Context

There are eight key areas to help guide your Local Conversation. These are:

- Action
- Approach
- Context
- Governance
- Influence
- Involvement
- Leadership
- Relationships

This section looks at context: why it is important to understand your neighbourhood and the people living there, and how your Local Conversation connects to this. This section will cover:

1. What we mean by context
2. Why context is important for a Local Conversation
3. Practical methods to help you understand the local context
4. Equity, diversity and inclusion
5. The risks of not understanding the context
6. A summary
7. Some helpful do's and don'ts
8. A final exercise

1. What we mean by context

The context for your Local Conversation means everything that exists around it that will have an impact. For example, this could include a neighbourhood's local and political history, the diversity of the people who live there, and what some of the key challenges and opportunities that the neighbourhood face might be. Context can be considered from a number of perspectives, and the following headings and suggestions are indicative, rather than exhaustive:

Social

Neighbourhoods have histories or characteristics that only the people who live there will fully understand. This is part of what makes each neighbourhood unique. For example, a neighbourhood that is defined by a local council or ward boundary may be very differently defined by the people who live there. This is often the case where a ward boundary has

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been changed, but people still see themselves as living where they always have lived – regardless of its new name. They may even continue to use older place names to define their locality.

Social context also includes any demographic trends in the neighbourhood, public opinion and reputation, all of which impact on those living there. How neighbourhoods are perceived from the outside is significant for those living in the neighbourhood.

Political

It is important to be aware of the broader political context within which the Local Conversation is taking place and of the impact that this may have upon communities. Some obvious examples of this are the economic, social and health impacts of the coronavirus, the social tensions of Brexit, the consequences of economic austerity or changes to the benefits system.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

The diversity of a neighbourhood is a critical part of its context. It's important to understand which communities make up the neighbourhood in terms of race, age (e.g. are there more younger or older people), levels of disability and mental health needs, the number of LGBT+ members. This topic is covered in greater detail in section four below.

Economic

The economic context will involve you thinking about the local economy, local household incomes, the availability of good quality homes and secure training opportunities and employment across different demographics. The immediate and longer term economic impact of the pandemic is likely to remain a critical issue for many neighbourhoods.

You might also think about the affordability of goods and services to people on low incomes, including significant increases in the costs of power, public transport and council tax, or reductions in state benefits.

It is important to be aware of the past – places have industrial heritages which may have changed or disappeared over time. This is both an important element to consider in thinking about the skills which may be left, the anxiety raised about new industries moving in and being sensitive to some of wounds that there may be about times of previous greater financial prosperity.

Digital

Understanding the scale of digital literacy in a neighbourhood is also an important aspect of context. Access to broadband, devices and data and the level of digital skills amongst residents are important to understand, especially if you are considering and planning activities which require a certain level of digital literacy to deliver. The opportunities afforded by digital platforms in influencing are discussed in more detail in the Influencing section of this guide.

Environmental and social

This will include the impact of climate change, supply chains and environmental issues on the neighbourhood. There may be particular issues faced by residents in respect of litter, fly-tipping, lack of green space, few community meeting spaces, safety, range of shops, how near they are to busy roads or air pollution – all of which affect people.

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2. Why context is important for a Local Conversation

The Local Conversation is not taking place in a vacuum. The context in which you are working will be informed by things that have happened before or are happening now. It may be that lessons can be learned from what has worked well, or has not worked well, in the past. It may be the case that a particular building or community space is really well used by the community and that further events could be held there, or it may be that a community has no common or shared spaces, or they're in a location which is far from ideal – which may make getting people together more difficult.

Communities may be united or divided about particular issues, and it is important to be aware of this before opening a discussion or debate. There is a risk that some residents' memories of 'how things used to be…' may be inaccurate and gain validity and affect decision-making. Equally, having that history can be critical to finding a way to move forward together. It is really important that practitioners feel confident in exploring and if necessary, challenging these views, if they are likely to have such an impact.

Things that happen at a global level (such as Covid 19) or a national level (such as Brexit) can have a huge impact locally. Whichever side of the debate that you sit on, for example, there is no doubt that Brexit has caused huge divisions across the country, within communities and within families. Knowing how people feel locally about a global, national, regional or local issue may help you to approach a discussion sensitively, given that it is likely there may be polarising views put forward by some residents.

Another example of the national context having an impact locally is the government's programme of austerity, introduced by the Coalition government in 2010. This was an attempt to reduce the country's debts after the 2007-08 economic crisis, which led to £30 billion worth of cuts to public services. At the same time, the number of children living in relative poverty rose, as did the number of people using food banks, and those who were homeless. Changes to the welfare system and the increased use of financial sanctions against people who are seen as failing to comply with an increasing number of conditions in order to receive welfare support have also led to an increase in hardship. You can read more about this in _The Marmot Review: Ten Years On_ (2020) if you are interested.

This has naturally impacted regional and local contexts. Reduced local authority budgets have meant many local charities and voluntary organisations have struggled for funding over the last decade, and many have closed or cut back their services as a result. Understanding the extent to which these factors are having an impact on your neighbourhood is important context to have. It will help you understand the kind of initiatives that may be needed locally if some popular ones have been withdrawn. This can be a balancing act, though, as it is not the job of community organisations to fill the void of reducing public services, especially with far more limited budgets.

The local, regional and national context in which each Local Conversation is operating can change rapidly, and these changes can have a positive or negative impact on residents' lives. You should be actively facilitating annual steering group reviews of the context in which the Local Conversation is operating, discussing what has changed and what hasn't, and whether that is for better or for worse – and if and how your Local Conversation can respond to these changes. If and when residents' priorities change, it would suggest the context is changing and it's important to be aware of how things may need to shift and adapt to this.

You can find some prompts to support you with this below.

Exercise 1: Understanding more about your local context

With your steering group, consider some of the questions below. This is a useful list of prompts to reflect on fairly regularly – perhaps once a year. Context changes, and so do neighbourhoods.

- Who lives in the area? Consider population data and demographics.
- Consider the diverse range of people who live in the area, including by ethnicity, age, socio economic status, disability, newcomers and people who have lived there for years etc. What do the headline priorities appear to be? For example, is it clear that fly-tipping is an issue? Or maybe the area doesn't have any green space, or activities for young people? Does the Local Conversation's priorities reflect the neighbourhood's?
- What different things matters most to different communities in your neighbourhood?
- What are the neighbourhood's strengths?
- Where do people see their neighbourhood boundaries and why?
- What has and has not worked well before?
- What is already going on? Are there some existing activities or campaigns that you can tap into, rather than having to start from scratch? How can you avoid duplicating what other people are already doing?
- Who are the local influencers and power-holders, or 'gatekeepers'? These are people in key roles such as councillors or the MP/MSP/MS, or organisations who might be able to provide you with access to certain groups of people or community facilities. There is more on this in the Influence section.
- Who puts money into the local neighbourhood, and who funds the local services or community groups?
- What other initiatives are happening in the local area? Do you know the networks that are associated with these?
- What is the history of relationships between different groups in the area. For example, do different organisations get on with each other, or might they have fallen out over something? Can this be resolved?
- Where do people tend to go or meet (for example, a corner shop, pub, café, fish and chip shop, hairdresser, park or places of worship)? Do people have to go outside of the local area to access any of these?
- How many local groups are aware of the Local Conversation and what it is trying to achieve? Are you advertising opportunities to join in through these neighbourhood hubs?
- Is the Local Conversation taking place in an area rich with assets (for example, local buildings, local services, public spaces, local community groups), or in an area where there are no community hubs, or where people find it difficult to connect?
- What are the different forms of communication within the neighbourhood – for example, local newsletters, notice boards, or social media groups that you can tap into? Who is and isn't engaged with them? And if you know of lots, are they still active? Are there new ones?
- How can you connect with schools, GP practices, or voluntary sector groups operating in the area and how do they view the local context?
- How many people in the area have a car, and what is public transport like?

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These are just some ideas to consider, and the list is absolutely not exhaustive. You should consider what other things it might be important for you to know and understand about your area and incorporate these into your planning.

Planning for the Future

So far, we have considered how past and present context are relevant to a Local Conversation, but looking ahead into the near or even distant future is also an important aspect of understanding context. This is sometimes called 'horizon scanning'. Reviewing the future strategies and plans of Local Authorities, health services or other institutions of power locally can reveal some extremely useful information about development plans in neighbourhoods for example. In some cases this may involve knocking down existing housing and replacing it with something that may not meet the needs of residents. Practitioners can prepare themselves for such impacts by factoring in longer term plans into their own strategies.

While no-one could have predicted the Covid-19 pandemic, organisations are now aware of the impact and the possibility that there may be recurrences in the future. The same applies to economic market fluctuations and the climate crisis and it is wise to consider future scenarios in understanding context.

3. Practical methods to help you understand the local context

a)   Neighbourhood assets

A large part of understanding the context of your neighbourhood revolves around understanding its assets. Assets might include residents and their skills; the facilities and community or public spaces available in the area; activities; and the neighbourhood's cultural history. There is an in-depth consideration of asset-based approaches in the Approach section of the guide, but there are also some methods outlined below to help you identify your neighbourhood's assets.

Doing a 'walk around'

You might have lived in the area for years, so have a really good idea of what it is like to live there. You might, though, have a less clear picture of how other people see it. You will be looking at the neighbourhood through your own eyes, and residents may see the context in which they are living, ageing, working and bringing up families very differently to you, and perhaps, differently to each other.

If you aren't really familiar with an area, say a more distant part of your Local Conversation's neighbourhood, there is nothing quite like walking around it to get a feel for what is it like to live there. Try doing this at different times of the day and weather conditions to get a deeper sense of the place and its meaning to a diverse range of local people.

If you have lived or worked in the area for a while, try walking around with some other people who live in the community - perhaps people you know less well. For example, you could ask a group of younger people to walk you around the area and to point out the

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areas they like and those that they avoid. You could ask them to take you to spaces that are important to them and ask them to explain why this is so. Doing this with a group of older people, or with people from a minoritised ethnic community, or with disabled people may give you a different perspective too.

You can record what people say about different spaces using your mobile phone and take photos or videos (making sure that you get consent from people before you do this and being clear how you intend to use it). Also, before you record what people say, you need to be clear as to what you promise them regarding anonymity and confidentiality. Some people might be happy to talk to you and to share their views with you, but they may not want you to reveal their identity or the fact that they have spoken to you to anyone else.

> **Resource:**
>
> You can find out a little more about walking interviews here and here.

Another way of doing this exercise, but without actually having to go out for a walk, might be to get a map of the area and ask people to talk to you about the area, pointing to places on the map as they do so. The goal would be to try and find out how people feel about different spaces and why, just like the walk.

> **Resource:**
>
> This article from Friends of the Earth is broader than simply considering how space might or might not be shared across different sections of a community, but you may find the ideas covered in the concept interesting. It looks closely at building equity (or fairness in terms of experience), bringing the community together and cutting resource use.
>
> Also, the Scottish government's Place Standard Tool can help you interrogate what you know about your local context. It's designed to provide a simple framework to structure conversations about place, and to help you think about the physical elements of a place (for example its buildings, spaces, and transport links) as well as the social aspects (for example whether people feel they have a say in decision making).
>
> It can help you consider all aspects of place in a systemic way, uncovering areas where you need to find out more. Once you've done this, it can help you think about which areas of a place could be improved to help you plan what to do next.

b)   Collective identities and memory sharing

In the introduction we noted that communities often have histories or characteristics that only the people who live there will fully understand. Different communities living in the neighbourhood may have different views on what it is like growing up and living there, and these should be captured and added to the 'tapestry' that illustrates the local context. It's important, especially for practitioners who are not from an area they are working in, to spend time researching this and ask residents to share the stories that connect them to their communities.

Sharing memories and experiences of how the Local Conversation and community has developed over time is also important. Shared memories between those who are involved in the project will highlight the achievements and the journey travelled by the Local

Conversation, as well as things that may not have worked so well or ongoing gaps. These memories are useful: they can reveal both collective goals and collective hurts or sensitivities, whether from failed initiatives or something like the loss of housing.

This quote was taken from an evaluation report written in 2016 about Big Local areas and highlighted the importance of shared memories in the projects:

> 'Shared memories were important in shaping how context and initiative began to evolve together through positive and negative feedback loops. Past experiences impacted on trust, speeding up or slowing down the process of collective action that Big Local put in train. They also influenced expectations, shaping the impact of ongoing experiences. In each area, we witnessed the creating of new memories and narratives through the recounting of stories, both celebratory and cautionary, about the Big Local journey so far. We found that people were keen to look back and see how far they had come. This process of creating new shared memories seemed to be important in moving them forward'.[1]

Exercise 2: Memory sharing - putting this into practice in your Local Conversation

- Set aside time with a variety of different residents to be reflective on the community in the past number of years. What's changed? What's not changed? How do you feel living here now? Why?

- For those more closely involved with the Local Conversation for a longer period of time, what has the Local Conversation achieved? Has this changed anything within the community?

An example may be reflecting on green spaces in the community that the Local Conversation has spent time developing.

- What were the green spaces like ten years ago? If we don't know, who can we ask to find out? Has the Local Conversation changed the way green spaces are perceived in the community? Who has helped to achieve this locally? How do people use these spaces now?

As mentioned in the Involvement pillar, reflecting on your successes is also great for residents' morale.

c)   Local social media and media

In lots of communities, there will be numerous localised social media groups, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Nextdoor, Twitter or Instagram – run by community groups, mutual aid groups, residents, the local authority etc. which can help to paint a picture of local history, local issues and conflicts and local assets too. Connecting with the administrators could be a good way to make these connections, and to see who is especially vocal within the community.

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[1] Lois Orton, Emma Halliday, Michelle Collins, Matt Egan, Sue Lewis, Ruth Ponsford, Katie Powell, Sarah Salway, Anne Townsend, Margaret Whitehead & Jennie Popay (2016): *Putting context centre stage: evidence from a systems evaluation of an area based empowerment initiative in England*, Critical Public Health

Local newspapers and local websites will also be a useful resource: they are a readily accessible archive of what has gone on and is going on in your neighbourhood.

d)   Data

Another important method for understanding your Local Conversation's context is to get to grips with local data.

Census data

The UK Census is undertaken every ten years, with the most recently published being in 2011. Its purpose is to collect population and other statistics essential to those who must plan and allocate resources. A new census took place in March 2021, and its initial data will be published in 2022 and fully in 2023. Meanwhile, although some of the published 2011 data will no longer be representative of your neighbourhood, lots of it can still be useful.

The Census takes place at the same time in all parts of the UK. In England and Wales, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the responsible body, and in Scotland, it is the National Records of Scotland (NRS). You can look for and download statistical information about, for example, your neighbourhood's population from the Office for National Statistics or National Records of Scotland websites.

What you can find there, and elsewhere

Using the ONS website as an example, you can search through a filter for different types of information. For example, you can search for information by geographical area, sex or age.

The ONS website can be quite hard to find your way around if you are not familiar with it and, for the purpose of the Local Conversation, you may find this European City database to be easier to use. The database contains information that is not just about cities; you can use it to get more local population data about gender, age, ethnicity and religion - at district, ward and parish level.

Indices of Multiple Deprivation

Another more 'local' set of data you might wish to look at for England is the information held by the Department of Housing, Communities and Local Government about the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. The Indices of Multiple Deprivation is a way of measuring and ranking how 'deprived' any area is in relation to another. It looks at things such as income levels, poverty, the crime rate and access to housing, and uses these to come up with a measure of how disadvantaged an area is relative to others. This data is held in Scotland and Wales, too, as SIMD and WIMD.

You can get this data at a very local level (at what is known as a Lower Super Output Area, typically covering a population of between 1,000 and 3,000 people) by entering the postcode of the area that you interested in. There are 34,753 Lower Super Output Areas in England and Wales, and this site will tell you where your area ranks. In Scotland, these are called Data Zones. Detailed national data is held on the National Records of Scotland website, and population data per Data Zone can be found here. You may already be aware of these, as they are how People's Health Trust designates fundable neighbourhoods.

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More local data

Another source of useful data might be your local council's website. These vary quite a lot in terms of accessibility and the ease with which you can find information. Some are easier to navigate your way around than others. You might be able to get some help from the local authority to get the kind of information that you want, and some councils have details for who you can contact for information. You can also contact your local councillor and ask them to help you to identify someone in your local council who can give you the information that you need.

The kind of data and information available from these sources is largely statistical, but it helps you to get an overview of who lives in the neighbourhood, as well as an insight into what some of the key problems or issues might be.

Some examples

- Looking at ONS data from the Department of Work and Pensions, we know that 55.3% of children in the funded neighbourhoods in Gateshead are in single parent households, against an average of 27.2% in England (per 2017 figures). This might suggest youth activities could be especially valuable, supporting those parents who may struggle with childcare while at work.
- Looking at police data, we know that in December 2018 to November 2019, there were 27.9 incidents of criminal damage in the St Mary's areas of Southampton, versus an average of 8.6 in England. This might suggest safety is a priority worth testing with residents, or that a wider range of activities might be welcomed.
- Looking at 2011 Census data, admittedly collected many years ago, we can see that 4.1% of the population of the funded neighbourhoods in Stanwell are Sikh, against 0.8% in England. This might suggest reaching out to the local Gurdwara would support the Local Conversation to become more representative, if it isn't already.
- Looking at data from the 2017 British Population Survey, 23% of residents in the funded neighbourhoods in Longbenton identified in the least-engaged group with the Internet, against 9% nationally. This might suggest that work on digital inclusion might be valued by residents, especially following the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is always useful to gather other contextual information about your neighbourhood, and the sections below are designed to give you some ideas as to how you might go about doing this.

Resources:

- This page created by Locality provides links to data from a number of sources for areas such as crime, health, heritage, landscape, retail, biodiversity, employment and housing.
- This link also contains a really useful PowerPoint presentation (Locality/My Community) called 'What is my neighbourhood like?' that focuses on using statistical data.

Exercise 3: Plugging the data gaps

With your steering group, open up a discussion about your neighbourhood.

1. List the Local Conversation's priorities.
2. Going through the priorities one at a time, identify and write down your long-term goal for this priority.
3. Then, discuss the context surrounding this priority. What does the Local Conversation know, or feel to be the case? What were people saying when the priority was identified?
4. From there, think about whether or not there is data that can support the views of residents. Having this data to hand will strengthen your argument for change, whether you are directly taking action yourselves or you are attempting to influence other decision-makers.
5. Collect or find the data! If you don't know where to look, a search engine is a good place to start. To help you, there is an example from a fictional Local Conversation in Bury, Greater Manchester, below.

Example: Improving public transport routes in our neighbourhood

1. One of the top priorities for our Local Conversation is to improve public transport routes in our part of Bury.
2. Increasing the number of public transport routes would be an affordable way to help children get to school and support residents to get to work, shop for food, or to travel without the need for a car. Residents want regular public transport options returned to the neighbourhood. Public transport is environmentally friendly, and it helps people to live fuller lives.
3. Residents told us there used to be lots of buses that went through the estate. Regular transport was available to the city centre, which meant people could access parks, do their bigger food shops, collect their pensions, meet with friends and family who live further afield, and get other buses or trains outside of the area to see more of the world. Not everyone can afford a car, and residents feel the buses come at inconvenient times and there are far less per day than there used to be.
4. We don't have the data to back this up, but it feels like it must be out there. We know the bus timetable now, and we must be able to find some of the older ones, before things got worse. One of our forum members pointed out that surely, the local authority and the bus companies must know how many passengers use the services. And the chair mentioned that the Local Conversation could survey people living in the neighbourhood to ask them what they think about public transport locally, and whether they would like to see it improved.

Collecting the data from different sources

Campaign/pressure group data

If I enter 'Bury bus cuts' on a search engine, I find a BBC News article saying the Campaign for Better Transport has identified more than 3,000 local bus routes across the country that have been lost or reduced since 2010.

On the Campaign for Better Transport's website, they have a useful-looking guide for people who want to campaign to save their bus services. And one of our steering group members could definitely give them a call. This could be valuable.

Data identified by trustworthy sources

On another link from the search engine, I find a local news article which says funding for bus services in Greater Manchester has been cut 28% since 2010. We can use this.

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Local authority data

Back to the search. Let's try 'Transport data Bury'. There are a few links that look useful. I find the main reports page for Transport for Greater Manchester, and click on their 2019 spreadsheet. It shows me this:

Table 12 Bury Key Centre Inbound Vehicles 1997, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, Feb 2010, Nov 2010, & 2011 - 2019

Time Period	Year	Cars	LGV	OGV	Buses	M/C	P/C	All	Time Period	Year	Cars	LGV	OGV	Buses	M/C	P/C	All
0730-0930	1997	3960	328	146	248	10	32	4724	1000-1200	1997	3551	332	149	265	13	15	4325
	1998									1998							
	1999	3714	333	86	240	16	41	4430		1999	3504	357	105	240	9	11	4226
	2000									2000							
	2001									2001							
	2002	3733	293	69	237	23	18	4373		2002	3914	374	107	255	15	7	4672
	2003									2003							
	2004									2004							
	2005	3493	331	105	204	20	43	4196		2005	3551	394	86	222	9	21	4283
	2006									2006							
	2007									2007							
	2008	3693	320	128	211	24	70	4446		2008	3475	363	105	229	19	34	4225
	2009									2009							
	Feb-10	3286	281	99	192	8	65	3931		Feb-10	3285	320	102	215	11	22	3955
	Nov-10	3234	317	48	195	15	59	3868		Nov-10	3554	351	82	214	8	33	4242
	2011	3367	242	71	197	15	63	3955		2011	3608	373	62	216	20	38	4317
	2012	3210	289	82	188	14	91	3874		2012	3677	312	74	210	6	37	4316
	2013	3146	284	52	181	11	90	3764		2013	3525	326	58	190	9	34	4142
	2014	3072	254	61	189	13	89	3678		2014	3672	313	85	210	13	51	4344
	2015	3117	241	64	193	13	78	3706		2015	3763	298	83	209	8	55	4416
	2016	3154	271	64	178	9	77	3753		2016	3621	302	96	191	9	41	4260
	2017	3390	275	67	185	9	89	4015		2017	3688	313	83	194	12	27	4317
	2018	3404	233	69	164	8	73	3951		2018	3941	319	75	173	9	30	4547
	2019	3328	238	61	139	6	35	3807		2019	3614	307	71	165	3	18	4178
	2019/1997	0.84	0.73	0.42	0.56	0.60	1.09	0.81		2019/1997	1.02	0.92	0.48	0.62	0.23	1.20	0.97

I can see from the information (highlighted, left) that 139 buses came into Bury before work in the morning in 2019, but we had 193 in 2015. That's 54 fewer buses! And there were 248 in 1997! In fact, in the row at the bottom, in bold, it tells me that bus services have reduced by 44% since 1997.

We can definitely use this in our campaign. That sounds like a great headline stat – they've literally cut the bus numbers in half. We've got the evidence to back up what our neighbours have told us. This would be great on an infographic, or a poster.

But how many people are using the buses? I head back to Google, and I check the local authority's website. It tells me they don't count this, but Transport for Greater Manchester (TFGM) do. Fine – let's go back to TFGM's website. They don't really share any data, or at least I can't find it, because their website isn't the easiest to follow. What I do find is their Freedom of Information page, and legally every public service has to respond to these. It tells me they're committed to being transparent. We can definitely ask them how many people used the buses last year, and how many used them in the last 20 years too.

There, I also find a list of all their meetings which are open to the public – which is very useful for when we're ready to start influencing them. Maybe we could attend some.

National government data

Is there anywhere else I can look for useful data? Transport for Greater Manchester's page also tells me they publish lots of data on www.data.gov.uk. Clicking on transport, and searching 'Greater Manchester', I get 910 results. That's a lot, but it's everything they've ever published. I can refine this by looking at the Publisher. Clicking on 'Transport for Greater Manchester' gets only 38 results. That's not too many to look through the titles of, and to explore the relevant ones.

Within about a minute, I find one listing the Bus Stopping Points in the area, and a map of all the bus routes. These are not the easiest files to work with, but one of the young people who leads our after-school club is great with computers and she's really passionate about the transport issue. Maybe she can help us out.

Already, we feel a lot better equipped.

Using the data

Now that you have gathered the data and understand the context better, you are in a stronger position to use that data to influence and bring about the change that you want to see. There is more detail in the Influence section of the guide on how to do this effectively.

Reflection: What sources of data are you currently using to understand the context in which your Local Conversation is operating, and how are you sharing this with residents? How useful are these data sources?

Understanding what others are doing

Another essential part of understanding context is identifying others already working on similar areas either specifically within the neighbourhood or wider area. Thinking collaboratively, are there priorities that you can work on together, and consider how you can collectively make a difference, rather than duplicate? There is more on the importance of this and collaboration specifically in the Influence section.

4. Equity, diversity and inclusion

Equity is about ensuring people have the right amount of resources, support and information to ensure that they have as equal an outcome or chance of success as any other person or group.

Diversity is about recognising, respecting and valuing differences in people. The diversity of the local population for example, should be reflected in governance and decision-making groups.

Inclusion is about ensuring people are valued, involved and influencing. It involves taking deliberate action to create environments where everyone feels respected and able to achieve their full potential.

Communities are made up of diverse groups of people, including people of different genders[2], ethnic backgrounds[3] and religions[4], disabled people[5], older people[6], young people[7], members of LGBT+ communities[8], people with mental health needs[9], people with learning disabilities[10], and people from different socio-economic backgrounds.[11] It is

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[2] LSE Commission on Gender, Inequality and Power, *Confronting Gender Inequality*, London School of Economics (2015)

[3] Cabinet Office, *People living in deprived neighbourhoods*, Ethnicity facts and figures (2020)

[4] Welsh Government, *Analysis of protected characteristics by area deprivation: 2017 to 2019* (2020)

[5] DWP, *Disability facts and figures* (2014)

[6] Public Health Scotland, *Older people* (2021)

[7] Public Health Scotland, *Young people* (2021)

[8] Equalities Office, *National LGBT Survey* (2017)

[9] NHS England, *The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health* (2016)

[10] Public Health England, *Learning disabilities: applying All Our Health* (2018)

[11] Cabinet Office, *Socio-economic background (SEB)* (2019)

critical therefore that all Local Conversations take a proactive approach to equity, diversity and inclusion and that you know who lives in your neighbourhood. It is not enough to be open and welcoming, you must also challenge the way in which your Local Conversation works, whether it is designed to be inclusive and whether it centres the needs of more marginalised people. You must positively target the involvement of under-represented groups and those whose voices are seldom heard and create allyships which help to increase and champion their voices. Local Conversations should be speaking out about the key issues affecting underrepresented groups of residents in their neighbourhood (including local and national government policy changes and legislative developments) and providing opportunities for people and communities that are less visible or traditionally less involved to participate. See further guidance on this in the section on Involvement.

It is essential, as part of understanding context, to consider issues of equity, diversity and inclusion. This will help to shed light on the additional inequalities or stigma faced by certain groups of people in the area who have one or multiple characteristics, whether Black refugees who are disabled, older LGBT+ people, young people with learning disabilities and so on.

Knowing the context is also about understanding the power dynamics within neighbourhoods which can impact the ability of certain groups to have their voices heard. Where this is the case, practitioners should acknowledge it and put measures in place to ensure that all residents' voices can be heard.

It is important to understand not just the makeup but also any connections they have to other groups within neighbourhood; are some groups more marginalised than others; are there groups who you have little or no contact with? By understanding this, you can start to work with these groups to understand whether the way in which you work is inclusive of them? If it is not, what are some of the barriers and how do they suggest you can remove them. You can also understand some of the different cultural issues which may prevent people from being more involved and consider whether particularly groups of people sit on your steering group and management team – this is more than being visible, it is about bringing people's real experience to the decision-making spaces.

5   What are the risks if you don't understand the context?

If you (and your Local Conversation steering group members) don't fully understand the context the Local Conversation operates in, you risk falling short on the other seven sections of the practice guide, and ultimately, being able to bring about the changes that residents want in their neighbourhood.

Without understanding the context, your approach might be considered insufficient, another community organisation may have tried it before and, at worst, it might be exclusive and it might offend people. Without context you will struggle to get people involved: if you don't know who you are seeking to engage, what appeals to them, what doesn't, and what has happened before, it is unlikely people will see something for themselves or for their neighbourhood in what the Local Conversation has to offer. Further, context is important to understand relationships in the area. There will always be social dynamics, power imbalances, and conflicts to manage. Everywhere and everyone has a history. The best way to stay on top of this is to be aware of this history, and to

manage issues as they arise, rather than wait for them to directly impact the Local Conversation's success.

If you are seeking to bring something positive to the neighbourhood, you need to know what has worked and what hasn't; which services may have existed, but no longer do; what assets the community has – its people, its community facilities, its green spaces, transport links, shops, existing activities, other local groups, and the safety of the area, for instance. Otherwise, it is likely you will be wasting your time and residents' time. For example, if residents say there is a real shortage of activities for young people in the neighbourhood, and you start a football activity – but it turns out that one of the few activities that already exists is a local children's football team, this is something you really need to know.

Context is important for action and influence, too. As noted above, data and evidence can be a vital asset. If you are seeking to encourage the local authority to address an issue, you need to be sure this is a real issue. Think about the example of bus services from the activity earlier in the pillar. If, in fact, buses are running more frequently than they were five years ago, you are unlikely to get very far if you say they've been cut back. Having evidence on your side, and knowing the full context of an issue, helps you to sharpen your message and keeps your actions targeted.

6   Summary

Why is it important to understand the context in which your Local Conversation is taking place?

Understanding the context of your neighbourhood – its history, the people who live there, its diversity, what is there and what isn't – is a crucial foundation for project delivery. Your context is something to keep in mind when thinking about your approach, how you get people involved, the relationships and dynamics that exist within the community, the action the Local Conversation takes and the activities it delivers, as well as how it seeks to influence others. Regularly scanning the context and exploring this with residents will ensure that your priorities stay relevant and you are focusing on the right changes to pursue collectively. Understanding context creates an effective baseline and will support effective progress reporting and evaluation and ultimately understanding the impact you are making.

Context changes

This is something to bear in mind. As time passes, things shift. A very visible example of this would be the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on different groups of people within the neighbourhood.

Developing a better understanding of the context

There are lots of ways to do this. Some we have outlined within this section of the guide involve speaking to people, walking around the neighbourhood, memory sharing, checking local Facebook groups, and looking into publicly available data.

You can support a better understanding across the Local Conversation by encouraging residents to lead on these activities, or at the very least to be involved.

- What could be done to help develop a better and shared understanding?
- What can you do with this new knowledge? Does this help the Local Conversation target its work more effectively, and what might you put into a 'Context Plan'?

7 Some Do's and Don'ts

> **Do**
> - Take account of all views and perspectives
>   Consider the diversity of your neighbourhood
> - Draw on a wide range of data sources
> - Talk to other organisations working in the neighbourhood
> - Think about the future
>
> **Don't**
> - Make any assumptions – all organisations have things they don't know/do well and an objective analysis of context can help to highlight these
> - Don't avoid difficult issues and/or addressing differences in opinions.

8 A final exercise

To bring everything together in this section we would like you to do one more exercise:

> **Exercise 4: Getting your Local Conversations steering group to understand the importance of the context in which they, their friends and family live**
>
> In this section of the guide, we have talked about Context – including what might be helpful to understand about the local area to support the Local Conversation and some practical resources and exercises.
>
> Although this guide is aimed at Local Conversations practitioners, it's really important that residents also have access to the tools and resources we have discussed in this section – not least your Steering Group, or whatever it is called locally. They will be able to fill in some of the gaps in terms of your (and their) understanding of the local context, particularly in relation to issues/histories that have not been formally recorded. They may well be interested in the resources we have discussed and use it to further develop the Local Conversation and exert influence using data and broader research.
>
> As a final exercise please consider how you are going to ensure steering group members have a full understanding of the local context and what three things have you taken away from this section that you can discuss with them to further develop their knowledge of the local context within the Local Conversation and how they might use it?
>
> Having done this please let us what we could add to this section that might help others, in terms of exercises to try, sources of information from which to better understand the local context, and how you have shared it with residents.

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IMPORTANT