

Transcript of Andy Burnham's Speech to ILC's Future of Ageing 2025

Thank you for the very kind introduction. Good to see everybody. I hope everyone can hear me okay.

I've been Mayor of Greater Manchester for nearly eight years, and you might remember I spent 16 years in the Westminster system. This last third of my political journey has been by far the most invigorating, rewarding, and exciting. In this great city, where I'm speaking from, I'm proud to say we were the first age-friendly city region in the UK designated by the World Health Organisation. Here, we try to think things through from the bottom up, working with our residents and communities. This approach is much more conducive to making good policy than anything I did as Secretary of State for Health, where we often struggled to respond effectively to the times we were living in.

As a country, we're spending huge amounts of public money sustaining people in lives that aren't what they want. Whether it is older people stuck unnecessarily in hospital or people in the benefits system who can't find the support they need to move forward, we need to rethink our approach. We've been trying to run things from a series of silos in Whitehall, none of which deal with the whole person. Each deal with part of a person's needs but doesn't join the dots to see the whole picture.

The arrival of devolution in England allows us to take a whole-person, whole-place perspective. It lets us rethink the architecture of the British state and how we use public money to support people in living well, especially in later life. It opens up a more preventative, person-centred approach, which we're trying to pioneer in Greater Manchester.

This conversation comes at an important time for us. In April, we will move to a new relationship with Whitehall, receiving our funding as a block rather than tied up in individual departments. This integrated settlement will give us more freedom and flexibility in spending our £630 million budget. We're ready to show there's a different way of thinking and working.

Before I get into specific issues about ageing and living well, I want to outline the broader thinking in Greater Manchester that underpins our work. This applies to people of all ages. First, we believe the country's approach to housing must change. We want to adopt the Finnish philosophy of "housing first." If housing isn't sorted for people, nothing else can be. Housing is the foundation on which everything else is built. We're rethinking how to get the housing our city region needs.

Secondly, if people don't feel safe when they leave their homes, they can't live the lives they want. Strong, safe communities are crucial. Then it's about mobility – physical mobility, social mobility, connectivity – both physical and social. If these

fundamentals are right, we create the conditions for people to live well and lead good lives. We're reorganising around these principles, taking a different approach to housing, working with Greater Manchester Police to police our communities differently, and creating an integrated public transport system like London's, called the Bee Network. It will be the first integrated system outside of London.

Here's the crucial piece: launching a new Live Well service. This is a big idea we're bringing forward in April. Using the integrated settlement, we'll rethink the support available to our residents to help them live good lives, connect with each other in communities, and move forward. Currently, we estimate that about a third of people ringing their GP at 8:00 AM in Greater Manchester aren't calling with a medical need but with an unmet social need. This highlights that our public services aren't set up to support people in the ways they need.

As we develop our thinking, I'd like GP practices to refer people straight into the Live Well service, delivered through our partners in the community and voluntary sectors. This service would take a whole-person approach, supporting people with whatever is worrying them or holding them back – whether it's housing issues, debt, relationship problems, or dealing with bereavement.

We want to develop a Live Well approach in later life, particularly focusing on living well with dementia. This is essential. If you check today, you'll find many people in hospitals across the UK are medically fit to be discharged but can't be because the system isn't working for them. We need to turn this around to make things right and sustainable from a public finance perspective.

It starts at home. We want to ensure investment goes in early to support people in living in their homes, part of our Housing First approach. It's a false economy for governments to cut the Disabled Facilities Grant. Supporting people to adapt their homes to live independently as long as possible makes sense. From there, they can get out and about using an age-friendly public transport system, which we're implementing in Greater Manchester.

We're also looking towards employment. Through our Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter, we're recognising what good work looks like for people in their 50s, 60s, and even into their 70s. As people age, they may need more flexible work arrangements. I'm dealing with professional pressures and ageing parents, and I've woken up to the challenges people face in their late 50s and 60s. We need direct conversations with employers about flexible work at the latter stages of people's careers.

We believe in using adult education flexibilities to help older people pivot towards new areas of the Greater Manchester economy. Greater devolution of employment support would enable this approach throughout life. We also need

to think about how work, engagement benefits, and pensioner benefits integrate, allowing people to maintain economic activity for as long as they wish, avoiding the cliff edges around pensions and benefits.

I'll pause here to leave time for questions. The message from Greater Manchester is whether people in London and other cities worldwide want to work with us to think through what it means to live well in later life and how public services need to change fundamentally to enable that. We need to rethink how homes are designed, how we help people downsize as they age, and what age-friendly communities and transport look like. What is age-friendly employment? How do we support people living well with dementia or other conditions in their communities?

I believe if we are to help people live well in a preventative way in later life, we must stop charging for preventative care. Leaving people unable to access support at home only to end up in expensive hospital beds is unsustainable. The time has come to consider a care system free at the point of use, funded similarly to the NHS through a national contribution system.

If we leave things as they are, more older people won't get the quality support they need at home, leading to crisis situations in the most expensive parts of the health and care system. This is a depressing vision of where we're heading if we don't step back and make fundamental changes to the British state.

Devolution is the life raft here. With devolution across England, we can rethink things from a place-based perspective built around people and their needs. As we enter the second quarter of the 21st century, the cracks in our systems are becoming more apparent, and public finances are increasingly unsustainable. The time has come to fundamentally rethink our approach, focusing on prevention, housing first, and people living well throughout their lives and into later life.

That's the Greater Manchester view. We believe we can pioneer a new way of thinking and working, collaborating with friends across the country. I hope some of this resonates with the conversations you've had. I'm open to your comments, feedback, and questions. Thank you very much for listening, everyone.

Q & A session

Alex Kalache:

Thank you very much. I'm Alex, President of the International Centre in Brazil, and I happen to have been the Director at the WHO when we launched Age-Friendly Cities. Manchester has always been one of the big stars. I'd like you to explain the difference between what you are doing and what the age-friendly global movement from Geneva is doing, with over 1,700 cities enlisted. Secondly, you have put a lot of emphasis on housing. I heard you say we needed to improve housing so that people can continue to live where they have always lived. But

coming from a Brazilian perspective, many people live in poor conditions, with violence, in houses that can no longer be improved because they are beyond repair. What advice do you give in such cases? I know, from my familiarity with Britain, that this also happens here. People want to age away, not in place – far away from the horrible places where they have been living for 60–70 years.

Andy Burnham:

Thank you. I think we need to become much more interventionist on housing, particularly housing for older people, and create much more attractive, age-friendly communities within our towns and cities. If I think of my generation, I don't think people necessarily want to go somewhere quiet. They want to be where the life is, where they can access sport, culture, and the arts.

We need to support the downsizing process in a much more active way, putting people in appropriate housing where they want to be. Looking at what we're doing in Greater Manchester around regeneration, especially of our town centres, we envisage building much more accommodation that will be particularly attractive to both the under-25s and the over-75s at the same time – intergenerational communities in the heart of places where people want to be. This way, they can access the things that make life worth living.

I believe you can't have an age-friendly strategy without a housing-first strategy. You can't leave housing as an afterthought because, if you do, it won't create the conditions for people to live well in later life. Maybe that's what Greater Manchester is doing a little differently – we want people to be able to live the life they want to live rather than be forced to stay in circumstances that don't allow them to have a full and engaging life. That means putting housing much higher up the agenda.

We talk about ageing in terms of healthcare and social care – all important – but housing should be number one. I am increasingly pioneering that as the Greater Manchester approach.

David Sinclair:

Thanks, Andy. I was really interested in your point about making places work for 25-year-olds as well as 75-year-olds. I've had lots of conversations with your colleagues about how the night-time economy is extraordinarily important for all cities, but none of it will survive if we just focus on one age group. We need to think ahead and create a lifetime economy for all ages.

Andy Burnham:

Here's an interesting thing: I'm part of what you'd call the Hacienda generation in Greater Manchester. Does anyone in that room know what the Hacienda is? Did anyone go there?

Andy Burnham:

It was a little club we had here in Manchester, which you might remember. I got turned away at the door more times than I actually got in, but I did make it in once or twice. The reason I mention that is because the Hacienda generation is getting old. I can promise you that my era, as we go into our late 50s and 60s, probably wants something very different from what our parents wanted. We want to grow old in places where the action is, where life is vibrant, where we can access things, be part of activities, and contribute in later life.

This is about rethinking housing and community living for older people, particularly with an eye on intergenerational living. We're living in times where things are becoming more divided – by age, race, gender, you name it. We need to promote a different way of living, where people contribute together.

I see an opportunity in Greater Manchester. If I look at the proud towns that circle our city, we have huge potential to rethink residential accommodation in the heart of those places. We've done it in Stockport – that's our first project where we've built new accommodation. Interestingly, it's in high demand among both the under-25s and the over-75s. That's naturally happening – people are choosing to live in these places at both ends of the age spectrum. We want to see much more of that.

If you build to age-friendly standards, you make housing better for everybody, including young adults with disabilities. Age-friendly housing shouldn't be a tick-box exercise in the planning system. We need to start building to an age-friendly standard for all housing because it makes life more liveable for everyone.

Debbie Marshall, Silver Marketing Association:

Hi Andy. Your point about the Hacienda made me think of something. I did some research with older people about online content, and they said, *"Please can you stop talking to us about pruning roses and start talking to us about the Stone Roses?"*

Switching from that, I wonder whether you have any thoughts about the private sector and its role in orientating its products and propositions towards people in the later stages of their lives—particularly as they transition between the active and passive phases of retirement. I can see that, in the Far East, companies are already ahead in this area, but it's not yet on the agenda here in the private sector.

Andy Burnham:

I love that! You picked up on my point really well. I think we're seeing the emergence of daytime nightclubs in Manchester, and I know that's happening in London too. So, yes—the ageing generations are definitely thinking differently about things.

I think you're onto something really, really important: how do we get the property industry to think seriously about age-friendly living and accommodation? We need to give people places to downsize to, which would then free up larger homes for families who need them. I think there's massive, pent-up demand for this kind of change, and it's something that's beginning to happen here.

As I mentioned with Stockport, we're starting to rethink our towns. They surround a very successful city, and as we've created a better public transport system—the kind Londoners have long had—we're beginning to see the potential for age-friendly urban living.

Arunima Himawan

At ILCUK, we've been developing a global Healthy Ageing Index, which ranks 153 countries on how well-prepared they are for ageing populations. Currently, we're looking to create something similar at the UK and local authority levels. I wanted to ask how you think Manchester might score on such an index – how age-prepared the city might be, and what you and the central government would want to prioritise. What would be at the top of your list to demonstrate that Manchester is a leading city for longevity? Is that something you're still working on?

Andy Burnham:

I think we'd probably score well on our rhetoric and words, but maybe less so in terms of the reality of life in our communities. The suffragettes, who hailed from here, talked about *deeds, not words*, and I think we do need to turn more of our words into real change to improve our score on such a rating.

What we do well, though, is in terms of language – we don't talk about ageing as a pressure, burden, or problem. We live the age-friendly agenda in a very meaningful way, focusing on the value that ageing brings. When I became Mayor of Greater Manchester, I banned the phrase *bed blocker* because that kind of narrative about older people creates a sense of burden or challenge.

It's about living differently. We've created age-friendly communities in Greater Manchester with simple adaptations, like widening pavements and encouraging businesses to open their facilities, such as toilets, to older people when they're out and about. One thing I'd highlight is that the Greater Manchester approach hasn't just been about public services – it's about the whole of society. Public, private, voluntary – every part of society embraces the idea of being age-friendly in everything we do. We see ageing as a wonderful asset and a contribution that improves society for everyone.

I think we know what we want to do. So far, we've been challenged by the way things are organised in the UK. If Greater Manchester had full freedom to implement what we want to do, I believe we could turn our words much more into reality.

Specifically, I'm talking about rethinking employment and employment support, adult education, and helping people retrain throughout their lives. We need to rethink how benefits work in later life, as well as rethinking housing extensively. We know what we'd do if we had free rein. We don't have that full freedom, but we don't see the status quo as an option.

If we carry on trying to run things as we are in Britain, the lives of older people could potentially get worse in the future, and we can't let that happen. This has to be about fundamentally rethinking the British state and how it supports people, with a *live well* philosophy and a *housing first* approach running through everything we do.

Fiona Carragher:

It's Fiona Carragher from Alzheimer's Society. We obviously work with you in Manchester, and it's good to hear you say that you see dementia as one of the priorities. I think what concerns us is the huge variation we're seeing across the UK in the care and support provided to people with dementia. It's really about thinking of the next steps – how can we learn from systems like Manchester that are doing it well, or at least trying to move towards something different? Because we're seeing systems, particularly in health and social care, struggling across the country.

Andy Burnham:

Well, this is a question, as I was indicating earlier, that's quite close to my heart at the moment. My dad has Alzheimer's, and when you live with it, you see things through different eyes – I've been doing that very much in recent times. I've seen some really awful things, if I'm being honest, but I've also seen some wonderful things. It wasn't quite what I expected.

What feels awful to me is seeing the change in your parent and knowing about that change before it's confirmed with a diagnosis. But what's even harder is the lack of immediate help to live well with dementia, because you can live well with dementia. Yet that concept isn't really part of our narrative at all, is it? It just feels like a really dark place at times, where people don't have the support or practical help they need when that journey begins.

Then you come into contact with the care system. It worked okay for a bit, but as many of your members will know – and as we found as a family – 15-minute care visits become completely unmanageable as Alzheimer's progresses. That system, in the end, caused utter chaos in our family's life. It's not just about living well with

dementia; it became absolutely, totally distressing for my dad. The idea that he could be moved from his bed to an armchair in 15 minutes without causing real challenges was impossible.

I was regularly in situations where, by the time things became unsustainable, I had to plead with carers – who, by the way, I don't blame; they were wonderful people in many ways – not to ring 999 over simple problems with my dad. But they were told to do just that, and I had multiple occasions where I had to beg them not to. I didn't want him ending up in a much worse place than where he was.

Having said all that, on the positive side, he's now in a care home where I'm just in awe of the staff and what they do to bring out his character. My feeling is we could do so much better if we rethought what's possible for people with dementia, rather than focusing on what isn't. The current system doesn't take a personalised view.

Here in the city, we've recently been designated as a Centre of Excellence for Music and Dementia. Manchester Camerata, one of our cultural organisations, has pioneered dementia support sessions at Gorton Monastery. Going there is one of the most joyful experiences – you see people completely lifted out of themselves. I don't see why we can't build a dementia support system based around music, or around memories people have of sport – simple things like that. It's not expensive; it's structured, simple support. If we took a more *live well* approach to dementia, rather than leaving people unsupported until it hits a crisis point, we could avoid the expensive, unsustainable situations we currently face.

My own journey through this, with my family and my mum recently, has shown me that we're doing the opposite of what we should. We're making it impossible to live well with dementia because of how things are being done. I believe there's a very different approach that could be taken with the same amount of money – one that supports a *live well* concept.

At the moment, I don't think, as a country, we're facing up to this properly. I don't see the level of research going into Alzheimer's and Parkinson's that there should be, considering this should now be a national priority. We're not giving people in their mid-years enough advice on how they might prevent the onset of dementia.

If I could finish on one point: we need the same approach to dementia as we had with cancer in the 1970s, when society came together with a unified drive to rethink and improve things. That's the kind of sea change we need when thinking about dementia. I'm sorry I've spoken at length on what is a profoundly important question, but I have total respect for the Alzheimer's Society, Parkinson's UK, and all the other organisations in this field. I think you've been left crying in the

wilderness for a number of years, and I don't yet see a response from policymakers that matches the scale of the challenge ahead of us.

It's time we recognised this as one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. Until we have public services that support people with dementia as well as they treat cancer, we won't have services that are ready for the 21st century.

David Sinclair:

Brilliant. Thank you very much.

David Sinclair:

Do you have any final messages for London?

Andy Burnham:

Well, first of all, contrary to popular belief, I love London. I'm very proud of our capital city, and we're not anti-London up here in Manchester. We've got lots to learn from London as well because we know brilliant things happen in London councils. I think the time has come for the North and South – Manchester and London – to work better together and rethink things from the ground up in our local areas.

I like to think that the devolution we're starting to see across England creates the space for solving issues around living well and ageing well. These problems haven't been solved from the Whitehall silos. I think we know, here in Greater Manchester and in that room, what enables people to live well in later life. The more we connect our places and rethink things together, the closer we'll get to where we want to be.

Thank you for having me, thank you for listening, and enjoy the rest of your day.