

# Participatory Arts and Creative Archiving for Valuing Urban Nature

**Dr Jenna C. Ashton**  
**[Jenna.Ashton@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Jenna.Ashton@manchester.ac.uk)**  
**[@heritagemcr](https://twitter.com/heritagemcr)**  
**[www.jcashton.com](http://www.jcashton.com)**

# Green infrastructure and the Health and wellbeing Influences on an Ageing population (GHIA)



@GHIA\_VNN

[www.ghia.org.uk](http://www.ghia.org.uk)



# The GHA aim

To better understand the benefits and values of urban GI to older people and how GI attributes and interventions can best support healthy ageing in urban areas.

Greater Manchester as the case study

Older adults as co-researchers

Arts and heritage approach

Multiple perspectives on values

Natural experiments

Social isolation

Biodiversity as a specific attribute of interest



## Researchers

- **Lead** Prof Sarah Lindley, Department of Geography, University of Manchester (UoM)
  - sarah.lindley@manchester.ac.uk
- 
- **Investigators**
  - Dr Jenna **Ashton**, School of Arts, Languages & Cultures, UoM
  - Dr Adam **Barker**, School of Environment, Education & Development, UoM
  - Dr Gina **Cavan**, School of Science and the Environment, MMU
  - Prof Penny **Cook**, School of Health Science, University of Salford (UoS)
  - Prof David **French**, School of Psychological Science, UoM
  - Dr Anna **Gilchrist**, School of Environment, Education & Devt, UoM
  - Prof Philip **James**, School of Environment and Life Sciences, UoS
  - Prof John **O'Neill**, School of Social Sciences, UoM
  - Prof Christopher **Phillipson**, School of Social Sciences, UoM
  - Dr Konstantinos **Tzoulas**, School of Science and the Environment, MMU
  - Prof Ada **Wossink**, School of Social Sciences, UoM

- **Researchers**
- Dr Matthew Dennis
- Dr Rebecca Taylor
- Dr Richard Christian

- Jack Benton (PhD/RA)
- Labib SM (PhD)



## Partners

- City of Trees
- Public Health Manchester → GM Ageing Hub & MICRA
- Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations (GMCVO) → Ambition for Ageing
- The Canal and River Trust
- Manchester: A Certain Future
- Manchester City Council
- Manchester Arts and Galleries Partnership



- **Advisory Group**
- Prof John Handley (Chair) with additional representatives, including GM LAs & other organisations



@GHIA\_VNN

www.ghia.org.uk



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

# To agree GHIA's multi-disciplinary foundation

1



2

**Understanding how older people can realise physical, social & mental wellbeing within GI spaces**

- *cultural participation & creative practice for tackling loneliness and isolation in old age*
- *role for GI & volunteering*
- *involvement of people with a variety of needs, while ensuring adequate protection, security & care*



3



**Understanding the ways in which GI can influence the health and wellbeing of older people**

- *profiles of older people in GM and analysis of health & wellbeing indicators*
- *urban greening, physical activity & overall well-being*
- *environmental exposures & GI*

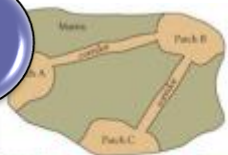
4



**Understanding how to value GI in the context of improving the health & wellbeing of older people**

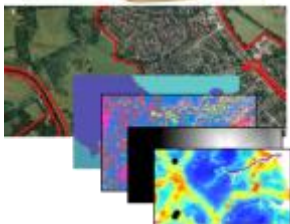
- *participatory and equitable forms of valuation*
- *representation of non-monetary valuation in policy making & public deliberation*
- *limits of monetary valuation*

5



**To develop & apply a new methodology for representing the needs, provision and value of GI for older people**

- *Maps of provision of and need for GI in GM*
- *Variations with scale*
- *Inequalities*



6

**To co-develop web-based materials, creative map, artist, heritage & evidence databases, reference materials, exhibitions & design guide**

# How will we do it ?

12 investigators & 4 researchers across geography, ecology, planning, sociology, arts, health, economics, philosophy....

5 project partners: Manchester City Council (now also **GM Ageing hub**), Canal & River Trust, Manchester Museums & Galleries Partnership, GMCVO, City of Trees, Climate Change Agency

Integrated data & techniques

Integrated concepts & approaches

Integrated knowledge on societal views & needs

Evaluated needs

Refined needs

Apparent needs for integral knowledge

Researcher perspectives

Knowledge Brokering

Partner perspectives



**WP2: Led by \*Dr Jenna C. Ashton (arts & heritage) and  
Prof Chris Phillipson (sociology & gerontology), with RAs  
\*Dr Ruth Colton (archaeology) and  
\*Dr Rebecca Taylor (design)  
(\*all practicing curators, artists and activists)**

Involving older people as creative co-producers in a programme of participatory action research to explore the barriers and strategies for accessing and using GI.

Aim is to counteract the narratives of decline and loss that permeate discourses around ageing.

Encourage new encounters, experiences, storytelling, curiosity and sensory engagement with space – offering reconsidered experiences of ageing as expressed through perceptions of the values of and benefits from urban GI.

The research explores ideas of heritage and place, considering how this influences perceptions with respect to GI, and motivations towards “caring” for space.



# How?

**Semi-structured interviews/ focus groups** exploring how cultural and volunteer organisations act as place making hubs within their local community, supporting grass-roots Green and Blue Space Champions and activity.

**Survey of local artists & engagement activities** crossing over between nature/ ecology/ landscape & wellbeing. Connecting to the Artists and Arts in Environmental and Landscape Research network (VNN).

**Site-specific creative archiving and “social action curation”** undertaken in locations of high deprivation. Working with residents to document, evidence and collect images, found objects, ecology specimens, types of spaces, artefacts connected to working in the space, documents of activism, experiences, activities and emotions of the urban green/blue spaces people work and play in. Evolving into travelling exhibition & publication “Who Cares?” ...

**Mixed-method analysis** of the creative content/choices & aesthetics (visual/material/sociological/ecological)





## Important qualities of the artist-researcher in valuing nature ...

- Practice varied and responsive
- Always working across disciplines
- Critical of structures that are the causes of social/eco problems
- Non-linear problem solvers and not afraid of “mess”
- Curious and emotive
- Well connected socially and creatively
- Nurture, care & “making” inherent in creative practice
- Always thinking “what next?”

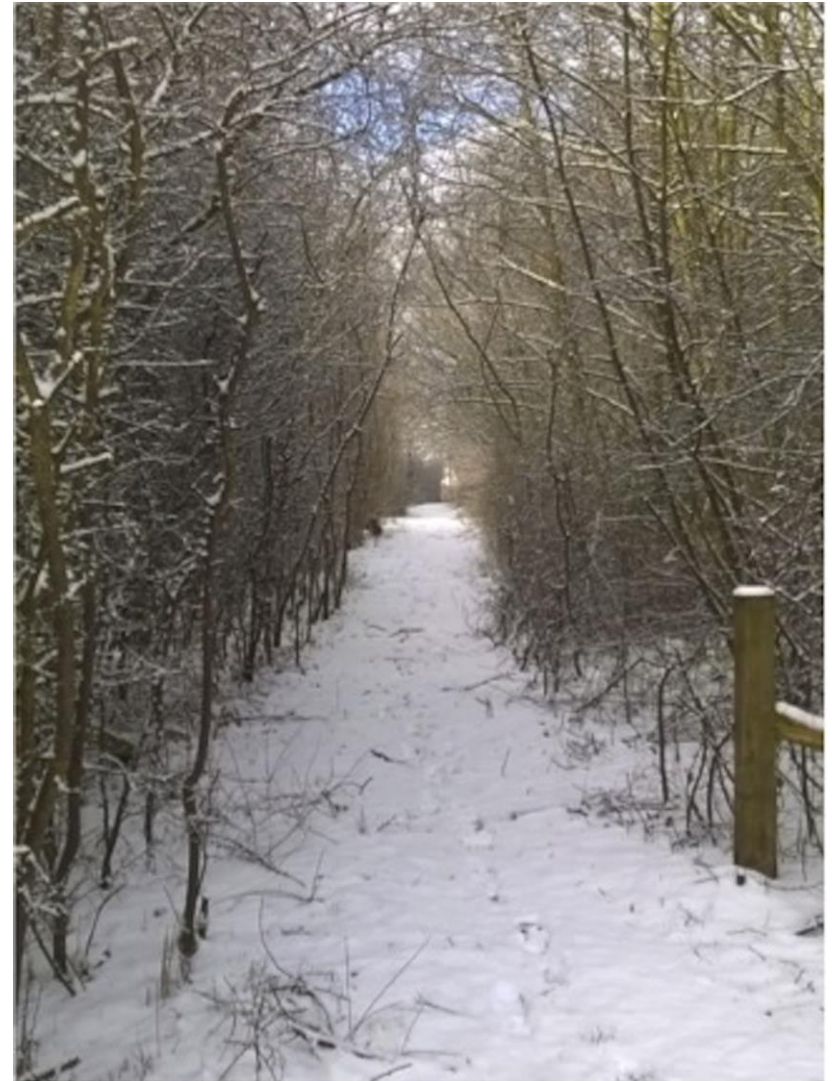


## For GHIA this has resulted in ...

- Ideas woven throughout the research development and bid
- Informing specific case studies
- Taking risks
- New social, creative and organisational connections
- Key research ideas methods led by an artist and designer
- Relevance and social change being at the front end



## Nutsford Vale, Gorton







**"A Heron in Nutsford Vale  
Meandering in the rain  
Along the rough paths  
Through the wooded copses  
Amid the burgeoning green leaf and birdsong,  
I saw the heron.**

**It rose  
With five flaps of its huge, curved wings  
From the reed-hidden pond  
To soar  
Grey into the grey sky**

**Can you see me as you soar?  
Here, in these few green acres  
Saved from the suburbs  
To give lift to your wings  
And a home to wildness.**

**But, heron, your progeny and mine may not alight here.  
Heron's need water and green trees and blue sky  
But people need schools of brick  
And roads of paving and tarmac.  
And I - - -**

**I need the wild surprise of a heron rising from a pond by a wood."**

“The morning of the first Planning Committee meeting I received a copy of the report. I literally sat there and cried as so much time, work and effort from writing the report to the magnificent drawings that had been put into it.

We were such a small insignificant group but our thoughts and feelings about this well loved space were all there in black and white.

Having a new focus for the group was beneficial for us. We had got back to the roots of why our group had formed - the benefit of the Community and the protection of the space. The sessions held gave us time to reflect [...]

I am pleased that the research will be always out there for people to see and hopefully will be used to help understand how green spaces are used [...]





# Final thoughts

- Artists have been responding to social and environmental issues for decades
- Trust artists and creative researchers
- HE physical spaces need rethinking in order to support creative methods of practice & pedagogy
- Bring into research conversations earlier
- Resource creative practice properly

