

**AGEING
IN PLACE
PATHFINDER**

**DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY
FOR GREATER MANCHESTER**

Couch to Out and About programme

February 2024



Couch to Out and About: Tameside

The Couch to Out and About project was developed due to an identified need from local residents and stakeholders in the Stalybridge area of Tameside. The project manager engaged with residents in mid and later life through existing groups and one-to-ones, and with stakeholders working in the area to understand what it was like to live there; to walk, access nature, socialise and shop in Stalybridge. It was highlighted that there was a substantial need for improving the connections between green (parks) and blue space (canals, lakes and rivers) and the town centre. In particular, Ridgehill, a neighbourhood in the north of Stalybridge, had a lack of amenities and resources locally. Furthermore, limited public transport meant residents made small journeys in cars and taxis. This coupled with the hill aspect of the neighbourhood, meant some residents were socially isolated and becoming deconditioned.

Through this insight, it was clear that intervention was needed and the locality around Ridgehill and Stalybridge town centre was chosen to be the focus. Options were discussed with residents and stakeholders and in January 2020, a local partnership board commenced. Members decided that it would be beneficial to have improved walking routes to link up different parts of Stalybridge, including the canal, the river and Stamford and Cheetham Park. These routes would be interspersed with social 'talking benches' for rest stops and opportunities to be social. The project would encourage people to go out walking by giving them somewhere to rest along the way. It would also promote active ageing and reduce the need for short car journeys or taxis contributing to cleaner air. It was also agreed that a map of the walking routes and locations of the benches would be made to bring it all together.

To get started, a number of the partnership board members conducted a walkability assessment using the Belfast Healthy Cities assessment (template found [here](#)). The partnership board included representation from residents, Canal and River Trust, Holy Trinity Church, Age UK Tameside, Southway Housing, Jigsaw Homes, Active Tameside, Big Local Hub, Action Together and members of Tameside Council's Public Health, Planning and Green Spaces departments. The group walked around the area to assess how age-friendly it was, looking at road crossings, pavement quality and general street safety while noting suitable locations for benches. There were a range of ages, mobilities and paces in the group which provided important insight into how people with different mobilities would navigate the space and how long it may take them. For this reason, it is recommended that walkability assessments and partnership boards have at least 50 per cent representation from older residents. From this, the group were able to decide on walking routes, bench locations and other things to note e.g. where isn't suitable for wheelchairs, prams etc.

Additionally, the Partnership Board meeting members designed what features the benches should have for it to be age friendly. These features included the bench being raised from the ground (to help with getting on and off), having arm rests and sturdy backs etc, with the Age Friendly Tameside logo in the middle. The board also decided to work with local school children to design and for them to be responsible for the benches, to increase community cohesion and respect. A community

organisation was also needed to make and repair the benches and The Shed (a workshop in nearby Dukinfield) was chosen.

As a worldwide pandemic spread across the globe causing lockdowns from March 2020, the Partnership Board meetings continued online, but after several members were furloughed or changed jobs and residents struggled to get online, the group paused by April 2020. The Project Manager restarted working on the tasks put forward by the Board from September 2020 to understand who owns the land, gain permission from the landowners and other tasks (including contacting planners/engineers/the Parks and Green Spaces department/Police/Community Safety team/Housing Associations etc) and acquire funding for the benches and map. Unfortunately, some of the intergenerational aspects of the project could not be achieved due to lockdowns and social distancing during the pandemic.

Some things to note at this stage:

- Gaining land ownership and permissions is a timely task, requiring multiple follow-ups.
- If benches are proposed on housing providers' land, they may survey residents for permission.
- Bench locations were declined by the Police initially but later accepted once the bench locations were moved in plain sight and away from walls, buildings, trees or dark/shaded spots to prevent anti-social behaviour.

Funding was granted from Ambition for Ageing and the BigLocal in January 2021. Work started in March 2021, with labour provided by Tameside Council engineers to clear the space and lay paving slabs ready for installation of the benches by The Shed from March- June 2021. The Shed also has a contingency in their funding to care for and repair the benches for five years from 2021-2026. In addition to this, each bench has an 'owner'; a person or organisation who is responsible for watering the plants, removing any litter and checking on the benches for repair needs (to inform The Shed). BigLocal are the owners for the three benches on Ridge Hill, the Fire Station for the one outside the Fire Station and the Labour Club for the one outside the club. Younger people from the Youth Justice Service also used the walking routes when getting out and about in the area and those with learning disabilities were also linked in, however, it is unclear if they still use the spaces.

A map (below) was made with cartographers (connected through the Council) which lists the seven walking routes, five benches, toilets, age-friendly assets and led walks through local organisations. Additionally, each bench is numbered with the number printed on the map. Local taxi companies included the numbered bench locations in their SatNav in case an individual gets lost, they can be located by their numbered bench. The maps are available online on Tameside Council's website [here](#) and over 500 copies were also printed and made available in several key places around the area, as well as handed out at the launch and to key partners.

As an extension to the project, BigLocal also applied to Ambition for Ageing for metal detectors to take on walks and a GoPro to film the routes. The BigLocal team also held photography sessions around the routes which could be edited in their hub. This led the project manager to create a wider project called 'Tameside Through the



Seasons' through Tameside Council, where residents were encouraged to take pictures whilst walking around the whole of Tameside. Submitted pictures were shortlisted and chosen by residents at exhibitions and online and then placed into a community calendar. It was so successful that Tameside Council ran the competition again in 2023 and have just launched it again for 2024, take a look [here](#).

The Couch to Out and About project launched in June 2021 with a walk around the routes and bench locations and free coffee for all attendees from a mobile vendor. Due to covid restrictions at the time, only 30 people were allowed to be present at any one time, but nonetheless the launch was a success and got the project on the map both locally and [nationally](#), with articles online.

- Seven walkways
- Details walking routes in Ridge Gill
- Details five benches
- Details how long each walk is and how long the walks take
- Details places of interest such as churches and the Big Local Hub
- Details toilet facilities/

For your consideration:

- During your engagement with local residents in mid to later life, do walking, benches, social areas, walking routes and history/heritage come up in the discussion?
- What about photography?
- Are local residents saying they want this in their neighbourhood?

If so, read on to our Top Tips:

Walkability

- It always pays to walk the area yourself and audit the space. Take a number of older people and partners/stakeholders with you to understand how walkable the area is. You may also wish to invite or accompany those in wheelchairs and on mobility scooters as they navigate the space too.
- 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. (this will be different for each area, but these are all useful). They can also hear residents lived experience from the area during the walks.

Bench locations

- If your partnership board decide to create benches around walking routes, decide where benches would be placed during your walkability assessment. Design these around walking routes. Consider ownership of the land, 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? ASB? Work with the police on this from the start.
- Once narrowed down to 10-15 or so bench locations depending on the size of your space, contact your local council to check on land ownership and gas pipes etc.

Land ownership and permissions

- In order to confirm who owns the land you have identified for a bench, you must contact your local authority Land Registry office, you often have to pay a small fee for this.
- If the land is council owned, you will have to gain permission from several departments within the council, including but not limited to:
 - The Neighbourhood Team,
 - Planning Department/Engineers (to ensure your bench will not interfere with gas pipes/electric wires/water pipes)
 - Parks and Green spaces (to ensure they can still carry out maintenance on land)
 - Waste Management (in case it blocks bin collections etc)
 - Community Safety (for crime/ASB)
 - Police
- Once you have permission, whittle the bench locations and numbers down to around 5-10 benches depending on the size of your space. You may want to have more if you have a bigger space or it is needed.



Bench design, creation and responsibility

- Involve a local carpentry community group who could make the benches locally. Gain quotes.
- Design the benches with your partnership board, what does an age friendly bench need to have/look like?
- Decide who can own these benches, look after them, tidy away litter and water plants.
- Involve local groups and organisations
- Intergenerational: Can a local school be involved and help design the look of the benches? (We weren't allowed to paint ours but you may be able to, ask your local green spaces/neighbourhood officers at the council and see if upkeep of painted benches can be included in your contingency)

Map design and creation

- Work with a cartographer to make the maps, factor this into the cost of design and printing
- Include on the maps the number and locations of the benches, community groups, toilets. I would also recommend you include local businesses that are age friendly (another top tip is to work with organisations and businesses to become age friendly through your partnership board)
- Ask local groups/churches/organisations if they can offer led walks around the area.

- Can these evolve to be photography walks, history and heritage walks, bird and nature walks, what do your residents want?
- On the Couch to Out and About map, both Holy Trinity Church and St George's church offered led walks, usually on history/heritage etc.

Impact

- The Couch to Out and About project got people in the local area encouraged to go out walking, whether that be alone or on a led walk from Holy Trinity, BigLocal or St Georges.
- This project also encouraged further intergenerational projects: school pupils from Gorse Hall Primary School worked with older people to knit and yarn bomb the bench next to the Labour Club for International Day of Older People in 2021.
- The Knit and Natter group at the Baptist Church then yarn bomb their bench in harmony with the Labour Club.
- Although the led walks are now finished two years after the project launched, the opportunity for further walks around the area is still available if needed, simply enquire within the organisation.
- Local home care and Primary Care Network (PCN) colleagues promoted the use of the benches and short walks while at visits where it was appropriate to encourage a little walking with a client locally.
- Members of the Youth Justice Service used the benches whilst out walking and helped with cleaning and sprucing up of the area multiple times as part of their work in the community.
- The project provided residents with the opportunity to rest and chat on the benches, at a time when being outside was one of the safest things you can do. The table in the middle of the bench, not only provided a little social distancing, but now we are seeing the safer side of the pandemic, it offers a nice rest spot for a coffee cup or your lunch whilst you have a chat with a friend or passerby.
- The contingency with The Shed has also ensured a longer term legacy for these benches, whilst further projects such as the Tameside Through the Seasons allows new life to be breathed into the space each year.

How would you design your Couch to Out and About?

Lauren
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