

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Working with policy makers and practice partners to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)

# Using theatre to start conversations about housing in later life

My home, my castle, my container, my prison? How do we imagine the future of where and how we live? Fuse researchers were part of an innovative collaboration using theatre to prompt conversation about how we can better prepare for housing decisions in later life.

The recent House of Commons 'Housing for Older People' report (Department for Communities and Local Government 2018) suggests that we need to 'age proof' new homes. We also need to 'age proof' ourselves and society, including planning for later life and changing ageist attitudes. The report suggests a national conversation is required, involving people of all ages from all backgrounds, to consider how we plan for our future lives.

Fuse researchers at Northumbria University have supported a project to stimulate conversation on this issue, using a theatre production by Skimstone Arts called 'Doorbells – Dreaming for the Future'. This is revised from an original production performed at the 2015 Edinburgh Festival and developed with older people living in Newcastle upon Tyne. The revised theatre version, which questions how we imagine where and how we will live, was in response to a Care & Repair England commission, part of an Esmée Fairbairn funded, UK initiative, showcasing how local older people's groups and organisations may influence housing strategies. Led by the Elders Council of Newcastle, this commission addresses the experiences of people ageing without children, and people who are caring for ageing relatives. Both groups have tended to be overlooked in conversations about ageing. The new production focuses on the story of Kathleen as she faces decisions about where she will live and how her life will change as she grows older.

A performance of 'Doorbells – Dreaming for the Future' took place in March 2018 in Newcastle city centre. Thirty-three

people attended, including young adults, those ageing without children and older people caring for ageing relatives. A post show small group discussion with 18 people provided feedback and project evaluation. The discussion focused on older people's housing experiences and how the experiences in their lifetime might have impacted on their perceived health and quality of life. The discussion also explored how theatre can be used as a method of public engagement to help people consider future housing needs and decisions.

*" Fabulous and thought provoking performance. I'd like to think there will be housing to meet my needs and not just 'one size fits all' when I need it "*

(Audience member at Doorbells)

## Key findings

- People feel unprepared for making housing decisions for later life. Younger generations, (aged between 18 and 40 years) may be challenged to consider preparing for ageing as it seemed so far in the future.
- People wish to take control of decisions about their future homes, but a lack of appropriate and accessible information, as well as a shortage of appropriate housing, undermine their attempts to prepare.
- The immersive live theatre production afforded rich and meaningful post-performance discussion. A freely accessible online film, also developed through the project, provided additional means for extending its reach. See the film here: [skimstone.org.uk/doorbells-dreaming-for-the-future-film](http://skimstone.org.uk/doorbells-dreaming-for-the-future-film).

## Policy relevance and implications

- Create more opportunities for people to explore and discuss later life housing options in neutral spaces, such as community centres, cafés, pubs, or churches. For example, this could follow a format similar to the Death Café model (Miles and Corr 2015) in which people, often strangers, gather in a confidential space to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death.
- Listen to and engage with people about home and health needs and desires in later life. These conversations need to include people from all generations and acknowledge a diversity of ageing experiences including: 'active third agers' who are fit and healthy into retirement; those ageing without children; people ageing with multiple long-term conditions; those who may feel on the margins of society (for example, people who are marginalised on the grounds of gender, sexuality, or ethnicity); and retired people looking after older relatives.
- Develop a national strategy for older people's housing to bring together and improve policy in this area, as suggested by the Communities and Local Government Select Committee Inquiry and report on Housing for Older People (2018), with input from this consultation.
- Engage with local portfolio holders for Housing, Social Care and Communities to facilitate joint action on improving health through the home in support of the national policy toward integrated and coordinated health and social care needs. To support this, the research team will engage with stakeholders and feedback on key recommendations for future developments.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

The Skimstone Arts theatre production, 'Doorbells – Dreaming for the Future' tells the story of Kathleen, facing decisions about where she will live and how her life will change as she grows older. The performance was commissioned by Care & Repair England (C&RE) and the Elders Council of Newcastle, supported by researchers at Northumbria University and Fuse-the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health. This performance was part of an Esmée Fairbairn funded, C&RE national three year demonstrator programme, across nine cities, commissioning conversations about housing in later life.

Department for Communities and Local Government (2018) Housing for Older People. London: House of Commons. Web: [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/370/370.pdf](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/370/370.pdf)

Miles L. and Corr CA. (2017) Death Café: What Is It and What We Can Learn From It. OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying 75(2): 151-165.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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