Community action in local government

A guide for councillors and strategic leaders

Community action

Community action

The context

Councils have seen significant reductions in their funding over recent years. The core grant to local government has been cut by 40 per cent since 2010,[1] and councils need to reduce spending in order to meet growing cost pressures.

As councils re-think how they deliver services, they have an opportunity to consider the role of local people in designing, commissioning and delivering these services. This is particularly important where involving the community has the potential to deliver savings, reduce demand and improve outcomes.

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1   http://www.local.gov.uk/briefings-and-responses/-/journal_content/56/10180/6842934?_56_INSTANCE_0000_templateId=ARTICLE

What is community action?

The Local Government Association (LGA) defines community action as 'any activity that increases the understanding, engagement and empowerment of communities in the design and delivery of local services'. This can include (in ascending levels of involvement) community consultation, joint planning, joint design, joint delivery and community-led services.

Community action activities vary widely in their objective, the types of activities involved, the role the community plays, their scale and their integration within the council. What they have in common is that they all involve greater engagement of local citizens in the planning, design and delivery of local services.

Why is community action important?

Involving communities in the design and delivery of services can help to achieve a number of objectives, including:

- **Building community and social capacity** – through the creation of social networks, volunteering, and helping the community to share knowledge, skills and ideas.

- **Community resilience** – helping the community to better support itself, such as through the development of skills and connections between people and agencies.

- **Prevention** – a focus on early access to services or support, engagement in design, cross-sector collaboration and partnerships. This approach can reduce demand on statutory services and/or improve quality of provision.

- **Maintaining and creating wealth** – such as through a focus on helping people into employment, creating new jobs, developing community enterprises or better use of existing physical resources.

Which parts of the community are involved?

Every community is different, and local action should reflect the particular needs of the community you are working with – whether that is defined by geography (such as a ward or village) or a specific group of people.

The groups that have most often been involved in community action initiatives across council areas so far include older people, people who are experiencing/at risk of social isolation, and people with long-term physical or mental health conditions or a learning disability. It has also been used to promote healthier lifestyles and physical activities in high-risk groups (such as residents in more deprived areas) or as community-wide engagement (to build capacity and resilience).

Community action work has also been used with children and young people, complex families, the homeless or those at risk of homelessness, and unemployed people. In short, any service that is for the community, can potentially include community action.

The benefits of community action

Given the range of activities that can be encompassed within community action, it follows that there is a broad range of potential benefits for different stakeholders.

Political/strategic benefits

- Fulfil corporate and service objectives/political priorities

- An opportunity to redefine what services the council should/should not provide

- Assessing need and identifying potential gaps in provision

- Changing the dynamic between the council and the community to move away from a 'them and us' attitude

Financial and service benefits

- Generating savings through cost reduction

- Enabling more effective commissioning

- Reducing duplication between services/providers

- Reducing demand

- Enabling services to be provided within the community (rather than statutorily)

- Maintaining and improving services or assets

- Making use of previously under-utilised community facilities/resources

- Reducing adverse events (such as falls in older people or homelessness)

Economic benefits

- Higher levels of employment

- Reduction in welfare benefits paid

- Training and skills opportunities

Community benefits

- Devolving power to local level

- Engaging local people in service design and/or delivery

- Meeting community priorities, needs or aspirations

- Improving community cohesion

- Building community resilience

- Providing communities with the skills, tools and support to undertake activities themselves, on a sustainable basis, including greater use of volunteering

- Developing technical skills within the community as the council moves services online

- Supporting people to become role models within their community

- A better understanding of the social assets within the community

- Helping people back into employment or to develop new skills

- Supporting independent living

- Improving community safety and the local environment

- Reducing the dependency culture and supporting greater self-management – for individuals and across communities
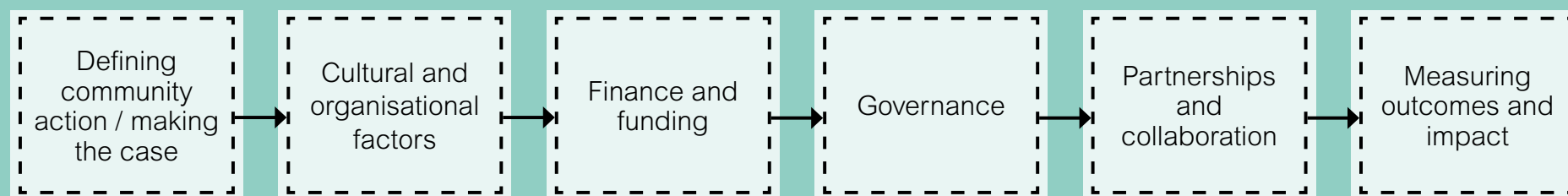
Wellbeing benefits

- Improving health, wellbeing and overall quality of life through participation in social activities and community life

- People feel empowered through learning new skills

- Reduced social isolation or loneliness

- Improved quality of life and better response to crisis events

- Increasing people's confidence

The business case for community action

As councils consider the potential merits of investing in a community action project or activities, there are a number of guiding principles they can take into account as part of the 'business case' process. These are summarised here, together with a checklist of questions for councillors and officers to consider as they plan, implement and review community action initiatives. Additional resources for 'making the case' can be found at www.local.gov.uk/community-action

Guiding principles for community action

| Defining community action / making the case | → | Cultural and organisational factors | → | Finance and funding | → | Governance | → | Partnerships and collaboration | → | Measuring outcomes and impact |

Key questions for councillors and officers to consider

Cultural and organisational factors

1. How does the project fit with corporate and service priorities and support an overall vision for greater participation in the design and delivery of services?

2. Who will 'champion' it at senior level?

3. How will councillors be involved and supported to communicate the right message?

4. Does the organisation have enough capacity to support the project in terms of resources, staffing and skills?

5. What message does your work need to give to local people, and to staff, in order to shift attitudes towards active participation and engagement?

Finance and funding

1. How will the project be funded?

2. Is external funding available?

3. Are there any match-funding requirements or opportunities?

4. What is the split between revenue and capital requirements?

5. What are the key types of expenditure that will be incurred?

6. Are there any specific conditions attached to the funding?

7. Can the project be delivered differently or scaled back with less funding?

8. What is the longer term funding/ sustainability model?

Governance

1. What are the terms of reference for the project? Have these been communicated and agreed with the key stakeholders?

2. What will the overarching governance structure be?

3. How will partners be involved in the governance process?

4. How will the target population(s) be represented?

5. What sub-groups/working groups will be required?

6. How regularly will groups meet and what information will be needed to support these meetings?

7. How can community action be embedded in day-to-day council business?

8. Is there a need to build governance capability within the target communities?

Partnerships and collaboration

1. Which external partners need to be engaged?

2. What role do these other stakeholders have in the project – for example joint funding, commissioning or delivery, or monitoring and evaluation?

3. Will the partners form part of the governance arrangements? If so, how?

4. How will the partners be engaged in the project on a day-to-day basis – communication channels, formal groups, workshops?

5. How regularly do discussions with partners need to take place?

6. Does the partnership align clearly with the vision and objectives of the council?
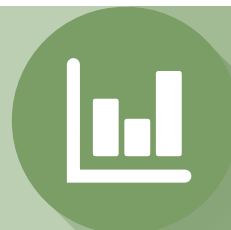
Measuring outcomes and impact

1. What is the target population(s) for the work? This may be defined by a geographical boundary or a section of society (for example older people, families, long-term unemployed, lone parents, the socially isolated), or a combination of both.

2. What other groups will be targeted who will not necessarily benefit directly? For example volunteers and community groups.

3. What is the current baseline? How many people are currently using the service or not accessing appropriate support; how many volunteers are already in place?

4. Who will be responsible for monitoring and collecting data? How could residents and volunteers be used to support collecting data about outcomes?

5. What form will monitoring take and how often? For example website hits, number of face-to-face interactions, volunteering hours.

6. What are the expected outcomes (quantitative where possible)? Are there any existing tools that will help to measure/quantify these?

7. Are there any performance measures that could be established in advance to define success?

8. Is funding dependent in any way on achievement of outcomes/measures?

Further information can be found at: www.local.gov.uk/community-action

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