Local Trust | Big Local

Doing it ourselves

A report from the
'Making Change Happen'
Big Local Networking and Learning
event on community research

This workshop was run on April 12th 2016 at the University of Reading with their kind support and in cooperation with Whitley Big Local. The event was organized and facilitated by Community Environment Associates (CEA).

University of Reading

Community Environment Associates

'Doing it ourselves' - A report from the 'Making Change Happen'

Big Local Networking and Learning event

1.   About the event

Increasing interest in community research from Big Local areas and a number of different approaches and initiatives within the programme encouraged us to organise this workshop to consider the opportunities that research can offer communities, as well as the challenges it raises. Big Local is about creating positive change within communities: if we are to know that people's lives and the areas that they live in are indeed changing, we need to gather evidence.

 This will be increasingly important as Big Local Partnerships seek support from other organisations and as they look beyond their 10-year funding period. Big Local is also about building skills within the community. Developing the skills and capacity to carry out research will be valuable to any Partnerships, and working with a university or college can support areas in acquiring these skills.

The event was held at Reading University (UoR) on April 12th 2016. Eight Big Local areas took part. The aim was to look at how Big Local Partnerships (BLPs) can work well with universities and colleges to build local skills and do research. There was also discussion about how (BLPs) can work to improve local transport connections – this had been the focus for local research.

 We chose UoR as our venue because Whitley Big Local is nearby and the Partnership have worked with the University over the last 18 months on a very successful project on transport needs in the area. Local people received training on how to do research interviews and run meetings and they have set up their own 'Whitley Researchers' group. Their first report on local transport issues is available here:

http://localtrust.org.uk/assets/images/uploads/Whitley_Report_25.09.2015_FINAL_VERSION.pdf You can also read a short blog post about this project on Local Trust' website.

Almost no-one from Whitley had been to the University before the start of this project, and now they have developed strong links. At the event, other Big Local areas also shared about how they work with colleges and universities and their experience of community research.

The central purposes of the day were to share the experiences of Whitley, to hear from other Big Local areas, to understand the benefits of community research and the problems, and to suggest ways in which any Big Local area could go forward.

2. Community research: what it is and how it can help Big Local areas

There was a lot of shared recognition of the benefits of research and work with universities. Good research reveals real needs, is user-focused and inclusive and helps with effective planning. |It shows if and how we are making a difference.

But this may not be easy. Several problems were identified at the start:

- Communities and colleges / universities have different ways of working and may work at different speeds and time-scales;
- Both partners may have different expectations and wants from the work;
- There may be a lack of confidence, skills and capacity in a BL area when it comes to doing research, and academics may not have the skills or experience needed to train local people as researchers;
- It may not be clear who is 'driving' the work.

Sorting this out may be very time-consuming and will need a lot of discussion before any research work starts. It is also the case that many Big Local areas may not have academic researchers located nearby and may need to work harder to find potential partners. Some Big Local areas lack a suitable centre or hub in their area from which to run a programme involving local people as researchers.

The concept of 'research' and 'action research' was questioned – what does it mean? Discussion led to agreement that this is (for Big Local) about:

- The systematic gathering of information
- Analysing that information
- Sharing it with the community and putting it to use.

The workshop then heard from various case studies and discussed the issues that came from them. The main presentation was by four members of the 'Whitley Researchers'.

3.   The Whitley story

Sonia Duval, Mo McSevney, Daniel Mitchell, Danni Dorn and Sally Lloyd-Evans presented their work as members of the Whitley Researchers' group. The presentation slides are in Appendix 1.

Whitley Big Local in Reading has since 2014 been developing Participatory Action Research as a partnership between the Big Local and the University of Reading (UoR). Local people have done training to give them the skills to do effective research for themselves.

This has been about 'Collective Action', working and learning together, and 'Research by ourselves for ourselves'.   This first project was about exploring transport needs and the experiences of local families.

The 'Whitley Researchers' - as they are now known - started in May 2014 and is a partnership that includes UoR students and interns, local schools, residents and community groups, with around 20 people involved. Initially 6 local residents were employed on a 'living wage' salary to undertake research, alongside undergraduate students and volunteers.

At the centre of this work is the idea that communities "just know things". Core information about low car use and other social issues was readily available, but the researchers explored the everyday travel needs and experiences of communities in Whitley and identified several transport barriers.

They worked with local people to survey the community, get over 500 questionnaires completed; they carried out 30 qualitative interviews with community organisations/public sector institutions and ran 5 focus groups.

The full conclusions are in the Appendix, but the core findings are about the importance of being connected and mobile. Too many families are facing transport barriers that have widespread impacts on their everyday lives.

The community is now working with Reading buses and the 'Readibus' service to get better local services (see p. 11 in Appendix 1) with re-routing of services through the estate.

The Whitley Researchers are continuing their work and are now doing research on Financial Exclusion in the area, while Whitley Community Development Association (WCDA)are developing a Community Training Programme with UoR.

The discussion following Whitley's presentation focused on some specific points:

What was the response rate and how did the team achieve it? The aim was to get at least 500 responses from an area of 4000 residents and work continued until this was achieved. It was all

done through face-to-face contacts e.g. door-knocking, at local supermarkets, at bus stops, via social clubs and resident's groups, Mums and Toddlers, sports centres etc. The researchers were careful about seeking to involve a representative sample of the local community.

How did the team address logistical issues around getting community researchers on board? The process wasn't easy and took time. Part-time posts, paid by the hour, were advertised in the local paper. Reading Voluntary Action helped with organisational matters such as payment and insurance issues early on, before the group decided to set up the WCDA.

Was there ever a plan to set up a local transport social enterprise? The aim of the research was to highlight and address unmet transport needs in the most cost effective way. The team found that making small changes to existing provision (e.g. bus routes) would be a good first step but there are other recommendations for future community initiatives in the report.

To what extent was UoR a catalyst for the success of the project? The project was driven by local residents. The University provided a neutral space and an enabling role but 'every single idea, the inspiration and influence all originated from the people in Whitley.' However, the advice given to the Whitley group to contact Dr Sally Lloyd-Evans at the University was a turning point and described as 'hitting the jackpot'. Finding a friendly academic proved crucial to Whitley's experience of participatory engagement work.

How did they feed back to the local community? This is a crucial aspect. There was the project report, stories in the 'Whitley Way' free community newspaper, and local engagement activities. Information was circulated through WCDA, Whitley Travels (offering trips out of the area), and the social club and café, which has become a central hub of the team's activities.

4.   What is happening in other Big Local areas

Four other Big Local areas talked about research activities and experiences in their area, highlighting different approaches and challenges.

SO18 Big Local (Southampton): developing new partnerships with local institutions

Barbara Hancock from SO18 talked about how they had worked with academia and how it helped them develop links with other institutions. University funded programmes usually have to demonstrate 'public benefit' so there are opportunities here for Big Local areas. SO18 was involved in a one-off Green Space project with Southampton University, but they encountered a few issues. Two students collaborated with the community, but they had a few problems (e.g. lack of commitment, uncompleted assignments) and there were difficulties in negotiating between different expectations from SO18 and the university, in terms of the rigorousness of

the research. SO18 is still trying to maintain contacts with the University, but a barrier remains in finding the appropriate access points. This work, however, had an important spinoff. SO18 was able to develop a good relationship with the City Council, as staff appeared to take the Partnership more seriously because of their involvement with the University, and they came to meetings for the first time. While the project on green spaces involved research, there was also an element of campaigning.

On the transport issue, Southampton is very different from Reading. There is fragmentation arising from privatised and competitive services, as well as bus cuts. While routes through the city centre are well-serviced, there is little provision elsewhere. SO18 is in contact with several of the companies and this has led to improved dialogue and an agreement to fit some services better around school hours. SO18 has been actively involved in circulating new timetables around the local community ('use it or lose it') and celebrated with a bus -shaped cake.

St Peter's & the Moors Big Local (SPTMBL), Cheltenham: focusing on engagement

Naif Pierre and Georgina Balfour talked about the Big Local area's work with the University of Gloucestershire. The university campus lies within the Big Local area so this proximity has played an important role. For the community it has been a gradual learning process, as they built a relationship with the University. In St Peter's & the Moors, the collaboration with the university went beyond just community research and focused on involving students in a range of activities that could help the community. The University has a 'DegreePlus Programme' and student volunteering opportunities which emphasise the importance of community engagement.

Initial work around a Community Allotment was quite slow, but since then SPTMBL have worked with students on a range of courses including Landscape Architecture, Community & Social Care and Geography. The Degree plus programme means that students do 30 hour and 70 hours placements with local projects. Similar projects exist in many universities. Once SPTMBL worked out how to make best use of this programme, the students have been very helpful. There is also now an Arts Action Group which is a partnership between the Big Local area, the Hardwick art Gallery at the university and local residents.

They identified some clear benefits such as:
- Fresh insights into delivering our outcomes
- Adding capacity and resources to our programmes
- Accessing Students who are residents in the Big Local area

There are also some learning points:

- Community buy-in & community leadership is key – developing this is an important part of the process with its own long-term benefits
- Setting clear and limited goals that will have impact within a module timespan
- Big Local needs the capacity to work with student volunteers (supervision and mentoring, policies and procedures)

Fratton BL, Portsmouth: a pop-up University

Sonia Vidal from Fratton Big Local explained how there are a lot of students in Fratton and the Partnership has engaged with Portsmouth University. The relationship is at an early stage but 'pop-up' events have been a starting point. University researchers have done presentations aimed at the community about their issues where these may be relevant or of interest to local people. These included work on dementia, ageing and gender issues.

Hackney Wick BL, East London: DIY community research

Polly Mann talked about Hackney Wick's experience. The community has no direct connections with a local university, but community research on local issues is something that the partnership wants to do. They are working on training local residents to collect information but there is a barrier in that people don't see themselves as 'researchers'. There is concern about having the word 'research' in a project title.

The Partnership have trained eight local researchers and are offering accreditation for the training. They have also run interactive sessions, pop-up events, and developed visual aids. They have trained several young people as peer mentors, but it has been hard to engage them, even though money has been allocated to pay them for undergoing training. Hackney Wick's DIY research team has started data collection in January 2016 and will launch the first results of their project in April 2016.

5.   Making change happen

Success – what does it mean?

A discussion session considered what is needed for conducting community research, what constitutes 'success' and how to make partnerships work.

Collaboration with a university or college is a different way forward for Big Local groups and quite different to partnership acting independently and conducting their own research, although there is value in different approaches.

The success factors will / may include:
•   Ownership by the community and empowering local people
•   Good research plans with clear objectives and specific outcomes
•   Good communication and feedback
•   Getting the right students into the right community projects – ideally they should be incentivised / motivated to help design projects
•   Being able to share ideas and results with other groups and organisations
•   Finding other centres / organisations to work with e.g. schools

There has to be a willingness on both sides – academia and Big Local areas - to work in partnership. This means being clear about long-term motivations at the start, and there must be time for supportive learning and reflection about what has been done. In community research, academics become 'activists' as community activists develop as researchers).

Different places, different people
Working styles will differ between universities, colleges and community groups. Acknowledging this factor, small group discussion considered two key questions.
• How do we start a relationship with academia?
• What can both academics and communities do to work well together?
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Starting a relationship
Some key points:
• Find out if there is a University 'point of contact' for community work (such as a 'Science Shop' or 'Participation Hubs').

- Look at what is already happening in universities near you, in terms of outreach, volunteering, or community engagement. You can access some of this information through the university's website.
- The Student Union may have a Community Officer who can help.
- Finding a key contact person is important, as is being clear on what s/he is looking to do
- Reputation building and trust takes time and can't be hurried
- If looking to work with schools and colleges, build links with teachers, parent governors, and management e.g. through school assemblies

Things to consider:

- Different stakeholders e.g. academics have other tasks and priorities and may work at a different pace
- Big Local areas might want to start considering how to develop processes and policies (e.g. on health and safety, safeguarding) as they start building relationships with universities and other stakeholders. Without these it may be difficult for other stakeholders to engage with Big Local groups.

It will take time to understand the organisational structures and 'ways in'. For example you may work with:

a)   an individual academic researcher or research director

b)   people with a responsibility to engage with the local community

c)   the Students Union and community-orientated societies

Each constituency is different and people won't necessarily know each other. Each will have their own reasons for engaging e.g. an academic researcher might be interested in writing a paper or in training for students, while a professional with a community contact role may be responding to a funder's requirements or liaising on aspects of student behaviour. Communication has to happen with all 3 categories as there is no automatic link between them, and issues of high turnover have to be considered. For example, student unions change their officers every year.

Working well together

Once you've found the way in there are other issues to consider to build a good relationship:

- Building a link with a university will take time and ongoing effort from both sides
- using participatory research to focus on shared interests can help build strong collaborations
- University staff may have access to professional networks where community involvement issues can be raised and information shared
- UoR is launching a Participation Hub – your university may have something similar

- Keep your contacts informed (mailings, social media etc.) as you develop even if you're not working actively together
- Consider when planning local events / activities how you might engage with local students

Nationally

This is an issue for Big Local at a national level:

- Is there scope for an 'academic Friends of Big Local' network?
- If you are working on research use the Local Trust new Facebook platform. Write up your project story/share experiences - www.facebook.com/groups/biglocalresearch/
- Local Trust's website has a library, where we save research studies on Big Local , guidance notes and ideas for research evaluation tools

What help would be useful?

- Some sort of cost calculator and/ or guidance related to issues such as production of leaflets, reports, cost of running a payroll, cost of DBS checks
- Guidance on what works can be carried out by volunteers and what should be paid for
- The stories and experiences from other Big Local projects, e.g. a searchable list
- Peer guidance from those already doing this
- A set of questions to ask at the start of a proposed project (Purpose, Position, Ethics)
- Health and safety guidance for Big Local groups
- Templates for Monitoring and Evaluation, Risk Assessments, different options for Quality Standards to help learning and cut administration time. But these need to be flexible and non-prescriptive.

This report was prepared by Chris Church and Jan McHarry of Community Environment Associates based on presentations at the event and records of the discussions. For more information or to comment contact: chrischurch@cooptel. net

Appendix: The 'Whitley Researchers' presentation

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COMMUNITIES "JUST KNOW THINGS"

- Population of 12,000; 4400 households (youthful)
- No car – 30% households
- 30% no formal education
- Multiple levels of deprivation
- Social housing
- Concentration of lone-parents with long-term health problems
- Focus for planners, public services and police but declining services
- Stigmatised

LIMITLESS POTENTIAL | LIMITLESS OPPORTUNITIES | LIMITLESS IMPACT

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'WHITLEY RESEARCHERS'

- Started in May 2014
- Partnership between UoR students and interns; local schools; residents; community groups
- Employed 6 local residents on living wage to undertake research with undergraduate students; volunteers
- Team of around 20

£1 million project to improve community transport in Whitley

Community Transport Research Project in Whitley brings community together

Community transport research project in Whitley

Whitley Big Local Community Project

LIMITLESS POTENTIAL | LIMITLESS OPPORTUNITIES | LIMITLESS IMPACT

University of Reading

OUR RESEARCH

- explore the everyday travel needs and experiences of communities in Whitley, and identify transport barriers
- building skills; working together; making things happen

    - Questionnaire to 500+
    - 30 qualitative interviews with community organisations/public sector institutions
   - 5 focus groups

LIMITLESS POTENTIAL | LIMITLESS OPPORTUNITIES | LIMITLESS IMPACT

A BETTER CONNECTED WHITLEY

- Our research tells a story about the importance of being connected and mobile

- Too many families are facing transport barriers that have widespread impacts on their everyday lives...

- Mobility itself is at the heart of tackling the issues of deprivation, isolation and social exclusion that are frequently associated with Whitley

- Transport and mobility play important roles in order to help individuals and families access and connect to education, work, social and life-enhancing activities

- Connecting school children and families to new places and experiences enhances lives

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"I have to take Mum shopping to Morrison's, I have to walk to hers, then get a bus to the top, then change buses, we can't carry much and I'm exhausted by the time I get home...I have to go again by myself as I have to carry Mum's bags". (Focus Group 1)

Where do people go?
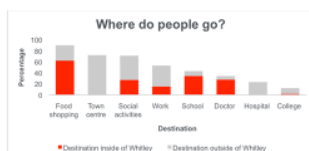
"taking shopping over two buses is prohibitive"

69% CURRENTLY DO THEIR FOOD SHOP IN WHITLEY (BUT NOT ALWAYS BY CHOICE...)

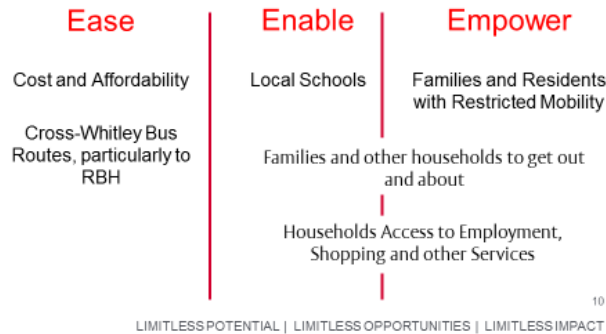LIMITLESS POTENTIAL | LIMITLESS OPPORTUNITIES | LIMITLESS IMPACT

Mobility Needs and Barriers: Transport

Mobility Needs and Barriers: Shopping and Food

Mobility Needs and Barriers: Social and Leisure

Mobility Needs and Barriers: Education, Employment and Health

Mobility Needs and Barriers: Real and Perceived Fears about Safety and Lack of Travelling Experience

'WORKING BETTER WITH WHITLEY: RECOMMENDATIONS

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Ease	Enable	Empower
Cost and Affordability	Local Schools	Families and Residents with Restricted Mobility
Cross-Whitley Bus Routes, particularly to RBH	Families and other households to get out and about	
	Households Access to Employment, Shopping and other Services	

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LIMITLESS POTENTIAL | LIMITLESS OPPORTUNITIES | LIMITLESS IMPACT

WORKING WITH READING BUSES AND READIBUS

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- "Public transport in Whitley is radial, rather than lateral"
  (Stakeholder Interview)

- 1/4 families do not have a car (ONS,11)
- Public transport is the main method of getting out and about
- Changing the No. 9 bus
- Reduced fares in school hours
- Community transport hub and bus buddies
- Schools Programme
- Community Coordinator

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LIMITLESS POTENTIAL | LIMITLESS OPPORTUNITIES | LIMITLESS IMPACT

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WORKING WITH SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

- WCDA to fund trips and outings:
  - All primary schools - Year 6 outings to help the transition to secondary school
  - Days trips for families; holiday clubs
  - Community transport hub at cafe – information and support
  - Visits to University of Reading for parents and children to build partnerships and widen access to higher education
  - Work and Training Opportunities

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LIMITLESS POTENTIAL | LIMITLESS OPPORTUNITIES | LIMITLESS IMPACT