Dear Reader

To the best of my knowledge there is no Chinese proverb or curse wishing you to live in exciting times, but do let me know if you come across one. I do not wish to make light of the problems most of our supporters are expecting or are already experiencing due to the changes in the funding environment, yet I am wondering whether this might be the time when the direction we have been heading in is changing.

To put it bluntly, there was a myth that if only we could produce good evidence politicians and funders would listen and funding would go to the right causes in the right way. For decades therefore we have tried to ask the questions that would help to find that evidence. To make sure I got my facts right I dug out an ARVAC publication about a meeting at the Home Office discussing questions of 'Policy and Practice' researching voluntary and community action. The meeting was held 20 years ago almost to the day on the 13th November 1990.

However, after all the efforts community organisations put in to provide evidence for others, such evidence was routinely ignored.

Some may argue that in today's funding environment it might be even more important to produce even better evidence to make a case to authorities and funders. Based on what we saw over the last two decades I would argue this is not the case.

How then, if the picture is so bleak, can I write about an 'ode to joy' as I do on page 4.

The reason is that many of us will now be forced to take control of our work and destiny in a way not seen for decades. In the UK Bob Holman is often quoted as an inspirational example of how this can be done. I have chosen to write about someone from China, who few people will have heard of. Yet both show the way and both their paths exemplify that the road never ends. It might get easier or more difficult yet the work we do cannot be concluded.

Now that we need to take control again, can we afford to spend time and energy on research?

I don't know whether the governing commit-

tees, volunteers and staff of hard pressed organisations feel they can. I do know though that they should now be free again to only answer the questions they really need answers to. If they want these questions answered in a sensible way I speculate that they might not need management consultants to tell them how to make savings through mergers. They have, if they need them, the tools to answer those questions themselves.

On the currently very rocky road ARVAC is their companion, bringing together those who have questions and those who might be able to help answer them.

I would like to thank the contributors to this bulletin for being on this journey with us.

If you travel in China your friends will wish you a level and peaceful road, meaning a safe journey, and I wish this to all of you.

Jurgen Grotz
(editor)

Sarah Pearson

Involving Residents in Regeneration - evidence from the New Deal for Communities Programme

The New Deal for Communities (NDC) Programme is one of the most important area-based initiatives ever launched in England. Its primary purpose is to 'reduce the gaps between some of the poorest neighbourhoods and the rest of the country.[1] Thirty nine local partnerships were awarded grants of approximately £53m with which to transform their neighbourhoods over a ten year period. The funding period for the 17 Round One Partnerships ended in March 2010; 22 Round Two schemes will draw to a close in March 2011.

The NDC Programme has a strong focus on resident involvement. There has been substantial investment in activities designed to enhance local capacity and encourage participation in NDC neighbourhoods. Nearly 20 per cent of Programme funding (excluding management and administration budgets) was spent under the community 'outcome', equating to almost £250m between 1999-00 and 2007-8.

The NDC Programme was evaluated over an eight year period [2] and provides rich evidence on the impact of resident involvement in regeneration programmes and the degree to which participation is associated with improvements in wellbeing at the neighbourhood level.

NDC Partnerships have employed an array of approaches to encouraging participation. Much of this work has been innovative, and the sustained commitment to resident involvement is a key achievement of the Programme. Findings from the evaluation provide useful principles for successful engagement:

- the need for clear strategy and expectations, as some NDC Partnerships were bedevilled in the early stages of the Programme by conflicting opinions around the scope, and limitations, of resident influence;

- the need for resources and leadership - but also for the community engagement ethos to be embedded throughout the organisation;

- the need for support for residents and for building connections to existing networks and infrastructure.

They also highlight the importance of involving local residents in succession planning and the need for the development of the capacity of local residents to continue to influence decisions affecting their local area.

There is clear evidence that resident involvement has impacted on the delivery of the NDC Programme, and there are many examples of projects which have responded to residents' concerns and where projects and facilities have been adapted to take account of the residents' views on 'what works' in their neighbourhood. In the main this influence has been positive, and when statistical modelling was undertaken to identify the factors associated with more positive change in NDC areas, higher levels of resident involvement emerged as a key factor.[3] But it is also true that in some cases residents' priorities have not been supported by robust evidence. Perhaps the key lesson here is that successful partnership working between residents and agencies requires parity of influence: residents (and professionals) can sometimes be 'wrong'.

[1] DETR (2001) New Deal for Communities: Financial Guidance

[2] The final evaluation (published in seven volumes) can be found at http://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/ndc_reports_02.htm)

[3] See CLG (2010) New Deal for Communities National Evaluation Final Report Volume Five: Exploring and Explaining Change in Regeneration Schemes: Evidence from the New

There is no doubt too that the NDC Programme has exposed professionals to the problems experienced by those living in deprived communities. There are many examples of NDC sponsored initiatives being adopted by mainstream agencies, and of different ways of working that have been trialled in NDC areas and subsequently rolled out across other communities. The critical issue here of course is how much of this collaboration has been driven by the availability of resources and how much will be sustained in the absence of NDC budgets and within the context of constrained public finances. Opinions are divided: some NDC Partnerships fear that successor vehicles will struggle to maintain influence when there is no £50m 'carrot' to attract agency involvement; others see a post-NDC world as an opportunity for residents to influence service agencies without the complication of programme delivery.

We also know that involvement is associated with improved outcomes for individuals. Those who have been involved on a voluntary basis in the running of the Programme identified a variety of positive impacts on their own lives, including knowing more people in the area, increased confidence and improved work-related skills. They were also (compared with the resident population as a whole) more likely to be satisfied with the local area, think it had improved, and feel part of their local community. And on a wider scale, residents who had been involved in more informal ways in NDC-sponsored or organised activities were also more positive about their communities than those who had not.

So for individuals, agencies, and the NDC Programme the emphasis on resident involvement has, by and large, been a good thing. But evidence around impact at the neighbourhood level is more equivocal. Although the numbers of residents involved in voluntary activity in NDC areas have increased over time, they have remained small: in 2008 only 17 per cent of NDC residents had been involved in NDC-related activities in the previous two-year period. It is still the case that participation

rates in NDC neighbourhoods are lower than those across England as a whole and, perhaps more crucially, little different to those in similarly deprived areas (which have not received NDC funding). As a result, although cohesion and well-being indicators have improved for NDC areas, they have not done so more markedly than in similarly deprived areas, or across the nation as a whole.

There are a number of reasons why relatively small numbers of residents appear to have been involved in NDC activities. One key factor may be the transience of some NDC populations. In contrast to the 'snapshots' of participation amongst all NDC residents, surveys of residents who had stayed in NDC areas between 2002 and 2006 (the NDC panel) revealed that fully 44 per cent of those longer-term residents in NDC communities had been involved in some form of NDC activity over the course of the Programme.

 The evaluation of NDC highlights some key policy lessons which are relevant to the current coalition Government's ambitions for the Big Society. These include: clarify objectives - what are the limits to 'empowerment'?; don't underestimate the scale of capacity building needed, or the time that it can take; recognise the diversity and instability of many deprived area populations; some groups are harder to engage than others; and so a range of engagement techniques is needed. Further evidence, including all the outputs from the NDC evaluation can be found at http://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/ndc_reports_02.htm

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Jurgen Grotz about Xu Bailun's Ode to Joy

Maybe we can be forgiven for thinking that the changes we are experiencing in the voluntary and community sector in the UK in these turbulent times are overwhelming and for allowing them to preoccupy us. Yet, in order to understand that we are not alone and that change is in the air elsewhere too we might need to lift our gaze from the day to day mayhem of cuts and campaigns and look out into the world.

Virtually unnoticed by anyone in the UK, a few days ago, in China, one of the few independent research centres in its fledgling voluntary and community sector became part of a much larger national 'semi – governmental' organisation. This marks the end of an era and maybe the beginning of a new one for the small centre and I would like to recall some of what happened in this now bygone era.

In 1985 a Bejing architect who lost his sight decided to change education for the visually impaired in China. His first step was to create "Ode to Joy", the first and still the only bi-monthly Braille publication for all visually impaired Chinese children. In 1987 he began to actively challenge the predominant approach of running schools for the blind as the only means of education for the blind in China. I first met Xu Bailun in 1990 in Beijing on the fringes of the Asia and Pacific Regional Conference of Rehabilitation International. We had lunch in a small local roadside restaurant opposite the conference centre. The busy road that separated the conference centre and the local restaurant still symbolises to me the chasm between the academic well resourced discussions in one and the down to earth search for answers to the most basic questions which we engaged in on the other side of the road. I was privileged to stay involved, albeit mostly far away, in the work of what was soon to become the 'Golden Key Research Center of Education for the Visually Impaired'. A small outfit with few funds, mostly from overseas donors, but an organisation that managed to change the approach to the education for visually impaired children in China in just 2 decades. My most enduring memory of Xu Bailun's work is of travelling with him to remote villages in the Southern Province of Guangxi seeing how visually impaired children lived there and how limited their educational chances were. The information gathered from such trips about the barriers to education became a crucial foundation of a new emerging approach. It was Xu Bailun's skill of working with local agencies, while still maintaining the independence of the centre, which marked his approach as so special. Despite Xu Bailun's frequent journeys across the chasm, symbolised by the road in Beijing when we first met, the 'Golden Key Research Center of Education for the Visually Impaired' stayed firmly on the side it started out from.

After 25 years of leading the Centre, however, Xu Bailun, now 80 years old and with his wife who was a major help in running the centre, suffering from long term health problems, both retired from their positions. In order for the centre to continue its work without his leadership it has now been placed into the strong hands of the China's Disabled Persons' Federation. Of course this ensures that the enormous progress that has been made is continued, yet I cannot help but feel that it places the centre on the other side of the chasm and I cannot help but wonder if that might mean the centre has not only lost an inspirational leader but also it's unique approach. However, in his leaving address Xu Bailun makes it clear that he sees this handing over as an achievement of his work and therefore I am writing this with joy about his tremendous achievements and with confidence that they will endure. I never told him but I always thought that his choice of title for the Braille magazine he started, Ode to Joy, was a bit over the top. Writing this has changed my mind and once again I am happy to accept that Xu Bailun has been right all along. More information about the centre can be found on its Website http://www.goldenkey.org.cn/.

This small development, seemingly insignificant to all the organisations in the UK currently fearful of cuts and change, if nothing else might highlight that much is made possible through the determination and commitment of individuals in the voluntary and community sector irrespective of how difficult the environment may seem. It also illustrates that where one door closes another one might open.

Kevin Nunan

Evidence Based Funding and MFPs

Governance Pages is a website containing information for trustees / management committee members, and was conceived as a way of making practical use of research into effective ways to develop governance in small organisations. The result was an information-rich but rather unexciting website and a number of users suggested linking the dry information to case studies or interviews in order to bring the material to life. So, for instance, a user of the website could find information and resources on recruitment and then watch a trustee talking about their experience of recruiting trustees. Or they might find an interesting interview and then click on links to related information and resources.

It may sound like an obvious evolution of the Governance Pages website, but a funder would surely ask for the evidence as we are all told that funders require evidence of need. But in fact it was a funder (the now defunct Active Communities Unit at the Home Office) that originally proposed that I create a video of trustee's experiences of dealing with crises. At the time they were funding the project to use action research to look at how development workers supported governance in small organisations. As part of the project the Media Trust were recording interviews with development workers to be shown on the Community Channel. The funder suggested making use of the Media Trust team to do some parallel interviews with trustees to help trustees facing difficult decisions – a 'two for the price of one' that the Media Trust happily agreed to. The resulting video, 'When the Going Gets Tough', was made by the Media Trust and distributed to CVSs and other local infrastructure organisations in 2004/5. The funder's hunch proved correct and there was considerable interest in the video which followed three case studies. Due to continuing interest in the video it was re-edited and posted to YouTube. It was this positive reaction to this video and inquiries about a follow up that gave us the idea to record some more interviews covering more situations from a broader range of trustees.

Five years on the project has access to fewer resources but the technology has made video making much more accessible particularly as it is only necessary to aim for a standard that looks acceptable when streamed to a website (the original video was recorded to broadcast standard so that it could be transmitted on the Community Chanel). Instead of hugely expensive professional cameras and an Avid editing suite it is now possible to use sub-£150 pocket video cameras, edit on a low cost editing programme on a computer and then upload to YouTube, enabling us to do more with less (and making Nick Hurd happy).

So how should we go about finding interviewees? Logically, identify the topics I want addressed in interviews and then seek out trustees willing to be interviewed on those topics. In reality the project must rely on volunteers coming forward and agreeing to be interviewed. It is then down to the interviewer to do some research, chat with the subject and try to draw out interesting points. Potential interviewees are brought to my attention via a number of routes: by featuring on various Trustee Newsletters or being 'trustee of the week' or speaking at events aimed at trustees; attending a governance course, blogging or writing on trusteeship. The obvious limiting factor of this approach is that often those who come to attention are self selecting and tend not to be your average trustees but on the other hand it does usually mean that they have thought about the issues and will generally have something interesting and coherent to say. Another consequence is that they are often MFP – not Music for Pleasure but Male, Frail and Pale. Finding a representative cross section of trustees to interview is always going to be a challenge.

Issues

Interviews can be disappointing - experience may confirm that dealing with many topics is frustrating - but may not add much new information or insight - though it can still be useful to confirm viewers own experiences and perhaps reassure them that they are not doing the wrong thing and must soldier on.

Some interviewees have interesting perspectives but may struggle to put their ideas across in a coherent way. Judicious editing can help but at some point, if multiple edits are involved, there is a danger that the editor is starting to create the 'meaning'.

Interviewees may hesitate to address topics that are difficult or painful or involve conflict or failure and there is a natural reluctance to air dirty linen in public.

'Interviewee regret' has occasionally been an issue, where the interviewee regrets something they have said, often because it is perceived as derogatory to either fellow trustees, staff or sometimes a funder. If edits can't solve the problem the only options are to scrap the interview or re-record it. Re-recording is not ideal but within Greater London this has proved to be a viable option.

Technical Issues

A high definition camera is unnecessary for streaming from the web, but a separate microphone is essential as clarity of the voice is paramount. A simple flip type camera is fine as long as there is facility for a separate microphone. There is no substitute for natural light and video quality in all but the most expensive cameras will suffer without it. Adequate editing and uploading programmes are now commonplace and generally come bundled free with the computer or the camera. YouTube is the ideal place to store and stream videos as it is simple, automatically backed-up and takes the strain of bandwidth usage off of your website.

The videos presented an ideal opportunity to invite comment and provoke discussion and make Governance Pages much more interactive. So it made sense to incorporate these features into the redesigned site. In the end a completely new platform for the site was chosen and this entailed a lot of work moving the static elements (all of the information and resources) over to the new site. The benefits are that the new platform is stable and expandable and allows for cataloguing and tagging the videos in a way that is useful and user friendly – though getting the taxonomy right seems more a process of trial and error.

Issues for the future: Finding contributors - especially outside the usual suspects (the male frail and pale) is not straightforward. One contradiction is that the more metropolitan the project remains, the easier it is to include a diversity of interviewees.
I have experimented with attending events such as forums and trustee conferences to try and get multiple interviews on the same date. However, these experiments have had mixed results. One idea that may be worth pursuing is to use a 'diary room' (a la Big Brother) or a video booth to enable trustees to make short videos. Either of these ideas would need some resources and even if the physical hurdles are overcome, ultimately it isn't clear if there are enough trustee events around the country to justify such an approach.

Finally, is there sufficient evidence to justify continued funding? Information from surveys and users of the website will be used to put a case for a continuation of the project but where did the funder who first proposed the idea get their evidence base from? We may never know. Surely it wasn't just an informed guess?

Kevin Nunan is the developer and administrator of ARVAC's Governance Pages Project

THE NEW SITE WILL BE LAUNCHED AT THE ARVAC AGM 11.11.2010 — HAVE A LOOK

Governance Pages

www.governancepages.org.uk

Louisa Hernandez

Building Community Research Through Collaboration

Voluntary Action Islington (VAI) in collaboration with ARVAC has developed a community-led research approach that offers small community groups and individuals access to resources to assist them to both own and develop research projects on issues that matter to them. Funded by City Parochial in November 2007, the programme enables Voluntary Action Islington to explore new approaches in research to improve chances for small groups to be part of decision-making processes. The work was informed by an initial scoping exercise to understand the barriers that groups faced in accessing and participating in research and this also identified groups who had research topics they wished to develop. We can now share what we have learnt so far and pick out how collaboration – with individuals and organisations of differing experiences and places— has enabled our programme to progress .

We now understand the art of collaboration, as lying in the ability to see how working together, despite and even because of differences, to respond to a common aim can provide decision-makers with better evidence to inform decision-making processes and to make changes for the better. Collaboration is, in our view, a way of sharing skills, resources, energy, enthusiasm, disagreements and concerns. In our story of collaboration, it has enhanced the community research that has been produced. Rather than serendipity of right time and passive approaches, this takes an active approach to working together.

In the case of our programme, one of its strengths has been the ability of individuals taking part to work collaboratively - through our work with ARVAC, Islington Central Reference Library, NCVO and LVSC. This has offered a wide reach both in sharing knowledge and understanding of developing research projects that are owned by the community and also in exploring ways to improve and build upon community research practice.

The approach we use

The process involves the Head of Community Research supporting a year-long programme, from the inception of a research cluster right through to disseminating and including research in decision making-processes. Each research cluster contains a group of individuals who are mutually interested in a subject. The cluster is then resourced with 15 sessions of research training and other meetings, accessible places to meet, fieldwork resources and a research mentor. The research mentor is a volunteer with research experience who guides the research cluster, takes part in the training programme and works with other community researchers in the cluster to develop a research proposal. The research proposal is presented to an ethics / research advisory committee of members ARVAC members. Community researchers are both empowered to bring their understanding of their own community and are also asked to question their own assumptions. Access to seldom-heard people and communities is made more possible by this approach, not least because many of the community researchers come from the communities they are researching. The research design, including fieldwork, analysis and report writing are all guided by rigorous attention to ethics. Collaboration is central throughout this process. It is likewise the key to getting the research heard and achieving the aim of the project – to allow research rooted in the concerns of a community to inform and influence policies and decisions that most affect that community. We recognise that this is a long and continuing process.

The research cluster approach has so far supported three research projects. One project called "No Recourse to Advice" evidenced why community organisations found it difficult to refuse advice provision to advice seekers, despite their lack of resources. This is a problem much-voiced in Islington, but had not previously been evidenced.

The research considered the impact if these small organisations could not continue to sustain a service so much in demand. The research involved 14 in-depth interviews with community organisations, predominantly from BME, refugee and disability communities. The project enabled credible evidence to be gathered by members of these communities so as to influence change in community-identified problem.

The research clusters have also gained from the collaboration between research mentors and the community organisations. Mentors can offer experience of doing research and community organisations will offer insights and learning into issues. Sharing in a community research project means people share skills, learning and knowledge to enhance the quality of the output.

VAI recognised that not all groups would want to participate in a long programme, so in addition, provided one-to-one support to small groups considering issues of collecting information and evidence to inform their work. An example of this was supporting Islington LINk (Local Involvement Network) ambassador training, which offered its members training to enter, view and report on residential care. In collaboration with Islington Central Reference Library which is open seven days a week, a community research resource offers staff support and access to a research library. Small groups that had found a lack of space to carry out research to be an issue can also access resources like free computer banks and a quiet study area. This is now an established resource with a lasting legacy.

As well as the first year-long series of in-depth research with these groups, we piloted a new 'snapshot' approach to community research, taking the same principles to apply them to a day-long workshop in which groups from Islington were invited to share their knowledge and experiences to feed into a report for the Islington Fairness Commission. Despite much talk of 'fairness' at local and central government level and the supposed centrality of local groups and voluntary organisations to the concept of the Big Society, there was no specific agenda item on the role of voluntary and community organisations in responding to known issues of lack of fairness in Islington. This workshop was one way to collaboratively address the absence of evidence from the perspective of grassroot

communities to inform the Fairness Commission's decision-making on the issue of fairness . Given the short notice it was a way to collect evidence that made it manageable for groups and individuals already stretched in terms of time and resources. IThe day became another example of how groups collaborating to share their experiences and knowledge created 'something from nothing'; the outcome was a promise by the Islington Fairness Commission to hear the voice of the third sector at one of their scheduled meetings.

Where the model is situated

Before discussing some key elements of collaboration within our model of community research, I want to consider where our model is situated. Most important is that it is owned by individuals who can be considered as either community representatives or individuals working or volunteering in Islington. Their work generally involves improving or acting to change problems they have identified as being of interest to their stakeholders: the communities they come from and are embedded within. Importantly, we are working with small groups, rather than large organisations or bodies. This means that a key difference between the model we have developed and which makes community research different from academic research is that there is no 'stepping away' from the problems after 'the research' is over.

The groups we work with are very much part of the communities they serve. The research helps improve understanding the issues for both the people inquiring into them as well as creating a collective and organised piece of evidence that can be presented as part of decision-making processes. It offers an opportunity to both refine what the problems really are that face a community and also an alternative framework for contextualising other factors that from a campaigning perspective, may not be considered, such as "Where does my problem fit along a spectrum of others all vying for attention and resources? How can we address the issue more strategically and build links with other groups working in the same or related fields?" Rather than defending niche areas at all costs, we hope evidence can facilitate wider collaboration.

Communicating the experiences of groups and individuals in ways accessible to people working outside their day-to-day realities is a strength of this research programme. Often the groups we work with have been formed from a need to address pressing problems, such as lack of recourse to public funds. Typical examples are refugee communities, homelessness, disability and other issues which are complex and, in a borough such as Islington, compounded by the wide degrees of inequality and social deprivation found in the inner city. The passion and commitment of groups gives them the sheer determination to keep delivering to people who use or are involved in their services against any odds. Yet, paradoxically, that passion can also make those issues inaccessible to others, creating experience 'silos'. Without some of the formal structures of large organisations and more often working in informal arrangements with scarce funds or the bare basics of premises and management teams or trustees, individuals are often unable to step away from the practical demands of complex problems to deal strategically with the issues, or to find bridges with others working with similar or related problems.

While groups and individuals may well be experts in their field, they often have no way to communicate their knowledge so that decision makers will listen. Groups will therefore often feel isolated and seldom-heard; they may say the same thing over and over again, but no-one listens and, more importantly, nothing changes. The very passion that drives their commitment to campaign for change can make them seem to be 'reel-off' issues so that, paradoxically, the net effect can be to make decision-makers switch off. This means that vital information will not heard by either party. Community research aims to find a way to bridge these small groups and the decision makers, so that each may understand the other's language and the valuable experiences both can bring to understanding complex and interrelated problems.

Another element of community research which has emerged as important is that it offers a process by which groups and individuals can refine the questions or problems their research aims to explore and thereby create a more solid evidence base to support their experience in the field. The aim of our community research programme is to reduce decision makers options for dismissing community issues on research grounds. That means finding ways to speak the same language as the system. 'The system' here means the structural mechanisms that dictate where resources are allocated and for what set of priorities, often using very formal methods of communication that small groups have to navigate and engage with, so as to have a presence. One aim of the model we work with is to remove some of these barriers to participation at a policy or decision-making level, to enable collaboration with the mainstream. The model also enables small groups to contextualise their issues by learning about how their problems are located within other problems.

It is therefore also vital to this model that quality is assured so that the research cannot be dismissed on the grounds of methodology, ethics or language. The findings generated by our research model need to be robust enough to sit comfortably alongside an officer's or consultant's report. It creates a platform from which to work, where the knowledge and experience of the participating groups move to the heart of the process, but can still be tested and interrogated within a broader, more objective framework and within a structure that draws in the mainstream, so articulating specific experience in a way that decision makers will listen to.

The role of collaboration

The programme we have developed creates a framework that involves the input of several different stakeholders along the spectrum of involvement from service users, to their direct representatives in the small groups targeted by the research programme (the clusters participating in the first programme), a host organisation (here, Voluntary Action Islington) brokers within the host organisation, who create links to other groups and organisations, information conduits (in our case the Islington Central Reference Library and the British Library) and then other key stakeholders, all of whom facilitate access to, or are themselves decision makers (e.g. councils, PCTs, funding bodies).

In our example, we have been lucky enough to have the backing and involvement of a funder (City Parochial) who support an approach that identifies outcomes but, also offers scope to experiment in achieving them, so enriching the approach. All parties have had a stake in collaborating and the type of collaboration that occurs at each point along the spectrum of information-sharing facilitates flows of knowledge between decision makers, small groups and their service users. This has ultimately enabled a richer understanding of complex problems, how they manifest within a specific community and what might be done to effect long-lasting positive change.

To realise the aims of our research model, we wanted, specifically. to build the capacity of small groups to do research. This was achieved through a 'learning by doing' model, whereby participants underwent the process of learning how to do research while applying it to their own research project. Within the programme we also sought to share learning from both individual and group learning perspectives within clusters, so multiplying opportunities to share knowledge and test assumptions. As with any group setting, where different people have different rates of engagement or come from opposing viewpoints, we had to facilitate the groups to work with one another. We achieved this through engaging an appropriate research mentor within each cluster, who facilitated the individual groups, and a community research specialist, who facilitated open learning sessions and had skills to take individuals through a research training programme so as to enhance their learning about taking a research project through to completion. Such collaboration relied on assembling a wide range of experiences, highly specialised skill sets, including flexible, responsive work styles, to draw out key information while keeping the whole process moving over the course of a whole year.

The physical environment for the research was also vital for maintaining motivation and momentum. Key to situating research within the community is finding a building that is accessible: free to use; open at the right times; offering the right facilities, inspiring but not intimidating. The relationship begun with the Islington Central Reference Library is a growing and fruitful collaboration where the order and organisation of the library's inherent structure could be matched with the flexibility and open-mindedness of an institution at the heart of and serving a wide range of groups and individuals within a community and so able to adapt to working with this type of community collaboration. In the library we found not only a vital but a symbolic practical resource. For if knowledge is power, situating the programme within a seat of knowledge such as the Reference Library provides a cogent message, chiming with the Islington Central Reference Library's agenda to democratise knowledge, to inform local groups. And promote collaboration in physically linking two groups with a common interest.

We made connections with the British Library as our neighbour. While finding the right collaborators there took time, when we did we could discuss potential future work. So far, we have been able to build for support a joint research project by the British Library and Social Care Institute for Excellent to consider the merits of developing a research portal. Using focus groups and interviews, we were able to present the importance and relevance of creating a community research portal as part of this work. This is now a project funded by Big Lottery supporting NCVO and the Third Sector Research Centre.

We need to ensure that moving community research into such a more mainstream, centralised system, does not lose the specificity and local nature of the issues raised by small groups seeking out community research resources. But the importance of this project to create a sustainable legacy for community research and increase the profile of groups working at the grassroots should not be underestimated. It should send a powerful message to the groups involved in our research clusters and have their research reports archived within the British Library, as another achievement of the programme.

Another core element of collaboration within this programme was at the level of its 'brokers' – individuals working for the host organisation (VAI), with access to a wide range of community groups and individuals. These brokers, alongside the mentors and the community research specialist were central to keeping the research on track, in line with the political aim of affecting change, but also with the practical task of getting projects finished, drawing on their expert insights into the daily pressures faced by research participants.

A good example of this type of effective brokerage was the role of the Local Involvement Network co-ordinator (LINk), who not only recruited LINk members interested in finding out more about a particular health and social care issue in their community but also attended training sessions, supported the facilitation of discussions and the fieldwork process. They advised on best ways to disseminate the final report to key decision makers, obtained stakeholder buy-in and assisted in writing and editing the report itself. In this sense they acted as a conduit between networks and were able to build on the trust and knowledge already acquired in their role as the LINk co-ordinator. Importantly, their knowledge of the day-to-day issues faced by the cluster participants in their 'day jobs' also helped them keep the research on track.

Both the brokers and the host organisation, by being situated at the interface between decision makers, the individuals and/or small groups participating in the research could keep the research connected to a local agenda. But they themselves were also beneficiaries of the research process in that it highlighted the need to make connections, enrich collaboration and find the links and common themes in day-to-day work with divergent groups and individuals, which can get lost in the running of organisations.

Another very important element was the ethics committee, drawn from ARVAC trustees who are working academics. Our work from a visible connection with an academic base structure and from the quality assurance that came from knowing there was a process in place for externally validating the methodology and ethical framework .

The collaboration between ARVAC from the original start point of using their 'Community Research: Getting Started' resource pack to seeking a means to build on community research has now led to an ongoing and deep collaboration between a range of individuals who often represent other organisations carrying out research, but who nevertheless are committed to employing their skills as research mentors, advisers on ethics and supporters in creating real opportunities of collaboration to achieve an overall aim of developing and supporting good quality community research that deserves serious considered in decision making processes.

As with any research, numerous factors can ensure work gets the best airing, including riding a policy wave, using it as a campaigning tool or for evidencing need for funding. We recognise that this is just one method of doing community research and we are about to embark on a second programme where we hope to develop it further. More work remains to be done in the areas of: collaborating with decision makers; taking our model out to other host organisations; and building on the learning environment of research clusters. However, all this will be informed by our central tenet that collaboration is to be nurtured at the core as it helps to build and improve on community research practices. In the tougher times ahead, collaboration and the sharing of experience, knowledge and resources it entails will be vital.

Louisa Hernandez, is the Head of Community Research at Voluntary Action Islington,

Annual conference and AGM

Building community research through collaboration

11 November 2010
at
Voluntary Action Islington
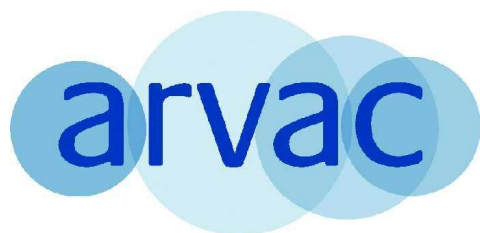### 200a Pentonville Road, London N1 9JP

AGM   11.30am-12.30pm;

Conference   1.00pm – 4.30pm

For full details see http://files.arvac.org.uk/arvacagmflier2010.pdf

Attendance is FREE but places are limited.

Please register and book a place by contacting:

Ruth Selwyn-Crome on 01603 591561 or community@uea.ac.uk

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arvac

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promoting effective community action
through research

About ARVAC

ARVAC (The Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector) was established in 1978. It is a membership organisation and acts as a resource for people interested in research in or on community organisations.

We believe that voluntary and community organisations play a vital role in creating and sustaining healthy communities, and that research plays an essential role in increasing the effectiveness of those organisations involved in voluntary and community action.

We want to hear from you:

Please send us:

- News items

- Details of new publications, resources or websites

- Information about research in progress

- Meetings or events you would like us to publicise

- Comments or opinion pieces you would like to share with other ARVAC members

by e-mail to
j.grotz@roehampton.ac.uk