

Empowered Communities in the 2020s: Themes from initial interviews and workshops

Like most research projects, this one began with a 'scoping' stage to make sure that we were asking the right questions and to get more ideas about who might want to contribute to the research. We are sharing a few messages that came out of this scoping because we are interested in your reaction.

So, here you can read about four of the themes that came out of the interviews we carried out and workshops we attended. There are other themes that we plan to explore through the questions that we are asking in the next stage and through the people, groups and organisations that we are inviting to respond.

'A local base for a national conversation'

That's how one participant described what they think this research needs. Many others that we spoke to agreed. They wanted assurances that the research will be rooted in local communities and driven by what those communities need and want. There were several reasons for this: first, it is about communities and so needs to be driven by them; second, it needs to include 'below the radar' or informal groups and it's not easy to connect with them unless you spend time in communities. There was a sense of urgency about the research, not only because of the uncertainty and rapid change we are living through across the UK but also because of what is felt to be happening in communities right now. One participant said: *'There are significant life threatening issues on the table, some terrifying stuff is happening in communities'*.

What motivates people to engage?

Before we even got started there was a lot of talk about getting 'beyond the usual suspects', talking to people who 'don't even recognise what they do as community development', about making sure we spoke with particular interest groups or communities of identity. But we needed to think more about how to do this. As soon as we began talking to people, things started to become much clearer. We need to understand what motivates people to get involved with communities, and what puts them off. By understanding this we can begin to look at how to broaden the range of people getting involved in communities. Here is how one young woman who describes herself as a volunteer community organiser in her neighbourhood put it: *'Older white people ... they have been consistent, stable, a lot of community meetings wouldn't be here without them. [But] the appearance of the meeting means people feel they won't be heard. The head [leadership of the meetings] needs young people, different ethnic groups.'*

'If you can't create jobs and enterprise, you won't regenerate your community'

People identified a range of issues where they thought community development can and needs to continue to make contribution. Some said people's economic prosperity and economic regeneration is critical: *'If you can't create jobs and enterprise, you won't regenerate your community'*. Community development can also help with social care and health and ageing - we were told, for example, that you need community development to make social prescribing happen. Also mentioned were: community harmony and cohesion especially in the light of populism; criminal justice especially youth justice; and planning and regeneration. There was general agreement that much of this 'issues based' community development work is fragmented, siloed and not connected to the voluntary or community sectors. Nor is it joined up with or aware that *'thousands of citizens are doing it but are not recognised as part of the community development world'*. As one woman who spoke to us put it: *'They said I'm not doing community development so what am I doing?'*.

'It may not be important to start with, but real change requires funds'

We picked up a variety of views about funding for work with communities. These can be summarised as: first, people in disadvantaged communities can organise but *'they lack the cash resources to effect change'*; second, while looking at the big context, not to lose the small things that make it possible for people to make a difference and that can happen without money and resources; third, some communities prefer to do-it-yourself, *'because the state only messes things up'*. Our feeling is that these views don't have to be mutually exclusive. Starting small has been a common theme but it doesn't mean that there is no need for resources later on. And past research suggests that another essential resource is the space for people to come together locally, whether these take the form of 'invited' and 'popular' or 'open' spaces.

Tell us what you think

We are publishing what we hear and learn as we go along so that we can find out how people react. So do get in touch and tell us what you think. To find out about other opportunities to contribute visit www.localtrust.org.uk. To contact the research team email enquiries@ivar.org.uk using 'EC2020s' in the subject of your email.

At a glance data summary

This document draws on six workshops and events that we observed or facilitated as part of the scoping, in communities, with community development practitioners and organisations and with community organisers and activists. It also draws on interviews with Local Trust senior staff and the former Community Development Foundation as well as the Empowered Communities in the 2020s steering group.