

ACTIVE MINDS STILL LEARNING

RESEARCH BRIEFING

Welcome to our research briefing summarising our work with older learners between autumn 2024-25.

The aim is to tell the story of our small project and to thank all of you who took part for sharing your time and support. We are also sending it to a range of organisations to encourage them to acknowledge, value and support small groups learning in later life. Our initiative was funded by a small National Lottery Award for All grant of £9,600. The research was conducted by a project officer, Dr Lucy Szablewska. It was managed by Dr John Miles and colleagues from the Association for Education and Ageing (AEA) and the Ransackers Association. We are all affiliated through the British Society for Gerontology Special Interest Group for Education and Gerontology.

Our efforts were inspired by our desire to deepen our understanding of what learning in informal community groups means to older people. We already know that attending classes and groups provides opportunities for social connection, keeps people active, and boosts well-being. But what sort of learning is going on in small groups?

The research was a scoping exercise divided into five phases. Our research officer Lucy Szablewska read useful existing research into learning. Then she went out and about in Northeast England finding out about groups ranging from craft and dance to well-being and men's shed groups, to local history and civic groups. She spent most of her time with 12 self-managed and volunteer-led groups. She asked people about their experiences of learning together, how learning in later life differs from learning when young, and what the benefits and challenges of lifelong learning are. She discussed what she found out with her colleagues and group members and summarised it all into ten preliminary findings (see inside). Lastly, she and the team arranged a research round-up event in Redhills in Durham City on September 24 (*see back page*).

In a nutshell our pilot exercise found that there is a rich patchwork of informal groups in our neighbourhoods.

There are 4 cornerstones: low-cost venues, self-help ethos, public-spirited organisers, and a wide variety of learners who have chosen to come along. Some of the learning involves acquiring skills, knowledge and friends. There are elements of learning to grow old through conversations about our rapidly changing world and our personal experiences of ageing. However, the existence of so many groups doesn't mean that everything is sorted when it comes to learning in later life. Groups and venues can face challenges in keeping going.

The Spanish artist Goya is a great example of adapting, evolving and growing. He sketched himself when he was in his 80s, deaf, learning to walk with sticks and adapting to life in a new home. On the picture he wrote 'Aun aprendo'. It means 'I am still learning'. The picture hangs in the Prado Museum in Madrid. We're reproducing it here to inspire us to rethink negative stereotypes and celebrate lifelong learning



TEN KEY FINDINGS

PATCHWORK OF SMALL GROUPS

1. Older people are sometimes talked about in negative ways. The focus is on problems, deficits and decline. But getting out into local neighbourhoods and talking to people in person helps us paint a different picture. There is a lot of get up and go, resilience and kindness. They organise and take part in a multitude of group activities in a range of venues. Some groups are part of national organisations. But many other groups are hyper-local & under the radar.

**It's like a hidden spider's web or a patchwork or a tapestry.¹*

THE CORNERSTONES

2. **Venues** - which are affordable and accessible. Local users often have strong emotional connections with these venues. They aren't just buildings. Academics describe them as 'great good places' and 'public living rooms'.²

**We didn't enjoy school but we enjoy learning about local history and other things now – for pleasure and out of interest. When we were young we used to hang around in this room where we now arrange talks. Our community centre is full of memories for us.*

3. **Group structures** - which are face to face, low-cost and open-hearted. Little paperwork or hierarchy. Self-help ethos. Participants don't need to book in or make an appointment.

**We ask people to put £1 into a pot. Some people don't put anything in and others pay more.*

**We don't give out forms asking people to grade their well-being on a scale between 1-10.*

We just get on with it & people come because they are interested and enjoy themselves.

**We pay £5 a month and some of that goes towards a Christmas meal in a restaurant.*

**After Christmas we all bring our leftovers in and share them.*

4. **Organisers** - who attend regularly and are a reliable point of contact and friendly face. They are facilitators who are able to help people bond with each other. Academics describe them as 'learning companions' and 'backstage supporters'.³

**I print out step by step instructions for my group so they can craft between sessions.*

Many organisers are unpaid volunteers. They are committed to the public good. Some have a strong religious faith. Some are social entrepreneurs who shoulder demanding responsibilities for buildings and financial management.

5. **Learners** – who enjoy choosing what they learn (rather than having to learn as they did in school/workplace). They don't just learn in the group once a week. They bring their learning from the past, their private passions and personal learning projects to the group. They apply themselves to tasks, mentor each other and share their learning with others outside the group. They acquire skills, knowledge and friends, and they develop and flourish.⁴

**We bring our whole selves when we learn to dance, our brains, hearts, bodies & feet.*

**We told a taxi driver that we learned that it was Emily Wilding Davison not Emmeline Pankhurst who died in 1913 at the races after being hit by a horse. We put him right!*

**Crafters are part of a fantastic tradition that's constantly developing.*

**I teach other people in my group how to make beautiful decorative stars out of paper strips.*

¹ The italicised * statements are paraphrased from Lucy's written record of discussions with participants.

² 'Good places' (Ray Oldenburg, 1989) and 'public living rooms' (Stacey Torres, 2025).

³ 'Learning companions' (Cranton and Wight, 2008) and 'backstage supporters' (Rika Yoro-zu-Kurata, 2021)

⁴ Thanks to Alan Potter for his book 'Quality Learning for Positive Ageing' & insights into later life learning.

ACTIVE MINDS STILL LEARNING

LEARNING TO GROW OLD – CARE, CONVERSATION AND GOOD CRACK

6. **Adapting to our changing world** - conversations in informal groups help people keep across current affairs and think about how to respond to progress and disruption.

**I like keeping in touch with what's going on, hearing about people I know, illnesses, funerals and so forth, and finding out about planning applications, new buildings etc.*

They adapt to new trends (and reinventions of previous trends) in frugal and creative ways.

**I make small sculptures out of metals like old cutlery & discuss how to do it with our group.*

**We recycle and upcycle materials from charity shops and share out a stash of donated wool.*

**We knit hats for premature babies & crochet blankets for care homes & to send to Ukraine.*

7. **Adapting to our ageing selves** – coming together enables people to share their feelings about the personal changes that come with ageing and care for each other.⁵

**I think men-only spaces like men's sheds are important for men who do solo hobbies or don't go to the pub. I enjoy the 'crack' & chance to talk about health & well-being stuff.*

**I come for the chat as well as the crafting, but we don't just 'chat'. We help each other solve practical problems and share recommendations.*

They draw on their own resources and each other to manage pain and loss.

**We help each other learn to live with chronic conditions and to accept our new selves.*

**I tell our group that I've spent my whole life acquiring skills. For example, now I'm older I've learned to use a walker with wheels and to sit on it when I'm tired. It's a brilliant skill.*

**I thought I'd stopped learning, but now that you ask, I've got better at playing memory games with my grandchildren. At first I thought I couldn't remember anything, but I can.*

CHALLENGES

8. **Challenges for groups:** groups go through cycles and flourish and fade if they depend on a few key people who are not replaced. Venues are partly dependent on shrinking pots of public funding. Public transport is not always available. Some banks have withdrawn free banking for small, unregistered groups. It can be difficult for people to find out about groups.

9. **Challenges for policymakers:** how to value informal groups and the buildings they meet in as vital 'community assets and infrastructure'.⁶ Small groups are often un-noticed. They can be overshadowed by larger organisations. There is a strong case that small groups save the public purse money by keeping people active and sociable.

10. **Challenges for us all:** how to recognise in older people's conversation the stories that remind us that ageing is a lifelong process and that what is good for older people is good for us all.

**One of our regulars was in his 90s. After he died his family came in and gave us a donation. They said his time with our group was the highlight of his week. They thought he couldn't do much and were amazed at all the new things he learned to do. We weren't amazed. We know what older people can achieve when the right opportunities come along.*

Also how to keep our learning fresh. There is always more to learn, something we didn't realise was there, or something we are avoiding but need to know. How to use our learning to remain informed and active citizens with a social purpose.

⁵ Thanks to Rob Hunter (Leicester Ageing Together) for his thoughts on learning to grow old.

⁶ Thanks to John Tomaney (who grew up in Sacriston near Durham) for his writing on social infrastructure and left-behind-places, and Luciana Lang for her writing on social infrastructure and age-friendly communities.

REDHILLS 24 SEPT 2025

RESEARCH ROUND UP



On 24 September 2025 we arranged a small research round-up event for the organisers of the groups. We invited them to a meeting room in the historic Durham Miners Hall (known as Redhills) in Durham to listen to presentations and share their reflections.

There were 3 short presentations. Lucy Szablewska presented the 10 findings and made the case that a lot of learning goes on in small, sociable and caring groups. John Miles reflected on cuts to government-funded adult education since the 1980s and made the case for better support for learning which prompts us to question ourselves, examine our circumstances and engage with people in power. Thirdly, Bruce Davenport, a heritage researcher from Newcastle University, discussed the ways in which heritage sites – such as Redhills – are funded, managed and supported, often by older volunteers (who learn a lot while volunteering).

Two themes emerged during the discussion. One was the question of who should be responsible for funding and organising adult learning and heritage activities in the future – the public, private or charitable sectors, or us out of our own pockets? It

was a difficult question to answer because of the long history of ‘muddling through’ with a ‘hotch-potch of arrangements’ that differ in every place and for every organisation. That looks likely to continue. Certainly small self-help groups run by volunteers are going to continue to remain important for older learners.

The other theme was how to define learning in later life. For instance, when a group of men get together, talk about their favourite music from their youth, buy a dozen kazoos on Ebay and learn to play them – is that entertainment or is that learning? We all agreed that learning shouldn’t be about memorising information, sitting exams and fear of failure. But we shared different understandings of learning. For some people acquiring skills in a joyful way with other people was the best sort of learning. For others learning is about being curious, drawing in new knowledge, and being open to changing our thinking. This conversation gave us all food for thought and showed that we need to challenge narrow definitions of learning and be open to a wide range of insights.

Afterwards some of the group looked around Redhills and learned about the story behind the superb restorations and new facilities. To book Redhills for conferences, weddings and meetings visit <https://redhillsdurham.org/> or ring 0191 323 3658 or email admin@redhillsdurham.org.

We are sending this briefing to a range of organisations in order to raise awareness about the profoundly valuable ways in which older people skilfully organise themselves with creativity and resilience. An online version of this PDF is available at www.ransackersassociation.org until spring 2026.

