

AN OLDER PERSON FRIENDLY CITY CENTRE

Report from a Working Group

December 2006

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INTRODUCTION

Assessing the 'older person friendliness' of Newcastle City Centre has been the focus of a Working Group of the Elders Council for the past four years. Why did we set ourselves this task? And why start with the City Centre? We were, of course, concerned about the implications of the forecasts of increasing longevity and changes in the population structure. Social policy has also concentrated on promoting independent living in our own homes for as long as possible. If more older people are to have full, active lives within their communities then we need 'older person friendly' environments where we can move around safely and easily. The City Centre was the starting point for our work because it is a focus for the commercial and cultural life of the City, and because we were aware that developments are being planned.

An Interim Report published in 2003 summarised conclusions and recommendations arising from an audit of facilities that contribute to ease of access, comfort and pleasure at being out and about in the city centre. The first section of this report gives an update on what we have been able to do to follow up these recommendations.

Following this first stage of the Working Group's programme, members have moved on to survey buildings in the city centre which are important in the commercial and cultural life of the city. From our first survey of the experiences and opinions of members, we knew that shopping is one of the main reasons for visits to the city centre. A further questionnaire to members about visits to cultural facilities produced more information about what is of most interest. So we have concentrated observations and investigations on the public buildings in the city that are most frequently visited.

The method used throughout the study has been for older people themselves to assess the streets, the buildings and the amenities of the city through direct observation, using a checklist of the points of interest. Wherever possible, visits to buildings were unannounced but followed up by letter if necessary.

The findings from this second stage of our enquiries are set out in the sections on Shops and Shopping Malls; Banks, Post Offices; Recreation and Leisure; Museums, Art Galleries and Libraries; Theatres, Cinemas and Concert Halls.

Our aim was to provide a comprehensive assessment of the 'older person friendliness' of the city centre. It has been noticeable during the course of our work that change is occurring all the time and that even greater changes are pending. At the same time older people continue to form a growing proportion of the city's population. Our city has been variously designated a party city, a city of culture, a regional commercial centre, a learning city and now a science city. Whatever the future holds, we should like it to be a socially inclusive and 'older person friendly' city.

OUT AND ABOUT IN THE CITY CENTRE

The Interim Report of 2003 set out the findings from an audit of the basic facilities in the City Centre which respondents to a members' survey said either helped or hindered free movement and enjoyment. We therefore concentrated first on public transport into the City Centre; pedestrian access into and around the City Centre; streets and street furniture; open spaces; public lavatories; signposting and information.

A presentation to the City Centre Panel was followed up by meetings with officers of the Council to discuss recommendations on the following points.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

- Public transport is the main way that older people travel into the City Centre. Congestion at bus stops, the design of buses, changes to bus routes, access to Metro stations, all have an impact on easy movement into and around the city. There have been some improvements in the spacing of bus stops. A major development has been the Quaylink bus service, using easy-access electric buses and providing a link between the City Centre and the social and cultural facilities of the Quaysides. Members of the Working Group were impressed by the design of the buses when invited to a trial run. For the future, we can see a role for this type of bus to provide a link with all cultural facilities in the city, not just the Quayside, and including the Leisure and Learning activities for older people at MEA House in Ellison Place.
- Concessionary travel has always been an important factor in enabling older people to be out and about. In 2006 the introduction of free bus travel, together with a Metro Gold Card (costing £8 per annum) has been widely welcomed, but pleasure has been tempered by announcements of reductions to bus services, and withdrawal of concessions for some other age groups. Re-routing and withdrawal of some services has deprived residents in certain areas of direct links with essential facilities such as hospitals.

BUS STATIONS

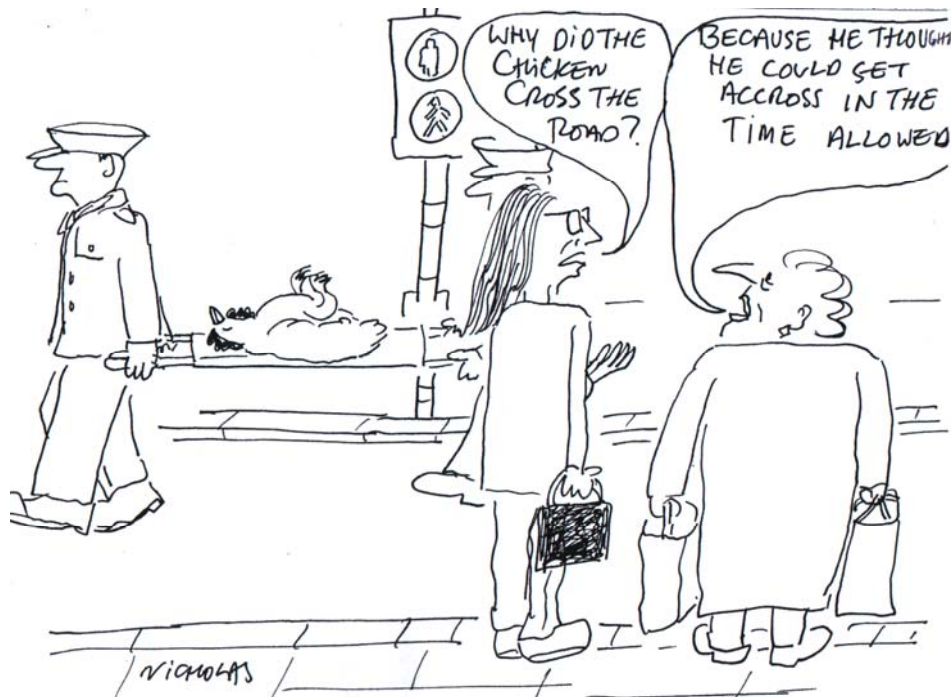
- Members of Working Groups have also been involved in commenting on the design of bus stations. We found the refurbishment of the Haymarket Bus Station resulted in real improvements. Plans for a new bus station to replace the Percy Street bus station under the Eldon Centre, were welcomed and studied with interest, with a chance to comment on the layout, and the type and design of amenities for passengers. In contrast the Coach Station in St James Boulevard, which replaces the former Gallowgate Bus Station, has been criticised, mainly because of its distance from other public transport routes. Although there are some amenities for travellers, e.g. a waiting room with seats, toilets, refreshments, they have restricted opening times and so are not available for passengers arriving and departing outside those hours.

PEDESTRIAN ACCESS

- Pedestrian crossing times into and within the City Centre are a cause for anxiety, especially for slower-moving people of all ages. To supplement the comments in the Interim Report, a member of the working group made precise checks on 'green man time' on all the main pedestrian crossings. The findings were discussed with an officer of the City Council who gave a full explanation of the regulations governing the various types of crossing. The Working Group persisted in asking for extended crossing time especially at two busy crossings and succeeded in gaining an extra 5 seconds at one of them. It was stressed that when the green man disappears, there is still 8 - 12 seconds before traffic can move. This reassurance has been passed on to members, but anxiety levels remain high.



- The issue of further pedestrianisation in the City Centre has been discussed in Working Groups. Although walking around traffic-free streets is a pleasure for most of us, for people who cannot walk very far it is important that bus stops, Metro stations, taxi ranks and disabled parking bays are close to pedestrian areas.



STREETS AND STREET FURNITURE

- A systematic survey of City Centre streets in 2002 concentrated on the state of pavements and cleanliness. It was noted that the main streets are well maintained and clean. Litter was observed in some places, e.g. under seats, and in back lanes which mechanical street cleaners do not reach. We had also noted the high standard of paving in the historic centre and in Graingertown but were concerned about broken paving stones in other areas, and the cobbled roadways in the older streets (e.g. Pudding Chare). In subsequent discussions with officers of the City Council, the problems of maintaining streets to a high standard of cleanliness and of ensuring that pavements have safe, level surfaces were explained. Informal observation since the original surveys suggests that the City Council gives priority to these issues, but there still seems to be no solution to the question of chewing gum carelessly discarded on to pavements. It is regretted that public money

has to be spent on costly cleaning equipment, which may also damage the grouting of paving stones as well as tarmac surfaces.

We consider that it should not be beyond human ingenuity to find solutions, e.g. effective cleaning machines and/or a programme to influence human behaviour.

- The design of street furniture is of concern to residents and visitors. Well designed railings, lamp posts and waste bins can all be pleasing to the eye as well as being useful, but it is helpful for pedestrians with visual impairments to know where they are, e.g. by using luminous strips.
- The design and the number of seats on streets is a major concern for shoppers requiring a short sit down and/or anyone wanting to sit for longer to observe the street scene or talk to a friend. It seems there is no single design for public seating that pleases everyone e.g. the poetry benches in Grey Street are attractive to some but repellent to others who dislike the cold surface.
- The appearance of streets is important for everyone, for instance, floral displays in the summer are attractive and are appreciated. Pavement cafes add to the liveliness of the streets, as do street entertainers. For older people, safety has to be a paramount consideration. Fear of falling on uneven pavements or of tripping over obstructions in the hustle and bustle can be a deterrent to coming into the City Centre. Even a minor fall can have serious consequences for an older person. It is therefore important that promoting good design of street furniture and encouraging lively activity in the streets always includes safety considerations.

OPEN SPACES

- The Working Group's surveys of open spaces showed that open spaces in the City Centre although few in number are popular with workers and visitors who enjoy a break in a pleasant green area. Two main areas with outdoor seating, Old Eldon Square and the garden around St Thomas's Church/Civic Centre, both include war memorials. It was noted at the time of the surveys that there was a conflict of interest between those citizens appreciating a tranquil green area and younger people wanting space for lively activities such as skateboarding. The creation of a skateboard park at

the entrance to Exhibition Park was a welcome development and provides an alternative to using city streets and squares. It appears to be well used and gives encouragement for the promotion of further facilities for young people.

- Members of the Elders Council have since been involved in consultation about the re-development of Old Eldon Square. The blank facades of the shopping centre on the north and west sides of the Square will be opened up for cafes and shops to have direct access into the Square with new footpaths crossing the Square. There is at present some conflict of interest in the use of the Square because groups of younger people meeting there are found to be intimidating by other pedestrians wishing to pass through or to sit in the Square.

In considering this proposal members of the Elders Council were concerned about preserving the character of the Square and about even a small loss of green space. There is agreement, however, that improvements are needed and that there should be no restrictions on access to the Square by young people. Open spaces should be available to all citizens, young as well as old, who wish to sit or walk around and enjoy legitimate activities in a pleasant green space. A solution may be to provide an alternative meeting place for young people.

PUBLIC LAVATORIES

- A thorough survey of public lavatories in the City Centre found that on the whole they were clean and well maintained. The main criticism was that there are not enough, especially in certain busy areas like the Quayside. Overnight provision is limited to automated toilets in the Haymarket, Watergate (Quayside) and Percy Street Bus Station.
- Toilets on private premises (shops, cafes, pubs) are well used but are meant for customers and are available only during business hours. Since the surveys there has been contact with national organisations such as the British Toilet Association, and Help the Aged, who are campaigning about inadequate provision. We were surprised to discover that there is no legal requirement for Local Authorities to provide public lavatories, in spite of the insanitary conditions of back

lanes in the City Centre resulting from lack of provision. A recent ministerial statement implied that there is unlikely to be legislation to enforce improvements.



- The Working Group has debated this matter several times, has studied the evidence of excellent provision by some Local Authorities, and has considered the suggestions put forward by the British Toilet Association, and other bodies, that the aim should be to subsidise the private sector to open up their provision to non-customers. Older people are certainly reluctant to go into a busy pub to ask to use a toilet! So members still consider that public provision is essential not only for the comfort and convenience of all citizens but also to maintain streets in a sanitary condition.



- In the Interim Report attention was drawn to incorrect information on the City Map which still gave locations of public toilets which had been closed for several years. It was a small achievement to get this corrected on later editions of the map. The major target of increased provision still eludes us.

SIGNPOSTING AND INFORMATION

- In surveys it was noted that 'fingerposts' at street junctions indicate directions to the main buildings in the City Centre. For 'other locations' there is a direction to look at the small map attached to the post. Members of the Working Group have observed better signposting systems in other cities. Large maps, with large print, are often strategically placed in town centres and provide an alternative way to giving information. Reference has already been made to updating the City Map which is distributed to visitors and to residents, but there is room for further improvements. The GOSIP information point at the lower end of Northumberland Street is disappointing as, even when it is working, it does not give useful information e.g. what's on and where in the City Centre.
- Although members told us in their questionnaire replies that the main reasons for journeys into the City Centre are for specific purposes, e.g. to shop, go to meetings, use facilities etc, there is also interest in enjoying the city's architecture and public art. At the time of the street surveys it was noted that Newcastle City Guides offered a programme of walks and bus tours in the summer months. This programme still flourishes. It was also noted that we did not have 'City Trail' leaflets for self-guided walks, such as are found in other cities. There have since been some developments, for instance, a Graingertown trail; a Guide to public art; a Bewick trail; a Quayside guide and most recently a (free) Newcastle and Gateshead Walking Guide. These are all useful in enhancing enjoyment of the City's amenities and to increase appreciation of our past heritage. It is pleasing that there has been some progress in providing information, but in 2006 we have lost, for the time being, two important access points. The City Library closed on 1 September pending re-building. At almost the same time the Tourist Information Office in Grainger Street closed suddenly. Both places were well stocked with up to date information leaflets, bus timetables, programmes of special events and with staff available to answer questions. The Tourist Information office reopened in November 2006 in larger premises on Market Street, but the information section in the City Library will continue to be missed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This account of actions and developments since publication of the Interim Report shows that some progress has been made in following up the recommendations, but it is clear that much remains to be done if the practical issues important to older people are to have an impact on plans for the future.

The Elders Council has been able to draw on the evidence of older people's views, together with the Working Group's observations, to contribute to consultations in 2005 about the Local Development Framework and during 2006 to the City Centre Area Action Plan. Experience so far suggests that we need to keep a constant watch over plans and policies and to assess them carefully for 'older person friendliness'. In spite of some limited progress we are still some way from being an older person friendly city. All the evidence we have collected shows that older people are proud of their City. Indeed, the strength of feeling about the City Centre, concern for our heritage from the past and for the future developments is apparent in the video presentation, Newcastle Past, Present and Future, made in 2004 and featuring photographs taken and words spoken by members of the Elders Council. Older people may be nostalgic about the past but still wish to share in visions for the future.

We therefore recommend:

- a) Older peoples' knowledge and experience of the City is recognised as a resource for the planners of future developments.
- b) The Elders Council is accepted as a contributor, and, indeed, a partner in the City Centre Partnership.

SHOPS AND SHOPPING MALLS

Members reported that many visits into the City Centre are for the purpose of shopping, so surveys were carried out during 2003-2004, using a checklist of facilities. Information has been updated by subsequent visits and by observation. The main findings are:

Shopping Malls: Eldon Square, Eldon Garden, Monument Mall
Shopping malls offer a safe, clean environment, protected against the weather, and are now smoke-free following a ban on smoking. There is level access into the Malls from the street. There are changes in levels within the Centres, but gradients are easy and there are escalators and lifts. The lifts are not well signposted for anyone who cannot use an escalator. Ease of circulation is quite good along wide pathways. Seats are provided in certain areas, and are well used in Eldon Way, Chevy Chase and High Friars. There are no seats in Eldon Garden and Monument Mall except those for customers in cafes. Lighting was found to be good so that the Malls are bright and colourful. The shop windows opening on to the Mall mainly have attractive displays but there are drab patches where there are untenanted shops. Toilets near the Sidgate and Nelson Street entrances, and in Percy Street Car Park were noted to be of a good standard, with the newest Nelson Street toilets receiving special praise. CCTV cameras are known to be in operation but were not found to be obtrusive. It was noted that internal signposting is not very helpful. The boards are not prominent and the lettering is not always clear. The use of old street names is not a good indication of routes through the Centre although there is some interest in retaining them as a reminder of what was there before the Eldon Centre was built. At certain times there are information stalls and display stands provided by organisations and companies in Chevy Chase. Entertainment seems to be occasional only e.g. carols at Christmas.

Members reported that the main difficulty in using the Malls is finding one's way around. There are information desks near the Monument entrance and in Chevy Chase, where it is possible to obtain a map of the Centre, and be directed to shops and other city centre facilities. For some older visitors who cannot walk very far it is important to know the distance to their destination. Because the Centre is enclosed it is possible to lose one's sense of direction. Since the first surveys were done there are electronic direction finders at certain points. Older people will no doubt take time to

become adept at using them. Our surveyors so far have not found them helpful.

SHOPS

The main findings from the surveys are:

Department Stores and branches of chain stores, including Boots (Eldon Square), British Homes Stores, Fenwicks, John Lewis, Marks and Spencer, North East Cooperative stores (Newgate Street)

Access - level from street or shopping mall to at least one but more usually all entrances.

Internal circulation - counters and fixtures are usually arranged to allow one clear pathway through the store, wide enough for wheelchairs and buggies. Other areas can seem cluttered and congested e.g. between garment rails and piles of boxes.

Toilets - of a good standard are available in all the above shops and are often used in preference to public facilities. Fenwicks ladies powder room received special praise.

Signposting - a list of Departments should be placed near entrances, but are not always in an obvious position.

Escalators / Lifts - between floors ease movement around the store. Where there are changes of level between sections of a floor, there is usually a ramp or a self-operated wheelchair hoist (John Lewis, N.E. Co op).

Cafes and Restaurants - are available in all the above stores and offer a range of menus.

Seats - are valued by older people needing to rest their feet and their parcels for a short time. Marks and Spencer scored best with 39 seats at the time of the first surveys but the number has since reduced to 11 at the most recent count (January 2006).

Appearance - the displays of goods both within the store and in external window displays are usually bright and eye-catching.

Older person friendliness - surveyor's personal assessments were based on attitudes of staff. John Lewis and Fenwicks received particular mention for friendly and welcoming staff available to deal with queries. Signposting in Fenwicks was found to be poor, so it is often necessary to ask staff for directions. It was noted that in Marks and Spencer it is often difficult to find someone to answer questions.

BOOKSHOPS were surveyed in 2004, with the following results: (main bookshops – Blackwells, Percy Street; Waterstones, Grey Street; Waterstones, Blackett Street; W H Smith, Northumberland Street).

Access - at least one level entrance to each shop.

Internal circulation - escalator to upper floor at W H Smith; recently Waterstones in Blackett Street have installed a small passenger lift serving all 4 floors. There are changes in level on the ground floor of Blackwells and Waterstones, Grey Street, but the former has a ramp. Otherwise in both these shops there are stairs, to basement at Blackwells and to basement and first floor at Waterstones, Grey Street.

Enquiry desks - in Blackwells and Waterstones can deal with queries and help find or order a particular book.

Signboards - list Departments and sections; shelves are clearly labelled, and it is possible to pick up books and examine them at island units.

Seats - not well provided except at Blackwells; Waterstones, Grey Street has 2 seats in the basement, and a seating area in a bay window on the first floor.

Toilets and refreshments - are not provided.

SMALLER BOOKSHOPS surveyed included CLC Bookshop, Higham Place; SPCK, Ridley Place; Robinsons, Grainger Market;

Oxfam Bookshop, St Mary's Place; The Works, Publishers Outlet, High Friars, Eldon Centre; Bible Shop, Pilgrim Street.

Access - all have level entrances, but some have internal changes of level and restricted space.

Bookstock - in most cases specialist subjects, or second hand or remaindered stock.

Older person friendliness - the CLC Bookshop and SPCK have friendly, welcoming staff who can provide seats and access to staff toilets if necessary

Browsing in bookshops is sometimes mentioned as a pleasurable activity but it is not easily available in the bookshops surveyed. There are examples in other cities of bookshops with comfortable seats and coffee bars. Staff are helpful, of course, and will bring books from other floors if requested, but examining a book while standing by a display stand does not allow a good browse.

GRAINGER MARKET traditionally offers a range of fresh foods, meat, fruit and vegetables; cut price dry goods and household equipment; hardware and tools; flower stalls; clothing; handicraft supplies; bookshop and bookstalls – indeed most of the supplies required in every household. It has always been popular with older people and is known for attractive displays of fruit and vegetables. Since the first survey the stalls and the aisles between them have undergone a programme of refurbishment. The toilets have been upgraded and there are pleasant café areas as well as space for occasional information stalls and regular handicraft displays. The improvements are to be welcomed, but at the same time there is interest in retaining the busy and friendly atmosphere of a traditional market. Comment has been made about the way the butcher's stalls display uncovered meat. Standards of hygiene are important but it would be regretted if we lost the atmosphere of a traditional market with fresh food openly displayed. With the closure of the Green Market, it is important that there is space for a fish market, and for plants, seeds and flowers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Shopping for household supplies is an essential activity for everyone. Looking round the shops in the city centre, especially department stores, is regarded by some, but not all older people as a pleasurable activity. In spite of growth in out-of-town shopping facilities, and the increased use of Internet shopping, city centre shops and shopping malls still draw people who want to check out and compare trends in fashions and furnishings and, of course, prices. There are some basic facilities that make it easier for older people to enjoy shopping, e.g. seats, signposting, ease of moving around, delivery services, and helpful staff. For shopkeepers the balance between selling space and circulation space is clearly important. But for older shoppers walking distances, lifts and escalators, and provision of seats make a real difference to the enjoyment or otherwise of the experience.

Over recent years there have been many changes in shops in the city centre, and in shopping habits. The changes are set to continue so it is important to stake a claim now for older peoples' views to be taken into account during the redevelopment of the Eldon Centre, and shops and shopping malls.

We therefore recommend:

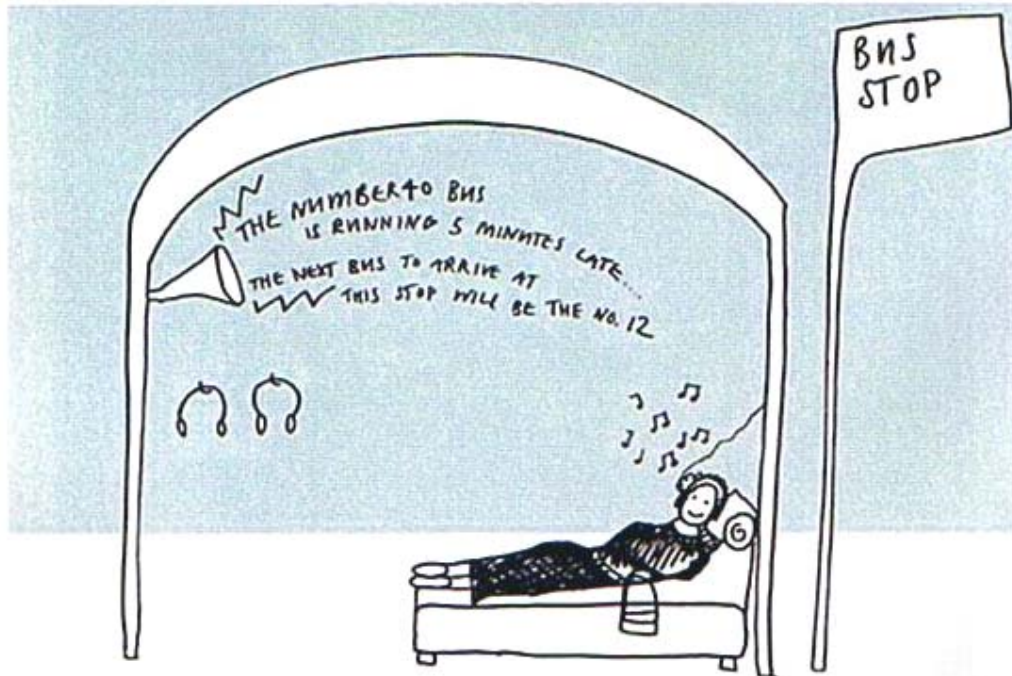
- a) better signposting in shopping malls while maintaining cleanliness and security; extending numbers of seats and improving general appearance and attractiveness
- b) shops to consider importance of circulation space, signposting, numbers of seats, and other amenities to make shopping more 'older person friendly'
- c) bookshops to consider extending amenities for browsing and enjoyment of choosing books
- d) Grainger Market to improve facilities but without losing traditional atmosphere of a market for fresh foods, including fish, meat, eggs, etc; for fruit and vegetables; and for plants and flowers.

Extract from “An Eccentric Cityscape”, a report of the Elders Council of Newcastle and Xsite Architecture, for Architecture Week 2005



- MORE SEATING URGENTLY REQUIRED
the most popular vote was for seating on all floors.
- MEN'S CRÈCHE
leave your husbands while you shop.
- FLIP FLOPS FOR RENT
a solution to those tired feet.
- BIGGER & BOLDER SIGNAGE
which way do you go when all directions look the same?!
- MORE HOOKS IN THE CHANGING ROOMS
and curtains that actually close

Extract from “An Eccentric Cityscape”, a report of the Elders Council of Newcastle and Xsite Architecture, for Architecture Week 2005



BUS SHELTERS MADE FOR HUMAN USE!

- SEATING AT BUS STOPS
We concluded that the seating at bus stops could not have been designed for human use.
- SIZE
Why are all bus shelters a standard size? How about a modular flexible design – you push on a wall and it expands.
- PLEASE MIND THE GAP
And the height difference! Access proved to be a particular problem especially for wheelchair users.
- FOR THOSE WHO DON'T GIVE UP THEIR SEAT
We thought a pulley system would do the trick, simply hook the device on the person's collar and remove them.

Banks, Building Societies, Post Offices, Information and Advice

For some transactions it has always been necessary to come in to the city centre. With the closure of local post offices and branches of banks and building societies even more people may have to come in to the city centre to carry out essential business. The Working Group decided to check out access to these premises during 2003-2004, using a checklist of facilities. The findings are as follows:

POST OFFICES, St Mary's Place; Eldon Square (Blackett Street); St Andrew Street/Orchard Street

Post offices are not signposted on the fingerposts in the city centre, and do not appear on the city map. All have level entrances but St Mary's Place and Blackett Street can become crowded at busy times. St Mary's Place in particular is very cramped and although there is an efficient queuing system, the queue sometimes stretches outside on to the pavement. Blackett Street has 12 serving windows and an efficient queuing system but is rather cluttered with postcard displays, and counters selling stationery gifts etc. St Andrew Street by comparison seems to be not very busy but is on the edge of the City Centre and difficult to find. Although all staff were found to be very helpful, the Working Group concluded that facilities at the two main post offices in the City Centre are inadequate. It was noted also that there is no late evening collection from post offices or post boxes in the City Centre, so it is necessary to go down to Orchard Street for this service.



BANKS AND BUILDING SOCIETIES

In 2004 a member carried out a full survey of banks and building societies in the City Centre. Most of them are in adapted, not purpose built, premises, but have managed to improve access. The survey findings show that most branches provide some amenities such as seats and pleasant waiting areas. The major branches have external as well as internal cash points, reducing the need to queue at a counter for simple cash withdrawal. Security arrangements have to be in place but are not obtrusive. If it is necessary to come to a branch of the bank or building society of choice in the city centre, then it should be possible to carry through transactions conveniently and comfortably. (A copy of the full survey results can be made available on request).

INFORMATION AND ADVICE

Customer Service Centre, Civic Centre, open Monday-Friday, 8.30 am – 4.30 pm

Access is by ramp or steps from Sandyford Road, or from St Mary's Place, via the Ceremonial Way and through the quadrangle. The route is not well signposted. The services available include a payment point for Council Tax and other charges; racks of information leaflets; Job Shop and job vacancy information. The Centre deals with enquiries about all council services, including a Video Link to specialist members of staff. Amenities include public payphone, IT information point, toilets (male, female, disabled, and baby changing) children's play area, private interview rooms, interpreting service, induction loop and minicom system for the hard of hearing.

Customers are advised to take a ticket for the service required, which gives a number in the queue. When the number is reached it is called out over a loudspeaker and is also displayed in the waiting areas. There are varied reactions to this system. Some find it acts as a deterrent for anyone uncertain about which service is required, while others find it helpful and efficient. It is suggested that the opening hours could be extended, e.g. compared with the service offered by a neighbouring Council, 8.00 am – 8.00 pm Monday – Friday, and 9.00 am – 1.00 pm Saturdays. Perhaps a modest extension might be a later closing time on Thursdays to coincide with the late shopping evening.

Citizens Advice Bureau, Nelson Street, open 10.00 am – 3.00 pm Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday. Wednesday is by appointment only.

Access is by lift to first floor.

The CAB is well established as a source of independent advice on citizens rights and can also help with personal problems. For such an important facility, opening times are restricted and access is not ideal.

Tourist Office, Market Street / Central Arcade, open 9.30 am – 5.30 pm Monday to Friday; 9.00 am – 5.00 pm Saturday.

Level Access from Market Street, and from Central Arcade, but internal steps between the two sections. Displays of information leaflets, guide books and souvenirs for sale. Staff are on duty to answer queries about the City, and about travel.

City Library, Princess Square, closed in 2006 for rebuilding. The comprehensive information section has been well-used, but during rebuilding is dispersed between the Customer Service Centre, Tourist Information Centre and community libraries.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of surveys and constant observations, it is concluded that the city centre branches of banks and building societies on the whole provide accessible premises and are as 'customer-friendly' as security arrangements allow. It is also concluded that post offices are not well signposted in the city centre, and have cramped premises, are often crowded, with queues for service and an absence of seats. There may be a growth in internet banking, in cash machines, and changes in methods of pension payments, but there are still times when a 'face to face' transaction is necessary or even preferred by older people. Seeking out information and advice also draws people in to the city centre, despite any increase in access to the Internet. The Customer Services Centre in the Civic Centre is the nearest we have to a 'one-stop-shop' for information about services. The Citizens Advice Bureau provides a service that citizens turn to when personal advice is needed.

We therefore recommend:

- a) that banks and building societies maintain their city centre branches to a high standard of access and 'customer friendliness'
- b) that city centre post offices have improved premises and amenities for customers to bring them up to the standard required for a major city
- c) that the Customer Services Centre has extended opening hours
- d) that the City Library information service is maintained in a central location while the building is redeveloped
- e) that the Citizens Advice Bureau has the resources to offer an extended service in accessible city centre premises.

RECREATION AND LEISURE

Visits to recreation and leisure facilities are one of the main reasons for older people to come into the City Centre, especially for activities which may not be available locally. Meals and refreshments are also important as part of enjoying time out in central Newcastle.

Six members of the Working Group took part in surveys, visits, and discussions with providers in mid 2003. Since then regular visits have been made to check up on any changes.

The main facilities surveyed, and some conclusions about them are:

Eldon Leisure, part of the Eldon Square complex in the city centre, offers a wide range of activities for all ages at reasonable cost, including social activities as well as fitness testing, exercise classes and games and sports. On 2 mornings per week the Impulse Fitness Suite can help individuals of 50+ to regain fitness. There are concessionary prices for older people at all activities. The Large Hall is used in the winter for indoor bowls and is very popular with older people who also enjoy the Tea Dances. Eldon Leisure is well used, and has enthusiastic staff interested in extending activities. Because it is well used the Working Group would like to see investment in maintenance to keep the centre attractive, and to continue to develop facilities. Priority should be given to improving access between the upper floors, as there is no lift to enable easy circulation. Space has been found for a new snack bar, so it is possible to chat with friends after enjoying activities.

Age Concern, MEA House. The leisure and learning programme provides a wide range of activities for people of 50+. The programme includes exercise, keep fit, yoga and tai chi; dance, Tap, ballroom, line and sequence; creative crafts; Writing Group; music appreciation; choir; Art Group; French and Spanish. There is also a computer suite with 8 places, and a Coffee Shop. As demand for activities has grown, some overspill classes are held in the Durant Hall nearby. Sessional charges have been kept as low as possible. The lively and friendly atmosphere was particularly noticed by surveyors. MEA House is not on a public transport route and special transport is not provided. In spite of this, attendance remains high. Linking with Newcastle College has

supported the current range of tutor-led courses, but there is concern about future provision as adult education providers are expected to concentrate on vocational, not recreational courses.

City Pool, Northumberland Road is an important part of city centre provision and offers swimming sessions on 6 days per week, and also a range of other facilities, Turkish bath, sauna suite, sun bed suite and fitness room. There are price concessions on all programmes for older people, and also 'Golden Years' swimming sessions, and 50+ Aqua fit on 2 mornings per week. Access into and within the building is not ideal because of steps at entrance and no lift. There are more modern pools outside the City Centre, which have better facilities for disabled people.

The Gate, Newgate Street was publicised as a great new entertainment centre for the City when it opened. A survey at that time has been followed up by further visits. The Odeon cinema on the top floor is mentioned in the section on theatres and cinemas. There are restaurants and bars on two floors providing a range of food and drink, some with special offers. The circulation areas are clean, but the lighting is rather dim and music is loud especially around machines with flashing lights. Younger people and families can be seen to enjoy the lively atmosphere but the noise and bustle may not be everyone's choice.

MEALS AND REFRESHMENTS

Surveys of shops, shopping malls, museums and libraries all show that there is a variety of provision of meals and snacks at a range of prices. We did not attempt to assess all cafes, restaurants and pubs in the City Centre, but we did survey provision by churches and a voluntary organisation. These are:

Cyber Café / Coffee Shop, Age Concern, MEA House provides soup, sandwiches, cakes and scones, coffee, tea and soft drinks, 10.00 am – 3.00 pm, Monday – Friday. Two computers provide access to the Internet, and can be used free for 15 minutes.

Brunswick Methodist Church, Brunswick Place. Sandwich bar in the foyer, open 12.00 noon – 1.30 pm, Monday – Friday (except August). Sandwiches, scones and biscuits, coffee, tea, soft drinks.

St Nicholas Cathedral Refectory open 10.00 am – 2.00 pm on weekdays. Cooked meals as well as snacks, coffee, tea, soft drinks.

Cloisters Café, St Mary's Cathedral, Clayton Street West, open 7.45 am – 5.30 pm, Monday – Saturday; 9.30 am – 1.00 pm Sunday. Cooked meals, snacks and drinks.

All the above have level or ramped access into the building, have pleasant surroundings and accessible toilets. Prices are very reasonable. The bonus is that voluntary helpers give a warm and friendly welcome.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The facilities surveyed are only part of the provision in the City Centre. We did not attempt to survey Lifelong Learning, Adult Education, WEA and U3A activities, although some take place in the city centre and draw in older learners. The facilities that were surveyed show that there is a variety of provision offering opportunities for physical activity as well as mental stimulus. A report 'Older and Active in Newcastle City Centre' for Action for Health – Senior Citizens in Newcastle (AFH-SCIN) in 1995 described the enjoyment in activities at that time, but also showed unsatisfied demand for a wider range of provision. Over the last 10 years activities have extended both at Eldon Leisure and at Age Concern, MEA House. In 2000 a Directory of Sports and Leisure Provision for Older People was produced by the Leisure, Pleasure and Learning Group which documented all the activities provided in both publicly and privately owned facilities, such as Health Clubs throughout the city. Although some Health Clubs offered concessionary membership and some 50+ activities, the city's Leisure and Sports Centres offered a wider range of activities for older people and at lower cost.

All centres regularly produce information leaflets about their programmes, which are usually available in libraries and information centres. Although efforts are made to publicise 'what's on', there are still comments about the lack of information. In the future it will be useful for up to date information to be held in the Information Resource Bank being developed with the support of the Quality of Life Partnership.

In addition to better publicity for what is available, it is also necessary to safeguard future provision of leisure and recreation facilities. There has been progress in increasing provision over the recent years. In any discussion about funding for these activities, it is important to recognise that they contribute to health and wellbeing and enrich the lives of older people. At present it is possible to have a day out in the City Centre, enjoy an activity and have a healthy snack in friendly company, and all at reasonable cost.

As the proportion of older people in the population increases it is essential that recreation and leisure opportunities expand also. Any proposal to reduce provision should be opposed.

We therefore recommend:

- a) that up to date information about programmes of recreation and leisure facilities is available through the Information Resource Bank (Information Now – see note below).
- b) that support is given to campaigns not just to preserve existing activities, but to extend them, either by the Elders Council or jointly with other organisations.

NOTE: Information NOW - www.informationnow.org.uk

Information NOW (**N**ewcastle **O**lder People's **W**ebSite) is a website that went live in November 2006. It has been developed by the Quality of Life Partnership, in conjunction with older people in Newcastle, and is a resource of information on topics which older people have said are important to them.

Information NOW provides information on benefits, care and carers, consumer issues, health, housing, leisure, travel and transport, and people to know/places to go in each ward in Newcastle. This list of topics will expand as more information is added.

The aim of Information NOW is to give older people better access to information about the things that they need and want to know. This could be by using the website yourself on your own computer, or at a library or community centre; or via staff in organisations who can access the information for you. If you don't like to read

information on a screen you can print the information and read it, or someone else could do this for you.

Of course, Information NOW is also a great resource for people working with or caring for older people in the city; a one stop shop of information for people aged over 50 in Newcastle.

To find out more visit www.informationnow.org.uk, or contact Claire Horton at the Quality of Life Partnership on telephone number 0191 255 1983 or by email at claire.horton@qualityoflife.org.uk

MUSEUMS, ART GALLERIES, LIBRARIES, PUBLIC LECTURES

In late 2003, six members of the Working Group surveyed museums, art galleries and libraries, using a checklist of facilities. In most cases, the first survey has been followed up by visits and/or discussions during 2004 and 2005.

MUSEUMS

Discovery Museum, Blandford Street. Admission Free.

Open, Monday – Saturday, 10.00 am – 5.00 pm, Sundays 2.00 pm – 5.00 pm.

Exhibits cover scientific, industrial, social and cultural history of Tyneside, with some hands-on, interactive displays. There are some opportunities for involvement in activities, such as use of computers, and for following up interests in industrial archaeology, local history etc. The Tyne and Wear Archives are in the same building.

Access: level entrance, modern glass enclosed lift to upper floors; clear walkways and circulation spaces on all floors.

Amenities: information desk and shop at entrance; some seats; toilets excellent, computer room (Live Wires) open to public; helpful staff; café; self service hot and cold snacks and drinks; light and airy building.

Outreach: Education Officer provides links with local groups; education materials on loan; very active Friends group.

Life Science Centre, Times Square. Admission charges, £4.99; concessions £3.99. Open Monday – Saturday, 10.00 am – 6.00 pm; Sundays 11.00 am – 6.00 pm.

Exhibits and displays explaining the origins of life and human development, many of them interactive and entertaining, and also raising ethical issues in the application of scientific knowledge. Provides good entertainment for children, but less for unaccompanied adults.

Access: level entrance, lift to upper level, easy circulation around exhibits.

Amenities: Information desk, clear signs to exhibition areas; toilets on each level; very clean and well-lit building; can be noisy at busy times.

Outreach: Provides base for Science Festival; programme of special exhibitions, events and public lectures throughout the year.

Castle Keep, Castle Garth. Admission, £1.50; concessions 50p. Open 7 days per week, 9.30 am – 5.30 pm (April – September) and 9.30 am – 4.30 pm (October – March).

Medieval castle keep, with displays and exhibits illustrating the history of the building, and of Newcastle, arranged by the Society of Antiquaries.

Access: 32 outside steps to entrance at first floor level. Internal steps to Great Hall, to upper floors and to roof, many in number and of uneven height and tread.

Amenities: Some seats on each floor, no refreshments, apparently no toilets. An important development in 2005 is the opening up of access by ramp to the garrison room on the lower ground floor, where it is possible to view a video presentation of a 'virtual tour' of the building with a lively commentary on its history. Access has to be arranged in advance, and depends on staff available to open up the facility.

Hancock Natural History Museum, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Closed in 2006 pending extension into Great North Museum.

The Hancock Museum has traditionally housed exhibits and displays explaining the natural history of the region. Programmes of special exhibitions and events have attracted children and adults of all ages to the Museum. Surveys and visits by members of the Working Group from 2004 onwards recorded that access to and circulation around the building was not ideal because of steps at the entrance, no lift and a shortage of seats. But exhibits were noted to be well presented and of general interest to visitors of any age. Staff were found helpful and considerate.

The Great North Museum is being planned to include also the Museum of Antiquities and the Shefton Museum (see below). There is therefore the potential to improve access to all the University Museums in an extension to the Hancock Museum. There will also be opportunities to improve displays, to make them more accessible to the general public, and to offer more amenities to visitors.

Museum Of Antiquities, The Quadrangle, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Admission free. Open 10.00 am – 4.00 pm, Monday to Saturday. Exhibits include a model of Hadrian's Wall and a replica of Mithraic Temple.

Access: Signposted from Haymarket and Queen Victoria Road. 3 steps at entrance (disabled access if notified). Circulation fairly easy around exhibits although rather crowded at one or two points.

Amenities: Receptionist at entrance desk and shop; no refreshments or toilets but Unicafe nearby. Seating, 3 chairs available, also 2 stacking chairs and a bench. Exhibits are clearly explained for the lay visitor with a general rather than specialised interest.

Shefton Museum, Armstrong Building, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Admission free. Open Monday – Friday, 10.00 am – 4.00 pm. An extensive collection of Greek art, pottery, sculpture and artefacts.

Access: The Museum room is on the first floor of the Armstrong Building, and is signposted from within the Campus. A lift is available, from main entrance on Queen Victoria Road, or from rear entrance of the Quadrangle but there are 5 steps to the lift from either entrance.

Amenities: No seats within Museum room. Toilets within the Armstrong Building. The exhibits are attractively displayed, not just for serious study, but also to inform anyone with a general interest in Greek civilisation.

ART GALLERIES

Laing Art Gallery, Blue Carpet Square, New Bridge Street.
Admission free; open 10.00 am – 5.00 pm (Monday to Saturday);
2.00 pm – 5.00 pm (Sunday).

Galleries include permanent exhibitions of Art on Tyneside; Watercolours; children's gallery; and works from the Laing collection. Special exhibitions are held several times per year.

Access: Level entrance to foyer and shop; lift to upper galleries.

Amenities: Reception desk manned by Friends of the Gallery; updated signage throughout the galleries; Braille plan of gallery in Marble Hall and model with touch/sound facility. Seats in most galleries; portable seats also available. Toilets on two floors. Café Laing offers hot and cold snacks, meals and drinks.

Outreach: Programme of lectures; Education Room, and study area with computer catalogue of reference material.

Hatton Gallery, the Quadrangle, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Admission free. Open Monday – Friday, 10.00 am – 5.00 pm; Saturday, 10.00 am – 4.30 pm.

Four good display spaces, for a varied programme of exhibitions and events, including students' work.

Access: Signposted within the University campus; 11 steps at entrance; alternative route possible through side entrance. Wheelchair platform lift installed in late 2003.

Amenities: Information desk with programme of activities, postcards etc. Toilets on ground floor following improvements in 2004. No refreshment facilities. Friendly helpful staff.

Outreach: Regular workshop sessions for schools as well as adult learners, with opportunities to try different techniques. Education officer available to give talks, arrange visits etc.

University Of Northumbria Art Gallery And Baring Wing, Sandyford Road: Admission free, open 10.00 am – 5.00 pm, Monday to Thursday; 10.00 am – 4.00 pm, Friday and Saturday. The Gallery was closed for refurbishment in 2003 but re-opened in 2004. Not well signposted.

A programme of exhibitions in the Baring Wing, each lasting 3-4 weeks; the Gallery is the agent for Norman Cornish's work, and also holds portfolios of original work by several other artists.

Access: Not well signposted. Level entrance to ground floor reception area, lift to upper level Baring Wing.

Amenities: Pleasant, clean circulation areas, 6 stylish modern seats in Baring Wing; toilets available.

Outreach: Saturday Art Club for children meets about 10 times per year. Group visits can be arranged out of normal hours.

The Biscuit Factory, Stoddart Street, Shieldfield.

Admission free. Open Tuesday – Saturday, 10.00 am – 8.00 pm, Sunday and Monday 11.00 am – 5.00 pm. Outside the City Centre but included because it is an important selling exhibition of the work of contemporary artists and craft workers.

Access: Not well signposted, Entrance 9 steps, alternative ramped entrance via cafe. Lift to upper floor in lobby.

Amenities: Large, airy, well-lit, open spaces for display of exhibits. Chairs, settee and bench seat on first floor. Toilets on ground floor are spacious and stylish. Restaurant open for lunches and dinner.

Outreach: Exhibits change several times per year. Leaflets and newsletter circulated with up to date information about artists and exhibitors.

Waygood Gallery, High Bridge

Independent contemporary art gallery and artist studios. Closed from 2004 for refurbishment of building and development in to a centre for artists and their work.

Newcastle Arts Centre, Westgate Road.

Admission free. Independent Arts Centre. Exhibition area is attached to the shop selling art works and artists materials, and is usually open during shop hours.

Access: Not signposted from outside. Level entrance into shop and through to exhibition area.

Amenities: Good exhibition space, bright and fresh. Information at shop entrance; exhibitions published in local press. Toilets available on request, no refreshments.

Side Photographic Gallery, The Side

Admission free. Open Tuesday – Saturday, 11.00 am – 5.00 pm. Exhibitions change several times per year and cover a range of topics. An extensive photographic collection is maintained and can be accessed on line.

Access: Entrance level, but 2 steps to ground floor and 15 steps to first floor exhibition areas; no lift.

Amenities: Information desk with leaflets and programmes etc. Toilets on ground floor. No refreshments in Gallery, but the Side Café is nearby.

Outreach: Newsletter, leaflets, information circulated regularly to libraries etc.

Colliers, Dean Street

Admission free. Open Monday – Saturday, 9.00 am – 5.00 pm. Independent selling gallery of contemporary abstract art.

Access: Slope down into building from street. Circulation areas rather cluttered.

Amenities: Information desk. No toilets or refreshments.

LIBRARIES

City Library, Princess Square, John Dobson Street

Admission free, open Monday – Thursday, 9.00 am – 8.00 pm; Friday and Saturday, 9.00 am – 5.00 pm.

The main lending and reference library for the city.

The City Library closed in September 2006 until 2009 for re-building on the same site. Surveys of the building in 2004 recorded that access was via level entrances from John Dobson Street and Princess Square, with lifts between floors, and information desks at entrances and on each floor. It was appreciated that a range of facilities was available within one building in a central location, e.g. spacious lending area and reference section with seating and work tables; an information section well stocked, with up to date information leaflets, travel information, etc; seminar room for lectures and meetings; a computer suite where classes could be held; local studies and family history section providing facilities for research, with microfilm and microfiche readers; and a café providing snacks and drinks and free 15-minute access to the Internet. The City Library has been the place that provides access to information and material for study that is not available in local libraries. During the period of closure, most of the above facilities have been dispersed to other sites. There have been consultations about the design and the content of the replacement building. A questionnaire to members of the Elders Council about their use of cultural facilities showed that libraries are the places most frequently visited. The City Library will be very much missed during the period of closure. Older citizens in particular, will hope that the new library will offer a full range of facilities, with helpful staff to assist with queries, and will be well stocked, with extended opening hours.



Literary And Philosophical Society:

Independent lending and reference library. Membership subscription £77 per annum for ordinary members. Open 9.30 am – 7.00 pm Monday to Thursday, 9.30 am – 5.00 pm Friday; 9.30 am – 1.00 pm Saturday.

A historic building with a valuable collection of books. Also provides facilities for meetings, lectures, music exams, and concerts, and a base for several societies.

Access: 3 steps to entrance, with handrail; further 2 steps into hall and reception area. Level access on ground floor to meeting rooms, toilets and reference section. Stair lift to first floor main lending area.

Amenities: Refreshments, coffee, tea, cold drinks, biscuits on first floor in lending area. Tables and chairs for study and writing. Ladies room, first floor, has comfortable chairs.

Outreach: A programme of lectures, poetry readings, musical performances is arranged. Admission to lectures by ticket, which is free but must be obtained in advance by both members and non-members.

PUBLIC LECTURES

Every year there is an extensive programme of public lectures, usually free, and in accessible locations, including the Museums, Art Galleries and Libraries already surveyed. Some examples are:

Insight Programme of Lectures for the public arranged by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. The main venue is the Curtis Auditorium in the Herschel Building, just a short distance from Barras Bridge. The lectures cover a wide range of topics and are given by distinguished speakers from around the world. Information from Public Lecture Office, 6 Kensington Terrace, NE1 7RU.

Joseph Cowen Public Lectures are arranged by the Centre for Lifelong Learning, information from the Centre at Joseph Cowen House, St Thomas Street, Newcastle upon Tyne.

The Life Science Centre arranges series of public lectures by scientists and writers.

Laing Art Gallery has a programme of lunchtime lectures.

Hatton Gallery has occasional public lectures.

Side Gallery has talks in association with programme of exhibitions.

Literary And Philosophical Society has annual programme of lectures; admission free but by ticket obtained in advance.

City Library has occasional programmes of talks and lectures in Seminar Room (basement level).

Café Scientifique debates and discussions are held regularly. In 2005, held in the Café Royal, Nelson Street. In 2006 Café Culture has a fortnightly programme of meetings, including café scientifique sessions, in World Headquarters, Curtis Mayfield House, Carliol Square; admission free, at 7.00 pm.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Working Group's surveys and enquiries have been recorded in some detail to support our conclusions about older peoples' participation in the cultural life of the City. Whatever one's interest, whether in ancient civilisations, industrial archaeology, painting and sculpture, natural history, developments in science, technology, or human biology, there are opportunities in Newcastle's Museums, Galleries and Libraries for continued learning and enjoyment. Recent improvements, for instance, at the Laing Art Gallery, at the Hatton Gallery, and at Discovery Museum have enabled easier access to these important collections. There are limitations on alterations to historic, listed buildings, but the provision of a virtual tour on video of the Castle Keep shows that ways can be found for people still to enjoy the architecture and history of a medieval building even when they can no longer manage steps. We are aware that further important developments are pending. There is an ambitious plan for the

Waygood Gallery to become a centre for the arts and for artists. Of great importance is Newcastle University's plan for a Great North Museum, which will extend the Hancock Museum to include the Museum of Antiquities and the Shefton Gallery on the same site and with improved facilities. Access to the University Museums is far from ideal at present so it is a welcome development for the University to open up facilities for the general public to enjoy, as well as providing centres for study and research. Of course, access in its widest sense covers more than just getting in to a building. In our surveys we asked surveyors to note not only the physical features of buildings, but also to assess them for 'older person friendliness'. Some of the exhibits at Discovery Museum were of particular interest, when older people had been involved in collecting material, and in recording reminiscences which can be played as a 'voice over'. Also noted was the reception desk at the Laing where members of the Friends group are available to offer information and advice and give a friendly welcome. Education officers are also important in reaching out to people, e.g. by giving a talk to a group followed by a visit.

A major development will be the re-provision of the City Library on the same site. This will mean closure of the present building for a period of time, and the temporary dispersal of facilities to other sites. The value of the City Library is having a range of provision in one central location. It is crucial that access to study materials is maintained during any period of building, as they are of interest to adult learners as well as young people. A survey of members' use of learning and cultural facilities showed that libraries are the venues most frequently visited.

Free admission to museums is important for older people, and to anyone with limited income. It is hoped that this policy can be maintained into the future. Amongst the major museums, the Life Science Centre is now the only one charging for admission, (apart from the 50p concessionary admission to the Castle Keep). Another important development which is currently being proposed is 'Science City'. It must be hoped that the opportunity will be taken to increase public understanding of advances in science, for people of all ages, young and old alike. The Life Science Centre, on the other hand, was felt to be 'young person and family' centred rather than 'older person friendly.' Perhaps more could be done to develop exhibits of interest to older people e.g. implications of greater longevity amongst other issues.

Apart from cost, other barriers to participation in the cultural life of the city identified in the Elders Council surveys are sometimes said to be lack of transport, lack of information, and having no one to go with. It is important that public transport routes bring passengers close to the relevant venues. In this context, the Quayside link buses now provide links between Newcastle City Centre, the Quayside, and the Baltic and The Sage in Gateshead. Museums and galleries regularly publish their programmes which are available in libraries, tourist offices, etc, or are sent directly to mailing lists. It is possible that in the future the Info Now, the information resource bank being established by the Quality of Life Partnership, will include information about what's on. Older people's clubs and groups can also do more to organise group visits. Indeed the Elders Council might consider promoting wider involvement e.g. by a 'Happy Hour' at Museums in the early evening, or by a 'Cultural Card' to give reduced charges at many venues.

We therefore recommend:

- a) The Elders Council is kept informed about future developments and has an opportunity to assess them for 'older person friendliness'.
- b) A policy of free admissions to major cultural centres should be continued and developed.
- c) Working Groups of the Elders Council continue to watch over changes in public transport to ensure easy access to Museums and Galleries.
- d) Working Groups of the Elders Council help to disseminate information and encourage participation in cultural facilities and events, e.g. by promoting ideas of 'Happy Hours' at Museums and Galleries, and devising a 'Culture' card to increase attendances.

THEATRES, CINEMAS AND CONCERT HALLS

In late 2004, the Working Group started to collect information about Theatres, Cinemas and Concert Halls by sending a questionnaire to their managers. This was followed up by the personal observations by regular users.

THEATRES

Theatre Royal, Grey Street is the main venue for plays, opera, ballet and musicals on tour, with a well-established annual residency by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and regular visits from Opera North and other national and international companies.

Access:

There is level access into the building, stairs between floors but a lift is available. Also level access into the stalls from a side entrance in Shakespeare Street, and 6 places for wheelchairs in the stalls (free ticket for accompanying person).

Amenities, Concessions:

There are toilets on two floors, and one accessible toilet in the stalls. An amplification system with headsets is available, also a loop system. Price concessions for Senior Citizens at most performances, also for 'assisted performances' e.g. subtitled or audio-described.

Outreach:

The Limelight Theatre Club for people over 55, annual membership fee £24, arranges meetings, visits and discounts on prices. An Educational Officer is available to give talks.

The Journal Tyne Theatre, Westgate Road, (formerly Tyne Theatre and Opera House). This theatre was closed when surveys started but re-opened in October 2004 under new management. Originally built as a Theatre in 1867, it was used as a cinema for many years between the wars, then restored as a theatre again by the 1980s. Programmes include plays, ballets, musicals, popular concerts and shows.

Access:

Level access from the street into foyer through one door, at western end of façade. There is level access from the foyer into stalls, but stairs to other floors and no lift.

Amenities, Concessions:

Toilets on two floors, one on ground floor with disabled access. Ramped access on ground floor by circuitous route to refreshment, bar area. Ticket concessions at all performances for Senior Citizens.

Live Theatre, Quayside This small theatre in an adapted building provides a base for the development and performance of new work by local writers, poets and actors.

Access:

Steps at entrance into the foyer and from foyer into main auditorium. Stairs to upper level, lift available.

Amenities, Concessions:

One toilet has disabled access. No loop system available. Concessions, usually 30% discount for Senior Citizens. Free seat for accompanying assistant/carer of disabled person.

Outreach:

Live Wires, an over 50s writing and performance group meets weekly and has a core of 20 regular members; new members are welcome.

Northern Stage, Barras Bridge (formerly The Playhouse). This small, purpose-built theatre, was closed at the time of the first surveys, but after refurbishment opened again in 2006. Access is now by level entrances from King's Road, and with lifts to all levels. A full season of performances by resident and visiting groups starts in January 2007. Northern Stage previously offered educational and outreach work, especially with youth groups. It is hoped this may continue and be inclusive of all age groups.

Metro Radio, Arena, Arena Way Large, purpose-built arena, can be hired for concerts, shows, displays, exhibitions by different companies and organisations promoting a variety of events.

Access:

Low level into building from concourse, and from foyer to main auditorium. Stairs to upper levels, lift available.

Amenities, Concessions:

202 seats suitable for disabled people, loop system available. Toilets well provided, 9 are accessible for disabled people. Price concessions depend on promoter, but usually available.

CINEMAS

Odeon Cinema, The Gate, Newgate Street is on the top floor of the Gate entertainment complex (see comment in Recreational Leisure section). There are at least 4 screens, showing major new films on release.

Access:

Is level from the street to ground floor and then by escalators and lifts to upper floors.

Amenities, Concessions:

Toilets near cinema entrance; one public toilet on first floor has disabled access. There are induction loops in every screen, some subtitled screenings, and audio descriptions for selected screens. Concessionary prices for Senior Citizens available, senior screenings Wednesday mornings £2.50 including refreshments.

Tyneside Cinema, 10 Pilgrim Street. Closed in 2006 pending rebuilding; opened in Gateshead Old Town Hall, West Street, from November 2006.

The Tyneside Cinema has offered a varied programme of recent releases and classic films, and has also sponsored festivals, musical events, animations, meetings and discussions. At Gateshead Old Town Hall there will be screenings three times a day, Monday to Friday, and four times at weekends. A Kids Club children's matinee on Saturdays will continue, and there will still be fortnightly screenings for the Silver Screen film club for the over 60s.

When the Working Group surveyed cinemas in 2004/2005, access to the building in Pilgrim Street was found to be difficult but the

'older person friendly' policies were much appreciated. Senior patrons will look forward to the Cinema reopening with improved amenities.

Side Cinema, The Side, small cinema with programme of films and documentaries from many countries, sometimes exploring radical ideas.

Access:

Level from street.

Amenities, Concessions:

Toilet accessible to wheelchair users. Membership costs £1 per year, tickets £3.50.

CONCERT HALLS

City Hall, Northumberland Road

The City Hall has been the main venue for both classical and popular concerts and musical events. From 2004 Northern Sinfonia is based at The Sage, Gateshead.

Access:

Steps at entrance in to foyer (level access possible from side entrance into main auditorium, can be opened specially). Level access from foyer into auditorium, but stairs up to gallery level, and down to basement bar area; no lift available.

Amenities, Concessions:

Toilets, none on ground floor, stairs to upper or lower level, no lift, so none with disabled access at the time of the first survey, but a toilet with disabled access has since been installed in the foyer area.

Other Venues in Newcastle for concerts and musical events.

King's Hall, Armstrong Building, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, used for student performances and other musical events. The Chamber Music Society has moved to The Sage, Gateshead.

Churches, St Nicholas Cathedral, St John's Church, St Andrew's Church, All Saints and Brunswick Methodist Church are used for concerts and musical performances from time to time. These

venues were not surveyed but are known to have reasonable access and acoustics (although the seats are not always very comfortable) and are conveniently located in the city centre.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Working Group has given particular attention to access to the buildings used for public entertainment. There are obviously limitations on what can be done in listed buildings to improve access while retaining the atmosphere of a traditional theatre or public hall. We also assessed the amenities provided, such as toilets, refreshments, and price concessions, all of which affect the comfort and convenience of those attending. The Theatre Royal has gone some way to offer facilities for people with disabilities and sensory problems and also offers opportunities for audiences to be involved through the Limelight Theatre Club. The Tyneside Cinema makes considerable efforts to cater for older and disabled people in a building that is not ideal. It is more difficult to assess the content of programmes for 'older person friendliness' as these judgements are influenced by personal taste. There are often comments about finding out 'what's on'. Theatres, cinemas and musical organisations publicise their programmes regularly in libraries and in tourist offices, as well as advertising in the local press and in City Life. It is possible also to be on a mailing list to receive regular notices. Joining a Friends Group will also ensure receiving information, as well as extra concessions.

Access by public transport is important for older people and is possible to most city centre venues but more difficult to anywhere outside the city centre. The Arena, for instance, is not well served by bus routes, and there are also steep steps up to the concourse from the road, although the building is fully accessible when one gets there. The Live Theatre on the Quayside has also suffered from poor transport links in the past, but can now benefit from the new Quayside Link service Q2. The opening of The Sage, Gateshead as a major new centre for concerts and musical performances has had implications for concert goers in Newcastle as the focus changes from the traditional venues like the City Hall. Again the Quay Link service Q1 provides a vital direct link to The Sage from the city centre and from metro stations. A ticket for a concert at The Sage, as also for the Theatre Royal, is valid for free travel on the metro.

Access in its widest sense is not just about getting into a building, but also about the facilities that enable older people with sensory problems to enjoy performances. Cost is an important factor for pensioners on limited incomes. Although concessions on ticket prices are often available, going to the theatre or to a concert is beyond the means of pensioners on minimum income, but going to the cinema is more easily affordable.

We therefore recommend:

- a) the providers of theatres, cinemas and concert halls should be encouraged;
 - i) to make their buildings fully accessible and include the features that cater for the comfort and convenience of older people, and
 - ii) to ensure that programme and performances are accessible to people with sensory difficulties. Programmes in large print would be helpful. Hearing loop systems need to be checked to ensure they are working, and staff need to be trained in their use.
- b) Transport authorities should take note of the need to provide public transport to cultural venues. Quay Link buses are a welcome development to enable easier access to Newcastle Quayside and to The Sage, Gateshead.
- c) In a recent survey Elders Council members indicated they would like to be more involved in going to the theatre, cinema and concerts. The Elders Council is recommended to take a lead in encouraging group visits, discussions and improved concessions, e.g. by enquiring into the feasibility of a Culture Card, as a passport to participating in the wealth of cultural facilities available to citizens.

... AND FINALLY

The Working Group set itself the task of auditing facilities in the City Centre for 'older person friendliness'. After 4 years of surveys and observations, what are our conclusions? And what should happen next?

We have walked around the streets; dashed across pedestrian crossings trying to beat the green man, and visited all the public lavatories.

We have walked around the shopping malls and checked the main shops for access, comfort and convenience.

We have visited post offices, banks and buildings societies (and managed not to get arrested as a security risk!)

We have checked out (and sampled) recreation and leisure facilities most time-consuming of all, we have visited museums, art galleries, libraries, and assessed access to theatres, cinemas and concert halls.

Each section of this report contains some specific recommendations covering points of detail. These will be followed up by Working Groups of the Elders Council, in particular Transport, Learning and Culture; Readers Group and the Steering Group for the Information Resource Bank, Information Now.

But the City Centre Working Group cannot end its work with this report. In reviewing our survey, one of the themes that stands out is the pace of change. Constant re-checking of our findings has been necessary. For example, during this period, there have been improvements to the Laing Art Gallery, Hatton Gallery, Theatre Royal, to mention just a few. And further developments are pending with the restoration and extension of Northern Stage, the Waygood Gallery, Tyneside Cinema, and above all, the new City Library and Great North Museum.

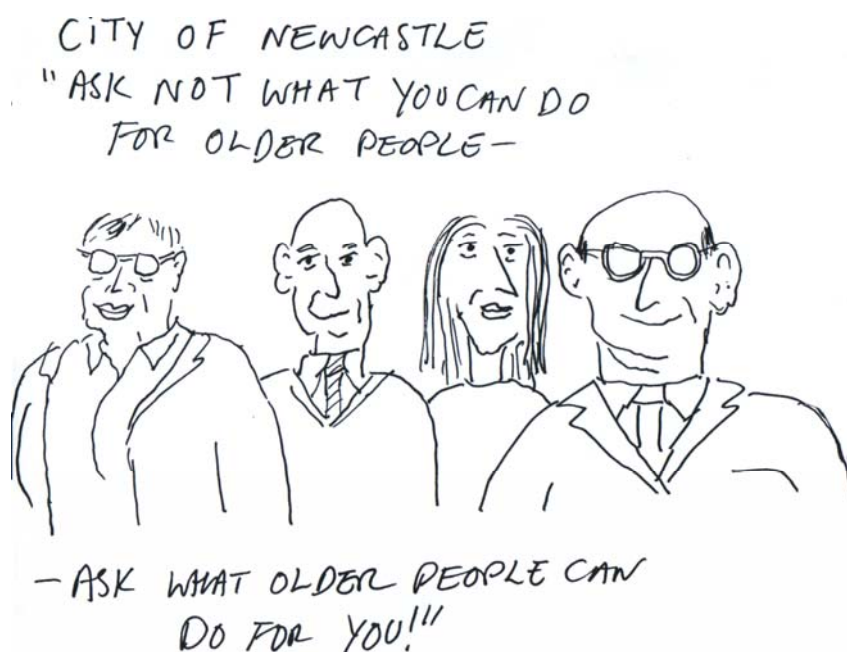
People over 50 represent almost one third of the City's population (this proportion is forecast to increase) and our work has shown that older people value the City Centre and have an interest in its development. We therefore need to know what is happening in the City, and where and when it will happen.

Other important overall themes are access to information, and getting around. We also need both safe walking routes and good public transport to enable not just access to all the facilities of the City Centre, but also enjoyment of the architecture, art and culture of the city.

In addition there are many wider areas of work to be followed up to ensure 'older person friendly' environments in neighbourhoods, district centres, and open spaces throughout the city. These are all key elements in developing strategies for the future for an ageing population.

In summary, it seems essential to us that older people should be closely involved in any future development.

- Looking to the past, we take pride in our city and in our heritage.
- For the present, in this report we now submit our evidence of what contributes to the 'older person friendliness' of our environment here and now. We have been able to use these findings already during recent discussions and consultations about proposed changes and action plans.
- For the future, on behalf of older people in the City, the Elders Council will welcome full participation in the City Centre Partnership, as the vision of a City fit for the 21st century takes shape.



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Vera at work, trying to read the planning application for redevelopment of Eldon Square