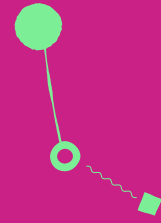


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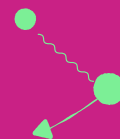
UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL

Community Organisers Expansion Programme Learning Report

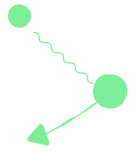
Authors: Marilyn Taylor and Mandy Wilson

Imagine was the Learning Partner to Community Organisers throughout the Programme. This report is a compilation of that learning.

Imagine Team: Marilyn Taylor, Mandy Wilson, Tricia Zipfel and Paulette Singer (from November 2017)



Community
Organisers



Summary of learning

The programme in numbers

3966

people were trained

in community organising - exceeding the target of 3,500 people

78

people enrolled

on Community Organising Qualification courses

1346

people attended follow on courses

in Listening, Action for Change or Building Power

341

young people were trained in community organising

The National Academy of Community Organising was established and grew - to a network of Social Action Hubs in **22 places** and **43 quality assured trainers**

Five new one-day quality assured courses, **two Qualification courses** and a **certificated youth programme** were developed

An active peer network of over

1500

community organisers developed

20
new Local Organising Groups

formed to take local action

£1.25 Million

was leveraged to support community organising work locally

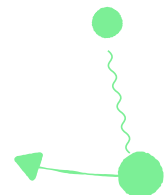


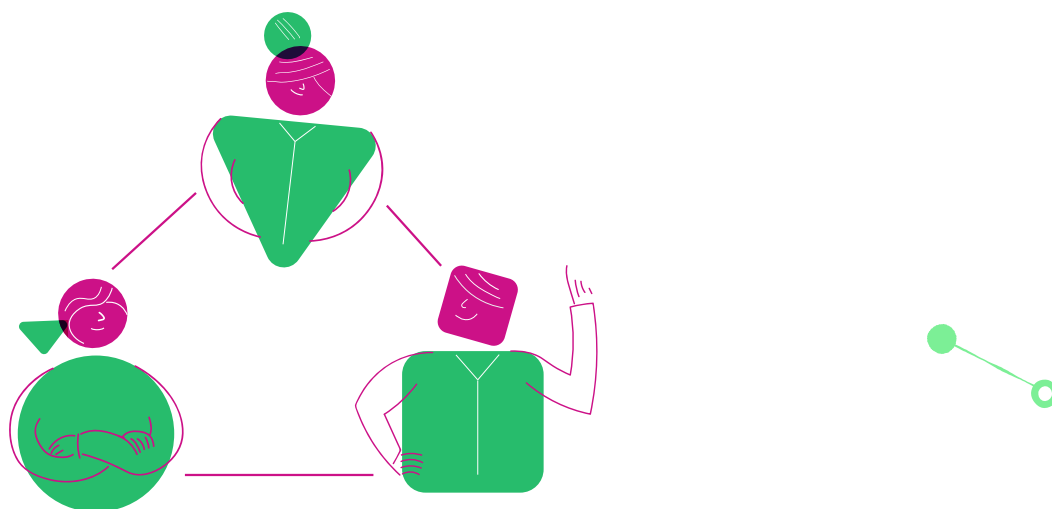
Key findings

- Due to the Programme's timeframe, and delay in starting, it had a hurried start and also was set up by a new organisation, so structures and processes need to be evolved alongside the action in the first months. Some of the social action hubs were also fairly new organisations and were also developing their own systems.
- Despite this, the COEP has done what it was funded to do, developing a robust training package and training just under 4000 people in community organising.
- Its design of delivering through hubs helped to ensure that the training was locally embedded.
- It also provided much valued training to a wider range of organisations who saw an opportunity to enhance their work through community organising.
- Its approach of listening, reaching out, and connecting people has built the capacity of residents to respond to a wide variety of local issues, most recently demonstrated in the COVID-19 crisis.
- It has established a strong reputation in localities where it operates and has helped to foster co-ordination and peer support.
- It has provided a framework for local action that can both harness initial energy and enthusiasm and build this in the long-term.
- In some areas it has provided a strong foundation for community enterprise development.
- Action has been locally rooted but there is also clear evidence of the value of a national network.

Learning from the Programme demonstrates the importance of:

- Long-term investment
- Devolution – enabling local residents to take the lead
- Mutuality
- Linking training to action, so that each reinforces the other
- Making space for informality so that initial enthusiasm is not quashed.
- Avoiding predetermined outcomes





1 Context and programme start

The Community Organisers Expansion Programme (COEP) followed the Community Organisers Programme (primarily a training programme, funded by the Cabinet Office, 2011-2014; managed by Locality), and two short term action oriented programmes, the Community Organisers Social Action Programme (funded by the Cabinet Office, 2014-5; managed by Locality) and the Community Organisers Mobilisation Fund (funded by the Office for Civil Society and the Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015-6; managed by Community Organisers).

In addition, a peer to peer network for community organisers was financially supported by Power to Change in 2016-17, and Community Organisers ran its own Youth Organisers Programme from 2018-20.

The COEP launched in March 2017. Its principal objective was to recruit and train 3,500 community organisers, building on the 6,500 trained in the previous Community Organisers Programme, with the aim of social change based on resident led collective action.

Although the programme started several months later than anticipated and in the final month of the financial year, the funder, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, expected the first

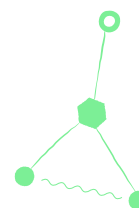
quarter targets to be met by the end of March 2017. A rapid 'scramble' to put in place programme staff and participating organisations followed, alongside an initial framework for designing and learning from the programme. Imagine has previously described this as a baptism of fire – Community Organisers was developing systems at the same time as delivering them. A remarkable amount was achieved over first 13 months (i.e. after a full year) but the rushed start was significant in terms of the time it took to generate clarity and shared vision about the programme's strategic approach.

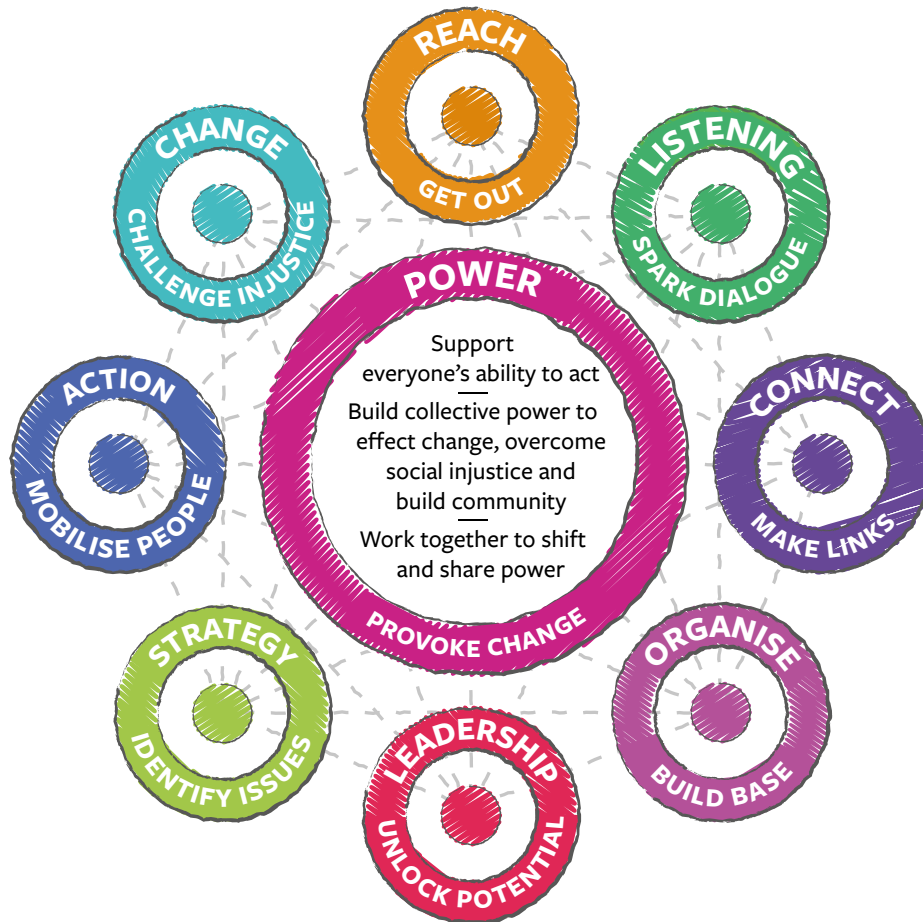


The COEP theory of change: a learning framework

In March 2017, Imagine worked with staff and directors of Community Organisers, as well as the funder, to design a theory of change for the Programme. This has been reviewed and redesigned by a range of programme participants at various points over the last three years to generate reflection and learning. The high level outcome - the top line of the theory of change - illustrated the government rationale for financial support:

“A strong democratic society where people engage in collective community action and effect social change. The COEP planned contributions to this are shown above.”





Understanding community organising

The term community organising is used by many different organisations. As the Programme rolled out it became clear that Community Organisers needed to define its understanding:

the work of bringing people together to take action around their common concerns and overcome social injustice. Community organisers reach out and listen, connect and motivate people to build their collective power for change.

This meaning was further developed through the community organising framework which maps the process of community organising.

With power at the centre of the framework – the building of people power – the elements around the outside map the process of organising: for example, building relationships through one-to-one

listening, bringing people together in a collaborative and organised way, nurturing people’s strengths, resources and leadership potential and strategising to affect change.



2 Findings

Programme foundations

The programme was built upon three key inter-related elements: Social Action Hubs, training in community organising and member networks.

2.1 Social Action Hubs

Social Action Hubs were envisaged as the key delivery partners and 20 were recruited within months of the programme start. They were all required to match the programme funding through in kind donations and other fundraising. Over the life of the programme, three hubs dropped out and three more joined.

The rush to launch the programme, as described above, had implications for the selection and programme management processes of the participating hubs. In March 2017 when the first 10 hubs were recruited, there were few paid staff in place, and crucially no programme manager. The impact of this was lasting in that hubs joined the programme with differing understandings of the programme vision and held different perceptions of what was to be expected of them. As time went on much of this was ironed out, aided by a programme management system, participatory design of the programme learning framework and the community organising framework (see Section 1) which evolved and was modified as the programme wore on.

There was wide variation in terms of the hubs' core business/purpose, centrality of community organising, age, funding model (enterprise, grant funding, dues based, contract based), size, relationships with local authority etc). In the five Social Action Hub case studies carried out by Imagine for example, we had:

- A multiservice community hub on a primarily social housing estate where it had been working for nearly 40 years, with COEP building on work started in 2013.
- A multifunction community federation working across the city since 2006, with COEP building on work started in 2014 and running alongside other funding for community organising.
- A London-wide organisation focusing on people learning English as a second language, sees community organising as central to its work.
- A Community Interest Company set up as a direct result of the Community Organisers Programme 2011-14 with community organising as its main business.
- The first branch of a community union initially set up by community organisers who participated in the Community Organisers Programme 2011-14, with community organising as its main business.

This variation has been a strength in that it has provided opportunities for practice and learning from experience across a range of contexts. It has however had some implications for a coherent programme-wide approach and mutual support amongst peers.

The programme offered Social Action Hubs opportunities to:

- embed community organising in the practice and culture of the organisation and / or the area, including training Social Action Hub staff and volunteers, increasing their confidence, building trust, raising aspirations
- sharpen the Social Action Hub focus and give them better tools to do what they wanted to do anyway (e.g. offering continuing professional development, holding them to account for their social action role)
- expand their coverage (including to very marginalised people) and grow the momentum of organising through dedicated community organisers and a training programme
- strengthen connections with, and accountability to, local residents
- build their reputation at local level – put themselves on the map, with ‘a valuable training resource to offer’
- be part of a national network, whose clear framework and certification gives them credibility.

In 2018, Social Action Hubs agreed that the defining features of a Social Action Hub were that it:

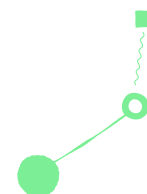
- delivers training to support (connect people to) social action.
- connects people together and facilitates social action
- models and demonstrates community organising (leading by example)
- advises, supports, signposts and sometimes funds social action.

The value of being a Social Action Hub

The funding that the COEP offered attracted organisations to the programme. But, it was more than that – they felt that the programme aims fitted with what they were already doing, *‘Offering training to bring people into community organising and then pointing them to ways of doing it’*.

One hub described how the community organising work impacted internally and externally. The organisation went on its own cultural journey – staff across the organisation accepted that community organising (listening and reflection) was integral to the way they should work and as a result it became better connected to, and trusted by, the local community.

A number of hubs found that being a Social Action Hub in a national programme helped them to feel part of something bigger and had a positive local impact – they were taken more seriously and became a ‘go-to’ place for training. Some also used their status as a hub to strategically position themselves locally and nationally. This opened up opportunities for partnership working with other organisations and to access funding from other national programmes.



Social Action Hub case study: Community Roots CiC (CRCiC)

CRCiC was formed by two participants from the 2011-2014 Community Organiser Programme. Since 2013, the organisation has worked with residents *‘to develop their confidence, use their voices and skills to take action on the things that really matter to them’*. It is a small organisation with two working directors at the start of the Expansion Programme increasing to three in 2020, who work alongside two trainee community organisers.

Training and Action

The COEP has had added some formality to the work that CRCiC does. For example, volunteers that had already been working with CRCiC have been trained and been able to start putting their learning into action. Staff dedicate an evening a week to doorknocking with trainees or to provide learning assessment support.

The COEP has provided an opportunity for CRCiC to be more outward looking and to reach out to other organisations. Running training has been a learning curve and has opened up opportunities to think about supporting community organising through organisations as well as in communities.

CRCiC has now developed its own particular approach to organising ‘Community Conversation Programmes’, which it has successfully packaged for other organisations. Over time they have found a way to integrate the training into the Community Conversations offer, as a way to ensure that local capacity is built in these other organisations after CRCiC has finished working with them. The fact that the training was quality assured added a degree of credibility.

Reflections on being a Social Action Hub

CRCiC feel that the funding enabled them to reignite people locally and to look outward more. They work explicitly with organising in their organisation and the hub status has furthered that by encouraging links with external organisations through the training offer. Local organisations have begun to recognise the value of the approach as a different, ‘smarter’ way to do their work and recognise CRCiC as a key partner in enabling that happen.

They have been able to bring new people and new ideas on board, they have reached a wider audience, grown their organisation and been able to offer training to new members of staff. They now have a robust evidence base, a meaningful community organising framework and the training courses that they can offer to partners.

Strengths and fragilities

Some felt that the COEP worked best where the Social Action Hub had an already established local profile – this provided fertile ground for community organising. Others, commented on how joining the programme had given their small fledgling organisations a real uplift and were much more sustainable as an organisation as a result.

Some of the Social Action Hubs however were, and still are, very fragile – in terms of financial sustainability, and, skilled and knowledgeable personnel. Particular challenges arose when there were changes within Social Action Hubs, especially if an Organiser left and a new trainer had to be recruited and introduced to the Programme, or a hub manager who had invested in the programme

vision moved on. This fragility had the capacity to undermine the robustness of a programme which relied on a small number of hubs and by the end of Year 2, three hubs had left the programme. Yet, three new hubs – organisations that had previous links with community organising and had built relationships with Community Organisers - joined at the start of Year 3. The downside to this churn is the loss of relationships, understanding and buy-in to the programme from those who left; the upside is that with only one year of funding left, the new hubs were enthusiastic to hit the ground running and brought a fresh enthusiasm.

All Social Action Hubs were responsible for employing, or at least contracting with, a community organiser who could deliver community organising training in the locality. At the start of the programme these were called ‘Experienced Community Organisers’ because they were people who had been through an accredited training programme themselves and had experience in the practice of organising. All the Social Action Hubs ran introductory one day courses, 16 ran follow-up courses and 8 ran one or more courses which were longer, more in depth and brought with them a qualification. In total 2512 people were trained by Social Action Hubs. The training is the subject of the following section.

2.2 Training

Training courses have included one day introductory courses, three one day follow on courses (listening, power, and action), more in depth training programmes (leading to an Award in Community Organising) and courses specifically modified to meet the needs of a particular group of participants. Training has been delivered to residents connected to a Social Action Hub, to public sector participants, to voluntary sector organisations and through publicly advertised open access courses:

3547 people attended an introductory course

1346 people attended a more in-depth course

More than **400** training courses were delivered

Most of the Social Action Hubs started by training their own staff and volunteers. One community organiser reported:

An introductory one day staff session in January 2018 aimed to ensure that everyone ... is on board with community organising as a way of thinking and working in a complementary way. This was part of embedding community organising in the organisation, as well as outside.

They then took various approaches to recruitment such as door-knocking, using existing networks, broader advertising, recruiting through partner organisations.

Social Action Hub case study: Rotherfed

Rotherfed (Rotherham Federation) works alongside community groups, tenants and residents associations across Rotherham. Formed in 2006, its overall aim is to strengthen communities in Rotherham. In 2014, Rotherfed hosted four community organisers as part of the Community Organisers Programme. It sought to continue this approach and with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund and other Trust funding it has employed and provided training for a team of community organisers.

Training and Action

The initial SAH lead sought to embed community organising principles across the organisation and felt the COEP would help the organisation to do this:

be the place to come to for campaigning'. It's USP is supporting people in communities. This is where community organising comes in. Communities doing stuff in their own communities

In 2017, Rotherfed recruited one of its existing community organisers as the lead trainer for the Community Organisers Expansion Programme. This worker left in late 2018 and was replaced by an external, though trained, applicant in early 2019.

Since 2018, 132 different people participated in the introductory course, with 29 of these completing at least one and sometimes all three, of the Listening, Power and Action follow up training days. Some of the 'Introduction to Community Organising' courses were offered as two day events so that participants could focusing on practical things like funding, community engagement and group development, and plan how to put their learning into action on the second day. Rotherfed believes that people feel valued because they are getting some formal recognition for what they do through the training programme

The current trainer has described seeing light bulb moments when people suddenly understand what community organising is all about. For one training participant, the training was life changing. Active in his own community, R went along to the Introductory one day training. He followed this up with the further three one day training modules which 'Gave me different ways of thinking about what I am doing and how'. R's confidence developed, he became much more proactive in community activity and in 2019 was subsequently employed as a community organiser at Rotherfed.

This move to action has been supported by Rotherfed's team of community organisers – training participants are encouraged to link up with an organiser and get some practice.

Reflections on being a Social Action Hub

Rotherfed felt that 'Social Action Hub' felt like a good title and promoted itself as such:

The SAH is not a place, it is about Rotherfed's offer.

In 2020, the SAH lead felt that the Programme was a success because it linked to Rotherfed's core values about supporting people to develop and sustain action, 'people who want to move on to become community leaders'. The training was seen to have been particularly beneficial because of its formality – it requires a level of commitment.

There is affirmation that they have learnt something, and there is networking within the cohorts. There is now a chat group amongst training participants in Rotherham – and they support each other. Legacy building – community members mentoring each other, people supporting other groups, not dependent on the worker. They realise that this is basic, not complicated.

The pool of trainers

The original intention was for the training to be provided by the organisers based in Social Action Hubs, supported by a set of Training the Trainers courses. But as other organisations recognised the value of community organising and came to Community Organisers for training, a pool of associate trainers was formed to deliver training to this wider group. Examples included national charities such as KeyRing, local authorities such as the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (following the Grenfell fire) and local voluntary and community sector bodies.

In total, there were 43 quality assured trainers delivering training either from a Social Action Hub or as an associate trainer. As a pool of trainers they made for a strong team. However, there were pros

and cons inherent in the different roles. Some of the hub based trainers saw themselves primarily as community organisers rather than trainers, for example while Associate Trainers sometimes lacked local knowledge and had little scope for follow up support for training participants where a hub was not involved. In hindsight, a better scenario might have been to pair hub based and associate trainers from the start so as to maximise the training and support experience for trainers and participants alike. This wouldn't have worked everywhere as resources available meant that the hubs were few, and weren't geographically spread, but it would have embedded the practice of co-training and contributed to quality control, especially where there was a turnover of hub based community organisers.

Training content and delivery

There were some teething problems at the outset whilst waiting for the training to be designed (in part due to the speed with which the programme had to be up and running). This led to some people not feeling on top of the content, despite Community Organisers' rich investment in a participatory content development process.

There have also been concerns around the scope to modify the content and remain within the parameters set for quality assurance. The Social Action Hubs had not always appreciated that they would have to deliver standardised training when they applied to be part of the programme, with one trainer commenting that the training courses:

are made up from predetermined activities, set in a specific order, neither of which is to be changed. Taking all of this into consideration, I feel that moving forward, the introductory training could be kept as it is, but the follow up training could be centred around particular problems.Rather than a set training, the materials could serve as a bank, which could be drawn on, and arranged in an order that feels most natural, and which could be supplemented by other materials as it becomes appropriate during an exploration of a topic.

Rolling out a standardised training programme is a challenge – on the one hand there needs to be a degree of consistency to ensure that courses meet the required criteria and hold their value, on the other hand participants have differing learning needs and styles that have to be accommodated if they are to fully benefit. Questions also arise about

the purpose and application of training for different audiences: e.g. is the same package appropriate for: training people who are on the journey to becoming a community organiser; training local authorities who will come into contact with community organising and may be a potential funder; training local people to be effective leaders and activists?

Community Organisers worked hard to meet this challenge. Generally, by 2020 there was widespread agreement that the training was working well – many trainers saying that it provided the impetus to deliver training in a more disciplined and structured way even if some put in their own additional content. For example, the implications of delivering the training to people for whom English is not their first language were brokored with the programme to ensure greater flexibility in the training model and tailored additions were made in some cases to ensure that the training was more directly linked to action, as well as to make it relevant to the local situation. Some hubs for example, followed the one day introductory course with a second day, to allow more time to set the learning within local relevance and context. There were also examples of how the one day training programme was broken down into

shorter sessions such as when training young people where the content was sometimes spread over two days or more and shorter evening sessions. Those working with young people also highlighted the need to ensure the training was fun and provided energy breaks when participants' concentration lapsed.

Community Organisers 'End of Programme Report' captures rich feedback from training participants. Imagine heard lots more; for example, one trainer talked about seeing light bulb moments – people suddenly understanding what community organising is - and two trainees described their training experience as a learning curve: 'knowledge is power - this is the best thing you can give anyone'. Other comments included:

I have also learnt more [about] listening to people by building trust and relationships with residents this will allow me to learn more key information like the skills residents have that can be used to make positive change.

I thought it would be more about organising events etc. I found it was more about organising the community as a whole

[it] gave me different ways of thinking about what I am doing and how.

(Participant talking about how the training has moved them on e.g. the role of organising a meeting rather than traditional chairing, developing leadership in the community.)

Follow-up support: training into action

There was some variation in what the follow up looked like – for some it was about providing opportunities to practise community organising and build community organising skills e.g. door-knocking; for some it was more about helping people to identify issues and agendas for action. The amount of time that was given to supporting people outside the classroom varied considerably. In the

2019 annual reports, the hours per month recorded ranged from 8 to 40, with the average (mean, mode and median) at around the 20 hours mark.

Community Organisers promoted a triangulated approach of training, support and action as the ideal model for social action hubs. And for some hubs this resonated:

This to me is what being a Social Action Hub is all about – providing the formal training for people to get a sense of what's possible and the ideas that

underpin the work and then reality based training and activity where people can put their skills into practice to make a difference in their community.

But repeated concerns from some hubs centred on the lack of resources for follow up and there was some disagreement over whether COEP funding covered the work required to train people ‘on the job’ as well as ‘in the classroom’. The challenges of follow up support were different for different Social Action Hubs. Where community organising was core business for the hub this support was perhaps more likely to happen. And some decided to focus intensively on a small group of trainees through the Award. The challenge was also partially met through the member development opportunities – Member Organisers in the first two years of the programme (particularly where resources were in effect pooled to provide a more comprehensive approach) and Local Organising Groups in Year 3.

The question of resources for follow up was also a significant issue in a separately funded Youth Organisers Training Programme, which operated in parallel with the COEP. Youth workers are not necessarily community organisers and so were not in a position to offer the necessary support. They have faced significant cuts in recent years and they generally had limited capacity, often being sessional staff. One respondent suggested that the ideal support from Community Organisers would be monthly consultancies and then a follow up two day workshop session after six months. Another had linked up with other local organisations, including Citizens UK, to maximise the support offer.

Social Action Hub case study: ACORN Bristol

ACORN Bristol is one of three ACORN branches selected as Social Action Hubs for the Community Organisers Expansion Programme. ACORN is a national campaigning organisation and describes itself as a community union. It was established in 2015 by graduates of the original Community Organisers Programme. It is a membership organisation with 865 members in May 2020 and is run by a Board elected by the members. Apart from the Programme funding, it runs mainly on membership dues, although it has had grants from foundations for specific pieces of work.

Training and Action

In its first three years it focussed mainly on private renting, supporting individual tenants in disputes with landlords and running campaigns. Successful campaigns have resulted in the adoption of an ethical lettings charter by the Bristol City Council and decisions by two major banks to drop policies that did not allow their mortgagees to let to people on benefits. In the past year it has broadened its scope to include, for example, campaigns on social housing, local transport and voter registration. All campaigns are decided by the members. It operates city wide but has set up local groups in two areas.

ACORN delivered an extended version of the one day Introductory course, adding in elements that support ACORN’s work and principles. ACORN also provides training specific to its campaigning needs as and when needed. It has provided media training but this is mainly done through ongoing coaching.

Community organising is central to ACORN’s mission and so follow up and supporting trainees into action is integral to its work. Trainees have mainly been ACORN members or potential members, although the courses were more widely advertised. Those who are involved in ACORN activities (half from the most recent course) have continued to be supported after training through ACORN’s ongoing work. Participants saw the trainings as an opportunity to step back and ‘see the whole picture’ and particularly valued the input on power mapping and strategy.

Reflections on being a Social Action Hub

The programme funding has been essential to ACORN's growth and development.

Apart from the funding, the value of being on the Programme to ACORN has been the impetus it provides to deliver formal training and to ensure this remains a priority, when there are many other demands on workers' time. Meeting the programme training targets has been a challenge but initial concerns about training content in the past have largely been resolved by extending the Introductory course. The theoretical discussions in the training are particularly useful for ACORN as well as the focus on listening.

The COEP was essentially funded as a training programme, although it aspired to meeting high level government aspirations around social action. However, a common message coming through all the Social Action Hubs was about the doing of community organising, not just talking about it. One hub based trainer commented that there

is learning that happens in the 'doing' that can't happen in the classroom – there is a need for reality based training and shadowing; another commented that the training needed to serve the social action, to complement the rest of their work and not to become an end in itself: 'tie training to the happening, not happening to the training'.

Social action is where you make the difference. It's not just delivering a course.

We haven't trained hundreds but I'm sure we have trained the perfect number for our capacity in providing the ultimate experience. We are well on target to ensure we train the 100 needed in 3 years but I believe the importance of balancing the training with the amount of support and action is a greater factor.

There is now a tension between wanting to let their actions lead and needing to deliver the workshop content

Yet, several Social Action Hubs have talked about how people are doing things differently, in the way that they now listen to others, don't 'do' for others and collectivise their approach to an issue. And whilst one hub suggests that it is hard to track

whether training leads to organising and another talks about the difficulties of finding the time for training and support and action, there are a number of examples that evidence a clear link:

People who have done the training are meeting to listen to users of the park. This listening work will help form a wider strategy for further park improvements.'

Following on from training ... volunteers have been part of a listening campaign. 'Our Cultural Community' project came from two local volunteers who noticed that racism locally was coming from a lack of understanding. The volunteer said 'I feel like I have some value to my community and to myself, over just being a mum, because we're doing something that's going to be important for so many people'. It's early days, but local people having the confidence to have difficult conversations about racism with their friends, family and neighbours is huge progress

I truly believe the training offered through the Social Action Hub has given the trainees the confidence and strength to push through all the barriers that came their way in getting the food project together.

There are numerous stories like these:

- X has formed a group, power mapped the issue, created a listening strategy, has over 1400 Facebook followers, and has collected 13,000 signatures on a petition around a local health issue
- Y went on an introductory course, learnt about the organising framework and got the motivation to use it. Concerned about

loneliness, Y went out door knocking with the Organiser, helped other isolated people make connections and has become a much more confident individual. Y talks about having 'a new sense of power' and has the confidence to connect people and bring them together to form a power base and lobby the council for improvements. Y has gone from being on benefits to a full time job as a health worker.

Training through partners

Community Organisers developed a training relationship with a range of organisations – individual local authorities, Keyring, Neighbourhood and Homewatch Network, National Association of Local Councils, to name a few. In addition, some of the hubs trained people recruited through partner organisations. In several cases, this training relationship has developed into a relationship based around organising, either through the adoption of new ways of working and / or through the employment of community organisers.

There is a potential tension between promotion and spreading the word through partners on the one hand and, on the other, ensuring that the

essential features of community organising are not diluted, particularly its focus on power. At the local authorities' round table, hosted by the Office for Civil Society, there were discussions about power between the individuals present, but there was also a sense that participants were talking about quite different approaches to work with communities. There is still much to learn about the suitability of the training in different institutions and settings, the extent to which the trainers are informed about the recruits' background and working context, about how the model can be used and embedded within these different settings and also how it can complement other approaches.

Social Action Hub case study: English for Action (EfA)

EfA was established in 2007, to bring English language teaching and social action together. The link between organising and pedagogy is central to the way EfA works, and it has had close links with Citizens UK. Language services are key, but the end goals are framed in terms of community organising and empowerment.

There have been two community organisers funded to deliver the COEP training since 2017, the first organiser left the organisation in 2018, and was replaced from November 2018.

Training and Action

The students came from very different backgrounds and were living with a range of issues connected to their legal status, housing, finances etc. A related complication was that students changed over time – unlike residents in a neighbourhood – so there was a relatively small window within which to get them involved in organising.

The main learning identified by the SAH was:

- People who have done the one-day training have gained skills and have been able to use the learning
- EfA learnt that having teachers on board was crucial if it was to have an ongoing relationship with its target group of students
- The best examples of impact were where teachers and students were both trained –going forward, these are the sorts of opportunities EfA will be looking for.
- It has been able to adapt the Community Organisers training materials to suit ESOL groups and this has also been of benefit more widely across the Community Organisers Expansion Programme.

Over 350 people have been through the one day training courses. Below are some examples of how training has informed action:

- The Community Organiser was able to link student learning to action through the national ‘Lift the Ban’ campaign. Students produced their own banners and joined demonstrations with other ESOL groups. Because the organiser met regularly with the group, the students began to really understand and use the language of organising – in the classroom and in other contexts.
- The training around power analysis helped students understand what’s possible. For example, it led to them registering voters prior to a general election at a local school.
- One of the training participants is now an active member of a local group. He set up two ESOL classes for parents in the area (and another resident has set up a child-care project to support the women attending these classes); and he has secured funding. The one-day training workshop was a catalyst for his involvement in a project that has community organising at its heart.

Reflections on being a Social Action Hub

The value of the programme was that it made community organising outcomes explicit, and so forced EfA to hold itself to account more in relation to organising.

The Community Organiser has been pleased to be part of the programme – she feels it has helped her grow, given her a different view of what’s possible, and has also added value to EfA and the scope to have more impact. EfA’s funding rarely covers community organising as well as teaching whereas COEP funding has enabled them to build in time for organising around the classes.

2.3 Membership and networks

Community Organisers has experimented with different ways of supporting and developing its membership over the three years of the Community Organisers Expansion Programme. This can be seen as a positive – it illustrates that the programme is adapting as it learns about what is and isn't working. For the first two years member organisers were appointed at a regional level to support regional and sub-regional groups. The Year 3 revised membership development strategy aimed to consolidate the existing membership and provide a push to greater action locally and nationally through Local Organising Groups. For Community Organisers, this allowed for a longer-term strategic view:

- Starting small and local in order to establish integrity, establishing connections, sharing skills and tools
- Building up from there, with more formal meetings and a more formal structure, identifying issues and commonalities across a wider area
- Moving into action.

This revised approach therefore provided support for local action oriented organising groups with at least 21 members who would design their own organising action plan and be independently constituted.

Local Organising Groups (LOG)

The groups established included: communities of interest, communities of identity, local residents' groups and 'infrastructure' groups supporting community action across a county. Some were associated with Social Action Hubs, others had had training or support through Community Organisers in the past, and for some it was their first significant involvement although they may have had some contact with a community organiser in the past. The nature of the issues they faced, the assets they had as a group and the activities they planned varied considerably from training to action (mutual support through to campaigning) to co-ordination and infrastructure support for professionals and activists.

In some cases the LOG system had encouraged a group to set up; in others it had allowed an

existing group to grow and develop. In one case, LOG funding had allowed a group to survive when its parent organisation shut down. Most felt that without the funding they wouldn't be where they are now.

Some questioned whether the application process and criteria were too formal, but most compared LOG funding favourably with other sources, being freer and more flexible. Some welcomed the opportunity the process gave them to reflect on their strategy; some felt that becoming a LOG gave them more credibility and recognition. In one case, it had allowed the group to access funding from elsewhere.

It is still early days for the LOGs but there are positive signs:

The grant is an amazing investment in talents and skills that are already there. Taking it to the next level and moving it on...

It represents an opportunity for growth.... We've got people who are proper community organisers not volunteers. ...They absolutely get all those words on the sheet of paper that is the [Community Organisers] framework.

[without the LOG] people's connections, friendships, projects would not happen. The core group are doing loads now – they wouldn't have got to know each other in this way.

Around half of the LOGs interviewed in March 2020 spoke about their involvement in, or a stated intention to move into, social change activities. Some also saw the potential for support in taking up local issues at a national level and valued the contact

and credibility that Community Organisers had with its funder, DCMS. Of course, events in March 2020 were shaped by COVID-19, and most of the LOGS found this shaped their immediate priorities (see Section 3).

The national network

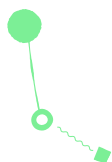
Those involved in community organising have ambitions to scale up from the local. Many members have seen the national network as an opportunity to further their knowledge and to connect as well as 'change a bit of our world'.

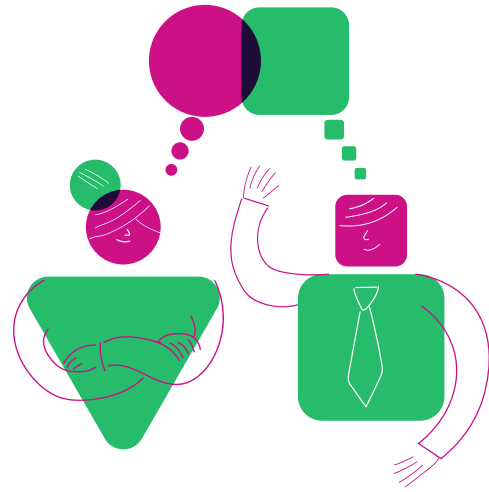
In November 2018, Social Action Hub leads discussed how to embed organising and were keen to see Community Organisers continue: 'we are mutually dependent'. They also saw the need to share resources between hubs and for visits/peer support and exchanges. In Spring 2020, community organisers were clear about the purpose and value of their national network and its accompanying support body, Community Organisers:

- the connections
- a community of practice to learn and continue to grow (described as a lifeline)
- the training for trainers in community organising
- the power of a network (rather than the power of individuals), creating greater capacity to lobby for change at a national level.

People talked about being part of something bigger than themselves which provided a sense of belonging and 'broadens the mind'. One Social Action Hub felt that although it operated differently from other hubs, the national network is 'a framework for all of us' and would like the national quality assured training offer to continue. Another commented:

There is value in the way we use organising here – being able to share that around the country and learn what others are doing. It feeds into a sense of solidarity, collecting ideas, providing mutual support learning from others about their approach to issues that you are facing.





3 Achievements and learning

A great deal has been achieved.

Programme participants (organisers, trainers, Social Action Hub leads) have been clear about the value of the Programme to local action. They felt that it had given Social Action Hubs an offer to sell as the go-to place for advice on community organising and social action. It 'put them on the map'. People also commented that community organising fitted with

their ethos and represented what they were about. Being a Social Action Hub provides an opportunity (and funding) to develop their work, to grow community organising and to train others, meaning that more people were able to take action on things they wanted to change.

Social Action Hub funding made social enterprise investment into organising ... possible, faster than it would otherwise have been.

For some Social Action Hubs it expanded their reach and allowed them to build the capacity of some pretty marginalised people:

Being a Social Action Hub gives us a real opportunity to help people to increase their personal power

Community Organisers provided a quality framework and its national, certificated training gave them credibility. Community organisers valued the opportunity to be part of a national network, to be part of something bigger as part of a like-minded community and the potential this offered to create power in numbers. Examples of achievements included:

- **Building momentum**, connecting people, with community leaders energised from the training and getting a sense of belonging from the network.
- **Mobilising people to campaign and take action** e.g. the ACORN campaigns have seen successful challenges to banks/landlords/ litter collection; in some areas, trainees themselves were now supporting others into social action.
- **Continuing engagement of people who have been on the courses**, with informal training and support.
- **More people using organising language**, linking organising to everything.
- **Increasing local profile**, other organisations coming on board, breaking barriers e.g. with local authorities
- **Securing more resources and working towards sustainability** – we know where we are going.
- **Broadening engagement**, e.g. with young people through the young people's organising training.

Stories of community organising from Stockport

WOW – What’s on in Woodley (Dave): Share information about what’s going on. Various community groups in Woodley came together to find ways to share information. Different groups and organisations involved e.g. Health Champions group, Starting Point, St Marks, Woodley Methodist Church, Arthur Greenwood

Period Boxes (Kath): Kerry and Laura listened to people in the coffee shop and found there was a need. People contributed by replacing what was used. Took action – made protection available and trying to understand who else can help e.g. schools. Challenging the tax on sanitary products e.g. asks people to contact the MP to make a stand against this. Have a free box in Start Point coffee shop.

Local Organising Group (Yasmin and Lois): Been on the community organising training courses and formed an organising group with clear and shared roles and responsibilities. They share ideas and feel they have found the right place for their skills and talents – national Community Organisers, learning together. They have a visioning workshop this Thursday.

Holiday Food Club (Terri): held conversations with the community, talking and listening. Identified a gap – the holidays present a challenge for low-income families – they are now running a holiday club in the school holidays – offering a hot meal and activities like cooking and cinema.

Men Matters (Winston and Liam): bringing men together and helping them to have a voice about their wellbeing. Men matters is a programme that runs over 4 weeks allowing men to get together, to socialise and speak about their own problems, learn something to help make a positive change for themselves and get a deeper understanding of personal care. It helps to make a difference re: moving to a positive mindset to want to change!

Ability to respond in time of crisis

Perhaps however, the biggest indicator of the value, and legacy, of the programme has been the nimble ability of Social Action Hubs and Local Organising Groups to respond to COVID-19.

Trained organisers and Social Action Hubs have been able to respond quickly and appropriately to community needs during the 2020 crisis. Even though most of the hubs existed as organisations

prior to COEP, there is evidence that the philosophy and the values, and the principles and practice, that community organising brought have facilitated their recent response. One organiser commented that the community organising work that had preceded the lockdown had established a strong platform and meant the community was primed and ready to respond:

It was kind of what they had been waiting for. And they were skilled enough to engage with it without it being ‘charity’...they are learning new skills right now in dealing with the crisis.

Responses to COVID-19

One Local Organising Group had already set up a social supermarket, primarily an affordable shop with a subsidiary food bank. This meant it was well placed to respond to the crisis before anyone else. The Group is filling the gap in the government's food parcels scheme and getting lots of support from supermarkets. It has also started doing deliveries. When lockdown started, the balance between the two functions of shop and foodbank changed dramatically, with considerably more demand on the foodbank, but this has now rebalanced.

A community organiser working with ESOL classes described how she needed to take time informing students about what was happening, incorporating that information into lessons, doing more casework. She is making lots of phone calls to see how people are. But people in the group are also checking up on each other, calling each other and will get in touch with the organiser if there is someone who needs further advice or help.

A Local Organising Group based on a cancer support group is supporting people who used to come to the drop-in and setting up a zoom drop-in.

In another area the Local Organising Group is now providing support with shopping and medications as well as calling people who may be socially isolated: There's a real sense of community – positive, but not Keep Calm and Carry On. A sense of: 'I'm not going to let that happen in my community.' Group members are arranging a point for food donations and pick up. The community organiser is working on a Day in Numbers – how many calls, how much shopping etc. 'People wait for it, they really love it.'

The community organising response depended on what else was happening locally. But several organisers compared their ability to respond with that of the local authority or even larger charities. They were often able to respond more quickly and flexibly, were often much more knowledgeable about their area and were trusted:

When the Council phone line went live, there was no call from any of the postcodes in [our] area. There must be a correlation. They knew there was someone local who could support them better.

Our Council people have just changed, so they don't know everyone, won't have diverse connections – they haven't got time to set that up.

Policies and processes get in the way... People trying to structure things that can't be structured in emergency responses.

Their established reputation meant that that they were the Go To place for residents needing information and other local organisations seeking to extend their reach. While lockdown was a challenge for a way of

working that relies on face to face connections, most adapted well to online working and they often found that they reached new people.

Online, we have reached people we wouldn't have reached with an event in the local Children's Centre. Our facebook analytics have gone through the roof.

Bringing people together

Working with others, community organisers in a Midlands town set up a Facebook group for people who were self isolating in theirs and the next town in mid March, to enable people to ask for help and offer help. Within one month it attracted 3,000 people and by week 12 of the lockdown (June 2020) it has 4,000 people.

However, they were also able to reach those who were digitally excluded, using arts, for example or refurbishing laptops.

Organisers built valuable connections not only among residents but across the local organisational landscape, offering peer support, identifying duplication, ensuring that responses were co-ordinated, sometimes mediating between different approaches. Prior relationships at this level had convinced partners of the need to work with community organisers but sometimes the crisis has encouraged other organisations to recognise the value that community organising brings and generated unexpected partnerships.

Networking across local agencies

One organiser was aware of a lot of big initiatives as lockdown began but there was also a lot of silo work going on, 'people doing the same thing 10 metres apart.' He brought together 30 organisations in one area of the city, all of whom were doing food distribution – but none of them knew about the others, even if they were just down the road. He also brought two community information organisations together to produce 5000 directories to put through people's doors with all the information about local groups. The team linked up with the children's centres, local housing officers and local groups to make sure those directories went to people without a computer.

Many community organisers are also very conscious of the need to prepare for the easing of lockdown, to 'pick up the pieces when it ends. New challenges will present themselves. The pressures on poorer communities are likely to increase as the country goes into recession. Organisers expect mental health to be a major issue:

We need to harness the goodwill that has appeared or else it could dissipate.

But there are opportunities too. The number of people involved in organising has increased significantly and communities are better connected, perhaps more willing to share their concerns. New relationships have been forged at an organisational level too and the reputation of organising has been enhanced in many areas. People at community and organisational level are asking for training in community organising to help them better connect with their local communities. Organisers are planning new listening campaigns to find out about the longer term impact of the pandemic; they are also planning to work with other local organisations

to learn the lessons of the crisis response. Some were hoping to make space for difficult conversations to address ongoing sources of community tension. Many saw an opportunity – even the necessity - for community organising to channel the pent-up frustrations and anger of lockdown and beyond into positive directions

For a more detailed account of responses to COVID-19, see *'Locally Rooted, the place of community Organising in times of crisis'*, M. Taylor and Mandy Wilson, 2020.

Learning

Community Organisers has adapted its models and approach as the programme has evolved, e.g. the organising framework and the membership development strategy. New Social Action Hubs have come on board as others have gone. The COEP has met its training targets and there are many examples of how communities have organised together to create change.

The journey hasn't always been straight forward – Community Organisers has worked with a number of tensions in delivering the Programme:

- Clarity so that everyone is pulling together - and evolution;
- Standardisation - and flexibility. Very different approaches and models of organising could sit (not always comfortably) and effectively contribute within the COEP;
- Numbers (of people trained) - and quality (of the training and follow up support);
- Training and action – the funding and targets of the Programme were clearly linked to training, but the training aimed to serve

longer-term action and the outcomes related to collective action and social change;

- Reality and pragmatism - and idealism and vision;
- Running a Programme - and building a democratic organisation;
- Broad promotion of community organising as a model – and retaining rather than diluting the integrity of the approach

So, when is flexibility to be welcomed and when is it important to have clarity about where the Community Organisers model begins and ends? How can the need to meet government targets on a quarterly basis be reconciled with responding to priorities on the ground? Community Organisers provided many opportunities (e.g. through whole programme residential gatherings, learning workshops and round tables) for those involved in the delivery of the Programme to come together to reflect on their practice and experience. These tensions were raised, discussed and debated. People didn't always agree but perhaps the strength of the model is its applicability to a wide range of settings and institutions.

Key learning points

1. The COEP had a rushed start, and was set up by a new organisation, so structures and processes needed to be evolved alongside the action over the first few months. Some of the Social Action Hubs through which the Programme was delivered were also fairly new, with few resources outside the Programme and very small staff teams.
2. Despite this, the COEP has done what it was funded to do, developing a robust training package and training a lot of people in community organising.
3. Its design of delivering through hubs helped to ensure that the training was locally embedded with opportunities to put learning into practice in a supported way. While a small number of hubs dropped out, others who had gravitated towards Community Organisers since the start of the Programme were keen to take their place.
4. It also provided much valued training to a wider range of organisations who saw an opportunity to enhance their work through community organising.
5. Its approach of listening, reaching out, and connecting people has built the capacity of residents to respond to a wide variety of local issues. This has been demonstrated most vividly in the COVID-19 crisis, where a history of organising and the trust this has created has allowed residents to take the lead.
6. It has established a strong reputation in localities where it operates and has helped to foster co-ordination and peer support
7. It has provided a framework for local action that can both harness initial energy and enthusiasm and build this in the long-term.
8. In some areas it has provided a strong foundation for community enterprise development.
9. Action has been locally rooted but the Programme has demonstrated the value of a national network as a way of sharing experience, addressing common issues and providing mutual support as well as spreading the message of community organising to other parts of the country (and internationally).

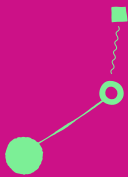
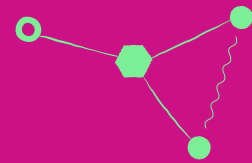
This Programme demonstrates the importance of:

- **Long-term investment** – resources that help to build for the good times as well as bad.
- **Devolution** – a light touch approach to allow organisers and local residents to take the lead
- **Mutuality** – residents don't necessarily see themselves as volunteers but it is an approach which allows the most vulnerable people to contribute

And the need to:

- **Link training to action**, so that each reinforces the other
- **Make space for informality** so that initial enthusiasm is not quashed
- **Avoid predetermining outcomes**, so that residents can determine the direction of the work

Finally, this report would be lacking if there was no mention of austerity and the impact of public spending cuts. Many of the hubs and partner organisations struggled with matching their vision for community organising with the resources available. Consequences include the squeezing out of support and action, people not always working to their strengths, a relatively low salary base for many of the organisers and increased likelihood of organisers moving on to other jobs (especially in Year 3).



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Registered charity number 1183487.