Learning and change
in the
Community Organisers Programme

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IPS

Executive Summary

Introduction

Reflection is a key principle of the Programme's approach and *Imagine* has been commissioned to support its learning over the first three years.   An evaluation has also been commissioned by government and will report in 2015. *Imagine* has previously produced reports on the hosting experience and the COs learning journey, both of which are available on the Community Organisers website.

This report has been compiled for Locality and explores the learning that the Community Organisers Programme has generated so far. It is based on a series of interviews with those involved in the Programme – COs, hosts (and employers), partners and civil servants –as well as a workshop with the Inspiration Network, a group of COs, hosts and employers, who have graduated through the Programme and who now provide support to current participants. As such, there are differing accounts about the Programme's history and development, based on diverse experiences, and therefore some sensitivity about what is written here. This report is compiled to aid learning and reflection and is not an evaluation of the programme. It does however, raise questions that the external evaluation team may wish to explore in more detail e.g. the hosting model, the variations and adaptations of the model and the impact of the Programme on local communities.

The full report is in three parts. The first part summarises what the Programme has learnt about managing a programme of this size and complexity; the second part explores the lessons that emerge from putting this approach to community organising on the ground and how it is working so far; the final part concludes with some thoughts about legacy.

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Learning and Change in the Community Organisers Programme

The Community Organisers Programme was launched at the start of 2011 as part of the new coalition's Big Society agenda. It was a central part of the government's commitment to devolve power down to community level. As such, it has been an attempt by government to deliver policy in a new way, driven by communities themselves rather than government or external agencies. To its credit, government has kept to this position, and been willing to be 'hands off.'

Managing the vision

The challenges
Managing such a high-profile Programme through a network of host organisations across the country at a time of considerable social upheaval presented considerable challenges. As partners in this new venture, Locality was itself a new organisation and Regenerate had not tested its model at this scale before. They encountered the all-too-familiar problems associated with the need to hit the ground running, without adequate time for pre-planning. In addition, the four year timescale for delivering the Programme, whilst generous, meant that a significant part of a much longer RSLM training programme was to be squeezed into a year.

This report is a product of the commitment to learning and reflection on the part of the Programme partners, with the early appointment of *Imagine* as learning advisors.

However, it was always difficult to make time for learning and reflection, given the other pressures on the Programme.

What has been learnt?
Not surprisingly, under these circumstances, the initial stages of the Programme felt rushed (and this was not helped by the high level of media interest that this flagship Programme attracted). There were problems of staff capacity, as well as the need to get systems up and running when the organisers were already on the ground. The Programme had to learn as it went along, and credit is due to the way that Programme managers and partners have handled the consequent stresses and taken the programme through transition. Locality built in a 'Discovery Phase' (Prince 2 project management system), which provided an opportunity for review and learning part way into the programme. This has resulted in the following changes:

- more management and training capacity introduced;
- refinement of the recruitment process through the introduction of assessment centres;
- the early introduction of a 50% funded progression year
- development of a Performance Management Framework;
- a substantial restructuring of the training process (underway);
- the introduction of a peer support network (the Inspiration Network), which could only happen as qualified COs emerged.

With the benefit of hindsight, many agree that a slimmer Programme, with fewer organisers trained over a longer period, might have been a better proposition. As an experimental Programme, a short term feasibility phase might have alleviated the stress on all concerned and allowed for a more relaxed early period in which to build the relationships on which a Programme of this nature depends.

The outstanding challenge for Programme management is that of communications: with the external world; within Locality; and with hosts and COs.

The Programme has held itself apart from the wider community policy and practice field. The barrage of criticism that inevitably met the blaze of publicity at the outset, contributed to its understandable suspicion of that wider world. But this sense of separation makes it vulnerable to continued criticism, which could be exacerbated if it fails to achieve the much-advertised numbers of COs and volunteer organisers. And improved external relationships may well be critical to the Programme achieving a legacy beyond 2015.

The Programme is also separate within Locality and many feel an opportunity is being lost to embed the principles of the Programme within the rest of Locality's work.

The Programme's uneasy relationship with the outside world extended initially to the hosts on which it depended for delivery. This has improved but there is still scope for reflection on how the hosts' role could be more fully integrated to make the best use of the experience that they have to offer.

Internal communications have been a source of frustration from the outset, with:
- confusion about roles between Locality and Regenerate leaving hosts and COs unsure where to go for information;
- inadequate information for hosts;
- late information on accreditation and a lack of feedback;
- requests for help going unanswered;

- a desire for more opportunities for face-to-face training and sharing of information – with yammer a particular disappointment.

While some of these concerns have now been addressed as a result of better resourcing and the other changes listed above, there is still work to do here.

The vision in practice

The power of listening
The Community Organisers Programme is about a shift of power from agencies and experts to communities. It is based on the power of listening, dialogue and networks of relationships. Everyone testified to the power of listening as the essential foundation for action and change. They also highlighted the importance of working first with individuals as a foundation for collective action. For some hosts the Programme was a chance to go back to the basic work that they knew was essential but could no longer fund; for others it was new. Either way, the Programme offered an opportunity to embed this way of working in their practice.

In a number of cases, Community Organising also proved to be an important foundation for other community programmes operating in the locality: Community First and Big Local among them.

Moving to action
Moving to action was more challenging. There was a strong feeling that this was something that needed more time than the Programme allowed. Meeting the target number of volunteers during the trainee year - at least in the official terms defined by the Programme - was also something that many COs struggled with. Some were disappointed that there was little evidence as yet of action, nationally or locally, to confront austerity and its impact on the communities where COs were working. But again this is likely to be a longer-term ambition.

Adapting the model
In trying to redress the mistakes of past Programmes, the Programme was firm about its basic principles: not doing things FOR local residents; working directly with individuals and not through existing groups; ensuring that the knowledge gained by listening was fully owned by residents. But, while, they acknowledged the rationale between these 'rules', many COs and hosts felt they were too rigidly applied, especially in the early stages of the Programme. Particular concerns they raised were that:
- residents sometimes need more support before they feel confident enough to take action;
- local organisations have resources, skills and knowledge that residents can use, and they are also important when it comes to securing progression;
- the knowledge gained from listenings could be used positively for change if shared with others at local and national level; some people argued that, if government was serious about devolving power to local people, they needed to hear what local people were saying.

Ultimately, however, it was a question of finding the right balance of working with residents without taking away their power; ensuring that residents benefit from the knowledge and resources of other local agencies, without being diverted by others' agendas; embedding Programme principles more widely in local organisations whilst still being primarily accountable to local residents.

Most agreed there was now more flexibility, and more understanding of how the principles can be applied. There would be considerable value in sharing experience on how COs are adapting the model within and beyond their first year, and reflecting on what remains essential and where it can be relaxed.

Variety
There was variation in how the Programme played out: in different locations, in different cohorts, with different host and with different COs. There was a strong feeling in favour of diversity – 'every community is different'. And a strong message that the pressure of Programme delivery should not rule out risk, e.g., that the Programme should continue to recruit COs from a variety of backgrounds.

Support
If the Programme is to develop a diverse army of COs, then support is essential. The trainee year has been a full-on experience, combining training and accreditation with targets for listenings, the need to recruit and train volunteers and expectations of demonstrable action. In addition, COs are often working in stressed communities and some have not had the support from hosts that they need. The Programme has not always recognised the emotional toll this can take. The training restructure currently under way has already addressed some of these issues, while the Inspiration Network and proposed regional gatherings are intended to provide the kind of peer support that COs particularly value. But COs also wanted more support in learning how to reflect and argued that, while stories of success are important for the Programme, it was also important to acknowledge and learn from what hasn't worked. Much more attention also needs to be given to how VCOs can be supported, now and into the future.

Progression
The Programme was originally designed on the basis of one year's bursary funding for COs. Now that there is a greater opportunity to continue into a second year, there is a call for a more strategic approach to that second year – and an exit strategy for those who don't progress:
- COs continue to need support, especially if they are working for a new host or have formed a CiC. And they will need support if they are to continue to a third year.
- Where COs do not progress, what happens to the communities they have been listening to? What are they told and where does the knowledge from listenings go?

Either way, there is a recognised need to put more energy into embedding the approach with hosts and other local organisations.

The legacy
Responsibility for addressing a number of the issues raised above will increasingly lie with CoCo:
- providing support for COs, as trainees and as progressors
- building a movement to keep hosts and COs connected with each other – and to link communities themselves together
- Reflecting the knowledge gained and taking up issues at a national level.

CoCo is being born into a difficult financial environment. Without it the legacy of the Programme is at risk, but this kind of organisation will be difficult to fund. The most sustainable model might rest on attracting some form of endowment that can cover

core costs, matched by membership contributions from community organisations and COs, and perhaps others such as trades unions, who could jointly finance, and benefit from, some of the services CoCo might offer.

A space and place for change: learning for wider community policy and practice

This is a Programme that set out to be new and different from what had gone before. All the evidence is that it has had a significant impact on the individuals involved and many of the hosts through whom the Programme has been delivered. It now needs to look to its future and its relationship with the wider community policy and practice world. Although it has presented itself as an alternative to community development, some argue that it is instead a welcome return to the basics of community development – on a spectrum of approaches that can learn from and complement each other.

As such, it has a lot to offer in terms of reasserting the fundamental principles on which community policy – and more professionalised forms of community development - should be built. It is also enabling a rich body of knowledge to be generated about community needs, strengths and aspirations. To build on this, it needs to reflect on how to:
  • embed its principles within Locality and the rest of Locality's practice
  • work more closely with other organisations to promote these principles and the interests of the communities it serves.

There are important messages here for government and other funders too. Firstly, the Programme is operating in a competitive market, which sets a premium on 'branding'. Funders themselves are competing. Yet collaboration is essential if communities are to benefit from the range of resources and programmes available to them. How can funders promote more co-operation? Secondly, this type of work is incredibly hard to fund – and government should be commended for investing in such an open-ended Programme. But funders need to learn patience; enough has been learnt about the time that it takes to build this essential foundational work.

Reflection Points

  • Programme tendering processes often encourage bidders to be overambitious in their programme design. Is there scope for bidders to negotiate a pilot phase before launching into delivery, and a review of targets part way through?

  • A wide range of skills have been required to manage this Programme. How can this learning be passed on to others setting out on a journey of programme management?

  • Relationships between partners are core to successful programmes but the building of trust takes time. How can this be acknowledged and allowed for in programme design and delivery?

  • How is learning and reflection best built in, and made use of, in an experimental programme of this kind?

- What is the strategy beyond Year 1, for COs, VCOs and for residents? How do we ensure that community organising retains a distinctive presence?

- Respondents repeatedly spoke of staying true to the principles of this model of community organising. Do all partners agree on what these are?

- How is the tension between sticking to core principles and local flexibility addressed?

- While respecting the principle that residents' knowledge is owned by them, is there knowledge that needs to be shared more widely – locally and nationally? How do we understand the challenge, and expectations, of moving to action?

- How can COs embed the principles of community organising in host and other local organisations whilst at the same time remaining independent and accountable back to their communities.

- How can VCOs be supported to continue the work of the Programme?

- How can the momentum of the Progranmme be sustained? And where does the responsibility lie for ensuring that this happens?

- How can the learning from the Programme be dissemianetd and benefit the wider community action and policy worlds?

- What will be the legacy for all the communities who have been invovled?

Learning and Change
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Full Report

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Introduction

The Community Organisers Programme was launched in a blaze of publicity in February 2011.   It was based on a belief that:

Despite decades of different government interventions, there are still too many places of disadvantage around the country. People in these areas find local services poor and unresponsive. They are disillusioned with government; they feel they are not listened to and have no voice. Programmes set up to empower them have failed to do so. Instead of freeing communities to make changes, government and professionals have often got in the way.
Community Organisers Programme Theory of Change

Its fundamental underlying principle in addressing this was that communities themselves could and should play the crucial role in tackling the root causes of entrenched and emerging problems. But for this to happen, there needed to be a real shift in power to communities, so that change could be driven by local residents themselves, rather than government or external agencies.

This belief was part of the Coalition's Big Society agenda when it came to power in 2010 with a commitment to devolve power down to community level. It also reflected a growing unease in the community practice world about the extent to which community work had become professionalised and co-opted into a government agenda over the preceding years, driven by targets dictated by external actors.   It takes its place alongside a series of national Programmes seeking to develop a bottom up approach to change, which include Community First, Our Place (funded by government), and Big Local (funded by the Big Lottery Foundation).

The four-year Programme has been run by Locality, working with Regenerate as its training partner. It undertook to train 5000 community organisers – 500 'senior community organisers' and 4500 volunteer community organisers - over a four year period, using the Root Solution Listening Matters approach developed by Regenerate, which places a premium on dialogue with residents as the foundation for action:

RSLM techniques allow community animators and organisers to listen and to explore things that people love about their area that they can build on, things that concern them most – their motivations for action – and their ideas for action, whilst focusing on and drawing out solutions.

Community organisers are based with local host organisations who are already embedded in the local areas where they work. They are funded by a training bursary for the first year and match funding is then available to support them as graduates of the Programme to progress to a second year.

Reflection is a key principle of the Programme's approach and *Imagine* has been commissioned by Locality to support its learning over the first three years.   An evaluation has also been commissioned by government which will report in 2015. *Imagine* has previously produced reports on the hosting

Full report

experience and the COs learning journey, both of which are available on the Community Organisers website.

The Programme will run until September 2015. This report has been compiled for Locality and explores the learning that the Community Organisers Programme has generated so far, the implications of this learning for the remainder of the Programme, for CoCo – its legacy body – and for community policy and practice more widely.

In this report, *Imagine* explores the learning that the Community Organisers Programme has generated so far, the implications of this learning for the future of this approach to community organising and the implications for community policy and practice more widely. It is based on a series of interviews with those involved in the Programme – COs, hosts (and employers), partners and civil servants –as well as a workshop with the Inspiration Network, a group of COs, hosts and employers, who have graduated through the Programme and who now provide support to current participants. As such, there are differing accounts about the Programme's history and development, based on diverse experiences, and therefore some sensitivity about what is written here. This report is compiled to aid learning and reflection and is not an evaluation of the programme; it therefore includes a variety of perspectives which can stimulate further debate that in turn can inform future development. It also raises questions that the external evaluation team may wish to explore in more detail e.g. the hosting model, the variations and adaptations of the model and the impact of the Programme on local communities.

The report is in three parts. The first part summarises what the Programme has learnt about managing a programme of this size and complexity; the second part explores the lessons that emerge from putting this approach to community organising on the ground and how it is working so far; the final part considers the implications for Locality and government, and asks what the wider community policy and practice world can learn. Each part ends with some questions for further reflection. The theory of change is appended in Appendix 1, along with a list of those interviewed and other information sources in Appendix 2.

Part I: Managing a Vision

The Community Organisers Programme offers an opportunity to re-imagine what community led development and community driven action could look like in the twenty first century. In this introductory section, we explore the management challenges of delivering a new high-profile government funded programme, '*across the country …. through a network of organisations, … (at a time of) considerable social upheaval'.*

By its nature this has been an open-ended programme – and therefore a risky one. Government was funding a process with no set outcomes other than a much advertised number of community organisers. In this respect it was an experiment from the point of view of government – *'a new way of delivering government policy'* - and respondents commented on the importance of the open mandate they were given by government as well as government's willingness to get behind a challenging programme. Those directing the Programme have been learning as new challenges have unfolded, and knowing what they know now, those involved may well have done it differently. However, some of the people we spoke to suggested that the Programme needed to go through the learning to get where it is.

> *The Programme has changed how I see the world in general – lots of learning about how to run programmes and work with partners, personalities and individuals, diversity and community accountability.*
>
> *I wouldn't change it for the world – it's been a fantastic learning opportunity.*

So, with the considerable benefit of hindsight (and a recognition that high profile government programmes are often rushed into being), we reflect below on resources, programme management, partnership, recruitment, training, learning and accreditation, communications and targets. Much of this is fleshed out in more detail in Part II: The Vision in Practice.

Getting going

It is not unusual for government to expect organisations delivering programmes to hit the ground running once a contract has been awarded. Yet acknowledgement and acceptance of this being the way things are couldn't have prepared Locality for the onslaught of pressure in the first nine to twelve months after the Programme was launched.

There was little time for settling in as Locality tried to meet the challenges of:
- managing a government flagship which was intended to contribute to new ways of thinking and doing (Big Society) with all the external scepticism that it inevitably attracted;
- designing and implementing processes, systems and procedures for what would become a huge voluntary sector employment project;

- establishing partnerships and relationships with other organisations, some of whom they were very familiar with, but some with whom they weren't, and contract management with these partners;
- promotion of the Programme to Locality's members and the wider world of community practice;
- creating a programme within Locality that was potentially a lot bigger than the agency itself – in terms of budget, numbers of people involved and reputation - whilst at the same time being part of a new organisation arising from the merger of two allied but different organisations (DTA and bassac);
- getting ready to deliver a contract that had come as a bit of a surprise, (Locality took a last minute decision to submit a proposal in its own right).

Locality had the foresight to understand that it would need to review progress and responded to the challenges above with a systematic approach to programme management, using the Prince 2 project management approach. This included a Discovery Stage, which ran until a review in October 2012, and informed delivery of the programme thereafter.

It is generally agreed that the original Programme design underestimated the resources needed to deliver the Programme – both within Locality and Regenerate - and the time needed to train COs and see movement on the ground. People talked about unrealistic aspirations, hosts felt squeezed, there was little financial margin to play with, and a year was not nearly enough to train a CO and see outcomes from their work:

> *It's long-term; it can't be done in a year. Communities are ever evolving – it's not a quick fix. With more time and resources, bigger things could have happened. The soft stuff takes time.*

Regenerate was always up front about the fact that that it was condensing a much longer training process into just 51 weeks and concerns about timescale are reinforced by experience elsewhere. A recent review of community organising by the Young Foundation finds that *'It takes at least 18 months before you start seeing action'*[1].

Several people said they would have preferred a model of fewer COs over a longer period and suggested that it should have been renegotiated. To its credit, Locality was able to secure a government commitment early on in the Programme to match funding for second year progression during the first year. But would they have designed it differently if they had envisaged a two-year scenario at the beginning? The current training restructure has acknowledged that some learning opportunities can now be built into the second year, though of course not all COs achieve progression.

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[1] The Young Foundation (2013) *Growing Community Organising,* London: The Young Foundation; see also Beck and Purcell's international review of community organising: Beck, D. and Purcell, R. (2013) *International Community Organising*, Bristol: The Policy Press

People referred to the setting up being rushed and lacking the pre-planning needed, e.g. to build a viable and learner focussed accreditation process. The initial months were less charitably described by some, as 'chaotic'. Small overloaded teams in Locality and Regenerate meant many COs felt unsupported, in terms of both the fieldwork and the accredited learning process. Hosts and COs have complained that communications were poor, emails went unanswered, accreditation deadlines were not met, employment and personnel matters weren't resolved quickly enough. Much of this has now been resolved, although communications is still a sore point. But early cohorts inevitably were 'guinea pigs'. As a result, they suffered and their experience should be acknowledged. The frequency of new cohorts starting has not always helped, creating a heavy workload for assessments.

Roles and relationships

The rush to deliver the Programme and get it right has placed great stress on the Locality and Regenerate programme teams. As time has gone on, greater capacity has been built within both organisations. There is a growing understanding of the different functions and roles that need to be played, and that management requirements vary depending upon the stage the Programme is at. Visionary leadership, partner relations, communications, process, logistical and forward planning, performance measurement and management, human resources, problem solving, training and learner support, risk management, logistics – these are just some of the skills and roles required in a programme of this kind and scale. These requirements are usually best met by a team of people that is bigger than the few originally entrusted with delivering the Community Organisers Programme. The current complement of skills across all partners is now a real source of Programme strength.

The broadened staff base of the two key delivery partners, and acknowledgement of the different functions required by the Programme, also seems to have helped ease and clarify the relationship between the two main partners. The Programme as it stands now is absolutely a product of both organisations and of the individuals within them and this 'mix' has created a more 'rounded' Programme than might otherwise have been the case. The emphasis on listening (as promoted by Regenerate) and the credibility, reach and capacity (that comes from Locality as a member based organisation) have combined to create something unique. It hasn't always been plain sailing, however. Both COs and hosts have reported getting 'different steers' from Locality and Regenerate and sometimes felt it was unclear who was in charge.

Another crucial relationship that success of this Programme rests on is the one with hosts and employers. Many felt their role was seriously under-resourced, and although more than one said the money really didn't matter, several felt that it doesn't reflect or acknowledge the work involved. Also early hosts tended to be unclear about what was expected of them. Several have commented on poor communication channels with Locality, and most felt

undervalued and underused, but again this was changing – and the two hosts we spoke to who had taken on a second batch of COs felt they now knew how to manage the three-way relationship.

The making of a 'good' Community Organiser

As understanding has deepened across the management team, learning about what makes a good CO has led to a performance management framework and assessment centres as part of the recruitment process – both generally welcomed. The PMF makes transparent the competencies of a CO and helps to systematise judgements about who is and isn't a 'good CO'. Some of those involved in running the Programme grouped COs into three bands - the high achievers at one end of the spectrum, the strugglers at the other end, and those in the middle. Some thought that, while the high achievers and strugglers got a lot of attention, those in the middle missed out; others that the need to focus on the strugglers might have given both Locality and Regenerate a skewed view of what COs were and weren't achieving.

> *We spend more time with those in deficit than those who are brilliant. So we don't necessarily support COs as well as we could. It's not necessarily the self-starters that miss out on support, but those in the middle and sometimes they slip through the net. Like all education, the gifted and talented get attention and so do the strugglers.*

The assessment centres provide an opportunity for those with experience of the Programme and of organising to select those who are most likely to succeed – '*to seek out the best'*. A significant point was made though that in recruitment it is important to recognise that these are trainees and not expected to be fully fledged COs from the start, and at the end of the day, hosts and employers do still have the final say. This is a tension that has surfaced in Programme team discussions as well as in interviews. The pressures of delivery could easily encourage a risk averse approach to recruitment which would outweigh aspirations to recruit a diverse range of COs, including those who might not have had much prior experience of formal training.

Most agree that the initial residential training has improved greatly – there is more attention to the practicalities, it is less abstract, and there is a little more time. Overall, it was always a question of squeezing a much longer training process into the time the Programme allowed and there were a lot of learners for a new programme without the development time needed for accreditation. Supervision was introduced during the first year of the Programme, though the primary vehicle of e-learning has not met with universal approval (see below). A mid-term face-to-face review session has been introduced and welcomed. A big and not surprising piece of learning is that, as the Programme progresses, COs particularly value peer-to-peer support and welcome both the IN and the idea of regional networks – these could only emerge as the Programme developed. A training restructure is now being carried out, involving COs, a few hosts and some providers, and a new

approach which keeps the best of the original Programme, but also some significant changes to some content and timing, will be introduced from Cohort 12 onwards.

There is a tension between remarks that the model was too rigid and the comment that supervision and guidance was sometimes too laid back. The principle of 'not doing for others what they can do for themselves' (see Part II) has applied to the training as well as delivery, with COs expected to take responsibility for their own learning. But it has meant that sometimes COs felt they were asked to take too much responsibility - they would have welcomed more guidance and more 'banking' education.

Unsatisfactory arrangements with accreditation have now been largely sorted, with more resource and the OCN Centre (the 'internal verifier' function) integrated into Regenerate – to the satisfaction of OCN and Regenerate. All those involved in the accreditation process recognise that there has been some fallout from the rushed implementation of the Programme. The framework was never fully designed or piloted – or rather it was piloted but as part of real life delivery. The demands of accreditation, with a high volume of learners and a new curriculum, and an inclusive recruitment process that brought people unused to learning into the Programme, have proved to be a steep learning curve for all those involved. It has been suggested that the formal accreditation of learning was more 'added value' to the original bid rather than a considered approach to programme and learner development, though the current role of Regenerate as an OCN Centre in its own right, now reflects a greater understanding of the value of accreditation. The revised training programme may have some implications for the accreditation process but at this stage OCN will continue to be the awarding body until Cohort 14 has competed its training cycle.

Communications

Online was a big feature of the original Programme design. It aimed to enable large numbers of COs across the country to participate in networked learning and provides for a cost effective mechanism to deliver training and supervision. However, this has not always been effective with such large numbers of trainees and variable internet capacity. Yammer is widely criticised – some COs are not comfortable in sharing challenges and difficulties through it, and it is seen by many to be little more than a 'bragging' platform. This ties in with a perspective from a number of COs and hosts that in a Programme that is about challenging power, key partners have not always dealt well with challenge themselves, and that responses have sometimes been defensive.

Internal communications with both Locality and Regenerate have generally been a source of aggravation for COs and hosts. People talk of making an enquiry and not getting a response for weeks. For their part, Locality and Regenerate have felt that COs could sometimes have taken more responsibility, though it is generally accepted now that messages from the

delivery teams are clearer and that, as the Programme has evolved, the key partners are more relaxed about questions and challenge.

Communication with the outside world has been a core issue for the Programme. Ministers need to know it's working if they are to keep faith with it – they need to show something for their investment. Their relatively hands-off approach has been described as 'exemplary' so far, but they do need stories to give to the outside world, especially as the election looms. The hype at the beginning sparked a lot of resentment and resistance from the outside (which may say as much about the outside world as the Programme), and the Programme now needs to say more about what it is achieving. Recently, 100 stories have been compiled to illustrate the community organising process in action for this purpose. The Programme also needs to distinguish between good promotional stories and stories for learning, which need to be honest about the challenges of this programme's community organising process.

It is difficult to know how much of the early, very public antagonism towards the Programme lingers on. The danger for the Programme is that it is still seen as very separate from the wider community development field. Even within Locality the Programme is seen as separate, despite the fact that it gave a boost to the new organisation and embodies its core values of grass roots development. The experience and learning from the Community Organisers Programme has the potential to transform the way the Locality works in terms of listening to its members and the way it runs other Programmes. And hosts' experience has the potential to spread this learning across other community anchor organisations and inform community driven practice across the country.

Targets

There is a tension between the commitment of the Programme to being open-ended and bottom up and the need to deliver measurable outcomes. The Community Organisers Programme has only one funder driven target – to achieve 5000 community organisers over the four years, 500 bursary funded and 4500 volunteers. Having just the one target is a rarity within government but an indicator of its desire to move away from the target driven policies of New Labour years. However, having only one – well-publicised - target could leave the Programme more exposed if it is not met: '*it will create difficulties if outsiders want to take a potshot and use this to say the whole Programme has failed*'. So there is concern that the numbers of VCOs have fallen behind. Although there is a feeling this is improving, there is pressure on the Programme to do a lot of catching up in order to meet the target. On the one hand, Locality has always asserted that it is important to keep reasonably high targets, because large numbers of people are needed to build community networks capable of taking collective action and this message does seem to be gaining more currency. On the other hand, however, it is unclear how government arrived at this number in the first place and, as we shall see in Part II, some feel it is unrealistic, should have been renegotiated, may be

incompatible with putting residents first, and may in any case not reflect the changes being achieved on the ground.

There are, of course, internal targets and reporting requirements and COs and hosts feel that a Programme that was supposed to be relatively target-free has been beset by paperwork. However, some of the more internally driven targets e.g. numbers of listenings, seem to be slightly more relaxed than they were, or perhaps it is that they are better understood as an inherent and positive element in the process, rather than being seen as a dead weight from above.

Programme Learning

The need to build learning into the Programme was essential because of the experimental nature, the scale and the speed of delivery required. Programme management has clearly evolved in response to experience over time and, although it may seem that there is little time to stop and think, the appointment of learning and evaluation advisors at the start demonstrates the Programme's *'clear commitment to learning and reflection'*, even if the role and its significance within the Programme has taken time to 'bed in'. Several respondents have commented on the value of a learning resource and a wish that there could have been more opportunities for reflection, challenge and learning integrated into the Programme.

Locality also built in the Prince 2 project management approach which includes a 'Discovery Stage' to inform future programme delivery, and a key space for integrating learning into programme development was the Programme Board. Initially there was also a Policy and Practice Group involving a range of VCS and academic partners which was an attempt to connect with and involve the outside world. However, these two committees were combined early on. Was this a learning opportunity lost?

The Programme Board has involved Locality members and host representatives, CO Council members, civil servants and Locality and Regenerate programme managers. When there was a particular task e.g. the Discovery Stage Review, Programme Board members played a significant role but as time has passed, Programme Board meetings seem to have become less and less frequent, perhaps due to other and more pressing demands on people's time.

Reflection Points

1. Programme tendering processes push organisations into designing ambitious methodologies. Is there scope for bidders to negotiate a pilot phase before launching into delivery, and a review of targets part way through?

2. A wide range of skills and competencies have been required to

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manage this Programme. How can this learning be passed on to others setting out on a journey of programme management?

3. Relationships between partners are core to successful programmes but the building of trust takes time. How can this be acknowledged and allowed for in programme design and delivery?

4. How is learning and reflection best built in, and made use of, in an experimental programme of this kind?

Part II: The vision in practice

The Community Organising Programme aimed to address some of the shortcomings of community interventions in the past and in particular to ensure that change is driven by residents rather than development workers and external agencies. It adopted the RSLM model developed by Regenerate. Key to this model were the principles of listening, not doing things for people, working first and foremost with residents rather than local organisations, enabling residents to set the agenda, and ensuring that the knowledge gained was in the control of residents rather than taken over by outsiders.

It is still early days for the Programme. As we shall report later, many of those involved stress how building community power through community organising will take time if it is to be sustainable. Nonetheless, it has left a deep impression on many of those who have been involved – as COs, hosts/employers and Programme deliverers. There is a growing body of stories – some reproduced in the boxes below - of confidence increasing among individual residents, relationships and networks developing locally and of small-scale achievements on which larger-scale change will eventually be built. And the principles of this model of community organising are being spread through and beyond the organisations involved.

So how has this been achieved and what has been learnt? In Part II, we look first at people's reflections on how the model is working in practice. We highlight some of the issues and tensions they have raised in relation to putting the model on the ground. We then discuss progression and how this is working out, as well as the steps being taken to establish a legacy body. We end with some questions for reflection.

The power of listening

> *The special thing about it is the listening discipline. Most of us work in a world where we purport to speak on behalf of people, especially in difficult times. We play games with it, consciously and unconsciously.*

People at all levels of the Programme testified to the value of listening. This remained for many the central feature of the model. Hosts spoke about how it had given them a greater understanding of the community – some said how envious they were of COs having the space and mandate to just go out and listen. Many of those we spoke to said that, although the principle of listening to the community had always been at the heart of their mission, cuts or the demands of contract work meant that they had lost the capacity for this basic foundational work:

> *We used to doorknock and this has given us the capacity to do that again. We work from very similar principles… but we didn't have anyone to do it. Now it's kind of validated our work.*

The hosts we spoke to relished the challenge it provided and were embedding it into their practice, using it for community profiling, parish plans or to tests out plans for new work. They also commented on how the practice of going out and knocking on doors, listening to people in cafes and other natural gathering places, had extended their reach to a more diverse group of people – different ethnic groups in some areas, children and young people in others. While these hosts were adamant that they had not taken on COs in order to promote their own organisation, some also found that residents were more aware of their own existing services as a result of the listening process.

Opportunities for hosts

One rural host had tried parish plans in the past and failed because people didn't see themselves as part of the community. So community organising offered an opportunity to see what people felt about their area and what concerns they had.

Another host said that it had unwittingly encouraged local residents to become dependent on its services. Community organising was an opportunity to 'look outwards and do things differently'. Less energy was spent on seeking resources and setting up bureaucratic partnerships and more on creating space that local people could use. Old measures of success had changed.

A third commented on how COs had provided 'proper outreach, with good levels of intelligence, new contacts, a different perspective on how to engage with people rather than simply relying on tried and trusted methods.

Listening starts with individuals and several people commented on the importance of this as a foundation for collective action. Some COs and hosts saw this as a crucial difference from what they saw as mainstream community development (and some other forms of community organising); for others, it was simply, as we have seen, a return to basic principles. Either way, it was a necessary step before people have the confidence to link up with others. Indeed, some residents have an initial distrust of the whole idea of collective action.

Individual change

We had a community hub on her estate and X came to us with 3 young children and no confidence. Now she is absolutely flying and runs one of our community hubs. She spoke at our annual conference. It's incredible how her confidence has built. When she went to the residential, she said, I can't do this – I'm coming back at the end of the day. But now she's signed up for a third year. We could have developed her but not to the same extent. She's blossomed – physically as well as in her confidence. She writes her own speeches and got a standing ovation at our conference……. She'll still be there for every single person on the estate, especially young kids and those who are excluded. She'll never lose that learning.

The impact on individuals is enormous. There is no history of enterprise in our area but at least two of the people our CO brought in as volunteers are going to get individual grants through Big Local as star partners [these are social enterprise grants] – they wouldn't have dreamed of it a year ago.

From listening to dialogue to collective action

Listening is only part of the story. The ideas of Paolo Freire have been influential in developing the Programme's approach to community organising and these highlight the importance of dialogue and relationships. Listening needs to move to dialogue. Building relationships is critical to community organising, getting people talking together and countering isolation.

Building relationships

One CO told the story of how an unlikely alliance between a white man and a group of Black women came about. Following lots of listenings, the COs held a drop in with a display to illustrate what they had heard and created an open space to listen. The opportunity to hear the experiences of the Somali women *'tweaked something in him - now he's helping them get a petition together. That came from open-ended listening'.*

A white guy and a Muslim guy are now working together on a local issue. They don't mix socially and probably never will. But they work well together and are making progress on the issue concerned.

Moving to action was something that many COs had found challenging, however. Several commented on the wealth of ideas that come out of the listening process. But they felt they got stuck when it came to turning these ideas into action. One commented that the model didn't do enough to help people beyond '*a house meeting and a tea party'*:

> *So COs go from feeling 'This is really exciting' to being really confused as they collect a billion ideas and then what?*

Was this a personal failure? One person suggested that the skills that made a CO a good listener were not necessarily the same of those that would help them move to action. Or was it down to the process? One CO felt that it was: '*That is also a familiar criticism of the Freirean approach – when you have these conversations, it feels like useful process, but it is hard to turn it into concrete stuff.'*

Others felt that too much was expected too early. COs recognised that '*it's important to go at the residents' speed but it can be frustrating…the RSLM process is fine for four years, but we don't have that time'.*

As we saw in Part I, the RSLM process would normally focus on listening for the entire first twelve months in order to build networks and identify a core team of local residents to take things further. Only then would it move to action. And in the early days, COs seemed clear that they should resist the temptation to work on 'projects'. But some people argued that an emphasis on numbers had pushed them in this direction: '*There is a danger that if you are too overt about measuring and counting action, that drives organisers to think that their job is to set up projects'.* It has been suggested that the current recommendation that COs support a few fledgling projects in Year 1 might be replaced with performance targets based on the building of networks as a

more sustainable power base. There was criticism, too, of the pressure from government for stories of impact on the basis of a year's investment:

> *..the danger is that if you prod the chrysalis too much, you kill the butterfly.*

There is a tension between participation and getting things done. Some COs underlined the importance of quick wins to inspire the rest of the community and show that something can be achieved. And of course, there are some stories of impact, even in that first year. But most felt that impact would be further down the line.

Examples of early impact

A bus service reinstated in Sheffield
A swimming pool reopened in Birmingham
A locally based job advice centre in Portland
A mass road campaign in Patchway, South Gloucestershire
Safety and security measures for boaters along the Regent's Canal

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Another area of frustration was the fact that as yet there is not much evidence of the Programme enabling communities to challenge those in power.   There are clear aspirations on the part of the Programme, and those in government who have promoted it, that this work should have implications for democratic process, politics and power. Some questioned whether all the COs appointed shared this ambition. But some certainly do and, frustratingly for them, the evidence suggests that this, too, will be a longer-term ambition.

An army of community organisers

As we reported in Part I, the most high profile target for the Programme is the achievement of 5000 community organisers (500 trained and 4500 volunteers) – indeed for the government funders, this is the principal target on which the Programme will be measured. As Part I explains, however, many felt this was an unrealistic target and some argued that it should have been renegotiated. There is some evidence that later cohorts are recruiting to target and achieving a certain number of volunteers has become a condition of progression. But there have been a number of difficulties[2]:

- There are what we might call **'technical'** issues about definition and timing. Who exactly counts as a volunteer community organiser? Although government was clear in its Invitation to Tender - i.e. a volunteer community organiser is someone who receives some training and carries out at some listenings over a period of time - this has not always been clear to those on the ground.
- There are also **'process'** issues. COs reported that it was often easier to work with people on their idea for a project than to persuade them to do

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[2] Imagine (2013)) *Learning about Learning,*
http://www.cocollaborative.org.uk/resources/learning-about-learning

listenings. They recognised the importance of getting a wider mandate for action, but argued that this could be an incremental process and that the confidence to do listenings – and an understanding of why – could grow out of small-scale action.

- Residents may be reluctant to sign up officially because of nervousness about the **impact on benefits and availability for work**, especially given the ever tightening constraints – '*sticking a label on someone is anathema'*, said one CO.
- Then there are issues about CO **time and skills.** One host commented that it was hard for COs to juggle training volunteers with their listening and accreditation schedules. And some felt ill-equipped to train volunteers when they were still trainees themselves;
- **Austerity** means that people in communities are struggling – the pressures on their lives make it difficult for them to take action;
- Finally, there are issues of **sustainability.** Volunteer involvement varies over time. Some may have life changes - as one CO said '*Life gets in the way'* and, especially given that they are not paid, volunteers inevitably come and go. For others, their renewed confidence leads to them getting a job – some have successfully applied to be paid trainees on the Programme.

Many felt there was a tension between getting the numbers and **quality** - spending the time necessary to build trust and really get to know people who might become volunteers or help the CO in other ways: '*If you get the VCOs but nothing changes, does anyone care?'*. There was also a strong feeling that, while, considerable energy and effort has been put into getting the training right for COs, little attention has been given to the training and support needed for VCOs and how to support COs in providing this.

Of course different COs respond in different ways to the challenges of community organising and we will return to this. Some have had no problem with signing up volunteers. But the process of moving to action and building leadership among residents highlighted a number of issues for COs in relation to the model's basic principles.

Applying the principles - challenges and balancing acts

While there was considerable support for the key principles of RSLM, some COs and hosts felt that putting them into practice was less straightforward than the theory suggested.

- *For or With?*

    The key things are the values and principles: hanging back, people taking responsibility for themselves, making sure they are the ones to take action.

Given the Programme's criticism of the tendency of previous programmes and practice to impose external agendas on communities - to do things to and for

them – an absolutely central principle of RSLM has been that action must come from residents themselves. One respondent commented that *'it is hard to break prevailing tendencies to look to the "expert"'* and it can also be hard for community workers to hang back. So, for the trainers, this message needed to be unequivocal. Indeed most COs took it very seriously. COs should be guiding residents through a process, not delivering things FOR them. However, some hosts and COs felt that, in demanding that COs resist doing things for residents, the Programme went to the opposite extreme and that opportunities and ideas were lost because COs felt they had to wait for the people in the community to take action. A host commented that it was '*sinful to let those ideas come up from the community only for them to disappear because no-one has the energy to go through with them'*. COs recognised the importance of ensuring that the momentum came from local people, but argued that remaining 'hands off 'could deprive residents of help that they needed. In one case, a host reported occasions when local people's lack of experience had nearly landed them in financial trouble; in another example, a host argued that a group could have done with advice on how to handle conflict:

> *Community development would have introduced the group to facilitation, structured the meeting to avoid a conflict situation, given them a few tools they could use. But the CO said: I'm not there to do it for them. It's up to them, it's their meeting.   It's not my meeting; I mustn't be doing what they should be doing.*

However, in the latter case, the host felt that the COs had not themselves been equipped with the skills they needed to support the community through these difficult issues.

In some cases, COs may have over-interpreted the message they were receiving. But in the early days, some COs reported quite punitive reactions from the Programme when they did take any initiative to help a resident do something. With later cohorts, more flexibility has come into the Programme and as they progress to Year 2, COs described an approach where they did things together with local people, so long as local people were willing to take responsibility and had a mandate:

> *It's about finding out what they want to do and helping them to do it. Doing it with them not for them. I use the 'we' language not 'I' and 'you' – we are doing this together. In the early days* [of the Programme] *it would have been 'you'.*

But finding the right balance is a critical journey for COs and the Programme as a whole and more learning and debate on how COs have squared this circle would be valuable.

- ***Working with other organisations***

The need to avoid imposing external agendas on residents is reflected not only in the listening process but also in the requirement that COs should not

work with other local organisations. Again the rationale is clear. This ensures that COs are working with residents' agendas and not those of professional agencies or existing groups. And it underlines the need to ensure that actions taken by local leaders have a solid mandate from the rest of the community. But it has been a source of frustration for many in the Programme who question the 'unhealthy distrust' that seemed to be embedded in the Programme at the beginning – a distrust that was even extended to hosts, with some seeing RSLM's 'anti-organisational', 'anti-institutional' stance as counterproductive.

There were a number of reasons why respondents wanted a more nuanced approach to other organisations.

Firstly, early hosts came up against a lot of resentment from other local organisations, because of the resources and high profile given to this programme at a time of cuts. Hosts had to manage what one called '*the politics of envy'* and this was not helped by a perception of the approach as being consciously separate from whatever else was going on locally (and even within the host organisation itself).

Secondly, local organisations have resources, skills and knowledge that local people can use. Not everyone is an enemy and many see it as important to embed RSLM principles in existing organisations if change is to be achieved. Certainly, there have been reports of other local organisations being impressed by the work of the COs and wanting to know more about how they can support this kind of approach. In one area, the success of a local campaign encouraged local councillors to take an interest. COs and hosts also describe how they were able to link local organisations together and, in some cases, how exposure to RSLM had successfully challenged the way other organisations worked.

The third and, for many, the most crucial point raised in our interviews related to progression:

> *COs spend the first two months saying: Huh? And the last two months saying: Oh shit! Because they weren't able to make relationships with local agencies. That's the biggest mistake. Could we not have been more impure? We could have built up a lot of allies over the past couple of years but we have organised totally independently, as if we had landed from the planet Zog.*

We will return to progression below.

For RSLM, it is the host who should be managing these relationships and protecting the space for COs to listen. But the expectations of the host have always been unclear (see Part I).

Meanwhile, the message is changing, not least in response to the demands of progression:

> *COs picked up that it was their job to do the listening but not to engage with other organisations to explain what they were doing. This led to friction. Locality has changed its attitude – they still say don't spend all your time talking to groups but there is much better linkage. For the succession strategy it is important not to rub organisations up the wrong way.*

Locality also see that it is important to embed the principles of CO in hosts for the longer-term. The challenge is to find ways in which COs can make an impact on the organisations in which they are located, whilst at the same time remaining independent and accountable back to the communities they are working with.

- ***Whose knowledge?***

RSLM requires that the knowledge generated from listening should stay with local residents. In the model this would be the community holding team, though our understanding is that few of these have been established. In the absence of a community holding team, it is not clear how this knowledge is collated and shared – there has been no systematic way of doing this to our knowledge. Given the way residents' views and knowledge have often been exploited in the past, this principle is understandable, and it reflects community organising practice elsewhere:

> *Community ownership of the production of knowledge is a powerful tool in the organising process, developing skill, confidence and a greater capacity to deal with powerful partners.*[3]

However, the fact that knowledge was not shared did create tensions between COs and hosts – or other workers within the host - at times. And there were several people who argued for a less rigid approach. The knowledge that COs gained could help a host attune its activities more to local needs and in some cases this has happened, despite the strictures of RSLM. It is also not clear what happens to the knowledge gained where COs do not progress.

Many argued too that local knowledge should be collated nationally, so that local concerns could be collectively expressed through a national voice – indeed they were disappointed that this hadn't happened as yet. As one host said:

> *If we're organising in disparate communities and if that information isn't being collated, I don't see the movement in it… a lot has happened in the world since the Programme started and it has all gone through without being challenged.*

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[3] *Beck and Purcell, see earlier footnote*

Variation

This is an account of stops and starts, highs and lows – which might be expected of any Programme, especially one that was avowedly experimental. That said, there was criticism of what many saw as the rigidity of the model at the outset and relief that the messages were now changing to allow for more flexibility. As one person put it, '*the initial scary stuff has mellowed*'. In fact we were told that the model is inherently flexible, but this was not clear to early cohorts in particular, who only heard 'half the message' and argued that the process put up unnecessary barriers. They were told to 'trust the process' but not told why and some felt this made COs unnecessarily dependent. On the other hand, maybe the model needed to be uncompromising at the beginning, to ensure that the key principles became firmly embedded and drove the practice on the ground. Had the model been looser from the start, might COs have slipped into old ways of doing things, done things for people rather than encouraging them to do things for themselves, got involved in projects rather than processes and relationships, spent too much time with other local agencies rather than directly with residents themselves? One view was that as more flexibility entered the Programme, some of the challenge associated with that uncompromising position had been lost: '*It's taking a hard line that makes it different'… You have to stick a firework in there!*'

Nonetheless, some COs had found it useful to learn about other approaches to community organising and enjoyed the opportunity that progression provided to adapt the model, while stressing that they still stuck firmly to the principles that RSLM embodied. There is surely scope for sharing information on the different ways in which they are doing this and how it is working out.

In reality, of course, there was variation in the way the Programme played out in different locations, in different cohorts, with different hosts and different COs. The Programme evaluation should be able to say more about this, but our study suggested the following:

- *Location*

Every community is different and this gave the Programme the chance to test its approach in many different settings – a real strength of the Programme. An important lesson for government was that it was impossible to generalise across the board and there were those who argued that RSLM should have taken more account of this. So, while some found the Programme worked well where there was already a lot on the ground to work on, others felt this left them with little room to manoeuvre. Some put their success down to the fact that they were in 'virgin territory'; others felt that, in the time available, it was difficult to move beyond the initial stages if there was no tradition of action on the ground:

> *There is a fine balance between where organising works and doesn't work. Areas that have had lots of money in the past aren't always the best areas – conversely where nothing has happened it can be difficult to get through the door.*

Some people felt that RSLM was a 'one size fits all' approach and did not allow for the challenges of different kinds of area. Some argued that it did not allow for the complex nature and history of urban areas, while others felt that it was an urban model and more account needed to be taken of the scattered nature of the rural population:

> *Rural areas don't have a lot of community spaces and communities don't look inside their community for services. There are a lot of second homes here, military families, commuters. Community organising needs to recognise that.*

In fact, RSLM was developed in a rural area and further debate about how location affects the application of the model would be of value, informed not only by the Regenerate experience, but also by the findings of the evaluation.

- **Hosting**

The Programme actively sought out different kinds of host. We are not in a position to report on how the Programme varied according to the type of host, and different area based approaches to 'organising the organisers' may be a useful study for the external evaluation team to pick up. There was a view that the hub and spoke model adopted by Regenerate elsewhere might have had advantages in building up a critical mass of information, experience and relationships in the time available to the Programme. The closest that the Programme came to this was in the collaborative hosting models that were adopted in a few places. In Leeds a partnership of thirteen organisations came together with a proposal for eight of them to host ten Organisers between them; in Bradford five different organisations initially '*developed collaborative working as a way of increasing ….. joint ability to influence and to deliver'*, and in Sheffield five organisations who hosted thirteen Organisers over three separate cohorts have worked together to create a future organising strategy for the city. These collaborative approaches are considered to have had their ups and downs, but with improvements, some feel it could be a useful model for cities.

Collaborative working

The model designed in Leeds had two key ambitions:

1. to enable a strategic approach to Community Organising - thus increasing the potential for higher impact and sustainability.

The follow on council funding of two posts could be seen as evidence of some impact, though the partnership structure did not actually help with sustainability – it just made fundraising more complex to organize.

2. to enable CO to be brought to bear to priority communities rather than ones where a vol org was well established.

> This was achieved really well and ten priority communities in Leeds had a CO for a year. This approach also brought a range of voluntary organisations together that have community roots and an understanding of community development - an achievement in itself that is still rolling out its effect.

- ***What makes a good CO?***

One question raised by our study was whether COs had to be extraordinary people, or whether they could be grown from a wider pool. There has been considerable variety in the kind of people recruited as COs and some see this as a great strength of the Programme. A lot of what has been learnt is reflected in the work of the assessment centres and in the Performance Management Framework. One of our respondents summed up the qualities required as follows:

- a people person, who has empathy but a core of steel.
- able to 'join the dots' and be quite strategic about how to move to action without doing things FOR residents (but also able to think tactically).
- believing that everyone has the power to make a difference - the most successful COs see something in people that those people don't see in themselves.
- knowing whether to push someone or not, when to introduce residents to other useful people– it's like a mentoring relationship.

Implicit in our interviews were debates about whether COs should live locally or not, what sort of background they should have and whether they should be able to 'hit the ground running'. Although one person commented that the *'level of education doesn't seem to make a difference – all kinds of people turn out to be successful COs'*, several respondents remarked on the preponderance of graduates – not only as COs but in the Inspiration Network which was set up to offer peer support. This may be impression rather than reality, and could be a response to a lack of transparency around how IN members are selected.

Host organisations who had made it their mission to 'grow' their staff from the locality saw it as essential that local people had the opportunity to train as COs:

> *We grow our own workers and could identify people who would be good COs. 85% of our staff came in as clients. We wanted to give an opportunity to these people.*
> *Its an opportunity for local people and important that the COs are embedded in their local community and can talk easily with people. People respect them in a way that they wouldn't if they were people they didn't know.*

One host celebrated the fact that they had been able to recruit older people – including men who had been made redundant as a result of the loss of local industries – and praised the contribution they had made. But another

respondent suggested that some local people would be more successful as volunteer organisers – for example, where they had difficulty with meeting the demands of an intensive training programme or of holding down a job.

Either way, there were those who argued that the Programme should not just be recruiting people who were already well- equipped to be COs, but should remember that they are trainees and look for potential. Although people should not be set up to fail, people develop at different paces and some who may not have been seen as promising at the outset had turned into very successful COs.

Support

There have been major strides in personal development for COs, as our *Learning about Learning* paper demonstrated.

Personal development; some comments from COs

I feel really lucky that this was my job. I've experienced a very intense two years, 'but it's the most I've ever learnt in my entire life. I've met some lovely people and been really inspired'

It made me more self-reliant and independent and I have developed the ability to challenge power

It has made me so much more aware of the needs and feelings of others and has helped me become less judgemental

It's made me stronger. I know myself more, have discovered tools and talents I didn't know I had

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Hosts who had employed local residents described how they were now 'changed people', 'brimming with confidence' – we were told of one CO who had never had a job before and who has now got another job on the basis of his CO experience.

But there was a general feeling that the Programme had underestimated the support needs of COs, taking a 'sink or swim' approach and expecting them to 'just get on with it', especially in the early cohorts. This is a process, we were told by one CO, that '*either gives you strength or drags you down'*. Another respondent commented that *'Everyone underestimated the support needed for the COs as learners and the need for a differentiated support model that took account of those less literate'.* There is an emphasis in the Programme on CO trainees taking responsibility for their own learning, but our '*Learning about Learning'* report describes the trainee year as an emotional roller coaster and respondents argued that there should have been more preparation or support for the emotional toll taken by working with stressed communities. A host commented how COs found themselves in situations that would test even the most experienced professional. COs commented on the harrowing stories they sometimes heard on the doorstep, as austerity

began to bite. There were many reports of poor communication and lack of response to queries from Locality and Regenerate – as well as uncertainty about who to go to for help. And while there was an emphasis on reflection in the training, some argued that COs needed much more support in learning how to reflect – something that has been recognised in the current training restructure.

COs overwhelmingly valued the support of their peers. And as new cohorts have come on board, they have often looked to the COs from earlier cohorts for advice. But there has been little room in their schedule for the peer-to-peer networking that so many want to see. Some felt, too, that more opportunities for COs to network and collaborate would build the momentum for action at a national level.

The value of peer support has been recognised by the Programme through the development of the Inspiration Network and is likely to be further strengthened during the remaining year of the Programme through regional meetings. It has also been suggested that more space could be provided for this at Action Camp – a combination of reflection sessions and opportunities for personal development. However, COs argued that it would be important to be honest about what has and hasn't worked – it has been difficult, they argued, to acknowledge and learn from failure.

> *We're trying to do two things. One is to progress, which requires promotion; the other is to learn, which requires us to figure out what has gone wrong. But there's no space to admit failure. We do it in our supervision too, talk things up. There's no chance for a level of honesty.*

They are trainees, they argued, and therefore to struggle is not a weakness or a sign of failure, but an opportunity to learn. Again they highlighted the importance of learning about and from other models.

One further important question raised by this study relates to the lack of support available to volunteer community organisers - seen by some as a major omission but also difficult to provide within the Programme's resources. Past experience warns of the risks of burn-out, of co-option, of gate-keeping, of facing hostility from power holders or other parts of the community. This will be a particular issue over the longer-term – how can it be addressed?

Moving forward: Progression

Some months into the first year of the Programme, funding was secured to support progression into a second year. But until recently, Programme design has concentrated on the first year. This means that there has been no apparent strategy for the continuation of the CO journey into Year Two for those who do progress – it is all *'rather random'*. Nor is there an exit strategy for those who do not - there was considerable concern about what happened to communities involved in the Programme after the COs' trainee year:

- On the one hand, if COs failed to progress, what would happen to the residents they had left behind? Would this be seen as just another time-limited programme that government had parachuted in and then ended, leaving the community high and dry? If so, the risk was that residents would be more disillusioned than ever, thinking 'Well that's another one gone!' This might also be the case if a CO progressed to another employer with different priorities. And what would happen to the knowledge gained?

- On the other hand, there were concerns, if a CO did progress to another employer, that the new employer might not understand the principles of the Programme and that these would be watered down. Or indeed that a new employer might not be willing to accept the challenge inherent in the model that was also more likely to surface after the first year. One second year host described how the progression funder was to some extent 'in the dark' about what was going on because the host was afraid plans for action would be seen as too challenging. This draws attention to the need for ongoing support and training after the first year, certainly for the COs but also possibly for the new employer.

As things stand, the usual route for progression is to continue with the host or find another employer. One host commented on how Organisers can 'sell' the programme and themselves in a positive light:

> *A lot of it is down to the individual. There was another CO who also came to us. His plan didn't match up and he emphasised that CO was not to be meddled with by the funders, but he wanted them to fund it anyway. Whereas x presented it as an exciting opportunity for us.*

Another option for progression – common in other community organising models - is to fund a community organiser through dues, but these are often paid by organisations not individual residents. Expecting to progress on the basis of residents' dues in areas hit by austerity is ambitious. At the very least, one person pointed out, if this is to be an option, there need to be quick wins and this will be rare in the trainee year for all the reasons discussed earlier.

In some areas, there is evidence that groups are getting on with things without the support of a CO but, as we have already argued, it is difficult to achieve this in a year.   Some felt that more attention needed to be given to embedding CO principles with hosts whatever the outcome of progression. This – and questions of sustainability into future years - will need to be high on the agenda for CoCo as the legacy body.

Moving forward: CoCo

A number of issues raised in this part of the report have important implications for CoCo as the legacy body. These include:

- the need to expand peer support;
- the need to take a more strategic approach to year 2 (and indeed subsequent years);
- the need to offer training and support to VCOs;
- the need to pick up issues at a national level.

However, most of those we spoke to had little idea about what CoCo was doing and what the membership fee they were paying was buying. It is early days as yet, but they wanted more transparency. It has to be acknowledged too that providing the financial stability for CoCo to develop any of these roles will be an uphill struggle. This kind of organisation is difficult to fund.

Nevertheless, CoCo will have an increasing role in developing and promoting CO as practised in this Programme. Respondents want to see it:

- Provide a network to keep all COs, VCOs and hosts connected, whether progressing, still acting as a host or not;
- Promote CO stories and build a portfolio of evidence for progression;
- Provide opportunities for learning about policy;
- Engage in training;
- Provide employer briefings;
- Build a movement and avoid becoming a 'professional association'.

Community Organisers have just elected four COs as Directors of CoCo and they will have strategic responsibility for ensuring that its four core functions of building an internal network and providing member services, promoting community organising and training future generations of Community Organisers are delivered. The legacy of the government funded programme is well under way, and it has been suggested that underpinning this legacy with use of the nationally recognised Qualifications and Credit Framework for qualifications in community organising might be one way to secure future public funding.

Maximising opportunities

In a few areas, the COP sits alongside other government or other national programmes. And, although this is not always the case, in some areas the listening process has provided a valuable foundation for other programmes. The COP does not come with pots of money for communities (for example, as the Community First and Big Local programmes do) and, for some this is one of its greatest strengths. Too often past Programmes have been consumed by the need to spend the money and one host spoke of the way in which hosting the Programme had encouraged his organisation to see success less in terms of the money they raised and more in terms of how it served the local community. But in some areas, the listening approach helped to ensure that money from other government Programmes was spent as the local community wanted.

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Community Organising and Community First

COs often operate in areas with Community First funding. Here there can be good linkage between the two Programmes, with Community Organisers highlighting local concerns and Community First providing pump-priming grants:

- In one area, older residents were frightened by number of hostels nearby, with wheelie bins being set on fire etc. They talked to COs about wanting security gates. The Community First panel agreed to contribute to cost of gates.
- In another area, community organisers found a resident who wanted to provide free classes for local people and Community First provided the funding for them to set this up.

The Office for Civil Society made attempts to ensure that its Programmes were linked in this way, but this was not always the case with other national Programmes and there are familiar lessons about the need for co-ordination between local programmes emanating from different sources. Nonetheless, in at least two areas, the foundation that community organising had created had also benefited Big Local in their area:

> *With Big Local, they haven't got the usual suspects. There is no: Let's have a rep of this, that or the other. Just, if you're interested, come along. There's a willingness on the part of people to get involved. Without CO, they wouldn't have heard about it. ……. It's widened participation, modelled how they've approached people and designed our Delivery Plan.*

> *We have been linked into Big Local by the CO – it's not of course the CO who made that happen, but she is a resource for Big Local. People in that area are organised beyond the usual suspects, have begun to identify with the estate…… In the past, they would have said: I could never do that, that's not for me, raised all sorts of issues. Now they are saying: That's going to have to come from me.*

Reflection points

1. What is the strategy beyond Year 1 for COs, VCOs and for residents? Should there be an exit strategy where COs do not stay in their initial area? How do we ensure that community organising retains a distinctive presence?

2. Respondents repeatedly spoke of staying true to the principles of this model of community organising. Do all partners (COs, hosts, training providers etc) agree on what these are?

3. How is the tension between core principles and flexibility to meet reality addressed? Now that aspects of the model are becoming more flexible, what are the essentials and what can be relaxed?

4. While respecting the principle that residents' knowledge is owned

by them, is there knowledge that needs to be shared more widely – both locally and nationally? How do we understand the challenge of moving to action, and what might the range of expectations around this might be?

1. How can COs embed the principles of community organising in host and other local organisations whilst at the same time remaining independent and accountable back to their communities.

2. How can VCOs be supported to continue the work of the Programme?

Part III: A space and place for change

In the introduction, we outlined the theory of change that was developed in the early stages of the Programme. It was based on a belief that community development had lost its way and that previous government programmes had encouraged dependency and 'learned helplessness'[4]. Some of the key principles that our respondents identified in the Programme's approach were:

- An approach based on assets rather than a race to the bottom
- Community people defining the way I work
- Working with individuals first
- And then about relationships rather than projects

Or as one person put it:

> *This Programme tells people they have the power to change things; they don't have to wait for change to come to them.*

Those we spoke to felt overwhelmingly that the Programme was demonstrating that this approach could work, although they emphasised the need to give it the necessary time and space. It has demonstrated that:

- Local residents can be trusted
- Local residents can surprise us
- Local people can generate lots of ideas
- Government can be hands off

New and different?

The mood of the Programme from the beginning was that it was promoting a new and different approach from those that had dominated practice in previous decades. Government made a big play of launching it as something new, better than anything before it, and consciously or not, set up the Community Organisers programme as something other players were only too ready to take pot shots at.

But several hosts and COs criticised the tendency to 'treat 2011 as Year Zero'. They saw it instead as a welcome return to the basics of community development. It proved, said one person, that:

> *There is a space and place in the world today for gentle grass roots holistic organising. It takes time but it works.*

It had allowed some hosts to reinstate ways of working that had been crowded out by cuts in funding or projects driven by funders' targets and requirements. And in some areas, it had demonstrated how this basic

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[4] Seligman, M (1975) *Helplessness,* San Francisco, Ca: W.H.Freeman

foundational work could underpin other programmes and approaches (see Part II). Rather than setting RSLM up in opposition to other approaches, therefore, they preferred to see it as part of a spectrum of approaches that could learn from and complement each other. Indeed, COs were keen to learn how other approaches could inform and complement their work.

As such, several expressed concern about the Programme distancing itself from other organisations at a local and national level. Given the hostility that greeted the Programme at the outset, especially at a time when VCS funding and community work posts were being cut, some defensiveness was understandable. But several people now wanted to see CoCo working in collaboration with other organisations, especially when it came to promoting community organising and working for change at a national level.

It is probably fair to say that this requires movement not only on the part of the Programme, but also on the part of others involved in community practice. One CO commented:

> *The community development world gets tied up in infighting because it is not willing to admit the contradictions within community work.*

It would be a sad reflection on the world of community work if it cannot engage in the dialogue and mutual learning that it wishes to promote on the ground.

Of course, the current funding climate does not help. Firstly, organisations are operating in a competitive market, which sets a premium on 'branding'. Funders could do a lot more to promote collaboration. There is always fallout when one organisation succeeds in winning a contract and others don't, and we acknowledge that those running a particular programme live and breathe it, and will defend it to the hilt. But what is the funders' role in helping to join the dots?

Secondly, this kind of work is hard to sell.   Several people commented that, while the Programme's approach embraced the kind of foundational work on which the project, enterprises, targets and outcomes that funders wish to see are based, it was hard to see who was going to invest in this basic work in the long-term. As a recent report on community organising from the Young Foundation argues:

Growing Community Organising

It takes at least 18 months before you start seeing action. Two key interlocking assets that take time to build – relationships and power – are vital for the community organising model….
Funders need to be patient if they want to grow organising. The participatory nature of community organising means that it is not possible to be certain of the outcomes that will be dictated by the priorities of local communities. This can make it difficult to define targets and agree on beneficiaries.

The Young Foundation (May 2013): *Growing Community Organising*

It is a difficult world into which to launch CoCo as a fledgling organisation. And the growth and survival of CoCo will be critical to any legacy for the Programme.

> *It is in a risky place – there are few funding streams to fund this kind of role UK wide. It's great for government to say, let's have nice, active communities, but who is willing to bear that risk?*

There is an urgency now to identify a funding model for CoCo, and suggestions have been made. The most sustainable model might rest on attracting some form of endowment that can cover core costs, matched by membership contributions from neighbourhood based community anchor organisations and COs, and perhaps drawing in others, such as trades unions, who could jointly finance, and benefit from, some of the services CoCo might offer. This could help shape the legacy body as envisioned by the Inspiration Network; *'A clearly defined CoCo which promotes community organising in collaboration with other organisations to influence issues on a local, regional and national level'.*

The challenge for the approach

The approach to community organising that the Programme adopted has been RSLM. And we want to end with a few reflections on how this has worked out in the longer-term. The first thing that must be said is that the principles that RSLM embodies are highly valued and many would agree these have been an invaluable foundation for the Programme as a whole. However, time and budgetary constraints mean that it has not been possible to implement RSLM in the way Regenerate (or indeed Locality) would ideally have liked. There have also been times when Regenerate have felt their 25 years of expertise in applying the model has not been acknowledged or appropriately applied. This is not a programme evaluation report and it doesn't delve into the value, detail and application of the RSLM model. But there is a debate to be had – as we have indicated in the main text - about how the model is applied by the Programme and CoCo into the future. In particular, there are questions now about how the relationship between the Programme and RSLM as the intellectual property of Regenerate is seen as the Programme goes forward, which need to be addressed. Conversely, there is an issue about the relationship between CoCo and the Association of RSLM Practitioners – and how the experience and resources of each can complement and add value to, rather than compete with, the other.

Shifting power

Finally, the Programme's theory of change speaks of a revitalised democracy with a real shift in power to communities. The long-term ambition of the Programme has been to build a movement for change that will challenge existing power. For a number of those involved this means that, as it develops, CoCo should be taking up issues at a national level and engaging with other organisations where appropriate to do so.

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This would involve making more connections between communities who have been engaged with the Programme. We reported earlier that COs do not feel there has been enough opportunity for sharing and reflecting together, although this may change with the introduction of regional meetings. Will this extend to communities themselves in the longer term? This is central to the community organising vision, as Beck and Purcell's review of community organising across the globe argues that:

> *The process of sharing local experience, reflection and analysis enables the urban poor to own the process of knowledge creation and to develop collective vision and action. Additionally, the process creates strong, personalised bonds between communities who share common problems, presenting them with a wide range of options through which they can address their problems.*

Reflection Points

1. How can the momentum of the Progranmme be sustained? And where does the responsibility lie for ensuring that this happens?

2. How can the learning from the Programme be disseminated and benefit the wider community action and policy worlds?

3. What will be the legacy for all the communities who have been invovled?

Appendix 1 The Community Organisers Programme theory of change

Why have a Programme?

Despite decades of different government interventions, there are still too many places of disadvantage around the country. People in these areas find local services poor and unresponsive. They are disillusioned with government; they feel they are not listened to and have no voice. Programmes set up to empower them have failed to do so. Instead of freeing communities to make changes, government and professionals have often got in the way.

The Community Organisers programme is based on the belief that communities themselves can play the crucial role in tackling the root causes of entrenched and emerging problems. But for this to happen, change needs to be driven by local residents themselves, rather than government or external agencies. There needs to be a real shift in power to communities.

How can this be achieved?

Over the four years of the Programme, 500 senior community organisers will:
- be **hosted** by local organisations who are already embedded in the local area.
- be **funded by bursaries** for the first year
- go through an **intensive training programme** – residential and on-line
- be given **opportunities to network** with and learn from each other, and the choice of various **options for further training**.

With this support, they will:
- carry out an intensive process of **listening** to local residents, tapping into what matters most to them;
- focus on residents' **assets** and their capacity to make change, rather than on problems;
- **challenge**, where necessary, residents' belief that there is little they can do to change their circumstances;
- Recruit and support volunteer community organisers - **people who are willing to take a lead** and will take action
- Establish **new arrangements to establish and promote local priorities**, with buy-in from the local community.

What will the outcomes be?

The initial outcome of this initial process of listening, challenging and building leadership will be more local people coming together and getting involved in making the neighbourhood better, with evidence of:
- **An increase in the range and numbers of people who are connected and participating** locally
- **COs reaching new people** and encouraging new people to take a leadership role (e.g. numbers of VCOs recruited and retained)
- **New activities and groups**
- **Raised aspirations**

In the medium-term this will lead to:
- **increased take up of community rights** and opportunities to influence and run services
- more sustainable activities, not dependent on grants
- evidence of **challenge to external service providers** and others who influence local opportunities and quality of life.
- **new enterprises and forms of investment,** creating new economic opportunities
- **new kinds of community-generated solutions** that could not be predicted at the outset.

In the longer-term the aim of the Programme is to achieve:
- **resident-led change that makes a difference to local communities** and the issues they raised at the outset;
- **more resilient communities**, fairer, more vibrant and more sustainable, better able to withstand shocks;
- **transformed relationships between communities and the agencies** that affect their neighbourhoods and their lives.
- **transformation of the local economy**
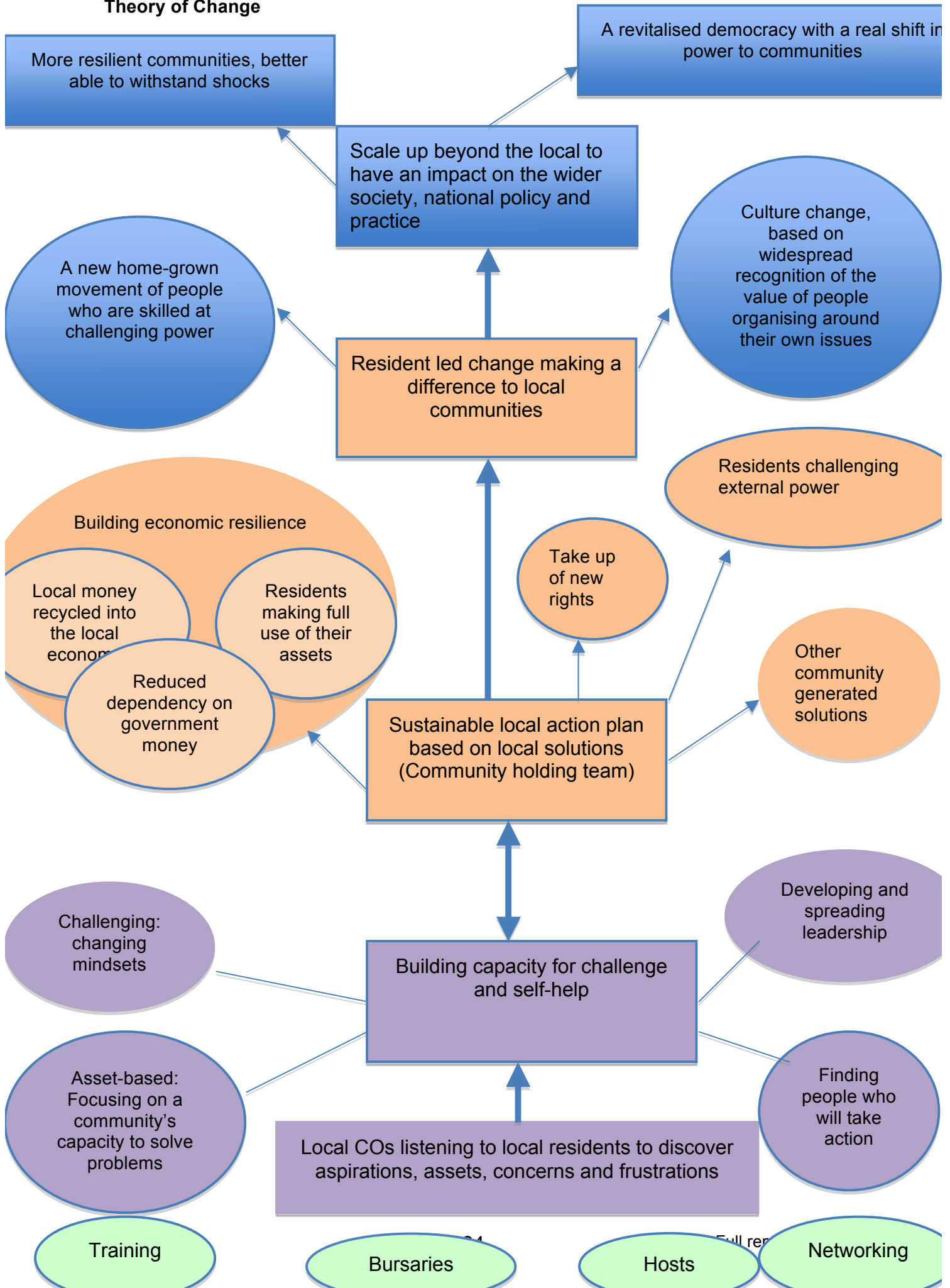- **a revitalisation of democracy** in these neighbourhoods.

This will be evidenced through:
- **demonstrable change in institutional practice and 'cultures',** the way external service providers, local authorities and others relate to the community
- **local actions sustained** beyond the life of the Programme
- **wealth created and fed back into the local economy**, e.g. through new and sustainable local enterprises, new forms of investment
- **improved levels of wellbeing**, as defined by local communities.

Finally, local change will not be enough. Ultimately, tackling the root causes of problems will require national action. The CO programme aims to generate a **new home-grown movement of people who are skilled at listening to people, driving change and challenging power,** evidenced by:
- **a diversity of skilled and experienced COs** trained by the Programme operating across the country
- a viable legacy body providing **new opportunities for training and learning**, with take-up spreading beyond Programme participants.
- **the COP approach becoming more widely embedded** in communities and institutions beyond the Programme.
- Examples of **changes in national policy and practice**

Diagram: Community Organisers Programme Theory of Change

More resilient communities, better able to withstand shocks

A revitalised democracy with a real shift in power to communities

Scale up beyond the local to have an impact on the wider society, national policy and practice

A new home-grown movement of people who are skilled at challenging power

Resident led change making a difference to local communities

Culture change, based on widespread recognition of the value of people organising around their own issues

Residents challenging external power

Building economic resilience

Local money recycled into the local economy

Residents making full use of their assets

Reduced dependency on government money

Take up of new rights

Sustainable local action plan based on local solutions (Community holding team)

Other community generated solutions

Challenging: changing mindsets

Developing and spreading leadership

Building capacity for challenge and self-help

Asset-based: Focusing on a community's capacity to solve problems

Local COs listening to local residents to discover aspirations, assets, concerns and frustrations

Finding people who will take action

Training

Bursaries

Hosts

Networking

Appendix 2 Sources of information

Inspiration Network workshop (28.11.13); COs, hosts and programme teams.

Interviews and conversations (Nov 2013 – Jan 2014):
Jess Steele, Locality
Naomi Diamond, Locality
Ruth Townsley, Locality
Simone Lamond, Locality
Lawrence Walker, Locality
Steve Wyler, Locality
Margaret Adjaye, Locality
Tanya Ekiyoyo, Locality
Neil Berry, Locality
Julia Olsen, Regenerate
Stephen Kearney, Regenerate
Helen Wallace Dowling, Regenerate
Nick Laffan, Regenerate
Nick Gardham, Regenerate
Bernie Wills, Penwith CDT
Belinda Fowler, Wiltshire Community First
Lindsey Guy, Granby Toxteth Development Trust
Steve Barnard, High Green Development Trust
Martin Holcombe, Birmingham Settlement
Sacha Bedding, The Wharton Trust, Hartlepool
Neil Bishop, Darnall Forum, Sheffield and Methodist Churches Wakefield
Sarah Dailly, Barton Hill Settlement
Jude Simmons, Community Links
Barbara Harbinson, Chair CO Programme Board and Halifax Opportunities Trust
Steve Crozier, Barton Hill Settlement
Tony Herrmann, Leeds CO Partnership
Sarah Baker, OCS
Hannah Rignell, OCS
Ian Dodds, Local Intelligence Officer, North East, OCS
Jeni McFadden, Penwith CDT
David Theakston, Clear Village
Guy Farrar, OCN
Maya Williams, Kirkgate Centre, Shipley, Bradford

Hosts Survey (October 2013)
CO Training Survey (Sept 2013)
Other research material gathered by Imagine, 2011-14

Full report