

ENABLING SOCIAL ACTION PROGRAMME

FINDINGS FROM BIRMINGHAM WORKSHOP#1: BUILDING THE SPACE FOR SOCIAL ACTION

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Findings from the Birmingham Workshop #1: “Building the space for social action”, 16 July 2018

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ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is working in partnership with the universities of Sheffield and Hull on Phase 2 of the Enabling Social Action programme. We are collaborating with local authorities to support them to co-design, co-produce and co-deliver services with local people, service users, and civil society organisations, to embed social action in their routine working.

The programme will support commissioners through a range of activities:

- Action learning partnerships with 6 local authorities to support new ways of delivering services.
- Champions who will share learning and insights and galvanise local networks through events.
- 6 national events to bring together a growing peer network.

WORKSHOP #1

The first workshop in our series took place at Stirchley Baths, Birmingham, a former swimming baths redeveloped into a community asset property. Our hosts and partners for the event, Birmingham City Council, welcomed guests on what was one of the hottest days of the year! Speakers engaged the audience with their messages on social action with presentations from Rebecca Noble, DCMS, Karen Cheney, Birmingham City Council, Ed Wallis, Locality and Damien Austin-Walker, Doit.life as well as the action research team. More than 70 delegates participated in four breakout sessions to explore the parameters of social action. Sessions were recorded with permission from participants and quotes used in this report have been anonymised. The following section explores the key findings from the sessions. It builds on our first report¹ based on the findings of scoping research conducted with commissioners and VCSEs in April 2018.

¹ Enabling Social Action Scoping Research Findings: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/management/esa/research>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 8 key conditions to grow social action which emerged from workshop discussions were:

1. Changing cultures and mind-sets

Despite local authorities' different stages of change, commissioners demonstrated a willingness and enthusiasm for embracing a new way of working. Key shifts local authorities need include moving from a large scale to local focus, from narrowly focused cost savings to social value and from complex and lengthy procurement structures to proportionate structures.

2. Shared leadership and power

Shared leadership with long term visions to lead with communities is key for social action. Social action cannot be controlled but leaders within local authorities could enable and influence.

3. Understanding parameters of social action and the role of VCSEs

Social action is not a free resource and often needs commissioning. Even where social action is community led, occurs spontaneously and where commissioning is *not* required, local authorities may be able to offer support to communities. VCSEs are diverse and commissioners should work with them to draw on their existing knowledge and valuable resources.

4. Taking risks

A key skill of local authority commissioners is to 'let go' of managing social action and take risks. There was recognition that social action may be stifled as a consequence of more risk averse local authorities.

5. Engagement, coproduction and trust

Listening and understanding the needs of communities (rather than assuming) is essential for local authorities to engage with diverse communities and build trust. Creating the conditions for engagement to happen strengthens social action.

6. Communication

The language we use to communicate social action needs to be unambiguous and inclusive. How social action is talked about needs to be understood from communities' perspectives.

7. Demonstrating evidence and impact

There is a need to use a range of new and existing evidence to demonstrate the benefits of social action. Good evidence may act as a benchmark for understanding starting points and outcomes.

8. Sharing good practice and learning

Some examples of strategies and initiatives were shared and there was recognition that sharing and learning helps grow social action but that there are challenges in doing so.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. Changing cultures and mind-sets

New ways of commissioning embraced working *with* communities rather than traditional procurement models. It was argued that this new way of commissioning requires a “different lens” and a greater focus on the process: “*how you do it rather than what you’re doing.*”

Many participants were open to culture change: “*we’re now looking at how we can do things together rather than doing to*” and viewed it positively as an exciting approach: “*Bringing everyone around one table and changing the format is refreshing.*”

There was some variation in the extent to which local authorities had adopted a new mind-set and embraced culture change:

“*In a previous local authority I worked at...members played quite a critical role in that leadership and culture change. Everywhere is different isn’t it and the challenges we face across the country.*”

“*You hear things like take back and control ...councils say they want to throw out the rule book.*”

Some participants shared the challenges they faced in trying to convince others in their council of this new way of working and how they had met with barriers. Some felt that whilst steps had been taken to move towards a new approach there was still more to do to ensure social action is embedded and universal:

“*Until we change that mindset social action will always happen in little pockets rather than the way we do stuff*”

“*We struggle with changing mindsets to convince people they can do things without the council to do that for you.*”

“*Isn’t it funny how everyone here has said we know that it has to change. And everyone is committed and enthusiastic but it seems like such hard work! It appears so difficult!*”

One commissioner openly admitted that she may be perceived as part of the problem: “*I’m struggling with this a little bit because I’m a commissioner so I can’t honestly say I do social action. I’m probably one of the barriers which people come up against when people think of the social action context.*”

It was also important to recognise that these changes take time and social action strategies need to see the long term vision: “*It takes years! The strategy needs to involve the community from the start. It will take a few years once they start trusting. It should be a cooperative approach.*” However, there was some sympathy that culture change could not happen suddenly: “*it’s not fair to expect people in procurement to change overnight*”.

Despite the will to change stubborn barriers persisted and in particular an overemphasis on cost saving rather than a *moral justification* in commissioning: “*A lot of procurement is set up to be cheaper and not because it is a better thing to do. That’s the change that hasn’t happened.*” However, it was also argued that it is “*not just about budgets it’s about mindsets.*” Whilst another participant suggested that: “*It’s more than mind-sets, it’s a change in culture*”.

However, there was a prediction that the pendulum could swing back to traditional approaches again: “*One local authority I know of has gone procurement heavy rather than commissioning heavy about unit*

costing and the provider doesn't know if they are coming or going...where they were once involved in co-design they aren't now... I think we'll get more procurement heavy with less money."

"They're looking at unit costs and not social return on investment- the wider community development, they just want to know if we are going to get more bang for our buck."

Shift from large scale to local thinking

Part of changing the culture was a move away from large contracts of large national organisations. For example, in meeting policy priorities for tackling loneliness and social isolation, traditional large scale services were seen as inappropriate: "it's not possible for a large service to deliver the things to make people feel less lonely...feel loved etc. So a service commissioned on a transactional basis can't do that." Another participant agreed that there needed to be a shift away from large scale contracts towards "lots of little ideas having a cumulative impact."

"Public procurement is fundamentally broken... There needs to be a way to access these innovative SMEs to kick start our economies nationally"

Others pointed to the mismatch between short term funding timescales and long term outcomes and impacts (such as tackling loneliness). A further consequence of smaller organisations squeezed out or short term funding were loss of relationships with vulnerable service users: "all that trust- particularly in the voluntary and community sector- it will take years to totally get back."

The problem of short term funding and a lack of sustainability creates a precarious and continuous churn of 'new' initiatives emerging as fast as others disappear: "It feels like whack a mole. You've got that one and then something else will pop up."

"With short term funding...it's just such a transient thing. Others too which are teetering on a knife edge and in 6 months' time will be gone...It feels very fragile."

As one commissioner explained there were often tensions in priorities: "I think this comes down to integrated commissioning structures and the way you work... where they make a commitment to only procure local and smaller services and they do that for a local investment into the area and also the environmental implications. To achieve social value there is a contextual change- so commissioning things that are local...thinking of wider community and environmental impact, sustainability. So *these* priorities and not what I would say my current priorities are of getting unit costs down, value for money and creating efficiency savings."

Whilst innovative initiatives were shared some were concerned over sustainability:

"These examples are zeitgeists. What happens when they cease to be effective anymore? Meanwhile there is less money coming through statutory routes and the big funders are less likely to give, so we're on a downward spiral and there's only so long VCSEs can plug those gaps."

The benefits of Social Value approaches was repeatedly raised and advocated in discussions:

"I think reigniting the focus around social value. Because today has actually been the first time in a few years of commissioning that we've talked about the costs associated with social good."

"A relatively simple strategy is raising social value in council's corporate plans. We all have to refresh them and re-do them...it's a great opportunity to raise the profile of social action and social value."

There was some debate on changing some structures. Whilst participants discussed “nightmare” procurement cycles which were lengthy and involved complex or bureaucratic paperwork, others felt that some levels were necessary for accountability of public funds, but that they need to be *proportionate*. It was argued that a framework for developing social action which has supportive ‘scaffolding’ is required: “The scaffolding is top heavy and not fit for purpose. You become so exhausted you can’t even start the job. What needs to happen is *different* scaffolding- not *no* scaffolding.”

Others too felt there was still resistance to change from those in power in local authorities: “It takes seven yeses to say yes but just one no to say no- and that is still the case.” Participants talked about how blockages with bureaucracy continue: “You used to have the term of middle management where you couldn’t get stuff past it. That still exists.”

2. Shared Leadership and Power

Participants argued that shared leadership with long term perspectives to take risks and lead with communities was key:

“The secret of great social action is you have to have real strong risk taking leadership”

“You’ve got to have leadership that’s willing to take risks and that’s the problem. You’ve got to have someone who’s willing to look long term and be brave.”

Many participants felt that this strong leadership needed to happen from the individual local authority officer level: “every officer thinks about residents and communities first and foremost before providing a service.” Beyond this, leadership needed to happen at all levels and be reflective: “It’s about changing that culture from the leadership to say, this is where we did it well and this is how we should be working with our communities.” Others argued that political leaders need to be convinced of the value of social action: “What can we do to convince our political leaders to shift that power relationship?”

Leaders in local authorities were described more in terms of “influencers” or “enablers” rather than authoritative. Moreover, there was debate over “empowerment” with some critical as to whether social action as political activism can ever be ‘encouraged’ by the state as social action cannot be controlled: “Social action is often against the state! So how can you promote it if it’s against the state?”

There were further tensions over ‘responsibilities’ of social action : “The police should be doing policing and the community should be doing community work. So we’ve got mission creep.” However, another participant argued: “It might come under the guise of being more integrated. I’m a commissioner but I do mission creep and I think that happens and will happen more and we’ll see different services joining together.”

3. Understanding parameters of social action and the role of VCSEs

Concerns were raised that social action if done *too* well might take over some statutory core public services and an over-reliance on volunteers rather than paid workers. There was a message that social action should not be seen as a free resource: “You have to be careful that some of this is *not* free. It might be that we can enable social action but some of it either needs some support or coordination.”

Another participant stressed that it is not just the parameters of social action (or whether responsibility lies at the community or statutory level) but also the motivations for why people choose to volunteer in their communities: “The point is it’s not free- it needs commissioning.” The suitability of volunteers within certain roles in contrast to professionals with key skills was another point raised. Moreover, another issue which emerged was the rights of disabled people who have paid personal assistants to not suddenly be expected to have volunteers imposed upon them.

Whilst some social action needs commissioning other forms may happen naturally or spontaneously without the need for commissioning. For example, commissioning may be unnecessary for a person to check in on their neighbour but a local befriending scheme may need commissioning. However, as the workshop mapping activity showed it is often difficult to demarcate the types of social action and whether they need direct commissioning or not.

It is important to recognise the diversity within the VCSE sector: “the voluntary sector don’t speak with one voice.” Many argued the VCSEs filled big gaps with examples from local authorities where “what they’re doing is putting money into the VCSE to bridge that gap” and “let *them* form connectors to reach out into the communities”. A “healthy voluntary community sector which is also supported by good infrastructure.” was seen as critical for building the foundations for social action. Other key stakeholders included faith based organisations: “most local authorities have faced statutory cuts and we find that the faith based provision is propping up a lot of the provision.”

However, there were variations and conflicts within and between different VCSEs in different communities. An example was given of two voluntary organisations which refused to work together and how understanding these challenges and working around these issues were essential. Despite these challenges VCSE networks are vital and commissioners could better draw on their experience and utilise existing networks of VCSEs as well as elected members. This point about positively exploiting these existing links was also raised in the scoping report findings.

4. Taking risks

Echoing our findings from the scoping report, the need for commissioners to take risks and ‘let go’ of controlling the process of social action was key:

“The greatest skill of commissioners is to know when *not* to get involved...Celebrate what’s going on but show humility by not getting involved”.

“Sometimes the authorities just have to let people get on with it.”

Despite the willingness of participants to step back to let some kinds of social action flourish independently rather than control, this was often met with opposition from others within local authorities. Some councils were reluctant to change and preferred to “stick in their safety nets and don’t want to try anything new or anything different”. Worse still was local authorities which were risk averse and aggressively rejecting suggestions to change: “If you think about the culture about what works on the ground- it’s collaborative culture- it’s happening right now where we are all here sharing and not trying to shoot one another down. If you think about the local authority ...if you have a group of members who are

openly taking swipes at each other that culture will percolate down and the culture will be 'let's shoot down things and let's not take risks!'"

Some participants highlighted the 'fear factor' of embracing risks which fed into a "risk averse culture": "In the public sector we see awful cultures...where people are afraid." An example was given where good ideas are rejected by those in senior roles out of fear of the risks involved. Another participant explained that it is the nature and severity of risks that have changed and "drives the culture": "we're just dealing with higher and higher levels of risks all the time." One participant described that "more experimentation" is needed and that current grant approaches were forcing commissioners hands to take risks: "It's grants de-risking the commissioners!" However, risks are taken within communities and with little support: "people on the frontline are doing amazing things on a shoestring but can't get support from the cultures that are supposed to be supporting them!"

Interestingly there was debate that risk taking was directly impacted by austerity and there were both negative and positive impacts of this. Some felt that "austerity killed any risk taking and any innovation." Yet others felt that "austerity has created a division but also its brought communities and public services together because they've had to think more innovatively about how they're going to address public services". Another participant likened it to a "vicious pendulum" where there was a swing towards outsourcing and the voluntary sector grew but "it's the austerity effect and you find yourself back at the other end of the pendulum."

Some argued that there are greater consequences when risks are *not* taken and collaboration does *not* happen. Some commissioners are "risk averse and 'oh, we don't want to scare people'. It's going to scare people a lot more if you don't involve them! Leadership and enabling staff to take risks that can stop staff from bad and dangerous practice is necessary." Others also felt that shying away from risks had greater consequences for social action: "It's not just being risk averse, it's putting barriers in the way!"

5. Engagement, coproduction and trust

It was argued that true coproduction must be "relational, genuine and authentic" and "more than consultation." Another described coproduction as "a two-way process rather than shouting into the wind" but which must "start in the community." Participants at the workshop had different experiences of engaging with communities. For example, a councillor described her identity as "a conduit between the officer and the community". Another described how different assets and skills come together through engagement: "We're all part of the jigsaw. We all don't know everything."

Participants were open about the challenges in coproduction they faced: "we've tried different formats and committees...but the same people turn up time and time again... I don't know if anyone else has cracked that? We've struggled significantly." Another participant shared their experience of unsuccessfully engaging with the community: "We went in with a predetermined idea and the community told us something different." There were other examples of where co-production with communities had failed. One example was given of how a community group member tried to engage with council representatives but felt intimidated in council buildings amongst "middle class" people in power in a

board meeting. In another example a community criticised an approach as 'poverty pimping' where funding was gained to address poverty in a particular area without engaging the community.

It was argued that sometimes engaging communities involved a 'push'. For example, a participant described how threats to close public libraries ensured people were forced to act: "as soon as you say you're going to shut a library that does mobilise communities. So there was a bit of carrot and stick there. If you don't do something it will close."

Some discussed different ways of engagement through forums or juries. However, others felt that whilst innovative models of engagement existed it was necessary to be flexible and not control or reinvent engagement: "where we go wrong is imposing those structures on communities."

"I think it's really important to actually ask citizens how they naturally gather to find out rather than be prescriptive and do that from a local authority perspective."

Creating *conditions* for engagement was seen as much more important than creating new models: "You can be as innovative as you like and come up with new models ...but it comes down to a couple of simple things, it's about creating as many opportunities as you can for people to engage."

It was argued that being "in those spaces where we learn and do" with communities was important as was "doing fun stuff" to make engagement enjoyable. As well as spending time where social action is happening naturally, local authorities also need to be clear about the kinds of support offered. Breaking promises was a clear means of damaging trust with communities and why setting out expectations clearly was critical: "It hinders the action that is about to take place!"

"It took a lot of working with them and being with the community and showing my face and getting the trust re-built from absolute ruins."

Consistently the message was that citizens' perspectives on the issues that matter *to them* must be prioritised. Genuinely listening to the issues that matter to communities builds trust.

"The most important is what is the most important from the citizens perspective and not defined by external organisations"

"It's what's important to people! So if you bring people together and address that you can bring people on board. If you dismiss bins and dog muck do it at your peril!"

"It's important to understand what matters to citizens in their localities and locality is important."

It is important that local authorities do not assume what the issues in a community are or be prescriptive:

"Where we think certain things are an issue in communities but they're not. Just because the agenda is there to deal with a certain thing it doesn't mean that it is *their* agenda!"

"You may have a small interest group who think litter is an issue but there may also be other hard issues around child poverty. I think you need to be very careful where you focus your attention. It may be on that small interest group who has a loud voice."

A further issue related to engagement of communities is the diverse identities within communities. The value of place based approaches was raised in discussions and one perspective was that “people identify with a place rather than a service”. However, others were critical of a focus on place and emphasised communities which are connected via cultures, faiths, specialisms and online communities. “Place based is useful but there are other ways and it’s about being careful with that and how people define themselves with other communities.”

“Place based is a gimmick but it is about identities. I can have multiple identities.”

Place could also be a potential barrier and an example was given of rural communities where initiatives (such as an asset vehicle transfer scheme) struggled to work effectively. Transient families, refugees, as well as commuters were identified as potentially difficult to engage with as these groups could lack a sense of belonging to neighbourhoods and place.

6. Communication

Most talked positively about changes in the language of commissioning of social action. For example, the change in mindset was reflected in the language of commissioners’ roles as “enablers” rather than “fixers” or “problem solvers”. This meant that where local issues were addressed councils could not take full responsibility but rather it had happened because people came *together* to act.

However, the ambiguity of meanings of social action created barriers. For some there was a sense that social action was not new and that it had simply been relabelled under a new guise: “we got rid of safe neighbourhood teams and now re-packaged it and calling it social action- it’s very much what we were doing before.” Furthermore, participants’ experiences varied on the extent to which they had engaged in dialogues around social action and co-production. For example, one participant was critical that not enough had been done in over a decade to embed a social action and genuine co-production approach: “why are we still having these conversations?! It’s heartbreaking in a way.” Another participant also discussed the challenges in having these conversations: “We’ve never had an honest discussion with stakeholders about what we mean by co-production.”

Another participant argued that government definitions of social action omitted important reference to power and democracy. In this way the language was perceived as ‘absent’ but there were other examples of where language was contentious:

Participant A: “I do find it difficult when I hear words like empowerment! For the people who are *ceding* the power...it’s a bit arse about face.”

Participant B: “Enabling or assisting would be a better word.”

Participant C: “Resilience is a better answer.”

Similarly, words like social isolation and loneliness were controversial: “A lot of the language we use is on deficit- like isolation, prevention”. The language of procurement was also seen as authoritarian: “If it’s

still seen as procurement of a service it will continue to be seen as done *to*.” Other ‘tricky’ terminology included language on volunteering.

Another participant explained how it is important for those in power “to use straightforward language which people can understand” to avoid alienating communities. Poor communication or so called ‘project management speak’ could create obstacles for local authorities working with the community. It was therefore important to reframe the question to understand communities’ understandings of social action and ask “what is social action in their own language?”

7. Demonstrating Evidence

Participants felt that whilst they know social action works, it is difficult to evidence:

“The ‘prove it’ is difficult to do. It will save money down the line but trying to prove that is hard.”

Another participant also argued that evidence of the benefits of social action was needed to convince those in power: “how can you measure in a meaningful way so commissioners want to buy that?”

“In order to know where you are going you need to know where you are- like GPS. I see so many projects collapse because you have to know where you are in order to show the outcomes.”

It was argued that better use of existing data was needed: “looking at the qualitative and quantitative evidence that we already have as well as local intelligence.”

Participants were interested in utilising a range of types of evidence and case studies were mentioned as helpful in bringing stories to life. With an abundance of measurement tools in existence, consistency in measuring was seen as critical: “There’s so many toolkits and measures out there- there’s probably too many! But it’s putting that value on it so if you have to do an assessment you assess impact on neighbourhoods where you can see in 2 years time this will stop x,y and z from happening.”

8. Sharing good practice and learning

The workshop aimed to give participants the space to share with others what works and doesn’t work so well. Participants shared good practice and learning but also described where other local authorities share knowledge with others. Some examples of strategies included:

- work with likeminded people who “buy in” to a social action approach and the rest will follow
- work with particularly active leaders working in a ward/community
- approach communities directly and have verbal conversations and avoid written documents if possible
- use of ‘one pot’ funding approaches where communities have ownership over spending “for people to join forces and avoid competition. Everyone benefits then.”
- community catalyst approaches,
- crowdfunding
- online community lotteries

- holistic approaches: “you need community hubs, the places, good networks such as community organisers and connectors and that used to be seen as the icing on the cake but it *is* the cake!”

Participants wanted more cross fertilisation of ideas through events and suggested that more local councillors were involved. Whilst sharing good practice was seen as important, so was recognising tensions such as issues of competition within the VCSE sector: “People can be quite particular about their domain and not sharing.” Others agreed: “Tell me about it! It’s a competitive one.”

Overall participants promoted the replication and sharing of the many good social action ideas which currently exist:

“There’s great stuff already happening across the city and nationally as well which we need to integrate”

“There’s so much stuff happening that we don’t know about so the challenge is how do we start sharing this stuff....to inspire others.”

“There are good things happening but how you share that is why we’re here!”

NEXT STEPS

The next stage of the action research programme involves working with six local partnerships on social action projects to coproduce solutions to issues faced by the communities.

Future events will continue to provide forums to share more examples of good practice and learn through our network:

- “Changing Roles and Relationships: Should we learn to let go?’ (London, 14 September 2018)
- “Making Stories Count: What, Why and How should we be measuring impact?” (Leeds, 30 October 2018).

Our initial report based on scoping discussions in April 2018 with commissioners and VCSE groups can be found online at: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/management/esa/research>

If there are themes and issues highlighted within either report which you feel need further investigation or you have relevant case study examples and reports which you would like to share, please contact the research team (contact details below).

You can also share your views and experiences and highlight any ongoing initiatives by engaging with us via twitter @Enabling_SA #socialactionnetwork #co-creatingchange

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