



# MHCLG – Communities Framework

Call for Evidence

Community Organisers, 13 February 2019

**Community  
Organisers**

[www.organisers.org.uk](http://www.organisers.org.uk)

**LISTEN  
POWER  
ACTION**

## Response to MHCLG consultation

*Community Organisers* welcomes the opportunity to contribute to thinking within the Department. The suggestions, proposals and evidence below draw on learning from previous Community Organising programmes, and on 34 responses (between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> February) to the specific questions asked by MHCLG. These responses are informed by the community organising process of:

- ‘listenings’: structured one to one conversations with local residents in their homes or in the various places where they gather;
- local community meetings, and participation in parish council meetings and community fora;
- focus groups;
- more informal conversations on the street, in community venues and as part of events;
- social media; and sometimes
- questionnaire surveys.

Everything that is captured in this paper is an example or drawn from an edited story. *Community Organisers* can provide more detailed evidence if that is required.

Respondents commented on the fact that they are able to reach people who do not normally speak up through their door-knocking campaigns. Their presence in an area over time allows relationships to be built and trust established to the extent that people open up about what matters to them in their communities. A local resident reported on how a group of neighbours self-organised themselves to knock on doors each street for about 9 months: ‘*We collated data with themes and connected individuals interests and aspirations*’ Another had carried out a major consultation exercise in her estate that ranged from listenings to a questionnaire survey with 250 written and 89 online responses. A third commented that resident action, including a petition, along with a focus group of 15 residents had demonstrated the need for a better, more accessible park.

### How do we know what communities want: some examples

- A community survey 2017, door knock (4 times a year - plus some more frequent localised door knocking), resident planning groups (monthly), local forums (5 times a year)
- Community engagement at our Big Lunch in the Park events in 2018 and 2017 (approx 120 attendees and 15 volunteers) and subsequent spin off meetings with community members to support them in realising their ambitions for the community

- I know this by having listened to over 3000 residents over that past 6 years and working alongside people to develop community action projects,
- Through 7 years of listening to, living in, working with our community.
- We are running a listening project in the high rise blocks: There are 5 blocks with 60 flats each but we also do listening in the gardening project
- Over 200 listenings with patients and people who experience health inequalities since the start of the expansion programme.
- 500-700 listenings over the past three years.
- Through listenings: 120 as part of the Age Friendly Notts project

What we found, of course, is that all communities are different – there is no one text book picture, either of what is needed or what can be done. That is why any action needs to be preceded by listening to residents. So what do communities want?

## What do communities want to do more of in their communities?

The two most common things that people in communities want to do more of for themselves are: connecting people and improving the environment.

### Connecting people

This is what most people say they want when they are listened to. And it is something they feel they can contribute to. They want to ‘create a strong community’, ‘*connect with like-minded people*’ and ‘*to reduce isolation and loneliness by providing opportunities for people to make friends and feel needed*’. This is a particular concern for older people.

- Reducing isolation

Through listening to dozens of particularly older residents over the past 18 months, it became clear that this is a common concern in terms of not feeling connected to their community. Many residents talked about feeling lonely and/or isolated due to; the loss of partners or how caring for partners has isolated them, children not living nearby, feeling unsafe due to perceived antisocial behaviour, their own ill health etc.

But there is also a lot of concern about the need to provide activities for young people, given that youth services have been completely cut in many areas:

*‘Young people mainly talk often to us about the lack of things to do and how things they once could access no longer exist’.* A survey respondent commented that this inevitably leads to

young people gathering on street corners and associate it also with increases in anti-social behaviour.

Survey respondents also commented on the need for social clubs for excluded people, for more choices for people on their own, suffering domestic violence, and for black and minority ethnic communities.

- Loneliness and isolation – the value of a support structure

Age Friendly Nottinghamshire is a Nottinghamshire County Council project focusing on reducing loneliness and isolation. The project uses a ‘Listening’ process to bring people together with a shared vision and support them to take action on the things they care about most. Having ‘listened’ to residents at an independent retirement scheme in Beeston, ‘Wacky Wednesdays’ was born. This games afternoon was the impetus for four new groups: Beeston Community Action Project (see below), Good Vibes, the Yew Tree Social Group and Community-Pitstop. Together they have organised social activities, litter picks, entertainment evenings and day trips as well as supporting the most isolated residents in their homes. 18 regular activities have been set up over the last year giving residents the opportunity to socialise, make friends and feel more connected to their communities.

Respondents wrote about the importance of getting together for fun. People in communities want ‘*activities such as affordable community cafes, befriending services, help with transport to get to groups etc*’. They are concerned too about safety: ‘*being able to go out at night without being afraid/safe to leave the house*’. They gave examples of how communities can help improve access to social and other activities.

- Giving people access to the things they want to do

And it is not just ... the big stuff in their communities (such as community centres) but also the smaller stuff such as access to clubs and activities. If people don’t have the money to pay for things they are left out. People need to feel able to work together to come up with new ways of accessing clubs and activities by working with organisations. Old Chapel Works in Stafford is working with a boxing club to find a way of those people not being able to afford to go, but the people who really need to go, being able to by raising money locally

## Improving the environment

This is another common outcome of listening campaigns. There are countless stories of people who have never been involved in formal community action before getting together to do a regular litter pick, clean up neglected areas, create pocket parks and gardens that become havens of peace in stressed areas and/or grow food. Residents can reconnect with

nature, save money on food; they also learn new skills and make new friends. Often this gives them the confidence to take further initiatives.

- Start small and build

I have been working with two local communities who have recently set up very proactive community action groups to address local issues. One organised a really successful community clean-up day which will now become a regular event, with some people adopting streets and areas and pledging to keep them clean. They are currently working a setting up a community grocery co-operative in response to local shop closures. The other group put on an incredibly successful community festival and are organising regular clean-ups and community improvement activities and are working on a community allotment with the local schools. They've just been donated a community room by a local business, are working with the Council to take over management/maintenance of their village green and are working with schools and other local organisations to tackle ASB & put on activities for young people.

More generally, people in communities want opportunities to get involved – but on their own terms – they don't want things that are 'prescribed' like typical "volunteering roles", but opportunities to get involved in community action based on what they feel passionate about and around the time they can give'. Through getting involved with others, they also benefit personally. They want 'opportunities to believe in themselves and have a sense of optimism':

*'It is clear from the core group of residents I am supporting that there is a desire from them to take community action personally. The pride and empowerment they take from doing something themselves, rather than being done to, is important'.*

- Informal action

'G' said she would like to see more working together in informal ways. Her motivation for getting involved in the project is to "encourage people to smile more. That is my measure of success.' G attended a Community Organising Training Workshop; she now runs 'Happy Thursdays', has set up a telephone helpline and is currently setting up a food bank. On average, she spends 37 hours a week volunteering in some form.

*"Getting involved with this project has got me back out more. It's given me loads of confidence because prior to this, I had become poorly and lost my friendship circle so became isolated and lonely" ... "I feel getting involved with AFN and BCAP is now having a positive impact on my health. "This project has given me a sense of purpose and I feel useful again. I have inspired others to get involved."*

Respondents commented that residents are not short of ideas. They want more community-led projects. But, as one commented, volunteers are *often overstretched and need more support*. And in some areas, the lack of social infrastructure has a massive effect on community building: *‘people just want to eat, work and have a roof over their head. But they are struggling to do just this’*.

In Bristol a group of residents have come together who call themselves “The People’s Republic of Oldbury Court.” They have laid on summer events and held a street party where some 60 people socialised together for the first time. After a listening campaign they held a food share event at Eid, attended by some 80 people – this won a social cohesion award. They have produced a one-off newsletter, got the pub listed as a community asset and hosted two events for young children which was organised by young children. But a monthly coffee group run by older people lost momentum after about six months. So while they feel they have done a considerable bit of groundwork over the last two years and want to do more, they are finding it challenging with very little resource in the neighbourhood and doing this in their spare time.

## What would people like more control over?

Communities want more control and influence over many things:

*‘They want to be involved in all decisions that affect them at a local level and on how budgets are spent. When people have more influence it has come through the effective collaboration between community organisers and the council. This has created the opportunity for people to engage powerfully and fully in local decision making’*

What people want more control over depends upon local circumstances. Examples of early impact from the Community Organisers Programme illustrate the diversity of what communities want:

- A bus service reinstated in Sheffield
- A swimming pool reopened in Birmingham
- A locally based job advice centre in Portland
- A mass road campaign in South Gloucestershire
- Safety and security measures for boaters along the Regent’s Canal
- Car parking charges stopped

The main thing is that people are listened to and can work constructively with others to make things happen. As one respondent said: *‘They want to be involved in key decisions and*

*will offer their time to attend community and local authority meetings. This is the type of action they would like to do more of.*

Meaningful consultation and listening is always appreciated and valued, even though it is perhaps at times more time consuming. But there were many comments about ‘meaningless consultations that go nowhere’:

*‘Its not what communities want to have more control over, they need to know that they can have control. There are consultations but people don’t know there are opportunities to get involved in decision making. Those in power don’t reach out and engage with people in places where they are at’.*

We have heard examples of councillor’s surgeries being held at inappropriate times, the police not hearing what women are saying about their experiences of domestic violence. Generally people want local services to be more accountable and they want to be listened to:

*Seeing a commissioner or someone from the CCG answerable to the people they serve would be interesting.*

People want to have more of a say in decision making and the allocation of public money, so that it is spent on the things that communities actually want – ‘the right things’.

## So, what are the specific issues people in communities want more say over?

A series of survey responses related to housing and housing developments. A common theme was that new housing developments do not have adequate infrastructure or facilities.

- **Having a say over housing and housing developments**

We are a new build community and expanding we have around 3.5/4,000 people with no facilities because the infrastructure levy was spent on highways. I have listened to the community and set up a charity to deliver on the communities needs and we are working in partnership with many companies and Local Government. The community feel they are ignored - more housing is to be built and our infrastructure is not adequate; no roads have been adopted, we have no bus service. All this makes communities angry.

Some were concerned about the disproportionate number of challenging tenants being ‘dumped’ in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This is an issue within both the social and private rented sectors; people would like more of a say, and a conversation about their neighbourhoods. Others were interested in developing *community led housing*.

Related to this, a common finding is that people want more control over the physical *environment*, for example, the maintenance of estates. They want a safer environment - people often don't feel safe going out at night and they want more say in *policing* and ways of reducing antisocial behaviour. They are also concerned about access to public transport and their lack of voice in decisions about *transport services*:

*things like bus services can be very important, with bus routes being taken away leaving people feeling isolated.*

Several respondents referred to *community ownership of assets*. They would like more information, for example on who owns them and who is trying to take them over. They also want more control over their *economy*: engagement in attempts to halt the decline of local shops and businesses; a say in the kinds of training and work opportunities that are provided.

## What do people want in terms of inclusive spaces?

Our evidence is that space is important for inclusivity and that this can be any space – a café, park, community centre, even a street... But communities feel there are no longer enough safe spaces. Community centres and youth clubs have folded. And one survey respondent suggested that policy tends to focus on parks, libraries and council owned buildings to the detriment of existing sports clubs, scout halls, church halls and community centres. Others referred to untapped assets and unused spaces.

### Community centres

Community centres are high on the agenda - accessible and inclusive. For example in one very large council estate, there is just one community centre which can only be accessed by older people: '*Young people have nowhere to go, there is no youth club, nowhere to hang out*'. Community centres are essential for the kind of social connection we discussed in the section on what people want to do more of: '*somewhere to drop in and have a cup of tea*', '*places to mix across generations*'. They are essential to provide space for community activities and meetings. They also provide somewhere to go for information and resources, advice on benefits etc. And they can be community learning centres.

- Why community centres are important

Community centres are the greatest assets that communities can have. it's a place where you can meet like minded people, find help and support in concerns they have, share experience and ideas. It is really a place that when you feel completely disempowered, where you find relief and support.

Community centres need to be affordable, welcoming to those who can't afford room hire, with sufficient meeting space, with 'light touch access', 'multiuse but not too slick' i.e. they



need to be ‘homely’. Being affordable meant free to hire with free parking and access to public transport. People wanted centres that were community owned, or community managed with funding from the local authority.

- Somewhere to get out and socialise

I have heard from service users that they miss the social clubs that afforded them the opportunities to leave their homes and get out and socialise. Their social isolation makes living very difficult. Many service users find it difficult to have a hot meal because of the new benefits and losing their DLA. Many people don't know what to do with their time and the social isolation increases their depression and sometimes their anxiety. That some people find that having nothing to do during the day makes it harder to withdraw from drinking and/ or taking drugs. I have heard this evidence from resident meetings with my housing association and at a peer advice group.

However, there were differences between areas - from one respondent who was concerned that there might be too many competing centres in the locality to another where there was no space to have any community centre. One survey respondent describes shared housing with no social space which means people congregate on street corners and bridges, which can be intimidating:

*‘A lack of green space is a clear concern in the community. The area is highly residential and predominately formed of terraced housing which only has access to small back yards/gardens. Shared housing is also very common, and people therefore lack their own social spaces to mix with others. This can cause issues in the neighbourhood as people tend to congregate on street corners and bridges, which can be intimidating for others’.*

In another area there was a need for ‘A centre for BAME [groups] as there is little or no such venue and no activities geared to their needs’. In another area, however, there was concern that community centres were being taken over by for-profit nurseries.

It is important to recognise that other places are also important as social hubs: particular mention was made of libraries and pubs.

## Youth clubs

There was also a strong demand for youth clubs – far too many have closed, with an attendant risk – perceived or real - of antisocial behaviour. Several were keen for them to be run by the community – as ‘the only people who understand the full extent of issues’.

*.... There are not enough safe places left, the community centres have folded, the youth clubs have shut. Everyone I talk to agrees that young people need somewhere to go and meet their peers in a safe place. So youth clubs is a big one for my area.*

## Outdoor spaces

People in communities also want outdoor spaces for play, for socialising, for barbecues, for sports and skate parks:

*Young people and adults all tell us they wish they could have had these kind of things*

Outdoor spaces also provide much needed opportunities for community food growing and community gardening.

People want spaces that are: clean, safe and not dumped on; well maintained and free of anti social behaviour; accessible and maintainable for diverse communities; well equipped. However, one respondent commented that care needed to be taken with their siting, particularly in new developments: *'We don't want residential areas turned into public parks and playgrounds creating lots of noise and anti social behaviour'.*

- Safe spaces for young people

Young people talk about the park area in their community. Once it was a park; however now the equipment has all been ripped out, no slides, swings, lights etc. This has made the area a source of ASB and some young people no longer want to go there as they don't feel safe.

A local park has a number of play areas for young children. These are often vandalised by teenagers who have no facilities of their own and spend a great deal of time in the local park at night. Local volunteers must then spend time cleaning up broken glass from areas set aside for children aged between 3 and 8 years of age left behind by night time teenage drinking. There are no youth centres in the area and when groups of young people gather at nearby shops they are often dispersed by police or PCSO's simply moving the problem elsewhere. In short, some public facilities are becoming no go areas even shortly after dark for local residents and temporarily unusable for their young children during the day, dependent on whether volunteers are available to clean up.

Even where there is open space it is not always easy to access for community events. People want a more streamlined procedure for temporary event notice and applications to hire green space:

*At our Big Lunch in the Park event people said they wanted more fun and free events in the park. Organisers would like the Temporary Event Notice, and Application to Hire Greenspace process to be streamlined/more light touch and free for not for profit groups to encourage more events to happen in greenspaces, with possibly a 'light touch' or fast track version to enable communities to be more spontaneous in how they use their spaces and help people feel that these spaces are their resource to use as the community would like.*

## What do communities want local and national government to do more/less of?

### The way government works

Some of the responses to the above questions are also relevant here e.g. people want greater involvement in decisions that are taken that affect them, engagement in service design, to be listened to and respected as having a valid voice. There were many messages about wanting *devolved power* – money and resource / budget control at local level. They wanted *more accessible decision making*:

- A more open and accessible local council
- More accessible consultation around regional and national policy
- Better processes for consultation i.e. greater response times, and where those with power listen and fulfil their commitments

And they wanted a *more holistic response* from government and other agencies involved in their localities. They talked about the need for

one point of contact and the need to integrate and collaborate around social and environmental action – unemployment, fly tipping, poverty, lack of awareness, escalating food waste, loneliness, etc. They felt that limited resources could be more accurately targeted, that there could be better signposting to services and more contact to, and between, local organisations.

### What government can provide

More specifically, our evidence suggests that people in communities want:

#### Locally relevant skills and employment opportunities

People are looking for more support in looking for work and spaces to share skills, including locally based training to help gain employment – a school survey found that 75% wanted basic IT skills, basic maths and English and help with CV writing. Some mentioned the need

for more job opportunities that build on people’s skills and experience, for example in child care. There are lots of really valuable skills in the community but when councils wants work done such people rarely get a look in.

- **Recognising and valuing people’s skills**

One bloke started with litter picks and running an allotment and has gone on to organise a monthly singalong in a cafe. Through this he has found people who can play the piano and the guitar and a printer who has done a song guide. Another example is the people who are doing the litter picks and keeping their areas clean and tidy – these two very strong volunteers could do refuse collection or be supported to put together a community tender.

*But they wouldn’t stand a chance. The procurement process is far too removed. If it were simpler with more support and it invested in community collectives, they could take on far more.*

Employment opportunities in the areas organisers work are often low paid. So people need help to make ends meet, especially around childcare e.g. up front and ongoing childcare costs, as this is a barrier to taking low paid employment:

*The marginal rate of working isn’t enough locally to encourage people into the low paid jobs that are available especially when taking things like Free School Meals/prescriptions etc into account (focus group of 15 residents).*

#### More accessible and relevant services

Services in these areas have been cut or centralised. Communities need them to be:

- More easily accessible locally (e.g. mental health services), especially in rural communities with poor transport links
- Better and locally relevant e.g. health, dental and hospital care; transport.

In particular survey respondents mentioned the need for:

- Funded care for elders
- More support for vulnerable and homeless people
- More after care choices post prison and addiction
- A greater local police presence
- A more humane welfare system

Housing was again raised as an issue and people wanted:

- More basic infrastructure, particularly on new housing developments

- More social housing
- More pressure on landlords to provide services and deal with anti-social behaviour

### The need for support

Communities struggle to know what they can demand of government – they don't feel they have the power and this creates passivity. They would like support to provide learning on politics and local democracy and a demonstration from national and local government that they have faith in the contributions that local people can make e.g. more positivity and encouragement for people with ideas and enthusiasm. They asked for more bottom up programmes like Big Local, *'to take control of their own solutions rather than going along with yet another initiatives that will end when statutory funding comes to an end'*.

They also talked about the need for on going opportunities around localism, recognising that community building takes time and patience. One of the Community Organisers Social Action Hubs that engaged in the department's Mobilisation Fund programme four years ago states: *'We are ready now'*

- Learning from the Community Organisers Mobilisation Fund

Two messages for government were to allow adequate time and to provide the independent resources needed to employ a designated worker at an early stage, which would help communities to get up to speed and engage with the process:

*Communities need a designated worker, who is free from the council's agenda, to support them to explore their community rights.*

*Without someone on the ground actively engaging people to take action in their community, promoting and supporting the use of community rights, then disempowered communities are less likely to make use of community rights.*

*For people to be able to 'own' things locally; decisions and assets, it takes time. If you want people who are not the 'usual suspects' or most organised then you have to build the confidence of local people*

It was also felt that national government could do more to publicise community rights e.g. a national marketing campaign, and more to encourage local authorities to participate in this agenda, to work with communities and to ensure that they were up to speed. One community organiser urged a more strategic approach at local level:

*Encourage local authorities to take a strategic joint up approach in their support and approach to neighbourhood planning and community rights. This would I feel reduce the number of unexpected developments that lead to mistrust between different community groups and the local authority due to sporadic engagement.*

Community organisers also asked for stronger legislation to enable communities and local authorities to stand up to powerful developers and landowners.

*Ultimately, it is easy to get an ACV but difficult to do anything with it. Lots of groups have fallen by the wayside*

Funding is a key issue. People want:

- Devolved budgets which would lead to more locally relevant spend
- Small pots earmarked for grassroots groups
- Funding to support volunteers

They also emphasise the importance of paid worker support for community groups to take action and implement their ideas

## What do they want less of?

In general this is the converse of what they want. In relation to services they complain about:

- Top down services.
- Unelected bodies directing services
- Cuts to quality services (and replacement with market driven cheaper ones)

When it comes to organising things for themselves, they complain about red tape and complicated procedures:

*Other organisations and ourselves have often talked about the frustration when we try to organise small community events and have to tick so many boxes and jump through so many hoops that it becomes too time consuming and stressful.*

The responses generally pointed to distrust in government. National government needs to listen more:

*The most telling comment in the focus group was one woman who when talking about living in Hartlepool said "there's nothing worth fighting for." It's a tale of seeing the civic infrastructure of the town systematically stripped with few employment prospects which make it financially viable to work.*

## Concluding comments: the value of listening and organising

As one community organiser said:

*'reflecting back on what is the key to maintaining motivation is listening; spending more time on building relationships by listening to people's aspirations and to facilitate conversations rather than rushing in to forming a group'.*

We referred above to fact that communities value the support of a paid worker. Community organising supports local people to build stronger, better connected neighbourhoods, networks of local people where they feel more powerful and can make collective decisions about where they live and take action, where they can influence services and have access to resources to do the things they want to do:

*We want local people to feel like leaders rather than bystanders where decisions are made to or for them.*

*When communities have had the chance to influence and are being listened to (genuinely listened to) you can see the impact and the benefit for people. A few people have had token involvement in the past but now many people have having meaningful involvement. They are doing things and taking action – not just being a body in a meeting.*

- An example of listening to action

The team met with 'D' who said he knew others that shared his passion to help people in the community. Shortly after, he with three others formed BCAP (Beeston Community Action Project). D attended the Community Organising Training Workshop and now has a group of 10 volunteers who are very active in the community. BCAP have organised events and activities, have undertaken litter picking events, a range of events for Older Peoples Week and more recently developed a 6 week 'Bootcamp' course to improve intergenerational relationships on a local park. He is working in partnership with local organisations such as Tesco, Wilko's, Neighbourhood Watch schemes, local police and CAT team and is now liaising with local councillors to find ways of supporting each other. D and his BCAP team are keen to find funding to enable them to do even more in the community and are maintaining a portfolio of all the volunteering work the team have undertaken.

*"Getting involved with AFN and BCAP has enthused me more to plan better things" "It's changed my life, it's slowed me down and stopped my patterns of bad behaviour"*