

people's
health
trust



Evaluating Local Conversations 2019:

Supporting collective control to reduce health inequalities

Introduction

Local Conversations is a programme run by People's Health Trust (the Trust) that aims to improve health in neighbourhoods experiencing some of the highest levels of disadvantage in England, Scotland and Wales. Working with neighbourhood organisations and the Trust, residents take action to create fairer places in which to grow, live, work and age. Together, they increase their control and influence over the things that matter to them locally. Research shows that control and influence are important drivers of health.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) have been evaluating the programme, exploring how it works and the impact it is having. This summary presents the findings of the evaluation so far.

Overall, the evaluation has found that the programme has created a number of important improvements in the neighbourhoods involved. Most notably, as a result of coming together through action, social connections both within and between groups of people have improved. This is an important finding which is known, through existing research, to have a major effect on health outcomes.

Some residents have been closely involved in making decisions about Local Conversations and supporting the delivery of actions. Their confidence about the possibility of change, as well as their knowledge, understanding and skills about how to create change locally has often increased. By feeling able to make changes in their neighbourhoods, some report high levels of control and a greater sense of purpose. While larger numbers of people have become involved in this way over the length of the evaluation, there are often still only small groups of people regularly and actively involved in Local Conversations.

There is limited evidence that Local Conversations have increased the amount of influence that residents have over people and organisations in positions of power locally, as most of the action taken so far has focused on communities doing things for themselves rather than influencing others. Moreover, there are some instances of negative outcomes as a result of residents feeling some frustration over the slow pace of change.

Some of the action taken through the programme is resulting in changes to the wider determinants of health in the Local Conversation neighbourhoods, most prominently improvements to local environments and green spaces. However, these are often small in scale, and on the whole, Local Conversations are still focused on bringing people together through activities.

Finally, the social connections gained through Local Conversations - as well as the increased levels of confidence, knowledge, understanding, skills, control and purpose - is having a knock-on impact on health and wellbeing in many cases.

Local Conversations operate in areas that are facing extreme difficulties, from poverty to poor housing and stigma. Moreover, with the local state in retreat due to a decade of austerity, some of the communities involved feel abandoned and in decline. In this context, those leading Local Conversations locally have developed practical ways of bringing people together through a range of activities and projects. However, if the programme is to achieve its aims of developing collective control and tackling the wider determinants of health, efforts need to be made to build on the successes achieved so far by:

- Continuing to extend the reach of Local Conversations and involving more people in regular and active roles
- Involving and influencing people and organisations in positions of local power as part of Local Conversations actions
- Deepening conversations about what needs to change locally and supporting residents to take bigger, bolder action that will result in sustainable change.

About Local Conversations

At the time of the research¹, there were 20 neighbourhoods across England, Scotland and Wales participating in the Local Conversations programme. Each neighbourhood falls into the highest 30% of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation and has a population of approximately 4,000 to 5,000 residents.

How Local Conversations works

In each funded neighbourhood, a lead organisation - who are usually already embedded within the locality and well-trusted by residents - receives an initial grant from the Trust of around £20,000 to conduct early engagement. They reach out to residents and support them to reach a common understanding or vision for their neighbourhood and to develop a plan for how this vision can be achieved.

A full grant of between £200,000 and £300,000 over two to three years follows. This enables local people to address local needs and aspirations with the support of the lead organisation and the Trust. This might involve residents taking action on local concerns themselves or residents influencing other agencies including local government and the NHS.

Local Conversations is about putting local people in charge of the agenda and giving them the power to change things. They are free to change or adapt their priorities and actions as they learn from and build on what they have done and deepen the conversation about what needs to change locally.

A number of neighbourhoods have received top-up funding to extend the length of the programme beyond the initial three-year period, as the Trust intends to fund and support the programme over a longer term (up to nine years).

Because of the way that Local Conversations neighbourhoods were selected, the programme is reaching communities that might not typically be involved in similar initiatives. While this means the programme operates in the places that might benefit the most from being involved, it is acknowledged that progress may be both slower in pace and more challenging than comparable programmes operating in different contexts.

What it aims to achieve

The Local Conversations programme has a Theory of Change which sets out the changes the programme aims to make and how (see page 4). It describes how the programme aims to improve health and wellbeing, and subsequently reduce health inequalities, through two main pathways.

First, through the direct result of action taken by residents to improve local services and the social determinants of health, such as housing, income, employment and local environments.

Second, through the process of involvement in Local Conversations, residents increase their: social connections; knowledge, understanding and skills about how to bring about change locally; confidence about their collective ability to make or influence change; influence over powerful local individuals and organisations; and resources. It is expected that these outcomes will increase the amount of control people have over their lives and neighbourhoods, both individually and collectively, which is a key driver of improved health and wellbeing.

In their review of control and health inequalities, Whitehead et al.² note that the relationships between collective control and health are both direct and indirect. When communities collectively make or influence change, they may prevent or mitigate risks to health and generate the capacity to do so in the future, build social networks and combat isolation, develop neighbourhood trust, and reduce alienation and distress. Conversely, powerlessness, or lack of control, is thought to increase stress, which is known to have adverse health effects.

Theory of Change



The evaluation of Local Conversations

NEF is leading the evaluation of the programme so that the Trust and local partners, as well as others who are concerned about health inequalities, can learn from its development. The evaluation collects information about the programme in a number of different ways:

- Case studies in five Local Conversations neighbourhoods, which provide in-depth qualitative information about how the programme works in practice and describe progress made towards achieving the programme's theorised outcomes. Case study methods include interviews, group discussions, observation and peer research by residents in the case study areas.
 - Support for self-appraisal including workshops and follow-up, to help the projects to design and deliver their own evaluations and reflect on what is going well and not going so well.
 - Deep-dive research into emerging topics of interest as they arise over the evaluation period.
 - A longitudinal survey of project participants, providing a breadth of quantitative information across the 20 Local Conversations. The survey is repeated every six months. This enables outcomes to be tracked over time, and compared to national averages collected in the Community Life Survey.
- This paper offers a summary of the first two years of findings, at the midpoint of the evaluation, based on data collected up to August 2018. It updates and builds upon a summary of the first year of the evaluation ([available here](#)). Annual summaries will continue to be published as the programme and the evaluation progress.

Process: how projects work locally

After engaging residents about local priorities, a crucial first step for each lead organisation was to set up a group of local people to take the work forward (often called 'steering groups'). Steering groups are a core part of the Local Conversations process, and in many areas are the main way that residents are able to make decisions and control the projects locally.

As time has passed, many Local Conversations have developed additional mechanisms for residents to get involved in decision-making. Some, for instance, have formed resident-led 'sub-groups', which have oversight of particular actions or activities. Others have combined small, formal steering groups with larger, more informal meetings so that a wider range of residents can contribute their thoughts and ideas.

Action taken over the course of the programme has been wide-ranging, taking a number of forms and aiming to tackle a variety of issues, including:

- **Action aimed at making change**, such as street cleaning, maintaining green spaces, flower planting and the construction of community gardens.
- **Action aimed at influencing others to make or support change**, such as working with school students to develop a youth manifesto to influence local politicians.
- **Activities and projects** including sewing groups, football clubs, bowls clubs, youth groups, Zumba classes and dance groups as well as projects which support residents with specific issues such as housing, employment and addressing drug and alcohol use.
- **Community events** such as summer fun days, Christmas parties and annual community award ceremonies.

These actions often offer opportunities to deepen engagement and identify further priorities for people locally. In addition, residents very often lead actions themselves, including deciding how things are run and managing delivery.

The numbers of people participating in Local Conversations actions vary according to both the neighbourhood and the type of action taken. Typically, more people take part in lighter touch, infrequent actions such as community events, activities and projects. Far fewer people tend to be involved in more time-intensive actions.

While Local Conversations are engaging a wide variety of people, there remain consistent trends in who is and is not participating in the programme at this stage. Those responding to the residents' survey are most likely to be female, employed or retired and to have lived in the funded area for more than ten years. Staff do, however, note that Local Conversations have become increasingly representative over the last year, making clear that 'the quietest voices in the community are being heard'. The long timeframe of the programme has been key to achieving these early successes. Trust and relationships cannot be built overnight, especially with marginalised groups and in areas where there is a history of poor engagement practices that have undermined people's trust in new initiatives.

At present, there are few examples of Local Conversations working with or attempting

to influence local systems or organisations in positions of power as part of their Local Conversation. Sometimes this is due to the nature of priority areas chosen, which often focus on connecting people through events and activities locally, to promote community cohesion and tackle social isolation. Others have chosen to focus initially on actions that can be taken by neighbourhoods themselves, in order to build levels of control before taking bolder action and influencing others – which is seen to be a much harder task.

Relatedly, much of the action taken through Local Conversations has not yet attempted to tackle some of the larger, more structural issues that residents face. A key question facing the programme's development is how to build on the social action taken so far to progress bigger, bolder action on the issues that people say affect their health locally.

Challenges and enablers

The Local Conversations programme has faced a number of barriers throughout the process. Most notably, the programme operates in areas that are facing extreme difficulties, including poverty, poor housing, stigma, drug and alcohol issues and retreating public services. In some of the neighbourhoods, these issues have worsened over the last year.

Residents have sometimes been involved in prior projects that did not materialise into change, leaving feelings of disappointment and distrust towards new projects. In some cases, people do not want or feel unable to take on more responsibility in their lives.

Many of those leading Local Conversations have developed practical methods of bringing people together to take action in these circumstances. Where neighbourhoods have been particularly successful, a range of factors have driven this, including:

- **Neighbourhood presence.** Community events, repeated over time, as well as visible changes in the community have enabled Local Conversations to build trust with residents who are not yet involved and have provided a means of encouraging residents to participate actively.

- **A variety of opportunities to participate, with dialogue and decision-making built into all aspects of the project.** Local Conversations with a wide range of community events, social activities, resident-led projects and action aimed at making and influencing change have been the most successful at engaging a greater number and diversity of residents. People are able to participate in the ways in which they feel comfortable, and there are multiple routes to increasing their involvement over time.

- **A clear vision** for the Local Conversation, which is owned and recognised by the neighbourhood and where activities are seen as part of a wider programme of change in the area. This makes it possible to develop dialogue and decision-making about the Local Conversation, and to support people to move from one part of the project to another. Where there is a lack of clarity, coherence or project identity, it proves more difficult.

- **The role of staff and residents leading and facilitating the Local Conversation.** Successful leadership characteristics include:
 - Persistent encouragement and support for residents to increase their participation.
 - Passion for making positive changes in the neighbourhood, and the patience to see them through.
 - A conscious principle of inclusion, and an awareness of who is and is not involved.
 - A culture among staff that favours supporting and enabling, rather than leading and directing, is vital.
 - Staff who are locally embedded in their neighbourhood, who bring positive existing relationships and a deep knowledge of the neighbourhood with them, are often more likely to succeed.

Impact: What has been achieved so far?

Shorter-term outcomes

The Local Conversations is achieving a number of the shorter-term outcomes set out in the programme 'Theory of Change'.

The strongest evidence emerging from the evaluation is that residents have increased their social connectedness locally.

In case study neighbourhoods, this includes stronger bonds within groups - for example amongst young people in a neighbourhood, and stronger bridging connections between groups, for example between young people across neighbouring areas. Over time, connections have tended to broaden with more people experiencing these outcomes.

These case study findings are consistent with the results of the residents' survey, where significantly more Local Conversations participants report talking to their neighbours on most days and stronger feelings of belonging to their neighbourhood than England-wide averages, as well as averages for those living in similarly disadvantaged areas (see Figure 1). A majority of survey respondents also agree or strongly agree that they had made new friends through the programme (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. How often do you chat to any of your neighbours, more than just to say 'hello'?

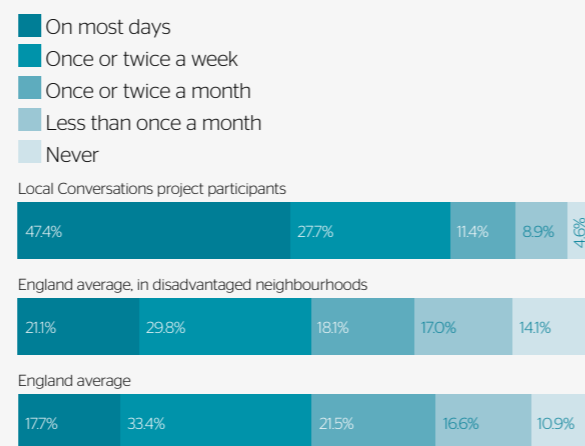
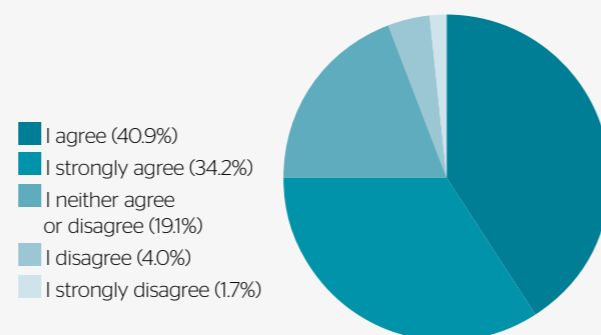


Figure 2. Through the Local Conversation, I am making new friends



Sources: Local Conversations survey, 2017-18; Community Life Survey 2016-17.

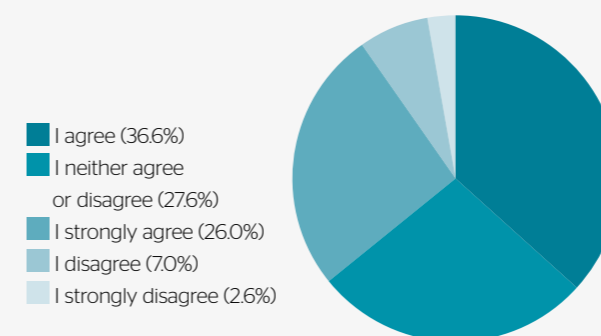
Source: Local Conversations survey, 2017-18.

We know from existing research³ that **social connections** play a vital role in health and wellbeing. This is because social relationships have stress buffering effects, can have positive impacts on health behaviours and contribute to a sense of meaning and purpose in life. The effect of social relationships on mortality risks are comparable with smoking and alcohol consumption and are likely to exceed other risk factors such as physical inactivity and obesity.

People involved in Local Conversations have also improved their **knowledge, understanding and skills**, as well as their **confidence**. Many report through both case study and survey research an increased sense of purpose because of their involvement in Local Conversations (see Figures 3 and 4). Taking part in decision-making forums and participating in action has led many to feel like they are making a difference to the area and giving back to the community. Some report the Local Conversation is giving them something valuable to do and participate in. This sense of purpose was regularly linked to improved wellbeing.

"It gives you something to look forward to. It helps with confidence and purpose."
(Claremont, 2018)

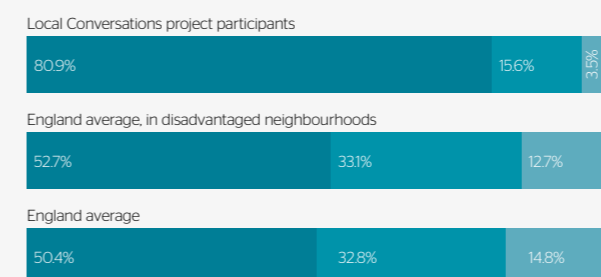
Figure 3. The Local Conversation has helped me learn and develop new skills



Source: Local Conversations survey, 2017-18.

Figure 4. When people in this area get involved in their community, they can really change the way that their area is run

I definitely or tend to agree
I neither agree nor disagree
I definitely or tend to disagree



Sources: Local Conversations survey, 2017-18; Community Life Survey 2016-17.

Evidence from both case study and survey research suggests that these outcomes have occurred most prominently for those most heavily involved (such as members of decision-making bodies and those delivering local activities). Local Conversations should think about how to encourage more people to get regularly and actively involved in projects - by supporting decision making and leading on actions - to maximise the number of people experiencing positive changes.

There is limited evidence that the projects have increased local residents' **influence** over people and organisation in positions of power. This is because most of the action taken has involved putting on activities and events and did not aim to increase influence.

Some have described **unintended negative outcomes**, including frustration at the lack of change - both in terms of changes to the neighbourhood and changes in the number of people getting involved in the project. This is especially the case when residents' efforts go unnoticed by the wider community due to the slow pace of change. Despite this, most residents in case study areas have remained committed and persistent in their involvement despite setbacks, and have received more recognition for their efforts from members of the wider neighbourhood over the past year.

"Thing is, now people realise what we're doing, so it's not a case of we're having to say what we're doing. A lot of them know what we're there for now."
(Claremont, 2018)

Longer-term outcomes

At this stage, there is limited evidence that the programme has achieved the longer-term outcomes described in the Theory of Change. However, some longer-term changes are beginning to materialise.

The groups of people most involved in Local Conversations, such as those taking part in steering groups and those leading on the delivery of actions, report an increased sense of control as a result of their involvement. However, the numbers of residents participating in this capacity tends to be small. There are signs that more people are getting involved in this way as the programme progresses, but change is slow.

Whilst some Local Conversations activities have increased access to local services through advocacy and advice sessions run as part of the projects, residents and lead organisations have found engaging with local agencies difficult due to the effects of funding cuts on their capacity and engrained cultures of working within some of these organisations. Often, residents talked about retreating local authorities. In one case study area, the Local Conversation was said to be 'managing decline' by enabling residents to keep vital services open despite the retreating local state. Residents report lower levels of satisfaction with local services and amenities than England-wide averages, but this figure could be even lower without the Local Conversations programme and the work done by residents.

There are several examples of changes to the wider determinants of health, most notably improvements to local green spaces and the

built environment as a direct result of action taken through the Local Conversations programme. However, these are small in scale at present. This is because much of the action taken through Local Conversations has focused on communities putting on activities and events in their neighbourhood to increase social connection and taking action to make their own changes. On the whole, Local Conversations is not yet focused on bigger, bolder upstream action – involving organisations in positions of power – to tackle the wider determinants of health. However, this form of action and influence was anticipated at the start of the programme to take longer to achieve.

The social connections gained through Local Conversations are having positive impacts upon residents' health and wellbeing, especially where residents were previously socially isolated or where they are facing tough times and are in need of the vital support offered by newly-formed connections.

The knowledge, confidence and sense of purpose and control gained through active participation in the programme, as well as visible changes to the neighbourhood, is reported to have a further positive impact on the wellbeing of residents involved by enabling them to feel better about themselves and the area in which they live. This finding is consistent with existing research suggesting that the reputation of the area in which you live may have an effect on your health and wellbeing⁴.

Building on achievements

Local Conversations has achieved a lot in the early years of its implementation. In areas experiencing a range of complex issues – from poverty to poor housing and a retreating local state – those leading Local Conversations have found ways of bringing people together through a range of activities and projects, and enabled some residents to make decisions to control the direction of the programme. This has led to a number of valuable outcomes for people locally.

The long timeframe of the programme – neighbourhoods are expected to be funded for up to nine years – will give those involved the space to build on these initial successes. If the programme is to achieve its aims of both building collective control and tackling the wider determinants of health, projects should be supported to:

Continue to extend their neighbourhood reach, involving as many people from a wide range of backgrounds as possible. Involving more people in regular and active roles – including decision making and leading and supporting actions – is likely to spread the number of people experiencing a range of positive outcomes.

Involve and influence locally powerful people and organisations as part of action. There will be limits to the amount of control that residents have, and to the sustainability of the changes made through Local Conversations, if the programme does not engage with or challenge local systems and continues to operate separately from where power currently lies.

Take bigger, bolder action on the local social, economic and environmental determinants of health as conversations deepen locally about what needs to change. The changes made to local connections, confidence, knowledge, understanding and skills will provide a firm base, upon which to support this form of action.

Case study one:

The Roma community in Govanhill, Glasgow

The Local Conversation in Govanhill is supported by Community Renewal Trust. A number of actions have been taken through the programme. They have organised large scale community events, housing maintenance and a housing study as well as a series of groups and activities for a number of different demographic groups within the Roma community. Residents participate in the programme in a number of ways, ranging from a community forum, to leading on organising events, to participation in projects.



The area

The lack of a shared language locally, as well as a dearth of places to meet, have presented barriers to the Local Conversation, but the employment of a Roma lead and development of a community canteen overseen by Community Renewal have supported progress.

Changes through the programme lie predominantly with the connections gained through involvement, which spike around the large-scale community events organised through the Local Conversation. This has led to some instances of reduced social isolation and improved health and wellbeing. Some of those involved have gained knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence through their involvement.

Govanhill is a suburb of Glasgow, situated south of the River Clyde.

It is an area with a history of immigration, most recently from Romanian and Slovakian Roma over the last five to ten years.

Connections within the two Roma groups are strong - with close-knit family relationships - but connections between the two groups are weaker due to language barriers. Community Renewal - who facilitate the Local Conversation in Govanhill - oversee a free community canteen every night in a Church of Scotland building, and this provides a crucial space for the Roma community to go and to socialise with one another.

"The canteen creates a space for the most marginalised and disadvantaged group in Europe."
(Govanhill, 2018)

Much of the community have a low income and poor housing conditions are particularly acute for newly arrived Roma families, ranging from disrepair to overcrowding. Questionable or illegal landlord practices are also common,

such as asking for a three to six month deposit, not conducting repairs, or barring Roma from renting their property. There is a fly tipping issue, which some fear is damaging the reputation of the area.

Many Roma do not speak English fluently, which restricts their ability to access services and employment. It also limits the amount of control that they can exercise locally. Younger Roma often translate for their families.

"I think the biggest challenge [the community faces] would be the language barriers that prevents a lot of members of the Roma community from accessing services."
(Govanhill, 2017)

The project

Through the Local Conversations programme, residents have chosen to focus on four priority areas: the local environment, housing, communication and social events. They have subsequently taken a range of action using the Local Conversations funding, including:

- Organising a series of community events, such as a St. Nicholas Party, a Burns' Night Supper and an annual Roma Day parade.
- Coordinating the cleaning and maintenance of housing closes (the shared hallways in Govanhill's tenement flat buildings) and commissioning a baseline study of the condition of the housing stock as a first step towards generating solutions to the poor housing problem.
- Organising a series of projects and activities - men's, young people, sewing, dancing, and photography groups.
- Setting up an employability service, with an advisor appointed to work with residents to understand their situation, skills and experience and provide advice on working towards employment.

Residents participate in, and have control over, the Local Conversation in a number of ways. There is a community forum through which discussions about possibilities in Govanhill and ideas for how things might change. It meets every six weeks, and is informal in nature.

As well as participating in funded actions - such as attendance at community events - residents often play an active role and are able to exercise small acts of control and ownership. Young people take decisions about the direction of the youth group, for instance - where to go and when - and there is a group of volunteers that lead on organising community events.

The Local Conversation in Govanhill has faced a number of barriers so far. Most notably, the lack of a shared language between residents, the project workers and other local partners means that communication has been difficult. Working with Roma leads to facilitate the process has been crucial to beginning to break down the communication barriers.

There is a lack of spaces to gather in Govanhill, but the canteen overseen by Community Renewal has been essential to Local Conversations, both in terms of engagement and a space for action to take place.

Many of the actions progressed - such as the organisation of community events and the close improvement projects - are reliant upon residents taking the lead and taking things forward. However, the benefits system presents a barrier, as claimants can lose some or all of their benefits if they do a certain amount of work or volunteering activity.

What's changed?

Social connections have improved through the many groups and events organised. The young person's group, for instance, cite 'making friends', 'getting to know people more' and 'feeling loved' as the three common things they get from attending the group. Spikes in people's sense of social connectedness are reported most markedly around major events that are organised, namely the St. Nicholas Party, Burns' Night Supper and Roma Day celebration. There are instances of reduced loneliness as a result of connections gained.

Those involved in leading or supporting action report gaining knowledge, understanding and skills about how to do so. They report a range of specific skills learned through participation - from sewing to cycling - and instances of increased confidence. The dance group and photography group had public performances and exhibitions of their work. Older children who were previously very shy also started facilitating sessions.

The newly factored closes have seen waste management improve and repairs are starting to happen. The employability service is gaining numbers, and securing volunteering placements as well as two paid jobs.

Case study two: Lozells, Birmingham

The Local Conversation in Lozells is supported by Aspire and Succeed, a community organisation founded by residents. Residents have identified a number of priority areas and taken a range of actions to address these priorities, including a series of activities for young people and benefits and housing advice and signposting services. They have built tyre gardens and hanging baskets across the area, annually spring clean fly tipped rubbish from the neighbourhood and hold community awards. Residents, nurtured and supported by the lead organisation, have taken on a variety of leadership roles, from participation in the steering group to organising activities.

Changes made through the Local Conversations programme include improved social connectedness, and consequentially improved social support and health and wellbeing. Recently, many report feeling able to start classes and conversations locally themselves and residents are beginning to increase their influence. There are visible changes to the local environment and some residents have secured access to their service and benefits entitlements.

The area

Lozells is an inner-city area in the West of Birmingham.

The area is made up of people from a range of ethnic groups. Most prevalent are more established Bengali and Pakistani communities. There are smaller Caribbean, Irish and white British communities, along with more recently settled Somali and Eritrean communities.

Overall, residents say they like living in Lozells. They are proud of their neighbourhood that is often described as a close knit and supportive community.

"We all play our part in the community that is why I like living around here."
(Lozells, 2018)



Poor housing and poverty are issues for some in Lozells, and there is a fly tipping problem that is perceived to have worsened to cuts to collection services.

"One of the big issues is poor quality housing. We've got lots of children who've got asthma problems, breathing, respiratory problems. When we talk to parents, it turns out that they are living in damp conditions, they're paying rent to a landlord, the issues aren't being dealt with appropriately."
(Lozells, 2017)

Other challenges described by residents include historical stigma as the area has a perceived bad reputation, as well as a lack of accessible, affordable activities for young people. Some are not confident in speaking or understanding English, leading to social isolation - particularly amongst older women.

the Job Centre, as well as advice and signposting service for housing issues.

- Several initiatives to address the priorities of place, environment and safety, including tyre gardens on street corners tended by volunteers, an annual spring clean, a hanging basket programme and annual community awards.

There is a resident-led steering group and residents are able to control parts of the Local Conversation by taking on leadership roles, supported by Aspire and Succeed. Examples include leading and organising group activities, such as the football club, which is led by a volunteer, and the Zumba class, which is organised by local women. A wider group of residents have been able to take smaller degrees of control when participating in action. Residents tend to the small street gardens and the young people attending the football club plan and run short training sessions.

Staff facilitating the Local Conversation in Lozells have been effective at deliberately and actively seeking to identify and nurture local leaders as part of their everyday work, and the project relies on the willingness of local people to lead, direct and support its goals and activities. A conscious principle of including and encouraging a diverse group of residents across different groups has ensured that the project has grown and reached new part of the community over time. Although many are actively involved, encouraging more to get involved and take part is still a challenge. This has meant, for instance, that there has not been enough people taking responsibility for the community gardens.

The project is also having to respond to reductions in services that used to be provided by local authorities. Reductions in collection services has increased instances of fly tipping, which Aspire and Succeed work with their community to deal with through days devoted to clearing up bulk waste.

What's changed?

People involved in a range of activities report positive changes in social connectedness. For instance, women attending the Zumba class reported having new friends and young men attending the football club have built relationship that allowed them to discuss sensitive issues. Several people have said their health and wellbeing had improved as a result of improved social support and connectedness.

"I certainly speak to a lot more parents, mums that I probably didn't know before. It's just a case of 'Hi, Bye', but... it's created more of a closer community."
(Lozells, 2018)

Recently, many have expressed how they felt able to start classes and conversations themselves, with some taking on community leadership positions.

"You've got individuals who've never seen themselves as leaders in any way, shape or form, who are suddenly taking a lead."
(Lozells, 2017)

A number of activities are beginning to increase the influence of local people over decisions that affect them. For example, Aspire and Succeed is a founding member of a Neighbourhood Forum which aims to tackle housing issues and bring residents together with local policy makers. The lead organisation have been active in making stronger links with the housing team at Birmingham City Council and have supported young people to develop their Youth Manifesto in an attempt to influence local politicians.

Visible environmental changes to the neighbourhood have occurred as a result of action taken, leading to a sense of pride in place and an increased sense of control. The benefits advice service has helped individual residents secure the money they are entitled to.

The project

Through the Local Conversations programme, residents have chosen to focus on three priority areas:

- Children and young people
- Jobs and money
- Place, environment and safety.

They have subsequently taken a range of action to address their priorities using the Local Conversations funding, including:

- A series of actions and activities for young people, including a Youth Manifesto bringing together four primary schools with debates chaired by students, a youth club providing young people with skills development, Zumba classes which young people attend with their mothers, football training and rowing competitions.
- A benefits advice and access to employment project, in partnership with

Case study three:

Upper Afan Valley, Neath Port Talbot

The Local Conversation in Upper Afan Valley is led by Neath Port Talbot CVS. Residents have identified a range of priorities, and subsequently focused on supporting local community hubs to help them to continue and expand their work locally. They have also set up a resident-led grants panel which has the job of dispersing small grants locally.

Local people have a culture of working together in the area, which has supported the aims of the Local Conversation; however, as many people are already actively involved in the neighbourhood, it has been difficult to recruit additional residents to get involved. Funding cuts and a sense of abandonment are making people feel out of control and that they are 'managing decline'.

Changes made through the programme (via the community hubs) include increased connection, reduced isolation and improved health and wellbeing, as well as an increased sense of purpose, and a softening of the impact of austerity locally.

The area

The Upper Afan Valley is an area covering around 4,500 people near Port Talbot, encompassing a number of small villages: Cymmer, Gwnfi and Glyncothrog.

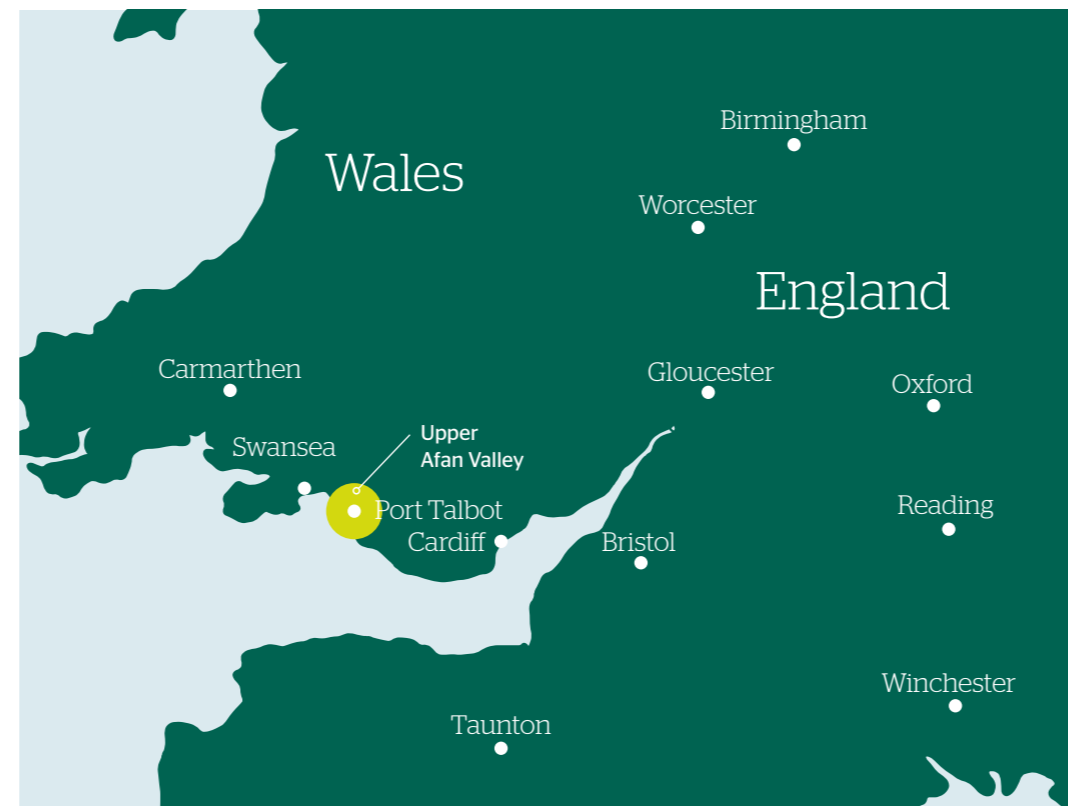
The strengths of the area are said to be the community spirit among the people who live there and the beauty of the countryside. Residents report that neighbours are close and supportive and people go out of their way to help each other.

"The community is very strong... There are fabulous walks around here, I love living here."

(Upper Afan Valley, 2016)

The valley has experienced disadvantage since the closure of its mines in the 1960s and 70s, when it lost much of its employment and transport infrastructure. Finding paid work often depends on travelling outside of the area, but poor public transport links make it difficult.

The lack of local employment has been exacerbated by the closure of many local



amenities and services in recent years including a swimming pool, youth club, post office, football club and residential home.

"Things are closing down like dominoes. I don't understand, it's the most deprived area and they're cutting it... It makes you think what are they going to close next, but there's not much left to close."

(Upper Afan Valley, 2017)

"They're having to move out of the area for employment. The buses are being reduced and this means it's harder for the community to work from here."

(Upper Afan Valley, 2018)

Through three community hubs, the community has taken ownership of many of these services cut by the Council, including sports fields, a library, community centre, village hall and swimming pool. Several residents have stepped into roles as trustees for locally-owned services. However, this is not always seen as an indicator of empowerment, but as a position they have been forced into.

The project

Through the Local Conversations programme, residents have chosen to focus on three priority areas:

- Support for community hubs and voluntary activity
- Increased access to the local natural environment
- Linking communities through improved transport as priority areas.

So far, action has focused on supporting the local community hubs, who have received funding to continue and expand their voluntary work. This includes funding a part-time staff member to lead marketing and events at Cymmer library and contributing to the activities at Gwynfi Miners Hall.

Many local people are involved in the project, directly and indirectly. Involvement ranges from being trustees and workers within the community hubs, to developing, managing and participating in a wide range of activities such as art classes, sports clubs or maintaining meeting spaces. There is also a resident-led grants panel which has the job of disbursing micro-grants to local groups such as a community bowls club and an organisation running camping activities.

Local people have a culture of working together - out of necessity - to keep buildings and activities going, as the region has had to adjust to the loss of employment since the 1970s. This has helped, and people are keen to maintain this cooperation. The existence of the community hubs, where people can meet and socialise is a major enabler of the Local Conversation in the Upper Afan Valley. However, there have been a number of barriers along the way. It has been difficult to recruit and maintain staff to lead the Local Conversation, which has created a lot of turnover and stops and starts

to the programme. As many people are already actively involved in the neighbourhood, it has been difficult to recruit additional residents to get involved. Finally, despite all of the efforts, several people involved in the project say they feel like they are managing decline because of the deluge of spending cuts to local agencies locally. This has created a sense that issues affecting the valley are outside of their control.

What's changed?

It is difficult to separate out the impact of People's Health Trust's funding from that of other sources, given that the Trust is a minority funder of the hubs. With that caveat, several emerging outcomes can be identified, for those directly involved and for the wider community.

Large numbers of people are involved in activities that bring people together from across the area. This helps combat isolation and loneliness, especially for older people and those affected by cuts to public transport. An increased sense of social connections and reduced isolation have led to wellbeing improvements for some.

"If you're feeling a bit down in the house, you come here and then it does help you, you know."

(Upper Afan Valley, 2018)

Volunteers and steering group members report a sense of purpose, giving something back that in turn further contributes to wellbeing.

The Local Conversation contribution has made it possible for two of the hubs to take on part-time workers and contributed to the existing revenue stream for the third. The hubs play a key role in softening the impacts of economy and amenity decline, providing stability for people in the wider community and keeping many vital community assets open.

Case study four: Claremont, Blackpool

The Local Conversation in Ten Streets is supported by Claremont First Step Community Centre in Blackpool. Having identified improving the local environment, activities for young people and community inclusion as priority areas, a number of actions have been undertaken as part of the Local Conversation including litter picks and clean ups, hanging baskets and activities for young people. They have also organised fun days and other large-scale community events.

Residents are involved via steering group participation and volunteering to support activities and actions. It has been difficult to involve residents in the project, but there are small signs that this is improving over time.

The project has improved social connections and confidence, those involved report a heightened sense of purpose and perceptions of the neighbourhood are beginning to change.

The area

Claremont is an area in the north side of Blackpool's city centre, within walking distance from the sea, the promenade and the North Pier. The Local Conversation is focused on ten streets in the centre of Claremont.

Claremont has good access to essential services and amenities. Residents also enjoy living close to the beach.

"We're local to all the amenities, we're close to town, close to the beach, and it's like a free day out, basically."

(Claremont, 2017)

In the past, a thriving tourism trade presented many opportunities for residents but the decline in domestic tourism drastically affected the local labour market. Drug and alcohol issues have arisen in tandem with the rise in deprivation and unemployment in the area, and there is a perception that matters are getting worse.

"It's about 20 years ago it started, we started to go downhill, but I'd say in the last 10 years it's gone dramatically so. And we've just risen and risen up the scale of deprivation. It's extremely high in all areas across the board, employment, housing, crime, we're up there unfortunately which isn't a nice place to be."

(Claremont, 2017)

"There are quite high cases of mental health issues and substance misuse in the area, be it alcohol or drugs. That in itself comes from the unemployment."

(Claremont, 2017)

Many interviewees talk about the high proportion of Houses in Multiple Occupancy



(HMO) in the area, which were historically run as guesthouses. Property owners are also reported to be often absent and neglectful, and the quality of housing can be very poor. Fly-tipping is another big issue for residents locally.

"There's a lot of private landlords around this area and unfortunately a lot of them don't keep the properties up to scratch." (Claremont, 2017)

"Where I live, there is one these gated entries and it's a regular target of fly-tipping there."

(Claremont, 2017)

There is an acknowledged divide in the community between the more permanent residents on one hand and the residents living in HMOs on the other.

The project

Through the Local Conversations programme, residents have chosen to focus on three priority areas:

- The local environment
- Activities for young people
- Social inclusion.

Residents have subsequently taken a range of actions to address priority areas.

Activities under the environment priority include community-led litter picks and alleyway clear ups as well as greening the grounds around the local medical centre and church. The group have put up hanging baskets across the neighbourhood.

Under the youth provision priority area, staff ran a six-week music course at a local music studio. In addition, two young people have gained football coaching qualifications and started football coaching sessions with other young people in the area.

The Claremont Ten group have also continued to organise fun days and festive events and are embarking on a range of new activities including a knitting group, charity fundraising events and a local newsletter to further engage people in the neighbourhood.

There is a resident-led steering group which has a core membership of five people with formal responsibility for the project's direction. There is also a wider group of residents who meet on a more informal basis and are able to connect and input into the project, but without the formal power and responsibility of the steering group. Overall, active participation in the project is still from a small group. Steering group members lead on a number of the actions taken alongside a small group of wider volunteers.

Many residents in the area have complex needs - including housing instability, mental health problems and substance misuse issues - which are perceived to mean they are unlikely to engage with the project. There is disempowerment and a lack of confidence in the area as a consequence of a history of failed promises, poor or absent engagement practices and being treated punitively by agencies in the area. While there is a need to expand engagement in the project, making visible changes - such as community events and environmental action - has enabled the lead organisation and steering group to begin to establish trust with the wider community and to recruit extra participants.

"I think that's a big factor in people seeing it and seeing it repeated that we're not going away, it's not a year-long thing and then that's finished and off you go, back to normal. It's an ongoing thing that's going to keep going and that helps with people thinking yeah, okay, there's going to be a bit of longevity."

(Claremont, 2018)

What's changed?

Participation in the Local Conversation has resulted in a number of changes for those involved and the wider community

Community activities and events have helped to improve connection. The group of volunteers clearing alleyways of rubbish and planting flowers developed strong social connections and the steering group in particular have become a very tight knit group.

Volunteers and steering group members have gained skills in deliberation and consensus decision making, and have an increased confidence in the possibility of change and their role within it.

"Yeah, confidence, definitely. You can see it clearly, it is really quite obvious. I mean, stopping people in the street and telling them about us and things like that."

(Claremont, 2018)

Residents describe an increased sense of purpose - or something to work towards and to give back to the local community - as a result of participation.

"It gives you something to look forward to. It helps with confidence and purpose."

(Claremont, 2018)

As recognition of the Local Conversation programme has increased, there is a perception that it is beginning to change people's views of and pride in the area. This has resulted in more personal action to upkeep individual properties and a small-scale decline in fly-tipping.

"I think since we've started doing the environmental things, clean-ups and what have you, I think there's certainly been residents that may not be involved in the wider projects, but they've started to make improvements to their properties."

(Claremont, 2018)

"I think if they see, well yeah, there is a difference. As I say with the planters the place is looking brighter, it's looking a bit cheerier, it makes people feel good."

(Claremont, 2018)

Next steps

New Economics Foundation's evaluation of the Local Conversations programme will continue until 2020, and we will release short reports each year detailing progress and learning. Forthcoming deep-dive research will examine the range of ways that residents take control, with the findings being used to inform practice. An updated report on the third year of the evaluation will be published in spring 2020.

For more details and a copy of the full report, please contact People's Health Trust.

Written by New Economics Foundation and People's Health Trust

Cover images:

Top: Local Conversation in Haverhill

Bottom: Local Conversation in Lozells



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