

Evaluating Creative Community Conversations

An Elders Council of Newcastle project funded by Awards for All

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Summary: Evaluation Creative Community Conversations

The report presents an independent evaluation of 'Creative Community Conversations'. This was an Elders Council of Newcastle-upon Tyne led project working in partnership with Newcastle City Council and local communities funded by a Big Lottery, Awards for All grant.

Chapter 1 sets out the background to the report

The Creative Community Conversations were conducted by members of the Elders Council, supported by the Quality of Life Partnership. They were planned in partnership with Newcastle City Council and local community representatives and were carried out during the winter of 2015 and the spring and summer of 2016. The Conversations were held with older people in the Newcastle localities of Kenton i.e. Cowgate Neighbourhood Centre; the Church of the Ascension; Montague Estate Residents Association (MERA) and in Kenton Library with the Tenants and Residents Association. Also in Fawdon, with the Silver Linings Group, in Dinnington and Chapel House.

The main purpose of the project

To bring local older people together in a shared community space, and encourage them to share ideas, knowledge and opinions about their area using various creative media such as community maps and role play exercises. Also to assist the Elders Council to engage more with older people and develop a better understanding of older people's experiences in different parts of the city.

Chapter 2 gives the main findings from the evaluation of the project

An informal approach was used to engage older people. The approach was called a Conversation but it was very organised although it was relaxed. Maps of local areas were used in most Conversations. They helped older people identify the places they went to and how they got about the area. Some Conversations used post it notes and role plays (Kenton) but the Fawdon Conversation used conversation cards and people were invited to respond to them. The Dinnington Conversation used a game with markers on a board and cards to prompt responses to particular places in Dinnington.

The methods above were successful because they engaged people in the process. Almost everyone said they enjoyed the Conversation and it was better than traditional consultation meetings. This was especially the case for people in Dinnington and Fawdon. It also made a big difference that the Elders Council volunteers were carrying out peer to peer Conversations with other older people.

The evaluation also found that at every Conversation participants exchanged information on local facilities, services, shops, leisure, education, keeping well and

how to take care of themselves better and above all, transport options. Most people went away with some new knowledge and new contacts as a result.

Key lessons set out in Chapter 2

- Conversational approaches work
- Using maps of local areas helps people to focus and to engage fully with how they use the area, facilities and services around them
- The conversation cards and the map game with cards were particularly effective at engaging people and people really enjoyed them
- Peer led collaborative approaches are valued by older participants
- Good preparation covering all the bases is vital and the Elders Council now have a very good blueprint see figure 2, page 9
- Conducting Conversations requires skilled facilitators and the Elders Council did well to do this but their skills and capacities were stretched
- Conversational approaches produce detailed information on what it feels like to grow older in particular communities and localities in everyday language. They also produce concrete information on which proposals and plans can be based
- Conversational approaches get at the detail, for example the reason why something is an issue, such as transport.
- Conversational approaches promote active engagement and respectful listening. They encourage quieter people to engage.
- Participants enjoyed giving their views in a way that was accessible and respectful to them. Being sociable, welcoming and friendly promoted a sense of dignity which was vital. The lunches and tea or coffee with cake made available at the Conversations helped make it enjoyable.

Chapter 3 Impacts and recommendations

- Share the learning with all Elders Council members and partners – the finer details about peer to peer Conversations are important
- Develop more opportunities for more Conversations
- Share the processes for setting up and carrying out successful Conversations
- Develop the tools used in the Conversations
- Celebrate the new partnerships and new learning with an event
- Nurture new relationships and partners by inviting them to regular events.

For the Elders Council

- Take forward plans to renew, strengthen and enrich the role of Elders Council volunteers including plans to support new volunteers so they can engage in a variety of roles with specified role descriptions
- Consider a name change

- Encourage Elders Council members to learn facilitation and other skills so there is more capacity to reach out to older people and recruit new members.

1.0 Background and Introduction

The report presents an independent evaluation of 'Creative Community Conversations'. This was an Elders Council of Newcastle-upon Tyne led project working in partnership with Newcastle City Council and local communities funded by a Big Lottery, Awards for All grant.

The Creative Community Conversations were conducted by members of the Elders Council, supported by the Quality of Life Partnership. They were planned in partnership with Newcastle City Council and local community representatives and were carried out during the winter of 2015 and the spring and summer of 2016. The Conversations were held with older people in selected Newcastle localities.

The Elders Council has been seeking for some time to extend its reach and to talk to more older people more often in different parts of the City. In August 2015 Chair of the Elders Council Mary Nicholls met with Newcastle City Council officers to discuss a potential Awards for All application that complemented the City Council's Bright Sparks Programme of community development work in Kenton (funded by DCLG).

1.1 The localities and communities

The localities where Conversations took place were carefully selected with Newcastle City Council partners. The areas are

- Kenton. Four locations were selected. They were 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.
- Dinnington. The Conversation fed into the Parish Council's work on developing a Neighbourhood Plan. The Conversation took place on March 10th.
- Fawdon Silver Lining Group. This was with a group established by Councillor David Faulkner which meets regularly in the Community Centre. The Conversation took place on 14 April 2016.
- Chapel House. Only the preparatory planning discussion for the Chapel House Conversation was included in the evaluation. The Conversation took place in July 2016.

1.2 The Creative Conversations Project

The main purpose of the project was to bring local older people together in a shared community space, and encourage them to share ideas, knowledge and opinions

about their area using various creative media such as community maps and role play exercises. The brief for the evaluation noted “this should act as a first step to building the confidence and capacity of older people to contribute to their communities, by increasing their knowledge of local facilities and contacts, and cultivating community relationships.”

In addition the project aimed to:

- Strengthen the Elders Council’s knowledge of people’s experiences of ageing in different parts of the city. It was anticipated that this would help the Elders Council to be better informed when it represents the views of older people on citywide forums.
- Build the profile of the Elders Council across the city and strengthen and diversify its membership.

It was noted repeatedly in information produced for each local steering and planning group that the Conversations were not intended to be consultation events.

1.3 Evaluation purpose and focus

The evaluation complements the Elders Council’s report on the community conversations to Awards for All. It also answers the following specific questions:

- To what extent has the Elders Council achieved the aims set out in its funding proposal?
- What impact has the community conversation had on the capacity/plans of the local groups to act for the benefit of the wider community?
- What impact has the programme had on the Elders Council including on how it works and its partnerships with locality based groups?
- What impact has the programme had on raising the profile and reach of the Elders Council?
- What are the key learning points for the Elders Council and its future work?

1.4 Evaluation timescale and methods

The evaluation was carried out in May, June and July 2016 and it involved the following:

- Collection and analysis of background notes about the project including notes of meetings by the Steering Group; notes of planning meetings with local communities; briefing notes to Newcastle Elders Council members for individual Conversations; write ups of all Conversations by Elders Council members; write ups of individual Conversations by the evaluation team and by Ian Johnson PhD student from Digital Civics, University of Newcastle.

- A background group discussion with Elders Council members at the start of the evaluation
- Individual face to face and telephone interviews with key partners responsible for helping to set up Conversations
- Observation of one Conversation and participation in facilitating a second Conversation
- Two group interviews with people who participated in Conversations
- Several telephone interviews with some Conversation participants
- Sight of feedback responses to the Elders Council from participants
- A group interview with Elders Council and Quality of Life Partnership Steering Group members and Conversation facilitators.

It was not possible to interview everyone who wanted to be interviewed due to time and cost constraints but a good cross section of people were interviewed.

Topic guides designed for each layer of interviews are available on request.

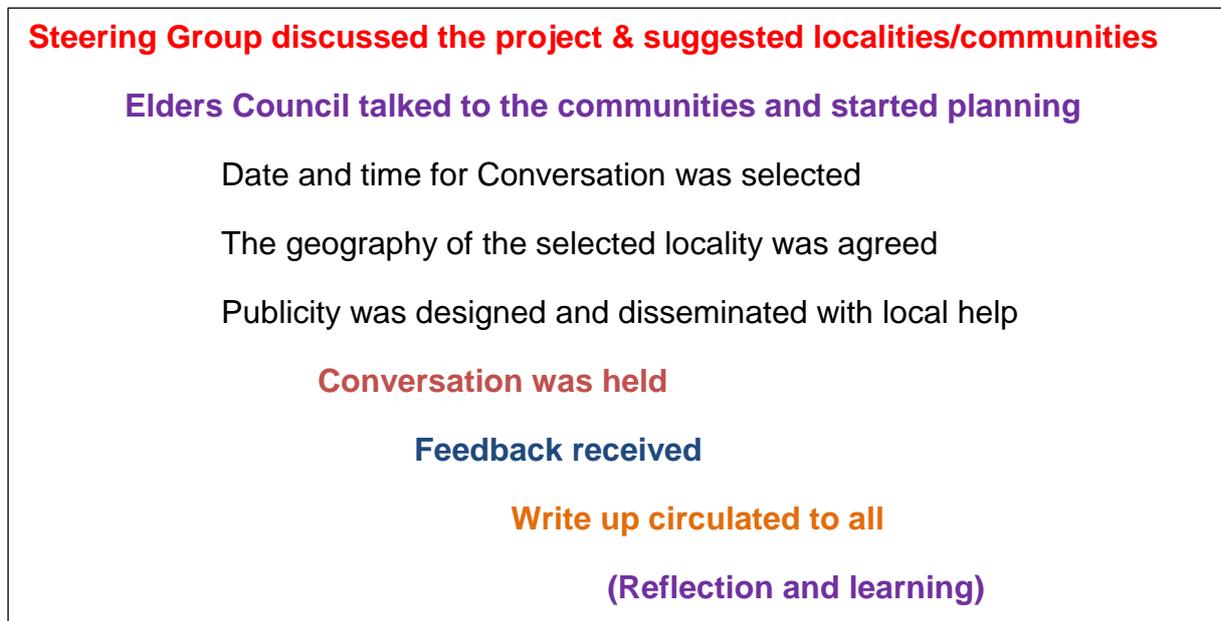
1.5 The structure of the rest of the report

Chapter two considers the views expressed by everyone concerned compared to the overarching aims and objectives set for the Community Creative Conversations and draws some conclusions. It also considers if the Conversations identified key concerns, places, people and touchstones in the lives of older people in six localities. Finally, chapter three considers the evidence from the evaluation on the role adopted by the Elders Council in the Conversations and the wider implications for the Elders Council in its work going forwards. There are five key recommendations.

2.0 The Evaluation Findings of the Community Creative Conversations

2.1 An overview of what the evaluation covered

Figure 1: Conversation process from start to finish



2.2 Learning cycle

The different processes above were largely envisaged by the Steering Group from the start but we added the final processes of reflection and learning. This is because interviews with Elders Council facilitators and others indicated that after each Conversation the facilitators tended to reflect on the lessons they had learned and what they would do in the next Conversation as a result. A learning cycle was, therefore, also taking place and it is evident that the learning continued all the way through the Conversations. We return later to the lessons that were learned from these reflections.

2.3 Effectiveness of the processes for the Conversations

Feedback from interviews suggests that the processes generally worked effectively. They began when the Elders Council and the Quality of Life Partnership established a Steering Group for the project. The Steering Group helped select the localities where Conversations were planned. They also helped with contacts for local community groups in order to prepare for the Conversations. All of this worked well. However, there were some weaknesses within the Elders Council's capacity to maintain a level of ongoing commitment to the project and there are some learning points from this experience which are covered fully in chapter three.

There is little doubt that engaging with community groups in local areas and partnering with them in order to set up the Conversation ensured that a venue for a

Conversation was better chosen than would have been the case without local knowledge. Similarly having prior knowledge about the way local people tended to define the geography of their local area was better understood. The latter was essential when it came to preparing maps and for making sense of the comments that participants made about the geography. The local context made it all explicable and often local partners had expert insight into how a community worked and this included local geography and transport links. For example, during the planning for the Conversation at Chapel House it emerged that the main neighbourhoods composing Chapel Park are divided by a main road. Poor bus connections between Chapel House and Chapel Park meant that transport hire had to be planned into arrangements by the Elders Council to enable older people to reach the intended venue for the Conversation easily. In the end the locality was widened to take account of the fact that people identify with other localities too such as Westerhope and West Denton.

The planning approach described above was not used in the same way for the Kenton Conversations, (Cowgate, and Church of the Ascension, MERA Hall and Kenton Library with TARA) which was held first in the sequence of Conversations. The Kenton Conversations piggybacked onto work that the City Council's Bright Ideas Group (funded by DCLG) is doing in the area on community budgeting and the group wanted to do more with older people. The Bright Ideas group essentially became the local planning partners for the Conversations and were responsible for most of the publicity.

The Cowgate Conversation, for example, despite a lot of publicity did not attract older residents. The Conversation was also planned with less close involvement from the Elders Council and this could have been a factor. However, a key respondent and volunteer from Cowgate commented that after asking why local older people did not attend he was told that the venue for the Conversation was known to local people as a venue predominantly used by young people and that could also have been a reason. Minutes from the planning group for the Kenton Conversations noted that one of the drawbacks with piggybacking activities with existing groups is that they can be seen as 'cliquey'. The interim report to Awards for All on the project also noted that the Bright Ideas group were not as well networked into local communities as had been thought.

The lessons from Kenton were taken forward and the planning for other Conversations was much more detailed and thought through.

Feedback has been provided as far as practically possible to groups who participated in a Conversation. Write ups also appeared in the Elders Council Newsletter which is widely distributed. However, some people who were interviewed later could not remember seeing or hearing feedback from the Conversations. Some people had to be reminded.

Everyone who was contacted in the course of the evaluation will receive a copy of the summary of this report. The full report will be accessible to all from the Elders Council of Newcastle website?

2.4 Conversations: Numbers, similarities and differences

Six of the intended seven Conversations were evaluated and the planning for the final seventh was included. On average around 20 people participated in each Conversation although one Conversation in Kenton attracted only 3 people.

As noted earlier, four of the Conversations took part in different localities in Kenton and these Conversations piggy backed on some existing work being undertaken by Council partners. The four conversations were rather different in their feel compared to the other Conversations perhaps because a proportion of the participants were already meeting together with Council officers for other reasons e.g. because they were members of a tenant/ and or resident association or for consultation reasons. This perhaps led to people bringing preconceptions with them that the Conversations were intended to feed into a programme of change led or influenced by the Elders Council. In contrast the other Conversations tended to involve a wider cross section of older people with broader interests and there were fewer references to expectations that the Conversations would lead to change led or influenced by the Elders Council.

2.5 Maps and methods

How useful were the methodologies that the Elders Council used in each Conversation in terms of stimulating conversation and capturing data?

Figure 2 Common methods used in Conversations

Facilitated by older people from the Elders Council

Aimed to be sociable, friendly, informal and welcoming to all

Aimed to encourage older people to express their views

Invited older people to sit in small groups at tables

Asked older people how they define the local area, what they think about local services, what they know and what they can share. favourite /least favourite places, where people go, where they don't, how people get about, how people feel about the locality, how they get to important places, how they see people they want to see, how people feel about getting older in the area and getting older in it

However, there were some differences. The Dinnington Conversation for example used a map based game (a game adapted by Newcastle University Digital Civics

PhD student Ian Johnson) which asked people to move markers to favourite or specific places and used a set of cards to ensure that each person on a table had a 'turn' or an opportunity to say something about the local area. The whole Conversation was filmed and audio recorded by Ian and the Digital Civics Newcastle University team. The Elders Council provided table facilitators to nudge people along.

The Fawdon Silver Linings Group used a set of Conversation Cards developed with the Quality of Life Partnership¹ which sparked conversation about aspects of ageing and life. Participants wrote their responses on paper tablecloths. A map was not used although there were discussions about the local area and locality for example, because the cards encouraged talk about getting around. Table facilitators were used to encourage and help conversation by all.

The Kenton Conversations used maps of each locality and also incorporated a number of tasks and exercises designed to encourage people to consider a range of questions and topics including who they knew to go to for information or advice, who was in their local networks, how they used the local area, what was important to them and where on each map would people go for certain services or not go for specific reasons. Ian Johnston who attended a Conversation in Kenton (Church of the Ascension) noted that the maps helped to start off conversations. He thought they worked well and encouraged people to focus on particular places that were important to them for a number of different reasons. He developed the idea for the Conversation in Dinnington later on.

2.5.1 How successful were the methods at engaging older people?

Overall the Conversation Cards and the map based game with markers and suggestion cards, proved most successful. They produced more meaningful and in depth comments and engaged people more successfully with fewer leads necessary by facilitators. They also attracted the most overwhelming interest and comments from participants because they enjoyed them and they said they were highly engaged. One community leader said on behalf of Fawdon Silver Linings Group:

"They ... found it (the Conversation) very accessible and they enjoyed the process"

Individuals at the Conversation said that they thoroughly enjoyed it and "found it sociable and fun". A couple of people said it was very different to the usual kind of meeting "entertaining and interesting" and "it really made me think"

Participants at the Dinnington Conversation were overwhelmingly positive and buzzing from the event. Some comments were:

¹ The Conversation Cards were developed by Barbara Douglas, Professor Rose Gilroy and Moyra Riseborough for a different project

“I loved the ...social aspect, conversation, sense of humour, exercising brain and realising how fortunate we are to live here”.

There was a ...”good discussion around the table”.

“Much better than a meeting – everyone contributed”.

Parish Councillors interviewed some weeks after the event gave a “very positive YES!” in response to a question regarding whether or not they felt that the game had worked:

“The idea was good...they aired their concerns”

“They were all into it”

“There was a definite engagement in it”

Participants from the Kenton groups (with the exception of Cowgate and MERA who did not attend the group interview) said they enjoyed the Conversations. People who were at the Conversation at the Church of the Ascension said they thought everyone had been able to express their view – it was thought that having the maps led to a wider and structured discussion.

However, there were few people at the Kenton Conversations who didn’t know each other at each event so networking was more restricted. Although the Kenton localities were reasonably well served by most services and had access to basic shops there were few places where people could go for information and advice and people tended to rely on family and friends. Consequently there was much more talk in Kenton Conversations about the help people wanted from the Council to fill this gap. There was less interest expressed in helping to create change themselves compared to the other localities/communities.

An interesting and important point was made by a number of participants at Conversations including the Church of the Ascension in Kenton, Dinnington and Fawdon about listening and giving people time and space to speak. Conversations appeared to encourage this particularly those involving the conversation cards or the map game plus cards.

“We took a turn and gave people time to speak”

“Everyone spoke and waited their turn”

2.6 Meeting objectives on working with localities and local people

2.6.1 Top level objectives – comparing achievements to expectations

Taking the top level objectives of the Creative Community Conversations project first, the aims were to bring older people living in a locality together to share their experiences, knowledge and ideas about what it is like to grow old in their locality. A Conversation was intended to contribute to “building the confidence and capacity of older people to contribute to their communities, by increasing their knowledge of local facilities and contacts, and cultivating community relationships.”

Reflecting on the objectives for the Conversations, the evaluation suggests that at every Conversation participants exchanged information on local facilities, services, shops, leisure, education, keeping well and how to take care of themselves better and above all, transport options. There was considerable surprise expressed by groups of older people when something they had not heard about before was mentioned or when one individual said they didn't know about a coffee morning at a local pub. Most people went away with some new knowledge and new contacts as a result. These points were noted in feedback from participants immediately after Conversations and in discussion with them at the time by Elders Council members. However people often forgot they had said these things – this was particularly evident amongst participants interviewed in Kenton.

Transport and being able to get to places and people was a recurrent theme. There were important points and suggestions made for change which we return to later.

There was a general concern about Council and public services being withdrawn. In Dinnington most fears concerned the potential relocation of the GP surgery to Ponteland, which is not easily accessible by public transport. In areas of Kenton the concerns were more associated with being unsure who to contact for information or advice locally and people wanted the Council to provide some kind of drop in advice service locally.

2.6.2 Contributing to local communities and finding solutions

Some Conversations were more successful than others in encouraging older people to consider what they could contribute to their local community. For example a Dinnington Parish Councillor stated:

“The one good thing that came out of the table I was on was that they did say “is there something WE could do?””

Similar points were made by participants at the Fawdon Conversation. Clearly some participants at Conversations were already highly engaged in their communities, for example they were members of Parish Councils, Church committees and Wardens, members of tenant and resident associations, City Councillors and members of the Elders Council (in some cases all of these roles!) There were however few comments in the Kenton Conversations from people who were prepared to do something in the community although there was a general view that more needed to

be done by the Council to provide advice and information on who to contact for services and help.

There were subtle differences in terms of the subjects people were used to talking about and felt comfortable with too. The Fawdon Silver Linings group founded and facilitated by Councillor David Faulkner regularly host discussions on a variety of topics and the members are therefore used to asking questions and to debating ideas. A newcomer appeared on the day the Conversation was held and was made welcome by the group despite the fact that their 'leader' David was not present. All of the members happily swapped information and considered what else could or should be done and by whom including themselves since most people are living longer. People also talked about healthy living and how they felt about their mental health. Conversations became very detailed and often very personal – however it has to be remembered the conversations took place amongst a group of people who have met before and who are used to talking. All the same people commented that this was a different kind of conversation to the one they normally had.

The philosophical turn of conversation was something that the Fawdon group were comfortable with but some of the Kenton groups were more familiar with consultation on concrete topics rather than on ageing and what the implications are from increased longevity. The notes from the Kenton Conversations are markedly practical and do not stray into personal or philosophical territory.

2.7 Other Conversation objectives

What impact has the community conversation had on the capacity/plans of the local groups to act for the benefit of the wider community?

Evidence from the Conversation write ups and interview data suggest that there was most visible impact in Dinnington where the detailed responses from older people on the locality will feed into a Neighbourhood plan. To underline this, the Parish Council were particularly aware that the Conversational method revealed issues and topics in a helpful way and flushed out some matters that had not been identified before.

It is not clear how other community groups intend to take forward the views expressed by older people or if they expect to since some appear to be expecting the Elders Council to do this. There is ample evidence that the Conversations provided insights into how older people in different City neighbourhoods and communities actually engage in everyday life and how they see and respond to their localities. The Conversations provided a different opportunity and a different perspective for older people and many people enjoyed the opportunity. It appears that this approach compared to the more familiar consultation approach will take many people time to adjust to.

2.8 Did the Conversations identify issues and touchstones in localities?

The Conversations identified that transport was the biggest concern of all almost everywhere when people are no longer able to drive or rely on public transport. The lack of accessible available and affordable transport is the biggest single thing that prevents older people from seeing friends and family, from reaching shops with a good affordable selection of food and from joining in leisure and civic activities.

For example, it is difficult for older people reliant on public transport to reach services and facilities as well as friends in Ponteland. Services are poor at night. One lady told me that she liked to attend Mass at the Catholic Church in Ponteland on a Sunday but could not afford to go regularly because she has to use a taxi to get there and back.

Transport provision is quite reasonable although not perfect in Kenton, and people use transport links to shop at Asda in Gosforth. There is a lack of public transport to lower parts of the Montagu Estate and it is difficult for anyone with walking difficulties to get about if they live on an estate that the bus does not visit. Older people can become isolated virtual prisoners as a result.

The transport issue is complicated by the fact that buses do not follow routes older people necessarily want and need to take. It can be very difficult to navigate from one part of a neighbourhood or locality to another and can involve two bus journeys with timetables that do not make the journey easy. This was the case in parts of Chapel House and Kenton.

Buses are often less frequent or not available at all in the evenings and on Sundays. This means that older people can become isolated from everyday activities and cannot enjoy some of the social interactions those of us who are mobile and can get about easily take for granted.

Most localities are well served with basic facilities and services, for example, in Kenton the mapping done by participants showed that there are at least three key hubs in the area where there are basic facilities – GP, shops etc. although they do not all have the same spread of services available (e.g. Post Office or Pharmacy) and are not necessarily easily accessible to all older people. North Kenton is pretty well served in most departments (apart from lacking a fish and chip shop), although other parts of Kenton are not so well served. Getting access to a chiropodist is an issue in Kenton.

In Dinnington there is good access to facilities and a limited range of shops but there are major fears over plans to resite the GP surgery to Ponteland. Clearly lack of public transport is part of the reason for this.

There are a range of community facilities in all localities but in Kenton MERA is underused. It is a challenge for people in Dinnington to manage the community facilities that exist and Parish Councillors are heavily involved but so far they have

done so very well. People in Dinnington noted that it can be difficult to find out what is going on in the way of leisure classes and the WI. This reflected to a certain extent the retrenchment of local adult community education services.

In all localities many people have grass-roots networks and know of services e.g. window cleaners, gardeners. The issue is getting people to realise this and share it with others. The Conversations facilitated some of that. Most localities have a newsletter which lists a lot of local handy person /services – the Conversations suggest that more local knowledge could be drawn on to inform and update newsletters.

There are nice parks in most parts of the City and green spaces for walks. Fawdon and Kenton have a lot going on locally at sports centres – there is potential for ‘staying steady’ type courses and other exercises for older people.

2.8.1 Touchstones

The touchstones people mentioned were staying physically well, exercise, seeing friends, keeping active, seeing family. Visiting places, gardens and green spaces, taking part in civic events, being part of a local Church or Faith and, education - keeping mentally well and interested. Transport was integral to achieving all of these and so was having a reasonable income and good health.

Staying in the workforce and having to work for longer were challenges and concerns for Conversation participants and older people reported mixed emotions and views about this.

2.9 The Conversations weren’t consultation

To reiterate, the aims were to bring older people living in a locality together to share their experiences, knowledge and ideas about what it is like to grow old in their locality. The Conversations were not intended to be consultation events although where appropriate they were intended to contribute to ongoing discussions in a locality. For example in Dinnington the Conversation helped the Parish Council to identify issues and concerns that would feed into a developing Neighbourhood Plan.

Yet, from the comments people made (with the exception of the Fawdon Silver Linings Group) most people did not grasp the wider conceptual nature of the Conversation objectives. They forgot almost immediately, they had different purposes in mind despite being advised of the objectives for the Conversations or had not understood the explicit objectives in the first place. Quotes illustrate differences in perceptions.

Feedback on Conversation at Dinnington on what people hoped would happen next (immediately afterwards) included:

- We hope that something good will happen.

- Awareness raised.
- Feedback to amongst others Newcastle City Council. Sadly they probably won't take notice.
- Hopefully all points raised i.e. roads and public transport will be noted.
- I hope that the services will improve at the Doctor's Surgery.
- Hopefully decision makers will listen. Please listen particularly about Doctor's Surgery and crossing.
- Not sure! Hope will help with neighbourhood plan.

"I'm still not sure what it was all for or what the point was"

"It's a good way to explore a subject"

"I wanted to know what came out of the exercise where we placed stickers on the map"

(Church of the Ascension, Kenton all groups' interview)

2.9.1 On ageing

Comments included the following:

"It's really good to be asked to express our views" (Fawdon Silver Linings Group)

"It's a British thing not to talk about ageing. It will be beyond some people's comfort zone but skilled facilitators can bring it out." (Talking about the Fawdon Silver Linings Group experience.)

The Conversation

"Performed a function in getting people to get together"

"There was that element of getting people together for the conversation"

The issue of addressing stereotypes regarding ageing is important:

"We may be older people but we're not stupid"

As you get older you don't age in your head, but you find it irritating when you're classified as being "of an age"

(Dinnington Parish Councillors reflecting on the Conversation in an interview.)

A Newcastle City Council officer was disappointed although perhaps the expectations expressed in the comments really reflect the fact that funds for the kind of long term community development referred to are not available:

“It was a dipstick really – without any follow through - nothing has happened since. This kind of work needs longevity.” She had hoped it would give a boost to work in Kenton, “but that hasn’t happened”. However, anything that helped with consultation in her view was useful.

This comment was in contrast to the views of older people who on the whole, gave very different views and liked the fact that the Conversations were led by older people who understood many of their concerns about growing older.

2.9.1 Would participants like more Conversations?

The Elders Council are committed to sharing the details from the Conversations with the City Council and with other community level partners. They may also decide to have more Conversations. When asked, most participants said they would welcome more particularly if they were planned regularly and if the subject interested them. A number of people said that their friends would have enjoyed the Conversation and were not able to come or would have attended if they had realised it was going to be so interesting.

One person suggested that a Conversation every couple of years would be ideal.

2.10 Conclusions to the chapter

The Conversations achieved almost all they set out to do.

The hardest nut to crack was conveying the message that it is a worthwhile and necessary activity for older people to talk about how they are experiencing ageing and this information provides the details to inform policy makers and decision makers as well as older people themselves.

Despite the slightly blurred view about the objectives amongst participants, people actually did express their views about growing older in a locality and what it felt like to live there – but they often didn’t realise it. A Dinnington Parish Councillor for example, commented that the “Conversation didn’t really get round to ageing until people started talking about transport”. In fact, all participants in Conversations explored the experiences of ageing and living well but often without any conscious thought as we have seen.

The lack of attention we generally pay to ageing as an experience to focus on rather than glide over in everyday life illustrates a general societal failure to value ageing as an important part of life. The participants in the Fawdon Silver Linings group were an exception since their Conversation was very explicit. The participants touched on for example, how people can learn to value themselves as individuals when they are no longer part of the paid work force or when ill health affects their status and well-being. They also talked about the need for change in social and economic behaviour

so that it becomes common place for older workers to transition to different kinds of work in later age and at using the skills of older people including the very old, in neighbourhoods.

2.10.1 Conversational approaches work

The evaluation demonstrates that when it comes to engaging people in how they live their lives as they are getting older; the conversational approach works far better than traditional meetings or consultation methods or “traditional” research techniques e.g. interviews using structured questionnaires. All participants agreed that the conversational approach was more engaging and appealed to them. Having peer to peer led Conversations made a difference too and the Conversations promoted a collaborative ‘feel’ almost everywhere.

As we pointed out before, some people were looking to identify concrete outcomes rather than the more subtle and detailed information they actually provided which also produced proposals for concrete action if people wanted to follow this up. For example, where pedestrian crossings need to be sited in Dinnington.

Carrying out the Conversations required the Elders Council (who are all volunteers) to work pretty hard. They diligently planned and prepared for each Conversation and learned lessons from failures to recruit in Cowgate that they applied to Conversations elsewhere. They also got better at thinking through the questions to ask about each locality and the geography that people have in mind that live there when they are older. Being peers with older participants gave the Elders Council the opportunity to talk about sensitive matters, health issues and staying well in a matter of fact way that younger professionals could find more difficult and perhaps are less aware of. The Conversations were also an enjoyable experience for many older people and the sociable and informal aspects actively promoted engagement.

2.11 Key lessons

- Conversational approaches work
- Using maps of local areas helps people to focus and to engage fully with how they use the area, facilities and services around them
- The conversation cards and the map game with cards were particularly effective at engaging people and people really enjoyed them
- Peer led collaborative approaches are valued by older participants
- Good preparation covering all the bases is vital and the Elders Council now have a very good blueprint see figure 2, page 9
- Conducting Conversations requires skilled facilitators and the Elders Council did well to do this but their skills and capacities were stretched
- Conversational approaches produce detailed information and enable people to talk about what it feels like to grow older in particular communities and

localities in everyday language. Along with rich discursive information they can and do produce concrete information to base proposals and plans on

- Conversational approaches get at the detail for example underpinning why something is an issue or why something is so vital – such as transport.
- Conversational approaches promote active engagement and respectful listening. They encourage people who are often quiet in more traditional meetings, to engage.
- Participants enjoyed the fact their views mattered and that they could give their views in a way that was accessible and respectful to them. Being sociable, welcoming and friendly promoted a sense of dignity which was vital. The lunches and tea or coffee with cake made available at the Conversations were, as Elders Council members know, more than window dressing.

3.0 Impacts on the Elders Council. The Future and Recommendations

The final chapter first looks at three aspects of the evaluation that have not been discussed so far and goes on to consider the future and recommendations for the Elders Council.

- What impact has the programme had on the Elders Council including on how it works and its partnerships with locality based groups?
- What impact has the programme had on raising the profile and reach of the Elders Council?
- What are the key learning points for the Elders Council and its future work? (Some of this was referred to in chapter 2).

3.1 What the Elders Council does and what it stands for

Since they are relevant to the chapter it is worth considering the aims of the Elders Council. They are to:

- Provide a platform for the voices of older people in the city;
- Ensure older people are well informed about what is happening in the city and the services and activities they can access;
- Encourage older people to make a contribution to the life of the city.

The Elders Council has a membership of over 2000 individuals. Membership of the Elders Council is free and open to anyone aged 50+ living or active in the city.

Elders Council members give their time on a voluntary basis. They are supported in their work by the Quality of Life Partnership staff team.

For further detail about the work of the Elders Council see www.elderscouncil.org.uk

3.2 Impact on the Elders Council, how it works & local partnerships

The impact of carrying out the Conversations on the Elders Council was considerable and has encouraged Elders Council members to reflect on how they could improve their engagement work with local older people. It has also proven that engagement through informal but well planned and executed Conversations works well and is necessary.

Interviews with Steering Group members indicated that while it was intended to have a larger EC Steering Group (SG) that would include local members in order to build local partnerships this did not happen. The initial group formed for the SG was never very stable. Responsibility fell on a core team of people who are already working very hard.

There were a number of different points of view on the subject.

One Elders Council member said it was partly a reflection of the time and capacity people have given to other commitments and their state of health which affected their ability to shape the initial conversations and stay with them.

Perhaps more could have been done to build a Steering Group that could reach out to local groups? However, it is easy with hindsight to say this.

An Elders Council member who helped facilitate almost all of the Conversations said in her view that some EC members get used to people doing things for them and it's hard to shift that perspective.

Perhaps the real difficulty which was hinted at in the group interview is that the EC is different things to different people. For some it is a social setting, for others it is where they volunteer to do a specific task such as helping run the radio show on Community Radio or distributing or writing the newsletter. Some people enjoy being Elders Council members while others would rather do something else.

However, Elders Council members who participated in the project and who facilitated Conversations enjoyed the experience and learned a lot from it. They were aware that the learning could be lost if there were no formal opportunities to share approaches and good practice.

3.2.1 Working with communities in an open way

In terms of working with local partners and communities, the Elders Council formed some new and in all probability lasting relationships as a result of organising the Conversations with individuals who are prominent in their communities in Fawdon, Dinnington, Kenton and Chapel House. The local planning groups established to develop and plan each Conversation were very important in this respect. They not only helped make each Conversation work and had a practical impact they also

established or strengthened relationships between individual Elders Council members and people in local communities.

As we noted in chapter two however, where some participants arrived at Conversations with alternative agendas and issues they wanted to air there was not necessarily a meeting of minds. This particularly occurred amongst groups that were meeting already for other purposes and a key lesson is that it is best to hold Conversations with a wide variety of people rather than piggybacking onto existing groups.

All partnerships of course need to be nurtured and a challenge for the Elders Council is how they can continue to do this.

3.3 The EC and transitioning – issues and capacity

The Conversations programme also brought home issues about the capacity of the Elders Council. An interviewee commented that a lot is expected of the Elders Council at times and sometimes expectations are unrealistic. However, Elders Council members genuinely want to engage more and better.

The group interview with Elders Council members who facilitated most of the Conversations and were members of the Steering Group revealed that the EC as an organisation is in the process of transitioning. Not surprisingly transition is uncomfortable.

A comment was made about current difficulties within the Elders Council that some people wanted radical change now and others really don't want to change at all. Tensions have been experienced as a result.

“We haven't been consistent”

In the process of transitioning the Elders Council is currently looking at its governance and considering how that should work rather than on how it works at the moment. An analogy was drawn between work to develop community training where the emphasis is on building capacity through skills and reflection and creating as a result a consistent pattern.

An Elders Council member and noted that since the Elders Council was formed the world has changed and the Elders Council has to change with it. Everyone agreed there was room to build in a reflective loop so that Elders Council members can challenge themselves. Comments on the need to 'develop, improve what we do and to regularly refresh the membership' were also agreed on.

“We have tended to stagnate and people become defensive as a result.” (Elders Council member.)

3.4 Areas for change

Four main areas for change were identified:

- 1 “We need to get better at enabling and encouraging people to see opportunities to learn new skills and not be afraid if they don’t know something”
- 2 We need Conversations and being out and about. One interviewee noted that “we need this kind of activity and the techniques we are learning to be part of the process for meeting people and continuing to grow the Elders Council. It has to be part of the plan.”
- 3 It was also felt that more attention needs to be paid to the tools Elders Council members need so they feel equipped when they are out and about in all situations to talk about the Elders Council knowledgeably and with confidence.
- 4 There was a need to address the bigger picture, to have a strategic overview where everyone knew what the big plan was and what the Elders Council are all driving towards rather than focusing on the minutiae of meetings and minutes “so we can move forward”.

On the need for mentoring and building the confidence of Elders Council members one person talked about her experience saying that it makes a big difference if people are encouraged to develop their skills or draw on the talents they have face to face because for her that really was the catalyst. “Someone told me that of course I could talk about the Elders Council and I did but at the time I doubted I could speak in public”.

3.5 More targeted approach to attracting volunteers – role specifications?

Alongside developing the skills and talents of people who are already Elders Council members a more targeted approach to attracting volunteers who want to do specific things such as get involved in talking to others or campaigning was suggested. Otherwise the implications are that the Elders Council will continue to have capacity issues. Having specifications for particular kinds of roles was also discussed since this would be a useful way to enable candidates to consider the roles they would like to take on and could match up to.

3.6 A formal support structure for volunteers?

We talked about the need to support volunteers and whether peer support was enough. There was a preference for a volunteer support structure that properly supported people. It’s something that is missing at the moment. Some parallels were drawn between other third sector and grass roots voluntary organisations which are starting to set out projects and specifications and skills in order to recruit specific

volunteers with certain skills sets or the willingness to learn. There was considerable interest in this approach and it was agreed that it could be a more dynamic method for finding a range of new members. Paid support and development staff are necessary in order to underpin the approach.

3.7 Elders Council needs a clear identity and a simpler message

The lack of a clear identity and the absence of a simple description are barriers for the Elders Council moving forward and get in the way of attracting new people.

“It is an ongoing problem that we have to give quite complicated descriptions when it would be so good if we could say something snappy. The concrete things we do like the newsletter and the radio programme are easy but the more abstract things are much harder to describe.” (Elders Council member.)

3.8 What impact has the programme had on raising the profile and reach of the Elders Council?

The evaluation analysis indicated that the Conversations raised the Elders Council profile significantly. Some people joined the Elders Council and many people took copies of Elders Council newsletters. A number of people also joined local resident associations and made mental notes to go to other kinds of groups in the locality.

The participants at two of the Kenton Conversations and the Fawdon and Dinnington Conversations said they had heard about the Elders Council, but hadn't had any information from them. Many people signed up to receive the Elders Council newsletter and some individuals in most Conversations said they wanted to become members.

3.8.1 There was the following exchange of views on talking with the Elders Council at a Conversation

“I had heard about the Elders Council before this but didn't know much”

“Well I am a member”

“Yes oh are you? It was a good idea to go out and see people so we can see who the Elders Council is. It helps when you can meet people”

“I am still not sure what they stand for”.

“It is good to have methods to feed into the EC – but what will happen as a result?”

(Church of the Ascension evaluation interview with participants.)

3.9 What are the key learning points for the Elders Council and its future work?

Some of this was referred to in chapter 2; however, the Elders Council agreed that there has been a lot of learning from the project. The Elders Council think a great deal more could be done using the blueprint for successful Conversations that they have developed. It is widely acknowledged that it is important to reach out to older people across the City.

The Elders Council would like to do more projects like this. Generally it has been a positive thing to talk to people in local communities more and to take messages about the Elders Council to people. There was a genuine interest in finding out about the work that the Elders Council does and much interest in how people could find out more about the radio station, events, social activities and making a difference. There has since the Conversations been a small growth in membership as a result.

It was noted that most Conversations were positive in tone. People were respectful and challenged each other with courtesy without Elders Council interventions or leadership which was interesting so facilitators learned to relax. Older people got to the subjects that they were there to discuss without too much steering from anyone. A common approach that older people used to tackle a tricky area was to ask each other “why do you think that?” or, “have you tried x?” People helped each other in this way to see that there were solutions and ways around issues.

The key thing that struck the Elders Council was how important transport is.

“We always knew this but it isn’t until you hear the detail and the personal stories and what it means to people that it really makes sense.”

“In Dinnington people were adamant about the importance of the doctor’s surgery. They were really worried it was going to close”

After the Conversation the suggestion was made to the Parish Council that enquiries should be made about the future of the GP practice with Health Watch but she doesn’t know if this has been followed up.

3.10 It’s all in the name

Many participants commented on the need in their view to change the name of the Elders Council. Their comments were that the name sent the wrong message. The name suggested the Elders Council was for the very old only. The word Council was misleading and it was suggested that as a result older people tended to identify the Elders Council with the local authority when of course it is a separate organisation.

“The title “Elders Council” was seen as causing problems due to the perception that “Elders” must mean “somebody older than me”. Consequently it was felt that the Elders Council should change their title (Dinnington evaluation interview).

Other people said the name was dated and needed to fit into today's context.

The name "Elders Council" (both the "Elders" and "Council" parts) can be a barrier to people participating. Further the organisation can have an image problem – it is seen as being for academics and ex-professionals. It needs to be more representative – at present it isn't necessarily representative of the population of the city (although the Elders Council has tried hard to get others to engage)

"Previously none of them had had any idea about the Elders Council and thought it must be for the "very elderly" (Kenton evaluation interview)

3.11 Conclusions and recommendations for the Elders Council

There is little doubt that the Conversations provided opportunities for the Elders Council to start meaningful discussions with older people in localities around Newcastle upon Tyne. The Elders Council successfully developed a set of processes or a blueprint to plan and deliver interesting and engaging Conversations that engaged older people and which everyone enjoyed. They learned from their first experiences to plan each Conversation and to pay attention to understanding the geography of local areas as well as how best to recruit older people.

The Elders Council formed good relationships with local areas and communities and this is a good basis for future work. As a result the Elders Council can talk with authority about the needs for people-shaped transport networks that should connect older people to places and people they want and need to be connected to. They can also talk with detailed knowledge about how older people say it feels to be growing older in Dinnington or (parts of) Kenton, Fawdon and (presumably) Chapel House.

As we grow closer to the time when older people will spend more time in their older life than in their younger lives it is appropriate to really engage with how people perceive and experience ageing. It is something we will all journey towards if we are lucky and planners need to know how best to support older people to lead full lives, to stay healthy and to be connected in order to do this. The Conversations provide a potential new peer to peer method on how to do this as well as possible.

3.12 Recommendations

3.12.1 On the Creative Community Conversations programme

- Share the learning with all Elders Council members and partners – the fine and subtle details in particular about peer to peer Conversations are important
- Develop more opportunities for more Conversations
- Share the processes for setting up and carrying out successful Conversations
- Develop the tools used in the Conversations and ensure they include cards and relevant maps

- Celebrate the new partnerships and new learning with an event
- Nurture new relationships and partners by inviting them to regular events.

3.12.2 For the Elders Council

- Take forward plans to renew, strengthen and enrich the role of Elders Council volunteers including plans to support new volunteers so they can engage in a variety of roles with specified role descriptions
- Consider a name change
- Encourage Elders Council members to learn facilitation and other skills so there is more capacity to reach out to older people and recruit new members