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Deacon, Lesley, Lockhart, Kate, Gray, Gill and Bikova, Zeta
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Practice Report: Story of Place, 2023



Authors: Lesley Deacon, Kate Lockhart, Gill Gray and Zeta Bikova

I really appreciate Kate Lockhart for always offering advice and helping my voice be heard. She works 24/7 for Wallsend and people's rights really... the meet ups are good and she's always thinking of ways to help people in Wallsend to be supported, families in general.

Gill is also always in the background sorting out different issues in Wallsend, and asking questions on what needs improved, and attending meetings about funding help in area etc

Kate and Gill are absolutely amazing women who are always there to offer support and encouragement. They really understand what it's like to be living in this community and the struggles faced by so many. Without them and the work they do I think Wallsend wouldn't be the same.

Figure 1 Community voices

Introduction

This Practice Report was co-written by Community Development Officers (Kate Lockhart and Gill Gray) and University Researchers (Dr Lesley Deacon and Zeta Bikova) to report on the work of Story of Place, over the last four years.

The research conducted by Kate and Gill was a piece of live fieldwork that took place over a period of four years (2019–2023), to understand a *community*. The research was active as the approach taken moved with the community itself based on where the community was, at the time of data collection, and what was needed for the community's voice to be heard. The project itself had four core stages of data collection and analysis – these, along with findings, will be set out in the rest of this report.

What is 'Story of Place'?

Story of Place is an independently funded project (by the Ballinger Foundation) within Wallsend Children's Community (WCC) which is based in the North-East (NE) of England. There are concerns as the NE has seen an increase in relative poverty from 20% to 23% in recent years (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021) which has left families below the national average standard of living. The impact of this in the NE has been higher than anywhere else (North East Child Poverty Commission, 2022).

The aim of WCC is to 'build over a generation, a Wallsend where children and young people have access to exactly the same high-quality chances as those in more advantaged areas'. The aim of the Story of Place project was to explore the challenges, strengths, opportunities and barriers faced by Wallsend families. Most of the work took place in two areas of Wallsend with the highest levels of deprivation: Howdon and Central Wallsend (NE28).

At the start of the project, Kate Lockhart and Gill Gray were employed as Community Development Officers to support community members to develop and co-design action plans to address issues voiced by local people based on their needs.

Methodology: Facilitated Practice-based Research (FPR)

As part of their role, Kate and Gill were trained in FPR (©University of Sunderland), an approach on which they collaborated, in 2019, with Dr Lesley Deacon. As part of this, an intensive research teaching programme took place during which a research plan was co-constructed and then implemented by Kate and Gill. FPR is underpinned by the framework of Emancipatory Practice Development, which espouses the need for practitioners to engage in critical reflection of existing values and beliefs before research takes place (Deacon, 2022; 2023). This is because, whilst it is essential that *all* stakeholders are involved in evaluation, there can be a disconnect between person-centred policy and practice. This means that people in communities can have services put onto them (top-down) rather than based on what they need (bottom-up).

Data collection and analysis

This next section of the report presents the data collection approaches taken for each stage in the research, along with data analysis. Different methodological approaches were applied, determined by what approach was appropriate given the scope of the project (*Pragmatism*

(Muurinen and Satka, 2020) and the creative approach most likely to be successful in engaging participants in the community). For each stage, research ethics were considered to ensure any harm to participants was minimised. (Where Lesley and Zeta were involved, ethical approval was sought, and received, from the University of Sunderland’s Ethics Committee.)

Stage 1: Knowing the community

The community that needed to be understood was the NE28 postcode, and whilst Gill was from Wallsend (and raised her children there), Kate was from outside the region. So in light of this, Kate and Gill completed a community walkabout to immerse themselves on the ground, in the local community (ethnography). These community walkabouts took place over a period of approximately twelve months, as Kate and Gill actively engaged within the community to try and understand it. Kate engaged as someone unfamiliar with the area and as a new mother, taking her daughter with her. Gill engaged as someone familiar with the area and as a new grandmother, taking her grandchild with her. This enabled them to apply a critical eye to knowledge about the community.

Throughout the walkabouts Kate and Gill wanted to ‘get a sense of what was already out there’ for families in terms of community resources (in NE28) with the aim of creating a ‘mental map’ of the area. Gill had tacit knowledge of resources that were available in the community, but Kate, as someone unfamiliar with the area, did not have this and was therefore reliant on advertising, both physically in the community and online. This enabled an exploration of how visible resources were to community members.

During these walkabouts Kate and Gill made notes concerning ‘what’s on’, i.e. observation of adverts in the local area for families. Based on this, nine venues were visited over a period of twelve months, as set out in **Table 1** below.

Event	Session/Activity/Event	Cost	Visits
1	Stay and Play session	Free to attend	2
2	Swimming pool – toddler session	Entry £	1
3	Local pub 1 serving food	Free to attend but must make a purchase	2
4	Local park 1	Free to attend	1
5	Soft play	£ to enter	1
6	Local park 2	Free to attend	1
7	Local pub 2 serving food	Free to attend but must make a purchase	1
8	Organised Local event	Free to attend	1

9	Local café aimed at toddlers	Free to attend but must make a purchase	1
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Table 1 Community walkabout service visit

After each visit, Kate and Gill completed a day sheet (fieldnotes) containing their observations of the culture in which they were immersed, which they shared with Lesley. Lesley’s role was to be a critical friend by raising questions of their notes, e.g. what was meant by ‘healthy’, ‘value for money’ etc. Lesley then completed a thematic analysis of the field notes.

Analysis

During the walkabouts Kate and Gill observed that whilst organisations reported to them that they were running events for families, this information was not always visible within the community, e.g. in posters/notice boards or online. Of the venues that were visited, two key themes emerged following the thematic analysis.

Cost implications

Four of the nine venues were free to enter but none provided free food/refreshments. This is potentially significant, as on face value it could be observed that free services are being offered but no venues were completely free of some charges, therefore this assumes that families have some disposable (surplus) income for spending on these activities, which is curious considering the level of deprivation in the NE28 area.

Spaces for interaction

Only two venues encouraged cross-group interaction, i.e. interaction with people other than those who came with you to the venue in the first place. Therefore a lack of meaningful interaction was fostered outside family interactions (similar to Deacon et al.’s (2019) findings concerning adults experiencing isolation and loneliness). So whilst some families engaged in the services provided, few interacted with other families also accessing the services, which meant community cultures were not necessarily being encouraged.

Update

The data collection and analysis for Stage 1 was completed in 2019. When reflecting back on this in July 2023, Kate observed that many of the places they visited no longer exist. For example, a small soft play has now become a nursery. The soft play they observed had been popular because of its low price and because it included free meals for children – but this is no longer available.

Stage 2: Families’ stories

Once Stage 1 was completed, this helped give a better understanding of the community and its resources. A decision was made in July 2019 to invite people living in NE28 to participate in group discussions, over coffee, whilst completing a lifecourse activity where they drew their own timelines (informal focus groups). The aim was to understand directly from participants how they perceived their life in the community. One person facilitated the group, whilst the other made notes.

Analysis

Data collected then went through a thematic analysis, with the following themes emerging.

Safety

Various examples were given (as shown in **Figure 3**) emphasising people's perceptions that their area was 'not safe'. This was connected, by participants, to feeling that there were no resources for children and young people and that they were not being listened to by service providers. This connects back to the community walkabouts, where Kate and Gill observed that whilst resources were available, these were not always advertised online or physically in the community, e.g. via posters/notice boards.

Leaving Wallsend for education, returning for family support

University/education was the main reason people gave for leaving Wallsend. However, they tended to remain with local universities such as those in Newcastle/Sunderland/Middlesborough. The reason given for coming back, or for those who stayed in the first place, was family – for childcare, linking with the ethos of WCC; *it takes a village to raise a child*. Participants observed that the more people they had around them to help the easier they found it.

I went to uni at 18 but came back to raise my family as I wanted the loving close childhood for my kids that I had.

I moved away to Kent but came back after 2 years so my parents could help with the childcare. I'm so glad I did. I would not be able to afford paying for child care now.

Live in Wallsend, work elsewhere

A number of participants reported that they were working elsewhere but lived in Wallsend.

I live in Wallsend, my kids go to school in Wallsend but I work in Newcastle. There just isn't the same opportunities in Wallsend.

The perception of there being limited job opportunities in Wallsend was part of this, but in addition, participants observed that it was cheaper to live in Wallsend rather than where they were working.

Houses were so much cheaper in Wallsend so we moved back and my parents followed.

Summary

So, families' stories followed a similar path where if they did leave Wallsend, they went for education. They came back for their family support, for the lower cost of housing, but tended to work outside of Wallsend.

It is much cheaper to live in Wallsend but it is harder to get jobs here. I had one job in a cafe in Wallsend but they let me go due to lack of hours available to employ me.

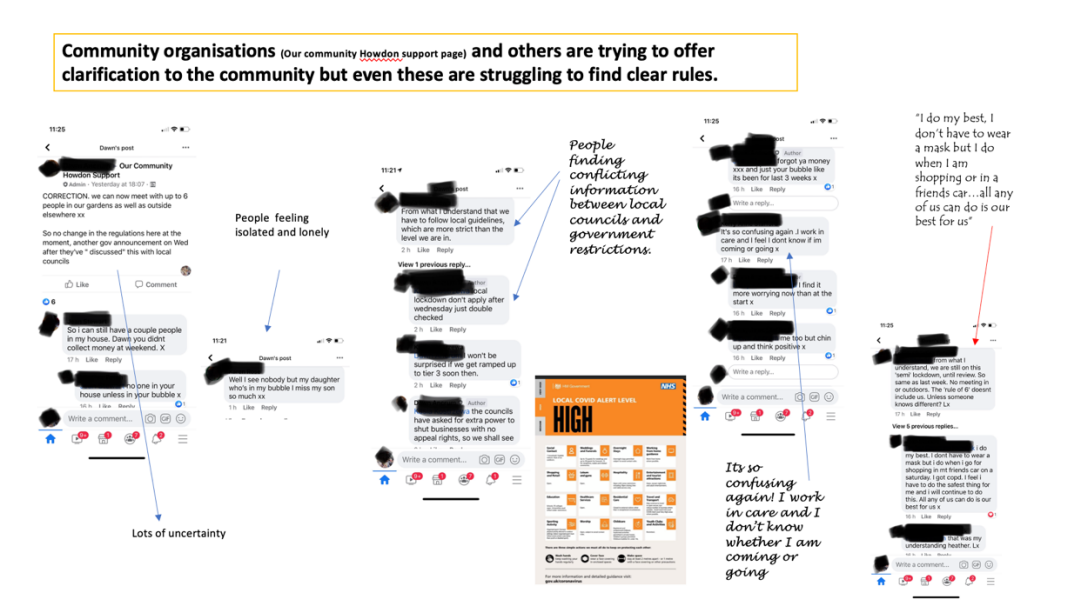


Figure 5 Live community research example

Stage 4: Community Champions (WhatsApp Group and in-person discussion groups) – active, live research, ongoing

The final stage of data collection follows the development of Community Champions (CCs). Following the focus group mailing list and the growth of the online community during Covid-19 lockdowns, the role of CCs were developed by Kate and Gill during the ‘Summer of Fun’ (2021). The Facebook group that emerged during the Covid-19 lockdowns became a WhatsApp group as it was more accessible for community members (informed consent was still sought and received from participants). Community members reported to Kate and Gill that they had lost focus on themselves due to work/family commitments and had wanted to connect with others. In consultation with community members, the WhatsApp group emerged along with the role of Community Champions. During the summer holidays community support changes due to schools being closed. The aim of CCs was to keep the momentum going (which had emerged during the lockdowns) for community members who were interested in creating a network and making connections with one another.

CCs are invited to join the WhatsApp group; attend a weekly discussion group (where they can bring children); and get priority bookings for activities in the community, for being involved in the group. In the longer term, CCs have observed that the biggest benefit they have had has been in **making connections** with similar people to themselves, e.g. firstly during Covid-19 lockdowns and then shared experiences of having low incomes. This has helped them feel less alone and more strongly connected with others – something which was not observed in the first two stages of data collection. On analysis of the WhatsApp group interactions, the feeling is that ‘support is strong’ between the members of the group and in the Wallsend area in general.

Benefits for WCC and professionals in the community are: CCs are sent links to surveys for testing (before they go live) from WCC, Save the Children etc.; live data is collected and

analysed from their discussions and fed back to professionals, e.g. concerning how services are being received and what needs the community has at that time. This is live research.

At the time of writing this report there are a total of 28 CCs, of whom 21 are actively engaged, and nine of those give regular feedback. Attendance at the weekly group is very much employment-dependent. It has been observed that, of those who are working, they tend to do shift work and their attendance depends on whether their rota allows. The CCs who come to everything are not working. A few come because activities for children are provided, but when they go back to work they are no longer able to attend. It is noted that if CCs have a job it can be difficult to commit, as CCs are volunteers.

Current themes

As with the live data that emerged from the Facebook group, Kate and Gill complete a weekly thematic analysis of data concerning what community members are *talking about*. They gather data from the weekly group meet-ups and virtual WhatsApp dialogue. The data gathered feeds into formal research studies or is used to help test surveys and give feedback.

Struggling to manage

Community members are struggling, after Covid, benefit changes and cost-of-living increases. CCs observe that families are having to change and budget more because shops they used to observe as 'cheap' are no longer as affordable.

Shops around here aren't AS cheap anymore. I don't even go in Iceland anymore, as every product has almost doubled in price.

The Aldi prices have went up hugely, but still seem cheapest supermarket available to me.

The food frozen family deals at Co-op and Howdon Spar, used to be £5 Now they are £6 or even £7, so I won't buy them anymore.

I used to be able to live on sales food per day, for £4 only! Herons has got more expensive and more unhealthy.

The cheap shops are becoming more and more expensive even for basics. I like to cook from scratch and don't buy much packaged jars etc. but I'm finding I'm now having to do so because they are a lot cheaper than cooking from scratch. I've always bought cheaper cuts of meat as this is what our family likes (Chicken drumsticks, wings and thighs etc. rather than breast) and I'm finding even these are getting so much more expensive everywhere.

My usual shop is done in Aldi and Lidl where a family shop for 4 used to be around £40 a week, this is now at least £70 which has forced me to shop less often and later in the evening when they may have reduced some of the meat and diary items.

I actually notice the price hike in Iceland/Farm Foods, for instance a pack of butter milk chicken is £4.99 or buy 3 for £12. When before is was only £2.99.

CCs report that the reason they do not ask for help is because 'nothing's going to change', so they feel that the burden is placed on them to change their attitude and manage and not ask for help. Linking back to Stages 1 and 2, families did not feel they were being listened to and could not ask for help before Covid-19 either. CCs consider how they can make £10 go further, so observations show the community engages in 'problem solving' to try to help each other, e.g. 'I've seen this which is free', or 'this is available', acting as a community online. This was illustrated during Easter 2023 where CCs engaged in virtual dialogue to help each other find cheaper alternatives.

Go to M&S just before it closes and get all the sale meat.. it's a fab way of getting cheap joint of meat for the freezer.

Is it worth working?

This theme emerged through CCs considering how even if they have job this means they can sometimes have less money than those accessing benefits. For some, this related to the cost of childcare.

Sometimes I really to think if it's actually worth working. Childcare costs are going up and up but my wages aren't. I have to pay more than half of my wage on childcare or other after school activities.

For others it was highlighted how they lost access to benefits because of their work.

I work really hard and so does my husband. We used to be on tax credits but are self employed and we started earning more so don't get it anymore. We are £17 over the cut off and are finding it so so hard. It feels like you get punished to work.

We both work so we aren't entitled to any help and like so many other families just finding it so hard.

We have to help ourselves

Families perceive that they have to help themselves; they are not looking to the services as they do not perceive them as *helping*.

I love being part of the Community Champion group. When we meet up it is so so supportive because I realise everyone is just struggling as much as me.

I love being a mam but it's so hard to juggle everything. I go to bed thinking about money and budgeting for the week and wake up thinking about money.. it's exhausting.

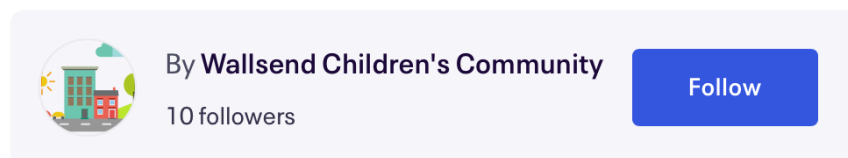
Thank god I live in Wallsend because I don't think I would have this level of emotional support anywhere else.

Impact of Kate and Gill's work with the Community Champions – 'we are the link'

Links have been made by Gill and Kate, between the CCs and organisations such as Save the Children UK (who contact Kate directly for 'first hand, live and raw' feedback from the community, which is invaluable in their research) and the Northeast Child Poverty Commission's Director, Amanda Bailey (to share lived experiences from CCs with policy makers). Community members have also been supported by Kate and Gill to develop business ideas and participate in campaigns. For example, in October 2023 an event was held by WCC to celebrate to the 'achievement of two young ladies from Wallsend in co-creating a Child Poverty Campaign with other teenagers from across the country with Save the Children UK'. At the event they shared their own and their families' 'journey through the development of this campaign, the conversation changers it has provoked, and their hopes for reducing child poverty for theirs and future generations' (Paula McCormack, Executive Lead, WCC). Dense Welch (local actor and TV personality) has become aware of their work and recently described them as a 'voice of the Northeast' ([WCC Facebook](#)).

Potential Not Poverty

Follow this organiser to stay informed on future events



By Wallsend Children's Community
10 followers
Follow

Figure 6 Invitation to campaign event

Figure 7 demonstrates a sample of Facebook posts showing some of the work of Kate and Gill, including making links between community members and service providers, and links to other research.





Figure 7 Facebook adverts demonstrating linking the community

What these examples illustrate is that practitioners at WCC are the link between community members, professionals and services. Community Champions, whilst able to share the voices of other community members, are volunteers. Other practitioners, e.g. in education, health, policing, social care etc., have other primary responsibilities. A direct link between community members and practitioners does not currently exist, so the work of Story of Place is not yet finished...

A key issue concerning the role of Community Champions is this fact that they are volunteers where practitioners and other stakeholders are paid. This means they are being asked to give up their own time, and whilst this is something they are invested in as community members, it does not mean their time is infinite. There is concern from the community that without WCC being the link, the connections would disappear as they are not yet fully in place.

I have always volunteered and I get a lot of joy out of doing so however it is taking more of my time now to make the amount of money needed to cover all of the basic bills so unfortunately voluntary work is something I'm going to have to cut down on

or give up altogether to enable me to find the balance between work and raising my 3 kids.

I love volunteering. It's the only thing I have at the moment that isn't just being mam. I can't find a job that will fit in around my kids.

What Kate and Gill have achieved through Story of Place is not just in conducting research but in the way it has created this link with voices in the community. As they are independent, the Community Development Practitioners are able to make connections between community members and community resources (see **Figure 8**). They are positioned in the role of facilitator, between different stakeholders in the community, able to hear the voices of community members.

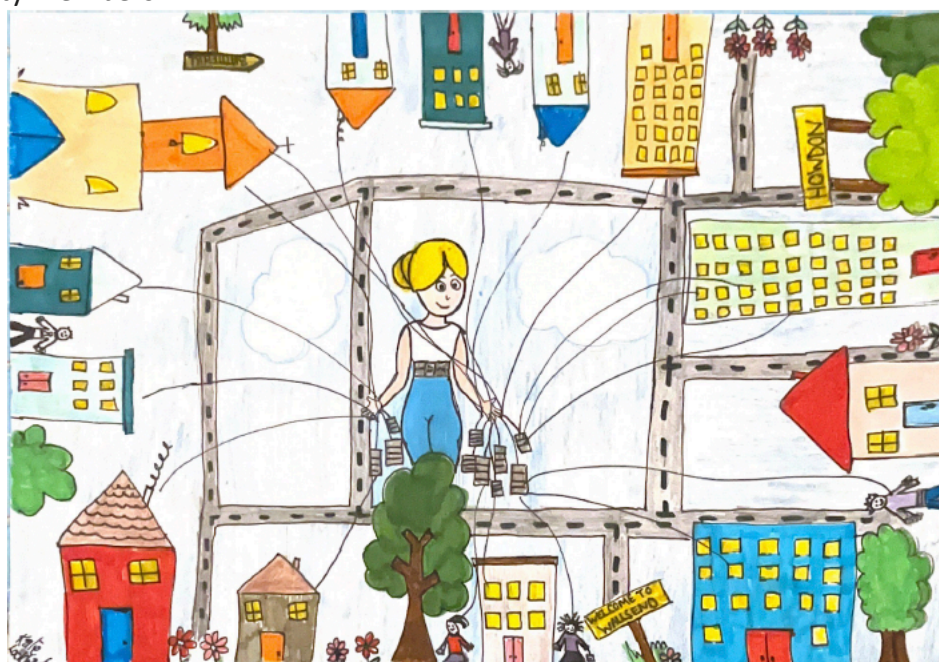


Figure 8 Story of Place and WCC linking community members and stakeholders

Without this role, all the strings would be dropped as they are not direct links, but instead links made by the Community Development Practitioners based on their knowledge, which is fluid – not something that can be written up into a manual, so people know who to go to, but responsive to a fluid community with changing needs.

Conclusion and recommendations

This report is aimed at highlighting all the work conducted by Kate and Gill over the last four years, which has been considerable. At the time of writing there are concerns regarding the continued funding for these roles, therefore the following recommendations are made.

- Share this report with Wallsend Community Partnership Board as evidence of work conducted in the community.
- Develop a 'you said we did' strategy to share examples of the work with community members.

- Seek funding to continue to fund Kate's role so that this important link in the community is maintained.

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