Can communities and public services work together to achieve lasting change in communities?

Between 16 October and 26 October 2015, Local Trust and New Start collaborated on a survey asking views on residents collaborating with local authorities to create the change they want to see in their community. By 'residents' we mean all those living in an area, who may take action as part of community groups or who may get involved independently. With the term 'local authorities' we refer to elected members or staff involved with local government and local public services.

There were 203 respondents[1]: 71 identified as working for a charity/voluntary organisation; 67 identified as working for their local authority; 39 identified as people who volunteer locally (whom we have referred to as residents); finally 26 identified as 'none of the above'.

Key findings

Across all groups, while there is a strong belief that greater resident involvement could contribute to improving local communities, there is also some level concern about the feasibility of a more collaborative approach.

- **Just under 81% of respondents identifying as local authorities, close to 89% of charities, over 96% of the group identifying as 'none of the above' and over 97% of residents agreed that their local community could be improved through greater input from residents.**
- **60% of local authorities, about 62% of charities, 67% of residents and close to 70% of the 'none of the above' group believe that a collaborative, resident-led approach would be feasible in their area.**
- **Over 40% of local authorities identified working closely with residents as the best potential response to the challenges raised by cuts to services, with over 51% of residents and 35% of charities reporting the same. Close to 54% of the 'none of the above' group also identified working with residents as the preferred solution to reduced funding.**

'Different expectations' and 'a lack of understanding of each other's priorities' were perceived by all groups as key barriers to working together successfully. However, while different expectations were perceived to be by far the biggest challenge by local authorities (70%), a lack of understanding of each other's priorities was identified as the biggest barrier by both residents (82%) and charities (73%). The 'none of the above' group was split pretty equally between the two: over 57% identified 'different expectations' and close to 54% 'a lack of understanding' as the biggest barriers. In addition, over half of local authorities suggested a lack of required skills and expertise as another barrier (51%).

Opportunities for dialogues and discussing solutions together was identified as the most effective way to engender better collaboration by most groups (79% of residents; 69% of charities; close to

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1 273 people opened the questionnaire on Survey Monkey but only 203 completed it. Out of the 70 non-submitted questionnaires, 27 were from the charity group; 17 from the local authorities group; 13 from the residents group; and 13 from the "none of the above" group.

63% of local authorities), followed by 'more open-mindedness' and the presence of someone or an organisation to facilitate dialogue.

Support for a resident-led approach

In our survey, close to 95% of local authorities stated that they valued working with local communities highly or very highly.

In the climate of reduced public sector funding, local authorities are struggling to deliver services. Our findings showed high support for a collaborative, resident-led approach to improving local communities: 85% of local authorities, 95% of residents and charities, and 74% of the 'none of the above' group agreed or strongly agreed. By contrast 86% of local authorities, 95% of residents, over 90% of charities and 72% of 'none of the above' disagreed or strongly disagreed that community decisions should be made by local authorities alone. Furthermore, around 90% of all groups disagreed or strongly disagreed that it is unrealistic to think that local authorities and residents can make a tangible difference together.

Open answers

Among the **local authorities** group, those that answered yes to the question if a collaborative, resident-led approach to community improvement is feasible in the community stated that:
- It works in some communities: those with a strong sense of community and active individuals.
- It is cost effective and inclusive.

Those who answered 'no' or 'not sure', identified the following challenges:
- Capacity: it is difficult to get residents to come forward on a regular basis.
- Some communities have more capacity, but others find it hard to gain real involvement and take the lead.
- There needs to be a variety of mechanisms for residents to be engaged but there must be the opportunity to 'drop in and out' so residents do not feel obliged or deterred from becoming involved.
- It's not supported by executive management or leading politicians.
- Too much responsibility, time and resources for residents – it might prove difficult to find the right people with the dedication, skills and commitment.
- This question assumes that resident led approach is a necessarily a good thing. In many instances it's problematic.
- There are too many different interests.
- Dominated by small number of vocal 'representatives'.

Among the **residents group**, those that believed a collaborative, resident-led approach to community improvement was feasible stated:
- Many say they're doing it already – that they already have a collaborative culture.
- There is a large amount of local expertise.

Those that disagreed identified a few barriers:
- Apathy and capacity was pointed to as a barrier.
- In urban areas with complex, overlapping communities there needs to be someone to ensure multiple needs/interests are considered and that it is representative.
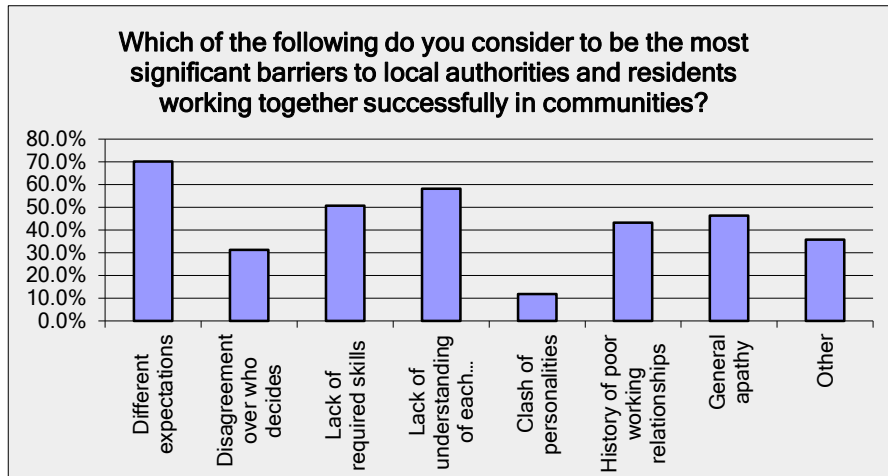
Figure 1 - barriers perceived by local authorities

Which of the following do you consider to be the most significant barriers to local authorities and residents working together successfully in communities?

Figure 3 - solutions preferred by local authorities

Which of the following do you think are most likely to make local authorities working with residents more productive?
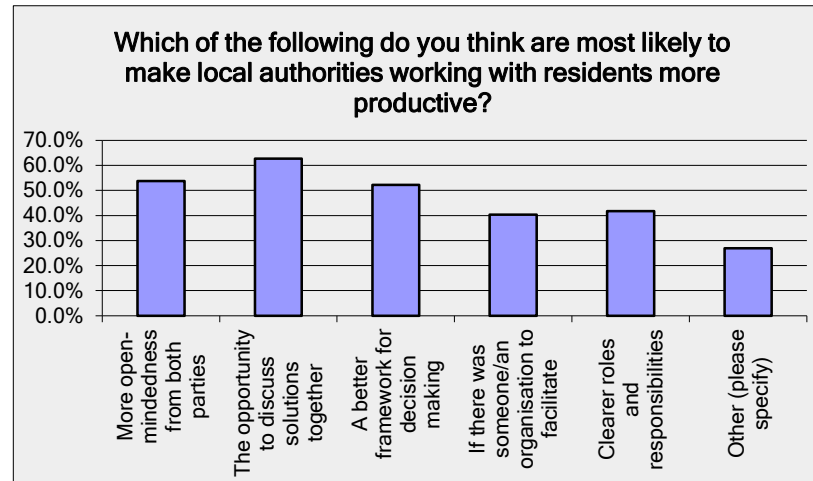
Figure 2 - barriers perceived by residents

Which of the following do you consider to be the most significant barriers to local authorities and residents working together successfully in communities?
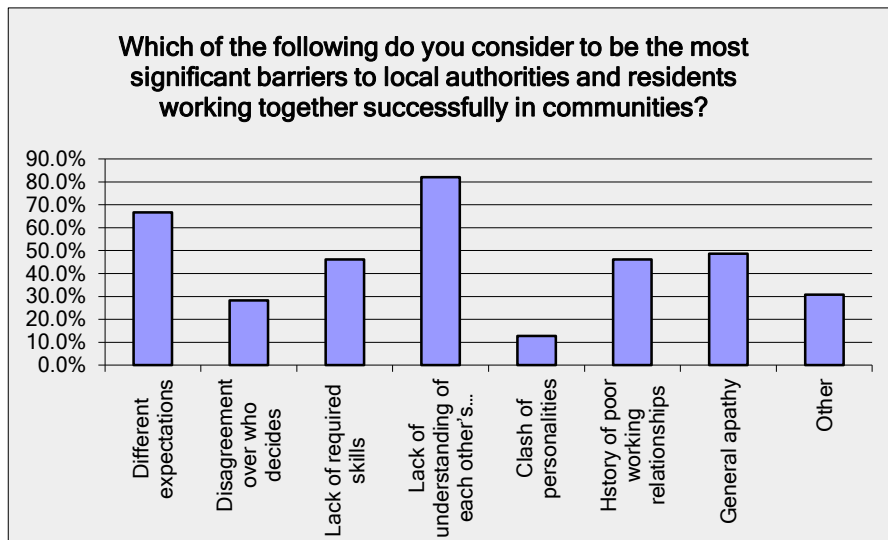

Figure 4 - solutions preferred by residents

Which of the following do you think are most likely to make local authorities working with residents more productive?