



# Urban Imagination

Seldom Heard Voices in Deprived Communities  
Cheshire Community Action and  
St Helens Community Empowerment Network



# Two research projects

- Originally two projects were submitted
- Similar in Themes
- Suggestion that both organisations teamed up for a partnership application
- Project funding agreed

# Research areas

- Crewe Cheshire East



- Fingerpost St Helens



# Aims

- To research and learn from the good practice elements of rural Community Led Planning (CLP)
- Identify the drivers and barriers to getting involved with local decision making and how we can encourage under-represented groups in urban communities to be more active.
- Assess the potential for Fingerpost, a deprived area of St Helens, and deprived areas of Crewe in Cheshire East to have Community Led Planning Exercises.

# Scope of the Project

- An **Evaluation of the rural CLP process** through telephone interviews with **experienced community led planners**
- **Focus groups** with local residents in both areas to explore the reasons for lack of engagement.
- **Desktop research** to identify the drivers and barriers to getting involved with in local decision making.
- Interviewing **Registered Social Landlords (RSLs)** that work with communities.

# Scope of the project

- Telephone and Face to face **interviews** with Local Authorities in St. Helens and Cheshire East.
- **DVD Film** to accompany this report, of stories in St. Helens with community members showing their experiences.
- Learning from rural **toolkits and resources** to help inform future CLP projects in urban areas.
- Organising a **Participatory Budgeting** event that focuses on projects that meet community needs and demonstrating a different method of engaging people in local decision making.

# Scope of the project

Learning from rural **toolkits and resources** to help inform future CLP projects in urban areas.

Organising a **Participatory Budgeting** event that focuses on projects that meet community needs and demonstrating a different method of engaging people in local decision making.

# Research methodology

- Undertaken from October 2010 to January 2011
- Desktop Research, telephone and community video and audio interviews
- Focus groups
- Community groups, Housing association staff, PCT Staff,

# Rationale

- Two different urban areas which in the past have experienced a loss of traditional industries and have typical issues common with many urban areas. Former industries were supportive of the local community in each area.
- How does this impact upon participation in local decision making?

# Community Led Planning

## What is it?

- An in depth study carried out by a community itself. A development plan for a community for the next 5-10 year period.
- Already undertaken by 4000 communities across England.
- Taking responsibility for making things happen locally rather than waiting for others to decide.



# Who produces it?

- The community itself, volunteers, local people, people working locally, and supporting services.
- For a full list of completed CLPs visit:
- <http://www.cheshireaction.org.uk/completed-parish-plans>



# Why the interest?

- The Localism and Decentralisation Bill
- “Big Society”
- Community Empowerment
- Active Citizenship.



# Research Findings

- Lots of information generated.
- Things that would encourage them to get more involved with local decision making included:
- Single issues dominated the answers including a wide range of concerns with highways, the Lyceum Theatre, support for older people and anti-social behaviour.
- Some stated that they like where they live and wanted to put something back into their community.
- Knowing the right portfolio holders in the Council e.g. Cllr Rachel Bailey (Portfolio Holder for Community Safety).
- Drop-in sessions suit people low in confidence that may not be comfortable speaking out in an open public meeting.

# Research Findings

- Passionate and professional Council workers and members that were responsive to requests were said to be a key motivator to getting involved with local decision making practices.
- Many reported in the feedback that more open discussion meetings similar to the format of the focus group itself would be beneficial.



# What stops people from getting involved?

- **Structure of consultation sessions** with limited time to ask questions.
- **Lack of feedback** from Council officials appeared to be a popular problem.  
Not having the right people in post to work with the community.
- **Intimidation** - Using an approach to community engagement that does not properly engage people but instead intimidates them and creates resentment amongst those that want to participate.
- **LGR** – the re-structure of an organisation the size of a Local Authority can take years before systems and services are properly established and operate effectively. LGR in 2009 still has repercussions for communities in Crewe as Council staff continue to change regularly which has an impact on the continuity of service quality and consistency.

# What stops people from getting involved?

- There was a feeling that there was **poor leadership** from the local authority which had an effect on their experience with other staff.
- **Low staff morale** - Lack of confidence and morale amongst Council staff was perceived to affect their ability to offer a quality service.
- **Poor communication** about where the public can feed information to the Council was perceived to be a problem. Poor communication can also lead to opinions and perceptions that may not be true.
- **Poor access and transport** to Council consultation events and meetings can prevent local residents from attending sessions, particularly those with poor mobility and / or disability.

# Summary of research findings

- **There is a strong feeling in both Crewe and Fingerpost that local resident's voices are heard but not necessarily listened to and acted upon by the local authorities.**
- **There is a lot to learn from the successes of Housing Associations and Regeneration Programmes who work with deprived communities by using a variety of engagement techniques that apply to different sections of the community.**
- **A well managed and properly resourced activity that is facilitated independently such as CLP / neighbourhood planning or PB can overcome many obstacles to engagement and people taking local action.**
- **CLP can re-energise local groups and also lever significant levels of funding into an area based on well evidenced community consultation.**

# Summary of research findings

- **There is a strong potential for a community planning exercise in both Fingerpost and Crewe but further work will need to be done (subject to resources available) with each of these communities in order to build capacity and identify the best approach to take.**
- **Building strong partnerships and relationships from the outset is crucial for the success of any community planning exercise.**
- **Whether working in rural or urban communities, valuing people's views and opinions and promoting a good understanding of the impact of their input and actions is fundamental to the success of any activity.**
- **Short-termism on government funded regeneration or community development schemes causes disappointment and discourages local action when funding runs out at the point when progress is being made. A holistic long term view is needed to solve the problems of deprived urban communities.**

# A key research finding!

**A significant percentage 47% of the actions in CLP action plans are done by the communities themselves.**



# Questions?

