



DEVELOPING AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT HEALTHY AGEING

The role of faith spaces as social infrastructure

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2024



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Church of God 7th Day, Longsight.

GLOSSARY

Age-friendly cities and communities (AFCC): 'An age-friendly city or community is health promoting and designed for diversity, inclusion, and cohesion, including across all ages and capacities.' (Creating age-friendly cities and communities, www.who.int)

Age-friendly cities and communities (AFCC) framework: a model, developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), that provides guidelines to the public and third sectors by looking at eight areas of concern in the planning of AFCC initiatives and programmes.

Age-Friendly Manchester (AFM): Age-friendly Manchester is a programme within public health at Manchester City Council that oversees and promotes age-friendly activities across Manchester city.

Bhajan: a devotional song with a religious theme. It usually happens as a group event, with one or more lead singers, accompanied by music.

Bridging and bonding social capital: these are two different types of social capital. Bridging social capital is about creating relationships outside one's social network while bonding social capital is about strengthening existing relationships.

Faith spaces: In this research, faith spaces include formal spaces such as churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues, but also informal spaces, such as people's homes or a community hub, which may be turned into a faith space for a special occasion.

Faith leaders: include formal as well as lay leaders, i.e., people without a formal training in their faith but who play an important part in the running of activities, maintenance, and management of faith spaces.

Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities: 'works to stimulate and enable cities and communities around the world to become increasingly age-friendly.' (Creating age-friendly cities and communities, www.who.int)

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA): the combined authority for the city region.

GMCA Ageing Hub: a programme within Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) that oversees and promotes age-friendly activities in the city region.

Masjid: another name for a mosque. It stands for the space at the heart of the Muslim community.

Older people: In this report the term is used to refer to people aged 50 and over.

Place-based approaches: stakeholders working together for the benefit of geographically located communities.

Social infrastructure: the spaces and organisations that enable communities to create social connections, such as parks, playgrounds, libraries, cafés, local shops, leisure centres, community centres, faith spaces, etc.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Greater Manchester has a growing older population, and one which is becoming increasingly culturally diverse. It is also a city region facing high levels of inequality around health, income, and access to neighbourhood services. In this context, faith spaces provide much needed support as well as places for social connection. However, faith spaces are rarely acknowledged for the work they do, they are mostly self-funded, and they rely on mainly older volunteers to deliver their services. This report presents findings from an 18-month study into how faith spaces in Greater Manchester support different groups of older people, mapping out their existing and potential contributions to the World Health Organization's framework of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities.

The research was led by an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group (MUARG) at the University of Manchester. The project built upon and extended a long-standing collaboration with the Age-Friendly Manchester (AFM) team at Manchester City Council. As a result, the project was a collaboration with a range of partners, including local authority public health and neighbourhood officers, third sector organisations, faith-based and interfaith networks, and diverse groups representing older people from across Greater Manchester. The study applied a multi-methods approach to data collection, including a survey distributed to faith spaces across Greater Manchester, focus group discussions and interviews with informal and formal faith leaders, interviews with older people, and ethnographic observations. A range of participants contributed to the data collected for this project. This included those who would be considered faith leaders or representatives of faith communities, as well as older people who were regular users of faith spaces.

Four faith spaces were selected as the sites of more in-depth ethnographic research: Gita Bhavan Temple in Whalley Range, Qadria Mosque in Longsight, St. Paul's Church in Kersal Moor Salford, and the Church of God of 7th Day in Longsight. Central to the research was a series of Knowledge Exchange Events (KEE) which were held in faith spaces, involved interfaith workshops, and included a visit to the sacred landmarks of each space as well as a culture-specific meal.

FINDINGS

Importance of faith spaces for older people

Faith spaces provide spiritual wellbeing, belonging and a sense of community through connection to culture and/or to place. They help older people to develop and maintain social connections. For older people, faith spaces often serve as 'social connectors', enabling a sense of community, and providing practical and emotional support to members of faith communities across gender and social class.

Level of awareness and understanding of the age-friendly cities agenda amongst faith leaders

Many of the faith leaders we interviewed were unaware of the formal 'Age-Friendly' concept, nor did they know that Greater Manchester's was admitted to the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities, reflecting its commitment to becoming an age-friendly region. However, faith leaders displayed high levels of awareness of the range of issues facing older people in their respective communities.

How faith spaces support the WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities framework

The report shows that activities and services provided through faith spaces map onto all the domains of the age-friendly framework. Faith spaces make especially strong contributions to the age-friendly agenda in relation to the domains of 'respect and social inclusion' and 'social participation'. Applying the age-friendly framework to faith spaces provides insight into how the spaces can be even more inclusive and accessible to older people.

Challenges and barriers faced by faith spaces

We continue to see great inequality across different neighbourhoods, as well as social isolation amongst groups and individuals within the older population. Such experiences are reflected in the provision of various services by faith spaces, these often targeting recent migrants, those experiencing isolation and/or financial hardships, and people undergoing challenging life transitions such as bereavement, divorce, health problems, and relocation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report argues for a more strategic involvement of faith-based groups in public health and age-friendly agendas. Taking into consideration the existing support happening in faith spaces and the opportunities for that work to be expanded, the report suggests the following recommendations to extend the role of faith spaces in promoting healthy ageing:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS, SERVICE PROVIDERS AND FUNDERS TO SUPPORT OLDER PEOPLE IN FAITH COMMUNITIES.

Recommendation 1. Explore how to enhance the role of faith spaces in contributing to promoting health and wellbeing in the community.

Recommendation 2. Provide support to enhance the social function of faith spaces, both for existing users and members of the wider community.

Recommendation 3. Consider better use of faith spaces for specific forms of support during times of transition and change.

Recommendation 4. Recognise the role of faith spaces in supporting isolated and/or newly arrived groups to the community, and their potential to connect older people to age-friendly initiatives.

Recommendation 5. Develop new ways of sharing existing funding information and proactively supporting access to funds.

Recommendation 6. Consider more regular use of 'F' for Faith when referring to VCSE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise) when this is appropriate.

Recommendation 7. Broadening the age-friendly framework to embrace spiritual participation and cultural diversity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THOSE INVOLVED IN CREATING AGE-FRIENDLY FAITH SPACES.

Recommendation 1. Promote health and wellbeing activities in faith spaces and raise awareness on health and wellbeing in the community.

Recommendation 2. Enhance the social function of faith spaces both for religious users and members of the wider neighbourhood.

Recommendation 3. Engage with funders, policy makers and interfaith fora to better understand funding and support opportunities as well as potential barriers.

Recommendation 4. Explore co-production and other engagement approaches to increase knowledge of older people's needs.

Recommendation 5. Look to increase peer to peer communications and interfaith exchanges of good practices to support older people.

Recommendation 6. Improving accessibility of spaces for older people from different backgrounds and abilities by learning from existing Age-Friendly guidelines.



INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from an 18-month study into how faith spaces in Greater Manchester can contribute to creating 'age-friendly' cities and communities. These are defined as environments that can 'optimise opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age'.¹ The aim of the study was to assess the potential of faith-based organisations and spaces in supporting older adults experiencing inequalities of various kinds, for example people from ethnic minorities, those ageing in low-income neighbourhoods, and those at risk of social isolation.

The work aligns with a broader interest in identifying new 'age-friendly' approaches to supporting health and wellbeing, by viewing different types of facilities within neighbourhoods (such as faith-based spaces) as community assets, with their greater utilisation having the potential to reduce disparities in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy. Working in close partnership with the Age-Friendly Manchester (AFM) team and network of organisations, both within the city and the region, this report aims to inspire innovative strategic policy approaches that raise the aspirations of what is now considered a global 'age-friendly' movement.

The focus on faith spaces is partly informed by the potential such spaces have for accessing the variety of groups within the older population. Greater Manchester has a growing older population, and one which is increasingly diverse.

It is also a city region facing high levels of inequality around health, income and access to neighbourhood services. This presents challenges to delivering age-friendly policies and programmes that can meet the needs of different groups, and those affected by economic and social inequalities. Faith spaces and organisations have historically played a vital role in providing help within communities, representing important assets for the wider community as venues for activities and services. Secular

spaces have also played a significant role but there is a growing shortage of these given financial pressures affecting local authorities and public services.² Spaces such as churches, temples, mosques and synagogues provide venues for community activity, and spaces of support, information, and social connection. Hence, their potential in making a unique contribution to fostering age-friendly cities and communities.

However, whilst faith spaces are central agents of development in their wider neighbourhoods, in a similar way to non-faith third sector organisations,³ they often deliver services that neither the state nor the market no longer or are unable to provide. Yet they are rarely acknowledged for the work they do, are mostly self-funded, and reliant upon volunteers to deliver their services. The COVID-19 pandemic shed further light on how faith spaces support communities, playing a vital role during successive lockdowns delivering food, medication, and spiritual support to those who were house-bound. Research also showed how most of that work was provided by older adults themselves who make up the majority of the voluntary work force in faith spaces.⁴

Visiting a church, synagogue, temple or mosque (or other faith-based space) can be an important part of everyday life for people of faith, one which may increase in importance in later life. Yet there is little research which directly explores the relationship between faith spaces and the creation of age-friendly environments. Furthermore, there is also limited research on the extent to which faith spaces can play a significant role in the lives of people who do not identify as a practicing member of a faith community. This project aimed to address these gaps by providing an evidence base of how faith spaces are currently supporting older people, and how such work might be extended through new collaborations with local authority and third sector partners. While this study focused on urban faith spaces, many of the lessons can be applied to rural communities, where faith spaces may be the only community asset accessed by older people.

The research was guided by the following research questions:

How are different groups of older people using, shaping, and participating in faith spaces? How does this vary according to ethnicity, gender, health needs, and congregation?

What kind of services and forms of community support do faith spaces/organisations already provide for older people?

How could the role of faith spaces as a form of social infrastructure be extended to promote health and wellbeing of older people ageing in place? What new approaches and interventions can we identify and co-produce to support people to age well in place?

What are the current links between the age-friendly agenda and the work of faith spaces/organisations? How could these links be strengthened to benefit both worlds?

Whilst the argument of this report is that faith spaces can, and do, contribute in very important ways to the creation of age-friendly communities, the project team recognises that this will not be the experience of everyone. This report presents findings based on the experiences of those who regularly use faith-spaces for religious or non-religious purposes; it does not provide an account of those who may feel excluded from such places.

Therefore, in discussing the role of faith spaces as significant sites for age-friendly initiatives, the report also advocates for all community spaces to work with an equalities approach to ensure those spaces are safe, inclusive, and accessible for everyone. In other words, faith-based settings are one amongst other forms of social infrastructure, such as parks, libraries, local shops, and community hubs, all of which have an equally important role to play in terms of creating safe and accessible spaces for all.

The report is structured as follows: first, the Greater Manchester context for the study is described, both in terms of the city-region's demographics, and its development of age-friendly work. Second, the report reviews evidence on the role of faith spaces in supporting older people, with this linked to debates around developing age-friendly cities and communities. Third, an overview of the methodology of the study is provided, highlighting the mixed-methods and co-production approach adopted for the study. Fourth, the report presents the study findings based on a survey, interviews and focus groups with religious and community leaders in Greater Manchester, ethnographic accounts of the activities of different faith-spaces, and interviews with older people using and participating in these spaces. Finally, the report presents a series of recommendations for promoting and supporting the role of faith spaces in the development of age-friendly cities and communities.



**THE GREATER
MANCHESTER CONTEXT**

THE GREATER MANCHESTER CONTEXT

According to the 2021 Census, 27.4% of the Greater Manchester population were 55 or older, a figure projected to rise to 30.1% by 2041⁵. The older population in the region is one of the most ethnically diverse in the UK: 87% of residents aged 55 and older identify as White British, with the second largest group identifying as Asian British Pakistani at 2.9%, and 1.5% identifying as Indian⁶. Ethnic diversity is even more pronounced in the City of Manchester, one of the ten boroughs which comprise Greater Manchester. Data from the 2021 Census reveals that 68.2% of residents aged 55 and over identify as White British, with significant groups of older people identifying as Asian British Pakistani (7.4%), other Asian (5.0%), and Black British (7.8%).

Ethnic diversity has increased across all age groups in the city-region, and will continue to be an important feature over coming decades. Since the Census in 2011, the ethnic minority population in Greater Manchester has grown significantly above the national average (51.9% increase compared with 39.3% nationally). This has largely been driven by new arrivals, with 77.4% of the increase being accounted for by people who have settled in the UK since 2011. The 'other' ethnic group increased the most in percentage terms (up by 144.3%), followed by the Black (up 81.0%), Asian (up 43.0%), and Mixed ethnicity (up 42.5%) groups. In comparison, the White British population in Greater Manchester fell by 4.5% over the period, a bigger decrease than nationally (down 1.7%).

Ethnic diversity is also reflected in the various faith communities within the city-region. In the 2021 Census, 12.1% of Greater Manchester residents (of all ages) described themselves as Muslim. This was the third largest group after 'no religion' (31.8%) and Christian (47.8%). Jewish people accounted for 1.2% of residents in Greater Manchester and Hindus for 1.0%. Other faith groups accounted for less than 1% of residents. There were large differences between the districts of Greater Manchester in

the responses of residents. For example, in Wigan, 62.8% identified as Christian; in Oldham nearly a quarter of residents (24.4%) said they were Muslims; and in Bury, 5.5% self identified as Jewish.

There have been relatively rapid changes in the religious affiliations of residents in the decade since the previous census in 2011. The largest change was for those residents who said they had 'no religion' (up by 64% in Greater Manchester in the decade between 2011 and 2021). There was a decline of 19% among residents who said they were Christian between the census years of 2011 and 2021. Residents who said they were Muslim increased by 61%; those who said they were Jewish rose by 12%; and Hindu by 19%. However, it is important to note that population level data on religious identity does not reflect cultural and ethnic diversity *within* faith communities. For example, the group identifying as Christian will include people of White British, Irish, Eastern European and African and Caribbean heritage.

Alongside its increasing ethnic and religious diversity, the city region also faces multiple challenges related to poverty, social exclusion, and lower than average life expectancy, together with inequalities within and across different age groups in the population.⁴ The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) established an *Independent Inequalities Commission* in the autumn of 2020, with a report published in March of 2021 examining the structural inequalities existing in Greater Manchester.⁷

The Commission's findings confirmed the high levels of inequality in educational attainment and employment, as well as highlighting the impact of poverty and racism on the health and wellbeing of people across the region. The Commission found a range of progressive actions already being taken but raised the issue of how they could be embedded within public service delivery, responding to the immediate challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic austerity.

The Commission called for wellbeing and equality goals to be put at the heart of the Greater Manchester Strategy, with public budgets and projects geared towards redressing imbalances by building a strong economy and working with residents to deliver the best possible services. Recommendations included: first, strengthening the mandate of Greater Manchester's equalities panels (these include the LGBTQ+ Equality Panel, the Disabled People's Equality Panel, Older People's Equality panel, the Race Equality Panel, the Faith and Belief Equality Panel, and the Women and Girls' Equality Panel); second, establishing an independent Anti-Discrimination Body; third, working with education and training providers to bridge the skills divide; and fourth, community wealth-building and investment initiatives⁷ This context has been important to the historical and ongoing development of age-friendly work in Greater Manchester.



After the weekly ritual at the Jain Centre, the common room is transformed so people can watch the World Cup Semi Final with different generations coming together.

DEVELOPMENT OF AGE-FRIENDLY WORK IN GREATER MANCHESTER

Since the early 1990s, agencies across the city-region, faced with major challenges with regard to health and social inequalities, have been committed to improving the quality of life of its older population. This has established important and ongoing partnerships across sectors and across different areas of local and regional government. A commitment to co-production has empowered older individuals to share their voices and lived experiences, resulting in the establishment of a dynamic older people's board. This board has played a significant role in shaping the city's housing development, and health and social care strategies.

In 2007, the World Health Organization (WHO) created a framework for age-friendly cities and communities as a tool to be used by cities to adapt policies, services, and environments to meet the needs of their older populations. The framework consists of eight areas of proposed investment to make cities a better place to grow older: communication and information; transportation; housing; civic participation and employment; social participation; respect and social inclusion; community support and health services; outdoor spaces and buildings¹ (see Figure 1).

In 2010, Manchester was formally admitted into the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities, becoming the UK's first Age-Friendly City. Subsequently, in 2018, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority became the UK's first Age-Friendly City-Region. These milestones represent significant progress in advancing age-friendly initiatives, establishing Manchester and Greater Manchester as leaders in developing strategic policy approaches for age-friendly cities, both nationally and internationally.

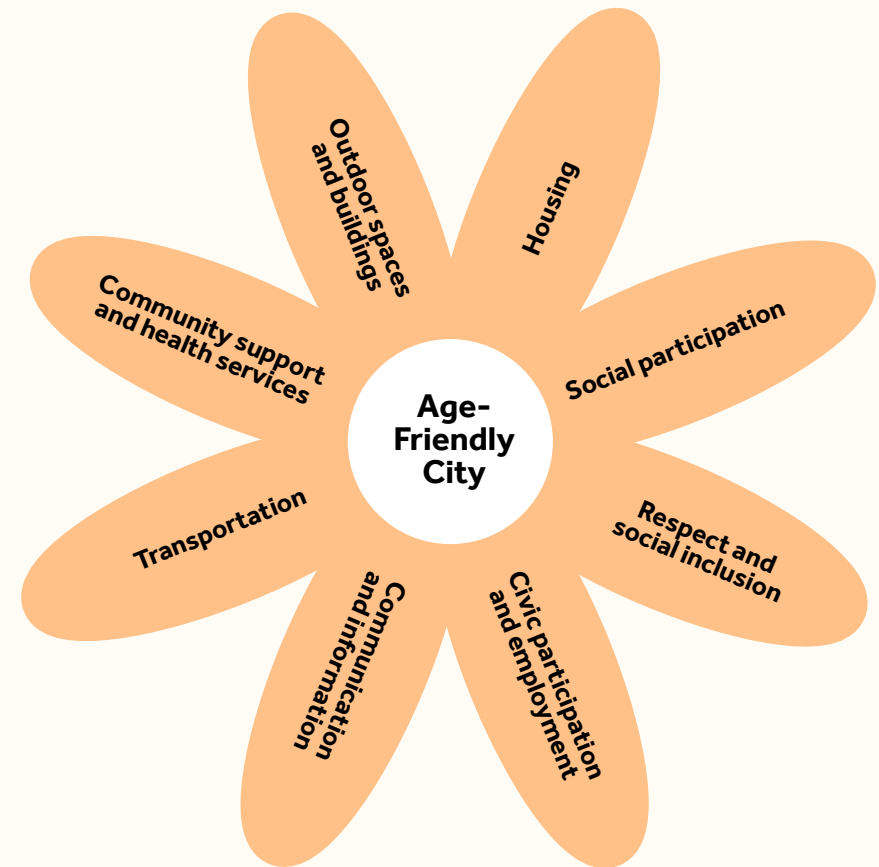


Figure 1. The eight domains of the Age-Friendly City



**THE ROLE OF FAITH SPACES
IN AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES**

THE ROLE OF FAITH SPACES IN AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES

Existing research demonstrates that visiting faith spaces can bring a diversity of spiritual, physical, emotional, and social benefits.⁸⁻¹⁰ The crisis experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the role of such spaces in the context of emergency responses.⁴ However, there is limited research on how these spaces contribute to the age-friendly cities agenda, how they can support age-friendly activities, and how they promote social participation amongst groups of older people experiencing problems relating to poverty, poor health, and related issues. This research addresses this gap by exploring the potential of faith spaces to reduce disparities to increase the quality of people's lives in areas characterised by poor housing and low incomes.

Through an 18-month engagement with different faith communities across distinct geographies in Greater Manchester, this study offers evidence that such spaces are community assets with potential to be an essential part of the age-friendly agenda. This section of the report presents some of the existing research and discusses how faith spaces are already providing services and support for older people, both from within, and outside of faith communities.

Many faith spaces offer activities and services that have a social rather than, or as well as, a spiritual focus, including lunch clubs, coffee mornings, and craft groups. They have the potential therefore to attract people beyond that of the faith community itself.¹¹⁻¹² Such activities might not be targeted at older people or badged as 'age-friendly' programmes but may be popular as day-time activities.

Participation in social groups may help promote wellbeing as well as offering support to those experiencing loss of a partner, relative, or close friend.¹⁰ They can also protect against social isolation, and provide

support in times of personal hardship.^{10,13} In these various ways, faith spaces provide a key social function in their communities, with the undoubted potential for contributing to the age-friendly agenda.

Faith spaces, together with their staff and volunteers, occupy positions of trust within communities. As such they can be an important source of advice and information for members of the faith community and beyond. Faith spaces also have the potential to work in partnership with health and social care services, providing health information, organising health promotion events, health screenings, providing funding for specialised medical care, and managing prescriptions. In this way, faith spaces could be a point of referral for social prescribing, a system whereby local agencies can refer people to a link worker, who in turn connect people to community groups and services taking a holistic approach to people's health and wellbeing.

However, whilst faith leaders might be in a strong position to signpost health and wellbeing information, some leaders may feel it is not within their remit. Instead, they may take a more generalised approach to creating the conditions for health and wellbeing within their organisation. Faith leaders can and do act as important sources of information for health advice. However, differing levels of health and social care literacy can mean some leaders are less equipped to deal with the particular health and social needs of older individuals.

Voluntary and faith-based organisations can serve as crucial channels for age-friendly programmes to engage with sections of the older population who might be less inclined to participate in age-friendly activities offered by other organisations.¹⁴ This may be especially important when reaching out to ethnic minority communities, and those who may be isolated from healthcare information services and support. For example, research in the USA¹⁵ has found faith spaces can be essential for engaging with older African Americans through helping to reduce health inequalities.

CULTURAL HERITAGE IN FAITH SPACES



Different Faith and Cultures.

age-friendly communities

faith and heritage

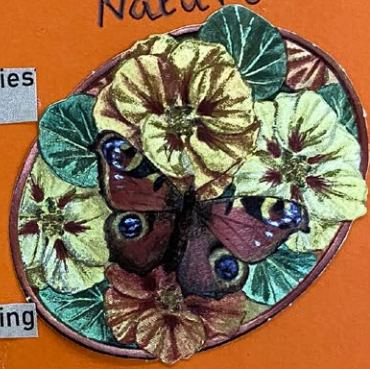
nurture a sense of belonging

↓
come together



Open your mind

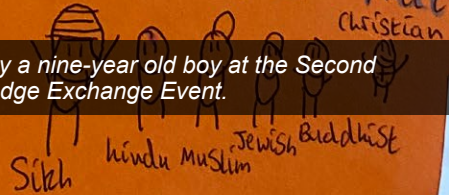
Nature



Get out and about,
Spend time with
Nature!!!

Identity

Who you are and, where
you're from matters



By Reuben George
Age: 10

Collage work made by a nine-year old boy at the Second Knowledge Exchange Event.

This is because such spaces are among the most 'visible, respected, and credible agencies in the community', and as such, they may be more trusted as health care promotion hubs than other public health agencies. Research on migrant communities has similarly revealed the extent to which recent migrants rely on faith spaces for a range of services, including childcare and language support.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

Faith spaces can be important sources of information and support for recent migrants by providing culturally specific food, a space for social connections, and advice and information in appropriate languages and dialects.¹⁸⁻¹⁹ The social support provided within religious spaces may be particularly useful for refugees, who often encounter numerous religious and cultural differences within the host country, alongside challenges such as social exclusion, deprivation, and isolation.²⁰ Moreover, faith spaces have been found to provide culturally tailored interventions, help foster relationships with those of the same ethnicity, and address racial disparities among older diverse communities.^{13,21}

In summary, existing literature points to the important role that faith spaces can play in the lives of older people. They provide a forum for social interaction, support, information and health and wellbeing. Yet much of this work exists outside the age-friendly cities and communities' research agenda and network, potentially resulting in missed opportunities to develop innovative forms of support and collaborative approaches.

Specifically, in a city-region as ethnically diverse as Greater Manchester, age-friendly programmes must be able to adapt their ways of working so that they are able to engage with older people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Faith-based organisations represent one way of delivering on this objective, as discussed in the findings section of this report.



**STUDY DESIGN AND
METHODOLOGY**

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

THE RESEARCH TEAM

The interdisciplinary team of researchers who led this study are all members of the Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group (MUARG) at the University of Manchester. Professor Tine Buffel served as the principal investigator, with Professor Chris Phillipson as a co-investigator, and Dr. Luciana Lang, Dr. Sophie Yarker and Dr. Patty Doran as researchers on the project. This project builds upon and extends a long-standing collaboration with Manchester City Council's Age-Friendly Manchester team (AFM). As part of the collaboration, Dr. Luciana Lang from the research team was seconded to work with Age-Friendly Manchester. This involved attending Age-Friendly Manchester Team meetings, regularly working from a desk space in their offices, and involving AFM Board members in project activities held within faith spaces.

CO-PRODUCING THE RESEARCH: ADVISORY GROUP AND COLLABORATORS

The researchers worked with a range of partners, including local authority public health and neighbourhood officers, third sector organisations, faith-based and interfaith networks, and diverse groups representing older people to co-produce the research. The co-production approach involved discussing methodology and procedures with a variety of stakeholders, including the Ageing Hub at Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), the Centre for Ageing Better, the Greater Manchester BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) Network, and the Manchester BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) Network. Partners were involved right from the start to ensure a genuine route to co-production and help the team to have a well-grounded understanding of the issues at play. An Advisory Board was formed with some of our partners to explore new approaches and interventions that could be used to co-produce support for older people.

The research team participated in meetings of the Faith & Belief Equality Panel, a forum comprising 43 interfaith and single-faith organisations, where they received valuable inputs and insights which informed the research design of this study. At the pilot stage, an overview of the project was also presented to the Greater Manchester Older People's Network for their feedback. This is a network of people aged 50 and above working for positive change across Greater Manchester.

The research team also involved the AFM Older People's Board, responsible for ensuring that the priorities expressed by older people contribute to wider decision-making in the City of Manchester, in shaping the study. Engaging these groups prior to the data collection ensured that the research reflected the needs and concerns of older people in Greater Manchester to the greatest extent possible. Throughout the research, faith and community leaders (see Table 1) provided input into the development and execution of the research. Their involvement was vital at all stages of the project.

Co-production requires significant time investment, and we are aware this may represent an obstacle for the involvement of organisations. Establishing relationships and building trust with individuals who may have personal reasons for keeping their faith private is a time-intensive process. Faith spaces are usually regarded as safe spaces where people can connect with others who may share similar experiences, such as feelings of exclusion, and/or prejudice.

Members of the research team benefitted from having sufficient time to engage with faith rituals and celebrations. The ability to involve members of faith communities in the project's events also proved highly valuable. This included hosting all project events within faith spaces, collaborating with lay leaders to plan event programmes, and actively engaging community members in event activities (see further below).



Women making flower garlands at Gita Bhavan Hindu Temple.

THE POSITION OF THE RESEARCH TEAM

An important issue concerned the position of the researcher given the nature of the project. None of the researchers were active members of a faith group, information which was shared with participants whenever the subject arose. In addition, the member of the team who conducted the ethnographic fieldwork and interviews was an older female with a migration background, which provided an advantage in terms of empathy regarding age and cultural diversity. However, it also meant that within certain faith spaces where some activities were segregated by gender, interactions predominantly occurred with other women, with some skewing of the study sample as a result.

METHODOLOGY

This research applied a multi-methods approach to data collection, including a survey distributed to faith spaces across Greater Manchester, focus group discussions and interviews with informal and formal faith leaders, interviews with older people, and ethnographic observations. A range of participants contributed to the data collected for this project. This included those who would be considered faith-leaders or representatives of faith communities, as well as older people who were regular users of faith spaces. Further details of each method and the participants are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Stages of research and methods used

Stages of Research	Methods and outcomes
Literature Review	<p>A review of existing literature was carried out to gain an understanding of existing knowledge about the role of faith spaces in supporting older people.</p> <p>A summary of this review is presented above.</p>
Survey of faith spaces in Greater Manchester	<p>A survey was distributed to faith spaces across Greater Manchester to assess: 1) their level of awareness of the age-friendly cities and communities agenda, and 2) what activities and services faith spaces offered to support older people in their community.</p> <p>The survey was distributed online via networks and mailing lists and via post to 300 Greater Manchester locations and resulted in 51 responses.</p> <p>In summary, 15 responses came from Church of England leaders, 21 came from other leaders of other Christian faiths, 3 responses were received from Muslim leaders, and the remainder came from other faiths.</p>

<p>Focus Group with members of Greater Manchester Older People's Network and with AFM Older People's Board</p>	<p>A focus group was held with 4 members of the GM Older People's Network, and with 4 members of the AFM Older People's Board. One person sits both on the Board and on the Network making 7 the total number of participants (2 men and 5 women). Five out of seven participants also regularly attended a faith space in their community.</p> <p>Faiths included: Christian (2), Hindu (1), Muslim (1), and Jewish (1).</p> <p>The aim of the focus groups was to help inform later stages of data collection such as the choice of ethnographic sites.</p>
<p>Focus Groups with faith leaders</p>	<p>5 focus groups were carried out with a total of 25 faith leaders, lay leaders and those considered organisers in their faith community (15 men and 12 women).</p> <p>Faiths included: Muslim (7), Jain (3), Charismatic Christian (8), Mormon Christian (1), Anglican Christian (2), Unitarian Christian (1), Baptist Christian (1), Buddhist (1), and Hindu (1).</p> <p>The aim of the focus groups was to assess current levels of awareness of the AFCC agenda, find out what support was being offered in faith spaces for older people, and to explore the extent to which communities felt the needs of their older members were being met. Focus groups were also used to inform the later stages of data collection.</p>
<p>Interviews with faith leaders</p>	<p>9 individual interviews (7 men, 2 women) were carried out with faith leaders, lay leaders and those considered leaders in their faith community. These interviews were used to support data collected from the Focus Groups and/or inform choice of selected sites to conduct ethnography.</p> <p>Faiths included: Anglican Christian (2), Jewish (2), Charismatic/Pentecostal Christian (2), and Muslim (3).</p>

<p>Interviews with older people</p>	<p>20 interviews (8 men, 12 women) were carried out with people aged 50 and above who belonged to one of the four faith communities involved in this study's faith spaces: Anglican Christian (6), Pentecostal Christian (6), Muslim (6), and Hindu (2).</p> <p>The aim of these interviews was to explore how older people use faith spaces, what the spaces meant to them and how they supported them to age in place. Some interviews also included biographical details of the participants such as migration stories and other significant life events.</p> <p>Audio recording of interviews was at the interviewee's discretion. Audio recordings were transcribed and where recordings were not made, the researcher took notes. All names used in the report are pseudonyms.</p>
<p>Ethnographic participant observation in four faith spaces over the course of 12 months</p>	<p>Approximately 300 hours were spent attending services, rituals, meetings and other organised events at the four main field sites included in the research: Church of God of Seventh Day (Longsight), Gita Bhavan Hindu Temple (Whalley Range), St. Paul's CoE (Kersal Moor, Salford), and Qadria Mosque (Longsight).</p> <p>Data was collected in the form of observational notes, photographs and informal conversations with older people visiting these spaces. In total, 111 informal conversations were held, with 25 men and 86 women.</p>
<p>First Knowledge Exchange event, focusing on the theme 'Cultural Heritage'</p>	<p>This event explored the role that cultural heritage plays in supporting people to age well in place. It was held at the Gita Bhavan Hindu Temple in Whalley Range and brought together 43 participants including faith leaders, lay leaders and older people from each of the four faith spaces included in the ethnography of this study.</p> <p>Participants in this event were introduced to the concept of Age-Friendly Cities and to the Age-Friendly Cities Framework by the chair of the AFM Older People's Board and a research team's member.</p>

<p>Second Knowledge Exchange event, focusing on the theme 'Faith spaces and Age-Friendly Cities'</p>	<p>This event used Ketso, a participatory visual toolkit, to explore how spaces from different faiths support older people and how this relates to the WHO eight domains of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. The activity was facilitated by Manchester City Council Officers from AFM and from the Neighbourhood's team and by older collaborators from faith spaces.</p> <p>Representatives from nine different faith spaces participated in this event.</p>
<p>'Rapid ethnography'</p>	<p>Insights gathered from these sites were complemented by our researcher spending shorter amounts of time carrying out what we have referred to as a 'rapid ethnography' of 12 other faith spaces (or spaces that 'become sacred' on special occasions) including: Church of God of Prophecy (Moss Side); Jain Community Centre (Longsight); Victoria Mosque (Rusholme); Assembly of God (Manchester City Centre); Sacred Heart Catholic Church (Gorton); Indian Senior Citizen Centre (Whalley Range); St. Andrew's Anglican Church (Kersal Moor); Sri Guru Gobind Singh Gurdwara Educational & Cultural Centre (Whalley Range); Shree Swaminarayan Mandir (Oldham); Heathlands Village Synagogue (Prestwich), as well as private houses that hold prayers to cater for Muslim women.</p> <p>The purpose of these 'rapid ethnographies' was to ensure a greater diversity of faith communities in Greater Manchester was represented, enabling the exploration of contrasts and differences as well as similarities with the main study sites.</p>
<p>Collaboration with stakeholders from four faith spaces</p>	<p>The project encouraged the formation of a group of collaborators from each of the four faith spaces where ethnographic research was conducted. This group helped researchers co-design the Knowledge Exchange Events while also providing valuable insights regarding the eight age-friendly domains of support and services.</p>

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE EVENTS

All Knowledge Exchange Events (KEE) were held in faith spaces, involved interfaith workshops, and included a visit to the sacred landmarks of each space as well as a culture-specific meal. The main theme of the first KEE was prompted by contributions from South Asian participants who emphasised the inter-connections between faith and culture. As a result, together with our collaborators, the research focused on how cultural heritage was disseminated in faith spaces and the role of older people in its transmission.

The event was co-designed with participants who brought a number of faith-related objects and memorabilia (such as sacred books, old photographs, rites of passage testimonies, letters, communion invites, newspaper cuttings, and other faith-related objects), which were displayed in the main room. Seven members of different faith spaces also gave presentations at the event to showcase the work of their faith community in supporting older people.



Faith community member speaking at the First Knowledge Exchange Event.

The second KEE was aimed at identifying how different faith spaces contribute to age-friendly cities, and the ways they promote wellbeing and participation of older people. This interfaith workshop co-mapped how faith spaces and organisations promote healthy ageing.

Ketso²² kits were used to stimulate interaction among participants and collectively reflect on the WHO Age-friendly Cities Framework.¹ Ketso kits enable participatory visual methods and are known for promoting productive collaboration and learning while ensuring everyone's equal participation. The KEE also explored the different experiences of ageing within different faith communities and for people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The discussion was followed by a hands-on craft activity where participants added their insights as part of individual and/or collective collage works.

CASE STUDIES

Four faith spaces were selected as the sites of more in-depth ethnographic research based on multiple criteria, including geographical and religious diversity, the presence of a substantial number of older individuals engaged in the faith space, and the organisation's willingness to participate in the research. This involved the researcher dedicating substantial time to the organisations, engaging in both religious and non-religious activities, observing the utilisation of spaces, and conducting formal and informal interviews with older people in these spaces.

While initial contact with faith spaces at the selection stage was not always straightforward, there was a general willingness and interest to participate in the research. During the research, engagement with the project was encouraged through participation in the Knowledge Exchange Events and through sustained engagement with faith spaces by researchers.

Table 2 offers contextual details about each of the case study sites. These included a Hindu Temple, a Mosque, an Anglican Church, and a Pentecostal Church. The spaces were selected to reflect some of the religious diversity of Greater Manchester as the scope of the research did not make it possible to include all the main religions of the city region.

Table 2. Faith spaces included in the ethnography

Faith Space	<i>Location</i>	Background and demographics of the faith space
Gita Bhavan Temple	<i>Whalley Range</i>	The site was bought in 1987 by members of the Hindu community. The temple mainly serves the Hindu community who travel from all over Greater Manchester. It is a highly intergenerational space with a constant flow of people of all ages throughout the day and evenings. The attendance is also fairly even regarding gender.
Qadria Mosque	<i>Longsight</i>	Qadria Jilania Islamic Centre Manchester is a Sunni Mosque that conducts most services in English. It is situated in a nineteenth century Anglican Church. It was founded in the early 2000s and it caters for Muslim men, women, and scholars. On a day-to-day basis it is attended mostly by men.
St. Paul's Church	<i>Kersal Moor, Salford</i>	St. Paul's is an Anglican church located in an area with a high proportion of people from the Jewish Orthodox community. The attendance to church is mostly by older people. The Church is associated with St. Paul's primary school. Its graveyard is part of a heritage trail.
Church of God of 7th Day	<i>Longsight</i>	The Church of God of 7th Day is located on the site of an Anglican church, which was bought in the 1950s by a group of devotees from Jamaica who had settled in Manchester. It caters for people of all ages, as it has a Sunday School, and a gospel band with singers and musicians. It also has a high proportion of people over 50.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

RESEARCH FINDINGS

IMPORTANCE OF FAITH SPACES FOR OLDER PEOPLE

As part of the survey, faith leaders were asked: *What do you think are the most important needs of older people in your religious / faith community living in Greater Manchester?* A range of answers were provided, and these were categorised into three broad themes of: community-building, practical support, and spiritual needs. Interestingly, the category with the most responses was community-building. Faith leaders identified companionship, community and making connections as important for older people, particularly in relation to making relationships within their local and wider communities as a way of dealing with loneliness.

Answers relating to practical support ranged from advice about finances and healthcare to issues facing older people in later years e.g., planning care, where to live, funeral wishes. As expected, many respondents mentioned understanding the spiritual needs of older people, including access to specific rituals as well as fellowship, and the opportunity to share their faith and beliefs. These themes were explored in more depth during the interviews and ethnographic observations.

The findings suggested that older people across the various faiths attended the different spaces for both spiritual and non-spiritual reasons. The main reasons for visiting the spaces included attending services, 'fellowship', praying and singing with others, being with a family of faith, study meetings, and being with oneself. For those who had a faith, taking part in associated faith practices was the most important reason for visiting the space, although in conversations, the social aspect of performing rituals together was often mentioned. Participating in faith-related activities supported people's sense of wellbeing in a number of ways, with many describing their involvement as a therapeutic experience. For some, visiting their faith space was about having a moment of calm and being with oneself. Chaya, a Hindu woman of Indian origin in her 60s,

expressed this sense of wellbeing as having a break from the rest of the world by entering an immaterial space:

"When I come here I leave the world outside, then I spend some hours here and then I go back to that world."

A similar sentiment was expressed by Uma, a South Asian Hindu woman in her 60s:

"It's about rest, worship and rejuvenation. Shut out the distraction of your mind so you're locked in with God."

As well as offering moments of solitude and quiet reflection, faith spaces also provided much valued opportunities to be with others and to enact faith collectively, as a community. This was often through participating in practices such as singing, praying, or eating together, as elucidated by Usma, a Muslim woman in her 60s:

"[I come here] to connect with myself, connect with my heart and my soul, to connect with the universe, from Allah, to get the light into my heart, and to connect with my other sisters. To be a part of the community and not on my own. Not like a floating soul that is totally disconnected from everybody...to be part of a community."

The collective experience that faith spaces provide is particularly important for those living on their own. Many of those interviewed described their faith community as their 'family'. For example, Toby, a White man in his sixties, had started to attend St. Paul's Church a few years ago. He lived on his own, and for a number of reasons he had never been in employment. Being part of a 'family of faith' made him feel useful in ways that he had not felt for many decades:

"I'm involved, I've got a commitment, I've something to do. [Otherwise] there's no one to back me up... it gives me purpose. I've [got] no family of my own... this is my family."

However, the faith spaces in this study also supported a wider range of benefits beyond that of spiritual wellbeing, both for those who identified with a faith community, and by those who did not. Some participants from the White British community who visited the Anglican church told us they did not think of themselves as people of faith but the space was important for social purposes:

"I'm a humanist so I don't come here for the service, but to have a cup of tea with people." (Beth, a White woman in her 70s, Anglican church)

Others came to the spaces for faith-related activities but also to get fulfilment from other activities:

"Some events, like music lessons, are for your own personal development not just worship." (Elvis, African Caribbean man in his 60s, Pentecostal church)

Eating and sharing food together was also an essential part of why older people visited many of the faith spaces. This was especially important at the Gita Bhavan Hindu Temple, as elaborated by a lay faith leader during a celebratory event:

"Older people come to chant and socialise, but lunch is really important because they aren't eating alone at home."

"I come here for the singing and praying. And is nice to eat with everybody afterwards." (Arun, South Asian man in his 60s, Hindu temple)

The opportunity provided by these spaces to participate in practices such as sharing food, singing, and praying together was an important way in which faith spaces supported older people. In addition, the way different groups use, shape, appropriate and participate in faith spaces is informed by people's life trajectories as well as by cultural orientations.

For example, for participants from migrant communities, visiting their faith space was an important part of connecting with their culture and sense of identity. Kaajal is in her late-70s and had restricted mobility. She travelled twenty miles by tram and bus using a walking frame to get to the Hindu temple to which she was especially attached:

"At the temple in Oldham most people speak Punjabi while here is Hindi and Gujarati, that's why I come all this way."

Like Kaajal, others travel long distances to attend a faith space more aligned with specific cultural affinities, such as language, style of worship, food, and types of rituals. Many of those with whom we talked told us how their personal biographies often connected with their chosen faith space, such as being taken there as a child by a family member, or attending important personal rites of passage, such as confirmation, marriage, christening of the children, and funerals. The connection to place was in these cases an important part of their sense of belonging. For example, Alan, a White man in his 60s, could recall important past events from his life during his long involvement with his church:

"For me, the most memorable moment I had at St. Paul's was one day when my mum and I took communion together."

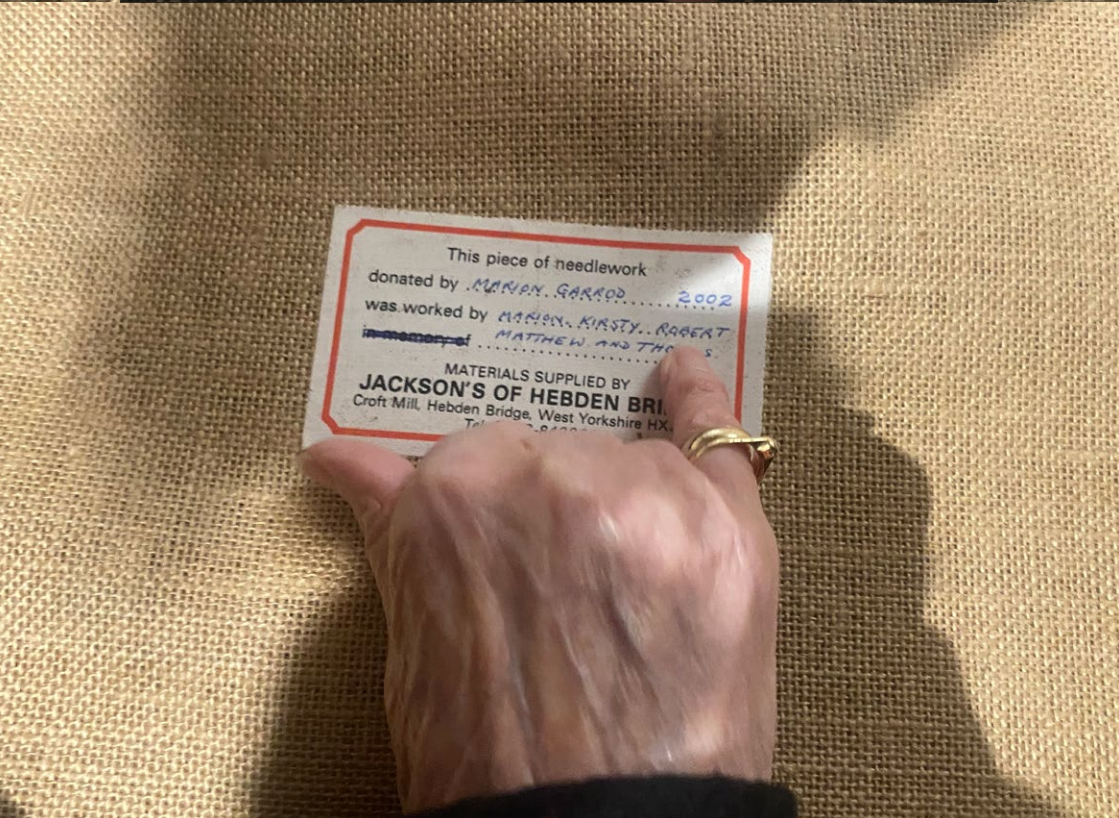
Leah, a 90 year-old woman, had started coming to St. Paul's when she was 15 years-old:

"[I come here because] it's part of my life. I got married here in 1955, after having my first baby, I came here to be churched, my children were baptised here, and later I ran a toddler group here."

Carl, a White man in his 70s and former minister who continued to attend this church even after moving away from the area, explains this sense of belonging:



Leah proudly shows the kneeling pad she embroidered for St. Paul's Church with the help of her children sixty years ago, whose names are shown on the back.



This piece of needlework
donated by MARION GARROD 2002
was worked by MARION, KIRSTY, ROBERT
MATTHEW AND THE S
MATERIALS SUPPLIED BY
JACKSON'S OF HEBDEN BRI
Croft Mill, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire HX
Tel: 01422 842222

"This particular church, when people come here, they really feel the very fabric within the stones of the building, a sense of continuity with history. This has been their spiritual basis, generation after generation, and so it has psychologically and spiritually a very deep importance for the people of this community. And that is also expressed in the way in which people here, they are very warm towards each other.

They all know each other from childhood and there's a real sense of commitment from within this community, not just towards the building and its maintenance, but also towards looking out for one another. So this really is, psychologically, socially, spiritually, a very significant part of this sense of heritage and identity."

As well as being a central part of people's everyday lives, faith spaces played an important role in offering support during times of personal difficulties or transitions. Many of the White British study participants who attended the Anglican church commented that they had either started visiting, or had returned to the church, at key moments in their lives. For some, this had been around a divorce or bereavement, whilst for others the extra time they had after retirement meant they were able to engage with the church in a more focused manner. In all cases, people commented on the spiritual and social support they were offered during these times, and how this had had a positive impact on their wellbeing.

The maintenance of intergenerational connections was also important for older people from migrant backgrounds, who described how visiting a specific faith space allowed them to maintain important connections to earlier generations. Pastor Ruben, a faith leader from a Pentecostal church, explained how the service is a *"tradition, about life with Jamaican roots, a lifestyle people were introduced from being a child"*. Hellen, a woman in her 60s, migrated to Manchester from Jamaica when she was six. Her family used to go to a church in Old Trafford in the 1960s at a time when their congregation hired spaces for worship. Her parents were friends with the group who acquired the Church of God of 7th Day:

“Caribbean people are born into church, parents teach you how to pray, and [this] is passed down through the generations.”



This was seen as equally important for younger visitors to the Hindu temple, as a young mother explained:

“I’m a parent that wants to keep these cultural enactments alive. That’s why we do this. Older people carry a lot of religion in them.”

For this participant, ‘cultural enactments’ referred to the ways older people transmit knowledge to which younger generations might have limited access, such as rituals, songs, and foods. She went on to explain that in the Hindu community, older people played an active role as ‘carriers of heritage’, and that this participation is experienced as vital for the mind and the spirit.

Faith spaces were often visited because they were seen as a ‘safe space’ within the community, an aspect voiced by some of the women from minority ethnic groups. For example, the research team visited some informal faith spaces used by Muslim women, such as private households, where groups of women from within the same community of faith gather to pray, sing, and have food.

Such spaces are welcomed by many as they feel there is greater freedom than may be experienced in a mosque, especially in terms of having ownership of the sessions and the space. A female faith leader talks about a chosen topic with those attending, reciting prayers at different intervals during the session. The women can sit comfortably on chairs or on the floor and they can share food in a celebratory manner after the collective prayer in the direction of Mecca.

Another example of a safe space was revealed by Janet, an African–Caribbean woman in her 60s, who felt a collective sense of belonging through common experiences of prejudice:

“Here I’m not a minority, I’m amongst my own... I come here because of the culture...this way of celebrating is unique to us...it’s about the way we celebrate. We have a shared cultural experience of racism and poverty.”

Similarly to Janet, the style of celebrating in some Christian spaces reminds older people of their culture and of the difficulties their parents had in securing a place of worship when they first migrated to the UK. These common experiences of belonging to a community that was often discriminated against is an intrinsic part of the experience of that faith space. There is a sense of pride for the collective achievement in creating a safe space for cultural expression.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Why faith spaces are important to older people:

- *Spiritual wellbeing.*
- *Developing and maintaining social connections and mental wellbeing.*
- *Belonging and sense of community: connection to culture and/or to place.*

LEVEL OF AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES AGENDA AMONGST FAITH LEADERS IN GREATER MANCHESTER

Many of the faith leaders we interviewed were unaware of the formal 'Age-Friendly' concept, nor did they know that Greater Manchester had been admitted to the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities, reflecting its commitment to becoming an age-friendly region. Within the survey, respondents were asked if they were aware of the term "Age-Friendly City", with just under half (45.8%) of respondents answering "yes". This mixed level of awareness was supported by further in-depth discussions with faith and community leaders across Greater Manchester.

However, despite limited awareness of the WHO Age-Friendly Framework itself, leaders did display high levels of understanding of the range of issues facing older people in their respective communities, together with a strong desire to engage further in work to provide support to older members of their congregations. Many faith spaces provided activities and services, often connected to their local neighbourhood and wider communities, aimed at supporting older people beyond addressing their spiritual needs.

As part of the survey, respondents were shown the Age-Friendly Cities and Communities framework (Figure 1), along with the explanation of how it is commonly used. Following this, respondents were asked to consider how the religious spaces which they were involved in supported the domains of the Age-Friendly Cities framework (ranking high support as 5 and no support as 0).

The results are shown in Figure 2. *Social Participation and Respect and Social Inclusion* were the domains that faith leaders thought were most supported by faith spaces (an average response of 3.84 and 3.83 out of 5 respectively),

Communication and Information was also ranked highly (an average of 3.16). However, *Transport, Housing and Civic Participation and Employment* were all low with an average ranking below 2.

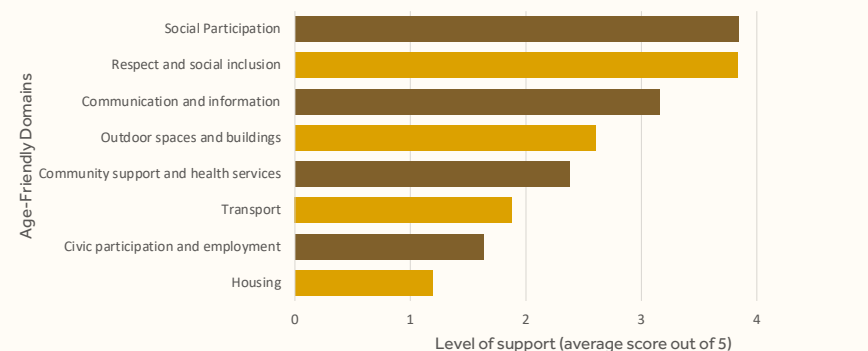


Figure 2. Responses to the question: To what extent do you think the religious spaces you are involved with in Greater Manchester support each domain of the framework of Age-Friendly Cities? (With 5 being a high level of support and 0 being none, or very little support.)

In-depth discussions about the WHO Age-Friendly Framework inevitably touched upon the issue of how 'older people' are defined as a group, and understandings varied across different faiths and within different cultural groups within the same faith. Some participants also noted that older people from ethnic minorities often contend with health-related challenges earlier in the life course compared to their White counterparts. A male African-Caribbean faith leader during a focus group commented:

"[Being older] can be to do with medical issues and becoming more aware of medical issues – from 40 for example men have to be more aware of prostate issues – from then you could be considered an older person. And if you look at the rates of death for men [in the community of African migrants] most men don't get to those ages [70s]. We don't tend to enjoy that word 'old'. Health wise it really resonates earlier."

During discussions with religious and community leaders, some felt there was a lack of recognition of the role of faith and spiritual wellbeing in the AFCC framework. While some suggested such aspects could be included under the domains of 'Respect and Inclusion' or 'Social Participation' in the age-friendly model, others felt that spiritual engagement supports older people in a more holistic manner, positively impacting mental wellbeing. Consequently, there was a view that 'Spiritual Participation' deserved a separate domain.

While it was acknowledged that not everyone adheres to a faith, it was argued that for certain faith communities, especially those with people from minority ethnic backgrounds, this oversight could potentially lead to exclusion, as those spaces were not considered in wider age-friendly cities agendas. In other words, some people may feel excluded from age-friendly initiatives because faith belonging and the particular needs that are met in faith communities, which often overlap with cultural-specific practices, are not acknowledged in the age-friendly framework.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Awareness and understanding of the age-friendly cities agenda amongst faith leaders:

- *Awareness and understanding of the age-friendly agenda is not universal across faith leaders.*
- *Faith leaders display high levels of awareness of the range of issues facing older people in their respective communities.*
- *It was suggested that there is a lack of recognition of the role of faith and spiritual wellbeing within the AFCC framework.*

HOW FAITH SPACES SUPPORT THE WHO'S AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES AND COMMUNITIES FRAMEWORK

The second inter-faith Knowledge Exchange Event discussed the activities and services provided by faith-spaces and how these related to each of the eight domains of the WHO's Age-Friendly Framework. The following sections discuss each domain in turn and begins with a quote from the WHO explaining the meaning of that domain.²³ While we are aware that some of these domains overlap, the categorisation of services provided within faith spaces according to the framework is nevertheless fruitful.



Participants from different faiths taking part in the Ketso activity.

OUTDOOR SPACES AND BUILDINGS

***'The external environment has a major impact on the mobility, independence and quality of life of older people as they go about their daily lives beyond the comfort of their homes.'* (WHO)**

Faith spaces are part of the built environment of local neighbourhoods, with their buildings and outdoor spaces representing important assets to communities.

This research found that many faith spaces are utilised beyond their religious remit, providing a facility for various activities. For example, spaces may be hired out for use by other locally-based organisations, such as for concert rehearsals and performances (St. Paul's); as vaccination centres during the COVID-19 pandemic (the Jain Centre); or as spaces for events held by organisations in the third sector (Church of God of 7th Day).

Hiring rooms out was an important source of income generation for many faith-based organisations. In other instances, the space was available without charge by charitable and non-profit organisations and groups running food and baby banks, providing access to essential items to support families experiencing financial hardship.

Many faith spaces are regularly used as polling stations and for meetings with local councillors, granting local residents access to information about council services. Such activities often involved people outside of the religious community, with faith spaces serving an important role as neighbourhood centres in their own right.

Faith spaces also provide important 'warm spaces', providing a heated area where members of the public could visit during the winter months in the context of the cost of living crisis. Some faith community members remarked that with the cost of living crisis more people were using faith spaces as a way of saving on heating bills at home.

Having a kitchen is a valuable asset enabling faith spaces to provide hot food, and tea and coffee, a vital way of bringing people together as they leave the faith-related realm and move into everyday catching up. Kitchens vary a great deal between the different faith spaces often reflecting cultural variations of what is offered:



Faith organisations that have outdoor space represent an important asset to the local community, however, due to limited resources and volunteers, these might not always be used to their full potential. One example of how the outdoor assets of faith spaces can be used to support age-friendly activity was the Sacred Heart Catholic church in Gorton that, with the local primary school, had created a garden comprising a vegetable plot for intergenerational activities, a shed for craft activities, and the 14 'stations of the cross' (a traditional processional route used by many Christian churches), all co-produced by the local community, and mostly maintained by the over-50s. The wider community also benefitted from the garden as both visitors and volunteers.

Some faith leaders thought their outdoor spaces have potential for further work. St. Paul's Church offers occasional guided walks of the graveyard led by one of the lay leaders, but they sometimes struggle with finding volunteers to take care of the gardens where the gravestones are located. As a local heritage site with graves of illustrious people in the history of Manchester, some people we talked to thought that the gardens surrounding the graveyard, which lead to the Kersal Moor, had great potential for outdoor activities.

The benefits of outdoor activities were also felt beyond the boundaries of the faith spaces. A group of women started going for walks in a local park as part of an informal initiative by a lay leader from the Muslim community who participated in the research. One of the women taking part in the walks was Rayhana, a 72-year-old Muslim woman, who migrated to Britain as a young woman. She explained that she had had a busy life working as a teacher and looking after her children on her own. She used to do all her prayers at home so when she eventually retired she did not have a network of other Asian women and found herself 'stuck at home':

"[Going out for walks with the group of women] made a big difference in my life because I used to sit at home depressed not going anywhere. But now I come out with this people, and we enjoy that...I feel like a human being again before I was just sitting like a statue at home. Now even if I don't come here, I just try to go round the block, round my house, let's walk. It did make a big change and now I sleep fully as well because I walk, I talk to people."

The benefits of investments in green spaces for mental and physical wellbeing are widely documented and conversations were held with faith community members and voluntary organisation about additional positive outcomes that could result from having a communal assets such as growing food, and attending to flower beds.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND HEALTH SERVICES

***'Accessible and affordable community and health services are crucial in supporting older people to remain healthy, independent and active. This involves an appropriate supply of care services conveniently located close to where older people live and trained health and social workers to provide these services.'* (WHO)**

The research confirmed the contribution of faith spaces to providing community support and health services. Many of the faith spaces offered activities supporting the mental and physical wellbeing of older people.

This was sometimes delivered in partnership with health professionals who might offer advice on lowering cholesterol levels or spotting early signs of diabetes. For example, the Time Out group at St. Paul's started as a craft activity but subsequently broadened to include speakers, local history, and talks by health professionals about dementia, high blood pressure, and diabetes amongst other topics. Denise, a woman in her 60s, has been running the group for a number of years:

"Some people attend who go to another church or none. Today, a non-church goer brought her neighbour to the coffee morning and I invited her to Time Out - hopefully she will feel she can come. We have also managed to attract the occasional male."

Another example of a health activity is the weekly bhanja singing sessions at the Hindu Temple attended by older women. Mina, a 66-year-old retired GP, sometimes gives stretching exercises before some breathing and meditation exercises. Aahana, a woman of Indian origin in her 70s, who had been running the session for over two decades, explains how breathing can promote both physical and mental health:

"Be grateful you can breathe, be grateful that your organs are working, your heart, your legs, your stomach. Practice the breathing exercises every day... 10 minutes in the morning, but every day."

At the end of the session, all gather in the dining room to have lunch together. Mina tells me that clapping hands, as the women do throughout the bhanja singing session, is a good exercise because they are pressing on important pressure points on the hands. The women we spoke to feel those sessions contribute to their emotional and physical wellbeing, as described by Enea, a woman of Indian origin:

"I come here for the singing and praying. And it's nice to eat with everybody afterwards."



At this session, there was an additional celebration of India's Independence Day before the collective meal.

The particular way that Aahana and the group of older women attending her sessions understood wellbeing as something that involved singing, clapping hands, meditating, and eating together, prompted the research team to explore diverse understandings of 'wellbeing'. To that end, we included an activity at the Second Knowledge Exchange Event where people listed individual and collective activities that they perceived as providing them with a sense of wellbeing.

Amongst those listed, a large proportion happened within the realm of faith spaces and/or were enabled through faith networks, such as eating, talking, singing, praying, dancing, meditating, worshipping, and interacting with people. Although interpretations of wellbeing varied, many associated it with spending time with others, as well as being with oneself. The contributions also show how understandings of wellbeing can encompass doing service for their communities, which includes volunteering.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYMENT

***'Older people are an asset to the community, and they continue contributing to their communities after retirement. An age-friendly city and community provides ample opportunities for older people to do so, be it through voluntary or paid employment, and keeps them engaged in the political process.'* (WHO)**

Faith spaces facilitate civic participation and employment of older people, through both paid and voluntary roles. Many are important employers of older people, as the majority of lay and formal leaders working in the spaces visited were above 50 years of age. Some lay leaders went on to have a more formal role in their congregation after they retired, but there are also older people working in roles such as janitors, gardeners and treasurers. The president of one of the largest mosques in Manchester talked about how attendance can promote interactions which can lead to employment:

"Networking is an important form of cultural practice: people need an employee, or someone needs employment, the mosque is a place where that can happen."

Faith spaces also make a significant contribution in terms of civic participation, with the provision of opportunities for volunteering and in facilitating services. This was referred to by many in this study as 'doing service' and was highly valued by many of the participants. Older people were in many instances actively involved in the running, managing and organisational roles within the spaces observed. This was in both paid and voluntary capacities, as explained by Marion, a White woman in her 90s, who had attended St. Paul's church all her life:

"My husband cleaned all the brass. I did the flowers, the lighting and was part of the choir. I used to bring four older women to church every time and now it's my turn to be taken."

For many older members of the congregation who were not in paid employment, faith spaces also provided a valuable opportunity to 'do service' for their community, making people feel productive as a result. For example, Beth, an African-Caribbean woman in her 60s, regularly visited her local church to attend a luncheon club and help with their foodbank. Despite being restricted in her mobility, participating in this way made her feel useful:

"Luncheon club is at 12, food bank starts at 11. I help with things I can do sitting at a table like packing tea bags into plastic bags."

Beth told us that if she did not go to church to help, she would be at home on her own. By going out of the house to help with the kitchen at her church, she sees people, participates in the running of the food bank, and gets a cooked lunch which she can eat with others. Contributing to the running of the organisation became an important part of the daily routine for many of the older people in this research. This was particularly important for people who had experienced a recent life transition, such as retiring or losing a partner.

Kahini, an Indian woman in her 60s, had joined a group of women, all aged over 50, who volunteered at the Hindu Temple by helping out in the kitchen, cleaning and running a weekly food stall. Being able to do service in this way allowed people to feel a sense of purpose and responsibility, as well as providing opportunities for socialising.

This aspect was spoken about as a key commitment by all spaces visited, which play an important role in providing older people the opportunity for civic and social participation in their communities. More specifically, they provide opportunities for older people to contribute to local charities and voluntary organisations such as food and baby banks.



At Time Out, participants prepare Christmas decorations.



Community members at the Church of God of 7th Day help with the baby and food bank.

RESPECT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

'An age-friendly city is one that encourages older people to participate more in their city's social, civic and economic life.'
(WHO)

Faith spaces foster respect and social inclusion through intergenerational and intercultural activities, for example providing support for older people who were more recent migrants to the UK, and by ensuring those with mobility and accessibility issues were still able to remain in contact with their community. More generally, we found that faith organisations address social inclusion of older people of all and no faiths through a wide range of activities within increasingly diverse neighbourhoods, signalling their vital role as community organisations.

Concerts by Salford Symphony Orchestra at St. Paul's attract significant numbers of people; while the baby bank at the Church of God of 7th Day has many visitors from both the Polish and South Asian communities. The Sri Guru Gobind Singh Gurdwara offers a hot lunch every Sunday to members of the community of different faiths and of no faith; similarly,

everyone is welcomed to eat at the Gita Bhavan Temple and at the Jain Centre on celebratory dates. These examples show that some faith-spaces offer opportunities for social connection and support to a range of groups and individuals within the community.

The research also found that participants would welcome more opportunities to include people of other faiths. During the second Knowledge Exchange Event, participants showed enthusiasm for further interfaith exchanges, to the extent that 'more inter-faith events', and 'inter-faith festivals' were included in the recommendations drafted during the meeting. We found that opportunities for inter-faith exchanges often happen beyond the limits of faith spaces, demonstrating their potential for promoting respect and social inclusion.

Faith communities may cater for isolated members of their communities through initiatives organised by members of the congregation, which may include support to the homeless, to house-bound members in the local area, and at times with specific programmes such as digital inclusion. Amongst the South Asian participants, the emphasis was on the families to ensure older members of the community were included in key celebrations and services, and it would be up to them to include those isolated in events important to their community of faith. Samira is a woman in her 80s who migrated from Pakistan to the UK in the 1970s. She used to be an active member of the Muslim community until her husband died. She has suffered with depression and rarely leaves her home. The mosque with which she is associated organises annual processions to celebrate the birth of a major prophet. On those occasions, she joins the crowds in the neighbourhood of Longsight which comprises a lively atmosphere of people of all generations. Her daughter says this is one of the few occasions where her mother feels part of the community:



Procession through Rusholme and Longsight.

Helping to integrate people into the wider community is an important way that faith spaces can support the respect and social inclusion of older migrants:

“We don’t do coffee mornings like some White churches but we have bible studies and prayer meetings... because they are during the day, it attracts more older people. It is also about addressing their mental wellbeing, their sense of belonging and community.”
(North African faith leader at a Pentecostal church during a Focus Group)

Faith spaces that cater for migrant communities are in a better place to know the needs of these communities as they are often run by people with a migrant background, or with extensive experience of working with different generations of migrants. As such, they often have intimate knowledge and understanding of the needs of older people in their community, as a North African faith leader explains:

“We [Assembly of God] provide ethical food to older people, help with those who are not literate in reading and writing English; book tickets online, take people to appointments. We are a big community here – everyone knows everyone.”

Respect and social inclusion were nurtured through intergenerational exchanges. The research team found that those spaces where older people are respected as important members of the community are also spaces where there is a greater participation of people of all ages. This is particularly the case of South Asian faith spaces, but was also experienced in Pentecostal churches. As discussed earlier, older people are seen as having a vital role in disseminating rituals and traditions to younger generations:

“As soon as you are 50-plus you are an elder up there, revered, someone who has wisdom. They are consulted around different issues for their past experiences. Elders are older people who lead.”
(African-Caribbean faith leader during Focus Group)

Faith spaces were found to be mindful of the different accessibility needs of their older members. One of the churches had installed a ramp to improve access for those with mobility issues. Respect for older people’s needs might mean projecting words from a service onto a big screen (as seen in some faith spaces), or by using specialist audio equipment. Inclusion through digital technologies greatly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, having become an integral feature of some faith spaces, even if some organisations struggled to disseminate digital literacy amongst their older members.

There was a lot of support from younger members of families to help older people learn new technologies. The pandemic also introduced older people to WhatsApp groups, which have subsequently become widespread. Across faith communities, participants felt that faith spaces had a key role to play in promoting the inclusion of older people. This was achieved by enabling remote access to services and visits by faith members to those isolated in their homes. In this research, we saw examples of volunteers from faith spaces doing regular home visits to assist those isolating at home. While home visits tend to be to members of faith communities who are housebound either temporarily

or permanently, there are cases when they visit people of no faith whose needs are known by the community. That said, some faith leaders felt that more needed to be done to build connections in the wider neighbourhood, especially with older people of no faith.

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

***'Participating in leisure, social, cultural and spiritual activities in the community fosters older people's continued integration with society and helps them remain engaged and informed.'* (WHO)**

Faith spaces support the social participation of older people in a variety of ways. As well as religious practice, faith spaces provide a range of non-religious, social activities for its members and the wider neighbourhood, including coffee mornings, lunch groups, craft, games and sports sessions, and drop-ins covering a range of matters of concern.



As well as facilitating social participation, the connections established through these activities often created opportunities for additional activities such as volunteering. This was especially significant for those people experiencing periods of change or transition in their lives. For example Jackie, a White woman in her 60s, had started attending St. Paul's after her mother died, finding a wealth of volunteering opportunities:

"I thought I had to now continue that...it's the community. I now do lots of volunteering outside the church."

Similarly, Camilla, a White woman also in her 60s, started attending church more regularly after she divorced:

"I was cared for and supported here. [The congregation] wasn't cliquey, and I enjoyed having a direction to move into."

Camilla started attending Sunday services, became involved with gardening, then started to help with Sunday School. The church motivated Camilla to get training as a lay reader (service leader) and to develop her piano skills. Music was an integral part of social participation across all faith spaces. Carl, a former Anglican minister in his 70s, explained the importance of singing as a collective experience:

"There's the music, there's the singing of hymns and some of them are very ancient, others are very modern. But that's a wonderful moment in the service where we lift up our hearts and we sing to the Lord."



At Qadria mosque, there is a snooker table on the upstairs floor, which attracts a significant number of older men in an instance of participation in an activity unrelated to faith. Amongst the Muslim community, women organise informal gatherings in non-faith spaces, such as people homes, to conduct prayers.

These consist of three to four-hour gatherings with about 25 women in attendance, most of whom tend to be over 50. Private households become temporary sacred spaces for the duration of meetings, which consist of studying lessons from the Quran, praying, singing, and eating together.

In these spaces, a woman usually takes the role of a religious leader, and chooses a topic to be discussed, which may be property rights, businesses, or family obligations. The lay leader explains that here they have the autonomy to discuss matters that may be out of bounds elsewhere, such as divorce according to Islamic law. These spaces offer more freedom for women to socialise and discuss everyday matters once the prayers are over, while being more inclusive of those older women who do not attend mosques.

***“I like to join my sisters here because we are like-minded people.”
(Fatima, a South Asian woman in her 70s)***

An additional finding was that social participation often extended beyond faith spaces, with the connections made leading people to pursue activities unrelated to their faith. Andrea, who is in her 60s, started going out and travelling more after she joined the Women’s Ministry:

“For the last probably six, seven months we’ve been going to the Palace Theatre and we’ve been watching movies together. Because we always say that we only really meet at church...But as a group we think that we should, you know, we go out together.”

Facilitating social participation and networks beyond the immediate community also led to interfaith exchanges of various kinds. For example, Longsight Women’s Faith Forum was formed out of a need for women of different faiths to come together outside of religious spaces. After the bomb at the Manchester Arena, they decided it was vital to build

bridges of ongoing friendship and support, especially between Muslims and Christians, in spaces where faith is valued and respected. Apart from two young mothers with children, they are all aged between 50 and 78, with around 45 people on the WhatsApp Group.

The Faith Forum meet every three months in a Library to have group discussions about faith in action in the neighbourhood as well as sharing food, which is an important part of their meetings. They have used topics to build understanding about different experiences of prayer, and ‘being a woman in your faith tradition’, they also have had guest speakers to talk on topics such as, ‘Listening to the voices of Afghan refugees’. Many of them have been to each other’s homes and to each other’s places of worship, celebrating Ramadan, Eid, Christmas and Easter. The Forum has led to other forms of participation and support, especially during the pandemic, as one of the South Asian women commented:

“We supported each other through the whole of lockdown via the WhatsApp group.”

WhatsApp groups have also become an important extension of the relations forged in faith spaces. A lot of people we talked to belong to more than one WhatsApp group that allowed for the continuation of social connection and support outside of their visits to the space.

Such groups increase connectivity more broadly as members of the group exchange pictures and information about events outside the realm of faith spaces, such as opportunities for collective walks, or outings as a group or to disseminate members’ birthdays and plan celebrations. But there are also examples of non-religious activities, including coffee mornings, craft sessions and community choirs, which attract people without a faith:

TRANSPORTATION

"I associate this place with my friends. I don't have a faith so it's not about faith. It's the fellowship." (Paula, White woman in her 60s, St. Paul's)

The Time Out group that meets at St. Paul's illustrates how activities in faith spaces can attract people from different backgrounds, providing one of the few opportunities in the neighbourhood for older people of no faith to socialise. For participants such as Alice and Ellen, both in their 70s, the Church functions as a community hub and they go there to catch up with neighbours, rather than having a cup of tea in their own at home.

By speaking to a diversity of faith leaders and older people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, this research also found that social participation can mean very different things in different communities, and to different generations within migrant communities. During a Focus Group with leaders of churches consisting of recent African migrants, concerns were raised over the limited engagement from older generations with initiatives in the UK. They attend church locally but any spare time is used to work to help family members abroad:

"We set up a food bank and we struggled to get volunteers from the community to help with that. For every black person you see here, they represent at least five other people elsewhere. Because so many of us are supporting elders back home we have less time to be involved here. Migrant communities give a lot to charity back home."

In brief, social participation of older people can extend through international networks and faith spaces can play a key role in facilitating this process. Therefore, when thinking about how to support the participation of older people, it is important to recognise that this might not always mean volunteering with a locally-based group or being directly involved in the neighbourhood.

'Accessible and affordable public transport is key to ensuring a city's older population is able to age actively and remain engaged with their community, with access to health and social facilities.'
(WHO)

Although providing public transport facilities is beyond the remit of faith spaces, it was an important matter of concern for many of the faith leaders as it presented a significant barrier to older people in engaging with their organisation. Only one space out of the sixteen formal and informal faith spaces visited had access to a minibus, which was used to pick up older people from their homes to attend lunches provided by the organisation. In this case, the organisation was not an exclusive faith space but a community hub that was turned into a faith space for special occasions. People paid a membership fee to have access to services, which included a dedicated driver who would collect older members of the faith community.

Other faith spaces hired buses once or twice a year for trips out, but that again had become rarer since the COVID-19 pandemic due to decreased attendance and pressures on financial resources. The organisation of lifts for those who were less mobile was an integral part of lay leaders' responsibilities in some faith spaces, while in other spaces, lift sharing happened in a more spontaneous manner. People referred to the challenge of bringing older members of the community to the faith space, and the desire to have a more formal strategy to help them with everyday errands such as taking them for doctor's appointments, as well as the occasional day out.

Most of the faith places visited were located on bus routes but getting to medical appointments was identified as a major hurdle for those without family nearby. The eligibility criteria for *Patient Transport Services* (PTS) was found to be restricting and meant that many over-70s were

precluded from using it. Ring & Ride, a transport service for people who find it difficult to use public transport, was also mentioned as a relevant form of service, but was not always available.

In brief, the research found that older people encounter difficulties accessing essential spaces, such as health care professionals and hospitals. Some faith spaces have stepped in to address this issue by providing alternative transport options, ranging from offering their own transport services to facilitating informal arrangements among members of the faith community.

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

***'Staying connected with events, news and activities with timely, accessible and practical information is a key part of providing an age-friendly environment. Therefore, providing access to information to older people in appropriate formats and considering the wide range of needs and resources older people have is vital.'* (WHO)**

Faith spaces have a key role to play in communicating information to their users and to the wider community. This became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when many faith organisations transferred their faith activities online by streaming services and prayers for people to watch at home. Faith spaces also provide communication and information for older people through drop-in sessions on issues relating to topics such as housing, health issues, legal advice, and language support. The liturgy, in the case of the two churches visited, allows room for announcements regarding events happening in the community which can range from people's birthdays and funerals, to street parties.

Considerations regarding communication shared by participants during the interactive workshop included the need for big print on service booklets and newsletters; readable material on screens during mass;



Women gathered in the home of a faith community member to pray, recite, and eat together.

more effective sound systems; up to date information on display boards; as well as the need to include positive images of older people. For participants, these were key concerns in the area of communication and information. However, decisions over the dissemination of information also had to consider the production costs associated with printing and distribution:

“One third of our over-70s active members can’t...won’t access the internet so paper copies of newsletter, policies and strategies, minutes, reports are all made available. This has, of course, cost implications for the running of the church.” (Simone, White woman in her 60s)

Organisations told us about having to make choices to cut costs on the production of newsletters. Encouragement and assistance to access things online is seen as increasingly important, especially regarding the use of smartphones and access to emails. Amongst the spaces we visited, most information about faith-related events was disseminated through Facebook. Very few faith spaces had paper-based newsletters, with St. Paul’s being one exception.

HOUSING

‘The housing conditions of older people are often linked to their quality of life and whether they are able to age independently and actively in their community. Appropriate housing design and its proximity to community and social services allow older residents to live comfortably and safely, while housing affordability gives them peace of mind.’ (WHO)

Housing was the area of age-friendly work participants felt faith spaces made the least direct contribution. This was mainly felt to be outside of their remit or covered by other services. Some spaces however did contribute indirectly to this domain by, for example, offering advice about

how to access housing repair services, and signposting to services that could help homeowners with home insulation and energy saving. Some faith spaces also have strong connections with locally-based sheltered and extra care homes whilst others offered spaces where local councillors met to discuss housing and related issues.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

How faith spaces support the WHO’s Age-Friendly Cities and Communities framework:

- *Demonstrating the range of the range of activities and services provided through faith spaces, examples map onto all the domains of the AFCC framework.*
- *Faith spaces have particularly strong contributions in relation to the domains of ‘respect and social inclusion’ and ‘social participation’.*
- *Applying the AFCC framework to faith spaces provides insight into how the spaces can be even more inclusive and accessible to older people.*

PROVIDING SUPPORT TO OLDER PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In this section, we address the barriers faced by faith spaces in providing support to older people, along with some of the responses identified by the research team. As context, the survey asked: How do the religious spaces you are involved with in Greater Manchester support the needs of older people? The results are shown in Figure 3. As well as providing religious ceremonies, over 80% of respondents stated that through the religious spaces 'visiting and befriending' and 'social activities' were ways in which the space supported older people. In addition, over 65% of respondents said that through the spaces, 'opportunities to volunteer' and 'practical support' was provided.

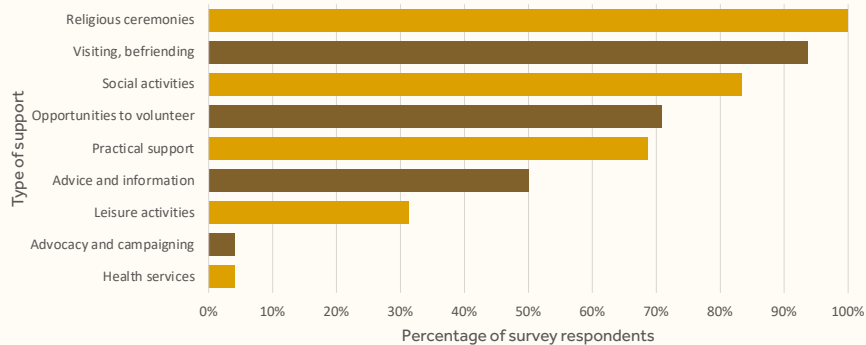


Figure 3. Responses to the question: How do the religious spaces you are involved with in Greater Manchester support the needs of older people? Tick all that apply.

Many faith leaders and people involved in the running of faith spaces spoke of wanting to do more to assist their older members. However, organisations faced difficulties of various kinds in achieving this goal, including the lack of paid and voluntary help associated with (in some cases) declining congregations, and limited financial resources which affected the ability of organisations to pay staff, meet energy bills, and maintain buildings. Such difficulties were experienced by the Anglican Church visited for this study, which had seen a decline in venue hire and in numbers of volunteers especially after the pandemic:

"We open as a polling station and that brings people in. It means that people come here for different reasons and then they realise they could come here to pray. We used to have a playgroup and that was really good to bring people in. That stopped with Covid and we can't continue because we don't have the people. Some have become less mobile over the years,' the problem is again the ageing demographics." (Lay leader at St Paul's)

As discussed, faith spaces are important in enabling people to take part in cultural practices that meet their sense of belonging and wellbeing. For some faith-based organisations, lack of a permanent space of worship presented a significant challenge to being able to support their community. This was particularly the case for more recently arrived migrant communities, such as those from West Africa, who hire spaces in communal buildings. In these circumstances, a group of people will arrive early to organise the room according to their faith, including placing objects, musical instruments and equipment, and other holy objects in the space. Once the service is over, members of the congregation will then dismantle all the objects and equipment associated with their practice.



Members of the Assembly of God putting musical equipment away at hired space.

Reliance upon temporary spaces has direct consequences for the type of support that can be offered, with recent migrants potentially

disadvantaged in being reliant on having to hire spaces in order to provide services to their respective faith communities. Space hire is usually for a block of three to four hours and often without kitchen facilities. This shows how wider contexts of inequalities shape the services that are available for communities of faith and/or identity.

Recent migrants are often part of what has become recognised as 'dispersed communities', groups of people who often have to travel to congregate with their peers. Faith spaces are particularly important for such groups bringing together individuals who live across the city region and would not otherwise meet on a regular basis.²⁴



Kitchen at the Jain Centre, Longsight.

For many organisations, costs associated with the heating of spaces were significant, especially with rising energy costs. Most faith spaces relied upon community contributions for their maintenance, with few receiving grants supporting running costs. In this connection, many faith leaders expressed frustration at being unable to apply for funding in the same way as non-faith organisations. When it comes to city region funds, the wording in grant agreements state that: "The Recipient shall not use any of the Grant: (a) for activities which may be party-political in intention,

use, or presentation; or (b) to support or promote religious activity", which implies that viability depends on the proposed activity not being used to promote a particular faith.

The financial strain on faith spaces has been a persistent challenge since the 2008 financial crisis, exacerbated by subsequent austerity measures, and further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The cumulative effect has been a significant decline in financial resources, the impact of which cannot be overstated. Many faith spaces felt there had been a noticeable reduction in the number of people using their space:

"We used to have a playgroup (for young children) and that was really good to bring people in. That stopped with Covid and we can't continue because we don't have the people [to support the work]." (St. Paul's)

"Before corona we used to have children's classes. Fassah [a lay leader] and others hosted different conferences there. After Covid, people started doing things on Zoom." (Qadria Mosque)

A general comment across all spaces is that places were busier before COVID-19, with many people not returning after the pandemic, along with a reduction in the number of events. This had financial consequences in terms of reduced donations, but also a reduction in the number of volunteers with, as a result, reduced activities and services. That said, some also remarked how COVID-19 introduced new developments that will remain in place, such as recording of services, WhatsApp groups, and more digital dissemination of activities. Some spoke of remote attendance as positive, and more inclusive of devotees who have mobility or caring restrictions; others raised concerns about people 'not bothering to go out anymore'.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Challenges and barriers faced by faith spaces:

- *Precarious nature of some faith spaces: disparities in resource allocation across neighbourhoods has an impact on social infrastructure and service provision.*
- *Decline in face-to-face participation: difficulty in recruiting and retaining volunteers, exacerbated by the pandemic.*
- *Impact of COVID-19: since the pandemic, there are less resources both in terms of people and funds. The cost of living crisis has added pressure as heating bills increased.*



Family Day outside Qadria Mosque.



SHREE MAHAVIR BHAGWAN

SHREE MAHAVIR BHAGWAN

CONCLUSION

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CONCLUSION

The overall aim of this project was threefold: first, to assess the potential of faith-based organisations and spaces in supporting older adults experiencing inequalities; second, to identify novel 'age-friendly' approaches that have the potential to reduce disparities in healthy life expectancy; and third, to co-produce a set of policy recommendations aimed at increasing the capacity of faith spaces to support people to age well in place, building on our partnerships with Age-Friendly Manchester, the faith sector, interfaith networks, and different groups of older people.

The findings demonstrate that faith spaces provide a range of critical services to vulnerable groups within communities. They also play a pivotal role in providing support to particular groups of older people, including ethnic minority groups, recent migrants, those experiencing isolation and/or financial hardships, as well as people undergoing challenging life transitions such as bereavement, divorce, health decline, and relocation. For older people, faith spaces often serve as 'social connectors', enabling a sense of community and providing practical and emotional support to members of faith communities across gender and social class.

Relationships are made both through faith practices conducted on a weekly and/or daily basis, and through a range of services that are delivered to include older people beyond the faith community. COVID-19 made the role of faith spaces even more evident as they became the first port of call to respond to their communities' needs and demands. An example of this concerned efforts to tackle food insecurity through the provision of food banks to the wider neighbourhood, something that expanded during the pandemic and continued beyond, driven by the cost of living crisis affecting communities throughout Greater Manchester.

As seen in the examples in this report, faith infrastructures inform the level of support organisations can offer. With changing demographics in relation of participation in religious practices, faith-based organisations face many challenges developing and maintaining their faith spaces.

There is a strong sense of autonomy amongst many faith organisations who have developed and maintained their spaces from the bottom-up, without the intervention or support of non-religious organisations. That said, greater collaboration between the public sector and faith spaces could diversify and amplify the ways that the age-friendly framework is applied within faith spaces.

A strategic involvement of faith-based organisations in public health and age-friendly agendas could enhance existing work already happening in faith spaces by:

- ***Involving faith-based spaces in the delivery of health-related programmes and support services. Faith leaders are especially important in accessing marginalised groups.***
- ***Providing opportunities for health services to come into the places of worship to deliver health information and activities.***
- ***Extending funding opportunities for faith-based interventions aimed at improving older people's social, mental and physical wellbeing.***
- ***Building on interfaith, age-friendly, and community health networks to create greater awareness of the activities and resources available through faith spaces.***

This report advocates a two-way flow between local authorities and faith spaces. The traditional role of such spaces has changed in the period since 2020, reflecting changes brought about by the pandemic, pressures on health and social care services, together with the impact of austerity, and the cost-of-living crisis. However, the fact that faith leaders managed to deliver services with the invaluable help of a (mostly) older and voluntary work force underlines the need for help and recognition from local authorities and other relevant organisations.

We are aware that this research does not reproduce the rich diversity of faith communities across Greater Manchester. The time and scope through which this project was delivered restricted the number of spaces examined and limited the capture of a full understanding of the potential role of faith spaces in relation to the delivery of age-friendly programmes. Similarly, the project did not examine in detail the role of variables such as gender and social class in influencing access to faith spaces. In future research it will also be important to understand the perception of faith spaces from older people who do not profess to having a religious faith.

The environment in which community services are delivered is changing and funders are increasingly aware that more resources need to be made available for spaces that can serve the wider neighbourhood. However, funding is a major barrier and communication about how to access funding is sparse. We continue to see great inequality across different neighbourhoods, reflected in the variety of pressures facing faith organisations. Such inequalities are reflected in the provision of services by faith spaces. As one participant stated 'it's a very uneven playing field'. A more strategic alignment between the public sector and faith spaces could potentially even out available resources, thus making a major contribution to making our cities more age-friendly.



A group of children performing a play to celebrate Diwali at the Indian Senior Citizen's Centre.



AGE-FRIENDLY CITY

HOUSING

SOCIAL INCLUSION

CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYMENT

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

TRANSPORT

OLDER PERSONS' EXPERIENCES

RECOMMENDATIONS

Getting a life by growing old
Taking shopping
Growing old
Growing old
Growing old

KNOWLEDGE COLLECTIVE SCENE
MY HIGH
MY HIGH

Anjaleka talks

Let's study to them
Let's study to them
Let's study to them
Let's study to them

HOUSING

SOCIAL INCLUSION

SOCIAL INCLUSION

OLDER PERSONS' EXPERIENCES

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RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS, SERVICE PROVIDERS AND FUNDERS TO SUPPORT OLDER PEOPLE IN FAITH COMMUNITIES.

Recommendation 1: Explore how to enhance the role of faith spaces in contributing to promoting health and wellbeing in the community.

This study highlights the numerous ways in which faith spaces already support and promote healthy ageing. For example, they served as crucial sources of information during critical periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis, with faith leaders playing an active role in addressing community health issues. Collaborations between health and wellbeing services and faith spaces hold significant potential to address the needs of underserved groups of older people by leveraging the community trust and extensive experience of faith-based spaces to provide tailored support and essential services.

Recommendation 2: Provide support to enhance the social function of faith spaces, both for existing users and members of the wider community.

Faith spaces have considerable potential as social spaces, and more could be done to include people of no faith. Increasing the availability of outreach activities open to all is seen to boost footfall and revenue. Where not already being done, organisations could consider renting faith spaces for outreach and informational events. Improved communication among faith spaces, the public sector, and third-sector organisations could put faith spaces on the map and 'on the radar' as a community asset for people of all backgrounds.

Recommendation 3: Consider better use of faith spaces for specific forms of support during times of transition and change.

The research revealed ample evidence showcasing how faith organisations can provide a supportive environment for individuals during challenging periods in their lives, including those marked by divorce,

bereavement, and declining health. Such a role becomes particularly pertinent within the context of an ageing population, when people may find themselves navigating major life transitions, in some cases without the immediate support of family and friends. Recognising the crucial social role of faith spaces in supporting people through difficult periods in their lives by investing in better information sharing is especially important. An example could be linking activities happening in faith spaces through strategies such as social prescribing.

Recommendation 4: Recognise the role of faith spaces in supporting isolated and/or newly arrived groups to the community, and their potential to connect older people to age-friendly initiatives.

Faith spaces already serve as vital hubs for addressing social isolation in later life by offering essential sources of information, advice, and opportunities for community interaction. Moreover, they are crucial for integrating groups such as newly arrived migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers. As such, these spaces serve as gateways to reach older individuals who may not be accessing traditional communication channels, providing entry points to connect age-friendly initiatives with older people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Recommendation 5: Develop new ways of sharing existing funding information and proactively supporting access to funds.

This study highlights a common misunderstanding among faith leaders regarding their eligibility to apply for external funding. In some cases, there is a perception that all activities conducted within faith spaces are ineligible for funding, when in fact, only those promoting religious activities may be excluded. To address this misconception, proactive measures should be taken to disseminate information about available funding sources, capacity building, and support mechanisms. By providing clarity on eligibility criteria and facilitating access to funding opportunities, faith leaders can maximise their potential to secure external resources for initiatives that benefit their communities beyond religious activities.

Recommendation 6: Consider more regular use of 'F' for Faith when referring to VCSE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise) when this is appropriate.

This research advocates for the inclusion of 'F' within the acronym VCSE when appropriate. Doing so can enhance awareness of external funding opportunities and support mechanisms available to faith spaces, which in turn, may empower these organisations to expand their role in promoting healthy ageing. This recommendation aligns with the perspective shared by the Greater Manchester Faith & Belief Panel.

Recommendation 7: Broadening the age-friendly framework to embrace spiritual participation and cultural diversity.

The research reveals how perceptions of wellbeing vary among different cultural groups. For instance, activities such as breathing exercises at Hindu Temples, communal dining and collective singing or chanting in Muslim, Hindu, Anglican Christian, and Charismatic Christian spaces was integral to spiritual, physical, and mental wellbeing among the participants in this study. These insights highlight the spiritual and cultural dimensions of ageing, which tend to be overlooked in the WHO's Age-friendly Cities and Communities framework. Integrating religious practices and cultural traditions into the framework could lead to a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to promoting health and wellbeing among diverse older populations.



Ladies' room at Victoria Mosque.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THOSE INVOLVED IN CREATING AGE-FRIENDLY FAITH SPACES.

Recommendation 1: Promote health and wellbeing activities in faith spaces and raise awareness on health and wellbeing in the community.

Many faith communities offer a variety of health and wellbeing activities, including breathing and movement exercises, gardening and walking groups. Such initiatives could not only be shared with other faith communities, but they also allow for strategic alignment with public health and age-friendly priorities to address health issues within the communities they serve. Training and support will be important in expanding existing work.

Recommendation 2: Enhance the social function of faith spaces both for religious users and members of the wider neighbourhood.

Neighbourhoods, and the faith spaces within them, would benefit from broader community and interfaith collaborations. For instance, leveraging outdoor greenspaces for community green walks and gardening initiatives presents an untapped potential to connect communities, faiths, and generations. Additionally, promoting intergenerational activities within faith spaces can further enrich the social fabric of the broader community, creating a more inclusive and cohesive neighbourhood environment.

Recommendation 3: Engage with funders, policy makers and interfaith fora to better understand funding and support opportunities as well as potential barriers.

There is a common misunderstanding among faith leaders regarding their eligibility to apply for external funding, with some mistakenly believing that all activities conducted within faith spaces are ineligible for funding. Actively participating in interfaith fora, city, and local neighbourhood networks, and subscribing to relevant bulletins and newsletters can help clarify specific funding opportunities. Moreover, engaging in these networks provides valuable learning experiences and opportunities to share best practices in securing funding and navigating potential barriers.

Recommendation 4: Explore co-production and other engagement approaches to increase knowledge of older people's needs.

This study suggests exploring co-production and alternative engagement approaches to enhance understanding of older people's needs. During the research, faith-based organisations actively participated in various co-production and engagement methods, collaborative meetings, and Knowledge Exchange Events. Such initiatives have the potential to empower members of faith groups to gain deeper insights into the needs of older people in their communities and beyond, thereby highlighting opportunities for further development within faith spaces.

Recommendation 5: Look to increase peer to peer communications and interfaith exchanges of good practices to support older people.

Having regular opportunities to share learning through peer to peer and interfaith collaboration can yield considerable benefits as a result of the cross-fertilisation between different cultures and styles of working with older people. Using interfaith collaborations and networks to share good practice and exchange experiences about working with older people can optimise the support offered in faith spaces. This could be replicated going forward and would provide opportunities for further interfaith collaboration.

Recommendation 6: Improving accessibility of spaces for older people from different backgrounds and abilities by learning from existing Age-Friendly guidelines.

The research underscores the significance of supporting and improving access to spaces and services for older individuals. It acknowledges the necessity to address barriers to access, which may manifest as physical limitations, such as the absence of wheelchair ramps or inadequate signage, as well as emotional barriers, particularly for individuals of no faith who may feel hesitant to enter faith spaces. Therefore, proactive measures will be essential to ensure the inclusion of members from diverse backgrounds within the wider community.

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"This timely and highly relevant report is the first to provide insights into the role of faith spaces in supporting the development of age-friendly cities and communities. It captures diverse experiences of older people's everyday lives within faith spaces while highlighting ways in which policymakers can work alongside faith communities to support healthy ageing."

Paul McGarry, head of GM Ageing Hub

"As we age, most of our time is spent in our neighbourhood closer to home and faith spaces are a vital part of what is local. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local faith spaces offered safe spaces where support was accessed, and they continue to provide the opportunity for further activities and support helping older people to age well."

Elaine Unegbu, Chair of Age Friendly Manchester Older People's Board

"We welcome this report for highlighting the need to focus on ageing and the role of faith spaces in our local communities. Across our ethnically diverse communities, faith spaces are an important part of daily life for our older people, not just for worship and religious connection, but also deeply critical for holistic support and friendship. Loneliness and isolation are a sad reality in our communities and faith spaces need to be a central part of creating age-friendly cities."

Atiha Chaudry, Chair of GM Ethnic Communities Network and Lead for Manchester BME Network

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