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# Building a 'Bigger Society': going beyond the 'usual suspects' in a local community training programme

Peter J Larkham, Michael Hardman, Alister Scott,  
Rachel Curzon and Julian Lamb



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## **Abstract**

This paper critically reflects on a recent training course developed in response to a local authority tender for the support of “community champions”. Initially 10 participants were selected for a 12-week course based in their local community. In such endeavours the emphasis is usually placed on the experiences and social learning from the viewpoint of the participants themselves, and research has rarely focused on the way in which project managers and agencies interact with participants. This paper uses information from meetings, course sessions and individual conversations that builds a narrative revealing how negative perceptions of approach and philosophy towards the course and participants were changed through the social learning embedded into the project. Such findings offer important insights into the real challenges facing the conceptualisation and delivery of the Big Society idea. Although evaluation is at an early stage there is compelling evidence that in order to build the Big Society there is an urgent need to consider the ways in which agencies need to change their approaches, networks and relationships in order to construct meaningful dialogues with their local publics.

**Key words:** Community champions, community engagement, training course, delivery, reflection

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# Building a 'Bigger Society': going beyond the 'usual suspects' in a local community training programme

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## Introduction

The 'big society' is, in contemporary political rhetoric, derived from prime Minister David Cameron's vision of empowered communities, power being redistributed from the state to citizens, set within a culture of voluntarism (Cameron, 2010). On the election of the Coalition government this quickly led to a new policy environment for the voluntary sector (Alcock, 2010). However, this vision was quickly criticised: "Cameron views the active citizen as simply a philanthropist and volunteer rather than as a politically literate individual, knowledgeable about the major political issues of the day and actively involved in debates about how public or private services ought to be run" (Kisby, 2010, p. 484).

Indeed, the 'big society' is not wholly a creation of the Coalition Government. Concepts such as 'active citizenship', 'citizen's charters', 'third way politics' and similar have originated from governments of differing political persuasions, rhetorically seeking to empower communities, from the 1970s and perhaps even earlier. Elements are visible in some actions, particularly at the local level, dating from the previous Labour administration, particularly in seeking to respond to shortcomings as expressed in national data and league tables at a time of austerity following the 2007 financial crisis. If action had to be taken, how was it going to be supported and encouraged? This paper reviews the experience of one such project for which the authors were engaged as consultants; providing a first-hand perspective of how a project developed and survived in these particularly difficult economic circumstances for local government.

This initiative arose as a direct result of poor results in the national 2008 Place Survey. This survey "provides information on people's perceptions of their local area and the local services they receive ... The survey collects information on 18 national indicators (NIs) for local government, used to measure local government performance for 152 county councils, metropolitan district councils, London boroughs and unitary authorities ... [It] was designed primarily for use at the local level" (DCLG, 2009, p. 3). Its primary purpose was "to collect information at local authority level, to inform performance monitoring" (DCLG, 2009, p. 15). Its focus on, and definition of, locality is interesting: "when completing the questionnaire, respondents were asked to consider "local area" as the area within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home" (DCLG, 2009, p. 16).

One district council in the English Midlands<sup>1</sup> felt that the results for one of its wards in particular were sufficiently poor that action was required (Box 1), and it obtained central government funding for a project called "Connecting Communities". The authority "recognises that in order to fully adopt and embed the modernisation and improvement agenda there is a requirement for a dedicated commitment to the empowerment of local communities" (from tender document). The project aimed, amongst other things, to recruit

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1. We are not specifically identifying this local authority; nor the identities of individuals working for the various agencies nor the participants in the programme. Therefore some publications that would otherwise identify the locale are not given full Harvard citations.

Box 1: The issues as identified by the District Council (anonymised, from tender document, February 2010).

As mentioned above, the Place Survey 2008 results indicate that the residents of \*\*\*\*\* District have low perceptions of concepts such as community belonging, involvement in decision making, and participation in regular unpaid or voluntary work. The list below contains four National Indicators measured by the Place Survey, with the CCDC score, the ranking out of the 8 Districts which make up \*\*\*\*\*shire (with eighth being the lowest), and the ranking against all English Councils (from a total of 353, with 1 being the highest).

NI2 – Belong to immediate neighbourhood: 59.8%; 7<sup>th</sup> in \*\*\*\*\*shire; 178<sup>th</sup> in England

NI3 – Involved in decision making in last 12 months: 7.7%; 8<sup>th</sup> in \*\*\*\*\*shire; 352<sup>nd</sup> in England

NI4 – Influencing decision making: 21.5%; 8<sup>th</sup> in \*\*\*\*\*shire; 349<sup>th</sup> in England

NI6 – Regular unpaid help: 17.6%; 8<sup>th</sup> in \*\*\*\*\*shire; 331<sup>st</sup> in England

This ranking illustrates the particular areas of need for \*\*\*\*\* District Council to address in order to implement the shift in emphasis from service users as receivers of services to active participants in shaping their communities. This challenge was also identified by the Corporate Peer Review conducted in March 2009, the recommendations of which noted that \*\*\*\*\* DC should “develop a considered corporate approach to community engagement, empowerment and capacity building rather than the current ad-hoc arrangements”.

With regard to National Indicator 4, further analysis of Place Survey data commissioned by \*\*\*\*\* DC has highlighted that the \*\*\*\*\* ward, located in the town of \*\*\*\*\* in the North of the District, has the lowest proportion of residents who feel able to influence decision making; with only 12% of respondents agreeing that they were able to do so. This is less than half the proportion than the averages for the West Midlands (28%) and England (29%). This issue is further corroborated by results from the “Feeling the Difference” public confidence survey jointly run by \*\*\*\*\*shire Police and \*\*\*\*\* DC, which reported in May 2009 that 64% of respondents in the \*\*\*\*\* locality disagreed that they were able to influence neighbourhood decision making.

\*\*\*\*\* ward also contains a Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) ranked amongst the 13% most deprived in England for multiple deprivation. This LSOA has particular deprivation in the domain of Education and Skills, being categorised within the 2% most deprived nationally. Additional contributory factors include Income, Employment, and Health deprivation.



and develop the capabilities of what were termed “community champions”. The authority identified an officer to oversee the project: this person was the District Council’s PR and Marketing Manager, who had not previously been involved in such projects. There was a project steering group drawn from community agencies and service providers. A project manager was appointed from one of the local voluntary sector agencies. The project tender was advertised in 2010 and we submitted a bid drawing on a range of community engagement experiences. We were interviewed by the steering group, where we discussed in some detail our response to the tender document. Despite some tough questioning our approach was favourably received and we were formally commissioned to provide background research on the issues within the ward, and to develop and deliver a training programme for “community champions”. This paper discusses our reflections on the experience; although we are aware of the potential for bias that this perspective introduces.

### **“Community champions”**

This term was selected for this project by the local authority. It is also used in a proprietorial sense in other contexts (<http://www.communitychampion.org/>) and various communities (geographical, business and other) run schemes, identify, train and promote champions, etc. (see [www.cravendc.gov.uk/communitychampions](http://www.cravendc.gov.uk/communitychampions); [www.tesco.com](http://www.tesco.com) › Home › Greener Tesco). The association of Project Managers, for example, has Community Champions for its “online community”, who are told that “community champions are volunteers who have time to help and guide others as they use the community. The champions are the most active members and set the tone of the community. This is a privileged role...” (<http://www.apm.org.uk/CommunityChampionGuide>, accessed 20 June 2012).

The concept of ‘community champion’ in the context of the present project shifts focus on to the skills and social capital of particular individuals as opposed to communities; and this is an important issue that goes to the heart of individual versus collective social capital discourse (Portes, 1998; Shortall, 2004, although we do not elaborate this point further). This suggests that success has more to do with the presence of individual *animateurs* who have the capacity or authority to “make things happen” rather than the design of any scheme or support network. This pattern can clearly exacerbate spatial inequalities in, for example, the way in which scarce funding and other support is secured and re-secured. Yet how individuals can motivate collective action or stimulate community formation and cohesion is intensely problematic; although this seems to be taken for granted in politically-driven projects such as this.

### **Moving beyond the engagement and disengagement dualism<sup>2</sup>**

The major rationale behind the securing of funding for this project was that residents in this ward were both dissatisfied with local services and disengaged from processes of consultation and change. However, disengagement is a complex phenomenon and hence is likely to require complex solutions. Community engagement (and inevitably individual engagement within this wider picture) is often presented as a natural state of being or universal good, with non- or dis-engagement seen as a personal or social problem. Phillips (2010) criticises such views as leading to dualistic constructions of people and communities. Although such views frame many current popular discourses and policy debates about community, they inadequately reflect the “diversity and complexity of community activity” and “need be re-thought”, not least through recognition that people may “feel that they do not want or need to express a voice about, or to play a role in influencing, what happens in their

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<sup>2</sup> This section draws on an unpublished project rationale written by Alister Scott with Martin Phillips and other collaborators, to whom due acknowledgement is made.

community” (Phillips, 2010, p. 12). A range of studies also suggest that people’s active engagement in ideas and practices of community is far from universal, and indeed might be seen to be regularly undertaken only by a minority (for example, Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Mohan, 2011). Mohan (2011) also highlights the need for a temporal dimension to engagement studies, noting that people ‘dip in and out’ of engagement as personal circumstances, interests and motives change,

In particular, disengagement has been characterized under five dimensions:

- *antagonising*, where people show active resistance to calls for engagement (Proctor, 2006);
- *absenting*, either a passive resistance or a deliberate position of neutrality or non-engagement;
- *‘being’*, either an indifference (cf Simmel, 1908; Bauman, 2002), or what Kraftl (2010) identifies as the ‘simply proximate’ rather than interactive and relational;
- *bestowing*, some active engagement and interaction with others who are co-present within a locality; although the degree of interaction may be quite minimal, a ‘low-level sociability’ (Laurier and Philo, 2006, p. 193)
- *‘communing’* (Crow and Allan, 1994) or *‘encountering’* (Buber, 1947), an emotional or spiritual engagement with community.

In this complex construction, the concept of a disengaged population and a problem ward community is likely to be over-simplistic; and the approach taken by the local authority and BCU team alike could be criticized. Is it realistic to expect to be able to generate higher levels of engagement amongst such a diverse population? Are the rhetoric and reality of the ‘community champion’ appropriate?

### **Social learning<sup>3</sup>**

The concept of social learning was fundamental to our initial framings of this project. It has been widely used in a range of learning situations including sustainability and the environment; researchers and the wider public. There is increasing interest in the wider benefit of effective knowledge production processes where a range of actors can work together to produce solutions and outputs (Reed, 2008). While this project was certainly primarily intended by the local authority to “build capacity” for the selected community champions, we also felt that this was an example where it might be possible “to facilitate interaction and a dialogue that takes place on equal terms, avoiding processes that become dominated by particular knowledge types or actors” (Glass *et al.*, 2012) – in other words the “usual suspects”.

However, there is contestation over the very term ‘social learning’ (Reed *et al.*, 2010). In its early stages it referred to individual learning taking place in a social context, and hence is influenced by social norms (Bandura, 1977). Yet most learning takes place in a social context; and more recent views have emphasized the dynamic interaction between people and their environment in the construction of meaning and identity (Muro and Jeffrey, 2008), yet such work ignores recent conceptual developments in education and psychology, and substantial disagreement over the conceptual basis of social learning remains (Wals and van der Leij, 2007). Reed *et al.* (2010) identify the following confusions:

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<sup>3</sup> This section draws from work led by Mark Reed, some in discussion with Alister Scott’s yet-unpublished RELU rural fringe research project.

- “social learning as a concept is frequently confused with the conditions or methods necessary to facilitate social learning, such a stakeholder participation”;
- “there is frequently confusion between the concept itself and its potential outcomes ... although social learning may be both a process of people learning from one another and an outcome, ie the learning that occurs as a result of these social interactions, it is often defined in relation to the wide range of additional potential outcomes it may have”, and
- “despite conceptualizing social learning as a process of social and/or political change, there is often little distinction between individual and wider social learning”.

They conclude by suggesting that, for ‘learning’ to be considered ‘social learning’, it must

- “demonstrate that a change in understanding has taken place in the individuals involved. This may be at a surface level, eg via recall of new information, or at deeper levels, eg demonstrated by change in attitudes, world views or epistemological beliefs”
- “go beyond the individual to become situated within wider social units or communities of practice within society; and occur through social interactions and processes between actors within a social network ...”

The intent and design of this project sought to meet both of these criteria. The individual community champions develop new knowledge, skills and experience; their generic new learning, and the specific projects which they developed throughout the programme, would be very clearly situated within, and benefitting, the wider community.

### **Usual suspects**

There is a key argument in participative processes that existing elites continue to govern governance largely through control of key aspects of partnership roles, remits and funds (Hague, 2004; Derkzen and Bock, 2009). This has significant implications for community involvement, capacity and social capital even in the types of small-scale project discussed here. Goodwin encapsulates this problem admirably:

“The substance of community involvement is variable, with the local community being more commonly engaged in the initial identification of needs than in either project implementation or providing feedback and monitoring. As such, it could be argued that the much vaunted ‘community engagement’ is simply used by many partnerships as a ‘resource’ which must be enrolled and demonstrated in order to secure funding, rather than as a necessary system of accountability and capacity building. This in turn raises questions as to who is being ‘empowered’, and for what ends? Policies aimed at empowerment will need to stress the development of a ... programme designed specifically to enhance community capacity and social capital at the local level” (Goodwin, 2003, p. 31).

This project was developed from the start to focus beyond the usual suspects; although clearly its initiators and those overseeing it were squarely within this group. This dichotomy may well have led to some of the clashes of culture and views that we identify within the development and delivery of the project.

## Connecting communities: a journey of discovery

In the following section we explore the formation of the project in detail: the area targeted, the research methods employed to collate data, participant recruitment and the location of the training course. Through this narrative we identify the obstacles which arose and demonstrate the strategies developed by the team to keep the project on track.

### Exploring the locale: an overview of the area

The ward contains approximately 9000 residents and is a mix of prosperous middle-class housing, an estate built to house coal industry workers transferred to the region in the 1950s, a large expanse of protected landscape, and a small, comfortable and self-contained village community. The ward is also the 13<sup>th</sup> most deprived in England in terms of multiple deprivation, thus the centrally-sourced funding was allocated to the area in the hope of improving this relatively poor showing in the ranking table.

We were tasked with recruiting champions from across this diverse locale; a specific ward in an industrial large town. One immediate key problem was the project's focus on a single ward, and the nature of its boundary. Although, as in this instance, resources and policies are often determined by these local political boundaries, to residents they are often invisible, unimportant and permeable. The latter was the case with this project, with three artificial separations occurring within the ward: the affluent rural community considering themselves separate from the suburban middle class who, in turn, were (or sought to be) isolated from the occupants of the former coal mining estate inhabitants. Each faction viewed the other in a negative manner, preferring to remain within their own class base.

Whilst the research team had established the fundamentals of the ward, it was necessary to delve further into the area to discover the hidden issues affecting the communities. Once these issues had been established, the team would focus their efforts on a recruitment strategy to build the course and attract participants. The following section will provide a narrative of the data collection and interview strategy employed during this project.

### Preliminary research: the current issues

Researching the issues of the area involved searching in local media, interviews with key stakeholders, and interrogation of datasets of local service providers including the police and the local authority itself. This was primarily tasked to the project's research assistant, who used a variety of resources, including informal interviews during local public events, to collate information and build a picture of the ward. The Placecheck survey results were thus placed in a wider context.

A concern was the Placecheck response rate: the entire District survey targeted 2,790 addresses and obtained a 41% response rate, with the ward in question returning only 84 responses (District Council Placecheck report, 2010). Although some of the Placecheck questions were perhaps simplistically phrased, clearly this ward was dissatisfied with a lot of services and with the overall value and performance of the local authority.<sup>4</sup> Only 32% of residents felt that local public services promoted the interests of local residents (11<sup>th</sup>: 52%, 21%) and 34% that local public services acted on the concerns of local residents (9<sup>th</sup>: 62%, 15%): this is a low-scoring district. Only 22% of the ward's respondents were satisfied with

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<sup>4</sup> Results from the District Council's Placecheck report (2010) covered all 15 wards, and the specific ward is here given with (position of the 15 wards; highest ward, lowest ward) data for comparison.

the way that the District Council ran things, and 25% with the County Council. Residents also felt unable to influence local decision making, with 12% feeling that they had influence, lowest of all 15 wards in the district. On the other hand, 73% of residents were satisfied with their local area as a place to live (9<sup>th</sup>: 92%, 58%) and 58% felt that they belonged to their neighbourhood (10<sup>th</sup>: 76%, 43%) so this was far from being uniformly the worst ward.

To our surprise, and despite the Placecheck results, key concerns arising from our own inquiries in diverse resources related only to relatively minor issues including very localised examples of traffic speeding, dog fouling, and litter: yet these concerns were frequently and strongly expressed. Clearly, too, the local authority in particular, and other public services including the police, had mounted a variety of campaigns to address such issues. Yet perhaps the most frequently-raised issue was that of the local authority itself: there was a high level of dissatisfaction at a perceived unresponsive attitude – this ward felt itself to be on the periphery of the district (which is geographically accurate), and low in priorities for any resources (more contentious).

The research assistant's various reports highlight the disconnection experienced between the various ward levels and the local authority. Issues were evident on all levels, from the working-class estate, which experienced high levels of anti-social behaviour, to speeding issues which formed the main concern expressed in the rural village. Figure 1 shows a common landscape feature of the less affluent estate, which was intended to be maintained by local authority contractors.

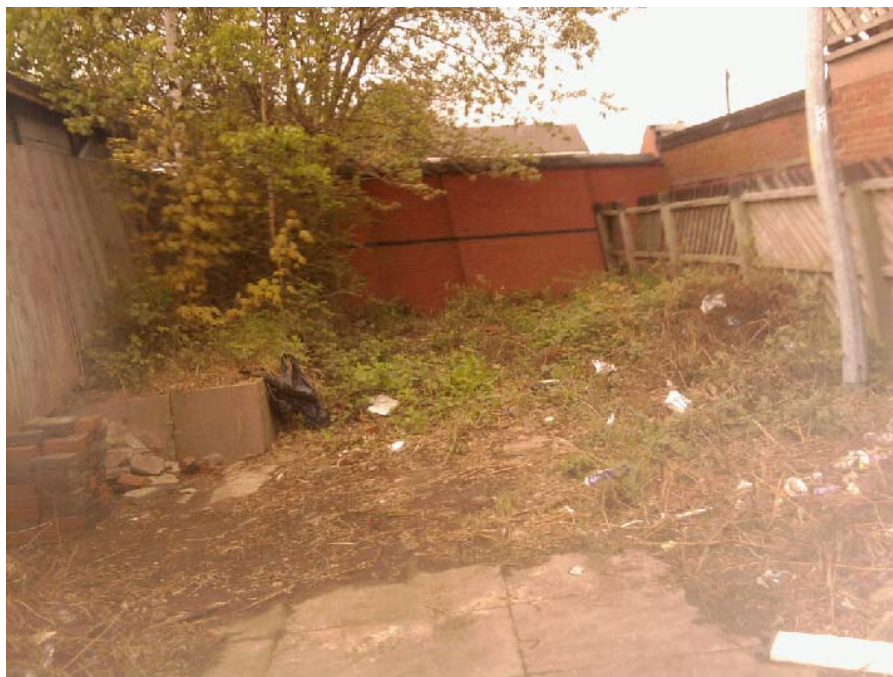


Figure 1: A patch of neglected land in the ward (photograph: Mike Hardman).

The research team also made visits to the area, walking the area in general and those sites identified through the research process as being potentially problematic, in order to build familiarity with the area and its potential issues.

Fundamentally, the research indicated that the main perceived issue appeared to concern the local authority's apparent neglect of the ward. Whilst the researcher uncovered a variety of other minor problems, these all appeared to connect with the residents' opinion that they

were unimportant in the eyes of the council. Evidently, this suggestion resulted in the project recruitment stage becoming more problematic than had been originally planned: there was a need to formulate a strategy to attract participants who perhaps viewed this project as another potentially unsuccessful local authority initiative.

The initial research results were presented to the project steering group, which appeared content with the work done and detail of discussion. We were urged to move swiftly to the recruitment stage, yet there was no response to our finding about residents' negative response to the local authority itself. A further problem appearing at this time was that the project team appeared not to be invited to every steering group meetings, and no formal minutes were taken of the meetings that did take place.

#### Attracting participants: a strategy for recruitment

Our original project bid had envisaged recruiting about a dozen 'community champions' representing the breadth of this diverse ward. However, this proved extremely difficult: potential participants from all socio-economic groups viewed visiting academics, who were attempting to raise awareness and attract individuals, as representatives of the local authority. This was, in part, a result of the authority's insistence on 'branding' the project in local media and leaflets: despite our suggestions, the authority's logo was prominent.

Another obstacle surrounded our inability to specify the nature of the 'champion' role. Although the steering group had a firm idea, we had argued from the start that the term 'champion' (though widely used in similar contexts) might be seen as divisive – and indeed some potential volunteers were put off by this. We also suggested, at the original project interview, that an integral part of the training should be that the role of the 'champion' should be defined and developed by negotiation with the champions themselves. We were overruled on both counts.

Then, the issue of the ward boundary restriction was significant. It proved difficult to identify sufficient people resident within the boundary, yet some willing volunteers lived outside the boundary. Despite the local authority's campaign in the local media, and leafleting all addresses in the ward, it proved difficult to recruit from across the diverse area and so more specifically targeted promotion was undertaken. Agreement was eventually negotiated with the steering group to recruit residents living outside but close to the ward boundary, or those who worked within the ward. This enabled the project team to target other individuals who had expressed interest but were otherwise unable to partake in the project.

The fact that the local authority insisted on using its corporate image in this campaign reinforced the residents' suspicions: the project team had a hard job convincing those to whom we spoke that we were wholly independent. As this paper has already established, the local authority itself was widely perceived as a significant element of "the problem". The refusal of the authority to allow promotion of the project without the authority's 'branding' and prior approval resulted in several participants backing out and refusing to communicate any further; perceiving the course as a tool through which the authority could use community members for free labour.

Another key point which we offered – the USP of our tender – was to link our training with a RTPI-accredited module of our undergraduate course. Participants who wished to do so could, by enrolling on the module with the university fees paid through this project, and taking appropriate assessments, receive formal university credits. There was also an added incentive for those who were particularly ambitious: they could continue their studies at BCU and gain further qualifications as part of the course.

We were conscious of the need to recruit an equal number from each of the three segments of the ward, thus allowing balance on the course concerning the issues raised. A number of potential participants were identified through the 'usual suspects': councillors, community leaders or community groups; or who put themselves forward. All were interviewed by BCU team members at their homes, workplace or by telephone, as they preferred. Key to the interview was not only exploring their backgrounds and educational attainments, but their 'pre-understanding' (Gummesson, 2000, p. 13) of the potential role of a 'community champion', and the way in which having a particular issue or problem which they wanted to tackle as part of the course motivated them to come forward. This was a useful entry point for people and allowed us to use this as a focus for developing the course material and the assessment. Eventually 11 volunteers were identified.

This slow recruitment may have touched on a fundamental problem with the 'community champion' type of approach. Such people who would put themselves forward may have multiple reasons for doing so, of which genuine care for the community may be only one: personal self-esteem may be even more powerful. Conversely, some potentially excellent people identified to us had to be convinced to take part: this was hard work.

However, the course did not start well as one of the 11 disappeared (literally: even the organisation he worked with could not make contact) even before the course began. Another lasted only two weeks, citing child care issues for not returning. Another was lost to a business opportunity, and finally one to illness.

#### Hosting the course: choosing a suitable location

This paper has already discussed the delicate and varied nature of the ward, particularly the separation which exists between the various inhabitants: the relatively deprived estate, middle-class suburbia and a very affluent small village were all considered part of the same ward, but viewed themselves as wholly separate entities. Therefore we realised that identifying a suitable venue for the course would be equally delicate. A 'happy medium' had to be sought, which would please all participants and would be readily accessible; there were mobility and territory issues, with some participants wishing to remain within their immediate locales.

We sought several locations in public buildings across the ward, in order to spread our resources and message widely, and to be able to access different locations for possible walking visits. Our original intention was to have several venues throughout the 12-week course, in order to bring the participants into each others' communities – providing transport if needed. We chose, first, a local primary school – partly because one participant was a governor; a ready-made gatekeeper who could facilitate easy access. The school had a community room, and promised powerpoint projection facilities etc – but when we arrived the projector was missing, the screen was blocked, and we were never able to get a definitive answer from the school as to what if any internet access was available! Some of the external lights were faulty and, despite being reported as a health hazard in the depths of winter, this was never addressed. Nevertheless we stayed at this location, as it proved popular with the 'surviving' participants, and convenient for the one with mobility problems. The lack of facilities forced us to adopt a low-tech approach and, despite our fears of appearing over-simplistic, this proved popular and effective.

#### Developing the course content

Our original successful proposal used material from an accredited undergraduate module on 'Regeneration', which was adapted to the spatial context of the ward, and set within more

deliberative processes. Each participant was recruited into the University systems, with access to online support facilities etc.

Core to this was the idea of developing the module in 12 2.5-hour blocks, moving through a journey of discovery relating to issues of governance, planning and environmental issues, community engagement, and development. This was designed to develop both understanding of agents, agencies and processes related to local community development, but also identify and build practical skills relating to community-level projects and engagement. The key goal was to equip students with skills to enable them to build and use a toolkit in order to meet their intended roles as community champions. Although superseded in the views of some planning theorists and practitioners, the stages of survey/analysis/plan/monitor/review, for example, were readily transferrable to a local community seeking to generate action about an issue of local concern. We had envisaged a number of presentations by service providers relevant to this locale, as well as from some demonstration projects – successful and unsuccessful – from elsewhere.

To our surprise, at an early meeting with the steering group, however, and despite our original (and we felt successful) presentation of the course rationale and approach, the key aspect of participants identifying and developing their own locally-based projects as a starting point proved highly controversial; as did some aspects of the planned course curriculum which had been circulated to the group. The Steering Group's response was:

1. This was not supposed to be a community development course; the project was about people championing the council and other agencies.
2. They were concerned about the risk of raising individual and community expectations about what could be done as they had no budget to take action.
3. There was a clear danger of participants making excessive demands on the council that could not be met. The project was not about this.
4. One member clearly spelt out that BCU's role was to inform the participants about how to work with the council and support the council in discharging their functions more effectively. In essence their role was to support the council within the ward and raise awareness of what the council are doing.
5. There was complete rejection of the idea of a course programme in community development which might challenge the council and other agency activities. This was not about building social capital.
6. There was also concern voiced about having planners come to the group as it felt that planning matters were again not relevant to the project.
7. The Steering Group did not want these people doing their own thing. They needed prior approval.

This list is from a senior team member's notes from the meeting, as no formal minutes were circulated. This discourse was interesting, to say the least; as at the original project interview we had very clearly spelt out our approach and philosophy to use a community development and regeneration module and adapt it to the specific needs of this ward. We had been awarded the contract on this basis; but now the steering Group seemed to be raising new concerns, suggesting that its members had their own agendas.

The BCU team representative at the meeting stood our ground and argued that community development was not necessarily about challenging authority. In our view it was about giving people skills to communicate more effectively, with a wide range of stakeholders and at varying levels; and to identify the best mechanisms to tackle issues. In some cases people/communities may be able to do things, partly or completely, alone; or to initiate action; or at other times in partnership; but always using communication of activities. The course was about helping people to understand local governance in order to be able to



identify the key players, understand what they do to help key issues, and to communicate effectively with them.

We had proposed to bringing a number of representatives from local service providers to speak to the course participants, including some local planning officers who were then engaged in developing policies for the local area. We felt that their views, and exploration of the activity of policy-making, was key to the course as planning has a major impact upon quality of life; and it was important that the group could interact with planners particularly given the progress of the core strategy and the action area programme for the area. We were surprised at the strength of feeling expressed against this approach.

With regard to the identification of problems, the team representative argued that there were ways in which we could work with people to get them to understand the nature of their problem and how they might solve it. In all cases, the need to inform and communicate with key agencies was stressed. However we would equip them with skills to more effectively articulate and define a problem; identifying, collecting and using evidence, and mobilising support from the community and other relevant stakeholders, including service providers.

The meeting was a very strange event; in that having been awarded a contract for the delivery of a training course on the basis of a detailed and explicit bid document, there was a clear view that the steering group wanted to exert substantial influence on changing the content and focus of the course. This raised issues of communication and channels of decision-making that remained unresolved, at least in part, throughout the duration of the project. The delivery team was not invited to every meeting of the Steering Group, at which minutes were apparently not taken; and the presence or absence of particular individuals at these meetings seemed to have substantial influence on the direction of discussion and decision, which could then be reversed at a later date.

The BCU team representative at the meeting noted the following:

“There was a key discussion centred on differing interpretations of the community champion and what it meant. This differed significantly to what was circulated in the promotional material. As many people signed up to the course under the impression of a community development guise I think we have to be upfront about the community champion concept. I still have concerns that the very specific views expressed by the council would lead to the withdrawal of ALL participants. Ethically I have a major problem too as I have briefed participants that this is a course about community development and not simply toeing the council line.”

The team's response to this meeting included a serious discussion of whether we should withdraw; but we felt a loyalty to the project participants whom we had recruited in good faith.

The course: a narrative of events

Despite this difference of opinion with the Steering Group, the course was delivered largely as originally proposed. Subsequent negotiations, and steering group meetings at which some members were not present, led to agreement on the approach.

As has been mentioned, a low-tech approach had to be used. Originally we had envisaged using adapted University teaching materials (including Powerpoint presentations, online access to a virtual learning environment, etc) but the lack of facilities in the school, and some participants' self-confessed technophobia, led to a very traditional pen-and-paper, display-board-and-Post-It style which was well received. The informality was an important element



Figure 2: A mapping exercise used in the first session (photograph: Peter Larkham).

in the diverse group beginning to develop confidence in each other and work together: in the two-hour evening sessions we had a tea break where the BCU staff made the drinks and served cake. The very surrounding, with child-scale facilities, was also an interesting contributing factor to improving group dynamics.

The first part of the course enabled participants to identify the issues of the area and of personal concern to them. This broke the ice, facilitated wider discussion and understanding of the varied area and its differing perceived issues. A combination of verbal explanation, mapping (Figure 2) and illustration proved effective, and was followed by a prioritising exercise. This proved slightly more problematic – it was difficult to reach consensus. Differences between generations and between residents of the different areas within the ward were clearly exposed. We had expected this, especially at this first session; and in our minds such exercises and the related discussion/mediation were integral to the training programme's goals of problem-solving, awareness of resource allocation issues, and understanding diversity. However it proved difficult to get this message across to the participants at several points in the training.

At an early stage, and picking up points raised in several of the recruiting interviews (and the steering group's concerns) we sought participants' initial ideas on the role of a 'community champion' (Box 2A, p. 15). These were perhaps simplistically expressed but were, clearly, much broader than the steering group had originally felt appropriate. However, obtaining this view of the community champion role, before any classroom input, was vital; it allowed the

team to understand what the participants thought their future role would entail, and how this would affect the local community.

Part two introduced the participants to the local governance of the local area. The key tool used was a 'question time' format, formally managed and with a chairperson facilitating the discussions, as this would allow members of the steering group and other agencies to answer respondents' questions, and also to meet them and to better understand their concerns and motivations for volunteering. It was this connection and relationship that started to change the relationship between the steering group and the participants, breaking down the former's apparent perception of the latter as a threat. Participants were briefed that the function of the 'question time' sessions was

- To get agencies and key local politicians aware and supporting your issues.
- To build networks within the community and up to agencies.
- To identify where partnerships and co-ordinators might help join up more complex problems. We sometimes focus too much on specific areas.
- To understand the importance of communication both from the agencies to you and *vice versa*.

The response to these sessions is detailed in the notes made at the time by the project's research assistant:

- "In the first question time residents appear to only ask questions relating directly to their projects. The second question time opens up a bit more with residents asking more varied questions, but these still heavily relate to their areas.
- The participants that don't have defined projects are more open with their questions, such as [one] who asked about the structure of the council (parish/district/county) and how they fit together. This type of question is of interest to the group as a whole as opposed to those that focus on specific areas of the ward.
- There is a sense of repetitiveness with the questions raised. Participants are asking the same questions to the different panels. A resident chats about overgrown paths and lighting in tunnels, this question has been raised at three previous meetings.
- A few participants are a bit too vocal. Other course students have little say in what is going on. This has been expressed in e-mails forwarded to Peter after the question time session has taken place.
- As an observer the questions times generally are ran fantastically. The facilitators handle the questions well and include all of the panel members. The question masters also prod those who haven't spoken to pipe up; including everyone in the discussion."

An independent BCU staff member also attended one session, and produced the following reflective commentary:

"From an observer's perspective, the session was smoothly delivered, stimulating and the material presented by the speakers stirred some strong feelings within the group of participants. In particular, these were crystallised around the below themes. More generally, I observed that there was some sense of unease amongst the local residents towards the role of the local ward member, and perhaps more specifically, the role in which the community forum plays in delivering action on such issues as 'maintaining the attractiveness of the local beauty spot'. In a similar vein, one question from the floor asked the Councillor 'what is the difference between county, district, parish councils?'. This led on to a broader discussion surrounding the way decisions taken at the Community Forum level were disseminated back to the community – 'through a local newspaper'.

Reactions within the group to the presentations from the Council planning officers were mixed – I observed some confusion amongst the residents at the types of level (and who has the ‘final say’), effectiveness of planning decisions and so forth – ‘what shops in the town centre’ ‘why are so many houses being built’. Perhaps, on reflection, the decision taken by the three presenters to ‘work down’ the scales of planning (district, town centre, supplementary guidance), although professionally delivered, tended to confuse the message that was intended to come across and reinforce the problems with communicating the ideas behind ‘spatial planning’. For instance, one [participant] was not aware of the consultation exercise for the Core Strategy undertaken at the leisure centre. It was noticeable that the town centre level planning (as described by [a local planning officer]) and the finer grain detail appeared to generate more interest – (perhaps people could understand this level of planning). There was also a strong sense amongst the group over the role and scope of planning: trade in the town centre decreased because of the introduction of car-parking charges; ‘not enough play spaces for kids’; ‘why can’t planners build more Council houses’.

In terms of facilitation, PL attempted (at times – particularly earlier in proceedings) to steer the discussions away from the minutia of very specific issues and to get the participants to consider some of the broader strategic dimension of planning. To some extent this was successful; however, in other senses, the group were more forthcoming (comfortable?) to raise questions of site-specific topics.

## **Key themes from the discussion**

**1. Concern from the group over the disconnection between the different tiers of the plan-making process.** Questions raised over which issues were tackled at Parish, local, County, broader level. These ranged from community gardening to the tidying-up of local beauty spot.

**2. Why can’t all decisions be taken using one plan?** After the three presentations from the ‘planners’, there appeared to be some confusion amongst members of the audience as to which piece of consultation is the most appropriate for their voices to influence decisions. Observed sense of unease at the different timings of consultation – out-of-sync?

**3. Language that is ‘everyday’ to planners is not ‘everyday’ to consumers of the plan-making process.** Nationally (European?) terms LDF, use of acronyms, part of everyday parlance to planners – observed that this was a point of confusion amongst the group. Apologies were forthcoming from the presenters about terms such as Core Strategy – “Big Plan” etc .... Maps, diagrams were used that had been produced using GIS by people trained in its use also reinforces the communication divide perhaps. Assumes people can all orientate themselves using these representations. Observed that some had trouble with map-reading and interpretation.

**4. Issues over the ‘bounded’ nature of how planning operates (lines on maps)** Some comments from the floor over housing being built on land adjacent to the administrative boundary of [the District] – dissonance between planners’ conception of bounded spaces (lines on maps) as a way of planning for future development and how lived experiences of places pay little regard to ‘invisible’ boundaries.

**5. Concern over effectiveness of representative democracy** Disquiet amongst audience as to how effective local representative democracy is in dealing with some issues – and how the results of the community forum were fed back to the wider community (newspapers most appropriate at connecting with residents?).

**6. Immediacy of planning decisions** Some discussion over the need to have more immediate decisions made over landuse. Spaces for children to play was cited at

least twice throughout the night. Also, some confusion within the audience as to the *scope of planning* – ‘town centre needs more shops’ ‘more Council housing’.”

In many cases the issues being raised by participants were ones that were clearly of concern to the steering group and this enabled a partnership approach to be cultivated to try and tackle these as the course progressed.

In week 6 we returned to the role of the ‘community champion’ and sought revised views based on the information and ideas raised thus far. The group was readily able to give four ‘thumbnail’ definitions, clearly developing from the original list, but where the word “caring” was used repeatedly. This gave an interesting additional perspective to the role, implying that personality was crucial (Box 2B). Even so, there was no unanimity: as the project’s research assistant noted at the time,

“Some of the participants still don’t value the role of a community champion; they’re very driven by their own individual projects. Hopefully this assignment will draw them away from that mind frame and shed some light on the role of what a champion actually does.”

Box 2: Participants’ definitions of the role of ‘community champion’.

A: Definitions given at Week 1

Group 1:

- Someone who acts as a motivator, who cares, gets involved, listens and is there when you need them. They are positive people who are responsible and encourage others to be responsible. Community champions should be available to everyone. They are not the Police and should be approachable.

Group 2:

- Community champions should:
  - Have motivation
  - Have leadership skills
  - Be a point of contact
  - Be a reference point for media
  - Should organise events
  - Be a ‘catalyst’ and a source of knowledge

B: Definitions given at Week 6

1. Someone who is involved with the community in a positive way. Helping people, caring about people and working with the people to change the community for the better.
2. Someone who is willing to take on an issue or issues in the community and act on it.
3. A caring person, not out to achieve personal credit, who fits into a caring team of individuals, who seek to create a better community.
4. Someone who cares and actually does something to benefit the community.

Through the three question-time sessions, the participants began to understand who does what and who is responsible for what, allowing important developments in projects. The development of a 'toolkit' following these sessions (Box 3) allowed participants to understand the need to measure demand, to provide suitable evidence, and to communicate clearly. Each of the simple 10 points was extensively explored using a range of 'personal stories' from the team's varied experiences of research and community activities. This approach, relying on experience that could be elaborated on request rather than on impersonal published examples, proved effective.

Box 3: The 'toolkit', with team comments used in the group discussion.

#### The toolkit

1. Identify an issue
2. Find out who might be interested within community and bodies<sup>1</sup>
3. Contact relevant bodies and individuals to discuss your idea and raise awareness<sup>2</sup>
4. Present initial ideas about your project to others to build support<sup>3</sup>
5. Select the most appropriate method to demonstrate community support<sup>4</sup>
6. Collect evidence following accepted protocols and ethics<sup>5</sup>
7. Analysing evidence<sup>6</sup>
8. Mediation: dealing with conflict<sup>7</sup>
9. Developing a plan for implementation<sup>8</sup>
10. Lessons learnt<sup>9</sup>

#### The comments

- 1 How: let's think about newspapers, minutes of meetings, local grapevine, talk to councillors and other key people in your area.
- 2 Who should I contact: just within the community or the agencies themselves? From point 2 think about talking to established groups when they meet rather than having special meetings. Develop a set of key questions to ask.
- 3 What mechanisms can I use to do this: slide shows, web site press releases, report, etc? Which approach is most suited to the group/individuals being addressed?
- 4 What method(s) are most appropriate? Explore using examples based on team's direct experience – Community visioning / Offa's Dyke / local Civic Society.
- 5 What research methods will produce sufficient and appropriately-documented evidence – supplement with exploration of what would convince, for example, a local authority committee; and with discussion on research ethics, insurance, health & safety etc. with input from local voluntary organisation.
- 6 Issues of getting professionals to do this so that the material is analysed and presented appropriately. Look within your community for experienced volunteers.
- 7 Realise that conflict is inevitable: values and views are not common. Those having to distribute scarce resources are particularly likely to be in conflict with groups seeking them. Discuss approaches to understanding such conflict.
- 8 The plan might include making a funding bid but, as was repeatedly stressed, many plans do not require money they need volunteers; can involve setting up a new group.
- 9 Need to evaluate progress. Identify indicators to measure success.

As a result of the course the LPA planning officers used the participants as a further focus group for a proposed area design statement. They were also able to input material into their forward planning processes. The group members were also able to contribute to the existing Community Forum; previously only one member had been aware of this organisation and had attended meetings, and expressed rather jaundiced views on its effectiveness. As a result of this, members of the steering group volunteered to return to give specialised briefings on individual projects and to establish closer working links and support in order to make these projects work. This relationship was starting to justify our initial approach and there was evidence of social capital being built on both sides. The mutual understanding through a positive dialogue (the question-time format) was key to this.

What was particularly illuminating was the way in which some of the most vociferous critics of the original approach on the steering group had evidently changed their views, becoming key supporters of the approach and actually actively helping to building the participants' projects and give critical support. Observing this transformation was amazing (particularly to the team member who had faced the initial criticism) given the huge suspicion the steering group had of involving in the community in anything more than the steering group's conception of the specific focus of the project (and, remember, these views had not been made known to us until several months after we had been appointed!). However, by building social capital through an accredited university module that had been specifically adapted for a local community area and delivered using a low-tech interactive format, we were able to transform the potential of both student and steering group through interaction and dialogue. This, it seems to us, is the key lesson. Community development is as much about bringing people together from different facets to understand how each works. Through informal discussion in a non-public arena, without confrontation, but where probing examination of viewpoints, evidence and issues can take place, real progress can be made.

## **Assessment**

From the original presentation to secure the contract we had been of the view that a training programme of this nature needed some form of assessment to encourage participants to take it seriously. We suggested using the participants' own projects as the focus for assessment (Box 4); but our initial suggestions met with resistance. Participants were unhappy at having to present someone else's project, and wanted to devote time to developing their own individual projects. We sought to build skills and confidence of working within the generic role of 'champion'. As previously, we were happy to respond to this, as a working exemplar of conflict resolution; but on reflection we are unsure that the group as a whole saw the point of this negotiation. The participants were extremely hesitant and worried about any form of assessment, perceiving this task as a 'waste of time' (Research Assistant's Field Notes).

The final assessment took the form pairing participants, to give mutual support to each other but also to allow a small element of role-play (Box 5). Thus part 1 of the assessment was a short written response, in the role of a community champion responding to the other's project. Part 2 was a formal presentation of each participant's own project, responding to the points raised earlier in the process. The audience for the final presentation comprised members of the steering group and several others who had been involved in the question time sessions. BCU staff gave written individual feedback for both parts. Box 6 shows the type of feedback presented, based around the 10-point toolkit discussed earlier (this was a fictitious example developed to guide the staff making their own comments).

Although the participants were enthusiastic, clearly their abilities and confidence varied. Nevertheless all produced material that engaged the audience, generating a great deal of

#### Box 4: The initial assessment brief.

##### Assessment Brief and Guidelines

The assessment is about the role of the “community champion” in taking forward a specific topic within your community. Each of you already has a topic area that interests you, BUT as potential community champions we do not want you to focus entirely on developing that topic to the exclusion of all else! So:

- 3 November: a topic title  
*We will pair up people/topics for the remainder of the exercise*
- 10 November: for your own topic, produce a brief note for your ‘partner’  
*Must be handwritten, and not more than 1 side of A4 paper*

Each person then has to work on ‘championing’ the project of their partner. This develops the role of the champion, and at the same time develops a framework within which a range of possible projects could be put into operation in the coming weeks/months.

*Individually (on behalf of your partner)*

You need to think about how the project can be defined and implemented: so consider

- What are the project's aims
- Identify who might benefit (individuals, groups, community)
- What is the need for the project
- How would you identify the need/priority of this particular project?
- Who would you need to work with in order to push this forward?
- Who would need to be consulted? (Would they need to *agree*? )
- What tools for consultation could you use?

*With your partner*

Discuss with them your ideas. How do you harness *their* energy and enthusiasm for this particular topic (whether or not it's *your own* interest?)

What you need to produce

- A discussion of these points. We are not specifying format or length. We prefer it written, but would accept a recorded discussion (or “interview” with your tutor).
- On the final session after Christmas, you will need briefly to present your ideas and responses to your partner's project. The audience will be the others in the group, the BCU team, and members of the Steering Group for the overall Connecting Communities project.



Box 5: The assessment brief as revised through a process of negotiation.

#### Revised Guidelines for the “assessment”

*Revised after discussions – this suggestion allows you all to present your own project, but also produces your views on championing and the role of a champion.*

The assessment is about the role of the “community champion” in taking forward a specific topic within your community. Each of you already has a topic area that interests you, BUT we do not want you to focus entirely on developing that theme to the exclusion of all else! So each person is then working with a partner (s) on ‘championing’ their project. This develops your awareness of the role of the champion, and at the same time develops a range of possible projects that could be put into operation in the coming weeks/months.

#### What you need to produce

- On the final session after Christmas, you will need briefly to present your ideas and responses about **your** project. We think you should use the 10-point checklist that we have discussed – but do incorporate other aspects if relevant. The audience will be the others in the group, the BCU team, and members of the Steering Group for the overall Connecting Communities project.
- A discussion of these points as explored *by you* acting as a “champion” **for your partner’s project**. We are not specifying format or length. We prefer it written, but would accept a recorded discussion (or “interview” with your tutor).
- Added to that discussion, *your* view of the role of a “champion” as it has developed over the weeks of the course.

thoughtful and helpful response. We also received very positive feedback from the audience and from the participants themselves after this final session. Their somewhat lengthy journey together resulted in a loose group bond, and when each participant had to present to the audience they felt supported and amongst friends.

Box 6: Example of written feedback on a project proposal, using the 10-point toolkit.

- Identify an issue

“A resident came to me with an issue that concerns the lack of public toilets located in [the rural village]. She explained that tourists regularly are left ‘cross legged’ and frustrated when visiting the village. This resident feels services should be provided, at present only the pubs offer any sort of public facilities.”

- Find out who might be interested within community and bodies

Private car park owners/land owners may be interested. The council may be able to help. The local tourist board could be an option. [The village] has a village committee that is always interested in promoting or improving the area. Consult the tourists.

- Contact relevant bodies and individuals to discuss your idea and raise awareness

You would need to find similar villages that may have done something similar. Ambleside, located in the Lake District, have a car park near the centre of the village with public toilets. These public toilets are well maintained and provide tourists with facilities that are needed in the area. There is a need to find out what local businesses, Councillors and residents think. There might be some interest from private land owners who may see this as commercially viable (i.e. charge for toilet use).

- Present initial ideas about your project to others to build support

Present to local land owners, who may have the funding to provide such services. Car parks would be the ideal spot in my opinion. Local council representatives could be interested in increasing revenue and services in [the village]. Other sources, such as the [voluntary organisation] or [managers of local protected area] could help with support.

- Select the most appropriate method to demonstrate community support

I feel in this situation you should start by using surveys/questionnaires to find out if tourists really need this facility. Are they happy with using the pubs etc in the area? Surveys would be difficult, since you would probably need a high number of people to make it a reliable piece of evidence to support your project. I feel you should use closed questions (i.e. yes or no) so that analysing your questionnaires/surveys would be more manageable.

- Collect evidence following accepted protocols and ethics

If you do take the survey option, make sure you stand in a public place and don't do it alone or in the dark. Leave your phone number with someone and tell them how long you will be and when you will be back. Ask permission from the local authority, I would personally start with the council itself and perhaps then attempt to get the tourist board interested too. Remember, if you're asking for people's names and addresses keep them safe. Data protection is a big thing when you're collecting personal information.

- Analysing evidence

Read through the surveys and produce a simple summary sheet that can be produced when meeting council officials etc. View the results yourself first, what do the tourists really want? Is there an actual need for your project? Follow information up; is there really a lack of facilities? Or is there a hidden toilet block somewhere?

- Mediation : dealing with conflict

Some villagers might not want a public toilet block. These buildings have been known to attract anti-social behaviour, even in the most tranquil of places. Who will manage the block? The council may challenge how it will be run. It's all well and good building it but think about the long term. There might be conflict if you do manage to achieve funding. People may think that the money can be better spent elsewhere. Tourist numbers may be falling and thus funding a new tourist toilet block might be seen as useless. Local pubs may wish for tourists to continue to use their facilities. When tourists use a pub toilet most buy the odd drink out of pure guilt. The pubs may think you're pulling away their trade.

- Developing a plan for implementation

I feel your plan should follow this format:

Source interest through surveys

Identify land that would be suitable

Contact land owner for interest

Attempt to find funding body

- Lessons learnt

I feel you will learn several lessons from this project. You will learn how to conduct successful surveys and use evidence effectively. You will also learn how to contact relevant bodies and work with them. Finally I think you will gain a lot of confidence from this project, whether it fails or succeeds, you will be proud to know that you're helping your local community.

## Exit

The local voluntary organisation which provided the project manager was to have continued to help the participants in delivering their projects over the spring and summer of 2011. We had designed a certificate of achievement for presentation, and had volunteered a 6-month post-training meeting to assist and advise the participants.

Unfortunately, the project fell foul of the massive local authority cuts of early 2011 that also affected the voluntary sector. The project's own champion within the local authority left, and although our draft final report was delivered in March, by September it had not been discussed let alone approved; nor had the authority realised that our final payment had not been made! Neither was there any final celebration and presentation of certificates, as we had hoped. The project manager's funding ceased and, finally, this person moved overseas. Although several months after the end of our direct engagement we learned that a couple of the projects, incidentally championed by the most articulate participants, were still ongoing, the others appeared to have faded out.

So this was, for the local authority, proof that generating social capital, engaging more closely with communities, and developing capacity is not a cheap exercise. Most significantly, it is not a "provide and forget" exercise. This group needed some continuing support and encouragement for their projects to be delivered and them to have gone on to develop further engagement with this community. That support has been cut.

Our view is that some of these projects would have failed again without the voluntary agency's support and the championing of the projects by the steering group; the very projects the steering group initially felt would destroy the very notion of community champion they had.

It also serves a great lesson about the way in which conflict can actually be a prerequisite for community development. By knowing that there was a clear issue about the way the steering group saw the project we made sure that we brought both groups together to understand each other. This understanding had a virtuous circle.

## Reflections and lessons

This project developed in unexpected ways, with relationships, expectations and contacts between the various parties (local authority, project manager, BCU team, and participants) all being problematic in various aspects.<sup>5</sup> The team had, from the initial interview, challenged the term “champion”, being concerned that this might have connotations of elitism and might repel some of the very people we felt necessary: the local authority and steering group insisted that the term be retained. In seeking to recruit “beyond the usual suspects” we were partially successful but at the cost of considerable additional and unexpected work; however the project was very clearly managed by a group consisting wholly of “usual suspects” with “usual perspectives”. These were open to debate and change but, again, at unexpected cost. In seeking to mould a programme to the specific cohort of participants we encountered problems of resourcing and culture; although this did lead to an unusually low-tech approach that all participants appeared to engage with, it did vastly reduce engagement with the University’s learning resources and the ability to participate in the credit-bearing module. Finally, the unexpected circumstances affecting longer-term support of these participants and their projects following the BCU delivery phase was disappointing, highlighting the issue that social learning, the development of ‘community champions’ and the growth of a ‘big society’ are all long-term issues requiring appropriate support and resource. Projects such as that reported here must not be seen as quick and cheap fixes because, like so many time- and resource-limited initiatives, their ability to deliver longer-term, sustainable, results can be negligible in isolation.

Several key points emerge from our experiences:

- Expect the unexpected. First, just as we were about to begin, the 2010 general election was declared and all local authority-funded projects stopped dead. We lost over 8 weeks; the timetable for summer activities was pushed into early autumn. Then, with course delivery stretching into winter, it showed very heavily on the day when two outside speakers from far afield were coming. Although we had a Powerpoint and audio of one, played on a laptop (clearly not ideal) we could not replace the other.
- Communication is crucial. We have discussed problems with the Steering Group; but there were also issues with the project manager who was clearly working to other agendas. For example she wished to issue satisfaction questionnaires for every session, as was standard for her organisation. We felt that this would be counterproductive, leading to “questionnaire fatigue”, and redesigned feedback mechanisms specific to our content.
- Gatekeepers: the Steering Group sought more direct involvement and control than had initially been made clear; and the local authority’s insistence on branding and corporate identity for all promotion were both problematic issues showing how different agendas on the part of ‘gatekeeper’ groups could conflict and potentially adversely affect the project.
- Participation doesn’t always work. We have discussed the problems on a couple of occasions with our participants, when things did not go as they or we had expected. We were prepared, indeed happy, to negotiate; but our participants were unused to such a flexible approach and, we think, saw it as a weakness.
- Capacity-building needs resourcing, and support over an extended period. A 12-week training programme such as ours can only ever be a beginning. The long-term exit strategy had been planned, but needed continuing support from the community organisation and local authority. Following the funding cuts, both ceased.

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<sup>5</sup> In writing this paper the project team has tried to fairly reflect its experiences, but acknowledges that some perspectives have been under-represented and that there were faults in its own perspectives and performance.

- Resources are always under-estimated. We had a staff team of 4 and a graduate research assistant, and we estimate that we had to put in double the time budgeted. On the other hand, we all enjoyed it and loved working with a fantastic group of participants. But it was hard work!
- And finally, overall we feel that in order to build the Big Society there is an urgent need to consider the ways in which agencies need to change their approaches, networks and relationships in order to construct meaningful dialogues with their local publics. It can't be done on the cheap.

## **Coda**

Since this initial project appraisal, our ongoing contacts within this group and community have revealed some interesting further issues. The profile-raising celebratory event that we had proposed had not been held: in fact this took place in September 2012, spurred by a new appointee within the authority! But one project has been completed (although it does need ongoing management) – the improvement of a local beauty spot, including information plaques. Two participants responded that they have been able to understand, more thoroughly, the 'inner workings' of the local authority. This has enabled one to work directly with departments, cutting out the middleman in an attempt to make this project realisable. The course also made the local AONB officer realise that the ward lay within the AONB's boundaries, which resulted in funds being made available to allow a contractor to help clean up the litter-strewn and vandalised space. The support received by this project has resulted in trees, and other large features being taken down so that the hilltop can be restored to its natural form. Essentially, this project has gone far beyond its original plans and the group is now seen as a formidable force, involving local groups, the church and others in the movement. Another project participant attempted to push the urban agriculture idea, but as yet it appears too radical for the council. It tried to set up a few events for her but she felt that these moved too far from the urban agriculture concept. Finally, two younger participants work for the local volunteer service.

So the project has actually delivered some who can be seen as 'champions' and one successful project. But this just reinforces the fact that growing community, or the Big Society, is a slow and laborious process. It does need practical support as well as finance; and perhaps what it needs most of all is continuous encouragement.

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