Communities in Control Study – What are we learning?

We have set out to find out if Big Local could improve the health of individuals and communities by empowering groups of residents to have more control over decisions affecting the places where they live. In the first part of the Communities in Control (CiC) Study, we have identified the ways that collective control is developing among groups of residents involved in Big Local, such as the ability to take action and influence change in communities. We have also looked at what factors are influencing the ways that Big Local is developing locally.

Summary of our research findings so far

Our research involved interviews with 140 residents and workers in 10 Big Local areas as well as with national organisations supporting Big Local. The team attended Big Local meetings and events and observed these, as well as reviewing 30 Big Local plans.

How collective control is developing

There is evidence of control developing among groups of residents on Big Local partnerships and also between these groups and other organisations.

- As Big Local partnerships become established and achieve early successes, confidence in their ability to affect change has grown. Those involved are also developing or pooling skills and knowledge needed to address local issues.

- Increasingly residents are feeling more able to work with other organisations to take action and achieve change. This has included developing new connections or building upon existing links with other organisations.

- However, the process of arriving at consensus in groups is often described as challenging and has sometimes made existing tensions in communities worse.

- There are tangible changes arising from resident led action, for example communities ‘claiming back’ land that was due to be sold to a developer, taking over buildings to use as community hubs and venues, or negotiating to use these spaces at discounted rates.

- Successful events build up confidence, but unsuccessful events or stagnation in decision making processes can lead to frustration. Sometimes, these
experiences have meant that some residents have lost confidence in the programme and disengaged from the process temporarily or permanently.

Spaces for participation in Big Local

As part of the research we have also observed different spaces for community decision making and participation created in Big Local and how these are experienced, namely:

- Partnership spaces – these have been set up as a requirement of the Big Local process. This space tends to be experienced among residents as being quite formal (e.g. minuted meetings).

- Resident spaces – these include less formal spaces for residents to get together such as community hubs. They tended to be seen by residents as more accessible and as a way of getting more people involved from the local community.

- Event spaces – many partnerships have organised events within their local area. These are usually more temporary spaces (e.g. annual galas and dog shows) and tend to be focused on increasing awareness among and involvement from the local community.

- Project spaces – these tend to be increasingly created as spaces for ‘getting things done’ in relation to a planned objective or activity. In some instances, professionals are invited to join the space for a specified task, usually when residents feel that they do not have a specific type of knowledge or expertise themselves.

The role of the £1 million

The research has also looked at what role the £1 million has played in enabling residents to work collectively to take action or influence others’ priorities.

- The availability of funding in itself has acted as a way of engaging and connecting residents. This has enabled new conversations about the priorities for local action.

- Community control of the funding has in some cases has opened up opportunities to negotiate and build relationships with other agencies (such as the council) about priorities for the local area.

- The rate of spend has often been slow as residents feel responsible for spending the funding wisely, or because it takes time to build relationships
with others. An emphasis has often been placed on investing (not spending) funds as well as actively seeking match funds.

- Some differences have also been apparent between Big Local areas about how much funding should be used to support running costs of Big Local (e.g. to employ a worker or not).

- In some instances, external agencies have also not understood the ethos of community control over the funding. There has also been tension where organisations or individuals are thought to be getting involved to gain funding for their own priorities rather than for the benefit of the community more widely.

- In a small number of areas – particularly where there was community activity already going on before Big Local – the funding has sometimes been viewed locally as a distraction, causing people to become overly preoccupied with how “the million” should be spent.

Influences on how Big Local is developing

Finally we also found out about factors that influence the ways that residents work together and with other external organisations. Sometimes these factors appear to have helped or have got in the way of resident led action.

- In some instances, Big Local areas have fitted well with existing boundaries of local areas (e.g. a village). In other areas, boundaries cover more than one ‘community’. The extent that residents have a common identity has influenced the time that it takes for people involved to agree priorities and act collectively.

- The presence of residents or organisations already active in their community before Big Local has provided links or structures that Big Local has been able to work through. This has enabled some areas to quickly establish networks compared to other areas where groups have effectively started from ‘scratch’.

- Previous bad experiences or distrust has sometimes affected residents’ willingness to work with practitioners locally. This includes when there has been a lack of transparency about how funding from past initiatives was used.

- There is also evidence of some practitioners or officials changing how they work with communities through being involved in Big Local. While this has taken time, this included, for example, a greater recognition by councillors in one area that they should listen to residents rather than assume the lead for local decision making.
More information about the study

On the Communities in Control website you can find other research briefings about the findings so far along with videos clips of researchers talking about the study:

http://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/health-inequalities/home/

For more information about this summary, please contact Emma Halliday on 01524 592980 or e.halliday@lancaster.ac.uk

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