

Case study – Targeted work

‘1000 conversations’: Community Organising and one-to-one interaction in St Peter’s and the Moors

This case study focuses on an activity that fits within the recurring theme of *targeted work*. This can have a particular *focus* on inclusion, hearing unheard voices and *widening participation* in Big Local. As will be demonstrated, the 1000 conversations work in St Peter’s and the Moors is about proactively hearing a wide range of voices, including those people who would not necessarily come forward unprompted.

The case study also strongly features elements of another theme of *communications and conversations*. This entails creating different communication mechanisms or tools to create dialogue and conversation with the community.

Description of the activity

Activity outline

An idea was developed to establish a bridge between the steering group/partnership and individual residents. In 2015 the area introduced a Big Local Listening Campaign called ‘1000 conversations’. This involved door-to-door visits and events to increase resident input into ideas and activities. It was felt that this could build relationships in a way that other methods, such as surveying residents, could not. The term 1000 conversations originally came from a resident and was loosely adapted from infrastructure organisation Locality’s ‘Action to Regenerate’.¹

One of the partnership members is a Community Organiser, who worked in another area. She was involved in Big Local in her capacity as a local resident, but she utilised her Community Organiser skills in her role on the partnership. When the partnership felt they were not penetrating into the community, and failing to get the community’s views, she provided the tools of this technique to do that. Her experience and expertise was important in developing the 1000 conversations.

A key part of 1000 conversations is visibility. This includes walking through the area and partnership members knocking on doors. By engaging with people, they could let them know about forthcoming Big Local activities, such as events. They have constructed a physical network map of people and who they are connected to. Through such work they are ultimately looking to build ‘*a more active and connected community*’.

One piece of feedback from the initial 1000 Conversations work was that local people were passionate about having something for children to do during the summer. Activities planned for this summer include the Youth Holiday Project by the Rock, a Community Music Festival supporting local talent with interest in music, and eight weeks of children’s play activities in the local parks, run by the Cheltenham Trust.

Connectors

As well as reaching a range of residents, tapping into ‘connectors’ was important. One of the partners in the early days of the steering group was a community organisation using Asset-Based Community

¹ See: <http://www.regeneratetrust.org/>

Development (ABCD) approaches and some of the residents first involved attended training offered as part of the ABCD project. ABCD uses the language of ‘connectors’ which the Big Local Partnership also now uses in talking about developing resident capacity – tapping into natural ‘connectors’ as part of recognising and building on such individuals as assets within their community. Connectors have been identified in the 1000 conversations work:

‘What we are finding is you can find those connectors in the community. Because those who are connected to other people are generally connectors. They are not always community leaders, but those connectors will tell other people what is going on...Working with people and their existing connections is important.’ (Partnership member)

Why they chose the activity

St Peter’s and the Moors launched 1000 conversations partly due to mixed results of previous activities, leading to a rethink about how to engage the community. The Big Local worker felt the initial consultation in 2013 was too impersonal:

‘We had to go on a journey to understand why that might be. Any one Big Local area is not the same as another’. (Partnership member)

How it fits in with Big Local in the area

1000 conversations was central to the current phase of Big Local, which is the second year of the initial delivery period (the first plan covered years 1-2, 2015-16). It was developed in reaction to a lack of engagement at the beginning of the programme. However, it was also important that this activity was able to inform the work of the partnership going forward. Ultimately 1000 conversations is about making Big Local resident-led.

‘...it’s about residents taking ownership in a collective way. So that things are passed on, like sharing knowledge, passing on knowledge, a bit like oral history. So it’s about sustainability of residents’ ownership.’ (Worker)

The partnership member who was a Community Organiser has since secured local authority funding to undertake Community Organising work in the Big Local area.

Effectiveness

1000 conversations was seen to be improving the reach of Big Local, hearing residents’ views and as giving Big Local **legitimacy**:

‘...I think there is something around proving your legitimacy as a local partnership through local people...The 1000 conversations gave us legitimacy because we said we were doing things because of what people told us. We were building up a contacts base, an ideas base as well.’ (Worker)

In terms of the proportion of the community engaged, they aimed to knock on every single door, but they have found that they cannot engage everyone. The ambition of 1000 conversations is in its **scale of engagement**, because it would mean actively engaging with around a third of residents in the area.

Being visible was seen to be important. Walking around the area had made an important difference to its effectiveness, being seen as critical to establishing relationships.

Also central to engagement was **building trust**, through residents becoming familiar with those involved in Big Local. It was felt by the Big Local worker that Big Local identified an area as deprived. However, the residents may not see the area as deprived and sensitivity is needed with such terminology.

'You wouldn't say you are deprived to stranger, or that these are our needs to a stranger. But you develop the trust and legitimacy through something like the 1000 conversations for people to open up about what the real issues are in their community and what their real passions are in their community.' (Worker)

Identifying connectors has been important for linking to different networks and groups. The 1000 conversations is still at an early stage, not all the conversations have been completed, so it was hoped the networks and groups resulting from it would gradually start taking shape.

Learning (challenges and opportunities)

Challenges

Engagement in general, and 1000 conversations in particular, can be labour intensive. Finding the people to do it, especially volunteers, the majority of whom work, proved to be challenging:

'It is about capacity. Engagement takes a lot of time. To do it well takes a number of years really, to get to a point where you've got lots of people engaged. But having capacity, having the people to go and do that is an issue.' (Partnership member)

Learning for the Big Local Partnership

The interviewees' learning from being involved in Big Local so far can be summarised in the following themes:

- **Adaptability:** Not to be afraid to change the strategy if something is not working.
- **Consensus building:** There is a lot of hard work involved in developing a shared vision.

'It is not just one person having a vision, but it is having a shared vision. That is the biggest challenge.' (Chair)

- **Feeding back to the community:** Letting the community know what is being done and that their views and feedback is being acted upon.
- **Visibility:** It was important for those involved in Big Local to be visible in the community. In this area this has partly been done by walking the streets and going from door-to-door, and through events.
- **Targeting different parts of the community:** The Big Local area is not a natural, pre-existing community and some parts of the area are harder to engage than others. Therefore there needed to be a strategy to engage different parts of the area.

- **Converting interest into activism:** There was a lot of interest in Big Local, but this needs to convert into people becoming more active. Residents need to become more engaged.

'I think there's so much good will, so much money, so much interest. We need to capitalise.'
(Chair)

- **Limitations to volunteer-led activity:** Most of the partnership members work in full-time or part-time paid roles, thereby limiting the time they can commit to Big Local.

Learning for other areas

The interviewees identified the following tips for other Big Local areas:

- **Be proactive in finding people to engage,** including leaders and connectors in community, and develop and nurture them. If areas rely only on those who come forward, they will only get those who have engaged before. So as well as finding 'connectors', 1000 conversations can bring in those who do not always have a voice, precisely because it is a more proactive approach that does not rely on people coming to them.

'If you wait for people to come to you, you will only get a certain type of person who engages, you're not reaching the whole community. So in order to get a mandate you need to go out. Ideally I would suggest go out door knocking.' (Partnership member)

- **Capitalise on people showing an interest:** When someone is found who wants to get involved, be careful to act on it and do so quickly. They may not come back.
- **Act on all types of feedback:** Whilst it is important to work on data to gather a picture overall, such as surveys, it is also important to act on the 'small data', the individual feedback, speedily, in order to get people involved.