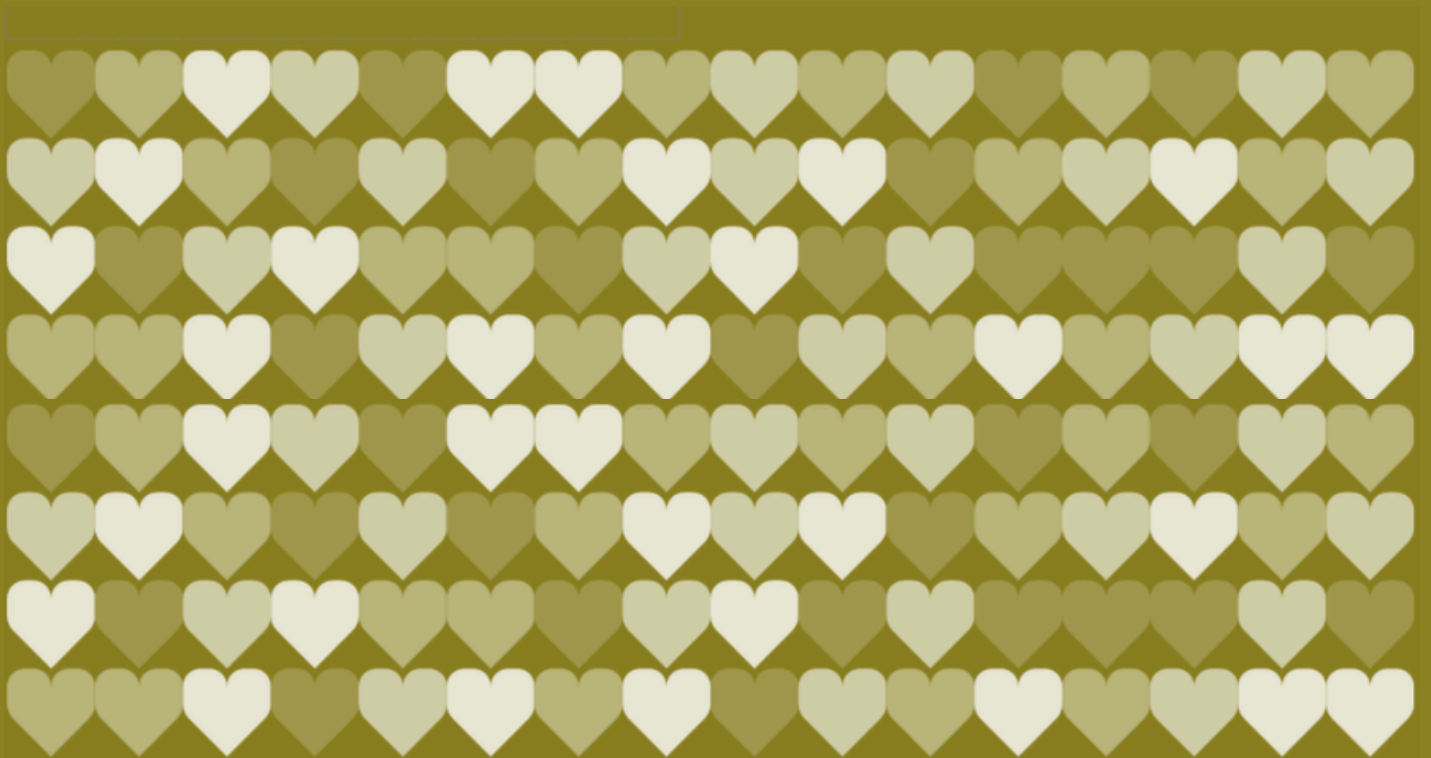




# **The Importance of Benches in supporting Ageing in Place**



## **The Importance of Benches in supporting Ageing in Place**

This guide looks at why benches matter, how they're used, the benefits they can offer and things to consider if you're planning to install benches in your neighbourhood. It could be helpful for local residents, community engagement officers, or partner organisations and is one of a series of helpful resources based on what we've learned from the Greater Manchester Ageing in Place Pathfinder.

The Ageing in Place Pathfinder is a programme led by Greater Manchester Combined Authority, working in partnership with Manchester School of Architecture (MMU) and Pathfinder lead organisations. Together with local Pathfinder Partnerships consisting of residents and stakeholders, the project makes sure older people's voices are heard and valued in shaping local responses to ageing. The Pathfinder aims to build stronger, more supportive neighbourhoods where people in mid and later life feel more connected, healthier, and better supported – helping to reduce inequalities as they grow older.

All neighbourhoods are unique but the desire to install benches is a common theme when creating age-friendly communities. Greater Manchester has a history of running bench projects, including the Age-Friendly Manchester benches project which started in 2007 in Old Moat, Withington and Whalley Range and the Couch to Out and About project which launched in Tameside in 2021.

### **The importance of benches**

The significance of benches has been noted in international publications (e.g. Palmer, 2024). Palmer stated that Fukuoka City wanted a barrier-free environment for its citizens and therefore created the Fukuoka City Bench Project to promote benches to be installed on footpaths and roads sponsored (and often provided) by local businesses.



The Young Foundation, (2017) commented that 'Sitting on benches supports healthy everyday routines by enabling people to spend longer outside'. Benches make it easier for residents to get around their neighbourhoods by offering places to rest on



the way to shops, appointments, or social activities. They also help people connect with public transport and each other. Residents regularly feedback that benches also provide a place to chat, something that Wigan residents encourage:

**"Could the benches be turned into chatty benches welcoming conversation around mental well-being and suicide prevention?" - Wigan resident**

The Young Foundation and the University of Sheffield embarked on the Bench Project (2017) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, to produce the Manifesto of the Good Bench: [The-Bench-Project\\_single-pages.pdf](#). This document states six attributes of benches:

- Benches are valued as public, egalitarian and free.
- Bench-space allows people to loosely belong, to see and be seen.
- Sitting on benches supports healthy everyday routines by enabling people to spend longer outside.
- Benches function as a social resource - they are flexible and affordable places to spend time at no cost.
- Design of benches and of sittable public space is important.
- People need to feel safe. Frequently used, visible spaces with a choice of where to sit can support this. Quality of materials, attractive planting, and cleanliness of public space seems to increase individual tolerance for the proximity of strangers and diverse ways of enjoying public space.

In addition, further research by Ottoni (2016) has found that for 'individuals who have chronic disease and physical mobility limitations, benches critically facilitate their mobility'. These two research documents show how access to public benches helps physical and mental health, allowing residents to remain independent for longer, which has been confirmed by a Rochdale resident:

**"Thank you for installing this bench near my house. I have very painful knees, and I can now sit and take a break from the discomfort whilst walking up the steep hill"**  
**- Comfort Udu, Kirkholt, Rochdale resident**

Rafoss (2025) published details of a bench specification in Norway. As part of this project, experts for universal design and older people designed an age friendly bench, including what it needed to incorporate without standardising the look and feel of them. With permission to be creative with the design of the bench providing they

adhered to the specification, this resulted in a variety of benches around the country, all fit for purpose. Age Friendly Norway are now keen to launch a bench competition to find the most attractive functional bench.

## Examples of Age Friendly bench programmes

### ➤ Age-Friendly Manchester benches

Manchester City Council have created a bench network consisting of strategically placed benches to help journeys and enable people to get outside. They consulted with local older residents to decide on the location of the benches. Due to its success and reliance on by local communities, particularly older residents, these benches are now featured in many other neighbourhoods in Manchester.



Age-friendly

The team used pre-made Stanford benches from Glasdon, made from sturdy and durable cast iron. These benches are approved by residents and have now been adopted as the standard Age Friendly bench in Manchester. You may recognise the logo from benches in the region.

### ➤ Couch to Out and About



The Couch to Out and About project was launched by the then Public Health Programme Officer Lauren Foster along with residents and stakeholders in 2021. These benches formed 7 different walking routes across Stalybridge with 5 benches strategically placed along the routes. The bench locations and the walking routes resulted from several walkability assessments that were carried out in 2020-2021 (more information can be found on the link above).

As these benches were installed during the pandemic, the design was influenced by social distancing requirements and a table was added, which doubles as a nice spot to rest a coffee and snack while sitting on the bench. These benches are promoted as social 'Talking Benches', where passers-by are encouraged to join bench users for a chat. They are both age and dementia friendly, having been designed by local residents and stakeholders, with taxi drivers inputting the bench geo-locations into their GPS trackers. Visiting the Couch to Out and About route in Stalybridge was influential in developing similar schemes in the Ageing in Place Pathfinder.

**"At last, we have somewhere to sit and watch the grandchildren play. It's a long way up that hill" - Tameside Resident**

### ➤ Ageing in Place Pathfinders

For the Pathfinders, the need for benches has emerged through engaging with residents in mid and later life and realising there was a lack of resting opportunities on popular walking routes in the area for recreation and transport, and in parks. This meant that residents were discouraged from using the spaces, and from being active and social, and the risk of social isolation and deconditioning was increasing.

The Pathfinders realised older residents needed more benches on popular walking routes and in parks. Without enough places to rest, people were less likely to use these spaces, stay active, and socialise. This increased the risk of social isolation and falls.

The Bury Pathfinder consulted with their residents on a Bury version of Couch to Out and About offering a potential solution for the accessibility issues in Clarence Park to enable more residents to utilise the space. This was approved, and through conducting several walkability assessments and co-designing the project with local residents and stakeholders, a Couch to Out and About programme including benches and walking route is now available in Clarence Park in Moorside. Several other Pathfinders, including Rochdale and Wigan have also installed benches, with Manchester and Stockport soon to follow suit

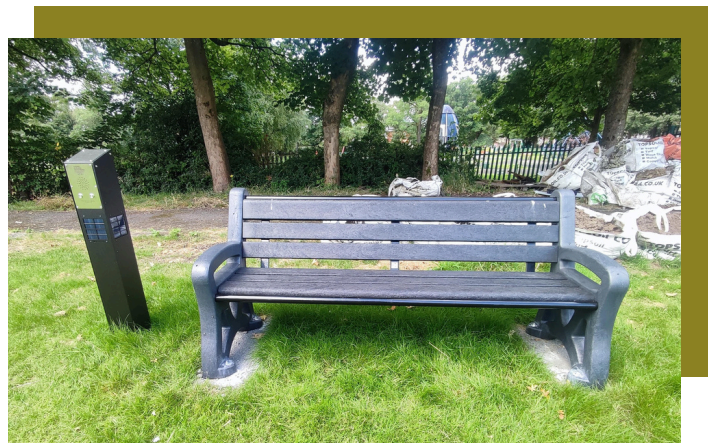


Image shows a bench and sound bar from the Couch to Out and About project in Moorside, Bury

## Examples of Age Friendly bench programmes

There are a variety of options for benches, here are a few examples from three schemes in Greater Manchester:

Example	Bench chosen	Costs	Benefits
Age Friendly Manchester	<a href="#">Stanford</a> bench, from Glasdon (standard bench)	£1344-1650 cost each including Manchester City Council fees for installation.	Require virtually no contingency for maintenance as they are so strong and stable.
Stalybridge Couch to Out and About (prices as of 2021)	The Shed in Dukinfield, Tameside	£3000 for 3 benches with a 5-year contingency for maintenance. The council then primed the ground with concrete slabs ready for installation at a cost of around £100 per bench, and the Shed installed each bench (included in their fee).	Made from wood and were customised based on the consultation to ensure it had age friendly features. Each bench has an owner, who will take responsibility for ensuring the bench is usable, in good working order and clean etc.
Bury Pathfinder	<a href="#">Phoenix Jubilee</a> from Glasdon (standard bench)	£1292 no contingency for repairs built in. An external contractor installed these for a cost of £1600 for all 6 benches.	Require virtually no maintenance contingency due to their sturdy design. Friends of Chesham Woods have agreed to take ownership of the benches, responsible for any maintenance.

\* prices accurate as of 2024/25 unless stated otherwise.



Consider the design and print of any maps, posters and any other promotion e.g. radio and launch day cost in the budget also. Any maintenance and repair of the benches, along with any cleaning and ownership/responsibility of the benches should also be considered.

## Challenges

- Installing benches is not without its complications and need for due diligence. Involving residents and stakeholders in consultation, walkability assessments and co-design is time consuming, and requires a significant amount of persistence.
- Despite involving many residents in the consultation and walkability assessment, some residents may object to certain bench locations for fear of anti-social behaviour. To overcome this, try to keep the benches in plain sight, away from any dark alleys or blind spots, avoid overlooking houses, and ensure they are in an open space.
- Consult with and involve the police in any plans from the start to ensure they approve the locations based on any ongoing or potential crimes.
- Planning approval is needed from the local council and highways teams, who will also check for any underground water/gas pipes.

The [Couch to Out and About](#) document features key information regarding these aspects and others, and potential ways to overcome them.

## Top tips

### Resident involvement

- If residents are feeding back that their environment is preventing them from getting out and about, benches could offer a solution.
- Ensure this is resident led at all times, choose routes and bench spots, seek planning permission from the council and highways, and approval from the police and this could become an improved space for your community.

### Walkability

- It's beneficial to walk the area and audit the space with local residents and partners/stakeholders to understand how walkable the area is.
- A walkability assessment (such as this [one](#) from Living Streets) can be conducted with local residents and stakeholders to assess for environmental issues and potential bench locations.



- Include wheelchair users and those who use mobility scooters to understand how they navigate the space.
- Include stakeholders on the walkability assessment who can influence change; these may be planners, transport colleagues, community safety officers, the police, housing officers, community groups etc. These professionals will have the opportunity to hear local residents lived experience during the walks.

## **Bench locations**

- If benches are to be placed around walking routes, decide on the routes and bench locations during your walkability assessment.
- Consider the ownership of the land and bench placement i.e. is the pavement narrow, can buggies, wheelchairs etc get around, is the spot visible? What could be an issue if you placed a bench in this area? Any potential anti-social behaviour issues?
- Once narrowed down to 10-15 or so bench locations depending on the size of your space, contact your local council Highways Department to understand land ownership and other potential issues that need to be accounted for.
- Choose potential bench owners to take responsibility of the bench going forward. Are there any businesses that may fund the cost of the bench, installation and maintenance?

## **Maps and Promotion**

A map can be made to show where benches are located and the best walking routes. It can also highlight areas suitable for wheelchair and pram users, and show where toilets, refreshments, shops, libraries, and chemists are. The map can also link to other schemes like Take a Seat.

Maps can be made by local designers or cartographers. Posters, leaflets, and a launch event can help promote the project and introduce the new benches to residents and partners

An example of the map from Tameside is here: [Stalybridge-Couch-to-Out-and-About-Benches-and-Walking-Map-FINAL.pdf](#)

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## References

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