

Story Circles Analysis

What are Story Circles?

Story Circles are an opportunity for a group of people to come together and explore their experiences, learn from each other, and experience meaning. The model enables participants to view the world as communities and flow. The flow of stories, insights, and ideas in a socially constructed Narrative Landscape. Within a story circle each member listens respectfully, not to contrived argument to win a debate, but to the heartfelt sharing of unique personal experience, without comment from the others, as the opportunity to speak passed from person to person, and a new, unique narrative and image of the way the world really is takes form. The new story that is unique to that group belongs to them and could be considered to be 'sacred ground'. The group experiences meaning, and they decide the 'so what' not the facilitator.

Research within groups in Coventry has shown that those involved report an improvement in wellbeing and increased social inclusion, and that they almost unanimously attribute this to 'being given a voice'.

Story Circles Approach

10 sessions run across Warwickshire have been fed into this report: 2 in Rugby, 3 in Kenilworth, 1 in Nuneaton, 1 in Bedworth, 1 in Atherstone, 1 in Halford, and 1 in Stratford. The sessions aimed to provide feedback on 4 questions:

1. What is important to you?
2. What is helpful in doing what is important to you?
3. What is unhelpful in doing what is important to you?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

Conversations were captured on cards or summarised in a report which were then analysed to create a picture of experiences of ageing in Warwickshire.

Question 1: What is important to you?

Theme	Explanation	Examples for Illustration
Relationships	<p>Participants highlighted several themes around relationships, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being part of a community, including mixing with different age groups.• Seeing friends and family.• Having activities to do that involve social interaction.• The benefits of having a pet.• Being part of a religious community.• Being able to give to others.	<p>"Community – being able to interact with others and still contribute usefully to the community."</p> <p>"A friendly neighbourhood, the younger generation moving in to the area is nice."</p> <p>"Family – keeps you young. Staying in contact with children, and other family members."</p> <p>"Socialising is so important. To do something every day is important."</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warm hubs were praised as a place to be able to socialise. 	<p>“Having a dog. People talk to you when you have a dog.”</p> <p>“Being part of a faith community – church is like family.”</p> <p>“Looking outwards. That’s another thing that’s important, that affects how you feel about ageing, what you can do and what it’s like; being outwardly focussed, and not just turning inward. Looking at other people around you and getting involved with them. It’s about attitude of mind some of the time.”</p> <p>“These warm hubs. They were not just about the warmth, but about the socialising and we don’t want to see them end in the summer.”</p>
<p>Access</p>	<p>Participants highlighted the importance of access to healthcare including themes around how easy it is to access, transport to healthcare services, and having services locally for recovery.</p> <p>Access to transport was also commented on more generally, both for the need for reliable public transport, as well as the importance of driving in maintaining independence.</p> <p>Being able to access affordable activities, amenities, and parks and green spaces was also mentioned.</p>	<p>“The expectation that our services should be more equitable and accessible, that they will be there when people need them.”</p> <p>“Access to treatment, but transport is a barrier in this.”</p> <p>“We have lost the art of respite and recuperation after illness/healthcare procedures. It’s important to have facilities for recovery at a local level – cottage hospitals – near home, and near those who can support. But these are being taken away.”</p> <p>“The need for reliable transport.”</p> <p>“Being able to drive. It’s really important for independence, and independence itself is vital.”</p> <p>“Being able to attend regular art classes. But these are only accessible by car, so my ability to get there in that way is also really important.”</p> <p>“My U3A membership. £10 a year, for over 50s. Found it via WCAVA. Loads of things to do.”</p> <p>“Enthusiastic appreciation was voiced for the local library which was considered welcoming, with good information and access to Wi-Fi.”</p>
<p>Health</p>	<p>Keeping active and staying physically healthy were highlighted, both as activities to participate in and to support enjoying being older. Having a</p>	<p>“Being active – getting out every day and doing something.”</p>

	<p>diet that supports you feeling well was also raised.</p> <p>The importance of mental health and wellbeing was also raised, both in terms of access to mental health support, but also the importance of the local area being able to impact positively on wellbeing.</p>	<p>“My health and my ability to participate in retirement. It’s not as I pictured – no National Trust gardens and coffee and cake every day!”</p> <p>“Diet is really important. It contributes to how well you feel; I am very careful about all that stuff.”</p> <p>“Being active, always – every day, still working in the garden, or going to line dancing every week.”</p> <p>“Good mental health support in maintaining mental health.”</p> <p>“The town’s flowers make a big impact. They really lift everyone’s spirits. Whatever they cost, it’s worth it.”</p>
Autonomy and Attitudes to Ageing	<p>Participants highlighted the importance of having autonomy and having a positive outlook on ageing. This included autonomy when facing illness and end of life, as well as feeling that thoughts and opinions are being heard in decision making.</p>	<p>“Permission to be myself.”</p> <p>“Attitude to getting older is really important in staying well.”</p> <p>“Skills in managing chronic illness that mean daily living is manageable.”</p> <p>“To be consulted with and for those voices to be taken into account in local decision making.”</p>

Question 2: What is helpful in doing what is important to you?

Theme	Explanation	Examples for Illustration
Access	<p>Access to transport and the accessibility transport provides was highlighted by participants. Local community and volunteer offerings were praised, as well as bus passes and train links.</p> <p>Participants praised access and support from some healthcare services, although some concerns about availability were also raised.</p> <p>Access to amenities was also raised, including both what is offered locally to access as well as online access such as to grocery deliveries.</p>	<p>“The community relies on lift sharing to cover the transport gaps.”</p> <p>“Being able to go further afield with a bus pass – to Stratford, Leamington for the day.”</p> <p>“Good community offerings run by goodwill and volunteers, including Medicar, which is run by Volunteer Friends Nuneaton & Bedworth. This is a volunteer transport scheme charging a nominal admin fee and then 45p per mile.”</p> <p>“Excellent train links to Birmingham, Leicester & Coventry, and a station with a ticket office.”</p> <p>“Clinical care from hospitals has been very good – lots of information, that part was terrific.”</p> <p>“Lifeline pendants.”</p>

		<p>“The Lifestyle Management course offered around 1 year post diagnosis for MS. It’s now only available for long COVID patients but there are so many other people that need those skills.”</p> <p>“GEH has minor injuries, which is a good alternative if you can’t get a GP appointment.”</p> <p>“Good amount of convenience stores throughout Nuneaton.”</p> <p>“Online grocery delivery is a very useful amenity.”</p>
<p>Relationships</p>	<p>Participants highlighted different themes around relationships, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support from the local community. • The importance of social groups. • Having family for support. • Support from religious communities. • Support from carers. • Having pets for company. • Being able to use digital technology to keep in touch with people. 	<p>“A supportive network in our community”</p> <p>“Groups like this one. Very important for mental health support, it’s a safe space for talking.”</p> <p>“Neighbourliness of a peer age group living close together.”</p> <p>“Family – vital for getting through significant health situations including operations for both spouses within 6 weeks. Without family coming to stay, what would have happened?”</p> <p>“The Mother’s Union community at church.”</p> <p>“A lady talked about her role as a carer, and the importance of the social contact for those she cared for. She described the depth of loneliness she encountered, that people just wanted someone to take an interest and listen to them.”</p> <p>“Pets for company – dogs, cats.”</p> <p>“What’s App. It’s brilliant for keeping in touch with people.”</p>
<p>Health</p>	<p>Participants highlighted that having good health and keeping active helps support them as they get older. Facilities, activities, and pets that help people keep active were mentioned.</p> <p>The local natural environment was praised for supporting mental health and wellbeing, as were opportunities for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and talking therapies.</p>	<p>“Having good health is so important for keeping a good life. When your health goes, other things become much more difficult.”</p> <p>“Outdoor gym facilities are good, would like to see more of them.”</p> <p>“Walking with the dog in all weathers.”</p>

		<p>“Having a paper round in the morning keeps me alert and active.”</p> <p>“Our rural surroundings help wellbeing.”</p> <p>“Places like The Railings for CBT and talking therapies.”</p>
Other comments	<p>Additionally, participants highlighted housing affordability and support to help improve houses, as well as doing creative activities.</p>	<p>“Housing is cheaper than in many Warwickshire towns.”</p> <p>“Some praised work they were aware of in the town to improve insulation in older houses.”</p> <p>“Being creative. This started when I retired, as I have time.”</p>

Question 3: What is unhelpful in doing what is important to you?

Theme	Explanation	Examples for Illustration
Access	<p>Access issues were discussed regularly by participants. There were different themes that came out around access, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital exclusion – participants felt that technology has become a barrier to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accessing different healthcare services - Finding out information - Parking where an app is required. • Healthcare access – participants expressed frustration at access to the healthcare system, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The cost of accessing care. - Difficulties in getting GP appointments. - Appointments moving to phone calls. - The discharge process from hospital not allowing for preparation to go home. • Local environment – participants raised issues with their local environment including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pavements in poor condition and obstacles on pavements increasing the risk of falls. - A lack of pavements in some areas, especially when linking to something important like a bus stop. 	<p>“Technology makes it harder to access things.”</p> <p>“Booking appointments – and other hospital technology in general – has become more difficult.”</p> <p>“GP access – works OK if you can do this online, but not so much if you can’t.”</p> <p>“Parking services that require you to use a phone.”</p> <p>“Phone responses can take too long – 57 minute phone call.”</p> <p>“The way discharge processes happened from hospital “you’re going home tomorrow” with no warning or opportunity to get things ready for this.”</p> <p>“Access to care – there is a trend towards paying for care, and if you can’t pay, you’re in trouble.”</p> <p>“It’s still unacceptably hard to get a GP appointment.”</p> <p>“GP’s having moved to phone consultation so much. It’s hard to feel confident in the experience. Do they really know what’s going on when they haven’t examined you?”</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A lack of cycle routes. • Transport – accessible transport options were raised by participants, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceived lack of transport options to healthcare services. - Information on public transport services being only available online which makes using them harder to use. - Perceived lack of transport options when you stop driving. - Concerns about amount of disabled parking at hospitals. - Concern about road accessibility to new building estates. • Amenities – access to amenities was raised, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The need for accessible toilets when out of the home. - The importance of ensuring disabled access to amenities. - More seats in shops and public spaces. - The need for information on local amenities. - Accessibility in shops. - Shops closing in town centres, leaving town centres empty. • Activities – participants highlighted the importance of being able to access activities, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being able to access activities at suitable times. - Having activities that are affordable. - Providing accessible information on what activities are available. 	<p>“Uneven pavements create obstacles.”</p> <p>“In this immediate locality – the details of the bus route on the return leg from Treddington. People have to walk back along the road. An older resident was hit by a car whilst doing this and is now in a care home having consequently lost the ability to live independently.”</p> <p>“The lack of cycle routes. One participant is a regular cyclist but finds this can be difficult and dangerous”.</p> <p>“Access to healthcare treatment – transport problems make this hard.”</p> <p>“Poor visibility of information about what buses go where. The insistence of putting everything like this online makes life difficult.”</p> <p>“There is little public transport available when one has to give up driving.”</p> <p>“Disabled hospital parking is a nightmare.”</p> <p>“There was concern about the number of new houses being built and the perceived lack of infrastructure to go with it, local roads were mentioned in particular.”</p> <p>“Provision of toilets – accessibility of these is a barrier to coming out of the home.”</p> <p>“Lack of disabled access in the village hall and pub – it’s not disabled friendly.”</p> <p>“Older people would be better served by more chairs in shops/public spaces.”</p> <p>“There is a need for a clear directory of places to go – what’s available and where, including libraries, church, venues for hire and how to contact them.”</p> <p>“Accessibility of shops is mandated in law, but often they are not accessible on the inside with lots of racks; difficulty moving around means staff have to bring things to you.”</p> <p>“So many shops are closing in the town. Big stores have gone and lots of empty units and no</p>
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		<p>communicated plans for how this is being addressed.”</p> <p>“Some community activities aren’t suitable because they involve going out in the evenings, and that can be difficult – especially in winter darkness.”</p> <p>“Memberships to leisure centres are expensive and this can be a barrier. There are health conditions/disabilities that could be benefitted/improved by having access to amenities more easily.”</p> <p>“Some people don’t know what to do, where to go. It’s knowing where these opportunities are so that everyone can find them.”</p>
Relationships	<p>Participants commented on examples of where relationships have broken down that have impacted their local area, including the closure of a village school, the change in dynamics in small communities, the perceived reduction in manners and respect, and the perceived disempowerment in caring for each other from health services.</p> <p>Participants also highlighted a fear of crime and not feeling safe in their local area.</p>	<p>“The closure of the village school broke community connections.”</p> <p>“Community is more diverse now but find people are suspicious and don’t want to get involved in village life.”</p> <p>“The general deterioration in manners and respect. Including when out on the roads and pavements at zebra crossings and traffic lights.”</p> <p>“Health services disempower people from having the confidence to step in and care for each other.”</p> <p>“Several stated they didn’t feel safe walking into town because of young men on scooters, and a general concern about street crime which meant they only went out in daytime. One woman told a story of taking her dog for a walk in the park and being confronted by young men who were verbally abusive to her.”</p>
Feeling Unheard	<p>Participants said they felt unheard or ignored, with some giving examples of being ignored when discussing their health or being unheard as a wheelchair user.</p>	<p>“Nobody listens to us.”</p> <p>“People sometimes do not address the older/more poorly looking person but talk via a relative. They can feel ignored and unimportant.”</p> <p>“Don’t hear what we say as wheelchair users.”</p>
Health	<p>Participants spoke about requiring support with physical and mental health. Participants highlighted the difficulty with living with chronic</p>	<p>“Living with chronic pain. Hip problems necessitate crutches, it’s restrictive, but avoids letting it become TOO restrictive.”</p>

	<p>pain, the need for support for carers particularly around loss and bereavement, and the importance of getting mental health support.</p>	<p>“She also talked about the lack of support for carers and the long-term effect of this. She highlighted the experiences when someone she had cared for died and the lack of recognition of how this affected her. She spoke of being expected to move onto the next client and just get on with it.”</p> <p>“Another person spoke about her struggle through most of her adult life living with bipolar. There had been a long history of poor mental health in their family, and they had struggled for years... She was desperate to talk to others who understood and to be able to access peer support in difficult times.”</p>
<p>Other Comments</p>	<p>Participants also highlighted the following themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The negative impact of COVID-19. • Being financially concerned about fuel costs. • Concern about having to move to a different area to be able to live in a supported way. • Concerns about getting older and what the future might look like. • Concern for those who are isolated and prone to accidents. • Perceived lack of suitable housing for growing old. • Environmental concerns. 	<p>“COVID spoiled lots of things.”</p> <p>“Foraging for wild loose wood helps with fuel costs, and can be used in woodburning stoves, but there are restrictions about this that should be lifted to make it easier.”</p> <p>“Local people who have owned their home are not eligible to move into supported places like Tannery Court, meaning that if you want to stop living independently, you have to move out of the area.”</p> <p>“As a group they expressed general anxiety about getting older and were worried about what the future looked like for them. They were concerned about the availability and nature of sheltered accommodation should they need it, the effects of climate change, social tensions, and increased pressure on services. They described it has n uncomfortable culture to get old within.”</p> <p>“Concern was expressed for elderly people who were isolated and prone to accidents. Their experience was that many elderly people were reluctant to have emergency alarms because of the perceived cost. A person they knew had been on the toilet for 24 hours and only found because neighbours realised the bathroom light had been on constantly but no lights anywhere else.”</p> <p>“Lack of bungalows or suitably adapted housing for growing old.”</p>

“Environmental issues came out as a serious and broad concern within the group, one man stated they ‘felt like voices in a wildernesses!’”

Questions 4: Is there anything else you’d like to tell us?

Theme	Explanation	Examples for Illustration
Access	<p>Participants commented on a range of themes relating to access, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Condition of roads and pavements. • The want for more activities. • Issues with technology in healthcare settings. • Issues with accessibility to amenities. • Perceived lack of buses, and a desire for minibuses in villages. • A perceived lack of amenities. • An opportunity to use social settings more regularly, such as warm hubs and school buildings. • The desire for more temporary blue badges. 	<p>“Potholes in the roads have got worse and worse.”</p> <p>“More access to arts and crafts – crochet, knitting.”</p> <p>“Hospital technology is a problem – systems used are not to suit elderly people’s needs. The screen upon entry to enter your details as you arrive is too difficult to use. Leads to late appointments.”</p> <p>“Accessibility in Shakespeare Theatre is a problem – too many steps.”</p> <p>“There won’t be a sudden change to have buses everywhere, it’s not realistic. But transport could be helped by minibuses round villages.”</p> <p>“The Kenilworth town centre market is so much smaller than it used to be, and it’s a bit lacklustre. It needs reviving.”</p> <p>“Could do with more covered seating spots to use when out, during bad weather as well.”</p> <p>“Would want to see warm hubs kept all year round for the social value.”</p> <p>“It would be really useful to be able to have temporary blue badges, issues by doctors or hospitals, after operations or procedures. Getting a blue badge is a lengthy process and yet many people have a short term need for one in situations like surgery, or accidents.”</p>
Relationships	<p>Participants raised the following themes around relationships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact of losing a partner or loved one. • A desire for more social opportunities. • Being alone most of the time. • A good volunteering spirit in the South of the county but a perceived lack of volunteering in the North. 	<p>“Loneliness due to losing your spouse is terrible.”</p> <p>“Would like to get out more – more groups, more meeting and talking.”</p> <p>“Alone the majority of the time, except for daily carer visits.”</p> <p>“There is a strong volunteering spirit in South Warwickshire, but there is more of a vacuum in</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The need for social support during bereavement. 	<p>North Warwickshire. Not sure why, or what the ingredients are to resolve/improve that situation.”</p> <p>“One person shared a story of her finding a lady in church whose mother had just died and how the bereaved person was desperately looking for a space to talk.”</p> <p>“One lady had moved to the area a few years ago from another part of the country but her husband had died five days before the move. She talked about her experience of grief and loneliness but also how in the last few months she had been welcomed at the tea and chat and this had been transformative for her.”</p>
Health	<p>Participants raised that loneliness is a problem, however there can also be a difference between being alone and being lonely, and that one does not automatically lead to the other.</p> <p>Participants also highlighted that it can be difficult to live a positive life if in ill health.</p>	<p>“Loneliness is a problem.”</p> <p>“There’s a difference between being alone, and being lonely.”</p> <p>“She also lives with COPD and often struggles to manage her condition and live a positive life.”</p>
Feeling Unheard	<p>Participants said that being heard and providing feedback to services can be difficult.</p>	<p>“Getting your voice heard and giving constructive feedback when services fail is very difficult.”</p>