

Key findings from Local Trust roundtable held 3 June 2015 at the RSA

Rethinking local development: how can we do more to enable residents and local volunteers to transform their communities for the better?

This June, Local Trust hosted a roundtable discussion at the RSA to explore the topic of enabling residents and local volunteers to transform their communities for the better. The event was attended by people involved in Big Local, academics, and voluntary and public sector professionals.

The event was held to harness the insights and ideas of those who attended and to find opportunities for future collaboration and action. The session provided plenty of insights into how rethinking local development can help create positive, lasting change for communities, where residents and local volunteers are encouraged and supported to take the lead.

Here are some of the key insights:

We must create opportunities for resident control in communities

There is a real opportunity to uncover residents' latent desire to help their neighbours and community, but people want varying levels of control and influence and this has to be understood. The challenges lie around thinking of creative ways to engage people and providing them with opportunities to contribute in a way which helps them to feel valued, and to help support people to become involved in a way that has meaning for them.

Key points

- There is more demand for resident control than we think, but this isn't being mobilised. Lots of people want to help make a positive difference but don't know how; communities often have a number of factors working against them and many people don't feel they have the skills and confidence needed. Residents need support and encouragement.
- There can be a high turnover of people when they are involved in voluntary activity and getting the right kind of engagement takes time. Larger organisations and bodies need to talk to residents and communities in order to help keep people motivated and feeling involved.
- Different things drive different people. We have to remember and respect that some people just want to live their lives and that for some people, simply having influence and a voice is more important than complete control. It's important to listen to people, and to have a spectrum of ways for residents to become involved, recognising that people respond to different approaches.

We must support residents and local volunteers to build the confidence and skills to improve their community

Many communities have had their skills and enthusiasm suppressed in the past and building confidence requires close attention to how people feel and the history of the local area. It's vital to respect the different aspects of people's personal lives that make them feel able to contribute to their community. Having a clear structure and pathway of support is important to help communities develop at the right pace and to help residents anticipate different challenges along the way.

Key points

- Confidence plays an important role in helping people to have more control over what happens in their community. Often, people want to be more in control but don't know how.
- For communities that have had negative experiences in the past, a healing process is important. It's also important to be aware of the inevitable emotional cycle of the people involved and accept that this will go up and down over time.
- Residents find that organisations come in and provide communities with things they don't need; it's a lack of listening that is unhelpful. Sometimes it takes time to get to the bottom of residents' feeling of powerlessness and apathy in order to turn this around.
- Residents often learn most from each other.

We must celebrate milestones along the way

It can be helpful to shift our thinking around volunteering to see it as an 'exchange relationship' and to consider the different incentives that encourage people to become involved, whether these are personal or community-wide. Lasting change takes time but there should also be a clear effort to celebrate all achievements and milestones along the way, as this can be an important catalyst to get people excited about what they're doing, and to ensure they're doing it together.

Key points

- For too long volunteering has been viewed as a gift relationship, but it can be helpful to promote the idea of reciprocity and think of volunteering as much more of an exchange relationship. Society shouldn't be afraid of promoting the self-help benefits of volunteering and making these more prominent.
- There is nearly always a fear of failure but it's about supporting people to try things and learn from the process by adapting and evolving. Sometimes it's having affirmation that can be most important to people – it is having someone say that it's okay to have a go and give it a try.
- It's important to embed 'little victories' at the heart of volunteer activity to sustain motivation and build momentum. Gaining an achievement early on and having that injection of energy is crucial.

Independence for local communities should not come at the expense of invaluable support

There should be a focus on promoting leaders in communities that seek to enable others and support greater independence among residents. Having the right person to motivate, facilitate the exchange of ideas and guide people to the right kind of support is immensely valuable.

Key points

- Community support shouldn't be directionless; giving people the right steer is vital. It's important to have the right type of leader that seeks to enable others and this is a very under-valued and under-resourced role. It can help to think of support as being best delivered when it is 'on tap but not on top'. This gives people advice when needed whilst enabling them to take the lead.
- Support is often withdrawn for programmes which carry risk or where there are chances of bad publicity. Sometimes investors and funders don't want to invest in enabling, they want to invest in doing, which creates a barrier to a resident-led approach. However, enabling is an essential part of building something much more long-term and sustainable.
- It's important to consider the implications for communities wanting more control but where there may be political competition locally. If a group doesn't have access to those who hold power, they can often become disgruntled and unsure of where to go. Community groups need to have somewhere else to turn to when they are ignored by key decision makers.

Lack of funding presents a challenge to resident-led development

There is a desire for devolution in government, but the main challenge will be the reduced funding available to local areas. There is a real opportunity for central support for volunteering initiatives, but the methodology behind it has to be robust.

Key points

- The will to devolve power is strong in some areas of government. The key question is how to enable communities in this co-production. The biggest crunch is that there will be much less funding. Devolution has to be carried out positively, but crucially this can't be because there is no money elsewhere.
- The effectiveness of volunteering support from private and public companies is still to be seen. It has the potential to be very positive but there is a real need to get the method working properly. The private sector should look to provide more free skill-based support to help residents to create change by building skills, resource and capacity. At the moment, many residents feel that the support they need from specialist expertise isn't there.
- Many groups are keen to encourage ideas of active citizenship and from a political perspective there is a big push behind the Big Society idea and localism.

What next?

While many of us are already doing work in this area, key insights raised during the roundtable suggest that it is crucial to mobilise and upskill people within communities, to ensure people have the resources they need, the appropriate support and frameworks to gain confidence and feel motivated to instigate change. There needs to be greater opportunities for residents and local volunteers to learn from each other, and more encouragement to local leaders who are supporting communities.