

COMMUNITY MOBILISATION

Unlocking the potential of community power

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New Local (formerly the New Local Government Network) is an independent think tank and network with a mission to transform public services and unlock community power.

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FOREWORD

Not in living memory for most of us have we faced a crisis of the magnitude posed by COVID-19. Local authorities up and down the country have been stepping in to provide vital community support, which, even in better times, is restricted by other commitments to the communities they serve.

Community mobilisation can and should play a central role in the life of local communities. Acting as a facilitator and an enabler, local authorities can reap the widespread benefits of an empowered community. By building relations with community groups, local authorities can equip these groups to better the areas they live in, thereby improving the lives of residents.

As this report from the New Local Government Network highlights, benefits are widespread when local representatives and councils grasp the opportunity to enable the communities they serve. With case studies and recommendations, this report is a helpful guide on how to unlock the potential of community power.

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Chair of Policy and Resources, City of London Corporation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When communities come together, they have the power to do extraordinary things.

Rarely has this been so apparent as in the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us have been inspired by local Mutual Aid groups rapidly mobilising to ensure that the most vulnerable in their communities have what they need to make it through the crisis.¹

In so doing, communities eased the pressures on frontline services, and made an invaluable, preventative contribution to this country's fight against coronavirus.² Perhaps more significantly, they also offered a glimpse of what a more democratic, more caring and better society could look like.

This report offers a how-to guide for public bodies – particularly local authorities – interested in mobilising the communities that they work with. We define a mobilised community as one that knows what it wants, knows what resources it has at its disposal, and has a plan for how to use them. Getting communities to this point is, we believe, the first stage in unlocking 'community power'.³ By this we mean communities' ability to – with support – deploy their own skills and resources to define and address many of the challenges they face.





In order to bring these types of communities about, we have created the following typology of strategies that would-be mobilisers can employ:

¹ Solnit, R. (2020). '[The way we get through this is together](#)': the rise of mutual aid under coronavirus'. The Guardian.

² From interviews author conducted for this research.


³ Lent, A. (2020). '[Community Power and the Triple Crisis of the New Decade](#)'. NLGN.



-  An **Individuals**-based strategy begins with the needs of specific people and works out how community assets can be built and deployed to improve their lives.
-  A **Groups**-based strategy looks to pre-existing groups within communities and strives to build up and empower them.
-  A **Place**-based strategy tries to make an area as conducive to community mobilisation as possible. This means thinking about things such as infrastructure, assets and the practices of local government and the public sector.
-  A **Service**-based strategy looks to empower people who interact with services and have ideas of how to improve them. It then helps build the capacity of those people to contribute to their own communities.

These approaches are illustrated within the report with detailed case studies, covering ideas like community organising and local area coordination, and projects such as community land trusts and participatory platforms.

Using insights gleaned from the case studies and wider research, this report also offers four take home messages for public bodies interested in community mobilisation in practice. They are:

-  **Catalyse, don't lead:** Communities direct; mobilisers facilitate. It is not the role of representatives from public sector bodies to lead communities to a predetermined destination – their efforts are better focussed on helping communities get to wherever it is they themselves want to be.

- **Listen:** A central theme to come out of this project is that true mobilisation can only occur around issues that are genuinely salient to the communities in question. These are not easily identified by external actors, and as such, listening is key. Listening is also crucial for building the trusting, positive relationships between representatives of public bodies and communities that are a prerequisite for successful projects.
- **Build something:** Successful community mobilisation initiatives build something that was not there before. This may be something physical, like housing or infrastructure. It might also involve less tangible assets, such as new networks or bonds between people and institutions.
- **Have clear goals:** Despite the fact that it is up to communities themselves to direct the process of mobilisation, it remains the case that in order to successfully design a project, public bodies need to have an idea of what they want to achieve. This does not have to be something overly specific – but simply being clear about whether, for example, the main focus is to reduce frontline demand, or to reform a particular service. This will help the approach come together.

If these ideas are successfully embodied, any of the approaches to community mobilisation outlined in this report have the power to transform places for the better. When done well, the process of mobilisation can bind people together, create new types of public services, and recast the relationship between citizens and the state. It can also create resilience and ensure that communities have the power to address and withstand the challenges of today.

Mobilisation is, then, essential work if we want to see our communities thrive beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and into the future.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of community power is becoming increasingly mainstream among policy makers. It can be seen in all manner of developments, from the proliferation of local citizens' assemblies on climate change, to the NHS's 'Health as a Social Movement' programme. Most recently, we can see it in councils' rush to harness the power of the Mutual Aid groups that have sprung up in response to the pandemic.⁴

However, despite the interest in it, community power remains a somewhat misunderstood concept. It can be invoked as a goal in and of itself, or it can be seen as a means of addressing systemic crises. NLGN's *The Community Paradigm*⁵ is an example of the latter. It sets out that the current, market-dominated model of public service delivery – with its unaccountable and opaque systems of power – alienates people and breeds distrust towards institutions. At the same time, the report critiques the lingering dominance of 'state paradigm' paternalism, and argues that we need to free the system of its residual behaviours. The shift towards preventative approaches needed for the long-term viability of services can only occur if communities are empowered to have much more control over commissioning, design and delivery.

As such, *The Community Paradigm* clearly positions community power as a way of countering two major challenges facing the country: demand on public services and declining trust in democracy and institutions. The medicine prescribed – an agenda of empowering people, democratising and localising public services – represents a major reorientation of the state. It goes without saying that making this happen will carry substantial risks.

One such risk is that communities lack the capacity to take on the kind of power that *The Community Paradigm* envisions. Without paying attention

⁴ Tiratelli, L & Kaye, S. (2020). 'Communities versus Coronavirus: [The rise of Mutual Aid](#)'. NLGN.

⁵ Lent, A & Studdert, J. (2019). [The Community Paradigm](#). New Local Government Network.

to community capacity to take on power, there is a risk of exacerbating, rather than solving crises in public service response to need. Another risk is that the agenda fails to live up to its own radicalism, and simply empowers the sorts of 'usual suspects' who have dominated decision making for decades. This would render The Community Paradigm incapable of addressing the issue of declining trust in institutions, as the vast majority of people would have no more power over them than they did before.

For community power to be fully realised then, the focus cannot just be on the role and actions of public services, important though they are. Communities must be considered too. They need to be networked, so that all voices can be heard, and in order that a transfer of power to the community truly benefits everyone within it. They need to have sufficient organisation and capacity to allow them to take responsibility for the things that come along with power. And they need to be engaged in political and democratic questions, to such an extent that they have a vision for what they want to do with the power that they have.

Getting communities to this point is where community mobilisation comes in. Indeed, mobilisation can be seen as a necessary precondition for bringing about the kind of revolution in relationship between citizens and the state that The Community Paradigm envisions.



DEFINING COMMUNITY MOBILISATION



A mobilised community knows what it wants, what resources it has at its disposal, and has a plan for how to use them.

Community mobilisation is a highly contested concept, with no consistent definition or theoretical framework underpinning it across all policy areas.⁶ Nonetheless, there are some relatively discrete ideas that are always present in conversations about the term, and from these it is possible to define it.

Mobilisation tends to be conceived of as the first stage in the process of a community taking action. It involves people coming together to identify the things they want to change, working out what resources they have at their disposal and formulating a plan for how they can use them to be successful.⁷

As the word ‘mobilisation’ suggests, this is an active process, related to creating dynamism where there was previously inaction. Sometimes this may be a totally organic process, where a community mobilises itself. However, often,⁸ community mobilisation involves some kind of external agent. This may come in the form of representatives from local government, NGOs, charities or from professional community organisers. Such actors are there to serve as catalysts in the process of mobilisation, not lead it. One of the key themes that emerges from the literature is that community mobilisation is about starting “where the people are”.⁹ For it to be a productive process, communities must mobilise around issues that are relevant and salient to them. It may be that such a process is oppositional in nature, and communities mobilise through social unrest against groups, institutions or aspects of the state they perceive as working against them. Alternatively, it may

⁶ Jamieson, W. (2008). [Factors Related to Successful Mobilization of Communities for Crime Prevention](#). IPC Review, 2, 11–33.

⁷ [Community Mobilization Sector Approach](#). Mercy Corps, (2009).

⁸ Cummings, C. (2016). [Is community mobilisation a myth? Experiences from Niger](#). ODI.

⁹ Minkler, M & Pies, C. (2005). “Ethical Issues and Practical Dilemmas in Community Organization and Community Participation” in Minkler, M (ed.) *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health*. Rutgers University Press, 116–135. Quote p.118.

be that such a process is more emergent, and reflects deeper, and less immediate, structural issues.¹⁰ Either way, an external actor is unlikely to be able to identify these from afar.

This does not mean that a mobilised community is a leaderless entity.¹¹ Indeed, identifying leaders is often a key part of the process of mobilisation. These would be people who can leverage the assets that a community has and take people with them in their campaign, whilst remaining accountable to the wider community.

Overall then, a mobilised community is identifiable by the following characteristics. It has a clear set of priorities, an understanding of the tools it has at its disposal, and a plan of how it wants to achieve its goals. It is led by accountable figures from within itself, and it is inclusive of the entire body that it seeks to represent. It may have some degree of formal structure, but it is unlikely to be defined through any single public, voluntary or private sector institution. In these ways, a mobilised community is the opposite of an atomised community.

Table 1: Mobilised versus atomised communities

A mobilised community	An atomised community
In active dialogue together	No ongoing process of dialogue
Has a clear set of priorities as a collective	A collection of individuals with separate concerns
Has developed a shared agenda	No shared agenda
Accountable leadership from within	No-one with a legitimate ability to speak for others
Aware of assets, and has a plan for how to use them	Insight into the community is under-developed
Is networked into local stakeholders and coordinates engagement	Individuals may engage with local stakeholders ad hoc, but this is not a coordinated process

¹⁰ From interviews author conducted for this research.
¹¹ [Five Steps to Successful Community Engagement and Mobilization](#). Global Communities, (2015).

If public services are to be revolutionised, with huge amounts of power being devolved to local communities, it is essential that these communities are resilient, organised and have the capacity to take advantage of the new opportunities opened up to them. As table 1 (page 12) demonstrates, there are certain attributes that can identify a mobilised community, which set it apart from an atomised community. The process of handing power to a mobilised community would be conducive to having a wide, positive impact, catalysing further the dialogue and collective relationships that exist, and realising a shared agenda in practice. On the other hand, the process of handing power to an atomised community would have a shallow impact since there is too much space between its members. This leaves open the risk of individual agendas coming to the fore, or trust breaking down before it has had a chance to build.

In this sense, community mobilisation can be seen as a necessary first step in unlocking community power. However, we also see a significant level of intrinsic value in community mobilisation, and believe that fundamentally, a mobilised community is a happy one.

CONTEXT

As a concept, community mobilisation has tended to be invoked in the Global South, largely in relation to public health projects.¹² In the Global North, it is either ignored, mistakenly used to refer to very basic interactions with communities,¹³ or confused with related terms such as community organising or community engagement. This section explores these terms, in order to set out how they are related to community mobilisation in practice.

Community Organising

Community organising is a concept with a rich history in places like the US, and has an accompanying, rich body of literature. A useful definition of the concept comes from former President Barack Obama, who worked professionally as an organiser in the late 1980s:¹⁴



Organising begins with the premise that (1) the problems facing inner-city communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions; (2) that the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organising people and the money [they raise] around a common vision; and (3) that a viable organisation can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership — and not one or two charismatic leaders — can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions [and ‘grassroots’ people].”

This definition draws out the contrast between community organising and community mobilisation quite helpfully. Firstly, community organisers, particularly those who follow the approach of influential theorist Saul Alinsky,¹⁵ tend to have a strong focus on ‘local institutions’, and often start there, rather than with people on the ground. Secondly, with its focus on ‘knitting together’ interests, organising tends to concentrate on coalition and consensus-building, rather than on mobilising around issues which emerge more organically.

¹² “Community Mobilisation”, World Health Organisation.

¹³ From interviews author conducted for this research.

¹⁴ Matthews, D. (2016). *Who is Saul Alinsky, and why does the right hate him so much?* Vox.

¹⁵ Alinsky, S. (1971). *Rules for Radicals*. Random House.

Community organising then, with its relatively specific focus, can be seen then as a more discrete concept than community mobilisation, and potentially, as a subset of it. It is one possible approach that an external actor can take in order to bring about a more mobilised community.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is a more common term in the UK.¹⁶ This is a much shallower process than either mobilisation or organising, and is more concerned with seeking permission, or getting feedback from communities before continuing with a predetermined project.

It does not tend to involve deep and meaningful interactions with communities, or handing over power in any meaningful sense. Indeed, when one considers the features of mobilised and atomised communities (see table 1 on page 12), it is perfectly possible to ‘engage with’ an atomised community since it is simply a bilateral discussion between the individual and the institution. The process of engagement in and of itself does not require the collective traits of a mobilised community, and does not seek to develop them.

More significantly, we know that some community groups are far harder to ‘engage’ than others, so without a proactive effort to mobilise these harder-to-reach groups, ‘engagement’ activities may simply reinforce existing inequalities, as only the ‘usual suspects’ will get to have their say.

In the context of the challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath, the need for us to go further than mere engagement has never been clearer. Community mobilisation has been a critical factor¹⁷ in supporting the most vulnerable through the crisis. Local practitioners and national policymakers alike will need to actively foster the conditions where this kind of behaviour can thrive, and where latent community power can be unlocked to ensure resilience in the future.

¹⁶ The vast majority of English Local Authorities have published Community Engagement strategies.

¹⁷ Cox, E & Bamber, C. (2020). ‘[Why mutual aid groups and the NHS volunteer ‘army’ must work together to save lives](#)’. RSA.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR COMMUNITY MOBILISATION

Enablers and Barriers

How, then, can communities be mobilised in practice?
The first thing we need to do to answer this question is to consider which factors enable and block the process. Would-be mobilisers need to consider how any enabling factors present in the communities they are working with can be foregrounded, and how any barriers present can be overcome.

The factors that we have identified here are based on a range of conversations with practitioners and community figures alike, reflecting on the problems they have encountered during their work, and the things that have allowed them to succeed.

Factors which enable community mobilisation include:

- Leadership:** Strong leadership within the community is vital for ensuring the legitimacy of any mobilised movement. It creates a sense of internal accountability which should increase their chances of success. This is why many historic instances of community mobilisation, from the Montgomery Bus Boycotts on, have invested so much importance in leveraging religious leaders.¹⁸ Leaders are also vital¹⁹ for mobilised communities' ability to negotiate with power, be that in the form of the state or any other actor, and as such are an essential ingredient to bringing about meaningful change.
- Effective communication strategies:** For mobilisation to be a meaningful process, it must be inclusive of the entire community, rallying support from all corners. One of the keys to achieving this is making sure that communications reach everyone and

¹⁸ King, ML. (1999). The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. Little, Brown and Company.

¹⁹ [Community Organizing: Important strategies to keep in mind](#). Callhub.

speak to them in such a way as to win their support. This means tailoring communications to the specifics of the community you are dealing with. It will be important to think about everything from using appropriate language to using the appropriate channels, so that people can be brought together. The combination of leaflets, WhatsApp chats and Facebook groups that have formed the backbone of the COVID Mutual Aid movement²⁰ are a good example of how a diversified strategy can ensure that you reach the widest possible number of people. Generating quick wins and communicating successes²¹ can also really help get mobilisation efforts going. When community initiatives are achieving tangible results, publicising them and creating momentum behind projects can ensure wide-spread buy-in.

- Attitude of the public sector:** Local authorities have a perhaps unique ability to make or break community initiatives. From the perspective of the community, having receptive people in key positions in councils can make all the difference, as the case studies on page 22-35 demonstrate. Where there is strong political leadership, open-mindedness to community power at all levels,²² and staff with the capacity to engage, community mobilisation is far more likely to be successful. The attitude of frontline workers across all public services is also important in building the kinds of relationship with people that is conducive to mobilisation.
- Having something to oppose:** Community organising theorist Saul Alinsky believed that mobilisation was easiest in the face of a common and identifiable enemy – an institution, law or group who could be fought and opposed. Mobilisation through opposition then creates the opportunity to form symbols and structures to rally around as a local movement, which can bind nascent community bodies together. Coming together in the face of adversity is key here, and arguably helps explain the origins of the Mutual Aid Group movement that we have witnessed in this pandemic.

²⁰ <https://covidmutualaid.org/>

²¹ From interviews author conducted for this research.

²² From interviews author conducted for this research.

- **Philanthropy:** The availability of financial capital is a great enabler of community mobilisation. The money most likely to be available to organisations and projects interested in mobilisation comes in the form of grants and charitable funding. Areas where this is more easily available will be more conducive to community mobilisation. Some will have schemes that support ‘place-based giving’, which look to harness the resources of philanthropists, corporate donors, local authorities and national funders in order to make positive change for local, place-based communities.²³ By creating a resource of available money for would-be mobilisers, ‘place-based giving’ initiatives increase the likelihood of mobilisation taking hold in a given area. The London Borough of Islington is an example of a local authority that has created infrastructure of this kind for its residents. Through its partnership with Islington Giving, grants are available to local groups that want to improve things in the area.²⁴

On the other hand, factors which act as barriers to community mobilisation include:

- **Scale:** Communities dispersed over large distances, in rural areas for example,²⁵ may prove hard to mobilise, due to issues of communication and connectivity. Related to this are issues of scale,²⁶ be they geographic or demographic. Mobilising very large communities can prove difficult, as the group may not exist as a coherent whole on the ground. However, focussing efforts on mobilising only a very small community can prove redundant, as the small group may lack the capacity to achieve or sustain real change. Finding the right balance here is a crucial challenge for would-be community mobilisers.

- **Characteristics of communities themselves:**
Communities afflicted with internal divisions²⁷ – be they along the

²³ Kay, L. (2018). ‘DCMS offers £600,000 to grow place-based giving schemes.’ Third Sector.

²⁴ <https://islingtongiving.org.uk/>

²⁵ [Engaging Communities Toolkit: A practical guide to community engagement](#). West Lothian Community Planning Partnership.

²⁶ From interviews author conducted for this research.

²⁷ Zakocs, R & Edwards, E. (2006). [What explains community coalition effectiveness? A review of the literature](#). American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 30(4), 351–61.

lines of things like class, race or age, or less structural factors – will have a much harder time mobilising. Similarly, poorly networked communities, and ones that have little by way of established leadership may also find mobilisation challenging, as the infrastructure that helps people pull in one direction will be lacking.

Particularly deprived or marginalised communities may encounter their own specific set of barriers, including things like:

- **Fatalism:** A sense of fatalism leaves people believing any fight for change will be futile. This relates to another barrier which all communities face – what economists would call ‘the free rider problem’²⁸, which means that individuals face limited incentives to get involved in things where their individual impact will only be relatively marginal. This sense of fatalism is heightened in marginalised communities.
- **Time and resource:** People in marginalised communities are less likely to have the time or resource to devote to getting involved in community activities – another major barrier to mobilisation.
- **Trust and confidence:** Marginalised communities are also likely to be more distrustful of representatives of the state or voluntary sector who may be seeking to enable mobilisation, presenting a further challenge for those trying to make change.²⁹ They may also have lower levels of confidence in their ability to achieve positive outcomes.³⁰

Overcoming these barriers with marginalised communities is likely to be a delicate process. The ways around them involve building things within communities themselves – namely, a belief that change is possible, and a belief that people themselves have the power to bring it about. Fostering these kinds of attitudes comes from the relationships that form between mobilisers and communities.

²⁸ Gram, L, Daruwalla, N & Osrin, D. (2019). [Understanding participation dilemmas in community mobilisation: can collective action theory help?](#) Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, 73(1), 90–96.

²⁹ Ramsbottom, A et al. (2017). [Enablers and Barriers to Community Engagement in Public Health Emergency Preparedness: A Literature Review](#). Journal of Community Health, 43(2), 412–420.

³⁰ From interviews author conducted for this research.

General principles

Drawing on the lessons above, and from consistent themes in our research more widely, what general principles can we identify for successful community mobilisation? These principles should be thought of as basic pre-requisites for success and should be embodied both in the design of initiatives, and in the day-to-day work of mobilisers.

We have drawn out three such principles:

- Be clear about your role:** Public and voluntary sector practitioners are there to act as catalysts to community mobilisation, not direct it. Their role, to a large extent, is concerned with joining things together. The work of community mobilisation is fundamentally about connecting; connecting people with similar concerns; connecting those concerns to resources; and connecting those resources to institutions. Another key function is to act as a bridge – someone who can link together local government or public institutions with community groups. Fulfilling this role requires having a deep and embedded knowledge of both sides of that divide.
- Mobilise around relevant issues:** It is impossible to force a community to mobilise around an issue artificially. The issues that rally a community may be hard to recognise from afar and need to be identified by communities themselves. All that an external agent can do is aid this process of identification. The issues that are important to people may seem relatively small – such as the desire to save a local shop, for example. However, social movements can snowball, and after uniting around one specific issue, community groups can flourish and start to take on broader issues.
- Build trust:** Mobilising communities relies on trust – and this is something that those wishing to advance the process must be proactive about building. Listening is an important part of doing this, as is showing recognition of what the community wants to achieve, how they want to do it, and then proceeding on those terms. Trust within communities themselves is also vital. Making sure that a coalition encompasses all parts of a community, and

that they are all given a voice, is important for success. Ensuring that structures and feedback loops exist for community leadership to be accountable to the people they represent is also something that mobilisers need to think about.

Towards a typology for community mobilisation

Bearing these enablers, barriers and principles in mind, what strategies are available for those wishing to promote community mobilisation? The following section develops a typology of different potential approaches – each of which will be illustrated with a detailed case study.

There are numerous variables for public bodies to consider as they formulate plans for community mobilisation – for example, the extent to which a strategy requires active levels of engagement on the part of the strategy-maker. However, the primary factor that differentiates approaches to community mobilisation is their unit of focus. Strategies can focus on:

- Individuals:** Approaches that begin with the needs of individual people and work out how community assets can be built and deployed to improve their lives.
- Groups:** Approaches that look to pre-existing groups within communities and strive to build up and empower them.
- Places:** Approaches that try to make an area as conducive to community mobilisation as possible. This means thinking about things such as infrastructure, assets and the practices of local government and public institutions.
- Services:** Approaches that look to empower people who interact with services and have ideas of how to improve them. They then help build the capacity of those people to contribute to their own communities.



CASE STUDIES: COMMUNITY MOBILISATION IN PRACTICE

What do each of these approaches look like in practice? The following section will provide detailed case studies to illustrate each one.

Each of these case studies here are operating independently of each other, but what they have in common is that they are all inspiring examples of what is possible when mobilisation is done right. Operating at a range of scales and on a variety of policy issues, taken together, they display the full breadth of potential mobilisations approaches outlined above.

Individuals

An individuals-based approach to community mobilisation starts with the needs of people on the ground, and looks at how community assets can be deployed, or built, in order to meet these needs. This means actively creating connections between people and between people and institutions, creating a more networked and resilient whole in the process.

Local Area Coordination provides an example of this in practice. Originating in Australia, it provides an asset-based approach to community building, mobilisation and public service reform, and emphasises reducing demand at the front line. Through the Local Area Coordination Network,³¹ numerous local authorities in this country have adopted this kind of approach, including the London Borough of Haringey.³²

³¹ <https://lacnetwork.org/which-way-next/>

³² [Local Area Coordination: parenting support activities](#). London Borough of Haringey.

Case study 1: Local Area Coordination

Local Area Coordination offers a way of reaching people who fall through the cracks of existing service provision. It exists to prevent people reaching that crisis point at which they might call on frontline services and help people with problems at the earliest possible stage. By doing this, money can be saved on expensive acute needs later down the line. This contributes to evaluation findings showing that for every pound spent on coordination, there is a four pound³³ return on investment in the borough.

Coordinators provide a universal offer, accepting ‘introductions’ from anyone – be they friends, family or neighbours – about any resident. There are no criteria for who they work with or what kinds of problems they are interested in. They are person-centred and focus on individuals’ personal visions of ‘a good life’. As a first port of call, they look to solve problems by mobilising and building community groups and assets.

In Haringey, coordinators were initially employed as part of the public health team which, as discussed earlier on, is where much work on community mobilisation begins. They now sit under the umbrella of Connected Communities, but this does not reflect any change in the kind of work that they do, which has always been far broader than just health. Coordinators operate in individual ‘patches’, areas covering approximately 12,000 residents. Each patch has its own specific set of challenges and opportunities, and coordinators are deeply invested and networked within their assigned area.

Activities

When first meeting a resident, coordinators try to take a different approach than traditional public services. Rather than presenting themselves as an expert, already in possession of the answers, they strive to have conversations on an equal

³³ Gamsu, M. (2019). [Haringey Local Area Coordination Programme – A Formative Evaluation of Implementation](#). Leeds Beckett University.

footing. Instead of focussing on deficits – ‘what can’t you do’ – they focus on assets and capabilities: what the resident can do for themselves; what they can do with the resident, and how the wider community can be involved. The end goal is always specified by the resident themselves. It is their vision for a better life and potential to make a contribution in the community that frames and directs the relationship.

A big part of the coordinator’s work is to network people with community groups. Often, people’s needs can easily be met by individuals or groups working in the community, but the problem is that these needs and these groups never come together. Coordinators make that happen, by using their deep knowledge of the communities that they serve.

The metaphor coordinators use to describe the support they offer is one of a bus – people can hop on or off at any time, but they are always open for service. They think about the residents they work with on two levels. ‘Level One’ covers people who have a fairly discrete, short-term need that can easily be resolved. ‘Level Two’ includes people who have more complex, overlapping needs and may require much more ongoing and personalised support. However, the fundamentals of the approach remain the same for both categories of resident.

As well as working with residents with needs, another aspect of a coordinator job is ‘to be the best friend of the voluntary sector’.³⁴ They work with them to increase capacity and grow existing community and voluntary organisations, while providing a vital bridge between the voluntary sector and the local authority. Particularly for the smallest community initiatives, they act as ‘the human face of the council’,³⁵ and are able to relay their concerns to the highest reaches of local power.

Coordinators can also set things up from scratch, where they sense a need. One coordinator reported finding a wide variety of people across their ‘patch’ all discussing the need for more

³⁴ From interviews author conducted for this research.

³⁵ From interviews author conducted for this research.

local provision around menopause, but no existing services were taking the lead. They decided to convene some of these interested parties and agreed a plan to train local people to become ‘menopause champions’ in their areas. These champions would then go on to set up whatever kind of services they felt where necessary in their communities, with support coming from coordinators where needed.

This is an excellent example of how coordinators mobilise communities – they listen, they network and they support local people to take the lead in addressing issues relevant to them.

Challenges

One of the positive effects of Local Area Coordination in Haringey has been the ripple effects across the wider local authority. Coordinators report that their person-centred, strengths-based approach to working with people, and their style of addressing residents on an equal footing, are both starting to be adopted elsewhere within the council. Yet because Local Area Coordination aims to drive changemaking and wider public service reform, this has led to certain low-level tensions emerging as newer working habits encounter more entrenched practice.

Managing relationships with community groups, has also at times, been challenging for coordinators in Haringey. Sometimes the fact that they are employees of the council can work against them when engaging with local initiatives, as there is an assumption that they are there to take it over or shut it down. Coordinators report having to think carefully about how to present themselves in these kinds of interactions. When helping projects get off the ground, there are also occasionally issues of trust, and of ensuring that communities themselves feel like they are still the ones that ‘own’ projects. These kinds of issues can only be overcome through the hard work of building trust and forming deep, meaningful relationships with people across the borough and across communities.

Groups

A groups-based approach to community mobilisation starts with the premise that pre-existing geographic communities have interests, needs and aspirations, and that these need to be seriously engaged with. This, most of the time, means measures being taken by external agents, who try to bring these interests together and out into the open.

The London Community Land Trust (London CLT) is an example of an organisation that has such an ethos hardwired into their activity. They use a community organising based model of delivering affordable housing, and in so doing try to meet the needs of urban communities. They do this through creating CLTs, which are vehicles for communities to develop, own and/or manage homes, or other physical assets.

Case Study 2: London Community Land Trust

Citizen's UK, a charity whose work includes community organising, spent years hearing people raise concerns about housing during its work in London. In order to be able to take forward the kinds of projects that could really help communities deliver solutions in this area, they realised that they needed people with expertise on construction, project management and budget management – things that they did not have internally. In order to facilitate this, they set up London CLT. Whilst a separate organisation, London CLT remains very much attached to Citizens UK, with staff regularly moving roles between the two.

There is a feeling among community organisers that this kind of radical approach is particularly necessary in housing policy, as development tends to have been something that local authorities have done to communities, rather than with them. People have been priced out of the areas in which they live, or watched massive changes take place around them, led by forces over which they have no control. Community organising has emerged as a way of mobilising communities around housing. CLTs, for their part, have emerged as a way of delivering results, and the need for them reflects the ways in which housing associations have

moved from being community institutions to being something far more corporate.

To date, London CLT has helped successfully establish five Community Land Trusts across the capital. All of these provide, or will soon provide, affordable homes for local communities, and have the added benefit of disrupting the status quo of housing and development.

Activities

‘Listening projects’ are the community organising technique that represent the first stage on the road to forming a CLT. Citizens UK trains local community leaders (for example priests or teachers) to have open-ended conversations with people in their networks, focussed on broad questions such as ‘what is the biggest issue facing you and your family?’. These conversations, which occur both with individuals and with small groups, reveal the key challenges facing communities. This is followed with a second round of conversations exploring the causal factors behind the initial findings. Housing is something that may come up either as a major issue in and of itself, or as a causal factor in communities where other things, such as mental health, are identified as the key challenge.

Either way, if housing emerges as a key issue, organisers then get to work in trying to pull together a steering group of ten or so interested and committed local people. If this group decides they would like to form a CLT, it is at that point that London CLT get involved.

London CLT’s role is to support the group of community leaders through the process, offering advice, guidance and expertise, but not to lead the process. They also work to bridge the gap between the community and the local authority, who they lobby and try to ensure a supportive approach from. One of their key roles is to get involved in formal negotiations between the community and the council, providing expertise and support to both sides.

Challenges

Managing the relationship between nascent community housing movements and local authorities can be challenging in numerous ways. One issue is local authorities occasionally approaching CLTs in a cynical manner, viewing them as a convenient means for unlocking sites for development, rather than engaging with them seriously on the issues that led them to form the CLT in the first place.

Another issue concerns some local authorities' approach to representatives of the community. Some councils are initially supportive of a CLT that has formed in their area, but then only want to engage and speak to representatives of London CLT or Citizens UK. This excludes the very people who are actually leading the process – the community themselves. This is revealing of certain hang ups about professionalism and sometimes dismissive attitudes about residents that can exist in some councils. When such issues arise, real progress can be difficult.

Despite these challenges, however, the idea of CLTs is beginning to take hold in local government. Councils are generally, organisers tell us, more supportive of proposals than they used to be. Nonetheless, it remains the case that the success of these projects tends to hinge on there being one or two committed individuals inside the council who can push it through.

The London CLT model relies on having a small team of community leaders to steer the project, and as such, another major challenge is around ensuring genuine community representativeness. In order to overcome this, CLTs encourage local people to become members of the Trust, hold open meetings and even sometimes go door-to-door trying to rally and mobilise harder to reach groups. Fundamentally, however, organisers believe that this issue is self-filtering – if there is insufficient genuine grassroots support for a community housing project, it will fail. There is simply too much work to do for it to be handled by a small and unrepresentative elite.

Places

A place-based approach to community mobilisation attempts to make an area as conducive to community mobilisation as possible. This means carefully considering everything from physical infrastructure and assets, to the attitude and working practices of public institutions. At its heart, it refers to approaches concerned with creating places in which community activity is able to flourish.

An example of such an approach comes from the ‘Every One Every Day’ project in Barking and Dagenham, which is run in partnership with Participatory City.³⁶ The project has created a platform which supports an entire ecosystem of community activity. It provides support for initiatives of all scales and focuses on maintaining and growing that ecosystem – generating a participation culture rather than boosting particular projects.

Case study 3: Every One Every Day

The ‘Every One Every Day’ project marked the coming together of two organisations that had both been on long journeys towards trying to build more mobilised communities. Participatory City was born out of a history of experimenting with different models of participation and community empowerment. In 2014, they led a project in Lambeth called ‘Open Works’,³⁷ which mobilised over 1,000 local people to get involved in their local area. An obvious evolution after this was to develop this model of participation and mobilisation by operating on a bigger and broader scale.

Around the same time, Barking and Dagenham Council were experiencing a change in leadership. One of the first things that the new team did was appoint an Independent Growth Commission, which recommended a focus on improving how they worked with residents, and efforts to move beyond a paternalistic working model. This was something that the local authority

³⁶ <http://www.participatorycity.org/>

³⁷ Cathcart-Keays, A. (2015). [How do you create a city for all? The answer lies in West Norwood](#), The Guardian.

wanted to change, so that they could support the flourishing of local communities, meaning people could set their own agendas and pursue their own ideas and projects. The chance to work with Participatory City and build a project to address exactly these concerns came along at exactly the right time.

‘Every One Every Day’ – the initiative that Barking and Dagenham and Participatory City have built together – has a budget of over £7 million,³⁸ and sits alongside other programmes that promote community mobilisation in the borough, such as a crowd funding platform,³⁹ and a local lottery,⁴⁰ which both provide grants for small-scale community projects.

Activities

The ‘Every One Every Day’ project aims to create a platform that can support people as they come together to change things locally. In practice, the platform consists of a range of infrastructure, including four high street ‘shops’ – where people can go with their ideas looking for support – and one workshop, where projects can be developed. ‘Every One Every Day’ offers expertise, experience, advice, materials and facilities to those with ideas that could improve their communities. It does not, however, offer grants. This allows the team to work with groups that do not have committees or bank accounts, ensuring that they can work at the kind of micro-scale that can prove challenging for local authorities.

Approximately 30 people work in the project team. They have “a very liberal attitude to ideas”,⁴¹ and work to support and develop all manner of resident initiatives. This includes projects where residents share skills with one another, like cooking, DIY or environmental projects, as well as things like batch cooking and community meal preparation.⁴²

Whilst day-to-day activities involve supporting these projects, the overall goal is to create an ecosystem of participation and

38 <http://www.participatorycity.org/welcome>

39 <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/funds/barking-dagenham-community>

40 <https://www.lotterybd.co.uk/>

41 From interviews author conducted for this research.

42 <https://www.weareeveryone.org/every-one-every-day>

mobilisation in the borough. This ecosystem is intended to foster a sense of individual and collective agency. The raft of projects that exist at any one time constantly changes and evolves in order to respond to people's ideas and energy. Some projects may grow; some may go dormant. But the platform means that stability is created through the whole, building resilience and inspiring people to participate in their communities.

Evaluation⁴³ has found that the project has mobilised at least 6,000 people to partake in community initiatives and launched over 146 projects. It has also calculated that the project has facilitated over 47,000 hours of people working and learning together in neighbourhood projects, and some 1,065 individual community events. More recently, it has been found that in every peer-to-peer session run as part of the initiative, people speak to an average of six new people from different cultures and backgrounds, creating new bonds within the community.

Challenges

One of the major challenges that 'Every One Every Day' encountered in their early days was building trust with the local community. They had to convince residents that they could be trusted, and that they understood their concerns – something made, at times, difficult by the historic relationship between communities and the council. When the high street 'shops' first opened, residents used to come in and ask staff who they were, what they wanted, and who they worked for, with a certain degree of scepticism.

Perceptions have since shifted and trust has grown. Once successful projects started getting off the ground, people came to understand what 'Every One Every Day' was all about, and goodwill towards it snowballed. These days, many local residents are shocked to find out that the kind of resources available to them through the project are not available to people everywhere across the country.⁴⁴ As such, the project has clearly become an embedded part of the community.

⁴³ Tools to Act', *Participatory Cities*, (2020). And we can link to this <http://www.participatorycity.org/tools-to-act>.

⁴⁴ From interviews author conducted for this research.

Services

A services-based approach to community mobilisation begins with people who have ideas about how to improve local public services, and looks to empower them – building their capacity to deliver for their communities. It focuses on potential changemakers, and tries to create space for them to be unleashed.

Community Catalysts⁴⁵ is an organisation that provides a good example of how such an approach works in practice. They employ ‘catalysts’ to work in local areas, facilitating people to set up small enterprises, ventures and initiatives that operate within the social care sector. By tapping into local knowledge, they aim to fill the gaps in existing services, improve the care offer available to local people and create wider systems change.

Case Study 4: Community Catalysts

One local authority that has commissioned Community Catalysts to work in their area is Central Bedfordshire. They wanted to improve the quality of care in their area, and to increase the range of options available to those in need. This is because, prior to the partnership with Community Catalysts, it was felt that there was insufficient scope for personalised approaches, with people having to adapt their lives around the timetables and offers of large care companies, rather than the other way around. In addition, there was a need for the council to respond to the general fragility of the home care marketplace, recognising that this does not work well for either customers or staff.

Community Catalysts has now been active in Central Bedfordshire for 19 months and worked to create and/or upscale 42 local social-care social-enterprises.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ <https://www.communitycatalysts.co.uk/>

⁴⁶ At time of interviews (in early 2020).

Activities

When a Community Catalyst connects with an individual or group who have an idea of how to improve the care system in their local area, the first thing they do is build confidence. By explaining how things can be done and demonstrating the road map towards success, they can demystify what might otherwise be a daunting process.

They also offer them extensive administrative and bureaucratic support, as these are the kinds of concerns that can otherwise crush the passion and enthusiasm of local people. In practical terms, this means things like:

- Helping people put policies in place around things like safeguarding.
- Showing them which regulations apply to their work and how they can be navigated.
- Helping them get things like DBS checks or insurance where necessary.

They may also offer practical advice about funding that may be available, as well as signposting to other resources, such as discounted offices or workspace.

Another major part of the role of the catalyst is to network these would-be change-makers. They introduce them to relevant figures in the local authority, so that mutual trust can be developed. Just as importantly, they introduce them to other local social entrepreneurs. Through holding regular networking events and creating things like WhatsApp groups to connect these important local figures together, social enterprises have the chance to learn from each other, and to hold each other to high standards.

Challenges

The major challenges that arise from this kind of work come from managing relationships. Most obviously, a vital set of relationships are those between the catalysts and the local people who are trying to make change. For successful, productive relationships to exist here, managing the issue of ownership and control over projects are key. Catalysts have observed that this can be a particularly fraught issue, as people who start their own initiatives tend to be proud of what they have built and are understandably wary of ceding power to an external agent.

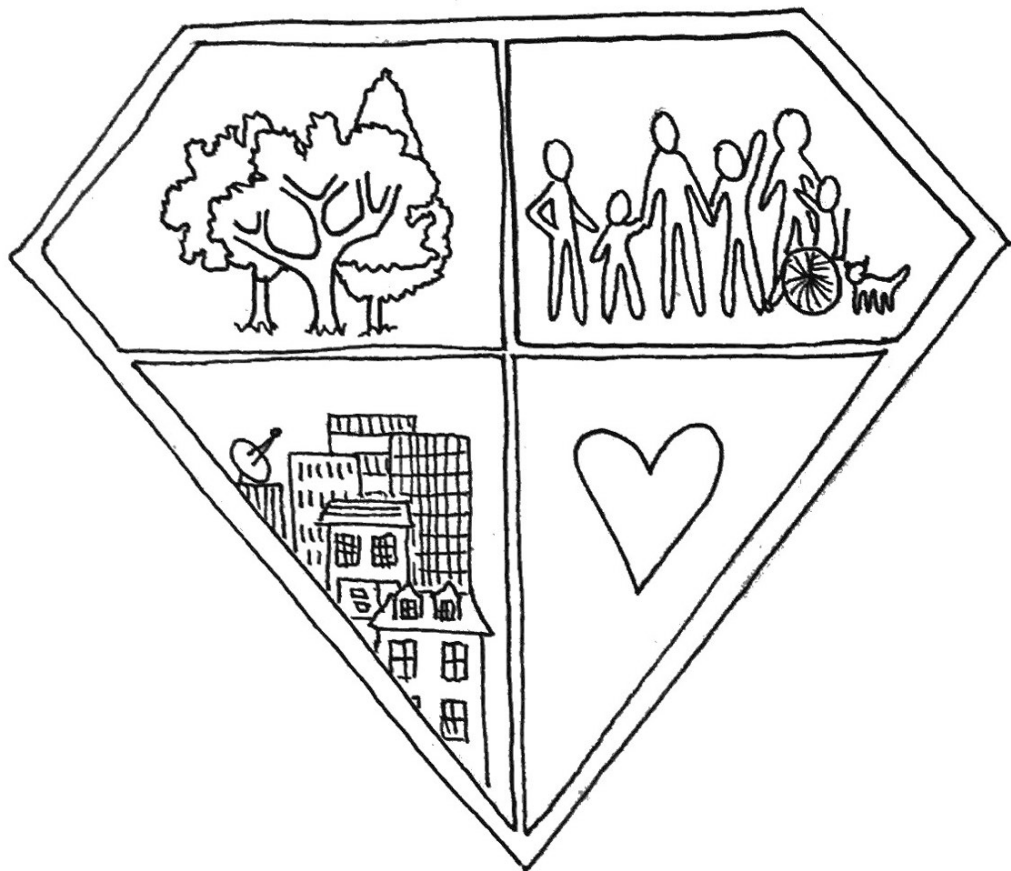
Accordingly, a successful Community Catalyst has to act in a supportive and facilitative way, rather than by assuming ownership of anything. In practical terms, this means offering advice, rather than telling people how to do things. Building up trust and ensuring use of appropriate language are also important here.

By managing these relationships, a catalyst can create an environment where people know that there is help available if they have ideas on how to make things better for their community. This can start a virtuous cycle of mobilisation.

Another important relationship for catalysts to manage is between local changemakers and the local authority. Of course, it was the council that commissioned Community Catalysts to work in their area, as there was a longstanding institutional recognition that they had an issue around the scarcity of providers in rural areas, meaning few options for personalised care for residents.

However, when Community Catalysts started working in Central Bedfordshire, there was still a degree of scepticism towards community initiatives, and specifically micro-enterprises, from some within the council. Fundamentally, this was an issue of trust – trust that community groups and small enterprises could deliver high quality services.

In order to overcome this issue, Community Catalysts led a culture change workshop for local social work teams, where they discussed and explained ways in which this kind of work can deliver improved outcomes for citizens. What made the most difference in terms of changing the culture at the council was getting a few 'quick wins' for the catalysts. Once positive feedback started coming in from people on the ground, momentum quickly started to build. Indeed, when social workers met with micro-enterprise leaders face-to-face, they immediately saw how their flexible, creative solutions worked for residents. This helped them re-connect with the values that brought them into the sector in the first place, and was a positive experience for all.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this report, we have argued that community mobilisation represents the first stage of unlocking community power. It is a process of bringing people together, identifying things they want to change, and coming up with a plan for doing just that.

Community mobilisation is an active, dynamic process, which is in large part about energising and empowering people. Mobilisation creates the sense that change is possible, and that a better reality is available to local people.

We have identified four separate approaches that organisations can take in order to mobilise communities, and illustrated them with case studies.

These approaches can be summarised as:

- An **Individuals**-based strategy, which begins with the needs of specific people and works out how community assets can be built and deployed to improve their lives.
- A **Groups**-based strategy, which looks to pre-existing groups within communities and strives to build up and empower them.
- A **Place**-based strategy, which tries to make an area as conducive to community mobilisation as possible. This means thinking about things such as infrastructure, assets and the practices of local government and the public sector.
- A **Service**-based strategy, which looks to empower people who interact with services and have ideas of how to improve them. It then helps build the capacity of those people to contribute to their own communities.



We also, in the first half of this report, identified some general design principles for community mobilisation, and presented a discussion of factors which enable the process. If we take those insights, and combine them with what we have learned from the case studies discussed in the previous section, we can offer the following four key take-home messages for would-be community mobilisers:

- **Catalyse, don't lead:** One thing that all our case studies have in common is that within them, communities direct and mobilisers facilitate. This demarcation is perhaps most clearly visible in the 'Every One Every Day' project, where the focus of the councils is simply to create the infrastructure that allows projects to flourish organically. However, even in more focussed projects, such as the work of 'Community Catalysts' in Central Bedfordshire, it remains the case that people at a local level create and shape the new care-sector initiatives, and that Catalysts simply work to make their lives easier. If community mobilisation is to be genuine, authentic and impactful, then adhering to this principle is key.
- **Listen:** Issue salience is key to mobilisation. People in communities have to genuinely care about a cause if they are to mobilise around it, and an external actor is not going to be able to identify these issues from afar. Consequently, a key part of any process of mobilisation is listening. This is most explicit in our London CLT case study, who run "listening campaigns" as part of their organising process – however, it is also evident in the other outlined approaches.
- **Build something:** In all the case studies presented above, a common theme is that the community mobilisers involved in them are engaged in a process of building something. Whether that something is a platform for participation, networks between residents, new care-sector services, or physical buildings – community mobilisation should result in the creation of new community assets.

- **Have clear goals:** Given the emphasis that has been placed on not leading the process, and on listening to residents, the idea that public bodies should have their own clear goals during a process of community mobilisation may seem counter intuitive. However, you need to know what you want to achieve in order to select which strategy of mobilisation you want to pursue. Are you looking to find a way of meeting acute need and reducing demand, or are you trying to reform an entire area of public services? Being clear about this helps the process of formulating an approach. It does not mean that during the work of mobilisation external agents should attempt to take over, or act in contravention to the wishes of communities, but it does mean that you know what you want to achieve through the process.

If we bear these lessons in mind, and exhibit them as behaviours throughout our work, any of the approaches identified in this report have the potential to transform local areas and communities, building new models of working and new relationships between people and state.

Addressing any of the myriad problems we face as a society today – from rebuilding trust in institutions, to building the resilience needed to withstand external shocks like pandemics – requires strong, networked and powerful communities. Mobilisation marks the first stage in creating these.

Quite simply, if we want to build a new kind of society, or to bring about a *Community Paradigm* in public service delivery, then we need to get mobilising.

APPENDIX: METHODS

The first half of this report was informed by two principle methodological approaches. These were:

- **A review of relevant literature:** Including work on community mobilisation, community organising, community engagement, community dynamics, and the relationship between community organisations and state power.
- **Interviews with experts on the topic of community mobilisation**

The case studies were informed by a combination of desk research and interviews. For each case study, we spoke to at least two people who were involved in the projects in different ways, so as to ensure a rounded perspective. The COVID-19 pandemic, and ensuing lockdown, unfortunately meant that plans to visit some of the case study projects had to be abandoned.

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**When communities come together,
they have the power to do
extraordinary things.**

This is something that is increasingly being recognised across the public sector. Public bodies of all kinds are realising that they can no longer go it alone, and that they do their best work, and make their most robust decisions, when they are working hand-in-hand with the communities they serve. But how can we develop communities to the point at which their potential can be fully realised?

This is where community mobilisation comes in – the process of building communities into cohesive wholes, with clear objectives and clear plans. This report offers a how-to guide for organisations interested in this process, illustrating a range of potential approaches that can be taken to build active, networked and powerful communities.

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