Sustaining Vibrant Communities

London Summit

Think-piece

June 2015

Headline Issues

- Much of the work of community organisations, social enterprises and the voluntary sector, often working in partnership with Local Authorities, is concentrated in areas of evidenced deprivation (IMD). Such areas involve high social and welfare costs funded through a shrinking public market. What resilience and self-help strategies are best suited to respond to the needs of poorer communities?

- Philanthropic input plays a major role in the support of good works – how can philanthropists play a more strategic role in long-term reduction in poverty and shrinking public services?

- An overarching issue underpinning Local Councils and community economies is devolution of fiscal powers from central government and fair positioning within public and private markets.

- This determines capacity of Councils and communities to manage their own local assets; housing; education; community health services; youth services; employment and economic development.

- Why is national and international competitive tendering seen as the preferred political choice over development of devolved community infrastructure and local public and private economies?

- Dismantling community-based public/private infrastructure and economies is both counter-productive and destructive. The ongoing public costs of failing communities, unless addressed, will result in higher social and future economic costs to the public economy.

- How can community sectors come together and use combined and cooperative strengths and scale to challenge unequal distribution of public investment in UK and European public markets?

- Is there scope for an independent and genuinely representative community body to build on the work of London Citizens and other existing local community organisations to bid competitively in the UK and Euro public market?

Example headline outcomes:

- A London Communities Commission - needs to be urgent and clear on demands
- Formation of a skeletal London Communities Cooperative – unified fundraising and individual contract management services.

Workshop Themes:

All themes should refer to concise evidence/data about particular issues within each of the sectors.

1. Resilient Communities

Resilient communities are built by active citizens who are prepared for social activism and participate within the local democratic framework; healthy communities are diverse and dynamic networks of people who share common human bonds and values; self-help means taking a civic or fiscal stake in determining and fixing local public and shared priorities.

- On the down side, there are a number of factors that contribute to the complex state of 'public health' or 'well-being' within a poorer districts or communities.
- Underpinning these is the level of social cohesion in communities where relative poverty dominates in a local population
- Well-being is founded on a complex of physical and mental, external and individual influences that impinge upon a person's state of health; well documented evidence has shown that unemployment is one of most corrosive influences on mental health; as are prescription dependence, sugar poisoning, smoking, and lack of exercise on physical health
- Fiscal democracy is the benchmark of a civil society and there is no reason why democratically accountable communities cannot be fiscally and partially or wholly responsible for local public services.
- 'Empowerment' is one of the key drivers in sustaining community building, where a community of local people become increasingly responsible for local assets, social cohesion and economic development
- There is of course not a 'one solution fits all' and there are numbers of different models of community empowerment, including Neighbourhood Planning groups, Parishes, Forums and social activists
- However, a critical inhibitor to local empowerment is the sharing of civic and fiscal powers by established public agencies and departments.
- The democratic deficit within communities with low numbers of people registering or casting a vote at local and national elections is a symptom of general disengagement from community life.

Example Outcomes:
- Development of public health/community partnerships.
- Community-building and local decision-making mechanisms to allow for meaningful community engagement and development.
- Community 'budgets' applied to improving public health outcomes.

- Community-based tendering arrangements through 'Anchor Frameworks' – community owned social enterprise
- Local volunteer 'socialisation' forces - Community Champions - Health, Employment, social facilities and activities

2. Affordable Housing

- Is London's community housing market being 'hollowed out' by inflationary demand from wealthy blow-ins and rest of world investors; and are LAs and developers acting in the local community and housing interest?

- Who defines affordability? Market? Local Authorities? Or established local community leadership?

- How can communities defend themselves against developers AND local authority planning consents?

- How can communities support LAs in fair not-for-profit community housing schemes?

- Is the privatisation of RSL property a coming trend? If so, how should this be resisted?

- What is the housing and social impact on places in outer London and outside London receiving expelled housing benefit capped residents from London

Example Outcomes:
- Develop a community housing policy – devolved housing management and local affordability
- Develop a London-wide community owned housing cooperative? (WECH model)
- Find a way forward to protect existing social housing and strengthen the influence of social housing tenants, ensuring rents remain affordable and that social housing cannot be sold off in the private market.
- Lobby for more fair rent legislation? Current privatised public rental levels are created by the 'market' not by citizens living in established communities
- Lobby for affordable rental caps for private social landlords

3. Jobs and Economic security

Despite the 'economic recovery' London's communities contain high numbers of workless populations. For example, In Westminster there are 11,500 long term unemployed people, many of whom have been through the Work Program yet remain 'workless'; as in the rest of UK hotspots, all live within the social housing or private social sector within or adjacent to communities with 'problematic' estates.

- Many employed people are under-paid by employers who rely on public working tax credits to meet minimum wage requirements.
- Youth unemployment is still fragile with long term prospects unaddressed other that through quasi-apprenticeship schemes
- The economy is supported by significant levels of free or cheap labour through intern, apprenticeship and volunteering 'schemes'.
- The economy has not 'grown', it has adjusted to cheaper labour rates and exploited off-shore tax benefits in order to maintain or increase profits that do not in themselves represent growth in economic prosperity for the general population.
- Support for new businesses is sparse both from government and banks

Key issues:

- Re-economising local communities
- Living wage
- In work poverty
- Employer engagement
- Youth employment
- Childcare
- Volunteering to work progressions
- Mental and physical health issues
- English language
- Individual capacity building and basic skills
- Confidence and esteem
- Etc.

Outcomes:
- Stability of community-based IAG employment services
- Training in life and social skills
- Relationships with local employers
- Intermediate Labour Markets schemes
- Youth employment schemes
- Job opportunities
- Small business support services - start-up and growth

4. Young people

- The generational importance of children to young adult flow demands budgetary stability and cutting edge opportunity building, particularly for poorer young people
- Despite this we know that non-statutory youth services are on everybody's cutting table. This is both short-sighted and counter-productive in terms of social and individual life costs.
- Early intervention from early years to youth is an obvious policy but is not being fully offered to numbers of poorer young people currently entering young adulthood.
- Young offenders require paths back into a 'straight' life – structured re-engagement in local communities

Plainly, there are real early intervention links between families with dysfunction, children and young people.

Early intervention serves two purposes:
- To identify children and families at risk of later social dysfunction, exclusion, and high public cost
- To provide an inclusive environment where young parents effectively socialise within the community thus strengthening social capital and future relationships producing a more stable life environment.

As reported, many younger people are experiencing 'mental health' issues that require one-on-one and group confidence/esteem activities on a regular basis.

Primary and secondary education is central to child/youth development and can be the catalyst for community-based out of school activities. However, continued housing benefit policy means that families are moved out of home communities and children are increasingly traveling long distances to schools.

Links to vocational progressions for students not progressing to HE are of critical importance to all communities, particularly NEET populations who 'disappear' from norms.

Enterprise and creative empowerment of Young People is essential to self-help strategies that could develop both individuals and as cooperatives within a 'sharing' economic context

Example Outcomes
- Clear policy imperative to arrest and reverse the trend of mental health issues among young people
- Community policy for stable budgets and investment into economic prospects for young people
- Early years intervention and development
- Community based youth hubs - activities, skills, counselling, career development etc.

- School/community partnerships to ensure synergy between each environment
- Ongoing relationship between local employers and young people