

Community Conversations



1. INTRODUCTION

The Elders Council had made a successful bid into the Big Lottery Fund. With this funding they intended to:

1. help older people become more confident and knowledgeable about their local area;
2. improve the Elders Council's knowledge and understanding of older people's lives and experiences in very different parts of the city, in order to be able to represent the views of older people across a wider spectrum;
3. improve the profile of the Elders Council by engaging with a wider range of people;
4. increase membership of the Elders Council;
5. broaden the socio-economic, cultural and gender mix of the membership of the Elders Council.

2. HOW DID WE GET STARTED?

The Elders Council identified three key areas in Newcastle in which to hold the conversations. We chose Dinnington as one of the areas, as we wanted to understand more about life in one of the 'villages'. We quickly found out that Dinnington Parish Council was in the process of developing a Neighbourhood Plan, so we hoped our community conversation would make a contribution to this by gathering the perspectives of older people in the area.

A small group of Elders Council members and Parish Councillors met on two occasions to plan the event, with support from a staff member from Quality of Life Partnership. We were also helped by Ian Johnson, a Ph.D. student from Open Lab at Newcastle University. Ian is interested in testing ways in which digital technology can be used as an aid to enable people to engage in the democratic process. He helped us greatly by devising a methodology for the session in Dinnington.

As with previous conversations we agreed the Elders Council would provide lunch and we asked that it was sourced locally if possible.

Publicity was discussed in detail and agreement made as to where flyers should be distributed and how we would use key contact points such as the GP surgery to promote the



event. We all agreed that “face to face” was the best method of approach and we would work hard to talk to people. 29 residents came to the conversation on 14th April 2016 in the Village Hall.

3. WHAT DID WE DO?

After the official introductions and welcomes from the Parish Council and the Elders Council, Ian Johnson introduced the task for the session.

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.

Participants were able to discuss the issues that were important to them. They found out new things about the village, and even changed their minds about something in the village, showing that people respected others’ viewpoints, and considered what others had to say. Most people went away with some new knowledge and new contacts.



4. WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

The first question people were asked to think about was what the places they would like to preserve and protect. The key places identified (in order of frequency) were the GP surgery, the Post Office and/or pharmacy and the ‘open green space in the centre of the village’.

People were very positive about living in Dinnington, where there is currently access to good local facilities and easy access to good local walks. It’s a relatively small community and people know each other.



There are places where activities take place; the village is fortunate in having a Village Hall which is well maintained and the Memorial Hall which is smaller but being upgraded. The Village Hall Committee works hard to keep these community spaces open and thriving e.g. W.I. offers a popular programme.



The Post Office in the centre of the village is an important asset and the Newsagents where you can get essential shopping.

Transport is limited and can create problems getting to certain places, especially when this requires two bus journeys which may mean much waiting. Some buses are limited in the evening. People do take advantage of the bus taking them to the District Centre shops at Kingston Park, however the lack of a direct bus to Ponteland was a big miss.

A common issue was people not being aware of what's going on, where things are and what's available. Although a number of individuals appeared to be very active and know a great deal.

There were some big issues mainly around the housing developments that will take place in the next few years; the uncertainty does bring concerns about a whole range of potential difficulties such as greater number of cars; the "sprawl" of the new housing; affordability of the housing for younger people and how important it is to have a mix of people and age groups living in the village.

Another major concern was the state of the GP surgery and fears that the service may be taken away from the village. The desire of the residents to have a new surgery in the centre of the village was clearly expressed by a number of people.

A common theme was the amount of traffic especially on busy roads into and out of the village where motorists did not appear to slow down or give pedestrians any room. There were discussions about the need for new road crossings for pedestrians.

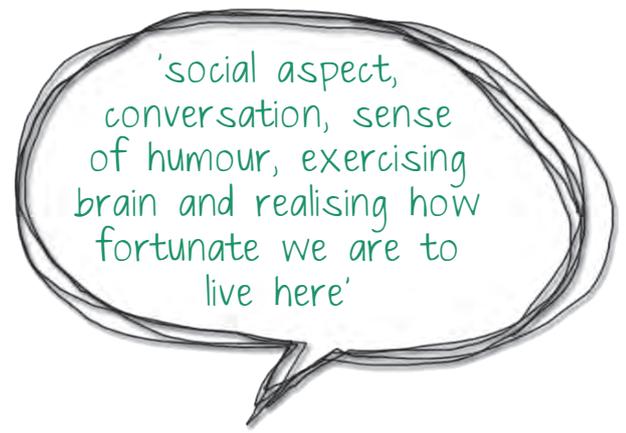


People were not just concerned for themselves, but were also concerned about facilities for young families such as playground facilities.

6. OUR REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The feedback from the session showed that people had enjoyed the opportunity to have a conversation about the place in which they live.

The Elders Council welcomed the opportunity to engage in conversation with people in Dinnington and to build their understanding of what it means to grow older in Dinnington village. Many of the people who attended the event had not heard of the Elders Council, so it also provided an opportunity to spread the word about the organisation and what it does.



The Elders Council also learned that there is value in creating opportunities for people to have conversations about ageing in place. These conversations might result in actions which are tangible and can be followed through; but they also give people an opportunity to find out more about the place in which they are living and the people who live there. We hope people will follow up with the new connections they made and ideas they discussed.

Ian Johnson, from Open Lab at Newcastle University and his colleagues were able to test their approach to engaging residents in conversations related to the development of the Neighbourhood Plan. Ian and colleagues will continue to work with the Parish Council in Dinnington to share more of the detailed information gathered at the event.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Open Lab at Newcastle University

Ian Johnson

University of Northumbria

Alistair MacDonald



The full report of the Community Conversations together with an independent evaluation report can be found on www.elderscouncil.org.uk

Open Lab
at  Newcastle University

