



Communities of Practice Forum:
Exploring Older Men's Participation in arts & wellbeing Services
July 2026 Forum session in partnership with Time & Talents' Older Men's Groups

Quick recap

This toolkit outlines the key insights, methodologies, and learnings from the Communities of Practice Forum: Exploring Older Men's Participation in arts & wellbeing Services held on 22nd July 2026.

Hosted by Flourishing Lives in partnership with [Time & Talents' Older Men's Groups](#), the session explored the development of T&T's Older Men's Groups over the past 10 years, including learnings about Accessibility, Inclusion and Communication, shared individual stories from participants, and facilitated discussions on establishing older men's groups and exploring dynamics in older men's groups.

1. Strategic Framework: The Two Strands of Engagement

Practitioners should identify which of the two distinct engagement models their project follows to better tailor their recruitment and delivery:

- **Activity-Led Groups:** These focus on a specific craft, sport, or technical task (e.g., pottery, music technology, or carpentry). The activity serves as the primary 'hook', allowing social connections to develop as a secondary, organic byproduct.
- **Community-Led Groups:** These focus on shared identity, local connection, or peer gathering (e.g., the Hackney Dudes or Time & Talents' Walking Group). The focus is on gathering and conversation, often rooted in a sense of place or shared history.

2. Recruitment: The "Art by Stealth" Approach

The language used to advertise services is a critical barrier to entry.

- **Avoid Academic Labels:** Formal titles like 'Modern Art Appreciation Society' can deter participation; instead, practitioners suggest a 'light touch' approach, such as walking to a gallery to see a "graffiti exhibition".
- **The "Expert" Hook:** Older men are frequently drawn to projects led by someone with **gravitas or professional expertise** (e.g., a professional carpenter or music technologist). They are more likely to engage when they feel they are learning a skill from a specialist rather than 'just' attending a 'social club'.

- **Peer Recommendation:** Word of mouth is the most effective recruitment tool, particularly for men experiencing depression or isolation who may be hesitant to self-refer to formal services.

3. Facilitation: Expertise Over Demographics

The forum addressed the debate of whether men's groups must be led by men.

- **Knowledge as Authority:** While there may be initial skepticism toward younger or female facilitators, this typically vanishes once they demonstrate that they "know their stuff" and lead with enthusiasm.
- **The 'Light Touch' Leader:** Facilitators should act as guides rather than clinical therapists. While heavy topics (such as bereavement or depression) may arise, the primary role is to ensure the group 'gels' and remains a safe, joyous space, referring more complex clinical needs to specialists.
- **Valuing Lived History:** Practitioners should view and value older men as 'a living part of local history' themselves. Encouraging them to share professional or cultural stories (e.g., life as a London Docker) fosters immense group pride and "democratic energy".

4. Redefining Participation: The "Safety Skin"

Sector professionals must broaden their definition of what 'successful participation' looks like.

- **Physical Company vs. Dialogue:** Some men seek physical company without the pressure of constant dialogue. A member sitting quietly with their hood up or wearing extra layers in warm weather is utilising a "safety skin" or a "place of comfort". This presence should be respected; they may need a long period of just 'being there' before they are ready to participate verbally.
- **Games as Social Lubricants:** Practical activities like Uno, Dominoes, or Sea-Shanties allow older men who struggle with quick verbal 'banter' or disabilities to be completely immersed and included in the group dynamic.

5. Practical Barriers and Logistics

- **Venue Sensitivity:** While pubs are natural social hubs (e.g., T&T's Pub Club), they can be exclusionary for those in recovery or from certain faith backgrounds.
- **Consistency is Key:** Reliability in the schedule is vital for older men who use the group as a weekly schedule to manage mental health and provide a sense of responsibility.
- **The "Old Enough to Chill" Mindset:** A recurring theme was that older men often feel they have nothing to prove, allowing them to step outside their comfort zones and connect with diverse individuals they would not have met in their youth.

Shared Links & Practitioner Resources

- CUH Arts (Cambridge University Hospitals): <https://www.cuh.nhs.uk/arts>
- The Blair Academy (Hip Hop Dance for Older People): www.theblairacademy.com
- Arts & Dementia Support: www.artsfordementia.org
- Resonate Arts (Dementia support through creativity): www.resonatearts.org
- Sound Minds (Mental health & Sea-Shanties): <https://soundminds.co.uk>
- Culture Health & Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA):
<https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/>
- Redbridge Music Lounge: www.rml.org