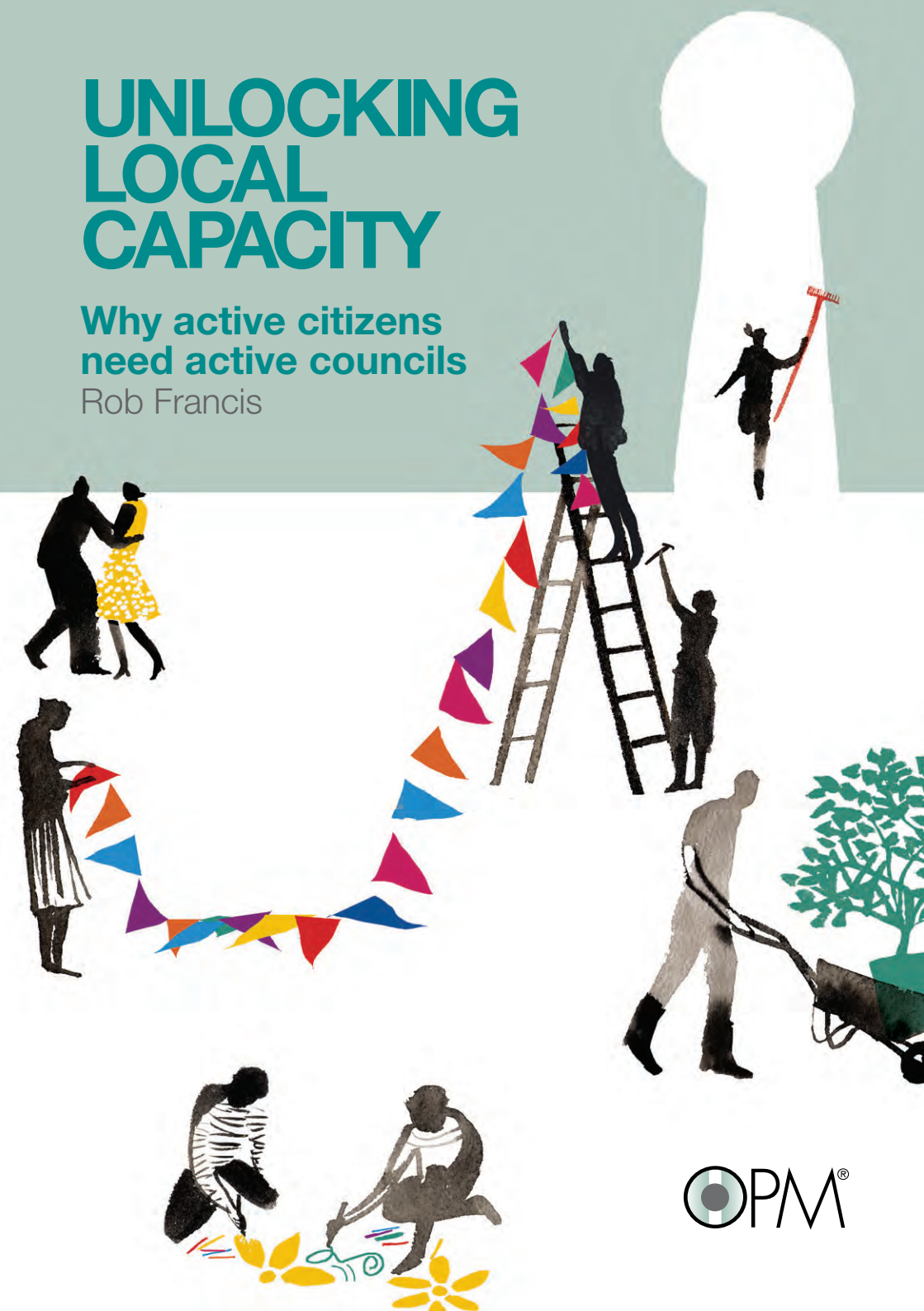
UNLOCKING LOCAL CAPACITY

Why active citizens need active councils

Rob Francis



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OPM is a public interest company that helps public services and communities to improve social outcomes. We work with officers and members in local councils across the country, along with their partners and the people they serve, to develop effective strategies and services to meet local needs.

This report was written by Rob Francis, with input from Sue Goss and Phil Copestake, and support from Sarah McDonnell. It builds on groundbreaking research conducted by NCVO, IVR and Involve (see pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk), but focuses on the role of local government specifically.

If you're interested in hearing more about OPM's work with councils to help them unlock local capacity, then email localgov@opm.co.uk or visit www.opm.co.uk.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Elected local authorities have been delivering services to England's cities, towns and villages since the 19th Century. Throughout this time local people outside those formal council roles have continued to use their own skills, time, energy and ideas to build, sustain and help to define the places we live.

Sometimes councils act in concert with local people, with this combined capacity used to maximum effect to achieve shared aims. Often they don't, and the opportunity is missed. This is not for want of trying: unlocking local capacity, in the real world of local government, has been persistently challenging.

So the topic of marshalling local energy and ideas for wider public good is not new. It is, however, one that is generating considerable interest, debate and action at present. Fundamental questions are being asked about what the local state can and should be doing, and about what happens to everything else.

These questions are central to discussions about localism, empowerment and what central government calls the Big Society; but they are being asked with such urgency because acute financial pressures demand it.

The current reality for all authorities, regardless of political hue, is that they can no longer afford to deliver all the services they typically have in the way that they have.

The process for deciding what to do less of and how to do things differently inevitably involves understanding what the rest of us are willing and able to do ourselves. Developing that understanding and translating it into concrete actions are things that all local councils are trying to do in England today.

About this report

This report sets out findings from new research about what councils can do to unlock the capacity in their communities. The practical experiences quoted are those of managers from 30 councils interviewed especially for this research, up and down the country.

Unlocking Local Capacity gives a snapshot of where local authorities are now and where they are heading. It highlights some of the approaches being taken and challenges being faced, and pinpoints the practical implications for councils, their staff, their elected members and their citizens.

WHY ARE COUNCILS SO INTERESTED IN HOW THEY CAN UNLOCK CAPACITY?

The key pressures

1 **Financial necessity:** councils cannot afford to do all the things they have, over time, come to do. If they're going to at least maintain current levels of health, wealth and happiness in their areas, that means finding capacity elsewhere to plug the gaps.

2 **Improving outcomes for individuals:** whether the emphasis is on reducing state intervention or supporting empowerment will depend on political persuasion, but there is a broad consensus that people's lives are improved if they are confident and able to do more themselves. In recent years an increasing focus on personalisation, co-production and 'person centred' approaches – both for local authority and health services – has provided evidence of the benefits individuals can experience when given more control.

3 **Improving outcomes for places:** again there are differences in how councils frame this, but there is consensus that it is healthy for a place to have individuals and groups actively engaging in the life of their community, as this can have benefits not only for individual wellbeing but also the local environment, culture, sense of community and cohesion.

The big questions

In essence, council efforts to unlock local capacity aim to address a handful of key questions:

- How can local authorities make financial savings without compromising the most important outcomes that people experience locally?
- How can citizens and communities be enabled to rely less on the state and do more for themselves?
- How can local people be empowered to play a greater role in shaping their communities?

The way in which these questions are framed and the order in which they are being tackled varies according to politics and history, and to personal preferences, suspicions and ambitions, but they are nonetheless questions which are being asked, in some form, in every council in the country.

In some councils, these are questions that have been high on the agenda for a long time – long before recent debates on localism or the big society. But across the country as a whole these questions are now being asked more loudly, inspiring more debate and leading to more visible action.

UNLOCKING NOT UNLEASHING

Listening to some politicians and commentators could lead one to conclude that the only 'role' for councils in all this is to move out of the way and let communities get on with it. The argument seems to be that people with capacity to do more themselves have been held back by red tape and need simply to be 'unleashed'.

Certainly there will be examples in many local areas where local people are ready and willing to act, needing no more than a green light from the authorities where before there were obstacles.

But for the most part it isn't that simple. The capacity is there in many guises and many types of community, but there is often a process of finding it, mining it, nurturing and supporting it – not simply lifting the lid and expecting it to burst out.

This is where local authorities come in. The business of tapping into community skills and energy is a very different one to traditional service delivery, and so councils are having to act differently in order to succeed – but act they must, rather than stepping back and saying to their citizens 'over to you'.

UNLOCKING DIFFERENT TYPES OF CAPACITY

This report considers the practical steps that councils can take to unlock three forms of local capacity: the capacity of individuals, the capacity of communities and, in support of those, the capacity of local authorities themselves (staff, members, physical assets and financial resources).

1 **Individual capacity:** The first chapter deals with councils' work to enable individual residents and families to do more themselves. This might mean taking more control and responsibility in their own daily lives, for instance demonstrating more positive behaviours in relation to health and fitness or recycling. Alternatively, it might mean encouraging individuals to participate more in local life, such as giving time to volunteer.

2 **Community capacity:** The second chapter deals with the capacity of communities, when individuals act together in order to make a collective contribution – such as taking on more control of a community asset.

3 **Council capacity:** The third and final chapter explores how councils can realign their own resources in order to support individuals and communities. That could mean empowering frontline staff so they in turn can help local people achieve things more quickly and efficiently, supporting councillors to be active community leaders, and finding ways to devolve budgets to the community level so that local people not only have a voice in what services the council delivers, but a role in their commissioning and maintenance.

01

UNLOCKING INDIVIDUAL CAPACITY

At its core, unlocking local capacity means supporting people to be active citizens. Later in this report, we consider how groups of people can come together to take action collectively.

In this first chapter, we begin with individuals and how they can be supported to participate more fully in the world around them.

For some, this means support to take more control in their own lives rather than being drowned in a cocktail of disconnected service interventions. For others, it means realising their potential as leaders amongst their friends and neighbours, encouraging positive behaviours and positive activity to improve their area.

The big challenge for councils in all this is how to change the conversation with residents in a way that makes them active contributors rather than passive recipients; how to flag up the assets people can draw on as well as the things they don't have, and how to respond to the factors that really motivate people to be more active.

TRUST, INSIGHT AND NEW KINDS OF CONVERSATIONS

'It doesn't necessarily take lots of financial resources – it's more about putting in the time and energy to build trust. Doing that can take years, but communities remember it and will value it for a long time.'

Councils realise that it's much more difficult for them to encourage local people to play more active roles if they have poor experiences of the council and low levels of trust in the council's ability or will to do a good job. A legacy of poor or misjudged communication and consultation can aggravate this, as can lack of deep understanding about the lives of people in receipt of the most service interventions. This is where a lot of authorities are starting from, at least in some of their neighbourhoods, and so investing time and energy to strengthen those foundations is where many begin.

'We just started by going out and talking to people on the estate, in a way we hadn't really done before. We weren't asking them about specific services, about what was working or what they wanted, just about the things they enjoyed doing, and what got in the way.'

Some authorities have decided to rewind and return to basics with the aim of building a deeper understanding about communities day to day,

rather than arriving with specific questions about what local people think about a specific issue. This has meant councils taking new and sometimes quite radical approaches to their engagement work, 'embedding' staff in target neighbourhoods for a period of several months, or undertaking ethnographic studies that seek to unravel the lived experiences of local people on their own terms. This is turn can lead to stronger relationships and trust between council staff and local people, which can be the basis of more coproduction in the way services are designed.

The Life Programme

The Life Programme started as a pilot in Swindon in collaboration with the social enterprise Participle, and initiatives are now taking place around the country supported by Life HQ community interest company. It aims to support and empower families facing difficult circumstances to build lives they want to lead.

Families who are themselves going through hard times have been part of the development process, alongside professionals who see the value of working in a different way. It gives families a dedicated team of workers, interviewed and chosen by the families themselves. The team begins by simply spending time with the families, 'doing things that will help you to get to trust each other.' Later on, the team will help those families to tackle more difficult challenges, learn things they want to learn and make changes in their lives that they want to make.

There is also a contributory element to the programme, so that families involved are active participants rather than recipients. Families who are part of the programme are expected to shape how it works, develop aspects of it for other families and help their teams to understand what sort of support works best.

In some localities, council efforts to build citizen trust and involvement represent a natural extension of neighbourhood management activity over the last ten to fifteen years. This often involves staff in some sort of neighbourhood officer role coordinating wider local partnerships that include local residents alongside elected members and representatives of public agencies.

'We have ward solutions meetings at least every two months, led by the elected members, where issues are identified on what needs sorting out in the area. These feed up to a bigger forum which pulls out the strategic themes from different wards so we can look at how to solve those locally across the board.'

In the more traditional of these arrangements, local residents have a voice at the meetings but it remains the council (or other agencies) going off to take the actions. As such, the capacity building element can be difficult to find. In other cases, the local meetings and forums result in the council supporting local people to take action themselves.

'If residents come along' saying 'we've got problems with litter and fly tipping' for instance, we can provide some practical tools, like bin bags and gloves, and the residents organise clean-ups which we then go and collect.'

For many councils making the transition from supporting community voice to supporting community action is a tentative and gradual one. Activities like street cleansing, after all, are core local authority territory, and councils can be wary about inviting residents to 'do their dirty work'. It is also something that is highly visible, hyper-local, low-risk and low-cost for local residents to get involved with themselves, however, and so a good area in which to test out local appetite for co-operating with existing services to 'top-up' local outcomes.

ASSET-BASED APPROACHES

'We're developing a strategic needs assessment on dementia and looking at how we can include people with dementia in developing that. There's a huge resource in communities which currently supports those people informally, beyond the work of paid posts, so we want to tap into that before we commission services ourselves.'

Increasingly, councils talk about taking an 'asset-based approach' to their conversations with local people about what they can do more of themselves.

In essence this means starting by looking at the resources people and localities already have and exploring how they could be better used – rather than by starting with what people don't have and would like or need. This

acknowledges that starting with what a community doesn't have can be de-energising, and in a climate where there isn't going to be much 'new stuff' on offer to plug the gaps, it can also be demoralising.

This is a valuable approach when it comes to unlocking the capacity of individuals to take more control and play a more active role, because it begins with what people already have at their disposal. This might be physical assets like a car or a garden shed, or skills and talents that make them better placed to participate in some activities rather than others – music, knitting, gardening, for instance, or formal skills relating to their work.

The fact that assets relate to individuals as well as buildings is important, and responds to the idea that treating people as 'needy' might be well-meaning but is ultimately disempowering.

Asset mapping with residents

In our work to support the national Ageing Well programme, OPM is running a series of workshops in localities around the country where asset-mapping is used to help older people, local authority staff and other service providers plot the community's assets in their broadest sense.

This can lead to interesting conversations about the importance of streets, shops and supermarkets as places of social interaction, the 'under the radar' activities that go on at a number of community venues unknown to council officers, and the sometimes unexpected things that can stop people making the most of these facilities. In some areas where there's seen to be 'nothing much to do', there may well be a good deal of public buildings available, but it becomes clear they are under-used – and so conversations can quickly move to 'what could we all do to change that?'.

Appealing to people's skills and interests

There are many people who would never think to step forward as volunteers – partly through anxiety about what they would be signing up to, and partly through believing they can't offer anything that other people would want.

And yet, if you ask those people to contribute something specific based on something you know they're good at or enjoy doing, you're likely to get a better response.

'The organiser knew who to go to… he knew that Betty, for instance, wouldn't be someone to put herself forward, but if he asked her to make some quiches for the party she'd be pleased to be asked… which she was. And of course that meant she came along to the event itself.'

MOTIVATING INDIVIDUALS

Incentivising and rewarding positive behaviour

'We want to test if offering people incentivisation like this motivates people to get involved, and also whether offering points through a large, recognised and trusted brand like Nectar is an encouragement in itself.'

Officers in some councils – fewer than one might expect given the high profile of these concepts – told us about their work around incentivisation and 'nudge'. This involves councils exploring how residents can be encouraged to be more responsible by reward. National pilot projects, particularly relating to healthy lifestyles, have been operating in this territory for some time.

Incentivisation can be a controversial approach for two reasons: firstly, because it can mean people in targeted groups getting 'rewards' that other citizens don't get even if their behaviours are the same; and secondly, because some are uneasy about the notion of the state coaxing people into behaving differently by dangling gifts in front of them, rather than educating them to want to change because it's a good idea.

One authority has been talking to the national retail reward card providers Nectar about running a pilot scheme which looks at the recruitment and rewarding of certain categories of volunteers. They are working with the police, for example, to look at how reward points could be given to people recruited as special constables. In the same area, an initiative is being run through the local voluntary and community sector umbrella body, whereby people get reward points for registering for a particular activity and also for actually turning up.

Reciprocation

Individuals can be deterred from volunteering by a range of factors. Uppermost can be concerns about getting 'dragged in' to activities or time commitments they can't manage, and a sense that they will be putting in time and energy with little recognition for their effort. By the same token, people are sometimes reluctant to call on the help being offered by others if it feels like charity, or compounds a sense that they are people 'in need'.

Building reciprocation into the process can help diffuse those issues, and an increasing number of local authorities are exploring timebanking as a means of doing this.

Research suggests that timebanks are a particularly good way to engage people who would not typically be attracted to standard volunteering opportunities, and the diversity within timebanking schemes is often very high. What's more, it's a concept that speaks to the idea of an asset-based approach, as it implies that everyone's time can be valuable to someone else – making everyone a contributor as well as a beneficiary.

'There's nothing more empowering than the thought that you can do something useful for someone else.'

Castlehaven Timebank

Camden Council set up a small steering group consisting of community and third sector organisations and council officers in order to promote timebanking in the borough. One of the steering group members, Castlehaven Community Association agreed to host a new Timebank. The finance for this came partly from the council and partly from Castlehaven. Housing officers supported the launch by writing to local tenants about it, as did a local housing association. In the first year the Timebank enabled the exchange of over 2,500 time credits and service hours, and boasted about 150 members. Paid staff are needed to run the process, but the energy it harnesses and the activity it results in is voluntary. The timebank is proving to be a way of engaging people who might not otherwise get involved in 'volunteering.'

CareBank

CareBank is a reciprocal time credit scheme to help catalyse more peer to peer provision of social care in Windsor and Maidenhead. Based on a Japanese concept this scheme enables residents to gain time credits in return for voluntary activity in support of older people. The Council has appointed the nationwide charity WRVS to take forward this project with a pilot up and running from March 2012. WRVS will work with local organisation to develop CareBank into a community led social enterprise.

The aim is to encourage residents to volunteer in their communities, enabling people with unmet support needs to live as independently as possible in their own homes. Volunteers will register with CareBank and help out with activities such as shopping, cooking, housework and gardening and earn time credits as a result. These time credits could then be used in a number of different ways for example - saved for the volunteers own family support in the future, used for a range of different services and activities e.g. such as free swims, or donated for the benefit of other people or local groups.

The power of relationships and networks

There is a growing body of research into what motivates individuals to be more active citizens. The Pathways through Participation report produced by NCVO, IVR and Involve drew a number of conclusions about enablers and barriers in relation to participation, including the importance of relationships and social networks.1[1] These, the report found, help to:

- shape an individual's personality, motivations and capacity
- trigger their involvement
- support them or prevent them from starting or sustaining their participation
- determine the likelihood of their participation being a success.

The people who can most influence an individual's behaviour and preparedness to participate in a particular activity may include close family and friends, work colleagues and others they come into regular contact with, and even those they don't know personally but who are part of their wider social networks. For councils and other agencies seeking to encourage more active citizenship and unlock the latent capacity of a community, understanding and working through these networks can be a crucial part of the process.

'In one ward, we've been looking at how people's social links affect their lives, and there's more energy behind that now. We realise there are differences in how these sorts of concepts work, such as in different faith or ethnicity groups.'

As the Local Government Group report 'A glass half-full' illustrated, some of the best work on this front has related to health and social care.[2] Councils and health sector bodies are identifying local individuals to act as champions for healthy behaviours, recognising that their neighbours may be much more likely to follow their lead than follow the advice of professionals with whom they might have little or no contact.

1 Brodie et al, 'Pathways through Participation,' 2011

2 IDeA (now LGG), 'A glass half-full: how an asset approach can improve community health and well-being

‘Word of mouth can’t be beaten in getting messages out to people. Our community ambassadors are a way of doing that.’

The RSA’s current work in Peterborough includes activity to identify such influential individuals, who they refer to as ‘change makers’, to generate new community-led projects.[3]

Through a process of social network analysis, local people are asked who they think these individuals are in their area, resulting in a list which is generated by a range of people rather than based solely on what council officers assume to be the case. These change makers – who include councillors and officers alongside voluntary group leaders and residents with no formal leadership roles – are now being brought together as a network.

Councils reiterate the effectiveness of personal connections in growing participation amongst residents. Some told us that whilst blanket appeals for ‘volunteers’ had tended to yield relatively poor responses, people had been much more responsive when invited to become involved in something by their friends and neighbours.

‘We ran fifty training sessions over the summer, and the new library service started in September. The feedback from volunteers has been very positive, many have told their friends and those friends have then come forward themselves and said ‘I’d like to join in too. We now have an additional 350 volunteers in the library service and have only reduced opening hours by 6%.’

3 See www.thersa.org/projects/citizen-power/changemakers

02

UNLOCKING COMMUNITY CAPACITY

In the first chapter we looked at what councils can do to bring individuals on board as more active citizens, whether to change their own behaviours, influence others to change theirs, or contribute personal time and energy to an activity that has wider benefits to the community.

Communities are, of course, made up of individuals, and so when many people are encouraged and supported to do more themselves, by definition 'the community' is also doing more for itself.

This chapter focuses on people coming together to achieve something which, as isolated individuals or households, they could not.

For instance, a set of disparate individuals may be encouraged, incentivised or nurtured to recycle more of their waste, to eat more healthily or to put time into a timebank. If those many individuals want to tidy up their local park or save their library from closure, however, they will need to act collectively to do so, negotiating with each other and probably with the local council.

The question here, then, is what can councils do to facilitate local voluntary effort whereby individuals come together as part of larger groups and networks? How can councils harness that collective time, that pooled energy and those many ideas into practical action for the good of a whole place?

SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERING IN THE COMMUNITY

'We have traditional voluntary sector infrastructure organisations in the county, and we've been encouraging them to help communities to think about how the dots could be joined – between groups, buildings, transport and so on.'

Most of the councils we spoke to began by saying that there was a very active voluntary sector in their area, and a long history of community groups doing things themselves.

This is not surprising, and reflects the breadth and depth of long-standing voluntary effort across the country. There was often a frustration that because the Big Society agenda itself was new, the implication was that volunteering was also new and that councils were like grandmothers being taught to suck eggs.

'Investing in community development and volunteers is something we like to think we've always done.'

A lot of councils work with co-terminus voluntary and community sector umbrella organisations and volunteer centres to build and sustain participation in volunteering locally. Through these third sector bodies councils are helping to fund services that provide information about volunteering opportunities, advice to voluntary sector organisations and also training and development to volunteers.

Focus on volunteering

In Leeds, 2010 and 2011 saw a two year focus on volunteering with partners from across the city, led by Leeds City Council and Voluntary Action Leeds. The campaign was driven by a concern that volunteering was lower in the city than nationwide, based on Place Survey data, along with local research that volunteering hours were falling further. An independent evaluation of the campaign suggested that by the end of 2010, those seeking information on volunteering had increased by 25%, with a further 21% increase in 2011.

The campaign in 2010 focused primarily on raising awareness of the range of volunteering opportunities, encouraging participation from diverse communities and ensuring that the volunteering experience is as positive as possible. Toolkits have been developed setting out standards of good practice and a Volunteering kite mark has been launched which organisations can achieve by demonstrating that they have achieved set standards of practice.

2011 focused on increasing the number of volunteering opportunities, the number of organisations registering their volunteering opportunities and on making these more widely accessible. A dedicated Volunteering Centre has been established in the centre of Leeds and volunteering outreach hubs are being rolled out in different parts of the city – these use council spaces where footfall is high with people are already accessing other services. The Volunteer Centre saw a massive 600% increase in the number of organisations registering their volunteering opportunities with the volunteer centre in 2011 compared to the same period in 2010.

Much of this supporting activity represents a continuation of earlier arrangements, although there is a sense from across councils that this work is an increasingly significant part of what they do, where in the past it may have felt more peripheral to the core business of straight forward service delivery.

Tightening purse strings mean that council support for the voluntary sector is under pressure and many councils are reviewing what they fund and how they fund it with greater scrutiny. Some have reduced their financial commitment to the local voluntary sector, whilst others were proud to tell us they have maintained existing levels of support.

Some councils are trying to be more creative in the way they support and promote volunteering than they used to be, integrating it into their mainstream activity. For instance, some are now publicising volunteering opportunities on their council jobs pages, which instantly takes them to a much larger audience.

‘We’ve got quite a different approach to a lot of authorities in that our main volunteering scheme is council-led. Because it’s run by the council we can link volunteers into council opportunities more easily, depending on their interests. They can also access training that we run. We have about 7,000 volunteers.’

The council as convenor

Councils can play an important role in 'joining the dots' in a place, bringing individuals and organisations together to forge those new connections which can go on to generate new community-led activity without the council necessarily being involved. OPM is working with councils to help them do this, such as in Cantelowes ward in Camden.

Taking Part

In September 2011, OPM and Camden Council hosted a community workshop for Cantelowes residents. The workshop was the first step in Taking Part which is supporting residents to take forward community-led projects that encourage people to get to know each other through working to make improvements in their area.

About 25 people came to the event. This included a mix of residents from across the ward, two local councillors, some staff from community and voluntary groups in the ward and a group of around ten young people who mostly live on the Maiden Lane Estate. Residents were enthusiastic and creative in the way they explored what might be possible, and they were keen to offer their time and skills in order to get projects moving. The ideas they developed included the formation of a green group, a skills-swap between young people and adults to feature job visits, mentoring and classes on languages, music or careers; and organising social and arts events.

Camden Council and OPM are now supporting residents to take their ideas forward by: encouraging them to share their ideas with local people more widely to see how they respond; action planning sessions to help figure out who needs to do what, when and encouraging applications for council (and other) funding pots in those cases where some dedicated resource is needed to make things happen.

USING VOLUNTEERS WITHIN COUNCIL SERVICES

'We have lots of volunteers in arts galleries, museums, libraries etc – hundreds in those services, but we're now moving towards volunteers running services that were previously led by paid staff. In one of our museums, for instance, the front of house is now staffed by volunteers.'

In some areas there is a long history of volunteer activity in council-run facilities, in others much less. In most, however, managers are exploring how they can grow this volunteer resource either by involving more people in existing opportunities or taking volunteering into new service areas.

Perhaps more than any other topic in this report, this use of volunteers in council services represents the most radical visible shift in how local authorities are involving local people as active contributors to the life of their community. It is also one of the more contentious when it means engaging volunteers in what have traditionally been paid public service roles.

Our research highlights three broad approaches to the use of volunteers: as augmenters, as saviours, and as active challengers.

Augmenters

Some councils defuse the potential controversy of using volunteers by making it clear that volunteer time augments the existing service, rather than replacing it – in other words, that they do not allow the council to shy away from its responsibilities and deliver a service 'on the cheap'. We heard about cleaner streets or parks groups, for instance, which improve on what the council's maintenance teams already do, and the library volunteers who's supporting role allows paid library staff to focus on tasks where their professional expertise is most valuable.

Library volunteers

On the 1st April 2010, Merton Library & Heritage Service entered into a formal agreement with Volunteer Centre Merton to recruit and manage volunteers on behalf of the council. This formal agreement was built on the success of the Home Visits Library Service, which has been administered solely by volunteers since April 2009. Since the launch of the partnership, 468 volunteers have been recruited and Merton now has the highest level of volunteering use of any London authority.

To date, there is a volunteer retention rate of 83%. Volunteers support staff in a range of different roles from meeting and greeting customers to shelving, delivering activities and events to providing training. There are also a number of supplementary roles such as Reading Group and Coffee Morning Co-ordinators, Yoga and Aerobics Instructors, Family History and Painting Group Co-ordinators. Volunteers have enabled staff to focus their time and attention on customer service and their core professional skills.

Volunteer 'thank you celebrations' are held annually and volunteers talk about the satisfaction from feeling they are making a contribution to the community, and the experience is resulting in some developing new training and teaching roles.

Saviours

Increasingly there is a 'harder end' to volunteering, where volunteers are not only augmenting what's there already but allowing it to survive where otherwise it would not. The examples we heard about typically involved libraries and community centres.

The process of tapping into volunteer capacity to help sustain services varies from place to place, and even within places. Sometimes councils make the first move, approaching community groups to explore whether they are interested in coming forward to help run a service that is at risk (or will be if alternative arrangements can't be made soon).

Where councils are successfully recruiting volunteers to help maintain services such as libraries, one of the main messages is that timing and approach is crucial. A council approaching a community with an ultimatum – step forward or this service ends – are more likely to get a frosty and belligerent response than the council which explains the current arrangements are unsustainable and that they want to work with local people to find a solution.

These are difficult conversations to have with residents angry that a service they value is under threat. And yet people are now so aware of the financial realities councils face, they appear to be more willing to listen and help than officers and members initially fear.

'I was asked to take 30% out of the libraries budget without closing any. We did a survey to help us understand what exactly people valued most about the libraries. I went to every area meeting, talked to local people and councillors about what they thought was most important, and about the challenge we faced.'

That's not to say this is a smooth process, and some officers told us about the tensions that can emerge within communities about when a campaign to save something should morph into an group that steps forward to help. As those sorts of debates play out in a community, a council needs to view that anger and frustration of campaigners as a starting point for positive action, rather than a force that it hopes will dissolve into nothing.

'If you have someone passionate enough about something to complain, we need to know what we can do to harness that into a positive contribution.'

One way of doing that is to approach community groups with a clear and honest position, but also one that's flexible and demonstrates genuine willingness to work out a solution. **Round table discussions run as workshops are often much more effective than traditional public meetings where even the room layout a) allows the loudest and angriest voices to dominate and b) encourages council and community take up positions of defence and attack.**

Challengers

We have talked about 'augmenters' and 'saviours', but a third group of volunteers councils are encountering are 'challengers' – local groups who proactively approach their council and ask to take on the running of a particular service or facility, either because they fear it may be at risk in future, or they simply think they can make a better job of it than the local authority – or both.

The Community Right to Challenge, included within the Localism Bill, means that local groups (and, indeed, local staff) don't have to wait for their council to invite them to take on a service or a building – they can proactively express an interest and must have it considered.

'There's a community centre which we've helped develop so that it's pretty much self-sufficient. The guy in charge is keen to expand and take on other centres, but the more you look into it, the more it becomes clear that it all hangs on him… so that could be a big risk.'

The challengers can prompt different responses in local authorities, depending who they are and what services / facilities they are interested in. Sometimes councils are glad of the offer, as it opens up new, creative conversations about sustaining and even improving the delivery of a particular activity. Sometimes councils are taken by surprise, and must embark on in depth assessments of whether the challengers in question will be able to offer sufficient service quality, sustainability and inclusivity if given the green light.

Living with difference

When it comes to using volunteers to support public services, councils are being pragmatic. In some towns, villages and neighbourhoods, people are ready and willing to take more on themselves, and so councils are helping them to do that. In other places, people are less ready and willing, and so the same councils will continue doing more of the same.

The consistency of provision which once would have been so important to many seems less important now, with councils more willing to say 'if it can work in these areas, let's try it, and everywhere else we'll stick with the status quo'.

'These are not overarching approaches that can developed and rolled out everywhere at once. One street might be much more able to come up with its own solutions than another. We're okay with that – we have to build this new train stage by stage whilst we keep the old train going.'

For some tax payers this will raise questions about equity – why do I pay for a service that people continue to get in the next town, but which I have to give my own time to maintain?' Yet the success of volunteer recruitment drives in some areas suggests that the concern about losing a service (or enthusiasm about improving it) is greater, and that people will therefore step up to contribute provided they feel valued and get support to do so.

GIVING PEOPLE THE TOOLS

Unlocking local capacity in many cases means literally equipping communities. A locality may have within it an abundance of time, energy and skills that can be harnessed for wider public good, but translating those potential contributions into a coherent, reliable force will usually require additional ingredients which local authorities can at least help to provide.

Providing the materials

People will be more willing to give their time if they're not also expected to provide the materials. Increasingly we see examples of councils addressing this by paying for and giving out certain equipment that then enable people to undertake specific activities.

Several of the examples we heard about involved environmental maintenance projects whereby local people give their time to look after a street or open space, and where the tools for the job are supplied by the council. As such, there is a cost to the council, but it's a relatively small one – and certainly cheaper than if they were paying for the labour as well.

We heard how important it was for the process of bidding for the tools or materials not to become the focus itself for communities or groups, distracting away from the activity the tools are intended for.

If councils are to maximise the potential benefit of a relatively tiny investment they need to be willing to take a light touch approach to how these resources are granted.

Adopt a Street

Adopt a Street is a scheme in Windsor and Maidenhead where residents volunteer to look after a particular area or street usually through activities such as litter picking. The Council provides these groups with basic materials such as bin bags and high-vis jackets. Currently – as of February 2012 – around 600 people are involved in these projects including businesses and schools. The Council has not reduced its own cleaning services where these groups are active – rather their work is additional. The Council sees the benefit as two fold: a cleaner local environment and the opportunity to build strong relationships between neighbours.

Advice, expertise and training to lighten the load

Giving people the right tools doesn't only mean practical things like bin liners and brooms; councils can also support active citizens with knowledge or expertise possessed within the organisation, or else build that knowledge and expertise within community groups through training.

Across the country, community groups are being involved in some increasingly complex negotiations about playing a greater role – and even taking control – in a host of areas previously delivered wholly or primarily by the state. Advice and guidance need to be made available to these groups to help them take sensible decisions.

People who volunteer want to feel appreciated and supported. Offering training relevant to the activity they're involved in can do both, and also makes it more likely that volunteer involvement in a project or service will be more likely to succeed in the long term. In most cases where volunteers are taking on new areas of responsibility, such as in libraries, youth clubs and community centres, the councils in those areas are preparing them with the necessary training.

'I recently sat down with some new volunteers who hope to take on a library that sadly we will otherwise need to close. Rather than rush the process, we'll bring in colleagues from Community Development to help get them into a position where they can take it on.'

People who volunteer also want to enjoy what they're doing. If 'back office' activities feel like a burden to volunteers and deter them from being involved, it may be in the council's interests to absorb some of those functions, freeing up the volunteers to do more of what really motivates them. In the case of a volunteer-led youth club, for instance, this could mean the council drafting governance arrangements or sorting out the CRB checks.

Councils also need to accept that this isn't a zero sum game. Participation and responsibility exist on a spectrum, and community groups will be ready to do some things but not others. If they're not prepared to do as much as the council had hoped, should that mean calling the whole thing off, or reassessing the relative roles of council and community?

‘Originally we asked volunteers to staff libraries, but volunteers said we still want a professional staff. There needs to be something of a negotiated settlement.’

Confidence to act

Finally, people need confidence in their own abilities if they are to step forward and get involved. Councils often find those confidence levels are lower in economically deprived areas where education, employment and wider life experience mitigate against it.

Councils therefore have a role in encouraging those who might not otherwise participate to feel more confident about doing so. Opportunities for encouragement will come through the interactions people have with council officers day to day, as well as through the activities of grassroots third sector groups that councils support. This returns us to the territory of open-ended conversations and focusing on assets. Confidence is likely to grow as individuals and groups progress up the ‘ladder of participation’, becoming more sure-footed as they take each step.

Building confidence across sections of a community will be important if councils are going to see active citizenship that is inclusive and broadly representative of its population.

The Big Society: help or hindrance?

This whole topic of building capacity could be seen as sitting neatly under the Big Society banner, but is this a label councils are using? Most appear not to.

In a lot of cases this is simple party politics – the Big Society is an idea associated with the Conservatives, and Labour and Lib Dem authorities are reluctant to sign up to their idea.

But even many Conservative-led councils told us they 'tend to avoid it'. Even beyond a council's political colours, it's a phrase that has clearly acquired a lot of unhelpful baggage for a lot of people. Some officers told us that whilst it embodies much of what they're trying to achieve, it's a phrase that muddies the waters and can turn people against propositions that in themselves are seen as positive.

Councils' reluctance to use the phrase can also reflect a frustration that it implies something new, and therefore can feel as though it overlooks capacity-building and volunteering support work that councils were already undertaking before the Big Society agenda began.

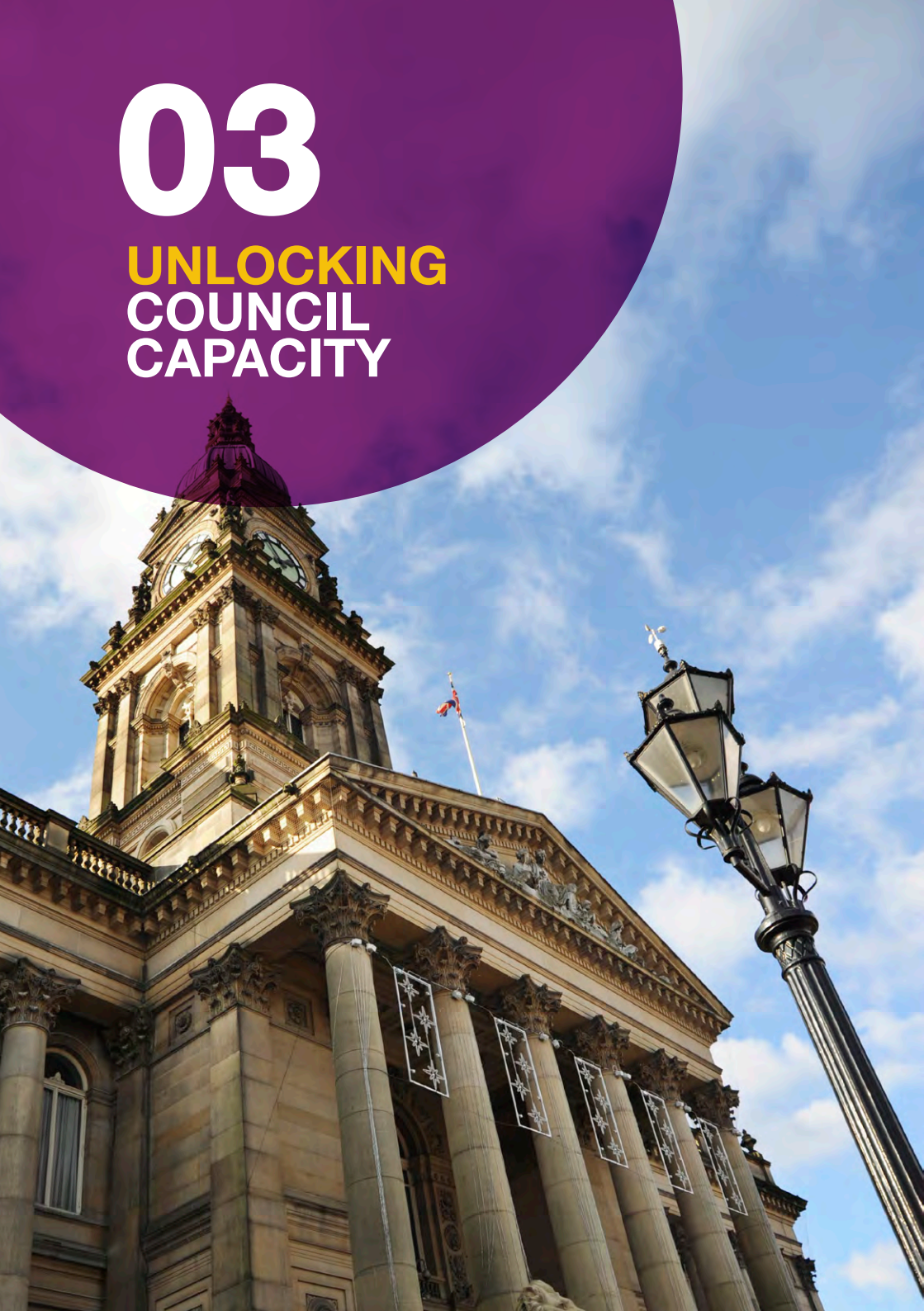
It doesn't ultimately matter what words we use – more important is what councils doing out there on the ground The Big Society phrase itself has become highly politicised, but the wider terrain of individuals and communities doing more themselves is one being mapped out by councils of all political hues.

That may not necessarily have been the case ten years or even five years ago, and as such represents a genuine and exciting shift of emphasis in the role and approach local authorities are taking.


Big Society is a hindrance, we never use it … For me it's poisonous … and it's recognised that locally, it doesn't help us make our case.
When we suggested this was part of the government agenda in terms of the Big Society, we got a big push back. There's a view that the Big Society is about using the voluntary sector to do things on the cheap.

03

UNLOCKING COUNCIL CAPACITY



Unlocking capacity is primarily about looking beyond the town hall to the assets, interests, energy and skills that exist within households and neighbourhoods, towns and villages.

As this report argues, however, this does not mean that the town hall ceases to have a role – indeed it has a vital and ongoing role, just not the same one it used to have.

Getting it right means that in the long term, public bodies will be able to manage with fewer resources of their own, but getting to that point means councils investing time, consideration and at least some money in marshalling those resources they do have in different ways.

'We need to change the question. Instead of asking 'how can our resources best be used to deliver services?' we need to be asking 'how can our resources best be used to support local people? Delivering services will always be a part of that – but only a part.'

When it comes to how councils deploy their own assets, there is a whole other debate about efficiency and value for money which we don't stray into here (although enabling communities to do more themselves should help achieve both).

Instead this chapter focuses on what councils are doing to get themselves in the best position to support individuals and communities in the way that unlocking local capacity requires.

MONEY

There are two distinct ways in which councils are opening up their finances as a means of unlocking capacity out there in the community. The first involves asking citizens how they think council budgets should be divided and asking them to act differently to help those budgets go further. The second is to provide pots of money to people in the community so they can do the things they want to do in their area.

Budget consultations

Some councils have long been proactive in bringing citizens into the conversation about how resources should be spent. Recent budget pressures have encouraged councils to beef-up that citizen engagement, partly to legitimise big savings proposals and partly to show local people how hard it is to decide what to save and what to cut.

In a lot of authorities, this takes the form of large scale budget consultations where, through survey work and deliberative events, people are invited to comment on the services that councils should prioritise and those where they might reduce resources.

In some cases this sounds like quite traditional consultation of the sort that lots of councils have been doing for some years, if more high profile than in the past, and doesn't necessarily equate to building the capacity of local people to do more themselves.

In other cases, there is this evidence that this more familiar 'have your say' approach is being augmented by something more in the spirit of unlocking local capacity, whereby residents are not only being given a voice in what the council does and doesn't do, but are also being given options which redraw the boundaries between what they and the council do.

'We're running a major campaign to engage residents on what we spend. We're spending quite a lot on street cleansing at the moment, and we're saying that if residents pitch in with that, we can maybe spend some of that resource on other things. In some areas, this approach is working well.'

A conversation which just says 'what should we cut?' is not a very positive or motivating one. A conversation which says 'we need to reduce spending – what can we all do differently?' is much more likely to help generate good ideas and positive sustainable actions rooted in the community.

Making this leap from asking citizens their views on budget priorities to asking them how all the assets of a place can be better utilised can be a valuable way of addressing budgetary pressures whilst also unlocking capacity.

Funding for community-led projects

In addition to the large-scale budget consultations, many councils are allocating pots of money for communities to spend on projects they themselves come up with. Sometimes this money is located in a central, area-wide fund and community groups submit applications for its use.

'Our Big Society Fund is about local people having some funding to set something up for themselves. There's been lots of interest and a lot of bids, most so far around youth work as that's a service that's changing a lot, so we're seeing communities responding to that.'

In other cases and, amongst the local authorities we spoke to, more commonly, that money is divided up between localities from the outset – whether by ward or another unit of geography.

In some councils this might be £1000 per ward, in others it's several thousands. In the examples we heard about, elected members are always involved in deciding which projects should be supported, and sometimes they are joined by other local people as part of a ward committee or area forum.

City Living, Local Life

In Kensington and Chelsea, a new programme City Living, Local Life sees wards allocated £20,000 each year for four years as a 'community fund'. This adds up to a commitment of around two million pounds across the borough over the life of the scheme. In addition, each ward is allocated dedicated officer time. The programme is also developing a local community news and events notice board and City Living, Local Life public website detailing all project spend and providing lots of resources like bespoke local 'How To' guides.

The programme is member-led. All three councillors in each ward need to sign off the final decision and co-ordinate the engagement of residents and supporting projects with officer support. It is a criteria of the funding that councillors must involve local residents and local groups in decisions, and in doing reach and appeal to a cross-section of people in the community. Some councillors are engaging people through existing local fora, some arrange one-off workshops to discuss the spending proposals, and some go along to community events where local people are likely to be. Local people are invited to submit ideas for ward projects, and must also demonstrate evidence both of local need or desire and the project's potential to improve quality of life.

Ideas supported so far or in development include a life coaching pilot for social housing tenants aiming to become a social enterprise, Christmas parties for pensioners, community events, multiple street festivals for the Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics, community websites, a sewing project run by Somali women, multiple community kitchen gardens, intergenerational events hosted by local schools, and a community cooking project run by Irish Travellers.

The different examples of community funds we heard about suggest this is happening in a variety of ways, but there are some features common to most of the schemes. In particular:

- They aim to generate and take up ideas from local people
- They intend to support projects that offer a clear benefit to the wider community, rather than serving narrow interest groups, and in some cases they require that projects are 'innovative'
- Form-filling is meant to be as non-burdensome as possible to make application easy
- Elected members are central in the process of deciding what is funded

Avoiding 'resource capture'

Historically, discussions about empowering citizens have always led some to ask whether everyone will be empowered equally, or if those with the loudest voices will get more. When it comes to allocating public money to community projects, this remains an important question. It seems to be one that councils are alive to, but not allowing themselves to be paralysed by.

The various funds being set up to kick-start resident-led projects tend to have in-built criteria around inclusivity, so decisions about what to support take this into account. Some told us they were familiar enough with the 'loudest voices' already to spot them early on, and others were confident that the process of funding projects was so transparent and public that it would be obvious if narrow interests were managing to get an unreasonable slice of the pie.

'If you discuss all these grants in public as we do, it does introduce balance. If it's the same people asking for money again and again, everyone else realises and makes a fuss – it's self regulating.'

BUILDINGS

In the case of council buildings – community centres, parish halls, schools and so on – the act of 'unlocking' is more than just a metaphor. Across the country, councils are looking at how they can enable local people to fling open the doors of unused or underused premises for community benefit.

Sometimes this is because efficiency drives and asset-based approaches encourage it. Or because councils plan to reduce or close facilities and this is a way of ameliorating that. And sometimes it's because local people are making proactive requests themselves – whether under the Right to Challenge discussed earlier, or simply through informal suggestions about things they could do in a particular building.

Some local authorities are in the process of transferring assets to community groups or parish councils, with those groups becoming wholly responsible owners of those buildings.

Asset transfer is a complicated business and for most community groups a daunting prospect, however, so in most cases it seems that more halfway house measures are being taken. This usually means a council retaining legal ownership of (and responsibility for) a building which in every other respect is taken on by another body.

This can feel safer both for the new occupants and the council, whilst still allowing the parish council or community group in question to use the asset and allowing the local authority to reduce its costs.

'We are looking at property that's either derelict or going to be sold but where the community may have a use for it. At the moment it's not a case of asset transfer, more asset share, with the council charging peppercorn rents, and if organisations can have a use for premises then we'll work with them to make that happen.'

OFFICERS

Citizens encounter council employees in a range of roles and settings, sometimes every day. Collectively these staff build-up people's experience of what the council is and how it works.

Whilst for some officers this insight sits at the heart of how they operate, many are confined by the conventions of traditional service delivery. All councils know that unlocking capacity will mean at least some parts of their organisations reassessing what they are for and how they position themselves as a result.

'Reorienting the tanker'

'Through the organisation at the moment is a sense of 'let's try things out'. In the past we would have thought it a bit risky, but now we're saying we'll give it a try and if fails we'll learn. So there's more room for learning in the council at the moment.'

Councils are huge organisations with thousands of staff. Several of the council officers we interviewed talked about the work they are doing 'behind the scenes' to reshape their organisations to fit with what is now required of them as enablers and facilitators – even 'agitators' – in neighbourhoods.

Some of this is structural, about how directorates are aligned and priorities articulated, and much of it is cultural; fostering new types of behaviour amongst staff and members; new ways to approach challenges and not only talking to local people but proactively involving them in leading what happens in their area.

If local people are to be supported to make positive contributions in their areas, then the place must be the focus, rather than the issue or the theme or the service traditionally tasked with sorting things out. For members and communities to be supported on these place-based projects, councils need to be able to offer resources and support at that level – across departments and perhaps at a level of locality many officers are not accustomed to.

'Taking this very local approach is definitely what we would look to do more of in future – you need that for the member, because it's the level at which they are seen by residents, and it's also important for the community because the results are more tangible to them.'

Training staff to be co-producers

Lambeth was the first local authority to set out its plans to become a 'cooperative council'. This is framing their efforts to shift from a culture of determining and delivering services centrally to distributing power more evenly with local people so that communities are directly involved in the commissioning of services, the co-production of service outputs and the management of the outcomes that result.

This is not a quick or easy process, as it requires council staff understanding the change as well as residents. The council is working internally to develop employees' skills and understanding of what coproduction entails. Through this development work, staff are helped to realise why coproduction goes beyond talking and listening to the public, instead embracing the practical, tangible contributions that local people can make through new sorts of relationships between citizens and the council.

Freeing up staff to make decisions

Giving staff freedom and flexibility to act on their own initiative is seen as beneficial in lots of ways, including encouraging creativity, improving staff satisfaction and raising organisational efficiency. It can also help to unlock the capacity of local people because it enables decisions to be made more quickly at a neighbourhood level – perhaps even on site, there and then – rather than being referred up to managers, in which time communities can become frustrated and lose interest.

'If a decision is made in a local authority, it has to go through five or six directorates as well as the Cabinet – and the community can feel disempowered by the time lag that entails.'

But is that easier said than done? It's one thing to tell junior officers 'you decide', but if the decision that is made turns out to be ill-judged, what happens then?

As with much of the organisational 'loosening up' that unlocking capacity can imply, senior managers, politicians and local people themselves have to accept that sometimes things might not turn out as intended. If councils make a commitment to working more nimbly and giving their staff reasonable responsibilities to act, they will hopefully not just retrench to their old long-winded sign-off procedures at the first mishap.

One aspect of this 'freeing up' referred to by the officers we spoke to relates to how officers work with members. More junior staff in particular can be daunted by elected members, making it difficult for them to have open, exploratory conversations about new ideas for an area. Some councils report that through the creation of ward and neighbourhood teams / forums / working groups, which bring members, officers and sometimes residents together around hyper-local projects, those working relationships are becoming much stronger.

ELECTED MEMBERS

Just as important as the question 'what is the role for councils?' is the more specific question of 'what is the role of elected members?' The local authorities we spoke to are keen to position their elected members variously as arbiters, facilitators, enablers, communicators, community activists and community leaders – and in most cases combinations of these.

Accountable and connected

Over recent decades, all initiatives to engage and empower local people have invariably led some councillors to feel they were being sidelined and 'worked around' by officers – locally, regionally or nationally – who wanted to hear the voices 'real people' and cut out the middle men.

If this was true before, it feels less true now. Perhaps in part this is because the business of unlocking local capacity is about more than hearing voices – it is about individuals and communities doing things, often with some sort of help or at least the green-light from the local authority.

As such, councils have decisions to make about what / who in the community to support and how to support them – decisions that involve public assets and therefore need someone with democratic accountability to be involved in the process.

'We've had one case of a couple of people vying for the same resource. In that case, we asked the local members to use their judgement on which would be a stronger case, and to assess if there was a chance of those people working up a plan together.'

Accountability is a crucial part of the picture. One of the main concerns about this whole agenda is that will lead to the uneven distribution of influence and resources within communities. As such, giving elected representatives the responsibility to guard against that and decide between vying interests when differences of opinion arise is hugely important.

As well as being formally accountable and legitimate, councillors should be well-placed within a community to pull together different groups and agencies, to broker negotiations, and to link up those local people with ideas to the most useful officer expertise.

Supporting members to support their residents

This all presupposes that councillors are well-known in their communities, familiar with its main actors and organisations, and personally confident and capable of bringing people together.

Our research confirms that some councillors are very good at this and always have been, but that many need (and indeed are asking for) help to take on a different type of role and mindset.

This means there is a job for councils to support their members in order that they, in turn, can support their communities.

The Focused Local Learning Programme

The Focused Local Learning Programme in Shropshire has been designed to help elected members provide their communities with the support they need to do more for themselves. It is rooted in the belief that elected members have the electoral legitimacy needed to provide effective leadership at a time of difficult choices and should be well-placed within their localities to facilitate conversations and help build networks.

Through the programme, and with support from OPM, councillors have focused on specific local projects they thought could be best tackled with the involvement of local people. This has helped councillors and officers to see what the main ingredients of a successful local project are likely to be, and what sort of role they can expect to play in it – often mobilising, convening and brokering, but not always taking charge and not always referring on to a council officer to 'fix the problem'.

One of the practical project successes to date has been the formation of a time-limited hyper-local partnership to tackle anti-social behaviour problems. This has, amongst other things, brought local people on board to look after a communal green space. Another project has seen the first big steps taken towards re-opening a derelict pub in a small village, which will ultimately be in community ownership.

Most councils we spoke to referred to the variation amongst elected members, with some being confident and comfortable in working as leaders and enablers in their local areas, some being enthusiastic to do more, and some being less engaged.

As with their work to support community groups to do more, councils are accepting that variation and working with it. This means some members working very differently to others, and calling on the expertise and resources of their officers very differently as well.

PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS

Parish and town councils are an enduring feature of the local government landscape, and district, unitary and county councils have been working alongside their local neighbours for a long time, at varying degrees of intensity and with different levels of success.

At a time when there is such a strong focus on opening up local capacity, however, it's perhaps no surprise that the role the most local level of council has to play is being re-evaluated. It's a sign of the shifting topography of public services that parish and town councils should feature with such prominence in the conversations that local authorities are now having about localism and changing how local outcomes are achieved.

'One of our town councils said to us 'we can run the library.' Two years ago we'd have said 'no chance!' But now we're talking about it. That's how much things have changed.'

Parish and town councils can be an obvious port of call for local authorities seeking to divest themselves of certain services and buildings. They can be seen as straddling the worlds of accountable officialdom and voluntary activity that is rooted in communities.

Some parishes are chomping at the bit, eager to play a greater role in the services and facilities in their areas, whilst others are sceptical and anxious about what is being asked of them. Local authorities can be at once surprised by the keenness of some parishes and equally surprised by the apparent total disinterest of others.

'If there's been a lesson for us, it's this: it's all very well developing a menu of options, but people might not be very hungry, or even in the right restaurant.'

As a result, officers unsurprisingly report 'a mixed picture' in terms of parish councils' willingness and readiness to support local projects and services in a different way.

Some town and parish councils are chomping at the bit, eager to play a greater role in the services and facilities in their areas, whilst others are sceptical and anxious about what is being asked of them. Local authorities can be at once surprised by the keenness of some and equally surprised by the apparent total disinterest of others.

'Some areas are keener than others, so we're starting with the keen.'

Again, the main message is that local authorities are accepting difference and working with it, progressing activity with those parish councils that are ready and willing whilst continuing to do things on the existing model where they are not.

Unlocking capacity in an age of austerity

We asked councils what difference they thought the financial climate made on their efforts to unlock capacity. The answers we got in response were mixed. Some felt it had made the job more difficult, because:

- enabling communities to do more themselves requires time and investment in community development work; the cuts mean that not only is the investment not available, but nor is the time
- the cuts have the effect of 'souring the debate', so that what should be positive conversations about local groups playing a greater role are heard as 'we want you to deliver services on the cheap'
- groups who might be willing to become more active are anxious that they will be left holding the baby, and that a council with reduced finances will be unable to help them out

Perhaps surprisingly, just as many thought that it potentially made the job easier, because:

- it created a 'burning platform', forcing councils to act rather than just talk, and generating practical opportunities for individuals and groups to involve themselves in the life of their area which hitherto never came to fruition
- it had shifted the terms of the debate, both within councils and within society, about what councils and communities should and should expect of each other. Without that, local individuals and groups would not have come forward with contributions in the way they are doing

Some thought both were true, and others that the financial climate was fairly irrelevant – either because unlocking capacity requires a particular approach but not a great deal of dedicated resources; or because their authorities had been progressing this type of work for some time outside of any cuts agenda.

> The budget cuts can make communities reluctant to come forward – do they want to get involved in something which might have its funding support withdrawn down the line?

> This is the best possible time to be doing this work.

> There's a social mood to all this, it's a generational shift. It's a fascinating opportunity and it's neither rooted in the left or the right – but we need a clearer national narrative about it.

> I don't think money is the issue to be honest... in some areas that had millions through the New Deal for Communities, the work stopped as soon as the money did. Here we have a really sustainable model, and have done for over a decade.

CONCLUSIONS

Final thoughts

This report makes the case that when it comes to local people doing more for themselves, it is not enough for councils to simply get out of the way; that capacity in most cases needs to be unlocked, not unleashed. In some instances, communities really have been stifled by their councils, and people with energy and skills to get on with things really have been unnecessarily tied up in red tape. But to believe this is the whole picture, or even most of the picture, is to caricature what is in reality a more varied and nuanced scene.

There are many things that motivate, encourage and enable active citizenship, and only some will be in the gift of councils to influence. In any given area, however, it will nonetheless be the council which more than any other single organisation has the profile, the power, the resources and the mandate to act; to support and nurture and monitor success so that as many local people as possible have the skills and confidence to play a more active role in the places they live.

As more of that latent capacity is unlocked, more doors will open. The people, the ideas and the projects that emerge will not always be to the council's liking, and the resulting activity will sometimes head off in different, even competing directions. There will be hard conversations to have and messes to clear-up, but councils and their citizens need to keep the faith and remain confident that overall, helping people to get stuck in is far better than shutting them out.

A proactive role for local authorities

Our research suggests the following are the ten key ingredients for how councils can successfully unlock local capacity:

1 **Changing the conversation:** Councils can start to shift public expectations and mindsets by engaging with them in a different way and asking different questions. The emphasis should shift from 'what do you need?' and 'what should the council do?' towards 'what assets do all of us already have?' and 'what can we all do that would make things better?' This should also help councils to focus their energy on people and places rather than services.

2 **Providing citizens with the advice, skills and confidence to be active:** Some people need help to realise what they can contribute so they are enabled to start imagining themselves as active participants, not passive recipients. That doesn't mean leaving them to their own devices, but supporting them to see their own potential. Frontline council officers who work with local people day to day are vital for this process. Further up the ladder of participation, when individuals and groups are approaching the council or being approached to take on a project, a service or a facility, it will be the council's role to make sure they're equipped to do so, whether in terms of materials or skills.

3 **Following the energy:** Councils will need to understand which groups have an appetite to be involved in which projects and services. *Some* parish councils and *some* community groups will be interested and able to take on new responsibilities in relation to *some* activities. If councils only move forward when there's consistency, they will probably be waiting a long time. Instead, they will need to be prepared to explore new approaches with those who are ready, and accept that it in some cases change will take longer.

4 **Putting elected members in front:** Elected members are crucial to making the most of the capacity out there in communities. As councils feel their way around this agenda, taking new risks and sometimes getting things wrong, members will provide an important anchor of legitimacy and accountability. Moreover, they are well-placed to know the mood in localities, the needs and the gaps, the assets and the activists. Where they don't know those things, and where they lack the personal skills or confidence to lead, facilitate and broker in the way they will increasingly need to, their councils must provide targeted support to help them.

5 **Building strong, long-term relationships with the local third sector:** The third sector is hugely important for councils trying to foster active citizenship. But if councils want a local third sector that can respond in the way they increasingly expect – proactively, collaboratively and focused on outcomes – they will need to forge relationships that support it to look like that. These relationships will require councils to be clear about their expectations; to commission in a way that encourages rather than shuts out small, local organisations; and to help join the dots within the third sector and between third sector groups and other agencies so that as a whole it is stronger and more sustainable in the long-term.

6 **Being prepared for flexibility:** Unlocking capacity isn't a zero sum game whereby councils either do everything or else step away and do nothing. In many service areas there will be ways that local people can make new contributions whilst other things remain firmly in the council's hands – and the lines won't always be drawn where councils first imagined. Deciding who does what will be a process of negotiation and may change over time.

7 **Keeping hold of the boring stuff:** If people are going to do things in their own time, they should be things that motivate and interest them, and things they enjoy. Councils can maximise the opportunities people have for doing the interesting bits by taking care of the less interesting bits – such as help with governance arrangements, health and safety and other admin.

8 **Being aware that variation can look like unfairness:** In a world where councils are more willing to help local people make things happen on their own terms, local variation will inevitably result. This can lead to questions about fairness which councils will need to keep in mind if they are to avoid giving some people and places 'a leg up' that others don't get. It will help if they are transparent in their decisions about why some projects are supported and others not; and also if elected members are visible as arbiters and monitors.

9 **Loosening up whilst acting responsibly:** It is easy to talk about 'following the energy', removing regulations and letting things happen, but we have to acknowledge that councils are still councils and have responsibilities to their citizens. The challenge will be generating and sustaining a culture that is creative and flexible and more at ease with reasonable risk, without compromising people's safety and security, or how prudently public resources are being used.

10 **Establishing a positive narrative:** Financial constraints are forcing the hand of local authorities – if they can no longer do certain things, their communities must. But whilst cuts provide the 'burning platform', and whilst honesty about squeezed budgets needs to continue, this cannot be the only narrative. Unlocking capacity needs to be about local people being given the help and encouragement to do interesting, enjoyable, energising things for themselves and their neighbours; it can't just feel like plugging holes in public services

If you'd like to talk to OPM about the things your council is doing to unlock your local capacity, then email localgov@opm.co.uk or visit www.opm.co.uk.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

OPM is grateful to the following local authorities who took part in the research informing this report:

- Barnet Council
- Birmingham City Council
- Blackburn with Darwen Council
- Bolton Council
- Brighton & Hove City Council
- Cambridge City Council
- Camden Council
- Cheshire West and Chester Council
- Derbyshire County Council
- Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
- East Sussex County Council
- Hampshire County Council
- Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea
- Lambeth Council
- Leeds City Council
- Luton Borough Council
- Milton Keynes Council
- Newham Council
- North Yorkshire County Council
- Oxfordshire County Council
- Portsmouth City Council
- Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead
- Shropshire Council
- Solihull Council
- Sunderland City Council
- Surrey County Council
- Swindon Borough Council
- Telford & Wrekin Council
- Wiltshire County Council
- Wolverhampton City Council

Designed and typeset by Effusion.

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