GROUNDWORK
CHANGING PLACES
CHANGING LIVES

Communities taking action

Understanding the landscape for community action in the UK

"...harnessing the assets of passion, pride and knowledge that already exists in local areas – and investing in the people and groups that can drive change..."

Foreword

Graham Duxbury,
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Chief Executive

Groundwork started life as an experiment in bringing together communities, businesses and government in a joint effort to improve quality of life and promote sustainable development in places that had become run-down and neglected. In the thirty-five years since, we have seen time and again the positive impacts that can be brought about when people have access to the skills, networks and resources to lead change in their local area.

Helping communities articulate their aspirations, overcome bureaucracy and drive practical action is still at the heart of our approach. Through our local projects, national programmes and grant schemes we aim to give local people the tools they need to address the issues that matter to them.

But what is life like for community groups in 2019? Although there's plenty of rhetoric about the importance of communities from politicians and think tanks, it's rarer that the people actually making things happen get to tell their story directly. We wanted to hear first-hand from community groups about their experiences and the type of support that makes their work possible.

The responses show that community-led action can achieve enormous benefits for individuals and whole neighbourhoods, but that for many community groups life is getting more challenging. Many felt that their group did not have enough capacity to meet growing levels of need in their local community and that a reduction in other services was creating new challenges.

It will surprise no-one that support to access funds was the most common unmet need among the groups surveyed: while many are

led by volunteers, this does not come for free. Funding for running costs as well as project delivery was a particularly common hurdle. Groups also told us that they would value a range of other (non-financial) support, including help engaging with the wider community, recruiting and retaining volunteers, public relations, and involving young people in their projects.

"What is life like for community groups in 2019?"

Despite the challenges, there were many positives to come from the survey. In a globalised, inter-connected world, the sense of belonging to a local place remains important. The most important motivations for people getting involved in community action were closely tied to their local areas and the desire to make connections with their neighbours. They also

demonstrate that the simple act of asking someone to get involved can be crucial – worth remembering when thinking about improving inclusivity in the voluntary sector.

More than anything, the responses emphasised the enormous benefits that can be achieved by local people working together: improved mental and physical wellbeing, the creation of new connections between neighbours who would otherwise rarely cross paths, and greater engagement in local decision making outside the group came up time and time again. While groups had often been set up with one aim in mind, they were invariably impacting on multiple issues.

We hope that this report will serve as impetus to policy makers and businesses to increase investment in and support for community action – creating a stronger 'social infrastructure' of places, networks and activities that underpin community life. As we navigate uncertain times, harnessing the assets of passion, pride and knowledge that already exists in local areas – and investing in the people and groups that can drive change – will help ensure that no area is 'left behind' when it comes to having strong and resilient communities.

Executive summary
Key findings

1

The reasons people get involved in community action are closely tied to their local area and a desire to bring the community together; being asked to volunteer is an important driver.

2

Community action creates a wide range of benefits for both those involved in running the activities and for the wider community, including improved health and wellbeing, new social connections and greater involvement in local decision making.

3

People report negative experiences when there is not enough capacity in a community group or where the loss of other forms of social infrastructure creates more demand for their activities than the group is able to meet.

4

Around half of community groups feel that taking action has become harder over the past five and ten years, despite most respondents agreeing that there is now more need for community-led action.

5

Sourcing sufficient funding is the biggest hurdle faced by community groups, including accessing grant funding and identifying long term income streams.

6

Three quarters of community groups say they need support to access funding. Grant funding could be made to work better for community groups by making the application process simpler, providing more flexible and long-term grants and allowing grants to be spent on running costs rather than just project costs.

7

Community groups also identify a range of non-financial forms of support which would improve their effectiveness, including consulting and engaging with the wider community, recruiting and retaining volunteers, public relations and the use of technology.

8

Half of community groups say they need more support from their local authority and the loss of capacity and services at this level is having a significant negative impact on their work.

9

The majority of community groups work with young people in some capacity but few have involved young people in a leadership capacity. In a small minority of cases, respondents expressed negative stereotypes about young people.

Recommendations

The views and experiences that community groups involved in this research shared paint a picture of the social infrastructure that those taking action in their communities value and rely on. Drawing on the conclusions in this report, Groundwork makes the following recommendations for community groups, organisations and government.

Community groups should:

> be aware of the motivations of their volunteers and actively reach out to underrepresented groups in their community.

Organisations across the public, private and voluntary sectors should:

> consider how supporting community groups can help both to achieve their shared aims and how they can enable community groups to increase their impact, including by supporting more people to volunteer;

> provide free or lower cost access to their buildings and premises to community groups, opening up more assets to the community.

Government should:

> assess the impact of loss of services and facilities (particularly at local authority level) on the capacity of community groups and set out plans for the enhancement of social infrastructure in the places that need it most;

> invest in a network of community enablers to provide practical support to groups on subjects including accessing funding, community engagement, involving young people, volunteer management, public relations and evaluation;

> make better use of social value requirements in public procurements to support the development of social infrastructure;

> use the next comprehensive spending review and the upcoming consultation on a UK Shared Prosperity Fund to ensure that flexible, long term funding is available to support community action in the places where it is most needed;

> use the next wave of dormant assets to create a Community Wealth Fund to provide strategic, long-term funding to support communities who need it most.

Introduction

Up and down the UK, people are getting together and making things happen in their communities. From community gardens to youth clubs, Friends of Parks groups to local sports clubs, people give up their time to improve the quality of life in their neighbourhood. While the government's Civil Society Strategy says that it wants people to be empowered to take responsibility for their neighbourhoods (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2018b), it pays little attention to the voices and needs of community groups who are doing just that.

This research set out to address three questions:

- What motivates people to get involved in action in their communities?
- What benefits are realised as a result of community action?
- What support and resources are needed to enable communities to take action in their local area?

These questions matter to Groundwork because helping communities to shape their own destinies has been core to our work since the very first project in St Helens in 1982. Groundwork was formed at a time of political, social and economic challenge as an experiment to help communities cope with change and work together and make their neighbourhoods better. Today, environmental challenges – from air pollution to energy price rises – impact disproportionately on those who have least while universal services such as parks and youth groups are feeling the brunt of nearly a decade of austerity in public spending.

Understanding how these challenges are affecting community groups has never been more vital. The government want to see people empowered (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2018b) and to take part in green action (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2018) but experience tells us that in some parts of the country community action can be harder to start up and sustain than in others. In areas with a transient population or where people are juggling multiple jobs to make ends meet, more support and resources can be needed to enable community action to take root.

Listening to the voices of those who are already organising projects and activities to benefit their local community is one step towards understanding how we can support others to do the same.

Literature review

A fair amount is known about who volunteers and what they say about their motivations. The government's annual Community Life Survey looks at rates of community engagement, volunteering and social action and provides indications of trends over time. This household-level survey provides high level statistics telling us, for example, that 59% of respondents agreed that people in their neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood. The 2017-18 survey found that 22% of people had taken part in volunteering through a club or organisation at least once a month, compared to 27% in 2013-14. The highest rates were found among the 65 to 74 age group while the lowest rates of volunteering were found among 25 to 34 year olds. This is perhaps unsurprising in the light of another finding: that the biggest barriers to volunteering identified by those not doing so regularly were work commitments, doing other things with spare time and looking after children or the home, many of which would be more likely to apply to younger people than older people who are likely to be retired (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2018a).

The Community Life Survey provides a snapshot of individuals' activity at one point in time. Other research suggests that people tend to move in and out of volunteering throughout their lives with only a minority consistently and heavily involved over their lifetime. It also highlights some inequalities in participation: those from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to have volunteered recently than those from higher socio-economic groups while those without any qualifications are less likely to volunteer than those with a degree (McGarvey et al, 2019). This is significant not just because it means crucial perspectives may be missing from community groups but also because it suggests that some people are more likely to miss out on the benefits of volunteering to mental and physical health and wellbeing (Davies, 2018a).

The reasons behind differential rates of volunteering between groups are harder to pin down. A wide range of factors has been

59%

of respondents agreed that people in their neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood

22%

of people had taken part in volunteering through a club or organisation at least once a month

found to influence volunteering participation; as discussed above, people commonly identify lack of time and competing commitments as barriers to volunteering (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2018; McGarvey et al, 2019) while the image of volunteering, lack of information and proximity to opportunities also plays a role in young people's engagement (Davies, 2018b). Others argue that volunteering activity is strongly linked to place and therefore a sense of belonging to an area is a key driver, as well as social relationships, skills and dispositions developed through contact with others (Dallimore et al, 2018). Increasing interest is also being paid to assets present in a community – the 'social infrastructure' – as a determinant of rates of volunteering and participation in community groups.

The concept of 'social infrastructure' has been around for several decades in the field of economics. Hall and Jones described social infrastructure as "the institutions and government policies that determine the economic environment within which individuals accumulate skills, and firms accumulate capital and produce output" (Hall & Jones, 1999). A considerable amount of literature has established a positive relationship between social infrastructure and economic development (Eicher et al, 2018). Social infrastructure plays into the determinants of volunteering and involvement in community groups in a number of ways: increasing the likelihood an individual will have a connection with someone involved in a community group, increasing

the likelihood that someone will have received services from an organisation and therefore be motivated to protect or contribute to it (Dallimore et al, 2018).

Subsequently attention has turned to the relationship between social infrastructure and community wellbeing in a broader sense, encompassing the social as well as economic effects. In a 2005 report for the Family Service of Toronto, Rothman defined community or social infrastructure as "a complex system of facilities, programs, and social networks that aims to improve people's quality of life", with partnerships and active involvement of residents a necessary condition for it to make a difference (Rothman, 2005). Social infrastructure is understood as the physical conditions facilitating the accumulation of "social capital", fostering contact, mutual support and collaboration within communities (Klinenberg, 2018). A study in Lithuania found that developed social infrastructure services create conditions for community wellbeing including enhanced interaction, strengthened sense of place, encouragement of community partnerships, increased skills, better health and inclusion of all groups (Vaznoniene & Kiaušiene, 2018).

Interest in social infrastructure in the UK context has mostly come from within civil society, with several reports having been published on the subject over the past year. In an essay for Local Trust, Dan Gregory argues that social infrastructure – "society's operating system", providing the systems that underpin social action, volunteering, co-operation and social enterprise – in the UK is currently too much in the hands of the public and private sectors, outside of community ownership or control. Gregory defines social infrastructure as the 'places' that foster togetherness, be they physical venues (such as community halls and libraries), online platforms, public services, routes, events or associations (Gregory, 2018).

In a report for Community Links' Early Action Task Force, Caroline Slocock suggests that social infrastructure has three mutually supportive dimensions: buildings, facilities and the built environment; services and organisations; and strong and healthy communities (including social capital, social norms, influence and control and partnership working). Slocock argues that Britain is relatively rich in social infrastructure due to a long history of investment across these dimensions, but that over the last decade there has been a "quiet reduction in social infrastructure assets either from closure, sales or poor maintenance" (Slocock, 2018).

Slocock is not alone in advancing the idea that social infrastructure has been weakened or threatened. Austerity in public sector spending since 2010, the political and cultural climate around Brexit and changes in the ways people work, live and interact have all been posited as putting a strain on community wellbeing (Wren Lewis et al, 2019). The context of budgetary constraints in public services means that greater community involvement can be easily politicised as a way of saving money rather than shifting power (Clarence & Gabriel, 2014). Gregory argues that the next few years will see a further rolling back of the state and that, consequentially, new models of social infrastructure are needed, with focused investment and a reassessment of how services can best be delivered (2018).

Community groups are both a part of a place's social infrastructure and a product of it. This research contributes to the debate on the importance of social infrastructure to UK civil society by asking grassroots community groups what types of services and support they rely on, as well as what they would need to further their activities. It will look at whether community groups perceive change to the context in which they work, testing the argument that social infrastructure has been eroded over recent years. This will help to build a picture of how policy makers and organisations can support community action to flourish.

Methodology

Representatives of 396 community groups responded to the survey between April and May 2019. Responses were invited from subscribers to Groundwork's mailing list, those who had received grants through Groundwork administered schemes, national and local partner networks and social media. Due to the self-selecting nature of the respondents and the lack of information about the overall population of people involved in community action in the UK, there are limits to the generalisability of the findings. However, the issues and themes raised by survey respondents highlight common experiences among community groups and areas for further exploration and research.

A small number of semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals involved in community groups. Again, the participants in this stage of the research were self-selecting and it is not possible to know to what extent they are representative of the population of those taking action in their communities. The interviews did, however, highlight some shared experiences among community leaders who participated in the research and provide the opportunity to explore issues raised in the survey responses in greater depth. The interviews were analysed using qualitative coding software.

Community groups are both a part of a place's social infrastructure and a product of it.

Analysis

About the respondents

It is not possible to draw any firm conclusions from the demographic characteristics of people who took part in the survey. This information is included here for context and to highlight the need for further research with some demographic groups.

The age profile of respondents was older than the general population, with the most common age of respondents between 55 and 64.

This may reflect the common finding that older adults are more likely to be active and frequent volunteers, possibly due to the greater time available in retirement or semi-retirement (McGarvey et al, 2019). It is possible that those leading community groups may have a different age profile to other volunteers, and that retired or semi-retired people have more time available and were therefore more likely to respond to the survey. Separate, focused research is needed on the experiences of community groups and projects among young people.

23% of respondents to the survey reported that their day-to-day activities are limited either a little or a lot because of a long-term health problem or disability. This is slightly above the 21% of adults nationally who reported a disability in response to the government's Family Resources Survey 2017/18. However, the government survey found that 44% of state pension age adults have a disability compared to 18% of working-age adults and this was broadly reflected in our survey: the proportion of respondents who said that their day-to-day activities were limited by a long-term health condition or disability rose to 40% among respondents who
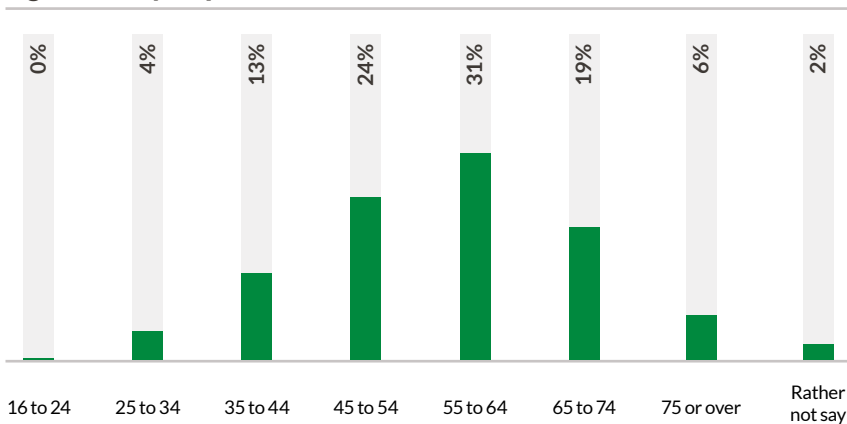
were 75 or over (Department for Work and Pensions, 2018).

92% of respondents gave their ethnic group as 'white' and this rose to 95% when those that selected 'rather not say' were excluded. This is notably higher than the 87% of UK residents who described themselves belonging to a white ethnic group in the 2011 census (Office for National Statistics, 2013). Previous research has found that ethnicity has little bearing on overall propensity to volunteer but low base sizes prevented conclusions from being drawn on frequency of volunteering among different ethnic
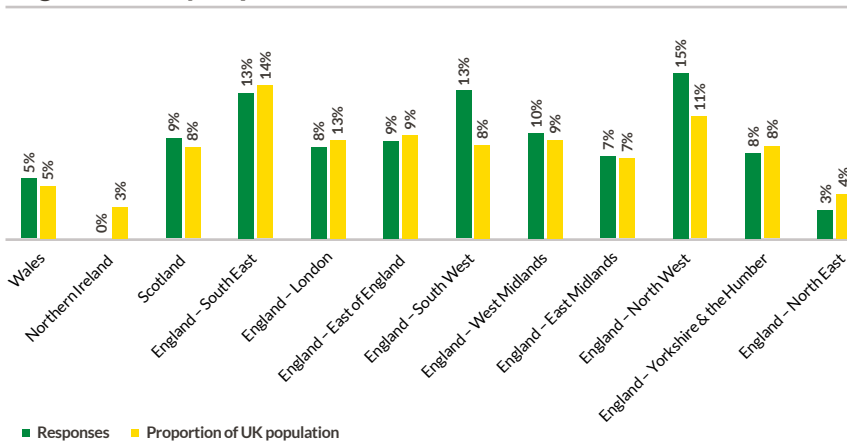
groups (McGarvey et al, 2019). While this research does little to shed light on the experiences of black, Asian and minority ethnic people participating in community groups and projects, this is another area where focused research could provide valuable insight.

The responses were spread reasonably widely across the country, as shown by the chart below, though some regions (South West and North West) were slightly overrepresented while others (London and Northern Ireland) were slightly underrepresented.

Age of survey respondents

| 16 to 24 | 25 to 34 | 35 to 44 | 45 to 54 | 55 to 64 | 65 to 74 | 75 or over | Rather not say |
| 0% | 4% | 13% | 24% | 31% | 19% | 6% | 2% |

Region of survey respondents

Legend: ■ Responses ■ Proportion of UK population

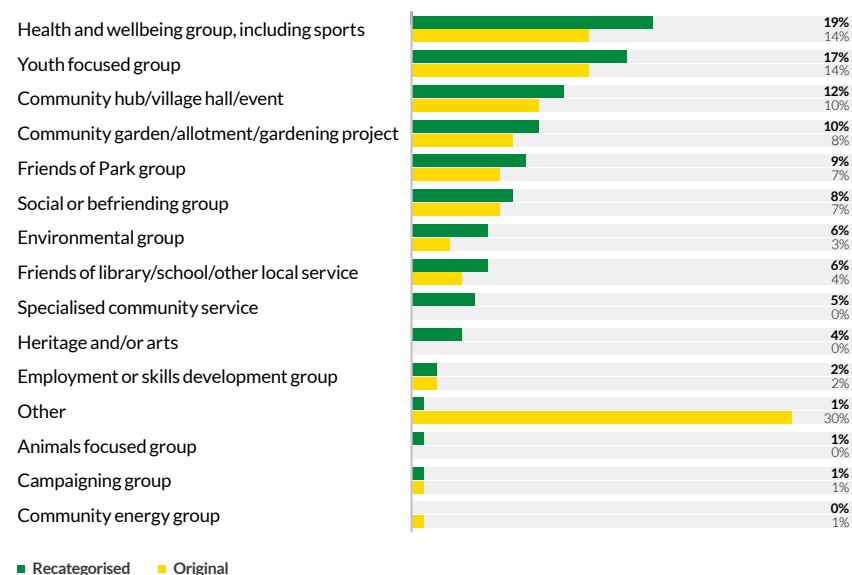|	Responses	Proportion of UK population
Wales	5%	5%
Northern Ireland	0%	3%
Scotland	9%	8%
England – South East	13%	14%
England – London	8%	13%
England – East of England	9%	9%
England – South West	13%	8%
England – West Midlands	10%	9%
England – East Midlands	7%	7%
England – North West	15%	11%
England – Yorkshire & the Humber	8%	8%
England – North East	3%	4%

The community projects

Perhaps reflecting the diversity of groups and activities, the most frequently selected option was 'other' (30%). All those who selected 'other' provided a short description and in most cases it was possible to assign these to existing categories in order to give a clearer overall picture of the types of community activities respondents are involved in.

Three new categories were created to reflect the answers given: specialised community service (e.g. community transport, food banks, assistance for members of the community with disabilities), heritage and/or arts, and animals focused groups. Where possible, categories that were selected by a small number of respondents in the original survey were amalgamated with other suitable categories (e.g. 'Community energy group' was re-categorised as a 'Specialised community service').

The types of activity give an indication of the needs that local people perceive in their communities, with many setting up projects to improve health and wellbeing, provide activities and opportunities for young people, support community spaces, or improve a local park or green space.

While almost half (46%) of the community projects respondents were involved in had been set up in the past five years, almost a quarter (24%) were much more established, having been running for more than 20 years.

Which of the following best describes your community group?

Category	Recategorised	Original
Health and wellbeing group, including sports	19%	14%
Youth focused group	17%	14%
Community hub/village hall/event	12%	10%
Community garden/allotment/gardening project	10%	8%
Friends of Park group	9%	7%
Social or befriending group	8%	7%
Environmental group	6%	3%
Friends of library/school/other local service	6%	4%
Specialised community service	5%	0%
Heritage and/or arts	4%	0%
Employment or skills development group	2%	2%
Other	1%	30%
Animals focused group	1%	0%
Campaigning group	1%	1%
Community energy group	0%	1%

■ Recategorised ■ Original

How long has your community project been running?

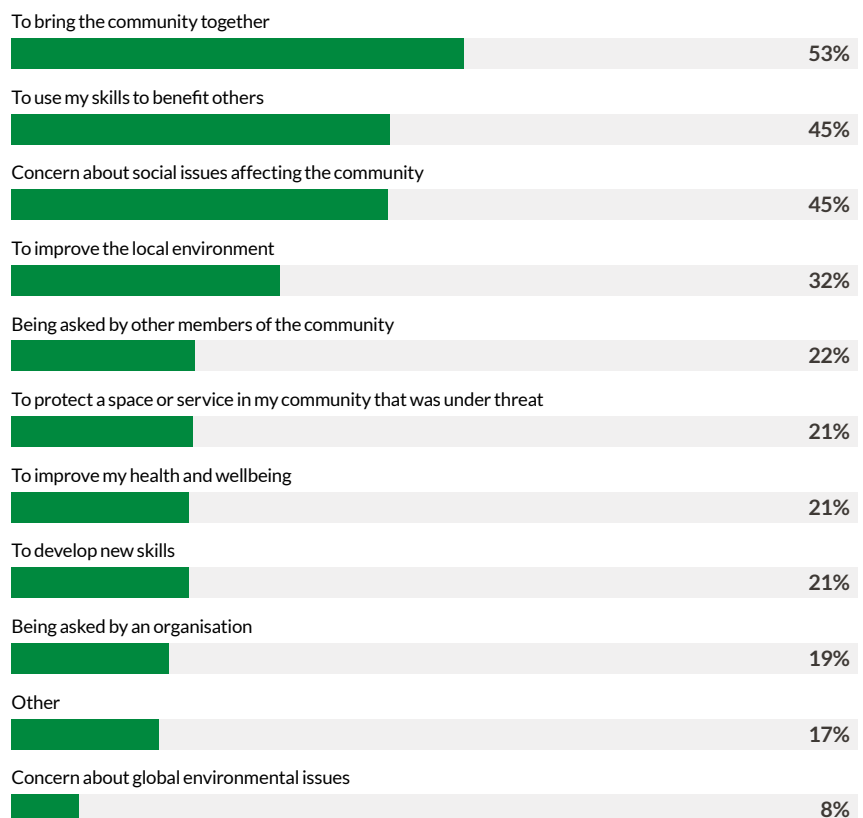| Less than 1 year	1 to 5 years	6 to 10 years	11 to 15 years	16 to 20 years	More than 20 years
4%	42%	14%	10%	5%	25%

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Motivations for getting involved

The most commonly selected motivation for getting involved in a community project was to bring the community together and the least commonly selected motivation was concern about global environmental issues, supporting the suggestion that feelings of belonging to a particular place are an important driver (Dallimore et al, 2018). Altruistic goals – such as concern about social issues or improving the local environment – were more frequently selected than self-orientated goals such as improving health and wellbeing or gaining skills.

Being asked was another prominent motivation, with 22% recalling being asked by other members of the community and 19% recalling being asked by an organisation. This underlines the power that community groups and volunteer involving organisations have to practice inclusivity by reaching out to individuals and underrepresented sections of the community.

Protecting a space in the local community that was under threat was among the motivations for 21% of respondents. This was particularly true for Friends of Parks groups, 54% of which selected this as a motivation. This may be a reflection of spending cuts in this sector – in 2016, 92% of park managers reported cuts to their revenue budgets over the prior three years (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2016).

What motivated you to get involved in your community project?

To bring the community together
53%

To use my skills to benefit others
45%

Concern about social issues affecting the community
45%

To improve the local environment
32%

Being asked by other members of the community
22%

To protect a space or service in my community that was under threat
21%

To improve my health and wellbeing
21%

To develop new skills
21%

Being asked by an organisation
19%

Other
17%

Concern about global environmental issues
8%

...feelings of belonging to a particular place are an important driver.

The impact of community action

We asked the survey participants what impact being involved in their community project has had on them as individuals. The responses illustrate the wide range of interlinked benefits that volunteering can bring.

Many people reflected on the satisfaction of seeing others benefit from the activities of the community group and the feelings of "pride and fulfilment" at having been part of making that happen. Feelings of empowerment and increased confidence in the ability of individuals and groups of residents to effect change were often described:

"I feel that there is enormous power in the people who volunteer and participate. There is enormous power in community, actually transcends all other powers" [Interview 4]

Using skills developed in another context to help their neighbours was a source of satisfaction for many, while others said that they had developed new skills through the community groups in areas such as fundraising, working with others, campaigning, project management and practical skills such as gardening or baking. A handful of people said that being involved in community action had directly or indirectly helped them to get into employment.

Making new friends and social connections, often with people who they might not come into contact with outside of the community group setting, was frequently talked about. Many respondents reflected that being involved had "helped me to expand my own knowledge" of their local area and the lives of their neighbours.

Many of the survey respondents highlighted improvements to their own physical and mental health. Some had become involved in the community project following a period of ill health – "I had a stroke in July 2016 that left me partially sighted and having to relearn how to use the computer. The Friends Group elected me as Secretary and I've regained so much that I'm now also a trustee of a local community organisation" [survey respondent] – while others reported a more general improvement to their wellbeing and/or fitness.

Although the majority of impacts spoken about were positive, not all were. The time commitment was frequently highlighted as a challenging aspect, though rarely as outweighing the benefits: "I sometimes think it takes up too much of my life but I get so much enjoyment out of it" [Interview 3].

Where stresses were mentioned, they tended to relate to the difficulty of meeting need in the community with limited capacity. The wider context of services available to the community had a big impact on many of the community groups, as one survey respondent explained: "it has become a second full-time job and we (4 volunteers) are now supporting over 200 other people -

which is exhausting and draining and serves to emphasise how families like ours are being let down by a lack of local education, health and social care services for children with special needs and disabilities".

The impacts that had been realised for the community were naturally closely related to the nature and purpose of the community group – providing a particular activity or service, creating or improving a particular space. But beyond these practical outcomes there were common themes in the responses: "collective pride in the heritage of the town and its history", reducing social isolation, improving the look and feel of the neighbourhood. Bringing people together was often described as having a significant impact: "Mixing of different social backgrounds from our town who generally wouldn't gather together has produced a community spirit which was missing".

In many cases, the community projects had played a role in helping residents to become more involved in local decision-making.

"All our volunteers are involved in decision making with us, so that of course gives them confidence to become involved in decision-making in the wider community ... I would say definitely they're more likely to be involved because they're involved with us, so it becomes more of a habit for them and prior to coming to us they wouldn't think that they would be able to do this." [Interview 4]

The community groups themselves had sometimes taken on representative functions, participating in consultations and partnerships with other organisations including local authorities and the NHS. One interviewee told how their involvement in the community group had led to taking on additional roles in the local area:

"I was responsible for helping to set up a local dementia arts partnership... I've also become involved as a representative at various meetings, like there's a public sector voluntary council that I sit on, which meets with councillors once a month. And also through that I've got involved in supporting grant-giving... So again, we're helping to influence what the voluntary sector develops around [the area]." [Interview 1]

"Mixing of different social backgrounds from our town who generally wouldn't gather together has produced a community spirit which was missing"

The challenges

Survey respondents were asked about the three biggest challenges facing their community group or project. The chart below shows the proportion who selected each option as one of the three main challenges their group faces.

Funding was the most significant issue for the groups surveyed, with 55% selecting access to grant funding and 46% selecting identifying long term income streams. This reflects the experiences of interviewees, who almost universally identified funding as the most important barrier they face:

"The main barrier is funding... The stuff we do in care homes we largely only can do it when we've got grants" [Interview 1]

"The same barrier that almost everything like this encounters: money" [Interview 3]

"Well our main barrier, one of our main barriers, is keeping the whole thing going because, you know, financially it's very difficult to keep this kind of project going" [Interview 4]

"I think funding is always a barrier. I mean, who wouldn't say that in the voluntary sector and particularly small voluntary sector?" [Interview 5]

The emphasis on grant funding may reflect that many of the respondents heard about the research through one of the grant schemes Groundwork UK administrates but is also likely to reflect the importance of grants to small grassroots voluntary groups.

Recruiting and retaining volunteers was another prominent challenge, selected by 46% of the survey respondents. While not all interviewees reported difficulty recruiting volunteers, all emphasised the importance of volunteers to keeping their projects going. Those that needed volunteers with particular skills or qualifications often said that this created an additional layer of challenge.

A small number of respondents highlighted involving volunteers from a wider range of backgrounds as particularly difficult. An interviewee running a music group in London explained:

"we're sorely lacking in women and we're sorely lacking in people from ethnic minorities... we're somehow not really attracting people from the community into running and helping with our organisation in a way that reflects the community" [Interview 1].

For just over a quarter (27%) of community groups who responded to the survey, a lack of local authority support or services was among their greatest challenges. Some of this related to a lack of services creating more need for the community group's work ("Providing services within the current state of health and social care", "lack of local authority support for our clients"), while others related to particular forms of support such as training or access to space.

Many respondents said that they felt that community groups were being expected and encouraged to do more as a result of cuts to local authority and other public services, without the necessary support being provided. One interviewee summed up the dilemma:

"there's a difference between communities taking control and being empowered and being able to sort of, you know, control their own destiny... but also of statutory services not bowing out and expecting the charity sector to do it... without any funding and resources to go alongside that" [Interview 5].

This supports Slocock's argument that public sector austerity is eroding parts of the social infrastructure, putting pressure on communities.

The majority of research participants did perceive a greater need for community projects, with 89% of respondents agreeing that there is more need for community-led action compared to five years ago and 87% agreeing that there is greater need compared to ten years ago.

Although most felt there was greater need, only around half of respondents reported that taking action in their community had got more difficult over the previous five (46%) and ten years (53%), suggesting that changes have played out in the same way across the board.

Explaining what they felt had changed, many respondents pointed to loss of funding and resources at local authority level. In some cases this increased costs for community groups: "As austerity has bitten into local authorities, charges for use of parks/publicly owned green spaces have been introduced". In others, it meant that there was less capacity
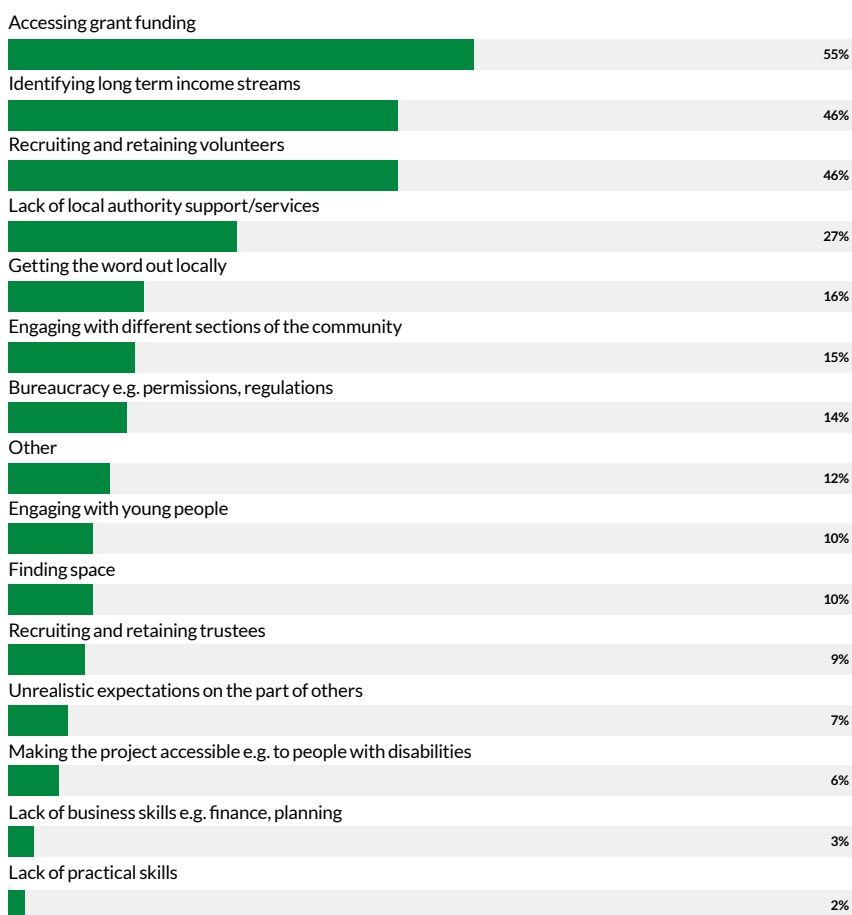
at local authority level to provide advice and support and less funding for services like youth groups that the community relies on.

Many respondents said that the process of applying for grants had become more time consuming and more competitive, with more evidence required by funders and bigger organisations often competing against small community groups for the same pot of money.
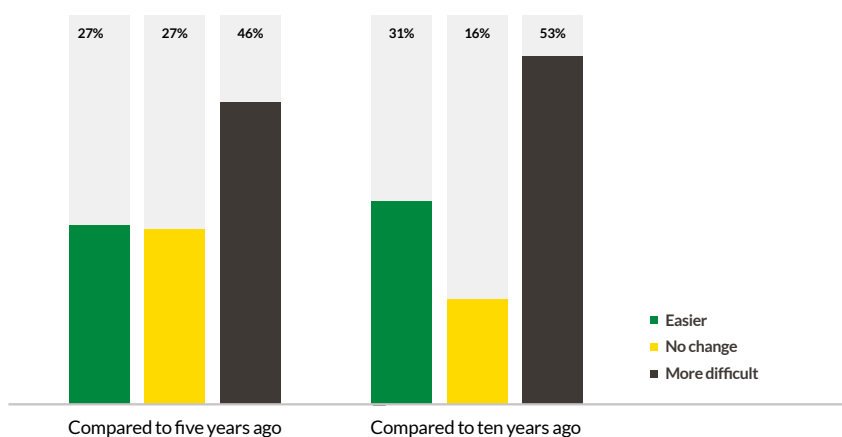
A decline in the amount of time local people have available to volunteer was also frequently mentioned. One survey respondent said that people in their area are "too busy working to keep their heads above water", indicating again that external social factors are having a significant impact. An increase in "red tape" was another theme, with increased requirements around safeguarding, data protection, health and safety and insurance highlighted.

Despite the challenges, there was some positivity about what lies ahead: 59% of community groups were extremely or very confident about their ability to continue their project in the future, and a further 32% were somewhat confident. Growing was seen as more difficult, with only 25% extremely or very confident about their ability to expand the project in future.

What are the three biggest challenges facing your community group?

Accessing grant funding
55%

Identifying long term income streams
46%

Recruiting and retaining volunteers
46%

Lack of local authority support/services
27%

Getting the word out locally
16%

Engaging with different sections of the community
15%

Bureaucracy e.g. permissions, regulations
14%

Other
12%

Engaging with young people
10%

Finding space
10%

Recruiting and retaining trustees
9%

Unrealistic expectations on the part of others
7%

Making the project accessible e.g. to people with disabilities
6%

Lack of business skills e.g. finance, planning
3%

Lack of practical skills
2%

Compared to five/ten years ago, taking action in my community is:

Compared to five years ago			Compared to ten years ago		
27%	27%	46%	31%	16%	53%

Legend:
- ■ Easier
- ■ No change
- ■ More difficult

Working with young people

Understanding the experiences of younger people in community groups should be a key priority for civil society, given their lower rates of volunteering compared to older age groups. Young people were underrepresented among survey respondents but all respondents were asked questions about the extent to which they were involved in their activities.

The majority (82%) of the community groups surveyed involve young people (under the age of 25) in their activities in some capacity. However, of these, only 14% had young people involved in leading the project, while 59% involved young people as volunteers and 78% involved young people as beneficiaries.

Among the projects that had young leaders and volunteers, respondents reported a wide range of benefits. Chief among them was the creation of friendships between people of different generations (79%), followed by the contribution of different skills and perspectives (both selected by 65% of respondents).

Among the minority of groups that do not involve young people in their project, 61% had tried to do so. For many, the barriers were to do with the times that the project ran and the availability of young people, who were often at school or work when the community group was active. Some people reported specific barriers, such as insurance requirements for volunteer drivers or a lack of young people in the (often rural) area.

Some groups had a desire to involve more young people in their activities but found that they did not have the skills or resources to do so:

"We are very resource poor, and that involves not having the experience, time, funds to specifically target young people."

"Lack of knowledge and use of social media. The current members of the Friends of the park are mostly retired and find it difficult to engage with young people."

Helping small grassroots community groups to access the expertise on the inclusion of young people that exists within civil society must therefore be part of the supportive social infrastructure on which community groups are able to draw.

There were a small number of respondents that expressed negative stereotypes about young people. For example, one survey respondent said the barriers to the involvement of young people were that:

"They are not interested in gardening. They have no social skills. Young people are the main cause of anti-social behaviour and are more likely to wreck our project than help."
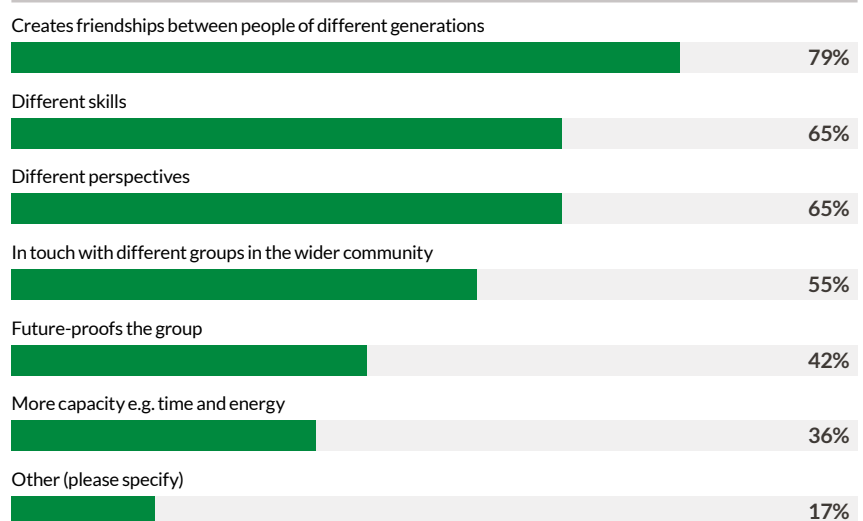
While this type of comment was not typical, the handful of similar responses highlights the need to challenge discriminatory attitudes where they arise in order to ensure that all sections of the community have equal opportunities to participate and contribute.

If young people are involved in leading the project or as volunteers, what benefits does this bring?

Creates friendships between people of different generations
79%

Different skills
65%

Different perspectives
65%

In touch with different groups in the wider community
55%

Future-proofs the group
42%

More capacity e.g. time and energy
36%

Other (please specify)
17%

79% of community groups involving young people said it created intergenerational friendships

The support community groups need

These themes were reflected when we asked about the types of support community groups need to achieve their aims.

The biggest area of unmet need was again around funding, with 77% of respondents saying they need access to grant funding and 73% saying they need support to develop plans for revenue funding.

When asked about specific changes they would like to see, simplifying grant application processes was a recurring theme, as was flexible and long-term funding that allows more time to become established. Many people commented that the process of applying for grants and providing the required evidence took up a lot of time, taking volunteers' energy away from the core activity.

Many respondents said their main ask would be "for funding to be more easily available for core costs/general running costs, rather than always having to have a "new project"", a frustration that was echoed by interviewees:

"It's interesting that so many funders want to project fund now but there are different definitions of what project funding actually means, so lots of funders will say we don't give contributions towards running costs, we only fund projects. But of course running costs are projects you know, paying the rent for the room that you sit in while you plan your project is a running cost and a project cost. So sometimes I think there's a sort of confusion in the language that's used by funders... because somebody's got to pay the rent and that's the truth" [Interview 5].

Grant funders being unwilling to cover the costs of staff was another difficulty. Many of the community groups were reliant on grant funding as their main source of income, meaning that they struggled to cover core running costs crucial to their sustainability. A different approach to grant funding would help many of these groups to sustain their activities.

Engagement with local businesses was the next most popular thing that groups were looking for, something that may have a financial as well as other benefits. One of the interviewees talked about how support from local business had been crucial in meeting costs for a stage in the community-led restoration of a canal line [Interview 3] while another spoke about the importance of their relationship with the business improvement district [Interview 7].

Although funding is clearly a crucial issue for community groups, it is far from the only area of need and a wide range of priorities were identified as important. Engaging with the community, recruiting and retaining volunteers, public relations (PR) and communications were all areas in which more than half of the groups felt they would benefit from help. Several interviewees suggested training on how to evaluate the impact of their community groups' work would help them tell their story and have more success in applying for grants.

Again, support from the local authority was a key area of need for many groups, selected by more than half of respondents, with the lack of capacity at local government level and a wider climate of cuts to services again providing background.

The majority of groups who needed it had access to building or outside space, but this remained an issue for just over a fifth of respondents (22%). For many community groups, space was available in their community but the cost of accessing it provided an additional layer of challenge:

"Halls are too expensive for community groups to pay as funding does not cover hall hire or rent, we should not have to pay to run community events in our community halls."

77%
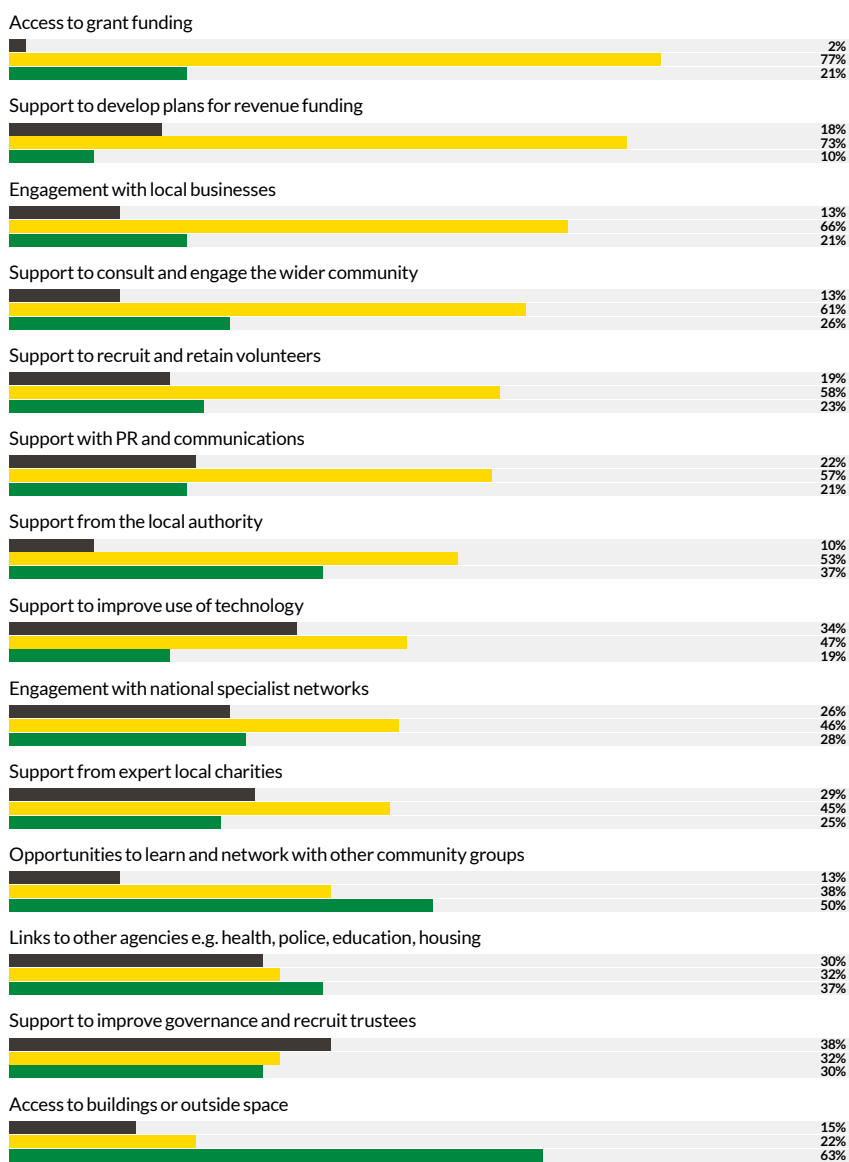**of respondents saying they need access to grant funding**

73%
say they need support to develop plans for revenue funding.

What types of support are needed to help your community group achieve its aims?

■ Not needed   ■ We need this   ■ We have this

Access to grant funding
- 2%
- 77%
- 21%

Support to develop plans for revenue funding
- 18%
- 73%
- 10%

Engagement with local businesses
- 13%
- 66%
- 21%

Support to consult and engage the wider community
- 13%
- 61%
- 26%

Support to recruit and retain volunteers
- 19%
- 58%
- 23%

Support with PR and communications
- 22%
- 57%
- 21%

Support from the local authority
- 10%
- 53%
- 37%

Support to improve use of technology
- 34%
- 47%
- 19%

Engagement with national specialist networks
- 26%
- 46%
- 28%

Support from expert local charities
- 29%
- 45%
- 25%

Opportunities to learn and network with other community groups
- 13%
- 38%
- 50%

Links to other agencies e.g. health, police, education, housing
- 30%
- 32%
- 37%

Support to improve governance and recruit trustees
- 38%
- 32%
- 30%

Access to buildings or outside space
- 15%
- 22%
- 63%

...there were many common motivations, benefits, pressures and calls for support...

Conclusions and recommendations

There is no single universal experience of community action and the perspectives shared as part of this research reflect that. Despite that, there were many common motivations, benefits, pressures and calls for support in the responses received, painting a picture of the social infrastructure that those taking action in their communities value and rely on.

Wanting to bring the community together and benefit the local area were the most common motivations for getting involved in community action, showing the crucial role played by place and belonging. Being asked was another prominent motivation, suggesting that community groups should be actively reaching out to underrepresented groups in their community.

Community groups create a broad range of benefits for both those involved in running their activities and for the wider community. The positive impacts community groups reported ranged from a sense of pride to skills development, improved health and wellbeing, creating new social connections and helping people to become more involved in local decision making. Other organisations and public services should be thinking about how community action can help to achieve their aims and how they can support community groups to increase their impact.

Negative impacts of community action are felt when there is not enough capacity in a community group to achieve its goals or where other local services were disappearing, increasing need for the community group's work. Declining capacity at local authority level has had a substantial impact on many groups. Supporting more people to volunteer should be a firm priority for the public, private and voluntary sectors and attention is needed to ensuring that social infrastructure and local sources of funding and expertise remain even as the role of local government changes.

While the majority of community groups include young people and recognise the benefits that his brings, some need greater access to skills and resources in order to do this effectively and a small minority subscribe to negative stereotypes which need to be addressed.

Access to funding is the most common unmet need among community groups, with particular need for long term sources of funding able to cover running costs. The upcoming comprehensive spending review, consultation on a UK Shared Prosperity Fund to replace European Union funding and proposals for a Community Wealth Fund all provide opportunities for government to make funding available to meet this need. The voices of community groups should be listened to in these processes to ensure that long term, flexible investment is available in the places that need it the most.

Having access to funds is vital, but groups also recognise the need for support to ensure funds are spent well and projects and services deliver maximum impact.

Community groups value support across a wide range of areas, including engaging with the wider community, recruiting and retaining volunteers, public relations and evaluating the impact of their projects. As businesses look to increase the impact of their corporate social responsibility work and employer-supported volunteering, they should look at how they can best make their workforce's expertise available to local community groups in their area.

Providing free or lower cost access to community spaces could make a considerable difference to some groups and more effort should be made to open up public and private sector premises to local groups, turning existing infrastructure into social infrastructure by redefining it as a community asset.

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