

Local Links – developing active networks in local communities

Findings
Informing change

January 2008

Common Purpose piloted 'Local Links' to improve neighbourhood networking, support, skills development and information sharing for local decision-makers and active citizens in four Yorkshire areas. The aim was to assist them to be better informed, empowered and more effective in their community roles.

Key points

- Local Links programmes enhanced networking in local communities. For many participants this was the key benefit – meeting others actively involved in the area, taking opportunities for working together and forging stronger links.
- The programmes built knowledge and improved understanding of the local area and how it works. Participants felt better informed as a result. They also learned the value of diversity within their community, seeing the world through others' eyes and breaking down barriers.
- Participation increased group members' confidence, particularly those less experienced in public meetings. Participants felt more effective and motivated within the community. Less experienced and less confident participants needed support to take part effectively. It was important to try to overcome barriers (language, gender, culture, class, age) to encourage participation from excluded sections of the community.
- Where individuals were unfamiliar with working together, by building up sufficient group identity and trust it was possible to have profound, honest debates about sensitive issues.
- Participants' projects and organisations benefited, by recruiting supporters, providing more volunteering opportunities, improving their profile and promoting services, and increasing collaboration and new sources of support. Local Links was particularly valuable for those new to the area or in a role where local knowledge and networking were important.
- Time and other resources were needed to understand the particular context of each area. Adaptability in response to local need and particular community conditions were vital to the success of the Local Links programme model.

The research

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Background

Senior decision-makers are increasingly well networked at local authority level through governance partnership structures such as Local Strategic Partnerships, health and regeneration boards, business forums and leadership programmes. The advantages are demonstrable: increasing mutual understanding, developing common aims, creating a shared language and establishing trust among partners from diverse backgrounds and sectors.

However, these benefits are not sufficiently available to more locally based decision-makers and active citizens. Hence Common Purpose piloted Local Links programmes in four areas of West Yorkshire to promote active neighbourhood networking and information sharing.

Local Links

The Local Links programmes brought together a diverse group of 14–25 participants in each area, comprising people active in community groups, voluntary sector bodies and businesses, and frontline public-sector workers. The programmes comprised six sessions of three to four hours, each held in a different local venue. The programmes were structured to be non-oppressive, participatory and stimulating, to create a supportive environment with appropriate ground rules (including confidentiality) and the commitment to neither give nor take offence.

The programmes provided opportunities for working together on local issues and projects. They enabled insights and learning using creative, analytical group work based on discussion, observation and listening. Contributions from experts and leaders from key organisations helped to share insights into how the local area worked and, importantly, the degree to which it didn't work.

Local Links provided a forum where those on the front line of local services – users and deliverers – could analyse where power and influence lay and identify where they might intervene and exert influence. Participants were encouraged to value diversity in all its aspects within their community, see the world through

other people's eyes, and break down barriers between 'them and us'.

Importance of local context

Four West Yorkshire areas (Todmorden, Heckmondwike, Shipley and Bradford BD5) were chosen for their different characteristics and diversity. Understanding the local context was crucial for delivering the programme in each area, as it impacted on: initial links with communities, ease of recruitment and access, and building sufficient trust for some groups to engage; the extent to which people were familiar and comfortable with collaborative initiatives; the local political/cultural make-up and levels of community cohesion; willingness to engage in dialogue, discuss difficult issues and plan together; and session content, responding to the level of knowledge and needs within the group.

Benefits of active networks

Stimulating active networks was a key aim of Local Links, helping to unite people and energise them to make networks more productive, worthwhile and sustainable. It was important to communicate the non-threatening nature of the sessions and emphasise that they aimed to build social capital, not create or extend power cliques.

The benefits of the networking opportunities provided included making connections with other participants and their organisations, leading to new opportunities: "...the scouts and the library made a connection and the scouts are now regular users of the library" (Heckmondwike participant). In-kind and reciprocal exchanges which built social capital were encouraged and facilitated: "I see it as a list of people that I can call upon as and when I need to – it's a bit like the old school network" (Heckmondwike participant). Ideas were exchanged and scope for influence increased.

The programmes enabled networks to broaden beyond the immediate group (e.g. opening the use of venues to include young people and minority groups) and gave access to new sources of support and ideas (e.g. through personal contacts and participants' family members). They encouraged neighbourliness, as they sought to break down barriers and improve mutual understanding by enabling the group to get beyond 'turf wars' and 'them and us' impasses, sometimes creating healthy controversy. Local Links also stimulated 'business' between unlikely collaborators. For example, in Shipley the more established community and faith groups provided young people with furniture in exchange for babysitting and gardening.

Community cohesion and diversity

Being located in very different areas, the pilot programmes provided contexts and histories of exclusion resulting from ethnic and cultural divides, as well as barriers to participation. Participant groups largely reflected the majority community in their area, and the degree of confidence within minority communities. Each group was generally diverse in terms of age, gender, length of time working/living in the area, roles (workers/activists/residents), and in representing activities and communities of interest. They also reflected the trends in community activity in the different areas.

However, the programmes encountered significant barriers to participation, in varying degrees according to local context – especially where involvement was sought from Pakistani and other black and minority ethnic groups, pensioners' groups and tenants'/residents' representatives. This may have been because of traditional power, class, age and gender divides within communities as well as perceptions that Local Links groups would comprise the 'usual suspects'. It also related to confidence issues within some communities of interest.

Involvement was difficult regarding 'hard to reach' and 'yet to reach' groups. However, young people's participation (notably in Shipley and Bradford BD5) was highly valued and gave participants opportunities to bridge traditional divides. The role of youth workers and volunteers in encouraging young people to come along, or participating with them, was very significant in overcoming participation barriers.

Controversy and difficult issues

Local Links did not aim to be challenging and uncomfortable, but the diverse perspectives and experiences of the groups made for degrees of uneasiness. However, the resulting turbulence and challenge sparked creative energy leading to action and motivation, and therefore to sustaining active social networks. For example, a heated debate with a local newspaper editor on the role of the media, and a challenge to the 'town team' by a tenants'/residents' representative, led to new communication and dialogue channels. This turbulence and ability to challenge also strengthened participants' confidence and courage.

Excellent to have full-bodied discussions and get some arguments going – I like the sessions most when I get a sense of how much everyone cares (which is a lot). Let's have more controversy and stimulation. (Todmorden participant)

Bridging divides

Local Links adopted varied methods, a diverse curriculum and a range of venues in order to bridge divides. For example, frequent small-group work with participants from different backgrounds overcame the tendency to form cliques. This was especially useful in bringing together young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and older, more experienced community leaders and workers.

Opportunities to experience other people's lives were provided, such as a group visit to social housing in Shipley and visits to youth projects across the area in Bradford. The group visit to City Hall in Bradford brought together parties that did not often meet, while the town centre tour in Shipley broke down myths about vandalism and young people. Older and younger generations worked well together and barriers were overcome. As young participants reported: "I feel I have a lot to say and I will get a chance in future meetings. Also I feel I'm now starting to understand that I can make a difference," and "I now understand a whole range of views from different people."

Knowledge and information

Participants saw great benefit in improved understanding and knowledge of the local area and how it worked. Seeing the bigger picture was key; many cited being 'better informed' and 'better connected' to what was going on, who made decisions, and the key issues in their area.

Some participants were very knowledgeable about local governance structures, while others (both workers and residents) had limited knowledge of the roles of elected members or where local people could exert influence. Enabling rapid learning and 'research' through group tasks and participatory tools such as photography, mapping, ranking and prioritising could identify and analyse a community's key concerns.

Mutual learning strengthened the community voice in two ways, by giving the community information and knowledge needed to influence effectively, and by service providers and other influential people learning directly from the community about local issues.

Sustainable community skills

Building a range of sustainable community skills was a central objective, including boosting local people's confidence and motivation to participate and have a voice. Other skills developed included: giving and receiving support in playing a full part in the community,

thus building social capital; story-telling – memories, experiences and sharing perspectives; and leading beyond authority – looking beyond individuals' roles (workers, officers, volunteers) to build the skills needed for influence and positive change.

Conclusion and recommendations

These pilot programmes were a 'one-off'. Future programmes could be run consecutively over a minimum of three years to establish the 'brand', build momentum and connect cohorts. Local Links would offer most value where it connected with other community initiatives to form part of ongoing capacity-building.

Programme costs would include staff time for recruitment, co-ordination and facilitation; venue hire; participants' travel and care costs; and materials, marketing and administrative costs. Delivery could be shared between organisations undertaking recruitment of participants (e.g. local authorities, partnership bodies, housing associations), and other organisations facilitating and co-ordinating (e.g. training providers).

From the experience of this project, the following recommendations are suggested.

Development and recruitment:

- Consider adequate pre-programme outreach, development and recruitment time, especially in areas with cultural and other divides and a lack of existing networks crossing these divides.
- Make clear marketing material available emphasising networking and mutual support.
- Work alongside intermediary organisations and individuals who can make a vital contribution.
- Use appropriate access/networking routes to recruit participants, including local community workers and other known and trusted contacts.
- Value word of mouth and informal communications.

Participation:

- Encourage participation from excluded sections of the community through buddying, mentoring, 'friendly' venues and appropriate timings.
- Offer subtle support to less confident members.

Design and delivery:

- Vary group sizes (though not less than 12 and not more than 40) depending on the vibrancy and extent of community activities, groups and services.
- Vary the venue and session structure, providing curricular diversity and underscoring being 'outside the box'.
- Provide frequent opportunities for small-group work with different participants.
- Be flexible and sensitive to local issues and needs, designing and adapting the curriculum accordingly.
- Make the experience sociable and fun.
- Value participants' expertise and viewpoints and enable everyone to express them.
- Encourage debate, expression of differing views and challenge; this may make for some 'edgy' sessions needing sensitive facilitation.
- Adopt a responsive, non-oppressive approach, with pastoral care where needed.
- Provide occasions for engaging with representatives of key agencies and other influential community leaders.

About the project

Susie Hay led this action project for Common Purpose, from April 2005 to April 2007, in four West Yorkshire areas: Todmorden (outlying area in Upper Calder Valley), Heckmondwike (market town), Shipley (outer city area) and Bradford BD5 (inner city area). The four programme groups varied in size from 14 to 25. Common Purpose (www.commonpurpose.org.uk) is an international leadership development organisation.

For further information

The full report, **Developing active networks in local communities: A review of Local Links, a pilot programme in West Yorkshire** by Susie Hay, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk. An independent evaluation of this action research project – **An evaluation of Local Links: Reviewing a pilot programme to develop active networks in local communities** by the Icarus Collective – is also available on the JRF website.

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