



Housing Voices: Using theatre and film to engage people in later life housing conversations

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- Elders Council Newcastle
- Skimstone Arts
- Northumbria University

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Background

Housing has been a key priority for the Elders Council since its inception. Its Housing Action group has undertaken a range of projects which have provided opportunities for older people to express their views, which Elders Council regularly feeds back to Newcastle City Council, housing providers and others to influence local policy and service development. For example, Elders Council recently contributed to the review of Newcastle City Council's Specialist Housing Delivery Plan and receives regular updates on its implementation.

Working with Care and Repair England on the national demonstrator programme on engaging older people to inform local and national housing policy and practice provided Elders Council with an opportunity to undertake a new project which would enable us to reach older people whose voices are less often heard. The work enabled Elders Council to build on a longstanding and successful partnership with Northumbria University and Skimstone Arts on the use of theatre to engage people in conversations about housing in later life. We chose to focus particularly on people who are ageing without children and carers of older people and to provide them with an opportunity to explore the issues which affect them. This was with the intention of providing the Elders Council with fresh insights to bring to local housing and housing related decision making as well as informing Elders Council's ongoing work on housing information and advice.

The project is also of national policy relevance. There has recently been a renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding (2018) on joint action across health, social care and housing sectors to improve health through the home. The Communities and Local Government (CLG) Select Committee Inquiry into Older People's



Housing and its report on Housing for Older People report (2018) recognised that housing decisions in later life are often taken from a position of crisis, and concluded that a national strategy for older people's housing is needed to bring together and improve policy in this area.

What we did

In 2014, this partnership, with support from Newcastle University, developed the 'Growing older in my home and neighbourhood', eight month participatory, neighbourhood project (Bailey et al. 2018, in press). One of the outcomes was 'Doorbells', a theatre production developed with participants, using drama, dance, mime, music and writing techniques to fictionalise the key issues raised.

Drawing on this considerable consultation experience and following partnership discussion, a solo performance of 'Doorbells' was created by Skimstone Arts, the content of which focused on the housing and support needs of:

- people who are ageing without children
- older people who have primary responsibility for their ageing relatives

We then planned and delivered a public performance of 'Doorbells' with a targeted audience, and participants were invited to take part in post-performance, facilitated group discussions. A short film involving themes and the main character from the performance has also been developed, shot on location within the character's home.



The film is freely available via:

www.skimstone.org.uk/doorbells-dreaming-for-the-future-film

Together with the accompanying resource pack, the film provides a legacy from the project in the form of a toolkit that can be shared and used more widely to facilitate conversations about how we prepare for decisions about our homes in later life.

The audience

The event was targeted as far as possible toward those who are ageing without children, and generations younger than those aged 55+ who are caring for ageing relatives. Efforts to recruit these groups in particular included: making the target audience clear on event flyers, holding the performance in the evening to enable those who work during the day to attend and disseminating the event through Ageing Without Children's social media pages and mailing.

An audience of 33 was achieved for the performance. We were successful in reaching a broad range of age groups, both men and women, and achieving representation from postcode districts from across Newcastle upon Tyne which vary in level of deprivation.

The performance

Doorbells - Dreaming for the Future, the iteration of the production used for the current project explores the multi-faceted experiences of home (as a castle, a



container, a prison) and centres on a key question: how do we imagine the future of where and how we will live? The production follows the character of Kathleen who, behind her own doorbell, navigates the challenges we all face as we grow older. What type of home will she live in? Who will she live with? What will she be able to afford? How will her social life change? Original songs and live soundscapes are developed to be playful and imaginative; we see Kathleen escape from reality into a world of books and stories and we explore some of the decisions she faces in her life in a humorous and sensitive way. At the same time, it aims to prompt the audience to think and talk more about the challenges we all confront as we age.

Doorbells, Dreaming for the future was created using real stories from a variety of contexts i.e. those in later years in a care home and day centre in a socio economically challenged areas of Newcastle from 2015 - 2018, also from an event organised for the original creation of Doorbells with Northumbria University research team.

Post show discussion and feedback

Of 33 audience members, 18 participated in three facilitated, post performance discussion groups. Table 1 shows the questions used to guide discussion. We drew on the expertise of academic partners from Northumbria University to devise, facilitate and analyse the findings from the discussions to ensure that findings properly reflected the discussions that took place.

Table 1: Post performance discussion questions

Focus	Content
Kathleen, the character	<p>1. Thinking about the character (as well as your own experiences), how much do we think about our future selves/homes throughout our lives?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of homes do we imagine we'll live in at different times throughout our lives? Why is this the case? • What kind of neighbourhoods – rural/urban? And why? • How important are connections in the community? In what ways and why?
Family structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might plans for our future homes be affected by our family structure, for example: • People ageing without children • People who are caring for relatives as they age themselves
Sources of Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sources of support do you think might be available/helpful for the character and others in her circumstances?
Aspirations versus reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often do you feel there is a gap between aspirations and reality when we're thinking about our future homes? E.g. between what we want versus what is available/affordable.
Planning for our future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's needed to help us better plan for and manage our housing needs and decisions as we grow older? (E.g. more accessible information etc.)

We also invited all audience members to complete a feedback post-card. Postcards asked for free text responses to the following question:

“How, if at all, has the performance prompted you to think more about where and how you might be living as you grow older?”

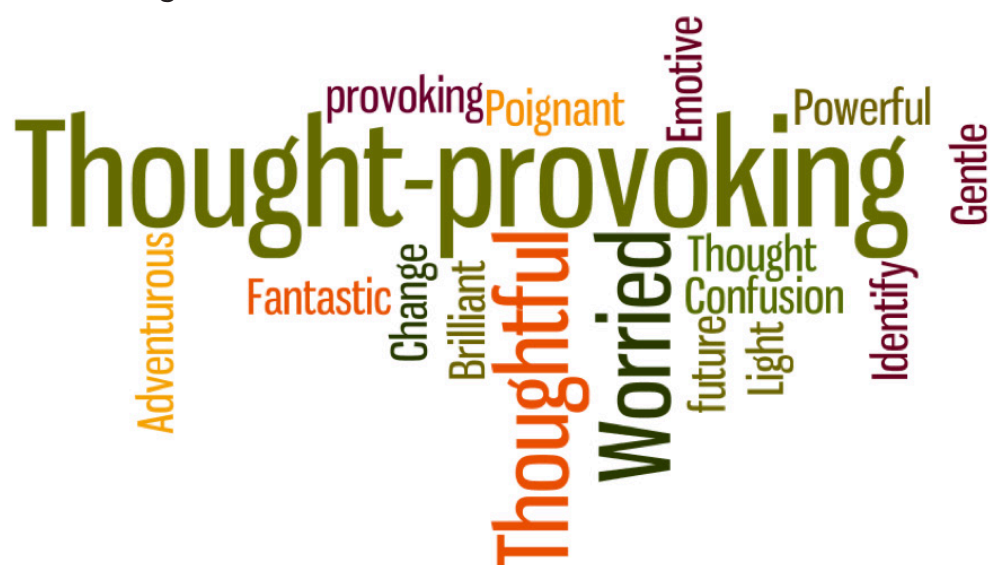


We received thirteen postcard responses. Postcard feedback was sorted according to themes, and their representative comments are incorporated into our below findings. Finally, people were offered the opportunity to add comments to displayed flip-chart paper, using Post-it notes. Comments received through these additional feedback mechanisms were incorporated into our analysis of the post-show conversation.

Key themes

At the start of each discussion group and in order to capture a sense of the immediate impact of the performance, each participant was asked to offer one word/phrase summing up their reaction to the production. This we capture in a Wordle, which is presented in Figure One below:

Figure One: Wordle



We wish to highlight the use of the words ‘worried’ and ‘confusion’ by participants as issues underpinning the discussion. That people enter later life in a state of worry or confusion about their future needs and options is likely to be detrimental to their quality of life, with this in turn pointing to the need for trusted and low cost resources to guide them through housing options and decisions in later life.

Key themes and their sub-themes are highlighted in Table 2. Under each of these we bullet common reflections raised within the discussion groups. Our discussion section offers a synopsis of our findings.

Table 2: Key Themes and their sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Planning ahead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpredictable and inevitable life changes • Need to take some control now • Ways to keep healthy • Accepting change • Expectations – retirement as a trigger • Intergenerational planning
Home and Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As we age what is suitable housing? • Later Life housing options and finances • Ageing without children • Inequities
Sources of Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None
Performance triggered reflections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The character, Kathleen • Moving into a care home • Being a good neighbour • Alone and lonely

A full illustration of the above sub-themes is available in the full report.

Key Findings

- This work has highlighted how unprepared people feel about making housing decisions for later life.
- Younger people also said they do not think about what they might need as they get older.
- People described a desire to take control of decisions about their future homes but a lack of appropriate and accessible information, as well as a shortage of appropriate housing, undermine their attempts to prepare.



- Learning about creative methods of public engagement to address this issue
- Development of a film and resource pack which provide guidance for others seeking to host similar events and conversations

Impact on policy and practice

- **Having conversations - the need to share information:** The performance and appetite for post show discussions demonstrated to Elders Council that people don't just need access to information and advice (of which there is a plethora, especially on-line). People need opportunities for conversation that enables them to explore options with others and in a 'safe' environment. This adds to the evidence that there is still a need for face to face or telephone advice. The recent closure of Age UK Newcastle and the loss of their advice and information service, leaves a significant gap in services for older people in the city. Elders Council will continue to raise this issue with both the Council and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). Newcastle City Council is working on a partnership with 'First Stop' (housing and care information and advice service) which will go some way to fill this gap, but more is needed.
- **Using theatre as an engagement tool:** The success of the initial performance has demonstrated the potential of using theatre as an effective tool for engagement, and all partners are committed to raising the funds to continue to develop this programme to engage a wider and more diverse range of older people, to help us to build up stronger evidence.

- **Influencing local policy and practice:** In the short timescale for the project, we have not been able to demonstrate immediate impact on influencing local policy and services. However, we have recognised that we have a powerful tool which we can use to further the work of the Elders Council and partners.

What next

Although interested, key Local Authority officers and politicians were not able to attend the first performance. Following the local elections, we have new portfolio holders for Housing and for Communities. Given the impact that we have seen from the live performance, we believe that it's important that politicians and officers have the opportunity to experience the performance and participate in post show discussion themselves, as we have seen the powerful impact this can have. It is our intention to invite the portfolio holders for Housing, Social Care and Communities to participate in a performance, and to use this as an opportunity to follow up with key recommendations for future developments.

And finally, due to the project's success, the partners – Elders Council, Skimstone Arts and Northumbria University – would like to further develop and share the issues and themes identified with an even wider audience, including key decision and policy makers. To this end, a tour of the live performance, extensive dissemination of the film version, along with a resource pack to facilitate conversations about the issues raised, are currently being developed.

The Partners

Elders Council of Newcastle

Elders Council was established as a forum for older people in Newcastle in 2001. Its key objectives are to provide a voice for older people in the city and to ensure that older people are well informed. Elders Council are active members of Newcastle's Age Friendly City initiative and regularly engage with decision-makers to influence policy and practice.

Northumbria University, Newcastle

Northumbria University is a research-rich, business-focussed, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence. Our research looks at shaping interventions that have impacts on a health, educational, behavioural, economic and social basis, at local, national and international levels.



Skimstone Arts

Skimstone Arts collaborates with diverse artists, researchers, individuals and communities, nationally and internationally. Our Ensemble creates and produces multi disciplinary touring theatre, film, music and exhibitions which reflect current social narratives, challenges and inspirations we face in today's diverse society.

We specialise in using artistic provocations, exploring our stories, and studio based practice with our Young Artist Collective (aged 16 to 25) and those in later years, and /or living with dementia, to respond to life themes that affect social change. This approach produces small to mid scale touring theatre or site specific and community performances and exhibitions.

Artistic Director/ performer Claire Webster Saaremets' professional practice reflects 20 years work and more than 50 collaborative artistic projects and commissions with more than 5,000 people of all ages, regionally and internationally.



Footnotes

1. Public Health England (2018) Improving health and care through the home: MoU. London: Public Health England
2. House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee (2018) Housing for Older People: Second Report of Session 2017-19. London: House of Commons
3. Bailey, C., Gilroy R., Reynolds, J., Douglas, B., Webster-Saaremets, C., Golan, M. (2018) Ageing in place: creativity and resilience in neighbourhoods in Goulding, A., Davenport, B. and Newman, A. (eds) (2018) Creative practice in the resilience of older people, Bristol, UK: Policy Press (In press)



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