Local Trust
creating lasting change

IVAR

Institute for Voluntary
Action Research

The Future for Communities:
Continuing the conversation

Report on the Future for Communities
gathering hosted by Local Trust
at St George's House on Monday
24th–Tuesday 25th September 2018

Written by Leila Baker and Marilyn Taylor

Introduction

In July 2018, Local Trust published *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power*[1] , which identified the critical issues that face communities – particularly disadvantaged communities – as they move towards 2020.

More than 800 people across the UK contributed to *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power*. There were five issues that kept coming up in our conversations with them. They were:

Poverty

The pressures of poverty make it hard for people to engage in their communities let alone change things for the better.

Transience

Population movement is part of life. However, increasing housing insecurity is making it difficult for communities to act together to become powerful.

Fragmentation

A powerful community is one where people feel they belong and where everyone can contribute. But our contributors were worried about the impact of increasing divisions in society.

Isolation

Public spaces are disappearing, being privatised or going online. This reduces the opportunities for people to connect with others and leaves them isolated and lonely.

Democracy

Already marginalised communities find it hard to see how they can become powerful through the formal political system.

The Future for Communities gives examples of some of the actions that communities are taking to address these but argues that they cannot turn things around on their own. So what needs to happen to create lasting change?

To kickstart ongoing conversations about how these issues could be addressed, Local Trust brought together 20 people, from academia, foundations, government, third sector organisations and local communities themselves (see Appendix), to reflect on the main messages from *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power* and discuss what should happen next.

---

[1] http://localtrust.org.uk/library/research-and-evaluation/the-future-for-communities

This gathering was structured around four 'provocations'[2] on themes taken from *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power* – place, power, transience and spaces. The provocateurs brought different perspectives to their topic – from civil society, government, community research and theory – and provided a springboard for a series of discussions over 24 hours. The questions posed to the provocateurs to help them shape their provocations are as follows:

- **The importance of place:** what does place mean? How does it contribute to individual identity? Why does community identity matter? Presented by Julia Unwin.

- **Power and influence:** who holds power as we enter a new decade? How can power be meaningfully transferred to communities? What does this mean in the context of reduced resources and capacity amongst those who have traditionally held and brokered power at a local level? Presented by Danny Kruger.

- **Transience:** what happens when many people no longer stay in communities for long enough to feel part of them? What does community mean for people living in insecure housing tenure and their neighbours? Presented by Marilyn Taylor.

- **Spaces:** what does the disappearance of shared space mean for civil society? What does it mean in particular for disadvantaged communities, where both public and private sector spaces are in retreat? Where can communities find common interests or meet with people with different views or backgrounds? Presented by Jennie Popay.

This report provides a snapshot of these discussions in the context of an increasingly important debate about the future of communities and of civil society. Participants all left with ideas on how to incorporate ways of improving these priority areas into their work or lives.

The intention over the two days was to challenge traditional assumptions and take nothing for granted. So, while participants offered a range of different ideas on the nature of these issues and how they might be addressed, there was no intention to come up with a manifesto – more to identify the critical issues that will need to be addressed if the debate is to move forward and communities are to be supported meaningfully into an uncertain future. These issues are discussed in Part 2. Part 3, in response, outlines four areas for action.

---

2 The idea behind a provocation is not to be controversial as such but to enable new understandings to emerge, to ask questions that will promote critical thinking and reflection.

What were the issues:
Five debates

Rather than giving an account of each of the discussions over the two days, we have identified recurring points, themes or arguments that emerged during the proceedings. There was often consensus about the problems and challenges faced by society in general today, but participants did not necessarily agree on their analysis of those problems or, indeed, the solutions.

They returned again and again to question their assumptions and the legitimacy of their responses to the problems being discussed. We have sought to reflect this mood in the way we have described the diversity of the conversations that took place. Some of the conversations were more practical than others, with examples of work on the ground. Here we have focused on the more general questions and issues that need to be addressed in the future, focusing on the five that seemed to us to be most prominent:

- **Legitimacy**
- **Adapting to a more mobile society**
- **Consensus and conflict**
- **Power and agency**
- **The importance of the local economy**

Legitimacy of outside support

'We could be party to disempowering communities'

There seemed to be general agreement on the problems and challenges faced by communities. But in her provocation, Julia Unwin asked: *'When we are in loud agreement, what are 'we' missing?'* This raised important questions for participants about their legitimacy, and not only theirs but also that of policy makers and decision-makers – indeed of any external intervention. How far do we really grasp the realities of what is happening on the ground in the communities we are talking about?

Some felt there was now a growing consensus on the importance of working with disadvantaged communities and thought that power was shifting in their direction. But others were more sceptical. Were these power shifts real or simply *'manipulation'*, *'reinforcing the status quo'*, making communities accept responsibilities they do not have the resources/capacity to fulfil? Are these supposed power shifts simply changing the terminology?

---

³   https://civilsocietyfutures.org/

Related to this, participants commented that strengthening communities has been a policy theme for years. Government itself has little institutional memory, but how effective are the current partnerships in and around the community sector at collective learning for the future? '*How do we learn at different levels and benefit from experience at all of the different levels?*' Participants also raised questions about the relative value of professional knowledge and evidence on the one hand, and community or ordinary, 'popular' wisdom on the other. Communities know what is going on and were described as '*the canary in the coalmine*' in the sense of detecting problems at an early stage, but they often go unheard, as the experience of the Grenfell Tower fire and cases of widespread child sexual exploitation demonstrate.

Adapting to a more mobile society

'*"These bloody migrants" can be read as a racist narrative or an accurate account where resources are under pressure*'

The inquiry into the future of civil society is finding that place is still important to many people. But sharing a place can be challenging and place isn't important to everyone. There was also general agreement that society was becoming more mobile – and in the future environmental refugees are likely to add a further significant dimension to population movement.

Politicians often turn to community as a stabilising factor in a crisis. But increasing housing insecurity, migration and the transience associated with both can be destabilising for both individuals and communities. This raised important questions about what 'community' means in a more mobile society and how helpful it is as a concept. Should we be focusing instead on building collective capacity?

Transience does not have to be a problem per se – population change has positive as well as negative aspects. The real issue, for some participants, was about choice (about where you live and what kind of community you live in) and resources (to support communities facing major population change and transition). For others it was about neighbourliness: how do we create neighbourly communities in and around transient populations? There were a number of suggestions about how to do this without being overbearing (welcome packs, events, etc.). Community housing also got a mention, but it cannot address the housing crisis on its own. Participants underlined the need for resources to plan for and support communities in transition but asked whether we really have the necessary skills to provide this support.

Participants also argued that there is a need for a national voice and a coalition of people and organisations working on the housing crisis: '*housing associations can't lead this, they have lost their radicalism*'.

Consensus and conflict

'We don't have to get rid of the conflict or manage it away, but what are the skills needed to build understanding and respect?'

If communities are changing, participants also discussed the continuing relevance of other factors that used to be thought of as 'stabilising' – family, religion, nation. The point was made that some communities are toxic, and participants also commented on the increasingly polarised nature of current political debate. Do we have the skills to work in difficult/hostile environments and how can we build consensus? Manufactured consensus does not move communities forward and one suggestion was that integration is the obsession of the middle classes. Should we accept that it is not always possible to build consensus and aim rather to build respect between different cultures and opinions?

Power and agency

'The idea of expert patients and self-care movements isn't helpful. The collective is the most powerful force'.

Many people do not see themselves reflected in today's political discourses, but this does not mean they are lacking in political insight: *'people do have political knowledge based on their experience'*. There seems, however, to be little empathy or sense of connection with people's lives on the ground among people in positions of power. And the system seems very fragmented – *'how do you get all the levers in one place'*?

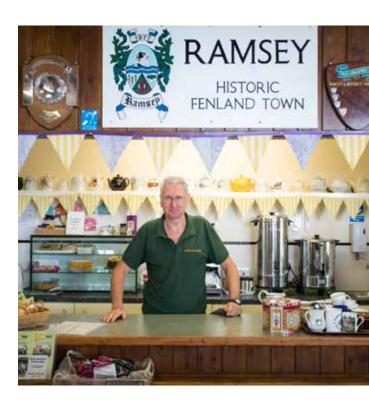How then can people best be connected with politics and policy? Three themes emerged:

- Current tendencies to scale up and centralise services favour efficiency over legitimacy and trust. So there is a strong argument for decisions to be taken closer to the people they affect. But localism can also create more inequality, so can we create local institutions that make this work? And what do we do where there is minimal public money?

- We need to shift dominant narratives. It is essential to change perceptions of what is possible, allow communities to imagine all the possibilities. We need to invest in helping communities understand the dysfunctional way policy has developed.

- We see small-scale shifts in power, but they are not part of a larger national shift – will these small changes have a cumulative effect, or have we lost our potential for ambitious thinking? There is a gap in leadership.

Participants also highlighted how swift responses to crises like Grenfell benefited from the fact that the necessary relationships had already been built between funders at national level and between them and local organisations.

The importance of the local economy

'How do you catapult people that are stuck in the poverty trap into something new?'

The economy is essential to social and political inclusion. Community housing is a drop in the ocean when there is little local business or income generation activity. Communities need to be given the opportunity to shape their own economies and create more inclusive economies within a place. Local economic initiatives are not just about creating services but also about providing a way to build solidarity across communities. How can people who are trapped in poverty be encouraged to take risks? It is scary. We heard about inspiring initiatives to create *'unlikely entrepreneurs'*, to provide incubators and nurture enterprise eco-systems. Community shares give people a reason to come together and take responsibility over things like parks and influence them. And participants said it was important not to overlook the continuing importance of community hubs and how challenging it is for them to become financially stable. But there are no strong networks for sharing knowledge and information on community ownership (as opposed to social enterprise, which tends to be about individuals).

How can the issues raised be addressed?
Four areas for action

The current high levels of uncertainty – and the sense of chaos and division in society – could well be disabling. But do they have to be? They are also a moment for change. So what needs to happen now? How do we 'create the conditions for agency to flourish and build momentum for government to travel with us?'

The people who joined the discussions at St George's House have a wide range of experience working with, and living in, disadvantaged communities. There was a strong sense that the will and the muscle exist to take action on all five of the issues outlined in Part 2 – a *'constructive militancy'*. To take this forward, they identified four areas for action, not just for themselves but for everyone who wants to support communities to become more powerful in the future.

Skills

From communities to government we all need to develop the skills to:

- Handle transition and plan in uncertain times, to be capable of resolution as well as resistance.

- Build the relationships that are needed for effective action at national level, between national and local organisations and at local level.

- Facilitate dialogue, understanding and respect instead of division, stereotyping and conflict.

Opportunities for discussion and debate

Locally, regionally, nationally we need to find new formats for debate that will:

- Provide the opportunities for reflection and 'deep' thinking that are essential to understanding the nature of the problems communities face and how they can be addressed.

- Help us to bridge divisions in communities, move beyond existing power structures and encourage a focus on collective problem solving.

[3] https://civilsocietyfutures.org/

Investment

Grant funding is needed to make community spaces sustainable:

- Physical spaces remain central to people being able to meet, learn, debate and organise locally.

- Many community hubs are being forced to charge more than their local communities can afford in order to be financially sustainable.

- If local community members aren't to lose out to outsiders who can afford to pay, the value of these spaces needs to be recognised and paid for. That means investing in local economies as well.

Alliances

We need to work together more closely locally and nationally if we are to:

- Amplify the voice and experience of people in communities .

- Connect power holders with local experience and *'give local power shifts cumulative force'*.

- *'A number of different institutions need to put a foothold in to say: "we have a view about these things".'*

Appendix
List of participants

Barbara Arrandale	Grassland and Hasmoor Big Local
Julian Corner	Lankelly Chase Foundation
Ruth Farningham	Birchwood Big Local
Sian Jay	Big Local rep
Maggie Jones	Foundation UK
Sahil Khan	Catalyst Housing Limited
Danny Kruger	Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport
Matt Leach	Local Trust
Ed Mayo,	Cooperatives UK
Jennie Popay	Lancaster University
Moira Sinclair	Paul Hamlyn Foundation
Marilyn Taylor	Institute for Voluntary Action Research
Andrew Tinkler	Gateshead Big Local
Dadirai Tsopo	Welsh House Farm Big Local
Julia Unwin	Civil Society Futures Inquiry
David Warner	Local Trust trustee
Alex Whinnom	Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation
Mandy Wilson	Independent researcher
Rich Wilson	OSCA and Local Trust trustee
Steve Wyler	Better Way