



Learning about learning

the Community Organiser learning journey



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The Community Organisers Programme is an ambitious experiment, seeking to promote resident-led change that makes a real difference to local communities. It is doing this through building a movement of community organisers who will enable residents to take action on their own behalf and to have the power and confidence to tackle the issues that are important to them.

This discussion paper reflects on the learning journeys that COs who have been involved in the Programme so far have taken. It is based on in-depth interviews with 20 COs over the past 12 months. It also includes the views of COs involved in the host case studies we carried out last year and COs involved in the volunteer study that Locality commissioned at the turn of 2012/2013.

The main findings so far are that:

- Community organising is an emotional journey and involves many ups and downs – because it embodies deeply held values and often engages with people who have difficult lives.
- For this reason, most organisers described their first year as a roller coaster ride, while a few did not last the course.
- This has implications – as the Programme has recognised – for the kind of people recruited to the Programme. It is not for the fainthearted! There has perhaps been less recognition of the emotional support that is needed.
- Most COs buy completely into the key principles of the programme. They welcome the emphasis on listening and on supporting residents to take action rather than taking a lead themselves. But a number question the RSLM mode when it comes to moving to action and recruiting volunteers. For some, this sets up an uncomfortable tension between sticking to the model and trusting their instincts.
- Generally speaking, those COs who stayed the course grew in confidence over the second 6 months of the Programme. However, uncertainties about progression affected their motivation, especially in the first few cohorts while details of further OCS funding were being hammered out. Nonetheless, some seemed to relish the challenge.
- Those who did progress remained extremely positive about the key principles of the Programme, although some welcomed the opportunity to introduce more flexibility into a model that they saw as too rigid. Others, however, argued that sticking to the brand was a major factor in their success so far.
- The initial 3-day induction elicited strong but mixed feelings. At the time of this study, many still felt too much time was devoted to role play (though with insufficient analysis) and felt unprepared for the practicalities of getting onto the ground. Several argued that it failed to recognise or capitalise on the range of experience among trainees.
- Generally speaking, COs found accreditation very challenging, regardless of their educational background. Although some felt it introduced them to important context and concepts, there were many frustrations – about lack of clarity in the assignments, failure to provide feedback, and delays at all stages of the process. They argued that the process was under-resourced, that the assignments should be streamlined and that not enough account was taken of the time that accreditation took away from their listening. Some struggled with taking responsibility for their own learning and most would have appreciated more guidance – for example on background reading.
- On the other hand, most felt re-energised by the Go Deeper option, whichever they chose. Some would have liked this input earlier.

- Most felt that there was insufficient match between the training they needed and the demands made on them at different points in the process. But many appreciated the fact that the Programme had changed its online sessions, moving to smaller groups and regular supervision sessions and to a mid-term face-to-face session.
- COs learn a lot during the Programme – about themselves, about their communities, and about the politics of organising. Some of this comes from the Programme input, some from taking responsibility for their own learning, some from reflecting with colleagues and/or hosts. But the nature of the learning journey means that access to support is vital. COs find their support in a variety of places, which are listed here in a rough order of preference:
 - o The local CO team
 - o The support and experience of other COs
 - o The host
 - o The Go Deeper option
 - o Online sessions and supervision
 - o Email or telephone support from Locality and RE:generate.
- COs highlighted the importance of working as a team. Lone working had proved extremely challenging and may have been a factor in the loss of COs during their first year. But being in a team which failed to gel could be extremely destructive.
- A host who understood the process and was well-respected locally was also a significant factor in CO support, as were other COs. COs wanted to see more opportunity for graduate COs to support and mentor those in later cohorts.
- One CO argued that the Programme was more about community animation than organising. This echoed a wider disappointment among those who had joined to 'make change happen', that it had not really confronted issues of power and was not radical enough. It is important to be realistic about what could be expected within the resources and time available to the Programme, but much will depend on how it is taken forward over the coming years as a movement, if those aspirations are to be realised.

is in tension with the creativity needed to build a movement and develop new approaches to persistent and entrenched problems. How can the model provide a strong framework for action while allowing COs the flexibility to innovate and respond to local circumstances?

- The sense that COs cannot share doubts, criticism or failures comes out strongly from our interviews. How can the model benefit from the critical reflection of its participants without losing its essence?
- The Programme believes strongly in COs taking responsibility for their own learning. But learning also needs to be efficient and effective. What resources are needed to ensure that COs are able to make the most of their trainee year and access the learning they need when they need it? And how can the experience of hosts and other COs best be harnessed?
- The 51 weeks trainee period provides a good foundation, but what are the ongoing training needs of COs and the Programme and how can both progression employers and CoCo best meet these needs on an ongoing basis?
- Related to this, transformation will not happen overnight – or even in 51 weeks. COs are learning the value of small changes as a foundation for longer-term transformation and it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved and when. But what are realistic expectations and how can the Programme ensure that it will address the 'bigger issues' that many of the communities that COs are working with are facing? Is there a map for this longer journey? How can the theory of change best be used to support this?

The main issues it raises for discussion are:

- Community organising is an emotionally challenging journey. Emotional intelligence and resilience are seen as key elements of the CO's make-up and there is a strong case for a greater investment in this, in order to give COs the strongest possible foundation on which to build. But the human and time resources within the Programme are limited and some COs referred to a 'lack of care'. What level of support is needed and how can this best be provided?
- The learning of the COs is geared to implementing a particular model of community organising but arguably this

1: Introduction

This discussion paper explores the learning journeys that trainee community organisers have taken over the period of the Community Organisers Programme to date. It is written by the Imagine team, as part of our role as learning advisors, and is intended as a discussion paper which will stimulate more reflection - on the nature of the journeys COs have taken, the ways in which that journey has been supported, how and why the journeys vary, and the implications for the Programme.

The paper is based on dedicated interviews with a small number of COs to track their learning journeys over time, repeat interviews with some of the COs involved in the host case studies we carried out last year, and some follow up interviews with COs involved in the volunteer study that Locality commissioned at the turn of 2012/2013. These dedicated interviews involved 20 COs from across the country and across Cohorts 1-5 and we captured experience from early on in the trainee year until after progression. We also drew more generally on the findings from the host case studies, the volunteer study and other encounters, e.g. during the Action Camp, Locality Convention etc.

The paper first discusses the journey taken by COs and how this might differ for different individuals. Sections 2 and 3 focus on the training and support COs receive and their reactions to it. A final section poses a number of issues for discussion arising out of the study. It is written largely from the CO perspective. As the numbers interviewed were small and the interviews open-ended, we do not give the

proportions who supported particular points. Instead we distinguish between points made by one person, by some or by the majority. We also include some quotations from the wider literature (in shaded boxes) that illustrate and reinforce findings from the Programme.

Two things need to be borne in mind in reading the paper. First, it reflects the experience of different cohorts, who will have had a different experience as the Programme and the associated training have grown and developed. It is also important to recognise that COs differ in their response to the Programme and its requirements, according to their previous experience, their expectations and learning styles, and the stage they are in with respect to the Programme. Second, the Community Organisers Programme is an experiment. It has limited time and resources, is dealing with diverse neighbourhoods and working with a range of hosts and COs. It is still learning and cannot possibly get things 'right' all the time.

For these reasons, some of the material here will be familiar, especially following the Organisers Council's report to the March 2013 Programme Board, and some of the recommendations will already have been taken on board. Nonetheless, there are a number of ongoing themes with respect to the processes and emotional journeys that COs have gone through, which we believe will benefit from being aired and further discussed.

2: The journey

The first 6 months will feel like driving around the M25 wearing a blindfold!

The CO learning journey was described by a number of COs as an 'emotional roller-coaster'. One compared it to the well-known Kubler-Ross 'grief cycle', which involves denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance and undoubtedly COs experienced many of these emotions at some stage in their trainee year. Table 1 (next page) gives a simplified version of how COs responded at different stages of their journey.

This is obviously a simplification. The journey is not linear; some travel faster than others; people respond in different ways; and COs can feel all of these emotions at different points, indeed they may experience contrasting emotions at the same point. Context, as we shall see in the next section, also makes a difference. However, it illustrates two very important aspects of the CO journey. Firstly, COs may feel

very differently about it at different points in time. We were struck by the similarity across cohorts in their reactions to the early stages of the journey, but also by the way in which, in most cases, their confidence grew over time, although there were some notable exceptions to this.

Secondly, this is a journey that requires considerable emotional resilience. In this, it is not unusual. Working with communities is acknowledged in the wider literature to be emotionally challenging, because it involves deeply held values, passion and often engages with people who face significant challenges in their own lives.

In the rest of this section, we describe the journey in more detail, illustrating it with quotes from the COs themselves but also, in the boxes, from the wider literature.

Motivation

Community organising (along with many other forms of community practice) is rarely simply a career choice. It is, as some

Stages of the journey	Common emotions / responses
Applying for the job and recruitment	Anticipation
The residential induction	Exhaustion, confusion; overwhelmed, charged up, excited; strong sense of being part of something.
The hiatus before starting	Frustration; anticipation
Getting onto the ground	Trepidation; fear; feeling unprepared but eager to get going
First positive listening	Elation; achievement
Following the RSLM steps (especially moving to action and recruiting volunteers)	Loyalty, determination, discovery. Tempered by confusion, uncertainty, denial
Accreditation, paperwork and targets	Stress, depression, anger, sense of inadequacy, but also sense of wider context and then relief, achievement
Going Deeper	Growing confidence; acceptance; 'aha' moments; reinvigoration; growth in understanding of the process, opportunities and/or how to tackle issues in their community
Preparing for progression	Uncertainty; drop in motivation; anger vs. determination
Progression	Achievement; freedom/autonomy; new energy; increasing confidence; challenge

of the literature acknowledges, an expression of who people are and their values, a part of their identity. The COs we spoke to came from all walks of life: several had a university education; many had been involved in volunteering or activism both in the UK and abroad; some had been community activists in their local area over a long period. Several had worked in the private sector and some had training experience themselves. Asked about their motivation, some COs spoke of their past encounters with poverty, their histories of political activism, or about 'wanting to make change happen'. For others it was more of an intellectual motivation or simply being attracted by something that looked interesting at a time when they were looking for a change in their own lives.

One CO had spent time travelling in Africa where she was confronted by lots of poverty on the one hand, but more sense of community on the other. In this country, she didn't know who was living in the same street as her. Over there, people seemed to have more time for each other.

Induction

COs found the **3 day residential** an intense and exhausting experience. They loved meeting the other COs in their cohort. But they reacted to the format in different ways. Some were impressed by the way their taken-for-granted ways of thinking and operating were challenged; but others were very critical of the role plays here and at the Action Camp – too long and yet without adequate analysis of the issues that were thrown up. In particular, people either loved or hated the majorians/minorians exercise:

It upset a few people, but it was quite thought provoking, finding out what it was like to feel disempowered by people who didn't mean to disempower you, who were wanting to do things for you.

But many said they were left with too many unanswered questions after the three days and went away feeling unprepared for what they would actually be doing on the ground. This was still true of the later cohorts. Some minded this more than others. One CO commented for example, that it was three days out of a whole year and they couldn't expect too much of it; others commented that they only appreciated the learning when it became relevant later on in the year.

One other issue that COs raised related to the diverse experience that each cohort brought to the Programme. They felt that this should have been acknowledged and that much more use could be made of the different kinds of knowledge they brought.

Getting onto the ground

Some then described a **hiatus** at the beginning while ID and employment matters were sorted out and while they did warm listenings - they felt frustrated at not being able to start on the ground right away. Once they got on the ground, their experience varied. Some started working in teams, even if they were later to work as individuals, and some even had the opportunity to do supervised practice listenings. But others described being thrown in at the deep end. Not surprisingly, several were uncomfortable at knocking on people's doors and apprehensive about how local residents would respond:

I felt like a salesman – it took me ages to feel comfortable with it.

But most came to really value this part of their work. Asked about the highlights of their first year or the 'lightbulb moments' in their learning, several referred to their first 'successful' listening – the first person to invite them in and show enthusiasm for what they were doing. Generally, COs found that residents valued the opportunity to talk to someone who did not have a pre-set agenda and they got a real 'buzz' out of the contacts they made and the momentum this built. This continued throughout their year.

....there is something about the 'aliveness of contact' that our research suggests is a value in itself – and not always understood by managers - These (anecdotes) seem to perform a variety of functions - renewing energy, inspiring imagination, arousing curiosity, rekindling anger, and provoking reflection and learning.¹

But COs were also challenged by what people told them. They heard some harrowing stories. This reinforced their motivation but left some frustrated at the slow pace of RSLM and the fact they couldn't do more. While they were energised by the stories they heard and the interest shown by some of the people they spoke to, handling residents' anger, despair,

apathy and mistrust of the system required emotional resilience and considerable trust in the process:

You hear about people who have lost their jobs and are really scared, then you knock on the next door. Some people take on these problems. I tend to be quite robotic; others lie awake at nights.

Development work involves a huge variety of emotional challenges such as in managing people's cynicism and mistrust in relation to civic renewal and public service provision, being on the receiving end of community or citizen anger or working with conflicts within and between groups and communities that are often exacerbated by policies designed to encourage competition for public funding.

...

These professionals were coping by drawing upon their own inner resources, qualities of resilience, flexibility and creativity, rooted in their own personal biographies, values and identities and bringing these to the situations in hand.¹

It was clear, as one CO remarked, that community organising was not for the fainthearted! And the Programme has acknowledged this both by introducing assessment centres and in some of the competencies on which its performance management framework is based: Maturity and Emotional Intelligence, Resilience and Robustness. One team from an earlier cohort commented on how the importance of resilience emerged during their recruitment process.

There was a group interview and it became clear that COs would have to be quite strong. We recognised this in each other.

It is not surprising therefore that some have left the Programme (18% from cohorts 1-3), while others we spoke to – working in areas with histories of conflict, drug use and crime - were absolutely desperate about the size of the task they faced. It is perhaps surprising that we didn't encounter more COs who felt like this. But a lot depended on the support they could access and we will return to this in Section 3.

From listening to action

Most found the emphasis on listening really powerful – it was important to be 'thrust into conversations' and many commented that residents loved being asked what their ideas were without any pre-set agenda. A few felt that it was disempowering for residents with 'loads of energy' to be left hanging because it was 'too early' in the process to move to action. But most accepted the need to keep the focus on listening in the early months.

Despite this, listening was not always plain sailing. One CO described the first 6 months as 'a very rocky road'. Another said:

It's very slow work – it takes a lot of time to get comfortable enough with the process. This took around 3 months. The targets make the work quite stressful – it's a long term technique and approach. The reality of this is difficult, lots of expectations. The ambition of the programme can be overwhelming.

We also encountered considerable variation among COs when it came to 'trusting the process'. While COs were converted to the listening process, many questioned later aspects of the model, especially when it came to **moving to action, recruiting volunteers and relationships with other local agencies**.

Moving beyond listening to action recruitment of volunteers could be very demoralising. COs repeatedly spoke of organising house meetings that nobody turned up to and of residents who showed an interest and seemed very keen, but then went off the boil:

We were told that they would be biting our hands off. Do you have to be a charismatic person? I want to be part of something everyone can do. It can be very disheartening – you feel you've made a connection, then a week later they've changed their mind.

It is easy for them to see this as a personal failing, even though it is clearly a common experience. However, some COs expressed frustration with the RSLM format for house meetings as well its insistence on getting volunteers to listen before they took any action. Younger people, for example, were particularly reluctant to do door knocking, as we reported in an earlier paper. One or two had got young people interested only to face obstacles from other youth workers who were protective (even possessive) of their service users and had their own agendas.

Some felt that the Programme was unrealistic in its expectations. Many residents have stressful lives and have a lot of pressure on their time. They are not getting paid and there is nothing concrete in it for them. They often have to drop out because of personal pressures or changes in their life circumstances – like having a baby, caring responsibilities or moving out of the area. Ironically, one or two COs mentioned

losing members of their 'team' to a job or other commitments, which they might not have had the confidence to get without their involvement in the Programme. And a couple of people mentioned that the forms and procedures involved could be off-putting.

COs also pointed out that supporting volunteers adds to the pressures on their time:

The time to build relationships is crucial – people have low confidence and respond to my suggestions to do listenings with "that's not me"; "I can't do that".

The issue of **relationships with other local agencies** was a third vexed question for a number of COs – getting the right balance between not being overly influenced by existing groups and agencies while making the relationships that would be helpful when residents moved to action. Some felt the Programme was too rigid about this and some had been able to get access to residents for listenings through existing groups that they might not otherwise have reached.

A further issue that came up in relation to the model was the need for repeat listenings in order to win people's trust and build strong relationships. In order to move to action and build a team of volunteers, COs needed to go back to residents who had shown an interest before. Indeed, some commented on the fact that residents really appreciated the fact that the COs came back to them. But this competed with the need to keep up the numbers of new listenings and some felt that targets should take this into account.

Responding to the challenges

The response to the day-to-day challenges of the process was varied:

- Some bought into RSLM completely and with enthusiasm, leaving previous experience and preconceptions at the door. One team put their success down to sticking rigorously to RSLM and not moulding it to their own liking.
- Others talked about trusting their instincts and adapted the model, not adhering strictly to the processes outlined. A number argued that the process should not be linear but allow for flexibility. When it came to the issue of getting volunteers to do listenings before moving to action, for example, COs said they did understand the importance of ensuring that residents did not go off and do their own thing and of ensuring that any action was rooted in what other residents wanted. But they suggested that this could be a circular or 'iterative' process, and that it might be more appropriate for a volunteers to do listenings after an event had brought residents together, rather than beforehand. Similarly, when it came to moving to action, some found

that residents often wanted COs to work with them before they felt confident to take a lead themselves.

- Many were somewhere in the middle, trying to stick to the process against their instincts that there could be other ways of moving forward. But trusting the process rather than their instincts was something that some COs found particularly challenging. The following extract from the literature captures what some of the COs experienced in this respect:

When caught in a dilemma an individual typically experiences anxiety because of the uncertainty regarding what is the right thing to do. Then, when choosing one course of action and rejecting another, guilt and regret will be felt towards the rejected alternative.¹

Towards the end of our interviews, some felt that the requirements of the process and the 'rules' of engagement were relaxing and mentioned instances where they had been encouraged to follow their instincts, though it may be that this was mainly true of those who had graduated.

However, there was still some frustration that RSLM did not seem to address the 'real' issues affecting the residents in CO communities, especially from those with an activist background or who came into the programme to 'make change happen'. There was a tension between the aspiration to achieve 'structural changes' that would empower local people and a practice whose focus seemed to focus more on small-scale activity. One CO argued that it was more like community *animation* rather than community *organising* and that to acknowledge this would both be more honest and make for a better relationship between COs and the Programme partners. Some commented, however, that they had learnt to appreciate the importance of small changes, especially at this stage in their work. Nonetheless, at a time when people in local communities are really suffering from the impact of unemployment and benefit cuts, others wanted more discussion of how and when the small things they were doing would impact on this bigger picture.

Other demands on CO time

In their first year, the COs are trainees and alongside their listenings, they engaged in formal training – **accreditation** for the first 6 months and **Go Deeper** options for the second six months. They were also given **targets** for the number of listenings they should do, and the number of volunteers they should recruit. They were also required to fill in **reflection** sheets, which were then returned to RE:generate.

Most COs recognised the pressure on the Programme from OCS to prove its worth. But **targets** were a major source of frustration and seemed at odds with everything they were learning about RSLM as a 'slow, subtle process'.

We were so excited about learning and now we are consumed with targets and paperwork

Some suggested that the targets encouraged COs to sidestep the process in order to register volunteers and get evidence of actions on the ground.

On the positive side, a number of COs really valued the emphasis on personal **reflection** in the Programme. Some were using reflection for the first time and one said that reflecting with colleagues was the most powerful part of the Programme. Several felt the questions were especially useful, although they thought daily reflections were too much. There were fewer positive comments about **accreditation** but some welcomed the introduction to theory and the opportunity to put their work into a wider context that the accreditation assignments provided. Some struggled with taking responsibility for their own learning, but even those with an academic background were unclear about what was expected of them.

As we shall see in Section 3, the accreditation process has been problematic and many felt it was under resourced. Here it is sufficient to note that the combination of accreditation assignments, targets and the paperwork left many COs feeling very stressed. One described how he found himself 'in a dark place' after failing a module. Many felt the targets were unrealistic and the time allocated for work on accreditation completely underestimated. This left some feeling increasingly inadequate, others feeling angry, especially since much of the paperwork, including the assignments, seemed to go into 'a black hole' – we were repeatedly told that there was rarely any feedback on reflections and that feedback on assignments was late – often too late to feed into the next set of assignments (which undermines the whole learning process).

Going deeper

Generally speaking, COs grew in confidence over the second 6 months. There were exceptions – some continued to struggle and became more and more despondent, especially where they were working on their own, had had to change area or had an unsupportive host. But many found new strength from their Go Deeper options – both the skills and context provided and the contact with other COs. They were a source of new enthusiasm, motivation and energy.

COs were also revisiting people and building up their networks. Where residents were moving to action and COs were building a team, this provided its own positive feedback. One said he had learnt to accept that he didn't need to have all the answers. Some had changed location from unsuitable areas and found that they were able to make much better progress as a result, even if they had lost valuable time. But for those whose progress was slow, the opposite was the case. They were still committed and spoke of their intention to do revisits etc., but sometimes this felt like a triumph of hope over experience, and was accompanied by an underlying anxiety,

even desperation, that time was running out, especially as progression loomed.

Progression

Second year funding was agreed quite late in the day for Cohort 1 and uncertainty about progression could be very demotivating, if COs didn't know whether they would be working in the same area, or indeed at all, after the 51 weeks:

When you're not sure whether you're going to be doing a job after the next month or two, it starts to affect your motivation. You can't do new listenings or move to action, get the excitement going. It's in the code of conduct not to promise what you can't deliver and if you are going to disappear in two months time, you can't promise anything.

A particular issue for a number of COs was the need to provide evidence of impact at this stage in their journey, so that they could attract match funding, especially when a key principle of the Programme was that the CO should take a back seat and let residents take the credit. It was a particular issue for those who had changed areas or started late and so had less time to prove their worth.

By the end of the 51 weeks, there were, we would suggest, four main groups of COs:

- Converts were fully bought into RSLM as a model and confident about pursuing the model into its second year. Several of these have been taken on by RE:generate.
- Adaptors were fully bought into the principles and committed to their local area, but saw themselves as freed from what they saw as the RSLM straitjacket and able to pursue the Programme principles as they saw most fit. Some of these were continuing with hosts who took a similar view; others had set up their own CiCs, determined to keep going one way or another.
- Sceptics were those who decided to leave, wanting to effect change but find somewhere else to do it.
- *Drop-outs* were people who had decided the process was not for them, or who had failed to find match funding (according to a recent quarterly report to OCS, one in four of cohorts 1-3 had not progressed). Some were angry; some had moved on; we suspect that some – who had been struggling over the second 6 months – may have felt demoralised and abandoned.

The watershed of graduation and progression gave those

who continued with the process new energy. Some were enthusiastic about demonstrating how RSLM could work; others wanted to break free of RSLM, though not the basic principles behind it. Members of one team spoke of how the model offered something distinctive and that this had earned the respect of other key stakeholders locally even though they were often competing for the same funds. They also argued that independence gave them more power and status locally. Nonetheless there was still uncertainty for many COs – few of those we spoke to had assured funds. There were questions, too, about some of the agencies who were interested in employing CO graduates. What, for example, did housing associations think they were buying and would they be willing to stick with the process or might they use it merely as a form of consultation?

Different experiences

This description of the learning journey has generally been one of ups and downs, elation and despair. There were exceptions to this, however: COs for whom the process seemed to work very well. And while there were a number who fell by the wayside, either during the 51 weeks (18%) or after graduation (25%), those who progressed were determined to stick with the movement and the principles, even where they weren't fully bought into all aspects of RSLM.

So what made the difference? We did not have the resources to do an in-depth study, but three sets of inter-related factors seemed important:

- Individual attributes
 - Previous experience
 - Emotional resilience
 - Appetite and confidence to learn
 - Learning styles
- Area characteristics
 - Levels of local deprivation, previous levels of organisation and population turnover
 - A local issue or crisis that the local community could mobilise around
- Levels and sources of support

Some also mentioned time of year as being an important factor, with few residents having the time or inclination to talk during December for example or when the weather was bad.

In Section 4 we will focus on levels and sources of support. The importance of the **individual characteristics** has been recognised in the steps that have been taken to tighten up recruitment through assessment centres, rather than leaving it to hosts who may or may not understand what is involved. As one CO said, *'this work is not for everyone'*. It has also been recognised in the Performance Management Framework and this may help free up staff to work with COs on particular competencies. But, as we have already reported, many COs felt that more could have been made of the different backgrounds and knowledge that they brought into the Programme.

The influence of area characteristics is well documented in the literature and not specific to this Programme, although COs did raise issues about how relevant RSLM was to different types of area. In areas where there is already high

participation, residents could find the presence of COs confusing. Conversely, in areas of high population turnover, division and high crime, residents were often reluctant to raise their heads above the parapet.

3: So what had COs learnt?

One CO described his year as *'a real learning curve – a lot steeper than I imagined but a challenge I really enjoyed'*. COs highlighted a number of aspects of their learning:

- Some referred to what they had learnt about the area they worked in and the experiences of local residents. One said it was *'an eye-opener how people on the estate were treated'*. COs commented on what they had learnt about how communities work, how councils work and how politics comes into play. They learnt a lot too from the people they listened to: *'seeing how much people know and how competent they are'*. They met *'some amazing people!'*
- Several said they had learnt a lot about themselves and how they interact with others. One said he had developed his intuition and judgement. Several said they had learnt to be more confident, to challenge people.
- Some mentioned more practical things: how to manage and use data, for example.
- Or they had learnt about community practice: spotting opportunities to take action, dealing with *'the difficult personalities'*, or learning that *'small things can make a difference'*.
- Several felt that the Programme's principles were now firmly embedded within them and everything they did – *'thought processes which challenge top-down, hierarchical decision-making'*.
- There were mixed views on how much they had learnt about power. One was very positive about how he had been helped to understand power in his community, but others were disappointed, given the claims made for the importance of power in the Programme. They described input on power as *'too abstract'* and felt that assignments and role plays left them to work out the implications for themselves in – *'so it was hard to know what the intended learning was'*.

One CO team talked about moving from unconscious incompetence, to conscious incompetence, to being solid in what you know but still learning. To achieve this, one CO commented that, while the potential was evident, a more strategic approach was needed with more emphasis on objective setting and learning outcomes. Another thought that the Programme needed a clearer learning framework that involved exploring concepts, learning about methods, applying this in practice and reflecting on learning.

It was like a strange attractor – all-encompassing because no-one defined what we should be doing

Learning styles

We have already commented on the variety of backgrounds and experience COs brought to the Programme. The Programme should take some credit for creating a common training framework – not an easy task. But this variety has significant implications for how people learn and how they are assessed/accredited.

A number of COs felt, as the recent Organisers Council report argues, that the Programme should have taken more account of different starting points and learning styles. One commented that she had filled in a questionnaire that asked about learning styles, but was disappointed to find that no account was taken of it.

Much has been written about the distinction between single and double loop learning.

Single loop learning occurs when new insights into a problem help us to adapt and cope better within the parameters of a pre-defined situation; double loop learning occurs when we learn to question how an issue or problem has been framed. If we see things in a different way then new solutions can present themselves. Some writers extend this analysis to talk about learning which questions the basic assumptions behind their practice; or about reflecting on learning processes themselves.

Adapted from Banks et al. 2

Some of the frustrations COs experienced arose when they felt that they were not being allowed to question assumptions within the Programme itself. There is clearly a balance to be struck between providing a clear framework for learning and allowing people the freedom to push at the boundaries and be creative, especially in a Programme of this kind. Some felt that balance had been struck:

Even if RSLM is restrictive, you still have a huge amount of freedom and a broad remit on a daily basis you design your own programme.

But in a programme which is supposed to be about challenging power, it was not surprising to find that others were frustrated by the fact that the Programme did not welcome critical analysis or encourage them to push the boundaries. A couple baulked at being 'treated as children' or 'patronised'; others felt that a Programme that was seeking to challenge power in the outside world should be more willing to accept challenge itself.

Timing

Several COs questioned whether the pace of the training reflected the pace of learning on the ground. One person described it as a drip-feed approach and that *'the timing of the drips didn't always match the realities COs were dealing with'*. A specific example was the need to be trained to train volunteers and one CO would have liked more training on working with volunteers. Others would have liked the input that they got through Go Deeper - on other models, for example, and on conflict resolution - to have been provided earlier in their year.

However, it was important for COs to accept that they were on a year-long journey. As one said: 'You're not supposed to learn everything from the start'. Some improvements have been made and timing was always going to be difficult to get right, especially given the limited resources and time available to the Programme. A number also commented that they only appreciated the importance of what they were being asked to do in the induction training and online sessions when they needed to use it in practice. Thus, one described how he had felt very vulnerable in the first 6 months but was actually learning and absorbing things – he just didn't realise it. Indeed, many appreciated that the most important way of learning was 'on the job' and that though this took a while and could be quite stressful, it eventually stood them in good stead. Nonetheless, several argued that a 'map' of the training input and the structure of the learning process over the year would help COs to see where they were in the learning process and to plan ahead. One described, for example, how he found out that his next assignment required him to run, and then reflect on, a house meeting, just after he had already held one. If he had known, he would have scheduled it accordingly. As it was, he had to set up something more artificial.

Content

We have acknowledged that the Programme wanted people to take responsibility for their own learning. But several of the COs, regardless of their prior learning, would have appreciated more input. One commented, referring to the emphasis on Paolo Freire, that he would *'love some banking education!'* while others said they would have appreciated more 'real-life' case studies rather than just being directed to have faith in the process. They wanted guidance and examples from the people who had *'done this before'*. We have reported already concerns about the reliance on role play in the face-to-face sessions, where COs felt there was more scope for analytical discussion.

COs also had specific comments on accreditation and Go Deeper.

- Accreditation

Much of the criticism of accreditation is now familiar and we do not intend to rehearse it here in detail, but this study confirmed the frustrations that the Organisers Council reported to the May Programme Board. The questions were unclear, there was insufficient guidance about resource material and the time allocated – at 1.5 hours a week - was completely unrealistic. Some felt that the requirements were unnecessarily onerous for this level of qualification – one argued there should be some allowance for COs with special learning needs, such as dyslexia. Most frustrating was the fact that feedback was late or non-existent, which meant that COs could not take it into account when starting their next assignment.

Some found that the combined pressure of targets and assignments in the first six months led people to *'turn in on themselves, become defensive..... It's not a good way to learn'* – and underneath an appreciation of what they had learnt, there was still some lingering resentment. There were some practical suggestions that COs made which could help. Several of these are in the Organisers Report to the May 2013 Programme Board. One person suggested that the Programme could have encouraged on-line study groups; others would have liked guidance on reading or other resources, which would have saved valuable time.

- Go Deeper

COs got a lot out of the Go Deeper options. Each offered something different but in most cases, as we have seen, they were a source of new enthusiasm, motivation and energy and gave the organisers space to think about what they were doing. COs welcomed the academic rigour of the PGCert, for example, as well as the theory and the exposure to other models of organising. It gave them *'badly needed context'* and *'a safe space to speak critically'*. One person commented that the freedom to think more critically meant that they also *'came up with the good things about RSLM'*. COs also spoke highly of other options: the conflict resolution option helped them to *'separate facts from feelings'*, the digital organising and community rights courses offered valuable tools and several COs spoke warmly of the support they got from those running the Go Deeper programmes. Ideally they would have liked some of this input earlier and it would also have been good to dip into each others' options – maybe have tasters (although it is hard to know where they would have found the time for this). Indeed, while some teams all went on the same Go Deeper, others diversified and would have been able to gain insights from each other. Some have used their bursaries to add to the training available on the Programme.

There were also specific suggestions about additional input that would have been useful:

- The political background to the Programme
- More theory and alternative models for those not on the PGCert
- Groupwork skills
- Working with volunteers and identifying leaders

- How to handle councillors
- Mediation and conflict resolution, especially for those not on the Community Resolve course
- Project management
- Data analysis

- Fundraising
- How to deal with vulnerable adults and mental health issues.

A particular concern for a number of COs was the lack of support for their role in training volunteers.

4: Support

This paper has described emotional and sometimes lonely journeys. It has referred to the Programme's desire that COs should take responsibility for their own learning and shown that, despite reservations, many did. One team commented that 'it is easier to gripe than be positive', saying that if they did not believe in what they were doing, they wouldn't have worked so hard on progression. But COs are trainees during their first year. And support is essential in ensuring that they gain the most out of their experience and can sustain their commitment.

Development professionals must necessarily use their emotional capacities. Poverty and exclusion generate 'social suffering', the 'hidden injuries' of class, race and other oppressions, and development professionals work with the resulting anger and despair....must function within 'dilemmatic spaces' in which choices are ambiguous, indeterminate and contested.

COs commented that it was 'a difficult and emotional job':

In any other job where you were listening to 10 harrowing stories a day, you would have someone help you deal with it.

They talked of the importance of setting boundaries and dealing with the emotional implications of building relationships in this way. However, most felt they were not getting enough of this support. Indeed, several felt the work ethic of the Programme pushed them in the opposite direction and that there was little concept of work-life balance. One described how she stopped taking her mobile phone home or answering emails in the evening because the job was stressing her out:

I didn't want to be a 24 hour CO and once I stopped thinking I had to be like that, things got easier.

Many COs also felt under pressure to absorb and implement RSLM without question. Some spoke about 'being jumped on' or 'shot down' if they strayed from the tenets of RSLM and felt a lack of 'care' in that the integrity of the process seemed to be the most important thing:

I was trained to challenge and then penalised – I worried that people would think I was a troublemaker

Some felt there was more latitude in the Programme now, while a few felt there had always been latitude for those who were 'trusted' to stick to the process. However a number of COs noted the potential contradiction between being trained to help people do critical analysis in order to challenge power and achieve change on the one hand, and being expected to stick to a prescriptive methodology on the other.

The principal forms of support in the Programme, in order of preference, were:

- The local CO team
- Other COs across the programme
- The host
- Online sessions and supervision
- Opportunity to ask for help from Locality and RE:generate
- The residential
- Action Camp
- Yammer

The team

Generally speaking, working as a team seemed incredibly important and team colleagues were top of the list when COs were asked where they got their main support from. COs felt there should be much more emphasis on this: *It's difficult to learn on your own.* Even if they each had their own individual area, COs generally got a great deal of support from their colleagues. Some had started out working together before splitting up into their own areas. They helped each other with problems, with accreditation assignments, and with reflection:

"...sitting at a computer is fine, but having someone else there bringing in ideas adds an extra dimension."

Another commented on how team members enabled each other to see very different points of view. Conversely, those who seemed to be struggling most were often those working on their own.

On the other hand, there would be risks for the Programme in relying on the team as a major source of support. One team

pointed out that this could be a case of 'the blind leading the blind'. In other cases, team members had left, leaving the remaining CO on his or her own. Most seriously, there were a small number of cases where team relationships were poor. There were instances where COs competed with each other for volunteers, for example, or undermined each other, where there were personality clashes or high absenteeism with no explanation. Clearly the host has a role to play here, but some hosts had difficulty knowing where their role started and finished.

Other COs

COs also got support from other COs across the programme, who they saw as an 'amazing' and diverse resource. One of the advantages of training sessions on-line and face-to-face was the relief of finding that others were going through similar experiences to their own. But COs in later cohorts also commented on the value of having members of earlier cohorts close by. Some had been on visits or had other teams visit them which was an opportunity to swap ideas and practical tools. One of the strengths of the Programme, one commented, was the variety of its COs and they got positive energy from spending time with each other. They felt they should make more opportunities to get together – '*model what we tell our communities to do*'. They all wanted to see more use made of CO experience, although as yet, they had little sense of what CoCo or the Inspiration Network would offer.

Yammer was also designed as an opportunity for COs to share experience but none of the COs we spoke to set much store by it, especially since the 'blue line' had been closed down. At best, some saw it as a way of picking up positive stories in order to impress OCS; others just saw it as a '*competition for commitment and a forum for boasting*'. They wanted a space where they could share failures without being judged.

The host

Support from the host was more variable, but where it worked, it was often a lifeline. Hosts could be a first port of call with a query or problem and the best hosts offered regular supervision and emotional support. One team described how they had different mentors within the host for different issues. Conversely, those with inexperienced hosts or hosts who didn't understand the process were really disadvantaged as, in a different way, were those whose hosts were not sufficiently embedded or trusted locally. The Programme expected hosts to provide mainly practical support, but some COs felt they should be encouraged to become more involved in the learning process. They also wanted to see the Programme provide better guidelines for hosts, who they thought were often undervalued.

Online sessions and supervision

Views on the online sessions varied. Some found them very useful – an important space - others did not. One team felt the sessions needed to recognize that people work at different speeds. But several commented that COs themselves needed

to take more responsibility for how the sessions went – turning up to every session and bringing challenging questions. Most people would have liked more face-to-face time, but they appreciated the reasons for relying on online learning: '*We'd have been moaning loads if we'd had to travel*',

Several COs commented on the emotional support that on-line sessions offered – a point also picked up in the Organisers Council report. But they found them less helpful in getting answers to dilemmas. They cited some technical issues with the sessions - problems with computers crashing or not being able to handle resource material – but they also commented on the dynamics of online discussions, with some people dominating, others getting lost (perhaps sitting in silence feeling more and more intimidated). In that respect, there was appreciation for the decision to reduce the size of the groups and introduce online supervision. They valued the opportunity to meet virtually with other COs, but felt there wasn't time to get beyond the basics. Echoing earlier comments, some wanted less emphasis on problem solving, more on discussion: '*You get referred to step 4, but you don't get a chance to discuss the merits of Step 4*'. Others thought there was scope for RE:generate to identify common themes, as the Organisers' Council report suggested.

Direct help from Locality and RE:generate

We heard a lot about failure to respond to questions and emails. COs wanted more evidence that their feedback on aspects of the Programme had been taken into account by Locality and RE:generate. They also wanted more feedback on their reports, especially reflections. But COs also commented on the positive support they had received. Helen was singled out by more than one CO for her help with difficult personal circumstances or challenges they were facing in their area, staff at Locality for help with HR and other practical issues. COs recognised that resources were stretched. But our interviewees echoed the Organisers' Council report on the need for much better communication. When nothing much was happening on the ground, it was important to have positive feedback to balance the pressure of targets and the emphasis on sticking to the process. They would have also valued regular updates on Programme developments. One or two felt that the Programme could do more to reflect on its own power, commenting in particular that its resistance to constructive criticism or questioning of the RSLM model.

Implications

COs were asked what advice they would give to COs joining the Programme and what they wanted from the Programme itself. The next table summarises their responses.

Advice for COs

Remain open-minded – give it a chance

Wipe out what you have done before – it's no good coming with received ideas

Look after yourselves

Build in time for reflection

Time, patience and perseverance are important – 'keep on it'.

Develop a good team relationship

Find COs in your area; build a network of support

Trust your instincts and be prepared to find your own way

If you are not sure, ask.

You won't find 'magic people' with great ideas straight away. Give it time.

Don't take things to heart.

Understand that you will still have questions at the end

Enjoy the ride!

What they wanted from the Programme

Answer questions and emails

Show feedback is taken into account.

Provide better guidelines for hosts

Don't promise what you can't deliver

Give positive feedback

Provide real-life examples

For additional training needs, see p. 14-15

5: Issues for discussion

The Community Organisers Programme is an experiment – a very ambitious experiment. Much is expected of it, not least by those running and participating in it. There have been teething troubles but the Programme is learning as it goes along and, in any case, it cannot expect to get everything right all the time. This is reflected in the learning journeys of the COs we interviewed. Some of their comments will have been taken on board already; others may be difficult to accommodate within the resources available. But we would like to highlight some of the more substantive issues for further debate:

1. The emotional challenges faced by COs come out strongly from our interviews at the same time as the lack of human and time resources to invest more in individual support or feedback and communication. The PMF may help to free up staff to work with COs on particular areas of concern. But this might be an area that warrants further investment, if COs are to realise their potential and not to be lost to the movement. Resilience is part of the PMF but there may be ways of nurturing this resilience – through a helpline system, for example, or perhaps time every month dedicated to addressing common concerns of COs as they deliver on the ground.
2. Most COs realised the importance of making a firm commitment to the listening process before moving into action. But they chafed at the detail of some of the later steps in the RSLM process. The learning in the Programme seems very much geared to implementing RSLM, but this may be in tension with the flexibility needed to develop innovative approaches to local issues and the creativity needed to build a movement. There needs to be more debate about how to encourage COs to interpret the framework according to context without prejudicing the Programme's essential principles. What needs to be preserved at all costs; where does the model need to accommodate different circumstances?
3. Related to this, is the sense that COs cannot share doubts, criticisms and failures, and this emerges strongly from our interviews along with the desire for a virtual forum which is private but could be geared to critical learning and discussion. There is also a strong sense that the model could benefit from the critical reflection of its participants without losing its essence.
4. COs recognised the need to take responsibility for their learning but argued that they needed more support to do this. What is the right balance between COs taking responsibility for their own learning and getting the support they need to ensure that learning is efficient and effective? Where should the Programme sit on a line between 'Sink or Swim' and being spoonfed? Related to this, how can the Programme best ensure that COs have the skills input they need at the point where they need it, given the resources available?
5. There is a need for better understanding of how the Programme is impacting upon and adapting to different contexts. And this raises the question of how more use can be made of hosts and other local agencies to ensure the right 'fit', while not prejudicing the principles of the Programme?
6. The 51 weeks trainee period provides a good foundation, but progression turns our attention to the ongoing training needs of COs and the Programme. How can the skills and quality of the Community Organiser role best be nurtured over the longer term, and how can both progression employers and CoCo best meet these needs on an ongoing basis?
7. Finally, it has always been an aspiration of the Programme to build the foundations of a movement, but how can it ensure that these foundations eventually produce the kind of change many in the Programme are seeking? COs are learning the value of small changes and is important to be realistic about what can be achieved and when. But how will the Programme ensure that it will address the 'bigger issues' that face many of the communities that COs are working with? Is there a map for this longer journey? And how can the theory of change best be used to support this?

Notes

¹ These quotations are taken from a draft chapter for Hoggett, P., Mayo, M. and Miller, C. (2008) *The dilemmas of development work: ethical challenges in regeneration*, University of Chicago Press.

² Banks, S., Butcher, H., Henderson, P. and Robertson, J. (2003) *Managing Community Practice: Principles, policies and programmes*, Bristol: Policy Press