



People's Health Trust - Active Communities Case Study



ACORN - Ethical Lettings Campaign

Introduction

People's Health Trust believes in a world without health inequalities. The Trust funds small and local projects in neighbourhoods that are most affected by health inequalities with funding generated through The Health Lottery. Active Communities is one of its funding programmes and grants aim to support people to create or shape local projects that will help their community or neighbourhood to become even better, and require local people to design and run these projects. Typically lasting up to two years, the grants are between £5,000 and £50,000 for each project. The programme's main intended outcomes are:

- **Collective Control:** Ideas designed and led by local people. Regular participation of residents, who are empowered to lead and take ownership of the project design, delivery and development.
- **Social links and ties:** Stronger connections between people. Decreased social isolation and loneliness, and improved connection, friendships and collective support networks among participants.

Drawing on face-to-face interviews and focus groups with the project lead, participant volunteers and partner in spring 2016, and visits in spring 2017 and winter 2017, the case study explains how people came together to shape and lead the Ethical Lettings Campaign project and shares what they have learnt and achieved as part of the 2016 Active Communities evaluation.

Key facts

HealthTogether

Bristol Health
Community Interest
Company (CIC) area

£74,336 of People's
Health Trust funding

Main activities

This project aims to improve the standards of and approaches to private rental housing in Bristol

Key outcomes

- Improved social links and ties
- Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets
- Collective action and control



About the project

Run by ACORN, a not-for-profit grassroots membership organisation based in Bristol, the Ethical Lettings Campaign brings together local tenants to plan and deliver actions in the housing sector, strengthening their social networks and promoting collective control. The group meets at ACORN's base in Easton, an area of Bristol, which faces disadvantage and social isolation, and has a high proportion of private housing tenants. The project was funded from January 2016 - December 2017 and designed to campaign for private landlords and letting agents to implement the Ethical Lettings Charter (or Standard as it is often known locally), which is a code of conduct to raise standards in the private rental sector. Over time, the project has diversified and, by the follow-up visit, the group had successfully run a number of campaigns, including improving the affordability of housing in the private rental sector locally, improving emergency accommodation, increasing voter registration, and campaigning for a ban on unfair letting agent fees (www.gov.uk/government/news/government-action-to-ban-letting-agent-fees). A particular focus for the project around the time of the second visit was championing the need for affordable homes within the conversion of a former chocolate factory site, including a campaign to support the public consultation process and inform the Planning Committee at Bristol City Council.

“Now we have the Member Defence team, the Comms team, Recruitment (which covers door-knocking), and the Spokesperson team (who speak at events).”

(Participant volunteer)

How are local people shaping and leading the project?

The most common way for residents to shape project delivery is by volunteering to design activities and lead on different aspects of the campaigns. Building volunteer capacity is central to the project. Volunteers and participants are recruited through word-of-mouth, through local community activities such as stalls in shopping centres, on local high streets and via social media.

The local actions designed by the group are taken forward through a number of key teams. Over time, the group has adapted these structures, demonstrating their agility to adapt and evolve as they become more experienced and take on more campaigns.

“The abilities of everyone involved, and their ambitions had grown quite a lot.” (Project lead)

At the time of the initial visit, the group had organised themselves into a number of core teams around outreach activities, data collection, communication, events.

These teams continue to form the underlying structure of the project, but broaden their scope to meet the needs of each campaign. For example, at the time of the initial visit, volunteers had set up an advice and support group to share learning with local residents. Over time, as the knowledge, skills and confidence of the group developed, this group has evolved into member defence teams, which are peer-to-peer renter support groups, who provide both online and offline support to local residents and advise individuals or small groups affected by hyper-local housing issues.

“Now we have the Member Defence team, the Comms team, Recruitment (which covers door-knocking), and the Spokesperson team (who speak at



The teams meet when necessary to plan a particular activity or action, rather than following a pre-determined calendar. The teams are organised by volunteer co-ordinators, but the team members have become increasingly autonomous over time, enabling the paid organiser to take a step back, only getting involved in new or high profile activities.

“They have been running multiple campaigns themselves... The level of autonomy they have is huge.” (Project lead)

“The point was to structure ACORN in a way that builds leadership, building power amongst members and reducing our dependence on staff or a few committed activists. I am the coordinator for Member Defence... We try to structure things so that members own their own issues and work collectively to solve issues. ACORN is the sum of all these people’s collective actions.” (Participant volunteer)



What has the project achieved?

Improved social links and ties

Over time, the group has **reduced social isolation** and increased the **social connectedness** of volunteers and participants alike by working in teams, enhancing their **personal wellbeing**. Participant volunteers felt more connected with their community over time, having formed new friendships with other volunteers and participants, and extended their social networks.

“It’s people from the community... It’s a place to come and make friends... I’d be lonely if I didn’t do this! You make your best friends when you do stuff together.” (Participant volunteer)

Members organised events at Easton Community Centre to engage with local people who were not ACORN members to explore a range of housing issues. Around 60 local people attended these events, and contributed practical and constructive ideas. In this way, the project is improving **social ties**, encouraging volunteers and participants to spread the word locally. The group’s Facebook page has also helped to create a **sense of community belonging**, and has been very popular with local residents from the start. Over time, participant volunteers continue to recognise their **shared interests**. The group have developed **collective support networks**, supporting each other and the community.

“Together we discuss the options for actions, how best to engage the local community, and then agree dates, times, roles for people to take for the petition... It’s an action committee.” (Participant volunteer)

Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets

The initial training / launch event held in February 2016 introduced the concept of collective action and control. The event included a workshop on developing a campaign plan, identifying letting agents/ private landlords to target and agree constructive direct action to engage them. There was also a workshop led by volunteers on organising a public event or demonstration. The event gave local people the confidence to help design and deliver activities. Over time, participants have been increasingly **empowered and confident to take the lead**.



“Together we discuss the options for actions, how best to engage the local community, and then agree dates, times, roles for people to take for the petition... It’s an action committee.”

(Participant volunteer)

“Their confidence, political engagement... grassroots democracy, their level of responsibility, we have people who have never done anything like this before who now run it.” (Project lead)

Volunteers and participants have increased **their knowledge and understanding** about how to effect change in the housing sector, resulting in an **increased sense of collective aspiration**.

“It’s brought more people into that influencing space... And it means that those people that are campaigning are better informed and understand what the Council can and can’t do and what the constraints are, legally and financially.” (Partner)

Participant volunteers have increasingly developed their organisational **skills**. For example, initially the volunteer coordinators provided weekly updates for the project organiser and summarised developments before the monthly members meeting. These meetings have become more ad-hoc as volunteers’ **independence** and ability to direct actions has increased. Meetings are now organised at key points in a campaign to assess progress and for members to vote on whether to continue an action. As participants have developed the skills and confidence to campaign effectively, they also reported **increased happiness and life satisfaction**, further strengthening personal wellbeing and supporting their personal development.

“If one of my mates has an issue I tell them to come [here], we have the confidence that we will be able to help them sort it out. Also, my knowledge of housing stuff is a lot better. Recently I applied for a job and a lot of my experience and skills had come from the stuff I have been doing here, like researching and door-knocking, communicating with people, public speaking, skills I have definitely developed through campaigning with ACORN.” (Participant volunteer)

Collective action and control

Tenants approached through the initial door knocking exercise regularly reported being too scared to complain to their landlord or letting agent as they feared eviction. As a group, volunteers’ and participants’ developed **increased confidence to effect change** by lobbying politicians and discussing how to improve the housing stock through collective action. The teams are democratic structures.

“Although we see them as [team] leaders, they are not the bosses, they do not have any more decision making power than anybody else, it’s more checking in with them and how their teams are doing. So it’s a hierarchy of responsibility rather than power.” (Project lead)

By jointly facilitating Big Housing Conversations with Bristol City Council, local people were **improving dialogue and sharing learning**. Over time, local people felt increasingly **empowered** to design and deliver activities.

“ACORN have done some great work in empowering people... Gave them a voice... Their membership can be involved in direct action and more traditional political activity, as well as being involved in the governance of ACORN itself.” (Partner)

“It’s brought more people into that influencing space... And it means that those people that are campaigning are better informed and understand what the Council can and can’t do and what the constraints are, legally and financially.”

(Partner)



The project works because it **reflects local needs and aspirations** to improve access to good quality, affordable housing in the private rental sector. Within the first six weeks, three letting agents and six landlords signed up to the Ethical Lettings Charter, who deal with over 500 local private tenants. Over time, the project has become known more widely in the local community, helping to increase access to assets and build capacity to affect change in their neighbourhood.

“For me, it’s been the growth of the organisation; it started with a few people and a bit of an idea. Now we’re like the go-to organisation representing tenants in Bristol... People come to us all the time and say ‘can someone from ACORN attend this meeting’... We’re now the organisation people go to and that feels really, really special.” (Participant volunteer)

Members ran a high profile campaign to support the case for affordable homes within the conversion of a former chocolate factory, which increased local involvement in **social action**. Activities included a social media campaign, door knocking, and a community event, which resulted in over 2,000 people signing the petition. Members also staged several demonstrations outside the Council building.

“A lot of it was around publicity and mobilising members. We asked people to write to the Council’s Planning Committee, during the statutory consultation period... We also took people into the Planning Committee, supporting them to speak to Councillors, and have their voice heard.” (Project lead)

These actions were very successful, as the Planning Committee agreed that six affordable units would be incorporated into the conversion. This demonstrates how the project has **increased participation in voluntary and community activity and social action**.



Jane’s story

Jane was new to the area and keen to get to know people in the local community. One of the initial organisers knocked on her door and explained that they wanted to mobilise local support and skills to tackle common problems with private landlords letting multiple properties in the locality. This opportunity appealed to Jane, and she joined ACORN. Jane has undertaken a wide range of activities, including organising door knocking teams and public meetings over time.

“I was one of the people that set up the first ever public meeting, asking the community what they would like us to work on and it was noted that housing was affecting people in this community.”

Jane has developed skills and confidence through the project, and is now empowering other members to take collective control and influence local decision-making.

“We have skills sharing with other members - part of the ethos of ACORN is to build leadership and sharing our skills and experience with each other. So for example, I learnt how to plan a direct action, and have taught other people how to do it. Now there are a whole raft of people in people in ACORN that can plan an action, without having to ask [the

“For me, it’s been the growth of the organisation, it started with a few people and a bit of an idea. Now we’re like the go-to organisation representing tenants in Bristol... People come to us all the time and say ‘can someone from ACORN attend this meeting’... We’re now the organisation people go to and that feels really, really special.”

(Participant volunteer)

lead organiser]. So we are building leadership and power. We've run three or four training events for members now. A couple of us went on a course so we have certificates in community organising."

Over time, as the project as grown, she has taken on additional responsibility by becoming the volunteer coordinator.

"I'm currently the Bristol Coordinator so I'm coordinating all the teams we set up, which is a fairly new thing and now it's bigger, better, there's a lot more involvement, its grown really well."

Overall, the interviews and focus groups found that the project met participants' needs through local people leading actions, a key outcome of collective control.

Longer-term outcomes

Members are confident that the project model will effect change over the longer-term, as the community are more empowered to take action, and Bristol City Council are committed to sustaining regular dialogue with ACORN.

"Through our work with the Ethical Lettings Charter and Bristol City Council adopting it, we're working with the Council through the Big Housing Conversation. That's not just about the private rental sector but also social housing tenants and those facing homelessness. It's a way of us holding the Council accountable, to stick to the policies." (Participant volunteer)

Bristol City Council is a key project partner and supportive of ACORN's work. The original Ethical Lettings campaign has been very successful, and the Bronze standard has been incorporated into Bristol City Council and a number of neighbouring local authorities' housing policies, in order to promote good practice in the private rental sector. In this way, the project is influencing the development of housing policy, demonstrating an **increased influence over neighbourhood services**. By the time of the final visit, the project had delivered a successful campaign demonstrating the importance of retaining a council tax exemption scheme to the city council. The council were planning to remove the exemption and introduce a minimum payment, which would have affected around 25,000 low-income households in Bristol. The campaign included mobilising local residents to sign a petition and respond to the public consultation, and members also wrote a briefing document, for local councillors outlining the human costs and financial impacts of the proposed policy.

Participant volunteers reflected at the final visit that ACORN now holds weight with landlords as well as tenants, demonstrating the outcomes and power of collective control.

"We have a reputation not just with tenants but also landlords, and the fact that we exist, is getting stuff done quite quickly, and is changing the balance of power between tenants and landlords." (Participant volunteer)

By promoting **collective action**, some participants and volunteers commented that they felt happier as they were able to improve their living situation, helping to improve their overall **health and wellbeing**.

"Through our work with the Ethical Lettings Charter and Bristol City Council adopting it, we're working with the Council through the Big Housing Conversation. That's not just about the private rental sector but also social housing tenants and those facing homelessness. It's a way of us holding the Council accountable, to stick to the policies."

(Participant volunteer)



“We had been bouncing around dodgy landlords... ACORN shifted it, [my partner is] now working and is the union rep in her branch at work. She’s involved in politics at the City level, and suddenly has a world and isn’t stuck. There are loads of people I’ve met that when they first get involved in ACORN they are shy, they are kind of timid about life, and now they are just absolutely buzzing in their own lives.” (Participant volunteer)

What has worked well?

- **Devolving responsibility and encouraging autonomy.** Volunteer coordinators, who have already demonstrated commitment and reliability, lead teams of volunteers, recruit members to design and deliver actions. This approach ensures the project is truly member led, and over time, teams have become more autonomous.
- **Flexibility.** The model encourages volunteers to use their skills and expertise flexibly to fit around other commitments, so volunteers may be more active at certain times.
- **Developing structures to effect change.** As the project matured, volunteers developed the skills and confidence to jointly facilitate community forums, known as Big Housing Conversations, with Bristol City Council. At the time of the final visit, the Council was meeting with ACORN members on a quarterly basis to discuss housing issues and Council planning in this area. ACORN also sit on the Bristol Homes Board, bringing the voice of the consumer to discussions about housing priorities and emerging policies. By having a say in this way, local people are effectively influencing and informing local authority housing policy.

What are the lessons?

- **All members should be involved in planning actions.** The group disbanded the Action Planning team after agreeing that all members should be empowered to plan campaign actions, rather than having a select few lead on the actions.

The future

This project has left a clear legacy as a number of local authorities have adopted the Bronze standard of the Ethical Lettings Charter: Bristol City Council, Bath and North East Somerset and South Gloucestershire. Some activities will continue beyond the project, such as regular structured dialogue with the city council, and new campaigns will be developed in response to emerging issues. Bristol City Council and ACORN are currently setting up a citywide tenants’ federation for tenants from all sectors.

As a result of the capacity building achieved through the project, ACORN members are also becoming more active in other cities, and developing a national voice.

“We were invited to a housing conference in London that was organised by some Unions, we attended on behalf of ACORN, that was really cool because they asked us to do the private rented workshop. There was a lot of interest in building a national tenants union, a lot of people asking us how we got started, and they were really keen to hear our ideas and maybe start a branch where they live.” (Participant volunteer)



The project applied to People's Health Trust to help the organisation grow and become more self-sufficient, run by its members using their collective control, skills and confidence developed over time.

“We've been able to build a sustainable organisation. Being able to work so consistently in Bristol, our reputation has grown and we have been able to expand across the country; we're now working in six cities. Having two years of guaranteed funding has enabled us to put serious resources into recruiting new members, all of whom pay monthly subscriptions, which makes us more financially stable. This will be a very good thing for the community as it will mean we are a genuinely independent organisation that can go wherever members want.” (Project lead)

