

VOICES

FROM EXPERIENCE

From small scale actions to wider decision making

One of three studies in a series illustrating the contribution that community development can make to community empowerment

1. Identifying needs through Parish Plans
2. From small scale actions to wider decision making
3. Community responses to economic development

This study looks at the specific transport needs of a rural community, the problem of heating a village hall and a how book club started the process of people getting to know their neighbours.

In each case, the initial actions led on to people becoming more involved in their communities, and in the wider decision making processes that affected their lives.

- Very simple actions and exercises can get people together and empower them. Local people acting together were seen to achieve results.
- Involving people does not have to be a time consuming, costly exercise but can produce some useful results and can be replicated - it takes commitment rather than resources.
- These approaches demonstrate the importance of enabling people to have a say in how their needs were met, particularly giving a voice to people who are often marginalised such as young people and those without their own transport
- Participatory approaches provide a way for people to get involved in the issues that affected their everyday lives such as buying food, access to health services and education and leisure
- The young people felt empowered when their views had been listened to and, more importantly, acted upon. They saw real results for having talked to people with resources and power.
- People who experience being listened to are more likely to become involved in local matters again and feel comfortable about raising issues in the future.
- Developing skills is participation and consultation among the decision makers is important. The parish councillors felt that their concerns had been taken seriously and that they had been given the tools to do something about local issues instead of feeling powerless to do anything to address them.
- Councillors can benefit from people coming together and from opportunities for councillors, community groups, people of all ages, backgrounds and interests to work together to identify needs and plan appropriate action.
- Such actions can restore faith in local decision making bodies, for potential passengers saw action coming out of the exercise and the businesses felt that they had been considered.
- Community development work approaches are very effective at engaging people and enabling them to define their needs and take collective action

Rural Transport Initiatives

Low take up of funds for parish transport initiatives led to a community development work support being offered to parish or town councils interested in undertaking a transport needs assessment.

Actions involved

- Inspiring people to become interested where there was no visible interest in public transport ('We've all got cars')
- Working alongside small groups, often women, to design a survey form and agree methods of data collection, installing and teaching them to use computer software
- Supporting a parish council wanting to help young people access after school services and a youth club in the nearby market town, by getting the views of young people.
- Examining transport needs within a village built on a hill

Young peoples access to transport

- A parish councillor involved in the weekly village hall youth club, negotiated an invite for the community development worker. She sat in the club with flip chart paper and post-its and with members designed a Friday evening service between the market town youth club and a service on other nights to access homework sessions. They applied to the Countryside Agency for funding.
- Information collected about the need to get to towns for evenings out and for activities in the village, was fed back to the parish council.

A bus up the hill

- To test out a the feasibility and demand for a bus service to link the bottom and top of the village, a simple survey form was used by people standing outside the Co-op at the top of the hill, and the doctor's surgery at the bottom of the hill, asking the opinions of shoppers and patients.
- The information led to funding for the Klipper. The community group running the service monitored and evaluated its use, and made changes to adapt it to passengers needs. When the initial funding ceased, the town council included the costs in the parish precept and continued the service.

Outcomes

- Tangible benefits for local people; young people accessing services without dependence on parents; people without independent transport and the fitness to climb a steep hill accessing facilities.
- Services were designed around interests of users made them sustainable.
- Local people developed skills in designing surveys to get constructive responses, and learned about using participatory techniques.
- Parish councillors willing to use these techniques in future, having seen them being used effectively, and appreciated the effects of giving people a voice.
- The parish council decided to carry out a parish plan exercise and enlisted the help of young people in collecting the information.
- Action is being taken on the village on the hill to restore the centrally based town hall and the three local churches have combined to use their buildings more effectively for worship and community use.

Green energy and village hall sustainability

A wind turbine now provides all the heat needed for a village hall in a small farming village about 2 miles from the North Sea in East Yorkshire, and sells back the extra power to the grid, this funds the maintenance and running costs of the village hall.

The village hall had undertaken a facelift a few years ago by local people installing new cladding, a new roof, double glazing, new doors and generally painted everywhere but the heating system left something to be desired.

A community development worker was approached by the village hall committee to help raise funds for a new gas boiler, the worker made contact with the Corporate Social Responsibility officer of a large utility company, who then worked with the Parish Council. The Officer took members of the Parish Council, who owned the hall, to a Northern network event on bio fuels and renewables which sparked off the idea for a wind turbine. The Parish Council transferred the ownership of the hall to an independent body who raised the funds for this project and co-ordinated the volunteer labour to erect the turbine.

The project brought people together and so added community cohesion. The people involved have moved onto working on a parish plan for their village. The village was affected by recent floods, and the Parish Council along with others in the area are making representation to the ERYC about the impact of climate change on their villages and what support they need.

Book clubs revitalise community association

A main road in a market town separated the facing rows of houses with no gardens. So meeting people in the street was difficult. Invites were put through people's door to attend a book club in the street – one for men and one for women.

People took it in turns to host the club and over the evening many other local topics would be discussed – anti social behaviour, criminal damage and ideas for a street party or make a local history booklet.

A community development worker who lived in the street suggested revitalising the residents association that had died about 15 years before. Open meetings were called and people from other streets were invited – participatory exercises elicited peoples concerns and a new residents association was born.

A town councillor opened the first public meeting, and other councillors have attended recent ones as they find it a good way to find out what peoples interests and issues were. The Town council provided a grant to get the group established and to pay for the newsletter and has recognised the association as a formal consultation body. The officers from the Safer Communities department now attend.

As new residents come into the streets so they are welcomed into the book club. Parties and barbeques are now held in the street, theatre trips arranged, people borrow and share items or ask each other for advice.

Social and community cohesion has dramatically improved.

This study has been written and compiled by the regional community development network for the National Empowerment Partnership in Yorkshire and the Humber. For further information about the network contact Val Harris on valharris@phonecoop.coop
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