Community Conversations

in Newcastle

1. OUR AIM

In April 2015 the Elders Council announced in their newsletter a successful bid; "You'll be very pleased to hear that we have been successful in gaining some funding for the next year from the Big Lottery Funding Body. We are calling the project "Creative Community Conversations on Ageing" which is a bit of a mouthful but we couldn't find a snappier one."

With this funding we aimed to:

1. help older people become more confident and knowledgeable about their local area;

2. help develop the capacity of older people to contribute to their communities and help to cultivate community relationships;

3. help the Elders Council knowledge and understanding of older people's lives and experiences in very different parts of the city in order to be able to represent a wider spectrum of views of older people;

4. improve the profile of the Elders Council by engaging with a wider range of people;

5. increase membership of the Elders Council;

6. broaden the socio-economic, cultural and gender mix of the membership of the Elders Council.

2. PLANNING OUR CONVERSATIONS

A core group of Elders Council members came together as a planning group to plan and develop the overall programme. In the initial stages we also invited a representative from Newcastle City Council to join the group, primarily to help us to decide the areas we would work in so that we could complement other activity in the city.

2.1 Choosing the communities

The following areas were selected after much discussion:

• **Kenton** as they had a Bright Ideas Group which was involved in a Community Budgets programme but was seeking to do more work with older people.

• **Dinnington** as one of the villages in the more rural part of the city

• **Westerhope and Denton** as large parts of estates in these areas were developed in the 60s and 70s and people had aged along with their homes

• **A group of women from the South Asian community.** This group came together at the end of the programme as we noted the lack of diversity in all the other conversations. This group met in August, 2016.

2.2 Our Approach

The local planning groups included Elders Council members, Quality of Life Partnership staff and local community members which differed for each of the conversations.

The planning followed the same basic pattern:

- Liaising with knowledgeable local community members e.g. local activists; local councillors; faith leaders; community workers etc.

- Fixing the time and date and place for the conversation to take place;

- Designing and distributing the publicity, the what, the who, the where and the when;

- Organising refreshments always trying to support local businesses;

- The community conversation itself;

- Gathering feedback and learning from the process;

- Writing up the experience.

3. THE CONVERSATIONS

3.1   Kenton

We started by offering several small community conversations in Kenton as the members of the "Bright Ideas" group suggested this would be a helpful way to proceed. In Kenton community conversations were held at:

- Cowgate Neighbourhood Centre; the Church of the Ascension; Montague Estate Residents Association (MERA) and in Kenton Library with the Tenants and Residents Association. The Conversations took place in November 2015.

- A conversation was also held with the Fawdon "Silver Linings" group in April 2016.

We relied very much on local people helping to publicise these events, although members of the Elders Council living in these wards were invited via inserts in our Newsletter and posters were created to display in public places.

The numbers of people attending varied from very small at Cowgate Neighbourhood Centre to around two dozen at the Church of the Ascension meeting. These community conversations all followed the same format.

After a welcome cup of tea or coffee, a member of the local planning team introduced the session, followed by information about the Elders Council and its work.

To stimulate the conversations, large maps of the area were produced and older people were invited to gather in small groups around them. Their task was to advise someone

new to the area about good places to go and things to do. Each group had a facilitator. People were asked to add post-it notes in places that were important to them; places they used frequently; to note people who had useful information or where they would go to find out what they needed.

It took a little while for people to begin to engage and the facilitator initially had to prompt but people soon began to work out where on the map places were and some talked at length. This also meant people exchanged views about individual choice or perhaps a similarity of choice. There were tablecloths too on which people could write. These and the post-it notes were collected at the end of the conversation. We also discovered that almost everyone found out something they hadn't previously known. All the conversations ended with a lunch to thank people for taking part.

During these early community conversations we were joined by Ian Johnson, a Ph.D. student from Open Lab, Newcastle University. He was very interested in using technology as an aid to enable people to engage in the democratic process. Ian offered to help us with future conversations, by designing a methodology which would facilitate more equal engagement of participants and would enable more systematic recording and analysis of the conversations.

3.2 Silver Linings Fawdon – who heard about our conversations through the Elders Council Newsletter and invited us to hold a community conversation as part of their regular meeting. This conversation took place in March 2016.

As the Elders Council had engaged with this group comparatively recently, we decided to vary the methodology we used for this session. Instead of working with map to find out more about the area, we invited the group to work with a set of playing cards which asked questions to prompt conversations about how people wanted to live in their later life. The group advised us to use the 'playing cards' approach with younger people as a useful tool for planning ahead.

3.3 Dinnington

We held another of our community conversations in Dinnington in April 2016. We were fortunate to discover Dinnington were working on a Neighbourhood Plan. By working together, we hoped to generate material for the Neighbourhood Plan, as well as gathering insights into what it's like to grow older in Dinnington.

We held two meetings with the Parish Council to plan the event. We jointly developed

publicity material which was much more explicit about the purpose of the event and the members of the Parish Council actively recruited people to the session. Ian Johnson (Open Lab, Newcastle University) devised the methodology for the session.

On the day 30 older people arrived at the village. People were gathered in groups of about six around a table with a large scale map of the village. Each table had plastic markers and a set of question cards. Cameras were set up around each table to make video and audio recordings of the session.

People took it in turns to take a card from the pack and read the question or statement. By using prompt cards, everyone had a fair opportunity to have their say. It did not restrict people to only talking when it was 'their turn'. There were many occasions when people asked for help, or others gave suggestions which generated debate.

It didn't take long for everyone to be involved and forget the camera was there. It meant too that everyone had an opportunity to say their piece and be heard. It also meant that sometimes people discovered things they didn't know about their local area.

3.4   Westerhope and Denton

We felt more confident with our next "Community Conversation" and were able to draw together a small planning group. Ian Johnson agreed to help us to deliver the conversation, which provided him with another opportunity to test his methodology and equipment.

We were following a clear formula by now which we were "tweaking" to suit circumstances.

This conversation took place in a large sunny room in a community building. We had the largest number of people at this event, 47 in total. As we were working on a larger geographical footprint, there was a wider exchange of

information. However the cards and markers proved valuable again in helping people to speak, to listen to others and often to think about things when a card with a particular challenge turned up. The event ended as always with a lunch to say thank you to all those who had taken part.
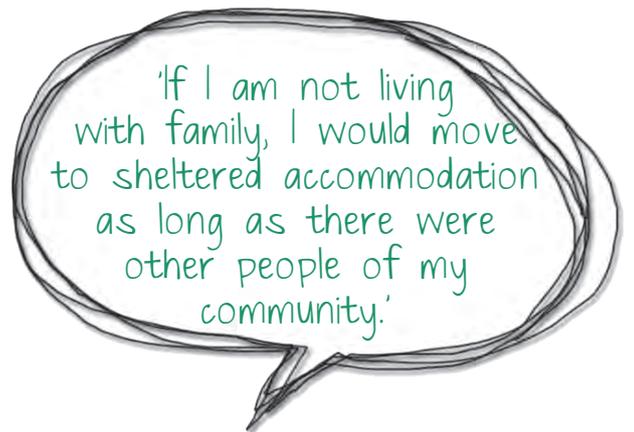
3.5 South Asian Women

Recognising that we had not engaged with people from different communities in the areas we worked in, we decided to try one community conversation with women from the South Asian community, mainly targeting second generation residents, whose voices are rarely heard in discussions with older people. We decided to adapt the 'playing cards' we had used with the Fawdon Silver Linings Group for this session.

The group that gathered included nineteen women and girls representing at least three generations, from people who came to live in England when they were young, through to second and third generations who were born and brought up here. It was clear from the conversations that the experience of growing older is very different for first generation older people, who often don't speak English and are therefore very dependent on their families and immediate community for support. The women and girls from second and third generations, identified that they would have very different opportunities. Technology also featured more strongly for younger people, who used skype to keep in touch with family; but older people were not unreceptive to the idea of trying out technology.

Having places to go where you can be amongst people from your own community and feel comfortable, was identified as very important. However, the need to mix with other cultures was particularly highlighted by the younger people.

'If I am not living with family, I would move to sheltered accommodation as long as there were other people of my community.'

4. OUR REFLECTIONS

The whole process was a learning circle;

PLAN

COMMUNITY
CONVERSATION

REFINE

REFLECT

We attempted after each community conversation to meet and reflect on what had happened, what we had noted and seen. This wasn't always possible face to face and so sometimes happened electronically. We also invited feedback from participants.

We paid attention to all of these reflections and feedback and followed through with them. For instance, we gave more attention to the design and distribution of publicity, using both printed publicity and on-line notice boards, but with a particular emphasis on giving information face to face.

The biggest refinement made was in using the methodology provided by Ian Johnson for the community conversations in Dinnington and Westerhope/Denton. The methodology worked well, stimulating very lively conversations and making sure everyone had a chance to speak. This has been a win-win in that Ian has had two opportunities to test his methodology in different community settings, and the Elders Council benefited from learning from his approach. The small group discussions were recorded on video, allowing for a more rigorous analysis of the discussions. The only downside is the difference in time frames between an academic research project and a community project. It will take a time for an in-depth analysis of the material. However, Ian has been able to provide us with an initial analysis of the issues to meet our more immediate need to report on the events.

'It was a different way of doing things. It encouraged conversation.'

'We all took turns and listened carefully to each other.'

Another refinement was needed at Westerhope/Denton. As we were working across a larger area, we offered transport for people at Chapel Park in order for them to attend the community conversation.

5. EVALUATION

In addition to our own reflections and immediate feedback, we commissioned Moyra Riseborough Research Associates to conduct an evaluation of part of the programme during April-June 2016. A separate evaluation report is available which provides useful recommendations for the Elders Council.

6. WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT OUR APPROACH?

• Working with a local planning group of people who know the area and have good networks is essential. The local planning groups guided us on choice of venue; ways to engage people and alerted us to key local issues.

• Using simple prompts to generate peer-led conversations works well as a method as people feel comfortable and relaxed.

• Engaging with Ian Johnson and his colleagues from Open Lab at Newcastle University was key to the success of the sessions in Dinnington and Westerhope/Denton. The approach using maps and prompt cards encouraged debate, but also ensured that everyone had an opportunity to take their turn. Using technology to record the sessions, provides the opportunity for more rigorous analysis of the data and the potential for the data to be presented on-line for future use.

• Facilitation is still needed to help with the flow of the conversation.

• Good, clear preparation is key to success.

7. WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF OLDER PEOPLE IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE CITY?

There were no major surprises in the issues discussed by participants in all the sessions. However, by having these conversations the Elders Council can be more confident that the work the organisation is doing is relevant to the lives of older people in the city. The key themes emerging from the discussions were:

• The importance of disseminating information about what's going on in local areas. It was clear from the conversations that a range of ways are needed to disseminate information from web-based resources such as Information NOW through to buddies and ambassadors who promote and welcome people to local activities;

• Transport: people are generally satisfied with public transport on major routes. Difficulties arise when people become less mobile and are unable to walk comparatively short distances to the GP surgery or place of worship or local shops. Schemes such as 'Hop to the Shops' partially address this issue, but there is more to be done to provide local, short distance trips;

• Local amenities are **very** important to older people. Closures of a GP surgery or local shop, library or community centres can have a very significant impact on older people, especially if they are less able to get out and about;

'the fear of losing local amenities'

(Westerhope/Denton participant)

• Community facilities offering a range of quality and choice of activity are very important to older people. In most areas we noted a good range of community facilities offering different types of activities. We felt there was potential for these facilities to come together to jointly plan their offer, so that a more diverse range of activities could be made available. In particular, there seemed to be potential for more joint promotion and outreach to include people who are becoming isolated. People were not just concerned with opportunities for older people, in Dinnington and Westerhope/Denton, participants particularly commented on the lack of playground facilities for young children;

• Older people are often stalwarts in the community, helping to maintain community activity for young and old. There is a growing need for this kind of commitment and entrepreneurship, and Elders Council could play a role in working with partners to develop more opportunities for older people to build their confidence and skills as community activists and facilitators;

• People identify strongly with their very local neighbourhood /village. Many people have lived in the same area since childhood; know the history of the place well, and have a strong sense of what makes a place work. Their local knowledge is invaluable and can be tapped into for local history sessions and history walks, as well as being a mine of information when addressing planning issues.

• In Dinnington and Westerhope/Denton major new housing developments are planned. The impact of these developments on the neighbourhood/village and in particular the demands on local amenities is a real concern.

• Wherever possible, older people prefer to stay in their existing home where they are familiar with their neighbours and the local area. Some people plan ahead and move to place which is suitable for them and close to local amenities. Some people are interested in the option of specialist housing.

• It was clear from some of the feedback that some people had quite unrealistic expectations of what the Elders Council might be able to do in response to the conversations. This illustrated the extent to which people are used to being 'consulted', rather than engaged in finding their own solutions wherever possible.
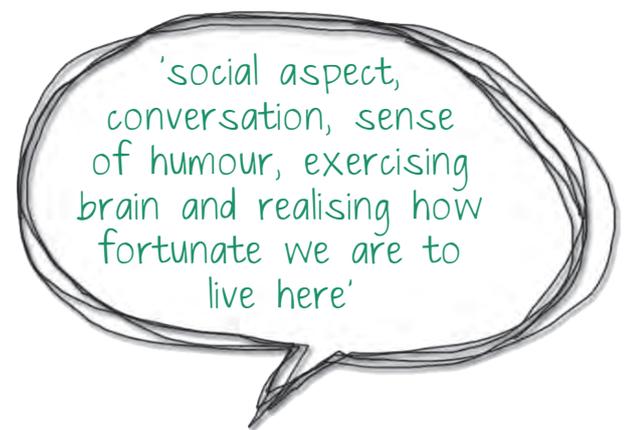
8. HOW EFFECTIVE WERE WE AT ACHIEVING OUR AIMS?

8.1   We were clearly successful in our first objective in helping people become more knowledgeable about their locality although it is more difficult to judge whether any confidence was gained. The nature of the conversations did mean all participants contributed and for some this may have been the first step to greater confidence in expressing views. We know from comments collected from all the conversations people went away with more information about their locality and about the people they met at the conversations. In the different conversations we held people expressed interest in joining groups they had heard of in their locality.

'learnt there were a lot more opportunities quite near by to participate in various activities'

(Westerhope/Denton participant)

8.2   All the conversations offered the opportunity for older people to become more knowledgeable about their own community and to contribute within their own community. The impact was seen more clearly in Dinnington where their conversation will feed more directly into the neighbourhood plan. Meeting together in an informal way helped people discover what was available; in some instances what might be possible and some conversations included what the people themselves could potentially do in their community.

'social aspect, conversation, sense of humour, exercising brain and realising how fortunate we are to live here'

(Dinnington participant)

8.3   We have a "bank" of informative comment from all the conversations with some overarching issues. As a result we can talk with some authority about the needs for transport networks that connect people; this was issue was raised at all the conversations. We can speak with detailed knowledge about what older people say it feels like to be growing older in Dinnington or Kenton, Fawdon and Chapel House/Park

8.4   The Elders Council successfully developed a set of processes to plan and deliver interesting and engaging conversations that engaged older people and which everyone enjoyed. By working in partnership with Ian Johnson and colleagues at Newcastle University we were able to introduce new approaches to our work.

8.5   The Elders Council needs to give further thought to how it engages with BAME communities on a more consistent basis so that we sustain an on-going dialogue.

8.6   Conversations raised the Elders Council profile significantly. Some people joined the

Elders Council and many people took copies of Elders Council newsletters. Across the term of this project we recruited 77 members.

8.7   We met with a total of 153 older people across the conversations. Of these 108 were women and 45 were men. Ethnic minorities were significantly under represented. We also recognise that most of the people who attended the events are connected into local activities, and it would take significantly more local engagement to be able to reach out more widely. The majority of older people were 65 +. The change in no default retirement age may have had some impact on this last figure.

9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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