Wirral People's panel

Report

WIRRAL

REVEALING REALITY

Background to the project

Improving engagement with local residents

This work was commissioned by Wirral Council to:

- Explore a way of improving engagement with residents and reach those not commonly involved in the council's existing consultation processes

- Work in partnership with local people to understand their priorities and views around a range of issues

- Upskill local people on engagement techniques and start to develop a sustainable infrastructure of resident engagement

- Develop ongoing, positive relations between locals and council services

What would be a good outcome of the project?

During the research, we reflected on what a 'good outcome' of the project would be. We identified **three key areas** that would be useful for Wirral Council both for short-term interventions, and for longer-term strategic goals when it comes to increasing engagement with a range of people.

Obtaining good quality data	Facilitating a mechanism of change	Building strong relationships
It is important that local issues are being made known to the council, and a process like this should reveal more than what is already know from consultations.	A successful intervention needs to enable the necessary mechanisms for changing and improving after the community and council have been engaged.	The process should build trusting relations between the council and community and demonstrate what the council is doing to reach those typically left out of typical consultations.

Our approach

The engagement method reached new people by tapping into local networks in nine different neighbourhoods

In each neighbourhood...

Recruitment of local facilitators

Facilitator training

Supporting facilitators to recruit panellists

Moderating panels

We found **local people** who were looking for an opportunity to engage with their area.

We upskilled them in recruitment and facilitation through bespoke **training sessions**

We supported them to **find people in their community** to take part in panel discussions

With local facilitators, we **co-facilitated a panel discussion** to find out what the local issues were

Recruitment of local facilitators

Our objectives:

- We wanted to identify local residents passionate about improving their area to upskill for this project and potential future engagement with the council

What we did:

- We recruited local residents for each of the nine neighbourhoods through scoping days, calling organisations, putting up posters in local services and on social media

- We aimed to recruit people who were not closely linked to the council

- We recruited a broad range of people with diverse skill-sets - from business owners, to football coaches to people who were unemployed

The recruitment process got easier over time, as we built up a network of contacts

What worked well:

- We built up contacts with organizations working in the community in order to reach people who might be interested in the project.
- This achieved our goal of finding people who had no experience and were looking to learn new skills
- We found people with few pre-existing relationships with the council, who were less integrated in current consultation processes
- These people also tapped into their own networks that were not known to the council

What could be improved:

- Creating initial contact was slow. Using pre-existing networks could have been more efficient.
- Facilitators also had a high drop-out rate. This could have been prevented by developing a commitment device (e.g. a contract)
- Some areas were more difficult to recruit from than others using this process as we were less able find or to gain traction with local community groups.

Facilitator training

Our objectives:

- We trained facilitators to ensure that they had skills and confidence to recruit a range of attendees and help with facilitation activities. Additionally, wanted to provide opportunities for skills development for future employment or community-based activities.

What we did:

- We conducted training in two separate waves. Each wave of facilitators had a 2-hour training session, detailing sampling and recruitment, venue-booking and fundamentals of facilitation

- This was carried out in a community centre in Birkenhead on a weekday evening

- We made sure they understood the requirements for effective recruitment and moderation to meet our objectives

- Training also provided the opportunity for facilitators meet one other so they could build a team before the recruitment process began

- Facilitators who were not able to attend were given the option to arrange a video call with researchers for an online version of the training session

Face-to-face training sessions created more buy-in from the facilitators

What worked well:

- Face-to-face training instilled a higher level of engagement and commitment from facilitators than those that were video trained. These facilitators were less likely to drop out and performed better throughout the process
- Some of the people who we trained had never taken part in a project of this nature before and were looking for an opportunity to develop their skills.

What could be improved:

- Due to the wide range in skillsets and backgrounds, it was hard to gauge the level of training needed and cater to all facilitators simultaneously
- Facilitators trained by video call were more likely to drop out. Their low level of commitment was probably due to the minimal amount of time or thought they had invested in the project. This could potentially be resolved by organizing more activities for them ahead of the recruitment drive

Supporting facilitators to recruit panellists

Our objectives:

• We provided support for facilitators through catch-up calls, emails and social media, to provide encouragement and to ensure the sample was as good as possible

What we did:

• Facilitators were supplied with posters, leaflets, information and sign-up sheets to help with their recruitment.

• We asked facilitators to give us updates on their recruitment every two days, and where possible we *double-screened* panellists (by calling them to ask some screening questions ourselves). This way we could monitor the quality of the sample and advise people who were struggling to meet the project objectives

• A council employee was also able to fill in when facilitator could not reach their targets

• Facilitators were entrusted to book a venue that would be accessible and appropriate for a panel discussion.

Facilitators found people to attend panels who had not been to council consultations before

What worked well:
- Facilitators connected with wide range of different people, many of whom had never been consulted before or engaged with their local authority.
- Some facilitators described feeling like the recruitment experience helped them get to know their own communities better, particularly as they spoke to more people and visited new places

What could be improved:
- Double screening all participants was difficult as not all facilitators managed to send through details promptly. Other methods, possibly digital platforms, could have been used to monitor the sample during recruitment.
- Due to variation in skillset/experience, some facilitators needed lots of support throughout the process
- Some left recruitment to the last minute, giving us less ability to monitor the panel make-up

Moderating panels

Our objectives:

We wanted to find out how the panel attendees felt about their local area, their relationship with the council, and what they felt was necessary to make improvements in their neighbourhood

What we did:

- We developed activities to uncover what people felt were the key issues in their area, and how they would prioritise these. We developed group and individual activities, as well as materials for a focus group discussion.

- In the venues, panellists were split into two groups, with a researcher guiding the conversation on each table. Facilitators also got involved in group discussions and were encouraged to lead some activities.

Insights raised during panels reinforced issues already known to the council

What worked well:

- Topics and issues were raised by panelists themselves. This gave them more ownership over the direction of the discussion and ensured that the issues spoken about were specific to them.
- An unintimidating and friendly atmosphere enabled an open and honest discussion
- After the discussions, panelists reported feeling that their voice had been heard. People also described feeling motivated to engage with their community more in future.

What could be improved:

- The topics covered in the discussion were broad and did not raise anything new to the council
- Some of the facilitators were invested locally and so found it difficult to stay neutral in group discussions. More attention to this in the training would have prevented this.
- More prior knowledge of the area's services would have allowed external researchers to challenge and probe certain lines of enquiry.

We captured the views of over 100 Wirral residents across nine panels

Wallasey C

South Wirral A

Wallasey B

Wallasey A

Birkenhead A

West Wirral A

West Wirral B

Birkenhead B

South Wirral B

Across the panels, similar themes came up across all the panels

- People were proud to live in Wirral for its **natural beauty and community spirit.**

- **The environment** was a major concern – on both big and small scales

- **Gaps in local support services** left some people feeling vulnerable

- People wanted to be more tough on **anti-social behavior** and the causes of antisocial behavior

- Panelists were concerned about the **local economy** of Wirral and felt it was in decline
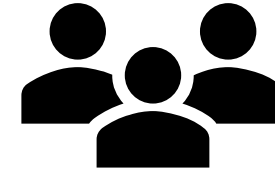
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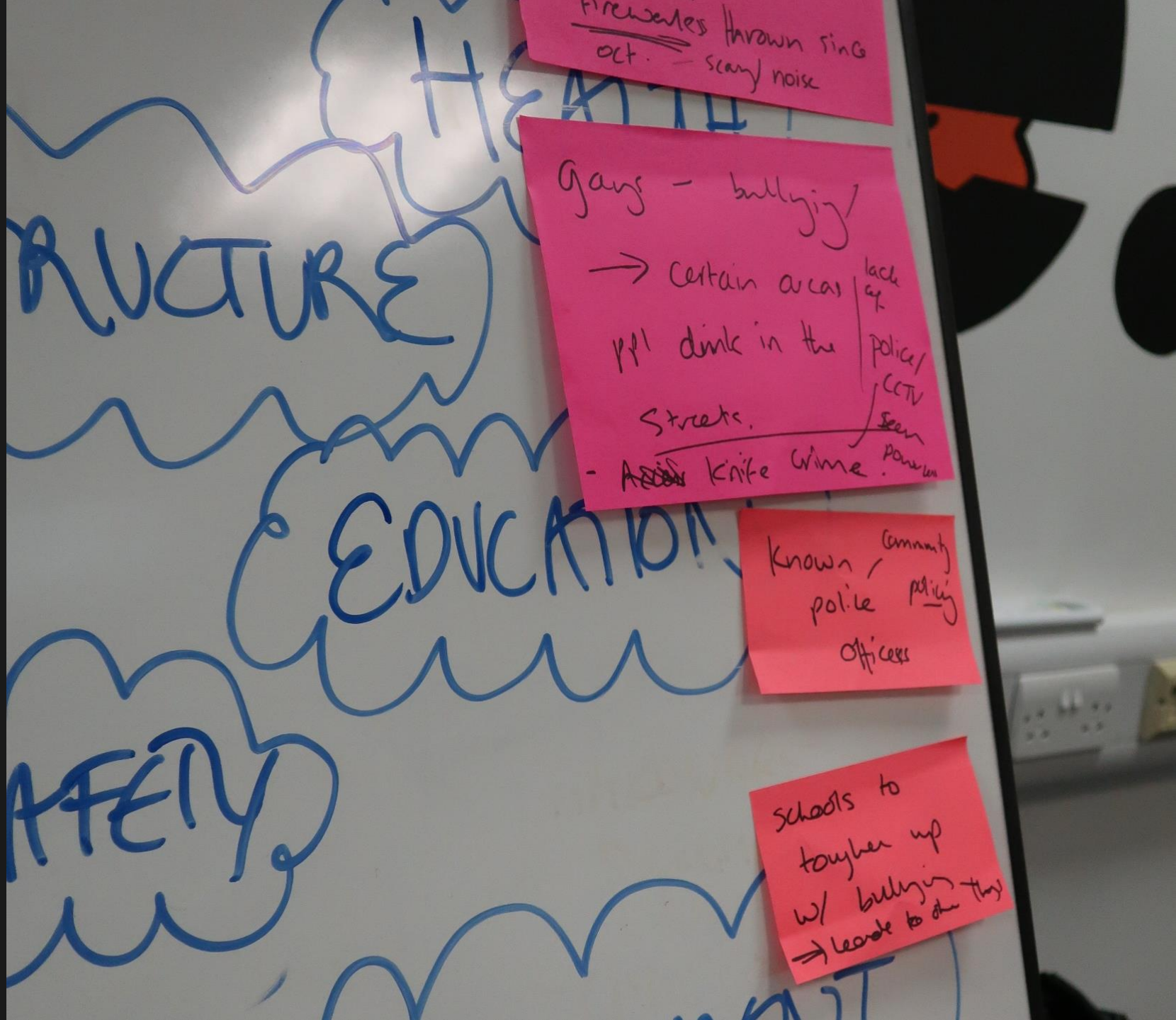
We decided to evaluate the process against these goals…

Obtaining good quality data	Facilitating a mechanism of change	Building strong relationships

How we did: We aimed to reach people who had not been consulted previously, to find out what issues these people cared about

Room for improvement: Issues raised were broad and did not provide any insight beyond that of the council's usual consultation practices

How we did: Panellists were open to thinking about what they could do to help

Room for improvement: People needed more support and encouragement to identify where they could contribute to improving their neighbourhoods, which they did not get from the council

How we did: People felt 'listened to' in the panel, and pleased to see the council showing an interest

Room for improvement: However some panellists had a more longstanding mistrust of the council, which needed to be addressed in a longer term engagement

Obtaining good quality data

What does good like?

- A process that engages with the community should provide an accurate sense of what the community care about

- Connecting with people who do not usually engage with the local authority should provide a particularly fresh perspective on what matters to them

We managed to reach people who weren't usually consulted - although a lot of the issues raised were not new

- The current consultation processes tend to address the same group of people, so we aimed to reach a wider audience

- **However:** Insights from the panel were mainly issues that were already known by the council

- **Although**, panel discussions were set up to be broad:
  - They could be designed with greater focus in future
  - Other methods would deliver richer data about key issues e.g. home visits, one-on-one interviews, site visits

In Birkenhead we heard from more vulnerable people in supported living – but the issues they raised were not different from those revealed in other consultation methods

Unheard voices:
- In Birkenhead A, **we met our objective of reaching people who lived on the periphery of the council's usual consultation methods**
- These included adults who grew up in the area, young people in supported living and people looking for work in the area
- They discussed the rise of violence on the street, drug abuse and attitudes among younger generations and a lack of housing
- While they brought a personal perspective, **these issues were already known to the council**
- Therefore, in its current form, the process succeeded in reaching people but did not deliver on new, good quality data

Birkenhead A

Opportunities for obtaining better data

- Focusing on one specific issue or theme so that the panel discussion delves into more depth

- This would allow for more targeted activities and stimulus which could be based on prior information

- Greater knowledge of the specific services and goings on in the area for the moderators would enable better probing and challenging

- With a specific theme, strategic sampling can ensure a range of views on that issue

Facilitating a mechanism of change

What does good like?

- A community engagement initiative needs to be set up so that real impact in the community is possible

- Engaging with the community without providing clear pathways to change can make public relations worse, if people feel like their input is not taken seriously

People were open to spotting opportunities where they could get involved in local initiatives - but didn't do this spontaneously

The panels allowed people to:

- Reflect on their sense of responsibility for improving their local area

- Identify community leaders in their local area with whom they could raise key issues

However…

- It took probing and encouragement for most to reflect on what they could do beyond 'report things to the council'.

- Most needed more long-term support and an ongoing relationship with the council to start and maintain initiatives for change

Council

Individual
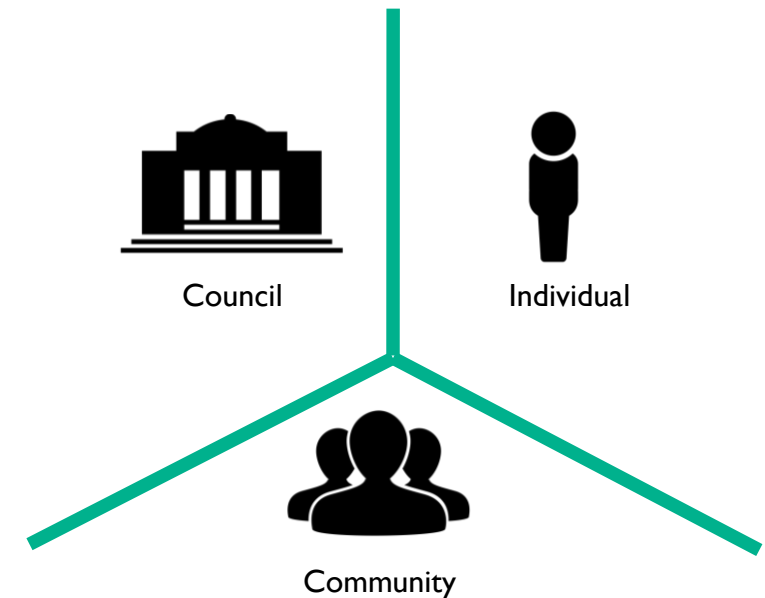
Community

Citizens struggled to reflect on what their responsibility was with regards to their community

Sharing responsibility:
- The panellists felt like the council were not doing enough for the local community and its residents. Local residents felt that solving local issues was the council's responsibility, and that their responsibility as residents was to tell the council what to do rather than taking action themselves.
- When asked what individuals or the community could do to address local issues, most of the responses were about lobbying the council.

Wirral South B

26

Panellists considered Birkenhead Market a prized asset in need of development – but felt powerless to do this themselves

Save Birkenhead Market:

- Panellists spoke fondly about Birkenhead market and felt it was in sharp decline.
- **They felt the council should be responsible for boosting the market by subsidising stalls**.
- When prompted, panellists suggested that the market could also have a community stall where residents could come to voice their concerns, as well as share information and skills.
- **However, the panellists did not know how they could go about making this happen without support**

Birkenhead B

For some with a more proactive, community mindset, the council was seen an obstructive force to positive change

Filling in the gaps:

- Two local residents in Leasowe perceived there a lack of support services in the local area for children aged between 11-17. They started an all-inclusive football league in order to fill that gap, but felt that the bureaucracy they faced from the council had been more of a hindrance than a support throughout the process. They reported feeling 'chased off the pitch' on numerous occasions for not having the right permits.

Wallasey A

Opportunities for better mechanisms of change

⚠ Encourage shared responsibility between council and community, supporting community efforts to try to meet everyone's goals for their area

⚠ Harness impetus to community engagement by asking panelists to sign up to a digital platform or mailing list where participants can share information about community initiatives

⚠ Schedule follow-up processes to address issues raised in the panels - demonstrating how the problem-owners have been made aware of the issues and providing feedback on what has actually been done

Building Strong Relationships

What does good like?

- Mechanisms of change will not feel legitimate unless relationships between the community and council are improved

- An exercise in community engagement should build trust and respect between the council and Wirral residents

- The current tensions between the community and the council can be mitigated with transparency, accountability and communication

Residents felt their voice was 'being heard' during panels - although there remained an underlying lack of trust towards the council more generally

The panels:
- Enabled residents to highlight issues they felt were important
- Reached a wider range of voices than current consultations
- Found some panellists who were willing to become facilitators and many were keen be involved in future panels

However…
- Residents still felt there was a lack of transparency over council decision-making and did not trust the council
- **Without the council present at the panels, relationships with the community were not directly being developed**
- No evidence of future change could be potentially damaging to council-resident relations

31

In New Ferry, relations with the council were tense and in need of some ameliorating

Feeling 'abandoned':
- Residents in the New Ferry area said they felt 'abandoned' by the council since the explosion. There was a strong feeling that support from outside of the local area, either by other communities or the council, was non-existent meaning that the community had to support themselves and local businesses were felt to be in decline, with little council attention.
- Residents were open about this in panels, but were still unsure what would happen next. Their trust in the council was still low and, as a result, they did not expect positive outcomes from the panel.

Wirral South A

Residents are not picking up on the council's extant communication channels

Lack of information:

- Residents in Wallasey felt that there was not enough information about community events. When talking about the possible needs of different community members, the panellists' main concern was whether these people were aware of or had access to information about relevant events and services. They were particularly concerned for those who were isolated or living alone

- In the discussion, panellists reflected that there was actually a lot going on in the community, which was not always communicated and celebrated

Wallasey C

"You have to go to the place to find out what's on there... and that means you know about that place anyway"
Wallasey C Panellist

33

Opportunities for better relationships

⚠ Bring in members of the council and councillors so that they are visible throughout the process, particularly to be present at the panels where they can build upon accountability and trust

⚠ Foster the network created by the panels by looping attendees into other community initiatives

⚠ Pair facilitators with a council member in a "buddy" system during the recruitment support phase to swap and share ideas

Opportunity Areas

How could a model like this be used to better effect in future?

Obtaining good quality data

- Specifically focus on one theme with more targeted stimulus and activities
- Moderators with greater knowledge of specific services and goings on in the area
- More strategic sampling to target specific audiences

Building strong relationships

- Council and other stakeholders to be involved throughout the process and present at panels
- Clear plan for staying in touch and engaging wider community members with next steps

Facilitating a mechanism of change

- Encourage shared responsibility and enabling to achieve community goals
- Clear system for communicating actions and follow ups to problem-owners in the council and wider community

Annex

Birkenhead A,
The Open Door Centre

Facilitator:
Part time bank employee and mental health volunteer in his 30's

Panel Composition:
4 females and 10 males
Ages 19 - 62

Panel Dynamics:
- A mix of different demographics, particularly age groups
- Attendees included 4 vulnerable youths from a housing project as well as 2 women who worked in Tomorrow's Women, which somewhat skewed the focus of discussion to their lived experiences.
- Panelists came in small groups but did not know each other outside of that and were happy to be split up into three groups.

Birkenhead A Issues

People felt that support services were harder to reach for certain people. For example, there was a lack of funding for men's services and a feeling that mental health services became more inaccessible after the age of 18.

Homelessness was perceived to be on the rise, and a particular problem reported was that homeless shelters did not open early enough, making vulnerable people feel abandoned and leading to more public drinking and drug use as a result, particularly around Grange Road.

People reported that anti-social behavior of young people and gangs was on the rise, and that police presence and response time was perceived to be inadequate. People wanted harsher sentencing on anti-social behavior, but also more activities for young people to keep them preoccupied.

People felt the area was once vibrant, with more reasons for outsiders to visit. With more shops closing in the town centre, people were especially concerned about blows to the local economy.

Birkenhead B,
Make Hamilton Square

Facilitator:
Two members of Birkenhead A panel: male in his 30's unemployed due to visual impairment, and a 55-year-old male involved in environmental activism.

Demographics:
6 females and 1 male
Ages 24 -61

Panel Dynamics:

- A mix of professions and backgrounds attended Birkenhead A, from vulnerable young people to self-employed and fully employed people in their 30's to retired people over 50
- Birkenhead B had 7 panelists in total of which a lot were vulnerable people, including people on probation and who were homeless.

Birkenhead B Issues

People were generally happy with the wide range of support services in the area - however, were concerned that some of them (like Sure Start) had closed. Also, some services were seen as less accessible. For example people reported that Arrow Park Hospital was difficult to get to- particularly for those struggling with a mental or physical health condition

Young people were seen as problematic for causing trouble in public. This included dealing drugs, drinking and bullying members of the public. People linked this to a lack of activities for young people, particularly from the age of 18, where people went from attending youth centers to the pub. People also reported feeling that police did not come when they were called.

Public spaces and events were important to the panelists and needed to be kept free and accessible. Birkenhead Market was specified as a key example of a space that needed support from the council.

Wallasey A, Leasowe Millennium Centre

Facilitators:
Employee of the center

Demographics:
13 panelists (5 male and 8 female)
Age 17 – 60

Panel Dynamics:
- Members of the panel predominantly knew each other and had some connection to the housing estate connected to the community hub
- Many of the panelists were unemployed or in part-time employment

Wallasey A Issues

Residents described issues with the local environment, particularly around dog poo, litter on the street, and public bins overflowing

Panelists were afraid of youths in gangs, and stories of fireworks being lit outside local convenience shops as well as rising drug use were used to illustrate how they intimidated locals. Police were also reported to be slow in responding when issues arise

People were upset that streetlights of whole streets were turned off, as it made them feel unsafe on the streets. For example, the road between Woodchurch and Eastham is particularly "pitch black" and scary as well as the pathway to sports center attached to the community hub

Panelist's didn't know where to go for mental health support. Someone had tried at their GP and felt rejected when they were given a digital service.

Wallasey B,
The Nelson Pub, Wallasey

Facilitators:
Employee of the center

Demographics:
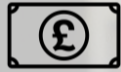13 panelists (5 male and 8 female)
Age 17 – 60

Panel Dynamics:
- Majority of people were from similar, relatively affluent, backgrounds
- Several people attended the panel in pairs, such as parent and son/daughter, married couples.

Wallasey B Issues

Panelists had a lot to say on rising inequality. They discussed a sense that developments and investment –such as Daniel Davis and Victoria Road developments – was causing a growing divide between the people who ould afford it and the people who were excluded due to high costs

A lot of people talked about the need for more attractions and focus investments on culture and events. The loss of the Wirral Show was lamented as it was seen to bring people together, and panelists felt that the council did not do enough to help it when it shut down. It was felt that local authority needed to spend money on attractions like this rather than flats.

Panelists focused on the lack of police presence, particularly when police and emergency services did not arrive quickly enough when called. This made people feel unsafe and fearful on the streets.

Public services were seen to be over-stretched. For example, people discussed how libraries were run by volunteers and not open long enough; park services were underfunded, and understaffed; and young people did not have enough to keep them occupied with only one local youth centre in the area.

Wallasey C,
The Misty Blues, Wallasey

Facilitators:
Both facilitators were volunteers football coaches in their 40's

Demographics:
9 panelists (7 male and 2 female)
Age 20 – 83

Panel Dynamics:
- Wide range of professions – from business owner to window fitters – however the great majority shared a passion for volunteering as football coaches.
- Most panelists came with a friend and all Football coaches all knew each other to some degree

Wallasey C Issues

Anti-social behavior was a key issue as people felt that young people were losing a 'fear of consequences' for their actions with police and parents becoming increasingly lenient. For example, they reported young people were now riding dangerously on bikes, because it was known that police were unable to chase anyone on a bike not wearing a helmet. As well as this, the parks were not lit up in the evening which residents felt made them hotspots for antisocial behavior - like drugtaking or violence

As coaches, panelists felt that there was need for more investment in the area's local activities for youths, such as better football pitches and more youth clubs

Panelists felt that suicide was rising in their area, and a few of them had examples of people lost to suicide in their networks. They felt there weren't any services in their local area to help them with this issue.

West Wirral A,
The Dee Hotel, West Kirby

Facilitator:
Woman who worked for a community organization

Demographics:
16 panelists attended (12 women, 3 men, 1 other)
Aged 17 - 68

Panel Dynamics:
• A mix of professions attended – from a business owner and an academic to someone unemployed, students & a kitchen assistant.

West Wirral A Issues

Parks and green spaces were considered an important perk of living in the area, however residents felt the council were not respecting these natural assets which made them angry. The Hillbre Island fire and the use of poisonous chemicals on the beach over Bank holiday were cited as key examples. Also, it was felt that the golf resort in Hoylake was not justified to be built on green spaces, however would have been justified if it offered more jobs, or the space was used for housing.

Fear of local youths and anti-social behavior was a major issue. Shops had been recently broken into in the area and this made residents feel scared of crime on the streets. As the nearest police station is Liscard, people felt there was not enough police presence and that the response time was very slow

Residents felt there was a high turnover of local businesses in the area and that there were too many charity shops replacing them on the highstreets. Residents expressed a desire to keep the independent feel of West Kirby as compared to New Brighton where they were happy to see the renovations attract young people

Generally, residents felt transport was reliable and well-connected to Liverpool, however some areas of the Wirral felt less accessible, like Heswall. There was a perception that parking in West Kirby is most expensive because of the area's affluence

West Wirral B, The Eagle & Crown, Upton

Facilitator:

Three female facilitators. One facilitator was an actress in her late 20s, The other facilitator was a semi-retired support worker in her mid-60s. The last facilitator was a local business owner in her late 40s.

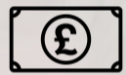## Demographics:

11 panelists attended (7 women, 4 men)
Aged 22 - 78

Panel Dynamics:

- At the panel there were some people in their 20s, however the vast majority of people were in their mid-30s upwards. There were a range of professions present including business owners, carers, retirees and teachers
- Panelists had never met each other before

West Wirral B Issues

£ Residents felt that the increase in the cost of living has impacted some people in the community more than others, particularly because of gaps in support services. For example, access to medical services in West Wirral is not equal across the area, such as with wheelchair access. Also there were sentiments that elderly people in the area need better service provision to combat loneliness

People loved the green spaces that surrounded the local area. However, this caused tension when green spaces were built upon as residents felt their landscape was "threatened".

Some also felt as if the spaces were not being regulated well e.g. youth hanging around and intimidating people, and there were sentiments around reinstating "park officers" to regulate the area

Wirral South A,
New Ferry Community Centre

Facilitator:
Male in his 40's, local business owner

Demographics:
11 female and 4 male
Age 18 - 50

Panel Dynamics:

- There were a lot of business owners in attendance – perhaps a consequence of the facilitator being a local business owner himself.

South Wirral A Issues

£ People wanted more investment in making the local area attractive. They particularly felt that the New Ferry explosion - and lack of development on the site - demonstrated that the council had given up on the area and did not want to make it an attractive place for people to come and visit

£ People liked the independent businesses in the area and thought that the council could do more to protect them, such as by lowering business rates or helping to fund local start ups

Lack of mental health services in the area meant that people did not know where to go to ask for help

There were also sentiments that there was not enough for young people to do in the area

Wirral South B,
Meadowcroft Community Wellbeing Hub

Facilitator:
Council employee

Demographics:
5 females and 3 males
Ages 20 – 75

Panel Dynamics:
- As the location of the panel was Age UK Bromborough, there were 3 panelists who worked at Age UK and 1 panelist that used Age UK services
- This panel was attended by fewer young people – two students on the panel who said they would prefer spending time in Birkenhead or Liverpool

South Wirral B Issues
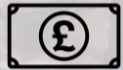
£ Panelists were proud of natural beauty in the area and wanted to maintain the Green Belt. They felt that there was a greater need for development of affordable housing and refurbishment of what already existed, rather than developing 'luxury housing'

£ It was felt that local businesses and initiatives were not being supported enough by the council. For example, the increase in local business rates by 50% in the past year and lack of access to funding for Age UK Wirral was described as having big impacts on the community. Also, parking in the area affected these businesses as people were deterred from shopping locally

People did not know what mental health services were available - even though they felt the local suicide rate was on the rise.