in the toolkit. Whilst working with archivists and librarians provides unmatched insight into historical sources, for the widest use and dissemination of these stories, the availability of online resources with a non-specialist facilitator is a valuable alternative.

Approaches

Manchester Histories work in partnership with Archives+, a consortium of North West and Greater Manchester based archives and organisations based at Central Library in Manchester since 2014.¹⁵ Archives+ partners provided sources from the Manchester and the North West region, however the design of each session ensures that no prior knowledge of the area’s history is required. Activities emphasis how people can be inspired by the past to reflect on the present and imagine the future, relating to the ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ – with ‘connect’ and ‘take notice’ especially underpinning activities. ‘Learn’ is primarily engaged with through looking at historical sources, though participants may also be trying something for the first time or re-visiting a skill they have not used for a long time.

The **Crafting Connections** toolkit activities explore the broadly construed theme of skills and craft, inviting participants can think about their intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Regional or culturally specific traditions shown in the toolkit, such as Lancashire and Yorkshire handloom weaving, are a starting point for broader discussions. People can bring their own experiences of making or using textiles to share experiences and connect with others. For example, in the activity ‘hand made’, what begins by thinking about carpentry and furniture making in the early twentieth century moves through discussions of what makes handmade items special, leading to reflections on everyone’s making skills. In a trial with Manchester Histories volunteers in May 2024, through prompting people to think in the broadest sense what they can do, the group then made representations out of plasticine of things they had made my hand or learnt themselves. This ranged from dancing, playing the Ukulele, making a bird box with spare wood, and crocheting to model railway making. The session ends with sharing of skills, and thinking about

the joy learning brings. Through encouraging a broad, flexible understanding of skills, people from a variety of cultural backgrounds or raised in different social contexts can reflect on their individual heritage.

This approach was influenced by Erin Beeston’s experiences at the Institute for Cultural Practices, where intangible cultural heritage is a teaching focus. In 2003, UNESCO adopted the following domains of intangible cultural heritage, which provides an indicator of how local knowledge and traditions can be understood globally:

1. Oral traditions and expressions
2. Performing arts
3. Social practices, rituals, and festive events
4. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
5. Traditional craftsmanship ¹⁶

Whilst the U.K. did not subscribe to the UNESCO convention, the core concepts ICH are often used to guide British cultural engagement initiatives. These domains underpin the ‘skills’ considered across the toolkit. For example, oral traditions and expressions are central to the ‘storytelling’ and ‘sing it’ activities, which use the North West Sound Heritage collection’s folk recordings as primary sources to inspire activities. Performing arts are brought into discussion points about skills, such as in ‘group draw’, whilst social practices like May Day celebrations are addressed in ‘sing it!’. Knowledge of nature is highlighted in the source discussion in ‘weave together’, and the dying history given in ‘pattern book’. Indeed, in the ‘make your mark’ trial activity with Manchester Histories volunteers, as they took notice of their journey to the session, several brought up plants and weeds they observed. Traditional craftsmanship has especially informed the research for the toolkit, with the suggestion of using Sam Hanna’s documentary films that recorded traditional crafts around Lancashire in the mid-twentieth century by colleagues in the NWFA.¹⁷

The past in the present

In heritage organisations, object-based reminiscence with older people was widely used during in the 2000s and 2010s, especially by learning and engagement teams. For example, at Salford Museum in 2009 a Memories Matter project funded by a Social Care Reform Grant included a series of object-centred reminiscence sessions with four care community groups.¹⁸ Helen Chatterjee has highlighted the effectiveness of using historical materials, objects, archives (documents, photographs, film) and stories, for this kind of therapeutic work.¹⁹ The Memories Matter project evaluation indicates wellbeing outcomes, particularly connecting participants with each other and their carers: ‘the sense that their personal stories were valued... made a difference to participants. They felt proud of their lives and this in turn supported the development of relationships between their peers and their carers’.²⁰ Museums and galleries have continued to work using similar methods, developing more complex interventions embedding social and health care best practice. Liverpool Museums, for example, developed a social history collections-based programme ‘to inspire, encourage and develop more person-centred approaches to dementia care’.²¹

Object focussed practice enables close connections between material culture and individuals and can be used as a starting point for bespoke practice in the community. However, a limitation of this technique is the heavy reliance on cultural anchors. The use objects or photographs from a specific era or place tend to reflect the taste of the dominant social group. In a study into Austrian older adults participation in culture, ‘future research in gerontology needs to problematise older adults’ exclusion from cultural practice as a matter of spatial and taste marginalisation’.²² In the UK, archive, library, and museum collections represent official histories of governmental institutions,

predominately homogenous white-British upper class perspectives underwritten by authorised heritage discourse.²³ Place-based reminiscence around photographs can risk excluding people in communities not originally from the area, enhancing feelings of otherness. The framing of activities by facilitators is crucial to establish place as a starting point, rather than the focus of an activity. For example, by taking an image of a park and using open questions (rather than site specific questions) like ‘what can you see’, which can lead to reflecting on the contents of the park and considering green spaces in general can widen possibilities for making connections. Therefore, material from Lancashire and Manchester in **Crafting Connections** is introduced with key information but becomes a basis for discussion that are not place focussed. Through centring activities on intangible crafts and skills, it is hoped that conversations can be cross-cultural and encourage inclusive practice through the discussion prompts outlined in the toolkit.

Whilst reminiscence may occur in the sessions, these are not the objective of using Crafting Connections. Learning about past craft practices and reflection upon these is a springboard in the activity plans to bring people into the present moment, to engage with an activity and discuss current experiences and hopes with their peers. Awareness of the present is encouraged through the inclusion of prompts to fulfil the ‘take notice’ aspect of the ‘Five Ways’, such as exploring the environment the group is taking part in. Furthermore, the future, through openness to new possibilities around the learning and appreciation of arts, crafts and skills is also prominent in the talking points of the ten activities. The Baring Foundation explain the significance this in their ‘Treasure of Art Activities’: ‘it is important to acknowledge that trying new things and having new experiences is just as important for most people in later life. It is essential to value and celebrate the lived experience of each person that you work with, whilst also recognising that this work should not take a solely reflective stance’.²⁴

Testing the toolkit

Manchester Histories maintain a group of regular volunteers, many of whom are older people. As the project entered the final stages, two workshops with seven volunteers provided the chance to collect feedback on activities for ‘home-made’ and ‘make your mark’. These sessions were not run exactly as set out in the toolkit, rather as consultations. The group were introduced to concepts behind the toolkit and the ‘Five Ways’ at the start. Feedback was noted throughout, and groups also elaborated on Manchester Histories event feedback forms. Perspectives on whether the sources and discussion points were too focussed on the past was particularly valuable. For example, a short film ‘Lost Connections’ (2021) tested with the second group for the ‘make your mark’ with activity, which explores what archives are and how you can record your own experiences. This film was made during the pandemic and brought up complex emotions recalling lockdown life.²⁵ During discussions, several people focussed heavily on the archival footage of old technologies, avoiding aspects of the narrative about loneliness. Whilst this can certainly be used for other workshops, for the design of the **Crafting Connections** toolkit, reflecting on the past is at the start of the session but should not overwhelm the activity. Equally, the sense of the present explored through this film has the potential for triggering trauma from the pandemic and without proper training in therapeutic or mental health practice, Erin and the group decided that this film should be omitted from the final toolkit.

As well as Manchester Histories volunteers input, several activities were tested within the longer Come and Chat sessions held in the Histories Hub. Others were tried by the art group at Chorlton Good Neighbours, a neighbourhood care group and charity based in South Manchester. At two sessions, activity ideas and source material were provided to the art group where the regular facilitator managed the group. These broadly showed that the tasks met their objectives and provided useful comments for adjusting activities. For these pilots, responses were captured using Manchester Histories evaluation forms developed in 2022, testing further methods was beyond the scope of this project. Alternatives to these event feedback forms include Lickert scales informed by mental health surveys or visualisations like to the umbrella tool developed by UCL.²⁶ A Lickert scale inspired smiley-face graphic, tracking facial expressions from unhappy to very happy, is provided in the toolkit to aid facilitators wishing to try this technique. The idea of using smiley-faces for a wellbeing toolkit also links to the familiarly used Wong-Baker faces scale of 1 to 10 for pain in health care settings.²⁷ CHWA have compiled a collection of evaluation resources and examples for practitioners.²⁸ Details of this resource and other useful online material is included in **Appendix B**.

Next steps

Crafting Connections was essentially a pilot project and would benefit from further evaluation. Each of the ten activities could be tested further with groups in the Manchester Histories Hub. Equally, as the toolkit is designed for use by facilitators working in the community, there is scope to collect responses from those trying these activities across Greater Manchester through GM libraries. Evaluation also raises wider research questions, which of the available health and wellbeing frameworks is most appropriate for this type of community intervention? There were frequent debates at the Historic England/ CBA Heritage and Wellbeing Conference of the appropriateness of data collection methods from wider health and social care, will altering existing heritage qualitative evaluation tools to fit with medical models or even economic cost models undermine the wellbeing experience of engaging with heritage? Considering people as the focus of the project (which ties into the CHWA guidance on person-centred approaches) the time taken to collect health data from the participants has the potential to outweigh the benefit of participating in the activity.

Through seeing how the ‘past in the present’ works over a longer period, feedback can shape the toolkit with amendments, additions or a follow-up resource. Other opportunities include the potential to explore more specific audience’s needs, for example, how these activities working for with dementia patients? Can we make these heritage activities more accessible to neurodivergent users? Creative Manchester and Manchester Histories will continue to explore creative approaches to wellbeing and seek to find further ways to explore the role heritage can play in improving people’s health.

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Manchester Histories and Creative Manchester would like to thank everyone who generously shared their time, insights, and shared experiences with us to support the making of this toolkit. A special thanks to Manchester Histories volunteers, the Come & Chat groups, Chorlton Good Neighbours art group, and the dedicated staff from the Archive+ Partnership.



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This project was made possible through funding from Manchester City Council and The Higher Education Innovation Fund, which supports knowledge exchange between higher education providers and external partners to benefit society.



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