

Evaluating Local Conversations 2020



Introduction to Local Conversations

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. Neighbourhood organisations and the Trust support residents to take action to improve their local areas in ways that are meaningful to them. Through dialogue, decision-making and action, residents increase their control and influence over the things that matter to them locally. The intention is to improve local social determinants of health, local services, and health and wellbeing, and ultimately contribute to a reduction in health inequalities.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) has been evaluating the programme, assessing how it works and its impact. This summary presents key findings from 2019, the third year of the evaluation.

Two significant developments since the last report are:

- There is increasing evidence that residents are building collective control, including increased attempts to influence people, organisations and institutions in positions of power.
- The programme is engaging with a more diverse range of residents, including people from underrepresented ethnic groups, more vulnerable residents in multiple occupancy housing (HMOs), newly arrived migrants, refugee women and young people.

In addition, the data shows a slight worsening of reported health in this period compared to previous periods. This should be explored further in the next report.

A promising evolution from 2018 is the increase in attempts to influence change locally across Local Conversations areas. Around 80% of lead organisations reporting attempts to influence those with power locally, including local councillors, local members of parliament (MPs), decision makers in the NHS, housing associations, the city council, and social service groups, Network Rail and the police. Case study evidence also demonstrates that in some areas previous actions aimed at creating change, the majority of which focused on visual improvements to the built environment, have helped residents start to articulate clearer demands for improved basic infrastructural services. These include improved housing conditions and public transport, for example. This progression evidences how local people are gradually building more capacity to control the conditions that affect their lives.

Responses from Resident Surveys suggest that these attempts to influence are spanning a wider and more diverse range of people, as more young people, people of ethnic minorities, people with mobility constraints and vulnerable residents have engaged in the Local Conversations. A higher proportion of men, people of minority ethnic backgrounds, young people under the age of 21 and LGBT people responded to the residents' survey in 2019 compared to previous years. More areas have introduced targeted outreach and programming to engage underrepresented groups, like newly arrived migrants and young people. Two other promising developments that demonstrate greater depth of engagement are increased levels of volunteering and increased independence of steering groups from lead organisations. However, most Local Conversations still struggle to increase and deepen resident engagement. Lack of time (due to work and caring responsibilities), absent or poor transport options and personal issues (e.g. shyness, mental or physical health conditions) are cited as the top barriers to participation.

Local Conversations operate in areas that experience extreme disadvantage due to poverty, inadequate transport and poor housing, for example. Many areas have suffered from the widespread failure and closure of local services and amenities after a decade of austerity. As a result, many local people in these communities feel disempowered and distrustful of authorities. A decade of austerity has also led to a deterioration in health outcomes and health inequalities across the country, especially in areas of higher deprivation, as reported in *The Marmot Review: 10 Years On!*¹ To counteract the problem, those leading Local Conversations locally have developed practical ways of bringing people together through a range of activities, events and projects.

However, for the programme to achieve its aims of developing collective control and tackling the wider social determinants of health, there must be efforts to build on, scale up and sustain the successes achieved so far by:

- Extending the reach of Local Conversations and involving more diverse people in regular and active roles;
- Continuing to try to influence people and organisations in positions of power in order to achieve desired changes locally;
- Increasing residents' skills, training and capacity, especially on issues relating to leadership and governance.

Notes:

- 1 Marmot, M., Allen, J., Boyce, T., Goldblatt, P. & Morrison, J. (2020) 'Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review: 10 Years On,' *The Health Foundation*

About Local Conversations

At the time of the research, there were 18 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 the Local Conversations programme works

In each funded neighbourhood, a lead organisation that is already embedded within the locality and well-trusted by residents receives an initial grant of around £20,000 to conduct early engagement. This entails reaching out to residents and supporting them to reach a common understanding or vision for their neighbourhood and to develop a plan to enact this vision.

A full grant of between £200,000 and £300,000 over two to three years follows to enable 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 priorities or attempting to influence other agencies, including local government and the NHS. Top-up funding is available to extend the length of the programme for each Local Conversation for up to nine years.

Local Conversations is about putting local people in charge of the agenda and giving them the power to change things. Because the Local Conversations programme operates in places that are most in need of change, it may ultimately be of greater value to residents if successful. At the same time, there is an acknowledgment that progress may be both slower in pace and more challenging than comparable programmes operating in different contexts.

What it aims to achieve

As indicated in the Local Conversations Theory of Change (Figure 1) the programme aims to improve health and wellbeing, and subsequently reduce health inequalities through two main pathways:

- Direct results of actions taken by residents to improve local services and the social determinants of health, such as housing, income, employment and local environments.
- The process of involvement in Local Conversations, through which residents increase their social connections; knowledge, understanding and skills; confidence about their collective ability to create or influence change; influence over powerful local individuals and organisations; and resources.

The expectation is that these outcomes will increase the amount of control people have over their lives and neighbourhoods, both individually and collectively. Control is a key driver of improved health and wellbeing.

The relationships between collective control and health are both direct and indirect.² 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 connectedness, networks and trust; and reduce isolation and distress. Conversely, powerlessness, or lack of control, is believed to increase stress, which has adverse health and wellbeing effects.



Notes:

- 2 Whitehead, M., Orton, L., Pennington, A., Nayak, S., Ring, A., Petticrew, M., Sowden, A & White, M. (2014) 'Is control in the living environment important for health and wellbeing, and what are the implications for public health interventions?', *Public Health Research Consortium*

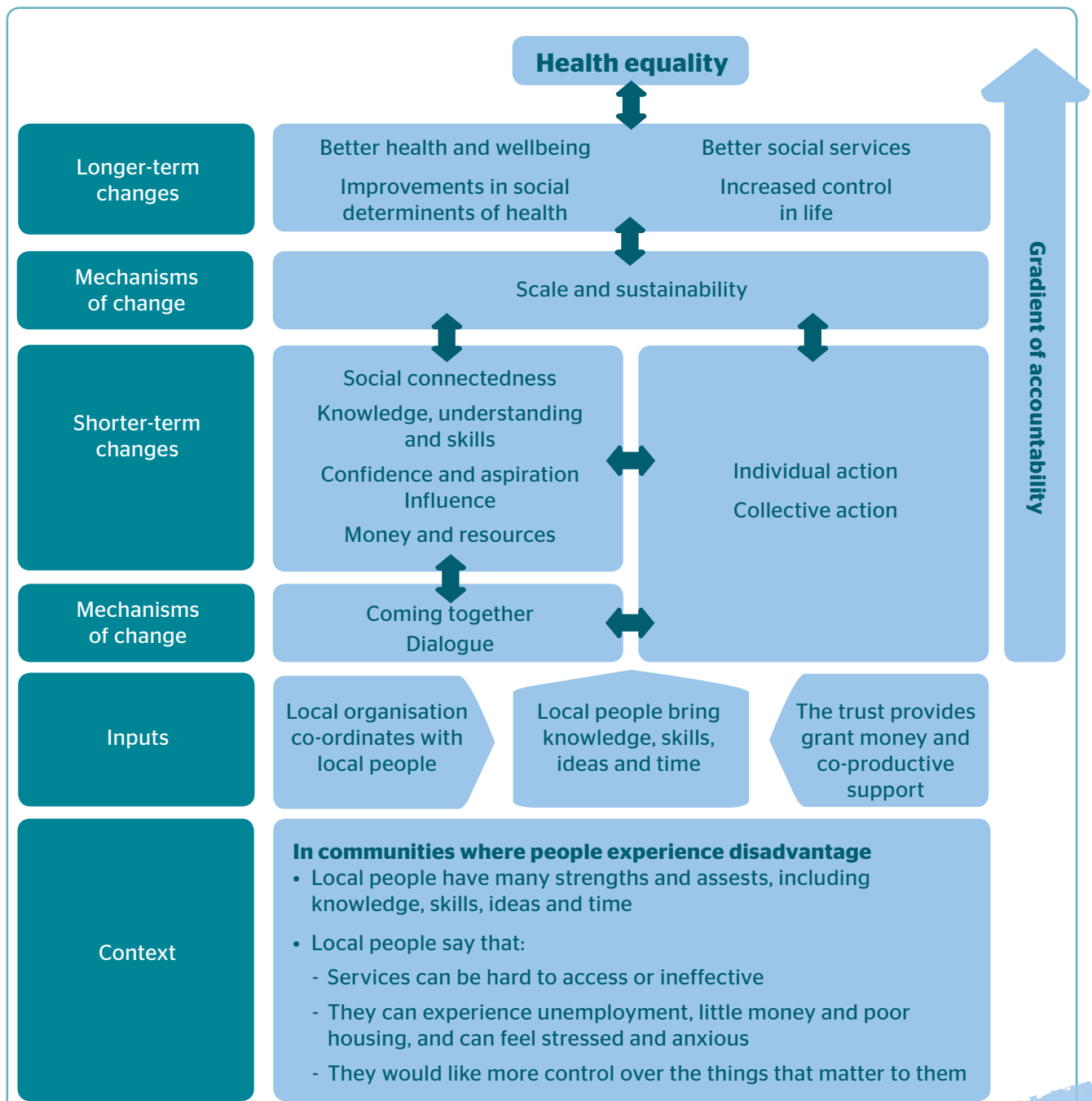
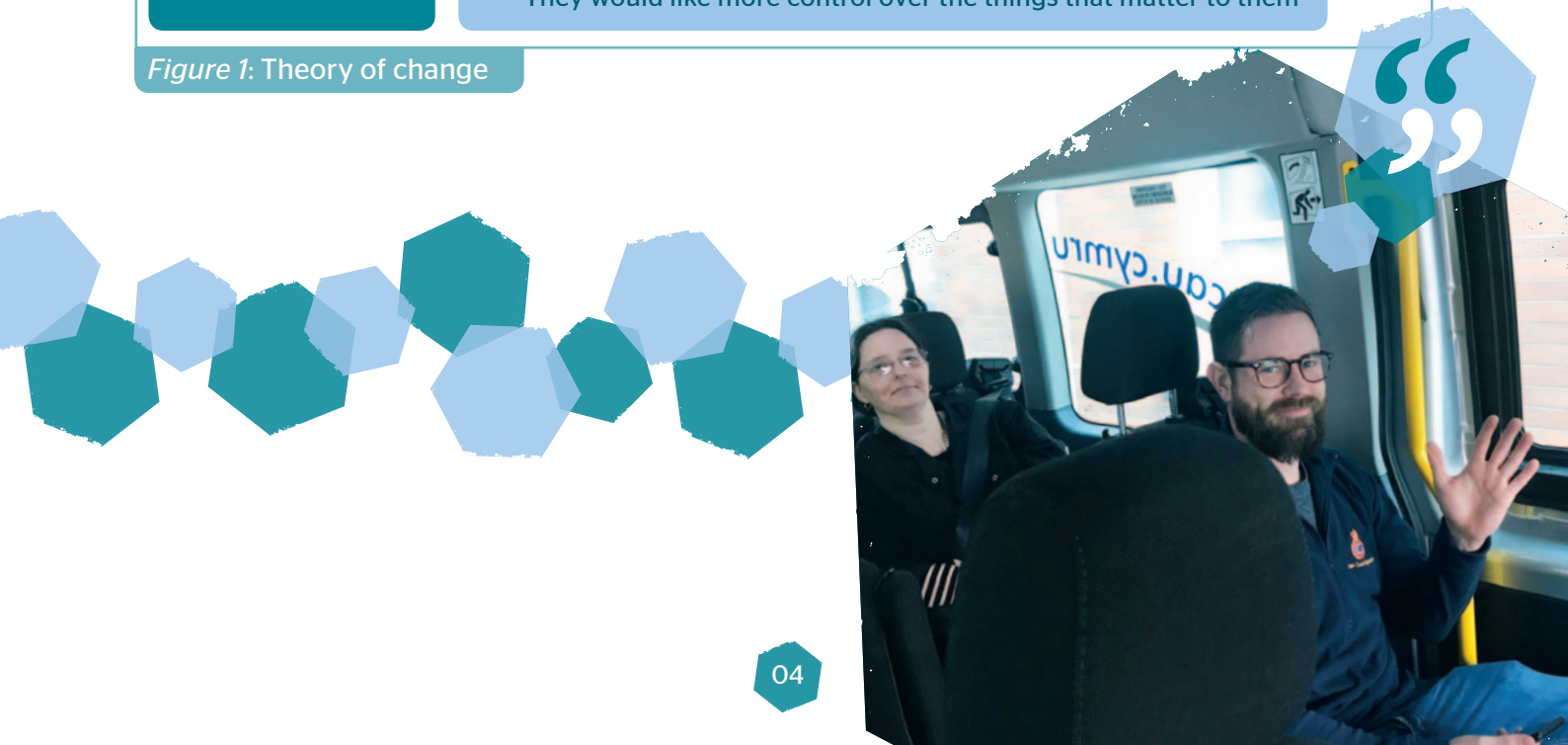


Figure 1: Theory of change



The evaluation of Local Conversations

NEF is leading the evaluation of the programme to capture and share learning with the Trust and local partners, as well as others who are concerned about health inequalities. The evaluation collects information about the programme in the following ways:

- Case studies of four Local Conversations neighbourhoods (interviews, group discussions, observation and peer research), which provide in-depth qualitative information about how the programme works in practice and offers insights into progress made towards achieving the programme's theorised outcomes.
- A longitudinal survey of residents who participate in the programme, which provides a breadth of quantitative information across the 18 Local Conversations. The survey is repeated every six months, which enables outcomes to be tracked over time and compared with national data collected in the Community Life Survey.
- Support for self-appraisal, including workshops and remote support, to help the projects to design and deliver their own evaluations of what is, or is not, working.

This paper offers a summary of findings from the third year, based on data collected up to August 2019. It updates and builds upon a summary of the first and second year of the evaluation ([available here](#)). The evaluation will conclude in 2020 and the final evaluation report and summary report will be published in 2021.



Interviews, group discussions, observation and peer research provide in-depth qualitative information about how the programme works in practice



Process: how projects work locally

Most Local Conversations neighbourhoods have established resident-led steering groups or similar, which are the primary means through which residents regularly convene, engage in dialogue and decision making, and control the projects locally. Steering group members are more likely to have been involved with the Local Conversations for two or more years, and almost all members feel more influential in developing their Local Conversations, compared to people volunteering or participating in activities.

Many steering groups form sub-groups to delegate responsibilities, oversee events or activities, and help distribute workload. Given their smaller size and specific focus, sub-groups can be easier to organise and offer more opportunities for residents to get involved in decision-making. Around 80% of Local Conversations have sub-groups in place, with half of these indicating their sub-groups were well-established. The other half suggested their sub-groups were new and needed further development, with a minority expressing the need for more formality and structure in the sub-groups.

Across Local Conversations neighbourhoods, actions and activities taken over the past three years have been wide-ranging, assuming different forms and aiming to tackle various issues, including:

- **Actions aimed at making change** – Previously these actions focused primarily on visual improvements to the built environment (e.g. flower planting and street cleaning). These actions broadened in scope in 2019 to include more employability and training opportunities and targeted actions to explicitly address social isolation and loneliness.
- **Actions aimed at influencing change** – In the past, actions aimed at influencing local authorities and others to make or support desired changes were significantly less common than residents taking action to make changes themselves. In 2019, there have been promising developments evidenced in the lead organisation survey and case studies that show that the Local Conversations are increasingly attempting actions aimed at influencing change (e.g. reviving a transport group with the aim of liaising with local authorities and bus companies to improve public transport).

- **Community events, projects and activities** – The types of events, projects and activities put on by Local Conversations areas have increased in number and range. Resident participation has increased, too, and the benefits of participation are increasingly emerging. For example, women in Lozells who routinely attend the Zumba class report having improved their English and confidence levels, which they feel has enhanced their employability prospects. As illustrated in the Theory of Change (Figure 1), increased confidence is a key short-term outcome, and it is widely recognised that improved confidence, along with building skills and knowledge supports positive employment outcomes.³ However, there must also be employment opportunities locally for those outcomes to translate to employment outcomes. It is clear that local people value the Local Conversations.

There is evidence that the Local Conversations have been engaging with a wider, more diverse range of residents, such as more vulnerable residents in multiple-occupancy housing (HMOs), newly arrived migrants, refugee women, people from underrepresented ethnic groups, young people and socially isolated older men. Staff survey responses highlighted the increased diversity in participation as a key success.

The residents' survey responses also reflect greater diversity. Between 2018 and 2019, the proportion of White/White British respondents dropped slightly from 78% to 73%, and the proportion of respondents of all other ethnic groups increased from 22% to 29%. There is slightly more diversity across other areas, too, such as gender (35% of men responded in 2019, compared to 32% in 2018) and age (respondents under the age of 21 increased from 14% to 18%).

Targeted actions to reach out to underrepresented groups may have helped increase diversity. Examples of such actions include a new social group for isolated older men in Claremont, expanded provision of activities for girls and young women in Lozells, and a new and well-subscribed youth club in Upper Afan Valley.

Notes:

- 3 Qenani, E., MacDougall, N. & Sexton, C. (2014) 'An empirical study of self-perceived employability: Improving the prospects for student employment success in an uncertain environment,' *Active Learning in Higher Education*

However, it is important to note that although the Local Conversations have engaged a more diverse range of residents, participation does not deepen or evolve into leadership roles. In the words of one lead organisation staff member, "People are happy to come to events/projects but are reluctant to commit to a role with responsibility, be it lack of confidence, mental health issues and long-term illnesses, which prevent them from making the commitment."

Steering groups, which tend to have the highest levels of control, continue to lack diversity in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. Lozells is an exception, as most of the steering group members are Pakistani or Bengali, but this may be a reflection of the large Pakistani and Bengali population in Lozells.

Despite continued difficulties in getting a more diverse range of residents to deepen their participation by assuming greater responsibility in the Local Conversations, a positive evolution is the increase in actions aimed at influencing change across several areas. Although many of these attempts to influence have recently emerged and have not (yet) resulted in tangible changes, they indicate a positive shift in residents' perceptions of control, and increased engagement with local authorities and public sector bodies, as well as increased partnership building with other local organisations to try to collectively influence those in power. It would be useful to track and support the development of these attempts to influence over time.

Challenges and enablers

Austerity, retreating local authorities and services, and structural inequalities have been key barriers the Local Conversations programme has faced since its inception. Other barriers to engagement and progress include the related loss (or threat of loss) of physical space for people to gather, poor housing, inadequate transport infrastructure, crime and anti-social behaviour, and residents' complex personal circumstances (e.g. time and resource constraints due to poverty, drug and alcohol problems).

As The Marmot Review: 10 Years On found, austerity has not only led to a decline in health, but also exacerbated health inequalities. Although large funding cuts have had a negative impact on the social determinants of health across England, deprived areas have experienced more severe cuts, which has undermined their capacity to improve social determinants of health. This has implications for the Local Conversations, which operate in the most deprived neighbourhoods of the UK, where residents can tangibly feel the negative impacts of funding cuts and receding local authorities.

For example, residents have expressed feeling powerless about structural issues and government policies over which they have no control. One of the hub trustees in Upper Afan Valley said, "People can talk about how their own lives are improved by participating in an activity, but at the same time despair about the impossibility of stopping school closures or cuts to social care."

Similarly, a volunteer in Upper Afan Valley commented, "All sorts of things have closed in the last five or ten years and every time there's an outcry of varying degrees, but nobody takes a blind bit of notice because a couple of thousand people stuck up the Valley really don't matter, do they?"

Residents have also expressed a lack of trust in authorities, which makes them less willing to engage in the Local Conversations. As a staff member at the lead organisation in Claremont, Blackpool said, "Over the years, residents have been told and even promised [by the local authority] that this is gonna happen, that's gonna happen - we're gonna get to the bottom of this, we're not having any more HMOs and so on and so forth, and it's all just gone over people's heads and it's never happened."

These feelings of being overlooked, mistrust in authorities and powerlessness about structural issues limit the extent to which residents can build collective control. The Marmot Review: 10 Years On suggests that challenging austerity and structural inequalities may be a more effective route to build collective control locally. This has implications for the Local Conversations, especially as one of the negative consequences of Trust funding has been that the Local Conversations have stepped in to fill gaps left by receding local authorities and services. To what extent does this help to normalise austerity? To what extent have the Local Conversations been able to challenge structural inequalities? As the evaluation progresses, it would be worth reviewing the Theory of Change in light of emerging findings around the limitations of collective control and potential negative outcomes of Trust funding.

One respondent to the residents' survey attributes the maintenance of local facilities and services to the Local Conversations programme. Two staff survey respondents discuss how they have successfully supported residents with issues around welfare, immigration, Universal Credit, and housing access - particularly for people with mobility challenges. In one area where employability training has been discontinued, residents who attended in 2018 have transferred their knowledge to others by helping them fill out Universal Credit and Housing Benefit forms. Although these are inspiring anecdotes about the strong sense of community

among local people, the onus should not be on local people to deliver essential local services.

An emerging challenge in 2019 has been interpersonal conflicts and tensions between individuals pursuing their own agendas instead of acting on behalf of the collective. This appears to be an unintended negative consequence of steering groups building more collective control and becoming increasingly independent of lead organisations. In the words of a staff survey respondent, "Ironically, the challenge has been people gaining confidence and control, there is a tension emerging between individuals wanting to 'go it alone' setting up initiatives that benefit them as opposed to the wider community."

Another staff survey respondent echoed these sentiments: "It became a situation where individual agendas took over collective decision making. The lack of accountability and experience of community work have given rise to complex relationships and notions of leadership, which lack fairness and transparency." The ways in which collective control manifests in practices and the associated challenges are an area that we will devote more attention to in the final year of the evaluation.

Despite these challenges, where the Local Conversations have made significant progress, there are several key enabling factors:

- Existing spaces for people to gather** – Physical spaces are necessary to enable people to engage in dialogue, decision making and action.
- Dialogue and decision making spread across all aspects of the project** – When opportunities for dialogue and decision making are dispersed throughout the Local Conversations (e.g. in events, activities and actions) and not just confined to dedicated decision-making forums (e.g. steering groups), residents are more inclined to feel that they have a say.
- Effective promotion and communication** – Case study areas have established several ways to raise awareness about the Local Conversations and related events and activities (e.g. word of mouth, social media and a WhatsApp group, door-to-door newsletters).
- Strong relationships between lead organisations and the residents' steering group** – There should be a culture in which staff primarily seek to support and enable, rather than lead and direct, projects. Moreover, staff should actively seek to cultivate local leaders and encourage the independence of steering groups, both of which appear to be increasing.
- Partnerships between the Local Conversations and other local organisations** – In 2019, Local Conversations have increased their partnerships with local organisations, including public sector bodies, to facilitate activities and events and increase influence. These partnerships vary and include local schools, local pubs, Citizens UK, Residents Associations, local authorities, and local GPs.
- Training, skills and confidence** – For people to engage in collective dialogue, decision making and action, they must have an initial level of confidence, and be properly informed, trained and supported. Sustained involvement in the Local Conversations has enabled steering group members to build their skills and confidence, and therefore assume more responsibility. There has been an increased demand for more training opportunities, as exemplified in the case studies and the staff surveys, which will continue to help increase the Local Conversations' autonomy and control.



Impact: What has been achieved so far?

Shorter-term outcomes

There has been notable progress on the shorter-term outcomes in the Local Conversations Theory of Change. Findings from 2019 echo the strong evidence in the 2018 report that residents have increased their social connectedness locally, and also evidence progress around influence as well as money and resources.

Social connectedness

Over time, social connections have tended to broaden, with more people experiencing these outcomes, especially as the Local Conversations have increasingly engaged with more diverse residents. These case study findings are consistent with the residents' survey findings, in which 47% of Local Conversations participants report talking to their neighbours on most days, which is significantly more than in similarly disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England, with an average of 21%.

47%

of Local Conversations participants report talking to their neighbours on most days

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

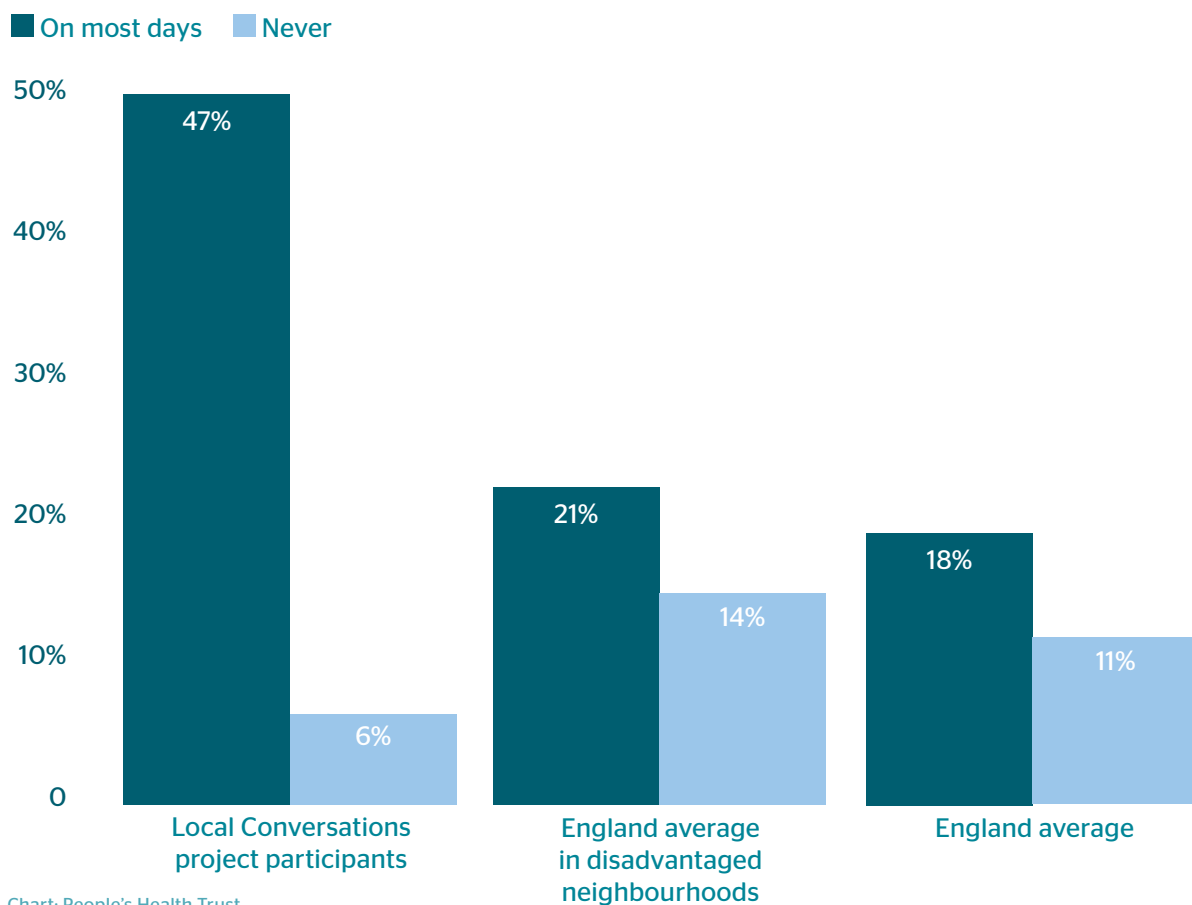


Chart: People's Health Trust

Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-19, New Economics Foundation, Community Life Survey 2016-17, Cabinet Office

Figure 2: Frequency of talking to neighbours, more than just to say 'hello'

The increased number and range of Local Conversations activities and programming, as well as the increased participation from a wider range of residents, has strengthened social connectedness. For example, a staff member from the lead organisation in Upper Afan Valley described the change in a woman who started participating in more activities, such as sports, art and the Mums' Club: "Becoming involved with the Local Conversation and the anchor hub has enabled her to come from somebody completely cut off, to somebody involved with their community,"

Increased social connectedness is related to increased knowledge, understanding and skills, as well as increased confidence and aspiration, as these social connections can often form and strengthen as a result of participating in

educational or training opportunities. In Lozells, for instance, women have gained more confidence and friends by attending English classes, and are increasingly managing and participating in activities. One volunteer said a lot of women have "made friends within the English language classes here, who have probably felt quite isolated in their homes and are now discovering what they can do."

Local Conversations participants also reported significantly stronger feelings of neighbourhood belonging compared to England-wide averages and averages for those living in deprived areas, which we know is strongly correlated with wellbeing and may be particularly difficult to achieve in neighbourhoods experiencing stigma.

In your immediate neighbourhood, how strongly do you feel you belong?

■ Very or fairly strongly ■ Not very or not at all strongly

Local Conversations



England average in disadvantaged neighbourhoods



England average



Chart: People's Health Trust

Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-19, New Economics Foundation, Community Life Survey 2016-17, Cabinet Office

Figure 3: Feelings of belonging in your immediate neighbourhood

When asked about neighbourhood trust, Local Conversations participants reported significantly higher levels of neighbourhood trust than those living in deprived neighbourhoods but the same level of trust as England overall.

81%
of Local Conversations participants expressed a feeling of belonging within their neighbourhood

Trust in people living in the neighbourhood

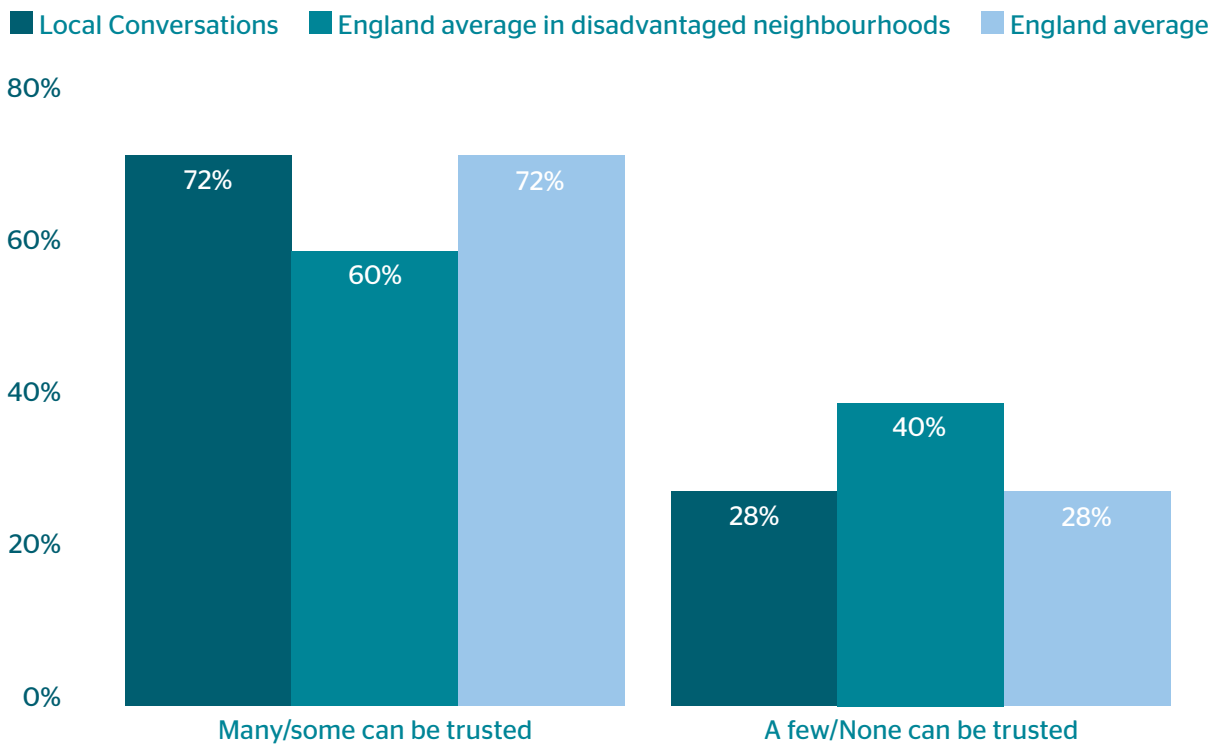


Chart: People's Health Trust

Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-19, New Economics Foundation, Community Life Survey 2016-17, Cabinet Office

Figure 4: Trust in people living in the neighbourhood

Although Local Conversations residents reported lower levels of satisfaction with local services and amenities, compared to the England average and the average in similarly deprived areas, they reported higher levels of satisfaction with the local area as a place to live. The reported lower levels of satisfaction

with local services and amenities could also be interpreted as a sign of progress. It could reflect residents' increased awareness, confidence and ability to both reflect on and articulate their discontent with services.

Generally, how satisfied are you with the local services and amenities in your area?

Very or fairly satisfied Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied Very or fairly dissatisfied

Local Conversations



England average indisadvantaged neighbourhoods



England average



Chart: People's Health Trust

Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-19, New Economics Foundation, Community Life Survey 2016-17, Cabinet Office

Figure 5: Satisfaction with local services and amenities

Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?

■ Very or fairly satisfied
 ■ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 ■ Very or fairly dissatisfied

Local Conversations



England average indisadvantaged neighbourhoods



England average



Chart: People's Health Trust

Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-19, New Economics Foundation, Community Life Survey 2016-17, Cabinet Office

Figure 6: Satisfaction with local area as a place to live

This further suggests that despite the lack of satisfaction with local services and amenities – which have been declining due to austerity – living in a Local Conversations area somehow contributes to residents’ satisfaction. When asked about the difference the Local Conversations has made in their lives, the top four answers that residents provided were meeting new people, making friends, improved confidence and providing a sense of purpose.

One resident said, “I’ve met new people that have also joined the group. Keeping busy and arranging some of projects keeps me alive.” An elderly resident said, “This project is good for me as I am 80+ and gives me pleasure to share my skills and have friends to share it with me. Helps with love lives too.”

Depth of engagement

In addition to greater breadth in residents experiencing increased social connections as a result of the Local Conversations, there has also been an increased depth of engagement among those already involved. One sign of this is the increased independence of steering groups from lead organisations. Staff survey results show that there are two areas where residents are actively steering the Local Conversations. A lead organisation staff member in one of those areas commented, “It’s great to see residents approaching staff and volunteers to set up their own get-togethers and events.” This suggests that not only has there been a deepening of engagement among those already actively involved in the Local Conversations, but also that projects are moving towards greater sustainability.

Anecdotal qualitative evidence from case studies suggests a positive correlation between depth of participation (e.g.

moving from simply attending events to volunteering or even joining the steering group) and the strength of the positive outcomes they experience. For example, in Blackpool the landlady of a popular local pub recently joined the steering group. She previously hosted a charity night for the Local Conversation and has been interested in getting more involved. She felt that her participation in the Local Conversation gave her a greater sense of social connectedness and purpose because she could connect with and support her local community more. As an example, she said that if someone came into the pub and was clearly struggling with alcoholism or mental health problems, she now felt more able to refer them to places or services that could help them.

Influence

The evidence from case studies and staff survey responses of more actions aimed at influencing change across Local Conversations areas in 2019 evidences that collective control is building. A new development across case study areas is the increased actions aimed at influencing change in three particular areas: housing, transport, and local health services.

All four case study areas have increased engagement with the local doctor’s surgery, some with greater success than others, and plan to strengthen those partnerships to improve access to and quality of health services for residents. This may reflect how the Local Conversations are taking advantage of opportunities created by regional and local policy shifts towards social prescribing. In this case, the Trust could play a role in helping people gain a better understanding of local policy contexts in order for the Local Conversations to build partnerships more efficiently.

Meanwhile, in the staff survey, 14 out of 16 areas report attempting to influence those with power locally. When asked which individuals and organisations they tried to influence, answers included local councillors and Council officers, local MPs, elected mayors, the City Council, decision-makers in the NHS, a Director of Public Health, housing associations, social service groups, local action groups, schools, Network Rail, the Endorsement and Standards Board for Community Development, and the police.

Examples of how residents tried to influence those individuals and organisations include:

- Attending local election hustings to try to influence decisions of local councillors
- Organising meetings with those they want to influence and informing people of their work
- Collective action, such as joint projects

Examples of what Local Conversations have achieved as a result of these attempts to influence those in power include:

- Gaining more resources for the Local Conversation – These include a community land transfer, the right to redevelop community infrastructure, and additional training from local authority officers.
- Building useful relationships
- Directly changing the strategy of individuals and institutions
- Nothing so far, but there is optimism that things will progress in the future.

Across the board, most of these attempts to influence are nascent and follow-up in 2020 is necessary to monitor any developments. Still, it is important to recognise that the increased attempts to influence reflect an increased sense of collective control, which is corroborated in the residents’ survey. For example, 76% of Local Conversations participants agreed that people in their neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood, which is greater than in similarly deprived areas (49%) and in England on average (57%). This is an important finding, as strong belief that people in this neighbourhood pull together to improve the local area is an indicator of collective control.

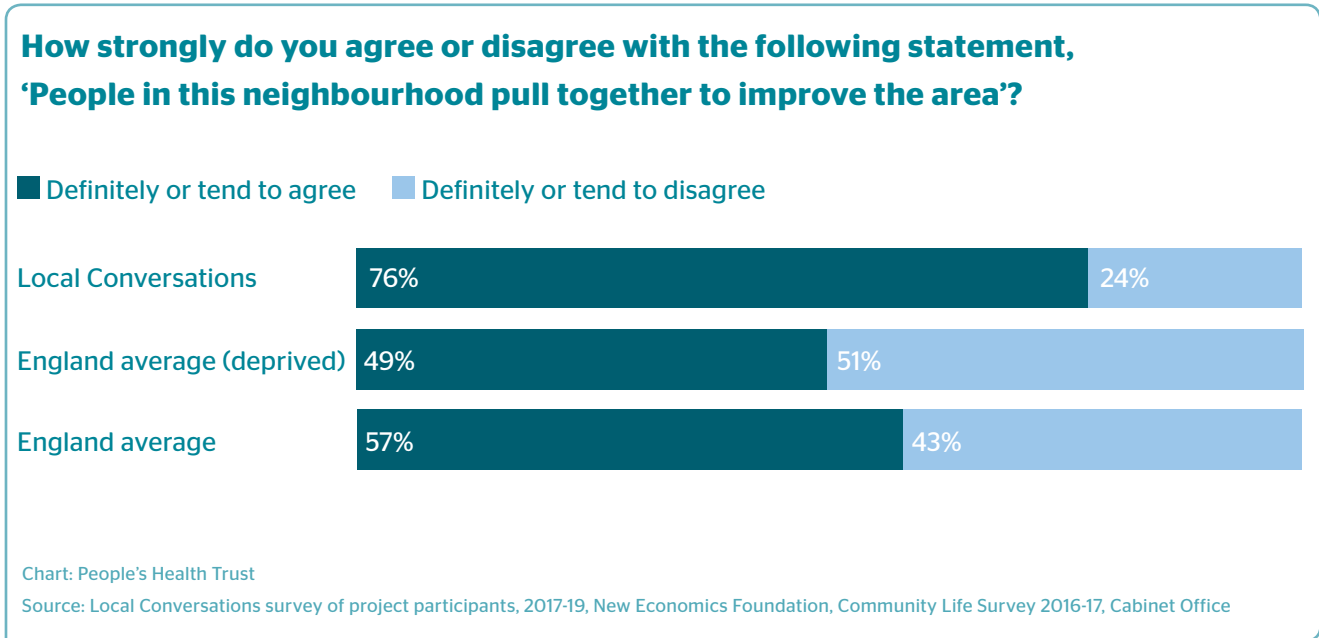


Figure 7: Agreement that “People in this neighbourhood pull together to improve the area”

81% of Local Conversations participants agreed that when people in the area get involved in their local community, they can really change the way the area is run. Again, this is significantly higher than the average in both England

overall and in similarly deprived areas of England, and is an important indicator of collective control.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement, 'When people in this area get involved in their community, they really can change the way that their area is run'?

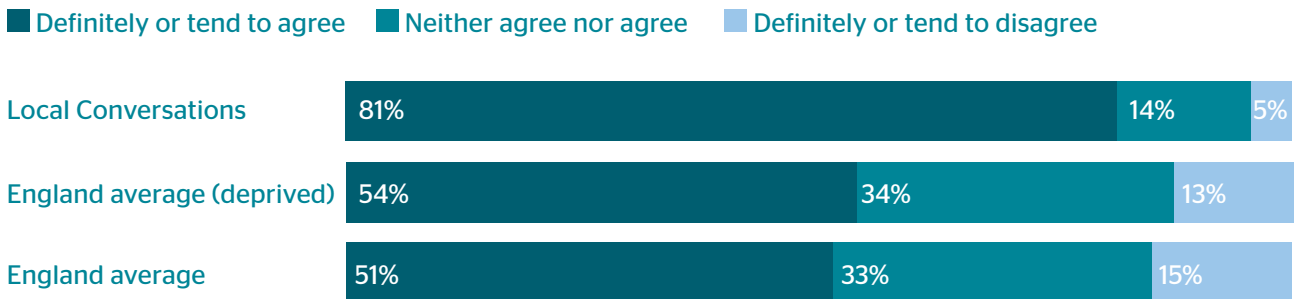


Chart: People's Health Trust

Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-19, New Economics Foundation, Community Life Survey 2016-17, Cabinet Office

Figure 8: Agreement that "When people in this area get involved in their local community, they can really change the way that their area is run"

As previously mentioned, feelings of control and ability to influence appear stronger among residents who have assumed greater responsibility. In the residents' survey, nearly 90% of steering group members agreed or strongly agreed that they can have a say in developing the project, compared to just over 60% of participants. Still, it is clear that residents benefit from any level of participation in the Local Conversation.

Money and resources

Building on the aforementioned point that attempts to influence those in positions of power have, in some cases, yielded more resources for the Local Conversation, the staff survey findings confirm that 2019 has seen an increased ability to secure money and resources. 7 of the 16 areas that responded to the staff survey said that the Local Conversations programme has helped enable them to secure further funding. Some of these amounts are quite significant, such as £120,000 for three years from Children in Need, £80,000 for two years from the Tudor Trust and £500,000 from The National Lottery Community Fund.

The increased acquisition of resources for the Local Conversation is meaningful, especially as hopes for the sustainability of the Local Conversations were a common theme in the staff survey. Numerous respondents spoke about dedicating time in the coming year to ensuring the sustainability of activities and projects by increasing training opportunities for steering group members, as well as continuing to cultivate more leaders.

81%

of Local Conversations participants agreed that they could change the way their area was run

Longer term outcomes

Consistent with the previous report, there is limited evidence that the programme is achieving the longer-term outcomes described in the Theory of Change and this reflects the gradient of accountability. But some longer-term changes are beginning to materialise, and the 2019 evaluation raises interesting questions around longer-term health and wellbeing outcomes.

Findings from 2019 reiterate previous findings about how the social connections gained through the abundant opportunities to come together through the Local Conversations continue to have a knock-on effect on the health and wellbeing of residents. Across case study areas, it is evident that increased confidence, knowledge, and sense of purpose gained from the Local Conversations are positively impacting residents' wellbeing. This is especially true among the most active participants (e.g. steering group members and those leading actions) and previously socially isolated people.

However, because deeper forms of participation remains confined to a fairly small and homogenous group of residents (in terms of age, gender and race), and because engagement with socially isolated residents continues to be tough, a small proportion of residents overall experience the highest levels of health and wellbeing outcomes. This underscores the importance of increasing diversity and inclusion in the Local Conversations programme to ensure that the health and wellbeing outcomes can be more widely distributed among residents. When asked about their hopes for the upcoming year in the lead organisation survey, the most common response was to bring new and underrepresented groups into the Local Conversations. Discussions with staff and residents

during case study fieldwork also reflected a shared aspiration to involve a wider range of people in the Local Conversations, so that more people could experience the benefits.

As in previous years, Local Conversations participants report worse health than areas experiencing similar levels of disadvantage and national averages. This tallies with some findings from The Marmot Review: 10 Years On about the amount of time people are spending in poor health in areas experiencing the highest levels of disadvantage. The largest decreases in life expectancy occurred in the most disadvantaged 10% of neighbourhoods in the North East where two Local Conversations are based. But on a wider scale, the amount of time people spend in poor health has also increased across England over the past decade and those who already have lower life expectancies will spend more of their shorter lives in poor health than those in wealthier areas.

This suggests that in the subsequent years of the Local Conversations programme, if the programme is to achieve its aims of both building collective control and tackling the wider determinants of health, the Trust needs to provide more support to projects to take bigger and bolder action on the local social, economic and environmental determinants of health and has created a plan to achieve this. Given that austerity has severely weakened the capacity of areas experiencing disadvantage to improve the social determinants of health, the Trust can play a larger role in supporting projects in this respect. The Trust can also take a more proactive and vocal role in challenging austerity, which could include helping to lead a national strategy on health inequalities by amplifying the voices of the Local Conversations residents.



Case study one: The Roma community in Govanhill, Glasgow

The Local Conversation in Govanhill is supported by Community Renewal Trust.

The context

Govanhill is an area of Glasgow, situated to the south of the River Clyde. Govanhill is a suburb familiar with immigration. There have been different waves of immigration into the area over the last few decades, most recently the Roma people (both Romanian and Slovakian) during the last five to ten years. Many people live in poverty, work in low-paid and largely unskilled jobs, and live in poor housing conditions. The latter is especially acute for newly arrived Roma people, who experience overcrowding, disrepair and questionable or illegal landlord practices. Many Roma people also do not speak English fluently, which restricts their ability to access services and employment, as well as the amount of control they can exercise locally.

The project

Residents participate in, and have control over, the Local Conversation primarily through a community forum and shaping the design and timings of the various groups and activities. They have chosen to focus on four priority areas: the local environment, housing, employment and social/cultural events. Though these priority areas are conceptually more prominent than they were in 2018, the local environment seems to have the least traction. Examples of actions that the Local Conversation has taken in the other three priority areas include:

- **Housing** - Roma people have expressed persistent concerns about poor housing conditions and discrimination and the lead organisation recently commissioned a formal baseline study of the local housing situation. By building the evidence base about housing conditions in the area (e.g. affordability, access, quality) and developing recommendations to improve access to quality housing, especially for the Roma population, this study has potential to influence policymakers. Follow-up in 2020 is warranted to determine the impact of this study.

Below: Young Roma women attending an employability workshop.



- **Employment** – As of 2019, the employability service has run for a full year. This entails an employability adviser who provides one-to-one support with Roma people to understand their situation, skills, experience and aspiration, then offers advice on working towards employment, which can include help with CVs, job applications or preparing for interviews. The employability service has supported 68 clients (two-thirds men, one-third women) and placed more than a dozen people in work.
- **Social and cultural events** – 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 parade. However, it is difficult to ascertain the depth and quality of social connectedness that residents gain from attending these events. In addition to larger one-off events, there are smaller routine events, like a weekly men's group for men and boys to socialise and a weekly sewing group for women.

Persistent barriers to the Govanhill Local Conversation have been the lack of a shared language among residents, project workers and other local partners; a dearth of places to gather; and the benefits system. Many of the actions progressed, such as the various community events and the housing study, rely on residents taking the lead. However, claimants can lose some or all of their benefits if they perform a certain amount of work or volunteering. Still, the employment of a Roma lead, the appointment of four Roma community facilitators with proficient English and the development of a community canteen overseen by Community Renewal have supported the Local Conversation's progress.

Changes through the programme lie predominantly with the participants' increased confidence and sense of control, as well as social connections gained through involvement.

What's changed?

Changes through the programme lie predominantly with the participants' increased confidence and sense of control, as well as social connections gained through involvement. One way this is evidenced is in the newly introduced Community Achievement Awards, which formally recognises volunteers who have conducted at least 60 hours of community work. This is something that the Local Conversation made possible, to demonstrate appreciation for volunteers and help improve their employability prospects. In 2019, three volunteers received a Community Achievement Award certificate at a large social gathering to celebrate their contributions.

Meanwhile, the most negative change in 2019 has been the loss of community premises. Previously the Local Conversation groups met in various church hall rooms, but the building was deemed unsafe following an electrical inspection and has been closed indefinitely. All Local Conversations activities have been transferred to the Community Renewal office, other premises, or cancelled. Community Renewal and the community forum are investigating other available premises, but choice is limited. Securing space is a priority and will inevitably affect the scale and sustainability of the programme's future activities, events and outcomes.

Perhaps the most significant positive change is the increase in residents' confidence and sense of control. This is evidenced in the newly introduced Community Achievement Awards, which formally recognises volunteers who have conducted at least 60 hours of community work. This is something that the Local Conversation made possible to demonstrate appreciation for volunteers and help improve their employability prospects. In 2019, three volunteers were presented a Community Achievement Award certificate at a large social gatherings to celebrate their contributions.

Case study two: Lozells, Birmingham

The Local Conversation in Lozells is supported by **Aspire and Succeed**.

The context

Lozells is an area in the west of Birmingham with a lot of ethnic diversity, including established Bengali and Pakistani residents, smaller numbers of Caribbean, Irish and White British residents, and newly arrived migrants from countries including Yemen and Syria.

Residents characterise the community as a close knit and supportive one, but many households struggle with poverty, unemployment, Universal Credit, housing and benefits. Austerity has exacerbated all of these issues.

Lozells is increasingly gaining recognition as a model for community organising. The provision of youth activities also seems to have contributed to increased perceptions of safety, as well as a decline in tensions experienced between boys and young men in Lozells, and young people from outside the area.

Lack of time continues to be a barrier for residents to get involved, but there is a high level of enthusiasm from those involved – particularly staff and steering group members. That, along with supportive relationships and a shared vision, has continued to expand residents' participation. According to monitoring data from the Trust in late 2018, 30 residents are involved in some form of governance function (e.g. steering or action groups) and a further 450 people, out of a population of 3,300, have taken part in at least three different activities or events.

The project

In addition to continuing and expanding most activities from 2018 (e.g. employability training, youth activities, community gardens, Zumba, cycling), the Local Conversation in Lozells continues to focus on three priority areas: children and young people; jobs and money; and place, environment, and safety.

Children and young people – A focus has been on expanding the involvement of young women and girls. To that end, two groups have been developed, one of which focuses on arts and crafts for younger girls and the other, which provides a social space for peer interaction among adolescent girls. There are also resident-led drama classes, phonics classes, and cycling classes. The Youth Manifesto project continues to run, helping young people learn about democracy and local government as well as giving them a forum in which to articulate their demands and hold local politicians to account.

Jobs and money – There have been more activities to promote employability, including helping people improve their English, confidence, skills and perceptions of employability. While employment outcomes may take longer to appear, increasing people's confidence and perceptions of employability is an important achievement.

Place, environment and safety – Residents continue to lead projects in this area, including continuing the street/community gardens. The project has also worked with other local partners to deliver larger projects together to visually improve the neighbourhood. These include mapping litter hot spots (which will inform a project on understanding citizen participation and support the Local Conversation in improving their waste-collection projects), and coordinating with residents and the waste contractor to do clean-up days.



Lozells is increasingly gaining recognition as a model for community organising.

What's changed?

Local engagement in collective action has grown throughout the project. Meetings with the local councillor and the Neighbourhood Forum, which are both hosted by Aspire and Succeed, have enabled residents to hold public services to account. The Environment group has also liaised successfully with the local waste management contractor to leverage their support in major local clean-ups, and continues to improve the neighbourhood by expanding the community gardens and installing tyre gardens. Project workers and residents hope to expand the scope of existing projects.

The project has also continued to try to engage underrepresented groups in the area (e.g. recent migrants, as well as women and girls) through targeted outreach, such as projects specifically targeting young women and girls, which has significantly increased their representation in the project. Women are now more involved in participating in and managing activities than in previous years. English classes continue to be a significant source of social connectedness, particularly for women. The confidence people gain through these classes has also increased their ability to act in their communities. Other residents have also continued to similarly deepen their involvement over time, for example moving from the steering group into leading projects themselves.

Finally, there has been an increased sense of local ownership of community spaces this year. The Aspire and Succeed building has become an essential part of the community by holding many activities that residents run, facilitating the Neighbourhood Forum and hosting the local councillor's surgeries. The project has successfully pursued additional funds to ensure sustainability, and an additional staff member has enabled the project lead to play a strategic role in future planning.



Women are now more involved in participating in and managing activities than in previous years. English classes continue to be a significant source of social connectedness, particularly for women.

Case study three: Upper Afan Valley, Neath Port Talbot

The Local Conversation in Upper Afan Valley is supported by Neath Port Talbot CVS.

The context

The Upper Afan Valley is a small community encompassing several small villages and around 4,500 residents in South Wales. The area has a high level of community spirit, and residents feel the community is close and supportive. However, the area continues to suffer from deprivation that began with the closure of its mines in the 1960s and 1970s and resources are limited. There are poor public transport links both between the villages and to nearby towns, which makes access to employment, services and amenities difficult. This problem is exacerbated by the closure in recent years of amenities and services (and consequent job losses) in the Valley. In this context, the Local Conversation funding is critical as a rare funding stream that allows flexibility.

Two recent local events have negatively affected residents' feelings of empowerment. The first is a political reorganisation, as the three local councillors have left the ruling Labour Party to become Independents, thus diminishing their ability to influence decisions made at the local authority level. The second is the recent failure of two campaigns: to save the local secondary school and to reinstate local bus services. Both campaigns failed despite residents' heavy investment and commitment. Both events illustrate the hugely challenging environment in which residents and the Local Conversation are operating.

The project

The Local Conversation in the Upper Afan Valley has three organisational strands: a Local Conversation Worker, three community-run hubs that act as anchor organisations, and a panel of residents distributing grants for small community organisations to purchase equipment. Most activities are delivered from the hubs, and those reported in 2018 have continued along with a range of new activities (e.g. a youth club), thanks to grants from the Independent Panel. The hubs continue to play a major role in providing community spaces and services, and repurposing existing spaces has been explored (e.g. a local mental health group is now hosted at the Cymmer library).

Residents continue to be heavily involved in these activities as trustees, volunteers and participants. For example, young people primarily manage the youth club and work with adults to co-recruit sessional workers. Although it is hard to ascertain the number of people involved in Local Conversations projects at the hubs, rough estimates suggest around 24,000 visits were made to the hubs in 2019 in total. These opportunities continue to be important in maintaining community spirit and wellbeing in an area that is otherwise very cut off.

In 2019 the Local Conversation has strengthened its capacity to deliver on its goals by bringing in a new project worker to support the revival of the environment and transport groups, convene the small-grants panel, engage new residents and facilitate further development of residents to take on/improve leadership roles. The transport group has also brought in a local authority worker with connections in the council and an understanding of how to leverage influence.

24,000
visits were made to
the hubs in 2019


Grant funding has enabled the involvement of a consultant to consider how to develop overarching governance across five larger voluntary organisations in the Valley, including the three hubs. This project is distinct from the Local Conversation, but has a similar goal and will help improve coordination among local third sector organisations.

What's changed?

The outcomes reported in 2018 have continued, particularly around social connectedness. Residents feel more socially connected and benefit from taking part in activities and using spaces that are supported by the Local Conversation. Although the steering group has not met since 2018 due to the absence of a Local Conversation worker to coordinate it, residents continue to feel in control of activities, suggesting new ideas and leading them. However, as previously mentioned, wider systemic issues have also left people feeling disempowered.

There has been more emphasis in 2019 on developing governance structures, in terms of both coordinating organisations and providing training for volunteers within the Local Conversation. The addition of the new project worker has added momentum to the Local Conversation and enabled a more coherent approach to potential models of governance, training and publicity, which includes looking at more long-term issues, such as the need for upskilling Local Conversation participants. However, the Valley has also been suffering heavily from further cuts to public services, lack of employment and population declines, all of which continue to make it a difficult context within which the Local Conversation can operate.

Finally, 2019 had a focus on survival, rather than expansion. The Valley is reliant on one-year grants, which - unlike Local Conversations funding - are project specific, so there is minimal flexibility in how to spend money or for organisations to make long-term plans and meet core costs. The Valley is also suffering heavily from further cuts to public services, lack of employment, and decreases in population.



The Valley has been suffering heavily from further cuts to public services, lack of employment and population declines, all of which continue to make it a difficult context within which to operate.

Case study four: Claremont, Blackpool

The Local Conversation in Claremont is supported by the Claremont First Step Community Centre.

The context

Despite its affluent past, Blackpool has been in a long economic decline along with the city's tourist industry. High unemployment, poverty, and the related high incidence of poor health all affect the area. Residents feel that the neighbourhood has been sidelined by the local authority. Both residents and staff tangibly perceive the ways in which austerity has further reduced the local authority's resources, such as by weakening the third sector in an area where people are in high need of support.

Housing is a problem in the Claremont Ten – there is a high rate of HMOs in the surrounding streets, which are usually poorly maintained by absentee landlords, and often used by other local authorities to fulfil their statutory duties. These residents are often transient, perceived as not invested in the neighbourhood and associated with anti-social behaviour.

Despite these challenges, the Claremont Ten is well-connected to Blackpool's services and amenities. It also has pockets of social capital, for example local pubs, which have become involved in the Local Conversation, offering their facilities to host galas and organise litter-picks.

Residents continue to gain increased social connectedness from attending the various events and activities, while volunteers also have gained more knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence.

The project

Through the Local Conversation in Claremont, a range of activities occur, including weekly classes and recreational activities, environmental projects and larger festive events for the community to come together. The Local Conversation focuses on three priorities: improving the local environment, youth provision and activities to bring the neighbourhood together.

In the environment stream, previous activities such as alleyway clear-ups, rubbish amnesty days, and litter picks, have continued with wide support. Compared to previous years, the effect of the environment group's work now seems to be rippling out into the wider community, with more residents seeing these positive changes and proactively cleaning up their homes and streets. Residents and staff alike noted this during case study fieldwork, and steering group members remarked that the Local Conversation had developed a good local reputation beyond the work of the environment group. In addition, residents who had been involved in the neighbourhood clean-ups formed a new sub-group to focus on a newly acquired community garden.

The focus of youth provision has shifted towards younger children; for example, the Learn and Grow project offers children new experiences (e.g. trips in Blackpool) and supports parents in interacting with them.

In terms of activities to facilitate community inclusion, established groups such as the Knitting Group and Line Dancing have continued. New activities in 2019 included a popular weekly walking football session, functional fitness classes, a group for socially isolated older men and 'Raid the Larder,' a weekly food bank run in collaboration with Blackpool Food Partnership, which reaches the most vulnerable residents in the community. Residents continue to gain increased social connectedness from attending the various events and activities, while volunteers also have gained more knowledge, understanding, skills, and confidence.


The Local Conversation benefits from a well-established lead organisation that provides both physical space to host activities, as well as organisational capacity, such as staff support. The steering group comprises committed members, who now are quite experienced and work well together. However, there are difficulties in deepening residents' engagement so that more residents are assuming more responsibility and leadership. This transition takes a lot of time, due to a lack of trust in authority, and to the fact that participants themselves lack disposable time, resources and confidence to engage.

What's changed?

Three significant changes in 2019 are the steering group's increasing independence of the lead organisation, the development of new partnerships and increased diversity in participation. Steering group members have grown into their roles and are assuming greater responsibility, by being more proactive and able to act independently. Staff have been committed to nurturing this by providing community development training, for example.

In addition, staff are continuing to take the lead on developing relationships with partner organisations, which are emerging but proving fruitful. A new partnership has enabled the expansion of 'Raid the Larder,' and the Centre will be joining a new multi-agency partnership in the area. The hope is that these partnerships will continue to grow and create more opportunities for the steering group to expand the scope of their projects and develop as community leaders. Staff and residents are also hopeful that an emerging partnership with the local GP surgery will become more formalised, which could create potential opportunities to influence.

Finally, 'Raid the Larder' has engaged transient residents who previously did not engage with the project and enabled opportunities for deeper engagement because attendees have built rapport with each other and started coming to the Centre for help with other issues.



The hope is that these partnerships will continue to grow and create more opportunities for the steering group to expand the scope of their projects.



-  020 7749 9100
-  peopleshealthtrust.org.uk
-  enquiries@peopleshealthtrust.org.uk
-  facebook.com/peopleshealthtrust

-  twitter.com/Peoples_Health
-  Instagram.com/peopleshealthtrust
-  Linkedin.com/company/people's-health-trust
-  Youtube.com/user/PeoplesHealthTrust