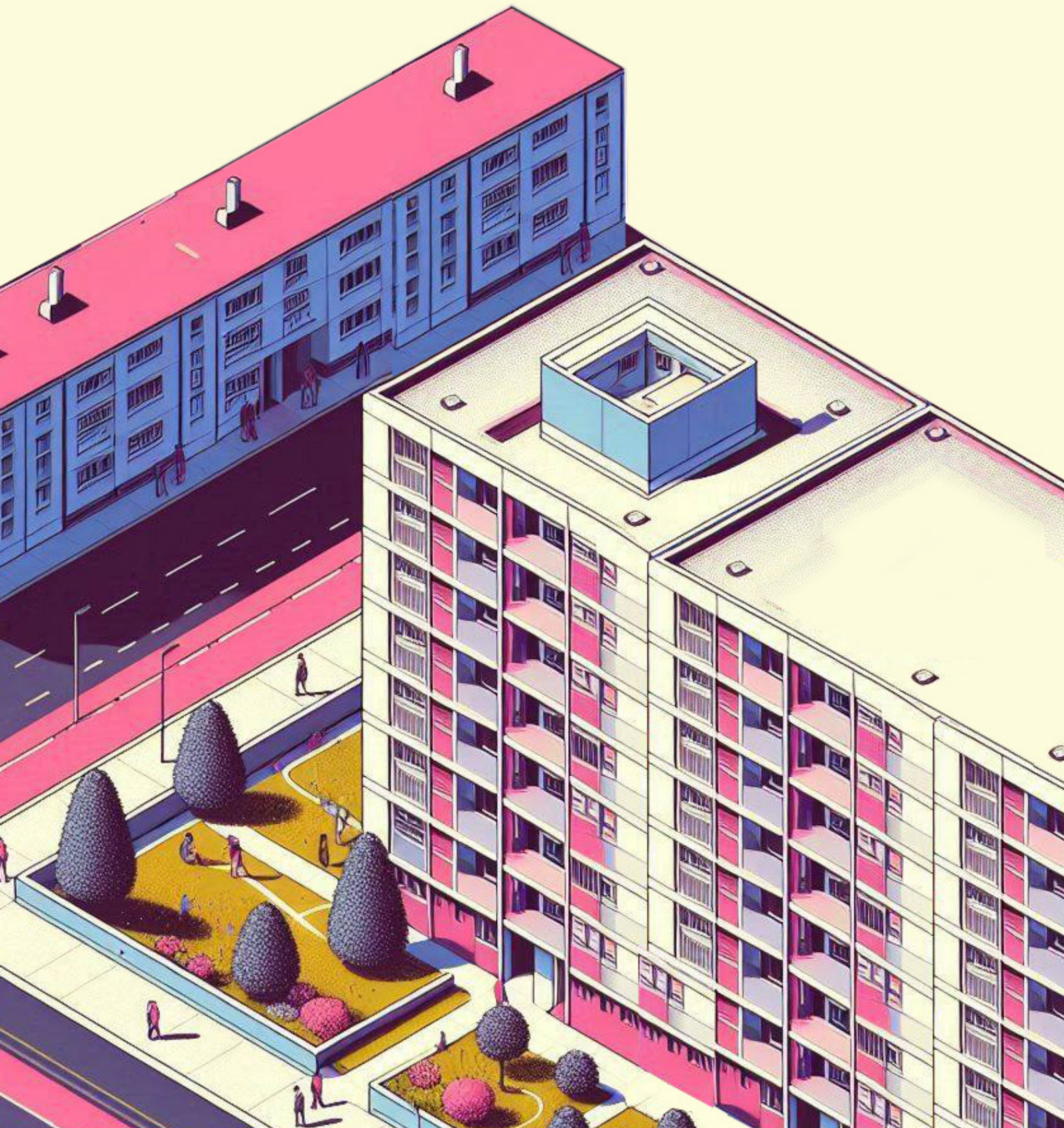


Co-Creating Age-Friendly Social Housing

***Improving experiences of ageing in place
through community collaboration***



Co-Creating Age-Friendly Social Housing: *Improving experiences of ageing in place through community collaboration*

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Glossary

Age-friendly cities and communities - a model, developed by the World Health Organisation (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 City - '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)

CLASS – a community development charity that develops programmes that build capacity, leadership, and peer learning in low-income areas through a participatory and community-led approach.

Cohousing - a collaborative form of housing that brings an intentional community to live together, with a mix of private dwellings and shared/common facilities.

Co-production – a collaborative approach to research and intervention that brings a range of different actors/stakeholders to work together, with a strong ethical ethos around the balancing of power.

Gentrification – a process of urban change where low-income areas are radically transformed, attracting wealthier populations that cause inequalities and displacement for existing residents.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority – the combined authority for the Greater Manchester region across 10 boroughs.

Greater Manchester Housing Providers Group – a partnership of housing associations and housing providers working together to tackle complex housing challenges facing the region.

Housing associations – organisations that own, develop and manage social housing in the UK, and are registered and regulated by the government's Regulator of Social Housing- also known as Registered Social Housing Providers.

Hyper-local – a territory at an intermediate scale between the home and the neighbourhood, i.e. the street, the block, the precinct, the building.

Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group (MUARG) – an interdisciplinary group of researchers based at the University of Manchester working on a range of themes across population ageing and urbanisation with a strong methodological focus on coproduction. The group has strong collaborative links with national, regional and local government, third sector organisations, NGOs and older people.

Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) – a community-based model originating from North America that supports ageing in place, particularly in high-rise accommodation. They capitalise on a high concentration of older adults already living in one place by providing a range of integrated services of health and social support that are retrofitted into the existing housing accommodation where older people have always lived

Social Housing – affordable housing that, in the UK, is predominantly owned and managed by housing associations

Social infrastructure – the shared spaces within a neighbourhood, such as cafes, parks and libraries, which help support social ties and a sense of connectedness (Yarker, 2021).

Spatial Justice – the fair allocation of resources, opportunities and benefits in a place, which influences the capacity of such neighbourhood to accommodate the needs and aspirations of their residents. It also enables tenants to access and make use of urban spaces, as well as have control over the resources that shape them (Soja, 2010).

Co-Creating Age-Friendly Social Housing

Improving experiences of ageing in place through community collaboration

Executive Summary

Context

The World Health Organization's (WHO) *Age-friendly Cities and Communities* model calls for older people to be 'actively involved, valued and supported' in creating fulfilling places to live, supported by cross-sectoral collaboration to address the multi-faceted challenges that older people experience. Research has highlighted the challenges of enacting this on the ground, particularly in minoritised and marginalised communities, given the barriers to civic participation resulting from multiple levels of economic and social exclusion.

Housing associations are an important stakeholder in the Age-Friendly Cities and Communities movement in the UK. Over half of the socially rented properties in England and Wales have an older person (50+) living in them, many of whom experience significant challenges because of economic, social and health inequalities. This has led many housing associations to rethink how they can support their older tenants, beyond the immediate home environment. The National Housing Federation argues that housing associations have "...a key role in shifting the policy agenda from dependence to prevention, from paternalism to choice and independence" (National Housing Federation, 2016).

This project aims to explore how older people, housing associations, academics, and other stakeholders, can come together to develop novel, place-based age-friendly initiatives.

The study aimed to address the following questions:

- How can age-friendly programmes respond to the lived experiences of older tenants?
- What are the processes through which residents and housing associations can co-create age-friendly programmes, recognising the different powers and constraints on each party?
- How can co-produced age-friendly initiatives address different experiences of spatial exclusion, as a result of gentrification, social isolation and discrimination?

Methodology and Case Studies

The project explores these questions through the co-creation of three case study initiatives in Greater Manchester, UK. The project uses a *Participatory Action Research* (PAR) approach, working alongside communities of older people and local stakeholders to take action to co-create both social change and new knowledge at the same time. The case studies are:

- Developing a **Naturally Occurring Retirement Community** initiative at Hopton Court, a 9-storey tower block in Hulme, Manchester (with One Manchester Housing Association)
- Working in partnership across the neighbourhood to support **social infrastructure** in Brinnington, Stockport (with Stockport Homes Housing Association)
- Bringing older tenants together to explore opportunities to create a socially rented **cohousing community** in South Manchester (with Southway Housing Trust Housing Association)



Findings

Based on the case study initiatives, we have identified three cross-cutting factors that are important in co-creating age-friendly social housing: Developing collaborative age-friendly initiatives at a hyper-local scale; supporting co-production by developing trust and redistributing power; and addressing spatial justice through collective action.

Theme 1: Developing collaborative age-friendly initiatives at a hyper-local scale

This study emphasises the role of what has been termed ‘natural neighbourhood networks’ (Gardner 2011) in shaping age-friendly initiatives. These networks, formed through relationships between neighbours, friends, and service providers, influence older people’s experiences and their ability to drive local change. Focusing on a hyper-local scale allowed older people to identify specific community challenges and propose tangible improvements. However, a key finding concerned the lack of integration between community-led initiatives and wider public services that operate at a city or national scale. This highlighted a limitation of integrated ‘place-based’ service delivery, an approach increasingly common in the UK public sector, when these delivery models are unable to accommodate the diverse forms that community-led action can take.

Theme 2: Supporting co-production by developing trust and redistributing power

This study highlights the importance of building trust and addressing power imbalances between tenants and housing associations. Trust is fostered when community-based workers are equipped to form genuine, reciprocal relationships with tenants. By working locally with smaller groups, co-production and partnership are possible. Our study identified benefits when housing association staff have the autonomy to adopt person-centred approaches, acting as mediators within a community rather than representing the housing association’s interest. However, challenges such as staff turnover and short-term contracts are a barrier to developing trust, as tenants experience frustration when established relationships are lost.

Theme 3: Addressing spatial justice through collective action

The case studies demonstrate how age-friendly initiatives can address specific community dynamics and aspirations, and begin to tackle societal challenges such as social isolation, the impact of urban gentrification, and ageism. Housing associations are well placed to collaborate with tenants to address these systemic issues, with collaboration able to resist unwanted changes, mitigate against negative effects, and imagine possible futures. However, long-term concerns relating to spatial justice require sustained support, and short-term projects may harm communities. The study suggests that a more localised approach could enhance the WHO Age-Friendly Cities model, enabling housing tenants and associations to lead positive social change for older generations.

Recommendations

Despite the range of challenges experienced across the three case studies, we found that meaningful change is possible when it addresses the specific social, economic, political and environmental factors of a place and how these affect older people. We suggest that:

Housing associations should...

- Recognise the unique role they can play in supporting age-friendly initiatives, and commit to developing action plans for how they will support ageing in place.
- Provide support, leadership and training to front-line staff delivering age-friendly initiatives.
- Engage with local government, social care organisations, business, charities and the voluntary sector to determine how long-term, preventative initiatives can be resourced.
- Work with other housing associations to share knowledge, best practices and advocate for action to support the age-friendly movement.

Older people should...

- Be recognised as *experts* within their communities and valued as agents of positive change within any age-friendly initiative.

Local Government should...

- *Work* with housing associations to make them core stakeholders in local ageing programmes.

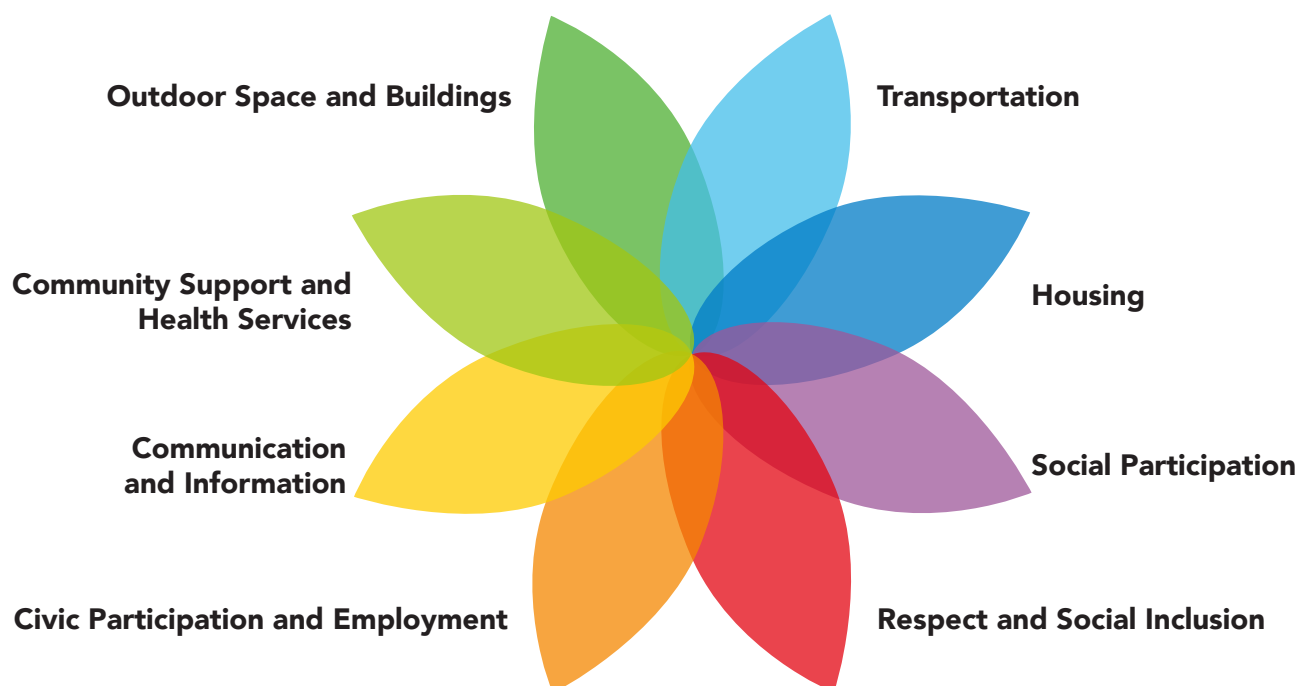
Academics should...

- Value the *contributions* they can make to local age-friendly initiatives, while also being aware of perpetuating negative conditions through the design of grant applications.

1 Introduction

An ageing population raises important questions about how older people can be supported and enabled to age well in cities. ‘Ageing in place’ has emerged as the dominant societal response, one which aims to support older people to live independently in their familiar surroundings for as long as possible. This is also viewed as helping to maintain important connections and relationships in the communities in which they may have lived for much of their adult lives (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024; Pani-Harreman et al., 2021; Peace, 2023;).

The World Health Organization’s (WHO) Age-Friendly Cities and Communities programme is an international movement that aims to support ageing in place, calling for partnerships across sectors that improve the physical and social environment where older people live. The WHO identify eight domains that need to be addressed to increase the age-friendliness of cities (see Figure 1): housing, social participation, respect and inclusion, employment, community support and health services, outdoor space, transportation, and communication and information. Across Greater Manchester, various interventions have been promoted to support community-based age-friendly work, for example the ‘Village Model’ (see Goff et al., 2020), the ‘Ageing in Place Pathfinder’ (see GMCA, 2024), and *Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities* or NORCs (see Brydges et al., 2022). Most of the work to date has focused on the home and the neighbourhood as pivotal scales for supporting ageing in place. There is, however, an *intermediate scale*, between the home and neighbourhood, whose potential role is more ambiguous and less explored. We will refer to this intermediate scale as ‘hyper-local’ - the street, the block, the shared building - where issues and responses are linked to specific places and populations that are affected by them.



Above: The eight domains of the World Health Organisations ‘Age-Friendly Cities and Communities’ approach

Housing associations are an important stakeholder in the Age-Friendly Cities and Communities movement in the UK. Over half of the socially rented properties in England and Wales accommodate people 50 and over, many of whom experience significant challenges because of economic, social and health inequalities (ONS, 2016). Those living in social housing have significantly worse health outcomes than other groups of older people, and many are impacted by social conditions which negatively impact their quality of life. Housing associations, the organisations that own, develop and manage social housing in the UK, are recognising the need to go beyond just the 'bricks and mortar' of the homes they provide, to rethink how they can support their older tenants to age in place, recognising the wider determinants of poor health such as social isolation, poverty and inequality.

Responding to such issues, this report is based on research that developed and explored novel place-based age-friendly initiatives to improve the ageing of ageing in place in social housing in three different areas of Greater Manchester, realised through innovative and collaborative research partnerships between older people, housing associations and academics. The research was developed by an interdisciplinary academic team (architecture, sociology and geography) from the Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group (MUARG), and members of the Greater Manchester Housing Providers' Group (GMHP) and their older tenants. There was also stakeholder involvement from both Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and local charity organisations such as Community Savers (CLASS).

The report is structured as follows: first we establish the context of the Age-Friendly Cities and Communities agenda and its efforts to support ageing in place, before then exploring ageing in place within a social housing context. Second, the methodology of the study is discussed, where we outline the three case study initiatives developed, highlighting the coproduction and mixed-method approach employed. We then present the project's findings through three cross-cutting themes: Developing collaborative age-friendly initiatives at a hyper-local scale, by which we mean the intermediate scale in between the home and the neighbourhood; supporting coproduction by developing trust and redistributing power; and addressing spatial justice through collective action. The report concludes with reflections on the implications of the learning developed through the project, and recommendations for academics, policy-makers and housing associations about how they can support older people to enact transformative community change.

2 Context: Ageing and Social Housing

Ageing and the Age-Friendly approach

The UK has an ageing society, with increasing levels of both diversity and inequality in later life. There are currently 10 million people aged over 65, with one in five older people living in poverty (Centre for Ageing Better, 2024). Over recent decades, there has been increased interest from policy-makers and community-based stakeholders about how to address unequal experiences of ageing, particularly in respect of their health, financial and social dimensions.

In the UK, 85 cities and regions have signed up to the WHO's 'Age-Friendly Cities and Communities' (AFCC) programme, which promotes the creation of age-friendly policies, environments and initiatives that foster independence, good health and social inclusion (WHO, 2007). The age-friendly approach aims to support 'ageing in place', where older people are supported to live independently in their homes and communities for as long as they wish (Horner and Boldy, 2008; Golant, 2015). At the same time, there is an uneven capacity for some urban neighbourhoods to support efforts of ageing in place, made difficult by increasing inequality arising from austerity and gentrification, both of these exacerbating social isolation, spatial exclusion and deprivation (Lewis and Buffel, 2020). The consequence is significant contrasts in health and wellbeing amongst older adults, which are felt most acutely by those living in low-income, marginalised sections of society, including within social housing. The need for alternative neighbourhood-based models to support such groups amidst rapid urban change and widening inequalities is becoming increasingly salient (Goff et al., 2020; Buffel et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is a lack of consensus about how to produce inclusive environments for older people, particularly those living in urban areas of deprivation, facing multiple levels of exclusion (Buffel, Doran and Yarker, 2024).

The age-friendly model calls for older people to be 'actively involved, valued and supported' with infrastructure and services that promote health and wellbeing in ways that are meaningful to them, supported by cross-sectoral collaboration to address the multi-faceted challenges that older people experience (Alley et al., 2007; WHO, 2023). However, there are difficulties enacting this on the ground, particularly in minoritised and marginalised communities, given the barriers to civic participation arising from multiple levels of exclusion. A number of research studies have highlighted the failure of age-friendly initiatives to fully address or involve marginalised groups, despite them being amongst those with most to gain from such programmes (Lehning et al., 2017; Buffel and Phillipson, 2018).

Ageing in Social Housing

Over half of the socially rented properties in England and Wales accommodate people 50 and over, with many older tenants experiencing significant challenges reflecting different types of inequalities (ONS, 2016). 60% of older social tenants report long-term health problems that limit their day-to-day activity compared to 32% of owner occupiers, and 40% of private renters. The demographic characteristics of social housing in the UK have undergone a significant shift over the last 20 years, with life outcomes worse for current generations of older social tenants than previous ones. Acute demands and constrained supply for affordable housing have meant that the social rented sector has shifted more towards supporting vulnerable members of society, with fewer social tenants active in the labour market (Scanlon et al., 2017). This, in turn, has led to an increased number of tenants reaching later life with having experienced cumulative disadvantages, with higher prevalence of financial insecurity and poor physical and mental health amongst older social tenants. Despite this, research shows the importance of social housing in addressing these disadvantaged, particularly compared to the insecurities of private rental accommodations. The support and tenure security that comes with social housing, particularly when tenants feel they are in control of their environment and privacy, is shown to have a positive impact on wellbeing and life satisfaction (Gregory et al. 2020).

Alongside an ageing population and tenant base, many housing associations are also grappling with an ageing housing stock, with 45% of socially rented homes built before 1964. This has led to increased challenges of ensuring homes are appropriate for people to age in place. Despite growth in spending on repairs and improvements since 2019, there has been a 474% increase in complaints concerning substandard living conditions in socially rented accommodation in the same time period (Housing Ombudsman Service, 2025).

The majority (83%) of social housing in the UK is non-specialist, general-needs housing (Hall, 2024: 4), although housing associations also own and operate significant amounts of specialist housing such as Extra Care and Sheltered Housing. However, recognition that the majority of older people will continue to live in mixed communities has led many housing associations to appreciate the importance of programmes that support 'ageing in place'.

The National Housing Federation argues that housing associations have "...a key role in shifting the policy agenda from dependence to prevention, from paternalism to choice and independence" (National Housing Federation, 2016), while the Housing Association Charitable Trust (2024) argue that housing associations need to rethink their approach to an ageing population, looking beyond the bricks and mortar of homes they rent to adopt new place-based approaches grounded in partnership and coproduction. Critically, this requires transformative coproduction that values the existing capabilities and community networks, achieved by cultivating interpersonal relationships in and with existing marginalised communities (Yeh et al., 2024: 203). There is already significant good practice on ageing that can be seen in the social housing sector,

both from mainstream housing associations and specialist providers for older people. Examples of this include:

- Habinteg, for example, not only act as a provider of accessible and adaptable housing, but has a long history of campaigning to improve housing standards across the UK. Working with Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the 1990s, they helped to develop the Lifetime Homes initiative. This was a radical call for more accessible homes at the time, but after years of lobbying and advocacy many of these principles have now been absorbed in the UK Building Regulations as requirements for new housing. Habinteg continue to support policy and research innovation in accessible housing through their Centre for Accessible Environments initiative (Habinteg, n.d.).
- Housing21 became the first local housing association to develop a dedicated Cohousing Strategy aimed at delivering cohousing schemes for older people, with its first cohousing development is under construction at time of publication. Rupali Court in Birmingham, will provide 25 one- and two-bedroom apartments for social rent. (Housing21, n.d.). Housing21 have also worked with the UK Cohousing Network and researchers at Sheffield Hallam University to reflect on the development of their cohousing workstream, highlighting further opportunities for housing associations and cohousing groups to work together going forward (Arbell and Archer 2023).
- Southway Housing Trust has developed a long-running strategy aiming to create age-friendly neighbourhoods in South Manchester. In 2011, Southway Housing Trust partnered with Manchester City Council, Manchester Metropolitan University and University of Manchester to develop a pilot Age-Friendly programme in the Old Moat neighbourhood, using participatory research to develop a community action plan and 114 actions, many of which were delivered in subsequent years (Southway Housing Trust, n.d.; White and Hammond, 2018). The Old Moat pilot not only informed further projects led by Southway Housing Trust in other neighbourhoods, but also wider programmes working in over 35 neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester through the Ambition of Ageing programme (2016-2020) and the Ageing in Place Pathfinder initiative (2022-2025).

3 Aims and Objectives

Research Questions

The findings discussed in this report emerged from a *participatory action research* (PAR) project entitled 'Co-creating age-friendly social housing' (CCAFSH), funded by the *Vivensa Foundation* and which ran between September 2022 and March 2025. The research was developed by an interdisciplinary team (architecture, sociology and geography) from Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Manchester, who are members of the Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group (MUARG), members of the Greater Manchester Housing Provider's Group (GMHP), and their older tenants across three neighbourhoods. There was also stakeholder involvement from both Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and local charity organisations such as Community Savers (CLASS).

The project's aim was to develop and study place-based, age-friendly initiatives to improve the experience of ageing in place in social housing. This was achieved through building on innovative collaborative research approaches involving partnerships between housing associations, older tenants, and academics in a Greater Manchester setting.

The study aimed to address the following research questions:

- How can age-friendly programmes respond to the lived experiences of older tenants?
- What are the processes through which residents and housing associations can co-create age-friendly programmes, recognising the different powers and constraints on each party?
- How can co-produced initiatives aimed at supporting ageing in place address different experiences of spatial exclusion, as a result of gentrification, social isolation and discrimination?

Co-production

The project uses a *Participatory Action Research* (PAR) approach, working alongside communities of older people and local stakeholders to identify and answer research questions together through the design and creation of new age-friendly initiatives. PAR is a collaborative research approach that places value on the importance of experiential knowledge for understanding and tackling issues, through the direct involvement of those involved, taking action to co-create both social change and new knowledge at the same time (Cornish et al., 2023). This type of research is widely promoted within the age-friendly realm, where there is a drive to work 'with' (rather 'to', 'or', or 'for') people, offering communities and organisations greater control over the research process and its outcomes (Buffel, 2018; 2019). It is often seen as a 'deeper' form of participation, with a committed ethos of finding and creating alternative ways to engage in conversation that brings out the best of what everyone can contribute (Perry et al., 2019: 6).

Case Studies

The research involved three different case studies across Greater Manchester, with each area representing a distinct set of conditions that generate spatial exclusion, therefore presenting pressure that impacts opportunities for ageing in place. The age-friendly initiative in each area had a different focus and was led by a different housing association, responding to the specific challenges within each community. In each case study, a project officer(s) was employed through the housing association to lead and support the age-friendly intervention.



Above: Map of Manchester and Stockport, showing the location of the three case study locations

1. Naturally Occurring Retirement Community in Hulme, Manchester (with One Manchester)

One Manchester Housing Association operate across central, south and east Manchester, where they own and manage over 12,000 homes. They have a strong presence in Hulme, the area of this case study. Hulme, located directly southwest of Manchester's city centre, has a relatively small but highly disadvantaged older population that are concentrated in high-rise tower blocks. Older residents are negatively impacted by the ongoing expansion of the nearby universities exacerbating existing experiences of multiple and entrenched deprivation. In this case study, One Manchester Housing Association partnered with a tenant group to explore how best to support older tenants living in Hopton Court, a nine-storey tower block adjacent to both the University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University. Despite not being designed specifically for older people, 75% of tenants are 50 and over and 96% are living alone (Cribbin et al., 2021). There are well-established mutual aid and social programmes organised by tenants for those living in the block who struggle to navigate the complex health and social care system.

After years of campaigning, tenants partnered with their housing association to trial reimagining the block as a '*Naturally Occurring Retirement Community*' (NORC). Originating in North America, NORCs are living environments or areas that contain a large concentration of older adults. A NORC programme takes advantage of this, providing a range of integrated services of health and social support that is retrofitted into the existing housing accommodation where older people live (Jiaxuan et al., 2022). By bringing social and health support *into* the block, NORCs facilitate ageing in place, offering a proactive rather than reactive approach to challenges associated with ageing. Given that NORCs are tenant-led, they also offer the opportunity for direct involvement of the older people who live there to have a say in shaping how they want to live. The model itself is novel to the UK, particularly within a social housing context.

The project funded a NORC project/development officer for 2 years ending in October 2024 to assist in developing the NORC initiative on the ground. They had the following objectives: catalysing tenant-led initiatives and building both trust and positive relations between tenants; supporting the development and tenant management of a community space in the block; and developing links with external service providers. There were difficulties that created barriers for progressing the NORC model, however the project officer focused on bringing the community together, having direct engagement with 46 older tenants, convening the Hopton Tenant Meetings which met on 10 occasions, and hosting 70 drop-in sessions to support socialisation with different activities each week, usually centred on food, music and storytelling. They also worked with tenants to organise 14 events including community BBQs and day trips, acted as key facilitator and bridge for local services. Examples of this included bringing the local Cornbrook Medical Practice into the block during tenant meetings, and also supporting the co-creation of the proposed Hopton Court community space by conducting a block-wide consultation. The aim was to bring as many different voices into the process so that the NORC programme reflects the diversity of the block itself, responding to aspirations of tenants that emerged over the two-year engagement on the ground.



Top: Members of the Hopton Court NORC partnership
Bottom: Photograph of Hopton Court

2. Supporting social infrastructure in Brinnington, Stockport (with Stockport Homes)

Brinnington is located 1.5 miles north of Stockport's city centre, and is physically isolated from surrounding neighbourhoods due to an elevated motorway to the east and south, along with a river to the north and west. There is a significant disparity between social, economic and health deprivation in Brinnington and the relatively affluent suburbs nearby, leading to stigmatisation and exclusion of local residents. Brinnington sits in the 22nd most deprived ward nationally, and has a significantly lower life expectancy than both the local and national averages (One Stockport, 2023).

Stockport Homes is an 'arms-length management organisation' (ALMO) for Stockport Council, who oversee the management of their housing stock of around 12,000 properties. In this case study, Stockport Homes worked to bring together a group of residents to develop a programme of age-friendly activities, with the aim being to overcome historical difficulties in engaging tenants from Brinnington. The case study also explored opportunities for Stockport Homes and older residents to engage with other stakeholders and community groups in the area. The project ran parallel to the '*Ageing in Place Pathfinder*' initiative that spread across 10 boroughs in Greater Manchester, where a team of three project officers employed through Stockport Homes were working together across different scales and spaces on the Brinnington estate.

Initially, the focus for our project was working in the neighbourhood centre, which consists of a small pedestrian precinct of shops and a community centre managed by Stockport Homes, which houses the local library, community café and neighbourhood offices. However, existing challenges and politics circling this area meant that the team were confronted by hostility around its use, and diverted a lot of their attention to instead going out to the community to widen engagement.

On the ground, this translated into a process of engagement and relationship-building across the estate, where the team tried to support connections with residents and community groups. The project team put on events with social, physical activity or skills-based aims, including a weekly drop-in; extensive work to support and coordinate between existing stakeholders and organisations in the community, and convening a steering group to bring tenants, community volunteers and core stakeholders together. All of the engagements had the sole purpose of generating opportunities for older residents to share aspirations for, and be involved with, the shaping of their neighbourhood.



Top: The First House Community Hub in Brinnington.
Bottom: Part of the public plaza outside First House

3. Exploring opportunities for socially rented cohousing in the area around Old Moat in South Manchester (with Southway Housing Trust)

Southway Housing Trust operate across the south of Manchester, managing over 6000 homes. Their general needs housing stock is dominated by three-bedroom properties, which for many older tenants may be unsuitable given the challenges associated with reduced mobility, as well as what may be a preference to downsize or 'rightsize' in later life (Hammond et al., 2018). As a result, in line with their long-term commitment to support age-friendly principles, Southway has sought to diversify its housing stock.

This case study explored Southway's attempt to develop a fully social rented co-housing scheme with a group of their existing older tenants. Cohousing is a residential community which combines individual dwellings with shared social facilities. Cohousing communities are usually resident-led and managed, with the explicit aim of generating social bonds between residents. There are few cohousing communities in the UK, and the bottom-up, self-funded development model seen in most UK examples means that few opportunities currently exist for social housing tenants to get involved in cohousing communities (Carrere et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2020).

The project aimed to explore the processes through which older tenants can come together to negotiate a cohousing community that supports them to age in place, recognising the legal, financial and operational constraints that need to be overcome. A project officer was employed for 13 months until February 2025 to support and guide tenants through this process, which started with bringing together a group of interested tenants through initial drop-in sessions, none of whom had any prior knowledge or experience of cohousing.

The journey has consisted of visioning workshops, design workshops, trips to existing cohousing schemes, and engagement in a series of activities that help support the skills needed to develop a cohousing community, such as community cooking or consensus decision-making sessions. Throughout these various engagements, tenants have been encouraged to take their own ideas/aspirations about cohousing and negotiate them with others in the group, to the point of being able to plan out an individual dwelling to start imagining what form the community might take.



Top: Members of the Southway Cohousing Group on a study visit to Chapel Town Cohousing
 Bottom: The Southway Cohousing group undertaking a consensus decision-making workshop

4 Methodology

Given our embedded nature in the project, as academics we have reflected on the process, gathering insight and key learning. This was done through a multi-method approach (common in participatory action research), including: fieldnotes and observations of two years of direct engagement in the communities along with informal conversations had during that period; interviews with stakeholders/tenants; monthly reflections meetings with project officers in each area and surveys. Together, these methods allow us to identify the challenges and opportunities that emerged in each case study, and to better understand the role housing associations and older tenants can have in co-creating age-friendly initiatives. Further details of the data collection methods can be found in the table below.

Methods	Overview of activity in each case
Literature review	A review of existing literature on each of the different themes underpinning the distinct focus of each case study was carried out, including: Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs); the role of 'social infrastructure' within marginalised urban neighbourhoods; cohousing for older communities; participatory action research and coproduction methodologies Each identified key themes and gaps, building on the existing knowledge that already exists amongst the partners in the collaborations.
Scoping research <i>(Total of 5 interviews and 2 focus group workshops)</i>	Before starting the participatory action research in each case study, the research team conducted initial scoping interviews to build up a greater understanding of each area and project: Hulme: 1 stakeholder interview with CLASS and project officer. (The NORC pilot started before the CCAFSH project, and research team had prior involvement with the groups on the ground, hence not as much scoping research was necessary) Brinnington: 4 interviews and 1 focus group with Stockport Homes employees; 2 interviews with local stakeholders; attending various regular events hosted by local community groups; and a 1 hour walk around with Stockport Homes employees

	South Manchester: One two-hour workshop with senior staff at Southway Housing Trust. The research team had also previously worked with Southway Housing Trust on a teaching collaboration, as part of the Master of Architecture programme at Manchester School of Architecture. This lay the ground for the case study and informed the initial trajectory of the project.
Collaborative activities documented through (auto-)ethnographic observation <i>(Total of 404 hours)</i>	The engagement on the ground took different forms in each area, employing a variety of 'methods in action' to develop familiarity with the communities and to gather rich insight on the process. <i>Hulme:</i> The research team spent more than 225 hours engaging with the community over two years, consisting of weekly drop-in sessions in Hopton Court, as well supporting the NORC Development Worker to organise meetings, events such as BBQs and day trips, as well as group activities such as community cooking and gardening underpinning the NORC initiative. There was also engagement in the preparation and organisation 10 Hopton tenant meetings and 10 partnership meetings/workshops. <i>Brinnington:</i> More than 179 hours were spent on the ground, having meetings and informal conversations with the project officer, as well as attending the local community groups and events over 1.5 years. This included weekly drop-in sessions held at various locations in the area for over 1.5 years, over 10 events planned by the project officer, the supporting of existing initiatives/events and 14 steering group meetings. <i>South Manchester:</i> The research team supported the organisation and delivery of 7 two-hour workshops, two trips to existing co-housing schemes, and a two-day intensive co-design workshop over a 13-month period. Data on each area was collected through observational notes, informal conversations and photographs.

Reflective interviews with project officers <i>(Total of 25 interviews)</i>	The project officers in each area were interviewed periodically by the research team in order to reflect on their experiences throughout the process, highlighting barriers and opportunities. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was recorded. 7 were held with Stockport Homes; 12 with One Manchester; and 6 with Southway.
Interviews with senior housing association colleagues <i>(Total of 5 interviews)</i>	Interviews were held with senior roles within each housing association to explore the view of these programmes from a senior leadership perspective, and how age-friendly projects might fit into the wider movements and challenges of the social housing sector – including 2 with One Manchester, 2 with Stockport Homes and 1 with Southway Housing Trust
Interviews with tenants and community volunteers <i>(Total of 10 interviews)</i>	On top of the numerous hours of informal conversations held on the ground and recorded via note-taking, the research team conducted recorded interviews with tenants and community volunteers in each area – including 4 in Hulme, 2 in Brinnington and 4 in South Manchester. The aim of these interviews was to understand the process from the perspectives of the community. The length of each interview was between 30-60 minutes.



5 Findings

Based on the three case study initiatives, we identified three factors that are important in co-creating age-friendly social housing: Developing collaborative age-friendly initiatives at a hyper-local scale; supporting co-production by developing trust and redistributing power; and addressing spatial justice through collective action.

Theme 1

Developing collaborative age-friendly initiatives at a hyper-local scale

How can age-friendly programmes respond to the lived experiences of older social tenants? Geographic scale is an important aspect of Age-Friendly initiatives, with significant implications for the kinds of activities that can be achieved on the ground. Much of the existing practices supporting older people to age in place have tended to operate at the scale of individual cities and neighbourhoods, geographies that align with those of local government operations and associated public service providers. Similarly, there is a significant body of work around age-friendly homes, and the way that the physical environment of a single dwelling can support older people to age well in place.

An area that is less well understood is the intermediate, hyper-local scale between the home and the neighbourhood, i.e. the street, the block, the precinct, the building. These are geographies that enable the development of '*natural neighbourhood networks*' (Gardner 2011), which are interactions between people (friends, neighbours, strangers, service providers) that are realised in place. The sites of natural neighbourhood networks include the social infrastructure outside of the home environment (parks, cafés, community centres), but also thresholds and transitory spaces (bus stops, pavements, elevators, shared gardens in residential blocks). An important concept raised by Gardner is '*relationships of proximity*' - that being physically close to other people, particularly when it is the same people regularly, provides the opportunity for informal networks to emerge. These networks grow from spontaneous social interaction where mutual respect, admiration and camaraderie are allowed to emerge, which help foster peer-support and interdependence between.



Although this hyper-local scale is important in determining the experiences older people have in their community, it is also a scale of ambiguity, lacking formal leadership and collective resources, thus seen in the eyes of many stakeholders merely as a constituent of a wider geography. Our research suggests, however, that new approaches that embrace this hyper-local scale can offer significant benefits in generating transformative community change.

This section will explore two aspects of this: first, the role of proximity and shared experiences in helping tenants define and respond to localised issues; second, the potential for housing associations to contribute to these efforts due to their unique position as local stakeholders. Proximity and shared experience as a driver for local action.

The opportunities of taking a hyper-local approach based on a set of shared experiences between tenants can be seen in the Hopton Court case study (Case Study 1), where tenants came together to develop a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community programme. This case study demonstrates how using '*relationships of proximity*' as a starting point for local action enables forms of intervention that wouldn't otherwise be possible.

Example 1: Addressing local challenges through the co-creation of a NORC programme

Case Study: Hopton Court NORC, Hulme

There has been a history of community-led action in Hopton Court, with a core group of tenants providing support to more vulnerable individuals living in the tower block. Exhausted by reactively supporting their neighbours on a case-by-case basis, many of whom had high levels of complex needs, this group began organising to raise awareness and attract more support and resources into the block. The proximity of tenants was a defining factor in their decision to come together. Not only did everyone have a shared set of experiences relating to problems within the tower block, but the close and regular interactions made tenants acutely aware of the plight of particular residents experiencing health challenges or financial hardship.



Above: Examples of community-led action from Hopton Court tenants. Left to Right: A poetry book, a protest movement, a theatre production, and two research reports produced.

Tenants also began collaborating with local organisations such as *Community Led Action Saving and Support (CLASS)*, who helped them to build relationships with other stakeholders in the community, including the local health centre, academics from the local universities and the landlord of the building, One Manchester. Tenants were supported to carry out community-led research, where the hyper-local scale enabled a survey to be taken door to door to every older resident in the block. These research projects led the group to focus on the Naturally Occurring Retirement Community model as a potential solution to the challenges they faced.

The ability for the NORC model to build on the strengths of the natural neighbourhood networks that existed within the block was noted by tenants:

“When I first heard about [the NORC], I was empowered by it. From what I can understand, it’s about keeping ageing people in their own properties. And so it makes sense from a community perspective, in building community. [The NORC] keeps somebody living within their community, and that can only be a good thing...if someone is ageing, they shouldn’t lose their community or have to move out of their community, at a time when they need the community more than ever?”
(Hopton Court tenant)

Critically, the hyper-local focus of the NORC, operating in a single tower block, allowed tenants to develop activities that responded to specific needs for the people and the place where they live. The project officer was able to host a drop-in located in the lobby of the tower block, a threshold space that all tenants had to move through, which led to increased engagement and curiosity about the programme. Equally, the hyper-local focus enabled the project to address specific conditions experienced by tenants, which might not have been shared by those living elsewhere in the neighbourhood. For example, the expansion of student-led housing has meant that affordable dining options have been lost in recent years, and the resultant loss of social infrastructure has led to tenant complaints about the lack of things to do during weekends. The group responded to this by setting up a Saturday Breakfast Club, hosted in the caretaker’s room, where tenants can come together to eat and chat.

The NORC programme exemplifies the potential for age-friendly programmes to build on the ambitions, skills and concerns held by older tenants, which are translated into collective action when supported to do so within a socially connected community. This aligns with emerging discussions in the study of ageing, which recognises the importance of starting from the strengths of older people and the contributions they are already making to their environments and communities, building on this organically rather than seeking to address the problem from scratch (Yeh et al., 2024: 216).

Housing associations as facilitators of tenant-led local action

Housing associations in the UK have the opportunity to be important stakeholders in supporting age-friendly working due to their strong geographic footprint. Many housing associations in the UK were established through a stock transfer of former council estates, or operate as arms-length management companies for local government-owned housing, meaning that they often represent significant properties within a local area. As a result, many housing associations commit to undertaking community development work in places where they have a concentration of tenants. These staff are well-placed to facilitate and coordinate opportunities for local action, understanding opportunities for support or resources that might not be known to tenants. An example of this is the Brinnington Art Group, a voluntary group who were supported to expand their offer to address wider concerns in the neighbourhood.

Example 2: Using housing association capabilities to support existing community groups

Case Study: Brinnington, Stockport

The Brinnington Art Group was established and led by residents, delivering regular art classes attended by older people at the First House community centre. Through an increased presence of Stockport Homes' team on the ground, the art groups organiser approached them because they were keen to engage more within the community and expand the group's offer.

After engaging with the art group, the project officers learned that the group was being funded by the organiser directly, who was unaware that financial support was available. The team supported the group to write funding bids, aligned to the group's ambition to address wider concerns in the neighbourhood through their art practices.



Above: Brinnington Art Group

After receiving funding, the group began '*Brinnington Rocks*', an intergenerational initiative where people from Brinnington were invited to decorate a rock, which was later to become a mural outside First House. The programme was envisaged as a way to bring younger and older people together, established in part due to ongoing issues with anti-social behaviour in the community, which several older residents reported as making them fearful about going out of their homes. The Stockport Homes team were able to publicise the initiative within their network, including to a local primary school which participated in the programme.

The project officers and Brinnington Art Group also collaborated on a mural project based at a local care home. Both the Stockport Homes team and members of the art group felt that the care home was quite isolated from the wider community, and felt it important that they were proactive in reaching out. Again, the project officers facilitated the connection between the art group and the care home, providing a small amount of funding to paint a canvas, which the care home residents participated in as a joint activity.

These two projects exemplified the value of the professional peer network that the Stockport Homes team provided, and its ability to support tenants to translate their ideas into local action. Due to their neighbourhood-wide remit, the team already had good relationships with other community-facing professionals in Brinnington, such as managers at the care home and staff at the primary school, and were able to commit time to bringing the groups together and finding resources to allow these activities to take place.

The data and communication channels that housing associations maintain allowed them to be uniquely placed to facilitate targeted, hyper-local working. Across the three case study sites this took several different forms, including sharing on the housing association's social media channels, e-bulletins, newsletters, posters, and the use of tenant contact information to directly target communications based on demographic characteristics. The use of these channels was not consistent across the case study sites. Some project officers expressing surprise that others had been able to send targeted invitations to tenants based on data held by the housing association, with staff hearing conflicting advice about usage of tenant data from their respective communications teams.

Example 3: Leveraging housing association communication channels and data to support engagement

Case Study: South Manchester Cohousing

Unlike most cohousing groups, which are bottom-up initiatives created by eventual residents, Southway wished to explore the viability of bringing together a group of older tenants to develop cohousing with them. The first barrier to this was uncertainty about which of their tenants might be interested in cohousing, or even if any of their residents knew what cohousing was. As a result, the first steps of the South Manchester Cohousing case study were an advertising and recruitment campaign, aiming to provide material that explained cohousing and set out what Southway Housing Trust wanted to achieve. This information sharing would be supported by a series of 5 in-person drop-in events in different neighbourhoods where tenants could ask questions or discuss the project. The aim was to bring together an initial tenant steering group to push the project forward.

To reach as many people as possible, the project officer worked with the communications team at Southway Housing Trust to develop an engagement plan that utilised their existing internal capabilities. The communication team helped create a website with all necessary information, and five social media posts from the main Southway Housing Trust accounts to direct people to the website with short, animated video clips. These posts received 3355 views and 35 likes over the month after they were posted, and led to the project officer following up conversations with some tenants who commented or replied to the posts.

Come and talk to us

Southway Housing & Manchester Metropolitan University are working in partnership to look at how a cohousing project may work in South Manchester. Southway tenants who are over 50 years old are invited to come and chat with us at one of the **FREE** events below to find out more about cohousing and to share their thoughts.

Barlow Moor Community Centre
23 Merseybank Avenue M21 7NT
4th March, 10am-12pm

Withington Library
410 Wilmslow Road M20 3BD
5th March, 1-3pm

St Catherine's Community Centre
School Lane M20 6HS
6th March, 1-3pm

Burnage Library
Burnage Lane M19 1EW
12th March, 1-3pm

Westcroft Community Centre
26 Westcroft Road M20 6EF
19th March, 10-12pm

If you can't make one of these events or you have missed them don't worry you can still contact us using the details on the back of this leaflet.

Further information
Some useful links where you can find out more about cohousing.

Over 50's Cohousing
Southway Housing & Manchester Metropolitan University's project.

Community Led Homes
A website with lots of useful information about cohousing.

LILAC Cohousing
A video tour around LILAC cohousing scheme in Leeds.

Lancaster Cohousing
An Interesting 'Tedx Talks' video by Alison Cahn.

New Ground Cohousing
An older women's cohousing scheme in Barnet.

Contact us
If you would like to find out more about cohousing or to give us your thoughts contact Paul Greenwood on:
p.greenwood@southwayhousing.co.uk
07860 758 361

Cohousing
co-creating communities

Above: Part of a booklet posted to Southway Housing Trust tenants

Next, the information on the website was condensed into an email, which was sent to every Southway Housing Trust tenant aged between 50-70 (the target age set by the housing association), with over 2000 tenants receiving this message. The information was also formatted as a flyer and brochure, which was mailed out to 858 Southway Housing Trust tenants between 50-70 for whom the housing association did not have an email address on file.

The campaign led to 24 requesting to join the project via email, 10 people attended drop in sessions. Although each member of the cohousing group decided to join for their own reasons, concerns about becoming socially isolated as they aged were cited by many tenants:

"I liked the kind of ethos of [cohousing]... for me it's about wanting to live independent and healthy, wanting to be part of an active community, it's about being connected but also about having privacy, and having those stronger community connections in place, it's about building connections"
(Southway tenant)

"Cohousing is new, it's something different...I'd never heard it before, I am interested in the community aspect of it...it would be nice to have more people to have a chat with because I'm nearly 60, and I know I am looking at retirement and older age and I don't want to be on my own a lot of time"
(Southway tenant)



Challenges of hyper-local working

Several challenges must be recognised about working at a hyper-local scale. The lack of alignment with existing geographies used by statutory or public services means that it has been challenging to build connections with existing neighbourhood-wide programmes. This was the case in Hulme, where tenants had mixed experiences in embedding public services into the NORC programme within their tower block, as explained in Example 3.

Example 4: Integrating health support into community settings

Case Study: Hopton Court NORC, Hulme

Research led by tenants at Hopton Court revealed that older people in the block had high levels of health and social care requirements, and that barriers were preventing older people in the block support (Cribbin et al., 2021). To address this, the NORC development work arranged a meeting with members of the Manchester Local Care Organisation, whose Neighbourhood Health teams were responsible for leading public health initiatives in the city. The Neighbourhood Health teams in Manchester are organised into areas of around 50,000 people, and it proved difficult to find a way of embedding their programme of work into Hopton Court. The Neighbourhood Health team offered to train tenants in the block to be 'health champions', which aims to empower individuals to share advice and support with their neighbours. Tenants in the block rejected this offer, which they felt was inappropriate given the high and complex level of need in the block, and would place an unacceptable burden on those who were trained. The Neighbourhood Health teams made it clear that direct support would be hard to achieve within Hopton Court, given the challenging resource environment within the public health sector.

The NORC programme at Hopton was more successful in building a connection with the local health centre, located a few meters from the block. This included health workers, collaborating with an *Independent Living Worker* who worked at Hopton Court in 2021-2022, to develop a crisis list of vulnerable tenants living in the block.

"It can sometimes be difficult to obtain access to Hopton Court and [the independent worker] has facilitated this for our clinical team. She has encouraged residents who may not have seen a GP for years to make appointments and come into the surgery, allowing us to build rapport with vulnerable. [The independent living worker] has really helped to reduce the workload of the surgery and provided support for some of our most vulnerable patients."

(Local healthcare worker)

Although the *Independent Living Worker* role concluded in 2022, the relationship continued when the *NORC Development Project Officer* was employed later that year. They continued to collaborate with the medical centre to arrange for them to come to Hopton Court to provide general health checks directly after a tenants' meeting, and offer basic checks such as a blood pressure test. These interactions were crucial in developing relationships between tenants and health professionals. As a result, one tenant has become a community connector between the tenants and the health centre, regularly collecting leaflets and flyers to share with neighbours and post on the notice board, as well as informing other tenants of ongoing health initiatives during the Hopton.

The attempts to integrate wider programmes into the age-friendly interventions were a frustration in both Hulme and Brinnington, where we observed a disconnect between tenants' expectations of public services and what was being delivered. In both areas, tenants often understood the specific conditions at a hyper-local scale – the individuals engaging in anti-social behaviour, or the specific reasons behind delayed hospital discharge – and were disappointed when these weren't acted on. This highlights the potential for tenants operating at a hyper-local scale to address some of the complex, place-based challenges experienced in communities, but only if public services have adequate resources and programmes are responsive enough to address issues as they are identified.

The focus on hyper-local interventions also raises important questions about equality of opportunities, and the appetite stakeholders have for funding activities in a specific context as opposed to an offer that is available to all residents. A counterargument to this is that there is more to be gained from investment in areas with high levels of need, but also that the proximity and connectedness of individuals allow for the creation of added efficiencies, as exemplified by the Hopton tenant acting as a connector to his neighbours. In Hopton Court, we can see how the NORC intervention was able to build social cohesion and interdependence between neighbours who interact regularly, which would have been impossible had the beneficiaries been individual residents distributed across a wide geographic area.

To summarise, working at this hyper-local scale enables targeted activities that respond to local concerns that would be hard to replicate by programmes operating at a broader neighbourhood and city scale, but equally these localised initiatives are limited by a lack of alignment with some forms of public sector service delivery. Our study does, however, highlight the potential for age-friendly initiatives at a hyper-local, neighbourhood and city scale to be complementary. Community groups with close, place-based connections can learn from each other to socialise good practice in a neighbourhood. An example of this is the Meredith Matters programme in Hulme, which began partway through the NORC programme at Hopton Court. The Meredith Matters team was proactive in engaging in the NORC project to make sure they could embed as much learning as possible into their initiative, which similarly aimed to improve health and resilience of older tenants in a neighbouring tower block.

Equally, good practice in communities can be quickly embedded into wider initiatives at a city scale when there is a supporting infrastructure to enable this. In Greater Manchester, there has been a long history of age-friendly initiatives in neighbourhoods, many of them involving housing associations and academic partners, supported by the GM Ageing Hub. Both Southway Housing Trust and Stockport Homes are part of a programme led by the GM Ageing Hub called 'Ageing in Place Pathfinder', a partnership aiming to create better neighbourhoods for older people. This provides opportunities for practitioners can share experiences and good practice, building a knowledge base locally and socialising the importance of age-friendly working across different industries and sectors of local government. This included a workshop led by our Hulme project officer, who worked with several practitioners from across Greater Manchester to reflect on the challenges of coproduction through a creative writing exercise.

Finally, our research has highlighted how many older people feel they have an ownership and stake in their hyper-local environment, with older people experiencing a greater sense of agency when compared to the wider neighbourhood or city. Critically, this allows new forms of co-production to emerge, where all residents within a geography can engage directly in collaborations that shape their experiences of ageing in place. In the next section, we will explore the nature of these co-production processes in our case studies, highlighting challenges and opportunities in achieving cross-sectoral collaboration between older people, social housing providers, academics and wider stakeholder groups.

Theme 2 Supporting coproduction by developing trust and redistributing power

Coproduction is central to the 'Age-friendly' approach, which seeks to place older people at the centre of decisions and processes that affect their lives and the places that they live. Coproduction involves "approaches, ways of knowing, voices and actions that come from a greater plurality of starting points, perspectives and critically conscious relationships" (Yeh et al., 2024: 220). We argue that the hyper-local scale of age-friendly interventions enables new models of coproduction by developing trust and reallocating power through community-led initiatives. For housing associations, there are significant opportunities to produce these new forms of coproduction by building on their existing relationships in communities. Equally, distrust or animosity that might have built up over time can be barriers to coproduction, and can require novel models of engagement to rebuild connections in communities. This section will unpack these findings in turn, reflecting on the opportunities and challenges involved.

Developing Trust

One of the key benefits of adopting hyper-local engagements is the ability for housing association officers to develop genuine and interpersonal connections with tenants, in a way that is simply not feasible at neighbourhood-scale geographies with thousands of residents. Our research revealed that this creates opportunities for iterative and longer-term processes of engagement that can identify and address multifaceted barriers to participation. A key method for achieving this has been through person-centred approaches to engagement, with the frequency of these across the three case studies suggesting an inherent ability for initiatives at this hyper-local scale to foster inclusion and build trust.

A common theme was the dissociation between tenants' views of their housing provider and their views of individual workers employed by their housing provider. In many cases, markers of institutional roles were often seen as limiting workers' ability to form genuine relationships with tenants, with one project officer in Brinnington highlighting their corporate lanyard as a reminder of a power imbalance between the housing provider and the community:

"If you've got your lanyard on, you've had it, they don't want to speak to you. We don't wear our lanyards, it's about listening to people and being yourself...Don't go in there with 'Hey, I'm from Stockport Homes'...just be yourself and treat people how you want to be treated. I do think that sometimes it is forgotten...[we take] every little opportunity that we have to humanise ourselves and integrate ourselves as part of the community"
(Stockport Homes project officer)

One of the ways we observed the housing association project officers in all three case studies develop trust was through actions of affective labour, where they showed genuine care beyond what is expected of an institutional representative. This notion of 'affective labour' is often ignored in accounts of co-production, where the true essence of what 'relationship building' actually entails within such communities is glossed over.

Example 5: Cooking for co-researchers to build rapport

Case Study: South Manchester Cohousing

Following a campaign to recruit of tenants to a core steering group (see example 3), the first workshop to develop the Southway Cohousing Group was held at a community centre in Burnage, Manchester. The session was scheduled for 6-8 pm because several group members had work responsibilities during the day, and consequently the project officer agreed to provide a full evening meal for participants. While the instinctive reaction was to pay for an external caterer to provide lunch, the research team and project officers instead made an active decision to cook dinner for the group, each picking a recipe that they regularly cooked at home. The focus of the first session was to outline several key aspects of cohousing, including the use of social eating as a way of building community, so it felt an appropriate way not only to feed the group but to use it as a practical learning opportunity.

Prior to the first session, none of the group knew each other, so the meal allowed 40 minutes for a group of tenants and social housing officers to (literally) break bread and start to build relationships.



Above: Researchers, housing association workers and tenants having a shared meal as part of a workshop event

Several positive comments were made by tenants about the decision to cook the food rather than buy it in, and two tenants agreed to return the favour and cook for the next session (with the cost of this reimbursed from the project's budget). After the session, the project officers reflected that they felt the decision to cook was positive as it showed their commitment to the project beyond it simply being a job they are paid to do, as well as signalling that the project was itself a social activity to engage in.

It must be recognised that behind the scenes an institutional bureaucracy remained in place, with the housing associations officers needing to undertake food hygiene training to provide catering for the session. This was hidden from the tenants who only saw the housing associations officers being welcoming and accommodating.

The use of person-centred approaches created challenges across the three case studies, particularly when project officers were exposed to older people struggling with challenging circumstances. Beyond being hospitable, the adoption of person-centred approaches also led to examples of long-term and iterative forms of engagement, where the barriers to participation that are prevalent amongst marginalised older communities could be identified and addressed. An example of this in the Hopton Court case study was the NORC project officer's work to overcome language barriers in the block.

Example 6: Navigating language barriers to support inclusive engagement

Case Study: Hopton Court NORC, Hulme

Recognising that eight different languages are spoken by tenants in Hopton Court and that many of these tenants had not previously been engaged in the community, the NORC project officer decided to learn to say 'hello' in all the languages spoken in the block.

"...it's just a respectful thing. I suppose it's nice to learn to say hello, I mean it takes a bit of effort, but it opens a lot of doors."

(NORC project officer)

Building from this, the NORC project officer started using a translation app, which allowed tenants with limited English language skills to engage in a complex and nuanced co-design process to support a new community space that was being planned. This opened the door for these tenants to become integrated into the wider group, in turn building their confidence by practising English with their neighbours in the weekly drop-in socials:

"...I said [to a tenant], 'oh you should come in and have a brew on a Tuesday', but then [they] were saying they were embarrassed because they couldn't really speak much English...[when the tenants came] they were trying to kind of speak basic English, but we ended up having an three-way conversation where I was using Google Translate between English, Spanish and Mandarin"
(NORC project officer)

These examples demonstrate how the NORC project officer understood the experiences of older people with limited English skills from a social perspective, rather than merely seeing language as a logistical barrier. By focusing on the human experience of language exclusion, in which language was driving a low sense of belonging, the NORC project officer was able to expand engagement much further than if documents and flyers were merely translated. The NORC project officer identified this way of relationship building incrementally to be "really slow", but that it "generates the most organic and authentic" relations.

It is important to recognise that developing trust doesn't just mean improving connections between tenants and a housing association. Our case studies also highlight the importance of *intra-group collaboration*, where tenants are given the opportunity to build strong relationships with each other. In two of the projects a *WhatsApp* group became an important mechanism for bringing the group together. Similarly, all groups in each case study opted to go on trips out of their immediate community, which were seen as an important bonding experience. *"The trips have brought a sense of togetherness, [they] lifted spirits and moods and brought community closer together"* (Hopton tenant). For example, Southway Cohousing tenants went on two field trips to existing cohousing communities and were able to talk to the residents who had developed the community. This not only acted as an educational visit but also provided a shared experience and extended time for the group to interact socially.

Similarly, all of the housing associations in this study made efforts to build trusting relationships with other agencies, service providers or charitable groups that contributed to older people's experience of place. This was particularly pronounced in Brinnington, which had a high concentration of existing community groups that already offered activities aimed at older people, as detailed in Example 7.

Example 7: Relationship building through partnership working

Location: Brinnington, Stockport

Project officers in Brinnington felt they were on the 'back-foot' developing relationships with other organisations for several reasons. Some community member suggested Stockport Homes had a negative reputation, due to a perception they 'took over' activities they got involved in or planned activities that clashed or overlapped with those already taking place. There were several community groups already established in the area, and initial feedback from long-term residents and volunteers was that the team should be working with the community, and not in competition. The team thus spent their time developing relationships with organisations to build trust, engaging in often smaller, tangible efforts over a longer period to do so. They recognised the community structure that exists, and sought to facilitate that structure and the initiatives that were already ongoing, as opposed to duplicating existing activities:

"When those doors started slamming, I think I got to a point where I was like this just isn't working'...I gave it that chance and opened up to the small wins...give it time... it is building trust, it's building relationships, not just with the community but also your partners because a lot of the people, the partnerships in Brinnington, have been there a long time, they're established...it has a positive cumulative effect"
(Stockport Homes project officer)

For example, the team facilitated Food Safety Certificates for volunteers at a weekly foodbank and warm space, held by a local group in a church in Brinnington. Even when the team hosted their own initiatives, whether they be one-off events such as a tea dance or a 12-week programme of yoga classes, they always joined forces with at least one or more of the groups. It's important to note that it is only through being embedded in the community that the team are able to recognise and facilitate collaboration opportunities – through reacting to and being part of informal conversations within the community.

"You need boots on the ground, you have to be embedded in the community"
(Stockport Homes project officer)

This focus on supporting existing groups is not without challenges, particularly when the supporting work is often invisible to others. For community-facing staff, it is perhaps easier to demonstrate the success or impact of their work by point to events they have organised themselves or tenants they have directly engaged with. In Brinnington, the project officers were pleased that their managers were supportive of their focus on collaborative, indirect action as a way of addressing the challenges they identified. This speaks to the importance of strong and informed leadership, which place a critical role in supporting on-the-ground staff to build trust in communities.

Redistribution of power

Building trust through inclusive, person-centred approaches needs to be understood as a means to a more important end, i.e. a redistribution of power and responsibility that allows older people to have a determining role in the places and environments in which they live. Achieving this goal requires us to recognise the asymmetries of power between all those involved in a collaborative process, as well as the dialectics that cast a shadow over all interactions between paid and unpaid, academic and lay, housing providers and tenants. Across these projects, we aspired to value all participants as equally but differently expert, but in practice and despite everyone's best efforts, there are inherent challenges in achieving this.

Early in the Hopton Court NORC project, we identified the importance of the setting in which collaboration can take place as a barrier to the redistribution of power, where the default mode of operation always sat with the professional parties.

Example 8: Rethinking 'legitimate' forms of engagement

Case Study: Hopton Court NORC, Hulme

At the outset of the project, the partnership meetings for the Hopton Court NORC were structured as standard, professional meetings, with participants receiving agendas and minutes, discussed for two hours around a conference table – an environment very comfortable for the academics and housing providers, but less so for the tenants. A tenant reflected at the time that:

"I feel like I am always being asked to learn a new language, a new way of thinking..."
(Tenant, March 2022)

Later, when the NORC project officer began their role, they immediately began developing strategies to *de-formalise* engagement and take on the responsibility of ensuring that the contributions and voices of tenants was given greater recognition within the housing association. An example of this was the process for creating a new community space for tenants in the block. The diminishing availability of social spaces within the wider community emerged as a significant concern among tenants. In the absence of affordable and accessible local venues for meetings, social interaction, and organised activities, a dedicated space was seen as essential for creating a successful NORC programme. At first, the tenants aimed to create a new community building in the gardens of Hopton Court, securing a charity grant to hire an architect (Loop Systems) to undertake a feasibility design. However, a change in leadership at the housing association led to a new proposal - converting a vacant ground-floor apartment within the block into a community space. Faced with a tight deadline set by One Manchester, the research team prepared a series of illustrative proposals that adapted ideas from the earlier co-design process to fit the apartment layout.

Rather than hosting formal meetings, the project officer and some tenants organised a community BBQ to undertake a consultation for a proposed new community space. Tenants led the cooking, whilst the development worker took groups of tenants into the space due to be converted, where they discussed the proposals and gathered feedback. Later, the development worker and tenants undertook a block-wide survey by knocking on doors, meeting One Manchester's legal requirements to show tenants had been consulted and consent to the proposed changes. They reported that tenants were happy to contribute to the survey because they had already heard about the proposal at the BBQ, which translated into a high response rate, with 71% of the block completing the survey. The development worker then processed the survey results with the help of the research team to report them back to the senior management team, allowing them to demonstrate a robust consultation had been undertaken in line with their organisational responsibilities.



Above: Photos from a BBQ/community space consultation event at Hopton Court

Bringing authenticity into the engagement to develop trust across the three case studies has meant that more equitable conversations have been able to emerge. There was a commitment in each project to meet the community on their own terms and move conversations into spaces that encourage greater levels of participation than was previously the case. Examples include: having drop-in sessions in the local community church in Brinnington during the weekly warm space; Hopton Court tenant meetings being held in the garden surrounding the tower block; or having workshops in cafés as part of the cohousing group:

"...to ask [tower block] tenants to suddenly go into a new environment where they're surrounded by all these professionals and stuff like that might be a little bit too confronting. So we thought doing [engagement] on their home turf would be the best idea possible."
(Stockport Homes project officer)

"I was knocking on and being like, 'You want to come downstairs and have a brew?' And then being, 'Oh, there's a meeting going on. You may as well stay.' Yeah. Because sometimes obviously people don't like the word meeting, but it's very chilled and gets more people in the space"
(NORC project officer)

The attempts to go out to the community and meet with older residents have brought a greater variety of tenants into formal processes from which they are usually excluded. The case studies have demonstrated the significance and value of informal conversations, as well as alternative ways to filter voices up a system, thus helping to redistribute power by enabling older tenants to not only have a voice, but for that voice to be able to affect and influence the shaping of their ageing experience and neighbourhood.

Challenges of coproduction

The AFCC movement promotes coproduction as a simple ethical good that brings about meaningful, equitable change for older communities. At the same time, there are barriers on the ground that are less well articulated. This is particularly salient when working in areas with an entrenched history of marginalisation and disadvantage, and those affected by austerity and gentrification, where collaboration can be fraught due to intersecting emotional, social and bureaucratic processes (Greenfield and Buffel, 2022; Yeh et al., 2024)

Whilst housing associations often have a long-term established presence in neighbourhoods that can be advantageous for supporting novel-age friendly initiatives, we must equally recognise that some tenants' relationship with their housing association is less positive, and past conflicts about rent, maintenance or complaints can loom over any attempts to foster collaboration (Kavanagh et al., 2025). This project revealed how this legacy of mistrust can reappear, particularly when unexpected events or challenges emerge. One of the project officers observed that:

"I understand [the residents mistrust]. Many of them have experienced situations where authorities and systems haven't help them at all. They have been let down...[I think] they would benefit from support, but sometimes they don't think they will get what they need, so its easier just to do it themselves."

(Project Officer)

Across all three case study sites, the short-term nature of initiatives and staff turnover were commonly cited as a barrier to the development of trust. The time-limited nature of many community-based initiatives (including this research project) creates tensions between tenants with a long-term stake in their community and workers operating within a fixed timeframe. Tenants were aware of the paradox that the project was seeking to develop long-term and sustainable community models, supported by support teams on precarious contracts. The project officers in Brinnington reflected that their short-term contract led them to accelerate the process of 'bedding in', but that this had implications in terms of the impact they could have longer term.

"...if we have 10 years, we could have comfortably sat in a bit more. We could have said we're not gonna try and move things along [so fast], spend a decent amount of time getting to know people without any sort of agenda...I think that maybe we would have been able to establish a structure that has a bit more longevity naturally"

(Stockport Homes project officer)

Some older tenants highlighted the exhaustion derived from constantly having to build relationships with support workers, only for their contracts to end or for them to be reassigned.

"It's devastating to lose [the role], she has changed the building beyond recognition, for [the role] to happen for a year and it just be removed, that's the biggest thing, especially in the winter, I don't know how the residents will cope...it's positive impact has been expressed from multiple parties"

(Hopton Court tenant)

To summarise, the development of person-centred approaches to engagement, in which housing association workers have been given space and license to create genuine relationships with tenants, has been central to the development of trust across all age-friendly initiatives in this study. More challenging, however, has been translating this trust into delegated power, due to the complexity of structures that impact how housing associations work and sometimes a differential understanding of the powers that they might have to be able to enact change. This revealed itself in various ways across the three case studies, sometimes causing frustrations amongst tenants and community groups. As one tenant noted:

“They [the housing association] add all these extra requirements... when they gave us funding, suddenly we needed to do all these risk assessments... even though we had been doing them [the activities] for ages. It was too much, it made it a job rather than just a nice thing we wanted to do.”

(Community Volunteer, Feb 2023)

In the Brinnington case study, some of the requirements of the housing association created friction between them and much more agile community organisations at times – for example, a poster for an event requiring sign-off from the housing association’s marketing department, which tenants felt was unnecessarily onerous for such a simple task. In the NORC case study at Hopton Court, the offer to develop a community space within the block led to several delays beyond the tenant and the housing association’s control, particularly around planning permission and various safety and fire approvals needed. These led to frustrations amongst tenants, who were unaware of these roadblocks and were under the impression that the housing association had greater powers to progress the project unilaterally.

Despite the challenges we have seen across all the case studies, we can see examples of how these collaborations have begun to make changes on the ground, addressing the local experiences of gentrification and social exclusion with collective action. In the next section, we will examine the possibilities for age-friendly work at a hyper-local scale to achieve spatial justice for older people, and the limitations of realising these ambitions within current societal contexts.

Addressing spatial justice through collective action

How can co-produced ageing in place initiatives address different experiences of spatial exclusion as a result of gentrification, social isolation and discrimination?

If age-friendly initiatives are to genuinely support older people to age in place, they must be able to address wider societal issues that impact older people's lives. One expression of this concerns how age-friendly initiatives can contribute towards achieving spatial justice. An age-friendly approach to spatial justice requires interventions, policies and initiatives to respond to the inequalities and marginalisation affecting particular groups of older people. National and transnational issues such as societal prejudice and retrenchment of public services can have a significant impact on older people's quality of life, but it is important to recognise that these are often manifest in localised situations influenced by gentrification, loss of social infrastructure, and a weakening in social cohesion within communities. The stark lived reality of these systemic issues has resulted in a recent push for age-friendly initiatives to adopt more radical, creative and aspirational approaches to allow communities to have greater and more equitable opportunities to tackle the root cause of the marginalisation that they experience (Buffel, Doran and Yarker, 2024).

All three case studies developed in the project sought to address different issues related to spatial justice, albeit interpreting these societal challenges mostly through a positive framing of contributing to creating a better community. In Hulme, tenants were driven by a desire to respond to both gentrification in their neighbourhood and the lack of resources compared to the level of support and need that tenants experience. Within the Southway cohousing group, the tenants were driven by concerns of social isolation and a lack of suitable housing. In Brinnington, the tenants were seeking to address the decline of a local precinct and a fragmented community, overcoming negative relations between the housing association and the tenants.

As a result, each case study illustrated a different approach to spatial justice, expressed in terms of **resistance, mitigation and imagination**. By *resistance* we are referring to the ability for initiatives to push back against wider forms of inequities through collective organising and activism; by *mitigation* we mean initiatives seeking to cope with the stubborn systemic inequalities older people face; and by *imagination* we emphasise the co-creation of alternative futures that envisage a more just future for older people in their community. We now explore each in turn, emphasising the well-placed position of housing associations to play a key supporting role.

Resistance

Central to the idea of spatial justice is the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources, but the mechanisms through which these are allocated often exclude the voices of older people, leading to local economies that deepen inequalities. When changes within a neighbourhood generate and perpetuate the marginalisation of older people, there are opportunities for age-friendly initiatives to play a role in resisting these changes by promoting inclusivity and ensuring that community planning reflects diverse lived experiences. The World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities model provides a framework for addressing these challenges, particularly through focus on civic and social participation, yet our research highlights the disconnect between these aspirations and realities facing older people on the ground. Particularly in the Hulme case study, we observed how an economic and business imperative driving changes in the neighbourhood created little opportunity for older people to contribute to emerging plans, leading to changes proposed that would negatively impact their lives. While local residents should ideally be able to shape their environment through contribution to the planning and development process, Example 9 demonstrates how older people's marginalisation in the planning process led to another response – civic participation through resisting change and fighting to demand a more just local environment.

Example 9: Resisting gentrification through collective action

Location: Hopton Court, Hulme

The intervention of a NORC at Hopton Court can be understood as a form of localised resistance against a variety of external pressures faced by tenants. The area around Hopton Court is subject to an ongoing process of gentrification brought on by the rapid rate of development from the city centre and also from the neighbourhood's proximity to two expanding universities (Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Manchester), which has created an influx of a younger, transient population. This has resulted in a lack of affordable and accessible social infrastructure in the local area, with a marked change in the retail and leisure landscape over the last 20 years. Local tenants have expressed how:

"...there is nothing for us now, it's all for students" and also described how "...there is no social life in Hulme anymore, it's very sad, it's a young person's place now" (Cribbin et al., 2021).

In response to this, tenants have collectively organised and engaged in various forms of protest aiming to make their experiences known and heard. This has included a poetry book titled *'Thirsty Scholars'* in 2019, which documents tenants' experiences of neighbourhood change and gentrification, and a theatre production in 2018 called *'Can You Hear Me From Up Here?'*, which reflected on the emotions of living in high-rise social housing post-

Grenfell. The Grenfell Tower fire, which killed 72 people, revealed decades of statutory neglect and failure by several businesses and institutions (Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2024). As social housing tenants in a high rise property, the emotional and psychological impact of this disaster cannot be understated.

The group also engaged in more traditional campaigning, fighting successive attempts to build a student apartment block on a derelict pub next to their site, a process that at the time of writing is ongoing. In other words, the older tenants engage in activism in response to the “constant pressure” they face in their everyday lives:

“We will keep up the fight because we are a community that has a right to be here, a right to services and right to be heard”
(Hopton tenant)

Interwoven in this is the fight against the precarious ageing experience experienced in Hopton Court through the NORC. The boom in student housing exemplified the erasure that older tenants were experiencing, as it ran counter to their desire for more supported housing in the area (Cribbin et al., 2021). The lack of specialist housing means that many older tenants in Hopton have little option but to live in a general needs block, despite having support needs more aligned to better resourced supported housing. Raising awareness through campaigning led to the development of the NORC initiative, which tenants saw a mechanism for obtaining an equitable amount of support and resource, proportionate to the level of need experienced in the block:

“Manchester is going through a growth period and is expanding at an alarming rate.... there is a community [in Hulme] but it’s being slowly eradicated...if someone is ageing, should they lose their community, at a time when they need the community more than ever?”
(Hopton tenant)

The NORC intervention at Hopton Court highlights the potential for age-friendly initiatives to push back against broader social issues that affect older people, but it is important to recognise the extraordinary effort that tenants need to make to achieve even modest goals. For housing associations, this also highlights a tension about what such an organisation can or cannot do to support tenants fighting against injustices. In this case, One Manchester did support the theatre production and attracting resource to provide support for tenants in the block, but remained neutral in the protests against the planned student housing development.



Above: Hopton Court residents involved in Block the Block initiative
(Source: Greater Manchester Tenants Union)

Mitigation

One of the challenges experienced across the three case studies was that many of the unjust conditions experienced by older people were seen as outside of anyone's control. When systemic issues like the cost of living were increasingly being identified as barriers to ageing well in place, the only course of action available was to explore how collective action might mitigate against the impact these issues had on older people's lives.

One of the tactics across the case studies was to promote the development of relationships between residents to enable peer support, while also strengthen the relationship tenants had with their landlord so that targeted interventions could be made. This required a slow, continual and reflexive process of engagement, through a programme of drop-in sessions, social evenings, exercise classes and day trips. This cumulative process of breaking down barriers between people in the community was underpinned by a continual presence in community – organising events and supporting those who want to organise their own, rather than a single event or activity:

"So it's not that we've done this big thing, it's just the little things that are adding up"
(Brinnington Project Officer).

Example 10: Supporting vulnerable tenants through person-centred approaches

Case Study: Brinnington, Stockport

Stockport Homes 'Eyes Wide Open' initiative shows how this cumulative approach to building relationships within a community can help mitigate against challenges experienced by older people. The initiative calls for staff to be vigilant to the contexts and situations in which they find themselves, and proactive in responding to issues that they see are affecting their tenants. An example of this being successful in practice can be seen in the annual distribution of winter welfare pack to vulnerable tenants. The pack contains information and treats like a chocolate selection box, but more importantly is an opportunity for staff to knock on older people's doors.

"It's often the customers who you don't hear from often, who don't complain or make a fuss, but who might be hiding problems... So we can refer to help and support, use the housing support team. It's about having a boots-on-the-ground approach. It's very hard to address those inequalities when you don't see it yourself." (Project Officer, Stockport Homes, Feb 2025)

In other instances, mitigation strategies emerged in response to specific spatial injustices, notably changes to a neighbourhood that felt outside the control of residents. In Hopton Court, the loss of social infrastructure where tenants felt welcome was a direct result on the ongoing processes of austerity and gentrification in the neighbourhood. Recognising that the retail and leisure offer in the community was outside of their and their housing association's control, the tenants focused their efforts on co-creating a social space within the block itself. Sociality – along with its indirect health and wellbeing benefits – is a key foundation of NORCs. In this sense, the space would offer the ability for tenants to come together to socialise in a high-rise block, a type of accommodation known for breeding social isolation with adverse psycho-social impacts (Gifford, 2007; Kalantari and Shepley, 2021), made worse by the hostile external environment.

Because the NORC programme through the collaborative process provided opportunities for a relationship to build between the Hopton tenants and One Manchester, the housing association was able to appreciate the value and importance of this space in supporting ageing in place, making a commitment to invest significant resource to renovate a ground floor flat into a space that would be tenant-led. Although this has yet to be realised at time of writing, and the process has been fraught at times as unexpected delays and miscommunication have generated frustration and tension, the commitment to fund a community space represents a long-term investment from the housing association into the NORC project. This offers tenants stability and control of a shared common space *within the block*, two characteristics that are lacking in the wider neighbourhood due to the pace of change gentrification is driving.

Imagination

One of the challenges of addressing social issues is that the status quo is visible, but the alternative is often hidden. Across all three case studies, one of the core functions of coproduction was to create space for alternative models to be imagined, understanding the individual and collective aspirations of older tenants. While simply inviting older tenants to offer solutions is itself a movement toward a more just society, the case studies in this project highlight the benefits of undertaking these processes of *imagining a better society as a collective*. This speaks to the more radical and creative asks emerging within the age-friendly agenda.

Example 11: Adopting creative methods to support collective visioning

Case Study: South Manchester Cohousing

The Southway Cohousing group exemplifies how collaboration in the form of creative imagination can lead to new solutions to social issues being identified. None of the group (except for one tenant) had heard of cohousing before they joined the group, and none had ever visited a cohousing community. As a result, the group initially struggled to conceive what their lives would be like in a cohousing community, or if any ideas that were emerging as they learned more about the model were shared with their peers.

To address this, the research team designed two workshops that focused on imagining what life in their cohousing community could be like. The first workshop used a combination of narrative-based storytelling and generative AI to allow each participant to visualise their idea of what the community might operate. In pairs, the tenants undertook a guided interview that told the story of 'a day in the life' within the community, with the interviewee making notes of key works and components in the story. During a break in the workshop, the research team input key words and descriptors of each story into a generative AI image application, creating a series of scenes from people's stories, which we then discussed. This workshop not only provided a mechanism for tenants to reflect on what they wanted their community to achieve in terms of both spaces, activities and social relationships, but also allowed these to be socialised within the group, albeit within a context without any constraints about the kinds of visions people put forwards.



The second workshop attempted to add a dimension of consensus and constraint to the process of imagination, forcing the tenants to confront some of the tough decisions that might impact their lives in the community and find a common ground. To do this the research team produced 'How "Co" Can You Go', a collaborative card game where different features of a cohousing community are assigned a cost, and the tenants have to work together to decide how they want to spend their limited resources. Again, the game's main function was to foster an open discussion between tenants about how they wanted to live together and what kind of interactions they expect to have in the community. The entire cohousing project has been "...an exercise in imagining what could be" (Cohousing project officer). Reflecting on these workshops, we suggest that acts of collective imagination don't just offer up solutions to societal challenges, but enable tenants to take great ownership of ideas through testing and socialising the ideas in a group setting. This is something facilitated by the hyper-local scale, which in this case offers a more *comfortable scale* allowing tenants and those working with them to be more bold and imaginative with their ideas. As the project officer stated, the cohousing format offers a way for people to be a part of the collective conversations that ultimately shape their horizons beyond the current age-friendly housing offer:

"The whole point of cohousing is that they are involved in those conversations...I would say now they have a much clearer idea of cohousing having gone through the process...they have definitely gone from this new idea to recognising that it is something they can buy into and it's something they could want in their life"
(Cohousing project officer)



Challenges of addressing spatial justice through age-friendly initiatives

While issues of spatial justice in an immediate environment offer a focus to age-friendly initiatives developed at a hyper-local scale, we must equally recognise the impact that national and transnational issues have on the lives of older people, and their capacity to engage in collective processes and activities.

The timeframe for this research coincided with the cost-of-living crisis in the UK, high levels of food and fuel poverty amongst marginalised communities, over-stretched health and care services, and the lingering social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the case studies, it was common for people to become disengaged from the project due to 'personal issues', but in many cases, these were systemic issues that social tenants were experiencing on a personal level. This included ill health due to gaps in health or social care support, increased care responsibilities, being victims of crime or anti-social behaviour, or limited disposable income to engage with their wider community. By working at a hyper-local level, exposure to these issues becomes an unavoidable component of co-production. The precarious nature of support and funding can also compound these issues, particularly the prioritisation of funding for innovation and pilots over long-term delivery. In the three areas we have studied, there is a conflict between the laudable aim of promoting citizen empowerment and participation, and the capacity for communities to support these initiatives independently without external support.

In Hulme, the NORC project officer noted several instances where individuals became disconnected as a result of ill health, bereavement or the impact of anti-social behaviour, necessitating an ongoing process of checking in and improving relationships. Despite the strength of connections now seen between tenants in Hopton Court, without a consistent investment in time, resource and support it is foreseeable that the networks and connections in the block could weaken over time, perpetuating the previous issues by which a small number of volunteers take on an unsustainable burden of care for others in the block.

"[Tenants have said] they don't want it to be a co-op where they do everything...some people like to be busy and are up for doing things, but they just can't [manage it]. There needs to be that support, funding... Just in terms of the cost-of-living crisis, many people are struggling. It doesn't feel that feasible."
(NORC project officer)

To summarise, we would suggest that a focus on hyper-local action through coproduction has enabled the case studies in this project to address age-friendly agendas through a social justice lens, while simultaneously demonstrating how stubborn these conditions on injustice can be. While we are hopeful that the development of trust, devolution of power and coordinated action can continue to act as means of effecting positive societal change locally, we argue that there is equally need translate local action into a broader social movement, led by older people themselves, to share learning and advocate for spatial justice at a national and transnational scale.

6 Summary and conclusions

The current slow rate of specialised housing construction suggests that the vast majority of these older social tenants will continue to live in general-needs housing for the foreseeable future. These conditions underline the importance of investments and programmes that support 'ageing in place', providing both the physical and social environment to support people to live healthier lives for longer.

In this report, we have demonstrated the potential for housing associations and older tenants to work together to find novel ways that support ageing in place. We have demonstrated how working at a hyper-local level supports new opportunities for creating inclusive and collaborative processes grounded in trusting, inter-personal relationships, and in doing so identify and address the specific challenges that people face in their community. Despite the range of challenges experienced across the three case studies over the last two years, our study suggests that meaningful change can only be possible when it addresses the specific social, economic, political and environmental factors of a place and how these affect older people.

To summarise the key findings from this study:

Question 1: How can age-friendly programmes respond to the lived experiences of older social tenants?

Our study highlights the importance of natural neighbourhood networks in developing age-friendly initiatives. These networks - the relationships between friends, neighbours and service providers in specific places – have a key role in shaping older people's experiences, as well as determining the agency that older people have to enact change locally. By focusing on age-friendly initiatives at a hyper-local scale, older people in our case studies were able to identify specific challenges and opportunities that emerged through shared experiences and regular informal interactions. This focus allowed tenants to suggest changes in their community that were specific and tangible. Much like the strong relationships between tenants at this hyper-local scale enabled new types of age-friendly initiative to emerge, our research also identified the importance of the professional peer networks that on-the-ground housing association staff develop. This broader overview of the community allows housing association staff to create a bridge between tenants and service providers, allowing both to realise more than they could in isolation.

Our research suggests that a major challenge to developing age-friendly initiatives at a hyper-local scale is the lack of alignment with existing geographies used by statutory or public services, which made it difficult at times to build connections with existing neighbourhood-wide programmes. While the kinds of community-led, place-based action developed in this research align well with current views in local and national government about integrated services, the limited and precarious resources currently in place limit how far it can be adopted.

Question 2: What are the processes through which residents and housing associations can co-create age-friendly programmes, recognising the different powers and constraints on each party?

Our study highlights the importance of processes that build trust and address power imbalances between tenants and housing associations. The examples documented in the report demonstrate that this is only achieved when community-based workers are given the tools and opportunity to build genuine, reciprocal relationships with the tenants they are working alongside. By operating at a localised scale with smaller numbers of potential collaborators, new forms of co-production and partnership working become possible. Our research shows that this is most successful when housing association stakeholders are given autonomy to generate person-centred approaches, where they can act as a mediator within the community rather than representing the housing association and perpetuating a 'provider/customer' dynamic where true collaboration is stifled.

The creation of trusting relationships provides the foundation of collaborative approaches that address the unequal redistribution of power between stakeholders. Our study demonstrates the need for community-facing workers to play a role in bridging the gap between the community and the organisations they work for, where opaque institutional processes and complex regulations can alienate and disempower tenants.

A barrier to these goals identified across the case studies was issues related to staff turnover and those employed in short-term roles. Tenants spoke of the trauma that comes when trusted relationships are lost, and the exhaustion that comes from getting new staff up to speed.

Question 3: How can co-produced age-friendly initiatives address different experiences of spatial exclusion, such as gentrification, social isolation and discrimination?

Exploring age-friendly concepts at a hyper-local scale enables different kinds of initiatives and projects to emerge, responding to both the specific dynamics within a place and the aspirations of the people who live there. By supporting co-production within specific local contexts, housing associations and Communities are well placed to address the systemic challenges that can negatively impact older people's ability to age in place. Our study shows that increased collaboration enabled spatial justice to become a shared concern between housing associations and tenants, with both parties committing to tackling it. This can take the form of resisting negative changes, mitigating against them, or empowering communities to imagine what alternative approaches are possible.

One of the challenges to achieving these goals is the long-term nature of issues such as gentrification or social exclusion, which means that any solution also needs to have stability over a longer period. Across all case studies, the challenges of short-term funding and perpetual piloting of initiatives were cited by residents and partner organisations as having a detrimental impact on communities, including the conclusion of this research project. We must recognise the time and emotional energy expended by community members to build up trust, relationships and a shared understanding behind any pilot or project, and the subsequent loss and disillusionment that occurs when the staff and resource involved in those short-term project disappear. Our study also suggests that there are limitations to how self-sustaining these initiatives can be once resource is withdrawn, particularly in areas with a high level of need that might benefit from them the most. The systemic nature of this short-termism in the way that projects are resourced, which often emphasises innovation over sustained delivery, needs to be reconsidered if genuine impacts are to be realised.

To conclude, this study suggests a possible future trajectory for the WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities model. The current mainstream model in age-friendly policies, dominated by projects at the scale of a neighbourhood or a whole city, makes it harder for the precise conditions of spatial injustice to be identified or addressed. By working together, we believe older social housing tenants and housing associations are uniquely placed to operate at a more localised scale, and in doing so be at the vanguard of efforts to enact positive social change through collective action, for the benefit of current and future generations of older people.

7 Recommendations

Based on the research undertaken through this project, we offer the following recommendations for how social housing providers, local government, older people and academics can better support age-friendly initiatives.

Housing associations should...

Recognise the unique role they can play in supporting age-friendly initiatives, and commit to developing action plans for how they will support ageing in place.

This recognises there is no one-size-fits-all initiative that supports ageing in place, and instead commits to working with older tenants to understand the challenges, opportunities, needs and aspirations of the specific contexts they live in. Achieving this requires housing associations to be proactive in developing multi-sectoral partnerships that place older people at the centre of decisions that affect their lives.

Provide support, leadership and training to front-line staff delivering age-friendly initiatives.

Housing association staff in roles supporting older people should be encouraged to build genuine, trusting interpersonal connections with tenants. This study underscores that some tenants will have a negative perspective on their housing provider for various reasons, and that giving staff the freedom to bring their personality, intuition and common sense to their role is critical in encouraging wide and equitable participation of tenants. Housing associations should appreciate the affective labour that staff put into their efforts building connections in communities, particularly those where older people face challenges, and seek to provide appropriate support to staff working in difficult contexts. Critically, staff need to feel valued for their contributions to their organisation, and be valued for the complex skillset necessary to support older people.

Engage with local government, social care organisations, business, charities and the voluntary sector to determine how long-term, preventative initiatives can be resourced.

While we recognise the challenging funding landscape for many housing organisations and statutory services, this study highlights the fatigue and disruption that short-term funding can bring to communities. While the idea of place-based, coordinated service delivery around a preventative agenda has gained prominence in the UK in recent years, housing associations are uniquely placed to translate these aims into practice with their high level of local knowledge and strong relationships with residents.

Work with other housing associations to share knowledge, best practices and advocate for action to support the age-friendly movement.

It is heartening that more housing associations have begun to co-produce programmes to better support ageing in place. These make important contributions to the still-emerging age-friendly movement, and the expertise and good practice that is developed must be shared and valued in the sector. Housing associations house 3.1 million people aged over 50 in the UK, so they have significant power to influence local and national initiatives if tackled in a coordinated manner. We recommend that professional bodies such as the National Housing Federation and national organisations such as the Housing Association Charitable Trust continue to build a community of practice around age-friendly issues, and consider how they can align their efforts with existing national networks such as the UK Network of Age-Friendly Cities.

Older people should...

Be recognised as experts within their communities and valued as agents of positive change within any age-friendly initiative.

This study highlights the knowledge, creativity and dedication that older people contribute to age-friendly initiatives, as well as the barriers that, if unaddressed, can limit their participation. Co-production between communities and other organisations can be fraught at times, particularly when expectations and difficulties are not shared openly. To address this, we recommend that older people are engaged in the planning and delivery of age-friendly initiatives from the outset, with the ability for older people to be equal partners. This will often require stakeholders to develop new ways of working in collaboration, with the onus on partners to adopt processes that are accessible and equitable to tenants who wish to participate.

Local Government should...

Work with housing associations to make them core stakeholders in local ageing programmes.

Local government needs to recognise the valuable role that housing associations can have as anchor institutions that deliver services to older people, and their potential to facilitate change in local communities. The case studies in this project align with the model of place-based integrated working often used within local government, which is used to facilitate preventative approaches to supporting health and wellbeing. Our study highlights the challenges of achieving this kind of whole-system partnership working on the ground, particularly when the needs of the older community don't align with existing public health delivery programmes. We recommend that this is addressed by involving social housing providers in the planning and development of age-friendly strategies, creating the infrastructure to support the varied forms of age-friendly initiatives that might be needed to address local needs.

Academics should...

Value the contributions they can make to local age-friendly initiatives, while being aware of perpetuating negative conditions through the design of grant applications.

Our study highlights the value that community-led research can provide to older communities, and the role of researchers in supporting ageing in place. As researchers, it is important to balance a desire not to impose ideas on a community with a recognition that our ideas and methods can make an important contribution when shared with our collaborators. We suggest researchers adopt the position that all partners in participatory action research are considered equally but differently expert, creating a collaborative environment where ideas can be shared without prejudice, ego or imposition.

We must also consider the negative consequences when research funding is misaligned with the needs of a local community. We recommend that academics consider ways to ensure flexibility in their grant applications, including devolved community budgets that are managed by tenants, recognising that the needs of a community can rarely be fully understood at the initial bid writing phase. Academics should also engage with funders to explore how to reduce the detrimental impact that comes from precarious short-term projects, which result in a resource cliff-edge that can negatively impact local communities. While it is a positive ambition for community-led research to result in self-sustaining initiatives, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that can prevent marginalised communities from achieving autonomy, and the need for long-term funding settlements that extend beyond intense periods of research.

Support older people at a hyper-local level, as part of their obligations as civic institutions

While housing associations are naturally positioned to support localised age-friendly working, it is important that other localised stakeholders are equally invested in support older people. Universities are well placed to answer this call through, with many already committed to adopting place-based approaches to build equity and fairness in the cities and communities they are based through the 'Civic University' model. In Hulme, the tenants at Hopton Court were able to attract funding from the University of Manchester to support some of their work, with the university's Head of Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement now sits on the steering group for Ageing Well in Place in Hulme.

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