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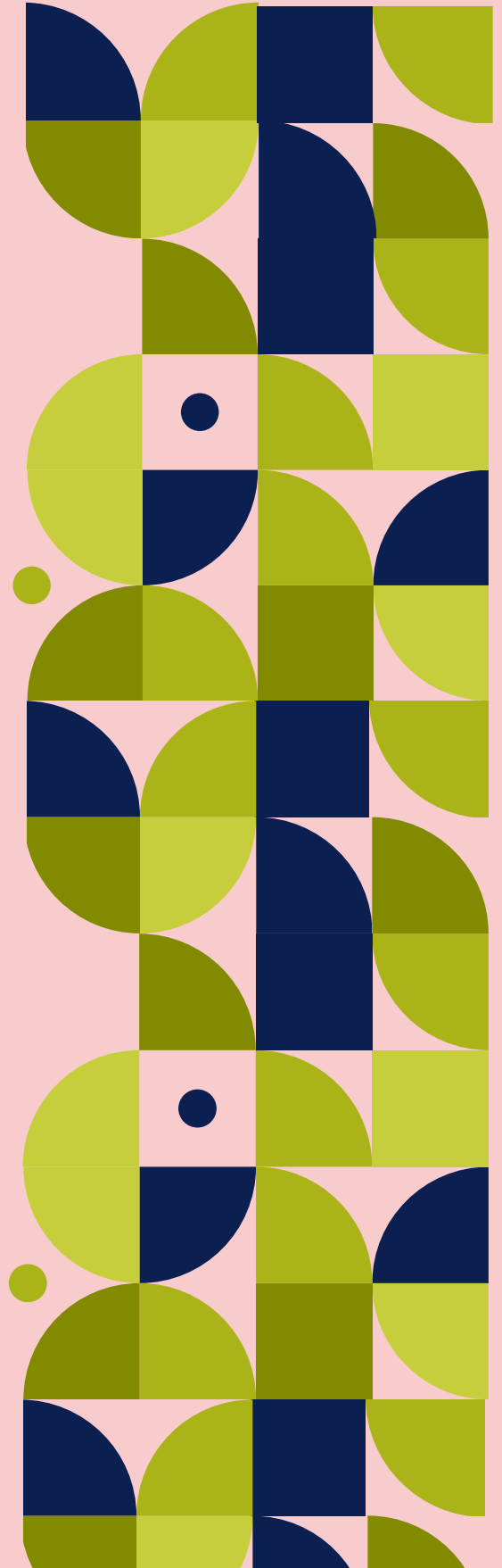Healthcare & Urbanisation

LISTENING EXCHANGES

A PILOT PROJECT

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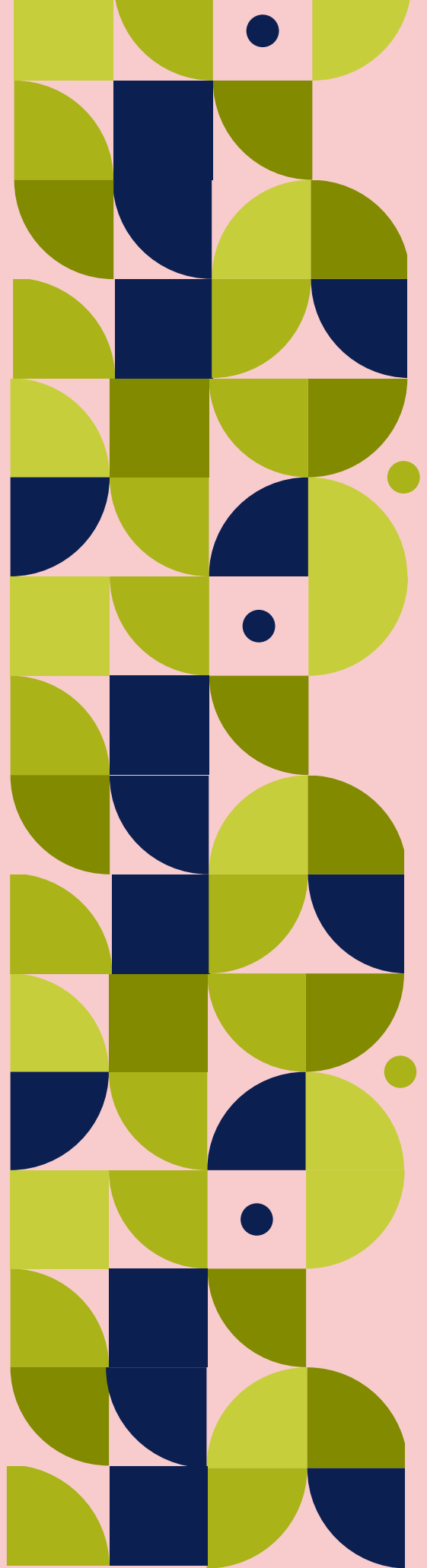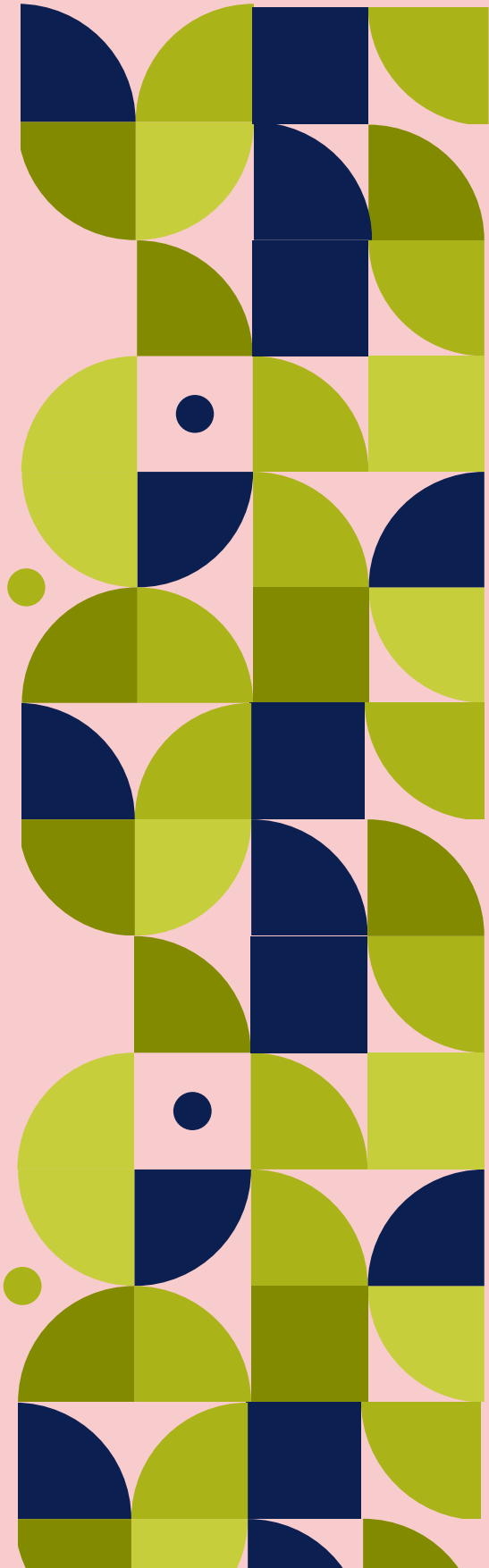**ASTRID KRISCH**
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INTRODUCTION

A key challenge facing society in the 21st century is increasing polarisation relating to a range of policy issues, including climate change and sustainability policy (Khan, 2024). National and local governments have enacted policies which, in some cases, have divided opinion. Recent examples include the introduction of an Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) in London and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) in many cities throughout England, including Oxford. The introduction of LTNs in Oxford has elicited strong feelings for and against, and has been characterised by increasing polarisation within communities.

This project was funded by the University of Oxford (the Oxford Policy Engagement Network – OPEN). It aimed to explore whether a method involving "Listening Exchanges" could alleviate tension and division connected to the LTN debate and contribute to addressing polarisation in a local context.

The project took place between February and July 2024, with a trial of 10 Listening Exchanges involving 22 participants, held in Oxford between May and July. It was undertaken with the involvement of Oxfordshire County Council who endorsed the project, met regularly with the project team, and discussed the preliminary findings with the research team towards the end of the project.
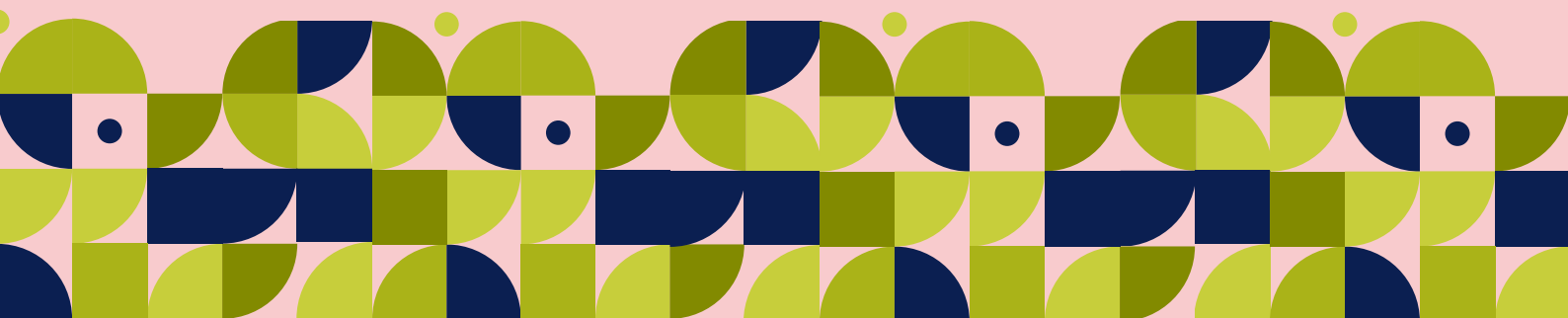
REFLECTIONS AND KEY LEARNINGS

The results of the Listening Exchange project have led to five Key Learnings about the potential impacts of the method:

Key Learning 1: Listening Exchanges were valued by participants. Storytelling and respectful listening played a role in helping people understand each other, challenge assumptions and stereotypes and establish common values.

Key Learning 2: There is a need for 'Third Places' where people can feel heard, and can listen to others with different perspectives, in a safe environment. Listening Exchanges often resulted in an intention to approach future conversations about LTNs with more openness.

Key Learning 3: The core elements of the Listening Exchange process of storytelling, respectful listening and empathy-building, could contribute to consultation processes which influence policy. The Listening Exchange method could be adapted to facilitate this.

Key Learning 4: Further research is needed to explore how impacts at an individual level ripple through to changes in social interactions on the topic of LTNs (both online and in-person), and therefore to wider community and societal impacts.

Key Learning 5: It is important to have a neutral facilitator, that is, someone not involved in making LTN policy, to provide non-partisan guidance for the Listening Exchange. Facilitators from diverse backgrounds would help to ensure that Listening Exchanges engaged with a wide range of participants, and would increase trust in its neutrality.
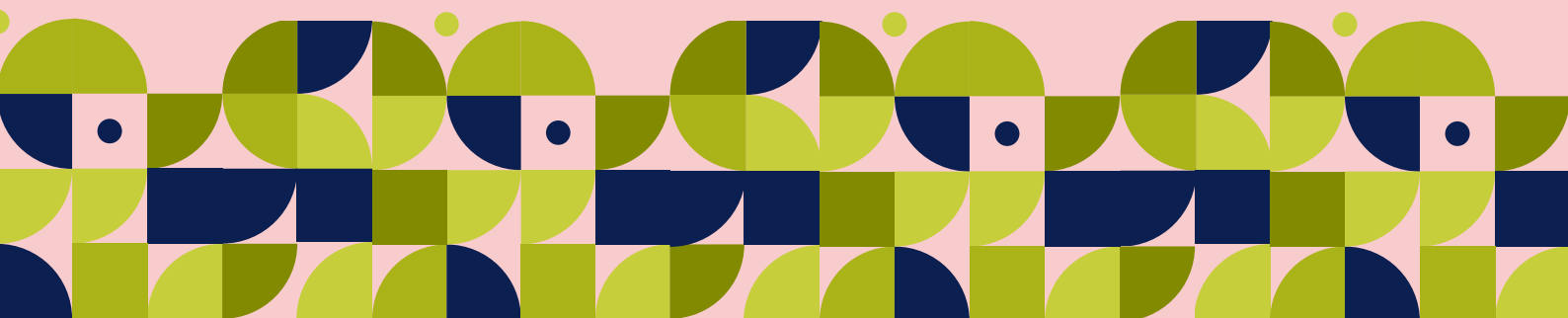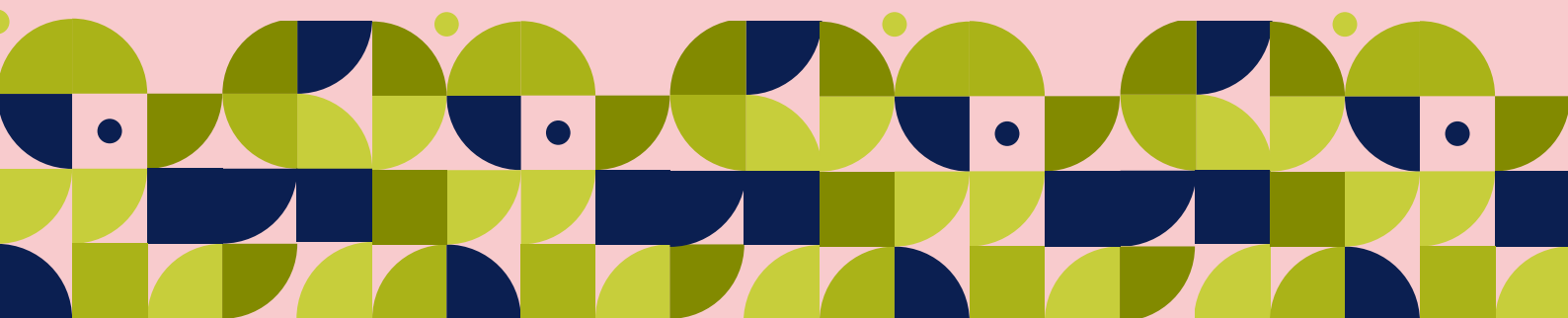
SCALING UP THE LISTENING EXCHANGES

In order to amplify the impact of the Listening Exchanges beyond the individuals involved, five options are suggested, drawing on the researchers' experience of the pilot project as well as ideas from the Listening Exchange participants:

1. Organising larger "Group Listening Exchanges"
2. Applying the "Goldfish Bowl" method, in which a number of people observe a Listening Exchange
3. Recording the Listening Exchanges to be made available online
4. Running Listening Exchanges with "community leaders"
5. Making a short film or other media representation about the Listening Exchange process.

SUMMARY

The Listening Exchange project has revealed that there is considerable scope for common ground and common values between people who consider themselves to be on opposite sides of the LTN debate. Community exchanges, ideally face-to-face and involving storytelling and exchanges of lived experience, are a highly valuable process for individuals to understand each other better. The principles of listening and exchanging experience might be well harnessed in processes of community consultation, for policy-makers to understand different perspectives in areas that divide the public and build trust.

As local authorities face increasingly challenging policy issues in the coming years, be they related to climate change and net zero, or the housing crisis and pressure on urban development, engagement methods that can address polarisation will become ever more valuable. This project has demonstrated that the Listening Exchange method has potential to have positive impacts on individuals in the context of the debate around LTNs. Understanding the impact of the method on medium term behaviour, adaptation of the approach for use in the context of public consultations, and exploring ways to scale up their impact, warrant further investigation.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

A key challenge facing society in the 21st century is increasing polarisation relating to a broad range of policy issues including climate and sustainability policy (Khan 2024). Polarisation can be defined as "a state in which opinions in society are divided and partisan groups form around the divided opinions" (Koudenburg and Kashima, 2021: 1068). In recent years, polarisation has increased following climate action related to mitigation and adaptation, where national and local governments have enacted policies which have divided opinion (Bogner et al, 2024). Recent examples include the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) in London, and the introduction of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) in many cities throughout England (LGA, 2021).

In Oxford, LTNs were initially introduced by Oxfordshire County Council in 2021 in Cowley and further extended in 2022 to East Oxford, following the national Government's provision of an Emergency Active Travel Fund to resource such schemes, in response to the pandemic. The aim of LTNs is to create quieter and safer streets to encourage active travel by restricting movement of motorised vehicles through certain residential areas. However, the LTN policy has elicited strong feelings on both sides of the debate, and has been characterised by increasing polarisation within communities, with those on either side expressing strong views, and in some cases, taking unlawful action such as vandalising or removing bollards that restrict movement.

This project was funded by the University of Oxford (the Oxford Policy Engagement Network - OPEN). It aimed to explore whether a method involving "Listening Exchanges" could alleviate tension and division connected to the LTN debate and contribute to addressing polarisation in a local context.

The project took place between February and July 2024, with a trial of 10 Listening Exchanges held in the city between May and July. It was undertaken with the involvement of Oxfordshire County Council, who endorsed the project, met with the project team, and discussed the preliminary findings with the research team towards the end of the project.

This report presents the results of the pilot, together with a critical review of the method, and reflections on how the Listening Exchange approach can have relevance and applicability for local authorities facing similar polarisation. The report starts with an explanation of a Listening Exchange, followed by details of the project's method and approach to recruitment. The project findings and key learnings are then presented, followed by reflections for scaling up the method to expand its impact.
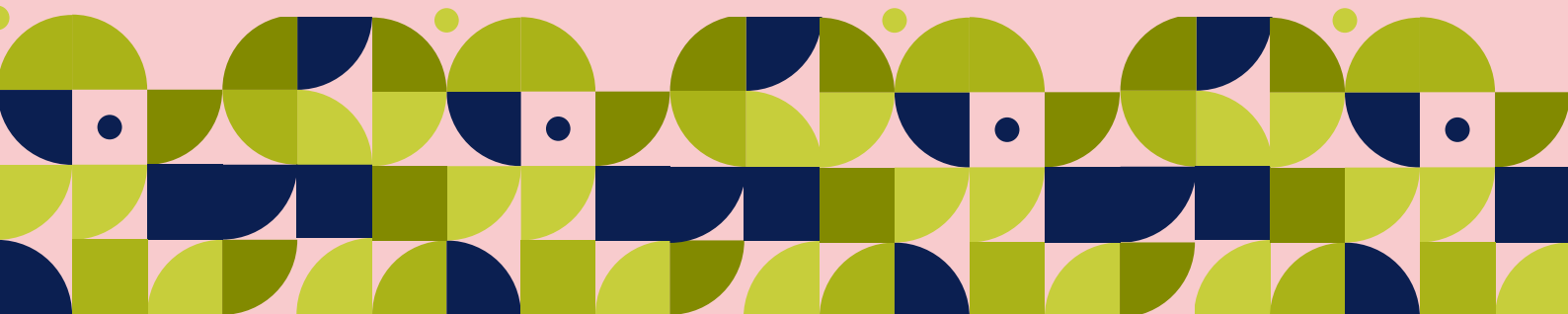
2. WHAT IS A LISTENING EXCHANGE?

THE LISTENING EXCHANGE METHOD

The Listening Exchange (LE) method was designed for this exercise and draws on approaches of deep and reflective listening used widely in therapeutic and conflict mediation settings.

An **LE brings together two people**, one who supports, and one who opposes, LTNs to express their experience of LTNs and to listen to the other's perspective. The **LE is overseen by a facilitator experienced in mediation**. It aims to provide an opportunity for a resident to connect in person with a fellow resident who has a different view. The **process enables the building of an empathetic connection**, with each person being heard by the other and having the intention to listen to the other. This process can create a **positive feedback loop** of reducing defensiveness, building trust, and strengthening interpersonal connection (Jones et al, 2023; Jones and Russell, 2021). The enquiry here was whether deep, reflective listening could be usefully applied to a polarised community setting, on an issue that continued to be contentious, where participants did not know each other and would be unlikely to interact again.

Listening Exchanges **encourage participants to speak for themselves and express their direct, lived experience of LTNs**. This facilitates a personal and storytelling approach, taking the focus away from debates about what data may or may not show, whether LTN schemes work or not, and for whom. Importantly, an LE is **not about changing the other person's mind, or about changing policy related to LTNs**. The principle is that all perspectives are valid, and that LEs have no influence over LTN policy.

The facilitator starts by **asking a question which is answered by one of the participants**, for a set length of time, up to 90 seconds. The second participant is then asked to **reflect back to the first participant what they heard (i.e. repeat it, not verbatim but in a way that captures the meaning)**. The facilitator checks with the first speaker that everything has been covered, and any gaps are filled in. The roles are then reversed, and the second participant answers the same question. Again, the first participant repeats after 90 seconds what they have heard.
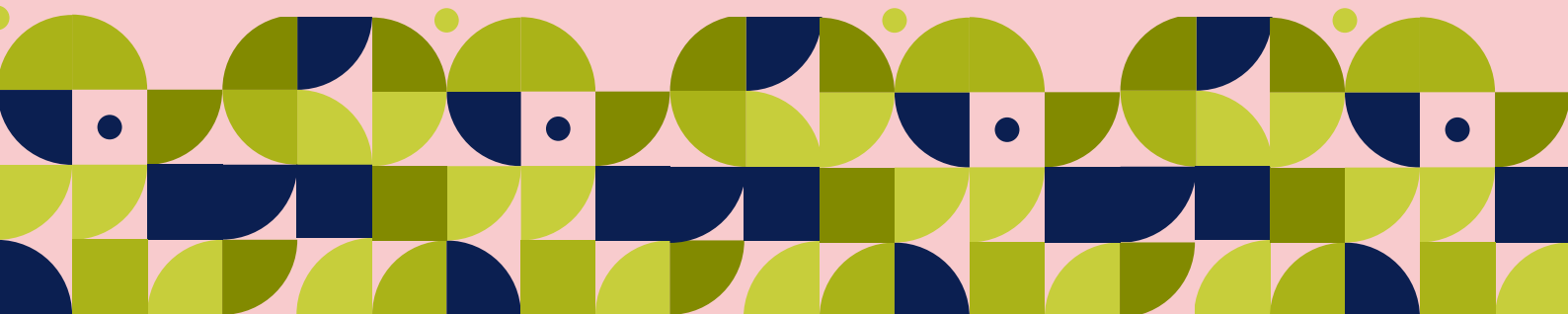
This process continues through a series of up to 8 further questions (see Appendix 1 for the list of questions), and usually lasts a total of 60-90 minutes. Once a rhythm and practice of listening are established, and depending on the participants, the **structure can loosen into a more free-flowing exchange**. This process is managed by the facilitator, who gauges the dynamics of the pair and how best to help the LE develop constructively. Time-keeping can continue if there is a tendency for one or both parties to talk at length. As the LE evolves, the facilitator either draws on the list of eight pre-defined questions or may include new questions, depending on the flow of the exchange.

An **LE can range on a spectrum** with, at one end, one that focuses heavily on an empathetic connection between the participants, and at the other end, one that is more aligned with a healthy, respectful discussion about LTNs. The form it takes will depend on the participants. A more empathetic exchange requires good listening skills and a greater ability and willingness to be emotionally vulnerable. In the event that participants don't naturally wish to explore this territory, or struggle with an aptitude for it, the facilitator can move the LE towards a healthy, though less emotionally exposing, exchange about personal experience of LTNs and their impacts.

During the LEs, the facilitator plays an active role. The **facilitator engages specifically** if participants are struggling to reflect back, or broadly repeat, what they have heard. If participants find it hard to remember the full content of what they hear and worry that this might suggest they are not listening carefully, the facilitator intervenes to relax the atmosphere and support the participant by reflecting together. If a participant struggles to reflect back what they hear and instead responds with their own views, the facilitator can interrupt to model for them what reflecting back looks like. Facilitator intervention is sometimes needed a number of times until the participants settle into the process.

If one participant is able to repeat what they had heard more effectively than the other, creating an imbalance, the facilitator can take part in the reflecting back process to equalise the empathetic listening between participants. If a participant wants to 'download' at the start of the process, not feeling able to listen to someone else before they can get their own views off their chest, the facilitator allows a two minute 'download' at the start for all participants. The process is then reined back in to that of the core reflective structure. In these ways and others the **facilitator works to create an environment that is maximally conducive to building trust and understanding**.
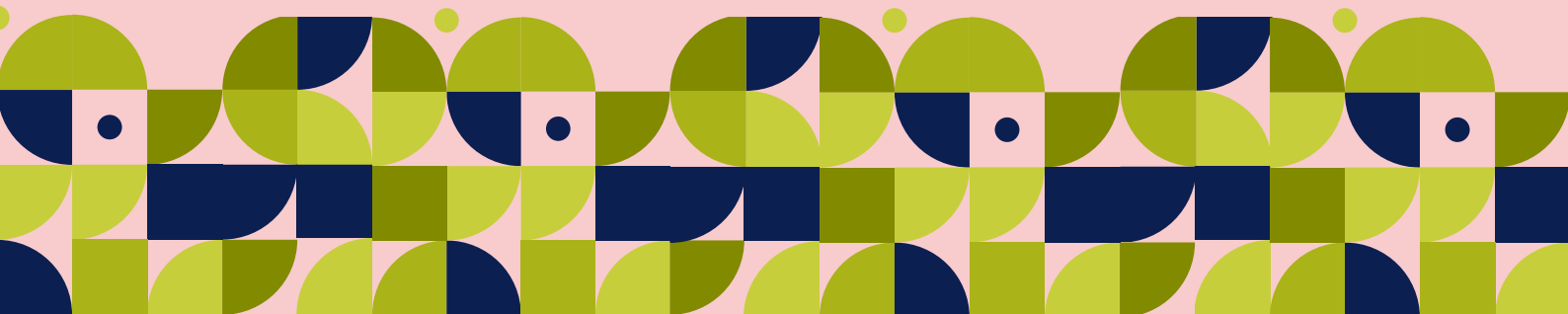
The Listening Exchange itself **took place in 'neutral' community venues** that were conveniently located for participants. These included: Ark-T (Barns Road), Rose Hill Community Centre, Restore on Cowley Road, Oxford Community Action (OCA) café, Florence Park Community Centre, and Flo's in the Park café. Refreshments were provided and the room was set up to ensure that people felt welcome.
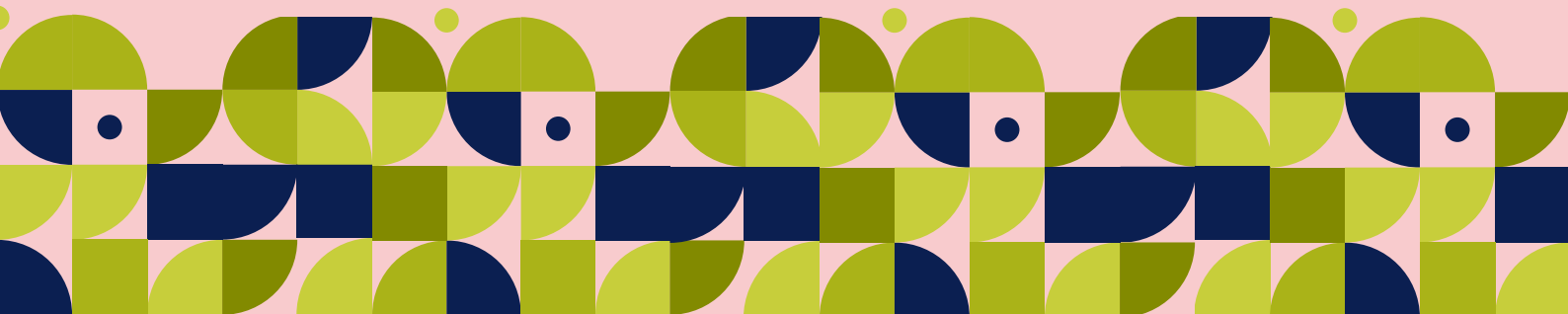
RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION FOR THE LISTENING EXCHANGES

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, and strong views on either side expressed in public channels such as social media, it was decided that **LE recruitment would best be carried out through personal contacts and 'snowballing'** (asking participants to help identify other potential participants through their networks) rather than publicly advertising for participants. Many participants were recruited through direct personal contacts, as well as through the medium of '**Trusted Contacts**'. 'Trusted Contacts' are individuals in the community that were known by, or introduced to, members of the research team. Trusted Contacts were approached and in turn, suggested community members who might be interested in taking part in an LE. Following their agreement, these individuals were then approached by the research team, either on the phone or in person.

In addition, **recruitment took place in public places** such as shops and cafés, approaching people on Cowley Road and Magdalen Road, in Blackbird Leys (community choir and Oxford Hub), in neighbourhoods where LTNs had been implemented and on associated boundary roads. Others were recruited through snowballing. Of the 22 participants, 16 were from direct contacts, 4 came from Trusted Contacts, and 2 came from snowballing from previous participants.

Towards the end of the project, snowballing through word of mouth picked up, and members of the public who had heard of the project expressed interest in taking part. However, resources and the timeframe did not allow for their inclusion in the pilot. If a further iteration of the project were to take place in Oxford, thirteen additional participants have expressed interest in being involved, from a diversity of backgrounds.

There were **two key criteria** for selection: firstly, that the **individual held clear views predominantly in support of or opposed to LTNs**; and secondly, that they were **willing to listen to another perspective.**

Roughly ten people who were approached to take part declined to do so. Reasons volunteered for declining included that they didn't see the point of it in a context where LTN policy was not going to change, they didn't feel strongly enough one way or another about LTNs, they didn't want to listen to the perspective of others or they didn't perceive that the process would be useful.

From the list of potential participants, the facilitator paired residents together, one 'supportive' of LTNs, and one 'opposed'. Time was spent before the LE, describing the process to participants and ensuring they understood clearly that it was about listening. Given that trust was such a crucial part of the process, it was **important to ensure participants were fully onboard with the ethos** and to start building trust with the facilitator before they agreed to take part, or met the other participant.

Participants were provided with payment as a thank you for taking part in the LE, a total of £45 (£30 for the LE and initial evaluation interview, and a further £15 for the final evaluation interview). There was a budget to reimburse the costs of transport, any caring responsibilities and the option of a translation service if needed. The aim was to lower the barriers to participation and ensure that no one was excluded for financial reasons.
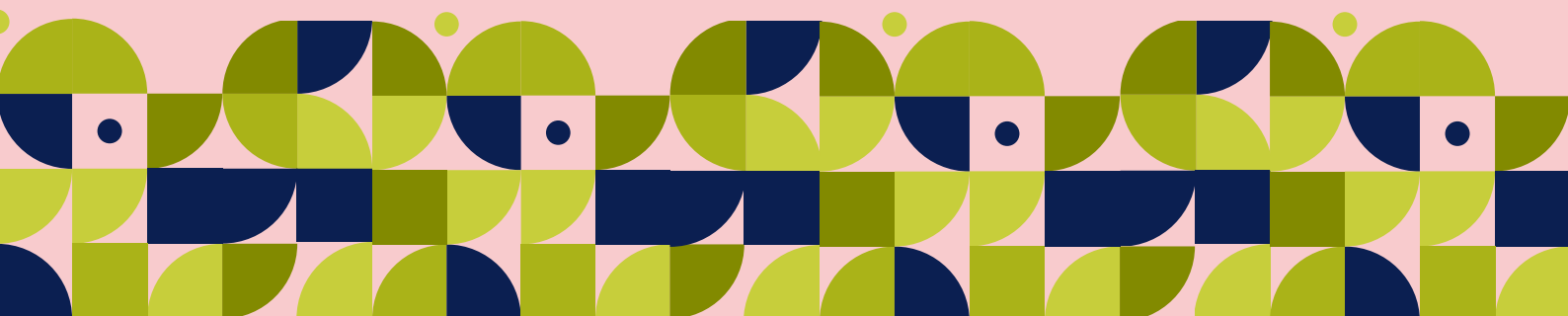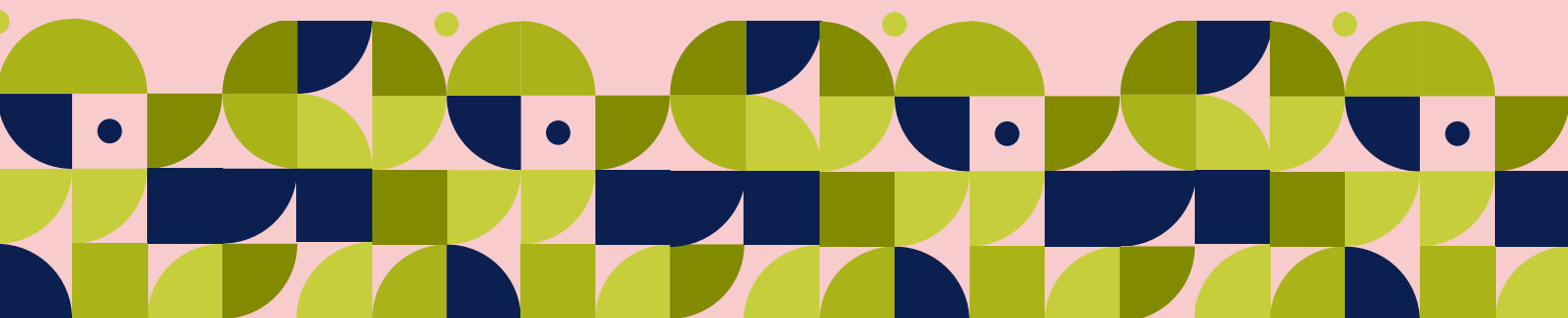
3. LISTENING EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS

The research team completed a total of 10 Listening Exchanges, **nine involving a pair of participants (18 people in all), and one involving four participants**. There was a balance across participating genders (10 women and 12 men), and participants were mostly over 45 years old (all but three). In relation to ethnicity, over 18% of participants self-defined as not being 'White' or 'White other'. There were a broad range of professions, from community and charity workers, to tradespeople working out of vans, delivery drivers, a driving instructor, a retired midwife, self-employed people working from home, unemployed people, and a café manager.

Most **participants came from the postcode areas within OX4**, including East Oxford, Littlemore, Marston, Rose Hill, St Clements, Temple Cowley and Florence Park. One person lived on a boat. There was a mix of participants living within LTNs, on the boundary roads of LTNs, and living outside the LTN areas. It is worth noting that not all those living within LTNs were supportive of them.

Various **participants had very strong views about LTNs**. As examples, one participant opposed to LTNs had removed an LTN bollard from a street, another who was supportive of LTNs had been 'driven at' by a large truck while defending a traffic barrier, another described trouble sleeping because of their anger about LTNs, and another felt so frustrated by the impact of LTNs on their life that they had considered selling their house. Despite these strong views, their willingness to listen to others, careful preparation before the LE, and the role of the facilitator, ensured that exchanges were measured and respectful.
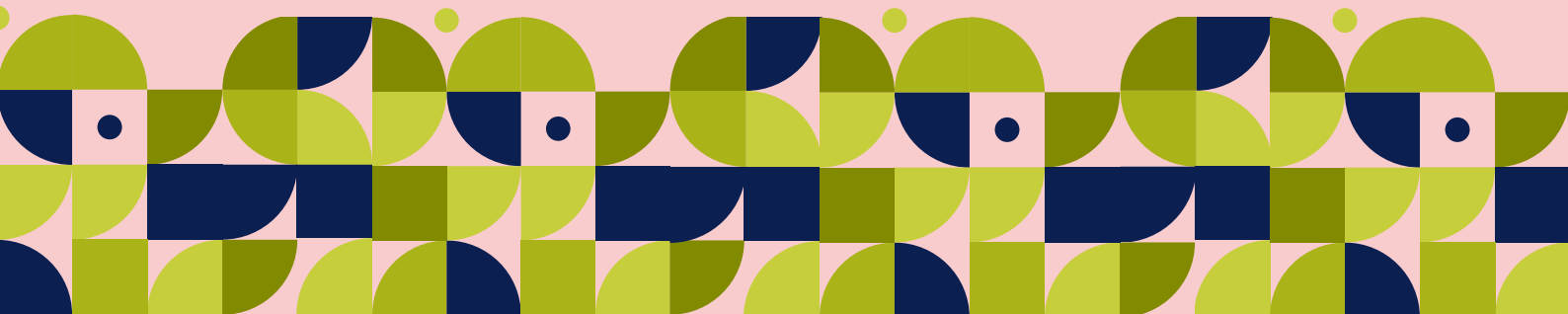
4. LISTENING EXCHANGE EVALUATION METHOD

To evaluate the impact of the Listening Exchange, **participants took part in two interviews, one immediately after the LE, and one 7-10 days later**. Immediately after the LE, each participant was interviewed individually by a researcher for up to 30 minutes, to speak about their experience of the LE, and to provide their initial reactions to the method. The interview covered topics such as: how they felt about listening and being listened to; whether there were any significant moments for them during the LE; whether and how they thought the process was useful or effective; and whether there was anything they would change about the process.

The aim of the second interview (up to 30 minutes) was to provide further reflections on the method, with some distance, and to explore whether the LE had impacted on how they would engage with people holding different views on LTNs. The questions for both evaluation interviews are provided in Appendices 2 and 3.

During the LE, either **one or two researchers were present**, and took notes on the nature of the interactions, how participants related to each other, their body language, emotions and the key points made by each participant. The researchers' guidance for taking notes is provided in Appendix 4. The evaluation interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed by the research team using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5. EXPERIENCES OF THE LISTENING EXCHANGES

In this section, we report on participants' experiences of taking part in an LE, and the impacts it had on them, highlighting the key themes that emerged from the evaluation interviews. These themes were common to both those who were supportive of LTNs (Sup) and those who were opposed (Opp).
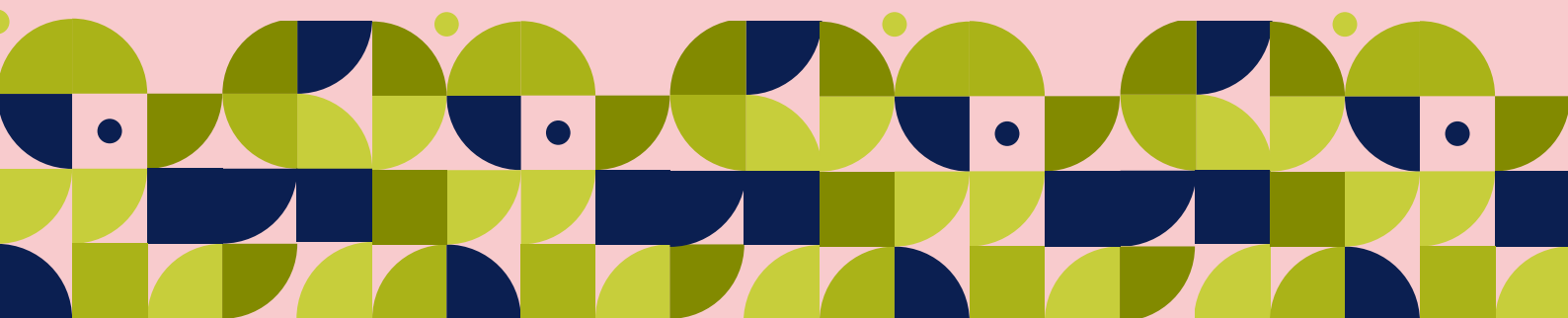
BUILDING UNDERSTANDING AND CONNECTION

A number of participants said that the LE helped them **develop a connection with their listening partner and understand their perspective more**, through the process of being heard themselves, and hearing others.

One participant talked about how **"cathartic" it was to be heard**, and how her frustration eased when her LE partner heard about her lived experience (Opp9). A number of participants opposed to LTNs felt **they had not been heard by local politicians** in relation to LTNs. One said that, even though their listening partner had no ability to impact what would happen with LTNs, **having someone listen to them in their frustration with LTNs was helpful** (Opp4).

As well as being heard, the LE provided the opportunity for participants to listen to others. One person, for example, commented on how significant it had been for them to hear the heavy toll that LTNs had taken on their listening partner's mental health, adding two hours per day to their commute. They had not realised that some were suffering such negative impacts (Sup4).

There was an impactful moment when one participant (Sup5) said that the LTNs had led to them **halving the amount of asthma medication they needed, after which their listening partner (Opp5) said that it had led to them doubling the amount they needed**. One lives within an LTN and the other on a boundary road. The same LE challenged a participant's understanding of the meaning of car ownership. For her (Opp5), owning a car meant that she could expand her employment and career options, while for the other participant in the LE (Sup5), car ownership connoted social status and having "arrived". Participating in the LE helped to **broaden each person's understanding of the economic, social and cultural context of each other's lives, and how that influenced their listening partner's views on LTNs.**

The research team had some **concern that those against LTNs might find it difficult to hear how others had benefitted from them when they themselves felt they had suffered so much**, and particularly because this process was not designed to bring about changes to the schemes. But this was often **not the case**. One said, "*I am always really pleased to hear when people have positive things to say about LTNs because there is such a groundswell of negativity*" (Opp6). Another thought, above all, that even if they felt disadvantaged by LTNs, it was important to talk. "*It* [the LE] *was democracy, it was good. It was a fair process*" (Opp8). They also expressed the view that, despite a perception of "*collusion and bad tricks in politics*", it was crucial that people talked to each other.

DISCOVERY OF COMMON GROUND

Participants expressed surprise at how much common ground emerged between them. Common areas of agreement were a consensus that some people gained from LTNs and some lost out, that social media exchanges about LTNs were largely toxic, that buses were central to a successful transport system in Oxford, and that LTN implementation had been difficult. Interestingly, **another area of commonality related to people not feeling heard or feeling silenced**. A common refrain of participants against LTNs was that their views were not taken into consideration. One participant, for example, said, "*When I see a bollard, I feel that I don't matter*" (Opp3). At the same time, many of those who opposed LTNs (such as Opp8 and Opp1) hadn't realised that those who supported them also felt unheard or silenced. Some who supported LTNs refrained from expressing their views on social media or in conversations. "*I stay silent because I don't like conflict. I am worried about being shouted at.... my friend was punched.... I don't know if I can talk to anyone any more*". (Sup8)

Common ground was also revealed at the level of values. **Freedom and fairness emerged as widely held values**. For some, freedom to drive on all roads by the most convenient route was important, while others cherished freedom to cycle more safely and to be free from pollution. For some, increased pollution and congestion on boundary roads attributed to LTNs was unfair to those who lived on them or had to use them to commute by car or van. Others thought it unfair that those in residential areas had previously suffered increased pollution so that drivers could take shorter routes, and emphasized the importance of reducing CO_2 emissions now for fairness for future generations.
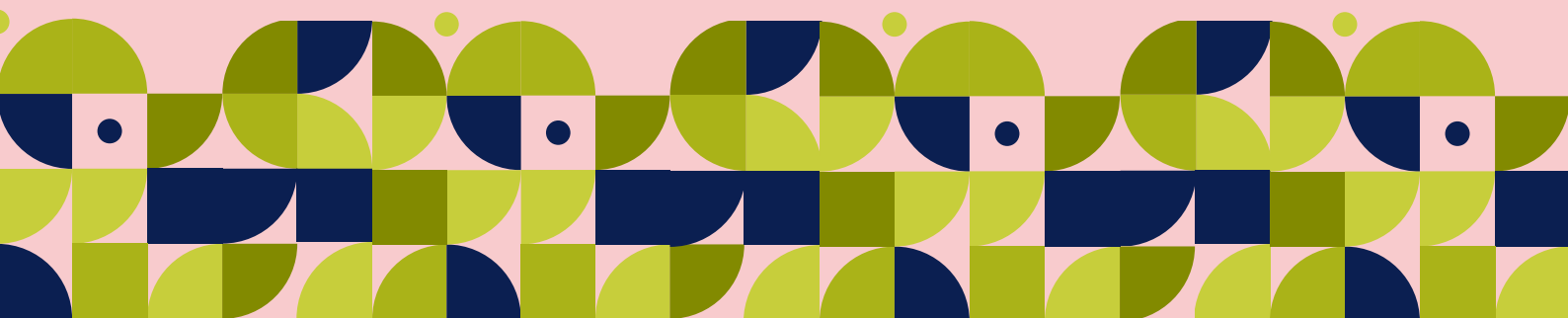
Recognition that, even though their positions were different, participants had similar values underneath their perspectives helped build bridges and moved people away from thinking the other 'side' was 'selfish' or 'stupid'.

> *"It's about the depth of the conversation. If you get down to the level of what's important, what we hold important, then that's kind of the building blocks for a bit of understanding"* (Sup9).

The discovery of this common ground was enabled because **participants spoke from their personal, lived experience**. There were numerous examples of how sharing personal stories deepened participants' understanding of different experiences, or of how participants heard perspectives that were not new to them, but which landed with them differently because they were set in the context of a real person's life.

> *"I learned some things about the opposing view. Nothing I didn't know at all, but nuances of different lives, [...] about her limited ability to reach her elderly friends. [...] Hearing specific things about somebody's personal experiences is more powerful than knowing the general arguments"* (Sup8).

Another person who was opposed to LTNs was aware that LTNs had brought benefits to some residents, such as quieter streets, more freedom for children and safer cycling. But hearing first-hand how these benefits had impacted the children of her listening partner made them more relatable and convincing (Opp2).

SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURE OF THE LE

Participants, both supportive and opposed to LTNs, agreed that the **structure of the LE meant that the interactions were focused and felt safe and respectful**. One participant (Opp3) particularly liked the space for honesty, with no need to self-censor. This was shared by others:

> *"It was very good, very nice to have this space to talk in a kind of trusted environment, where you can relax a bit and know that your views are valuable, as valuable as anybody else's... it's very nice to get the chance just to freely talk... in what could be a tricky situation with such heightened views, but it was nice to feel held"* (Sup5).
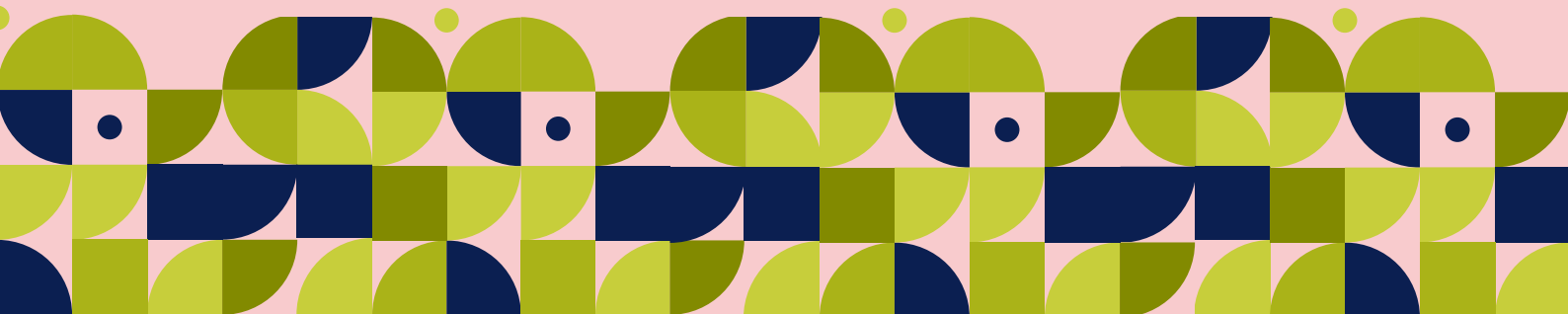
One participant (Sup5) commented that the **controlled environment was helpful for the exchange of views** and meant that the pair didn't interrupt each other. Another participant said it was, "*very good to speak in a calm, structured way to someone, and to hear their perspective and have space to share your own*" (Sup1).

Due to a fear of conflict in relation to exchanges about LTNs, many participants **approached the LE with apprehension**. Anxiety was explicitly stated by at least eight participants (four 'supportive' and four 'opposed'). However, the nervousness was quickly dispelled once the LE began. The structured format allowed for respectful listening.

Many participants remarked that the **tone and respectfulness of the LE interactions lay in sharp contrast to exchanges on social media** related to LTNs. The LE was described as an antidote against the "*viciousness*" on social media (Opp1), while another participant remarked that the LE had made her "*realise that there are humans behind the horrid comments*" [referring to hostile posts on social media] (Sup1).

Many participants said they had **avoided conversations about LTNs**, one saying, "*As soon as talk of LTNs comes up I run for the hills*" (Sup2). Some had experienced dismissive, conflictual or aggressive interactions related to LTNs. One participant said they feared that anyone against LTNs would be aggressive and that they'd be attacked for their opinion. The LE had helped lessen that fear, "*I am less worried now about having the conversation in my community*" (Sup7).

Participants were not able to identify anywhere else in Oxford where safe, respectful interactions between people who held different views about LTNs could take place. One participant felt that LEs had the potential to be valuable as a "*tool for creating space and focus for seeing other people, which is a big part of what community is about*" (Sup3). This underlines the value of the LE as a **physical space** where people can listen and be listened to.
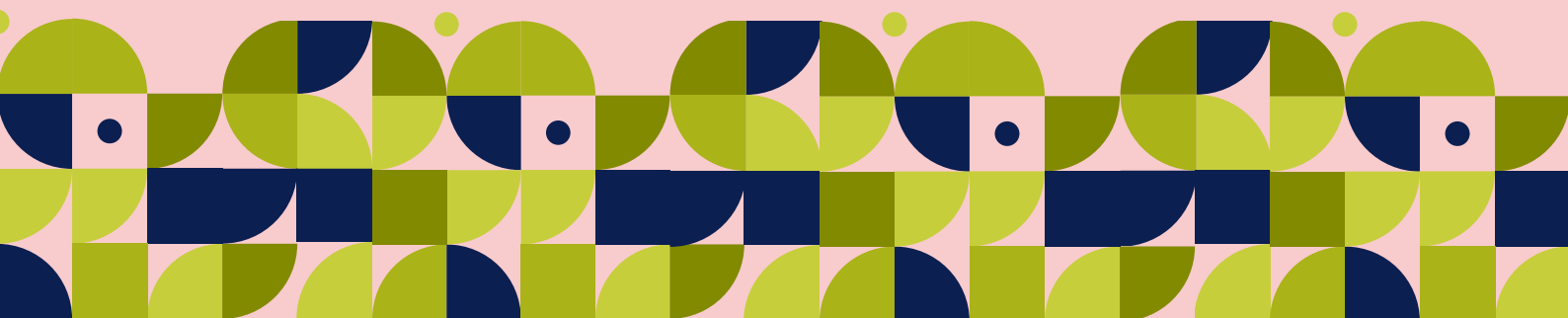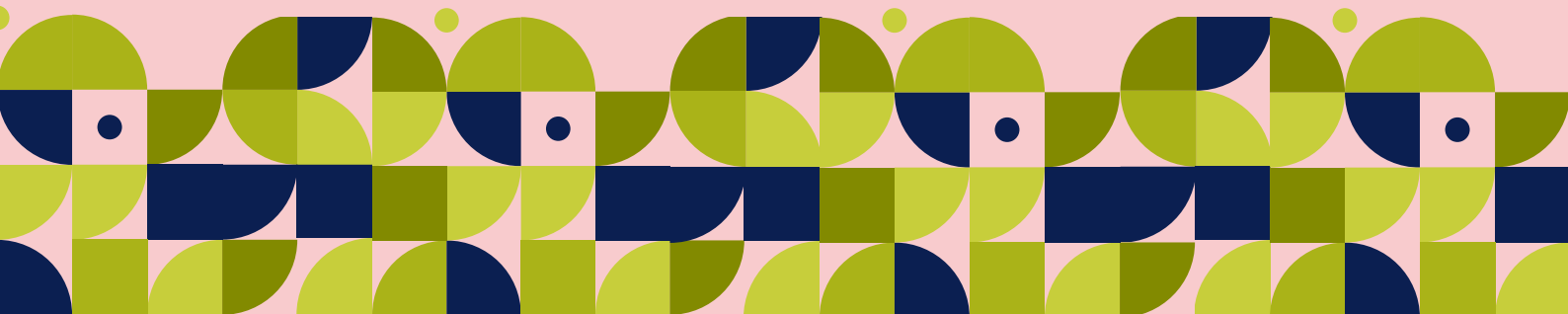
CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES AND ASSUMPTIONS

The LEs had an impact on participants' assumptions and the stereotypes that they might have associated with particular sides of the LTN debate. "*There are always more sides to the story than you expect*" (Opp3).

One participant's previous interactions with those supportive of LTNs had led him to believe they were all extreme and selfish, and wanted to impose their views on others (Opp4). He arrived at the LE with this view, but afterwards re-evaluated it, feeling "*more mellow*" towards his LE partner, who had shown an interest in, and respect for, his perspective.

Another participant's preconceptions were challenged, commenting that she realised "*not everybody who is pro-LTNs are tree hugging, self-interested people*" (Opp9). Another reported that previously, he would have been quite intimidated by those opposed to LTNs, but now he would feel more comfortable having that sort of conversation with people who held opposing views (Sup3). One participant commented that the LE had made her realise that there are **many different perspectives in between the extremes, and that she hadn't heard these nuanced views previously** (Sup4).

There were various examples of how the **reality of people's lives contrasted with what might be considered stereotypical positions**. In one LE, both participants were members of the Green Party who cycled regularly and lived inside an LTN (Opp7 and Sup7). In another LE, the person opposing LTNs had been brought up with 6 bikes in the house and their father used to cycle from Oxford to Wales to see his parents (Opp8). In another, both parties had sick parents who were in the John Radcliffe hospital and had to get there often by car (Opp7 and Sup7).

The LE sometimes **helped draw out the journey participants had been on to reach the views they held**. One LTN supporter said they used to be a 'petrol head' who had driven by car to shops less than half a mile from their home, for over 20 years. They said that since LTNs were introduced they had bought an electric attachment for their bike, now cycled to the shops and had sold one of the family cars (Sup5). Their listening partner, who felt distraught about the impact of LTNs, said that, rather than allowing cars to move more freely again, maybe the answer was to ban all but essential cars from Oxford so everyone could get around more easily by bus (Opp5).

REFLECTING ON THE PROCESS OF LISTENING

Many participants commented on how **listening is effortful, and did not come easily**. For example, Opp1 remarked how hard it was to listen to someone without their own internal dialogue accompanying what they heard, while Opp5 noticed that there was a tendency to grab onto the parts of what someone was saying that resonated with her, and to ignore the other parts. She found that the **LE helped her to listen to everything that was being said**.

Another participant found that the LE process was a **good discipline**, to take care to hear someone closely, rather than just listening in order to reply (Sup9). However, in this particular LE, he wasn't sure how much the other person genuinely wanted to see through his eyes. Out of all the LEs, this was the only expression of doubt over whether the other party had genuinely tried to understand their point of view.

Two participants (Sup5 and Opp9) commented that they **found it challenging to repeat back someone else's perspective, when it differed strongly from their own**. But they felt that the structure and setting of the LE made that achievable, as it was *"a convivial place [in which] to talk about [a] very tricky and deep-rooted and emotional… subject"* (Sup5).

In some cases the LE led to reflections on the impact of listening on mutual understanding and capacity to put themselves in the other's position.

> *"At one point, it's almost as if we swapped roles, where she was saying some of the stuff that I might have been saying, and I was saying some of the stuff that she might have been saying. So it did lead to a kind of deeper understanding"* (Sup5).

APPROACHING FUTURE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT LTNS WITH MORE OPENNESS

Participating in the LE **impacted how some people intended to approach future conversations about LTNs**, with some feeling more confident than others about the likely extent of this impact. A number of those opposed to LTNs said they would like to engage with and understand their community better. One participant (Opp1) said that when discussing LTNs with others who are similarly opposed to them, she is now **less likely to "add fuel" to the fire** or collude with negativity, and more likely to direct the conversation to views of alternative solutions to traffic problems.
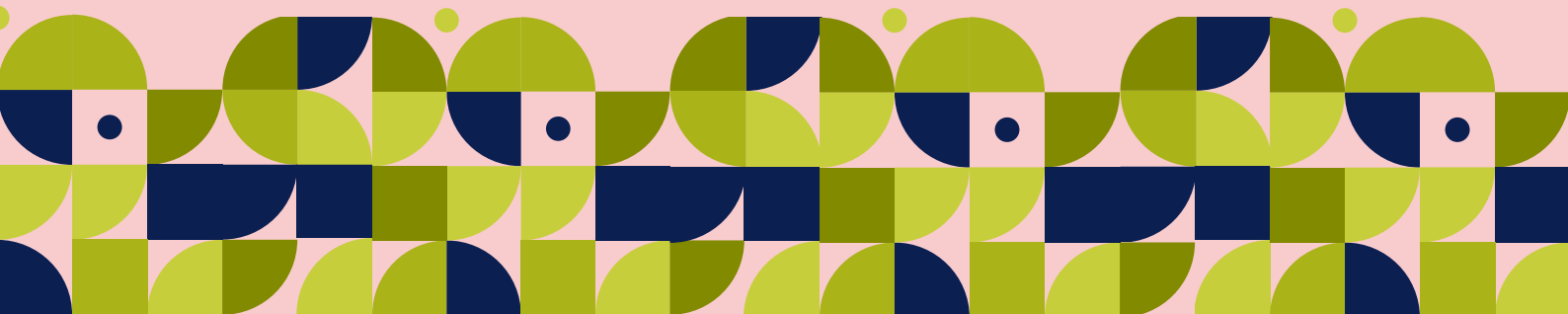
In a mirroring of this position, a participant supportive of LTNs (Sup2) said that in future discussions with those supportive of LTNs, **he is more likely to point out the negative, as well as positive, effects of LTNs**, now that he has been made more aware of them through the LE. Reactions from participants after the LE indicated an increased openness to those with different views. In future conversations, Sup2 commented that **he wouldn't be so forthright in expressing his views**. He will be **more sympathetic towards the other person**, trying to understand their views, but would also put forward an alternative perspective. In another case, Sup1 said that in future conversations, she would try to give more space for people to share, and try not to interrupt. Sup8 said that as a result of the LE experience, he would be **more open to hearing why people had a different view**, if he was talking to someone in the street about LTNs.

Similarly, a participant opposed to LTNs remarked:

> *"I think I'm more resolved to try and be positive. And not … immediately categorize somebody … because they're that type of person … from that point of view, or from that initial cultural framework"* (Opp7).

However, some participants with pressured or precarious lives said that conversations about LTNs were a luxury that they rarely had capacity for (Opp3 and Opp4). Participant Opp3 said that he would now be more curious to understand the views of people he disagrees with, and so may be more likely to seek out those conversations. But he would **still be wary of engaging with people who don't listen**, but just want to "score points" and drain his energy.

Overall, participants felt that the experience of the LE had **left them more open** to conversations about LTNs, having been exposed to different views in a measured environment:

> *"I think I'm probably more excited to talk to them [people with a different view] and less wary of talking to them... now that I have this reference point of what I consider a good conversation about that kind of stuff in the way it can go, even if it's not just like this, like logical debate or whatever... this is a good model for future interactions"* (Sup3).
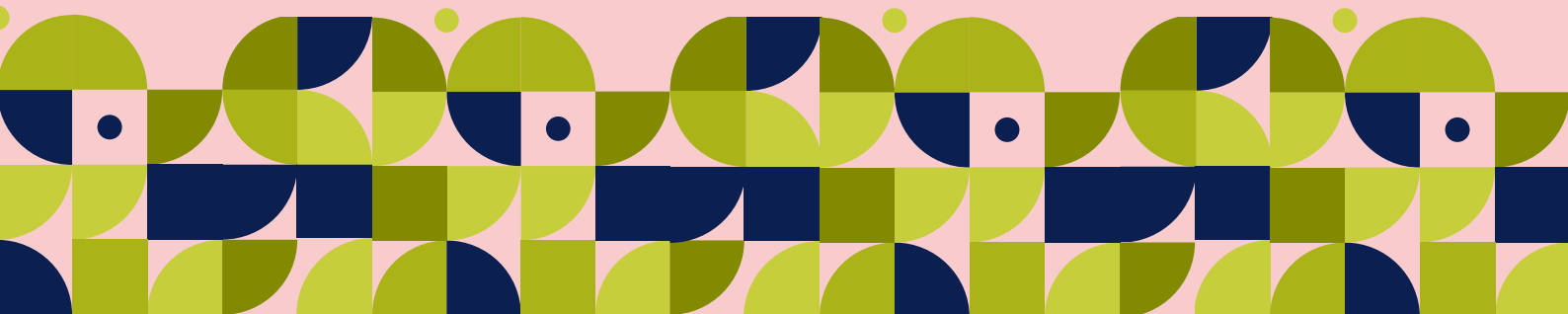
6. REFLECTIONS AND KEY LEARNINGS

In summary, the results demonstrate that LEs have changed the way that individuals think, feel and relate to each other. The findings show that LEs have led to an increase in openness for participants, an enhanced capacity to listen, a greater understanding of the benefits and disadvantages of LTNs, and have potentially led to a more empathetic engagement with others on the issue of LTNs.

In the light of these findings, we now turn to reflections on the method, to critically consider some of the key learnings, and the potential for scaling up to enhance the impact of the method.

Key learning 1: Listening Exchanges were valued by participants. Storytelling and respectful listening played a role in helping people understand each other, challenge assumptions and stereotypes and establish common values.

Evidence from the evaluation interviews demonstrates that participants appreciated being heard through storytelling and through sharing their lived experiences. This communicated the real-world impacts of LTNs and helped to build empathy during the exchange. It is a process which helps citizens understand the variety of views in their community and counters the distortions of social media and other news outlets.

Key Learning 2: There is a need for 'Third Places' where people can feel heard, and can listen to others with different perspectives, in a safe environment. Listening Exchanges often resulted in an intention to approach future conversations about LTNs with more openness.

One of the striking outcomes of the LEs was the positive reaction that participants had to meeting with someone with a different view, face to face. Several participants commented on the lack of such moderated spaces. Our increasingly digitalised world has wide, and sometimes negative, implications, for the way citizens relate to each other (Graham and Aurigi, 1997; Latham and Layton, 2019). This speaks to a lack of so-called 'Third Places' (public spaces outside the home and workplace where people can interact with others and connect with their community), and a need for them (Finlay et al, 2019; Oldenburg, 1997; Oldenburg, 1989; Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982).
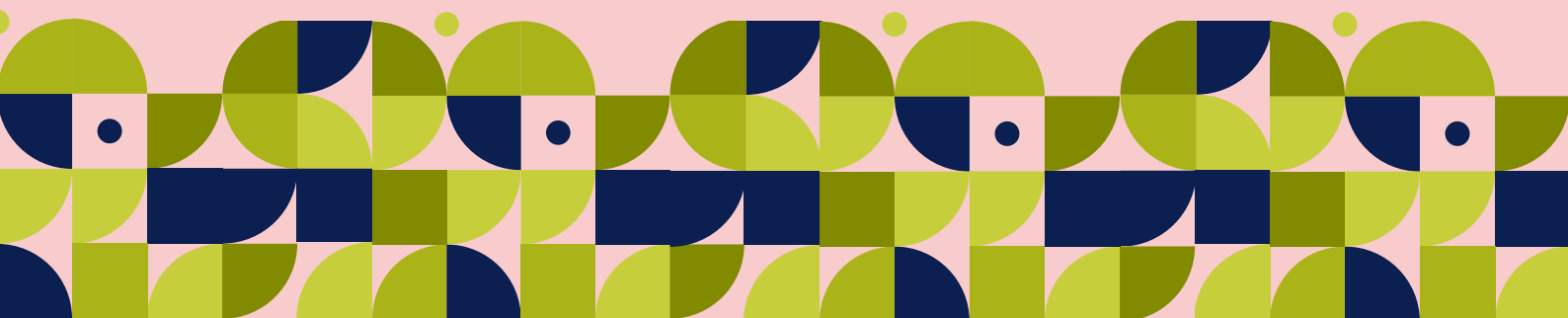
Key Learning 3: The core elements of the Listening Exchange process of storytelling, respectful listening and empathy-building, could contribute to consultation, engagement and involvement processes which influence policy. The Listening Exchange method could potentially be adapted to facilitate these.

This pilot project operated in a context in which policy could not be influenced. The core elements of the LE process, which generated trust, understanding and connection, could, however, be transferred for use in a policy-influencing environment. The LE most naturally aligns with being an '**engagement tool**', (a process to establish an effective relationship so that more specific interactions can take place) as described by Oxfordshire County Council in its 'Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2022-25' (2022, p4). It could be adapted for use as a **consultation tool** (a dynamic dialogue with the aim of influencing decisions), or an **involvement tool** (the process of facilitating effective interaction between planners, decision makers and stakeholders to exchange views on a continuous basis). Recruitment to, and facilitation of, such processes might be managed differently.

Indeed, interest in these sorts of application was expressed by participants, particularly those opposed to LTNs, in this pilot project. As stated above, a number of participants felt they had not been heard by the local authority during implementation of LTNs and indicated that 'doing an LE with someone in power' could address the sense of feeling unheard and powerless they described.

Key Learning 4: Further research is needed to explore how impacts at an individual level ripple through to changes in social interactions on the topic of LTNs (both online and in-person), and therefore to wider community and societal impacts.

This pilot was short, with LEs taking place over a period of two months. Further research could explore whether such interactions influence the way citizens engage in exchanges about LTNs over time, both online and in person (in terms of their attitude or capacity to listen, for example).
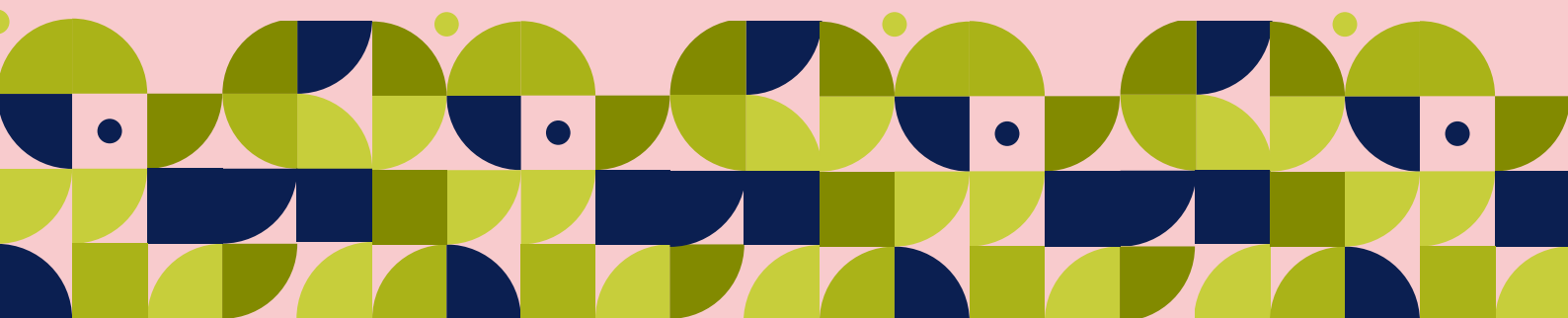
Key Learning 5: It is important to have a neutral facilitator, that is, someone not involved in making LTN policy, to provide non-partisan guidance for the Listening Exchange. Facilitators from diverse backgrounds would help to ensure that Listening Exchanges engaged with a wide range of participants, and would increase trust in its neutrality.

If LEs are to be used not as a consultation tool to influence policy, but as a bridge-building process, as in this pilot project, it is particularly important that participants trust the neutrality of the process. This enables participants to share their honest and personal experiences. If a series of such LEs were initiated by a local authority, it would be important to appoint a neutral facilitator to run them. Such trust could be strengthened by having facilitators from a wide variety of backgrounds, which might also support recruitment of a diverse range of participants.
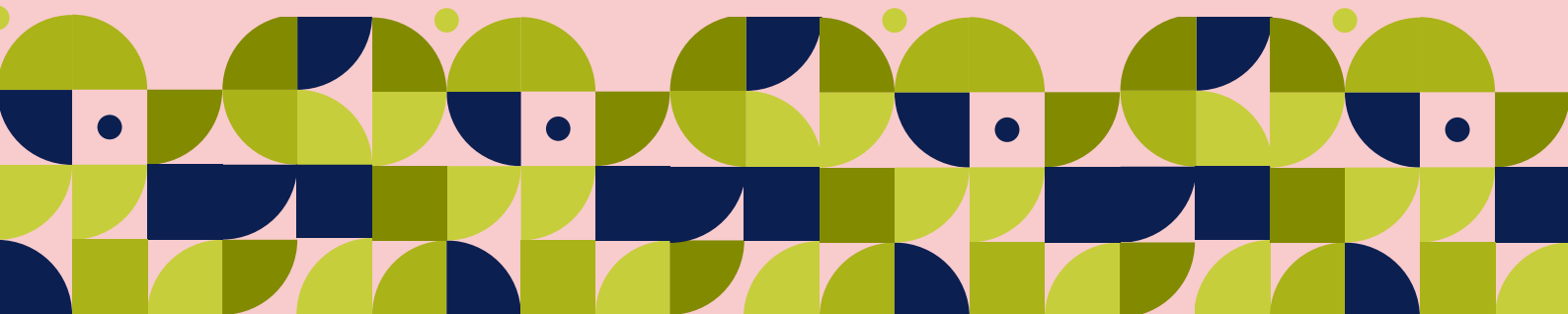
7. SCALING UP THE LISTENING EXCHANGES

From this pilot project, we have demonstrated a number of benefits for the individuals taking part. However, the known benefits are currently limited to the individuals involved, without evidence of the impact on the wider community.

The LE method as used here was relatively resource intensive. The time needed to set up and implement an LE is estimated to have been 6 hours for an LE with two people (approximately 1.5 hours onboarding per participant, 1 hour organising diaries and venues, and 2 hours to run the LE). Resources needed included time and money as well as social capital, the relevant networks for recruitment. The facilitator involved in this pilot was well connected locally which contributed to the success of the recruitment.

The time taken in recruitment reflects the particular sensitivities for this type of process in Oxford, given the tensions that exist within communities around the LTN policy and the fact that the pilot was being carried out in a context where policy could not be influenced.

In other settings without the same sensitivities, the total time needed for each LE could be significantly reduced. If recruitment could be carried out by advertising, for example, or using existing, established networks, the total time needed might be 2 hours per LE (0.5 hours to recruit and organise, and 1.5 hours for the LE).

We have drawn up a list of possible options to scale up the method, which includes input from participants, who were asked for their suggestions.

1. **Organising larger "Group Listening Exchanges":** One option would be to involve 4 or 6 participants, with equal numbers on either side. The maximum number of participants would be 6, in order to retain the intimacy of the LE setting. This group LE format was trialed during the pilot phase in one case, but would need to be further tested, evaluated and refined.

2. **Applying the "Goldfish Bowl" method:** A "Goldfish Bowl" setting is one in which LE participants and the facilitator are seated in the middle of a circle with observers on the outside, witnessing the exchange. Again, this would need to be tried and evaluated in particular to assess whether the engagement of those participating was affected by the presence of an 'audience'. Such a process could potentially be adapted to a policy-influencing context (ie a consultation, engagement or involvement tool) by incorporating policy-makers into it, either as active participants or observers.
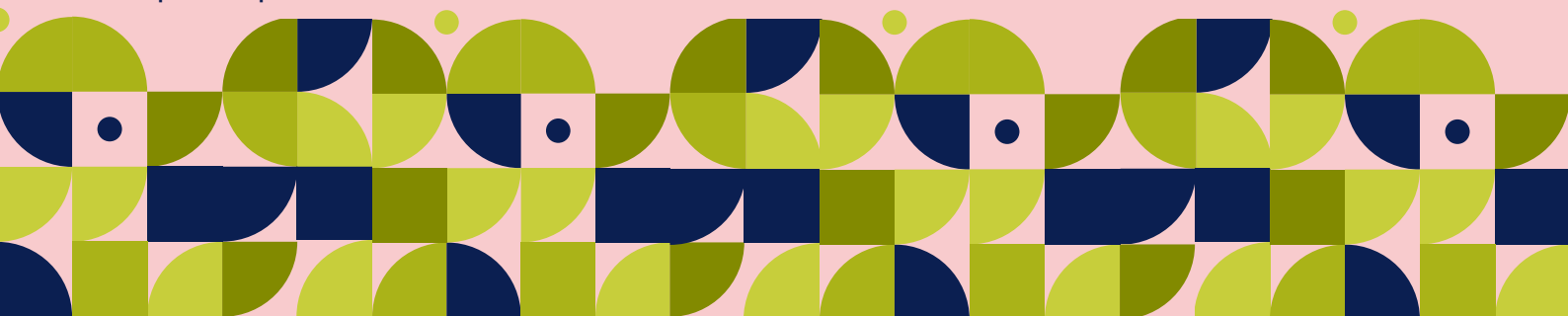
3. **Recording the Listening Exchanges to be made available online:** LEs could be recorded and made available online. Notwithstanding the issues around consent, anonymity, and the potential impact that recording an LE may have on participants' responses, the availability of a recorded LE online, unedited, as well as curated clips of the most significant moments, could reach a broader audience.

4. **Running Listening Exchanges with "community leaders":** For this pilot project, our aim was to try the method out with 'regular' citizens. However, we suggest that an LE, either with two community leaders, or one leader and one member of the community, could have wider and powerful impacts locally. Again, this would need to be tested and evaluated to ascertain its potential.

5. **Making a short film or other media representation about the Listening Exchange process:** A further possibility to widen the reach of the LEs would be to make a short film to tell the story of people from different sides of the LTN debate, coming together and listening to each other. This could be released through various channels (the full film and trailer, anywhere between 5 and 30 minutes in length), shown at community venues, and could be the starting point for discussions about bridging divides. Other media outlets could also be used (radio or print, for example).
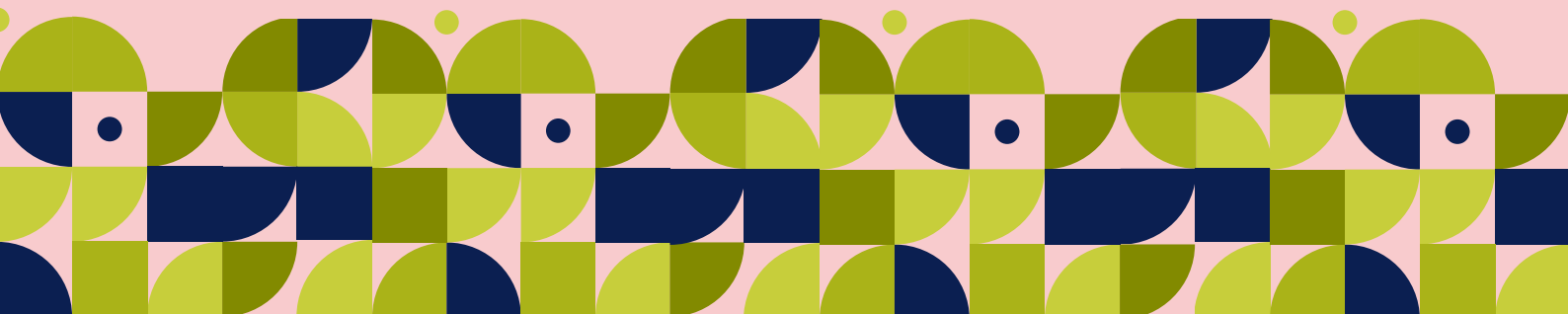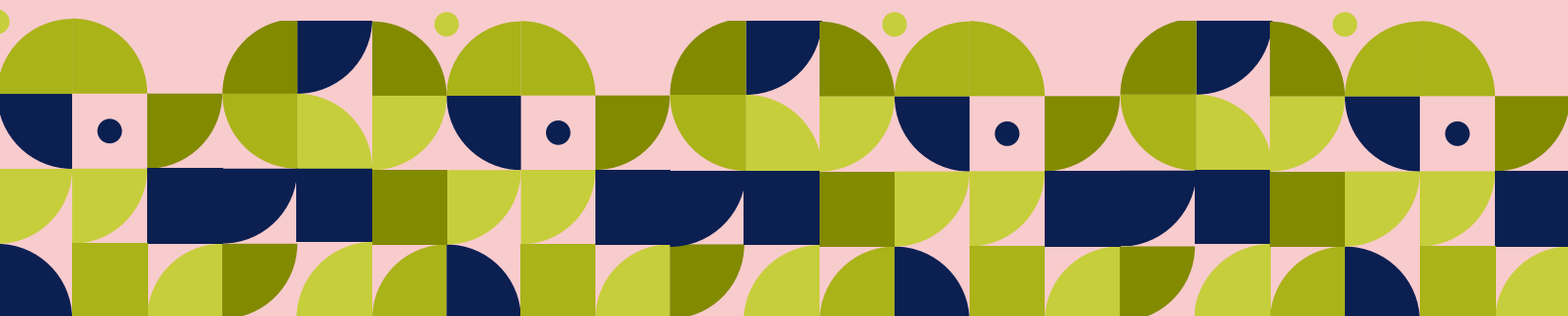
8. CONCLUSION

The Listening Exchange project has revealed that there is considerable scope for common ground and common values between people who consider themselves to be on opposite sides of the LTN debate. Community exchanges, ideally face-to-face and involving storytelling and exchanges of lived experience, are a valuable process for individuals to better understand each other. The principles of listening and exchanging experience could potentially be harnessed in processes of community consultation, for policy-makers to understand different perspectives in areas that divide the public.

As local authorities face increasingly challenging policy issues in the coming years, be they related to climate change and net zero, or the housing crisis and pressure on urban development, engagement methods that can address polarisation will become ever more valuable to prevent backlash or policy reversal. This project has demonstrated that the Listening Exchange method has potential to have positive impacts on individuals in the context of the debate around LTNs. Understanding the impact of the method on medium term behaviour, adaptation of the approach for use in the context of public consultations, and exploring ways to scale up their impact, warrant further investigation.
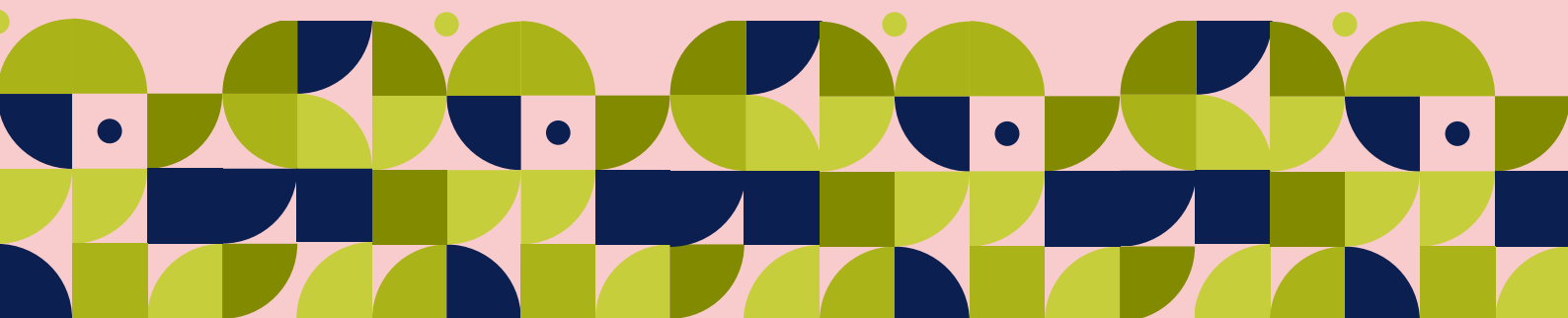
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONS USED DURING THE LISTENING EXCHANGE

The initial question:

1. When you see a bollard, what do you feel?

Depending on what emerges in answer to that question, the mediator asks subsequent questions which might include:

2. Have there been key moments, conversations or events which have influenced your perspective on LTNs? If so, what have they been and why did they impact you?

3. What has been your experience of social media in relation to LTNs and how do you feel about that?

4. What has been your experience of community cohesion in relation to LTNs and how do you feel about that?

5. Have LTNs influenced the way you feel about those around you, your neighbours and wider community? If so, how?

6. What is your take on freedom - do LTNs increase freedom or reduce freedom?

7. What is your take on fairness - do LTNs increase fairness or reduce fairness?

8. Do you think changes are needed to Oxford's transport system or not?

9. If you were in a position of authority, where would you go from here and why?
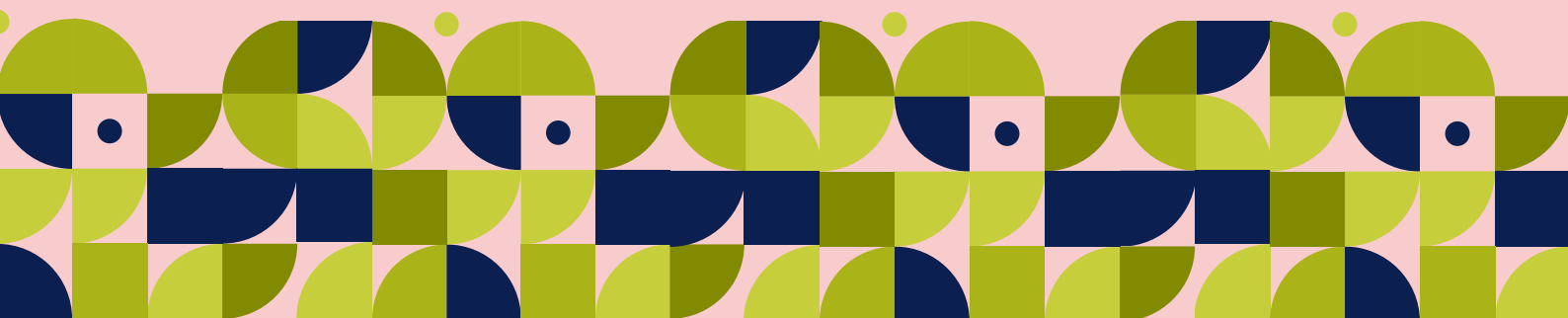
APPENDIX 2: QUESTIONS FOR THE INITIAL EVALUATION INTERVIEW

Immediately after the Listening Exchange:

1. Was it helpful for you? If so, in what ways?

2. Were there any significant moments for you?

3. How did you find the process of responding to the question, and hearing your views reflected back?

4. How did you find the process of listening to the other person and reflecting back?

5. Did your feelings towards the other person change, as a result of the process of listening and reflecting back?

6. Do you think it will change the way you interact with people with different views in the future? If so, who? And how? (e.g. talking about LTNs directly, or just saying hello?)

7. Can you comment on whether the LE has influenced how you feel about 'key players' in LTN public discussions? (eg council members on either side of the debate, activist leaders on either side of the debate, local press / media).

8. Do you have any other feedback about the process?

9. Is there anything about the process that you'd change?

10. Do you think a process like this could be useful in the wider community? If so, how? (could it decrease division or help people feel better about their community?)

11. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

12. Is there anyone you know who might want to take part in a Listening Exchange?

Thank you for your time.
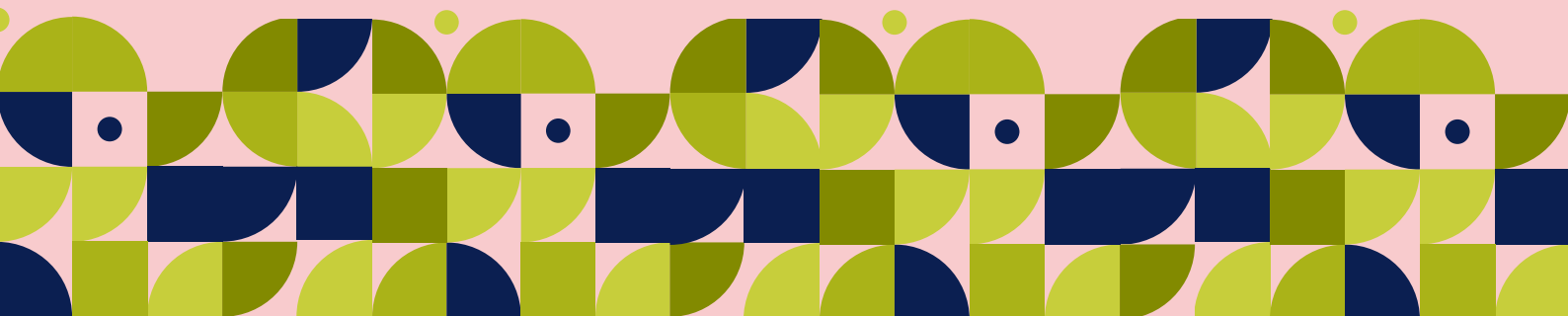
APPENDIX 3: QUESTIONS FOR THE FINAL EVALUATION INTERVIEW

You've had a bit of time since the LE took place. We're interested in your reflections since it happened.

1. Can you describe any interactions you've had with other people (about LTNs) since the LE?

2. Can you reflect on how those interactions may have been influenced by the LE?

    [If no interactions, how might the LE impact your interactions about LTNs?]

3. When you think of someone with different views to you on LTNs (after the LE), how do you feel?

4. Do you think this feeling is the same, or different, to before the LE? How?

5. Can you describe how you feel about your community now, and whether that has been influenced by the LE?

6. Can you comment on whether the LE has influenced how you feel about 'key players' in LTN public discussions (eg council members on either side of the debate, activist leaders on either side of the debate, local press / media).

7. What did you find helpful about the LE?

8. Have you got any other comments about the LE?

9. Do you think a process like this could be valuable to the wider community? If so, how?

Thank you for your time.
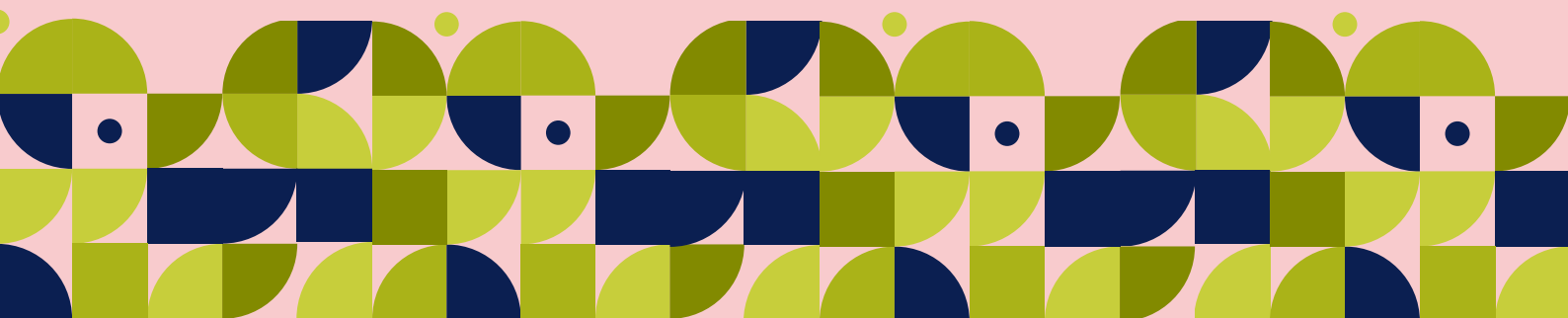
## APPENDIX 4: GUIDANCE FOR RESEARCHER NOTE-TAKERS DURING THE LISTENING EXCHANGE

Content of the LE

1. Take notes on the key points that were made by each participant

2. Note in particular any comments on 'why' they think the way they do

3. Note if the 'listener' was effective in reflecting back (did they include all the points that were raised).

Observations

Take notes during the LE on the following:

1. Do the participants appear to be listening to each other?

2. What is the nature of the interactions between the participants?

3. What is the emotion in the room?

4. Is there any evidence of 'softening'?

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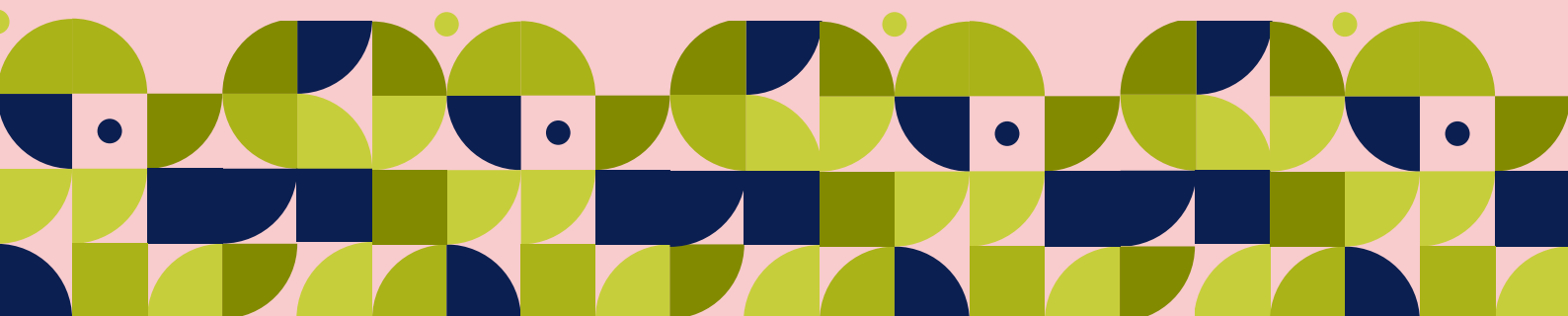
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