

The Small Change Forum: Parson Cross, Sheffield

Event report



A one-day event held in Parson Cross, Sheffield, 13 June 2012, hosted by Kate Genever and Steve Pool, Nabeel Hamdi and Multistory in association with the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP), Oxford Brookes University.

Summary

This forum event explored how small change community development practice could be adapted and applied by local stakeholders in Sheffield.

The event brought together interested local residents, community artists, academics, local councilors and officials, arts organisations and community located activists to discuss Small Change, its ethos, partnerships and future actions. The event introduced the main ideas and principles of Small Change practice to the group and explored ways of mobilising a regional Small Change Forum Network in Sheffield.

Important to this process was identifying next steps to uncover existing resources, skills and knowledge which could be used to bring about positive change in the community.

Information from this event including the report is available at:

www.smallchangeforum.org

For more information, please contact Jeni Burnell, Chair, The Small Change Forum:

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The Event

This Small Chang Forum event explored through theory and practice the small change approach and how it can be applied to community improvement projects in Sheffield. Organised in partnership with Sheffield artists, Kate Genever and Steve Parsons, the day included discussions regarding local context.

One outcome of the event is the need for an idea to be presented as a visible and tangible project so that people see and understand what change looks like. Another was to recognise that development needs to respond to the strengths, assets and resources that already exist in communities. Small Change projects therefore do not need to be problem-based but instead driven by needs and opportunities.

The day began with a small change talk by Nabeel Hamdi followed by an exploration of the Parson Cross area of Sheffield and a discussion of the context in relation to a proposed creative project which is being developed using participatory arts and small change principles.

This event is part of The Small Change Forum (The Forum) initiative. The Forum is a research and practice initiative that is developed by the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP) based at Oxford Brookes University and Multistory in association with Emeritus Professor (Oxford Brookes) Nabeel Hamdi. Its aim is to promote small change learning and practice in the UK and internationally with events designed to share new ideas, tools, methods, practical wisdoms and principles that inform teaching and practice, and to create a policy environment conducive to change.



Introduction: Small Change

Generally speaking, the small change approach starts with a common sense assumption: to achieve something big, start with something small and start where it counts. Projects, as part of this initiative, explore how small, practical and mostly low budget interventions, if carefully targeted, act as catalysts for bigger long-lasting change; change designed to improve people's lives and livelihoods.

Professor Nabeel Hamdi presented the concept of *cultivating* community not *building* it and highlighted four main points to consider for Small Change practice:

- **Start Small, start where it counts** – it is important to deal with the immediate problem in order to make a longer-term difference. It is essential to respond using practical and visible interventions.
- **Knowing and Knowledge** – conventional understanding and learning about community development argues that before 'doing' you need to finish 'knowing'. Small Change theory states that you should act and by reflection you know.
- **Reasoning** –the expertise, resources and intelligence in communities already exists, the community development professionals or so-called 'experts', just need to mobilise and help nurture these resources.
- **Practice is an act not a science**- practice is based on wisdom and on incremental planning rather than large comprehensive planning. Plans need to develop in incremental steps through a series of actions, which help form and develop the next stage.

"Don't think too much before doing, but don't do too much without reflecting"

- Nabeel Hamdi

Action Planning

The Small Change approach uses the Community Action Planning (CAP) way of working. Used all over the world, CAP is widely recognised as an effective way of working with diverse groups of people to understand what they want for their community. The technique includes a series of sequential steps coupled with participatory techniques including mapping, art activities, design workshops, community profiling, model making, neighbourhood walks and photo surveys; all of which are aimed at gathering information about a place and people so as to make informed and collective decisions for change. The main points for action planning are:

- **Problems and Opportunities** – what are we responding to? It is not just about the problems, as fantastic assets and skills will already exist, it is just about finding them and knowing where to look.
- **Goals and priorities** – trying to identify and converge the vested interest of the group.
- **Options and Trade-offs** – how do you reshuffle the variables to offer more choice and get more 'buy-in' from stakeholders.
- **Resources and constraints** – what resources do we have and what resources do we need? What is stopping us from achieving what we want to do?
- **Project teams and tasks** – identifying the roles and responsibilities of the group.
- **Implementation and monitoring** – getting a project up and running. Ensuring the impact and results are being monitored in order to reflect.

This approach is in contrast to the conventional approach to planning and community development work which is:

- Data collection
- Analysis
- Considering the options
- Evaluation of the options
- Develop plans.

This is a very timely and costly exercise, which inevitably means that plans are out of date and irrelevant especially in relation to rapid economical, social, political and environmental changes.

Small Change challenges this approach through the steps outlined below. This process needs also considers what strategic plan the small change catalyst project can be attached to or be part of, to spark longer-lasting change.

Action Plan Steps:

1. What do we need and what have we got?

This can be done though:

- Looking
- Measuring
- Carrying out resource survey
- Listening

2. How can we get what we need?

What is the wish list and what are the aspirations of the group? What can we do ourselves? what can we do but need some help with? and what can't we do? During this process it is key to put the reign on expectations and not offer unachievable outcomes.

3. What and who will get in the way?

These constraints can be themed such as institutional, financial, technical etc.

4. Overcoming hurdles and finding ways to get people who can help as well as finding out how and when.

Understanding Parson Cross: introduction to the work of local artists Kate Genever and Steve Pool

Kate Genever and Steve Pool are artists collaborating on a project in Parson Cross in Sheffield. As part of their commission they have been given access to an artist studio in a recently developed building called Soar Works Enterprise.

Kate and Steve were awarded money through Arts Council England to explore the ideas of social thinker Ruskin and his work around 'The Betterment of the Working Man'. Ruskin was the leading English art critic of the Victorian era but also a prominent social thinker and philanthropist. His social view broadened from concerns about the dignity of labour to consider wider issues of citizenship, and notions of the ideal community. For Ruskin, all economies and all societies are ideally underwritten by a politics of social justice. Ruskin's ideas influenced the concept of the "social economy" characterised by networks of charitable, co-operative and other non-governmental organisations.

Influenced by Ruskin's work, Kate and Steve will, over the next 18 months, aim to develop local networks and strengthen connections between the Soar Works Enterprise and local people. They want to explore how to work with local people including using the small change approach in order to enable them to make better use of the building which is currently underused.

Poly-technic: Kate and Steve have set up a Poly-technic which will soon offer a range of opportunities including arts related classes such as life drawing, talks and publications. They hope this will encourage people to meet, talk and engage in developing and sharing skills. The Poly aims to act as a small change catalyst for people across Sheffield in developing ideas and learning.

Transect Walk

A transect walk is a useful tool in community planning as it allows a group of people to dissect sections of the community into a series of walks. A transect walk assists with describing and showing the location and distribution of resources, features, landscape, main land uses along a given transect. These can be themed such as heritage, housing, community etc. A transect walk can be used for:

- Identifying and explaining the cause and effect relationships among topography, soils, natural vegetation, cultivation, and other production
- Activities and human settlement patterns
- Identifying major problems and possibilities perceived by different groups of local analysts in relation to features or areas along the transect
- Learning about local technology and practices
- Contributing as a tool for site selection
- Triangulating data collected through other tools

During the transect walk of Parson Cross, the group were asked to investigate the area while reflecting on the following questions:

I see what I see very clearly, but what am I looking at?

I hear what I hear from clearly, but what am I listening to?

This process allows one to understand cause and effect. What you see are the symptoms or effects but what are the causes? It also helps to gain a quick understanding of an area, what are the indicators for change and how can the 'energy' and resources be released.



The group split into 5 groups and took a transect walk around Parson Cross. Some of the observations were:

- **Security railings** – there seemed to be an issue about safety as many areas were gated off. This segregated parts of the community and clearly defined boundaries.
- **Sense of pride** - There appeared to be a sense of pride in peoples' homes as houses and gardens were well-kept.
- **Weeds on pavements** – certain areas were neglected and not well maintained
- **Private spaces in public areas** owned by the municipality creating restriction for the local community.

Post transect walk the group considered the following issues:

- **Types of Community**

When talking about and developing ideas for community it is essential to understand the different types of community. Some of these include communities of: place, culture, interest, practice and resistance. It is important to understand the types of communities when working with people so as to gauge people's allegiances.

- **Developing and broadening the range of partners**

In order to develop sustainable and strategic projects, a wide range of partnerships need to be established to make this happen. From the transect walk, the group talked about how the local authority had 'stamped' their authority over the area – resulting in local people feeling a lack of ownership and local identity. Ideas of developing projects with the local authority were discussed such as maintaining neglected spaces as part of a social enterprise.

- **Aspirations**

To initiate and develop a project that fulfils the vested interest of the community it is essential to understand the aspirations of the immediate and wider group. This area of discussion focused on project ideas such as carnivals, mobile gardens etc. (at present, these ideas were based on experiential learning, nostalgia and people's ideas of 'best; practice without consulting the community). Working with the local community so as to give people a sense of ownership was a key area of discussion.

- **Value of Peer Network**

The group discussed the purpose behind this event being to mobilise a regional Small Change Forum network in Sheffield, in order to share ideas, knowledge, resources, peer support, case file etc.

- **Next steps**

- Continue to open up dialogue and explore ways of maintaining these connections through the online forum and further Small Change Forum events
- Explore ways to develop a visible small change intervention in Parson Cross to understand the opportunities for projects
- Invite people to submit and provide information and case studies on a Small change projects which they are carrying out.
- Investigate how the network is placed regionally, in the local community and positioned strategically.

- **Further information:**

Report available at: www.smallchangeforum.org

CENDEP: <http://oisd.brookes.ac.uk/architecture/cendep/>

Multistory: www.multistory.org.uk

For information about the forum, please contact Jeni Burnell, Chair:

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Annex One: Programme

Annex Two: Contact list – (I'll tidy this up too)

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