

Evaluating Local Conversations 2018: Supporting collective control to reduce health inequalities



Introduction

The Local Conversations programme aims to reduce health inequalities in some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England, Scotland and Wales. It seeks to narrow the health gap between rich and poor, which is otherwise growing wider with a strong trend towards richer people living longer, healthier lives than those who are poorer. Research into the underlying determinants of health shows that an important contributing factor is how far people can control what happens to them.

The programme is funded by People's Health Trust, which was set up to address health inequalities in Great Britain and create fairer places in which to grow, live, work and age. The Trust supports and encourages resident-focused approaches as a means of addressing the underlying structural causes of health inequalities with funding from The Health Lottery. It provides funding to neighbourhoods with approximately 4,000 to 5,000 residents, which fall into the highest 30% of the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

There are currently 21 Local Conversations across England, Scotland and Wales. The grants support local residents – who often feel they have little or no power to improve their daily lives – to come up with their own ideas about how best to tackle the social and economic factors that affect their physical and mental health. The aim is for residents to gain more control over things that matter to them and to build this control not just individually, but collectively – by meeting and speaking with one another and doing things together. The programme is based upon the model of control set out below, with the theory of change at the end of the report.

Understanding collective control

Collective control is the process in which people gain feelings and experiences of control through their involvement in collective activity. So what does it take to build collective control? Studies have found key factors to be social connectedness; knowledge, understanding and skills; money and resources; influence; and confidence. As the diagram below demonstrates, it is important for people to have a sense of control as well as to exercise control. Perception and action reinforce one another, and help to achieve real change.

About the evaluation

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) is undertaking a four-year evaluation of the Local Conversations programme, so that the Trust and local residents – as well as others who are concerned about health inequalities – can learn from it.

In this first phase of evaluation, NEF has been working with all Local Conversations projects to support them to develop methods of self-appraisal. It has conducted regular surveys of residents across each neighbourhood and in five of those areas, it has carried out detailed case studies.

This paper offers a summary of early findings, based on data collected up to August 2017. It draws on the case studies in five neighbourhoods: Govanhill, Glasgow; Claremont Ten Streets in Blackpool, Lozells in Birmingham; Upper Afan Valley in south Wales, and Netherfield in Milton Keynes.

What has been achieved so far?

In each Local Conversation area, there is one anchor, or 'lead', organisation that receives the grant from the Trust. They are usually already very well-trusted locally, though this is not uniformly the case. Crucial first steps for each lead organisation have been to set up a smaller, representative group of people to take the work forward (sometimes 'steering groups') and to engage local residents in discussions about what matters to them and what they most want to change or build upon within their neighbourhood. This has led to residents setting out their priorities and undertaking the actions that they have chosen. This phase usually lasts six to eight months, before a fuller grant is awarded upon presentation of their priority areas.

Several areas report a phase at the beginning of the full delivery of the Local Conversation where there are few tangible outcomes. They have found this to be a crucial phase – one in which the lead organisation's staff are building relationships and trust with local residents and other organisations locally, and finding opportunities for people to get involved with the project.

Shorter-term outcomes

Through their evaluative work, NEF has explored how the Local Conversations have achieved outcomes that, according to the programme's theory of change, may contribute in the shorter and longer-term towards increasing local control and better health.

By coming together, engaging in dialogue and taking action, people in the Local Conversations areas have started to achieve some of the shorter-term outcomes modelled in the programme's theory of change. Most commonly, there are signs of increased **social connectedness**, and of people gaining greater **confidence**, as well as **knowledge, understanding and skills**.

These outcomes are experienced both by those residents in steering groups and voluntary roles, as well as by residents participating in local activities. However, the degree of involvement clearly makes a difference. Outcomes for steering group members have typically been stronger than for volunteers, and outcomes for volunteers have been stronger than for those participating in activities. Broadly, stronger outcomes have been found in areas where the Local Conversations process is more advanced.

Social connectedness

Increased social connectedness has developed as friends and neighbours come together and form stronger bonds, both within and between groups in different estates and postcode areas.

“I've met a lot of nice friends through my group, yeah. We go to the pub and have a wee drink together, just a wee get together. So it's really, really good; it's really positive.”

Resident, Claremont

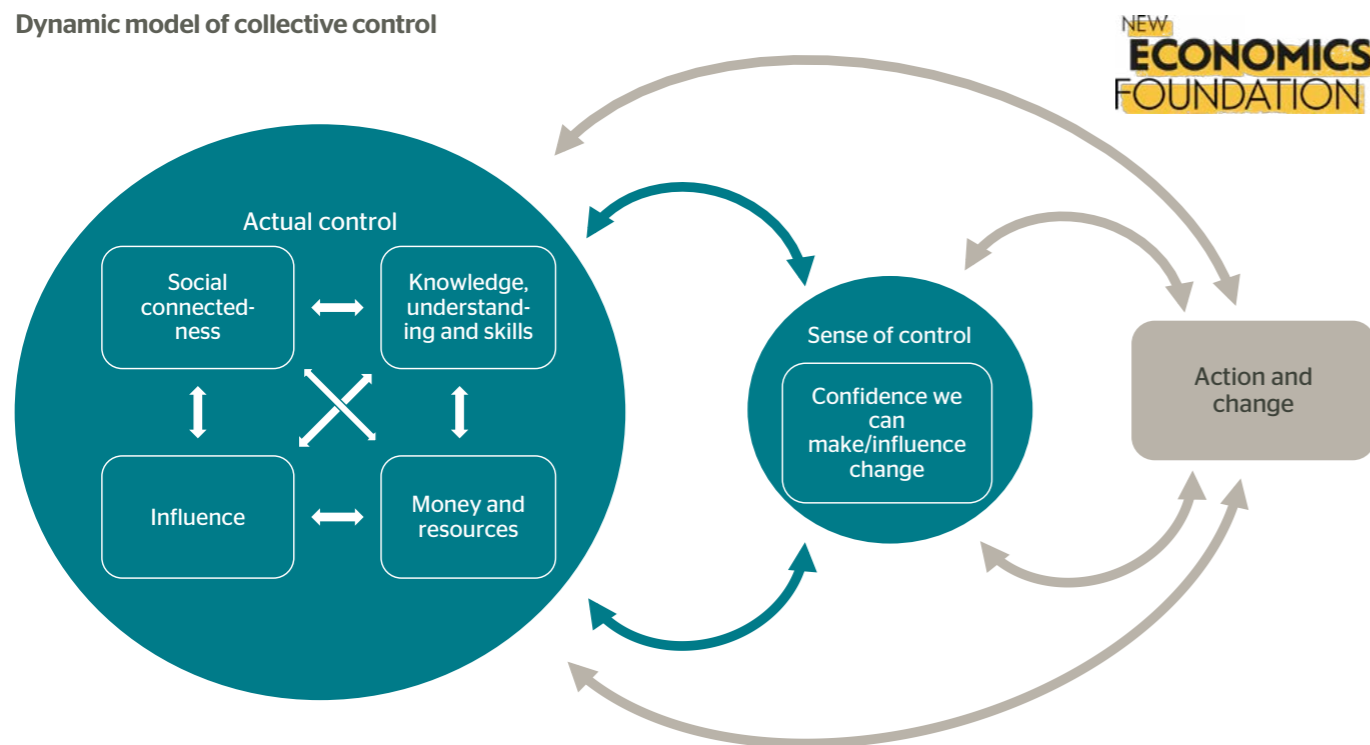
Confidence

Increased confidence in the possibility of change and the ability of local people to influence or deliver it develops at first amongst those who participate in local action. Where action leads to visible results, confidence can spread or ripple through to others in the neighbourhood who have not yet participated.

“You've got individuals who've never seen themselves as leaders in any way, shape or form who are suddenly taking a lead... And they've now got employability skills that they didn't particularly have, or weren't aware that they had before.”

Resident, Lozells

Dynamic model of collective control



¹ Referred to as 'steering groups' for the remainder of the report

Knowledge, understanding and skills

Increases in knowledge, understanding and skills have so far most commonly occurred at an individual level. For instance, residents reported gaining employment and language skills through local initiatives, as well as knowledge of how to access and improve services.

At this stage, it is rare for people to gain knowledge, understanding and skills about routes to change at a collective level. Where this has happened it has been among those people most heavily involved in the programme, such as members of steering groups, grants panels or those leading action in areas where the Local Conversation process is more fully developed.

Other outcomes identified in the theory of change but less commonly found so far, are increased **influence, money and resources, and action**.

Influence

Where influence is beginning to increase, it has taken two forms: mediated and direct. Several lead organisations report having more influence as a result of the Local Conversation, working more closely with decision makers and those in positions of power. In areas where the Local Conversations process has more recently begun, the influence of the community is mediated by the lead organisation, where staff hold much of the contact with people in positions of power.

Only in a small number of areas has the lead organisation begun to broker relationships and support residents to exercise more direct forms of influence over those in positions of power. For example, in Lozells, the community have built a relationship with the local authority to work together to prevent fly-tipping and finding strategies to overcome the issue.

The development of influence on a wider scale is likely to take longer to achieve than some of the other outcomes, because it involves changing perceptions and behaviours of those outside the community, and challenging existing power relationships. Local Conversations need to ensure a strong foundation in order to exert wider influence.

Money and resources

The Local Conversations programme has helped to increase the availability of money and resources in many areas. It has done this mainly through building local capacity, supplying supporting evidence, developing new relationships with funders, and encouraging lead organisations and other local groups to apply successfully for funding from other sources. The programme has helped bring additional funds worth more than £1 million into at least 11 Local Conversation areas. Although less common, some individuals have accessed new money and resources of their own because their involvement in the programme has enabled them to gain access to benefit entitlements, or to move into employment.

Action

On a relatively small scale, individual residents describe making important changes in their lives (for example, starting to go out more, exercise, or talk about their problems). In some areas, more local people are joining or gaining representation on decision-making forums or lobbying groups, or are taking part in shared activities to improve the environment, or go on trips, or set up groups and classes.

Purpose

Another outcome emerging from discussions with residents that is not fully captured within the original theory of change is a sense of purpose. Residents have noted the importance of having 'something to do' and 'making a difference' through the Local Conversation.

“To me, I feel as if I could still go out and do jobs, but nobody wants to know. This is why I do this. Volunteering work keeps me busy. So this is what I do.”

Resident, Claremont

Outcomes for local organisations

Most lead organisations say that their involvement in the Local Conversation has had an impact on their organisation. They have deepened their knowledge and understanding of their local area, community development, creative, and resident-led ways of working. They have also built stronger networks with others conducting similar work, including the lead organisations of other Local Conversations. They have also been able to grow in terms of funding and staffing, capacity (including knowledge and skills), and are developing a higher profile.

Longer-term outcomes

Some of the longer-term outcomes identified in the programme's theory of change can be seen in some Local Conversation areas.

Scale and sustainability

Local Conversations currently tend to be small in scale, covering between 4,000 and 12,000 residents, with participation and outcomes associated with committed groups of residents. However, in some areas, participation in the Local Conversation and ownership of the project is beginning to show signs of achieving scale. Participation is growing, ownership and control are starting to spread and work is starting to take place independent of the lead organisation.

Improvements of the wider determinants of health

Several areas are showing signs of small-scale changes to the wider determinants of health. Most typically, these are improvements to local green space and the built environment as a direct result of action taken through the Local Conversations programme.

Challenges and barriers

Some areas experienced unintended negative outcomes. Many identified a common set of challenges and barriers to coming together, engaging in dialogue and taking action in their neighbourhoods.

Momentum

Momentum is important for Local Conversations, and some areas have experienced interruptions to their work. One saw a **gap in activity** as the lead organisation went from the initial engagement phase to a fully live Local Conversation. The process of agreeing for full grant funding can lead to a pause in activity and sometimes undermine trust among residents, particularly where they had been consulted in relation to other, unrelated regeneration initiatives previously and had not seen any change as a result. This can affect involvement and relationships, for example by losing members from the steering group in between phases.

Pace of change

In addition, residents reported **frustration** that they have given large amounts of time and energy to the project yet seen little change where there had been external delays beyond the control of the steering groups, lead organisations or the funder.

“It’s been quite frustrating. Over the period of time, if you are a resident, and you see the flyers and the newsletters, and you say ‘oh yeah, we’re getting the CCTV’, but we’ve been saying that for ages and it’s still not up. It really needs to materialise now... People keep asking, ‘Why’s the CCTV not up yet?’”

Resident, Netherfield

Scale and reach

The majority of Local Conversations have not yet achieved large scale and reach at this early stage. A minority have not yet been able to expand beyond a small group of residents who both sit on steering groups and take part in activities, to the point where they involve larger numbers of residents.

There are signs that, where Local Conversations are more firmly established, where they have introduced a wider range of activities and achieved small, visible changes, and where there are multiple avenues of ownership and control, they are able to encourage more people to get involved. Case study research is beginning to show how larger scale and wider reach may be possible. Lozells, one of the longest-running Local Conversations may be beginning to achieve this.

Over-reliance on steering groups

In a number of areas, there may be an over-reliance on developing the steering group as a mechanism of control. Some projects have not explored ways of enabling a wider range of residents to take control.

Reaching the most marginalised and seldom-heard groups

Many areas are successfully reaching people facing isolation and high levels of disadvantage, but say they are finding it difficult to involve the most marginalised and seldom-heard groups in the Local Conversation area.

Time

The Local Conversation is a long-term process and most areas are still in the early stages (even after up to three years of funding). It takes time to build trust, relationships and participation, and to start tackling priority issues.

“In a lot of cases people have got lots going on. In a lot of cases, there’s quite complicated circumstances that people are living in. And it’s not necessarily something that they feel they have the space in their lives to do. This doesn’t mean that they will never get involved, it just takes time, starting with something small and growing and hopefully having a positive impact on their lives as a whole in time.”

Lead organisation, Netherfield

Becoming more strategic

There are major issues that residents in different areas have identified as very important, such as housing, employment and mental health. However, these have not always been identified by local people as priorities for action, for a range of reasons. They may be seen as beyond the control of local people or local organisations; they may have been too sensitive to emerge during the engagement phase; or the engagement process may not have been sufficiently attuned to them. Whether and how they are then incorporated into the Local Conversation is a challenge that some areas may soon be facing.

Local politics and partnership working

Many Local Conversation areas are finding it a challenge to navigate power dynamics between local residents involved in the Local Conversation (such as powerful local families or individuals), or other sources of power, such as local services, councillors, councils or MPs. Some lead organisations have reported that those currently in positions of power have been actively resistant to the Local Conversation, and believe this may be because their vested interests or power have been threatened.

What has helped to bring about change?

Despite challenges and barriers, Local Conversations have often found creative and insightful ways of overcoming them. The following factors have made it more likely that the process of people coming together and engaging in dialogue will lead to action and change.

Visible change

Visible, tangible change that has been achieved as a result of Local Conversation action or activity can help residents to trust that the Local Conversations programme will move beyond consultation, and to demonstrate that change is possible and that participation will be worthwhile.

“Now the Local Conversation is here, when small changes happen, like the way beds get built, or the shrubbery gets cut down, visible things that people can see happening, I think it enables people to see that if they do come up with an idea there’s no reason why it can’t happen.”

Lead organisation, Netherfield

Multiple ways of getting involved and taking control

Formal steering groups can be off-putting for some residents. If there are multiple avenues through which residents can gain control through the Local Conversation - for example by forming priority action groups, and by supporting residents themselves to lead and develop actions - this can help to develop a shared sense of ownership and increase participation.

Links to those in positions of power and authority locally

This can provide necessary permissions for action and potentially support activities.

Skilled support of the lead organisation

Much of the success of a Local Conversation is contingent upon the capacity and skills of the lead organisation to take the vision for the programme forward. Being the lead organisation is a complex and skilled role, and the evaluation has evidenced some very skilled working practices among lead workers. Initial analysis suggests that the most successful working practices include:

- Actively including residents in everyday work and interactions, seeking to identify and nurture potential leaders among them, as well as encouraging and supporting people to take responsibility for turning their own ideas into action.
- Having an explicit theory of how local services and decision-makers can be influenced, based upon evidence or experience. Those who have found ways to include local services and decision-makers in the Local Conversation and built positive working relationships with them produce some encouraging results.
- Reflective practice on their role as lead organisation, including the complex balance between bringing their own experience to help guide the Local Conversation, and supporting residents’ decisions even when unsure whether they may work:

“Be open and flexible in your thoughts. Be sensitive to different cultures and traditions. Be realistic and honest when dealing with people. Be a great listener and be motivated to follow up conversations with action. Be persistent and lead by example.”

Respondent to survey of lead organisations

- Helping to increase local knowledge about different ways of doing things and ideas about what is possible, by encouraging residents to bring their own experience, judgement and encouragement to discussions.

“Aspirations can be quite low; people in the community often know what they don’t want but not what they want in its place. They talk about problems and issues in their community but many have... accepted them because they’ve had no real opportunity to change things in the past.”

Respondent to survey of lead organisations

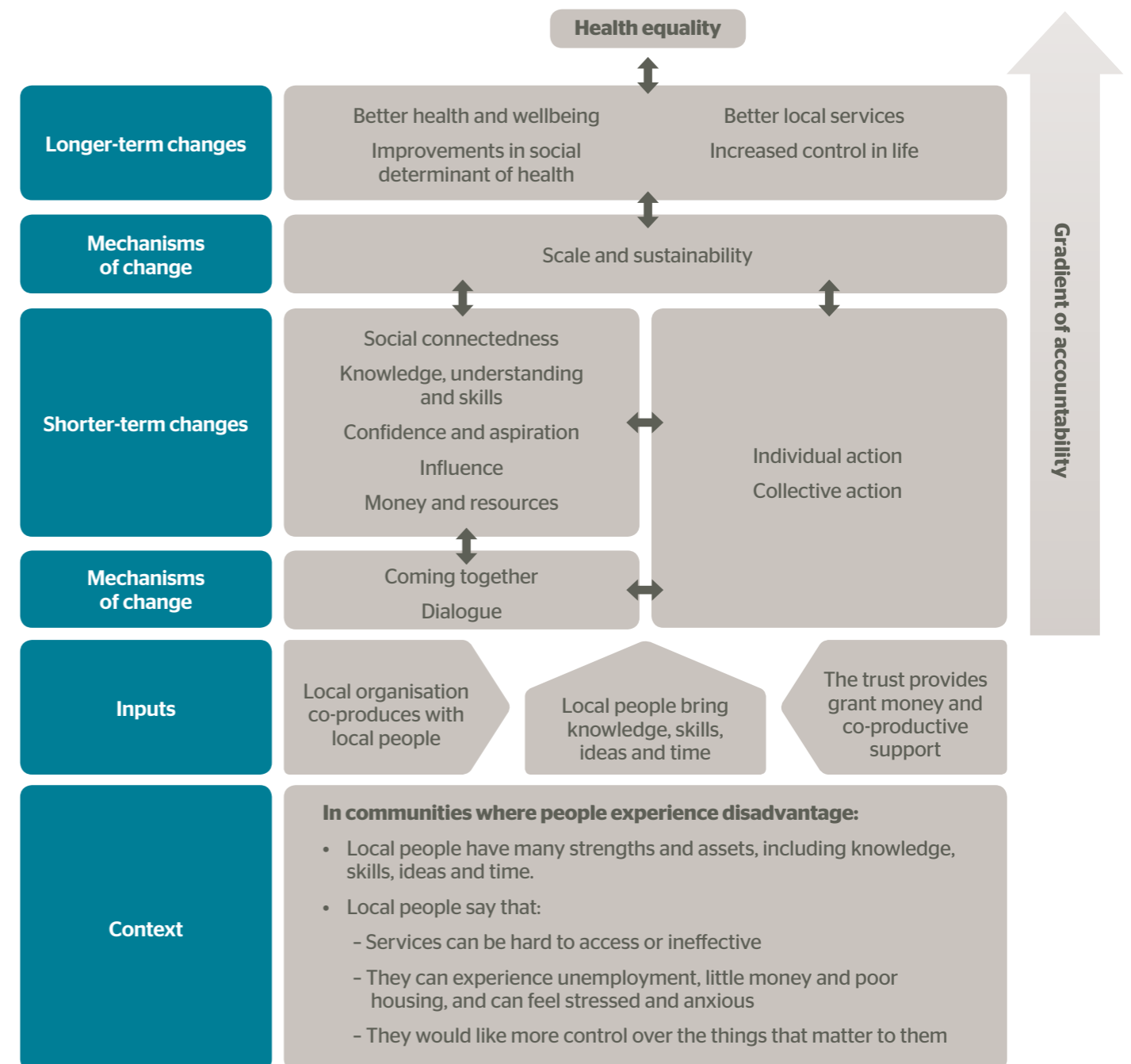
- Being flexible enough to nurture ideas as they emerge, whether or not these fit easily within the initial set of priorities. This, however, raises the issue of how to avoid concentrating the power to set priorities among those most heavily involved.

Theory of change

The Local Conversations programme theory of change provides the foundation for action. Based on the dynamic model of control and on a range of academic studies, as well as on discussions with people involved in the programme, it shows the interrelated steps that can be taken to achieve the end goal.

Accordingly, when people are able to get together and build up control collectively, this will lead to improvements in local factors that affect their health (social determinants), and to better local services. These changes improve their health and wellbeing, and ultimately help to reduce health inequalities.

A theory of change helps people to be clearer about how they can achieve their goals, to check progress from one step to another and to change what they are doing if they are not making enough headway. Each neighbourhood has built upon the programme theory of change to reflect local conditions and their own ideas about what needs to change.



Next steps




The 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 second year of the evaluation will be published in summer 2019.




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

People's Health Trust

-  www.peopleshealthtrust.org.uk
-  enquiries@peopleshealthtrust.org.uk
-  020 7749 4194
-  www.facebook.com/peopleshealthtrust
-  www.twitter.com/Peoples_Health
-  www.linkedin.com/company/people's-health-trust

New Economics Foundation

-  neweconomics.org
 -  info@neweconomics.org
 -  020 7820 6400
- Key contact: Daniel Button

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