Case study – Empowerment and capacity building

Helping residents and local organisations grow in Whitley

The *empowerment and upskilling of residents* is a key part of Big Local. This can enable residents to deliver Big Local or to deliver on their own enterprise or project ideas. In many cases this can take the form of training, whether a formal course or more informal learning. In Whitley Big Local there were a number of activities that helped to build the capacity of local residents. The two approaches focused on here are community researchers and opportunities at the community hub.

Description of the activity

Activity outline

There were multiple ways residents were being upskilled as part of Big Local in Whitely. Early on, the area invested in resident training with a group of residents trained up in community development: *'to help us better understand and apply community development principles and best practice in WCDA's* [Whitley Community Development Association] *work in the hope of truly achieving long term benefits for Whitley.'*

Two initiatives in particular have entailed significant capacity building of residents. Firstly, the area trained up a group of community researchers in partnership with the nearby university. Secondly, the community café provided a variety of paid and voluntary opportunities. These are explored below.

In 2013 pilot research for Whitley Big Local identified transport as a major issue for the area. This led to the Rep approaching an academic at the University of Reading in 2014 about facilitating a community-led research project to explore the transport and mobility needs of Whitley residents. This was to include training and employing five local residents, employed on a living wage, to conduct the research. Their role was to undertake the data collection, assist with the data analysis and contribute to the final report. A new community research network called the 'Whitley Researchers' was subsequently developed in April 2014. The project was funded through Whitley Big Local (£7,500) and the University of Reading (totalling £5,500).[1]

The research included a questionnaire with 500 local residents, 30 interviews with public and voluntary sector organisations, and five community focus groups undertaken by the 'Whitley Researchers':

> *'Drawing on the principles of participatory action research (Mohan, 2007), which aims to empower and equip local communities with the skills needed to undertake their own research, the Whitley researchers engaged with a wide range of community groups, schools and colleges, statutory service providers and voluntary organisations to understand multiple viewpoints and perspectives.'*[2]

With the focus on transport, the project aimed to:

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[1] Sally Lloyd-Evans, Lorna Zischka, Daniel Mitchell, Danielle Dorn, Elizabeth Kingdom, Emma Lacy, Ellie Bowerman-Wyatt, Mo McSevney, Sonia Duval, Nicky Bennett, Richard Bradbury, Fatoumata Saidykhan, the Northumberland Training Academy and John Ord. (2015) *Working better with Whitley.* pp. 9-10.

[2] Lloyd-Evans et al (2015) *Working better with Whitley.* p. 9.

1. Explore the everyday travel needs and experiences of communities in Whitley, and identify transport barriers;
2. Suggest ways of addressing unmet needs that could be targeted by the *Whitley Big Local* initiative.[3]

This led to a roundtable with the council about bus routes.

Another example of capacity building is through community café, which provided a number of paid and voluntary roles for local residents. Capacity building was defined in different ways, from more formal training (for example around community development) to building confidence:

> 'It doesn't matter whether they succeed at the task or not. But because they feel valued in the space where they are doing the task they are growing in confidence…Capacity building has to take into account that people are being themselves in a way rather than a cog in a machine.' (Partnership member)

There was also more informal, slower burning capacity building work; what one partnership member described as 'community building'. She also talked about the difference between participation (e.g. attending an event) and engagement (e.g. people taking steps to become involved, for example at the local school). She felt it was especially important to engage those not previous engaged.

Why they chose the activity

Initially the community research was going to examine the feasibility of setting up a community transport scheme in Whitley. However, during the design phase it became clear that 'transport problems' facing the local community needed to be identified before decisions were made about potential solutions. Transport can often be indicative of broader community needs:

> 'Access to transport is more than an issue of getting from one place to another; it's essential for building community connections, widening access to education and work opportunities, and is vital to the everyday well-being of households. The demand for transport is a derived demand; transport is not an end in itself but rather a component of the demand for other things such as education, work or shopping.'[4]

The community café was central to Whitley Big Local's activities, having been opened in 2014. In their Big Local plan, the partnership summarised feedback from consultations about what residents wanted from the café, with some clear messages coming through:

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[3] Whitley Big Local quoted in Lloyd-Evans *et al* (2015) *Working better with Whitley.* p. 9.

[4] Lloyd-Evans et al (2015) *Working better with Whitley.* p. 9.

'The same subjects came up again and again however the questions were asked and whoever we asked. We want a vibrant community centre with a cafe serving good quality affordable food, we want things for young people to do; to entertain them, keep them off the streets, and raise their aspirations for what they can achieve, we want easier access to services, we want a cleaner and more pleasant place to live, and we want to lose the stereotype, for people to respect us and for us to be able to take pride in Whitley as our home.'
(Partnership member)

The community café not only provided a venue for groups to meet, it provided a space which local residents could use, where the food was not too expensive. People were able to interact informally, including those who have not engaged before:

'It's about that engagement and who we are engaging. Are we engaging the "usual suspects" in the community or are we starting to engage the people who previously haven't been engaged? And I seriously believe we are at that turning point now. I noticed it more having been away for a month and come back. The number of people who have been casually using the café and are now asking questions and support with things. Asking to volunteer with things, asking to be involved in things.' (Partnership member)

For example, one resident used the café regularly, just to have coffee opposed to engaging in activities. After a while she asked for advice on setting up a parent-teachers association, despite initial resistance from the school. This is an example of Big Local helping to facilitate broader community engagement and, further on, potentially becoming more active in Big Local:

'I think that is a direct result of the work we have done through Big Local, using the café as a tool. So I would say give it another year that's the kind of people who will come on the partnership.' (Partnership member)

How it fits in with Big Local in the area overall
The community research was a key component of Big Local overall, focusing on a major issue of concern to local residents. Furthermore, the café provides a focal point of a lot of Big Local work in the area, having acted as a venue for groups, an informal space for residents to meet over reasonably priced food and drink, and the source of both paid and volunteering opportunities.

Effectiveness

NCVO

The interviewees highlighted the following as being particularly effective in engaging the community in Big Local.

The community café was about providing stability and a hub for the community. It was **sustainable** and can support itself through raising revenue and existing beyond the ten years of Big Local. The community researchers are now embarking on a new project focused on financial inclusion. This indicates the sustainability of the activity, with more people being trained/empowered and new issues explored.

There was also **variety**, for example, there were different points of entry into Big Local, enabling residents to engage in more active roles or more informally. The Rep highlighted this:

> *'You have a good spread of what I call trigger points. If there is interest locally, they can sign up and support a whole range of things.'* (Rep)

There has been **development and training**. Six people have been trained (City and Guilds) in community development. The café has also proved to be an effective way to engage the community, both in terms of a physical space that can be used as well as offering paid and volunteering opportunities. The community research project got residents involved and also offered paid opportunities.

In terms of the community research, there were **tangible results** with a change in bus routes, something the bus company outlined on their website:

> *'Part of the research suggested that the respondents wanted to have a cross-Whitley service connecting them to more places within the local area and beyond – such as supermarkets, community centres and the hospital. Using this research we have worked with the Big Local project team to look at how we can meet the needs indicated in the research. Therefore, we are proposing to change the route of our scarlet 9 buses to best serve the local area. It is key that scarlet 9 carries more people as it is currently not covering its costs and so this experiment would not only help to meet the needs of the community, but could also help revitalise scarlet 9!'*[5]

Learning (challenges and opportunities)

Challenges

There were some challenges around having to develop procedures for volunteers applying for paid posts within Big Local. They felt this could be overcome by members of the partnership making a declaration of interest before applying.

With the community research an interviewee felt that it was harder than it looks in terms of how to get people engaged and to stay engaged. The initiative involved a wide range of people, from self-motivated students to people from the community not as confident or perhaps less interested. It was important to get them all in the same place, something that required speeding some people up whilst slowing others down.

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[5] https://reading-buses.co.uk/articles/consultation-for-scarlet-9/

Learning for the Big Local Partnership

The learning included the importance of **listening to the community**; what was referred to as a 'shut up and listen' approach. This includes the importance of face-to-face interaction, and community researchers were seen to be a key part of this.

The members of the partnership and other people involved in Big Local had to be **accessible** to the community. Again the community café was key in this.

If the partnership says they are going to do something, they should do it. It was important to **keep promises** in order to build and maintain trust. There was a negative legacy of previous initiatives with the local authority, which had been seen to let residents down in some cases.

Learning for other areas

- **Involving as many people as possible:** It was felt that there is no point in a few people sitting in a room making decisions without knowing what people want, but that there was a need to talk to as many people as possible. The more people invested in Big Local, for example the more people participating and shaping it, the more successful they will be.

- **Act as a collective:** Being able to mobilise different people in the community is vital. It can be difficult to change things as an individual, but collectively it is possible to have great impact, such as changing the bus route:

  'Having something solid, well consulted, well written, and well supported by your community makes you successful. It then gives statutory authorities, bodies, businesses no choice but to listen to you.' (Partnership member)