

Community engagement and community leadership: a summary

This is one of four papers presenting learning and practical guidance from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Neighbourhood Programme (2002–6). Each paper is based on a theme that was important to several communities. The programme worked with 20 neighbourhoods in England, Scotland and Wales, bringing them together into a learning network and providing extra resources. These included a small funding pot, support from experienced independent facilitators, networking opportunities and access to information.

Community groups are keen to recruit and retain new members. Community leadership can be an area of dispute between councillors who claim legitimacy as elected representatives, and residents who claim legitimacy as active neighbourhood participants. The experiences of the neighbourhoods taking part in the joint project on community engagement and community leadership indicated that:

- A physical meeting place is important in attracting local residents. Equally, no-one joins a group to have a bad time: meetings need not be boring; trips, events and celebrations bring people together.
- Programmes need to respond to different attitudes, cultures and priorities. If people feel like outsiders they will not join in.
- Good information enables campaigns to focus on the main issues and accurate data may highlight hidden problems.
- Imagination can solve problems: a small gathering in someone's front room may attract more people than a formal meeting in a cold hall in the middle of winter.
- Many residents will be under 11 or over 60, so activities should appeal to different age groups.
- Engaging with partner organisations takes time and skill. It is important to work positively with the council or other providers of services and to encourage partners to do the same.
- 'Collective' leadership is important and effective, with councillors, senior and middle managers and residents agreeing to share and build power.

Background

The experiences of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) neighbourhood projects suggest that there are four main outcomes of community engagement. These are not exclusive and residents may engage in community action to achieve all four. The first is:

- to build an effective and sustainable community organisation.

If residents succeed in this, they can move towards the other three:

- to work in partnership with other groups to improve local services;
- to be taken seriously by those holding power and to get involved in decision-making at a local or regional level;
- to work with other groups and power-holders to develop sustainable neighbourhoods.

Over time, this last outcome may include managing community assets and encouraging social enterprises.

The joint project on community engagement and community leadership concentrated on the first objective. It wanted to find ways of recruiting and retaining active members who would be prepared to put in time and effort to support the group. One of the other JRF joint projects undertook a detailed review of the experiences of being taken seriously by power-holders, as they emerged in England, Wales and Scotland. Achieving permanent assets and an income stream was addressed briefly in a third joint project on funding. While recruitment was the main discussion point of this exercise, the community engagement projects did make a brief reference to work with other agencies and with local authorities. They found that most residents do not ask for very much. Put simply, they expect community engagement to:

- **Have a point to it.** Residents are not willing to be shuffled round from consultation meeting to consultation meeting so that officers and councillors can say that residents have been engaged in the decision-making process.
- **Help with understanding the issues.** At the start, residents were often unfamiliar with language and processes. They found it difficult to follow academic jargon and did not know their LSPs from their LAAs. Now many residents are more confident. They expect officers and councillors to be committed to changing the language they use and to make sure that residents fully understand the issues.
- **Go at an acceptable speed.** Residents are suspicious, often rightly, of discussions that appear to

be rushed. They expect straightforward information, a genuine outline of the issues and the choices for action, and time to discuss and consider.

The five neighbourhoods contributing to the joint project found it difficult to allocate time for specific meetings so the issues of community engagement and leadership were discussed at each of the JRF networking events. Each project then volunteered to research a distinct element of the issues emerging from this networking and two took part in a round-table telephone conference on the issues.

The project neighbourhoods

The Llanharan Community Development project

involves the three mining villages of Llanharan, Brynna and Bryncae, with a combined population of 8,000. The project has developed considerable skills in fund-raising that led to a wide range of community-building activities. Residents have been active in making links with local schools and in supporting a youth club. Community-based training is popular and the neighbourhood base offers drop-in facilities for young people. Llanharan has found that members of the community can be fully engaged in action programmes as long as the organisation does not take on too much too quickly, and lives within its means. The Llanharan Community Council has recognised the value of the community programmes and has pledged a significant and continuing financial contribution. The group is considering whether to join a consortium of local organisations seeking to develop a substantial new community facility on a site that is available in the village.

Eastfield, near Scarborough, North Yorkshire, started with a residents' group comprising a few committed enthusiasts. Their efforts demonstrated the importance of not becoming discouraged and the potential of small groups to grow and succeed. The Eastfield residents now have a training centre that includes comfortable rooms for meetings. The group has become effective enough to have a neighbourhood participation officer and is seen by the council as an important partner in establishing a neighbourhood management initiative in Eastfield. After a very successful Eastfield Carnival, plans are already in place to make it an annual event. The group has also worked with parents and younger children and has developed an important link with the Sanctuary Housing Association. In the light of the new housing development in Eastfield, Scarborough Borough Council is working hard to help the group engage more closely with development, planning and environmental issues and to build up their skills and experience in these areas.

Empowering Communities Group (ECG) Barrhead, East Renfrewshire, was established as an umbrella organisation responsible, initially, for engaging with voluntary and

community groups in distributing funds made available under the Scottish Executive's Social Inclusion Programme. ECG then started working more broadly with local organisations across its local authority to co-ordinate community engagement in community planning processes, to influence council policy, and to promote effective partnerships and develop training initiatives that would help community organisations develop more effective community activity. ECG used organised visits to places such as the Scottish Parliament to encourage residents to become involved in community activities.

Pickersleigh Estate, Malvern, is an example of a large housing estate set in the middle of an affluent area. As Malvern Hills District Council falls outside any of the targeted regeneration programmes, improving the estate has to be tackled using existing resources. A positive stock transfer ballot has recently led to the establishment of a more local housing association which has considerable interest in safeguarding its property assets in Pickersleigh. The police and local schools have become more active in the past year, with the result that an operational group has recently been established. This involves the service providers working to a strategic plan and includes input from residents. Residents have tested a strategy of holding 'first step' meetings between neighbours in their own front rooms or in the nearby community room. This approach appears to have involved residents with no background of engagement in community affairs.

The Broad Street area of Swindon has become increasingly diverse in the last 15 years. It is the town's 'reception area', with settlements of Muslims from Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and significant communities from Turkey, Goa, the Caribbean and St Helena. The Broad Street Community Group has been established as an offshoot of the initial Community Council, with an explicit aim of broadening the base of community engagement. Broad Street is also a participant in the transnational example of a 'Streets for Living' project, which offers an excellent vehicle for community engagement since all residents from the different communities can develop closer links to help improve the quality of life for everyone. Broad Street has also used small, localised 'front room' meetings to engage residents who would not feel confident attending large set-piece occasions. JRF has helped with the establishment of a group of active citizens that has now become established as a determined advocate of neighbourhood development.

Promising practice identified through the joint project

Each of the five neighbourhoods in the joint project identified a number of issues relating to community engagement that they volunteered to test and report on.

A number of the groups involved found that having a base to work from attracts residents to the organisation. Llanharan has a bustling community building that is too small for all its activities, Eastfield has a meeting room, and residents on the Pickersleigh Estate in Malvern have a council-owned community centre. Some groups have a small shop as a base. In addition, both Malvern and Broad Street, as well as other groups such as St Pauls in Bristol, have successfully held small neighbourhood meetings in residents' own homes. The informality of these small meetings attracts residents who would not attend a big formal meeting and people bring their friends and neighbours along.

Having fun and sharing food is a good way of getting people involved in local activities. This method is successfully used in busy, big-city neighbourhoods to bring residents from different countries and cultures together. It is equally important in villages and smaller places where such social events are a good way to publicise the work of a group and to get more residents involved.

The groups emphasise the importance of recruiting volunteers and making sure they are treated properly. ECG and Llanharan are both trying to find ways in which volunteers might be able to get a small recompense, without this being seen as pay. For some volunteers, being fully involved in the work of the group is reward enough. Successful groups include volunteers in all aspects of the work of the group, including any discussions on policy issues. Volunteers are not just people who 'help out', they are active people who can often take on significant responsibilities. Llanharan's highly effective fund-raiser is a volunteer, not a paid member of staff.

Sometimes a successful campaign can result in more residents getting involved. This can also be the case if the group becomes involved in a big project – such as the 'Streets for Living' programme in Broad Street, Swindon – that involved groups from different European countries working together.

As groups become well established a paid worker can help keep recruitment going. The community engagement joint projects were generally successful in moving from using solely volunteers to the appointment of a paid worker. There were occasional examples of friction between the residents and the worker and these were usually the result of the group not having clearly envisioned how the new relationships would work.

Links with councils and councillors remain patchy. In some neighbourhoods, local councillors join residents' meetings and do their best to make effective links. Positive connections with council officers can sometimes be encouraged through partnerships developed with

bigger voluntary organisations. Housing associations have been involved in this way in both Eastfield and Malvern. Nevertheless some council officers seem stuck in what one project describes as 'default mode'. They do not automatically think of involving residents in important decisions. Instead, they must be cajoled and reminded despite using the rhetoric of 'putting residents at the heart of the neighbourhood process'.

Learning points

- Most projects found word-of-mouth to be the best way of getting more residents engaged in community action. The more successful recruitment programmes started from some social activity, often involving food and where those involved took the responsibility of introducing friends and neighbours to the group. In Broad Street, a gathering of 250 people was organised in this way. A number of projects have successfully involved both young people and parents. Small groups meeting in front rooms can also be a good place to start community engagement.
- Numbers, though, are not everything. A small and determined group of residents can get things started. It can take a long time to build up the membership but as long as the group is welcoming to new recruits, this will happen. Eastfield is an example where patient work has paid off.
- Campaigns can be an effective way of getting more residents involved but it is important to make sure that any campaign is based on clear and accurate information. Campaigns should aim to bring together residents, councillors and officers to tackle a problem on which they all agree.
- Community leadership remains a tricky area. Councillors claim the right to represent residents because they have been elected. Residents claim rights by virtue of the work they do and the time they spend organising community activities. Councillors may soon be given greater responsibilities to check the quality of local services and this will require them to work very closely with residents. The belief that power can grow when people share it is proving to be slow rooting. Significant numbers of councillors and council officers still feel that there is only a finite amount of power around and, if residents have more, they will lose out.

Signposts to further information

There are many web sites to guide groups wishing to explore the issue of community engagement. In addition to the JRF's (www.jrf.org.uk) these include:

- www.renewal.net

This the online guide launched by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit to provide information about what works in neighbourhood renewal. The site includes 'how to' guides, case studies, research papers and project summaries. Be careful to note the date of postings on the site as some case studies are old and have not been updated.

- www.cdf.org.uk

This site offers a useful checklist of relevant publications, including reports on community engagement in local strategic partnerships.

- www.dta.org.uk

This provides information on development trusts, which are organisations that combine community-led action with business expertise and enterprise.

- www.audit-commission.gov.uk

The Audit Commission's site offering a wealth of material, including a wide range of inspection reports giving fascinating detail of the performance of local authorities, housing associations and other service providers. The Audit Commission produces these evidence-based reports to help drive improvement in public services.

- www.idea.gov.uk

The website of the Improvement and Development Agency, which delivers in-depth improvement news and examples of good practice from councils across England and Wales.

- www.partnerships.org.uk

This is David Wilcox's useful site on participation and partnerships, together with the latest news on online communities.

- www.neweconomics.org

This site gives information about the New Economics Foundation, an independent organisation that describes itself as a 'think and do tank', with an international perspective on economics informed by the belief that 'people and the planet matter'.