



Background and outline of the project

As a charitable organisation, Gateshead Older People's Assembly supports older people (50+) across Gateshead in a number of ways. The projects undertaken by the Assembly and the services it provides are guided by the organisation's Strategic Delivery Plan, which was driven by the charity's trustees, themselves older people from Gateshead.

The Strategic Delivery Plan is underpinned by nine strategic objectives:

- 1. Increase older people's knowledge of issues affecting them**
- 2. Be the voice of older people in Gateshead**
- 3. Reduce loneliness and isolation for older people in Gateshead**
- 4. Increase opportunities for older people to live fuller lives**
- 5. Improve the health and wellbeing of older people in Gateshead**
- 6. Reduce the number of falls suffered by older people across Gateshead**
- 7. Build stronger networks to support older people across Gateshead**
- 8. Increase opportunities for older people to participate in wider society**
- 9. Increase community safety and awareness of safeguarding issues**

These objectives are not mutually exclusive and the Assembly's management aims to meet at least three of these objectives with every project it undertakes. The Assembly Ambassadors project meets objectives 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

There are around 80,000 people aged over 50 living in the 22 wards making up Gateshead. Many live in areas which are rurally isolated or where there is limited provision for socialising and exercising. For a lot of these people, the lack of social and wellness activities in their communities can have detrimental effects on their mental wellbeing and physical health.

Often, providing transport to activities in other wards can be costly and is not always sustainable. The Assembly Ambassadors project was designed to expand the number of activities and social opportunities for older people across Gateshead, ideally resulting in no older person being more than 10 minutes away from a group. Our overall goal is to establish or support at least 22 new groups over the first two years of the project.



This project will run from July 2018 to July 2021 and will be centred around our tried-and-tested free taster model. The first two years of this project will be focused on setting up new groups. We will cover the cost of room hire and the group leader's fees for the first 10 hours, giving older people the chance to try something new without having to make a financial commitment and giving group leaders/instructors some "breathing room" in which to get their new group established and sustainable.

In year three of the project, we will identify and train Ambassadors from each of these groups and they will work to signpost other older people to activities in their area and form close links with local GP surgeries, offering shoulder-to-shoulder support to other older people who may need a bit of extra help in making the jump to taking part in new groups or taking up exercise.

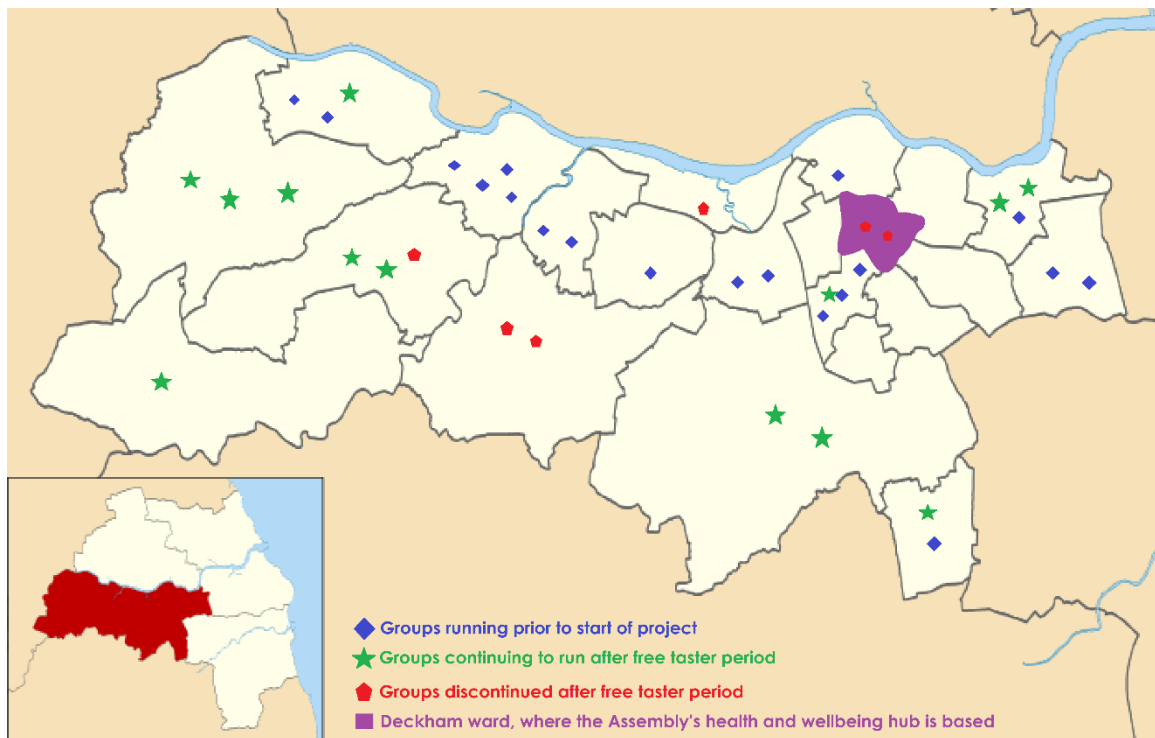
At the end of this project, there will be a network of sustainable, low-cost activities for older people across Gateshead which will help tackle isolation, improve physical health, and improve attendees' overall quality of life. This should help to relieve the strain on the NHS and the local authority as the number of visits to GPs and hospitals for non-medical issues should be reduced and communities should feel more vibrant, resilient, and connected.

The first six months

Our focus in the first six months of the project was on establishing new groups in areas where we did not already have a strong presence. The Assembly's health and wellbeing hub is based in Deckham and most of the groups and classes we supported

were clustered around north-central Gateshead (blue symbols below). Western, southern, and eastern Gateshead were therefore our priority areas.

As you can see from the map below, we achieved a nice geographical spread with our first cohort of new classes (red and green symbols):



In total, 19 new groups were established or supported during the first six months of this project. The groups were located in 11 of Gateshead 22 wards and included:

Tai Chi	Low Impact Exercise	Floristry Skills	Iyengar Yoga
Solo Salsa	Gentle Yoga	Easy Does It	Dancercise
Reminiscence & Writing	Introductory Watercolour	Film Club	

In total, 249 Gateshead residents aged 50+ joined these new groups and 206 (83%) continued to attend the groups after the free taster period ended. This is in line with what we have experienced using our free taster method since 2015. On average, 80% of attendees continue to attend after the free taster period ends.

Lessons learned



Of the 19 groups supported, 13 groups (68%) have continued to run on a paid basis. While we, of course, would like all groups to be successful, we take a realistic view and are pleased with this level of success. We have identified some reasons as to why some groups did not continue to run:

- Venue issues – In one case, no one arrived to unlock a venue for two consecutive weeks. We could not risk this happening a third time as it was damaging to the reputation of the Assembly and the instructor, so the class was discontinued. This class will be relocated to another venue.
- Instructor issues – While the Assembly funds and markets the groups during the free taster period, we do have an expectation that group instructors will also market their groups, particularly as the groups will belong to them once the free taster period ends. Gateshead is a very large borough and our resource is limited, so we expect instructors to assist with publicising their groups on a local level (e.g., distributing leaflets, displaying posters, marketing via social media, etc.). This did not happen in a couple of cases and those groups did not attract sufficient interest and were discontinued. In the future, we will be much more explicit around the requirement that instructors
- Managing expectations – We organised two gentle yoga classes and advertised them as such. In the beginning, there was a good level of interest, but it soon became apparent that attendees had varying ideas of what “gentle” meant, with some wanting chair-based yoga and others looking for a more strenuous floor-based workout. This led to some confusion and resulted in a lower level of interest in these classes, which did not make them financially sustainable for the instructor. We will be trying again with these classes and will market them as “seated” or “floor-based” yoga as appropriate.



Sustainability and impact

We are pleased that there are now 13 new opportunities available for Gateshead residents aged 50+ to socialise and exercise and we are well on our way to reaching our goal of 22 new groups before July 2020.

Feedback from attendees of the new groups has been overwhelmingly positive, with many saying they appreciate the opportunity to try something new for free. Others have told us that they feel better after exercising and have started looking for additional classes to attend.

"It's been lovely to be able to give it a go for a few weeks. I'm not sure I would've paid to come along if it wasn't free as I didn't know much about it [Tai Chi], but now that I'm here, I'll come along as long as the class is running."

"I've met some new people and I look forward to my Wednesday class. I didn't do much before, but now I have somewhere I need to be!"

"This has changed how I feel about myself. I honestly didn't think I could exercise for 5 minutes, let alone 45!"



The instructors we have supported have told us how helpful it is to have a guaranteed income during the free taster period. Setting up a new group can be risky and some tell us that they have only been able to establish these new groups because of the funding we have been able to offer.

If each of these new groups continues to run for 48 weeks per year, this could generate £7,488 in room hire fees (624 sessions x £12/hr) and £39,552 in instructor fees (206 attendees x 48 weeks x £4/week). This represents a contribution of at least £47,040 into Gateshead's economy each year.

For further information, please contact Lola McPartland – lola@gatesheadopa.org.uk

Thank you to The National Lottery Community Fund for their ongoing support of Gateshead Older People's Assembly.

