

Imagine: Summary of learning from Community Organisers programme

The power of listening: reflections and learning over 4 years

The Community Organisers programme has been an ambitious experiment, seeking to promote resident-led change that makes a real difference to local communities. Locality, the managing organisation, its key partner RE:generate and other partners, have spent the last four years doing this through building a cadre of community organisers (COs) who recruit volunteers and enable residents to take action on their own behalf around the issues that are important to them.

It has been an evolving programme. It had to hit the ground running - before everything was in place and challenges could be foreseen. There has therefore been a strong commitment to learning throughout and, as a result, the experiences of later cohorts are very different from those of the 'kickstarters'. As learning advisors to the programme, 'Imagine' would like to acknowledge the time generously given to us by COs and hosts, and the very positive relationship we have experienced with Locality and its partners, including their willingness to take on board our reflections. This paper is a summary of the learning generated and provides lessons for future policy and 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. There is overwhelming support within the programme for the power of listening as the essential foundation for action and change. COs have also highlighted the importance of working first with individuals as a foundation for collective action. For some of the organisations that have hosted and / or employed COs, 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.

The opportunity and the risks

The programme was launched at the start of 2011 as part of the government's Big Society agenda. It encapsulated the government's commitment to devolve power down to community level. As such, it has been an attempt to deliver policy in a new way, driven by communities themselves rather than government or external agencies. To its credit, government has largely kept to this position, and been willing to be 'hands off.' It took a risk, and has seen it through – funding basic community work that is very difficult to resource. Locality also took a risk in signing up to a programme so closely associated with a government 'Big Society' agenda and should be

credited with preserving as much independence from government as possible.

Managing such a high-profile programme with hundreds of trainee organisers and thousands of volunteers, through a network of host organisations across the country, presented considerable challenges. As partners in this new venture, Locality was itself a new organisation and RE:generate had not tested its model at this scale before. They encountered the all-too-familiar problems associated with establishing a brand new programme. In addition, the resources that were on offer from government meant that the programme had to take key elements from a 3-5 year organising strategy and deliver it in a year.

Review and learning have been embedded within the programme and a number of changes made e.g.:

- increased management capacity;
- the introduction of assessment centres to hone the CO recruitment process;
- development of a performance management framework;
- a 50% funded progression year, followed by a subsidised 3rd year for selected COs;
- a significant restructuring of the training process, with Locality taking more control 'in house';
- the creation of a funded peer support network (the Inspiration Network);
- a structured training programme for volunteers.

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Balancing Acts

Ultimately, finding the most effective approach to community organising in the Programme has been a question of balance, between:

- recognising and safeguarding the distinctive elements of community organising whilst allowing for local flexibility and the creativity needed to embed community organising at local level;
- recruiting and supporting a wide diversity of trainees whilst maintaining a consistent level of quality and achievement in learning and work on the ground;
- working with residents without taking away their power – knowing how best to support residents whilst ensuring they ‘own’ information and resulting activities;
- 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;
- encouraging effective action and quick wins whilst sticking to the principle of engaging large numbers of people over the longer term and building a mandate.

These tensions are part and parcel of working in community practice – sticking to principles as well as being pragmatic about people and communities. Below we highlight some key learning points, drawn from a range of programme participants and their experience over the last four years.

Learning for policy and practice

Allow sufficient time

One year is too ambitious to deliver a demanding training programme - listening, recruiting volunteers, moving to action, sorting out progression and embedding the approach at community level. Initial achievements in some areas have been lost because the work could not be sustained, and there is a clear sense from the COs who progressed that an extra year allowed the momentum to continue and make a difference. The experience of hosts and employers also confirms that spreading the process over a minimum two year period is essential in building relationships and guaranteeing some sustainable volunteer involvement. Value has been added to the programme where there has been a longer timespan e.g. where COs have progressed, where hosts have taken on a second tranche of COs, where a CiC has been set up, where Social Action Fund monies have been gained to further develop local initiatives.

Map out the journey

It is important to be realistic about what can be achieved within and across different timescales. The evolving nature of this programme and its fast and furious pace has not always enabled adequate planning. Planning for progression is a good example - uncertainties about progression affected the motivation of some COs and panicked some hosts who wanted to keep them.

Building momentum

It takes even longer to scale up – from neighbourhood to city wide to regional and/or national levels. The knowledge gained from listenings could be used positively for change if shared with others at a wider level. Broad based networked action is still in its infancy and yet essential if this approach is to survive.

Allow for variation

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Every community is different – and there is great variation in how the programme has played out: in different locations; in different cohorts; with different hosts/different employer organisations; and with different COs. There is a strong commitment to the listening model as an underpinning framework for organising but this needs to be balanced with an opportunity for some local flexibility and innovation to ensure that practice can be embedded in a range of community contexts.

The diversity of COs recruited to the programme has been one of its great strengths. COs have valued this and would like to see more opportunities to share stories and learn from others' experience.

Recruiting and supporting volunteers

Paid and continuing CO support has been significant in attracting and retaining volunteers. This is because:

- Residents often need a lot of support before they feel confident to take action, let alone take a lead.
- Volunteers are not a static group. They move on, some get jobs, people dip in and out because 'life gets in the way'. It is the prerogative of the volunteer to come and go and there is always the need to refresh the volunteer bank.
- Volunteers may themselves have complex needs that require appropriate support, for example mental health issues.

The Programme's emphasis on volunteers, and the sheer numbers of people recruited, has produced a lot of evidence and useful learning about 'volunteering'. Some 'headline' findings from the Programme include:

- Whatever the policy rhetoric, people in receipt of benefits can find the requirements of the job centre, as translated by local staff, a barrier to volunteering.
- Many COs find the concept of 'volunteer' problematic because it implies an altruistic gift relationship which cuts across the community organising principle of appealing to self interest, supporting activism and not 'doing for others what they can do for themselves'.
- Different cultures create different opportunities and barriers for volunteering and community leadership – there is still a lot more to learn about the motivations of volunteers and the challenges they face.
- Children and young people engage in different ways – the role of young volunteer organisers may need to be seen differently from the adult version based around 'listening'.

Making national programmes local

National programmes need to be locally embedded and the hosting model has provided the grass roots element to this national programme. As one host said, '*it has cost us more than £3k but the value far outweighs what we have put in*'. Future adoption of the hosting model might consider how to use hosts more effectively in order to increase capacity within a programme and should bear in mind that:

- different types of hosting/employment arrangements have a range of implications for programme management, including HR, in terms of support, information, role and legacy;
- hosts require a good understanding of the programme approach and regular communication with programme managers, HR and each other;
- the dynamic of the hosting/employer/trainee/trainer model can make or break success.

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Build on foundations

Whilst there is an ideal of community organisers in every community, making the practice stick in areas where it has already started can be more powerful. There is a lot to harness and build on in the Programme – from hosts and employers to volunteers, especially those that have started training through the VTP.

Risks can pay off

There has been a strong message throughout this programme that risk has been its bedrock. Locality has managed a pilot programme that has crossed boundaries in terms of its operating model, and government has stuck with an ambitious programme that was not bound by stacks of outputs, was not instrumental and was very process based.

Learning for support and training

Community Organisers

Community organising is an emotionally challenging journey. The trainee year in particular is 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 with vulnerable individuals.

Emotional intelligence and resilience are seen as key elements of the CO's make-up and there is a strong case for building investment in this, in order to give COs the strongest possible foundation on which to build. Ideal trainees appear to be those who are comfortable with the learning requirements/process but also have a real appetite to learn in a more intuitive way and not afraid of taking risks.

A diverse recruitment base requires a whole range of different training styles to meet different learning needs. COs reflected that opportunities to develop the following skills had been the most important:

- listening skills – the ability to listen 'properly', as many community organisers have put it;
- reflective practice;
- opportunities for personal development, resilience, confidence, ability to take risks;
- people skills – communication, building relationships, being inclusive;

The skills which COs feel should be given still more emphasis include:

- facilitation and group work skills
- dealing with conflict and negotiation skills
- time management, self-management and project management.
- support for lone working, personal safety and wider safeguarding issues
- more training in how to recruit, support and train volunteers
- strategic thinking - political awareness, a better understanding of power and of the social/economic context of community organising.

The styles of training COs most value are: learning on the job'; peer learning, interaction with other COs, sharing experiences and solving problems together; the emphasis on personal reflection; opportunities to be more self-reliant and to think creatively. On-line support sessions and action learning sets are helpful for many but a constant theme is that face-to-face contact with peers and with trainers is preferable to on-line support. Possibly, both on line and face to face training have a

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role to play and this has important implications for the resourcing of future training programmes.

Generally speaking, COs have found the accreditation process very challenging, regardless of their educational background, in part because for some it is an unfamiliar form of learning and for many because it added to the pressures of doing a new job, often in a new working environment, within a short time. Whilst a lot of COs (50% of those surveyed in 2013) have said their hosts were involved in supporting their learning and that this was helpful in understanding and developing their role in the local community, there are for whom the hosting model has been quite an isolated and difficult experience. In these circumstances particularly, COs have commented that more explicit acknowledgment and praise for their work and learning achievements from the programme team would have helped them to build confidence. What has been very valuable however, has been the opportunity for peer support. The creation of the Inspiration Network (selected COs in progression years) has amply demonstrated how the programme can develop and build on its own assets. For example, the introduction of bi-monthly regional training workshops where COs have been able to meet each other and learn from more experienced COs has proved very popular, even though the most experienced qualified COs are mindful that they only have two to three years of experience and are still at an early stage of learning. In any future programme, continued training and professional development opportunities for progressers would be useful.

Volunteers

Volunteers value training opportunities and the Volunteer Training Programme (VTP) has been proven as a core and essential element of the community organising process.

The VTP ran in fifteen areas in 2014/15, and illustrates the value of a structured programme of training and accreditation for volunteers. Although it can be challenging for volunteers to meet the requirements of accreditation, especially those for whom English is not a first language, the VTP has motivated volunteers and given them legitimacy. The VTP has also supported COs as trainers and has impacted on the legacy of the Programme at local level.

Hosts

The host induction training is crucial in understanding what the Programme and its process is all about. Some hosts have suggested that a follow up session e.g. when the COs have been in post for a three months, would have been useful in refreshing their knowledge of the mechanics of the Programme as well as the Programme's particular approach to organising. Some hosts were unclear about what was expected of them in terms of support and supervision, and around personnel matters and management of COs. They identified the need for a space to network and talk through the practicalities of their role.

Learning for programme management

It took a while to put adequate management capacity in place and it may still not have been enough. This has been a complex national programme recruiting and training 543 employees in 14 different cohorts, contracting with over 300 hosts and employers, and supporting 5703 volunteers. The model of a national organisation placing COs with local hosts has been an interesting one and paid off with regards to embedding and sustaining community organising in many areas. Greater clarity, though, about roles and lines of accountability between the key partners and local

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stakeholders i.e. Locality, RE:generate and hosts, would have benefitted the programme and reduced the confusion some have felt about who was responsible for what.

There could have been greater investment in hosts as the local roots of the programme. Many accepted that they were being used as 'incubators' but would have liked to have had a role across the spectrum i.e. they were happy to be hands-off with their COs, but would have liked to have benefited from being part of a national programme, and contribute more to its development. And those who joined the programme early on as 'kickstarters' have expressed the need for greater recognition of their, and their COs, 'guinea pig' status.

This programme has been a very fast roller coaster with training delivery as the main driver. This is understandable. However, it has undermined capacity to build understanding and advocate the value of this particular community organising approach, within Locality as well as the outside world.

Learning for the legacy of the programme

COs describe their experience of the programme as having had a 'profound impact' on them (and this includes many who have left the programme). The Programme has also left an important legacy with many of the host and progression employers of COs who have been able to reconnect with local communities at a time when resources are increasingly limited. The legacy looks most secure where:

- Additional resources are available to train volunteers and develop projects (e.g. through the VTP and the Community Organisers Social Action Fund).
- Host and progression employers have understood and been committed to the Programme and able to find or commit resources to keep COs past their first year – some have taken on more than one cohort, others have adopted 'progressors' from elsewhere.
- COs have found other sympathetic institutions that are committed to community organising – these include some housing associations, students unions, community anchor organisations, campaigning bodies.
- COs have set up CiCs to continue their work.
- Local ACORN branches have been set up.
- There has been a fit with other government or national programmes, like Our Place, Big Local etc.

CoCo as the legacy body will need to determine its particular role in supporting community organising. For example, it could act as a 'craft association' which protects the values of the approach and provides appropriate training and support; it could act as the promoter of the programme's approach to organising; it may play the role of broker between funding / employment opportunities and COs; it might support the creation of a social movement of COs and volunteers. This is an ambitious agenda and it will be strategic, deciding on priorities for the short-, medium- and long-term. Ultimately, CoCo needs to reflect on the learning from the last four years. As well as reflecting on the balancing acts described above, it will need to weigh up the importance of independence with the need to secure funding, the need to further embed community organising in areas where the foundations have been built with the need to spread the approach to new places, and the need to establish its distinctive approach while working with others in the field to secure the changes that communities want and need.

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Appendix

This paper summarises learning from Imagine's work from 2011-15. It is drawn from more detailed reports, including:

- Reflections on host selection process 2102
- Reflection on training 2012
- Reflections on accreditation 2012
- Locally rooted – hosts 2012
- Learning from Community Organisers 2013
- VCO report 2013
- Learning about learning 2013
- Training survey Oct 2013
- Learning and change 2014
- Training Review 2015
- Volunteer Voices 2015
- Legacy Report 2015