With the support of local schools, service organizations, United Way Volunteers & Staff, conversations took place with 120 Woodstock youth to learn more about what places & spaces in a “Youth-Friendly Community” could look like. Following the Harwood conversation process, youth shared their current experiences in Woodstock and their perspectives on what they believe needs to happen to better support all youth.
Beginning in the fall of 2016, United Way Volunteers & Staff, trained in the Harwood Process, visited 12 locations across Woodstock to have conversations with youth ages 12-17 years. Youth were selected by local schools and organizations and a wide cross-section of our community was represented. They had diverse backgrounds, lived in different neighbourhoods & had a variety of personal interests & experiences. Students appeared comfortable, engaged in conversation & were eager to share their experiences & opinions. The open-ended questions were aspirational & encouraged dialogue. The same themes & comments were revealed within each group which strengthens this overall representation of youth’s perspective in Woodstock.

This is what Woodstock youth said...

Overview
Youth-Friendly Places & Spaces

Youth in the City of Woodstock want to see more dedicated places & spaces created for youth and they want a voice in the design of those spaces. They are concerned that for most youth those places do not currently exist. As they talked more about this, they spoke of safe neighbourhood spaces where kids are welcome to gather & where there are opportunities to pursue their personal interests. They said these spaces should be welcoming, accessible, clean, affordable & large enough to accommodate a variety of interests. These spaces need to include WIFI, food & outdoor areas. They said we need to focus on making this a common community goal. The youth said the Mayor, other local influencers & decision makers need to make youth a priority. To do so, community leaders need to collaborate with a broad range of youth & invest in places & spaces which meet their interests.

Existing Places and Spaces

Youth spoke of existing places, spaces & programs in Woodstock that they feel meet the needs of young people today. Most youth said they were not connected to social & recreational programs, but a few said they participate in traditional fee-for-service activities such as hockey, dance, gymnastics, theatre, etc. When youth spoke of places they liked, they described them as welcoming & fostering a sense of comfort, belonging & acceptance. They said that participation wasn’t contingent on membership, ability to pay, adherence to any belief or a commitment. Places specifically mentioned included the Woodstock Public Library, the YMCA’s Free Teen Friday Night, Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Navy League, Calvary Church’s Collide Jr High Program, the Oxford County Community Health Care Centre, Southside Aquatic Centre & the Woodstock Navy Vets’ games. The youth on the south side of Woodstock also identified Southside Park & the Skateboard Park as places that were easy to get to & good places to ‘hang out’. They said that many of those organizations have staff who smiled & said hello when they entered, were nice, treated them respectfully & were happy to have them around. They spoke of a few businesses that accommodate the younger crowd. These businesses don’t ‘shoo’ them away & allow them to stay for long periods of time despite making limited purchases. Youth said that more formal & informal places such as these would reflect a youth-friendly community.
Safety, Security & Belonging

Youth want to feel physically & emotionally safe. They are concerned that Woodstock does not particularly feel like a safe place for children & youth to live & referred to past tragic events to reinforce their concerns. As they talked about their physical safety, they referred to ‘sketchy’, dirty areas of town with people that make them feel uncomfortable. They said they are not able to safely walk to specific areas of town due to their own comfort level, parental concerns, distance &/or having no sidewalks. They said that even when they are in small groups they may be chased, bullied or verbally harassed. Youth said they often see fights or drug deals in public spaces. As they talked about their emotional safety, they referred to feeling judged by their peers, community members & not feeling accepted for who they are. Youth said they feel stigmatized & unwelcomed in many public places & local businesses. They said we need to have a clean, welcoming & accepting community where everyone can feel safe.

Programs & Services

Youth want opportunities to explore their social, recreational & learning interests. They are concerned that beyond traditional organized athletic activities, neither the schools nor the community have a great deal to offer them & that they are unaware of what may be available. As youth talked more about these concerns, they talked about a shortage of safe spaces to meet with friends & hangout. They also said many existing programs have inflexible schedules or limited hours, cost money & are difficult to get to. Youth spoke of wanting to explore a variety of new activities such as music, arts, cooking, drama, technology, games & sports; they also spoke of not always wanting a program, but rather just space to be. They want to feel welcomed & encouraged to participate regardless of their skills or abilities. They also talked about needing welcoming indoor & outdoor spaces along with areas to ‘chill’, free WiFi & a snack bar. These spaces need to be ‘supervised’ by engaged & approachable staff who understand & can connect with youth.

Accessibility

Youth want easily accessible places, spaces & programs that are created specifically for youth based on their feedback. They are concerned that there are few engaging activities & that transportation costs & locations of existing activities are barriers to their participation. As youth talked more about these concerns, they indicated that there are few options for youth not interested in sports. They said that many families are not able to afford activities, bus fare, or provide rides. Depending on the riders, they do not always feel comfortable on the bus & they are not allowed to walk too far from home or their neighbourhood. They say that we need to better target communication to youth as they are often unaware of what is available. They say we need to focus on providing free, informal neighbourhood-based options or create a central location with transportation provided.
What is a community conversation? It is a safe place where people can come together to talk about their aspirations, concerns & how they want their community to move forward. They are typically small groups of 8-14 people who have a casual discussion that is facilitated by a trained moderator. The conversations are transcribed using the participant’s words to ensure that their experiences & perspectives are accurately captured.

What is the difference between Public Knowledge and Expert Knowledge? Public Knowledge helps us better understand people’s lives & identify key issues of concern. It can help generate a common purpose for action. It helps experts & local decision makers set realistic goals & roots community work making it more relevant & impactful.

**EXPERT KNOWLEDGE**

Expert knowledge comes from expert or professional analysis. It often includes data, demographic & market studies, evidence-based decision making & best practices.

It is usually presented in expert or professional language.

**PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE**

Public knowledge comes only from engaging in conversations with people in a community. Only the people within the community themselves can tell us their aspirations, concerns & how they see different facets of their community.

It is usually in plain language that everyone can understand.

How are common themes identified? From conversation to conversation it is important to see if people’s comments are connected or related. The facilitator & note takers convene to identify the themes & determine what were the important learnings. The focus is on the words that were spoken & captured, not an interpretation of what was said.

What is United Way’s commitment moving forward? We have a deep responsibility to share what we learned with decision makers, community leaders & people who are interested & may be in a position to help effect change. We commit to doing so.

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