

Chat for Change: Stoke-on-Trent's rallying cry against the cost-of-living crisis

In the wake of a biting cost of living crisis, I visited the Bridge Centre in Birches Head, Stoke-on-Trent, which has become a hub of hope and solidarity. [Birches Head Get Growing](#), based at the centre, hold monthly Free Shop Swap Shop events at which there is free fresh food and non-perishable goods, clothes for all ages and sizes, children's toys, books, and household items. Anyone can take what they need, or swap something of their choice!



The event in February witnessed the birth of "Chat for Change," developed by the [Raising Voices group](#). It's a model for community organising that's looking beyond discussion to become a catalyst for community action.

The event included a range of experiences, with an exhibition space that showcased artworks from previous anti-poverty projects led by Raising Voices group members. These pieces were not just the photographic art and ceramics on display; they represent stories, emotions, the silent and powerful voices of people in the community. These served as conversation starters with local people either in admiration of their artistic aesthetic or as an identification with the story being illustrated.

However, the heart of "Chat for Change" was its conversation space, where individuals shared their realities of the cost-of-living crisis over a cup of tea. Birches Head Get Growing volunteers also baked a mountain of delicious cakes and refreshments which were very much appreciated.

People's accounts were not just heard, they were felt, resonating with the Raising Voices team, and creating a valuable record of lived experience. This can contribute to communities informing local policy and practice in tackling the cost-of-living crisis. Indeed, the organisers are preparing a summary of the outcomes from the event which will be shared with a wider

local partnership, led by the City Council, that is delivering a plan to tackle the cost-of-living crisis across five key themes.

Other activities included a snakes and ladders game, which traced the journey of two individuals grappling with the challenges of homelessness. Adults could play the game with the cards and the story, but children played a standard version of the game without the story. The game was intended as a conversation starter for adults; and as a pastime for children to enable their carers to participate in the event without distraction.

Organisers see this event as a seedling of a local poverty truth movement, designed to help people identify their source of power, so that those in hardship can help to shape local plans and activities on their own terms. It was designed by the Raising Voices group involving Expert Citizens CIC, whose members' lived experience ensured the pertinence and authenticity of the event. This "Chat for Change" event was a pilot, a prototype following a co-design process. The Raising Voices team is now crafting a resource pack and toolkit to replicate "Chat for Change" across other locales led by diverse community groups and organisations, with the team's support. "Chat for Change" is a testament to the power of community organising, offering valuable insights grounded in real-life experiences.

"Chat for Change" wasn't just a single event; it was the start of a conversation, a local movement, that could change the way policy is made and practice is improved in partnership with communities. It showed that when a community comes together, united by a common cause, they can identify the power they have to influence change.

As ever, "Chat for Change" is a collaborative effort, with key partners in Raising Voices community group including [All The Small Things CIC](#), [Expert Citizens CIC](#), [Stoke on Trent Food Bank](#), [Birches Head Get Growing](#) and [Staffordshire University's](#) civic engagement team. Funding for the events and toolkit has been sourced from Civic Power, Poverty Truth Network and Know Your Neighbourhood Fund.



Increasing volunteering and tackling loneliness through the **Know Your Neighbourhood Fund**



The "Chat for Change" event in Stoke-on-Trent has illuminated a path of hope, showing us the profound impact community organising can have. It's a call to action for Community Organisers everywhere: harness the power of lived experiences to drive change. By hosting your own "Chat for Change" style events, you can gather invaluable insights and stories that resonate with the heart of our communities. These narratives are the key to influencing the [Cost-of-Living Alliance](#) and shaping the discourse at the forthcoming national summit. Let's unite, share our journeys, and together, we can forge a future where no voice goes unheard, and no story is left untold. Your participation is crucial — join us in this nationwide effort to make a difference.

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