NEIGHBOURHOOD CHALLENGE

Learning from innovative communities

CONTENTS

You can read about individual project approaches and methods in the Neighbourhood Challenge publication *17 stories begin*:
**http://www.nesta.org.uk/assets/blog_entries/
neighbourhood_challenge_seventeen_stories_begin**

INTRODUCTION

Neighbourhood Challenge is all about developing new ways of supporting community-led innovation that unlock the assets and creative potential that exist in all communities. This focus combines two different insights. The first is that communities, even those with low social capital, have the potential to generate their own solutions to their own priorities. The second is that funders and support agencies have an important role to play in creating the enabling conditions required for community-led innovation to flourish. If funders always ask the same questions, they'll always get the same answers; we therefore need to encourage more innovative approaches to community funding and support if we want to help local people generate innovative solutions in their neighbourhoods. This paper sets out some initial learning on both aspects, drawing from the experiences of projects working on the ground.

Developed by NESTA and the Big Lottery Fund, the programme has invested in 17 different organisations and partnerships around England, selected because of their ambition to test out innovative ways of building co-operation, collaboration and action within their communities.[1] Starting from the belief that there is latent potential within their neighbourhoods, each local project is seeking to uncover local assets of all kinds and to make the most of them.[2] In many cases, this has required different ways of working, using methods or techniques that are unfamiliar either to the local organisation or to their community. It has also required a different, enabling approach to funding and supporting these projects.

Through working directly with the projects, the programme also provides useful insight into the wider localism agenda. Our reflection is that it is important to understand what conditions, beyond top-down regulation such as the Localism Act,[3] can help create an enabling environment for community-led action. In this programme, we have particularly focused on those areas that

have not typically had high levels of civic participation and where some of the conditions that support active participation (access to meeting spaces, effective local groups, strong social networks) are underdeveloped or hidden.[4]

This paper

At this midpoint in the programme, we have the opportunity to make some observations about the approaches projects are taking to identify and unlock local assets. However, it is not possible at this stage to draw firm conclusions about the *outcomes* associated with these new ways of working. This paper presents observations, drawing on evidence from the people that are funding, delivering and supporting the 17 projects.[5] The paper identifies both the common features of their approach and what is distinctive about *how* they apply their methods. It also maps their activities against a process of change to illustrate how their approaches are enabling community-led activities and solutions to develop.

We will look firstly at how the 17 projects really work on the ground, drawing insights from what is distinctive about the ways in which they apply their methods and highlighting why this might be of interest to other projects and funders alike. The second area of focus is the conditions that have encouraged and enabled the projects to work in these ways, both at the local level and through the environment created by the Neighbourhood Challenge programme. Indeed, we believe that an understanding of both is necessary to realise the vision of people in neighbourhoods around the country helping themselves and their communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SECTION A

What has been happening in the Neighbourhood Challenge communities?

We can understand the approaches that have been used to stimulate and support citizen-led action within the Neighbourhood Challenge communities by mapping them against different stages of social innovation.[6]

It is interesting to note that the communities themselves were not exposed to this, or required to work according to any such framework. The behaviour and approach we map in this section, developed from the bottom-up.

1 Prompting

2 Developing

3 Testing

4 Sustaining

5 Scaling

6 Systemic change

Source: Adapted from (2010) 'The Open Book of Social Innovation.' London: The Young Foundation and NESTA.

Prompting ideas	Inviting people to have conversations about their community
Developing ideas	Providing the space and opportunity for ideas to grow
Testing ideas	Trialing new activities and new ways of approaching problems
Sustaining good ideas	The activities that work well become everyday practice
Scaling and influencing others	Other people are learning from or taking up these experiences
Systemic change	There is a step change supported by local initiatives

During the first six months of the programme, the activity in Neighbourhood Challenge communities understandably reflects the first three stages in this process – **prompting, developing and testing ideas**. Our evidence suggests that these stages, rather than always being linear and sequential, often overlap, may happen in tandem and can be repeated out of sequence. At this stage in the programme there is less evidence regarding the second three stages about projects being sustained, influencing others and leading to systemic change, but there are signs that local politicians and service planners are watching and being influenced by what is happening in some of the communities. We will keep a watching brief on these later three stages of the social innovation process as Neighbourhood Challenge develops to capture evidence about progress.

In the next section, we turn our attention to what we know about the 17 Neighbourhood Challenge communities by posing the questions: what have the Neighbourhood Challenge projects been doing to prompt, develop and test new ideas and what is distinctive about their approach?

1. Prompting ideas:

"Inviting people to have conversations about their community"

All of the Neighbourhood Challenge communities characterised themselves at the outset as places where levels of participation were low, participation infrastructure (such as community facilities and community organisations) were under-developed and where participation rested with a small number of individuals. They all set out with an intention to transform this so that new people would be active within their communities to effect change. An important part of their approach over the past six months has been to provide the catalysts that capture peoples' attention and get people thinking and talking about what they would like to change in their community.

For many, this has happened through holding conversations of various kinds with people. **Three features of these conversations stand out: 1) where they have been happening; 2) what the focus of the discussion has been; and 3) who has been initiating the discussions.**

1. **Where:** conversations have not been happening in formal meetings. They have been happening over the garden gate, in kitchens, on sofas in town centres, outside schools, in churches and mosques, or at local events and community celebrations.

2. **What:** there has been a very open invitation for people to discuss their local community from the point of view of what could happen, rather than what isn't happening. The conversations have not stopped here. People have also been encouraged to talk about the contribution that they could make – focusing on what skills and passions they can bring and build on rather than just a commitment to give up time to an existing project.

3. **Who:** in some communities, conversations have been led by paid staff, recruited because of their ability to connect with people and inspire them. However, in many of the communities the conversations have been led by local people who have been supported or trained to initiate discussions.

In some communities, the process of engaging people in conversations has been particularly **challenging** because of the absence of local places and spaces, such as parks, pubs and libraries, where everyday exchanges take place. The levels of resources required to hold conversations with people have been higher in these communities and some have found it necessary to extend the time they originally planned to devote to this early 'ideas-prompting' stage. In other communities, negative past experiences of participation or community investment have contributed to a degree of cynicism or disillusionment about the value of getting involved. Where this is the case, it has been important to find ways to articulate the opportunities presented by Neighbourhood Challenge; to lead by example and share good news stories as they emerge; and to ensure that tenacious and trusted community leaders are equipped to advocate for community-led approaches.

SE Village, Peckham: June 2011 Blog

I'd like to introduce you to the newest member of the team… the SE-Village sofa!

This sofa, donated to us by the British Heart Foundation, has a very simple purpose, to provide a space for conversation! SE-Village is being promoted at lots of local festivals and events and we wanted to think of a creative way to engage people in more meaningful conversations about their dreams and ideas, the thoughts they may have about running a club of their own, or joining one. So… the Village sofa developed. Currently fitted with new wheels to make it transportable and about to be 'pimped' to make it a more extraordinary sight and attract more attention.

It WORKED! People came for a chat, a 'consultation', they talked about their dreams and ideas and wrote down the imaginary name of their own 'SE-VCLUB'. They will be now be contacted and invited to make their idea become reality…

Read more here

Holy Trinity Community and Partnership Centre, Newark: July 2011 Blog

Well here I am sat reflecting on my first couple of weeks as an animator and I must say that I have been pleasantly surprised by the willingness of people to speak not only of their concerns and issues but of the dreams, visions and aspirations for their communities too.

My first port of call was a block of flats, the first thing I noticed was that the door was very heavy and the communal staircase had been badly repaired after some damage left by workmen. We talked to several tenants in that block who have faced issues ranging from lack of reasonably priced activities for their children through to noise aggravation and telephone cables being cut. But the one thing that struck me was that on the whole there were positives and two ladies in particular who were passionate about meeting with others to discuss these issues…

Next was a venture onto an estate to start listening. Here I spoke to a number of young people who although not yet passionate talking to each other were very forthcoming in expressing views about where they live. Including the recently closed youth club, the state of the roads and the issues they saw around drug addiction and alcoholism.

So am I still excited by the prospect of listening to gain an understanding and then supporting people to move to action? The answer is most definitely an unreserved yes.

Read more here

Shiregreen Neighbourhood Challenge: June 2011 Blog

…We swapped plans for a door-to-door survey for methods which are much more people friendly, fun and locally specific. We have continued this month running events with schools and found that events outside the school gates are a great way to talk to parents and young people…. We had a tick box "What is your family good at" survey. We used seven volunteers at three sites round the school and ran the events over different days.

From these events we are building our database of contacts. Early indications suggest that an interest in cooking, DIY and music are strong, with people praising the activities we are hosting for young people and yet saying the gap in provision is still wide in this area. We will continue to use the talent of parents to lead events with younger children.

Read more here

2. Developing and blending ideas

"Providing the space and opportunity for ideas to grow"

Having prompted a variety of different people to talk about their community and to think in terms of skills and assets, the Neighbourhood Challenge areas have gone on to provide the space and opportunity for ideas to develop and blend. Processes have been devised that have allowed people to develop their thinking further and share their ideas and aspirations with others. This has been important in terms of fostering an enabling culture within communities, which values and invests in the already existing potential of people. This stage marks a shift in the conversation from 'What needs to be done *for* this community?' to 'How do we make this happen together?"

Two features stand out about the way in which the Neighbourhood Challenge communities have developed and blended ideas. First, local support has been directed at people with good ideas and second, large-scale events have enabled many new people to come together and play an active role in shaping and selecting the ideas that are taken forward.

1. **Support directed at good ideas:** this typically involves a coaching or mentoring-style approach, where individuals or groups have an opportunity to further develop and consolidate their ideas. In many cases this support has come from within communities; local ambassadors or community champions, with an ability to enthuse and inspire others, have been encouraged (and in some cases, trained) to mentor others. This peer-to-peer approach has encouraged communities to draw on their own resources to grow local potential whilst at the same time enabling stronger local networks to develop.

2. **Large-scale, open events:** these events, held in school buildings, sports halls and community centres, are bringing together large numbers of people from within the local community and giving them the opportunity to hear about and select the ideas that they think should receive further funding and support. They signal a departure from the 'public consultation meetings' that many communities have become accustomed to for a number of reasons.

   Firstly, they have been promoted to all parts of the community by the people using a range of communication devices including word-of-mouth, poster campaigns, personal invitations, press releases, radio broadcasts and social networking. Secondly, the timing and location of the events have been carefully considered to maximise opportunities for new people to participate. Thirdly, the level of community participation in the design and running of the events has been high – for example, residents have played a promotional role, community leaders have welcomed participants, local people have presented their ideas, and refreshments have been provided by local groups. Finally, the events have been designed to maximise the opportunities for

social relationship-building and network-building.

The **challenges** associated with developing and blending ideas have been articulated by some of the Neighbourhood Challenge communities. Firstly, there has been a recognition that for some people it can be a big jump to move from voicing an idea to articulating that idea to others, to implementing the idea. It has been important to be sensitive to 'where people are at' and to not railroad them into a process that they haven't signed up to. Secondly, the engagement of large numbers of people in the development and selection of ideas has presented some very practical challenges. Most prominent has been the requirement to construct voting systems that are deemed by the community to be easy to use and, importantly, both fair and transparent. Projects have developed and tested an approach to doing this that work for them.

Coopers Edge: October 2011 Blog

Coopers Den was held on 8th October and the community turned out in strong numbers to support all the brave local souls who pitched to our business savvy dragons. It was a fantastic event and five ideas are now being supported and all will have a lasting positive impact for the community. The process has energised a number of new residents and new relationships and social enterprise partnerships have been forged.

Read more here

Changemakers Greater Manchester:
October 2011

We ran our second participatory budgeting event in Moss Side on Saturday 1st October at the Powerhouse centre. It was a swelteringly hot day, but people turned out to support the projects that were bidding for funds. One-hundred and sixty attended, less than Old Trafford, but this probably reflected the fact that the pot of funds available was £15K rather than the £30k we had available in Old Trafford.

The gathering was very diverse, representing the breadth of people who live in Moss Side. There were also a good number of young people there who had come to support projects aimed at providing resources for them. This reflects the concern in the area for young people, many of them living in poverty and alienated from mainstream activities.

There were 20 project presentations – all very different and imaginative and 12 projects were funded.

The key issue to emerge from Moss Side is that of school exclusions of young black people. A lot of people we talked to before the event expressed deep concern about this, and at how it was a long-standing issue which no-one had done anything to tackle. Young black people are about seven times more likely to be excluded from school than their white counterparts – some permanently. The knock-on effect of this upon the young people themselves, and upon the community, is incalculable. We have a broad group of people wanting to work together with us on this issue. Obviously it is a complex issue, which involves schools, teachers, parents, and young people themselves. But we aim to get started on this right away.

Read more here

Ark Academy: November 2011 Blog

Wednesday evening was a roaring success. We hosted the first ever North London Citizens Issues Workshop where citizens from across the five boroughs worked together to design the campaign objectives for the coming 12 months.

The gymnasium at La Sainte Union School was packed with 90 people from across Brent, Barnet, Camden, Islington and Haringey. There was lots of energy and the young people who came in large numbers really helped give life and excitement to the workshop.

The aims of the 'Issues Workshop' was to develop and finesse a proposal for the seven 'themes' of the Listening Campaign: Street Safety, Opportunities for Young People, Care & Isolation, Housing, Community Relationships, Living Wage and Immigration. Each proposal, by the end of the workshop, needed to include tangible, ambitious but winnable objectives for 2012 and have a framework for presenting the proposal to North London Citizens members at the Delegates Assembly on November 3rd.

Read more here

3. Testing ideas

"Trialing new ideas and new initiatives"

The Neighbourhood Challenge communities are all finding ways to put good ideas into practice. For many, this has entailed the use of financial awards which have allowed people to take some early 'first steps' and try out their ideas. Other resources within the community have had an important role to play. For example, community hubs have provided 'incubator' space from which emerging groups can make new connections, find support and launch new social activities and initiatives.

The process of testing ideas has been distinctive because 1) open access to microfinance has been promoted; 2) multiple strands of activity have been pursued and 3) there has been an emphasis on making connections across activities/initiatives.

1. **Open access to microfinance:** intent on removing the barriers that can stop people from pursuing an idea, resources have been utilised to harness local potential, and promote a 'can-do' culture. Open access to micro-finance, in the form of Challenge Prizes[7] or seed funding, has allowed people that have limited experience of community participation to lead new initiatives.

2. **Multiple strands of activity:** the permissive culture is evident in the way that multiple strands of activity are being pursued within the Neighbourhood Challenge communities. There has been a proliferation of activity on the ground, visible in the number of new initiatives that have being funded and new groups that have emerged. What stands out in particular is the diverse nature of the ideas that are being pursued and the wide range of people that are being involved.

3. **Connecting initiatives:** there is a strong emphasis on connecting initiatives within each of the Neighbourhood Challenge communities, using personal connections, newsletters, Facebook pages and community websites/blogs to create a sense of momentum and collective endeavor. In some communities there have been overt attempts to stimulate connections and build cohesion by bringing together all the people who have won funds for their project, who have a common interest, or who have set up a new group. This has allowed people to learn more about others' ideas and projects and has prompted offers of mutual encouragement, development, and support.

There have been **challenges** associated with the testing out of ideas.

Some organisations involved in Neighbourhood Challenge have also entered uncharted waters by the requirement to work flexibly and openly as such a fluid approach does not always sit comfortably within organisational structures that have

clearly defined boundaries, roles and responsibilities. As one organisation reflected, the long-term focus on relationships and community building can feel intangible and 'woolly'. Rather than being liberating, a relaxation of the rules can be unsettling for those people involved.

Conversely, in some communities where there has been a rapid, and to some extent unexpected, expansion in the level of community-led activity, there has been a growing recognition of the need to introduce processes that formalise communication with and support to volunteers.

The Challenge Prize model adopted by a number of Neighbourhood Challenge projects marks a radical departure from conventional grant funding which has led to some unease in places. With no 'rules' to follow, no route map for successful application, the Challenge Prizes have in their own right challenged organisations. There have been concerns about how to appropriately apply accountability; about the reputational risk of saying 'no' to local residents' ideas; and ensuring those who are unsuccessful in the prize remain well supported.

Over the remainder of the Neighbourhood Challenge programme it will be important to follow the progress of the activities that have been described above. We aim to better understand how they are making a difference locally, how they are overcoming challenges,

Stand out in Darwen:
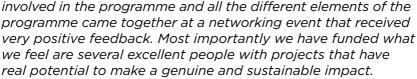October 2011 Blog

We're so proud of the work that has already been undertaken by our pioneer projects and this month have recorded an estimated total of over 1,000 hours and we're still receiving more updates! This is an enormous achievement and shows to the hard work and commitment the people of Darwen have put in. Proving that together, we really can make a difference.

Read more here

Bradford Moor Neighbourhood Challenge: September 2011 Blog

September provided a real opportunity to test out whether the model that we had adopted was going to work and overall it went really well. The panel was recruited, trained and met to assess and make funding decisions. The mentors started to become involved in the programme and all the different elements of the programme came together at a networking event that received very positive feedback. Most importantly we have funded what we feel are several excellent people with projects that have real potential to make a genuine and sustainable impact.

Read more here

The Mill: October 2011 Blog

Some groups which started informally in the 'living room' have proved so successful that they have started moving into the space of the more private rooms at The Mill. The Coppermill Recycled Teens (over 60s) group and Asian Women's Support Group have certainly already outgrown the public space and are doing amazingly well.

Read more here

if and how they are being sustained, and what influence they are having on others.

Whilst there is much to learn from the methods and approaches that have been applied within the Neighbourhood Challenge communities, it is also important to reflect on the role that the programme itself has played in understanding and creating the conditions for this type of innovative, community-led action to develop. This will be the focus of the second part of this bulletin, which will examine three broad 'conditions' that have facilitated the process of change in the Neighbourhood Challenge communities.

SECTION B

What can we learn about the conditions that have enabled community-led action?

Neighbourhood Challenge provides a timely opportunity to explore the role of funders and support agencies of all kinds in enabling community-led innovation to happen on the ground. The first six months of the programme have delivered some consistent messages about the conditions that allow new ideas to emerge, be developed and tested within communities. Here we focus on these conditions by examining the three key areas of interest that are emerging: money, power and relationships.

	At a local level organisations need to be able to:	Therefore funders and support agencies working at a programme level, should:
Money	Make money work as a catalyst for change	Be prepared to invest in and support potential – in good thinking and ambition
Power	Put power in the hands of local people	Promote an enabling support and funding relationship
Relationships	Develop a network of relationships that support and inspire	Invest in processes that support relationship-building

1. Money: as a catalyst for change

"The potential of people is there. We've given them the confidence and permission to make change happen."

Rather than using funding to address local needs or to fill gaps in provision, funding from NESTA is being used at the community level to unlock potential, build relationships and uncover local ideas, skills and talents. The Neighbourhood Challenge communities have created the opportunities for ideas to develop and evolve and they have then invested small amounts of funding in initiatives that allow people to put their ideas into practice. Multiple small investments are being used as catalysts for change and the Neighbourhood Challenge communities have designed funding processes that depart from those used by more conventional small grant funders.

• **Anyone with a good idea has the opportunity to benefit from the funds.** Eligibility critieria have been kept to a minimum and are not tied to formal organisational structures in the traditional way.

• **Processes for awarding the funds have been open and public.** This has created the opportunity for new ideas to be stimulated and new people to be motivated or inspired to get involved or put their own ideas forward.

• **Staged funding processes have been applied** to reduce the risks that are associated with such an open investment strategy.

• **Accountability has been public and dispersed.** Information about the beneficiaries, their projects and their level of funding has been published online and regular progress updates are promised.

• **Funds have been used to leverage in non-financial resources,** for example through time pledges.

Creating the right conditions : what we're learning

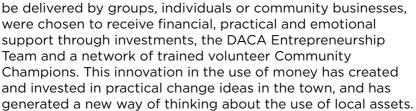Neighbourhood Challenge has been designed to optimise the

programme-level conditions for money to work as a catalyst for change. The features of the programme that are important in this respect are:

- **Barriers to accessing Neighbourhood Challenge funding have been reduced.** Strict criteria have not been imposed upon the communities that are using their Neighbourhood Challenge investment to make local financial awards. NESTA has encouraged communities to allow individuals and informal groups to access Neighbourhood Challenge resources.

- **The programme is focused on maximising local assets, not addressing local needs.** It is assumed that the potential for community-led action is there in communities; Neighbourhood Challenge funds the processes that will release this potential. This is different from some more conventional grant funding because it shifts the role of funding away from a *providing* role to a more *enabling* role. In practice this means that benchmarks of progress are less about hard outputs and much more outcome-oriented.

- **There is acknowledgement that not all investments will succeed.** There is recognition within Neighbourhood Challenge that all investments, whether they succeed or not, are worthwhile as they create new connections and develop resilience. Communities are being encouraged to experiment and take risks, explore new approaches in their work and invest in potential, not track record.

- **A culture of reflection has been promoted, oriented towards *learning* rather than *judgement*.** This creates the opportunity to learn from what has been happening and use this learning as a resource for growth. The catalysing power of Neighbourhood Challenge seems to be greater if there is a readiness to reflect on experiences, good or bad, and use the information that emerges to adjust, adapt and influence others.

"Ultimately, the outcomes will happen, but it is what we learn from them that should not be lost. We need to avoid being judged in conventional terms – yes, we will have 'done good' but that is not what we are about – we need to understand what has happened, how and why."

Case Study: Stand Out in Darwen

Darwen Aldridge Community Academy have used their Neighbourhood Challenge money to draw out ideas to improve the town and local communities from local people, and then asked those people to choose which ideas to support. DACA's approach is rooted in the belief that assets within the town – people, ideas, networks and physical resources – can be strong enough, *with the right support delivered in the right way*, to effect change.

DACA's invitation for ideas and involvement was delivered by taking the message out to the town's people, using virtual networks on the internet, local media in the form of radio and newspapers, and a touring Living Room which visited business, community organisations, schools, events and open spaces. Ideas were brought together and shared between local people at an Ideas Into Action event where over 100 voted on which projects were likely to bring about change in the town. Thirty-seven projects, to be delivered by groups, individuals or community businesses, were chosen to receive financial, practical and emotional support through investments, the DACA Entrepreneurship Team and a network of trained volunteer Community Champions. This innovation in the use of money has created and invested in practical change ideas in the town, and has generated a new way of thinking about the use of local assets.

One of the Stand Out in Darwen projects is the creation, by a group of teenage boys, of a new skate park in the town. The group shared their ideas with other local people at the Ideas Into Action day, and were genuinely surprised that the idea

Continued

was supported through the voting by a great many people. The structure of the day also generated offers of practical support to help the young people.

Since the Ideas Into Action day in June, the group has sought, and been given, a great deal of support and invested a great deal of their own time, in bringing their idea to life. The skate park equipment has been secured at no cost, and the overheads of deconstructing, transporting and rebuilding the park in Darwen have been met by local companies. The boys have worked hard to find a good location for the park, mindful of the need to avoid residential areas and minimise noise and disruption to other residents.

The skate park story illustrates the value of making money work in a new way; seeking out ideas, believing in the potential of local people to achieve, creating the right networks of support and levering available assets to add value to the original investment in the idea.

Read more here

2. Power: put power in the hands of local people

"The relationship between local authorities and local people, especially in some communities, has become one of dependency and defeat. People have become consumers of services. One of the most important things about this project is changing the relationship to a more participatory one."

A common feature of all the Neighbourhood Challenge projects is their commitment to finding ways to shift the power balance and to enable people to become agents of change within their communities. We can see this in a number of ways:

- **People have been encouraged to identify priorities in their community and to become the catalysts for change.**

- **Communities have had opportunities to directly influence the ideas which are developed and receive financial investment.**

- **Funding from within the community has supported local initiatives and added value** to the Neighbourhood Challenge investment.

- **There are schemes for for growing leadership and influencing skills within the communities.**

- **Local people are directing or leading** a wide range of new projects and initiatives to effect change within their own communities.

Creating the right conditions: What we're learning

In order to accommodate a different power dynamic within communities, funding relationships need to change so that they enable rather than restrict. This is evident within Neighbourhood Challenge:

- **NESTA is comfortable with a degree of uncertainty about the direction that the funded projects will take.** There is an acceptance that if community members, and not organisations' managers, are driving the process of change then the route that they take and their end destinations cannot be fully predicted at the outset. In practice this has meant that NESTA has designed contracts around the project's own ambitions, rather than lists of outputs or targets and they have been open to contract re-negotiations along the way.

- **There is a flexible approach to outcomes-setting.** Unlike many grant programmes, Neighbourhood Challenge is not working towards a narrow set of top-down outcomes. Although an outcomes framework was developed at the outset, this was extremely broad (it includes 27 change statements) and had sufficient scope to allow each project to select outcomes from this list and add more of their own. This contributed to a bottom-up process of goal setting and remains an important reference point for project decision making.[8]

- **There has been a shift towards greater local accountability.** NESTA has resourced the introduction of an online blogging platform within each community. There is an expectation that this is regularly updated to allow all members of the

community to access information about how Neighbourhood Challenge had progressed within their community.

"It's so light touch it's amazing – we've had the support when we've needed it, but nothing intrusive. This is significant given the nature of what we want to do – less would have happened locally if there had been more bureaucracy from the funder."

Case Study: The Mill

In March this year a group of residents from Walthamstow in London entered a building that had been vandalised and neglected over many years. It had no phone lines, unreliable toilets and swathes of rot and mould. Their aspiration was to turn this ex-library building into a self-running community space that people from all parts of this very diverse community would want to come to.

In their original proposal to Neighbourhood Challenge, residents of the Blackhorse Action Group and campaigners from St James Street library campaign, who originally lobbied to have the library reopened, set out their plans to lease one room in St James Street library building. All this had to change when their partners had to pull out unexpectedly. Faced with the possibility that the building might be lost, the residents persuaded Waltham Forest Council to give them a 15-year lease, then 'took a deep breath and jumped in.'

Undeterred by the size of the task ahead of them, the group decided to open the doors of The Mill as soon as they got the keys. Over a succession of open days

members of the community were invited to come in and see for themselves the potential of the space. They were also invited to offer their skills or time to the task of refurbishing the building, and share their ideas on how it could be used.

Where the skills or offers of time weren't identified, the Mill helped people find their skills and talents by believing in the ability of everyone to give something useful. In a sense this has been about confidence building and bridging a crucial gap on someone's journey to becoming engaged.

"It was so important to us that people took ownership of the building from the beginning. We wanted to show people that we weren't ready and it wasn't just us that was going to make the building ready – it was everyone in the community."

The open days were very successful. Over 100 people turned up on the first day, offering to share skills from plumbing to DIY and gardening. Since then the offers of support have grown and grown and the number of volunteer hours that have been given to the Mill have gone far beyond anyone's expectations. Local residents have decorated the building, made shelves, dug over and planted the garden, sewn cushions, helped to build furniture and even donated their jeans to be turned into curtains.

Volunteer contributions have also come from outside the community. Over the summer, a highly-skilled team of young volunteer architects and designers worked around the clock to plan and then build flexible, tailored furniture and fittings out of recycled materials for the rooms. Creating furniture out of old scaffolding boards and rocking horses that double up as bookshelves, they have helped to create a space that is unique: *"People comment that this is not like anything else within the Borough. It's tailored for the building and for the community."*

The Mill opened officially in September, offering a welcoming and flexible resource which can host local events, provide

meeting rooms for groups and exhibit local art work. There are open spaces for people who want to just drop in and read a paper or parents who want somewhere inside for their children to play. In the past month, activities at The Mill have included arts and knitting classes, a 'creating your own newsletter' workshop, cycle training, book groups and film shows – all of which have been hosted or organized by local people for local people.

Six months since the building was opened, and The Mill is becoming known for its ability to appeal to all sections of the community: one local councilor recently commented: *"It's the only place, other than the central library, where you actually see the demographic of the borough."* It's a space that has been given the freedom to succeed; it is promoting an enabling culture in which all ideas and contributions are welcome; it is using a host of different communication methods to invite people in from open days to newsletters and online social networks; it is being led by a group of people with a clear vision yet a willingness to take some risks and *"let every possibility thrive."*

Read more here

3. Relationships: a source of inspiration and support

"People that have never spoken to each other before are meeting together, planning how to run the group and raise money"

The aspiration to build strong and productive relationships is evident in each of the Neighbourhood Challenge communities. Connections and relationships are valued as assets that have a catalysing potential; they create opportunities for new inspiration, can be supportive and enabling and they can provide access to hidden or under-used resources within the community. Ultimately it is hoped that relationships will provide

the social capital that allows community-led action to be sustained beyond the life of Neighbourhood Challenge.

There are many examples of relationship-building in the Neighbourhood Challenge communities:

• **Collaborations between local organisations** (such as schools, churches and mosques) and experienced community organisers have made it possible for new approaches to be tested out.

• **One-to-one conversations are building relationships from which networks of shared interests and agendas are emerging.**

• **Community events have created a sense of shared purpose** and camaraderie which has then precipitated new community activities.

• **Community hubs have created a physical space for new collaborations to form** and grow and where new groups can emerge.

Creating the conditions: What we're learning

By investing in collaborative and supportive relationships, funders can help to release the catalysing power of relationships, and Neighbourhood Challenge has sought to do this in a number of ways:

• **Supportive relationships have been resourced.** NESTA engaged a delivery partner, NCVO, to maintain regular contact with the Neighbourhood Challenge communities and provide mentoring-style support. Additional funds were also put aside to allow additional support requirements to be met.

• **Opportunities for mutual support and learning have been created.** NESTA has treated the funded organisations as a peer-to-peer cohort of Neighbourhood Challenge innovators. Highly-participative national events have brought people from the Neighbourhood Challenge communities together and allowed them to discuss and learn from their different experiences. Exchange visits between communities, funded

by NESTA, are allowing stronger and potentially more resilient networks to develop.

- **There is a supportive and affirming communication style.** Communication between the Programme Manager and the funded organisations is promoted through regular e-mail bulletins, blog posts/comments and project visits. These allow NESTA to acknowledge and affirm the efforts and achievements within the Neighbourhood Challenge communities and the visits in particular foster and develop a deeper understanding of what is happening on the ground.

"This event has confirmed for me that we are all facing challenges in one form or another and these challenges can be overcome."

"It's been really good having access to established professionals with experience of this kind of work. We've been listened to and it is really unusual for anyone to take a real interest in what we are doing, and for the right reasons."

Case Study: Shiregreen Neighbourhood Challenge

Shiregreen Neighbourhood Challenge has a simple aspiration – to build a sense of neighbourliness across the estate and change the way people feel about their community. Led by Shiregreen Community Homes ltd, a subsidiary of Sanctuary Housing Association, this project has demonstrated the catalytic power of relationships. Intent on stimulating and enthusing people, Shiregreen Neighbourhood Challenge has used the last six months to seek out and reward good ideas, showcase and celebrate local talents and develop new enterprising initiatives, an approach that has been characterised

by opportunism, openness and flexibility. New activities and initiatives have evolved on the back of a good idea or a new collaboration, new partners have come on board and new people, young and old, are now getting involved.

The first stage of Shiregreen Neighbourhood Challenge was about uncovering what goes on beneath the surface of life on the estate, about finding ways for people to share what they know and what they are good at. For example:

- Community researchers have taken Shiregreen's **'talent spotting questionnaire'** out to schools, shopping areas, events and barbeques to find out what people are good at and how they would like to share their talents with others. A database of local skills has been created which is revealing some strong interests in cooking, DIY and music.

- **Shiregreen's Dragon Den** provided the opportunity for local people to present their ideas for local enterprises or community projects to a panel of business experts. The six winners are now being supported to develop their ideas which range from starting up a sewing enterprise to to establishing a local News Network.

- **Let's Celebrate Shiregreen**, brought together 1900 people across five sites in Shiregreen in the summer, and involved over 60 organisations and 70 volunteers. The event was about having fun *and* it was also about generating ideas, enthusiasm and opportunities for more community activities: the music stage was all about trying to get a music collective together; the gardening stall was capturing ideas to feed into the gardening project; the food stall was gathering recipes for a food project. *"Every time I designed an activity, I was thinking 'what can I get out of this'. We were promoting groups everywhere."*

New collaborations with local organisations and partners have proved extremely fruitful in terms of enabling Shiregreen Neighbourhood Challenge to capitalise and build on the emerging skills and ideas within the community. Amongst the

promising and exciting developments for the community are:

- New sporting opportunities for young people, arising out of joint initiatives with Sheffield Wednesday Football Club and Shiregreen Cricket Club.

- A new project involving 25 students from Sheffield University who are studying a business and enterprise module. The students have developed detailed business ideas around ways to benefit the community.

- A partnership with a local business to create Shiregreen's own 'Mission Explore' online game which will link online activity with outdoor missions in the streets and open spaces of Shiregreen.

- A ten-week cooking course, delivered by the Ministry of Food (Rotherham), will bring families together within newly refurbished community cooking facilities.

Although still in the early stages of delivery, Sheffield Neighbourhood Challenge is demonstrating the power of strong productive relationships. The early signs are that this is beginning to change how people feel about Shiregreen: *"It feels like there is a community spirit in the area, people are doing things together. It's opened my eyes to the knowledge and skills that the residents and the kids have got."*

Read more here

WHAT NEXT?

We are beginning to understand Neighbourhood Challenge as stimulation of two parts of a system. Firstly we are observing a process of citizen-led innovation on the ground which is catalysing change and unlocking untapped assets. Secondly, we are observing the role that funders and support agencies can play by creating the programme-level conditions that encourage these ways of working to flourish through trial, error and collaboration. In the programme, this has happened through a combination of flexible support, relationships and small amounts of catalytic funding.

We are discovering that *spreading* locally-led innovation is less about the invention and rolling-out of new and off-the-shelf engagement tools and methods. Rather, it is about drawing on what we collectively know from years of best practice in community participation and applying new combinations of tools and methods in a more collaborative, asset-focused and locally led way. This has real potential to make impact at scale if funding and support agencies *and* the communities they aim to benefit are both stimulated to work in these ways.

As the Neighbourhood Challenge programme enters the closing phase we will continue to track its impact on the ground and to explore the sustainability of the work. With this understanding in place we will have a fuller picture of what happens when funders think and do differently and when communities are challenged and supported to take a lead on making local change happen their way.

ENDNOTES

1. The Neighbourhood Challenge programme was launched in October 2010 with an open call to community organisations from self-defined areas of low social capital across England. Over 600 organisations expressed an interest, 50 were invited to a series of workshops to develop their ideas and ultimately 17 projects were selected to be part of the programme.

2. Assets are interpreted as the gifts, skills and capacities within communities which can be physical, human, social, financial, environmental, political and cultural. See: Green, G. P. and Haines, A. (2011) 'Asset Building and Community Development.' Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage Publications

3. Decentralisation and the Localism Bill 2010; The Localism Act can be accessed via http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted

4. 'Pathways through Participation.' (2011). London: NCVO, IVR and Involve.

5. The evidence review was carried out by Icarus, the Learning Partner for Neighbourhood Challenge. Applying an agreed enquiry framework, Icarus have, to date, conducted 91 focused and detailed telephone interviews and reviewed and analysed over 100 project blog entries.

6. The framework that we have used to understand this process of change is adapted from the wider movement of Social Innovation. See: Murray, R., Caulier-Grice, J., Mulgan, G. (2010) 'The Open Book of Social Innovation.' London: The Young Foundation and NESTA.

7. A Challenge Prize is a tool for stimulating, supporting and testing innovation, particularly among new groups of people. Challenge Prizes reward the achievement of measurable outcomes and have a very open set of criteria. See: NESTA (2010) 'Using Social Challenge Prizes to Support People Powered Innovation.' London: NESTA.

8. Icarus, the Neigbourhood Challenge Learning Partner, developed a set of 27 change statements at the start of the programme. These statements are themed across four overarching areas that relate to the building blocks of social capital: building capacity, confidence, capabilities and skills; fostering connections; enabling the community to have a voice; and maximising local resources. Example change statements include: organisations have new ambitions about their role within the community; people use and maintain their connections in different and enhanced ways; people feel they have greater levels of influence over local or national issues; local people are supporting and helping each other more. The change statements are an integral part of the overall programme Enquiry Framework and provide the reference point for the Enquiry Questions used to collect evidence to inform the learning included in this paper.

REFERENCES

Ark Academy: http://thecivitasblog.wordpress.com/

Bolton Neighbourhood Challenge:
http://boltonneighbourhoodchallenge.wordpress.com/

Boothtown Challenge: http://boothtownchallenge.wordpress.com/

Bradford Moor Neighbourhood Challenge: http://bmpass.wordpress.com/

Brixham YES Neighbourhood Challenge:
http://brixhamyes.wordpress.com/

Cambridgeshire Rural Challenge: http://cambschallenge.wordpress.com/

The Coopers Edge Trust: http://coopersedge.wordpress.com/

The Mill: http://www.themill-coppermill.org/

Peat Carr and Moorsley Neighbourhood Challenge:
http://peatcarrmoorsley.wordpress.com/

Holy Trinity Community and Partnership Centre:
http://parishpeoplespower.wordpress.com/

Lower Green Neighbourhood Challenge: http://lgnchall.wordpress.com/

Changemakers Greater Manchester:
http://thechangemakersblog.wordpress.com/

SE-Village: http://sevillage.wordpress.com/

Shiregreen Neighbourhood Challenge: http://shiregreen.wordpress.com/

Speak Out Speke: http://speakoutspeke.wordpress.com/

Speak up Preston: http://speakuppreston.wordpress.com/

Stand out in Darwen: http://aldridgepioneers.wordpress.com/

**A map of the projects can also be accessed online at
http://preview.alturl.com/qyi5r**

NESTA
Making
Innovation
Flourish

Neighbourhood Challenge launched in Autumn 2010 with a call for community organisations to offer their vision for galvanising and supporting locally led innovation. This paper highlights what we're learning through working with the projects as they put their ideas into practice. They have each refined and tested their approach to supporting change in their local area, tailoring methods to respond to what they know about local circumstances.

Some have chosen to apply specialist methods of community organising or campaigning, others are working to develop social and community enterprises, some are working to trial 'challenge prizes' which aim to provoke and reward community-led action. The organisations and communities they operate in are as varied as the methods they have adopted, including religious and educational establishments as well as smaller grass roots organisations, some based in highly diverse urban areas, others in rural locations. In short, it really doesn't get more local than this.

You can read about individual project approaches and methods in the Neighbourhood Challenge publication *17 stories begin*:
http://www.nesta.org.uk/assets/blog_entries/neighbourhood_challenge_seventeen_stories_begin