Working with community groups: Why and how to do it

Guidance for public agencies

About this document

This guidance is for public agencies working or seeking to work with community groups. It draws on research exploring how resident-led community groups in the Big Local programme have been working with local authorities, health services, schools and housing associations, published in the report Big Local relationships with public agencies. The guidance can be used by these agencies as a prompt for starting a relationship with a community group, or as a basis for building and developing relationships where one already exists.

This guidance was written by Leila Baker, Richard Usher, Helen Garforth and Charlotte Pace and builds on research developed by the wider Just Ideas team, including Veronique Jochum, Lisa Meaney, Graeme Fancourt and Amardeep Kainth.

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Introduction and background

All public agencies know they have a duty or remit to work with (or consult or listen to) people in the communities they serve. Beyond mere legal requirements, there are many benefits to working with people in communities; doing so makes the best use of local knowledge, experience, networks, skills and energy when planning, designing and delivering services and projects to support the community itself.

The current government's long-term policy direction more generally also signals a new commitment to community infrastructure and social capital. This gives public agencies committed to this agenda a rare opportunity to reinvent relationships with local communities, to revisit assumptions, and to foster community leadership.

This short document offers guidance for public agencies working with, or seeking to work with, community groups. It is built on findings from [research](#) conducted with community groups involved in the Big Local programme, a resident-led funding programme providing 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10 to 15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. The findings are relevant for any community-focused work.

The guidance in this document speaks specifically to four types of public agency: local authorities, schools, housing agencies and health agencies. Your agency may fit neatly into one of these categories. However, because public agencies and community groups are complex and varied, it may also be useful to consider the top tips for other types of agency, some of which might be relevant to your context too.

If you are considering starting a relationship between your public agency and community groups, we invite you to use this guidance as a prompt. If you have existing relationships, use it as a tool for building and developing them. We have offered simple questions at the end of the guidance for public agencies and community groups to use to reflect and discuss their relationship: what kind it is; where it is helping achieve better outcomes for people in communities and their organisations; and whether there is anything they want to adapt and improve.

The value of relationships: Why have them?

The value of engaging with community groups is extensive. People in communities are experts in where and how they live. Drawing on that local knowledge, perspectives, experience, networks, skills and energy is key to planning, designing and delivering services or projects that people in communities will really support and be supported by. If people have been involved in making the decisions, not only will the design be more appropriate, but members of the community are more likely to feel a sense of ownership, spread the word, and be advocates of the services.

As well as better outcomes for the communities – whether these are to do with housing, training opportunities, bus routes or opportunities for young people – jointly planned services or initiatives are more likely to provide what communities actually need. They are also likely to be more financially efficient, making joint planning a win-win. When you consider on top of this the opportunities for building the capacity of residents to take action; for local agencies to learn more about people in the communities they serve; and the mental and physical health benefits of people being involved in shaping their own lives and making new connections, it forms a compelling triple bottom line.

In work commissioned by Local Trust, economics consultancy Frontier Economics estimated that a £1m investment in community-led social infrastructure in a 'left behind' area **could generate approximately £1.2m** of fiscal benefits and £2m of social and economic benefits over a 10-year period.

There are notable challenges involved in communities and public agencies working together – whether they are historical and structural or to do with capacity, experience or resources – but our research has shown that whatever the context, there exists scope and possibility for change. By working together, good things get done, and they get done in ways that are more inclusive, welcome and effective than if either party had done them alone.

Outcomes from having relationships with community groups

In each of the sections providing specific guidance relating to the four types of public agency that our research focused on, we summarise the difference working effectively with community groups makes to the quality and outcome of work in any locality. Headlines from these sections are outlined below with more detail, tips and quotes in each part of the specific guidance.

For local authorities:

- Local residents are community experts, and groups they form can advise local authorities to improve engagement, design better services and places, and foster genuine ownership of community issues.
- Local grassroots groups have a real interest and passion in the neighbourhood they are based. They are committed to working for the best possible outcomes for residents.

- Our research found that grant-funding from local authorities is more effective where there are organisations that can work with communities to support them to apply for funding and deliver great projects.

For schools:
- Community groups can be another point of access into the local area, and another route into neighbourhood events and services that might support your school.
- Some community groups bring resources and funding that can contribute flexible funding for items outside the school budget.
- There are many opportunities for teaming up with community groups, such as on art projects, local environment activities, around food or holiday play opportunities, for example. Furthermore, working with community groups, schools can achieve greater impact on shared priorities such as food poverty, support for mental health, and activities for all age groups and families.

For health agencies:
- There is huge potential for communities to help with prevention. Examples include grassroots organisations co-facilitating peer-to-peer support, COVID-19 support, tackling loneliness, and supporting digital inclusion.
- Community groups often know who might need health and care support, and where to find them, thus improving referral pathways.
- There will be local community groups that know about and act on different aspects of the community's health and wellbeing needs – in particular, wellbeing and mental health support.

For housing agencies:
- Where regeneration projects are concerned – particularly those involving moving people, changing the make-up of existing communities, or creating new communities – the local groups supporting existing and new residents can be a source of ideas, credibility and networks that can add real value to your work.
- While some housing providers might have had dedicated community development workers full time on an estate, or involved in a single regeneration project, that dedicated resource is rare, and working with existing groups with existing relationships with tenants and residents can really bolster your reach into and work with the community.

What to have relationships about – there is huge potential!

From our research, we found that there are six core types of engagement between public agencies and community groups. These relationships focus on:

- **Co-design and co-delivery**: Developing or delivering projects, activities or services in partnership or collaboration.

- **Sharing and networking**: Participating in networks and forums together; promoting and sharing information about respective projects, activities and services.

- **Informal support and guidance**: Giving and receiving informal advice and support, whether this is advice to the public agency about the community or, more often, support to communities from the public agency that is brokered by the community group.

- **Routes into the community for public agencies and vice versa**: Consulting and gathering community feedback on public sector projects, activities or services; providing routes into the community, and a trusted platform for the public agency; providing routes into the public agency for community members.

- **Assets and infrastructure**: Community groups developing or acquiring assets from the public agency; working on large development and/or infrastructure projects with the public agency.

- **Funding**: Receiving funding from the public agency to deliver projects, activities or services, or the community group contributing funding from other sources to particular projects.

The above is not an exhaustive list, but it may be useful as a starting point for discussion about where, why and how you and your community work together. Being clear and in agreement about the purpose of these kinds of relationship is important for the development of the relationships themselves. Making time and space to explore other possible opportunities for working together can also be useful for continued collaboration.

Are you a powerful advocate or an acquaintance?

As well as thinking about the purpose of relationships, we found it is useful for both public agencies and community groups to have a way to talk about the kinds of relationships that exist between them, and their aspirations. We found it helpful to think of three main types of relationship; however, the important thing is the dialogue about the relationship itself.

From the research, we identified that community groups may see public agencies as a mixture of any of the following:

Powerful supporters and advocates

These agencies are supportive of community groups and use their power to understand and better advocate for the needs of the community. They have the power to turn ideas into action, because they possess the resources, time, or

authority to do so. For example, a housing association community investment manager who has been on the patch for years and whose team will continue to work there after a particular project or initiative has come to an end is a powerful ally.

Friends and acquaintances

These are agencies that have a good relationship with the community group and can be called upon for support when needed. This could include schools or education providers that get involved occasionally in supporting one-off events or training; through offering access to their site for community use; and promoting opportunities to the community through local groups.

Clients and contractors

These are agencies with which the community group has a formal arrangement to carry out work. For example, the council officers or health providers who commission a community group to deliver a service or an activity, or a community group who uses their own funding (from the National Lottery Community Fund, for example) to match-fund or bring services into their area.

The kinds of relationships that communities and public agencies create varies between areas and can also change over time. Relationships can also be greatly affected by history: for example, the history of the geographic area; the history of the community; or the history of the relationship itself. The research found that it helps communities and public agencies to know that it is alright to have a mixture of relationships and to be accepting of people's feelings about the past.

How can public agencies work effectively with community groups?

The kinds of relationships that communities and public agencies create varies between areas and can also change over time. Relationships can also be greatly affected by history: for example, the history of the geographic area; the history of the community; or the history of the relationship itself. The research found that it helps communities and public agencies to know that it is alright to have a mixture of relationships and to be accepting of people's feelings about the past.

The research has shown that where relationships are ongoing and judged to be successful or effective, there is regular contact and communication rather than just when there is a specific opportunity or a problem. It has also shown that there needs to be a catalyst to take the first step – whether this is a chance meeting at an event, or a conscious effort to seek out members of a particular group.

Think of all the groups you have contact with, but also those who may not be on your radar yet. Start scheduling in conversations about what you can achieve together. There will be forums, or other potential opportunities to connect, already scheduled, or you may want to plan, with the community, some specific introduction sessions. Walkabouts have been shown to be a successful way to achieve this, as have jointly hosted drop-ins. And look out for opportunities to build relationship when community groups approach you. And when those opportunities arise…

Approaches for public agencies to try

The following suggestions and prompts are drawn from what we heard from people in communities and people working for public agencies – with a range of both positive and challenging experiences of working with each other. These insights are designed to help you have conversations with community groups and individuals within communities. It is not a set of recommendations, or a checklist, because each organisation and local situation will be different – an approach that contributes to positive change and better outcomes in one area or involving certain organisations might not work in others.

Rather, these are approaches that have worked in some places that you can consider, adapt and try if they feel appropriate to your context. They will not all be suitable, but might spark an idea of something you could do, stop doing, or do differently to initiate and build up meaningful relationships between organisations and groups with different perspectives on your community.

Appreciate strengths: Acknowledge, make explicit and value the strengths that all parties bring, even if it seems obvious. There is a great tool available to support this: the strength cards from At My Best, which have been used with community groups and a range of public agencies to celebrate what each individual and organisation brings. Any strengths or assets based appreciative activity would work well, but this is one of our favourites, and works online or face to face: https://atmybest.com/products/strengths-cards

Understand roles: Understanding roles helps both parties to understand what type of relationship they can have, what they can expect from each other, and work out how to change it if it is not the type of relationship that they want with each other. It can also help to acknowledge the different roles communities and public agencies take when they work together.

> *Communities:* Bringing lived experience to shape and design initiatives in the community; supporting or implementing an existing project; ensuring that policy fits and is inclusive for the community; and influencing decisions through having access to public agency decision making processes.

> *Public agencies:* Enabling community action; opening up public processes for community contribution; brokering connections; facilitating take up and scaling or replicating community projects; providing simple enabling support – for example, venue use or printing facilities.

Take time to find out about each other's work: One of the factors that gets in the way of effective relationships is a lack of understanding of roles and remits, budgets, and structures. A simple anonymous Q&A at a meeting might help; ask for questions about the community group or public agency to be put in a hat or on Post-it notes, and then collectively review and answer them. There is no such thing as a stupid question, but some people may feel embarrassed admitting they do not know something about the context they are working within.

Walk in each other's shoes: Visiting, shadowing and attending meetings can work well, but there are other ways to connect – such as sharing a story of a typical day, or one highlight and one current challenge, that you experience in your role in relation to communities (and vice versa).

Focus on the possible: Find what you **can** do together, and acknowledge what is harder, or not currently possible. Use a flipchart or [Jamboard](#) with three columns to identify:

- what you are doing already
- what you could easily start doing together
- what might be trickier.

Celebrate the things in the first column, make a plan to get started on the middle one, and schedule a further planning session for the third.

Develop trust: Make time to listen and learn about one another's goals, including the big ambitions and firm plans and priorities; to understand one another's values; and get to grips with what each other really does. It can help to have this facilitated by someone independent who can create the space. What matters is that each party is encouraged to share and discuss their goals, values and what they do; and that the other party really listens, asks questions and deepens their understanding. For a public agency this might mean an open conversation in a community venue, perhaps starting with a walkabout in the area, with an independent facilitator briefed to help the conversation flow and draw out ideas.

'**We not they'**: Shifting the language can help. Jargon does not. Try thinking about a local place or system team and recognising everyone's roles within that, rather than focusing on sector boundaries. Try fostering a culture where it's understood that both you and the community make up the system you're working in. Instead of saying 'They should do x y z…', try 'How can we help?'. This simple phrase signifies communities and public agencies that see themselves as part of a system.

Look outside: Find the spaces and places where you and your structures (committees, boards, friends' groups, lay board, for example) connect. Do you know much about one another? If not, how could you help one another to learn more?

'**Haven't we been here before?'**: Accept that we are all human and there will be baggage and history here. Things will have been tried in the past, things may have gone wrong and, however willing the parties are, one positive meeting is not going to cancel that out. Find the things you can do together, and keep going. It is all about relationships – never underestimate the value of making time to get to know someone.

Questions for critical reflection

These questions could be a useful tool for any public agencies and community groups with an existing relationship to reflect on together.

- What would work well here?
- What strengths helped you get where you are now?
- What could you say 'yes' to?
- To make things better, what could you let go?
- How might you use your strengths to make a positive difference?
- How might this situation benefit you or others?
- What would a successful relationship look and feel like?

They are relevant questions to ask across a range of contexts and relationships between different public agencies and community groups. The section below brings a more specific focus to each type of public agency based on learning from the research.

Agency-specific guidance

Local authorities

Context: Policy and practice

Policy: The [Local Government Act 1999](#) places a duty on councils to continuously improve and requires that they consult with people who are likely to use services or have an interest in the area. The [Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill 2007](#) develops this requirement and places a 'duty to involve' upon all authorities from April 2009.

Practice: Local authorities and councillors will find they need multiple relationships between the community and different departments and layers in the hierarchy. Acknowledging that there is history of both positive and negative experiences from both local authority and community group perspectives – some things may have worked better than others – and finding where working together can be done can create a foundation of trust. This may be more effective than either ignoring historical disagreements or attempting to unpick them. Austerity may have dismantled some local authority capacity for community engagement but also increased their dependence on community groups. By acknowledging this, new routes into the community can be established.

What are the benefits and potential outcomes?

- Any community has, to some extent, an active network of people wanting positive change in the local area. Through working with the groups they form, find those active citizens who do things, and who know things – ask them for help to uncover strengths in the community. Understanding these strengths can bring energy and increase the potential of your work.

- Local residents are community experts, and groups they form can advise local authorities to improve engagement and design better services and places.

- Local grassroots groups have a real interest and passion in the neighbourhood they are based; they are committed to working for the best possible outcomes for residents because these outcomes affect them personally.

- Better delivery by community groups: Our research found that grant-funding from local authorities is more effective where there are organisations that can work with communities to support them to apply for funding and deliver great projects.

- A small under-the-radar group could be a missing piece of jigsaw, a driver to engage, and a key to unlocking energy and insight within the community.

- By working with a group that has a footprint in the local area, the local authority improves its reach and visibility. However, there is a healthy challenge in ensuring that you continue to reach out into the community rather than talking to the same people who you perceive to be representative.

"I don't think you can do anything meaningful for the community, unless you do it with them too. Taking a community with you on the journey not only gives those living there a sense of ownership and belonging, ensuring the project has wide buy-in and longer-term sustainability – but it means that whatever difficulties come your way (these are inevitable) you are in a better position to deal with them as you have a community that understands and can help with solutions." (Councillor)

Specific guidance: top tips and avoiding pitfalls

Some top tips from community groups and their local authority partners:

- Set up regular meetings: where local authorities and community groups have regular monthly meetings together, relationships were considered more effective, and the volume and outputs from joint working increased.

- History or baggage can stick and be hard to get past. Be proactive in making space to acknowledge the past – a 'car park' type activity (that is, taking note of issues that cannot be addressed immediately so they can be returned to at the appropriate time) can be a helpful way to hold these issues. Either accept or agree to disagree and move on together.

- Remember that this work is important to the community, and regardless of any issues, it comes from a place of care. Respect and acknowledge this.

- Establish a rapport, dialogue or relationship. Acknowledge that this might not happen overnight, but keep at it by keeping in touch and letting people know what you are doing and how you are getting on.

- Be realistic and manage expectations of what can be achieved. Do not over-promise because it will create disappointment and resentment, and this will put people off.

- Find the right people, who have the right relationships with the wider community.

- Be flexible in terms of timings when reaching out to community groups. Try to accommodate both those who work regular hours and those who do not by meeting in the middle – this could be at the end of a council officer's day and the beginning of a local volunteer's evening.

- Ask 'what would work well here?'. This helps to bring the focus to the context and experience within the relationship, and to base decisions or priorities on the strengths within it.

- Be sensitive to the community and community relationships when developing communications copy. Be sure to credit the right people, get names and facts right, and check in with the community group (for example, in relation to a press release). Time invested here builds trust and respect and will pay off in the long run.

Bringing it to life

We heard from a local authority councillor about the importance of effective communication in working with community groups and building a local authority culture that supports this way of working:

"**Communication should be … the crux of everything**. But this means meaningful communication, not giving a presentation about what you plan to do every few months. Plans should be co-designed as much as possible, ask questions and listen to the responses, adapting plans based on the community's feedback. Community groups aren't stupid, don't treat them like they are – if there is a problem, share it and be willing to work with them to find a solution."

"Councils and local authorities are here to serve communities. We are facilitators to help address the needs of a place and community. The projects that fail in my opinion are the ones that create a division between the two, by not communicating, listening, or trying to resolve problems that have been raised. **Success will only come by having an agreed objective and working together as a team** to try and deliver this, giving local residents ownership in the project. Sometimes it's community groups that are best placed to lead a certain project within the wider plan."

Schools

Context: Policy and practice

- **Policy**: The Ofsted [Education Inspection Framework](#) includes a requirement that "leaders engage effectively with learners and others in their community, including – where relevant – parents, carers, employers and local services".

- **Practice**: Schools can be seen as local neighbourhood organisations; their communities are often the same or with significant overlap with the local community. Through working with community groups schools gain new insights into the community around them and can pursue projects that they could not have carried out alone. This kind of collaboration has been achieved where the school and the community group have an ongoing dialogue – they understand one another's priorities and can see the potential of working together. Reaching this level of understanding can take time – something some schools will lack if they are stretched. One effective way to build this understanding is through a community group member sitting on a school's governing board and vice versa.

If a long-term structural relationship is not appropriate, some schools really benefit from an ad hoc relationship with a range of community groups that pops up now and then around a one-off event or activity. This can be an equally useful, and perhaps more realistic, kind of relationship.

Each school's situation and capacity to work with the community will be different – there is no one-size-fits-all. One of the key factors influencing how involved a school becomes in its local community is the buy-in of the governing body as well as the senior leadership and staff team. As one primary school head teacher put it:

"I am very lucky that my governing body shares my view that positive relationships with community groups are vital."

The benefits below might be helpful in a discussion with the governors about the importance of investing in these external relationships.

Finding an alignment of values is important when looking out into the community as well. Many community groups will share a school's understanding of the importance of a whole-family and whole-community approach.

What are the benefits and potential outcomes?

- Community groups can be another point of access into the community, and into community events and services that might support your school community.

- Some community groups, such as Big Local partnerships, have money and can often contribute flexible funding for items outside the school budget. Examples in the research report include buying football kit for a girls' football team and providing football boots and other support for young people who are refugees.

- Local groups and charities can provide excellent work experience opportunities in the local community and can offer and benefit from practical projects such as design of posters, or even websites.

- There are many opportunities for teaming up with local schools – on art projects, local environment activities, around food or holiday play opportunities, for example. The win-win comes from more people getting involved in the community and supporting your school community to become active citizens.

- Many local groups are tackling issues in their community, such as food poverty, support for mental health, and activities for all age groups, which will benefit your families. Larger or more established community organisations help address complex issues affecting your families. They offer a structured way to work with community – and often have links in PCSOs or other local stakeholders you might want to work with.

- Schools have many significant assets within their buildings, sites and facilities. These can be redundant at certain time of the year, and the school could be open to loaning or hiring these to the community. Some examples could be the use of school fields for outdoor summer cinema events, or weekend park-and-ride schemes, which can also generate income for or increase the profile of the school.

- By working with community groups, schools can create new ways for families who have had a bad experience of the school system (and are reluctant to enter school premises) to build confidence.

- A strong school community relationship will benefit children, young people and their families or carers. They will hear good things about the school and be proud to be part of it, which is good for all concerned with the school.

Specific guidance: Top tips and avoiding pitfalls

- **Invite the community and local groups in**: Inviting local residents and community groups into the school can lead to unexpected collaborations. In one school we spoke with, following a carol concert held in school for the local community, they *"developed a warm and mutually beneficial relationship between our children and a local Alzheimer's group."*

- **Build on school and community priorities**. Schools often prioritise many of the same issues as community groups – whether these are improving the environment by increasing recycling or reducing carbon emissions; encouraging art or music creativity; or increasing employability through training and work experience. Find and build the shared passion with groups that are working on these issues in the community.

- **Get involved in community events.** Make use of the school site and facilities – and think about the benefits of using other community venues for some school activities.

- **Identify the partnerships that will help the school with its family engagement work.** This is a two-way street, as there are many community groups that will relish the closer connection with a local school.

- Take an **open-door approach**. This can be time-consuming, but there are many potential benefits. Lesley Godwin, Head Teacher at Marsh Primary School, High Wycombe, said: "I am very open to visitors to the school and take phone calls whenever possible...which opens up many opportunities for collaborations which sometimes I would never have considered."

- **Play to the strengths of different roles in the school**. This will create connections that are meaningful and valued within the school community. Lesley continued: "Senior leaders in schools have the privileged position of a close relationship with many families and therefore can play a vital role in encouraging a safe, cohesive community where different agencies and groups of people work together for the benefit and wellbeing of all."

Bringing it to life

Lesley shared her insight on the difference that close working with community groups can make:

"Strong relationships between schools and community groups benefit the whole community as differences and similarities are learned about and respected by all. We have found that negative perceptions or fearfulness of different groups can be dispelled and replaced with mutual appreciation and friendship. 'Hidden' members of the community can be found, and unexpected relationships formed."

Health agencies

Context: Policy and practice

- **Policy**: There is a legal duty to involve patients and the public in commissioning health services. This is known as the 'duty to involve' and is set out in [statutory guidance for CCGs and NHS England](#).

- **Practice**: Health agencies can be a challenge for communities to understand as structures, names and processes are subject to change from national legislation, and local enactment of national changes. Finding ways to open up governance and other structures and demystify processes can be helpful. Getting together to get a handle on how one another works, and the kinds of health and wellbeing issues that are being prioritised both by agencies and by the community, can also help. Key for health agencies is to understand the health and wellbeing work that communities are delivering outside the NHS and public health context; and to work out how their own public sector work and that of the community can usefully fit together.

What are the benefits and potential outcomes?

- There is huge potential for communities to **help with prevention** and **tackle the wider determinants of health** as experienced by their residents. Examples include grassroots organisations co-facilitating peer to peer support, COVID-19 support, tackling loneliness, supporting digital inclusion; and working to support people with housing, food and physical activity.

- **Referral pathways**: Grassroots community groups often know who might need health and care support, and where to find them.

- There will be local community groups that know about and act on different aspects of the **community's health and wellbeing needs** – in particular, physical and mental wellbeing. This can be a great source of knowledge and even referrals.

- **Both parties have 'intel' and information**. Health agencies could do more if they had that grassroots knowledge, and the community could do more if it had access to population health data and insight into existing plans and priorities.

- **Volunteers and participants**: Many local groups have networks of people who might be interested in being on Patient Participation Groups or involved in surveys or outreach. There is a ready-made way to consult local communities through the existing structures.

- Primary Care Networks have a mandate to **reduce health inequalities** and have a named person with that role. Community groups form in all areas, including those with a higher-than-average percentage of people facing multiple social injustices and with an insight into lived experience of health inequalities. They can help inform your work to reduce health inequalities.

- Community groups can help you create a better understanding for residents of what takes place behind the scenes of frontline healthcare so **the journey from policy to practice** is understood.

Specific guidance: Top tips and avoiding pitfalls

We asked a member of a local Integrated Care Unit (ICU), why working with community groups is so important. She gave us this example:

"The ICU subgroup commissions a partnership of five community organisations to deliver community navigation (social prescribing) and community development across [the city]. Among the projects is an IT project funded by the ICU, providing residents with IT equipment and internet as well as (volunteer) digital connectors so that people can access online health services, connect with each other, do online shopping etc. As well as social and confidence outcomes for residents, the project seeks to **reduce the burden on care services**, for example, carers spending lots of time shopping for clients when this time could be better spent on personal care".

Community groups have **very local knowledge** and can work and respond to need in much more flexible ways than say statutory organisations. Community groups can be innovative and try new things:

"Our community navigation service relies to a great extent on small community activities for their social prescribing, taking pressure off primary care services. If community groups are involved in this way, they feel valued and their existence reaffirmed. It also opens avenues for funding."

A top tip for a health agency or structure that wants to initiate or develop relationships into communities is to **join local networks and keep attending.** In one city, for example, they have meetings in all six postcode areas to bring together statutory and voluntary agencies and community groups, where really valuable working relationships are built and information is exchanged. This has resulted in joint projects and working.

And one key piece of advice to a strategic lead in a health agency wanting to develop a culture of working with community groups? **Community groups cannot work for free.** While there is a degree of philanthropy, community groups need resources. Tendering processes are over bureaucratic and tend to put community groups off, as well as put them into competition with each other. Listen to solutions proposed by community groups who often have a better grasp of what is taking place on the ground. And don't use jargon – instead use language that means something to people in the communities you are working with!

Housing agencies

Context: Policy and practice

- **Policy**: Community investment is the work that housing providers undertake with communities, which is in addition to their responsibilities for providing housing and is intended to help those communities thrive. This is explained and defined by the [Centre for Excellence in Community Investment](#).

- **Practice:** Housing associations can be a powerfully supportive ally in a community, provided that your governance and leadership see the value of working with the whole community and not just your own tenants. Housing associations can add value to community work in many ways, from helping with the acquisition, development or running of a community hub to co-locating their community investment activities such as employment and training, health and wellbeing, support for young people.

What are the benefits and potential outcomes?

Where regeneration projects are concerned – particularly those involving moving people, breaking up communities, and creating new communities – the local groups supporting existing and new residents can be a source of ideas, credibility and networks that can really add value to your work.

While some housing providers might have had dedicated community development workers full-time on an estate, or involved in a single regeneration project, that dedicated resource is rare, and working with existing groups with existing relationships with tenants and residents can really bolster your reach into and work with the community.

Specific guidance: Top tips and avoiding pitfalls

Here are some specific tips drawn from our conversations with community groups and their housing association partners:

- **Identify and agree areas and issues of common interest**. There are obvious and less obvious goals and aspirations you will share with other local organisations in terms of outcomes for the local community. Focus on what you have in common, play to the strengths of organisations round the table, and develop a culture of sharing ideas, challenges, and offers to the local community.

- **Think beyond your housing stock**. As a housing association you are a key stakeholder in the wider community beyond your estate, and supporting residents to feel more engaged in an active wider community is of mutual benefit. Working with other local organisations in the community can encourage that sense of connection.

- **Make the most of community centres and spaces**. In some areas housing associations can be key to supporting both residents and local organisations to access spaces to meet whether this is in a community centre, or a meeting room within your housing stock. Think of buildings and spaces you have in your patch, and how they can be used on partnership, or offered to the wider local community. Bringing closer to your residents the kind of

support and discussions about things that are affecting the community gives them greater access and adds to ways you can support the community.

- **Explore co-funded opportunities**. Money pledged in partnership makes for better outcomes. Find the opportunities for jointly funded initiatives, events, projects to put partnership into practice and embed strong relationships.

Bringing it to life

A regeneration manager for a housing association told us how he has been trying to support housing managers to do small-scale community development work on their estate. Developing something like this in partnership with local community groups or organisations working with them – who may have that community development experience – is a way forward to build the skills and relationships needed for community development work and bring that added value.

Another example involved a local community group commissioning community development training from a local voluntary sector provider. The training was then offered to their workers and also community-facing staff of the contractors and housing association managing a large-scale regeneration project locally. Learning together built trust, skills, relationships. It also ensured a lasting link between the residents, local groups, and those responsible for the regeneration. This led to the funding that the contractors had earmarked for community benefit being invested with real community input, and used as match funding for funds that the community group had at its disposal from other sources.

Links to other guidance

Partnerships and collaboration: https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/community-action/community-action-overview/six-guiding-4

Time for a Change: https://www.betterway.network/time-for-a-change

Building strong integrated care systems everywhere: https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/B0661-ics-working-with-people-and-communities.pdf

Rebalancing the power: Five principles for a successful relationship between councils and communities: https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/rebalancing-the-power-five-principles-for-a-successful-relationship-between-councils-and-communities/

Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision making into the hands of communities. We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.
localtrust.org.uk

Just Ideas

Just Ideas Sustainable Solutions Ltd. is an independent social consultancy established in 2007, supporting communities, charities, public sector organisations and businesses working towards positive social and environmental change. We believe in supporting people to realise their power and voice. We value connecting people so they can create positive change locally and globally.
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