

An All-Age Friendly City Centre – Newcastle upon Tyne

**Summary of a report on a city centre project conducted by
Elders Council of Newcastle in collaboration with students from Newcastle
University's Planning and Architecture Department
September 2020 – January 2021**



'Town centres are not just physical places; they anchor, belong and connect to us in ways that are both tangible and intangible.'

Anchor, belong, connect: The future of town centres. IPPR report 2021

Introduction:

The Elders Council of Newcastle commissioned students from Newcastle University's School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape to work with older people on their experiences of being in the city centre and their ideas for improvement. This report is a summary of our work together and the outcome of several months of consultation and research which took place on-line between September 2020-January 2021.

This research was done prior to the announcement of the City Centre Transformation Plans which address some of the issues we raise, however we hope this report will be of value to the City Centre Transformation Team and it is our intention to engage with these developments as they evolve.

The purpose of the study was to:

- To highlight the current issues that older people are facing in Newcastle upon Tyne.
- To develop a strategic approach that would help overcome or mitigate these issues.
- To produce a strategy report that the Elders Council can use as an evidence base when contributing to making Newcastle an all-age friendly city.

This document is a summary of the key findings from the report.

Our Recommendations and Ideas

Community

- **Community Hub/Outlet and Information Centre**

There is currently a lack of a community and information hub in the city centre. As shops close, a hub could turn these empty spaces into a vibrant centre e.g. a space where people can find out about products and services; engage with innovators designing for ageing; hire rooms for group meetings/events. It could also include a café which would enable different generations to connect with one another to help tackle loneliness and reduce the stigma of growing older.

- **Public Toilets**

There continue to be issues regarding the availability of public toilets which are open outside of core shopping hours. We would welcome the opportunity to re-visit the 'Use our Loos' scheme to see whether this can be reinvigorated post COVID. We also welcome the provision of a Changing Places toilet in Newcastle city library and would like to see greater provision of this kind of facility in the city.

- **Public Seating**

Elders Council has previously conducted research into the quality of public seating and was involved in the design of the age-friendly bench, examples of which are currently outside the Catalyst (Newcastle Helix). In our experience, public seating is often poorly designed, uses cold materials and poorly/disproportionately located. Some seating is located close to litter bins which doesn't make them pleasant places to sit. Creating good quality seating will not only benefit older adults but also disabled people, parents with young families and the general public. We also welcome initiatives such as the 'Chatty Bench'¹ which encourages conversation and 'Take a Seat'² campaigns which help to make older people feel welcome in the city centre.

¹ <https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/citylife-news/community/happy-chat-benches-aim-combat-loneliness-and-isolation>

² <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/stories/age-friendly-nottingham-take-seat>

- **City Centre Living**

We would welcome the opportunity to explore options for intergenerational city centre living, which will appeal to many older people because of the close proximity to amenities, cultural venues, medical and community services and transport. This provision would encourage older adults to remain active within the community.

- **Urban Greening**

Increasing areas of greening across Newcastle is desired by many due to the health and wellbeing benefits they provide. We would welcome more green walls/roofs (such as M+S) and 'Adopt a planter' schemes in the city centre.

- **Safety**

Safety around metro areas and dimly lit streets should continue to be improved to ensure the safety of older adults and others. A safer centre creates a more attractive city for all who live in and visit Newcastle.

Getting Around

- **Public transport**

Public transport remains essential, with many older people preferring the bus network due to its ease of access and the advantages of the free bus pass. Although there are issues with the frequency of buses on some routes and in the evenings, in general there are good bus services across the city. All bus stops should have a shelter, the provision of seating and lighting.

Information in bus shelters is often poor. Elders Council would welcome the provision of real-time information at bus stops as well as greater promotion of apps providing travel and public toilet information.

Concerns were expressed about the reliability of the Metro, partly due to ageing rolling stock and industrial action. Elders Council has participated in the design of

the new metro trains, and we particularly welcome the additional seating, a more bespoke space for wheelchairs, and double grab poles and look forward to these coming on stream.

There is potential for improvement in network integration and, although there is an integrated ticketing system, an improved, simple ticketing system (e.g., Oyster Card) across the network would be welcomed.

- **Walking**

We welcome changes to make Newcastle a more walkable city, provided adequate attention is given to ensuring that all parts of the city are accessible to people with physical and sensory impairments and that Department for Transport guidance and standards are followed for the use of bubble paving and pedestrian crossings.

Particular attention needs to be given to the regular maintenance of pavements and pedestrian crossings. It also needs to be made easier for members of the public to report where there are faults which require immediate attention and for there to be a prompt response.

Elders Council urges Newcastle City Council to adhere to its commitment in the RNIB Street Charter, which was signed in 2017, **not** to introduce shared spaces for pedestrians and cyclists, described by one participant as 'a recipe for disaster'.

The introduction of more on-street spaces for cafes and restaurants is also a cause for concern where this reduces the width of the pavement and where barriers designating the eating spaces are not in place. These all add to the challenges experienced by people with physical and sensory impairments.

- **Cycling**

Some focus group participants stated they would like to see better-designed cycle infrastructure which is safe for all users. There are continued concerns about the behaviour of some cyclists who cycle on pavements. Similar concerns were raised regarding the introduction of e-scooters in the city centre. Participants were particularly concerned that the introduction of the e-scooter hire scheme might lead

to more people using their personal e-scooters even though this is forbidden. There were also concerns that, even with designated parking bays, e-scooters will be left at random so that they obstruct pavements and cause hazards for pedestrians. Elders Council would welcome feedback on the results of the e-scooter pilot.

- **Blackett Street pedestrianisation**

Participants have very mixed views regarding Blackett Street pedestrianisation. Whilst many people are supportive of the ambition to reduce air pollution in the city centre, there are significant concerns that the current proposals will severely restrict access to the retail core for those with limited mobility using public transport. There are real concerns that if it becomes more difficult to access the city centre, the decline in retail, which has already been exacerbated by COVID, will continue. The city centre also offers cultural and social opportunities which older people enjoy, but several people expressed the view that they would no longer come into the city centre if it became too difficult to get to places and shops they liked to visit. Several options were mentioned to ameliorate this such as the use of electric golf buggies and robot shopping trolleys (<https://mygita.com/>).

- **Traffic, noise and air pollution**

There were concerns raised whether moving cars out of the city centre would increase even further the volume of traffic along suburban high streets, such as Gosforth High Street, with consequent air and noise pollution on other high streets. There were suggestions that air and noise pollution data could be made visible e.g. on the advertising boards on Northumberland Street as this might help to raise awareness of the need for change. Questions were raised as to whether the 'Alive after 5' scheme should continue post-pandemic and whether it encouraged car use in the city centre.

Communication

- **Planning Consultation**

Elders Council is interested in participating in consultations on the Local Development Plan and other major planning consultations. However, the current planning system is difficult to use for many, the report identified the exclusionary nature of planning consultation currently, and recognized change was needed to ensure consultation was meaningful. However, Elders Council members did consider they had been given a good opportunity to engage in the 'Five Bridges' consultation with an adequate timescale for the consultation.

- **Digital Inclusion**

Increasingly all aspects of life are moving online, with services from organisations such as banks, councils and retailers often solely online. This shift online is predicted to continue and has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Elders Council has noted that this change often excludes older people and people on low incomes who are unable to afford the devices and broadband necessary for them to engage on-line. Whilst the Elders Council supports and promotes the importance of getting on-line, we must all recognize the need for access to face to face advice and support.

- **Education**

Educating both businesses and the community of the needs and issues of older people and those with mobility issues was an issue raised by the focus groups. Elders Council has been pleased to work with 'Dementia-friendly Newcastle' and would like to see this initiative continue, especially in raising awareness amongst city centre businesses so that older people and people with dementia feel more comfortable and independent when out and about in the city.

Conclusion

This research was done during lockdown when the older people involved had very limited opportunity to go out and about in the city centre. We will continue to monitor developments as lockdown eases, and proposals for the city centre transformation develop. We welcome the opportunity to continue the conversation with the Newcastle City Centre Transformation Team.

Elders Council would like to thank the students from Newcastle University's Planning and Architecture Department for their support in delivering this project. We would also like to thank the participants who took part, albeit on Zoom, when they would have much preferred to have been out and about in the city centre. A copy of the full report is available on the Elders Council website www.elderscouncil.org.uk.

Further information about this project and the work of the Elders Council is available from:

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