Research and Learning factsheet

Promoting community involvement

'Community involvement' is a broad theme that offers a range of approaches that help you to achieve what you want to – whether you are funding a programme or putting together a local project.

This factsheet introduces you to a number of ideas and things to think about in this area. It is based on BIG's experience of running and reflecting on a wide range of community-based programmes. You can find general information about those programmes and the issues discussed here on our 'Stronger communities' webpage.

▶ **What do you mean by 'community involvement'?** In this factsheet we focus on work based on geographic communities. Some people also use the term 'community' to refer to population groups who share a common characteristic (such as ethnicity or age). While much of what is written here could be applied to those 'communities of interest', they are not the focus of this factsheet.

An early stage of developing programmes to involve communities is to be clear about the following:

▶ **How do you define and limit the community?** Some areas have a natural identity, such as isolated rural settlements. In cities, on the other hand, boundaries are not always clear. People may think of their community as covering or crossing estates, wards, and local authority boundaries. You need to ensure that your boundaries make sense to the people you want to benefit and involve, but you also need to ensure that it takes account of administrative boundaries used by any authorities or other groups you want to work with.

▶ **Why have you identified this community?** In much of our work we have wanted to make co-ordinated changes for the better in specific areas. We have often identified those areas as having specific needs or levels of deprivation. But in working with the community it is essential to avoid alienating residents or reinforcing negative stereotypes by focusing on social problems, poverty and disadvantage. It is far more productive to work with the community and to highlight what residents want to change for the better.

▶ **What level of involvement are you offering, and why?** There is a big difference between, for instance, consulting with a community about ideas that you want to implement, and deciding to give the community a large pot of money to spend as it sees fit. But both of these are 'community involvement', and both have their place. In brief, if you want to implement 'top-down' policies and ideas, it is most likely that you will need to undertake and manage the work yourself, with input from the community.

But some of our most successful work has involved supporting communities both to develop their own ideas about what changes they would like to see and to manage a large part of those changes themselves. This can build communities' skills and confidence over the longer term, but only if funders and policy-makers are prepared to give support over a longer period and do not impose strict targets or requirements.

What this means is that funders and policy-makers need to know what they want to achieve, how they want to involve the community, as well as how much control they want to hand over to the community.

It is essential to communicate this clearly to the community from the outset and to stick to promises made. It may seem obvious, but 'empowering' a community – and then changing your mind – is only likely to undermine and community support you have built up. Remember

that you may want to 'empower' a community or 'build its capacity', among other goals. But at least in the early stage of such efforts, local residents are not likely to be enthused by such top-down ideas. They are most likely to be interested in having a say in making more concrete changes.

Handing power to communities

While we note throughout this factsheet that it is important to be realistic about what you and communities will achieve, our experience shows that it is indeed possible to give communities a lot of freedom about making decisions and changes for the better. Some lessons that have emerged from our experience of funding in this area follow:

▶ Meaningful and effective participation takes time, support and resources, rather than top-down direction, requirements and timetables, and must work sensitively and with the grain of the community. But it can be done!

▶ Successfully encouraging participation will require you to think imaginatively about your own procedures rather than simply transferring them to the community in question. For instance, public funders and policy-makers tend to work in a bureaucratic world of procedures: we have to because we are usually accountable to the general public. If we transfer power and decision-making to the community, we have to start by recognising that the community is accountable first and foremost to itself.

▶ A common concern is how whole communities can be accountable for spending public money. Various approaches can help to achieve this. First, if you give communities real control over resources and decisions meant to benefit them, along with support and information, our experience shows that they will feel a collective responsibility to make 'good' decisions – and to quiz each other about whether these are in fact the right decisions. Being open about decisions and the sums of money involved help to achieve this. More formally, it is possible to provide a sort of gate-keeper; that is, someone who is an agent of the funder and who signs off spending decisions.

Equality and fairness

'Community' refers to all residents of an area. Ensuring equality and fairness are often seen as challenges – if you don't handle them well they can lead to resentment and division. But starting from a vision of fairness and involvement for all (rather than, for instance, focusing on top-down targets)

can help to ensure acceptance and co-operation.

▶ In most cases it would be impractical to ask all residents to vote on decisions, so funders and communities create some sort of committee or panel. This raises the wider question of 'representativity'. Decisions about who to include (and how to choose them) will always be difficult. It's probably worth accepting from the outset that this will never be perfect, but that doesn't mean that this is not a serious issue. Many efforts at engagement and representation have floundered because those involved have not resolved arguments about who should be involved and which groups are not adequately represented. There is a danger that this can take attention and energy away for making decisions and doing the work about how to improve the community.

▶ It is essential for any representative body to have the trust of the wider community. The most effective way of maintaining that is to ensure openness and good wider communications and dialogue to allow community scrutiny and influence.

▶ A tricky issue is ensuring that decisions meet the needs of particular groups within the community. While many people talk about 'communities of identity', remember that those individuals may not see themselves as part of one group with one view. Try to be mindful that needs, loyalties and identities cross local boundaries and so area-based initiatives may need to be complemented by wider initiatives in order to ensure equality of opportunity.

▶ There are many other aspects to equalities and fairness. It is important for processes and involvement to be open to all. That means thinking about such issues as childcare, timing of meetings, and access to meeting places.

▶ At the same time, it is worth accepting that not everyone will want to be involved. There are many reasons for this: many people (and often those at most disadvantage) will not have enough free time or energy. Others will not be confident about their own abilities, while others may be more interested in undertaking practical work rather than, for instance, making decisions. The most practical response to this is to offer people a range of levels and types of involvement, and support that enables them to take part. Many participants in our community projects have deepened their involvement as their knowledge and interest have grown.

Maintaining involvement

While many initiatives have brought residents to-gether around an idea or a project, keeping them involved over the longer term can be difficult. Here are some things to think about:

▶ It is easier to involve the community and maintain that engagement if the community has a real say over decisions and spending from the outset.

▶ Sometimes communities have enthusiastically supported an idea, but when it reaches a particular goal (such as getting a grant, or a facility opening) that enthusiasm can fall away – because the battle has been won. The key to dealing with this is to ensure that the steps involved are fully thought through, and to celebrate those achievements as steps along the way rather than the ultimate goal. Be clear about what has to happen next and what support will be needed to get there.

▶ Outside events (such as inclement weather or wider economic or political change) can hamper progress or lead to reverses. Funders need to be aware of these risks and provide support to communities developing more complex plans. Another valuable strategy is to network projects or communities with others to share experiences, successes and problems.

▶ Many community initiatives rely on the enthusiasm of one or more committed individuals. Think about what to do if they move on to other interests or areas. Good wider involvement is important here.

▶ Sometimes the level of engagement may not need to be sustained. Many successful projects sustain their achievements by encouraging others to take on the responsibility of funding and managing improvements into the future. The best way to ensure this is to promote communication and buy-in from those potential supporters from the outset. Those supporters might include any combination of other voluntary and community groups, the local authority, other public sector agencies and the private sector.

And few points to close...

▶ Be entirely clear about the level of engagement you are offering and why – and to make sure that the community understands this.

▶ Part of the point of involvement is to respond to local conditions. Those conditions vary from one area to another and over time, so don't assume that what works in one place will necessarily work in another.

▶ If given enough support, time and space to learn, communities can make real and sustained differences – and individuals can be inspired to take on more responsibility and challenges beyond your initial expectations.

To find out more about our research and evaluation in this area, please visit our 'Stronger communities' webpage.