Local Trust
trusting local people

Living, leading, learning:

A summary report from
a series of community
leadership roundtables

COMMUNITY
LEADERSHIP
ACADEMY

Local Trust

IVAR we listen, and
learn together

creative
commons

Front cover: Community Leadership Academy participants
at a learning session in Manchester, September 2023
(Photo: Local Trust/Tessa Harri Carroll Photography)

COMMUNITY
FUND

Introduction

The development and practice of community leadership is supported by a range of organisations, projects, providers and funders – albeit using different terms including community development, community organising, community voice and community activism.

The Community Leadership Academy (CLA) has brought a distinctive perspective to the field. It has taken huge strides in the exploration of the practices and delivery mechanisms that progress the development of community leadership, enabling and empowering individuals to make a difference in their communities. To build on this learning, between June 2023 and February 2024, Just Ideas and IVAR were commissioned by Local Trust to facilitate three round table discussions between organisations and individuals delivering community leadership support and development programmes, including CLA programme participants.

The Community Leadership Academy (CLA) provides support and skills development for the volunteers making Big Local happen. The programme supports people effecting change in their communities, helping them to develop and share knowledge to benefit the whole community.

The community leadership roundtable discussions addressed questions posed by Local Trust, including:

- How might learning from the CLA be usefully embedded/shared with other initiatives?
- How can we support the development of community leadership?

The aim of the roundtable discussions was to generate peer learning between community development initiatives and a shared understanding about how to collectively shape the future of community leadership support. Participants heard and reflected on key findings from the CLA evaluation (see Building community leadership – Local Trust) and the individual stories of CLA participants. They shared their own experiences of supporting community leadership development, reflecting on similarities and differences, and committing to take key lessons back into their own programmes and organisations.

Building community leadership

Roundtable participants agreed that the purpose of community leadership initiatives is to shift power to communities. This shift is achieved by working with individuals and community groups to build their confidence to take decisions, speak out and act in the communities in which they live and work. This means they are invested for the future of these communities in a way that is distinctive from others who advise and offer services from outside.

There are multiple organisations, projects, and individuals working to empower communities through community leadership support and development. Each of those represented at the roundtables has a distinctive role, delivery system and processes and participant group, but the aim to empower communities is shared.

Participants in the third CLA roundtable meeting unanimously agreed the following statements based on discussions from the first two sessions:

1. Programme design for community leadership initiatives should be accessible, flexible, person-centred and relational.

2. Community leadership support should not all look the same but form a rich tapestry to suit diverse needs.

3. In designing community leadership programmes, there needs to be more emphasis on listening to people's stories and valuing different expertise to inform decision-making.

4. Until people in communities have regular access to decision-making spaces, the impact of community leadership in terms of shifting power will be limited.

5. The national tapestry of community leadership support will benefit from open conversations between key players.

There was further discussion and mostly agreement around the following statements:

1. Inequalities in communities limit the impact of community leadership work.

2. Further resource and/or new infrastructure for community leadership is needed to shift power.

3. There is plenty that we can do together to create a tapestry of community leadership that supports a shift to greater community power with existing resources.

In summary, participants demonstrated a **willingness to work together** beyond the roundtables to share their learning, to listen, to learn from the experiences of others, and to seek out practical ways to collaborate. They identified potential areas for collaboration and pooling resources, including shared funding bids, and seeking out opportunities to collaborate – whilst recognising that the larger system often positions organisations as competitors. Further cooperation needs to start with developing a more detailed vision about what a shift in community power would look like, although participants also argued for prioritising further investment in existing support for community leadership, rather than reinventing or replicating existing work.

This is not to suggest that different actors across the diverse system of community leadership support either do or will play the same role. The priorities and focus of participants' organisations and of funding requirements, and their response to local needs, leads them to work in different ways and with different people within communities. These different ways of working complement one another, but can do so more effectively through continuing cooperation and greater attention to the overall shared purpose of empowering communities.

In addition to the potential for further cooperation and learning, participants identified actions they can apply in their own context and/or organisation to ensure that existing programmes and activities more effectively work towards the overall purpose of a shift in power to communities.

Making it happen

Roundtable participants explored together how to further develop community leadership, identifying what good community leadership initiatives look like and how they develop leadership that makes a difference in local communities. The figure below identifies key elements of community leadership support.

Figure one: Elements of community leadership support

Leadership programme design

The roundtable discussions repeatedly highlighted the relational quality of community leadership and the importance of the relational in all elements of programme design – in content, in peer-learning opportunities and in leadership development practices, including one-to-one support. Participants identified a 'coaching' rather than teaching mode as most appropriate for community leadership development and pointed to community organising models (see What is community organising? – Citizens UK) . They highlighted the importance of accessibility of programme content and methods.

Future community leadership initiatives should give a central place to community voices in programme design and delivery, seeking out voices that are marginalised or rarely heard. They should empower community voices through confidence

building, practising speaking out in safe spaces, and promoting the development of community-based decision-making spaces.

'Infrastructure'

The future of community leadership development requires an enabling infrastructure, consisting of organisations, activities and individuals (staff and volunteers), sufficiently resourced, and working in a joined-up way to facilitate, resource and empower at both national and local levels. This should start by building on what already exists, rather than beginning with a blank sheet, and create opportunities for shared learning, cooperation, and collaboration. Effective infrastructure is required to make the community leadership impact greater than the sum of its parts, and requires investment for the future.

Collaboration

There is a need for greater collaboration between agencies and individuals working in the community leadership space, working together to maximise input and share resources. Future collaboration should engage with the widest possible group of people working on community leadership support. At minimum, there should be a space for continuing conversations between these organisations and individuals. The roundtables evidenced the value of such conversations to listen to and support one another, to avoid duplication and work towards a more joined-up offer for communities. These conversations have potential to spin out learning and increase the potential for a collaborative support

system for community leadership. However, there is a limit to what can be achieved through collaboration without additional resources. The wider system tends to position organisations as competitors for limited resources, and competitive funding leads to continued pilot projects rather than sustained shared learning.

Devolved decision-making

It is important that resources are made available and owned at the community level. Future community leadership initiatives should promote devolved decision-making, involving people from communities in programme design and in collaborative discussions between key organisations at national and local levels.

Evaluating impact

There is a need for further collaborative work to understand how the leadership development process reaches beyond individuals to deliver change in local communities. Leadership development programmes invest in and deliver transformative change in and through individuals but the capacity to make change is enabled or limited by factors beyond individual reach. Understanding the process through which leadership development leads to community change requires further evidence gathering.

Dissemination

There is a need to make the learning from community leadership initiatives widely available – beyond organisations and their funders. This learning should be promoted and showcased.

Key challenges

Roundtable participants identified challenges that are shared by different people and programmes supporting the development of community leadership.

Figure two: Challenges of supporting community leadership development

Resources

Roundtable participants identified potential actions they can take that have limited resource implications – both in their own practice and in sharing their learning with others. However, they also identified the transformative potential of new resources at two levels:

1. As funds made available to local communities for local decision-making and projects.

2. As funding for an enabling infrastructure at the national level.

The latter could be as minimal as resources to facilitate continuing discussions to promote shared learning; but a comprehensive national infrastructure for community leadership development requires long-term, future-focused investment. Although some shared learning can continue with minimal resources, funding brings power into the community leadership space.

Addressing inequalities

Roundtable participants agreed that future community leadership work must avoid reinforcing inequalities within and between communities, and address issues of inequity. This is both a challenge for individual organisations and programmes (ensuring they engage meaningfully with marginalised communities) and a systemic issue which would be an important focus for future cooperation.

Language of community leadership

Roundtable participants agreed that framing their programmes and the work of making a difference in communities as 'leadership' can be problematic. Many participants resist applying the terms 'leadership' or 'leader' to themselves. These terms can be empowering but can also encourage imposter syndrome and discourage participation. The focus for future work should be on supporting people to lead change and shape the national agenda, rather than on a continuing debate to define the concept of community leadership.

System power

Participants in the roundtable discussions recognised their own power as those who are able to contribute to the community leadership discussion and take action in their own context. However, there is a bigger system of influencers and institutions that will need to be challenged to make progress towards the purpose of empowering communities.

Long-term commitment

Developing community leadership takes time – to share learning, build infrastructure and to make a difference at the local level. At the individual level, it is important to nurture individuals over the longer term and to build-in support and techniques to avoid burn-out.

Towards community empowerment

Community leadership initiatives work with individuals to make a difference in local communities through the promotion of community voices, transformative projects, and relationship-building. There was consensus in the roundtable discussions about what such initiatives look like and how they have potential to make a difference. There was also an understanding that this potential can be grown through greater sharing of learning and increased collaboration.

However, important questions remain for further reflection, including:

• How do we ensure that community voices are positioned at the centre of a national system of community leadership support?

• What would such a system look like in practice?

• How would such a system promote collaboration, rather than competitive behaviours?

In spite of such questions, there is a moment to be grasped as the momentum of learning from the CLA can generate new opportunities for taking steps towards a comprehensive approach to community leadership that furthers a shift of power towards communities. This will take courage and resources to develop a space for future collaboration and a community of practice between programmes and initiatives but with community members at its heart.

Appendix: List of participants across thethreeroundtables

1. CEO, Clore Social Leadership
2. Co-chair, Big Local South Bermondsey
3. Community Volunteer (independent)
4. Deputy Director – Policy and Partnerships England, The National Lottery Community Fund
5. Director of Grants, Paul Hamlyn Foundation
6. Head of Research and Learning, Local Trust
7. Head of Services (South), Locality
8. Joint Deputy Director, Equalities & Involvement, People and Communities, NHS England
9. Leadership Development and Training Manager, Community First Yorkshire
10. Our Bigger Story Researcher; CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University/Mandy Wilson Ltd
11. Partnership member, Heston West Big Local
12. Principal Practice Lead, New Local
13. Senior Lecturer, Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, Open University
14. Senior Researcher, Local Trust

In addition, attendees included civil servants in national departments and senior staff from other housing associations, leadership development organisations and funders.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources, and decision-making into the hands of communities. We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

localtrust.org.uk
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About Just Ideas

Just Ideas Sustainable Solutions Ltd. is an independent social consultancy established in 2007, supporting communities, charities, public sector organisations and businesses working towards positive social and environmental change. We believe in supporting people to realise their power and voice. We value connecting people so they can create positive change locally and globally.

www.just-ideas.co.uk

About IVAR

The Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) is a small charity that works with other charities, foundations and public agencies to strengthen communities across the UK through action research. We listen, and learn together with our partners. What makes us distinctive is our unrestricted funding – which enables us to maintain our independence and neutrality, and gives us the freedom to act as a sounding board and thought leader at the interface between charities and their funders.

www.ivar.org.uk
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