COMMUNITY LEARNING IN SOUTH READING

The findings and the lessons learnt from community based action research by the Whitley Researchers

Study Higher
Community Learning in South Reading

The booklet was commissioned by Study Higher who asked the Whitley Researchers together with their partners – the University of Reading, to report on the lessons learnt from a range of community based action research projects carried out in South Reading.

Study Higher is a national collaborative network of higher education providers who work together to deliver outreach activities to young people, informing them about their future educational opportunities.

YES WE CAN

INTRODUCTION

This booklet describes the aims for each research project, how we carried out the research, the results and the lessons learnt. We hope it may assist other community practitioners who are seeking to develop a more participatory and community-led approach to working in deprived neighbourhoods.

We provide a socio-economic profile of South Reading that synthesises existing qualitative and quantitative research data from the Whitley Researchers and other sources. The Whitley Researchers is a participatory action research partnership between the Whitley Community Development Association, local residents and the University of Reading. It engages and involves communities in conducting their own research.

We believe that communities should devise their own solutions to local issues. Knowledge generation is therefore located at community level and not just in an academic or policy domain. Where solutions for local communities are identified from the top-down, they often fail to engage the local residents and so leave the community little changed.

Community research is also an exercise in partnership and communications – it enhances the sharing of knowledge across and beyond local communities. Through the use of participatory methods we hope to empower residents in South Reading to identify recommendations in collaboration with schools, partners and policy makers.

CONTENTS

OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

The primary focus is on two wards within South Reading – Whitley and Church. Whitley and Church wards are often described as the most deprived wards in Reading, and parts of them even rank amongst the 10% most deprived areas in the country – particularly in the domains of education, skills and training, income and employment. The label of 'socio-economic deprivation' is applied on the basis of statistics such as those produced in Reading Borough Council's 'Whitley Ward Profile,' in its Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and in nation-wide school league tables. For example:

- 15.2% of Whitley's working age population claim benefits compared with 9.6% claiming benefits across Reading as a whole.

- 28% of Whitley residents are qualified to NVQ level 3 or above compared to 48.2% holding this qualification or higher Reading-wide. 30.4% of working age people have no formal qualifications, and of those who are employed, twice as many as in other wards are engaged in lower paid manual labour.

31.6% of Whitley Ward's children are said to be at risk of living in poverty compared to an average of 18.7% in Reading as a whole. 37.4% claim free school meals compared to 22.1% in Reading as a whole.

- South Reading's main secondary school, John Madejski Academy (JMA), has the highest number of pupils eligible for the pupil premium in the whole of Reading (pupil premiums can be claimed by schools to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils): 53.9% of JMA pupils are eligible for this premium compared to 28.4% of pupils Reading-wide.

A group of residents from the Whitley Community Development Association prepared a Community Plan in 2015 in which they described their community as follows:

"Whitley is a geographical community located in the RG2 post code area north of the M4 and east of the A33. The area is mainly residential but has some light industrial sites situated on its western side between Basingstoke Road and the A33 which historically provided the main source of employment for the community. The proximity of the main roads out of Reading leads to many jokes about people living here because it's easy to get away and to estate agents often omitting reference to Whitley and simply referring to the area as 'south of Reading town centre with easy access to the motorway'. It is an area with a bad reputation".

An added quote from a resident states: "Whitley is a vibrant and growing community with huge potential to achieve for itself. With a single voice and community cohesion Whitley will continue to grow and challenge old stereotypes".

This is the community within which the research was to be embedded and, evident from the quotes above, a community stigmatised but with the pluck to challenge its branding, a strong community spirit and ambition to community betterment.

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OUR ETHOS AND APPROACH TO CHANGE

To step with positive intentions into South Reading or localities like it, is to confront – if you intend to work with and not for the people who live there, firstly your own notions of why South Reading is what it is and secondly what do you do that by-passes the overwhelming top-down verdict of deficiency; almost always described in quantitative statistical terms.

This paper presents some conclusions and some advice – culled from a grounded practice – that may help to steer a more constructive and less stigma-laden pathway. As Whitley Researchers, we follow a path that weaves between the trawling investigators who haul in data and take their catch away with them and those canvassers who collect subjective opinions only – what it feels like and not necessarily what it is like.

Our way emphasises a collective style, face-to-face with local residents, sharing a common project and a project the dimensions of which are planned at the outset with those set to benefit from the difference it makes.

We build knowledge generation by careful research using the skills, implicit knowledge and concerns of those who live in the everyday realities of disadvantage or deprivation or discrimination. This is a grounded, participatory approach that employs local residents as researchers who – supported and trained – are the genesis of the research project from beginning to its end. The end is a commitment to implement the research recommendations in and with those communities or groups who produced them in the first place.

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OUR RESEARCH PROJECTS

We present summaries of our several research projects preceded by some prior considerations – the foundations that provide a sound base for conducting community based research:

- Know your community – what it looks like and what if feels like but mostly who are the people you will work with and engage.

- Build local relationships prior to any research – who is likely to be interested and how will they benefit from participating in the research.

- What are the local issues or concerns – develop skills in turning private anxieties into public and collective responses.

- What assets and capabilities are there locally – the skills, experiences and knowledge of residents of all ages.

- Engage with participatory and innovative research methods and activities that are co-produced with local communities.

- Take time – most effective research will depend upon some prior periods of preparation, consultation and negotiation.

- Ensure that the research team are local residents mostly – a core group perhaps with intermittent involvement.

- What are the plans, if any, for the locality – who are the statutory agencies and key voluntary groups and how engaged or effective are they. All collaboration is welcome, lending momentum to the movement. Some funders may be only too willing to link into resident-led initiatives.

- Be open minded about the research content at the outset – engage local interest and participation as early as can be managed; build local ownership before any plans are finalised.

THE TRANSPORT RESEARCH

What we learnt 💡

'Working better with Whitley – exploring the everyday transport needs and experiences of local communities in South Reading' - University of Reading and the Whitley Community Development Association, 2015.

This was a twelve month participatory action research project that aimed to explore the everyday travel needs and experiences of communities in the Whitley area. It focused on the central role that mobility plays in connecting people to the places they need and, equally importantly, the places they aspire/want to go to.

This concern came out of earlier door-to-door contact with local residents. There was some scepticism about concentrating on community mobility needs – after all, people said we have a very good public bus service.

However, it became clear that affordable, accessible and time-efficient mobility was of paramount concern to a variety of people. These included isolated residents who perhaps suffered from anxiety; residents on low incomes and people without a car. Also families with more than one child or with children in schools outside of Whitley – and especially if parents, particularly women, were needing to manage drop off in more than one school, or manage a school run and caring responsibilities or a journey to work in the morning. Anyone needing to get across town rather than into the town centre (for example, the trip to hospital or to Reading College) also found the public transport system time consuming and expensive. It could be observed that the life of many South Reading residents was restricted to their immediate locality, with the cost and inflexibility of transport being one of the contributory factors.

- Best not to take immediate or hasty responses too seriously. Consider what local people say and check it out with more formal research using research questions that everyone agrees with (agreeing these research questions is a time consuming, reflective process of great importance).

- The data collection process is ideally carried out by local researchers. People find it easier to talk to others 'like themselves', and more openness is gained when having locals interview one another.

- The research process provides opportunity to advertise the home agency and its aims to the population intended to benefit from it.

- Door knocking has value. Particular geographical areas can be targeted but, for unbiased data, the selection of specific households to interview within that area needs to be randomised. Allowing local researchers to work in pairs boosts their confidence as well as keeping them safer.

- This research process enables the local research group to gain a greater understanding of the subject under discussion, especially where post-research discussion and reflection on the findings is scheduled in. (Although expert help may be required for accurate and efficient data analysis, the findings still need to be reflected on as a group and consensus built regarding the take-away conclusions).

- Having a steering group of representatives of relevant organisations is a major priority – for instance, for our transport survey, the presence of Reading Bus Company's Chief Executive proved crucial in implementing one of the research recommendations (a change in certain bus routes). Readibus also provided support for the project.
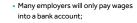
FINANCIAL EXCLUSION

Local discussions and plans for a credit union or community bank led to proposals for research focused on financial exclusion. The research considered more than household debt or loan shark activity locally; it was also about access to ATMs and local bank facilities. People felt stigmatised as Whitley residents; their local address impacting their chances of accessing credit.
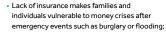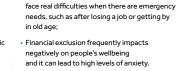
The financial problems identified included:

- Not being able to get an affordable loan, leaving people to borrow from high interest money lenders;

- Many employers will only pay wages into a bank account;

- Not having a bank account with direct debit excludes people from this method of paying bills. Most utility suppliers such as gas, electric and water charge more for using other methods of payment such as pre-payment meters;

- Lack of insurance makes families and individuals vulnerable to money crises after emergency events such as burglary or flooding;

- Not being able to save regularly means people face real difficulties when there are emergency needs, such as after losing a job or getting by in old age;

- Financial exclusion frequently impacts negatively on people's wellbeing and it can lead to high levels of anxiety.

What we learnt

- Local issues all too often are tied to national policy concerns or government legislation – at ground level residents will respond to local crises (e.g. low income and lack of access to essentials can be counteracted with food banks) but local activity cannot replace or make up for national policies, for instance, in ending several years of harsh austerity measures.

- Starting small and growing is better than taking on too ambitious a project too early. Good research can help people to avoid overloading enthusiastic participants with unmanageable or unrealistic tasks.

- Allies and partners are essential when conducting high priority research programmes but not all partners or agencies are best placed to assist – they may, for instance, have their own problems of resources, service effectiveness or staff concerns. It is therefore, prudent to try to ensure that those agencies who wish to be involved can meet the obligations associated with being research partners.

- Just because people are in trouble doesn't mean they want outsider advice! Change in practice mostly comes about through people making their own experiences. However, nearly everyone agrees that school help is needed to teach new pathways to the upcoming generation and young people themselves were found to be more open to instruction than others.

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BUILDING BETTER OPPORTUNITIES
The Stronger Together Partnership

This project considered barriers to employment faced by the unemployed. The Whitley Researchers in partnership with the University of Reading were commissioned to undertake this research project to support a successful £1.3 million bid by the Stronger Together Partnership to the Big Lottery and European Social Fund. From its commissioning in late February 2017, 100 interviews were conducted with unemployed residents in South Reading and the final report was published five weeks later on the 17th March.

We adopted a three-word framework for our recommendations: (1) EASE: facilitate solutions by working with existing provision and enabling services to make effective use of one another and of research data to better address needs (for example, having an effective referral system between agencies); (2) ENABLE: helping people to help themselves, for instance through the support networks identified in the research. Many of the unemployed that we interviewed simply did not know where to go for help, and of those who did, personalised (tailored) support was appreciated; (3) EMPOWER: strengthen people, agencies and organisations to acquire a sense of agency and to target support and activity to where it is most needed. Building confidence, skills, experience and knowledge of one's own strengths was seen by the unemployed to be key to progress.

What we learnt 💡

- Properly planned and organised research can be productive in short time frames – from conception to completion this project was little more than four weeks long.

- Assisting other partner agencies to make effective use of the research findings should be a priority in that partners may welcome a research initiative but be less capable or willing to implement the findings and recommendations. Perhaps a pre-research plan to action may be helpful – ensuring that the research directly informs change, with change being worked in as the end product of the research.

- Some agencies who formally lend support to a research activity e.g. allowing interviews with unemployed clients, may nevertheless be sensitive about hearing how their own staff respond to client's needs.

GREAT PLACES
Reading Place of Culture

Reading was the recipient of a £550k Great Place Scheme award to help put arts, culture and heritage at the heart of the town and pilot innovative approaches to enable cultural and community groups to work more closely together. The three-year programme (2018-20), funded by Heritage Lottery funds, Arts Council England and Historic England, aims to enhance Reading's cultural offer, help ease economic growth and improve the quality of life for people in Reading.

The Whitley Researchers via its partnership with the University of Reading, Reading Borough Council and Reading UK CIC are helping support the research and evaluation strand of the arts and cultural commissioning programmes and assist with events to engage local residents and agencies to enable participation. In Year One, this engagement took varied forms – for instance, offering administrative support, taking on facilitator roles in Great Places community events and exploring people's ideas of key themes such as art or culture through research projects that involved University of Reading interns.

It was found that some social groups (the well-connected, better-off sort) tend to find their way into cultural events no problem, and others (the less well-off and less well connected) rarely make them at all. Many in this group do not even think about going to such things. When asked, this group does however express an interest in hands-on, child-friendly events. They are likely to need some kind of personal connection to draw them in, as well as very low-cost barriers to entry. A 'participatory approach' involves developing a cultural activity with the local people, not just asking people what they want and putting it on for them (in which case, attendance is likely to be low). Moreover, most wellbeing advantage is gained from hands-on cultural activities – activities that help neighbours build their social connections with one another and achieve some creative expression for themselves.

What we learnt 💡

- There may be differences of style that conflict with the community researcher ethos – this latter is very grounded and bottom-up in approach but some organisations may adopt more of a top-down slant. Ways forward could include sharing appropriate roles best suited to each partner or adopting activities that are more open to local or community influence.

- Another issue might be associated with balance or distribution of power – for instance, in making key decisions. Partnerships may share membership but the 'membership' may not be fully represented when issues of resource or style are decided upon in some commanding group or forum.

- The interaction between University interns and the local community can be informative for both parties; the familiarisation aids understanding and access between the two.

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ASPIRATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN WHITLEY

Improving the collaboration between schools, families and the community.

Reading Borough Council's Housing Services commissioned the aspiration research with the University of Reading and the Whitley Researchers. The project was backed by the Whitley for Real partnership – a collaborative group of service agencies and community groups aiming to strengthen the 'local voice'. A significant contribution was also made by Study Higher, which enabled us to extend the project to consider aspirations for and barriers to higher education in South Reading.

The project began in March 2017 and completed with publication of its final reports in September 2018 (the Aspiration report) and March 2019 (the report for Study Higher).

This was an outstanding research project in many respects including:

- Focus on young people as researchers playing a lead role in the project's activities and events.

- An innovative style that used a range of events and methods to encourage interest, engagement and responsiveness –e.g. building a 'home' out of 1500 giant lego blocks, holding a community panel event where young people questioned service providers and community groups about their contribution to raising aspiration locally, and examining barriers and boosts to aspiration using a 'snakes and ladders' board game devised mainly by a young researchers team at the John Madejski Academy,

- An accommodating research invite that extended its investigations to parents, teachers, community representatives and other young people. It was possible to pinpoint where these different groups were on the same page, and where they were seeing things differently. It is at these points of difference that communication and mediation can be helpful. They help to identify where new pathways might be opened up.

- The project was enriched by having a highly supportive and active partnership of local community practitioners and service staff – the Whitley for Real partnership.

- Attitudes to learning are seen as real barriers to school performance and therefore to ongoing aspiration. However, we could witness the attitudes of the young people changing as the project progressed, with increasing confidence, ability to pinpoint problems, expression of opinions and problem solving.

What we learnt 💡

- Community research is an inclusive and participatory activity – those who are the focus of the research could equally be those who conduct the research.

- A community and university alliance offers deep reach into a community and can be equally powerful in activating university support, validation and engagement.

- Innovation counts – it may be a risky, messy or non-traditional event or process, such as developing the aspiration game, but doing research differently where appropriate can unlock responsiveness and excite engagement and participation.

- Having a strong team is vital – leadership, organisation, a range of skills, enthusiasm and team based respect and openness will ensure the research meets its commissioning remit.

It also allows for diversions and exploring side issues or related attractive options. The importance of developing soft skills in all this should not be overlooked. Keeping a team together, especially when cooperation is a sensitive issue and trust is low, takes a lot of time and talking through problems. Core members who are willing to put themselves out for other people are essential to keeping everyone investing in the team.

- Doing research is not the prerogative of the 'academic' – we are all 'researchers' when it comes to making choices or seeking answers. Adding a more formal approach to exploring local community issues or concerns can be hugely empowering and – with a commitment to action – lead to internal building up as well as external change.

- It is possible to learn from what does not work as well as from what does. For example, young

people have not necessarily responded well to offers of events that are 'put on' for them but they were interested in shaping events for themselves. Their own confidence and thinking patterns are changed by the 'doing' and by having their say.

- Starting small and growing is appropriate. More people come on board as a project shows promise, and progressively more ambitious projects can be tackled as experience is built up. This building of confidence is essential as success can be a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more people who believe in the project and step up to collaborate with it, the more likely it is to succeed. Networking and bringing more people on board is an essential part of the process. Being ready to change as you go along and keeping everyone well informed (people do not necessarily 'get' the vision all at once) is essential to building these collaborative networks.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Community based research helps shift the generation of knowledge from university to neighbourhood locales – not without university assistance and validation but a step towards recognising the implications of a grounded approach to research; particularly when it comes to turning recommendations into actions in local deprived or working-class communities.

Participatory action research helps bolster the voice of those previously disregarded. Grenfell examples what happens when 'ordinary' people's concerns are not heard or are ignored. Having a sound and credible base of evidence presented formally within and outside of a community could make a significant difference to the security and well-being of those who experience first-hand the failures of those responsible for services or facilities.

Our research often highlights the expressed needs of those who are seen as feckless or apathetic – 'we know best' still reigns as the dominant view of those who 'serve' communities. This view reinforces the dependence of communities on providers or disables the felt capacity of local residents to take action. Only picking up on what is lacking instead of identifying and developing assets reinforces stigma and misses opportunities. A community's assets depend on that community's people, and lasting change has everything to do with the way people interact with one another. Building connections and trust between people increases the capacity of the community to collaborate and to develop its assets. Participatory research helps build a renewed sense of agency on the part of those previously regarded as 'helpless'. With capacity to act comes confidence and a spirit to see the change and make it happen.

Research conducted by local residents has, in our experience, focused on the felt issues that affect everyday life or hinder the capacity to get by – the direction the research takes is kept under local control. One consequence is a questioning of the quality and effectiveness of neighbourhood services whether social, housing, educational or transport. Many service providers struggle to meet their responsibilities in a climate of austerity and, with inequalities already so entrenched, it is the people with the least alternatives who suffer the most. This raises horizons of awareness beyond the local to wider policy failures.

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whitley-cda.org/projects/whitley-researchers