How social context influences resident led action in an area based empowerment initiative

Overview

All areas have unique characteristics that help to describe a local place and its population as well as its history. This might include how much interaction there is between people living there, as well as people's memories of the past. When it comes to initiatives that aim to enable communities to take action to improve their areas, such factors may also affect how people act together and their ability to gain a stronger 'voice'.

Aims

The briefing explores how a major community empowerment initiative rolled out across England is developing locally. It looks at:

- How previous experiences shape early stages of rollout.

- How the initiative unfolds locally at different speeds and in different ways.

- How aspects of social context are changing over time as a result of the initiative's rollout.

What is social context?

- A community's shared history

- Past experiences of community activism

- People's attachment to local areas

- Interactions and relationships within local communities

- Relationships between citizens and agencies (e.g. public sector bodies)

Initial findings

- The initiative – Big Local - has allocated funding to 150 areas. These vary from former mining villages to urban areas. In some cases, Big Local areas fitted well with existing boundaries. In other areas, boundaries cover more than one 'community'. Cohesiveness of local identities has influenced the time that it takes for people involved to agree priorities and act collectively around these.

- The presence of community activists or existing organisations has provided links or structures that Big Local has been able to work through. This has enabled some areas to quickly establish networks compared to other areas where groups have effectively started from 'scratch'.

- Previous bad experiences or distrust of agencies has sometimes affected residents' willingness to work with practitioners. This includes when there has been a lack of transparency about how funding from past initiatives has been used.

- Although the initiative is at an early stage, there is evidence of shifts in behaviours. One example is connections developing between residents and professionals despite initial reluctance, as benefits of collaborating are realised. Some practitioners are changing how they work with communities as a result of working with Big Local residents.

BITE SIZE

Communities in Control Study

Project Briefing #3

About the CiC Study

The Communities in Control (CiC) Study is evaluating the health inequalities impact of a Big Lottery funded initiative called Big Local. The initiative is being rolled out in 150 areas in England over at least ten years. Each area is receiving at least £1 million and a range of support to enable residents to make a positive difference to their local community.

CiC Phase 1 (Jan 2014 - Dec 2015) has produced learning about the initial stages of this initiative for public health practice and communities. It involved 140 interviews with residents and professionals and observations in 10 Big Local areas. This was supplemented by interviews with national programme leads. Phase 2 (Oct 2015 - March 2017) is assessing how collective control among residents is developing, as well as early health and social impacts for individuals and communities.

Relevance for health inequalities

The findings offer – based on the experiences of residents and practitioners involved – an understanding of how local roll out has been shaped by different starting points. For example, a longer lead in time has been needed to build connections and structures in some areas compared to others.

An awareness of how initiatives unfold in their early stages also helps to identify what changes should be tracked over time as well as the possible health impacts of these - such as the connections from people coming together in new ways.

This briefing has focused on aspects of social context closest to Big Local.   Phase 2 will consider how factors such as public funding cuts might affect residents' abilities to gain control and realise local aspirations.

Further information

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a collaboration between: the Universities of Sheffield, Bristol, Cambridge, Exeter, UCL; The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; the LiLaC collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster and Fuse: The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

Big Local is managed by Local Trust.