

GROWING COMMUNITY ORGANISING

Mandeep Hothi / May 2013

About The Young Foundation

We are The Young Foundation and we are determined to make positive social change happen. We pioneered the field of social innovation with The Open University, UpRising and Studio Schools. We work closely with individuals, communities and partners building relationships to ensure that our thinking does something, our actions matter and the changes we make together will continue to grow.

youngfoundation.org

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Author biography

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The views in the report are those of The Young Foundation and the author. Any omissions or mistakes are our own.

Related work

Realising Ambition. The Young Foundation is a member of the consortium appointed to manage Realising Ambition which is a £25 million Big Lottery Fund supported programme investing in projects which have been proven to help children and young people to fulfil their potential, and avoid pathways into crime. Over the next five years, the programme will replicate the best evidence-based practice, reaching over 140,000 8- to 14- year olds across the UK.

Tracking the Impact of the Cuts. In 2012 The Young Foundation conducted a piece of research for Camden council giving an insight into the impact of the cuts on some of the most vulnerable in Camden. In the Summer of 2013 we will be re-visiting those that we spent time with – to build understanding of, and share, their new realities. Our qualitative study will be implemented by an impact analysis, data-based exercise from the council – which, when combined, should build a rich picture of people's day-to-day lives in the borough.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We define community organising as “the process of supporting individuals to come together to improve their communities by putting pressure on institutions, businesses and governments to act. Community organisers work to identify local leaders, bring together local groups and develop campaigns and actions about local issues.”

For the past two years, as part of our Building Local Activism programme (supported by the Big Lottery Fund), The Young Foundation has been working with organisations working within the above spirit to grow community organising across England. We aimed to scale the work of Church Action on Poverty, Citizens UK and People Can into towns and cities they were not already operating in to enable more communities and people to get involved.

To do so, we provided £120,000 of grant funding for staff salaries, events, training, external affairs support and specialist evaluation support, alongside a bespoke package of venture support to clarify vision, identify routes to scale, diagnose issues and identify where capacity needed strengthening.

Our programme focused on growing **sustainable** models of community organising. This report brings together our learning and makes six key points for strengthening community organising in the UK:

- **It takes at least 18 months before you start seeing action.** Two key interrelated assets that take time to build – relationships and power – are vital for the community organising model. Community organisers will spend the first 18 months talking to people within local communities, institutions and agencies to understand self-interest and recruit members.
- **Funders need to be patient if they want to grow organising.** The participatory nature of community organising means that it is not possible to be certain of the outcomes that will be dictated by the priorities of local communities. This can make it difficult to define targets and agree on beneficiaries.
- **Membership dues are essential for sustainability.** Depending on the strength of civil society institutions in an area, membership fees – called ‘dues’ in organising terminology – could contribute up to two-thirds of the funding needed to sustain community organising, with the remainder met by grant-making trusts and foundations.
- **Distributed in the right way, grant funding could be extremely powerful.** If grant funders were to offer to match-fund money raised by local communities for community organising, risk could be shared with the community itself, helping to grow sustainable models of community organising.
- **Community organising requires a high-degree of local ownership.** It requires a civil society institutions to contribute to the cost of the organisation and local leaders willing to put the time and effort in to making community organising work.
- **Good governance and management are essential if you want to retain fidelity while scaling.** Rolling out successful models of community organising at a city or town level carries inherent risks to conformity towards the organising model. Deploying the model away from the heart of the organisation could weaken adherence to its methods and principles.

INTRODUCTION

For two years, The Young Foundation has been working with specialist organisations to grow community organising across England. Funded by the Big Lottery Fund (BIG), our aim was to scale the work of these organisations into towns and cities they were not already operating in, enabling more communities to be involved in community organising – a model of community work that was not widespread.

Our programme of work was conceived in 2010 as the coalition government came into power. The government made the growth of community organising a flagship goal of the Big Society and in 2011 the government's national Community Organisers programme began.

For the purposes of our work, we defined 'community organising' as:

“The process of supporting individuals to come together to improve their communities by putting pressure on institutions, businesses and governments to act. Community organisers work to identify local leaders, bring together local groups and develop campaigns and actions about local issues.”

Different organisations have differing views on what constitutes community organising. We made the decision not to enter this debate. Instead, we wanted to work with organisations that could demonstrate they worked within the spirit of our definition.

We began with an open recruitment process between April and June 2011. Through this we started to work with Church Action on Poverty, Citizens UK and People Can, and intended to grow organising in places such as Middlesbrough, Nottingham, Birmingham and Salford. Each organisation received £120,000 over two years, combined with a bespoke package of venture support to help them strengthen their model of organising and their business operations.

The national Community Organisers programme is about to enter its third year and the government's commitment to social action remains strong. This includes the recently announced Centre for Social Action, a collaboration between the Cabinet Office and NESTA to support the growth of volunteering and social action, as well as the Decade of Social Action, which aims to support a new generation of socially-responsible young people.

In this short report, we will provide an overview of the work that took place and share our learning about how to grow community organising. We hope that this informs future attempts to grow this distinct and powerful model of community work, as well as other forms of social action.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANISING?

The most familiar name associated with community organising is Saul Alinsky, author of the book 'Rules for Radicals'. Alinsky dedicated his life to organising low-income communities in the United States and is considered by many to be the founder of modern community organising. His work to tackle powerlessness in poorer communities has influenced the development of different models of community organising across the globe for the past 50 years.

The ideas of Saul Alinsky are often compared to those of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator whose work has made significant contributions to community organising practice. In 1968, Freire wrote 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. In it, he outlined his methods which focus on raising an individual's awareness of their own oppression and increasing their capacity to change things.

The approach of two of the organisations involved in this programme – Church Action on Poverty and Citizens UK – is more aligned to Saul Alinsky.

In this model, the job of a community organiser is to build powerful, community-led organisations. They do this by recruiting members, finding and developing leaders, identifying issues and working with members to take action. Members often come from faith groups, trade unions, schools, universities and the voluntary and community sector. Community organisers also work with their members to fundraise, which often includes the collection of membership fees, which are called 'dues'.

There are some fundamental principles that permeate through different models of community organising. Three of the most important principles are¹:

Never do for others what they can do for themselves.

Understand self-interest. To get people to act upon issues, you need this understanding. What is in it for them in the broadest sense?

The importance of relationships. Perhaps the most important resources in organising are the relationships that are developed within and between leaders, organisations and those in power. These need to be based upon trust and mutual interest. This is done primarily through face-to-face meetings – what organisers call 'one-to-ones'.

These principles, when combined with the activities of community organisers and local leaders, help to build powerful community organisations. Once they become powerful, communities can embark on a series of activities to try to get local issues on the agenda of those in power. These activities may include listening campaigns, where large numbers of residents are consulted on local issues, direct action on local issues, or long-term campaigns to tackle deeper problems.

¹ Organizing for Social Change, Midwest Academy Manual for Activists. Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall and Steve Maax

Organisations also hold annual assemblies, where members reaffirm their commitment to the alliance they have created, publicly contribute their dues and reflect upon the year's activities. Assemblies are also forums for communities to negotiate directly with those in power, who are invited to hear the testimonies and demands of people experiencing particular social issues. Organisers and local leaders put significant effort into getting local residents to attend; larger numbers mean an increased sense of community power and real influence. As a consequence, attendance at assemblies is often high, dwarfing other public meetings in comparison.

The third organisation we worked with, People Can, went into administration in November 2012 due to a pension fund deficit.² People Can's work drew more on the traditions of Paulo Freire, as well as those that emerged from the field of asset based community development, which emphasises the need to use the strengths within a community as a basis for change.

Given that People Can went into administration before this project was completed, the learning in this report is focused on what emerged from the Alinsky-style organising of Church Action on Poverty and Citizens UK.

THE POLICY CONTEXT

Our programme to grow community organising was developed when the concept of the Big Society was first forming. In 2010, under the banner of the Big Society, the government signalled its intention to develop a national Community Organisers programme. The programme was launched in 2011.

The design of our programme was influenced by this context in two ways.

Firstly, cuts to public finances posed a clear threat to community empowerment programmes, which were largely funded by central or local government. In the absence of state funding, we wanted to explore whether a different kind of community work could take hold – one that offered communities greater freedom to set their agenda and employ different tactics to achieve change, such as campaigning. We felt that this would also increase community resilience: the ability for a community to overcome the setbacks it faces by taking collective action.

Secondly, we felt that if government policy was to lead to a growth in community organising, communities needed a choice of different approaches and models. To create this 'market', we identified the need to help organisations that currently delivered organising to grow their work and strengthen their business, so that they were better able to deliver at scale.

The national Community Organisers programme was just one of a number of government initiatives designed to achieve one of the Big Society's main aims –promoting social action. These include:

- **National Citizen Service.** A voluntary programme of national service for 16- and 17-year-olds

² More information about the circumstances that forced People Can into administration can be found at: www.thirdsector.net/Finance/article/1162496/Analysis-People-forced-administration-liabilities-past/?HAYILC=RELATED

- **Community First.** An £80 million fund, administered by the Community Development Foundation, that helps communities identify their strengths and local priorities in order to plan for their future and become more resilient
- **Centre for Social Action.** A two-year £36 million programme, launched in April 2013, to support organisations that want to mobilise people to take part in social action

While the government continues to promote the growth of social action, the language of the Big Society has gradually faded and it is not listed as an explicit policy on the [new government website](#).

THE ORGANISATIONS

We started this programme working with three organisations: Church Action on Poverty, Citizens UK and People Can.

Church Action on Poverty (CAP)

CAP is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity committed to tackling poverty in the UK. It works in partnership with churches and with people in poverty themselves to find solutions locally, nationally and globally. CAP does not promote faith through its charitable work.

For over six years, CAP has convened the Powered by People network (formerly called Changemakers), a network of Alinsky-style community organising initiatives across England and Wales. When we began working with CAP in 2011, it had established Thrive in Stockton-on-Tees and Changemakers Manchester – each an independent coalition of local faith- and community-based organisations, as well as individuals. The growth of this work has been sustained through grant funding and CAP does not operate a model of community organising that requires members to pay dues.

CAP has been helped in its work by the Gamaliel Foundation, one of the largest community organising networks in the USA. CAP has drawn upon the Foundation's professional support, particularly in developing and mentoring staff and in sharing experience of building large, diverse organisations.

Citizens UK

Registered in 1989, Citizens UK's charitable objective is 'to build the capacity of socially and economically disadvantaged people of Britain and Ireland to participate in public life and to strengthen the institutions from which they come'.

Citizens UK works by building relationships within and among communities, bringing people together around their common interests and making change through action. This is done by forming membership based alliances of value-led grassroots organisations. Citizens UK's model of community organising is based on local institutions paying membership dues. In 2012, Citizens UK raised 25 per cent of its funding through dues.

Citizens UK has trained over 3,000 people in community organising over the last 23 years. It employs over 25 professional, full-time community organisers in the UK's first Guild of Community Organisers. Together, these organisers have a collective experience of over 70 years in training people in their curriculum and method. This curriculum and method is 'broad-based community organising', following the tradition of Saul Alinsky but adapted and refined to the contemporary British urban context over the last 23 years of practical implementation.

When our programme started in 2011, Citizens UK was established in London, Milton Keynes and worked with diaspora communities across the UK.

People Can

People Can, formerly the Novas Scarman Group, was a charity that supported various low-income communities and vulnerable groups across the country. Its services included support to individuals that have experienced homelessness, domestic violence and services to rehabilitate ex-offenders. People Can also worked with communities in Cardiff and Brighton through its Communities Can Do programme, a model of asset based community development.

Our work with People Can was to scale its Communities Can Do programme through the charities network of hostels. This involved work with highly marginalised groups, such as the homeless and ex-offenders, with People Can's model emphasising working with each group's strengths in order to improve their voice within their localities.

The demise of People Can in November 2012, due to significant pension liabilities dating back to its time as a registered social landlord, put a halt to all of this work.

WHAT WE DID

For the past two years, we have supported CAP and Citizens UK to grow their operations into new geographical areas. In 2011, Citizens UK began work in Nottingham and Birmingham, while CAP started to work in Middlesbrough and Salford. These were places where both organisations had done some preliminary work to assess the viability of community organising, including whether local leaders were willing to support each organisation operating in their locality.

The two organisations have adopted different approaches to growing their community organising work. Citizens UK has formed new alliances – Nottingham Citizens and Birmingham Citizens – which will formally launch by the summer of 2013 with public assemblies. These events often attract hundreds of people from local institutions, pledging to support the work of the alliance.

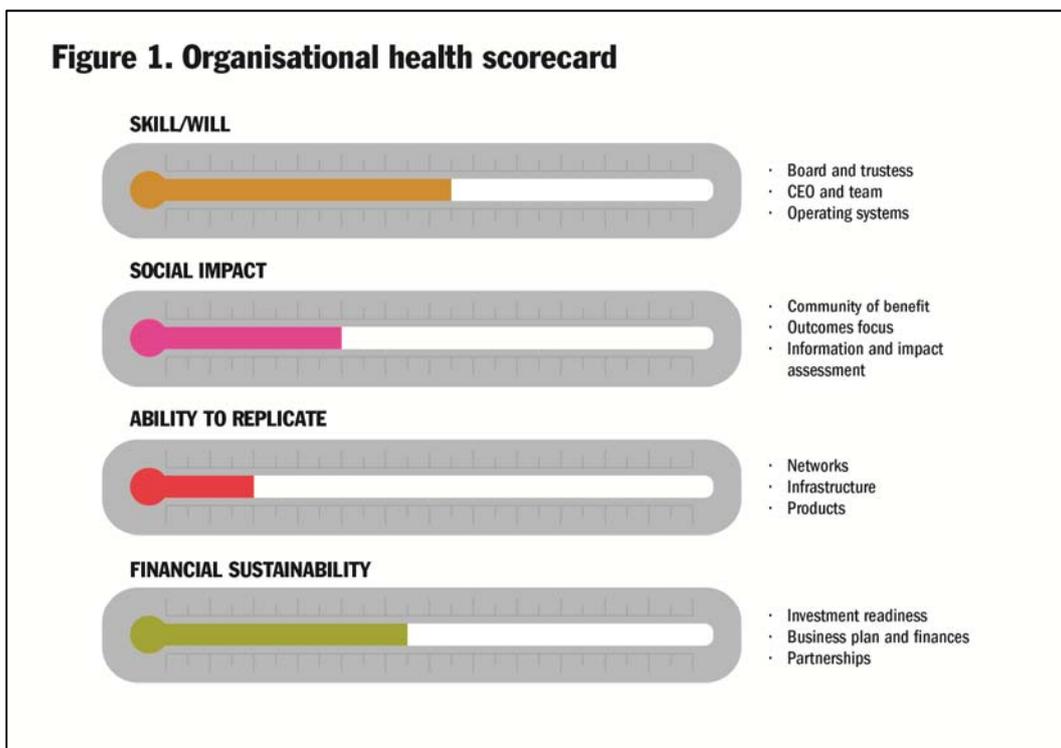
Instead of setting up new groups, CAP's approach to scaling has been to merge their work in their new target communities with their existing community organising groups operating in nearby geographical areas. Residents in Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees have joined together to form Thrive Teesside, while residents of Manchester and Salford have combined forces as Thrive Greater Manchester.

Both organisations received £120,000 of grant funding from us to help them scale. This funding was used to cover costs such as staff salaries, events, training, external affairs support and specialist evaluation support.

In addition, each organisation received a bespoke package of venture support from The Young Foundation. To design this package of support, we worked with staff and trustees of each organisation to clarify their vision, identify their route to scale, diagnose any issues and identify where they needed to strengthen their capacity.

To support this process we used a number of venture support tools:

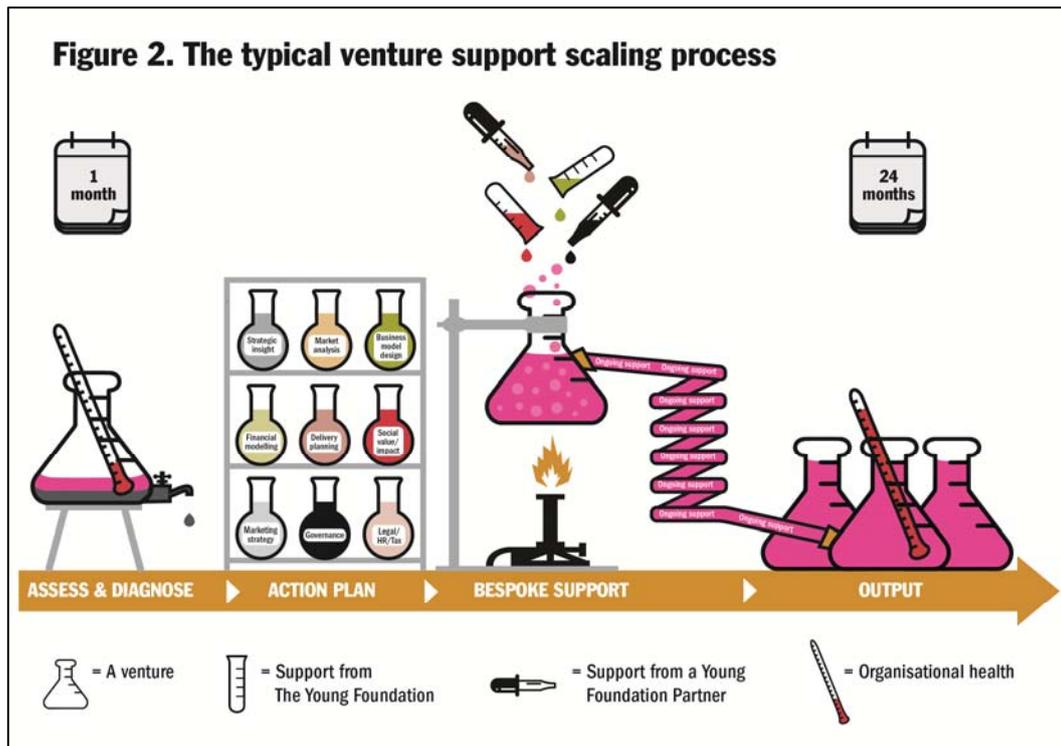
- We diagnosed their strengths and weakness through our **Organisational Health Scorecard (figure 1)**. The scorecard allowed us to assess their capacity across a range of indicators, including: the skill and will of their staff team, social impact, financial sustainability and their scalability.



- The mission, social change model and vision were identified through Theory of Change workshops.
- Each organisation's business model was mapped using our **Social Business Model Canvass**.
- For CAP, we developed a **Replication Framework**, which helped it to redefine its approach to setting up work in new areas; instead of scaling as an organisation, CAP would support others to replicate the community organising approach in their locality.

These tools helped us to develop scaling plans for each organisation (Figure 2). Over the two years, this support included:

- Strategic insight
- Market insight
- Business model design
- Financial modelling
- Delivery planning
- Social value and impact insight
- Marketing strategy
- Governance
- Legal/HR/tax



THE LOCAL WORK

Community organisers identify local leaders and support them to come together and take action on the issues that matter to their communities. This is a process that takes time. Organising – like other forms of community work – is likely to yield results in the medium to long term, rather than the short term.

Although this programme began in April 2011, the work in local communities did not begin in earnest until January 2012. Nevertheless, during the 18 months of organising work that we have supported, we have seen some remarkable results.

Nottingham Citizens

“The leadership development for me has been huge. I remember our first actions where I was scared to chair a meeting, now I chair everything. I have gone from thinking that I can’t do this to controlling meetings at the Home Office and chairing instead of others. I am not fazed anymore by those in power.”

A local leader and member of Nottingham Citizens

Nottingham has a population of over 300,000, which includes large numbers of young people at the city’s two universities. Poverty is spread disproportionately across the city, with some neighbourhoods much poorer than others. Citizens UK was asked to explore the feasibility of community organising in the city by local leaders who were interested in community organising. These leaders felt that the city’s mechanisms for involving communities in decision-making were not effective enough. They wanted something that would exist independently of the local public and voluntary sectors that allowed communities to define their own agenda and take action.

Citizens UK employed one community organiser in Nottingham, whose work was overseen by a steering group comprising of local leaders. During the course of this programme, the organiser has conducted one-to-ones with over 900 local residents, leaders and workers. Nearly 150 of these have undertaken community organising training and many have grown into leaders that develop actions and campaigns, including actions to address the suffering of asylum seekers in the city.

In addition, over 32 institutions have pledged to pay annually into the alliance (their ‘dues’) when it launches in April 2013 with an assembly that is likely to attract over 1,000 people. These financial pledges amount to £37,500 per financial year, in addition to the £29,000 seed money raised from local institutions.

Nottingham Citizens and the Police and Crime Commissioner

Nationally, the 2011 Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections didn’t excite the electorate; only 15.1 per cent voted. The elections were widely maligned, but Nottingham Citizens saw it as an important opportunity for local people to influence services that affected their quality of life. Organisers talked to local residents representing a cross-section of the city’s communities to find out what their priorities for action were.

On 12 November 2012, over 40 local leaders – all trained through Nottingham Citizens – managed to convene 1,045 people into a one venue to present their agenda to prospective PCCs. Victims of crime and police mistreatment gave powerful testimonies and a series of demands were made of candidates, most of which they supported.

On 15 November 2012, citizens in 41 constituencies across the country went to the ballot box to elect their PCCs. Out of these, Nottinghamshire had the sixth highest turnout. In January 2013, 38 local leaders met with the newly elected PCC, to plan how they would take forward their commitments.

Citizens UK Birmingham

“This process puts people at the heart of the issue. Together these people can have an impact; we need their involvement at a grass roots level.”

A local leader and supporter of Citizens UK Birmingham

Birmingham is a city with a population of over one million people. As with Nottingham, Citizens UK was asked by local leaders to explore the feasibility of community organising in the city. Some of these leaders were frustrated by failed regeneration schemes and felt that local communities lacked the ability to voice their concerns and influence local decisions. Others felt that the city had strong neighbourhood forums as well as significant levels of community activism, but that it needed to be better joined up and coordinated.

In February 2012, local leaders held an assembly to announce the work of Citizens UK Birmingham. Attendees shared their aspirations for the alliance and discussed local priorities. In March, a community organiser was appointed. Since then he has held over 250 one-to-ones across the city and delivered community organising training to 50 people. Citizens UK Birmingham has started to work on some issues raised, including housing.

In October 2012, an advisory panel was formed to help build Citizens UK Birmingham and over 20 institutions have expressed a strong desire to join and contribute to the new alliance, which was launched at a founding assembly in April 2013.

Citizens UK Birmingham has raised £13,500 in seed funding from local institutions and aims to raise £60,000 per year from local institutions in dues.

The Citizens UK Birmingham Pre-Founding Assembly

In November 2012, Citizens UK held a pre-founding assembly in the city centre. Over 130 people attended and heard from some of the city’s most prominent civil society leaders, who declared their position on the Advisory Group of Citizens UK Birmingham. These included leaders from faith communities, local schools and trade unions. One by one, they shared their personal stories and approach to social justice, while pledging to help grow Citizens UK Birmingham.

Thrive Teesside

“I had thought that we needed to work in the wider community without being afraid of treading on peoples toes or upsetting people. But we need to tread on toes.”

Participant on Thrive Community Organising training

CAP has worked in Thornaby, Stockton-on-Tees, since 2004. In 2007 CAP set up Thrive, which has gone onto become an award-winning organisation. Thrive aims to get the voice of people on the margins of society directly to decision-makers and trigger real transformative change in the area.

The decision to scale CAP’s work in nearby Middlesbrough was straightforward. Community organising had attracted the attention of some of the city’s existing and aspiring civic leaders

who wanted to work together to tackle poverty in the town and region. As work progressed, the original plan to setup a new alliance in Middlesbrough changed. Instead, residents from Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees chose to unite under the banner of Thrive Teesside.

In October 2012, Thrive Teesside's leaders came together to agree a shared agenda going forward. This including tackling the problem of rogue landlords in the private housing market, improving conditions in asylum seeker accommodation, and tackling high-interest and predatory lenders. Actions to address these issues are now being developed by local leaders.

Thrive Teesside's Inaugural Assembly

In November 2012, over 100 residents from Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees came together for Thrive Teesside's first annual assembly. Issues such as asylum seeker accommodation, doorstep lenders and private landlords were presented by residents who were actually experiencing the problems. These powerful testimonies were given directly to decision-makers in the room, including representatives from the UK Border Agency and Middlesbrough Council.

The meeting was chaired by local leaders, who were successful in securing some commitments from the decision-makers attending. These included the council's housing department agreeing to work with Thrive Teesside to better target its enforcement of environmental health standards in the private rented sector. The UK Border Agency agreed to investigate poor quality housing for asylum seekers and a rent-to-own company agreed to fund some work that could see those who are using its services gain recognition for their repayments in their credit rating.

Thrive Greater Manchester

"We want to work together. We will bring different communities together. We want to work across all the different areas in Greater Manchester. If we all work together and lobby our MPs on the same issue they will have to listen to us. As a group we have strength, but as an individual no-one will listen to you. Together we can all do something and make changes."

Voluntary sector worker and member of Thrive Greater Manchester

CAP's community organising work in Greater Manchester has followed a similar path to the work in Teesside. Community organising had been taking place in Manchester since 2004, through an organisation called Changemakers Manchester.

This programme gave CAP the opportunity to branch out into Salford. Early work included action with Somali parents to address the high rates of school exclusion among their children.

In December 2012, 28 institutions from the two cities decided to join forces and agreed that their organisation would be called Thrive Greater Manchester. Together, they developed a shared agenda that included taking action on the poor state of private housing, asylum seeker housing and improving the services of Job Centre Plus.

Thrive Greater Manchester: The Frierian School of Participation

Recognising that the methods of Saul Alinsky-inspired community organising do not appeal to everyone, Thrive Greater Manchester ran a Frierian School of Participation. Schools of Participation are spaces where individuals can come together, reflect upon their experiences, recognise their strengths, develop skills and take actions on the issues that matter to them and their communities.

Eight people from across Greater Manchester participated in the School, including two ex-offenders, one homeless person and Somali parents whose children had been excluded from school. Through the School, participants gained confidence in their ability to affect change and are currently working together on issues such as employability and housing.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Our programme focused on growing *sustainable* models of community organising. This meant that we needed to work with organisations that were not only good at what they did, but also operated a model of community organising that was capable of working without substantial amounts of state or grant funding.

In this section, we reflect on what we've learned about scaling a sustainable model of community organising, in the hope that it will support its growth in the future and provide useful insight for scaling other forms of social action.

It takes at least 18 months before you start seeing action

The community organising model relies upon two key interrelated assets that take time to build: relationships and power. During the first 18 months, community organisers will spend most of their time talking to people within local communities, institutions and agencies in order to understand their self-interest and recruit members to the community organisation they are developing. They will also spend time identifying and training leaders within the community.

While this sounds straightforward, organisers often have to navigate complex local dynamics, including local politics. They need to be able to build trust in order to convince people from different backgrounds to come together in a new organisation, and *pay for it* too. We found that across the four localities this programme operated in, around 30 per cent of people that community organisers engaged with went on to be involved in some form of social action.

In the community organising model, it is the abundance of strong, trusting relationships that creates and sustains power within communities. The model also stresses that communities should not engage in social action until they feel powerful and confident that they can negotiate on an equal standing. This means that some of the more visible outcomes associated with community organising – actions that are associated with exercising power such as a local campaign – are unlikely to emerge within the first 18 months. Ultimately, how much time it takes needs to be dictated by the community.

Funders need to be patient if they want to grow organising

The participatory nature of community organising means that it is not possible to be certain about the outcomes, as these will be dictated by the priorities of local communities. This also makes it difficult to define targets for funded organisations and to agree on who is defined as a beneficiary.

Given that organising is about communities gaining and sustaining power, many of these outcomes are likely to be realised beyond the lifetime of most grant-funded programmes. For example, we fully expect that the impact of organising in Nottingham, Birmingham, Greater Manchester and Teesside will not occur until after The Young Foundation's funding and involvement has ended.

Funders, especially those new to community organising, need to set realistic expectations. We believe that it is unlikely that social action funding programmes that last for less than two years will be successful in growing community organising. If constraints dictate that funding programmes need to be for shorter periods of time, funders should lower their expectations and set realistic goals for the communities they fund, particularly if success is measured on the volume of people involved in social action.

Membership dues are essential for sustainability

Depending on the strength of an area's civil society institutions, we believe that membership dues could contribute up to two-thirds of the funding needed to sustain community organising, with the remainder met by grant-making trusts and foundations.

There are three reasons why this makes community organising one of the more sustainable models for increasing social action:

- It significantly reduces dependency on grant or government funding.
- It means that members have significant ownership over finances and fundraising, are more invested in its success and take on more responsibility for generating future income.
- It reduced risk associated with unexpected changes in government policy, or changes to the priorities of trusts and foundation.

The only organisation that operated a membership dues model in our programme was Citizens UK. During the 18 months we worked with Citizens UK in Nottingham and Birmingham, it was able to raise pledges of £37,500 in membership dues, as well as £42,500 in seed money from local institutions.

Distributed in the right way, grant funding could be extremely powerful

Grant funding could be a potent mechanism for growing sustainable models of community organising. Grant funders could offer to match-fund money raised by local communities. This would be a powerful way of sharing the risk of growing community organising with the community itself, as well as unlocking latent community giving.

This approach was demonstrated in Nottingham. We contributed funding of £27,500 towards the cost of a community organiser, which unlocked a further £66,500 of funding from within the local community in the first year alone. If the organisation remains stable, it

will continue to raise £37,500 in membership dues from the local community every year – all because of the initial grant funding of £27,500.

Community organising requires a high-degree of local ownership

Community organising requires a high degree of local ownership, which can be measured by two tests:

- Are civil society institutions willing to contribute money towards the costs of organising?
- Are there local leaders who are willing to put the time and effort in to make organising work?

These are tough tests. If the answer to both of these questions for a particular locality is no, then it is unlikely that community organising will be sustainable or effective in the long term.

There are various reasons for failing these tests. The model depends on there being a sufficient concentration of civil society institutions in an area. If there are not enough institutions, a community organiser will not have a large enough pool from which to recruit members to help build a new organisation. The existence of a sufficient number of institutions is still not enough; these institutions need to have leaders that have the capability, or potential, to mobilise people. These institutions also need to be able to contribute financially to the new organisation.

To avoid such scenarios, Church Action on Poverty and Citizens UK conduct scoping work before they begin work in new areas. During this scoping – which is usually unfunded – senior organisers will spend time talking to leaders and institutions to assess the viability of organising. This process determines whether they invest more time and resources into getting community organising up and running.

All this leads to difficult decisions. On the one hand, communities in areas where civil society is weak are likely to be some of the most powerless and therefore in most need of community organising. However, they are also unlikely to be able to achieve results through organising and would almost certainly be totally reliant on grant funding.

In areas where community organising is not viable, other forms of community work may be more appropriate. For faith organisations, this could involve congregational development work. For other civil society organisations, community development might be more effective. These are still likely to be grant funded, but with different expectations as to what will be achieved in the timescales.

Good governance and management are essential if you want to retain fidelity while scaling

Both of the organisations we worked with are national organisations rolling out successful models of community organising at the local (city or town) level. This model carries inherent risks to the fidelity of the organising model. Adherence to the methods and principles of community organising may weaken when it is deployed further away from the heart of the organisation.

This can happen for a multitude of reasons, including the distance between the community organising agency and areas it is organising in, insufficient management supervision, and a lack of opportunities for training and mentoring by experienced organisers.

The practice of national organisations setting up local social action projects or branches has the potential to cause other tensions. Local communities may want to amend the model according to their own preferences, or local priorities for action may differ to those of the national organisation. This tension existed in some of our local work, but not all. In those localities where it was avoided, it was because of a mutually reinforcing and beneficial relationship between the local and national organisations. This manifested itself in two ways: the local organisation benefited from the resources that the national organisation provided, most notably the ability to amplify their local voice at the national level, and the national organisation benefited from being more connected to real leaders in local communities.

While there is always a possibility that tensions such as these may materialise, they can be mitigated against with good governance arrangements. If independent local organisations are created, their relationship with the national organisation needs to be explicitly agreed. Local organisations need to be clear what services the national organisation is going to provide, while the national organisation needs to retain quality assurance over delivery to ensure that its model is not corrupted.

CONCLUSION

As some of the more traditional methods of community work – such as community development – struggle to find state or grant funding, community organising offers something different for residents in cities, towns and villages across the country.

It is not a model that will work everywhere. But where it does, it offers communities the chance to build a truly independent and largely self-sustaining power base from which they can take action to improve their quality of life.

There are a number of ways to try to grow community organising. Our approach was to work with those organisations that had a track record, combined with the skill and will to grow. We contributed funding towards their organisers on the ground, and created a bespoke package of support around their needs as social ventures. This approach was useful in that it helped the organisations develop and refine their own approach to scaling or replicating community organising.

We believe our work has revealed some key learning for those that want to support the growth of organising in the future. For funders, the community organising model has a distinct advantage over other forms of community empowerment work: communities must be able to cover some of the costs themselves. This means that funders can use mechanisms such as match funding to unlock a community's latent capacity for social action.

But a commitment to growing community organising is a long-term one. The results do not materialise immediately: 18 months should be the benchmark in areas with higher capacity. We funded organising for less than two years and had to accept that much of the more visible work – such as campaigns and large public assemblies – would occur once our involvement had ended. But we did so in the knowledge that, if the organisations we were supporting could get organising off the ground, local communities could benefit for decades to come.