Empowered Communities in the 2020s: Shaping the future of work with communities

Summary of discussions from the

15th November 2017 event hosted by TWICS

IVAR Institute for Voluntary Action Research

Local Trust

TWICS

#Empowered2020s

Introduction

Empowered Communities

On the 15ᵗʰ of November 2017 the [Empowered Communities in the 2020s](#) research team held an event in Southampton, hosted by [TWICS](#), at Swathling Neighbourhood Centre. The following slides try to capture a flavour of discussions and key points raised as a record for participants and also as data to feed into the next stage of the research.

The session began with a short presentation on the emerging findings from the research (you can view the interim report [here](#)), followed by an introduction to a new piece of research being led by TWICS.

The group then explored some of the emerging questions from the Empowered Communities research as well as the overarching question being explored by the TWICS research.

The aims of the session were to:

- Deepen our understanding of how communities could become more empowered/powerful and vibrant over the next decade. We're asking how communities identify issues that concern them, explore approaches to address these issues and take action.

- To share research findings to date and gather feedback

- Dig into the research questions and sub-questions with a group of individuals with experience of and perspectives on a range of community development initiatives and approaches past, present and future.

The session was attended by representatives from local voluntary and community groups and organisations, as well as people who work with communities from the local authority and NHS.

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Group discussion: Testing & building on what we've heard

The research team presented 3 questions from the Empowered Communities research and one question from the TWICS research. Participants worked in groups to discuss the questions with a facilitator. The questions were:

1. Communities are being asked to take on more and more responsibility. Where is this empowering and where is it exploiting? And what can communities do to resist being exploited?

2. Does community work in your area exclude certain groups? What are your experiences of this? How can work with or in communities engage those that are harder to reach?

3. What or who are going to be the biggest influences on your communities over the next five years or so?

4. How do you connect communities: people to assets and assets to people, and people to each other?

Table facilitators asked each group one or more of the following questions:

•   what does this question mean to us here?

•   What are the examples form this community?

•   What can we bring in terms of ideas for supporting communities to be more powerful in the future?

The following slides present some of the ideas and discussion points that were raised.

Question 1: Communities are being asked to take on more and more responsibility. Where is this empowering and where is it exploiting? And what can communities do to resist being exploited?

Participants asked/raised the following points:

- **Transferring risk:** *Is it power and responsibility being transferred or blame?*

- **Examples include:** asset transfer, running libraries, parks, sheltered housing used to have lunch clubs, now residents are taking this on, or not! - activity coordinators have to run things with no resources; some things like youth work have been cut but this has not led to more volunteer-led provision – it's just not there anymore

- **Skills and responsibility** – getting people set up can be a barrier because of all the things group might need… insurance etc

- **Opportunities** – for young people to engage: scouts, Urasmus, Duke of Edinburgh

- **Volunteering is not the answer to austerity** – high expectations and commitment needed

What can we do?

- Support volunteers – advice and training around governance, health and safety and finance; offer a range of flexible opportunities

- Help groups connect with other groups

- Use online networks

- Work with young people, instil values

'Are services being dumped on people?'

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Question 2: Does community work in your area exclude certain groups? What are your experiences of this? How can work with or in communities engage those that are harder to reach?

Participants asked/raised the following points:

- Identifying different communities – this might be geography, faith, interest

- Thinking about what interests or hobbies people have – start here - Bringing people together needs to happen around a common goal

- Excluded: people who work, especially those that work far away from where they live

- Be aware of setting things up that people don't necessarily need!

- Thinking about accessibility and barriers to participation – hearing loops, wheel chair access

- A geography of a place can exclude e.g. Southampton is divided by the river

- Intergenerational work to tackle social exclusion, intergenerational divides – problem of short term funding to sustain this work

Ideas to take forward

- Could have community notice boards in surgeries so that different groups are aware of one another

- Potential for online directory but also problem of updating, needs to be owned by the community

- Different messages for different groups

- Need more enablers, training that's open to everybody

- Shifting expectations that information comes from a service rather than a neighbour

- Develop a vision for connected services and coherent signposting in Hampshire – *'no door is the wrong door'* - Challenge of keeping information sources updated

Question 3: What or who are going to be the biggest influences on your communities over the next five years or so?

Opportunities and threats in Southampton:

- **Regeneration** - brings in cash and new people, but this can be transient

- **Brexit** – uncertainty around whether European residents will stay; increasing tensions amongst local and migrant communities, *'we voted you out…'*; difficulty in thinking and planning ahead

- **Austerity** – a obvious threat leading to closure of groups, but also an opportunity for culture change in local authorities, but this is slow progress

- **Asset transfer** – Assumption that communities groups have sufficient capacity: *'every community group learns the hard lesson'* - that this is perceived as giving communities more control but actually takes a huge amount of capacity and energy. Economies of scale are not passed on.

- **Business –** Port Authority: huge employer, apparently with community priorities; other ways to network with business

- **Housing -** Communities will change with 'fixed term' housing, students not paying council tax, rogue landlords

- **Transient population –** 20-30% are students, migrants

What can we do

- Given uncertainty of Brexit, austerity…focussing energy on shorter term activities, questioning whether community work needs to be 'sustainable' in this context

- Use ethnic media in the city to reach different groups e.g. Awaaz FM

- Use the forums that already exist e.g. Big Local S018

- Explore new ways to commission services including social enterprises and smaller organisations

- Think about what infrastructure is needed

'Are all of us that are volunteering letting them off the hook… papering over the cracks?'

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Question 4: How do you connect communities: people to assets and assets to people, and people to each other?

Ideas…

- Need to make things more attractive to a wider group?

- Linking-up campaign, e.g. posters, link websites together, billboards

- Tools for how to find out things, but not just on the internet

- Do people want to meet up, i.e. do they have the 'head space', if they are in great need, e.g. for food, etc.

- do things people like singing, dancing, eating works, street parties

- Workshops to move people from one area to another, 'consuming' projects – that can help make people activists

- Quality rather than quantity important e.g. face-to-face meetings are time-consuming but worthwhile
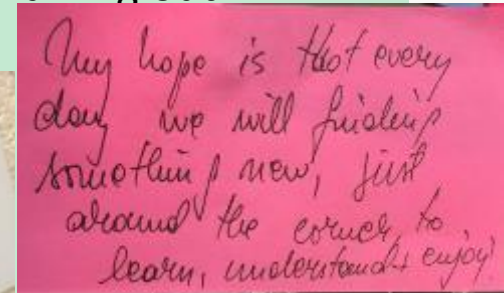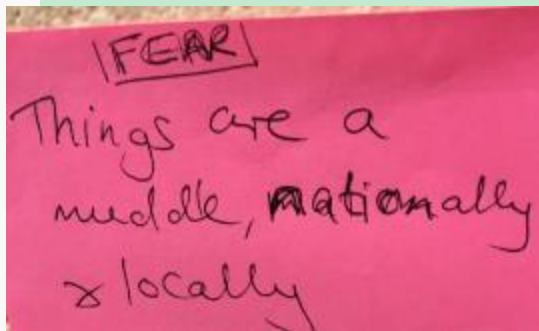
Looking ahead...

Looking ahead to the 2020s, what are the things that are going to be important to communities having control over their own future?

And what do we need to start putting in place to enable that?

We used the things people had said about their hopes and fears, drawing out themes which we then turned into questions. The themes were:

- Social isolation
- Environment
- Balancing research and practical action
- Learning and upskilling

As a warm up exercise, we asked participants to think about the future and pick an image that represented something they **hoped/ worried** about in their communities and then introduce themselves to someone they didn't know. Above are several examples.

How can we find a balance between talking, reflecting and researching AND doing/taking action in communities?

What can we do?

- Don't reinvent the wheel

- Take an asset based approach - not 'they' should do this - recognition that people need to support local groups/initiatives – flexible but not dependent support

- *'if we do all the time, we lose the sense of what we are doing'*

- *'The 'doing bit' changes quicker than research – research is slow and gets done again and again'*

- Find opportunities for learning and upskilling to enable communities to have more control and effect change

- Using digital solutions to facilitate choice and opportunity; an activity map to let people know what's out there; VCS can update digital distribution – link places together where opportunities can be followed, so communities know what to access

What else is needed?

- Capacity to work in partnership – this takes more effort but gives more benefit – and be aware of what is going on

- Research the research!

- Use community anchor organisations – who build capacity in other people – *'communities taking on responsibility need support.'*

- *'Don't look at the gaps, look at what it there and build around it'*

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What will enable communities to have control over their local environment, connect to nature and combat climate change?

- Southampton – bad air pollution - *'When we feel pollution directly, how can we/should we say something? What forums can we use?'*

- Cycle tracks aren't suitable even after consultation suggesting *'we have not been heard'* what can be done? Lobbying local councillors, demanding better feedback after consultations

- Need really small local consulatations which somehow distinguish bettwen local people who are expert in something from their live experience and giving weight to these over others who do not.

- Feedback from consultations needed otherwise people might not take part again

- Cyclists – shared pedestrian routes rather than cycle super-highways

- Recognise expertise of people to feed into consultations – those with local 'lived' experience rather than just the 'fluff' of people with a general view whose views are given equal weight

- Permissions to do things, e.g. gardening – Todmorden an example (https://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/)

How might learning and upskilling enable communities to have more control and what do we need to do?

- Opportunities for learning and upskilling enable communities to have more control and effect change

- Choice and opportunity and using digital solutions to facilitate that

- Activity map to let people know what's out there

- VCS can update digital distribution – link places together where opportunities can be followed, so communities know what to access

What will enable those that are isolated to take control over their future and what do we need to put in place?

- How find those who are isolated – who can advise? Someone needs to refer them

- How to advertise events/activities that could help, e.g. at places people would go, e.g. a vet as someone alone might have a pet; supermarket; GP surgery

- People unable to get out/People enabled to get out

- Better transport links and lower costs – transport is poorly funded

- Activities don't have to take place in a building, e.g. of group of neighbours who take bus into town, talk on the bus, go shopping and come back together

- Places need to be more accessible, e.g. autism hour in supermarket; sensory Sunday in a shopping centre; making seating available

- Better representation of ethnic minorities/refugees, e.g. they may not be in a 'group' so could feel isolated

- Globalisation concerns, e.g. Tamil language may not remain

- Face-to-face connections are important

- Everything is digital, so those without those links are isolated.

Reflections

- Evident from discussions was a desire for practical application of research e.g. self-reflection tool kit

- Despite the current challenges for work in/with communities, there are also some opportunities, for example working with local business (the Port Authority), collaborating with local government and health for better services and deeper democracy

- Use existing networks, link up, work in partnership – but this also needs some resource and capacity and time to meet and network and make best use of digital tools

- Reach different communities by tapping into what is already going on and what interests people

Contact the research team houda@ivar.org.uk for more information.

Respond to the latest findings and complete survey https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/H735C25

Find other ways to get involved http://localtrust.org.uk/our-work/empowered-communities/have-your-say/

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