

## **Key learning from pilot 1 of the Understanding Your Community course.**

### **The Understanding Your Community course aims to support people from the community in:**

- Experiencing sharing knowledge of community participation and action in their neighbourhoods and community;
- Identifying current local issues and concerns, and exploring these further through research, group discussion, and dialogue with community organisations, community services and local government;
- Experiencing decision-making processes and understanding the structures for local decision-making and representation;
- Considering ways that they, the participants, could be involved influencing decision-making in the future.

### **The pilot course:**

- was run during February 2006 over 5 evening sessions;
- and involved 10 participants (the optimum number), and 3 trainers (including the researcher).

### **The sessions:**

- Session 1 – introductions and community mapping;
- Session 2 – cooperative inquiry and internet research;
- Session 3 – decision-making and preparing for panel discussion;
- Session 4 – panel questions and answers;
- Session 5 – ‘visit’ and social activity.

### **Main contributions to this learning report:**

- Discussion with participants during the course;
- Feedback from participants through questionnaires at end of course (6 returned);
- Reflections from trainers and researcher during the course;
- Discussion with the Advisory group.

## **Session 1: Community Mapping**

Community Mapping involved creating a map of the community using plasticine, boxes, paper, coloured pens and post-its through discussion in pairs and then as a whole group. The map highlights neighbourhood and community activities, organisations and resources for participation. It supports a group in raising their present interests and concerns.

11 participants, 3 trainers

### **Participants said:**

Gave an overall score out of 5 for the whole session of 4.17 (range 4-5)

They, the 6 participants who gave feedback, all valued and enjoyed the community mapping:

- sharing local knowledge together
- finding out differences between different neighbourhoods, and seeing different views
- working as a team, and feeling a community spirit

For instance:

*Really enjoyed the “mapping”. Amazed by what I knew and didn’t.*

*Seeing the community map being built up and learning what was available in different sections of the community.*

Several people commented that there had not been enough time to complete discussions. One person felt the map should be more accurate – some roads were not in the right place.

Most people commented that an ice-breaker was valuable to get to know each other a little before doing the mapping work.

### **Trainers said:**

The ice-breaker and community mapping worked well but the mapping could be refined in the following ways:

- Needs more time for discussion, and could be more focused on ‘community-wide’ participation and services, rather than neighbourhoods – depends on time available;
- Needs 2 trainers working on the discussion following the mapping – one to support the group’s dynamics, one to support the group in working out what the issues are;

Learning report from the first pilot of Understanding Your Community course; produced by Craigmillar Capacity Building Project, Sept 2006.

- Needs to narrow down to 1 or 2 key themes to explore rather than 5 or 6 – the group would need to vote on the key issue.

**Advisory Group said:** recognised that there was a tension between letting people discuss an issue, and moving onto the next activity of recognising the key themes and prioritising them.

**In summary:** Community mapping was a successful activity that allowed the group to raise key community issues. But it needs refining, in particular, so that the focus can be on discussions about community-wide participation and current issues – and then prioritised down to one or possibly two key issues rather than the five used in the first pilot.

## **Session 2: Feedback on Cooperative Inquiry/ Internet research.**

The group researched community issues raised during the first session – working to set questions to answer, look for relevant information on the internet, and then bringing this back to the group for discussion.

### **Participants said:**

They scored the session out of 5: average – 4 (range 3 - 5).

All the participants spoke positively about using the Internet for research, although 2 commented that it was hard to find relevant information on the web. For instance:

*It was a good result when we finally found information on regeneration.  
I enjoyed finding out who is running the regeneration.*

The session concluded with a discussion about who should be invited to sit on the panel in session 4. Several people were happy with the selection of the panel, 2 others felt the trainers had too much influence on the group's decision.

### **Trainers said:**

Worked well, people were 'taking it seriously' ... but needs the following refining:

- **More focus** – still sense of covering too many issues, and people asking themselves question that are too difficult to answer with the time and support available – an underlying question of 'process and product' and getting a balance between people following their concerns, and the trainers supporting/directing the group towards issues that can be 'progressed' in a short timescale;
- **More time** – needed to complete discussions that have been started;
- **Computer support** – some pairs need more support, and this needs attention within another course.

**Summary:** Useful activity for the group but needs refinement – potentially needs to run over more than 1 session.

### **Session 3: Feedback on Decision-making activity**

The group undertook a decision-making exercise, in this case on housing/regeneration plans for an imaginary community – with 3 clear options. Having discussed their views, the group had to decide which option to support, and then to reflect on the process they had been through.

#### **Participants said:**

*Score out of 5: average 4.16 (range 4 – 5)*

All the participants said they enjoyed the activity mentioning ‘taking part’ and group interaction, and learning about decision-making processes - in particular:

- different ways of voting;
- decisions don’t always go your way;
- thinking about ‘who is making the decisions’ (on community regeneration)?

Things that didn’t work so well? Several people mentioned not having enough time to complete discussions, and one person suggested that other ‘decision-making’ options were needed within this particular activity.

#### **Trainers said;**

The decision-making exercise worked well – it provoked discussion, allowed people to learn particularly about different types of voting, and was taken seriously. Improvements could include:

- Improving the options – a better 3<sup>rd</sup> option;
- Thinking about how the group could explore ‘the hidden option’ – which is ‘non of the above’.

They also commented on the difficulty of getting enough time to prepare questions for a panel discussion – some people are inexperienced and more time preparing could build their confidence and skills to do this. This should be a *priority* as the course builds towards the panel discussion as a climax.

**Summary:** Decision-making was a good exercise for the group, and can be refined further. Needs thought as to how this activity, and others, fit into the timescales for the whole course.

## **Session 4: Panel discussion.**

A panel discussion on the themes/issues the group has raised, with panel members who are/from: community representatives, community services, and the local authority. Followed by informal discussions over refreshments and then feedback from the group on the experience of the discussion.

**Participants – feedback during the session:** The group were largely disappointed with the way the panel discussion turned out; comments varied from:

- Not enough direct answers (4) and no commitments to action (1)
- Got boring, disappointing (2)
- Enjoyable and/or informative but ... (2)
- Informative, did their best (2)

### **Participants – feedback from questionnaire:**

However they still scored the session well ...

*Score out of 5: average 4 (range 3-5)*

There were positives for the group, many said they'd enjoyed it, and the following types of learning were mentioned:

- Range of different views raised
- Community input to service planning
- Asking a question for the first time
- The art of political speaking (learning about)
- Informal discussion afterwards
- One panel member talking directly

The members of the group highlighted areas that didn't work well and needed improvement:

- Chairing needs to be more effective
- Panel members did not give straight answers
- Less talk, more dialogue
- Asking questions on the spot rather than preparing questions in advance
- Less members on the panel

### **Trainers said:**

**Disappointing** because the group were squeezed out of the discussion. Suggestions for improving this included:

- **Improve chairing** – should be done by course trainers as they know the group and its dynamics and aspirations, and should be tighter so that panellists give shorter answers, and group can respond to them.
- **Reduce themes and panellists** – working with 1 or 2 themes rather than 5 would give more time for deeper discussions of the issues, and would mean that a smaller panel (say 2-3 rather than 6) could be invited.
- **Group introduces their theme and learning** – the group starts the discussion on a theme by introducing the learning they've done and the questions they have.

#### **Feedback from the advisory group on Session 4;**

The Advisory Group were unhappy with aspects of session 4 too, in particular:

- Panel members were very political, evasive and didn't give direct answers;
- Chairing needed to be stronger to get panel members to give answers; there was time to get answers on all 5 issues;
- Style needs to be more relaxed, less hierarchical.

Could be improved by:

- Having either a group member as chair or a worker/ activist from outside the area – CBP staff were seen as too connected with community politics;
- Panel members getting support on how to work in this environment.

**Summary:** the group did enjoy this session but were also very frustrated by it. The participants, the Advisory Group, and the trainers are agreed that it needs developing and that issues around chairing and creating an environment where people can get their questions answered is crucial ... but the solutions are not yet agreed and will need further discussion and piloting.

## **Session 5: 'Visit' to concierges and social activity**

A follow-up visit to meet the community concierges to talk further about the key issue of community safety – although the concierges came to meet the group. Followed by attending a comedy night at the Community Centre.

### **Participants said:**

The participants gave very positive feedback on speaking with the concierges (5 of 6)

2 people spoke of looking forward to the social night later.

### **Trainers said:**

Felt too that the meeting with the concierges had gone well in particular the informal atmosphere and the careful chairing.

### **Summary:**

Informal style, openness to discussion of the concierge staff, limiting to one fresh and very current issue, and careful chairing made for a lively, enjoyable discussion. Social activity following afterwards felt like it made a strong finish to the course.

## **Thoughts across whole course.**

Six feedback forms (out of 10 possible) completed by the participants.

### **Participants said:**

- Enjoyed the group and spirit of the course – things ‘worked well’ (6/6) ... plus another course member by email;
- Learnt more about community safety and/or regeneration and/or decision-making (4/6);
- Wanted less panel members and more careful selection/ less issues in session 4 (4/6);

### *Other suggestions/ comments:*

One person wanted a feedback form at the end of each session.

Another person wanted to see more local people joining in – that is people outside of existing networks (‘the usual suspects’); in particular people from minority ethnic groups – no one on the course identified themselves in that way.

### **Comment from one speaker:**

An exit guidance session could be set-up for all those participants who want to learn more.

### **Trainers said:**

Sessions felt rushed – needs restructuring.  
10 people feels a good number for the course.

### ***Suggested revised format for a second pilot:***

**Session 1** – community mapping remains the key activity but is allowed to run for longer giving more time to discuss community-wide activities, and halted once a range of issues have been raised

**Session 2** – starts with the prioritisation of the issues raised through ‘PA voting’ by the group, so that 1 (or possibly 2) issues are picked – the other issues may be touched on during the rest of the course so that it remains about ‘Understanding Your Community’ but are not the key focus. Start the ‘cooperative inquiry’/ Internet research.

**Session 3** – complete the Internet research – giving plenty of time for discussion of the issues raised; consideration of and preparation for one or more local visits

**Session 4** – preparation for the panel discussion, followed by panel discussion.

**Session 5** – feedback on panel discussion, decision-making exercise to gain a better perspective on the role of decision-makers, and consideration of what follow-up work should follow, e.g. working with the group on a particular issue after the course, pieces of one off training and advice, an exit guidance process.

**Social Activity** – slotted in according to opportunities that present themselves, the interests of the group and the budget available.

**Summary:** Participants and trainers enjoyed the course and felt that significant learning had taken place. There were a range of smaller adjustments suggested, but also a fairly significant restructuring of the course to create time for greater and more effective discussion and dialogue. See the researcher's recommendations for the full list of changes and adaptations to be used in future piloting.

## **Researcher's recommendations.**

**1. Re-structuring of the course:** The next running (2<sup>nd</sup> pilot) of this course should follow the structure of the course suggested by the trainers above (pages 9 and 10), to see if this provides more time for discussion and control of the process by the group members.

**2. Working with one community issue rather than five community issues:** Again this should be tried on the next running of the course, but needs to be considered against the overall aim of the course which is 'Understanding Your Community' – which calls for a bigger holistic picture. It will be important to try and keep some connections with the other issues that the group raises during the community mapping; perhaps referring back to them at the end of each activity/discussion and asking the group if what has been learnt from exploring the one key issue also increases their learning about the other issues they've raised.

*Researcher agreed with the advisory group that this is an issue still to be fully resolved – further piloting of this course should help with this.*

**3a. Panel discussion – in general (Session 4):** having one issue rather than five will mean less panel members will be needed, and more time for discussion and closer dialogue on the issue; people should get to the answers they are looking for. If the session starts with the participants presenting their findings so far to the panel members, this should focus the discussions on 'their issues'. Careful chairing should keep the panel and participants in dialogue.

**3b. Chairing of the panel discussion:** the Advisory Group have recommended either that a group member (**option 1**) or a worker/activist from outside the area (**option 2**) be the chair for such discussions – so that there is independence from community politics. The trainers/researcher feel that one of the trainers (**option 3**) would be well-placed to chair the session because they've been working with the group, and understand its dynamics, and so can support the discussion – and that they can remain neutral within the discussion relative to the community politics within the (or any) area.

The researcher recommends therefore trying out all 3 options in future courses, and monitoring these. The most likely outcome is that different options will be needed for different circumstances such as: different groups of participants; work on different issues of different sensitivity; different types of panel members being invited.

*Researcher agreed with the Advisory group that this is an issue still to be fully resolved – further piloting of this and other courses on the learning programme should help with this.*

**3c. Briefing panel members:** the Advisory Group was concerned about giving panel members any information in advance about the issues that

concern people so that panel members were able to prepare their answers – they were looking for a more spontaneous discussion.

The researcher thinks that it is important for panel members to have some information on the issues and concerns, so that panel members know what sort of discussion they are getting involved in and can do some thinking in advance; although there is no need for this to be the full detail of the group's research, simply a sketch of where they have started from. The researcher recommends then that the group and trainers agree what information is passed to the panel members in advance of the panel discussion. This would also apply to the Chair if option 2 is chosen – see option 2 in 3b above.

*Researcher agreed with the Advisory group that this is an issue still to be fully resolved; further piloting of this and other courses on the learning programme should help with this.*

**4. Reaching a greater diversity of people:** One person felt that the course had not reached people on the 'outside' of existing networks; another comment was the lack of minority ethnic involvement in the course. The researcher's own perception is that there was a reasonable mix of people on the course including:

- people with considerable experience of community participation
- people with growing experience, and already with significant contacts with the CBP and/or other local organisations
- people beginning to develop their community involvement

However, having established the introductory course, there is challenge for the CBP and the Advisory Group to take it further afield and increase the diversity of people getting involved, through:

- work with other local organisations and community groups to run the course (or parts of it) in people's 'own' spaces – centres, churches, schools, and support them in working on the issues that matter to them;
- increase the diversity of people involved particularly those with little experience of community involvement, people with disabilities, people from minority ethnic groups, young people, and older people

The proposed 2<sup>nd</sup> pilot in partnership with the Thistle Foundation, who have strong links with disabled people in the area, is one of example of how this can happen. The CBP and the Advisory Group should work together to plan future use across the community of these courses.

#### **5. Follow-up work:**

The course has 'started things' that need completing:

- *More work on the issues raised;* Community Safety remains an outstanding issue; Regeneration is being taken up by some of the group who undertook the Understanding Community Regeneration course; other issues – local decision-making, youth and inter-generational work, community knowledge, need to be returned to in some form or other. The CBP and the Advisory Group should consider how to take these issues forward.
- *Involving participants as co-trainers:* two participants on this first pilot have mention interest in working with a lead trainer on a future course; two others were more ambivalent. This would be a great opportunity for people to develop individually and for the course to benefit from their local knowledge and contacts. The CBP and the Advisory Group should consider running a ‘training for trainers’ course aimed at those who’ve been on any of the pilot courses and who would like to think more about being co-trainers on future courses.
- *Accessing more training:* the worker from Adult Learning Link who gave a short presentation in session 4 suggested an ‘exit guidance’ session for those who had been on this or other of the pilot courses, to support them in considering other options. The CBP and the Advisory Group should consider developing such a session with other relevant local organisations such as Adult Learning Link, Worktrack, Child Care Services, and potentially a City-wide body such as Volunteer Centre Edinburgh.
- *Individual learning as well as group learning:* one member of the advisory group suggested that the course presently is focused on group learning and that some people might value an individual learning approach. This is definitely an issue for further consideration and potential further work, by the Capacity Building Project and the Advisory Group.