



Community Collaboration

A councillor's guide

Local Trust
creating
lasting
change

LGiU
the local democracy think tank

Forewords

An essential component of local democracy is building strong connections between citizens and the institutions that represent them. By including residents in the conversations that affect their lives, local government builds trust and mutual respect. This has never been more important. At a time when trust in public institutions is at a low ebb, councils have a vital role to play in restating and rebuilding the social contract between citizens and their governments. They can only do this by engaging openly with residents and responding to their concerns.

We believe that true engagement must go beyond bringing people into the council's own discussions and move towards engaging with people outside the town hall on topics, and in spaces, that are chosen by them. Working with residents should mean more than consulting on council decision making. It must put local people at the centre of efforts to redefine what local government is for, while helping them to shape their own communities.

With this in mind, councillors have a crucial role to play in supporting residents to realise their ambitions for their communities, taking a facilitative rather than leading part. Whether it is removing obstacles, offering advice, helping residents to navigate council processes or engaging with key decision makers, councillors are well positioned to smooth the path of community-led initiatives.

LGiU and Local Trust have been working together to celebrate the best examples of this way of working, which we describe in this report as Community Collaboration. We have explored – with elected members from across the country – how councillors can actively support communities to lead their own projects by facilitating conversations, using their network and influence, and advocating within their local authority. We hope this guide will serve as an inspiration to others looking to involve and empower their citizens in new and exciting ways.

Dr Jonathan Carr-West
Chief Executive, LGiU

At Local Trust, we've been delighted to partner with LGiU in inviting local government leaders to explore how to put more power in the hands of communities.

Our experience of running Big Local, the largest current place-based investment programme in England, means that it's a conversation we're passionate about. We see this report as being a key tool for Big Local areas and local authorities looking to collaborate positively to deliver great outcomes for their communities.

Funded by the Big Lottery Fund, Big Local is a unique initiative that enables residents in 150 areas to make their area a better place to live. With £1m of long-term funding committed to each area and an intensive programme of training and support, residents of Big Local areas are working together to transform their communities. We've seen the difference it makes when residents join together in collaboration with each other and with everyone who wants to make a difference locally, from local businesses to local charities and local councillors.

We know from our experience of Big Local and the conversations we've had with LGiU members that devolving more power to communities takes time and resources. But we've also found increasing agreement that councils need to give more power to communities if they're going to respond successfully to current challenges. What's more, councils who place more trust in local people can turn cynicism into energy, and unleash creativity.

We hope that – as well as being a resource for those working with and in Big Local areas – the experiences of councillors in Big Local areas and beyond featured in this booklet will inspire more debate about both the limits and potential of devolution to a community level, and encourage more councils to take their first steps towards new ways of thinking about collaboration with communities.

Matt Leach
Chief Executive, Local Trust

Introduction

Power to the people!

Engaging people in the decisions that affect their lives is an essential feature of local democracy. This goes far beyond town hall meetings and opinion surveys: we must recognise that communities often hold the answers to their own problems and allow them an equal voice at the table. For the purposes of this report, we call this concept 'Community Collaboration'.

Establishing a more collaborative approach to decision making has never been more important, for several reasons.

Firstly, local government resources are increasingly squeezed, with a 27 per cent cut in their spending power between 2010/2011 and 2015/2016, against a backdrop of rising demand for public services such as adult social care. They can no longer deliver services in the way they have in the past, and need to engage positively with communities to shape new solutions.

Secondly, the problems councils are facing are ever more complex and global: an ageing population, migration, climate change, Brexit and the rise in hate crime are just some of the issues to which councils have to respond. They cannot do so in isolation and must work with communities to find different ways of meeting these challenges.

Thirdly, we have seen an erosion of trust in public bodies in recent months and years - a growing mistrust of authority in many different spheres of public life and a sense that the voice of ordinary citizens is not being heard at either a local and central government level. Councils have an important role to play in showing how responsive and open government can be.

Local government must respond to these challenges as a sector, but when it comes to community collaboration, elected members are particularly important.

Councillors play a crucial role in leading their communities, but they must also seek to empower citizens to transform their lives and their area by using their position to facilitate resident-led solutions. Supporting the ambitions of the people to shape their area independently requires councillors to shift their way of thinking and work towards genuine collaboration.

The results of such a shift can be as diverse as pulling off large-scale events led by volunteers who may never have considered being involved in community projects before, to the creation of successful resident-led initiatives to support the most vulnerable citizens.

Councillors are already doing incredible work within their communities and many are already expert 'community collaborators'. In this report we want to highlight the particular importance of enabling and facilitating, as well as leading and vision-setting.

About this project

In partnership with Local Trust, LGiU has undertaken a year-long project to define and promote Community Collaboration and uncover the best examples of it in practice. We have been asking how councillors can actively support communities to lead their own projects by facilitating conversations, using their network and influence, and advocating within their local authority.

Local Trust supports 150 'Big Local' communities with the aim of helping residents develop and use their skills and confidence to identify what matters most to them, and to take action to change things for the better. In many of these places councillors are involved in supporting this work from the sidelines, with residents setting the direction. This observation provided the basis for the project, with Local Trust and LGiU both keen to explore how local government and residents can work together to find solutions to the inherent challenges involved with collaborative working.

To kick off the project, we ran the Community Collaboration category at LGiU's C'llr Achievement Awards 2016, which attracted nominations for councillors up and down the country who have excelled at supporting resident-led solutions. Following the awards ceremony, we ran a roundtable forum for councillors to discuss their experiences of building a collaborative relationship with their community, asking what works and what more we can do to support these efforts. We followed this with a series of interviews with councillors who have been working closely with their communities. This report ties together these strands by showcasing the best examples of community collaboration in practice that we uncovered along the way. It is a practical guide that draws on the advice and experiences of real councillors, that we hope will inspire others to try out this new approach to local democratic engagement.

Why now?

Councillors are currently working in difficult circumstances, contending with the impact of several years of budget cuts and the potential upheaval of the local government funding system if 100% Business Rate Retention goes ahead. It is therefore no surprise that councillors are often distracted by the big questions, such as how they will fund core services sustainably.

Similarly, communities are feeling the strain as the council services they rely upon are hollowed out, and many people are directing their resentment towards local government for their role in these changes. A generally poor public understanding of how local government works and is funded contributes to this situation, and all of this is complicated by the creation of new layers of local government in the form of Combined Authorities.

Now, more than ever, councillors need to take the bold step of moving decision-making out of town halls and into communities. There needs to be an open dialogue between elected members and the communities they represent so that they can work together to take difficult decisions and think innovatively about how to continue creating the types of places people want to live in. Communities are full of people with ideas about how to improve their neighbourhood, who might not have the confidence, knowledge or connections to put them into action. Councillors have a unique position as a convenor of people and resources, and can put that influence to use in supporting resident-led projects.

This can be uncomfortable and unfamiliar territory for councillors who have been used to making their impact through leading from the front, but we believe that taking a backseat and playing a more facilitative role can lead to just as, if not more, positive outcomes as the community takes ownership of projects they believe in.

Four steps to Community Collaboration



Sow the seeds of activism



Encourage true community ownership



Lend a hand



Spread the word



Sow the seeds of activism

In some areas there is a well-established infrastructure of grassroots community organisers, which gives councillors a head start in engaging their residents. But in other places it may not be as developed. In this circumstance, councillors can use their position to build capacity within the community and give people the confidence that they have the council's support for their ideas.

Councillors are in an ideal position to identify the causes underlying the lack of community infrastructure and address them to build a sustainable momentum for stronger future engagement. This may be by identifying groups of willing residents who have an idea for a project and offering them advice, training and resources to get it off the ground. Or it may involve mediating between community groups that have historically experienced tensions that have prevented friendly cooperation.

Whatever the situation, one of the most important things that councillors can do is spread the word that the council is willing to listen, help and support, and that residents are welcome round the table. By doing this, people who don't usually step forward may be encouraged to come forward with their ideas and projects knowing that their councillor is there to help.

Case Study: Cllr Sarah Judge, Manchester City Council Tackling domestic violence in Wythenshawe

With Movement for Change, an organisation which supports grassroots groups with training and expertise, Cllr Judge began working with a group of domestic violence survivors in Wythenshawe to provide better support for other women in the same situation.

The group of women, supported by 20 volunteers, raised money from the police innovation fund and local housing associations to set up 'Safe Spots' around the town where those experiencing domestic violence could go for advice without

having to go straight to the police. This involved training staff in community centres, cafes, shops and the local MP's office about the support available for domestic violence victims, so that women in the town had more open doors to turn to.

Cllr Judge has used her influence within the council to gain support for the project, and building on its success, the group has now established a dedicated women's centre in the town backed by funding from local businesses.



Case study: Cllr Vince Maple, Medway Council

Bringing back a sense of pride and ownership in Chatham

The Luton Arches Big Local project was set up as part of Local Trust's Big Local programme to support residents to make their area a better place to live. The project is led by residents who set their own priorities and plans, but Cllr Maple has used his position within the council to provide the group with the confidence, resources and knowledge they needed to get started and to earn the support of fellow councillors.

Many residents had a low opinion of their area, and part of the project's work focused on trying to engender more pride and ownership within the community.

With Cllr Maple's support, the Big Local group put in three bids for a Pocket Park project (including one to DCLG) and won all three. When they started working on planting new trees in the park, people were coming out of their houses to tell them not to bother, believing that the park would

only be vandalised. However, because the group got residents very involved in this process of designing the park, people were willing to volunteer to maintain it as they felt ownership of the space in a way that they may not have if it had been a council-run space.



Initially councillors and officers in the local council had strong ideas about how the Big Local project should work, but in time they came round to the idea that the power dynamic should be inverted with residents leading the way. It also helps them to know that they have

a willing group of residents that they can call upon to test ideas or discuss projects. Now councillors are big advocates for the work being done and help by linking the project coordinators with local CCGs, the press and other groups.

Encourage true community ownership

While it's probably fair to say that most people are on board with the idea of community collaboration, putting it into practice can often be challenging and requires a radical shift in the dynamic between council and resident. Too often, responsibility for this shift sits with a single team or individual within the council, and very often 'transformation' of this kind has a strong focus on digital local government. It is more difficult to discuss how the culture of the council contributes to a collaborative relationship with residents.

Community engagement shouldn't just be the responsibility of a single team; it should run through all parts of the council's activities. Councillors are well placed to ensure this cultural shift takes place, and to ensure that the outreach goes beyond tick box consultation exercises.

Councillors can use their links with the community to seek out and amplify voices that aren't usually heard, and encourage people and groups to proactively approach the council with their ideas, while in the background persuading fellow councillors to give residents more power in decision-making.

Another way councillors can help to move ownership into communities is to encourage their council to formulate strategies in collaboration with local charities, community groups, housing associations, service users and other local stakeholders. This way, the council and the community can together identify gaps in provision, identify and address potential risks, build collaborative working arrangements and prevent duplicating work, and ensure that the solutions are driven by people closest to the issues.



Case study: Cllr Jonathan Slater, London Borough of Lewisham Setting a collaborative strategy for mental health

London Borough of Lewisham has signed up to the Mental Health Challenge, and Cllr Slater is their Mental Health Champion. The council has a good history of working with the voluntary sector and has a dedicated cabinet member for the third sector who can directly feed back issues to the leader and the mayor.

The local housing associations are also proactive in engaging with the community and supporting mental health projects, including by providing jobs clubs, grants for residents' projects and shared space for meetings.

In 2013 the Lewisham Mental Health Connection was formed with support from organisations including housing associations, and the group runs annual

mental health conferences with the community.

When Cllr Slater became the Mental Health Champion in 2015 he became involved with their work by supporting them in hosting a wider-reaching conference that included other community providers and elected members, and arranged for them to use Lewisham's town hall. In this way, he connected the group to local decision-makers and ensured their voices were heard and recognised by people across the local area.

The local CCG and the council also held a stakeholder conference in early 2017 to hear from services users in the area, at which they launched their mental health strategy.



Case study: Cllr Gerard Brewster, Mid Suffolk District Council

Turning community concerns into positive action in Stowmarket

When Cllr Brewster re-joined Mid-Suffolk District Council in 2011, he picked up that there were complaints from residents about the state of a local park, Pikes Meadow. The wildlife and the river needed attention and the wooden play equipment that the district council had previously purchased with Section 106 funding was in poor repair due to flooding and vandalism.

The community had been managing the park but as time went on it became clear that the equipment was too dangerous to use and the council had removed it. This created a stir in the town, with many residents chastising the council for removing the equipment without replacing it.



Cllr Brewster, along with his colleagues on the council, began a concerted effort to speak to local people about their concerns and to find a solution. Out of this process, Friends of Pikes Meadow was formed to take on the management of the park. Cllr Brewster attends most meetings but leaves the community to lead them and provides support from the council when it is needed.

The group has organised various fundraising events for the park, including a tombola which raised over £10,000, and the town council helped by applying for grants worth £95,000 on their behalf. Working closely with the council's public realm department, the group were able to purchase new play equipment.

Lend a hand

Once the groundwork has been laid for a collaborative relationship with the community, councillors can really come into their own. As people start coming forward with projects and ideas, councillors are in a great position to help get them off the ground using their connections, their knowledge and their experience.

For a start, councillors are very familiar with the inner workings of their local authority and can advise residents on who they need to speak to and how to navigate the processes. They can also act as advocates for projects within the council, smoothing the way for projects to move forward.

Outside the council itself, councillors can use their strong links within the community to draw together resources, from individuals with particular skills, to other agencies, to community organisations. They can also use their knowledge of the local funding landscape to help residents and community groups find and apply for relevant pots of money.

The most important thing councillors can do is to let residents know that they are supportive of their efforts so that people feel confident that they can turn to the council for advice if they need to.



Case study: Cllr Joy Allen, Durham County Council

Putting Bishop Auckland on the map

Eleven Arches, a charity based in Bishop Auckland, arranged for a French company specialising in immersive live historical events to locate its next performance in Bishop Auckland. The idea was to host a fortnight of ambitious open-air performances, featuring pyrotechnics, fireworks, cavalry and light and water displays, telling the story of England's history. It would be run by a team of 1500 volunteers from the local area and had the aim of putting the town on the international tourist trail.



Because of the scale of the project and the short time frame, Cllr Allen became involved to help move things along quickly. She used her position within the council and community to spread the word about the project and get buy-in. When the planning department refused permission for the event, Cllr Allen succeeded in getting the refusal overturned by bringing technical experts to a planning committee meeting to convince members that the event would be run professionally.

Similarly when the licensing department expressed concern that the fireworks would lead to noise complaints, Cllr Allen negotiated with them and was able to get them on board.

The next phase was to source the 1500 volunteers from the community who would form the cast, the crew and the event guides. In a small town this was a big ask, particularly because volunteers would need to commit every night for two weeks. Cllr Allen used her influence in the community to excite people about the event and encourage them to get involved. As a result they succeeded in reaching their target – she also volunteered herself, along with her 80 year old mother!

The event has had a lasting impact on volunteering in general within their area, as it brought together people of all ages and backgrounds with a common purpose and the momentum of this engagement has been sustained even after the event in other community projects.

Case study: Cllr Kathy Ford, Saughall and Shotwick Park Parish Council Working together for a multi-use games area in Saughall

During a consultation around the annual Parish Council Plan refresh, residents of the Saughall and Shotwick Park parish identified a need for more sporting facilities for local children.

Cllr Ford played a key role in bringing together members of the community to design and support the proposal for a multi-use game area in Golden Jubilee Park and to donate their skills and expertise. The police supported the proposal as part of their work to prevent anti-social behaviour, and headteachers helped to push the idea forward in order to gain more activity space for their students.

Alongside the residents, Cllr Ford began the process of acquiring the necessary permissions and raising money. With the



help of a network of Community Investment Champions – individuals or organisations who contribute time and resources to the community – the parish council's steering group was able to demonstrate a clear need for a new sporting facility. For example, a local developer volunteered his time to help draw up plans and estimate pricing, and the school council was involved in consultations and helped to design the facility.

With such a wide-ranging support base, which also included the local MP, the steering group was able to make a convincing case for funding to the district council and environmental funder WREN. Both organisations agreed to fund half of the £80,000 needed with only a small contribution required from the parish council to unlock the funding.

Case study: Cllr Gerard Brewster, Mid Suffolk District Council Rallying the troops for Suffolk Armed Forces Day

In 2016 Stowmarket hosted the annual Suffolk Armed Forces Day, an event which brought together local veterans groups, the Royal British Legion, local army reserves and cadets, schools, and historical re-enactors for a day of celebration. Much of the event was led by local groups but Cllr Brewster lent a hand by chairing the



planning meetings. He also used his connections with the community to help the group attract donations. He helped to persuade local businesses to donate their services for the day, including the fish and chip shop which provided catering, the pub which offered discounted beer, and a toilet supply company which provided portaloos.

Spread the word

Councillors provide a vital link in communication between the council and the people, which is a great asset when it comes to promoting collaboration between the two.

Councillors are able to ensure that the decisions made in the council chamber and by officers don't negatively impact any projects currently underway within the community by feeding this message back to colleagues. And when the council is considering new ideas, they can point colleagues towards relevant resident-led work to see how they can work together to meet their goals, instead of duplicating efforts. They can let the council know when particular policies or approaches are having a negative impact on the ability of residents to self-organise.

The information should flow the other direction as well. Residents with ideas about how to improve their area, and those who are already taking action, will benefit from knowing where the council's priorities lie so that they can work together or fill gaps where needed. Councillors can also let residents know what challenges the council is facing and bring them into the discussion to create a collaborative response.

Case study: Cllr Mark Ereira, Suffolk County Council Productive environmental action in Bury St Edmunds

Bury St Edmunds has a population with a mixture of socio-economic backgrounds, and Cllr Ereira works with different groups in the town to engage residents in the green agenda and build understanding of environmental issues beyond immediate concerns.

He is involved with several groups, providing support for people to start and run their own environmental projects. For

example, Cllr Ereira helped the community around the River Lark to set up a charity to clean up the river, and supported the Bury Water Meadows Group by encouraging other councillors to support their mission by preventing a piece of meadowland from being developed.

He also volunteers his time helping to clear rubbish from the stream and fundraises to support green space preservation.



Conclusion

Better community collaboration is rarely seen as a ‘burning platform’ issue for a local authority. Some authorities already engage proactively with the community, but often they are concerned about increasing demand for already thinly resourced services if they engage the public in a meaningful way. They are comfortable leading from the front and don’t always want to change the way they work in response to resident voices.

We would argue that councils cannot meet the challenges of the future, or sustain public trust in their institutions without committing to a more engaged and open way of working with their residents. Councillors can be at the vanguard of this cultural shift.

For councillors who are actively pursuing a collaborative working relationship with their residents, the benefits can be significant and can come in unexpected ways – as these case studies show. Forging a positive relationship with residents allows for more constructive conversations about how council decisions affect the area and paves the way for citizens to feel engaged enough in the process to feed in their ideas.

Beyond these immediate benefits, empowering residents to pursue their own projects, in the knowledge that their elected representatives are on hand to help and advocate for them, builds community capacity that is so essential in these times of economic uncertainty for local authorities. Councillors should be prepared to take a backseat in such projects, and offer advice and support rather than strong leadership.

However this is not to say that leadership will not be required in the first instance. In areas without a pre-existing network of community organisers, councillors will need to play a role in starting to construct this infrastructure. This can be done by actively seeking out individuals who have ideas for improving their area but are perhaps lacking the confidence or connections to pursue them, and reassuring them that they have the support of the council. And in areas with active community groups councillors can provide leadership by advocating for them within the council.

Community collaboration can be a reviving force for local democracy and civic engagement. Residents are the experts in their communities and hold the key to solving local problems – and councillors are uniquely placed to unlock that potential.

Author: Jennifer Glover, Policy Researcher, LGiU



About LGiU

LGiU is a think tank and local authority membership organisation as well as a registered charity; and what we are about is pretty simple. We are all about people and the places where we live: we are about the everyday essentials that make life work – health, schools, homes, jobs, support, open spaces and the rest. And the thread that weaves through all our work is our core belief that all these essentials are best when they are designed and delivered locally.

How we work

At LGiU we feel that we are in a pretty fortunate position. We are lucky to have a wide network of councils, community groups, voluntary sector organisations, businesses and others with a deep interest in and commitment to local public services. The work we do is driven and informed by this network. We listen, we collaborate, we spark ideas off each other and from that mix comes the very practical daily information that we offer our member authorities, creative thinking about how we meet the challenges we face now and in the future and the expertise to put those ideas into action.

Local Trust

About Local Trust

Local Trust's mission is to enable residents to make their communities even better places to live. Local Trust runs the Big Local programme (funded by the Big Lottery Fund), an exciting opportunity for residents in 150 areas around England to receive £1m and a range of support over 15 years to make a lasting positive difference to their communities. Big Local brings together all the local talent, ambition, skills and energy from individuals, groups and organisations who want to make their area and even better place to live.

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