Power Partnerships: learning from Stevenage

About the Power Partnerships action-research project

The Commission on the Future of Localism was set up in 2017 to consider how to reinvigorate localism and strengthen community power. It was Chaired by Lord Kerslake and brought together politicians, policy experts and community leaders. We published the Commission’s findings in ‘People Power’ in 2018.

Over the past year, in partnership with Local Trust and Power to Change, we have been working on an action-research project in four areas to test our findings and recommendations in practice. Through this project, we hope to show how local authorities can drive forward a radical new localism agenda.

We have been working with Cornwall, Stevenage, Southwark and Wigan. Our learning from working with Stevenage Council and community organisations in Stevenage is summarised in this report. You can also read our full report with our findings from all four areas in ‘Power Partnerships’ online at locality.org.uk/power-partnerships
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Summary of our findings in Stevenage

As a Co-operative Council and the first New Town in the U.K., Stevenage has a history founded on the principles of self-help and mutual support. The leader of Stevenage Borough Council (SBC), Cllr. Sharon Taylor, was one of our commissioners on the Localism Commission and we heard how Stevenage has sought to put cooperative principles at the heart of relationships with residents, particularly in the context of a major town centre regeneration. We were therefore really interested in exploring our key findings from the Localism Commission with Stevenage.

Over the last two years there have been a number of initiatives within Stevenage to strengthen neighbourhood working and embed localism within the council. Greater internal resources have been allocated to community development alongside a new community involvement framework. In addition, the council’s pilot Cooperative Neighbourhood Management Programme is part of the Department for Culture Media and Sport’s (DCMS) Enabling Social Action programme. A pilot participatory budgeting scheme has also been developed for neighbourhood improvement programmes.

At our initial project meeting, with Rob Gregory, Assistant Director of Communities and Neighbourhoods and team members, we discussed current efforts to embed localism within procurement, regeneration and planning. Making sure localism is ‘business as usual’ requires workforce and organisational change, alongside strategic level commitment. Part of this has involved reshaping services around place to disrupt siloed working and has been facilitated by neighbourhood officers.

The voluntary and community sector (VCSE) in Stevenage have also been key partners in this journey. This includes taking a more neighbourhood-based approach to service delivery and strengthening their community development role. A new community centre strategy in Stevenage is also phasing out core-grants to community associations and is encouraging new business models based on strengthened community relationships. These dynamics have offered us some interesting learning about how Stevenage is seeking a partnership approach with communities, to maximise resources within the community and empower residents to have greater involvement in shaping the future of the town.
Our research activities

Our research involved a meeting with Stevenage’s neighbourhoods’ team at the inception of the project to identify key themes. We also carried out semi-structured interviews with six community organisations and volunteers across the borough.

A key part of the project has been to facilitate peer-learning with the other councils involved in the project. To support this, we held a roundtable in February 2019, hosted by Lord Kerslake (Chair of the Localism Commission), with councillors and senior council officers in Wigan, Cornwall and Stevenage. This was also an opportunity to explore how councils who are ambitious about community power could drive forward a radical new localism agenda.

Key findings

Localism requires neighbourhood institutions which help to ensure that power ‘sticks’ in communities and has meaning at a local level. This was a key conclusion of our Localism Commission. Local governance needs to be inclusive and participatory; and this often requires building community capacity through nurturing local ecosystems of community activity and organisations. Formal or informal structures, groups, organisations or institutions can play this role, but this infrastructure is vital in enabling communities to have a voice.

In particular, in strengthening community capacity for localism, the value of ‘informal’ community activity can be crucial. This can re-engage communities who feel powerless and provide the impetus for further community action. Providing the space and time for informal discussions on local issues without a pre-agreed agenda can lead to opportunities to develop other courses for local action.

In Stevenage, community organisations, residents’ groups as well as the council’s own community development team play a vital role in this localism infrastructure. Our interviews with community organisations and volunteers in Stevenage, explored these themes in greater detail.

Relationships and community engagement

In interviews with community centres and VCSE organisations, the relationship with Stevenage Council’s neighbourhoods’ team was highlighted as playing an important facilitative role. These relationships were highlighted both in terms of strengthening and celebrating local action, as well as in supporting partnership working in localities with other key services.
Three Neighbourhood Wardens, for example, were introduced to
neighbourhoods in Stevenage in 2017. Their purpose is to be the “eyes and ears
of the community”, resolving environmental or anti-social behaviour concerns
and being a link with other council services. They also support community
initiatives, such as local litter picks.

Interviewees highlighted that this role can provide residents, particularly in areas of higher deprivation or lower rates of
participation, with a boost to get projects off the ground and experience the
power of collective action. Neighbourhood wardens are also convening
partnerships within the community – for example with schools or local
businesses."

Interviewees highlighted that council staff and councillors take a relationship-
based approach to community engagement, seeking out opportunities in local
events and being part of a “constantly evolving conversation” with residents.
However, interviewees also reflected that the traditional “paternalistic culture” of
citizen/council relationships can be hard to break.

One interviewee described this challenge in resident meetings when problems
about the local area are discussed - such as overgrown green areas or litter. It
can be hard to shift the conversation from “what is the council going to do about
it?” to “what can we do about it?” In contrast, another community centre
manager (and local resident) described a wider culture of apathy which, in her
view, stops residents from even engaging in local meetings:

“We’ve got used to what things looks like… the attitude is ‘oh yeah, it’s
fine we can put up with that’. While people love living here, we don’t
necessarily have the aspirations to improve the place. We’ve had
austerity for such a long time… people are used to how things are, and
this builds a cycle of apathy.” - Community centre manager.

Building more participatory opportunities within community engagement and
local decision-making, can help increase peoples’ experience of ownership and
influence over their places. Stevenage is currently trialling a participatory
budgeting (PB) programme for neighbourhood improvement projects in priority
wards, with residents shaping ideas and determining priorities for spending.

One community centre manager described the impact of taking a more
participatory approach in decision-making:

“It involved workshopping different ideas with residents, developing
ideas around what’s needed in the local area, and then costing these up
and returning to people and saying ‘how shall we take this forward?’.
There’s a genuine conversation then about priorities.” – Community centre manager.

This approach is used to foster honest conversations with communities, and a culture of joint responsibilities and shared priorities. This honesty in relationships was valued by a number of interviewees; as one volunteer commented: “Sometimes I’m surprised how this is such a key part of everyday existence, in how they [the council] work, not just lip-service.”

Future for community centres

There are 14 community centres across Stevenage, owned by Stevenage Borough Council and leased to community associations. Many were purpose built community and recreational assets, designed into the New Town plans.

In recent years, the grant from Stevenage Council to community associations for the management of these assets has reduced, with the aim that from 2019/20 community centres will be entirely self-funded. While largely driven by financial pressures, the decision to change the funding structure for community centres has also been described as providing an impetus to revive their purpose and outreach within neighbourhoods.

Community centres are a pivotal resource within neighbourhoods, not only in providing community space but also as a potential catalyst for community activity. The new community centre strategy has prompted new conversations about how to strengthen community relationships, bringing in new users, activities and groups into the centres. As the manager of one community centre reflected: “The idea is that we are to become more ‘business like’... but in consulting around the new business plans, we will be drawing on support and ideas from the neighbourhood.”

Part of the new strategy is to encourage community centres to develop as ‘hubs’ within communities – with new income opportunities bringing in new connections with other public and voluntary sector agencies. Interviewees also described the possibilities this might bring for greater colocation of local services and groups with the community centre, with added social value for neighbourhoods.

“We need to develop our presence in the community, and increase people’s knowledge of the centre and its possibilities for the neighbourhood... the risk is currently we are a bit of a ‘white elephant’” – Community centre manager
Community centre managers reflected on the challenge for the sector in strengthening community relationships. Shared learning with the neighbourhoods’ team at SBC was seen as valuable, as well as peer-learning as a community centre network through the Stevenage Community Centres Alliance. Strategies varied, from community asset mapping to gain a better understanding of local relationships and strengths, to volunteer recruitment and new ideas for community events.

Interviewees also discussed their promotion and outreach within the local area. Social media was seen as a key communication tool; however, there was also a recognition that lack of access or digital skills can be a barrier to some residents and volunteers. Above all, it is the relationships with other groups and activities within the community that were seen as the most vital to community engagement, bringing in new connections. Getting people “through the door” was seen as important for building people’s confidence in accessing the space and encouraging more visitors through word of mouth.

Others reflected that power is built through small projects, like community litter picks or community garden projects. These develop the aspirations for the neighbourhood and are a catalyst for further action. Maintaining the momentum of community activism requires making connections between different groups and projects across the whole neighbourhood:

“There is definitely a gap in being able to communicate between these groups...there’re fantastic bubbles of things going on, but it’s underappreciated, most people don’t know what is going on in other bubbles.” - Community centre manager.

Youth engagement and future community leadership

All interviewees discussed youth participation and involvement as key to the future of localism and community power in Stevenage, highlighting more opportunities for developing the next generation of community leadership: “Young people need to shape communities in the future, otherwise they will disappear.”

The Youth Council was highlighted as a great initiative – but there is a need to broaden this participation, through greater involvement of schools and workplaces. Opportunities were highlighted for linking young people into community work, including creating more links between youth services and community volunteering, as well as more intergenerational projects.
References


ii Co-operative Councils Innovation Network. ‘Enabling Social Action in Stevenage.’
Available at: https://www.councils.coop/case-studies/enabling-social-action-in-stevenage/

iii Co-operative Councils Innovation Network. ‘Neighbourhood wardens make a

iv Co-operative Councils Innovation Network. ‘Neighbourhood wardens make a