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**Strategic Plan 2023-2026**

**Strategic Plan 2021-2026**

**Executive summary**

Growing old Gracefully was formed to challenge the misconception that an ageing Church is a failing Church and to support parishes in becoming more and more later life friendly.

We take inspiration from Pope Francis who in his general audience in March 2015 said:

***‘Old age is a vocation****, with its own challenges and opportunities for discipleship. From the perspective of secular history, old age is the final phase of a life in decline, a life with no future. From the perspective of the Christian faith, it is one stage in a human story that continues into eternity: there is no point in this life at which the Christian pilgrimage ceases.’*

British society is going through a period of significant change in the age structure of the population as people live longer.

This longevity is a blessing for older people, for society at large and for the Church. It also presents us with new challenges.

* As ‘later life’ becomes longer for more people, it covers a wide spectrum of stages, from *active later life* with many opportunities and room for contributing/volunteering moving through many steps into *frailer later life* when increasing adaptation and support is needed; we need to recognise all of this diversity.
* One of the tasks of later life is to make sense of one’s life and to come to terms with all that has happened and with what is to come. This is spiritual work yet older people tell us that, overall, the Church does not offer much that specifically responds to the issues of ageing.

We regularly do our own research and in 2018 we invited 175 people on our network to complete a survey and we had an encouraging response rate of 40%.

The comments received pointed to an appetite and a need for more coordinated and structured support for older people:

GOG has been in existence since 2009, but without doubt our most challenging time, like the rest of society, has been the Covid pandemic.

We adapted deftly and creatively to the pandemic and were pleased to be able to support and connect with many people in a variety of ways. We organised a number of online events, including a series on Life and Death and produced a 12 page booklet of prayers and resources, worked closely with the SVP and the Archdiocese of Liverpool.

Coming out of the pandemic we have learnt there is interest in online activities especially enabling us to reach people from a wider geographical area, and has reinforced a big variation in response where some parishes organised to keep in touch with older people and others left many parishioners isolated and feeling forgotten.

In 2021-22 we have offered a mix of online and face to face events including ones on the theme of adapting to losses in later life as well as celebrating the faith of the late Queen at the time of her jubilee.

All this learning has enabled us to plan our strategy for the next three years.

This includes offering

1. **‘How to be more Later Life Friendly in our parishes’ – a series of six online events:**We aim to organise and run this series combining our parish guide content with real life examples/stories from parishes, working in partnership with relevant agencies (such as Catholic Care, Saint Vincent de Paul, Caritas Leeds, The Briery, Leeds Bereavement Forum, Dementia Friendly Communities and so on): (see page 6)

This could include sessions on Finding purpose / vocation in later life  
How can we be more dementia friendly?  
How to enable conversations about end of life

**Later Life Champions Support Network ( see page 7) key people in parishes who want to engage with older people**

1. **Offer tailored support and learning opportunities to people in parishes,** working in a more intensive way with particular parishes to model good practice with useful tools, and build their capacity to carry on using these themselves. This would include (see page 8)

Resources needed.

We have been grateful for the commitment from the Diocese through Catholic Care of £8000 a year for the last three years

Although we have had some success in attracting a few small grants (usually no more than £1,000 or £2,000) we are in need of a significant amount in order to offer a worker a feasible work contract of at least 14 hours a week, so we are seeking funding of **£ 19780 a year of which 13,400 covers the cost of a freelance worker a year for 3 years.**

**Growing Old Grace-*fully –* our Vision and Ethos**

Growing old Gracefully was formed to challenge the misconception that an ageing Church is a failing Church and to support parishes in becoming more and more later life friendly.

Our vision is that:

* *Older people across the Catholic Diocese of Leeds experience spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing in positive and inclusive parish communities.*

Our mission is :

* *To enhance the spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing of older people across the Catholic Diocese of Leeds through raising awareness, inspiring and supporting responsive action in parishes.*

Our Objectives:

1. *To inspire and actively support parishes to introduce models and approaches which enhance parish-based support and involvement of older people.*
2. *To enable, equip and support individuals and groups in parish communities as they seek to involve and support older people in their own parishes.*
3. *To champion a positive view of ageing and the vocation of later life, encouraging and highlighting the invaluable contributions of older people.*
4. *To enable sharing of good practice and provide relevant and helpful information in accessible ways.*
5. *To use a consultative approach so that an increased understanding of needs, hopes and ideas of older people informs all that we do.*

We take inspiration from Pope Francis who in his general audience in March 2015 said:

***‘Old age is a vocation****, with its own challenges and opportunities for discipleship. From the perspective of secular history, old age is the final phase of a life in decline, a life with no future. From the perspective of the Christian faith, it is one stage in a human story that continues into eternity: there is no point in this life at which the Christian pilgrimage ceases.’*

In addition, in his recent Catecheses on Old Age, Pope Francis has highlighted many aspects of the meaning and value of old age including the following:

*‘When we are old, we lose some of our sight, but our inner gaze becomes more penetrating — one sees with the heart. ..The life of our communities must know how to benefit from the talents and charisms of so many elderly people who are already retired, but who are a wealth to be treasured.’*

*‘On the part of the elderly themselves, this requires a****creative attention****, a new attention, a****generous availability****.’*

[*Pope Francis Catechesis on Old Age: 11th May 2022*](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022/documents/20220511-udienza-generale.html)

We aim to inspire individuals and support parishes as they work with their older people in this particular stage of their journey with all its opportunities and challenges.

**Governance**

GOG has a small board of trustees of (mainly older) people with professional experience including services for older people, counselling, public policy, research, Catholic churches and much more, and they have current involvement in voluntary and professional work with older people. Although we have been running since 2009, we became a registered charity in 2015. Currently, our development worker is self-employed.

**How do we know there is a need?**

British society is going through a period of significant change in the age structure of the population as people live longer. For instance, based on data from the Office for National Statistics published in March 2020, Leeds is projected to see an enormous increase of over 50% in people aged over 80 in the next 20 years ([ONS population projections](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/datasets/localauthoritiesinenglandtable2)) and nationally there will be 2.2m more over 65s in 2027, than there were in 2017.

This longevity is a blessing for older people, for society at large and for the Church. It also presents us with new challenges.

* National statistics as well as our own experience tell us that a significant number of those attending Church are over 65 and most active parishioners are older themselves. A balance between dealing with their needs as well as attracting younger people is vital. These will include all those experiencing the life changes that come with growing older including bereavement, loss of mobility, loss of independence, loneliness, and for some people, living with dementia.
* One of the tasks of later life is to make sense of one’s life and to come to terms with all that has happened and with what is to come. This is spiritual work yet older people tell us that, overall, the Church does not offer much that specifically responds to the issues of ageing.
* Our whole society is still recovering from the impact of the pandemic and older people especially the most vulnerable have been particularly hard hit.

We regularly do our own research and in 2018 we invited 175 people on our network to complete a survey and we had an encouraging response of 40%. We asked then how they feel their parish responds to older people. In general, there was a positive response with people reporting a sense of ownership, belonging, mutual caring and spiritual support. The survey’s final question was to ask for one thing their parish could do better to welcome older people.

The comments received pointed to an appetite and a need for more coordinated and structured support for older people:

* Provision is patchy… a parish lottery
* Lack of systems or processes mean some older people slip through the net and parish responses are more down to the notice of individuals
* Church stands out as a place where generations mix at Mass, but there’s less evidence of more structured opportunities for support/learning
* Programmes addressing the spirituality of ageing or taking ageing seriously were not mentioned
* Not enough structured programmes to help support people cope with the varied losses that can come with long life, including bereavement.

More recently we have learnt from the pandemic and feedback from our network that:

* There is an appetite for online activities although not as a substitute for face to face and online events have encouraged some to be involved who wouldn’t be able to come to physical events
* The pandemic reinforced parish responses as very patchy relying on informal structures which showed that in a crisis there were very few structures to fall back on in some parishes
* On the positive side, some parishes made a wonderful response, organising regular phone calls, mass and other services online, as well as practical support; now they face the challenge of balancing the demands of returning to normal activities while continuing helpful practices
* Many connections have been lost and parishes are struggling to reform those links or make new ones with those who have not returned
* Volunteer capacity is greatly diminished, a new cohort needs encouraging to get involved
* Members of our network have told us how important it is to share good practice and learn from each other for the future

**How have we responded to the need?**

Over the 12 years since we began, we have responded in many ways to the need.

**Recent activities (2021 – 2022):**

1. ‘Life after Lockdown – supporting older people in our parishes’ online event Nov 2021: A practical and useful discussion event to enable sharing and mutual support between parishes, around three themes a) Restarting/starting groups, b) Online or ‘in person’, c) Supporting the vulnerable and reconnecting.18 people attended, and many more read the reader-friendly collated information on our website [on this page](https://www.growingoldgracefully.org.uk/some-themes-and-ideas-shared-at-our-discussion-event-on-4th-november/).
2. Perspectives on Later Life Series of events April – July 2022:  
   We were glad to organize three in-person events and one online event to reflect on the meaning, purpose and challenges of later life in creative ways.
   1. *‘Over the Hill or Embracing the View?’* *April 2022* – a thought-provoking lunch event with 4 speakers sharing a range of insights followed by discussion in groups.
   2. *‘Celebrating later life’* - *June 2022* - we enjoyed two Jubilee Tea Parties including older people sharing their personal stories of opportunities in later life.
   3. *‘Losses and Later Life’ July 2022* – a rich online event incorporating an overview of the topic, interviews with people sharing personal stories of coping with loss, poems and reflections, and time to share in groups.

We worked hard to capture the inspiring content of these events in accessible and creative ways and share them widely – both [on our website](https://www.growingoldgracefully.org.uk/perspectives-on-later-life/) and through [a magazine](https://lcileeds.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/City-Theology-Summer-2022-for-web.pdf) produced by our partner Leeds Church Institute.  
Each event was attended by 25 – 35 people and several hundred people have accessed the content on our website and through the magazine.

1. The Voice of Older people – Contribution to Synodal Process on behalf of our network: **GOG trustees put together** [a response as part of the listening process](https://www.growingoldgracefully.org.uk/the-synodal-process-a-response-from-growing-old-grace-fully/) **to highlight the voice and needs of older people based on our research and experience, which was gratefully received.**
2. Website content updated and regular mailings to our database of 300 people  
   We continued to connect with people regularly providing further useful information and thoughtful reflections through our website and mailings, including in-depth dementia resources, links to lent resources, Pope Francis’ Catecheses on Old Age, poems from an older religious sister and a piece on climate change.
3. Worked in partnership with various relevant groups including Caritas Leeds, SVP, The Briery Retreat Centre, Catholic Care and Leeds Church Institute.

**Response during the pandemic (2020 – 2021):**

We adapted deftly and creatively to the pandemic and were pleased to be able to support and connect with many people in a variety of ways:

1. [‘When you pass through the Waters…’ 12 page booklet May 2020](https://www.growingoldgracefully.org.uk/helpful-and-uplifting-booklet/):  
   In the first lockdown we put together practical as well as spiritual support material both on our website and in a 12-page printed booklet sent out to those not online (over 200 people). We worked closely with the SVP to adapt this for their members to distribute and the Archdiocese of Liverpool adapted our material to distribute to their parishes (wider reach of over 2000 people).
2. ‘A Matter of Life and Death’ online series of 4 events Oct/Nov 2020:  
   A webinar with Lynn Bassett followed by 3 discussion events giving opportunities to talk about end-of-life issues and how we can prepare ourselves, support others, and memorialise those we love. Over 60 people attended the webinar, and over 20 at each of the 3 discussion events.
3. Online services at Advent 2020 and Easter 2021: Giving space to reflect meaningfully whilst we could not meet in person – these were attended by over 40 people and over 20 people respectively, and an [Advent booklet](https://www.growingoldgracefully.org.uk/advent-leaflet-and-other-advent-resources/) was printed and sent to over 200 people.
4. ‘Remembering with Hope’ – an online memorialising service March 2021:  
   We partnered with The Briery to organise this sensitive and poignant time on the anniversary of the first lockdown to remember all those who had died in the last 12 months and we were joined by 47 people at varying stages of their grief journey.
5. More frequent mailings and support material added to our website regularly to reach out to our database of 300 readers at this difficult time.

**Previous highlights (up to 2019):**

* Delivered a range of one-day and half-day courses throughout the diocese for older people and those involved in their care, including Days of Recollection for older people, Care for Carers, Preparing for Death and Dying and Dementia Awareness. During 2015 -2018 alone we engaged directly with about 420 attendees and had contact with representatives from 80% of all the parishes in our diocese.
* Organised 3 Conferences to highlight later life topics and to share information about good work being done with older people in parishes.
* Developed an extensive and high-quality resource guide, ‘*Welcoming Older People: ideas for and from parishes’* presented in ring bound folders and electronically. Providing practical ideas with a spiritual basis in a user-friendly format, it covers 7 topics including ‘Older people and your parish’, Being mortal’, ‘Tackling loneliness’ and ‘Growing a dementia friendly parish’. To date at least 280 copies have been sent out in one format or another.
* Took a lead role in helping Leeds to register as a Dementia Friendly Diocese (launched in October 2018), forming a Working Group with Caritas Leeds and Catholic Care Leeds to develop and implement an Action Plan.
* Held over 15 Dementia Awareness sessions leading to the creation of hundreds of Dementia Friends in approximately 25% of parishes in our diocese.
* Shared best practice and resources through our website and regular e-newsletters, building a network of more than 400 contacts in our diocese and beyond.

**What do people tell us about GOG?**

Here are some comments drawn from feedback forms and letters or emails received:

I have been so touched and blessed by this event, which I think was by divine appointment. Very well organised and covered all aspects of growing old gracefully that I was hoping for and beyond.

Great event; liked the variety of speakers and their varying emphases. Delighted to find an event which deals with old age – there are courses for all other groups but nothing for us.

Very helpful in reflecting on older age – a good length of time with timekeeping very well managed.

I thought all the speakers were excellent and interesting; the lunch was very good, and the event was chaired and organised well. It gave me a lot of food for thought.

What a super idea and really well put together. I forwarded it to both our parish offices to print off and circulate and to have a link put on our Parish website. I have also sent it out to all our svp members and clients via WhatsApp - I've had very good feedback. It must have taken a lot of planning and research, a really professional job. Thank you.

I have had some time today to go through your publication and want to thank and congratulate you. It is so thorough and beautifully presented. Well done indeed.

I’m very impressed with your ‘Welcoming Older People’ pack – it was full of really good practical ideas which can be tailored to a wide variety of particular circumstances. I know that I will find it useful both on a personal level, and in a wider context.

Thank you for the booklet I received, it was unexpected but lovely, I especially liked the poem by Kitty O’Meara. I tried the Daily Hope telephone line you mentioned which was good as well. I have no computer, so this was really nice to receive in the post.

**Strategic Plan Going Forward**

At this ‘post-pandemic’ time we feel there are particular needs and opportunities (in addition to the ongoing matters surrounding longer life), and we want to play our part in the bigger picture as effectively and responsively as possible, using resources wisely.

Underlying objectives/principles for our work

* To be a resource for parishes as they re-start or start thinking about their approaches and activities to help older people feel included, valued and supported.
* To seek out, listen and respond to the particular needs felt by individuals and parishes at this time, shaping our work accordingly and raising the issues more widely.
* To help to build capacity and support ‘lay leaders’ at parish level as they work with older people, alongside priests, Eucharistic Ministers, SVP members and other groups.
* To enable sharing of good practice and mutual support between those working with older people.
* To respond spiritually as well as practically, helping to create spaces to reframe and express meaning in this complex stage of later life
* To celebrate longer life and the many contributions of older people
* To work collaboratively with new and existing partners

**Proposed Work Plan 2023 - 2026**

1. **‘How to be more Later Life Friendly in our parishes’ – a series of six online events:**Organise and run this series combining our parish guide content with real life examples/stories from parishes, working in partnership with relevant agencies (such as Catholic Care, Saint Vincent de Paul, Caritas Leeds, The Briery, Leeds Bereavement Forum, Dementia Friendly Communities and so on):
   1. Want to do more in your parish for/with older people?   
      Starting the conversation / thinking about aims / involving people / ideas
   2. Finding purpose / vocation in later life  
      Celebrating older people’s contributions / spiritual meaning in later life / intergenerational activities
   3. How can we be more dementia friendly?  
      Dementia awareness information / inclusive practice / informal mass or liturgy
   4. How to enable conversations about end of life  
      Marking Dying Matters Week in May / workshop about preparing for your funeral / end of life care questions
   5. Recognising losses in later life and being alongside the bereaved  
      Social connection opportunities / bereavement support groups / memorialising
   6. How to reach out and combat loneliness, including care for carers  
      Intentional connection and welcoming practice / enabling people to join in / supporting the housebound / groups for carers
2. **Later Life Champions Support Network**Following the series above, invite people to attend follow-up sharing sessions every two months where they can gain more helpful information, share the issues they are facing and get ideas from others in the group. We would aim to build this network of ‘lay leaders’ as a list of key contacts in as many parishes as possible, enabling ongoing learning and support as well as strategic and responsive consultation and development.
3. **Offer tailored support and learning opportunities to people in parishes,** working in a more intensive way with particular parishes to model good practice with useful tools, and build their capacity to carry on using these themselves.  
   This could include one or more of the following:  
   1. Recollection sessions/community liturgy  
      Work with a couple of people in a parish to organise a recollection/reflection session encouraging them to lead as much as possible and point to further suitable age-friendly resources they can use in future sessions.
   2. Age and Dementia Friendly buildings and practices  
      Guide a parish as they work through a checklist about how to make their building and practices more Age and Dementia Friendly.
   3. Dementia Friends  
      Help parishes to encourage people to become Dementia Friends through the short online session or help an existing Dementia Friend to run a short session in their parish.
   4. Dying Matters workshops  
      Provide resources and help a parish plan and run a session about end-of-life issues and preparing for your funeral, ensuring the parish has the resources to run it again themselves.
   5. Later Life courses (e.g Omega course)  
      Work with a person to run a course such as the ‘Omega’ course which comprises 6 sessions with videos and all materials provided, exploring ‘how to handle the changes of later years with hope and dignity’. Train them to run this course again themselves in their deanery/parish.
   6. Volunteer recruitment and management  
      Assist parishes in improving volunteer recruitment and practices with advice and template documents.
   7. Enabling linking to other services  
      For example, link parishes with The Briery Bereavement Support Centre to guide them through setting up a Bereavement Team, or with Catholic Care Older People’s Services to help them set up a friendship group.
4. **Resource Bank**Significantly add to the existing resources on our website to build a resource bank of printable resources, links to helpful websites, videos and courses in a user -friendly format, and share stories of good practice and experience in parishes.  
   For example this could include:  
   * Stories of later life activities from around the diocese
   * A bank of liturgies suitable for inclusive services
   * Age and Dementia Friendly buildings checklists
   * Dementia Awareness session plan and resources
   * Dying Matters information for a workshop
   * Volunteer recruitment and policies, agreements and good practice  
     and so on.
5. **Conference / Speaker Events on Later life topics**Organise events or webinars creating space for talking about important issues around later life and highlighting the issues more widely (in partnership with Leeds Church Institute).

**Resources and funding**

History and context

Porticus Trust provided start-up funding for one year from summer 2009 to cover work in Hallam and Leeds dioceses. After this a Development Worker role for one day a week was funded by Catholic Care Leeds from September 2010 until September 2013**,** and by a generous anonymous donor from October 2013 to 2015.

From April 2015, the (International) Society of the Sacred Heart provided funding for a development worker, working on average 16 hours a week on a budget of £15,000 per year. The total funding of £45,000 was for 3 years and finished early in 2019.

For 2020 to March 2023 the Diocese of Leeds through Catholic Care have contributed £8000 a year for 3 years; supplemented by donations from Sisters of Charity of St Paul the Apostle, Mercy Sisters, Harold Hood Trust and Charlotte Marshall Trust this has enabled a freelance worker on 14 hours a week, as well as covering other costs and a video project.

In addition to the monetary resources, it is important to note that an essential part of the success of the work has been the voluntary hours offered by GOG trustees, priests, religious and lay people who have given their time and wisdom to the project, plus the valuable pooled resources and capacity enabled through working with our various partners.

**Current need**

The current agreement with the Diocese and Catholic Care comes to an end in March 2023. In order to continue our work and develop the plans above, we need resources of **around £14,000 a year.**

Although we have had some success in attracting a few small grants (usually no more than £1,000 or £2,000) we are in need of a significant amount in order to offer a worker a feasible work contract of at least 14 hours a week, so we are seeking funding of **£ 19780 a year of which 13,400 covers the cost of a freelance worker a year for 3 years.**

**Notes on accounts (attached):**

1. We have secured a separate grant of £8000 a year for 3 years for the Lay Chaplaincy/Pastoral Worker for Older People Project from the Ladies of the Grail Society which is restricted funding. The first payment of this is showing in our accounts as restricted funding and cannot be used for our other work.
2. The Catholic Care funding has been held in their own account and drawn down by invoices from our self-employed worker direct to them, so it is not showing in the GOG charity accounts as income.

**Concluding Comments**

It is clear that the need for continued work on later life issues is greater than ever, and we have seen a gratitude for our recent work and an appetite for our proposed plans. We feel there are not many examples of this type of work within Catholic dioceses, and therefore our work can inform developments further afield.

The trustees of Growing Old Grace-*fully* are eager to build on the foundation of previous work by growing a responsive and developmental approach as outlined above. Benefitting from our previous experience and a track record in the diocese as well as established partnerships and contacts across the parishes, we feel we could be effective in meeting need and cascading learning and good practice in a ripple effect across the diocese and beyond. We therefore ask you to consider our request for funding as detailed above.