

**A structured approach to
grassroots cultural co-production
and co-commissioning in rural
towns and villages in Durham**

Report commissioned by Northern Heartlands and
produced by Dr Stephen Pritchard (October 2018)

ABOUT AUTHOR

I am an academic, researcher, writer, community artist and activist. I have practiced community art for more than 11 years, working with people who don't get involved in what is conventionally defined as arts and culture. I work in post-industrial towns, rural villages and landscapes, and city centres. My academic work expands upon my artistic practice (although I often prefer to deny my artistic practice, finding 'art' a troubling term), developing upon a critical ethnographic way of working that is focused on wandering, visiting and chance meetings.¹ My cultural practices inform my academic research and my research informs my practice. I often work cooperatively with local people and other artists. A firm belief that our cultures are ordinary – everywhere – and that people know what's best for them underpins my work. I founded a community art cooperative and the Socially Engaged and Participatory Arts Network and I'm a founding member and co-organiser of the Movement for Cultural Democracy.

¹ Critical ethnography is reflexive and aware of bias. It rejects the notions of detached research and scientific objectivism; rather, researchers acknowledge they are intrinsically linked with research subjects and their contexts. Its focus on socially and culturally constructed data, often refined and reformulated during the research process, can lead researchers to alter and redefine their research intentions and generate different theories as well as testing hypotheses. Indeed, by rejecting the judgemental aspects of traditional ethnographic processes, newer forms of ethnography distinctively acknowledge the research process as being openly interpretative (Bauman, 1987).

My practice can be summarised as follows:

Like all places, rural communities have their own traditions, habits, and languages, often unknown outside their tight circles. Their 'make use of whatever's close-to-hand' way of working inspires a simple creativity and crafty ingenuity so often smothered under conurbation-shaped synthetics. Rural people tend to measure things 'the old way' - a lesson contemporary art institutions might do well to heed. This strong sense of DIY appeals to our creative ethos - independence, community, do-it-yourself (or with the help of others who fancy getting involved/ having a go).

We know how to be slow; sensitive; honest; organic. We get creative when people say the time is right. Conversation and participation are paramount, taking many different forms; never exploitative; never constructed. Playfulness often receives a warm welcome.

We are privileged to be invited into rural (indeed any) communities. We are always incomers. It is never our place to judge.

We can only help people create potential spaces. We will leave sooner or later.²

For more information about my work, see Appendix 3 and my website.³

² S. Pritchard, *A View is Always Worth It: Social Practice in Rural North East England*, 2015.

³ <http://colouringinculture.org/previous>.

BACKGROUND

This document reflects the results of a research and development project commissioned by Northern Heartlands and undertaken by Dr Stephen Pritchard.

It is designed to follow up on the extremely successful visit of the Man Engine to Willington in July 2018 by offering a series of proposals about how Northern Heartlands can effectively integrate grassroots cultural engagement in Willington and in other towns and villages across its project area.⁴

The research took place in Willington and in the Dene Valley parish. The emphasis in Willington was on building upon the interest in culture and heritage generated by the Man Engine event by linking these narratives and activities to place and to an understanding of how the needs of people living in the town could be supported by future cultural activities. In Dene Valley, the research also explored the histories and needs of people living across this more dispersed, contested and rural place. Both places shared similarities yet were also different in many respects.

The report also builds upon practice and research about notions of cultural democracy, place-guarding (rather than the ubiquitous placemaking), grassroots participation, social practice, community development and people-powered decision making and planning. It therefore attempts to define prevalent attitudes within each community, to map existing assets and to highlight existing gaps in provision, and to understand the importance of place-specific contexts in developing truly grassroots strategies and ways of working in these communities. The report concludes by attempting to expand upon the knowledge produced during the research in these two locations into a general strategy and series of recommendations for grassroots cultural engagement that could be tailored to other places across the Northern Heartlands delivery area.

⁴ Northern Heartlands commissioned the Man Engine project in Willington. For more, see <https://northernheartlands.org/project/the-man-engine-in-willington>.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted using an ethnographic approach which directly engaged local people, business owners, third sector organisations, and local councillors. The conversations (of varying lengths) that resulted from this research were open and unscripted.

Another important element was the act of walking (or “drifting”) around Willington and Dene Valley to begin to get a feel for each place and how people interacted with each other and their environments. The research also explored the history and heritage of Willington and Dene Valley, relating these narratives and memories to the lives of people living in these places today.

The research mapped existing assets in each community and identified gaps in provision. The findings are compared with the views of local people about what they would like to see happen in their areas.

Finally, the research integrates current theory about community development, cultural practices, cultural democracy, community-led planning, and placemaking/ place-guarding to offer a series of radical proposals for future grassroots engagement projects across the Northern Heartlands area.

SCOPE

The research was conducted over ten days, with seven days of fieldwork and three days of background research and writing up.

I spent four days in Willington and three days in Dene Valley.

The limited nature of the fieldwork and background research means that this report reflects a representative snapshot of opinions in each place rather than a more thorough questionnaire or prolonged period of extensive community consultation.

The areas of research are limited to the town of Willington and to the parish boundaries of the Dene Valley and neighbouring Eldon parish.

My expertise in grassroots community arts practice and understanding of placemaking/ place-guarding, arts and regeneration, social practice, and community development ensures that this research is grounded in practice and theory. Examples of best practice have therefore been applied to the research and its suggested next steps in such a way as to enable Northern Heartlands to be able to develop an innovative and democratic approach to grassroots cultural engagement across its project locations.

PREVIOUS WORK

Northern Heartlands had engaged and continued to engage with people in both Willington and the Dene Valley before and during this research. The two places are part of the area covered by the Northern Heartlands project – one of sixteen Great Place Schemes in receipt of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council England. Its mission is: ‘to deliver cultural activities that transform people’s understanding of the heritage, landscapes and places they live in, building their confidence and ability to influence policy and decision-making’.⁵

Community Facilitators focused (alongside the rest of the Northern Heartlands team) on engaging communities in preparation for the project’s first large event – the Man Engine – which took place in Willington in July 2018.⁶ They accompanied me for part of one of my visits to Willington and also engaged with people in Dene Valley prior to this research and accompanied me on one of my visits to the area. Both facilitators were obviously very committed and already had built impressions of the two localities. They had also begun building relationships with some individuals within each community. They provided their impressions, together with links to connections and advice about what they had done ahead of and throughout the research.

It is important to recognise that prior engagement with some community members in Willington and Dene Valley impacted on the research in several ways. Firstly, it meant that relationships had, to various extents, already been established. Second, the project team had developed some ideas about the areas, communities and potential projects, as well as having planned and delivered the Man Engine in Willington. Third, some of the people previously engaged had developed their own understandings and expectations about what Northern Heartlands was and what it could or might deliver.

⁵ See <https://northernheartlands.org/about-us>.

⁶ The impact of this early engagement with the people of Willington will be discussed later in this report.

WILLINGTON

CONTEXT

The town of Willington is very proud of its mining heritage and still remembers what life and the town was like at the height of industrial activity in the area. Since then it has undergone sustained economic decline. It once had a good rail connection but, like the traditional industries, it has now disappeared.

The town has a strong sense of pride in its past and retains a close-knit community feel. There is, however, a clear lack of things to do in Willington and many shops on the high street are closed. The library is only open half the week and the Welfare Hall and BMX track have been abandoned. The green is large and, although seemingly relatively underused, it has potential to become a place of congregation – as it did during the Man Engine event. The town has new estates, but it seems they are somewhat disconnected from the older communities. There are also some relatively large council estates in the town. It is located on an important A road but is perhaps a place that many travellers pass-through without stopping. It does, however, have several high-performing schools.

Willington Central and neighbouring Sunnybrow are amongst the most deprived areas of England, scoring 1,307 and 1,776 in the 2015 index of overall deprivation. Willington Central (671) and Sunnybrow (848) are also amongst the most severely deprived areas of England in terms of low income. Similarly, Willington Central (440) and Sunnybrow (496) have some of the highest levels of unemployment in England. Indeed, almost all indicators of deprivation reveal that the central areas of the town are extremely deprived, with deprivation amongst children (447) and older people (2,341) particularly severe in Willington Central. Willington Central does, however, score highly in terms of local service provision.⁷

⁷ <http://durobs.durham.gov.uk/ia/ia1015/atlas.html>

It is important to note, however, that the immediately surrounding areas, including West and East Willington are much less deprived and many rural areas close by are relatively affluent. Given the town's population is less than 6,000 (2013) and its semi-rural location, the different degrees of relative wealth/ poverty are clearly visible. Unsurprisingly, it appeared that many active citizens were relatively affluent.

The town of Willington is therefore split between people living in the council estates and older ex-mining terraces – many of whom are unemployed or in low-paid work – and people living in larger housing around the edges of the town and those living in the new estates – many of whom are commuters. The relatively low house prices in Willington, the area's good schools and its semi-rural environment make it an attractive prospect for commuters. Indeed, the local town councillors seem to think Willington will become more of a commuter town in the future. It is about a 15 minutes commute to Durham City. The influx of new commuters and the need for longer-term residents to commute to work can lead to the erosion of community spirit, cause local shops to struggle as commuters buy essentials on the way home from work, can negatively impact the environment, and can place stresses on transport systems particularly, in this case, roads.

The average house price in Willington of £112,000 is very low in comparison to the national average, with house prices in Willington Central and Sunnybrow significantly lower than the town's average.⁸ It is worth mentioning that the new housing estate on the east of the town – Church View – is currently selling detached homes for between £240,000 for a 3-bed to over £500,000 for a 4-bed.⁹ This development indicates a further shift towards wealthy commuters. Rental fees in the town are very low, with most rentals in the town being around £350 per month.

Willington has its own council-ran library. It is open approximately half the week. The town also has its own leisure centre ran by a Community Development Trust, although it has limited facilities.¹⁰ It does not have a community centre. It has no youth facilities other than some small play areas which are often vandalised. The town has a

⁸ <https://www.rightmove.co.uk/house-prices/Willington-26980.html>

⁹ <https://www.fairgrove.co.uk/current-developments/willington/>

¹⁰ <http://www.spectrumleisurecentre.com/about-us>

community transport facility operated by the owners of the leisure centre. The Community Action Centre closed recently, and this led to many of the activities undertaken there to move to the library, which is now the town's focal point for community activities and learning.

The town's high street is in decline but still retains many essential shops including local butchers, fruit shop, opticians, pharmacy, dentist, beauty salons, takeaways, cafes, pubs, newsagents, hardware shop, off licences, convenience stores and a small Co-operative supermarket. The high street also has an independent charity shop which is dedicated to investing in the provision of funding for activities for groups for children and young people in the town. Willington also has an NHS health centre and a Sure Start centre. It also has a relatively large working men's club.

Willington's industrial estate is relatively new and has good levels of occupancy. Its resident businesses include the charity, Cornerstone, which provides training in wood working and furniture-making, selling its products to help provide homeless people with places to live and work.¹¹ The charity also provides services to young people requiring an alternative to school. It owns and manages a number of houses around Willington which it offers to its clients.

Willington has no arts, cultural or heritage facilities but the display of banners at the Man Engine clearly shows that the people are interested in creativity and creatively expressing their links to the past and hopes for the future.¹²

The town has its own semi-professional football club with a range of youth sides and a cricket club with a youth academy.

There are several churches in Willington, but these tend to serve different Christian sects and the town has a history of religious divide which was often linked to employment prospects. The Open Door Church. However, offers a range of services to the community, including a food bank.

The town also has several large areas of allotments.

¹¹ <https://www.cornerstone-north.org>

¹² The banners were made by local school children and by community members at a well-attended drop-in session.

Finally, the town has numerous Facebook groups which are relatively well-subscribed and used.

CONVERSATIONS

The research involved a conversational approach – unscripted and often unplanned. I spoke to 72 people during the research. Some of the conversations were very brief, others relatively short, and some were long – sometimes lasting several hours. The conversation with the two town councillors (one being the Mayor of Greater Willington) was more formal, taking the form of a meeting in their offices that was also attended by Northern Heartlands’ director, Jill Cole, and community facilitator.

The breakdown of people involved in the conversations is as follows:

- 2 local councillors
- 1 ex-town councillor
- 2 librarians
- 6 shopkeepers
- 1 café owner
- 1 manager of Cornerstone
- 2 charity shop workers
- 1 local historian
- 1 retired professor
- 4 young people
- 4 people in shops
- 15 people in the streets
- 32 people at the Man Engine event

The breakdown of the ages of people involved in the conversations is as follows;

- 16-21: 4
- 22-35: 19
- 36-59: 35
- 60+: 14

66 people were from Willington and its nearby areas; 6 were from further afield.

Conversations revealed that long-term residents were overwhelmingly proud of their community and its industrial past but they all felt that the strength of community spirit had declined in past decades. They felt that incomers and commuters did not contribute to the longer-term community and often kept themselves to themselves. One person described Willington as ‘a town split down the middle now’; another saying that people from one part of the town do not go to the other part. Interestingly, newer residents felt that the town had a great community spirit and that was often cited as a key reason behind their decision to move there.

Young people felt there was nothing to do in the town, with one commenting that ‘the only thing to do is hang around the dene’ and another saying, ‘We were promised a skate park and stuff, but nothing has happened’. People overwhelmingly agreed that more facilities were needed for children and young people.

Although some people (councillors and long-term locals) felt that the high street was in decline, it was clear that other people (mainly recent incomers) felt that the town still had a good range of shops and was not as bad as that of other towns. Some people called for a monthly market to attract more trade to the town, explaining that they had been waiting for something to happen for a while. Others felt that a market would not help the town and might even take trade away from the local shops. The local councillors were keen on using art on shutters or shop windows to brighten up the high street. Local people were generally suspicious when the idea was put to them, with one person (a long-term resident) arguing that ‘it won’t make any difference to us’; another (a recent incomer) laughed, saying that ‘we need new industries – tourism, digital, that sort of thing – not some sort of rural version of Shoreditch!’ There was a clear difference of opinion in relation to the state of Willington’s high street, although people were unanimously opposed to the present practice of using some of empty shops as cheap storage facilities. Many of the shops are privately owned, meaning that the possibility of a coherent high street regeneration/ placemaking plan would probably be difficult, slow and expensive, with little guarantee that any attempts to bring retail trade back to the high street unlikely to succeed. It is also worth noting that the high street is relatively diverse, and many shopkeepers are hopeful of maintaining a business that can sustain them in the near-to-middle-future.

It was interesting when people were asked the question of what art, culture, heritage and/ or creativity could bring to the community to help it develop. I asked this question to 49 people (68%) with whom I had conversations. I decided not to ask this question of the other people because of the flow of the conversation or just due brevity. The responses were as follows:

- Very positive: 12 (24%)
- Hopeful: 25 (51%)
- Negative: 9 (18%)
- Didn't know: 3 (7%)

The responses indicate that, of the people questioned, 75% had favourable perceptions of the value of art, culture, heritage and/ or creativity in helping develop the town, although their reasons varied. Most people's opinions were very general, however, some people offered structured explanations of the ways they felt art, creativity, etc. could bring benefits to the town and its communities. For example, many people thought that art and creativity would give local children and young people something to do. Meanwhile, many local businesses believed that art could help regenerate the high street and put Willington 'back on the map'.

Town councillors believed that arts and heritage could benefit Willington's young people and local shopkeepers. They thought that creativity could give children and young people something positive to do, and they also saw arts and heritage as offering the possibility of reviving the high street and 'putting Willington back on the map'.

Local historian, O.L., an elderly woman with an encyclopedic knowledge of the town and its surrounding environs, was passionately in favour of keeping the history and heritage of the town alive. She regularly exhibits historical information at the local library covering a range of topics, and she also produced a display for the Man Engine event which was viewed by many people as one of the best parts of the day. She has a vast amount of information and is keen to put it towards projects that offer long-term benefits to the town. She saved the plaque at Willington Welfare Hall and it is now on display at Beamish Museum. Most interestingly, she explained how she had, together with other local people, set up the Wear Valley Recall Group which, although no longer

operating, once toured care homes around the area with historical information and films that helped residents remember their pasts. This is an interesting idea which could be revived by older and young people developing something like this anew.

Several shopkeepers thought that a monthly market which offered 'something different' could help the town's economy. One shopkeeper also suggested 'mural paintings' as a means of attracting new business to the high street.

The manager of a community charity suggested that participatory art and creative activities could benefit the children supported by the charity and could enhance their wellbeing. He saw this as being something that could be built into his existing support programme.

The local librarians felt that the library was now the sole place in the town for cultural activities to take place. Whilst they were positive about this, they said that more facilities were needed to help groups develop outside of the limited opening hours of the library.

M.R. – a retired professor in social sciences with a background in education and community theatre – had some interesting ideas about how arts, culture and heritage could help develop the town. A resident of Willington for the past 5 years, having moved to the town because of cheap housing and because he was born in the North East, he explained that he had contacted Northern Heartlands when the project began to ask for support. He had asked Northern Heartlands for support for a project to reopen the Empire Cinema in Crook, but Northern Heartlands cannot fund capital projects. It became clear that he has several interesting ideas about how creativity could bring people together from across ages and backgrounds, although he was at pains to point out that children and young people should form the backbone of any projects.

M.R. also showed me two adjoining houses on one of the housing estates which were burnt out and boarded up. He suggested that they could be reopened as a

community theatre space and creative hub that could be owned and programmed by local community members. This seemed an interesting idea. The buildings are owned by local social landlord, Dene and Valley, which is part of County Durham Housing Group. The group was formed in 2015 when the county's remaining council housing was transferred to it.¹³ It is possible that the properties could be transferred to a community benefit society made of people from the town. Nevertheless, it is important to restate that Northern Heartlands are unable to support capital projects.

It is also worth mentioning that I also asked almost everyone (67 people – 93%) what they thought of the Man Engine event in Willington. 97% of people were positive about the event. This indicates that the one-off event had heightened people's awareness of arts, culture and heritage. One person said that there should have been posters around the town and in the estates, so people knew what was going on, adding that many people didn't realise it was taking place until the last minute. Another person said that the money spent on the event would have been better utilised by supporting long-term local community activities and possibly a locally-organised carnival, like those which took place regularly in the town until the 1970s or 1980s. The idea of reviving the carnival is interesting and could become a catalyst for year-round preparations and community-led creativity. This idea was echoed by another person who mentioned that the town's young people were once kept active by taking part in one of Willington's several juvenile jazz bands which toured the North East and beyond in the 1960s and 1970s.

¹³ <https://www.cdhgannualreport.co.uk/history-of-the-group/>

WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT?

This research identified that people in Willington had a number of ideas about how arts, culture, heritage and creativity could help the community to develop:

- Shutter art/ murals as a means of regenerating the high street.
- A 'cultural' marketplace once a month as a means of bringing new trade to the town.
- An arts hub for young people on the high street.
- A 'recall' project that could bring young and old together to develop ways of keeping the town's history alive whilst also supporting people's wellbeing.
- A coproduced heritage trail that could help bring tourists to the area to discover the town's rich mining history as well as its stunning natural environments.
- A community theatre and arts centre that would repurpose derelict housing in one of the town's estates.
- An additional strand to charitable work that could build arts and heritage within its existing service provision for excluded children from around the Wear Valley area.
- An annual community-led carnival to build upon the Man Engine event.
- A new form of mass youth participatory band that could reimagine the spirit of the town's once buoyant juvenile jazz bands from the 1960s and 1970s.

DENE VALLEY

CONTEXT

Dene Valley is an area lying in between the towns of Bishop Auckland and Shildon that encompasses several very small villages and hamlets: Eldon, Eldon Lane, Old Eldon, Close House, Coundon Grange, Coronation and Bridge Place. The area has approximately 2,000 residents and around 10% of its population are gypsies and travellers. It is an ex-mining area that was designated as a 'Category D' village in 1951, meaning that the county council decided that no building and little investment would take place there. The intention was to demolish all the housing in the area and move valley residents to the new town of Newton Aycliffe, but this did not happen. Some colliery rows were demolished but most were renovated by the inhabitants. The drift mine closed in 2002 and the valley is now a pleasant semi-rural environment. There are no council estates in the area and, whilst there are no new housing estates in the immediate vicinity, there is a relatively new, small private housing estate in Coundon Grange.

The area was built on coal mining and once employed thousands of people in the pits and subsequent drift mines. The entire area was covered by signs of mining. Housing was provided by the pit owners and was of a very poor standard. But the valley once had an open-air swimming pool for miners as well as tennis courts, a gym, allotments, etc. The area was bombed by a Zeppelin airship during the First World War.¹⁴ By the 1970s, the area was in desperate decline, however, it has recovered a little since then, largely due to investment by the New Labour government.

Many local people fought the 'Category D' status imposed upon the area and the legacy of this passionate struggle still lives on in the valley, with many people proud of their communities there and committed to developing the area. And, whilst there is a

¹⁴ For more information, see <http://www.swd.news/the-day-german-zeppelin-targeted-eldon>.

sense that the strong community spirit had declined by the late 1960s, some community members continue to fight for the people of Dene Valley. Dene Valley Parish Council have just announced that it intends to develop a neighbourhood plan which will demand investment from the county council. Dene Valley Community Partnership provides a 'One-Stop Shop' which has become a focal point for community services and activities for the area and, indeed, beyond. The area is served by a relatively new-build primary school which is rated as outstanding.¹⁵

Eldon (which covers the Dene Valley on the English Indices of Deprivation 2015) is ranked amongst the most deprived areas of England, although scoring 4,471 in the 2015 index of overall deprivation, it is considered less deprived than Willington (see above). Similarly, whilst Eldon is considered to be amongst the most deprived areas of England, it is ranked as less deprived than Willington in almost every area. The exception to this is crime, where Eldon is ranked the second worst area in County Durham and has a Crime Domain ranking that is one of the highest in the country.¹⁶ It is important to note that, compared to the areas surrounding Willington, those surrounding Eldon are generally more deprived, with only small pockets of affluence.

The area has a population comprising of longer-term home owners who have remained in the area after much of the area's immediate employment opportunities had ended, more recent home-owners who have moved to the area in search of cheap properties and good community spirit, an increasing number of rental tenants – many of whom are renting properties from private landlords and agencies, social housing tenants – an increasing number of whom have been moved to the area having been displaced from London, Basildon and other places, and a gypsy/ traveller population. The longer-term residents have noticed a decline in community spirit as more newer residents have moved in. They are concerned about landlords buying cheap properties then renting them, via agencies, to people displaced from other parts of England and recent EU migrants. Nevertheless, people do tend to see these people as often more hard-working than longer-term residents often believed to be stuck in, what one local person called, the 'benefits trap'.

¹⁵ <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/134855>

¹⁶ durobs.durham.gov.uk/ia/ia1015/atlas.html

The gypsies and travellers represent around 10% of the area's population, with many fields used as sites and even permanent residencies. This is significantly higher than the average number of people identifying as gypsies and travellers in the UK which, according to the 2011 census, was 0.1% of the population.¹⁷ Many other fields have been split and are home to a large population of horses. These people are not a singular community, instead being split into individual communities based on different origins. Local people feel comfortable with the gypsies and travellers because, as the Parish Councillor explained, they tend to 'generally keep themselves to themselves'.

House prices in the Dene Valley are extremely low, with many houses selling for less than £25,000. The average house price in the area is £56,000, which represents a rise of 33% in the last year (although it should be noted that this increase could be due to the very few properties sold during the period). Rental fees in the area are also very low, with many houses available to rent for less than £300 per month.

The valley does not have a library, although the Dene Valley Community Partnership's 'One-Stop Shop' offers a limited range of books for loan. The nearest library is in Shildon, around 1 mile away. There is a community centre in Eldon, but it is open on a very limited basis. The 'One-Stop Shop' in Eldon Lane also functions as a community centre. Dene Valley Community Partnership provides an excellent community transport service which extends well beyond the community's boundaries. It also provides a community garage which has received funding from a range of foundations and the EU. The nearest leisure centre is Shildon-Sunnydale Leisure Centre which is approximately 1 mile away. Dene Valley Community Partnership provides a small community gym.

There is no real high street in Dene Valley (although there is a road named High Street in Eldon Lane) but it does not have any shops, other than the 'One-Stop Shop' which (as discussed above) is a community facility. Eldon Lane has a well-hidden local convenience store, a pizza takeaway and a hair dresser and tattoo parlour. It also has an NHS GP's surgery, albeit with limited opening hours.¹⁸ There is also a Sure Start

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/whatdoesthe2011censustellusaboutthecharacteristicsofgypsyoririshtravellersinenglandandwales/2014-01-21>

¹⁸ <https://www.nhs.uk/Services/gp/Overview/DefaultView.aspx?id=40555>

centre which appears to be mostly closed but still offers a very limited service. There is also a relatively large and architecturally impressive working men's club in Eldon Lane.

Dene Valley has no arts, cultural or heritage facilities although some arts, crafts and music workshops are hosted in the 'One-Stop Shop' by local volunteers. There is a large, well-kept play area to the rear of Eldon Lane, another in Eldon, and a small playground in Coronation. None of them appeared to be vandalised to any great extent. There are no sports facilities or sports clubs in Dene Valley, although, again, Dene Valley Community Partnership offers a walking group. It also organises day-trips for residents from the area and service-users from further afield.

Dene Valley, like Willington, has several churches and they appear to offer some services to local people. Many people do not use them, however.

Dene Valley has an allotment which is maintained by volunteers on behalf of the Dene Valley Community Partnership.

Finally, the area has some Facebook groups, but they are not well used and have very small numbers of members.

It seems as if community services in the area are dominated by Dene Valley Community Partnership.¹⁹ This is positive in terms of it being a strong defender of the community and an established community organiser; negative in terms of the fact that many of its service-users are men and many are older, white residents.

¹⁹ <http://www.denevalleypartnership.co.uk/>

CONVERSATIONS

As in Willington, the research involved a conversational approach. All the conversations were unscripted and unplanned. However, it is important to note that several meetings, sometimes lasting several hours, took place with Dene Valley Community Partnership staff, volunteers and service users. The meetings were informal but followed agendas set out by the partnership team. Northern Heartlands' 2 community facilitators accompanied me during one of the meetings with the partnership and its service users.

I spoke to 28 people during the research.

The breakdown of people involved in the conversations is as follows:

- 1 Parish Councillor (also Chair of Board of Trustees for DVCP)
- 1 Dene Valley Community Partnership Operations Manager
- 11 Dene Valley Community Partnership service users/ volunteers
- 1 shopkeeper
- 1 musician
- 1 writer and actor
- 1 businessman
- 2 young people
- 1 person in a shop
- 8 people in the streets

The breakdown of the ages of people involved in the conversations is as follows;

- 16-21: 2
- 22-35: 5
- 36-59: 4
- 60+: 17

26 people were from the Dene Valley area; 2 were from further afield.

The conversations in Dene Valley fell into two distinct forms: passing conversations with people; and meetings with Dene Valley Community Partnership staff, volunteers and service users.

Talking to people on the street and in the shop revealed that most people were friendly and interested in what I was doing and who I was. Contrary to my expectations following conversations with those who have had some dealings with the area, everyone I talked to felt that, whilst the area had been neglected, it had been given a 'bad name' by outsiders who, usually, had never visited. One person said, 'People think this is a bad place to live. It's not.' Another said, 'We're sort of "under the radar" here,' adding with a grin, 'And that's not always a bad thing!' Older people were drawn to remember their pasts with a mixture of nostalgia and sadness. One older man said, 'This place was built on coal. It's still sitting on coal... We were a strong community. We're still a good community, no matter what anyone thinks ... But, by God, it was a dirty and hard place back in the heydays.'

When asked what Dene Valley needed to help it to flourish, people were, like in Willington, genuinely concerned about the futures of the area's young people. One young mother said that, while the schools were 'good round here', there wasn't much to do for older kids. 'Most of them are no bother, mind you,' she added. Another person said that the Sure Start centre 'hadn't really worked out' because of a lack of people wanting childcare because many young mothers in the area were unemployed and didn't need childcare. And, while unemployment in the valley is a problem, one person said, 'There's a grey economy around here, so a lot of people keep themselves busy, if you know what I mean?'

I met a family from Poland who were on their way to the park in Eldon. They were happy living in the area, having moved there several years ago from the south of England. I spoke to a young gypsy woman who said she liked living in Dene Valley because it was quiet and there was plenty of room for the horses. Another gypsy man was busy building a patio to the front of a rather impressive prefabricated property at the rear of the mothballed brickworks. He had lived in the valley for several years. I asked him what it was like living there. He smiled and said,

'We don't get no trouble round here. It's a nice place to live... Though we do keep ourselves to ourselves, like.'

The meetings at the Dene Valley Community Partnership's 'One-Stop Shop' were interesting. People echoed concerns about the lack of youth services in the area. They were keen to explain that the area wasn't 'a bad place to live' and that the area's perceived reputation as a 'no-go zone' was unfair. The Parish Councillor pointed out that 'it's just a few young ones who cause a nuisance' and that it didn't take much to sort out any problems. I commented on how well-maintained and relatively un-vandalised the parks were. 'That's because there's not much trouble round here,' was the response.

The Dene Valley Community Partnership was keen to listen to and work with Northern Heartlands, initially looking for the project to potentially support a range of things such as a community folk/ acoustic festival, a young people's art café in the 'One-Stop Shop', even an amateur theatre production. It became apparent, however, that many of the people involved at the partnership were dismayed at the lack of recognition in the new draft County Durham Plan, with the area being described as 'unviable' – something that linked back to the earlier designation of the valley as 'Category D' in the 1950s. Their response was to begin talking about a local plan – a parish-level plan for the regeneration of the valley and its communities. I attended a meeting at which people discussed the need for employment and training opportunities that built upon those already provided by Dene Valley Community Partnership. Ideas such as a new flexible, studio-style workspace for local people to start new businesses were discussed. Participants understood the need to bring new aspiration to the area and saw the small-scale new business hub as not only offering people in the valley new possibilities, but also bringing new people into the area to work and perhaps, eventually, to live. At this early stage, it would seem that an intervention by Northern Heartlands to perhaps assist in creatively developing the local plan may be a good way to support the area and its people, as well as bringing new and inclusive democratic involvement to people in the area who may not often get the chance to take part in planning what their area needs.

WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT?

People in the Dene Valley want the following things:

- More youth-focused facilities and activities.
- Local employment opportunities.
- A new workspace for small business start-ups that focus on growth industries such as the creative industries, sustainable horticulture, social enterprises, cooperatives, etc.
- Better housing.
- To be included in County Durham's future plans.
- To develop their own local plan for the regeneration of their communities that involves as many people as possible.