

## **Capacity building for activism: Learning from the past for the future<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

Working in the same area for twenty years might not be an appealing prospect for many community workers, particularly in the current climate, but sticking around for that length of time has its advantages. In particular, it has given me the opportunity to witness change – not only in the area and in the people I have worked with but in the community itself. Over time, I have also observed how national and local policy initiatives have impacted on community development and the ways in which we are expected to work with communities.

In many ways, the physical environment of North Edinburgh (formerly Greater Pilton) has changed dramatically for the better during the last two decades, with new community facilities in most neighbourhoods and many new housing developments replacing some of the area's worst housing stock. Two of the best examples are in West Granton and Muirhouse, where local tenants had a major input – not only in the design and layout of the houses but also in the development of the surrounding areas. There is, however, a downside to the regeneration process which has been taking place in North Edinburgh. According to local activists, there has been a decrease in the numbers of houses available for rent which has made it difficult for many people who were decanted to return to their neighbourhood. They also point to the increase in the private sector's involvement in housing in the area. Many people feel that the strategy to increase home ownership in North Edinburgh has led to an increase in private rented accommodation which has left many former council tenants paying higher rents and having less security of tenure. This situation is exacerbated by 'absent' landlords who fail to carry out their duties and by a high turnover of residents, making it difficult to re-establish the sense of community and belonging once found in many of these neighbourhoods.

Another positive development which is worth noting is the wide range of voluntary organisations which have been established in the area over the last 20 years. The services they provide address many of the needs that statutory organisations were either unable or unwilling to meet. Most of these projects can be traced back to grassroots campaigns initiated by local people. Unfortunately, however, the global economic crisis and the consequent cuts in public sector funding means that many of the services and jobs provided by these organisations might not exist in the next few years.

As we can see from the above, North Edinburgh has a history of community activism which has been responsible for many improvements in ordinary people's lives. The area also has a long history of issue-based campaigns which have generated a

collective political response from the community. The list of campaigns is too lengthy to document here, but it is worth highlighting some of the issues which local groups have taken up over the years: rent increases, dampness, poor repairs, unemployment, ill-health, the loss of health services, pollution, school closures, the poll tax, racism, water privatisation, 'super snoopers', poverty, lack of affordable childcare, fuel poverty and poor public transport.

### **The problem**

It was on my return to work after a period of study that I sensed a change in the nature of community activism in North Edinburgh. Re-reading articles in back copies of the community newspaper and discussions with local people about current issues made me aware that many people felt completely powerless to challenge and organise a collective response to the savage cuts to projects which they had fought for, developed and, in some cases, managed.

I was also aware that many of the activists who had fought for the right to have a place at the governance table were now extremely disillusioned with official structures established to promote community participation. I also knew from personal experience, and from conversations with people, that it had been a long, painful process to get the authorities to accept that the community had a legitimate right to be consulted on important issues and to be represented in local decision-making structures. Many activists who had been involved at that time were now of the opinion that a seat at the table was no longer necessarily in the community's interest. This was illustrated at a public meeting at the end of 2009 when community representatives were put in a position where they felt duty-bound as 'partners' to approve cuts to local projects.

I also was aware from my research that the local authority's strategy to increase involvement in local affairs was actually having the *opposite* effect, as many activists were choosing to walk away from a process over which they felt they had little influence. Some activists have decided to remain within the system, feeling that projects are best defended from the inside, but this situation creates an uncomfortable distance between 'the engaged' and 'the estranged'.

The crisis in community participation in North Edinburgh has been exacerbated by the fact that very few new activists are coming up through the system. There are many reasons for this, but it seems obvious to me that a significant factor has been an excessive emphasis on promoting participation in official structures at the expense of the kind of active issue-based work which traditionally generated new activists who were motivated by anger or solidarity. The irony of the situation is that a decrease in community activism and a decline in the community's capacity to assert itself is happening at the same time as participation, engagement and empowerment are, once again, key priorities for local and national government.

### **The role of community development**

Since my introduction to community politics in North Edinburgh in the mid-1980s, I have been consistently impressed by the capacity of local people to rise again and

again to the challenge of fighting injustice within their community. In fact, it was this fighting spirit and the idea that ordinary people could make a difference that inspired me to qualify as a community worker in the first place. And it was a growing uneasiness at what I saw to be the loss of this vital capacity and fighting spirit that made me return to what I consider to be the basics of community development – in order to work out what had led to this situation and what would be an appropriate response.

From my own experience, the basics involve a number of things:

- identifying an issue or problem which causes concern to members of the community
- researching and analysing the issue or problem
- consulting local people about their understanding of the problem
- bringing together people who are interested in developing a collective response
- providing the group with the necessary support to address the problem.

In addition, the process should be educational and should provide a range of learning opportunities relevant to the group's needs and objectives.

### **The proposal**

The proposal for a social history project emerged from my initial discussions with local activists who were angry that many of the achievements won by the community over the years were under threat and exasperated because the community didn't seem to be able to fight back. They recounted the many campaigns which had taken place in North Edinburgh and the different, and often creative, tactics employed by campaigning groups. People also talked about why they had joined campaigns and how their involvement had led to other things. It became very clear to me that this was extremely valuable information, from a social history perspective. More importantly, it also struck me that such a project would provide a space for local activists to reflect on their history of community activism – and what had become of it. My hope was that collectively-gained insights might re-motivate people and encourage them to develop alternative methods of articulating and addressing issues. In addition, it could also help to rebuild the community's capacity to re-engage with decision-makers on their own terms and to exercise more power and influence over what matters *to them*.

Although social history may not be an explicit priority of my employer, the Children and Families Department of the City of Edinburgh Council, I nevertheless see it as a valid and legitimate aspect of Community Learning and Development work which is entirely consistent with the stated outcomes of *The Scottish Empowerment Plan* produced by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA):

Fundamentally, community empowerment is about people taking collective action to make change happen on their own terms.

### **The project**

The original aim of the Project was to document the history of community activism in North Edinburgh from 1980 to the present time, to examine the ways in which it had changed during that period, and the factors which had contributed to these developments. Although the proposal gained widespread support from local activists, it was felt that the timescale should be extended – back to when the area was first developed in the 1930s. It was also suggested that the project should document the wider history of the area as this would highlight how those problems and issues experienced by local residents had contributed to the area's tradition of community activism. Although this additional aim significantly increased the group's work, it has proved to be an extremely important aspect of their research in terms of how this 'hidden' history illustrates the relationship between the wider social, political and economic context and the provision of housing for the working class.

The first phase of the project, which began in March 2009, involved a small group of activists in various kinds of research: reviewing videos of local campaigns, analysing back copies of the community newspaper, collecting articles from national and local newspapers from the 1930s, and identifying material from other sources such as personal records, archives from local projects and national organisations. From this research, the group have produced a valuable archive containing articles, photographs, publications and videos.

The group has also produced two 'timelines'. The first charts key national policies and events and has helped the group appreciate how decisions at Westminster and further afield relate directly to local issues. Such work also helps to make the crucial link between local and global dimensions of politics and power. The second timeline summarises key issues during each decade and many of the initiatives developed by the local authority in response to the problems of and in the area.

As I have already said, my view is that community development is an educational process which should involve a range of relevant learning opportunities for those involved. In terms of the social history group who are responsible for developing this work, this has meant negotiating a curriculum which meets the needs and the interests of group members. This has helped to maintain people's interest in the project and, at the same time, has ensured that participants are equipped to tackle each new phase of the project. During the last year, the programme has included practical sessions which have developed the group's research skills: visits, speakers on different topics, learning how to use computers to scan material and access information via the web, attending conferences, meeting and exchanging information with activists from other areas. There have also been sessions which provide the opportunity for people to discuss, debate and reflect on local and national politics and their impact on the local community.

The group compiled a short publication *Never Give Up*, which highlights key aspects of the archive. Members of the group have been involved in all aspects of this project, drawing on the knowledge and insights they have gained from the research process. The next phase of the project will involve producing an archive of interviews with local activists who will be given the opportunity to tell their own personal stories to illustrate the area's history and their experience of community activism. The material

will eventually be edited as a DVD and will focus on wider issues of citizenship. The publication and DVD will be used to generate discussion within the wider community and to involve more people in the process of critically reflecting on the changing nature of citizenship and why it matters. This represents a significant opportunity for local people to make sense of what's happening in *and to* their community and to develop their own ideas about what to do about it.

Those involved in the process have found the experience extremely useful and rewarding. They have developed their own analysis about the changing nature of community activism and have been able to reflect on their own experience *as activists* (as distinct from 'learners') and the impact this kind of learning has had on their own lives, the lives of their families and the wider community. Most of the group are retired and have indicated how much they value being able to contribute to something they feel passionate about. This is worth bearing in mind when we consider the current lack of priority given to providing educational opportunities for older people. It also highlights the potential of this group of citizens in helping younger people develop the knowledge and skills which are necessary to take part in democracy.

The project does not make any great claims concerning the current state of community engagement in North Edinburgh, but it does create some much-needed critical distance for local activists and shows how we can learn from the past for the present. North Edinburgh Social History Project is a modest project involving a small group of retired people who are supported by a part-time community worker with access to a very limited budget. What it demonstrates, however, is that *there are alternatives* to the current model of capacity building and that even within the narrowest of policy agendas there is still space to try and make a difference.

*For further information:*

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*Never Give Up* is reviewed in this edition of *Concept*