

Nothing but a Number

Stoke-on-Trent, an Age-Friendly City

September 2024

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report is a collaboration between members of the Ageing Well Partnership, led by the Beth Johnson Foundation, Keele University, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and the University of Staffordshire. It is a result of an initiative by Jo Gideon, former Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent Central.

The report presents evidence from a summit held at the University of Staffordshire in September 2024 to inform the provision of innovative and inclusive environments for ageing populations in the city of Stoke-on-Trent. It consists of a review of achievements thus far, particularly that of the Age-Friendly City Board (AFC) from its inception in 2012 until its disestablishment in 2019. This incorporates the identification of the range of work currently underway in the third sector and amongst frontline health and social care practitioners, planners, researchers and commissioners. Finally, it offers recommendations for policy and practice across seven priority areas.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, special thanks to Professor Martin Jones, University of Staffordshire, who hosted the summit gratis and without whose support the event could not have taken place and, in particular, to Katie Turner, Events Team Manager, who ensured everything from parking to presentations went smoothly.

Summary

This report provides an account of a summit entitled "Nothing but a Number: Stoke-on-Trent: an Age-Friendly City", held at the University of Staffordshire on 9th September 2024, exploring the challenges and opportunities facing Stoke-on-Trent in becoming an Age-Friendly City. It consists of four parts: 1) a **Background** overview of population ageing, the policy context, the origin of the Summit and its aim and objectives; 2) **Findings** from the meeting based on presented accounts of practice, policy and research; and 3) **Recommendations** for next steps followed by 4) **Conclusions**.

1. Background

In line with global trends, the population of the UK is undergoing a fundamental change in its age structure, with many people having fewer children and living longer lives. As a result, the average age of the English population is increasing, and Stoke-on-Trent is no exception. This population change has implications across all generations. In response, the World Health Organisation has devised a policy framework to act as a guide in developing Age-Friendly environments that enable older people to: age safely in a place that is right for them; be free from poverty; continue to develop personally; and to contribute to their communities while retaining autonomy, health and dignity. This framework is reflected in the UK by the Network of Age-friendly Communities, of which Stoke-on-Trent is a member, and by various government briefings (see below for example[1]).

[1]https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0539/POST-PN-0539.pdf

It was against this background that the summit was planned by the then Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent Central (2019-2024), Jo Gideon. It was to coincide with the launch of her "Nothing but a Number" podcast and was due to be held in May 2024. However, the event was unable to go ahead because a General Election was called, and all parliamentary business prorogued. In addition, Jo took the decision not to stand for re-election. Consequently, an alternative organisational base was needed and the Beth Johnson Foundation (BJF) agreed to act as host on behalf of the Ageing Well Partnership. The event was held on 9th September 2024, with the following aim and objectives:

Aim: To identify next steps in achieving World Health Organisation Age-Friendly status for the city.

Objectives: To provide the basis for a city-wide action plan by:

- Identifying work to date.
- Identifying gaps and needs.
- Identifying assets, opportunities and resources.

In addition to residents, the summit gathered experts across health and social care, the arts, business, and the voluntary sector (n=65). Insights from the summit are intended as a starting point to inform innovative and reflexive approaches to developing an Age-Friendly vision to inform policies and practices across the city – and beyond.

"So, if you actually design an age -friendly community, an age -friendly environment, it benefits everybody..."

Jon Rouse, City Director,
Stoke on Trent City Council

2. Findings

2.1 **Work to date**: exploration of this highlighted three principal areas:

2.1.2 Stoke-on-Trent Age Friendly City (AFC) Board was established by the City Council in 2014, with the city joining the WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities the same year. These developments reflected at least three years preparatory work on the part of the Council in collaboration with the Beth Johnson Foundation, and in liaison with Manchester City Council. Exact details of the preparatory work – led by the Healthy City Programme Team, chaired by Judy Kurth, Health Improvement Principal, Social Determinants of Health - and indeed the operation of the Board itself (i.e. minutes etc), are almost wholly unavailable despite search efforts at the City Council. Minutes from only one meeting of the Board (January 2018) have been found. Nonetheless, outputs included:

- Age-Friendly City Board Constitution.
- Older People's Charter.
- Customer service training for Council staff and transport providers.
- "Take a Seat" campaign for seating in public areas to enable community engagement.
- Engagement with local businesses including Steelite to support the award of 'Age-Friendly' status.
- Developed and produced a range of Age-Friendly promotional materials, including leaflets, posters, car stickers etc.

All outputs are available on request to the Beth Johnson Foundation.

The Board was disbanded with immediate effect following the 2019 local elections, with no political party having overall control of the City Council. COVID 19 (from March 2020) must be added as another disruptive factor.

2.1.3 The Ageing Well Partnership consists of 15 partner organisations across the city, working with communities to address basic needs from housing, health and social care support to strategies to combat loneliness

and isolation, to enabling engagement with the arts and nurturing both individual and community happiness. A survey (2023) of local community members' views of challenges around ageing (n=219) highlighted six themes: safety and feeling safe, housing, accessible resources/information, transport, community services, and social engagement. These views, perhaps linked to the importance of social engagement, were framed within an overarching emphasis on celebrating local history, and the national and global heritage and continuing impact of Stoke-on-Trent, industrially and culturally.

2.1.4 Research in ageing: presentations from a variety of leading researchers (at both universities) and representatives from health and social care, highlighted the breadth of international expertise and knowledge in applied bio-psycho-social research into ageing available locally.

2.2 **Gaps and needs**: The patchy details around the AFC Board point to the need to maintain adequate records going forward. The importance of having collaborative and accountable leadership and clear direction was also emphasised. It was agreed that the current situation highlights gaps in 5 domains where opportunities for improvement should be grasped:

2.2.1 The city vision for older people needs to be more strongly articulated.

2.2.2 The city-wide strategy for older people needs to be better envisioned and connected.

2.2.3 There are excellent opportunities for strategic political, civic and cross-sectoral collaboration.

2.2.4 There are presently gaps in (but excellent opportunities for) collaborative leadership between the City Council and other sectors that will need to be both coordinated and accountable.

2.2.5 The city infrastructure offers valuable assets but also gaps in provision and opportunity: the need is to develop an action plan with a commitment to evaluation and futureproofing.

These assets and opportunities but also gaps are reflected in the recent "Futures 100 Prospectus: Shaping Our City, Growth for All", published

since the Summit by the City Council (February 2025)[2]. The document highlights five missions to support sustainable growth : economic growth; clean energy/sustainable transport/the environment; regenerating the city; removing barriers to opportunity; and improving health and wellbeing.

Whilst it emphasises the inter-dependence of the five missions, the document mentions ageing and older people in only one: 'Improving health and well-being'. Within that mission "older people in residential care" is listed a key factor to be addressed. In doing this, Stoke-on-Trent will become "an exemplar age-friendly city where older people benefit from high-quality homes, local amenities and care and support whenever and wherever they need it." (p.26). This will be achieved by: "Delivering a comprehensive and integrated 'ageing well' programme through the Integrated Care System (ICS), combining prevention, timely assessment, single plans and proactive frailty management, as well as an emphasis on suitable housing provision and effective dementia care." (p.27). These are indeed urgent needs in addressing inequalities. However, as the summit demonstrated, such a narrow focus is only part of the story. It risks presenting ageing as a deficit unless it also incorporates strategies to innovatively build on the positive impacts and potential of an older population at an economic[3] and a strategic level in the short, medium and long terms[4]. Only in doing so, can Stoke-on-Trent become an "exemplar age-friendly city".

2.3 Assets and resources: there is global (e.g. WHO) and national (e.g. Centre for Ageing Better and UK government[5]) acknowledgement of population ageing and the need to develop age-friendly policies and practices. There are a number of local resources that can be drawn on:

2.3.1 The Ageing Well Partnership offers community-based reach across the city. In addition, its constituent member organisations offer further reach through their various national (and international) networks.

2.3.2. The Beth Johnson Foundation has built a reputation for listening to, learning from, and sharing older people's stories of ageing to build a future for all ages by pushing for positive changes in local communities.

[2] https://www.stoke.gov.uk/cityprospectus
[3] https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/ageing-silver-lining-exec-1cb.pdf
[4] https://www.ageinternational.org.uk/policy-research/expert-voices/the-positive-impacts-of-an-ageing-population/
[5] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/the-uks-changing-population/

The Foundation has a wide range of engagement activities across the city, working closing with individuals, communities, and other organisations.

2.3.3 Researchers in ageing at both local universities have expertise such that their work is not only nationally but globally recognised. Much of their work is rooted in the challenges facing local communities in the city, and the applicability of the findings to diverse communities across the globe is internationally recognised, with consequent impact.

2.3.4 Manchester is an international example of an Age-Friendly City. It was the first city in the UK, one of nine globally, to join the WHO Network of Age-Friendly Cities. The on-going support offered by the Manchester Ageing Hub team - originating in the research/evidence-based training and education offered by the (then) Centre for Social Gerontology at Keele University - is an enormous resource, both in terms of understanding 'lessons learned' and innovative responses at political, policy, service and research levels, not least.

2.3.5 Despite the paucity of documentation relating to the workings of the AFC Board, there are a number of documents that may be helpful to revisit and build-on, including:

- The City Council Cabinet AFC report August 2012 by Tony Oakman, then Director of Adult Services, and Zafar Iqbal, Acting Director of Public Health (based on a 2011 survey and report to the Council from the Beth Johnson Foundation).
- City Council Policy Performance and Intelligence Population Change 2017 report: 'A review of the state of ageing in Stoke-on-Trent'.
- The AFC Board's 'Older People's Charter' and Constitution.

3. Recommendations

Establish an organisational framework to develop Stoke-on-Trent as an Age-Friendly City that promotes health and is designed for diversity, inclusion, and cohesion, across all ages, ethnicities, genders and capacities, using the following mechanisms:

1. Leadership: Identify and consolidate clear opportunities for collaboration and clear lines of accountability between the City Council and other key partnerships, such as the Ageing Well Partnership.
2. Future proofing: Clear lines of accountability, methods and timelines for evaluation, and mechanisms to ensure transparency.
3. Organising: Convene stakeholders to inform the overarching strategy, deliverables and timelines.
4. Adding value: Identify and review current City Council and sector-specific (for example, the cultural sector) policies and strategies; take action to align where there are gaps in relation to Age-Friendliness; attract resources to work together with collaborators on issues of joint interest.
5. Influencing: Engage with local and (inter-) national partners to bring an ageing lens to mainstream policies and programmes, including strategies for media engagement and dissemination of activities and impact.
6. Enabling: Act as a platform for views and participation of older people in Stoke-on-Trent
   e.g: https://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/200091/life_over_50/8387/get_involved_with_age_friendly_manchester
7. Collaborating: Combine business, research, policy and implementation, including opportunities for embedded research to maximise impact in all three domains at a variety of levels, from undergraduate research projects through to UK Research and Innovation and National Institute for Health and Care Research programme funding.
8. Challenging: Promote a narrative that a) challenges ageism and b) focuses on those groups of older people who face the worst inequalities.

4. Conclusions

Ageism is endemic amongst us all, highlighted as a major challenge by the World Health Organisation [6] [7] and is widespread and accepted in our attitudes, policies, laws and institutions. Any initiatives arising from the summit will be threatened unless they are underpinned by education and training to combat such ageism.

As a result of the summit and the gaps identified, The Beth Johnson Foundation has already begun archiving the work of the Age Friendly Board with the intention of making this publicly available, together with the full report of the summit.

In addition to highlighting challenges in making Stoke-on-Trent age-friendly, the summit celebrates enormous achievements in the face of rapidly disappearing resources and changes in leadership. In doing so, it highlights the wealth of local expertise accrued over many years and which clear leadership can bring to bear in moving forward.

[6] https://www.who.int/news/item/18-03-2021-ageism-is-a-global-challenge-un
[7] https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combatting-ageism/global-report-on-ageism