

Active Wellbeing Leadership Network

Deeper Discussions – Meeting no.5

Karen Creavin – Community Empowerment

What are the issues?

We started with a round. Some of the things that came up where:

- There is apathy in communities with many people feeling that they aren't really listened to... there is mistrust, survey fatigue, engagement but people don't feel heard and things don't change locally
- Some of the capacity to scaffold in communities (Local Government) is now too impaired
- The capacity to work on the ground isn't there... there is a significant lack of investment in communities and the hyperlocal organisations
- Our focus has been getting the inactive to be active– isn't necessarily their focus– it has been a challenge to find the right people and get them interested.
- Getting a political steer for engagement and empowerment can be difficult
- There is some buy in for Place Based working but not always an acknowledgment that it takes time. Need to be able to keep the faith
- Raft of other priorities get precedence than working well with communities– often all the funding is already used up
- It is about promoting agency for those in the most need. Also about creating a win/win
- We need to do real listening and focus on meeting needs. Often the reality of people's lived experience isn't recognised when trying to work with people.
- It is important to recognise that there is a youth voice and we need to ensure that it is woven into Community Empowerment and place based working
- Important to recognise complexity and understand that there is more than one voice in communities
- We aren't always clear or aligned around the outcomes we are trying to meet. Within our sector and also with communities
- Concern that local empowerment can exacerbate fragmentation and a culture of top down is seen as the best way to achieve results at scale
- Scarcity isn't good for innovation and a lot of the fluid money is now gone out of the system so much harder to fund engagement and empowerment properly

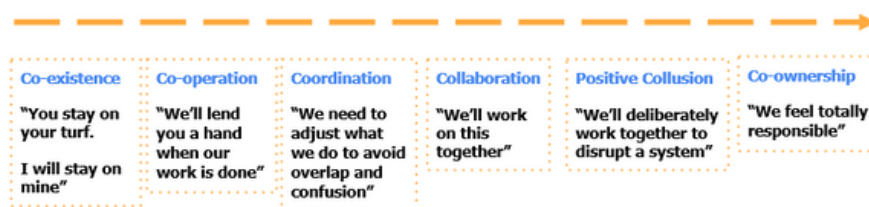
We framed this debate within the lens of Devolution and talked about the importance of community empowerment to ensure that devolution wasn't just a distribution of power down to town halls from Whitehall – as per Lisa Nandy's comments in her book *'All In' All In by Lisa Nandy review – why Labour must give power to the people | Politics books | The Guardian*

Community Empowerment will help make a reality of Devolution and ensure that decisions are made by those who are most impacted, those in the most need.... If we get it right. But what does that mean?

We talked about the significance of generating agency at a community level to enable empowerment. We talked about the importance of building trust as part of the resilience building needed to promote agency. We acknowledged that there are different layers of trust... there is the history of what has happened (or not happened) before which impacts on the trust between those with and without power. There is then the trust (or not) between the different stakeholders in the system, and those in the communities. We talked about the significance of who is seen to be asking, or attempting to work with the communities.

We differentiated between empowerment and engagement- which for a time in our discussion initially were being used interchangeably. We agreed that they are different, albeit on a continuum from consultation, through collaboration, to co-ownership.

From co-existence to co-ownership



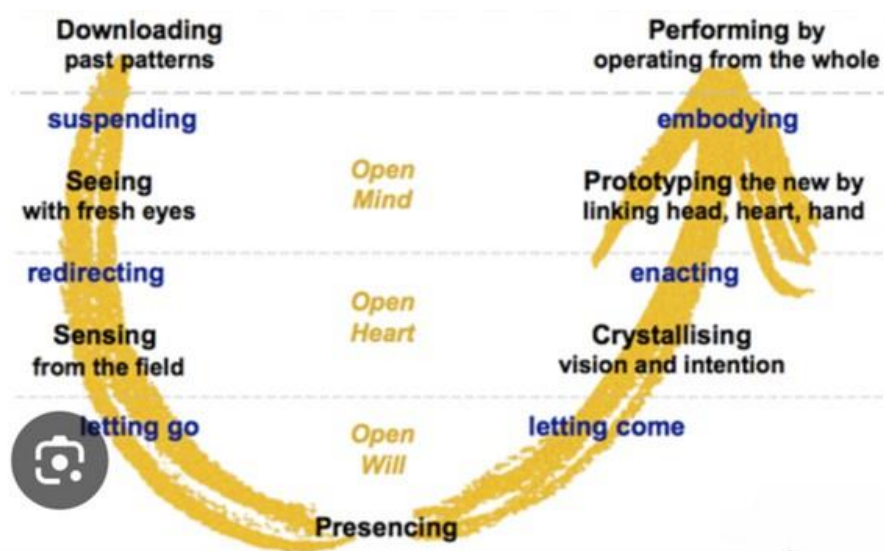
In terms of place, we spent time talking about the importance of a sense of place and place culture, which then led us into a discussion about the importance of an asset based approach to community empowerment. This also led to a consideration of place vs community and an acknowledgement that places could improve while the lot of a local community might not, as well as other issues around things like communities of interest that might also coalesce with place.

We talked about the difference between value and cost, about whether we could be informed by examples of where it had worked, and for whom.

This led us on to a discussion about 'doing with and not to' and the importance of connecting to other resources and networks who are working in this field. This led on to a discussion about the importance of embracing complexity and the balances and compromises that might need to be made.

We looked a little at who defines success- is it funders/commissioners or communities? We talked about the necessary iteration of process evaluation that need to come with this work. This led on to a consideration of the importance of taking a networked approach to the work, and ensuring that we have good feedback loops from the communities within our systems (we currently don't).

We introduced Theory U as a helpful change model and showed where we were in terms of opening our mind and seeing the issue with fresh eyes, being able to empathise with an open heart, and being prepared to accept that we need to let go of what we thought we need to do and be prepared to try new things Otto Scharmer explains the six principles of Theory-U



How can we attempt to address them?

We spent a bit of time discussing whether there was consensus on who is doing it well and in whose view? We agreed that there were pockets of good examples, but no single approach that does everything www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/community-power-the-evidence this is a helpful discussion piece to that effect.

We spent a little bit of time talking about the reality of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and how in order to do effective community empowerment we need to work with the presenting physiological needs that many in the most deprived communities are struggling with. We talked about the impact of scarcity and self actualisation and how this can amplify lowering aspirations.



We acknowledged that scaffolding for community leadership would support the development of knowledge, skills and capability, but then had a debate about ensuring that we didn't just expect communities to work on our terms, and to acknowledge the importance of the power being distributed and that the system itself needed to be prepared to change. We referenced a book by Scottish Rapper Loki (Darren McGarvey) which gave the example of a community group wanting some money for a jar of coffee but being made to have a constitution and Terms of Reference, funding etc etc.... all they wanted was some money for a Jar of Nescafe – but the system wants the community group to have good governance, they want a coffee... Book review: Poverty Safari, by Darren McGarvey – The Earthbound Report

We talked about capacity organisations like The Big Local who have experience of working with Communities and supporting them to spend money in ways that they determine. Matt Leech (although leaving the Big Local Trust) has a history in this work.

Next steps from the group:

Done as a round so some overlap

- Benchmark: what do we know now? Not starting from scratch
- We need to think about framing this around active citizenship, meeting the need where it shows up and then linking it to a wider community development journey.
- We can increase connections within communities and develop a sense of practices that support Community Empowerment (The Active Wellbeing Society were asked to share their briefing papers on Active Communities and Active Citizenship)

- We need to have sector wide clarity on terminology and there was a call for a briefing paper around terms and approaches (reflected in our discussion about the difference between empowerment and engagement)
- We need a '1 thing we can all do' guide to practices that support empowerment
- Invest in local leadership at all layers
- Differentiate between engagement and empowerment so that the sector is clear about the difference and why
- Share top tips/ case studies/ community engagement examples/ community power examples in a 'Bank of Dave' way
- go and find examples of where this is done well and share
- scaffold and support communities to make a reality of devolution on the ground (neighbourhoods, APPG and Commission)
- break into the community development world and bring in what we have done
- do a thought piece/ find out more about Theory U and change
- Local and Neighbourhoods need to be in the devo convos– how do we support that to happen
- Identify alternative engagement and empowerment models and bring a toolkit together of local examples of how this could then be applied to a raft of settings like a park/ youth offer/ community facility

**For more information about this work and the notes please contact
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