

OCTOBER 2018



# **TRANSFORMING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COUNCILS AND COMMUNITIES**

INSIGHTS REPORT

In partnership with:

***FUTUREGOV***

## INSIGHTS REPORT

**On 18 July 2018, NLGN partnered with FutureGov to host our latest Innovation Exchange at their offices in London.**

Over 25 participants from NLGN's network came together to share, learn and reflect on their experience of changing the relationship between councils and communities. The day was designed for everyone to share their insights in an in-depth peer-to-peer learning session, encouraging participants to explore not just their successes, but also things that hadn't worked so well.

Participants agreed the nature of the relationship needed to shift wholesale, driven by funding gaps, demand pressures and inequalities within their communities, but also propelled by people's changing expectation of influence and meaningful engagement that occurs in their daily lives. A "business as usual" approach is neither sustainable nor is it desirable. Participants came from councils at different stages of their "transformation journey"– some having experienced a shift in their council's approach driven from the top, others embarking on more of a "ground up" approach within their council, and others still relatively at an early stage.

There was consensus that the discussions around these issues can often be abstract and what was required were more tangible, practical insights into how the relationship can shift in practice. This Insights Report is based on the ideas and learnings from the discussion, drawing on real-life examples and tips shared during exchanges.

The report is in four sections, covering the following:

1. **The nature of change required in the relationship between councils and communities.**
2. **Using existing tools for deeper impact with residents.**
3. **Shifting organisational culture to engage people in new ways.**
4. **Ideas and best practice for routes to embed new ways of working.**

The report respects the Chatham House rule that was in place by anonymising contributions, except when an explicit piece of best practice is identified to be shared.

## FOREWORD

**FutureGov was delighted to host the latest NLGN's Innovation Exchange in our London office, where participants from local authorities came together to discuss transforming the relationship between councils and their citizens. Through open discussion, we debated what new relationships might look like, identified some of the obstacles and building blocks and shared practical examples of ways we could create lasting change.**

It was widely agreed that councils need to move from a transactional relationship with their citizens to a more collaborative one. Building collaborative relationships between a council and its residents is an important and powerful way to have more authentic conversations with residents. It builds shared understanding of the challenges councils and their communities are facing.

Ethnographic research was one of the practical approaches discussed that is helping councils better understand the needs and opportunities of their communities. FutureGov has supported a number of councils with this approach over the last ten years. By immersing ourselves in communities and carrying out in-depth research, we are able to visualise the difference between a council's perceived problems versus the actual problems residents face. This rich insight helps councils to understand problems

from citizens' direct experience, opening up opportunities to face them in unique ways.

Meaningful engagement with communities relies on transforming the culture and structures in councils. We discussed the new skills, ways of working and governance structures that are needed to work in different ways with communities. Ultimately all of this will require buy-in from leaders, senior officers and politicians and the need to make bold decisions.

FutureGov was proud to partner with NLGN for this timely discussion. At a time when communities are increasingly divided over complex issues such as Brexit, growing inequality and distrust with wider government, it's important that we work together across authorities to build new ways of working. Only in supporting each other and focusing on citizen needs will be able to build better, lasting relationships.

**Matt Skinner, Managing Director  
FutureGov**

# 1. THE NATURE OF CHANGE REQUIRED IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COUNCILS AND COMMUNITIES

**Participants identified how in principle the nature of the relationship between the council and the community needs to shift. There are a number of features to this:**

## FROM A TRANSACTIONAL RELATIONSHIP TO A COLLABORATIVE ONE

The traditional model of service provision and administration is very transactional in nature. This is underpinned by the role of council tax, which is paid like a household bill and therefore creates a sense amongst residents of “what do I pay my council tax for?” and an expectation that they require something for something. There is a lack of understanding of the balance of council spend on mainstream services that the majority use versus targeted support for the vulnerable minority. To change this, councils are looking to build more authentic conversations with residents to achieve shared understanding of the challenges and shared endeavour to reduce demand for services.

## FROM A SERVICE DELIVERER TO AN ACTION ENABLER

The traditional paternalistic mode of operating is no longer sustainable for councils – the

core challenge is how to unlock community capacity. Over the years there has been a tendency to take control of work that has historically been undertaken by residents such as low-level park maintenance, which can create a dependency on council services rather than community responsibility. As one participant noted “the biggest failures come from an attitude of ‘oh we can just do it’”, on behalf of the council.

## FROM A BUREAUCRATIC CULTURE TO ONE THAT PERMITS CREATIVITY

Council processes, systems and risk-averse approaches can play a role in constraining an open and trusting relationship with residents. People’s experience of interaction with the council can create tension and negativity, with a ‘computer says no’ culture jarring with other everyday interactions people have. How to recast the role and responsibility of council staff across all levels, and members themselves, to work with people in new ways to solve their problems or take direct ownership of them, is at the heart of this shift.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COMMUNITY?

There is no hard and fast definition of what we mean by community. From the council perspective it may be defined by existing ward boundaries, but from people’s perspectives themselves it can vary between a neighbourhood or just a couple of streets. Alternatively, communities of interest can come together around a shared interest or

need, and these can be prone to varying degrees of transience. The diverse range of definitions of “community” that apply differently in different circumstances, need to be kept in mind when considering who to engage, and on what basis.

## 2. USING EXISTING TOOLS FOR DEEPER IMPACT WITH RESIDENTS

**The core building blocks for recasting the relationship are already in place. The range of tools and activities that councils already use to interact with their residents can be used in different ways for impact, including existing networks and communication channels.**

### EXISTING KNOWLEDGE, CAPACITY AND NETWORKS

#### ... IN THE COMMUNITY

Abstract concepts such as “empowering people” don’t mobilise action – people are more likely to be engaged on specific issues and tangible problems. Sometimes, this can mean that a bad situation becomes an opportunity – for example in one area, a play area burning down became a focal point and catalyst for much more widespread community engagement.

There is much existing community activity and projects that can be engaged with in different ways if lateral links are made between actions and goals. In one council area a knitting club became a solution to child protection as the community was brought together and shared informal intelligence. In another area a cooking club was an opportunity for a domestic violence support drop-in session to sit in the room next door.

Think in non-traditional ways about how to create routes into the community – in one area, where in the past they might have had staff located in each parish, instead they now identify key community members in each location and work closely with them to identify opportunities. Another is starting small – asking a community or parish to run a park, for example, then building out from there.

#### ...ACROSS SECTORS

Building links across sectors is an essential foundation for lasting change in the relationship between councils and communities. For example:

- The voluntary sector can play a significant role in getting communities on board, particularly where councils can involve smaller, community-based charities and organisations which are intrinsically linked to the community they serve. Understanding the effect of commissioning to big national charities in lieu of these smaller organisations is

essential, as there can be a knock-on effect from large scale contracting.

- Community anchor institutions such as colleges and housing associations are services that are unlikely to relocate from a community. Their interactions with people and the purchasing power they have are also potential new avenues for different conversations.

## COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

### STARTING NEW CONVERSATIONS

New conversations are often built from trialling new ways of communicating and engaging with people. This means moving beyond traditional methods such as questionnaires and surveys to more genuine and accessible forms of engagement. Conversations need to be two-way, gaining insights from residents and aligning desires and expectations between the council and wider community. Examples include:

- **ETHNOGRAPHIC OR 'GUERRILLA' RESEARCH** whereby council employees are trained in ethnographic insights, techniques and mindsets to go out into the community and have unstructured conversations with people as they go about their daily business. One participant encouraged junior staff to join a queue for benefits advice to find out what people thought of the council's work.
- **EVENTS OR FESTIVALS** in the community can provide new opportunities for conversations. Barking & Dagenham organise a 'summer of festivals' on different themes attracting different demographics – they are heavily council branded and members played a huge driving role in their inception. Officers found that these festivals attracted hugely motivated people who were passionate about their place, and a council stand at events was used to engage people in conversations. A big priority that came through these discussions was enforcement, and people wanting the council to be stricter on this, which the council has responded to.
- **HOLDING A COMMISSION** can be a route to creating a different discussion around a priority issue. For example, Truth and Poverty Commissions have been used in a few areas as a forum for people to feel listened to about the reality of their lives, to create a platform for their voice and a different conversation across the council, with an emerging set of priorities directly resulting from the process.
- **EXTERNAL DESIGN-BASED ORGANISATIONS** can be useful as they have no preconceptions about the community, can also be a way of providing a new 360 view on current challenges through deep consultation sessions.

## USING DIVERSE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS FOR DIFFERENT CONVERSATIONS

There is a vast array of different mediums and channels to employ to communicate with residents. Understanding how to utilise each for different purposes and audiences is key. Examples of different approaches adopted include:

- **COUNCIL WEBSITES** are increasingly used as platforms for communities to network on rather than simply just a forum for broadcasting messages in one direction “from council to community”. Stockport council have OpenSource website community engagement<sup>1</sup> which provides the opportunity for people to find volunteering opportunities and to let groups represent themselves. DoncasterTalks<sup>2</sup> was a crowd platform which engaged residents in new insights to overcome barriers to good health and wellbeing.
- **SOCIAL MEDIA** provides opportunities for councils to reach large numbers of people, inform residents and start conversations about a wide range of issues. Facebook groups are also set up by community groups and can be a useful way of signposting people to different services. Twitter can be used in a positive way to engage people in discussion,

such as Doncaster Council’s request for residents to name their two council gritting lorries.<sup>3</sup>

- **PERSONALISED ONLINE ACCOUNTS** can allow residents to self-select services and resources that are relevant to them. St Alban’s Council’s site allows residents to self-select services on their dashboard, making it personalised, and they are working on making it 24/7 and responsive. For example, when an enquiry about child tax credits is made, a list of other relevant related services or community groups comes up.
- **PRINT MEDIA:** While online platforms enable councils to reach large numbers of people quickly and at low cost, some members of the community still rely on print media to engage with council activity. Using this forum to create a sense of local community pride, and bringing in the press on good news stories, can be a counter to more predictable “chief executive salary” stories which need to be met with patience.

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.stockport.gov.uk/groups>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.100open.com/work/doncaster-talks/>

<sup>3</sup> Last year’s winners were Gritsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Anti-Slip Machinery and David Plowie.

### 3. SHIFTING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE TO ENGAGE PEOPLE IN NEW WAYS

Substantive and meaningful engagement with the community relies on transforming the internal culture of councils. This requires changes in employee skillsets and ways of working; supportive structures and operations; and a clear role for elected members in driving a lot of this.

#### EMPLOYEE SKILLSETS AND WAYS OF WORKING

- NEW AND CREATIVE WAYS OF WORKING:** More effective outcomes can be achieved when staff are given the freedom to innovate and develop insights into how they might change to work for more impact. Newark and Sherwood Council set up two working groups from across staff – one focussed on commercial and one on resident engagement, with a focus on developing natural aptitudes of staff and new ideas. These ways of working can also be encouraged through staff training, using resources such as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://21stcenturypublicservant.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/21-century-report-281014.pdf>

- THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS:** Meaningful engagement with the community requires the development of soft skills such as empathy and emotional intelligence. This can include developing natural staff talent and focusing on these skills through recruitment. Often officers with professional backgrounds feel they are expert in their area – but need to be encouraged to talk to their community openly and listen to their feedback, which will help them to gain new insights.
- OPEN AND VISIBLE LEADERSHIP:** For culture change to take full hold it really needs buy-in from leaders and senior officers or progress risks being undermined. New ways of working involve a healthy degree of risk and a sense across the organisation that everyone has permission to think differently.
- COUNCIL-WIDE COLLABORATION:** A sharing culture should be normalised in councils, where there are opportunities for different parts of the council to come together around issues. For example, one council decided to schedule “clean days” with binmen, voluntary action encouraged from the community, which had a different and bigger impact on people.
- COMMUNICATION IS KEY:** Councils are using communication methods such as staff Facebook pages, workshops and cross-team meetings to maintain a collaborative culture. Enfield Council

holds culture forums and has a regular culture-focussed newsletter for staff. One participant suggested asking what are the 20 things everyone in the council should know and how should they be framed?

## SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURES AND OPERATIONS

Creating new ways of working within the council can be facilitated by having the right supportive structures and operations in place. Examples include:

- **RECRUITMENT PROCESSES:** For some roles, councils have removed competencies from job descriptions, placing more emphasis on values than specific skills or experience. Councils may also challenge traditional grading systems to attract valuable skills in areas such as IT, where competition from the private sector can be fierce. Wigan council identified core staff behaviours under the banner “Be Wigan” which is at the core of the recruitment process and HR functions including appraisals. They take a no-nonsense approach to being willing to lose staff who aren’t bought into their philosophy.
- **STAFF DEVELOPMENT:** Culture change should be embedded in staff development. For example, including cultural values in appraisal processes or introducing shadowing opportunities

across different staff teams. One council is clear about characterising negative behaviours as “vampires” which suck the lifeblood out of situations, so that there is an open and transparent approach, which everyone understands isn’t tolerated. Stockport council has trained family-facing staff in asset-based techniques but have also found that providing this training for other staff supports a deeper internal positive culture shift.

- **IDENTIFY RESISTANCE AND ADDRESS IT:** While those on the frontline are most often very open to new ways of working, as ineffectiveness blights their job satisfaction, it can be in middle management where there is the most resistance to change. They can lack buy-in to senior decisions made and feel that risk for change is on them – so understanding and supporting them can be key. There can be older age cohorts who are less naturally comfortable with technology-enabled new ways of working also, for example.
- **THE PHYSICAL WORKING ENVIRONMENT:** Colocation and changes in building design can provide opportunities for employees to work alongside staff from other teams. Many councils undergoing restructures or office moves have taken advantage of the situation to create better working environments conducive to collaboration.

## THE ROLE OF THE ELECTED MEMBER

The role of elected members sits at the heart of a new relationship with communities. Sometimes, officers can view members as a “hassle” and this needs to change – they should be seen as an engagement asset. Sometimes members come at issues from a different angle, but often that is based on conversations and constant contact with residents. In turn, members need to understand their evolving role as an advocate of a more enabling approach, as the 21st Century Councillor report sets out<sup>5</sup>.

Some councils have experimented with different approaches to foster a shared sense of mission within the council vis-à-vis the community. One council now has no separate rooms for councillors – members sit with officers. This, along with training and sustained effort has led to a clearer understanding that both actually work for the community, while maintaining their separate roles and skillsets.

In another council, a programme of job shadowing for members with frontline staff exposed them to the experiences of service users in ways they hadn't previously, and gave them a different perspective when it came to scrutinising decisions over those services above and beyond case-work.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/public-service-academy/about/twentyfirst-century-councillor.aspx>

How the council political leadership engages both with staff (through regular open forums) and with the community (in one area via up to 25 community sessions over a period of time for sustained engagement) is critical to shifting the dynamics – both of what is expected of the council staff, and what the community expects of the council.

## 4. IDEAS AND BEST PRACTICE FOR ROUTES TO EMBED NEW WAYS OF WORKING

While there are lots of examples of how to use existing mechanisms and resources to best effect, there are also new routes to take on larger scale initiatives which can embed new ways of working with communities. This section covers a range of resources and suggestions for practical routes to creating a shift in the relationship between councils and communities.

**‘DEALS’:** Wigan Council has recalibrated its relationship with residents through ‘The Deal.’<sup>6</sup> This wholesale change involves both the council and residents committing to eight system-wide goals, in addition to separate Deals in areas such as social care and health and wellness. The Deal sets out a new power relationship between the council and residents and is accompanied

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.wigan.gov.uk/council/the-deal/index.aspx>

by initiatives that provide communities with a greater sense of ownership. This includes a Community Investment Fund, which groups and projects in the area can apply for to work towards long-term goals and ambitions. It is very explicitly framed to residents as “we can only keep your council tax low if you take on more responsibility”.

### COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGNS AND

**PUBLIC DEBATES:** Changing the way a council communicates about issues can encourage a change in behaviour. Examples include Staffordshire’s ‘Big Fat Chat’<sup>7</sup>, which is a public debate run by Staffordshire’s Health and Wellbeing Board. It aims to draw together opinions from people in Staffordshire on how to help tackle obesity in the county.

## CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AROUND SPECIFIC ISSUES

Many councils are harnessing the skills, assets and capacity of other sectors in their local area. Examples Include:

### ■ WAKEFIELD’S COMMUNITY ANCHORS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME.<sup>8</sup>

Wakefield is working with the voluntary and community sector to develop a network of anchor institutions, recognising that these organisations can be a driving force for community renewal.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.bigfatchat.com/>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.nova-wd.org.uk/community-anchors-development-programme/>

- **WORK DISCOVERY WEEK, SUNDERLAND<sup>9</sup>** provides opportunities for young people to engage with local businesses in the local area.
- **COLLECTIVE IMPACT INITIATIVES IN AUSTRALIA<sup>10</sup>**. Unlike collaboration or partnership, these initiatives have a backbone organisation with dedicated staff who have the skills to bring sectors together and coordinate action around complex social problems. Collaboration for Impact’s ‘How To’ Guide<sup>11</sup> from Collaboration for Impact (CFI) outlines some important questions to consider before embarking on a Collective Impact initiative. This includes questioning the type of problem that needs to be solved and the level of existing alignment of purpose between stakeholders.

## PARTICIPATORY PROJECTS AND CITIES

- **BARKING AND DAGENHAM’S ‘EVERY ONE EVERY DAY’ PROJECT.<sup>12</sup>** This is a neighbourhood-led initiative, which aims to create hundreds of new projects and businesses through the sharing of resources, places and ideas within the community. The £6.4 million initiative will work with 25,000 residents across the borough to improve a wide range of outcomes and develop community relationships.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.makeitsunderland.com/skills/work-discovery-week>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.collaborationforimpact.com/collective-impact/>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.collaborationforimpact.com/the-how-to-guide/>

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.weareeveryone.org/>

- **COLAB, DUDLEY**<sup>13</sup> is a physical space or ‘social lab’ in Dudley town centre, which provides opportunities for the people of Dudley to come together to share and learn. For example, community members exchange knowledge and skills through ‘trade school’ sessions, which cover diverse skills from languages to crochet and photography.

## COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP OF FUNDS AND ASSETS

- **COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER (CAT).** Many councils are working to bring assets such as parks or buildings into community ownership to support the transformation of services and provide long-term social, economic or environmental benefits. **Power to Change** have produced a useful guide<sup>14</sup> for councillors looking to embed this approach. It outlines what CAT can achieve, how councils can best support it (including detail on the CAT policy framework), and how risks can be mitigated.
- **LOCAL TRUST’S ‘BIG LOCAL’ PROJECT** has provided 150 neighbourhoods across England with at least £1 million to create positive, lasting change in their community. The projects are led by communities but require significant collaboration with councils. NLGN’s latest report *Rebalancing the*

*Power*<sup>15</sup> sets out five principles for successful relationships between the council and communities based on learnings from these schemes.

## DELIBERATIVE DECISION MAKING

Deliberative decision making gives the public a greater say in decisions that affect their communities. *Involve*’s “Deliberative Public Engagement: Nine Principles”<sup>16</sup> provides a useful summary of the different forms deliberative public engagement can take, when it is most appropriate, and nine key principles to guide its implementation. These principles include: a transparent process; involving the right number and diversity of people; and ensuring that participants are kept informed.

An example of deliberative decision making in practice is participatory budgeting, which has been used in communities in, for example, Paris<sup>17</sup> and Reykjavik<sup>18</sup>. These processes are often led by the council, but the community actively engage in consulting on priorities and often vote on a shortlist of options. While many councils are in favour of these approaches, there can be issues

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/Rebalancing-the-Power-Five-principles-for-a-successful-relationship-between-councils-and-communities.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Deliberative-public-engagement-nine-principles.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/pb-paris/>

<sup>18</sup> See [https://www.citizens.is/portfolio\\_page/my-neighbourhood/](https://www.citizens.is/portfolio_page/my-neighbourhood/)

<sup>13</sup> See <https://medium.com/colab-dudley/sharing/home>

<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Final-version-CAT-GUIDE-1.pdf>

in implementation and councils often have to work to avoid simply responding to the loudest voice’.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the challenging context in which councils are operating, conversations at our Innovation Exchange reflected councils’ drive to challenge the status quo and transform their relationship with the wider community. Participants not only identified the need for change but shared valuable insights and examples of how this change can be put into action. This change marks a significant shift away from paternalistic and transactional models of delivery and involves significant transformation in council culture.

