



Museums for Life

Co-creating a collaborative
programme for older adults



Prepared By:

Dr Emily Bradfield,
Practitioner Research Associate –
Collections & Wellbeing (Older Adults)

September 2025

1

Executive Summary

“Museums for Life”, is an inclusive practice framework based on Creative Health Quality Principles, and findings from the 2024 “Reimagining” evaluative programme. The initiative piloted two eight-week creative programmes (March-July 2025) for older adults living with chronic health conditions, loneliness and people who had not previously engaged in a programme at the Museum, supporting 15 participants aged 60-91. The programme emphasised social connectedness through museum collection-inspired creative activities, high-quality art materials, and gallery exploration. Participants created collaborative artworks and formed independent WhatsApp groups for ongoing connection. The resulting framework aligns with the museum’s mission to inspire reflection, connection and creativity while supporting local public health challenges.

Project team

Cläre Basel (Creative Practitioner), Nathan Huxtable (Creative Studio Co-ordinator), Molly Blacknell (Creative Studio Co-ordinator), Alison Ayres (Creative Studio Co-ordinator), Emily Bradfield (Practitioner Research Associate: Collections & Wellbeing – Older Adults), Adrian Shaw (Head of Public Programmes)

Design work by Gorm Ashurst at Bullet Creative

Background

In October 2024, a briefing paper was produced which summarised Reimagining, an evaluative programme delivered in the Museum from April to May 2024 and funded by The Fitzwilliam Marlay Group Fund. The programme was underpinned by the Creative Health Quality Framework Principles (Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance, 2023) and Evaluation Principles (Centre for Cultural Value, 2021).

The next steps detailed in the briefing paper were to:

- Develop a set of principles for inclusive practice in the Museum
- Use the umbrella name of Museums for Life, for this new approach to inclusive practice
- To pilot the approach in 2025 with two series of creative workshops for older adults with health challenges, and an intergenerational community programme



Participant creation using pastels, inspired by nature

“The enjoyment of being creative with a group of strangers.”

Participant

“Seeing items in the Museum with a different ‘eye’ and seeing things not seen elsewhere.”

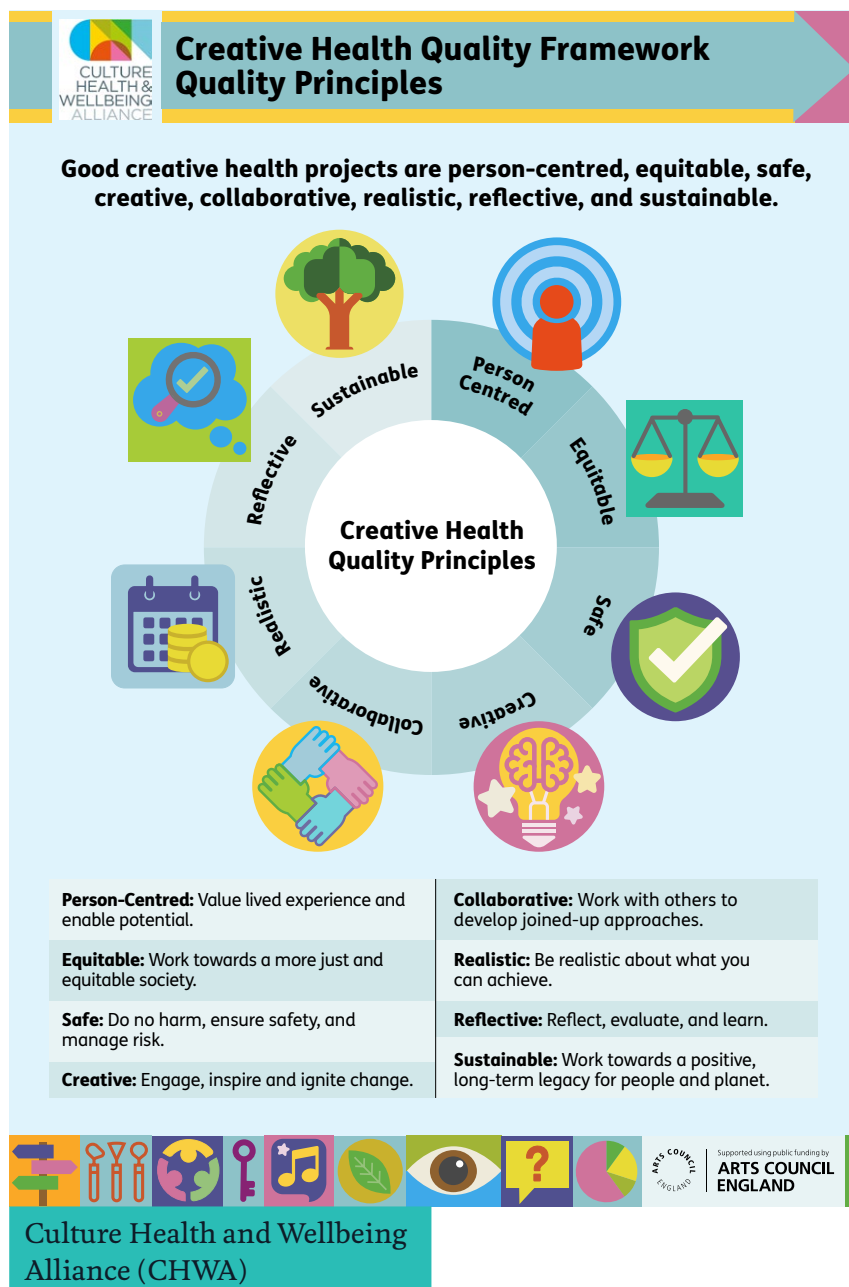
Participant

According to the World Health Organization (2025), one in six people report being lonely, which is defined as “a subjective experience, which refers to a negative ‘emotional state’”. Loneliness differs from social isolation or being alone, as it is considered to be “involuntary and undesired”, as opposed to an objective lack of interactions with other people (p.11). Locally, older adults (aged 65+) living in parts of King’s Hedges, Abbey, East Chesterton, Petersfield, and Cherry Hinton experience a high risk of loneliness. Furthermore, over 50% of older adults living in East Chesterton are also experiencing poor health and living with a disability (Loneliness Index, 2025).

Museums for Life

Developing the Principles for Inclusive Practice

From October – December 2025, Dr Emily Bradfield, Practitioner Research Associate: Collections & Wellbeing (Older Adults), collated participant and creative practitioner reflections from Reimagining, to develop a set of principles for inclusive research and practice with older adults, which were structured around the eight Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA) Quality Principles pictured below.



The concept of Museums for Life was created by Emily for this work - Lifelong Inspiration through Fulfilled Engagement – opening up the potential for this way of working to be adopted across the life course. The original aim was to use these principles, as well as the creative health quality principles, to support and guide an intergenerational project that was being developed in parallel.

The CHWA Quality Principles have informed the programme throughout, from development of the principles, evaluation and final compassionate debrief and team reflections.

“I love the concept of this and almost wish it could be a permanent offering from the Fitzwilliam [Museum].”
Participant

Strategic Development

Museums for Life aligns with the **Museum's new Mission statement:**

"We work with art, objects, spaces and experiences to inspire reflection, connection and creativity"

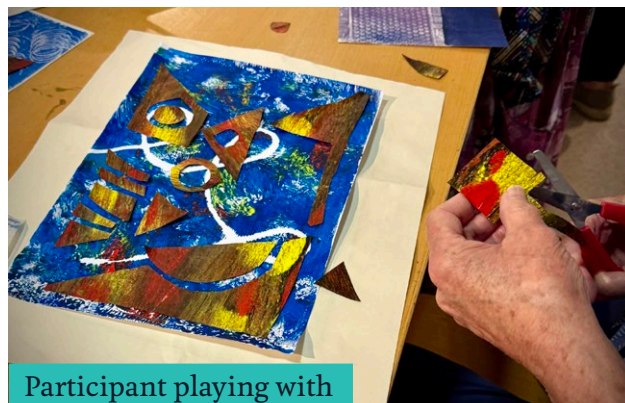
The project also supports the Museum's co-produced staff **Working Together Agreement's** commitment,

"We respect and trust each other's diverse experience and expertise and make space for collaboration"

Museums for Life embeds inclusive practice and creative health principles into the development, delivery and evaluation of health and wellbeing research and practice in the Museum. This work has been informed by an evaluative project **Reimagining**, which explored how creative programmes can help to create a healthier, more inclusive museum environment; and **Take a Walk in My Shoes**, a research project which considered experiences of being in the Museum and how these could inform and / or support health and wellbeing in the Museum.

Reimagining provided participants who had previously participated in **Look, Imagine, Move**, a programme supporting the physical and emotional resilience of older adults living with chronic pain, musculoskeletal conditions, and adult stroke survivors with the opportunity to reflect on their experience of taking part in the programme and explore the key ingredients of a creative programme for older adults in the Museum.

Museums for Life is informed by the **Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Integrated Care System's** Joint Forward Plan 2025 – 2030 key focus area on 'increasing number of years of good health', including healthy ageing and **Cambridge Public Health's** research priority of Lifecourse and Ageing.



Participant playing with gelli prints and collage

The project worked with older adults living with chronic health conditions, experiencing social isolation, and people who had not previously engaged in Museum programmes. The initiative also responds to Cambridge Public Health's priority around life-course and ageing, by providing an environment to foster ageing well within the Museum environment.

"I'm not being flippant when I say that, for me, the 'real' is a relaxing welcome to each session and much enjoyed and appreciated, along with the freedom to choose how to engage in each activity."

Participant

Research shows that people living with chronic health conditions experience fatigue in different ways, which can impact on their daily life. These symptoms of fatigue include depressive symptoms, subjective tiredness and cognitive symptoms (Cambridge Cognition, 2024). Therefore, it was essential to develop a flexible and agile programme of support. Through small group size, it was possible for us to create an environment through which to foster social connection to address social isolation and associated loneliness. Indeed, a number of **Museums for Life** participants described feelings of 'transient' loneliness in response to their recent retirement but quickly found themselves making friends in the group.

Connecting Nature and Heritage

(January – July 2025)



Emily, Nathan, Cläre

In October 2024, Emily met with the Public Programmes Team, to explore how **Museums for Life** might be developed in collaboration with Adrian Shaw (Head of Public Programmes) and the Creative Studio Team. Following this conversation, with a programme ethos of **Connecting Nature and Heritage**, a Creative Practitioner brief was developed, and the role was advertised through an open call – embedding the principles of inclusive practice through an equitable recruitment process.

In January 2025, the newly formed **Museums for Life** team (Emily, Adrian, Nathan, Molly, and Alison) reviewed and short-listed applications, together – and then conducted four artist interviews. Cläre Basel - an abstract artist based in Cambridgeshire - was onboarded as a freelance creative practitioner for the programme.

Three collaborative planning sessions were held in February 2025, to co-develop the two 8-week programmes, which aimed to support older adults (aged 65+), through small groups with up to 8 participants.

Whilst everyone was welcome, the programme particularly welcomed older adults experiencing isolation, living with a chronic health condition and those who hadn't previously participated in a programme at the Museum.

Recruitment was through local older people's networks and charities, and other networks.

The main aim was to support social connectedness through creative activities inspired by the Museum's collection - with a focus on drawing connections with one another and items in the collection.



Collaborative artwork from first programme (March 2025)

The programmes

Two eight-week programmes were delivered with a total of 15 (older) adults:

1. March – April 2025
2. May – July 2025

The age range of participants across the two programmes was 60 – 91. This age range is an example of inclusive practice – e.g. not excluding one participant who was under 65 years' old, but has a vision impairment, and wouldn't usually be able to access such programmes alone. Neither she or her companion had visited the Museum before and said they would not have come if it hadn't been for this opportunity.

The first programme had 10 participants, with five joining the second programme. While the intention was to have a maximum of 8 participants per programme, a couple of people arrived at the programme

unexpectedly (due to an administrative error, which meant we didn't have their names on the list). However, these older adults were welcomed into the group by everyone. It would have been completely inappropriate, and unkind, to turn them away. This demonstrates the need for flexibility within the **Museums for Life** framework.

The programmes were designed around weekly themes, drawing inspiration from the Museum's collection, but with a wide range of quality arts materials available each week so that participants could choose how they engaged with the themes.

Museums for Life programmes are created as invitations to come together and create, together. They are not designed to be education or learning programmes, rather opportunities for exploration, inspiration and connection.

Programme Reflections



Calendar cover from programme one, including participants' artwork and a group photograph

The project team met regularly throughout for a mid-point review and compassionate debrief (to review any challenging situations and provide peer support); weekly review and revision; and a final project compassionate debrief and review.

Each programme was different, with a larger number of participants joining the first series, leading to a different level of engagement and interaction. The group co-created a calendar of their artwork, which was printed and posted to everyone who had contributed and / or wanted to receive a copy. The second series was much smaller, with the four regular participants bringing humour and shared interest in each other's work. An end of programme gift for this group was a Fitzwilliam Museum keyring, and a voucher for coffee and cake for the participant and a friend in the Museum's café.

Key programme ingredients:

- High quality arts materials
- 'Real coffee' and good biscuits
- Opportunities to explore the galleries in sessions
- Creative invitations, not instructions
- A Fitzwilliam Museum sketchbook for everyone

"The activities were extremely good mentally and physically and I came away from each session wondering how it could be replicated for more people."

Participant

Next Steps

- **Independent Meet Ups:** Each group, including the Reimagining cohort from 2024, have created their own WhatsApp group so they can meet up independently. Meets up have included arranging visits to the Museum's study room (with initial support from Emily), and coming together to visit exhibitions and visiting Cambridge Open Studios.
- **Summer Celebration:** A summer gathering for the Connecting Nature and Heritage groups was held for creativity, connection, and a shared lunch - bringing together the two groups to share and celebrate together!
- **Future Programmes:** A third programme is being planned for early 2026, to pilot running the programme in the afternoon.



"The sense of calm I felt after each session and ability then to cope with anything through at me was something I would have liked to replicate for both myself and others."

Participant



Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Visitor Experience and Box Office Teams, and the PRA Co-ordinator, who all supported this programme, and of course to our incredible older (participants) artists who embraced the invitation to get creative! Thank you to **The Marlay Group Fund** for supporting this ongoing work.

The
Fitzwilliam
Museum

CAMBRIDGE



Fitzwilliam Museum
Trumpington Street
Cambridge
CB2 1RB

fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk