

**IVAR**

# Imagining Powerful Communities Conference: Proceedings

Part of the Empowered Communities in the  
2020s research

12 December 2017



**IVAR** Institute for Voluntary  
Action Research

**#Empowered2020s**

**What needs to  
happen so that  
communities have  
power and control  
over their lives in  
the future?**

# Introduction

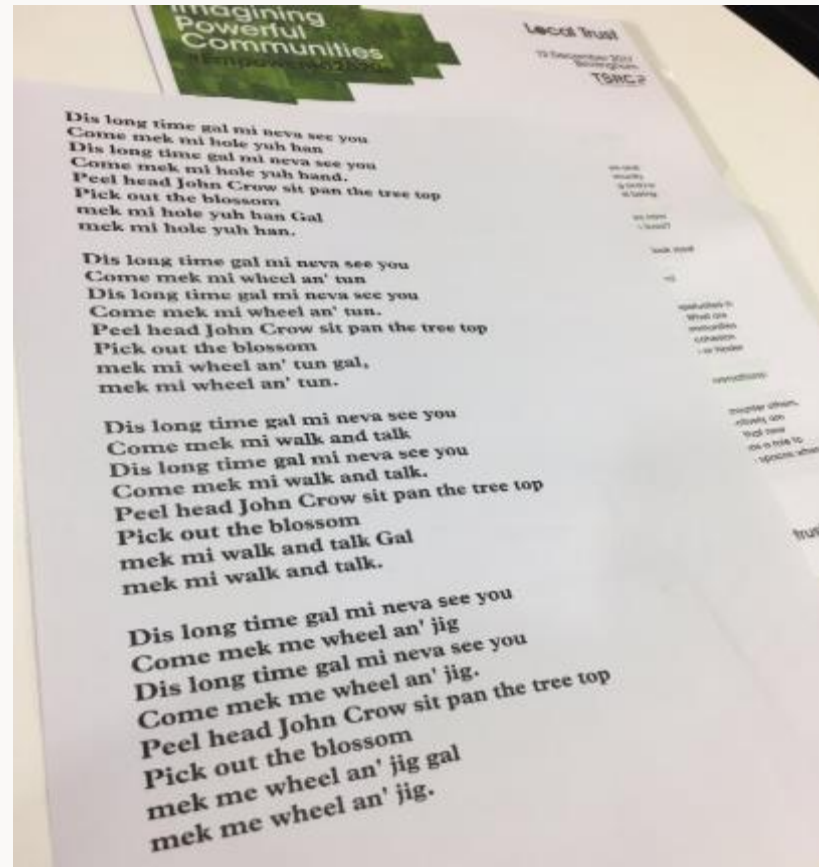
On 12 December 2017 the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) and Local Trust held a conference at Birmingham University.

This conference was an integral part of the *Empowered Communities in the 2020s* research which asks: *What needs to happen so that communities have power and control over their lives in the future?*

It was a chance to share some initial findings, dive deeper into questions emerging from the research, and begin working towards a better future – to inform the final phase of the research fieldwork and the conclusions of the research.

We called the conference, 'Imagining Powerful Communities' because we wanted it to be about using our imagination to think our way into the future, telling stories and being ambitious for our communities.

The conference was attended by citizens, voluntary organisations, community groups, academics, researchers and commissioners.



Calypso warm-up song lyrics

The research is being carried out by the [Institute for Voluntary Action Research](#) and was commissioned by [Local Trust](#). Find out more about how we are carrying out the research, sign up to the mailing list, and contribute your ideas through the online survey [here](#).

# Information gathered

The following slides distil all the information we gathered from all the conversations and outputs of the day. These are presented here as a summary of conversations, but will also feed into the next stage of fieldwork and the final report.

We have collected the following data:

- 9 workshop reports: 4 workshops in the morning that each focused on a different question thrown up by the research to date; 3 workshops in the afternoon focused on the fictitious places; and 2 simultaneous 'So what' workshops to bring together what we had discussed.
- 6 follow-up interviews with facilitators and participant respondents. In these short interviews we asked people to reflect on the process/techniques we used during the conference and on the progress we had made with the research questions.
- In addition, we have been able to refer to: 19 event feedback forms; text of the speech given by Andrew Robinson, former Chair of Community Development Foundation; trends research and resources produced to support the conference.
- We have also drawn on some of the things we created during the conference, namely models and songs.



The conference opened with a story about the Community Development Foundation (CDF), which was set up exactly 50 years ago and has only recently closed. Funds donated to Local Trust when it closed are paying for this new area of work about how communities can be supported in the future. Andrew Robinson, former Chair of CDF, welcomed people to the conference. He talked about ***'the human capacity to feel the needs of others and want to act. This is the good story'***, he said, ***'the one that will free people. It needs people like all of you here today who have gathered to consider the future of community development in the UK.'***

# Stage 1: Discussing and testing emerging issues from the research so far

# We spent the morning focusing on 4 issues

1. Communities taking responsibility for services/facilities: empowerment or exploitation?
2. What are the exciting things happening in communities now that will help create power and control over their lives?
3. How can communities break patterns of exclusion that divide and exclude?
4. Spaces for community learning and for difficult conversations: hopes and risks



*Theatre balloon game to explore exploitation/ Empowerment*



In each workshop, we asked people what this might look like in communities and places they live or work in.

# ISSUE 1: Community responsibility: Empowerment or exploitation?

## Method: Theatre workshop

During this workshop, participants used drama techniques to explore what exploitation vs empowerment looks and feels like in communities; they drew on each other's experience and collectively explored solutions.

- Community control of assets *can* be a good thing so long as the process and relationship between community and government are negotiated. Communities don't always work in ways that fit neatly with policy/planning timescales, for example.
- It helps where there is direct communication between government and residents rather than messages that *'get passed up and down the system'*.
- Decision-makers want the 'right type of person' to come to meetings/events. They can be detached from people's lives and unwilling to adjust format or explain purpose.
- Avoiding exploitation/empowerment means investing in people, but there is no money for capacity building now. People can be labelled as 'resistant' when they point out the lack of resources to make 'co-productive' and mutually beneficial processes happen.
- Participants said that theatre can be a means to challenge authority and to question why things are the way they are.



Decision makers want  
'someone who doesn't get  
emotional about issues, they  
need to speak well and  
behave in a certain way. They  
need to be articulate and play  
the game.'



## ISSUE 2

# What are the exciting things happening in communities?

## Method: Story-telling calypso workshop

During this workshop, participants drew on each other's experiences to explore new and different things happening in communities, new players and partnerships, opportunities and risks, and what will be going on in the future that will look most different from now.

- The group shared thoughts and experiences about what happens in communities that go through tragedy or disaster. Events had brought communities together (Grenfell Tower, Aberfan disaster), and might have changed how they are perceived or portrayed in the media; but views and experiences differed about whether this or relief efforts led to changes in distribution of wealth or power.
- There is *'a lot of pain for the community trying to find a way forward, a new way of doing things'*. Workshop participants questioned whether people have the time to collaborate and co-produce, and what was a legitimate expectation.
- Relationships between communities and local government are changing but maybe haven't settled yet: people are running activities whereas emphasis before was on them receiving services; communities are behaving like local government would have behaved in the past; local government is having to be more of a partner and less of a leader. Government cuts mean organisations are coming together in partnerships and this is empowering.
- Realising new opportunities may mean getting new people in the room: participants asked: How much could we get from a developer? Do we know enough to know what to ask for? Someone gave an example from the North of England where communities have realised you *'have to have Npower in the room to switch energy. To get food waste discussed you need to have Tesco's in the room.'*



*You must allow people to be their best,  
Power and control is our quest,  
A co-productive paradigm,  
But do our people have the time,  
Bottom-up, people power, full of zest.*



Above: participants enjoying a dance to calypso

*Money is power and cash is king,  
Is co-productive partnership the next big thing?*

# ISSUE 3: How can communities break patterns of exclusion and discrimination that divide and exclude?

## Method: Gardening workshop

During this workshop participants drew on each other's experience to explore, while doing some planting or gardening, what exclusion and inclusion/cohesion looks and feels like in communities now, and what it might look and feel like in the future. The idea was also to help participants experience gardening and learn how it can be used to foster cohesion in communities, as well as to learn something about plants/gardening. Key points that emerged included:

- Gardening, food and eating can be used as ways to share cultures and stories within and between communities. They allow people to connect with their multiple communities, e.g. a migrant shares food from their country of origin with other people in the community they live in now.
- Gardening can be inclusive – for example a good way to connect migrants to an area; and exclusive – tends not to be aimed at young people and as such reinforces intergenerational divides.
- Two examples were shared: a first-generation Nepalese gardening group, many of whom were farmers in Nepal, was a way for them to connect with each other and with the UK. They learned how to grow crops in UK conditions. Produce was then cooked and shared at free events with the wider community. Residents in another town persuaded the council to create allotments and a park on land that had been declared unfit to build on after two houses collapsed. The act of residents applying and then developing this space created a 'community' that had not existed before.



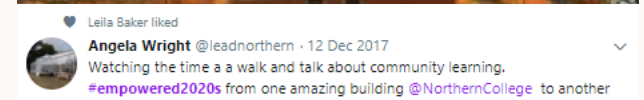
Gardening can bring a touch of home to diverse migrant communities.  
Everybody eats, food connects.'

# ISSUE 4: Spaces for community learning and difficult conversations

## Method: Walk and Talk

During this workshop, participants explored the built environment around the campus (water/waterways, green space, streets, heritage buildings), and discussed what spaces people feel are important for community learning, and where difficult conversations do and could happen. During the walk, the facilitator introduced issues like custodianship of public spaces, privatisation, and the future of housing as well as common spaces. The following key points emerged:

- There was agreement that informal spaces for learning and debate can create peer learning opportunities (*'take things out of the classroom so that people can learn from one another'*). Workshop participants felt it was important to always ask people where they want to meet to talk about particular issues, because most cultural groups have a preference about where they want to meet. While many people find a café or library a welcoming and accessible space, some people may feel it is too public, especially if they want to discuss something sensitive like community mental health.
- It's important to not be scared to have difficult conversations: one participant said of their community, *'We agree to disagree but we go on together'*, using celebrations like baby showers as opportunities for people who disagree to spend time together.
- Social media is used by the 'old young' to keep things moving between seeing one another face-to-face, whereas the 'younger young' may be trapped indoors by being able to do so much online. And linked to this, *'people cluster on the internet in similar groups'* or where conflict arises online *'the emotional pitch is raised'*.
- Participants had different views about whether or not universities support difficult conversations. This boiled down to an idea that it depends on the 'norms' that exist in different universities. But they were fascinated by the idea that the land for Birmingham University had been donated on condition it was used for health and education.
- Barriers to access identified: IT, language, mental health, lack of available places, funding, wheelchair access, bus routes.





*Education is the one thing that no one can take away from you. Once you've got some learning, whether formal or informal, you can't go back on that. And you can pass it onto the next generation.'*

*'It's so important to have spaces where people rub shoulders with one another.'*

*'Agree to disagree for a good listen.'*

# Stage 2:

**Imagining the Future:  
What could good look  
like for communities  
and what do we need  
to put in place?**

# Imagining the Future: What could good look like for communities and what do we need to put in place?

As part of the Empowered Communities research, [Localis](#) (an independent, not-for-profit think tank) produced three fictitious future communities, based on their research on trends in key areas that affect communities and community attitudes.

The purpose of the afternoon workshops was to use these fictitious places as a tool to explore some of the future challenges and opportunities for communities, and to discuss and debate what different key players can do to move towards the better scenarios in terms of powerful communities able to shape their own futures.

Participants could choose from three workshops – theatre, calypso and model building – to explore the following questions. Outputs were presented as a show-and-tell in the final plenary.

- What is your response to each of these places? What do they feel like? What excites you? What worries you?
- What's the worst-case scenario here? What's the best-case scenario? Explore from a range of community member perspectives.
- What can we do to work towards the best-case scenario?

From these workshops we have identified three cross-cutting themes presented on the following slides.



*Participants tasting different types of food as part of the inclusion/exclusion gardening workshop*



# Communities in the future: three themes

## Inequalities:

Related to work, travel and housing (emphasis on housing)

## Spaces:

Where people meet, interact and learn from one another

## Transience:

Population change, housing and job insecurity

# Structural inequalities

These are suggestions for what might help communities overcome structural issues such as housing, transport, local employment:

- More aspirational employment, including small industrial units in rural areas
- Transport links that connect diverse communities
- Housing that is affordable
- Housing, travel and employment are connected
- Broadband, particularly for rural areas/others who can't access

QUESTION: Which of the big ideas out there – new technologies, eco innovations, ideas – will help redistribute power and tackle inequality?



# Spaces

Spaces were seen as essential for people from different groups to meet and interact; and for entertainment, in particular:

- Nightlife and local festivals
- Sports venues and activities (but tend to get overlooked)
- Outdoor spaces and gardens and gardening
- Meeting the people you live alongside
- Broadband – social media helps connect people virtually

QUESTION: Which of these ideas will help find a way through the 'status quo' issues and connect people?



Participants performing their role play depicting a conversation between a young person, youth worker and housing officer

# Transience

This was a big theme throughout the conference. It covers a number of different issues: insecure housing; young people moving in and out of areas out of choice or because of a lack of options if they stay; and population movement among migrants, or among people seeking cheaper housing.

- Overall, people thought that there are both positive and less positive things to say about population change. For example, in rural areas there are people who fear change (e.g. through new housing developments or inward migration that they think will affect their way of life); and people who fear no change (e.g. because they would like to see more progressive attitudes to the local way of life).
- This suggests that what needs to happen are conversations – supported by spaces (see previous slide) – about:
  - **How can we address the way transience and population movement is changing places?**
  - **Understanding why different people want to stay or go.**
  - **Understanding what makes people care about the places where they live; and might some people be attached to more than one place?**
  - **Asking is there ever an 'end game', a moment when a town is forced to decide to 'grass over or reinvent' itself?**



Model making workshop: Participants created models of each fictitious place. Each structure had a meaning, e.g. hopes, fears, solutions, and participants discussed the models and activities that might make a positive difference to these places in the future.

QUESTION: What will help communities engage in this conversation?



*Greshamsbury rolls at a leisurely pace,  
For the elders that moved to escape the rat race.  
For the young it's a place to question the truth,  
And think about a home with a weather-proof  
roof.  
Although fragmented and transient,  
Is it a place that we can reinvent? (x2)*

*Barchester rent outpaces inflation,  
Fuelling a feeling of real frustration.  
Anyone young can no longer live there,  
It's far too expensive for their budget to bear.  
Although fragmented and transient,  
Is it a place that we can reinvent? (x2)*

*Silverbridge students move away fast,  
How do we encourage them to embrace the past?*

*Poverty and pain for those who remain,  
How do we move beyond our shame?  
Although fragmented and transient,  
Is it a place that we can reinvent? (x2)*

*Open up our minds to how others feel  
Create new spaces with community appeal  
New opportunities that keep our hopes alive  
Together we can find the power to thrive.  
Although fragmented and transient,  
Is it a place that we can reinvent? (x2)'*

# ‘So what?’ workshops

# 'So what?' workshops: what can we do?

In the final part of the day, we asked people: what needs to happen for communities to have power and control over their lives in the future?

We asked people to pick one thing that *they* can do something about; and one thing that they'd like to assign to someone else. Here are some examples of what people said (we have included key points from the wider discussion in the key messages from the conference):

- *'Be agile and responsive. Plan for change, growth, new and emerging needs. Think inter-sectorally. Don't design rigid systems in the image of loudest voices or community stereotypes.'*
- *'Fully involve people with lived experience to influence change in mental health services – "no token gestures".'*
- *'I would like to see more estates managing themselves through management committees/I will influence community groups to start gardening.'*
- *'I would like my local authority to inform residents better of what they are doing to improve the local environment.'*

# Overall key findings from the Imagining Powerful Communities Conference



# Key messages from the conference

These are the key points that emerged from the data that we collected at the conference. In time it may help to distinguish between the things about communities/community development that are familiar and remain; and things that are new/different.

Three points from the final workshops where people were invited to say what – from the day – struck them needs to happen for communities to have power and control over their lives and pledges they made to take action:

- Get outside: gardening, or doing other things together outdoors, could help connect people and *'get at those difficult conversations'*.
- Seek opportunities to make sure that policies relating to localism and communities taking control are enacted by building relationships with people in communities and negotiating mutually beneficial and respectful involvement.
- Learn together what 'fully involved' means for communities and how to achieve it. Don't make assumptions about, say, how people want to organise or get involved – ask instead.

Three points from the workshop on fictitious communities: in thinking about communities in the future, there appeared to be three themes that we want to pursue in the next phase:

- Inequalities: structural issues of housing, employment and transport need tackling together.
- Spaces: for people from different groups to meet and interact; and for entertainment.
- Transience: created by population change, housing and job insecurity as well as poverty.

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