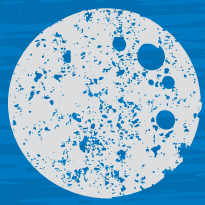
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together we are GREATER MANCHESTER

Dusk to dawn – creating a night time economy for all in Greater Manchester





Connections
Culture and society
Leisure and fun
Consumption
Economy
Inequalities
Accessibility
Safety
Transport and mobility

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We spent three days exploring Greater Manchester in the third week of August 2025, at the start of Pride weekend. Within this short period, we sought to engage with as much of the city region and its communities as possible. The project was necessarily constrained by time and resources and, as is often the case with qualitative research, it reflects our preferences, perceptions and biases.

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Executive summary

Greater Manchester is a city region that includes the cities of Manchester and Salford plus the metropolitan boroughs of Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan. This city region is ageing and changing. While it boasts world-class culture, sport and hospitality, much of the night time economy still caters to younger people, with late nights overly focused on alcohol – and not all parts of the region are equal when it comes to amenities.

Greater Manchester residents and visitors, particularly women, girls and people from older age groups, told us they want to go out and enjoy themselves but face barriers such as safety concerns, unreliable transport, inaccessible venues and a lack of company. Removing these obstacles would support local jobs, strengthen communities, reduce loneliness and social isolation – and unlock the "longevity dividend".

We worked with the GM Ageing Hub and the GM Night Time Economy teams at GMCA to explore how Greater Manchester and partners can shape a night time economy that works for all ages. This would boost participation, spending and wellbeing, and support good jobs. Our research draws on an online survey of stakeholders across the UK, interviews with consumers, workers and volunteers during a field visit to Greater Manchester, and workshops with local leaders. Together these sources help us illustrate what encourages people to go out, the obstacles they face, and potential opportunities to create a more inclusive, vibrant evening culture.

This report offers a snapshot rather than a final blueprint – but we hope it sparks action and informs ongoing work to make Greater Manchester an age-friendly place where everyone can live well. The insights could reach further: other UK cities could benefit from better understanding how long lives should shape night-time economies. Very little published research looks at age and the night time economy; of that, most focuses on middle age rather than older people, and few have asked what truly age-friendly evenings look like.

Seven prototype ideas

We've identified seven prototype solutions that would help make nights out more inclusive and appealing.

- **The Square Deal** would bundle food, entertainment and transport at clear price points
- **Friends for night** would help people find companions through intergenerational "Gig Buddies" and evening chatty cafés
- **Later leavers & early birds** would take pressure of peak travel times and create earlier, quieter events
- **Healthy nights, vibrant towns** would expand non-alcoholic and healthy food options
- **Sunday Funday** would animate town centres and extend Sunday bus services
- **Too good to miss** would offer last-minute discounted tickets and "mystery nights out"
- **Build it & make it accessible** would extend library and museum hours, map safe spaces, and introduce an accessible-venue kitemark

A summary of recommendations

At the end of this report, there's a full list of recommendations for national and local government, businesses and community groups – and one or two for individuals to consider.

- We urge the **national government** to create robust ONS data, align nightlife with crime-prevention and health strategies, and fund safe travel routes, lighting and transport. Proposals include tax relief for small businesses creating accessible venues, a Night-time Outcomes Fund, extended levies to reinvest locally, and an assessment of daylight-saving reform.
- We recommend that **Transport for Greater Manchester** (TfGM) appoints inclusion advocates, expands 24-hour and demand-responsive buses, coordinates Safe Passage corridors, and builds a single Bee Network evening map. along with an easy to navigate digital platform showing accessible venues, safe routes and late

services. GMCA should also incentivise age-friendly standards, support volunteering pathways and enforce "polluter pays" approaches to noise and antisocial behaviour.

- We encourage **local authorities** to improve the basics – lighting, toilets, accessible seating, wayfinding and warm public spaces – while using flexible licensing and micro-grants to enable earlier, alcohol-free and intergenerational events in libraries, schools, and faith and heritage buildings.
- We ask **venues, industry and cultural partners** to diversify the activities they offer, extend café hours, provide quiet and alcohol-free zones, adopt an accessible venue kitemark, and trial predictable "Square Deal" pricing. Sharing data, building mixed-age workforces, and strengthening safeguarding are also key.
- We suggest that **VCFSE groups and individuals** can contribute by running hyperlocal evening hubs, chatty cafés and sober socials, volunteering as buddies or stewards, and opening up schools, markets and faith spaces after dark.

These actions – supported by clear data, coordinated leadership and practical prototypes like the "GM Square Deal" or "Friends for night" – will help Greater Manchester and other UK cities create a night time economy that works across generations, strengthens communities and supports healthier, longer lives.

Building the 24-hour city: seven prototypes to test now

We don't want our recommendations to sit on the shelf – so we've pulled out seven key priority prototype ideas which we think authorities across Greater Manchester should consider, working with businesses, voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) groups and central government.

The Square Deal



We know that cost of living pressures prevent people from enjoying the night time economy. People told us they wanted certainty about how much a night out would cost and what they'd get.

The solution: a Greater Manchester Square Deal could enable people to budget more easily, including a set meal out, entertainment (cinema, theatre or live music) and transport. It could be introduced at different price points to drive traffic at different times or for different experiences.

Friends for the night



We heard people say that one reason they don't go out as much as they'd like is because they don't have companions who share their interests.

The solution: develop a package of offers to bring people of all ages together in a comfortable way, and communicate these widely and inclusively, both digitally and through physical posters and flyers. Examples could include an intergenerational "Gig Buddy" scheme, based on the scheme developed to help people with learning disabilities and people who are autistic by pairing them with volunteers to join them in the evening,[1] along with extended hours for Chatty Cafés and shared tables.

Later leavers & early birds



We found city and town centre public transport overcrowded at peak times (5.00 to 6.30pm). Many people we spoke to also mentioned that congestion on certain transport routes was intolerable on match days. We perceived that some parts of the city felt quieter than expected on a Thursday or Friday evening – but visitor numbers for the second week in August were significantly up on last year, according to Manchester's district footfall data[2] Also, we were told that summer loneliness can increase in parts of the city region, as some activities close down and people go on holiday.

The solution: pilot ways to incentivise people to stay in town and city centres until after peak travel time to reduce congestion on public transport. This would build on early evening dining offers, workplace reward partnerships and "Tuesday night traders" showcasing local food, fashion or crafts. Promote town and city centre activities during quieter times, targeting groups who may want to enjoy a night out but also want a guaranteed seat and a non-crowded environment. Licence early morning concerts to help build a 24-hour city. Provide micro-grants for age-inclusive, earlier-evening and summer-specific events in town centres. As proposed in Andy Burnham's 2024 mayoral manifesto, develop a combined travel and event card for older people, similar to "Our Pass" for 16-to-18-year-olds.[3]

Healthy nights, vibrant towns



Some people told us that town and city centres were too focused on alcohol in the evening. Although we found some non-alcohol-based activities, we believe these offers could be better packaged. We also found some gaps around healthy eating during the evening. In some towns we saw a proliferation of 24-hour gambling spaces, but few later healthy eating opportunities. Solo business travellers and older wealthier visitors are a potentially big growth market; more could be done to market healthy options for this group.[4]

The solution: use planning to incentivise healthy fast food and promote a healthy night out offering for all ages. Local authorities and partners working across Greater Manchester would benefit from promoting unusual non-alcohol-related activities such as partnering with hotel chains to offer 'healthy stay, healthy night' offers – e.g. town hall tours; walking tours or gardening clubs.

The Sunday Funday



76% of older people surveyed by Contact the Elderly (now Re-engage) say that Sunday is the loneliest day of the week. Yet we found that transport was often more limited on Sunday evenings, and towns were often relatively quiet.

The solution: pilot extending the Bee Network's two free city-centre circular bus5 timetables to run later on Sundays and bank holidays. Encourage Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to develop initiatives for attracting people into towns and cities on a Sunday, with a focus on activities that bring people together.

Too good to miss



While Greater Manchester offers many things to do, it isn't always easy to find out what's going on. Searching online often means search algorithms that return offers and advertising targeted at the majority or average visitor. So many people don't know what they're missing.

The solution: building on the success of the "Too good to go" app[6] which offers food at lower prices at the end of the day, develop a "too good to miss" app which offers reduced-price concerts, shows and other entertainment, which can only be booked at the very last minute. The app should also offer a "mystery night out" where you can buy an experience in advance but only find out what it is on the day of the event.

Build it (and make it accessible) & they will come



Greater Manchester has a fantastic range of activities for all ages. Some tweaks could extend that across 24 hours. But the offering needs to be as accessible as possible for people who may need a bit of help to access services.

The solution: pilot extending some library opening times to 10.00pm and restart evening activities in museums. Provide town hall tours into the evening. Adopt an accessible venue kitemark in line with the Age friendly Businesses Framework, covering accessible seating, acoustics, toilets, welcoming door staff and clear signage. Map live "safe spaces" such as toilets, first aid points and taxi ranks; deploy "rest buses" in hotspots during peak times.

Introduction: out and about in Greater Manchester

For too long the assumption has been that older people aren't interested in going out at night. Too many evening activities and licensing is designed for younger people, rather than for all ages.

This project was conceived to examine how the night time economy could thrive by catering to a range of age profiles and the different preferences that come with them.

An ageing population need not mean earlier nights, but it does mean our night-time economies must adapt to changing demand and behaviours. While a significant number of older people live in poverty, there are also many with money to spend in their local economy. Greater Manchester would benefit from providing opportunities and pathways to help them do so, encouraging more people to remain active and socially involved for longer.

ILC analysis shows that consumers aged 50 and over spent around £5.8 billion on food, retail, culture, hospitality and leisure in Greater Manchester in 2024. This was a significant increase from the £3.4 billion spent on these sectors by that age group in 2018. It equates to almost one pound in every six spent by households across the region, and around 16.6% of total household expenditure in 2024. Of that £5.8 billion, older consumers spend £1.5 billion on recreation and culture, and £800 million on restaurants and hotels.

ILC research suggests that recreation and culture is one of the top three growth sectors for older consumers.[7] The question is: how can the night time economy – a key part of our economy – get a bigger part of the longevity dividend? We know that as people age they tend to save more than they need. ILC research, in 2020, found that households headed by people aged 65 and over were saving £1.8 billion annually – more of this could be spent within their local economies.[8]

The Night Time Industries Association (NTIA) estimates that, in 2024, the UK night-time industry was worth nearly £153.9 billion and the night-time cultural industry an additional £42.7 million.[9] By the ILC's calculations the gross value added (GVA) generated by these industries across Greater Manchester in 2023 was £6.3 billion (around £6.6 billion in today's prices). But the available data is limited and doesn't provide an accurate picture of the drivers or opportunities available.

As a city region, Greater Manchester is starting from a strong position. Manchester city centre is booming. In addition to renowned attractions like Lowry, Factory International, Royal Exchange Theatre and Co-op Live, and iconic areas like the Gay Village and the Salford Quays, there are excellent venues, things to do and community initiatives across all ten boroughs, from Altrincham to Wigan Pier. But there's still significant scope for growth and innovation in the retail, culture, hospitality, tourism and sport sector, as well as in transport and mobility.

Although many libraries and leisure centres are open late and there are a range of options for those who don't want to base their activities on drinking. not all parts of the region are equal. There's potential to strengthen the night time economy's appeal to its ageing population.

We worked with the GM Ageing Hub and GM Night Time Economy teams to explore how GMCA and partners can shape a night time economy that works for all ages – boosting participation, spend and wellbeing, and supporting good jobs.

Our research draws on findings from an online survey of stakeholders across the UK, and from interviews with service users and consumers, as well as workers and volunteers, conducted during a research trip that visited all ten Greater Manchester boroughs. We organised an online workshop as well as a face-to-face discussion with local leaders. Together, these sources provide a nuanced picture of people's experiences of the night-time economy – what encourages them to go out, the obstacles they face, and where there is potential to create a more inclusive, vibrant evening culture for all ages.

While we sought to capture the views of as wide a range of people as possible and to cover as much of Greater Manchester as feasible, we were three visitors spending three days in the city region in the third week of August 2025, at the beginning of Pride weekend. The project was therefore constrained by time and resources and reflects our preferences, perceptions and biases, as is often the case with qualitative research. In addition, our visit took place at a single point in the year, without the bulk of the student population and during a particular celebration. This report therefore offers a snapshot, not a definitive analysis. We hope, however, that it provides food for thought and helps build ongoing work to make Greater Manchester an age-friendly place to live well in.

The implications for this research go beyond Greater Manchester. Other UK cities can benefit from better understanding the impact of longer lives on the night time economy.

There is limited published research exploring how older people interact with the night-time – and the research available mainly considers middle age ranges rather than older people.[10] While there is interest in age friendly environments, it seems few have thought about how to make these environments accessible into the night.



Random snapshots of Greater Manchester – taken by the report authors.

What we mean by the night time economy

The night time economy is often defined as economic activity between 6.00pm and 6.00am. In this report, we use the term to describe the wider ecosystem of places, activities and services that enable people of all ages to go out, connect and take part in culture, leisure and sport – both during the early evening and after dark.



Our definition explicitly includes the people who power it – hospitality, culture and leisure workers – along with the supporting services that make going out possible: public transport, taxis, security, cleaning, retail and logistics.

In our engagement, people associated the night time economy with both infrastructure – transport, lighting, venues and toilets – and with social interaction and connection. Many told us they wanted to broaden their horizons, but there was often a 'but': cost, feeling unsafe or out of place, having no one to go with and, for some, unreliable transport were common barriers.

When asked "What words do you think of when you think of the night time economy?", responses varied from the negative: "rowdy, dangerous, dirty"– to the positive: "exciting, interesting, cheering" but many had mixed views such as: "declining, expensive, harder to be part of but such good potential."

Greater Manchester boasts an impressive range of places to visit and be entertained – art galleries, museums, libraries, music venues large and small, sports stadiums and green spaces – as well as countless restaurants, clubs, pubs and bars. As in most city regions, the bulk of these are in Manchester city centre. But many people we spoke to would much rather they could go out closer to home. Several parts of the region remain quiet in the evenings without many options for local residents.

Of course, growth and investment is needed longer term, but with coordination and collaboration there are also low-cost approaches that could help improve some areas. We found no shortage of ways people socialise: sober saunas, a group of autograph-hunting friends brought together as fans of Coronation Street, pub karaoke and daytime raves. What many people need isn't complicated – often just somewhere to socialise, that's warm and dry, and has a toilet.



Random snapshots of Greater Manchester – taken by the report authors.

Has the way we have fun changed?

There are a few new trends:

- **We're going out a bit less overall.** Cost of living problems still bite: 42% say they're going out less than usual, while roughly one in five are going out more. Half of all consumers report cutting non-essential spending.[11]

- **We like daytime events and earlier evenings.** 6.00pm dinner bookings rose fastest in 2024/25 (up ~11% in London, ~6% UK-wide), with growth in group dining and more mid-week visits.[12] Daytime discos and 'matinee clubbing' appeal to people who want the vibe without the late finish, helping some venues reach older people and those who prefer alcohol-light formats.[13]

- **'Competitive socialising' keeps expanding.** The number of venues built around darts, bowling, cricket, mini-golf and the like has grown by ~40% since 2018, to nearly 600 UK sites, with operators still opening but warning that there may soon be too many.[14] Aqua aerobics, padel, pickleball, table tennis and similar "play+eat/drink" formats are booming, giving venues fresh early-evening traffic. For example, the number of people playing padel (a type of racket sport typically played in doubles) alone rose to just over 400,000 in 2024.[15]

- **Sport is a major driver of footfall.** Big tournaments and events, everything from cricket to snooker, push double-digit uplifts for pubs and bars. During Euro 2024, total drinks sales (specifically of beer) surged on matchdays, with venues that screened sport seeing the strongest spikes.[16] However, we found a common concern that major events in the city put significant pressure on transport and infrastructure and could sometimes harm smaller businesses and services.

- **Moderation has gone mainstream.** 38% of UK drinkers now opt for low or no-alcohol options at least occasionally, and no-alcohol categories are growing, with no-alcohol beer now >2% of beverage sales. Duty changes have also boosted sales of lower-strength beers.[17] Younger people's preferences are shifting towards creative, purposeful and wellbeing-led spaces – mirroring older

people's appetite for connection and meaning. If we challenge the stereotypes held by both sides of the age gap, we could open shared, intergenerational nightlife experiences.

"My dream night out would be fun, relaxation that doesn't involve booze – like night time zoos when the animals are awake, outdoor lido events, open air cinema." **Survey participant**

But it's also important to remember that many of today's older people are the same people who once packed Northern Soul dancefloors, followed Joy Division in Manchester's post-punk heyday and listened to New Order, A Guy Called Gerald and Lisa Stansfield in the 1980s and early 1990s. For many, the cultural choices of their youth continue to shape how they experience and value nightlife now.

"Nice meal followed by dancing at a gig, no trouble, bus home."
Survey participant



Random snapshots of Greater Manchester – taken by the report authors.

A more age-friendly night time economy

Greater Manchester's ambition is for residents and visitors to live well at night in a vibrant, 24-hour city region that's safe, accessible and diverse. The city region has world-class cultural organisations, venues and heritage sites – but visiting theatres, galleries and museums after 6.00pm can be challenging. Older people can face particular barriers – from perceptions of safety to a paucity of inclusive offers and transport at later hours and on Sundays.

"Locally yes, but I'd like to go out more in Manchester city centre. Venues in the city centre increasingly feel like places for 30- to 50-year-olds with plenty of disposable income."

Survey participant responding to."do you go out as much as you'd like?"

When the night time economy is accessible, it enriches social and cultural life, builds purpose and connection, and creates spaces where communities gather, fostering belonging and reduce isolation. Greater Manchester has made impressive progress, but there is more to do to ensure everyone can take part. Age-friendly shouldn't just mean promoting the inclusion of older people but building spaces and experiences that bring generations together. Intergenerational events – from family film nights to shared creative sessions – help strengthen trust, belonging and local participation.

"I do, I try to be brave, how bad could it be? Finding things to go to is the issue."

Survey participant responding to "do you go out as much as you'd like?"

Age-friendly Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester Ageing Hub was established in 2016;[18] in 2018 it joined the WHO Global Network, becoming the UK's first age-friendly city region. Its refreshed Age Friendly Strategy 2024–2034 aligns the Hub's work with the wider Greater Manchester Strategy; it sets priorities across economy and work, age-friendly places, healthy ageing, housing and planning, transport, and culture. Delivery is underpinned by The State of Ageing in Greater Manchester (January 2024) which

informs practical action and helps partners target effort where it will have the greatest impact.[19]

In September 2025, Manchester became the first UK city to introduce Age Friendly Leisure Standards, a new framework to make its leisure centres more accessible, inclusive and welcoming for older people. Developed jointly by Manchester City Council, Manchester Active, GLL (Greenwich Leisure Limited), Age Friendly Manchester and the Centre for Ageing Better, these standards build on the established Age Friendly Standards for culture and libraries[20] and were co-designed with the Age Friendly Older People's Board and with older people via consultation.[21]

What is "Live Well" in Greater Manchester?

Live Well is Greater Manchester's commitment to build community-led health and wellbeing support in every neighbourhood. Led jointly by GMCA, NHS Greater Manchester, and the VCFSE sector, it brings together Live Well centres in each locality and integrates access to money, housing, employment, wellbeing and social connection. It also forms a core part of the vision of the upcoming GM Night Time Economy Strategy, which focuses on ensuring residents and visitors can live well at night. A £10 million GMCA implementation fund is supporting roll out, with at least one flagship Live Well centre planned per locality by the end of 2025/26. The programme has attracted National Lottery Community Fund investment and is building a city-region Live Well Communities Fund.[22]

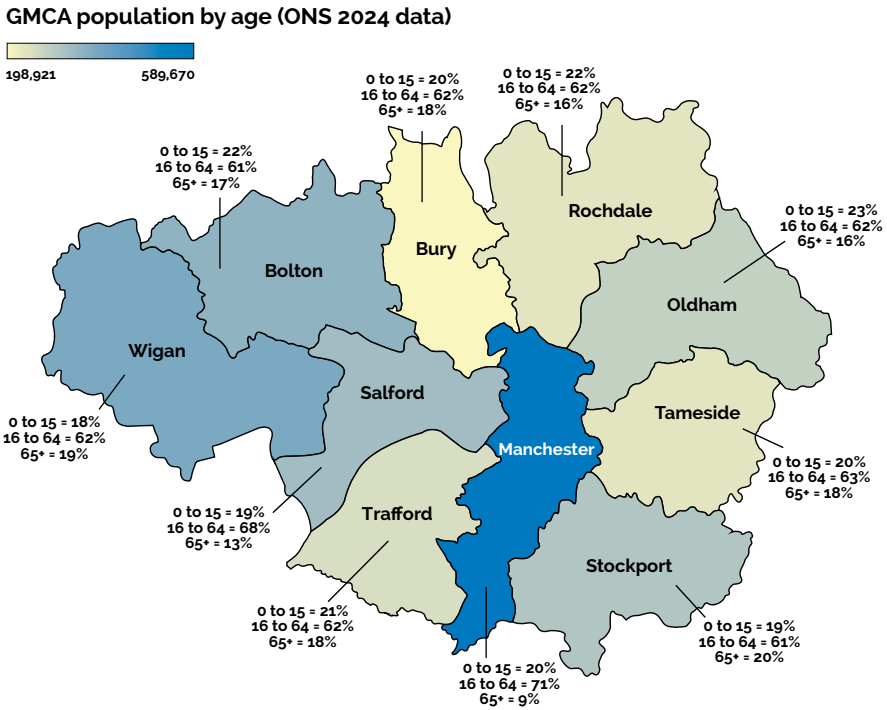
Embedding the night time economy within Live Well frameworks potentially links social prescribing and prevention more directly to culture and leisure, positioning nightlife as part of community health infrastructure.

"My dream night out would start with a small, local meal with my closest friends before heading to a gallery or a similar space for some sophisticated drinks. Some sort of interactive group activity would also be great. I'd then want to go and see some live music in a cool (but not overcrowded!) bar, with plenty of outdoor space in case I needed some time away from the hustle and bustle inside. I'd like to get moderately tipsy, not drunk, and enjoy walking home with my friends, grabbing a takeaway on the way if I was feeling peckish!" **Survey participant**

Some facts and figures

Age demographics

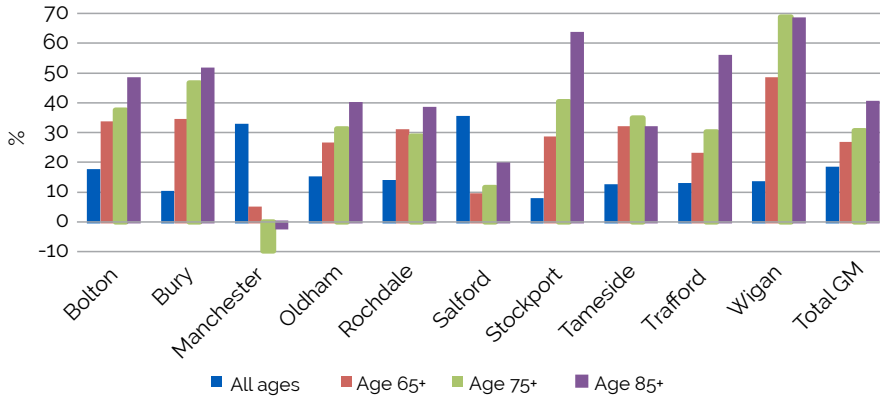
Figure 1: GM authorities and their populations by age



Source: ONS *Estimates of the population for England and Wales* (data mid-2024 published July 2025)

As in the rest of the UK, the population across Greater Manchester is ageing – but the ten local authorities are ageing at different rates. Apart from in Manchester and Salford, the number of adults aged 75 and over has increased significantly faster than the total population – over the last decade, Manchester saw just a 2.4% increase in residents aged 75 and over, while Wigan saw an increase of 40.6%. The increases in the size of the cohort ages 85 and over are also striking across all boroughs except Manchester and Salford.

Figure 2: Changes in older populations in GM authorities (2014 – 2024)



Source: ONS *Estimates of the population for England and Wales* (data mid-2024 published July 2025)

There is insufficient data on protected characteristics, and many older people feel 'invisible' in services and policymaking – particularly those who are disabled, LGBTQ+ or from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The night time economy workforce in GM

Around a third of Greater Manchester's workforce are in jobs or businesses with significant night-time activity (6.00pm to 6.00am), equating to 445,400 people.[23] Looking solely at the roles usually viewed as directly involved in culture, leisure, retail and supporting infrastructure, the GVA generated in 2023 across Greater Manchester was £1.9 billion. But if you take into account other roles in related sectors, such as transportation and storage, manufacturing, and health and care, then by ILC's calculations the GVA generated is nearer £6.3 billion (around £6.6 billion in today's prices).[24]

The challenges and barriers

Across the UK – and in many other countries – the barriers to enjoying a good, safe night out are familiar and persistent. People cite unreliable or expensive late-night transport, poor lighting and wayfinding, limited accessible facilities, crowding and noise, and concerns about harassment or antisocial behaviour. But people also talk about the importance of companionship and having someone to go out with. Isolation and loneliness stops people going out at night as well as in the day. Rising costs and inconsistent venue standards can further deter participation, especially for disabled people and older people. These are well-known challenges that appear repeatedly in both local surveys and international evidence, pointing to systemic issues rather than isolated problems.

- **Transport**: limited and unreliable late-night public transport, especially after midnight and on Sundays, makes getting home difficult and expensive. It's worth noting that concessionary pass use remains lower than before Covid, suggesting fewer older or disabled people and those on lower incomes are taking advantage of more affordable travel.
- **Safety and confidence**: poor lighting, inadequate wayfinding, and a lack of staffed or clearly signposted public toilets undermine people's sense of safety. Anxiety about travelling alone or visiting unfamiliar venues at night remains high, particularly among women and older people.
- **Cost of living**: rising ticket prices, food and drink costs, as well as surge-pricing for transport have made nights out less affordable. Less famous acts and smaller community venues struggle to compete with larger, better-resourced operators.
- **Limited, alcohol-centric activities**: in many places, the evening economy s is dominated by pubs and bars, leaving few quiet, interest-led, intergenerational or alcohol-free options. This limits participation for people who prefer or need alternative social settings.
- **Hyperlocal gaps:** many town and district centres "close" early or lack varied evening options. Vacant units are treated as spaces to rent rather than places for interim community use, reducing opportunities for people to gather locally.

- **Social connection barriers:** loneliness and social isolation remain major barriers. Many people say they have "no one to go with". Men in particular report finding it difficult to form new friendships or social circles after retirement, bereavement or family changes, leaving them less likely to engage in local cultural or evening activities.
- **Accessibility**: many venues and public spaces are not designed with age or disability in mind. Poor acoustics, limited seating, complex payment systems and dementia-unfriendly layouts all reduce inclusion and comfort.
- **Information**: information about what's open, when, and how accessible it is can be fragmented or out of date. Lack of clear travel and safety information also deters spontaneous or confident participation.
- **Weather and seasonality**: darker evenings and wet, cold winters discourage trips out, especially for those who rely on public transport. Few public spaces or venues are designed with sheltered, warm or weather-resilient features to sustain activity year-round.

Cost of living, inequalities and accessibility

The rising cost of living has reduced disposable income for many. Essentials such as rent or mortgages, utilities and groceries have become more expensive – food prices rose by around 30% between May 2021 and May 2024[25] – leaving less for leisure.

> ***"I don't go out as much as I used to or would like, because my income has shrunk over the last few years."*** **Survey participant**

The night-time economy serves men better than women. Despite gradual progress on the gender pay gap, women working full time still earned about 7% less per hour than men in April 2024, reducing disposable income for leisure. These financial pressures intersect with other inequalities, including a greater burden of unpaid care, limited flexibility in working hours and a lack of affordable childcare in the evening. Lower earnings can also limit safer travel choices late at night. A lack of free or low-cost public spaces compounds the challenge, as much of the night-time economy assumes people will spend money to access spaces.

Safety and inclusion remain critical barriers. People's experiences of the night time economy vary by gender, ethnicity and background. Their confidence to go out varies depending on previous experiences, whether they live alone, and whether they have someone to go out with. Greater Manchester's Night Time Economy Strategy places the safety of women and girls at its core. It commits to practical measures such as: the introduction of Manchester's WalkSafe+ App[26] and re-establishing "safety havens"; workforce training on harm reduction and anti-spiking; and wider adoption of Purple Flag standards (an award that shows a town or city reaches specific standards for being safe, diverse, vibrant, appealing and well-managed) across town centres.[27] In addition, Street Pastors, together with the Village Angels and Street Angels, have been recognised as making a significant contribution to ensuring the welfare of people on the streets of Manchester at night.[28]

Inequalities linked to age, income and health also shape participation. Greater Manchester has a growing and increasingly diverse older population, with rising financial precarity in later life. Older women and older people from Black and Asian communities are more likely to experience poverty, which constrains discretionary spend after 6pm. Since the pandemic, older people are using public transport less and are less confident about the safety of walking and cycling routes, which can further limit evening and night-time activity. For some people, digital exclusion remains an issue and restricts access where booking, payment and information are primarily online.

"No, because of my mobility issues, I am 62 and don't want to go to crowded places anymore (too easy to catch germs) or mix with people I don't want to." **Survey participant**

Finally, inequalities affect workers as well as audiences. A third of Greater Manchester's workforce is active at night across hospitality, culture, health and logistics. High turnover and lower investment in training can leave frontline staff without up-to-date skills on safeguarding, which in turn affects how inclusive and safe venues feel. Strengthening pay, conditions and training is therefore part of addressing inequalities in the night time economy.

The affordable ticket scheme at Octagon Bolton

To make theatre more accessible, Octagon Bolton launched its £4 Affordable Ticket Scheme, open to Bolton residents receiving Universal Credit or Pension Credit. The scheme also works via referral partners (such as local housing providers and youth organisations) to widen its reach beyond direct benefit claimants.

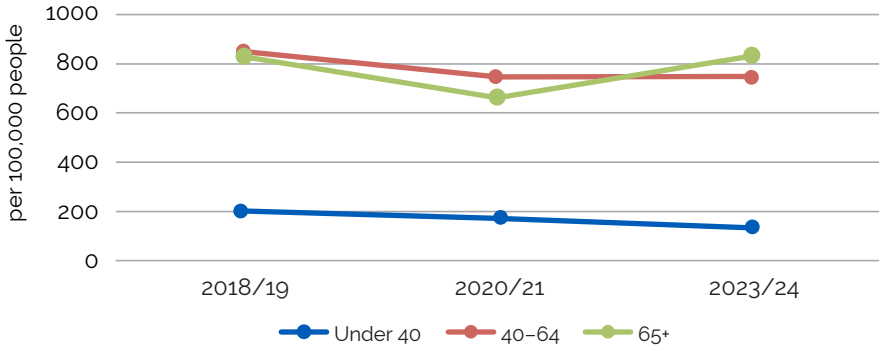
Over the year, 1,457 people from low-income households attended a performance under this scheme, with over £24,000 in ticket discounts delivered. Meanwhile total attendance across all productions reached 87,562 – one of the highest in the theatre's history. Recent reports and research show that the Octagon contributes £10 million to the economy of Bolton and the local area every year.[29]

Alcohol, health and the economy

Excessive alcohol consumption harms individuals and the wider economy through:

- Premature deaths and years of working life lost
- Reduced labour supply due to ill health
- Lower productivity at work (presenteeism)

Figure 3: Alcohol-related hospital admissions in GM by age group



Source: Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. Public health profiles. 2025 https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/ © Crown copyright 2025 (extracted October 2025)

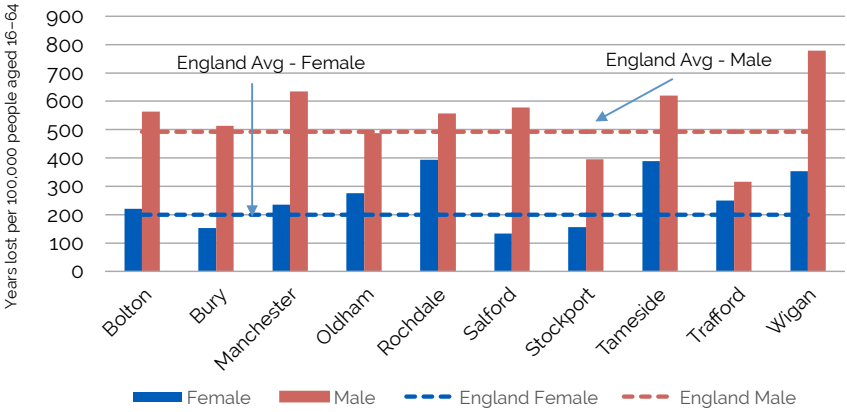
Across England, it's estimated that harmful drinking costs people aged 55–64 around £300 per person per year. This is three times the amount lost by 16-34-year-olds, due to the higher rates of heavy drinking in this cohort, as well as greater numbers who are inactive due to poor health.

Recent ILC analysis estimates that:

- Harmful drinking costs approximately £6 billion in lost earnings and around £12.5 billion in lost economic output annually across the UK
- 28,092 to 28,820 people died from alcohol-related causes each year between 2021 and 2023[30]

Men drink more than women, both across the UK and in Greater Manchester. Across the region, when we met people spending time alone in pubs during the day, they were mainly men.

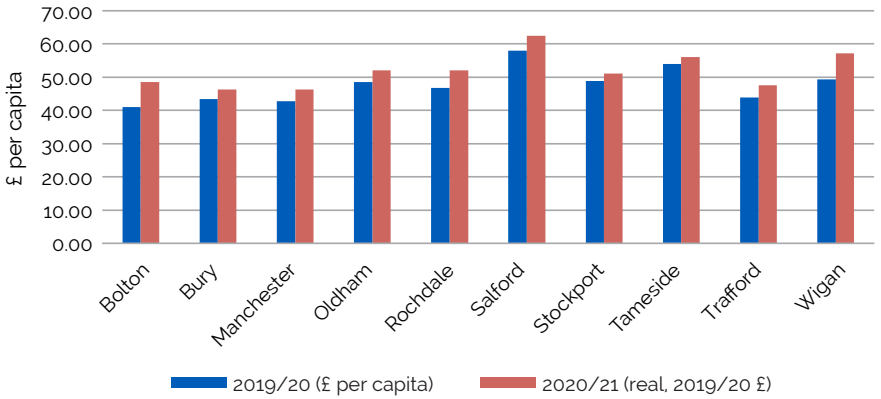
Figure 4: People's working years potentially lost due to alcohol in 2023



Source: Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. Public health profiles. 2025 https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/ © Crown copyright 2025 (extracted October 2025)

However, most available data on the impact and costs of alcohol abuse doesn't make it clear whether drinking takes place at home or not. We know that the risk of living alone and possibly drinking alone increases for older people – and that as we age, we become more susceptible to the effects of alcohol.

Figure 5: Per-capita cost to GMCA of alcohol-related hospital admissions in 2023



Source: Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. Public health profiles. 2025 https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/ © Crown copyright 2025 (extracted October 2025)

Creative and cultural nightlife – from live music to participatory arts – could help to prevent harmful drinking, by supporting emotional wellbeing and providing alcohol-free routes to connection. But further research is necessary to properly assess motivations for drinking at home versus drinking outside the home and to better understand if social interaction helps moderate or exacerbate alcohol abuse.

Noise and health

Noise pollution is no longer treated as a mere nuisance – it's increasingly recognised as a material risk to health and wellbeing. WHO environmental noise guidelines offer strong evidence that chronic exposure to transport and leisure noise is linked to sleep disturbance, stress and cardiovascular disease. European assessments estimate very large population-level harms each year, including new cases of heart disease and widespread severe annoyance and sleep loss.[31]

A thriving night time economy depends on people feeling comfortable, safe and welcome. The most direct harms of loud, amplified music are hearing issues: the effects are well documented.[32] But there are wider health effects too. High volume sound levels activate stress responses, elevate blood pressure and disturb sleep: all of these are linked to increased risks of cardiovascular disease over time.

Loud noise in venues also makes conversation harder and warning signals harder to hear, which can increase the risk of accidents and vocal strain from shouting. For workers who are repeatedly exposed, employers must assess risks, provide protection and health surveillance, and control noise so far as is reasonably practicable.

Poorly managed noise can erode trust between venues and neighbours, trigger complaints and licensing action, and deter residents and visitors from evening activity. The impact of disrupted sleep and stress from noise pollution, including traffic noise, affects people of all ages, but particularly children and older people.[33]



Random snapshots of Greater Manchester – taken by the report authors.

Turning challenges to opportunities

Looking at age differently

Greater Manchester's age-friendly culture initiative builds on the GM Ageing Hub citizen-based approach. Over 30 cultural organisations across Manchester and Salford collaborate to share ideas, develop age-friendly work, and build partnerships at scope and scale – reaching those least likely to participate.[34]

But it's important to remember that younger people are also seeking inclusive, creative spaces. Intergenerational approaches will be key to ensure increased participation at all ages.

Culture Champions

Culture Champions – a volunteer ambassador scheme for people aged 50 and over first launched in 2011 – has been widely cited as good practice. Originating in Manchester and previously managed by Manchester Museum, the programme recruited and supported more than as 150 Champions across Bolton, Bury and Manchester to co-design and deliver activities with museums, theatres, galleries and music organisations. While the programme's ambition was felt to be worthwhile and achievable, many of those involved were frustrated by the limited timeframes for many of the individual projects.[35]

My Generation at Matt & Phred's

Hosted at Manchester's live music venue Matt & Phreds,[36] My Generation Club Nights is a retro disco designed for people aged 50 and over, conceived by Mancunian Joyce Gill, who loved going out but felt the city centre wasn't meeting the needs of people like her. The first event ran at venue and charity Band on the Wall[37] over a decade ago and quickly proved its appeal. With support from Band on the Wall's engagement officer and Tracey Annette from the Age Friendly Manchester team, the project took shape as a dedicated Northern Quarter club night that introduces new audiences to the feel of dance floors from the 50s to the 70s.

Now held on Sunday evenings, roughly every three months, at Matt & Phreds, the night features a DJ with live performers and a welcoming, earlier-evening format. Clear finish times support safer journeys home; familiar music helps novice clubbers feel comfortable, and accessible pricing widens participation. Beyond the dance floor, this night tackles loneliness in later life by creating a sociable space where older people can connect and enjoy a proper night out.[38]

A healthier workforce

A third of Greater Manchester's workforce is active at night in hospitality, culture, health and logistics. Long hours and night work can take a heavy toll on health: disrupted body clocks, short sleep and irregular meals raise risks of fatigue, accidents, anxiety and depression, as well as longer-term risks of cardiovascular and metabolic disease. This matters both commercially and socially in the night time economy – tired, unwell staff mean higher absenteeism and turnover, more safety incidents, lower productivity and a poorer customer experience, which can shorten trading hours and squeeze margins.[39]

Investing in better rostering, better lighting, rest spaces, nutritious food and safe late transport will help protect workers' health, improve retention and service quality, and make night-time venues and services more reliable for everyone.

Liminal Space's Night Club initiative

The Liminal Space's Night Club is a workplace-based programme that brings sleep scientists and health academics together with night-shift workers and employers to make night work healthier. Delivered through an immersive pop-up that goes to sites at night, it offers practical guidance on sleep, light, food and daily rhythms, and recruits peer "sleep champions" on the ground, to help changes stick. Since 2018 it has supported more than 10,000 employees across 30+ companies, including Co-op, John Lewis Partnership, Thames Water, Transport for London, the NHS and

Veolia. Organisations report improved staff engagement, indications of reduced absenteeism and practice changes across sites. Almost all participants say they learned something new, and most intend to change their behaviour.

The programme is underpinned by partnerships with the Wellcome Trust and Oxford University's Sleep and Circadian Neuroscience Institute; it has been extended with Impact on Urban Health to tailor support for workers in Lambeth and Southwark. A pilot with Veolia found that 84% of workers learned new ways to protect their health and 73% planned changes. Night Club has also taken evidence to Parliament to press for better protections for the UK's 8.7 million night-time workers.

Improved transport

Greater Manchester's public transport has made big strides since full bus franchising was completed in January 2025. It has seen a simpler fare structure, growing patronage and better integration across bus and tram. But our research team were only in Greater Manchester for three days; we used the trams and trains more than the buses.

Most people we spoke to were enthusiastic about the Metrolink tram network. However, several told us that while reliability has improved in some areas, it remains patchy at busy times and still doesn't meet the needs of people who live outside of town centres. For example, we were told:

"It's a big deal to get from Horwich to Manchester – the train station is 20 to 30 minutes' walk from the main residential space and it's several buses for a long time; the same with places in Tameside." **Workshop participant**

TravelSafe[40] is a partnership jointly led by Bee Network and Greater Manchester Police, which aims to help support a safe and secure transport network across Greater Manchester. Reliability of transport is key to feeling and being safe, especially at night, and especially for women and girls.[41]

Night-time coverage is expanding, with four additional 24-hour bus routes[42] now running, but gaps remain for workers and late-evening audiences.[43] In most places public transport finishes relatively early in

the evening, while busy roads and expensive parking mean there are limited alternative options to get out and about outside city centres.

Table 1: GM public transport scorecard

Area	RAG	Notes
Affordability	**G**	£2 adult/£1 child single tickets will be available until the end of 2025 (subject to review). Daily and weekly contactless fare capping on bus and tram.[44]
Coverage	**A**	High coverage during the day. Night-time services exist but are limited in some districts.
Reliability	**A**	Metrolink generally solid. Bus punctuality improving but still variable by area and time of day.
Integration	**A**	More uniform "Bee Network" branding, app and fare caps to limit the costs of journeys across bus and tram. Rail integration will be rolled out by 2028.
Accessibility	**G**	All Metrolink stops are step free. Station upgrades are planned through Bee Network Rail.
Safety	**A**	TravelSafe presence and the launch of 24/7 LiveChat (real-time issue reporting). Perceptions improving but uneven.

Key

G – strong	**A** – mixed	**R** – weak

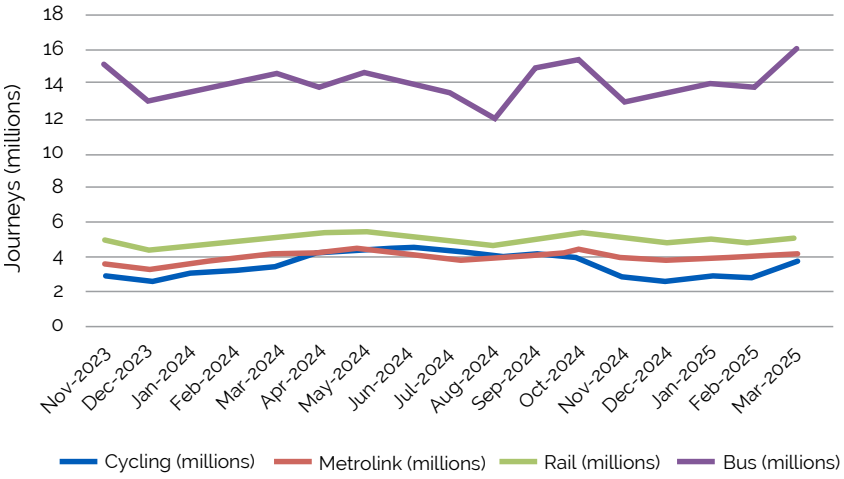
Greater Manchester is the first area outside London to bring all local bus services back under local control. Since January 2025, all bus services have been franchised under the Bee Network.[45] By 2030, the GMCA aims to boost bus passenger numbers by 30% (approximately 200 million journeys more each year), with a goal of 50% of all journeys to be made by public transport, walking or cycling by 2040.[46]

The number of journeys is up 12% year on year for buses brought under the Bee Network in September 2023. For those that joined in March 2024, the increase is 14%. It's too early to calculate year on year growth

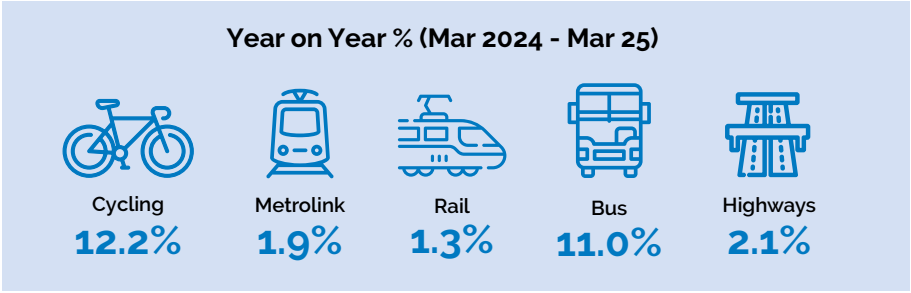
for services that joined in January 2025 but according to Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) performance has been strong, with 111.7 million journeys made between January and August 2025.

Buses do most of the heavy lifting when it comes to public transport, as Figure 6 illustrates.

Figure 6: Public transport journeys in GM (Nov 2023 to Mar 2025)



In March 2025, all modes of transport saw an increase compared with the same period in 2024, with cycling and bus seeing the largest percentage change.



Public transport underpins this city region's footfall, staffing and spending after 6.00pm. A more reliable, accessible and affordable evening network strengthens the night time economy while widening opportunities for older people. Given that most people live within 15 minutes of a bus stop, there's significant potential to expand routes and enhance services.

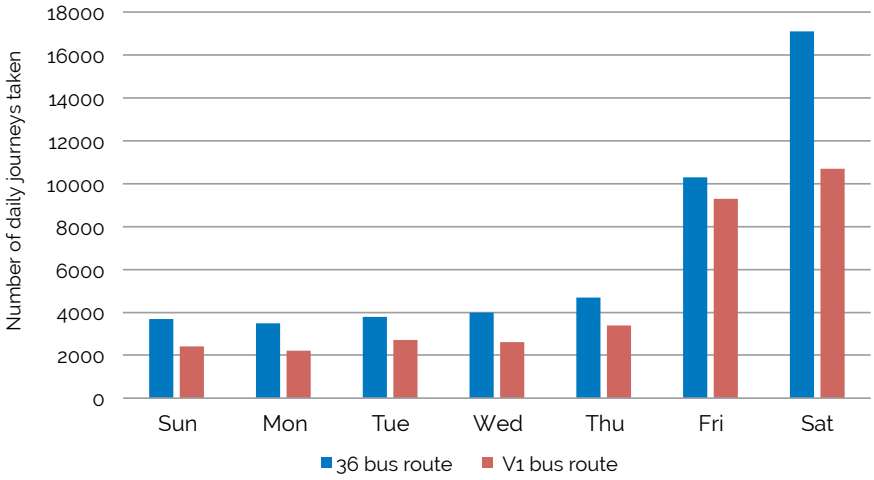
Table 2: GM population within a 15-minute walk of public transport stops (%)

	Bus	Rail	Tram
Bolton	99.52	31.13	0.00
Bury	99.52	0.85	42.35
Manchester	100.00	42.40	58.67
Oldham	99.03	6.95	51.53
Rochdale	98.11	26.91	23.90
Salford	99.07	48.32	29.44
Stockport	99.81	70.64	3.99
Tameside	99.18	62.56	25.75
Trafford	99.97	41.15	57.16
Wigan	99.69	27.67	0.00

Source: NaPTAN data (September 2025) https://beta-naptan.dft.gov.uk/download

In September 2024, the Bee Network launched pilot bus services between Manchester city centre and Leigh and Bolton town centres, running 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Figure 7: Pilot 24-hour bus route journeys by day of week



Source: TfGM data from Bee Network Committee report (July 2025)

TfGM plans to extend these pilot services until at least the end of the financial year 2025/2026. It's also scoping additional night bus routes in Bury and Rochdale and in Oldham, Tameside and Trafford for introduction in the next financial year.

According to initial TfGM customer research, people mostly use the pilot services to get to work, with most passengers surveyed working in hospitality. Users are more likely to be men (70%) than women (27%) and are more likely to be younger – 35% were aged 16-24, 54% were aged 25-44, and 11% were aged 45 and over.[47]

The role of pubs, bars, clubs and restaurants

In 2024, Greater Manchester boasted an average of 67 pubs per 100,000 people aged 18 and over, compared with 49 in Greater London.[48] Official data suggest a recovery since the post-Covid closures. However, there are a quarter fewer licensed clubs than a decade ago, while the number of unlicensed restaurants and cafés has more than doubled.[49]

Table 3: Change in numbers of restaurants, cafes, bars and pubs (2014 -2024)

Industry	GMCA 2014 total	GMCA 2024 total	Change 2014 to 2024	% change 2014 to 2024
Licensed restaurants	980	1340	360	37%
Unlicensed restaurants and cafes	600	1285	685	114%
Take away food shops and mobile food stands	1320	2570	1250	95%
Licensed clubs	355	265	-90	-25%
Public houses and bars	1600	1555	-45	-3%
Hotels and similar accommodation	245	300	55	22%

Source: UK Business Counts - local units by industry and employment size band ONS Crown Copyright Reserved [from Nomis on 16 September 2025]

While alcohol harms are real – and pubs, clubs and bars are not for everyone – these venues can provide important opportunities to meet new people, share interests and build community. More work on how spaces can be better designed to facilitate relationship building could offer significant economic as well as social benefits.

Chatty Cafés

The Chatty Café Scheme Community Interest Company (CIC) is a simple but brilliant initiative where some spaces (e.g. seats in a café) are clearly marked as being the place to go if you want to talk to somebody. There are 900 cafés across the UK and numerous venues involved in the scheme across Greater Manchester. The organisation is keen to expand its reach.[50]

Role of sport and wellbeing activities

There are seven men's professional football teams and two women's teams in Greater Manchester, around forty semi-professional and non-league teams, and numerous grassroots clubs. Previous research finds that 57% of adults support a team and 37% support their local club – a reach few institutions can match.

Manchester City and Manchester United are defining forces in Manchester's social and cultural scene, with outreach that extends far beyond football. For example, City in the Community and Manchester United Foundation run numerous programmes: from walking football for older people, to disability sport schemes, and work in schools and community centres across Greater Manchester.

House of Sport

The House of Sport Manchester at the Etihad Campus provides excellent facilities from 7.00pm to 10.30pm, but opportunities to socialise after sessions are reduced as the café closes at 4.00pm. Keeping it open later would be an easy fix to support evening economy aims.

Such venues could also consider the provision of wider activities and contribute to the growing 'creative health' agenda – recognising the role of cultural and creative participation in improving physical and mental wellbeing and tackling loneliness.

Wild & the Moon, Paris

This multi-country urban chain of 100% plant-based and plastic-free restaurants and cafes has a takeaway concession within the Paris Saint Germain shop on the Champs Elysée.

Greater Manchester's clubs could make similar partnerships with restaurants and café chains that offer healthier, alcohol-free dining options. This would increase the healthy options on the route to and from the stadium and increase visitors' options to buy team merchandise, with discounts on food, drink and merchandise for season ticket holders.

It's not just the big footbal clubs that contribute. Local football, rugby union, rugby league and cricket are at the heart of their communities; they have incredible potential to drive influence and change. And sport more generally can be equally transformative. Recent analysis by the Sport Industry Research Centre found that every £1 spent on community sport and physical activity generates over £4 for the English economy and society.[51] But although many sporting activities happen in the evenings, the potential to make these more social isn't always realised (unless alcohol is involved). For example, many sports centres have cafes but these often close far earlier than the rest of the facilities.

Forest Green Rovers, Nailsea, Gloucestershire

Forest Green Rovers FC is recognised by FIFA and the UN as "the world's greenest football club"; it has built healthy living into its ethos, on and off the pitch. The club serves only vegan meals to players, staff and fans, cutting saturated fat and encouraging more sustainable diets. It prides itself on initiatives such as a football kit made from a composite material consisting of recycled plastic and coffee grounds, the use of compostable packaging, and an organic football pitch.

Like many of the clubs across Greater Manchester, it also encourages active lifestyles in its local community, through outreach programmes and partnerships with schools and youth groups,

Sober social at Fix Sauna, Northern Quarter, Manchester

Fix Sauna's sober social, held from 7.30 to 9.30pm, offers a welcoming, alcohol-free way to spend a weekend evening in the city centre. The space was easy to find and the facilities were spotlessly clean, calm and well run by friendly staff who put solo attendees at ease. It was busy without feeling crowded, with around 15 visitors and a noticeable mix of ages, from people in their 20s to those in their 60s. However, access was a practical limitation: the venue sits in a basement with stairs only, so there was no step-free entrance.[52]

Fix Sauna's sober social worked for solo attendees and those in small groups, and it provided an intergenerational setting where older and younger people mixed naturally. Addressing the step-free access barrier would broaden who can take part, but the model already shows how alcohol-free, city-centre activities can contribute to a more inclusive night time economy.

Extending and repurposing spaces

Libraries

Libraries are often the most trusted low-cost public spaces for connection, learning and culture after school or work. They offer quiet places to read and study, digital access, a warm and welcoming space in colder months, and programmed activity that can run later into the day – all of which supports social participation for people of all ages, including older people on lower incomes or with access needs. In city-regions, libraries also act as signposts to local services and as neutral venues for intergenerational events, widening night-time and early-evening activities beyond pubs and bars.

Greater Manchester has maintained many of its public libraries, with up to 60% of Greater Manchester residents living within 15 minutes of one. And Manchester's 22 libraries achieved 'Age Friendly Libraries' status in June 2022, recognising their commitment to a set of age-friendly standards with adapted services and physical spaces to better meet the needs of older people.[53] Libraries are ideally placed to remain accessible and safe while stretching provision beyond the traditional 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Hyde and Bolton libraries

Bolton Central Library offers later openings, staying open until 7.30pm on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and from 10.00am to 4.00pm on Sundays and bank holidays. The library anchors a wider cultural hub with regular family film screenings in the lecture theatre, Saturday storytime, and the Bolton Library Theatre series, strengthening reasons to visit into the late afternoon and early evening.

Hyde Library in Tameside offers self-service access up until 8.00pm via a simple barcode access. This extends hours for registered members when the building is unstaffed, supporting flexible daytime and early-evening use. The requirement to register before using unstaffed access offers reassurance that the spaces remain safe.

Schools

There are 1,094 publicly funded schools across the city region. By law, schools must provide at least 380 sessions (190 days) of education each year. Teachers are contracted for a further five days where they don't have contact with their pupils but undertake preparation or training, often in school buildings. However, barring breakfast and after-school clubs, schools could remain open in the evenings, at weekends and during holidays. These could be community activity venues that could be available for community and corporate activity across Greater Manchester for well over two million hours each year – or around 168 hours every week.

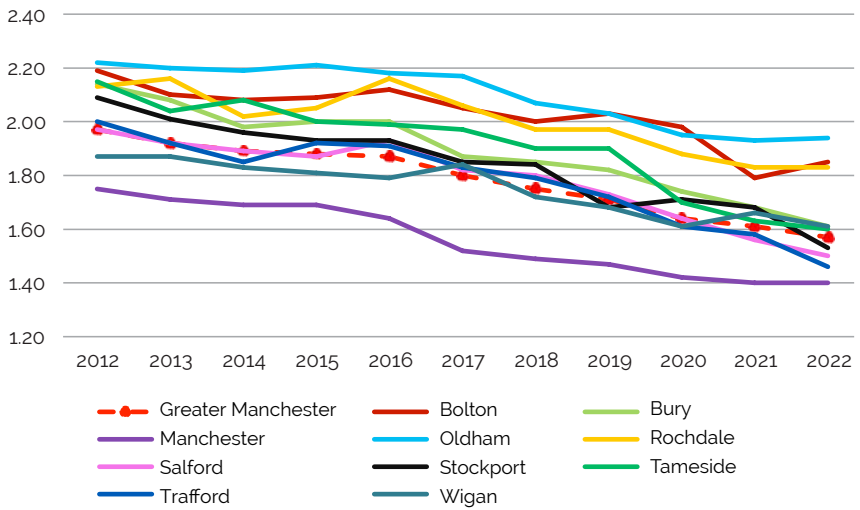
While using school assets in this way requires high level support from government, school leaders and governing bodies, the potential economic and social benefits for both schools and local communities are clear.

Table 4: Number of hours that schools are potentially available for other activities

Potential for extended opening	Per school	Across all schools
Term-time weekdays	6.00-9.00pm x 39 weeks = 585 hours	639,990 hours
Term time weekends	78 x 8-hour days = 624 hours	682,656 hours
School holidays	13 weeks x 8-hour days = 728 hours	796,432 hours
Total	**1,937 hours or 37+ hours each week**	**2,119,078 hours or 168 hours each week**

As birth rates decline, some school closures are likely. Policy should prioritise flexible reuse so that other users could continue to serve communities – whether by extending opening hours or transitioning to new uses.

Figure 8: Decline in fertility rates across GM boroughs (2012 – 2022)



Source: ONS Births in England and Wales: summary tables 2012 to 2022 – release date 23 February 2024 (data extracted October 2025)

Hackney Council

Following local school closures due to falling primary-age numbers, Hackney Council opened a consultation in July 2025 to repurpose ex-school spaces to meet community needs. The Mayor of Hackney stated a duty to retain these buildings as public assets that benefit communities, bringing spaces back into use while addressing key local challenges.

Retail spaces, markets and food-halls

The ongoing changes to shopping and leisure habits are reshaping high streets, creating opportunities to repurpose former retail spaces.

Food halls and modern markets are becoming key "day-to-night" anchors in Greater Manchester. Venues such as Mackie Mayor, Kargo MKT, Altrincham, Radcliffe and Stockport Markets can offer spaces that appeal to mixed groups, and a lower-pressure alternative to pubs.

Kargo MKT at Salford Quays

Kargo typically runs from 10.00am to 11.00pm with food served until 9.00pm. It positions itself as a communal space, with a rotating line-up of traders. It's part of a wider ecosystem of market-style dining across the city that helps people meet, eat and linger without alcohol being the main draw. Kargo MKT's Future Food Stars programme provided a launchpad for emerging food vendors to build their businesses. As part of the initiative, the businesses received business coaching and mentoring.

Staff working at Kargo said they were busiest on Thursday lunchtimes and at weekends. At these times, the places were filled with lots of families and the lively atmosphere sometimes felt hectic, and the hours long. However, the company is keen to expand and hopes to soon offer the Living Wage and better end-of-shift transport as the business grows.[54]

Crossed Wires, Sheffield

In 2024, Sheffield hosted the inaugural presentation of Crossed Wires, the UK's first podcast festival. The 2025 edition revived the former John Lewis ('Cole Brothers') building as a vibrant cultural zone, with free BBC Sounds-curated programming, alongside a 'sound garden' in Barker's Pool. Audiences were spread across multiple civic venues: the event reportedly drew more than 20,000 people, supporting hospitality trade across the weekend.

Crossed Wires shows how a talk-led, daytime-to-evening festival can attract intergenerational audiences, spotlight regional talent and boost the city centre without relying solely on late-night programming.[55]

Heritage and faith buildings

Greater Manchester is home to a diverse range of faith spaces that showcase the region's rich architectural heritage and cultural history. At a rough count there are around 1500 places of worship across the city region. Many faith buildings sit at the heart of neighbourhoods with good transport links and trusted local networks. With modest investment, they could operate as alcohol-free late-evening venues, offering concerts, cafés, warm spaces and community events that appeal to families and older people as well as younger audiences.

Faith leaders could help convene cross-community activities, host "safe space" hubs for people waiting for taxis or night buses, and provide chaplaincy support to workers in hospitality, culture and transport. This creates inclusive options after dark, boosts local footfall and supports a more balanced offering, beyond bars and clubs.

The benefits are two way. For city-region partners, involving places of worship can increase participation, extend in the amount of time people spend in local centres and improve perceptions of safety – especially for those who avoid traditional nightlife. For congregations, evening use brings new audiences, rental income and stronger community ties.

Clear agreements on safeguarding, neutrality and non-proselytising would be needed to ensure confidence for all partners. Done well, collaboration between faith leaders, venues and councils could

diversify the night time economy, support wellbeing and create a win-win for residents, businesses and communities across Greater Manchester.[56]

Events in Manchester Cathedral

Manchester Cathedral demonstrates how moving "nightlife" into the day, and using distinctive civic spaces, can create an inclusive, age-positive culture that complements the night-time economy. The cathedral's "Day Sessions" offer upbeat, sociable daytime parties with music from the 80s, 90s and 00s, with sessions timed at 12.15pm and 5.30pm that avoid late-night hassle. The heritage setting creates a sense of occasion that appeals across ages, while the central location and clear wayfinding mean people can easily find the events.[57]

Hinterland alcohol-free bar and cafe

Hinterland is an alcohol-free bar, vegan café and creative community hub in Manchester's Northern Quarter. It offers a calm, welcoming alternative to the typical noisy bar scene, with events, workshops and plant-based food designed to spark meaningful connection.

It sits in the basement of Manchester Buddhist Centre and grew out of that community. It underscores the Centre's roots in values of kindness, friendship and mindful socialising. It offers delicious food and shared space for conversation, culture and connection.[58]

The importance of community-led and co-created spaces

Community-led and co-created spaces can open up culture to more people and transform neighbourhoods. The examples below show how member-run venues and co-designed cultural programmes can build a sense of belonging, support wellbeing and challenge stereotypes about ageing, while sustaining a vibrant local scene.

The Carlton Club, Whalley Range

The Carlton Club is a member-led social club and arts venue operating as a CIC, with a bar, performance space, gallery and community garden. A mixed week-to-week programme encourages regular daytime and early-evening use, from backgammon and gardening to Pilates, yoga and a 55+ dance fitness session, alongside weekend live music and DJ nights. Concessionary membership recognises different income levels, including those whose sole income is the state pension. Clear travel information helps with planning; step-free access improvements are a priority.[59]

Platt Hall

Platt Hall, an 18th-century mansion in Platt Fields Park, is being redeveloped as a community-led neighbourhood museum for Rusholme, Moss Side and Fallowfield. Partners include the University of Manchester, local volunteers, local GPs, schools and residents. Formerly the Gallery of Costume (1947–2017), it now focuses on co-creating activity with residents to promote belonging, equality and a sustainable future, within Manchester Art Gallery and Manchester City Council.[60]

Royal Exchange Theatre "Elders programmes"

The Royal Exchange Theatre's elders programme is a long-running creative ageing programme for people aged 60 and over, designed to help older people feel connected and be creative, while challenging stereotypes about ageing. It includes introductory trial offers (Elders Mondays), a year-long Elders Company, progression roles through Elders Leaders and practice-based research with universities.[61]

The power of volunteering

Volunteering generates social and economic value that often goes uncounted. Previous ILC research work shows that unpaid contributions from older people – including caring and volunteering – are worth a sizeable share of national output. Several people we spoke to used volunteering to get out and make friends.

Cultural venues in Greater Manchester show how this value is realised in practice – including after dark. Lowry volunteers are "the first people that audiences meet," supporting safe, welcoming evening events; HOME's team helps with customer care, festivals and skills building; Manchester Museum's volunteers connect with diverse audiences during late openings; and the People's History Museum's volunteers underpin its community mission. There are similar initiatives in other venues across the regions, such as the Bowdon Rooms in Altrincham, the Met in Bury and the Octagon Theatre in Bolton. Together, these programmes improve visitor experience, ease pressure on staff and help venues sustain or grow evening activity.

Within the night time economy, there are benefits beyond venues' balance sheets. Volunteers improve perceptions of safety and welcome, particularly for audiences who may be uncertain about going out at night, including older people. They strengthen community links by engaging local groups and acting as trusted messengers, which can boost footfall for night-time events and catalyse repeat visits. Well-designed volunteer programmes also build pathways into paid work – for example through stewarding, festival support or creative facilitation – helping local residents gain experience and soft skills that are directly transferable to evening and weekend roles.

Siop Shop Gardening Club

Plant Co-Operative's volunteer-led Siop Shop Gardening Club meets every Wednesday, 6.00pm to 8.00pm, in a small patch outside Siop Shop in Manchester's Northern Quarter. Supported by Manchester City Council funding, the club has grown in popularity over the past year, particularly among younger people. Alongside regular maintenance, a Wildlife Gardening Club teaches practical skills that support local biodiversity and gives participants a clear sense of purpose.

Attendees value a welcoming, alcohol-free space to socialise and find calm while giving back to the neighbourhood. The visible, street-level setting encourages informal intergenerational contact, with older people from nearby flats often stopping by. One resident has even brought his grandchildren to meet volunteers and build confidence around new people, showing how small, purposeful projects can spark connection after work hours.[62]

Small changes, big differences

Sometimes it's the little things that matter; these were some of the things we noticed.

- Clear signage – positioned in the right places
- Free still and sparkling water offered in restaurants and cafes
- Toiletries and tampons supplied in toilets
- Sanitary bins in men's bathrooms
- Accessible seating
- Kindness

Solutions and recommendations

What can we do to help the night-time economy thrive and include people of all ages? Because barriers are interconnected, solutions should be too.

National government

- Establish a national night time economy dataset; ONS should publish an annual account covering GVA, employment, footfall after 6.00pm, incident rates and accessibility. Pilot with GMCA and one or two other combined authorities and scale nationally.
- Give combined authorities the power to create visitor levies, so towns and cities can extend the tourist tax and use revenue for resident discounts, safety and late transport. Ensure that these levies are invested back into community resources targeting all ages though local BIDs with specific responsibilities to invest in the night time as well as daytime economy.
- Extend the "small music levy" collected from larger venues to assist smaller ones and consider a similar "small sports levy" to help local sports facilities develop and provide cafes or other spaces to socialise.[63]
- Align night time economy planning with local health and care strategies, and with neighbourhood hub frameworks to embed culture and connection within local government approaches to population health.
- Create a Night Time Economy Outcomes Fund that matches the funds already made available for local trials on safe routes, later services and alcohol-free or intergenerational programming.
- Issue national guidance on how to create accessible and age-friendly venues, with tax relief for small businesses that comply.
- Update licensing and planning guidance to allow mixed-age, alcohol-free and earlier-evening events in civic spaces, schools and libraries.
- Planning should support appropriate age-friendly housing in town centres to help increase footfall and a sense of safety as well as generate customers for local businesses during the evening.

- The Home Office and Department for Transport should fund consistent night-time safety standards – for example: TravelSafe presence, help points, real-time issue reporting and last-mile lighting.
- Mandate shared measurement: require that providers and authorities share data on night-time complaints, incidents, transport load and accessibility, with simple national dashboards available for policymakers and public information.
- Invest in volunteer pathways: introduce small, ring-fenced grants for recruiting, training and retaining volunteer stewards, buddies and "trusted messengers".
- Daylight saving reform: commission an impact assessment on maintaining British Summer Time all year, to inform a Parliamentary decision by October 2026.

GMCA

Leadership and coordination

- Appoint advocates for the night time economy that have an explicit inclusion remit to align transport, licensing, culture, and health.
- Create a greater role for the GM Night Time Panel in coordinating districts, BIDs, venues and police.
- Encourage BID teams across the region to undertake activities to promote night-time industries.
- Develop a region-wide BID with a focus on the night time economy, to help tackle inequalities in activities across the region.
- Explore how GMCA could encourage greater financial investments in the night time economy outside of the thriving Manchester city centre.
- Incentivise businesses that meet agreed age-friendly standards.[64]
- Adopt a strict "polluter pays" approach for noise violations and anti-social behaviour by consumers, both on site and within a certain distance from the venue, depending on various parameters.

- Coordinate a local authority-wide communications review to ensure that events and age-friendly activities are properly promoted and sign posted across Greater Manchester.
- Incorporate policies on an age-friendly night time economy into GMCA work on age-friendly places.
- Encourage local authorities to conduct consumer research on what residents want.
- Support volunteering in the night time economy by younger and older people.

Transport

- Extend 24-hour and demand-responsive bus services, explore later hours for Metrolink and rail, and trial post-event "get-home" boosts on busy corridors. Provide late services until at least 00:30 along radial corridors on Friday and Saturday, with key hospital links daily.
- Build on the trials for the 24-hour use of the older persons' concessionary bus pass to allow older people to use night buses and travel before 9.30am.[65]
- Guarantee regular "clock-face" departures[66] after 7.00pm, coordinate last-tram and last-bus times, and publish a single Bee Network evening map with first/last services by corridor.
- Pilot on-demand "last-mile" connectors after 10.00pm where fixed routes are thin; co-fund priority bus measures on the most delayed corridors to lift punctuality above 85%.
- Expand the provision of safe cycle routes and parking.
- Use signage and messaging on the Bee Network and Metrolink to highlight what's available at neighbouring stops – e.g. on the 142 bus route get off in X stops for Platt Hall or on the train to Wigan Wallgate messages such as "don't forget to visit Wigan Pier or pop into the quirky and welcoming Wigan Central pub."

Safety and reassurance

- As part of the TravelSafe initiative, launch Safe Passage corridors with targeted lighting, CCTV, help points and visible night stewards in priority zones.
- Improve perceived safety at stops and interchanges with better lighting, sightlines, staff presence and easy real-time reporting.

- Create designated "safe stop" zones at evening hotspots.
- Build on the existing Take a Seat campaign[67] and ensure there are toilets open 24 hours in each of the urban hubs.
- Provide wayfinding and amenities such as lockers, bag drops and phone charging.

Digital and data

- Build a single real-time platform listing information on accessible venues, toilets, safe routes and late transport, with user feedback.
- Use behavioural dashboards to map complaints, incidents and transport strain and guide targeted interventions.

Place and programmes

- Fund pilots for night-time community hubs outside the city centre using underused public buildings.
- Commission robust consumer research and co-design prototypes across different cohorts.
- Extend visitor levy revenue collection and offer enhanced residents' discounts and "square-deal" bundles for activity, food and travel.

Individual local authorities

Show off what's on offer

- Much more can be done via posters, websites and social media to signpost events
- Work with the VCFSE sectors and local media, including community radio and newspapers, to feature stories about individual projects and initiatives.
- Undertake campaigns to incentivise early evening use of restaurants, cinemas and other facilities.

Planning, licensing and incentives

- Use flexible zoning and licensing credits for responsible operators; allow mixed-use cultural evenings in libraries, schools and halls.
- Offer business rate relief for venues that provide free toilets, quiet hours, intergenerational or alcohol-free programming and safe rest zones.

- Add simple sound meter checks and acoustics guidance to environmental health inspections.
- Encourage bars and restaurants to introduce shared tables – building on the Chatty Café model,[68] design spaces to encourage people to chat and engage.

Public realm and amenities

- Invest in the basics: clean, safe, clearly signed public toilets, seating, lighting, wayfinding and accessible crossings – and extend the Take a Seat campaign.[69]
- Map live "safe spaces" such as toilets, first aid points and taxi ranks; deploy "rest buses" in hotspots during peaks.

Programming and grants

- Provide micro-grants for age-inclusive, earlier-evening events in town centres and support neighbourhood "first-visit" and early evening windows.

Charities, communities and faith groups

- Run hyper-local evening hubs and sober socials in churches, mosques, community centres and markets, co-designed with residents.
- Organise volunteer night stewards who offer wayfinding, basic first aid and digital help; host "chatty café at night" meet-ups.
- Develop befriending, buddy and concierge schemes so people reluctant to go alone can join in safely.
- Use schools and halls for low-cost evening clubs, rehearsals, dances and workshops.
- Build peer leadership – train volunteers as trusted messengers who accompany others to events and advise venues on welcome and accessibility.
- Partner with universities on creative ageing and anti-ageism projects to improve practice and reach.
- Extend chatty cafés into the evening.

Cultural and sporting venues

- Extend café hours to better match venue opening times.
- Sports venues should partner with restaurants and cafes which offer healthier, alcohol-free dining options on route to and from stadiums, with the option to buy team merchandise and discounts for members and season ticket holders.
- Provide sponsored electric and eventually driverless shuttle links at discounted rates for residents and season-ticket holders to ease Metrolink pinch points, shared between venues (for example between Co-op Live and the Etihad Stadium).

Industry (venues, promoters, BIDs and operators)

Variety and pricing

- Diversify the activities you offer: this could include alcohol-free bars, quiet zones, matinees and early sets, interest-led nights, "lite clubbing", pre-midnight parties and intergenerational events.
- Trial "square-deal" bundles so spend is predictable; review dynamic pricing to protect affordability and smaller acts; use community tickets.

Accessibility and amenities

- Adopt an accessible-venue kitemark covering seating, acoustics, toilets, welcoming door staff and clear signage for those meeting age-friendly standards.[70]
- Provide ways for people to spend more time at venues and to find their way, such as lockers, bag drops and phone charging.
- Extend the Take a Seat initiative[71] and offer free toilet access where feasible.
- Develop intergenerational "Gig Buddy" schemes to help young and old people build relationships and attend social, cultural and sporting events together.

Safety and operations

- Ensure visible safety and wellbeing presence at big nights and coordinate with transport on post-event dispersal.
- Introduce alcohol-free areas at major sports and music venues.
- BIDs should programme safe, well-lit evenings and support late-opening culture beyond bars.
- Share venue data into public dashboards and participate in licensing-credit schemes.
- Build mixed-age workforces and customer-facing teams to strengthen inclusivity and perceived safety.

Individuals

- Be brave – try new things, go out after work and volunteer.
- Stay safe - use buddy or concierge schemes, report issues via apps like the free WalkSafe+ app[72] and volunteer as a night steward.
- Support local venues, community nights and neighbourhood hubs to keep options close to home all year round.



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About ILC

ILC is the UK's leading authority on the impact of longevity on society. We combine evidence, solutions and networks to make change happen.

We help governments, policy makers, businesses and employers develop and implement solutions to ensure we all live happier, healthier and more fulfilling lives. We want a society where tomorrow is better than today and where future generations are better off.

ILC wants to help forge a new vision for the 100-year life, where everyone has the opportunity to learn throughout life, and where new technology helps us contribute more to society.

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