



The art of influence

How to make the case for community development

A report on CDF's action research pilots

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Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Introduction	1
1. Methodology	2
2. Project reports	3
Project 1	3
Project 2.....	6
3. Conclusions	9

Acknowledgements

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Finally, we want to express our sincere thanks to the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR), whose instruction and subtle yet insightful advice has strengthened our work immeasurably.

Introduction

Community development (CD) workers in the public sector have two central roles: working **with** communities on the one hand, and **for** their organisations on the other. The sometimes conflicting priorities can leave practitioners torn between advocating on behalf of the communities they serve, and delivering the programmes of their employers. However, CD workers' regular face-to-face interaction with communities is vital to the success of the government's vision to 'generate vibrant local democracy in every part of the country, and to give real control over local decisions and services to a wider pool of active citizens'.¹ Despite the potential of CD workers to engage communities and inform service development, many lack effective ways of influencing their local authorities and other local service providers to be open and responsive to community needs.

Nearly all descriptions of the public sector CD worker's role include both the responsibility to improve communication between authorities and communities, and to ensure public services are meeting the needs of residents.² Yet in practice, this internal advocacy role is fundamentally downplayed, neglected and misunderstood. Frontline practitioners often struggle to effect change in their organisations' community-related policies, programmes and structures. For this reason, the Community Development Foundation (CDF) decided to take action in helping CD workers develop workable solutions to significant flaws within community related programmes. Using these solutions, CDF aimed to support CD workers to influence their agencies and the operation of community programmes.

The following report recounts work CDF undertook to identify ways in which CD workers can exert influence internally and realise tangible change within their organisations. Our aim was to work directly with practitioners to effect change: by identifying and addressing problems within their local authorities and reflecting on the effectiveness of the action taken. By exerting influence and realising positive change within their organisations, CD practitioners in turn build a stronger case for community development. We began with a simple question:

How can CD workers positively influence community-related policies and programmes for the benefit of local communities?

Section 1 briefly outlines the research method used by CDF. Section 2 presents case studies of our work with practitioners in two local areas. Finally, Section 3 offers reflections on the findings from the projects, and identifies relevant learning for other practitioners and their organisations.

This report summarises the key steps in the action research process (Section 1). For further guidance on conducting your own action research, visit www.cdf.org.uk/conductingactionresearch.

1 CLG, 2008, *Communities in Control: Real People, real power*.

2 The National Occupational Standards are clear that CD workers have a key role in making their authorities listen to their communities. Other models of CD worker roles identify the 'service developer' function of a CD worker in changing cultures, and the 'change agent' function in improving communication between authorities and communities.

1. Methodology

To determine how CD workers can positively influence their organisations' operations, we selected two separate local areas³ in which to establish and run **action research projects**. We looked for areas where CD workers were struggling to influence policy and strategy effectively within their organisations. This may have meant they were experiencing difficulty convincing their boss or a local politician of the value of CD, or were facing barriers within strategy or policy making processes. Once the problem had been identified, CD practitioners determined how to use their influence to help find a solution.

Action research⁴ is about learning through doing. Its primary outcome is not the final report, but the practical change which is secured. It aims to address 'real world' problems by using a collaborative approach to identify problems, take action, and reflect on the action taken and decisions made. In the course of our work with the projects and ongoing reflection on our methods, we developed a way of applying action research based on six general stages (see Table 1). For each of the projects, the practitioner groups went through these generic stages, focusing on the unique situation of those practitioners and the challenges they faced.

Table 1: Six stages to change

Initiating the project	Groups work together to identify problems and action required. With the help of a facilitator, they map out a shared vision of their objectives, as well as potential barriers, key stakeholders, and key actions.
Defining the problem	Groups begin to unpack, interpret and narrow the general problem(s) they initially identified. The result is a fuller understanding of the problem(s) they face, and what can be tackled realistically in the project.
Facilitating and group development	As groups work to solidify their project plan, team membership and responsibilities, leadership of the project moves gradually from the facilitator to the group members.
Generating and testing solutions	Once the problem(s) is clearly defined, groups can begin to brainstorm specific ways to achieve their goals. Developing a way to assess whether or not a course of action will help the group reach its objectives is crucial at this stage.
Lobbying and influencing	Who does the group need to influence? How will the group get buy in from these audiences? Building relationships and understanding the motivations and interests of different stakeholders is vital to achieving influence.
Evaluating	In the final stage, participants reflect on the process. What went well? What did not? Why? What would they do again?

3 We have chosen to keep both areas anonymous throughout the report. Our purpose is not to comment on the merits and deficits of particular individuals or authorities, but to address the common issue of influence, and how it can manifest itself in local circumstances.

4 The Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) provided methodological support and guidance throughout our work. In addition, IVAR conducted an independent review of our process.

2. Project reports

Project 1

Problem

In Project 1, a team of practitioners within a County Council saw a pressing need to address the lack of focus on, and co-ordination of, efforts to build ‘stronger’ communities.⁵ At the start of the project, the authority thought it was performing well on NI4, the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions within their locality. However, county and district council officers, as well as police and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) representatives felt there was insufficient focus on ‘stronger’ work resulting in a lack of impact at a local level. According to them, the potential of ‘stronger’ work was blocked by a lack of clarity and understanding of the ‘stronger’ agenda, structural challenges, political obstacles, and a culture that did not lend itself to this agenda.

It became apparent to project participants that gaining a greater focus on ‘stronger’ issues, and ensuring better coordination of work in this area, would require CD workers to exert significant internal influence.

Process

We brought together a group of ‘stronger’ advocates from across the range of local partners: the County Council, District Councils, Police Authority and CDRP. The group worked through the action research stages outlined in the previous section, tailoring each stage where necessary:

1. Initiating the project

The project opened with a frank discussion of what participants wanted to achieve from the process. In a participatory session, team members gave their initial thoughts on the problem, barriers and opportunities. Project participants informed senior staff members of the project at the start. Senior staff delegated participation to the officers with whom we worked.

2. Defining the problem

The group initially identified, very generally, barriers facing the ‘stronger’ agenda in their area. Four sets of issues were identified:

- structural problems in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)

⁵ ‘Stronger communities’ has a formal meaning and is expressed by the issues outlined in National Indicators (NIs) 1–14. As each authority chooses only a number of these indicators, the meaning of ‘stronger communities’ in Project 1 relates to key issues of community participation, community cohesion & belonging, community influence, community satisfaction, community infrastructure and volunteering.

Project I – *continued*

- conceptual/definition issues with the term ‘stronger’ and its interpretation
- cultural issues in the local authority and unwillingness to support ‘stronger’ initiatives
- lack of political support for the ‘stronger’ agenda.

Under the old structure, the ownership and location of ‘stronger’ work was confined to a single thematic group within the LSP. The group determined this to be a barrier to capturing, coordinating and strengthening the breadth of the ‘stronger’ agenda. In addition, there was no shared understanding of what ‘stronger’ meant, and thus no mature way of capturing all ‘stronger’ work across seven Thematic Partnerships reporting to the County LSP. It was felt that the current LSP structure did not sufficiently co-ordinate or prioritise the complicated work with communities, and that this was in part the result of a haziness, across LSP partners, about what ‘stronger’ relates to. At the root, the group felt there was a lack of ownership and responsibility for ‘stronger’ work within the County LSP. The group identified the structural and conceptual issues as the most crucial and resolvable.

3. Facilitating and group development

Over the next few sessions, group membership and team spirit developed. As facilitators, we encouraged both honesty and recognition of shared perspectives. Team members were able to tackle problems with a sense of objectivity and impartiality, rather than from the perspective of their roles or their organisations. As a result, the group was able to have mature and robust discussions in which they felt able to challenge and support one another.

From the mid-point of the project, our role gradually diminished, and the project became self-sufficient. In one of the planning sessions, a participant suggested a new model for planning influence. He stood up and facilitated the remainder of the session. From here on, the group took over full leadership responsibilities from us as facilitators.

4. Generating and testing solutions

As noted above, the group identified conceptual problems with the term ‘stronger’, and hence sought to develop a robust and workable definition that would encapsulate the range of related activities the authority was overseeing. The group developed this definition and adopted it as a central plank in the development of alternative structural models for the LSP that would improve ownership and focus on ‘stronger’ work.

A number of proposed structural models for the LSP were highlighted – these located responsibility for ‘stronger’ work in either single or multiple thematic partnerships within the LSP. With our help as facilitators, the group established

Project I – *continued*

criteria for assessing each structural model and objectively analysed each of the options according to the following:

- ensures clarity of purpose/remit/meaning and shared understanding of ‘stronger’
- performance is accountable under the structure
- allows for capture and measurement of all ‘stronger’ work
- ensures effective representation of ‘stronger’
- ensures ‘stronger’ is owned in other thematic partnerships
- enables bottom-up influence.

By assessing each model against this criterion, the group was able to compare the structural options and select, by consensus, a preferred structural solution.

5. Lobbying and influencing

The group developed what was called a ‘power-support matrix’ and undertook a stakeholder analysis, mapping all those individuals whose support they needed. The matrix was instrumental in enabling the group to identify, for the first time, which stakeholders they needed to win over in order to secure support for the structural solution, prioritising those who could be both influenced and influential.

Arising from this mapping, the group shared responsibility for the lobbying and influencing of internal stakeholders (such as Councillors and senior officers) amongst themselves. The group developed a core script which explained the desired LSP structure, and then lobbied key individuals and groups. Following this period of individual advocacy, a formal case for the structure was developed and presented to the Thematic Partnership.

Results

- A group of individuals was organised and mobilised to better advocate for ‘stronger’ issues (i.e. community development, community empowerment).
- They developed an innovative structural model and a detailed case for structural change, both of which can be shared nationally with other LSPs.
- The group secured the buy in to elements of this change from senior decision makers as well as a broad alliance of officers and other interested individuals. This case is being considered at the various levels within the LSP.
- Throughout the project, the group tracked national policy formulation to grassroots implementation, from the empowerment white paper to the Duty to Involve. They learnt how forthcoming policies could support the case for change, and used those policies as levers for action.

Project 2

Problem

Project 2 was based in a City Council. The participant team was part of a neighbourhood management structure working within a deprived neighbourhood. Some residents in the area had been critical of the physical environment, and expressed a desire for service providers to act in a more responsive way, particularly in terms of environmental works. The neighbourhood management team was struggling to ensure that service providers (inside and out of the local authority) addressed the issues raised by residents. A lack of formal neighbourhood management arrangements (particularly in terms of working with partners) meant the team struggled to influence, and secure buy in from crucial service providers.

With funding from the Safer Stronger Communities Fund, the neighbourhood management team agreed to develop a Neighbourhood Service Improvement Agreement (NSIA) between residents and service providers to ensure both parties meet their responsibilities. The success of the NSIA depended on securing buy in from service providers.

Process

The project aimed to address the underlying issues that stood in the way of developing an effective NSIA. The group consisted of members tasked with various roles in developing the NSIA. Differing levels of seniority were represented with a mixture of managers, community development officers/assistants and service development officers. The group went through the generic action research stages outlined in the previous section, tailoring stages where necessary:

1. Initiating the project

In initial meetings, we as facilitators explained the action research process, what participants could expect from their involvement and the differing roles they could play. These were essentially 'storming' sessions, where the group tried to get to grips with collaborative and reflective practices. A senior manager attended the initial sessions.

2. Defining the problem

Early discussions looked at the challenges the team was facing in trying to launch the NSIA project. Discussions focused on answering such questions as: What are the origins of the NSIA? What is the rationale for it? What can it achieve? What does a successful NSIA look like? It became clear that complex team dynamics needed to be addressed before a NSIA could be put in place. Barriers to the success of the NSIA project were categorised in the following way:

Project 2 – continued

Relationships & dialogue

- Lack of engagement with the community from some service providers
- Poor relations between neighbourhood management team and certain service providers
- No meaningful dialogue between the local community and service providers
- Need for wider community engagement beyond the same few individuals

Financial & contractual

- Lack of certainty over where to focus limited resources in a climate of cuts
- Tension between community priorities and previously set council workplans & budgets
- Tension between the community's and service providers' priorities

Development & delivery of the agreement

- Lack of clarity/consensus on goals and structure of a NSIA
- 'Felt' lack of knowledge within the neighbourhood management team about how to create a sustainable NSIA
- Need for a clear process for monitoring an NSIA and assessing impact
- Possible tension between a tailored NSIA and the need for consistency across all neighbourhood management areas

3. Facilitating and group development

CDF facilitators offered a critical perspective on the group's ideas and proposed actions. They presented a number of possible actions and structural solutions that would strengthen the development of the NSIA in the eyes of both service providers and the local community. Once the group had identified key actions, we witnessed the shift in leadership from us as facilitators to the group members as those actions were implemented.

4. Generating and testing solutions

Having developed the basis of the NSIA, in terms of the standards that residents could expect from service providers, the facilitators encouraged the group to give greater thought to how to ensure the intended outcomes of the NSIA (i.e. improved resident satisfaction with the physical environment) were realised. In a collaborative effort between the group and us, a structure was developed to explain how the various groups and agencies could work together to implement the NSIA. This proposal tied engagement work and relevant service providers

Project 2 – *continued*

together under a single management structure and would provide a mutually beneficial forum for community members and service providers. The group took forward this proposal, developed and implemented it.

5. Lobbying and influencing

Following the development of the proposal, a successful process of advocacy began. The group scheduled a series of meetings with senior officers from a range of public service providers to secure support both for the NSIA and for active participation within the new structure. Group members led the planning for each of these meetings, including the identification of common interests between themselves and the service provider, and how the new structure would help service providers face current challenges.

Results

- The group developed a NSIA as set out at the start of the project.
- The group built new and positive relationships with senior managers in key service areas. Relating to the improvement of the local environment, they identified shared concerns and a strong consensus to improve the local area. Service providers suggested local projects for collaboration and earmarked funding for these activities.
- The group successfully advocated a new partnership structure for local service providers to engage with the community. They have attracted representation from service providers, local businesses, community groups and churches.
- Local communities have reacted warmly to the new structure, particularly the ability to speak to a range of service providers about cross-cutting issues. A ‘street champions’ initiative has been developed as a result of the action research process, and has been met with considerable support from both the community and service providers.
- The team has markedly increased the level and quality of engagement from service providers. The neighbourhood management team has begun working more closely with service providers, and has initiated a more effective approach to advocacy and influence. Management clarified its requirements for community development, and plan to adjust job descriptions to reflect an internal advocacy and influencing role.

3. Conclusions

The importance of being influential

CD workers have a core role in terms of identifying and developing community-based solutions to local problems. However, this on its own will not effect change. It is not sufficient for workers to serve up local need at the door of the authority—they must do more to ensure public service decision makers hear local views and act on them.

Making authorities more responsive and more empowering requires CD workers to actively apply influencing strategies such as those presented in this report. They must take responsibility for identifying allies and points of influence, and build a unified advocacy team to push for the local solutions identified. However, structures and activity that need to be influenced are likely to be ‘moving targets’, as priorities and focus shift regularly. CD workers must remain adaptable to this change by keeping in touch with the agendas and interests of those they need on their side.

Critics will argue that it is not CD workers’ job to exert influence on the authority, but communities themselves. They would object to the idea of CD workers being ‘the voice of the people’. But in the realities of local government, communities need allies. CD workers are best positioned to listen to the needs of both local communities and authorities in order to arrive at shared solutions.⁶ To do so, it is essential that CD workers secure buy in from senior decision makers. This requires consideration of the primary motivations and concerns of those being lobbied.

A structured approach to identifying and advocating solutions

Sustainable solutions to local issues are best developed and advocated by those closest to the problem. We were able to work with teams of practitioners who were immersed in the many different aspects of common challenges – and who often possessed as many innovative solutions. The frontline practitioners with whom we worked provided insights into the failings of local processes, structures and partnership arrangements. This detailed analysis provided the springboard for suggested improvements and new ways of working.

To harness the potential of such individuals, it is crucial to take a structured and collective approach. By working as a team, groups are able to identify, unpack and narrow the problems they face. Reaching a consensus is vital if the groups are to generate and develop possible solutions that address achievable goals. Together, the groups select a suggested approach, which they then advocate to relevant decision makers.

6 The new National Occupational Standards now better reflect this role. See Standard 4 in Lifelong Learning UK (2009), Community Development Work National Occupational Standards (Draft).

As the two project reports demonstrate, by following this process and focusing on the issue of influence, CD workers can overcome many of the barriers to change. They must take into account different interests and agendas and facilitate realistic and workable solutions together with communities and public sector partners.

Persist – change is possible

Both of our projects were successful in achieving some change within a relatively short time frame as a result of effective, systematic influence. In Project 1, we can see how a collective effort to influence decision makers has led to tangible structural changes that will better support community empowerment, the work of service providers and result in better outcomes for local people.

In Project 2, we have seen how identifying common concerns amongst service providers and local communities resulted in a shared determination and action to improve the local area. The structural and relationship outcomes achieved with this project are significant in terms of developing more responsive and open services for citizens. From this we have been able to support CD workers to better facilitate and coordinate work with communities. They have been able to encourage local service providers and communities to actively participate, which has even resulted in service providers recognising and proactively pursuing opportunities for collaboration with communities.

These tangible shifts in structures, working practices and organisational cultures are vital ingredients in the revitalisation of local democracy within our communities. The projects we have discussed in this paper show us how CD workers can – in a short space of time – draw upon the experiences and shared interests of partners and colleagues to create and sustain a positive momentum to tackle a shared problem. CD workers have a vital role to play in effecting local change and we encourage them to draw upon the process and strategies deployed within these case studies.

Whilst the ability to influence is arguably a dying art, it has never been more important. Without it, we will only ever be able to benefit from a fraction of CD workers' potential.

Community Development Foundation (CDF)

CDF is a non-departmental public body sponsored by Communities and Local Government (CLG) and a charity registered in England and Wales and recognised in Scotland. CDF's mission is to lead community development analysis and strategy in order to empower people to influence decisions that affect their lives.

CDF is the leading source of intelligence, guidance and delivery on community development, engagement, empowerment and capacity building in England and across the UK. Our work cuts across government departments, regional and local public agencies and the community and voluntary sectors. We also operate at European and international level.

CDF's key aim is to build engaged, cohesive and stronger communities and community sector by:

- advising government and other bodies on community involvement, civil renewal and community cohesion, and measures to build strong, active communities and promote community development
- supporting community work of all kinds through networks, links with practitioners, collaborative work with partner organisations, funding and management of local projects
- carrying out research, evaluation and policy analysis to identify good practice in all aspects of community development and involvement, and disseminating lessons through training, conferences, publications and consultancy.

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Public sector community development (CD) workers have two central roles: working with communities on the one hand, and for their organisations on the other. This unique position makes CD workers valuable resources for informing service development. However, internal barriers within the organisations can block CD workers from effecting real change in policy and strategy. Without effective ways of exerting influence, CD workers are unable to fulfil their vital role as agents of change.

In their Action Research Pilot Programme, the Community Development Foundation (CDF) worked with two groups of frontline community development workers in the public sector to help them exert internal influence and realise tangible change within their organisations. The account of their achievements – and challenges – offers guidance and motivation for community development workers across the country.

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