Stories From The Six Towns:

The lived experiences of older people in Stoke on Trent



















Sue Read, CEO, the Beth Johnson Foundation, 2025

BJF Championing Positive Ageing

City of Stoke-on-Trent

With grateful thanks

This report describes a short but powerful project conducted by members of the Beth Johnson Foundation, and funded by Stoke on Trent city council, as part of their centenary celebrations in 2025.

This project could not have happened without the generous support of older members of Stoke on Trent, who gave their time so freely and shared their stories so proudly. St Johns Primary School, Penkull, as always supported their young children and their staff to be actively involved in this work. Such intergenerational approaches are extremely powerful ways of integrating the past with the future and ensuring the legacy of experiences can pass on to generations in so many different, creative and fun ways.

Personal thanks to Philip Hardaker, a good friend and wonderful ceramicist who has legacies across the city in many different buildings, parks and schools. Philip meets and engages with people of all ages, works his magic, and something unique and exciting inevitably happens.

Thank you all so much; your thoughts, memories and ideas will inform the next chapter and future generations of the city of Stoke on Trent.



Sue Read,

CEO, the Beth Johnson Foundation.

Storytelling is *'…part of the fabric of our society, culture, family and personal life…can be part of recreation, rehabilitation, and therapy. It is essential for mental health and wellbeing'*.

(Jennings, 2005: 27)

Introduction

The experiences of older adults are recognised as important, whether from a care facility perspective (Scheffalar, Janssen & Luijkx, 2021; Cook & Brown-Wilson, 2010), personal perspectives of lived experiences (Fudge *et al,* 2007) or as co-researchers (Durose *et al*, 2011; Buffel, 2018). Older people's voices and lived experiences can help to inform personal and responsive services, can actively contribute to policy and policy design, and can contribute to meaningful and creative research approaches to promote understanding (Wight -Bevans, 2020).

There is also a developing evidence base around the importance of intergenerational activities, such as helping vulnerable adults and increased community cohesion. Importantly intergenerational approaches are the most effective ways to reduce ageism against older people. Intergenerational practice creates opportunities for people of all ages to connect with each other, help spark new relationships, strengthens communities, and builds on the positive resources people of all ages have to offer each other (Who, 2024). These reasons have fundamentally informed the direction, content and format of this short evaluation to celebrate 100 years of living in the city of Stoke on Trent particularly from an older person's perspective.

According to the United nations, there is still limited access to good quality, affordable and equitable care that supports us to make the most of our longer lives – no matter who we are, where we live, or how old we are (UN Decade of Healthy Ageing progress report, 2021–2023). Therefore, anything we can do to address the inequities throughout the ageing process is worth doing, with intergenerational activities playing a useful role across this ageing continuum.

Overarching aims

As part of the 100 years celebration of the City (2025) we were invited by the local council to engage with local older community members to identify changes across the century through reflections and storytelling. Additionally, we recognised an intergenerational opportunity to explore the hopes and aspirations from our younger generation to inform where we want to be in the future. This short project involved a three phased approach:

Phase one: Aim

To interview older community members across the six towns of Stoke on Trent about their memories of growing up in the city.

Phase two: Aim

To adopt an intergenerational approach to share stories from older community members with children from St Johns CE(A) Primary School, Penkhull. Primarily, this involved two workshops which provided an opportunity to reflect on the past whilst simultaneously considering the future of what the younger generation want to see happen in Stoke on Trent: capturing their dreams and aspirations in meaningful ways.

Phase three: Aim

To develop a creative legacy to commemorate the centenary celebrations for older and younger members through intergenerational working across the ages. Philip Hardaker, a local renown ceramicist, was commissioned to facilitate the creation of two mosaics, one for the BJF, one for St Johns Primary School.

Recruitment

Members from the BJF used their established extensive links to invite older adults from across the six towns to become involved and also attended group meetings to inform local people what was happening and how they could tell their stories of living in the City. Recruitment was conducted using an informative flier (see Appendix 1).

Consent

Consent is always important when engaging and consulting with all individuals, especially around sensitive issues such as storytelling. A consent form was designed at the Beth Johnson Foundation for older members involved (see Appendix 2) where individuals were informed about the nature of, and rational for, the interviews. Permission to use their stories and take a photograph in their preferred venue, was sought. The School facilitated the consent process for children and their parents including existing processes for the permission of photography and filming.

Methods

Phase 1.

Using an intergenerational, narrative ethnographic approach to understanding the shared stories, we interviewed eight older people across the six towns of Stoke on Trent (Stoke, Fenton, Hanley, Burslem, Tunstall, Longton) in a variety of chosen venues.

Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and a thematic content analysis of all interviews and stories was subsequently conducted by one person. Direct quotations and associated photographs to illustrate the lived experiences of the older person were used to illuminate the individual and collective characters and personalities of those interviewed.

An interview schedule was developed in conjunction with Council members (see Appendix 3) which included 10 open questions to promote consistency of approach and provide a flexible plan of engagement. At each interview, individuals were asked if they would like to become involved in Phases 2 & 3 of the project and give permission to be contacted at a later date. Everyone agreed to be contacted and be involved in these later stages.

Phase 2.

We organised two workshops (1.5 hours each) at Parkfield House, during June, with older community members sharing their experiences and younger primary school children to explore hopes and dreams for the future.

The first workshop involved the older community members describing their experiences and sharing their stories (based on some of the earlier interviews). Workshop two focussed on the children identifying their hopes and dreams for the future in Stoke on Trent.

The workshops were filmed to capture the essence of the work and to produce a short celebratory film that explains the content and process of the work undertaken.

Phase 3.

Three workshop dates were organised to take place at St John's CE(A) Primary School, Penkhull, during May-June. Initially, a short introductory session was organised for the ceramicist to talk about what the work would involve and to explore with participants (older and younger people) ideas of what they might want to include in the design of their tile to inspire thought and ideas.

Following this, two full day workshops were organised at the School where participants could drop in and design their tiles and an additional workshop was organised for older people to continue making their tiles at Parkfield House.

A final session was arranged a few weeks later at St John's CE(A) Primary School for children and older people to paint their tiles in preparation for the ceramicist to design the final mosaic.

This report will focus solely on Phase 1 of this work, the interviews, however we have included a small selection of photographs from all three phases in the photo gallery.

Photo Gallery Phase 1. Interviews with older community members



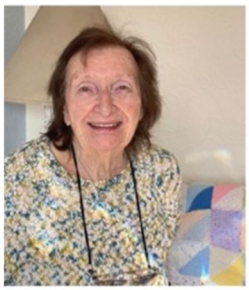







Photo Gallery Phase 2. Intergenerational storytelling sessions





Photo Gallery Phase 3. Tile-making Workshops




Interview participants

Eight people were recruited and interviewed. Those interviewed comprised of four males and four females: six individuals and one married couple. Their ages ranged from 64 to 96, with a mean age of just over 85 years. Seven of the participants were over the age of 70 years. Interviews were conducted in a place of the participant's choosing, and included private homes (1), a nursing home (1), community venues (4) and one on-line due to ill-health but eagerness to become involved.

Analysis and discussion

The interviews lasted between 55-75 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. What follows is a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts.

The analysis of the seven interviews and associated sub themes are presented as Table one, where seven themes emerged and a number of sub-categories identified within the themes.

Table one: Thematic analysis of interviews (N=7)

Themes	Categories
Social cohesion	Attachments Community mindedness Neighbourliness Maintaining friendships over time Generosity of local people Faith
Pride	Fierce loyalty Pleasure Volunteering Working through adversity Staying power The arts, lots but now seem to be reducing
Belonging	Through living and working Staying put '*Green and pleasant land*' Vivid memories Nostalgia Looking out for each other
Simplistic stories	Fewer motor vehicles Freedom and safety to play Sharing resources (houses, food, toys, transport) Children's harmless mischief making
Changes	Movement: • Transient people

	• Rules of respect • Quiet and sneaky • We got old • More traffic -less barges! • World has become smaller Accessibility: • Increased autonomy and freedom • Integrated ethnicity • Improvements for disabled people • Computers and IT • Jobs were plentiful Busyness of life: • Creating time to relax (do nothing!) • Limited spontaneity • Everything is planned • Vandalism has reduced • Movement away from Christian teaching
Health and well being	Dying younger Understanding and recognising difference Stigma Hardship: • Inherent sense of loss • Death • Family trauma • Stress • Forced retirement • Life limiting conditions • Broken relationships • Pending mortality
Messages for the future	Pride: • Be proud of your heritage • There's a lot to be proud of • Be proud of the people • Love where you are Personal: • Believe in yourself, you can achieve anything • Be flexible • Be happy • Take each day as it comes • Take each day as it comes • Don't grow old! • Be yourself • It's a big enough world for all of us • Look for something good in people • You get nowhere unless you work • Work but enjoy life • Put your tele-comms away…

In addition to the data specifically from the thematic analysis, a number of demographic details are worth mentioning. Of the eight people interviewed, three still happily lived in the house / street they had been born in.

> I grew up in Fenton,
> I still live in Fenton,
> I don't want to live
> anywhere else.
> I love Fenton.

All the family groups of those interviewed consisted of four family members (parents plus two siblings) with the exception of one five-member family, including a sibling who died early. Geographic reach was small, with a trip to London to visit relatives often seen as a great adventure and a rare treat. Such parochialism is still apparent today, with many people visiting international places for work or pleasure but always returning to Stoke on Trent.

A sense of social belonging was strong with people making attachments that, for some, lasted 60 years or more. That sense of belonging grew through living and working across the city, and one person described it as once being his '*Green and pleasant land*'. Many years ago, movement of neighbours was minimal, so children played together, adults grew up together, with some growing old together too. The lack of traffic meant that children played freely and safely in the local streets together. It seemed usual for a street to have one family with a car, and that family became the nominated drivers when accidents required medical attention. This was often described as a strong feeling of community mindedness, of neighbourliness, where you knew everyone and could always rely on help if you needed it.

Families and neighbours were closely interwoven, but you could also be alone if you preferred. There were no 'rules' but etiquette evolved as you grew with your family and those around you. There seemed to be a sense of fierce loyalty about living in the city, with no one interviewed regretting their lives in Stoke on Trent at all.

Everyone had clear memories of people, of family life, of routines, and were quickly transported back to their yesteryears as they reflected on their past and how it was to live in Stoke on Trent.

> Everybody got on
> with one another.

Housing was very different, with no heating (in most) or electricity (in some cases), no indoor toilets, and most remembering the day they finally had a TV, as the radio was the main form of communication in the early days. Football was still the 'international language'.

Some reflected on the unwritten etiquette of hierarchy in the home, that no longer exists. For example, you never read the newspaper until the 'man of the house' had read it first; you never helped yourself to Sunday tea (sandwiches) until the 'man of the house' had chosen his food first; extra meat was always provided to those male workers supporting the house.

Probably the unwritten, unchallenged rituals surrounding respect. Having paper copies of newspapers is fast diminishing with social media and cheaper on-line access, anyway. One person fondly remembered harmless mischief making, as many homeowners were very houseproud, and their front doorstep was regularly painted white. One person described how the pristine step was '*simply crying out for a muddy boot print to break up the whiteness'*!

Those interviewed nostalgically remembered school years, most of which were described as enjoyable, with the exception of one person who went to boarding school, where the way of life was very different and often painful. Many remembered teachers and fellow student names and gave examples of the fun and the difficult times experienced.

With many families remaining static, and only moving because of work, stories of sharing resources (food, toys, transport, clothing, child minding etc.) helped people to work through adversity and challenges and engendered a sense of belonging, as one person reflected that '*What really struck me was the generosity of spirit of local people…*'. Houses often had multiple occupancy to save money.

Work seemed to be plentiful in the earlier years, and of the eight people interviewed, the majority held professional positions, including teaching, caring, finance, council work, engineering, driving, and traffic management. One person who used to be a teacher in the creative arts was passionate and spoke proudly about the historical creative arts opportunities across the city, and felt privileged to have been part of this development. However, he worried now that such creative art opportunities weren't generally being protected and were dwindling, so that he feared for the future.

> "The streets may not be paved with gold in Stoke but if we can keep young talents here it benefits the community."

Considering that the interviews were with retired community members, it was interesting (but not surprising) that six of those interviewed were involved in volunteering roles. Some were leading initiatives (such as OLGBT group; North Staffordshire Pensioners Convention), and some had multiple roles in different volunteering capacities (supporting dementia initiatives; facilitating Bereavement Friendship Groups; the church; supporting Tea and Tech programmes).

> "I'm sure I get more out of it than the people I help."

Generally, many volunteers are of the older age group since they probably have more time to volunteer, but there are often other reasons such as they perhaps want to give something back for a life well lived; or wanting to share the skills learned during their years of vast experiences.

The majority of changes experienced by the interviewees focussed on movement, accessibility and the general busyness of life.

> If I didn't have any voluntary work now, I think I'd just be sitting at home, watching the telly and drooling in the corner! I'm busy, but I love it!

Families are no longer as static with movement centred around work opportunities, better or bigger houses, or growing families.

The married couple talked about '*More cars, less barges*!' and how noisier life had become as '*We got old*'. Older community members thought that the world seemed smaller, with travel more easily accessible. Whilst some grumbled about the growing use of IT, mobile telephones, media and computers, one person recognised that it had significantly changed her life. As someone with a visual impairment, computers enabled her to learn, to attend college, and were simply '*…a Godsend*!' as she wasn't taught to write in the traditional manner.

Accessibility was seen as better, with improved attitudes to differentness and disability noteworthy and more integrated opportunities, '*People are more sympathetic*'. There was a general sense of integrated ethnicity, increased autonomy and freedom of participation in work and social spaces and places.

Interestingly, a key change was about the busyness of life, and one person reminded us that nowadays, life is so busy that we have lost the spontaneity of just doing something when we fancy it and that we now have to '*create time just to do nothing*!'. An interesting concept, but very true in the stark reality of life. Of the eight people interviewed, five were practicing Christians, and there was a concern that there was a move away from faith and Christian teaching, which is worrying.

From a health and wellbeing perspective, there was an inherent feeling of loss across the ages as interviewees described a range of areas of hardship that they had overcome. As one ages, inevitable deaths increase, and family trauma, stress, forced retirement due to ill health, and living with life limiting and life changing conditions were changes difficult to live with.

Whilst the married couple had both experienced and overcome cancer, they described their treatment as good, and were happy to have survived such life-threatening conditions. The wife was now living with dementia and was living in a care home because of the deteriorating condition, but her husband visited her regularly and still lived in their family home. The love between these two people was almost palpable as they described their life together, and their happiness at still being together after so many years.

> We've had a good life, haven't we duck!

Conclusion

It was indeed a privilege to have been able to meet, talk and record the stories from this small group of older community members across the six towns of Stoke on Trent. They let me into their lives and were delighted to tell me their experiences as they grew up. They shared their stories and experiences so freely and proudly; happy to reflect and leave their legacy of a life well lived.

I always concluded the interviews by asking people to leave messages for the future community members of the city, and their comments truly reflect their pride on being part of the city over the last century. It feels fitting to end with their messages for the future people of Stoke on Trent:

> Be proud of your heritage – there's a lot to be proud of!
>
> Love where you are!
>
> Be happy!
>
> Be proud of the people because it's the people that make Stoke on Trent, in my way of thinking.
>
> It's a big enough world for all of us!

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Appendix one. Recruitment

Stories of Stoke



Join our session and share your stories Celebrating 100 years of Stoke on Trent.



The Beth Johnson Foundation are working with St John's CE(A) Primary School and with our older community members, to share stories together.



Venue: Parkfield House,
64 Princes Road, ST4 7JL
on (date to be confirmed)



You can also share stories on film for the Stoke on Trent Centenary Celebrations.

Places are limited so please phone or email to book your place.



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Appendix two. Consent form

Photo, video & Audio permission form

At the Beth Johnson Foundation we produce a wide range of materials to tell people about our services and for our work. From time to time, we require photographic images (moving and still) and/or audio clips of subjects, which we use to enhance and illustrate our media applications to make them more accessible and inspiring for our audiences.

We are also sometimes asked by other organisations to help them produce content that reflects our mutual aims, supported by the involvement of our community members. As part of the 100 years celebration of the City of Stoke-on-Trent (2025) we want to engage with local older people to identify changes across the century through reflective storytelling.

By completing this form, you give us full permission to use these images/recordings and any personal information you supply to us in our media applications/partner content, which reasonably promotes or advertise our aims. (This may include our printed publications; Website, social media, adverts; audiovisual and electronicmaterials; media work; display materials; and any other media we may use in the future.) They will not be used for any other purpose.

Thank you or your help.

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Please state here if there are any ways in which you do NOT want us to use any photos/video/audio captured today:			
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Appendix three. Interview schedule

Aim

As part of the 100 years celebration of the City (2025) we want to engage with local older people to identify changes across the century through reflective storytelling, and explore the hopes and aspirations from our younger generation to inform where we want to be in the future. Using an intergenerational, narrative ethnographic approach to understanding the shared stories, this will involve:

- Tell me about where you grew up

- What do you remember most about your neighbourhood?

- Describe for me the street where you lived?

- Who was in your family?

- What do you recall about the working life?

- What has changed most over the years?

- What do you miss most from those yesterdays?

- What's better in your life now?

- How has your health and wellbeing changed over the years and what help have you received around this?

- What messages would you give to younger people growing up in Stoke today?