

# Dukes Theatre: Prime Time

Creative Engagement for Older People  
across the North West.

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## Evaluation Report 2023-25



the  
**Dukes**



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## Summary

There is a growing body of research (some of it outlined in this report) to suggest that despite older people in the UK living longer, their increased representation in society is not always met with increased equity.

Older people often face physical and mental health challenges alongside ageist and ableist prejudice, and while an overarching theme of this report will be that it is inaccurate to stereotype older people as uniformly lonely and socially isolated, it remains true that ageing can create conditions which lead to these states.

In establishing Prime Time through a successful funding application to the National Lottery Community Fund, the Dukes aimed to build on its existing track record of creative community engagement with the aim of contributing to an 'ageing better' approach in the North-West of England through drama-based activity. Prime Time was designed to extend the Dukes' reach beyond Lancaster to include Morecambe (an area of higher deprivation), and to improve participants' wellbeing and confidence, strengthen their social ties and support networks, and develop their creative skills.

With the recruitment of part-time Older People's Co-ordinator Charlie Brown to the Dukes team in January 2023, Prime Time began to progress from an 'on paper' project plan towards becoming a real-life community. From the outset, Prime Time participants were actively involved in shaping the programme through their feedback and participation in an Advisory Panel. Activities from the first year included intergenerational work

with the Dukes' Young Company, sharing performances for family and friends, theatre trips, launch of the Prime Time monthly film club, and a film-making project which led to the Morecambe group's film being screened at the LA1 Shorts film festival.

Sensitive evaluation has been a feature of Prime Time from the outset and this report details the mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches used to establish a baseline at the start of the project and to measure impacts and outcomes over time.

Data collected throughout the funded two-year project cycle provides compelling evidence that Prime Time is delivering on its target outcomes around reducing social isolation, increasing wellbeing, developing skills, and improving the confidence of older people in the Lancaster and Morecambe communities.

### ⇒ Participants have learnt new skills

Through a varied programme encompassing acting, improvisation, movement, stagecraft, talks, Q&A's, theatre visits, film-making and film-screenings, Prime Timers have tried new things, stepped outside their comfort zones, picked up new skills, and further developed existing ones.

### ⇒ Participants are active, social, and challenged

Prime Time has become a compelling weekly fixture for many in the groups and this is in part due to the intensity of the practice and the way it stretches participants into new areas. In

conversation, Prime Timers talk about how physical the sessions are, how much talking and group work is required, and how they enjoy being challenged to grow. 'Thinking on your feet' is a phrase participants frequently use to describe this experience.

⇒ **Participants have improved wellbeing**

The evidence we have collected suggests that Prime Time is positively (and measurably) impacting on some of the proven core indicators of wellbeing. Using an abbreviated version of the Canterbury Wellbeing Scale, participants demonstrated clear improvements in reporting how well and happy they felt before and after sessions. Other wellbeing indicators relating to feeling 'valued and listened to within a community' showed the largest increases over the course of the project.

⇒ **Participants have greater confidence**

Confidence around learning new creative skills, as well as group working and social skills, rose over the course of the project. As well as commenting on their own confidence, Prime Timers spoke of a palpable sense of group confidence and of noticing changes in other people.

⇒ **Participants experience a sense of pride and achievement**

At the start of Prime Time, 13% of participants said they had no confidence in 'feeling pride/satisfaction in your achievements'. By the end-point none felt this way. Instead,

100% had 'some' or greater confidence in this area, suggesting participation has had a positive effect on Prime Timer's ability to take pride in their accomplishments.

⇒ **Creative practice at the Dukes has been strengthened**

Though perhaps more difficult to quantify or measure than the impact on participants themselves, this outcome is a significant contribution made by the Prime Time project. Giving older people a sense of ownership of the Dukes spaces, working collaboratively with the Dukes Young Company, as well as contributing through volunteering and attending as audience members, makes the Dukes a more inclusive and ultimately a richer, stronger, and more resilient community.

In turn, the benefits of this more diverse community are felt across the theatre and organisation as a whole. The presence of Prime Time has sparked new creative ideas around inter-generational working and collaboration with the Dukes Young Company and with Lancaster University. It has brought rich and extensive lived experience to the theatre and challenged the institution to be more inclusive, more responsive, and more agile in its approach.



Photo: Robin Zahler

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Ageing better – a context

There is an old saying that the future belongs to the young, but the data tells a different story - the older population of England is getting larger while that aged under 20 is decreasing. Since the mid-1980s, the number of people in England aged over 65 has increased by 52% (over 3.5m)<sup>1</sup>

As we live longer past retirement (average life expectancy in England has climbed steadily since the Second World War and currently stands at 82 years) the practice of 'ageing well' has received more focus.

Yet sadly, the research also tells us that though older people are growing in number, their increased representation in society is not always met with increased equity. In the UK, people's perceptions of when we transition out of youth and into old age are much lower than in other European countries. Ageism is known to impact negatively on both physical and mental health, as well as on the treatment and support we receive from healthcare providers<sup>2</sup>.

While the stereotype may be of 'baby boomers' benefitting from property price rises and favourable pensions, the reality is that wealth inequality within older age groups is vastly greater

than between older and younger age groups. 1 in 5 people over 65 in the UK live in poverty<sup>3</sup>.

The World Health Organisation estimates that 75% of the *'variation in capacity and circumstances of older people is the product of cumulative impact of advantage and disadvantage across people's lives'*.<sup>4</sup>

In the North-West of England, those aged over 65 make up a fifth of the population (1.4m people) and by 2040 it is predicted that the number of people aged -5-89 will have more than doubled. 53% of these older people are estimated to have a long-term illness which limits day-to-day activities at least a little (a figure also set to rise) while both life and 'healthy life' expectancies in the North-West are some of the lowest in the country.<sup>5</sup>

While an overarching theme of this report will be that it is inaccurate to stereotype older people as uniformly lonely and socially isolated, it remains true that ageing can create conditions which lead to these states. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities found in 2022 that:

⇒ Up to a third of people of all ages in the North-West feel lonely often or some of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> [Centre for Ageing Better](#), 2023-24

<sup>2</sup> [Healthy Ageing in the North West](#), 2022

<sup>3</sup> [Centre for Ageing Better](#), 2023-24

<sup>4</sup> WHO, [Healthy ageing and functional ability](#)

<sup>5</sup> Office of National Statistics, 2022

- ⇒ Older people are likely to be more vulnerable to loneliness following illness or loss of mobility, job and income, or a spouse, family or friends.
- ⇒ Those who are LGBTQ+ or have a disability are particularly vulnerable to loneliness.
- ⇒ The Covid-19 pandemic worsened these trends disproportionately amongst older people.

Older people in the North-West were also amongst the most likely in England to feel less valued by their community as they aged<sup>6</sup>.

Data comparing Lancaster (home of the Dukes) and Morecambe (also host to a Prime Time group) is more difficult to find. However it is clear that all of the challenges outlined above are amplified in Morecambe town, where the loss of historical status and income from seaside tourism has had a particularly damaging effect. Research from the Richardson Institute found that life expectancy in Morecambe is lower and the rate of 'pensioners in poverty' is higher than national averages, as are a range of other measures of deprivation, from higher crime rates to the number of people with no qualifications<sup>7</sup>.

## 1.2 Ageing better – creative solutions

So what can be (and is being) done to respond to our changing demography and growing understanding of what ageing healthily and well means?

In 2019, Public Health England and the Centre for Ageing Better ushered in the UN's Decade of Healthy Ageing<sup>8</sup> by pledging to uphold 5 commitments:

1. Putting prevention first and ensuring timely access to services and support when needed.
2. Removing barriers and creating more opportunities for older adults to contribute to society.
3. Ensuring good homes and communities.
4. Narrowing inequalities.
5. Challenging ageist and negative language, culture and practices.

While a holistic and multi-agency approach is needed to deliver these commitments in full, local interventions are also playing a part and the conception of Prime Time speaks to most of these goals.

The Dukes Theatre is limited in its resources and remit, but it does have the advantage of creative assets and expertise. Age UK has identified creative and cultural participation as the top-most contributor to wellbeing in older age.<sup>9</sup> A recent study by University College London on the arts and population health concluded that:

*'Among older adults, in addition to psychological benefits, the arts have protective associations against cognitive decline, dementia incidence, and multiple aspects of physical health*

<sup>6</sup> [Centre for Ageing Better](#), 2023-24

<sup>7</sup> [Poverty in Morecambe Bay](#), 2017

<sup>8</sup> [UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, 2021-30](#)

<sup>9</sup> Age UK [wellbeing research](#), 2018

*and functioning including frailty, chronic pain, and disability, as well as better perceptions of ageing.”<sup>10</sup>*

Similar research published by Trinity College, Dublin, in 2023 also found that:

*‘Participation in arts, creative and cultural activities is associated with higher quality of life and lower levels of depression, stress, worry and loneliness.’<sup>11</sup>*

The evidence-base is therefore growing, and while creative participation can never be a magic bullet for wider inequalities, we have a clearer picture than ever of the positive role that nurturing creativity and creative expression can play throughout our lives.

### 1.3 The Dukes

The Dukes is a producing theatre and cinema in the north of Lancaster, with two auditoria in its main building. A further studio/performance space, located nearby in the Moor Space, is dedicated to creative engagement and small-scale contemporary theatre.

The Dukes’ mission is bring the best in live performance and cinema to the communities of Lancashire, and to create opportunities for communities, individuals, and artists to develop and deliver their own creative work. In its 2023-24 Organisational Plan, the Dukes re-iterated its commitment to holding inclusivity at the centre of its work and offering ‘distinct and inclusive participatory opportunities for all ages within the

community.’ Currently the youngest member of the Dukes Young Company is 8, while the oldest member of Prime Time is now 90, which gives some indication of the breadth of different life stages this plan is reaching.

Through its Creative Communities programme, the Dukes has a strong track record on working with and within communities to support participation in creative activity. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Prime Time had existed as a participative group for older people in Lancaster, albeit with a specific focus on acting. Another influential predecessor of this project was *Bring Me Laughter*, a three-year project which brought together people living with dementia, their families, friends and carers, and artists, to explore laughter and creative play. *Bring Me Laughter* coincided with the pandemic and was in large part delivered online, however much of the learning from the project (conveyed through a dedicated project evaluation) informed the design of the current Prime Time approach.

The establishment of Prime Time in a period of recovery following the pandemic therefore marked a new chapter in the Dukes long history of engaging local communities in creative participation.

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<sup>10</sup> [UCL arts and population health](#), 2023

<sup>11</sup> [Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing](#), 2023



Photo: Robin Zahler

## 1.4 Prime Time Aims and Objectives

The outcomes which Prime Time was designed to deliver are largely centred on the personal and social benefits participants are expected to receive from taking part over a sustained period of time. Specifically, participants are expected to:

- ⇒ Improve their physical and mental health (report improved wellbeing)
- ⇒ Strengthen their social ties
- ⇒ Develop creative skills and confidence

If the project is successful, participants will report:

- ⇒ Feeling more self-confident
- ⇒ Having a more positive outlook on the future
- ⇒ Feeling socially connected and supported
- ⇒ Developing new skills

The design of Prime Time was also intended (over the three-year funded period) to produce a self-sustaining group which would continue to flourish in the years following, contribute to the creative community at the Dukes, and provide a model of good practice within the sector:

*‘It is anticipated that Prime Time will fully occupy the space between professional, amateur and community theatre practice.’*

## 1.5 Evaluation Scope and Methods

The primary aim of this evaluation was to gather data across the whole funded period of Prime Time activity in order to demonstrate the impact the work has had on participants, creative practitioners involved in delivery, and the Dukes theatre itself.

In doing so, the evaluator and Dukes team have aimed to follow the best practice evaluation principles established by the Centre for Cultural Value: Beneficial; Robust, People-centred; Connected<sup>12</sup>. Whilst the strategic goals of the project were mapped out before Prime Time convened, just as project delivery has adapted to the needs and feedback from participants, so have the evaluation methods used to gather data.

By building a relationship with participants over time and aiming to ensure their active contribution to the evaluation process, it is hoped that their voices are foregrounded and the pitfalls of evaluation as an ‘extractive’ practice have at least been mitigated.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods were used in this evaluation. Two specific measures were selected as tried and tested models for measuring reduction in social isolation (loneliness): the [Canterbury Wellbeing Scale](#) and [The Campaign to End Loneliness Measurement tool](#). These measures were chosen as the most appropriate for this project with the intention of benefitting from a standardised

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<sup>12</sup> [Centre for Cultural Value](#), 2021

and proven framework. Through trials with Prime Time participants, an abbreviated version of the Canterbury Scale was used as a practicable means of capturing session to session feedback on wellbeing.

articulate their experience has made the author's work a pleasure.

The findings in this report are based on:

- ⇒ A baseline quantitative survey with all participants at the start of the project (34 responses), the midpoint (30 responses), and at the end point (15 responses<sup>13</sup>)
- ⇒ Randomised weekly session Canterbury Wellbeing Scale surveys (152 responses)
- ⇒ In-person discussion groups with x12-15 participants (March 2023, March 2024, March 2025)
- ⇒ Telephone 'keep in touch' interviews with x10 participants (December 2023)
- ⇒ Older People's Co-ordinator quarterly progress log
- ⇒ Interviews with creative practitioners and Dukes delivery team (x4)
- ⇒ Collated email feedback and comment cards collected by the delivery team over the project period
- ⇒ Older People's Co-ordinator survey/journal, completed at 6 month intervals over the project

Thanks are due to all of the Prime Timers and delivery team who gave their time, commitment, and enthusiasm to participating in this evaluation. Their ability to eloquently

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<sup>13</sup> Only participants who had joined Prime Time in the first term and were still attending in March 2025 completed the end point survey.

## 1.6 Prime Time Theory of Change

The diagram below summarises the change Prime Time was conceived to deliver over the funded period 2022-25.

INPUTS	OUTPUTS		OUTCOMES (What difference does this make?)		
	Participants	Activities	Short term	Intermediate	Long term
<i>What we invest</i>	<i>Who we reach</i>	<i>What we do/produce</i>	<i>Learning</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Conditions</i>
Funding Freelance skills/expertise Theatre facilities Dukes team support	Older people (65+) in Lancaster + Morecambe	- Weekly 2-hour facilitated drama sessions (x3 terms a year) - Monthly cinema club (screenings + talks) - Group trips/theatre visits - Termly sharing performances for friends/family	New skills: - <i>Acting</i> - <i>Improvisation</i> - <i>Writing</i> - <i>Stagecraft</i> - <i>Production</i>	- Physically active - Socialising - Stimulated - Challenged	- Wellbeing - Companionship - Confidence - Fulfilment
	Creative practitioners (professional + student)	Employment/experience	- Facilitation with older people - Planning/adaptation - Leadership	- Refine/adapt practice - Meet participant needs	- Creative professional development - Fulfilment
	Dukes theatre community	Opportunities for older people/inter-generational interaction	Diversifying Dukes community	Responding to diverse needs	Active presence of older people within the Dukes



## 2. Establishing a baseline

### 2.1 Beginnings

Establishing Prime Time in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic presented many challenges, including recruitment of a suitable project co-ordinator and creative practitioners to deliver activity, recruitment of participants, finding suitable spaces to host groups and much more.

Beyond these initial hurdles, the long-term ambition of the project was to have a significant, positive, influence on participants' health and wellbeing, and to build a supportive community around a shared purpose.

To understand this journey, it was important to establish where participants and practitioners were beginning it from. Who are the Prime Timers? How did they view the fledgling project, and what did they hope to get out of participating?

Towards the start of the first term of Prime Time, all participants were asked to complete a survey which explored some of the goals and objectives of the project. Following this, a discussion group with participants took place at the Dukes in order to:

- Introduce the evaluator to participants to ensure that the project evaluation was understood and approached collaboratively.
- Discover more about participants' starting point for their journey with Prime Time, especially around social networks, self-confidence, and drama experience/skills.

- Understand what motivated participants to join the group and what they hoped to gain from participation.
- Understand how Prime Time might compare or integrate with other social opportunities and interests they have.

### 2.2 Challenging stereotypes

UK society has long bunched the 'over 65's' into one extended category of shared characteristics, yet in reality a significant age gap between older people can produce significant differences in terms of formative influences, self-identity, and health.

Most participants were adamant that they didn't like labels such as 'OAP' or 'over-65' as these felt pejorative and failed to account for their individuality and the perception that *'you're only as old as you feel'*. 'Older people' was preferred by some participants as a looser, open-ended, description, though not all were comfortable with the term. 'Old people' was considered a limiting and offensive term by most.

*"We don't want to be defined by our age, so we struggle to find a label that we're all happy with."*

*"I don't like naming things. People are very different even at the same ages."*

*"Some of my friends say 'us oldies' and I go 'No!' It triggers something in my brain. We shouldn't be labelled – we are as old as we want to be."*

Many participants took issue with the implication that being older in the 2020's was a disadvantage. A number spoke about how lucky they felt to have grown up in England in the 1960s and 1970s, when post-war changes in society seemed positive and progressive compared to what had come before. They felt life in the UK had been much more uncertain since the 1980s and expressed concern about the prospects for their children and grandchildren in the future.

However, alongside their determination not to be stereotyped, Prime Timers also spoke of the challenges ageing had brought with it. There was a sense that in their younger years, opportunities to socialise and meet new people - at their children's school gates, at work, in their local community - had occurred naturally and frequently.

After retirement, these opportunities had begun to diminish and it took more effort to meet people who were *"like-minded"* or *"on their wavelength"*. Participants from the Morecambe group were also more likely than Lancastrians to comment that they struggled to feel connected to their local community.

*"Nobody talks to each other anymore! I've lived where I live for 12 years and I know the names of the neighbours next door but not the other houses and there's only 8 houses."*

*"When you're retired, it's not going to come to you is it?"*

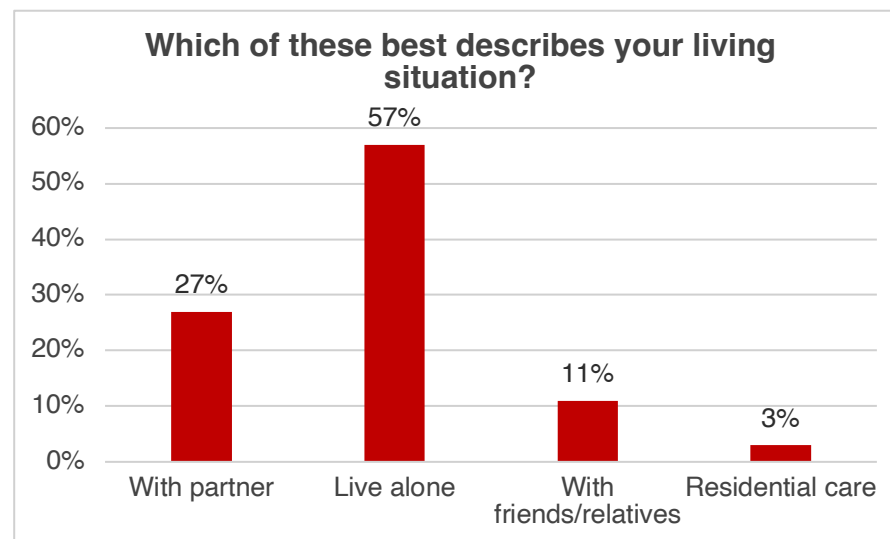
Some participants described a subtle erosion of confidence which had come with retirement and loss of a sense of worth which their careers had provided. There was a sense that

whatever you might feel about yourself internally, other people would still make judgments based on your appearance and over time this could affect your own sense of self.

*"People see you as an oldie, don't they? I do find it really patronising when people in shops call you 'love' or 'duck'"*

*"I live on a friendly road but I can't say I know any of my neighbours that well. I feel like I would like to have more to do with the community and to give something but I don't know how to go about it."*

When asked about their living situation, over half of participants said they lived alone.



Participants (the vast majority of whom are female) also felt

gender often played a role in how men and women respond to retirement. Whereas women may be more inclined to get out and take a chance on a new group, they felt men were more likely to remain ‘insular’ and simply stay at home pursuing their interests there. There was a feeling that work and sport often define male social identity in earlier life and that retirement can present a new and difficult challenge to these established identities.

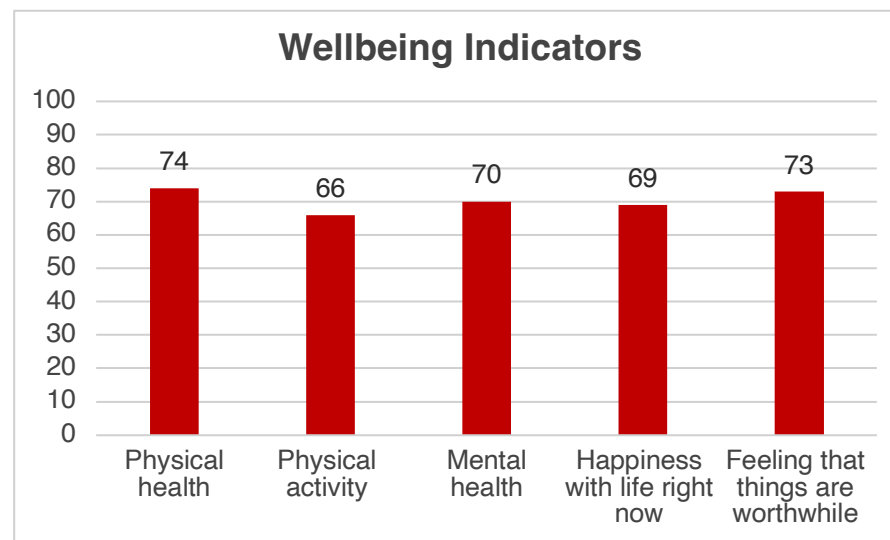
Interestingly, in conversation, even those participants who either lived with their grown-up children or were regularly involved in caring for grandchildren still described a need to carve out time where they could be their own, adult, self, and not be defined solely by their relationship to family.

### 2.3 Wellbeing

Though not new, pursuit of ‘wellbeing’ has gained traction in UK debate and policy-making in recent years. The Department for Health and Social care defines wellbeing as: *‘feeling good and functioning well - comprising an individual's experience of their life; and a comparison of life circumstances with social norms and values’* while the National Lottery Community Fund defines ‘personal’ wellbeing as *‘subjective, depending on how people sum up their life, feelings and emotional state, and whether they have meaning and purpose’*.

Wellbeing, therefore, is something only participants can articulate for themselves, though (as outlined in the introduction to this report) this evaluation adopted tried and tested indicators in order to measure or quantify wellbeing.

At the very start of the project, participants were asked to score themselves on a number of wellbeing indicators on a rising scale from 1 to 100.



Overall, participants tended to rate their physical health slightly higher than their mental health, despite actually rating their level of physical activity as lower again.

Happiness with ‘life right now’ and feeling that ‘things are worthwhile’ were chosen as indicators because of their use by the [Office of National Statistics](#) to monitor wellbeing across the UK adult population. Results from 2023 indicated that nationally, wellbeing (which had gradually risen since 2012) declined during the pandemic, briefly rose in 2022, then dipped again in 2023. UK average happiness with life scored 75 in



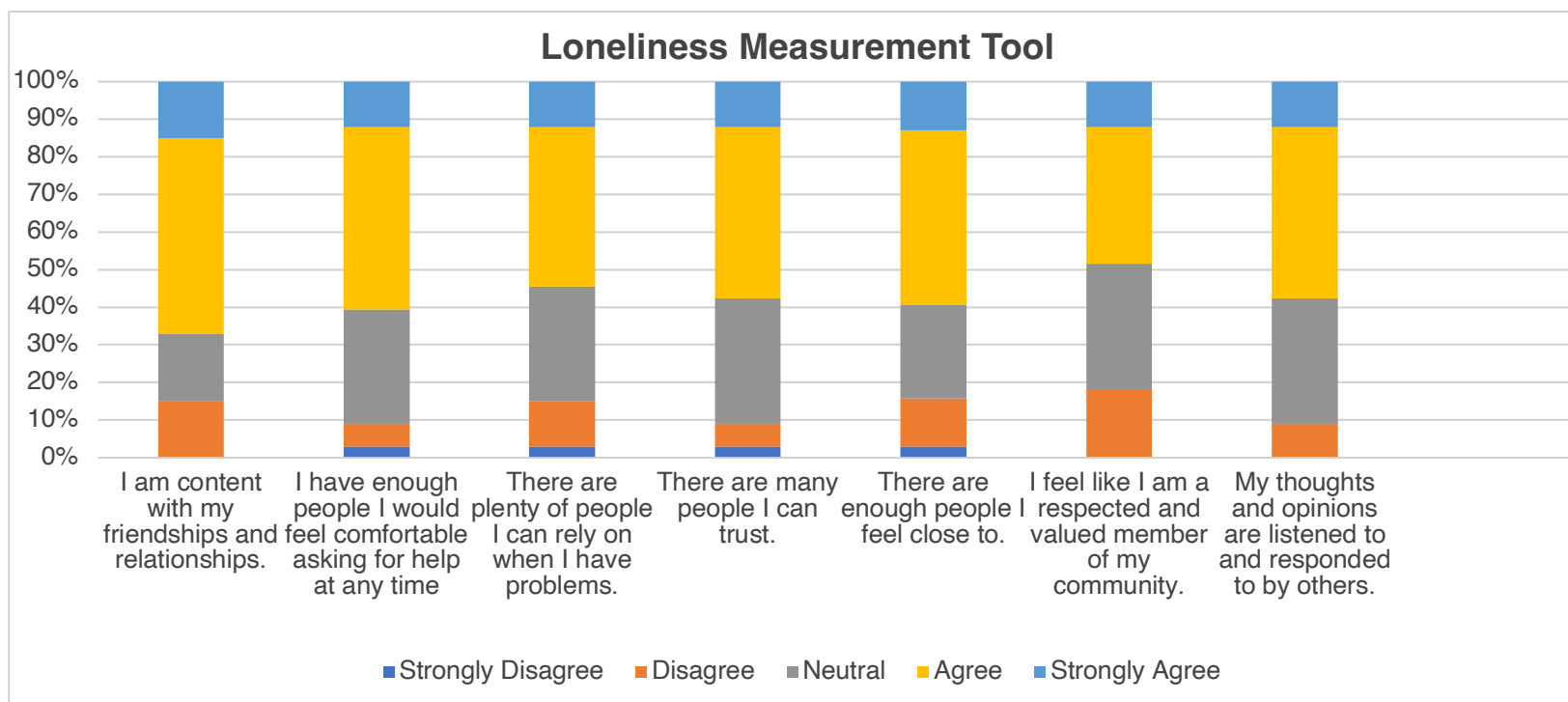
2023, while feeling that things are worthwhile scored 77 – both slightly higher than the baseline Prime Time group scores.

Participants were also asked to state the extent of their agreement with a series of statements designed as indicators in the [Campaign to End Loneliness Measurement Tool](#). Disagreement with these statements indicates a higher degree of loneliness, while agreement is indicative of reduced or absent feelings of loneliness.

At the start of the project, roughly 1 in 8 participants scored what could be deemed significant indicators of loneliness,

while a similar proportion scored at the opposite end of the scale, i.e. indicating very few feelings of loneliness. As might be expected, the majority of the group scored more towards the middle of the scale, with an average of 74% either agreeing with the statements (but not strongly) or feeling neutral towards them.

Interestingly, feeling like a respected and valued member of their community was the statement which drew the highest level of disagreement, suggesting that self-esteem in their local community might be more of an issue for Prime Timers than having access to close or trusted individuals.



## 2.4 Hopes and goals

It was important to ask participants at the start of the project what their own aspirations were for participating in Prime Time, and not to assume that wider project goals around reducing social isolation were necessarily key drivers for individuals.

Responses to this open question in the survey were remarkably consistent and largely fell into three categories.

### 1. New experiences, new people

Around half of participants said their main aim in joining Prime Time was to try new things, have new experiences, and meet new people. These participants didn't specifically mention drama or performing arts, but referred more generally to acquiring new skills, challenging themselves, and building social connections.

#### What do you most want to get out of participating in Prime Time?

- Challenging boundaries, new experiences
- Meeting interesting people
- Meeting new people and facing new challenges
- Try something new and meet new people
- Meeting people and learning new skills
- Friendships, new experiences and fun
- Social connections...feeling part of a community
- Trying new things with new people

### 2. Drama and creative expression

Just under half of respondents were more specific about wanting to develop their creative skills around acting, performance, or production. There was still a strong social theme to their goals – it was important that these skills were developed within a collaborative, group setting.

- I love performing and collaborating with others
- I would like to develop my creative abilities for example devising pieces
- Working together with others on a production (whether or not publicly performed)
- Learning new drama skills, fun!
- Meet people with similar interests and work together on projects
- Creative sparks and good conversations/ connections
- Acting, putting together little pieces with others, some insight into how to put a piece together
- Opportunities to be creative within a group

### 3. Build my confidence

A smaller group specifically mentioned being motivated to build their confidence, which is noteworthy as this was one of the stated objectives for Prime Time when the project was designed.

- Having the confidence to take part in the group
- Gaining confidence!

- To gain confidence and friends
- I feel as if I've lost a lot of confidence over lockdown as it shut me away a lot

In conversation with participants at the start of the project, a more nuanced but consistent motivation also emerged. Many described earlier phases of their lives as being busy and preoccupied with priorities such as work and raising children. Retirement now offered them a new opportunity to focus on themselves and their interests.

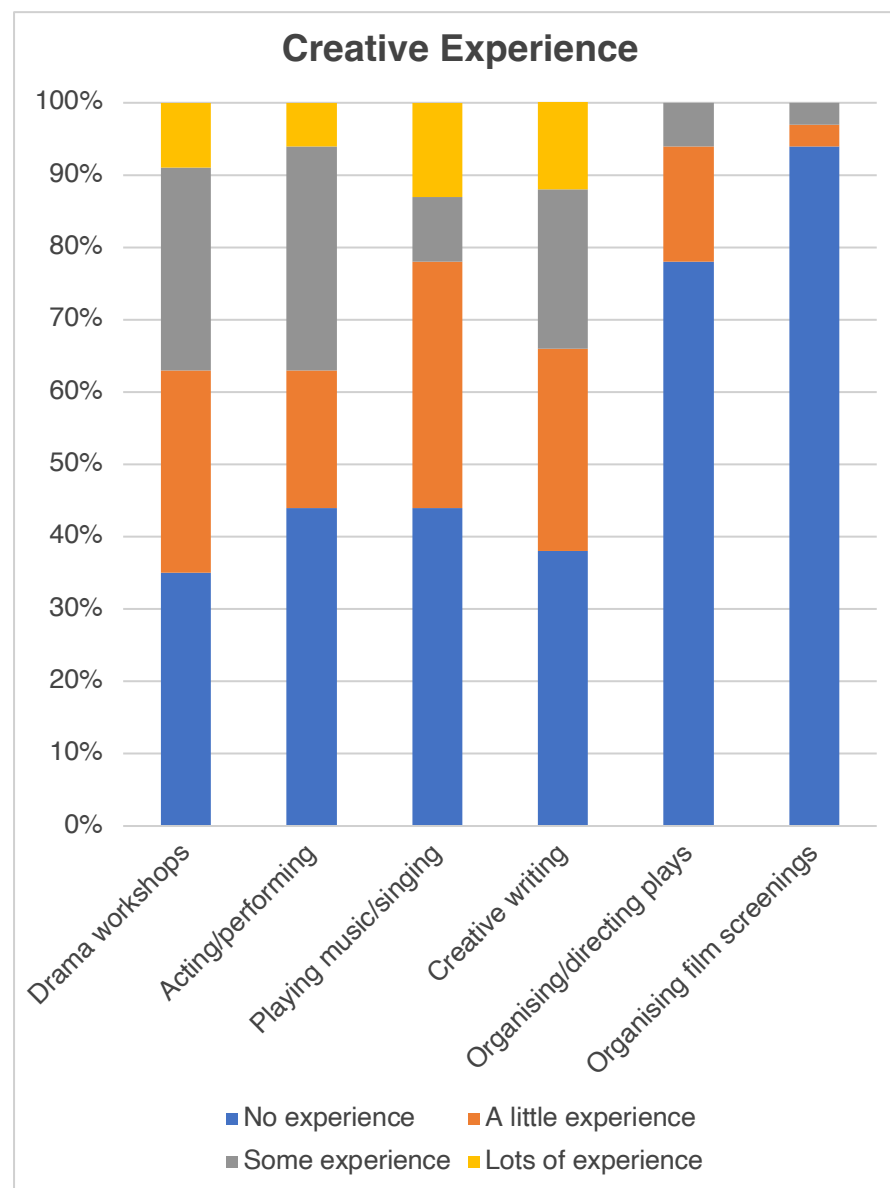
*"I've said to my children and my grandchildren, I'm a mother, I'm a grandmother, but I'm also me. I need some space and I want to get to know myself."*

Some also described losing some of their inhibition to try new things with age, being less self-conscious than in their youth, and of feeling emboldened through ageing to just 'have a go'.

## 2.5 Creative experience and confidence

Prime Time is not primarily intended to produce polished productions, actors, or dramaturgs. Rather, drama workshops, theatre trips, film screenings, and talks are all employed as tools and processes to focus participants' attention on developing new and existing skills and experience, with the aim of building their self-confidence and knowledge over time.

At the start of the project, participants were asked how much experience they had of a range of related themes, from attending plays and film screenings, to acting and playing musical instruments or singing. While most had extensively



attended theatre and cinemas previously, experience of acting and performing was lower and very few participants had experience of organising or directing plays or film screenings.

The majority of Prime Time respondents said they had no (or only a little) previous experience of acting, performing, or singing/playing an instrument. This proportion was even higher amongst the Lancaster group, where participants had had less previous contact with the Dukes. A few members of the Lancaster group had previously attended Prime Time during the period (pre-pandemic) when it was funded by Age Concern.

*"I'd never really had any interest in drama and then a few years ago the Dukes wanted a community cast for a play. I enjoyed every minute and from that I joined Prime Time."*

*"I've done a bit of 'am dram' in the past but I'm not interested in acting. I'm actually interested in the writing and I thought this might be a kick up the arse! I need an opportunity."*

*"I did 'am dram' as a young person and then didn't do anything like that for 30 odd years."*

Participants were also asked how confident they felt about their abilities across a range of themes, from meeting new people to performing or writing.

- ⇒ In general, confidence was highest around social skills such as offering support to others, meeting new people, and taking part in group activities.

- ⇒ Confidence tended to be lower around creative writing and speaking or performing in public.
- ⇒ Confidence was most split over physical activity (reflecting differing levels of health and ability) but also over taking pride/satisfaction in achievements, where a surprising number of participants suggested they had little or no confidence in.

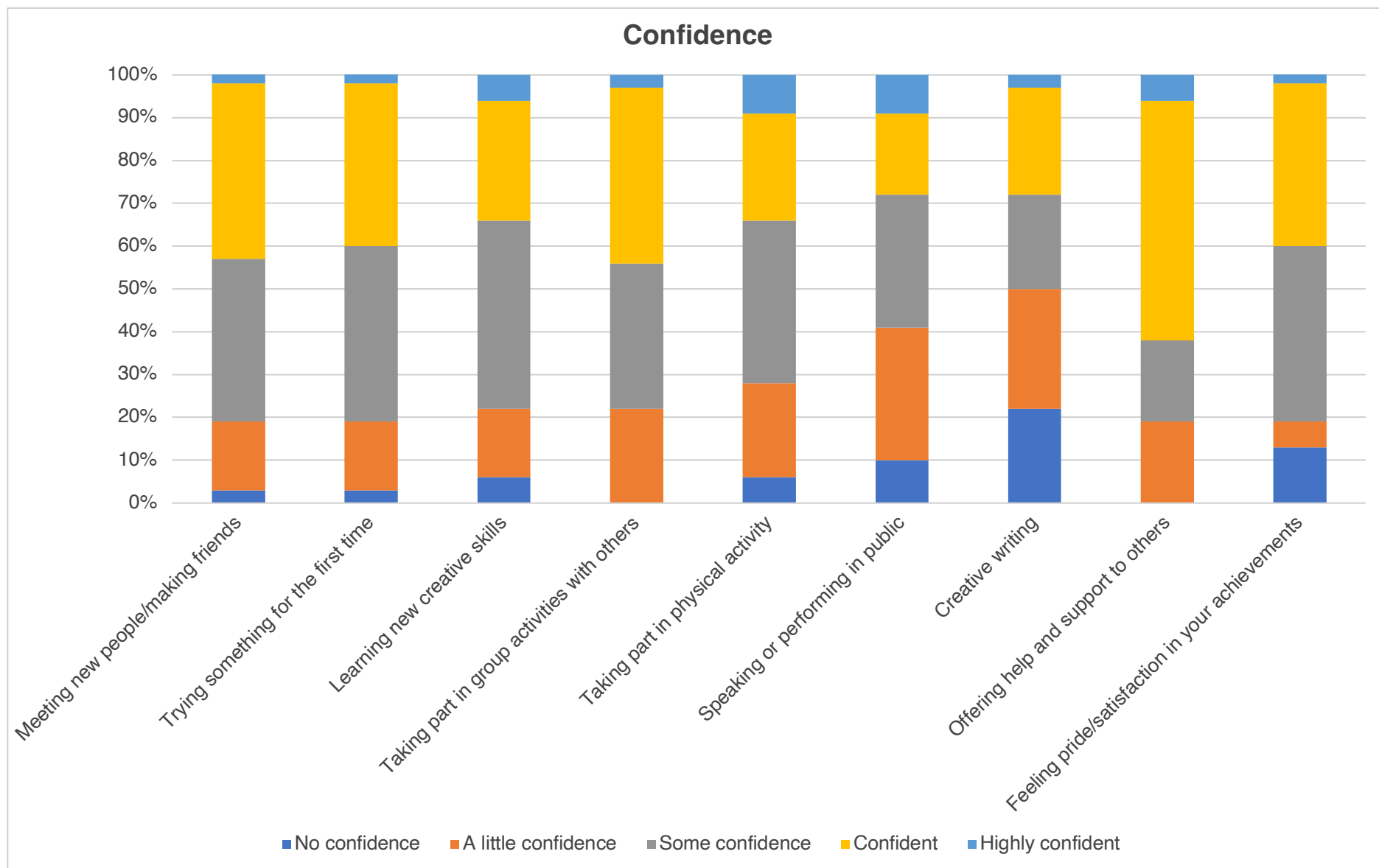
*"It's something that I've always thought would be lovely to do but I've never had the confidence to try."*

For most of the participants with previous experience of performing, there was a consensus that nerves and uncertainty beforehand were natural and to be expected, but once underway performing was something that boosted their confidence, made them feel good, and created a memorable 'afterglow'.

Some described their particular enjoyment of improvisation, partly in response to the additional nervousness and stress attached to remembering scripted lines. Others described the joy and escapism attached to "getting to be somebody else" for a short period and taking on a different character.

*"I don't feel self-conscious when I'm on stage as I'm not being me! It's liberating."*

*"It's just a fun thing to do. It's joyful."*



## 2.6 Participant Profile

The focus of this evaluation has been on allowing space for Prime Time participants to express their own individuality and challenge stereotypes. Nevertheless, without monitoring some of the demographic characteristics of the groups, we can't know if the Dukes' Creative Communities programme is delivering on its aim to be inclusive and representative of local communities.

- ⇒ The youngest Prime Timer is 56 years old, while the oldest is 90 – a clear indication that the groups span the target of 'Older People' (purposefully not book-ended by specific ages).
- ⇒ Just under half of participants are from low-income backgrounds.
- ⇒ Around a quarter of participants self-identify as having a disability (and around 7% say they have a mental health issue).
- ⇒ The vast majority of participants are of white ethnic origin.



Photo: Charlie Brown

*“What an amazing day! Thank you so much for organising this trip. The tour of the theatre was brilliant.”*

**Participant**

### 3. Building a community

#### 3.1 Year 1 overview

With the recruitment of part-time Older People's Co-ordinator Charlie Brown to the Dukes team in January 2023, Prime Time could begin to progress from an 'on paper' project plan towards becoming a real-life community.

A significant innovation for Prime Time was the establishment of two separate groups, with one based on theatre premises in Lancaster and the other in Morecambe. Going out into the community beyond Lancaster itself to host and deliver activity was a first for the Dukes and represented a conscious decision to work in an area of high need. As outlined in the introduction to this report, Morecambe is significantly more deprived than Lancaster and by establishing a new group to meet in the town the aim was to reach a new audience and to reduce barriers including travel, cost, and possible perceptions of the Dukes as exclusive or elitist.

From the outset, participants were pro-active in shaping the project delivery and articulating what is (and isn't) working for them. Through the organised forum of an Advisory Panel, members have helped to steer the future of the project, formulating plans for various theatre trips, improved administration and evaluation processes, and assisted with the marketing and promotion of Prime Time.

Activity highlights from the first full year of Prime Time included:

- ⇒ Lecture and Q&A with Writer and Producer, Darragh Carville.
- ⇒ Creative writing and script development with playwright and actor, Joyce Brannagh.
- ⇒ Improvisation and character exploration workshops with actor, Helen Katamba.
- ⇒ Block of 5 workshops delivered by Community Theatre students from Lancaster University.



- ⇒ An intergenerational workshop with the Youth Theatre Summer School.
- ⇒ Theatre trips to the Shakespeare North playhouse, The Octagon, Bolton, and the Dukes' Play in the Park.
- ⇒ Launch of the Prime Time monthly film club, programmed in collaboration with participants. Critic Mark Fisher gave a lecture and Q&A at the inaugural screening of *A Haunting in Venice*.
- ⇒ Film-making project with Kriss Foster and young people
- ⇒ Two sharing performances for family, friends, and colleagues in July 2023 and March 2024 at the Dukes' Moor Space to a combined audience of nearly 200.
- ⇒ The Morecambe group's short film *Slots and Cucumbers* was selected as a wildcard entry for the LA1 Shorts film festival, held at the Dukes in May 2024.

### 3.2 Year 2 overview

Activity highlights from the second year of Prime Time (April 2024 – April 2025) included:

- ⇒ Participation of 13 Prime Timers as part of the community cast in a professional production of *Alice in Wonderland* as part of Lancaster's summer Play in the Park.
- ⇒ A series of one-off themed participant workshops led by invited facilitators, which included storytelling, character development, and Shakespeare.
- ⇒ Participation in a creative ageing/sharing event with colleagues from Brewery Arts in Kendal and The Royal Exchange, Manchester.

- ⇒ An intergenerational Christmas party and trip to see *The Borrowers* alongside the Dukes Young Company.
- ⇒ A block of 8 Prime Time sessions facilitated by 20 Applied Theatre students from Lancaster University, and their course lecturer Dr Cami Rowe, exploring themes of unity and difference across the generations and concluding with a sharing performance.
- ⇒ The amalgamation of the monthly film club with a regular 'talking pictures' project post-screening discussion, organised by Prime Timers themselves.
- ⇒ Self-led 'side projects' from Prime Timers, including a new play-reading group and a film production.
- ⇒ Participation by one Prime Timer on the expert panel at Arts Council conference at the Lowry, Salford in April 2025

### 3.3 Charlie Brown – Dukes Older People's Co-ordinator

Charlie Brown has been the 'behind the scenes' organising force for Prime Time, having led the project on a part-time basis since January 2023. A musician by training, Charlie has over 20 years of experience in youth and community development work, but Prime Time was the first project in which she'd worked with older people specifically.

As part of this evaluation, Charlie completed progress journal entries every 6 months to record her reflections on successes, challenges, and changes in approach/practice. Through these reflections it has become clear that co-participation is one of the pillars of her approach to Prime Time. By working with an Advisory Panel drawn from the participants, constantly listening and inviting feedback, and sometimes knowing when

to take a lead, Charlie has managed the growth of the Prime Time community.

She reflects that managing communications effectively across a community of over 40 older people (a number of whom don't use email) has been one of her bigger challenges. Ring fencing a 15 minute slot every other week at Prime Time sessions to discuss forthcoming plans and arrangements has been a crucial forum for ensuring that the many aspects of Prime Time – from introducing new facilitators and session themes, to scheduling trips and sharing performances – all come together smoothly.

Reflecting on the past two years, it is the community-building achievement of Prime Time which Charlie says she is most proud of.

*“It's the bringing together of a community of older people, encouraging them to step outside of their comfort zone, and seeing them forge real friendships.”*

Charlie is also proud of the standard of creative output achieved by Prime Time, though makes an important distinction between the high standard of creative practice and the 'production values' of sharing performances. Maintaining a high standard of drama practice in the weekly sessions is part of what gives Prime Timers their drive and motivation, however sharing performances are primarily intended to be enjoyable for participants and audiences, as opposed to highly-polished productions and the associated stress which might accompany

these.

### 3.4 Sally Lofthouse – Prime Time Facilitator

From mid-2023 onwards, creative practitioner Sally Lofthouse has been the regular session facilitator at Prime Time. Working consistently with one group leader has suited both the Lancaster and Morecambe groups, providing continuity and allowing both participants and facilitator to get to know each other and adapt together to build a strong working relationship based on trust.

Improvisation and devised work has been a theme the Prime Timers have consistently shown an interest in as it reduces the pressure associated with learning lines and frees participants up to have fun in the moment. Playfulness, regardless of age, is something Sally sees as fundamental to Prime Time's ethos.

*“When you're getting to know a group then working with a script can feel quite rigid – with improv there are no mistakes – just discovery and playfulness!”*

Sally feels a major characteristic of Prime Time is the group's shared sense of purpose and willingness to work together to create something collaborative. This has helped to bond the groups, create camaraderie and support networks amongst participants, and led to participants surprising themselves in terms of what they have been able to achieve together.

*“There's physical contact, a lot of eye contact – that makes people feel seen. They're heard – everybody speaks each week and no-one is sidelined. It builds confidence, more than anything.”*

Sally also reflects on the role that comedy plays at Prime Time, noting that while in part this is a form of light-hearted escapism for participants, there is also a bonding element which comes from shared humour that helps to underpin the group's supportive camaraderie.

*"There's a need to pick each other up with laughter. It's a distraction from everyday life but it's also massively bonding and it communicates safety to each other."*

Working with Prime Time has also developed Sally's own practice and led her to adapt sessions based on participants' needs. Sally (herself a very physical performer) has discovered that participants all have different physical and movement needs and that building in options for sitting down or resting helps the whole group to manage and enjoy a session.

*"They're so committed and so invested that working with them is just an absolute joy. They're curious and they interrogate things – that's exciting! I feel like a true facilitator here rather than a leader as they have such amazing ideas."*

As she has continued working with the groups and trust has grown, Sally has begun to plan more challenging activities for participants which stretch their abilities and experience. Scripted work has played a role here, along with acting technique, and was the focus of a second sharing performance in March 2024. Working 'script in hand' as opposed to trying to memorise lines, has worked well for participants.

*"They can handle the more serious themes too and they like being challenged. They're asking me more questions so I have to be on my toes but I like being challenged too!"*

### 3.5 Social bonding

Sally's observation that shared sense of purpose is a major motivator for both groups is also a theme which came out in conversation with participants at the start of the project. Prime Timers spoke of the social interactivity and group work as being motivating to them. Sessions involved pairing up with others, sharing, and collective enterprise in a way which distinguished the group from other more individual creative pursuits.

For some participants, joining a group was something they were initially nervous or reticent about, however after the first few sessions they began to feel more confident and began to enjoy a sense of belonging.

*"I was a bit apprehensive when I first joined, thinking 'I don't do groups!'"*

*"I thought I was going to be really nervous because I'm quite a shy, introverted person normally, but actually I just loved every minute."*

*"I really enjoyed the sense of community, of being with the others, chatting and sharing thoughts and ideas."*

*"This is one of the first times really I can say I'm in a group."*

While initially the Morecambe group (starting entirely from scratch in a new location for the Dukes) was smaller than Lancaster, participation has steadily grown, though for both groups a gender imbalance in favour of women is something they would prefer to see addressed. Most participants agree that group sizes have an optimum scale (around 20 participants) beyond which it becomes harder to get to know each other and for facilitation to be effective.

### 3.6 Reach and retention

A notable feature of Prime Time has been the high retention rate of participants. Different life stages bring different challenges and for some participants who haven't been able to attend regularly the barriers have either been their health or their own caring responsibilities. These issues have become more pronounced in the second year of the project as some regular participants have begun to experience a decline in their health.

Managing attendance became easier with the adoption of pre-registration for weekly sessions, while feedback from the groups also led to session plans being shared with participants in advance. New starter packs were created to ensure health and support needs are recognised and that contact details for next of kin are up to date.

Another constructive development in year 2 was the adoption of a 'taster session' introduction, which allows prospective new Prime Timers to drop in on three sessions with no obligation to participate before deciding whether they want to commit to a full term of activity.

- ⇒ 67 individuals engaged in total since January 2023 (sessions, trips, activities)
- ⇒ 21 people average weekly attendance (Lancaster)
- ⇒ 16 people average weekly attendance (Morecambe)

Film club attendance has also been relatively stable since the programme was launched, with around 30-45 people attending screenings.

### 3.7 Prime Time Values

In the second year of the project, facilitator Sally Lofthouse worked with both Prime Time groups to help them define some agreed values, intended to refine their sense of purpose and also to offer guidance to prospective new members.

#### **Morecambe - Theatre and performing arts group that values: Friendship, Fun and Freedom**

*Our performing arts group is a place where people come together to experience different theatre and performance disciplines, offering a supportive environment and plenty of laughter while taking on new creative challenges. We value the adventure of life, trying new things and discovering more about ourselves through different performing arts practices.*

*We work hard to create an atmosphere that is relaxed and caring, allowing everyone the freedom to express themselves. We embody our values by sharing, listening and participating in creative tasks to generate an uplifting experience where everyone has fun, develops friendships and feels free to be*

*themselves.*

*'Dreams never grow old.'*

**Lancaster - We are Prime Time: a creative, supportive, and playful performing arts group**

*'Ageing without growing up'*

*Growing older doesn't mean we stop having fun or being creative. Prime Time drama group is a fun and creative team where everyone feels supported, included and has permission to be themselves. We make new friends, play games and explore a variety of performing arts disciplines whilst developing new skills.*

*It's important to us that we create an environment which is playful, as challenging as you want it to be and where everyone's life experience is respected.  
Together we change how people think about age.*



Photo: Gabi Dawkins

## 4. Impact and outcomes

The data we have gathered from the outset of the project early in 2023 (and over two full years of activity) clearly demonstrates that Prime Time has achieved a significant positive impact on participants, facilitators, and the wider Dukes community.

### 4.1 Participants have learnt new skills

Prime Time is primarily a drama group, and while the purpose is not to stage fully-fledged productions, this focus gives it a purpose and momentum. Participants don't attend simply to pass the time or for casual chat (though these are both additional benefits!)

*"It's always very professional, so we don't just feel like we're playing about to pass the time. It's done properly, and I think that's a great benefit to it."*

Through a varied programme, encompassing acting, improvisation, movement, stagecraft, talks, Q&A's, theatre visits, film-making and film-screenings, Prime Timers have tried new things, stepped outside their comfort zones, picked up new skills, and further developed existing ones.

*"We've learnt how to make a storyboard and used an i-pad to film bits of scenes ourselves. Not everyone was in the film – some people were doing background roles like directing."*

*"Being part of a group and learning new skills – it gives me a focus."*

*"We learnt that actors doing things on film are doing a totally different job to actors on stage. How they can keep doing the emotions when it's stop start, stop start – I think it's incredible."*

*"I've most enjoyed learning new skills in subjects I know nothing about."*

Along with trying things for the first time and beginning to pick up new skills, participants were aware of their own and the group's skills progression and improvement.

*"I think we've all developed creatively and explored our creativity more. Like the little improvised sketches we do to warm-up – you've got to think of something and be creative."*

*"My awareness of movement has come on a lot. How do you move on stage? Where do you move? What do you do? It's one of the hardest things and we've all learnt that."*

*"Since I've been at Prime Time I've had to think on my feet. If someone tells you to be a butterfly, or an octopus, I have to do that instantaneously! I've developed skills that I didn't have."*

Prime Time's main facilitator, Sally Lofthouse, was felt to be particularly adept at coaching participants to recognise and develop their own abilities.

*"We might have a script but we then have to explore the character, work out their motivation, their mood. Sally helps us break all this down."*

*"You don't have to perform. There are people who do background or technical roles, which is equally important and that's their skill."*

*"Sally picks up on people's skills and knows how to encourage them. I've never been taught about acting but I've learnt a lot from her."*

When asked what (if anything) distinguished drama as a practice from any other creative or artistic discipline, most participants felt that the collaborative working required at Prime Time was unique and unlike anything else they were involved in. Participation required co-operation, communication, and listening skills as well as specific drama techniques.

*"It's creative but also collaborative as we're very much working as a team, coming up with ideas together and seeing what works."*

*"There's a feeling of belonging and of doing something together."*

#### **4.2 Participants are active, social, and challenged**

It has been clear since Prime Time was established that, despite a shared characteristic of being older, participants were a diverse group with a range of physical abilities and needs. While some were looking to specifically find a new social focus and purpose, others were already leading busy creative lives in their retirement, participating and volunteering in their communities.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Prime Time has become a compelling weekly fixture for many in the groups and that this is in part due to the intensity of the practice and the way it

stretches participants into new areas. In conversation, Prime Timers talk about how physical the sessions are, how much talking and group work is required, and how they enjoy being challenged to grow.

*"We all love the improvisation. It's a challenge but we just let ourselves go and do it."*

*"At our stage in life it's definitely about challenging yourself, rather than getting comfortable. Anything that help you do that, physically and mentally, is welcome."*

*"We're greedy for more experience and for more challenges to be thrown at us."*

These characteristics were clearly demonstrated in the sharing performance given in March 2024, where a broad range of scripted excerpts, including more difficult work, showed a more serious dramatic side to the groups than the light-hearted comedy performed in July 2023.

*"It's very physical. You might go to a reading group, or art class, or sewing, but there's nothing else I've been to that's so active. You get up and do things!"*

*"It's a challenge, and I think it's always good to be challenged. You need to be challenged, as long as it's not too far out of your comfort zone."*

*"I think mentally it's stretching. I've lived alone for a long time and you just begin to think your brain is really slowing down. Prime Time is very stimulating and thought-provoking. You have to concentrate."*

*"It's giving you the opportunity to find out just what you're capable of."*

### 4.3 Participants have improved wellbeing

As introduced in section 2.3 on p16, Prime Time has adopted a broad definition of the much-used term 'wellbeing' and acknowledged the mosaic of elements – from daily mood and social interaction, to a broader sense of purpose and fulfilment – which contribute to positive wellbeing.

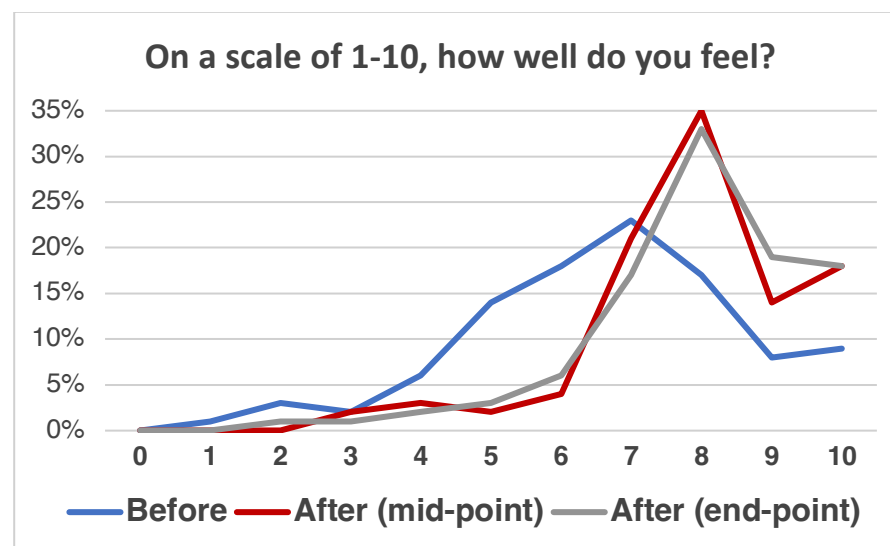
Because wellbeing itself is multi-faceted, we must acknowledge that a weekly 2-hour drama session (in term-time) can only be expected to contribute to wellbeing within a broader context, rather than in isolation.

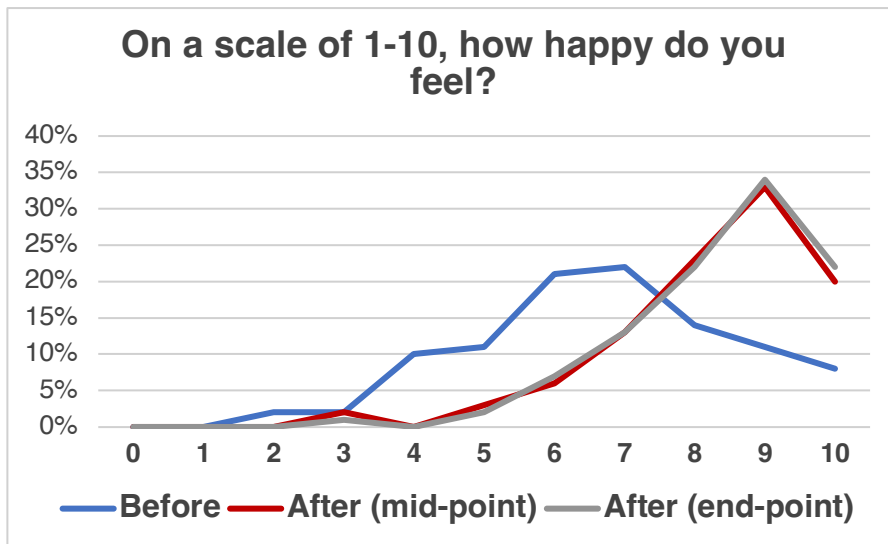
With these caveats in mind, the evidence we have collected suggests that Prime Time is positively (and measurably) impacting on some of the proven core indicators for wellbeing. As introduced on p10, an abbreviated version of the Canterbury Wellbeing Scale (CWS) was chosen as a tried and tested tool to measure 'in the moment' wellbeing.

Before and after each Prime Time session, a few participants (chosen at random each week) were asked to score both how 'happy' they felt and how 'well' they felt. The purpose of asking both questions is to differentiate from happiness as a potentially transient state of mind and wellness as a more rounded or nuanced state, incorporating health, relationships and other profound factors.

By tracking this data over all Prime Time sessions to date, the aim was to build a more robust data set (152 responses in total) to establish whether or not sessions as a whole could be shown to impact happiness and wellbeing.

The charts below show the average scores given by participants before and after Prime Time sessions, at the mid-point of the project (one year) and at the end-point (two years).





- ⇒ Both scales showed marked increases when measured straight after Prime Time sessions had been delivered.
- ⇒ As might be expected, in the moment 'happiness' showed a steeper rise than 'wellness', which may indicate sessions have a more immediate impact on mood and emotional state than on holistic 'wellness'.<sup>14</sup>
- ⇒ This improvement in stated 'happiness' and 'wellness' stayed largely consistent (but did not rise further) between the mid and end points of the project.

<sup>14</sup> These findings also correlate with those of the *Bring Me Laughter* project evaluation undertaken at the Dukes in 2021 by Jo Kay, which also used these questions from the CWS.



Photo: Gabi Hawkins

In conversation, participants were emphatic that participating in Prime Time had a direct impact on their emotions and state of mind.

*“God, performing is fantastic! It gives you that adrenaline rush and push. It lifts you up beyond what you’ve done before.”*

*“Sometimes I laugh more in that two hours than I do all week. And that’s brilliant for your mental health, isn’t it?”*

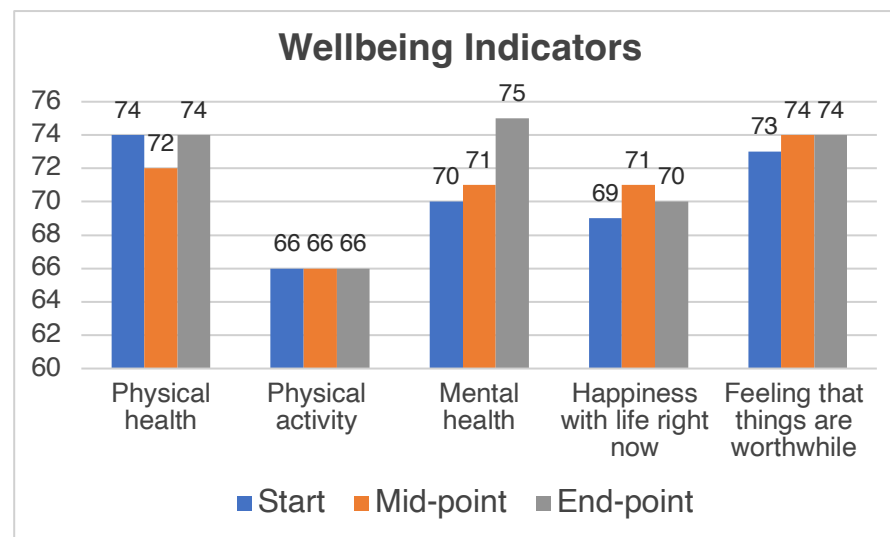
*“It’s one thing I really look forward to. It keeps me motivated!”*

*“Prime Time gives me two hours each week when I am not thinking about how much I miss my wife.”*

*“I try to be a positive person but sometimes it’s very hard. Prime Time gives you a big boost in terms of positivity, friendship and fun.”*

The wellbeing indicators surveyed at three points over two years of activity show an interesting difference between reported physical and mental health.

Participants were asked to score aspects of their wellbeing from 1-100. While physical health and activity remained largely consistent throughout, mental health and happiness scores rose slightly between the start and end-point surveys.



When asked directly to comment on Prime Time’s effect on wellbeing and mental health, many participants said it was a significant positive influence and were able to clearly articulate the contribution it was making.

*“Loneliness for our age group can be one of the biggest problems. It makes people ill. I was frightened of being lonely but I’m not now.”*

*“It’s 10 out of 10 for wellbeing. It gets me up and out, socialising, and I sleep better.”*

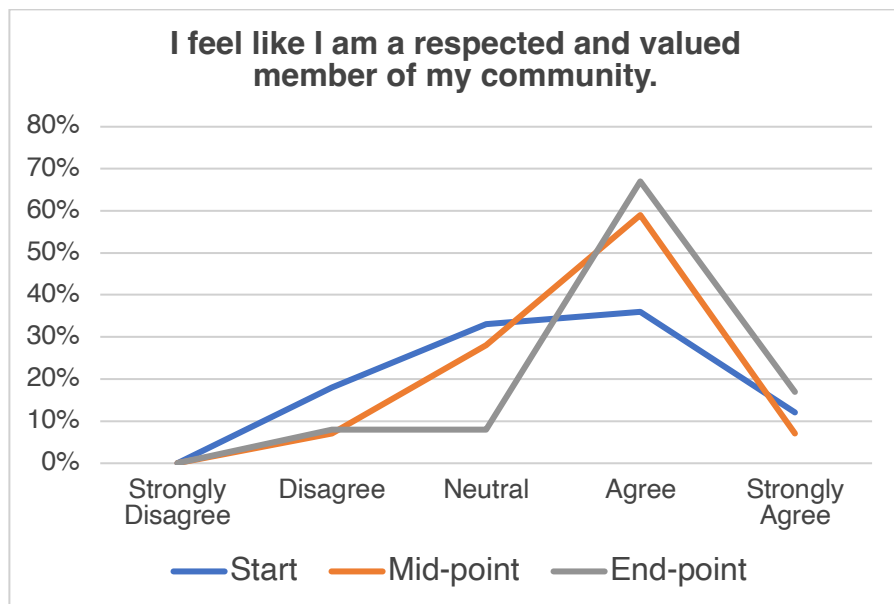
*“Over the last 18 months I’ve had fairly serious health problems. This is one of the things that has kept me going over that period. It’s something to look forward to and to be involved in. It takes you away.”*

*"It's had a good impact as meeting people, exercising the brain and achieving new skills boosts self-confidence and self-worth."*

*"Through Prime Time I have gained social connections, friendship, opportunities to laugh and have fun, as well as increased confidence and a continuing sense of personal achievement."*

The indicators from the Campaign to End Loneliness Measurement Tool have also shown some significant improvements from the project baseline to the end-point survey.

While all of these indicators showed some improvement, those that relate to feeling valued and listened to within a community showed the largest increases.



Feeling like a 'respected and valued member of my community' increased significantly. Whereas at the start of Prime Time 18% of participants had disagreed with this statement and 48% had agreed, at the end-point survey just 8% disagreed and 84% agreed.

In conversation, participants spoke of a sense of belonging found through Prime Time, friendships forged, and the way the groups function as their social networks.

*"When we don't have Prime Time in the holidays we'll often meet up for coffee. It's nice to carry it on and chat so we can get to know each other a bit better."*

*"I think it's vitally important that when you retire, you have a social network."*

*"It's making friendships and building relationships. Being in a community."*

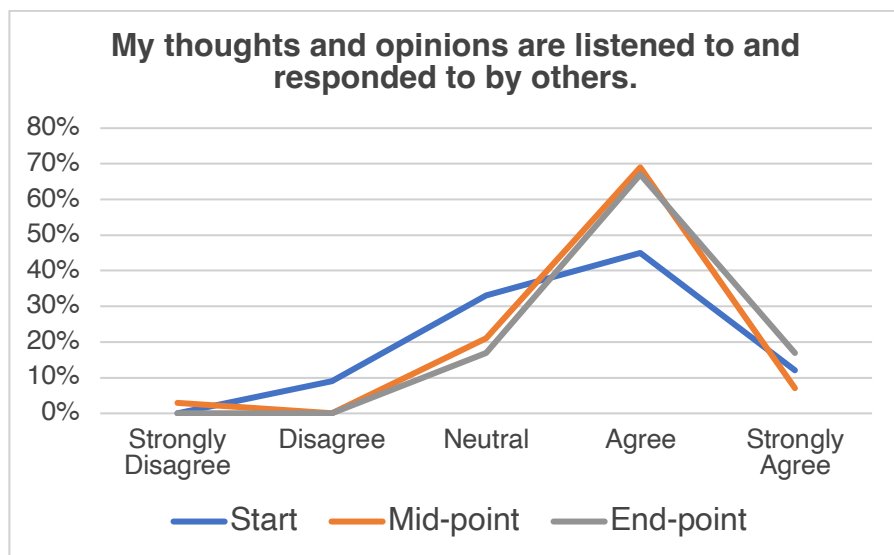
A notable feature of Prime Time which participants commented on is the stability and consistency which the weekly sessions bring to their lives, something that a less structured or irregular activity might not provide.

*"There's something about the consistency of Prime Time, meeting once a week. I do a lot of U3A things and it's once a month or something so it's not the same."*

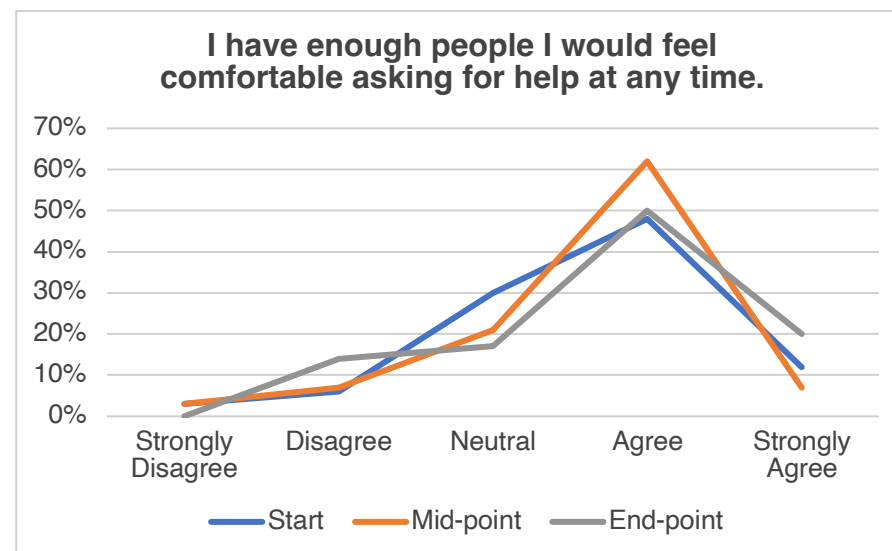
*"You can depend on seeing these people every Thursday and you build up more of a relationship with the group."*

*“At Prime Time we’re talking to one another all the time. That’s different from some of the other things I do, like singing (where we don’t even have a tea break!)”*

*“The best thing is knowing there is a safe place with friendly people where I can go every week.”*



Feeling ‘listened to and responded to by others’ also showed a steep rise, from 57% agreeing and 9% disagreeing with this statement at project start, to 84% agreeing and 0% disagreeing at the end-point.



The third indicator which showed a significant improvement was having ‘enough people I would feel comfortable asking for help at any time’. While a significant proportion of participants still tended to disagree with the statement, the proportion who did agree rose from 60% at the start of the project to 70% at end-point.



#### 4.4 Participants have greater confidence

In the end-point survey, participants were asked to rate their own level of confidence against the same series of indicators used at the start of the project.

- ⇒ Confidence around learning new creative skills had risen significantly. At project start, 6% said they had no confidence in this area, while 34% felt either confident or highly confident. By end-point, this had risen to 67% and no-one reported having 'no confidence at all'.
- ⇒ Measures relating to group working and social skills had also risen. Those participants expressing at least some or more confidence in taking part in group activities rose from 78% at the start to 91% at end-point, while those with at least some confidence in offering help and support to others rose from 81% to 100%.

Conversations with participants tended to indicate even greater increases in confidence and self-esteem than the quantitative measures used in the surveys.

*"I remember at the start thinking when Charlie walked through the door, 'what am I doing here?!' but here I still am – I've stuck with it."*

*"I've enjoyed every moment. Experiencing something that's been locked away inside me really and showing that I can do stuff."*

*"There's been a huge change for me over the past two years. I can go into a situation now and say something funny, make people laugh."*

As well as commenting on their own confidence, Prime Timers spoke of a palpable sense of group confidence and of noticing changes in other people.

*"You can see how a lot of people have increased in confidence since they started out. I think we've achieved quite a lot really."*

*"Prime Time promotes self-confidence and creativity."*

*"People have changed. They're more confident. People who said 'I don't think I want to do that', they're blossoming! They're doing it."*

*"I think I'm more outgoing than I used to be and I'm sure it's because of Prime Time and the things we do and getting to know people."*

Many participants feel Prime Time has taught them new things about themselves. Some feel this is a particular consequence of retirement giving them time to explore aspects of themselves that they didn't prioritise when working or raising families.

*"I never thought I'd be acting. I didn't have the time. Then suddenly you find yourself doing it and it's like 'here I am!'"*

*"When you're working and you've got family, you don't have much time for yourself. Now we're retired we can indulge ourselves and spend time doing what we want to do."*



#### 4.5 Participants experience a sense of pride and achievement

At the start of Prime Time, 13% of participants said they had no confidence in ‘feeling pride/satisfaction in your achievements’. By the end-point none felt this way. Instead, 100% had ‘some’ or greater confidence in this area, suggesting participation has had a positive effect on Prime Timer’s ability to take pride in their accomplishments.

In conversation, participants expressed this pride collectively as well as individually – speaking of a team effort which brought the groups together in a shared endeavour. While the Prime Time sharing performances were always intended to be informal and primarily for friends and family, they played a role in focusing the groups’ energy and commitment towards a goal.

Participants again commented on the benefits of structure within the Prime Time term, with the creative outputs serving as important milestones on a longer journey.

*“I like to have something to work towards and give me a sense of achievement.”*

*“For the performance, some people did very well with something they might not have chosen themselves, and that’s great.”*

*“We have achieved so much more than I thought possible!”*

*“I love the challenges, the range of new experiences and the satisfaction of achieving something new.”*

#### 4.6 Creative practice at the Dukes has been strengthened

In its mission and vision statements, the Dukes makes clear its commitment to the communities of Lancashire and its desire to create opportunities for, and actively support, their own creative work. Inclusivity is one of the theatre’s core values, and for the Dukes to exemplify this and be a representative institution, it is vital that people of all ages see the theatre’s spaces as for them. Equally, it is important that different generations come into contact with each other, share their views and experiences, and feel both seen and heard in the community.

Though perhaps more difficult to quantify or measure than the impact on participants themselves, this outcome is a significant contribution made by the Prime Time project. Giving older people a sense of ownership of the Dukes spaces, working collaboratively with the Dukes Young Company, as well as contributing through volunteering and attending as audience members, makes the Dukes a more inclusive and ultimately a richer, stronger, and more resilient community.

In turn, the benefits of this diversity are felt across the theatre and organisation as a whole. The presence of Prime Time has sparked new creative ideas around inter-generational working and collaboration with the Young Company and Lancaster University. It has brought rich and extensive lived experience to the theatre and challenged the institution to be more inclusive, more responsive, and more agile in its approach.

A strong example of this in Year 3 has been Prime Time’s collaboration with the Lancaster University’s under and post-

graduate theatre courses, supervised by Senior Lecturer in Applied Theatre Dr Cami Rowe. Students pursuing an optional module in applied theatre have facilitated Prime Time sessions across the spring 2025 term, impacting on their own development as well as participants.

In conversation, both students and Prime Timers report the benefits of this inter-generational exchange. While participants feel it has brought new energy and ideas to the sessions, the students spoke about the value of working with older people, as well as the inspiration they drew from seeing older generations maintaining their passion for creative expression.

*“From the moment we arrived the Prime Timers were really on board. They gave us feedback and we’ve been able to tailor the sessions to what they wanted. It’s been great to see that bond grow.”*

*“We came in with more of a ‘let’s create’ than ‘let’s challenge’ mindset but the group have really responded and asked us to push them, which has resulted in us pushing ourselves too. Expectations have definitely been exceeded.”*

*“On my course this has been a breath of fresh air. We do a lot of work that’s for us or coming from us. This (Prime Time) is important to other people, and that’s been a top part of my degree.”*

*“It’s nice to see older people who still have their love for theatre. There’s such a sense of community. It’s rejuvenating for our mental health too.”*

*“I look forward to this every Thursday because there’s such an energy in this space and it’s such a welcoming group.”*

## Student Facilitators

### 4.7 A ‘pay what you feel’ fees model is felt to increase equity

For the first year of the project, Prime Time was free to all participants with the intention of ensuring that cost would not be a barrier to participation for any older people facing economic disadvantage.

In the second year, with the intention of moving towards a self-sustaining funding model, a ‘pay what you feel’ approach to fees was adopted. Participants could themselves decide (confidentially) whether they were able to contribute financially to Prime Time running costs, to a maximum of £100 a term.

Participants tend to feel this flexible approach is welcome and working to address the social mix of Prime Time participants by reducing a potential affordability barrier.

*“I was feeling a bit guilty with it being free! We were getting an awful lot for nothing. I was looking for ways to put a bit of money in the Dukes tills.”*

*“The income range for older people varies enormously, so this way of paying helps to reflect that.”*

*“Pay what you feel is good because it doesn’t put anyone off, whereas if there was a set fee that might seem affordable to some but not to others depending on their circumstances.”*



## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this evaluation offer compelling evidence that Prime Time is delivering on its target outcomes of reducing social isolation, increasing wellbeing, developing skills, and improving the confidence of older people in the Lancaster and Morecambe communities.

The quantitative methods used over the course of two years' activity indicate improvements across many accepted indicators of wellbeing, particularly mental health, social connectivity and support networks, motivation, and self-esteem.

However it is the qualitative evidence and the words of the Prime Timers themselves which best articulate the value that the project has delivered. For some members of the group, Prime Time has become the socially and mentally stimulating highlight of their week and allowed them to express and develop creative attributes they had never previously exercised.

This evaluation has also explored the question of what makes Prime Time special or differentiates it as a model for creative participation. In this respect, it is clear that taking the practice and process of drama seriously, while simultaneously not positioning a fully-fledged stage production as the ultimate goal, underpins Prime Time's impact.

Coaching participants to be the best creative they can be in the moment, while maintaining an ethos of playfulness and 'no risk' experimentation, builds motivation, confidence, and creative skills. In turn, these attributes contribute to wellbeing.

Having established that Prime Time is very much viable, meets a clear need, and adds value to its theatre community, the Dukes' is committed to maintaining and developing the group following the period of guaranteed funding covered by this report. Nevertheless, times remain challenging for theatres across the UK facing ongoing cost pressures and a highly competitive funding environment.

The introduction of Pay What You Feel session fees has been an important (and equitable) step in allowing participants to contribute to Prime Time costs, but this income alone will be insufficient to make the project self-sustaining in its current delivery model.

With a new Head of Creative Communities taking up post at the Dukes in spring 2025, a key goal will be to pursue funding opportunities that would safeguard the continuation of Prime Time as a flourishing presence in Lancaster and Morecambe, but also allow the project model already established to be rolled out into new communities in Lancashire so that its reach and benefit might be extended even further.

# the Dukes

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