

Craigmillar Learning for Community Participation and Action report: Chapter 6a – Community organisations.

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A 'research group' of local people - to locate key issues and concerns

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A full list of those who wished to be acknowledged is found in the separate Chapter 12: 'Background information (appendices)'.

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Craigmillar Communiversity (see chapters 7 and 9)
The Estate of Bill Douglas (see chapter 7)

Chapter 6a: Community Organisations - working on a management committee or Board of a local organisation

Introduction

A significant number of local people are members of local Boards or Management Committees for community organisations and community centres – 64% of the people the researcher met individually for instance. They form a body of knowledge that it is valuable for others to know about.

This chapter looks at what they are learning, and the training and development they find useful, including:

- forward planning for a Committee (pages 4-6)
- good communication within a committee (pages 7-8)
- finance and funding issues (pages 9-10)
- legal responsibilities of Board and Committee members (page 11)
- wider management issues (pages 12-13)
- training and support (pages 14-15)
- final comment on a learning programme for local active people (page 16).

Note: Before reading this chapter it would be useful to look at Chapter 1a. This will give you some background information on lifelong learning, community learning and development, and participatory research.

Forward planning:

Management Committees and Boards are involved in the developing of plans for their organisation. Some members of Bingham 50+ Committee spoke of their planning work. Firstly talking with members:

A consultation day – the worker and the chairperson use the information from this day to build plans. It gives people (members) a chance to have their say.

And then negotiating over funding:

The Committee aims to produce a plan for the Community Education committee, and then agree funding. It's difficult to plan until you know what funding you've got ... funding is from Community Education so you have to have an educational aspect to the classes

Craigmillar Community Arts' Board of Directors had employed a consultant to do some action planning with them over one 3-hour session. The process involved 7 steps:

- looking at the skills and experience of the Board members
- describing what the organisation does – its activities
- thinking about the purpose of the organisation and getting to core purpose
- linking the 'purpose' of the organisation with its activities – understanding it's strategies for achieving its purpose
- looking at the values of the organisation
- thinking about what Board members would 'love to be doing' within the organisation and prioritising these as a Board
- looking at the patterns in what people said and thinking what to do next.

A report was written up which described how the Board could use this information to build an action plan. The session had a mixed response from Board members. A significant number of Directors felt it had not helped them move forward, saying:

Waste of time and money. There was nothing gained by the exercise

Didn't need anyone to help us go through what we already knew – no new ideas

Why did we pay to do this? Couldn't we have done this ourselves?

Others including members of staff spoke positively; for instance:

As a Board Member who is not active with (in projects) it was very useful

Useful finding out what members of the group thought priorities (should be)

To get a clear picture of what the (organisation) exists to do.

The planning work seemed to work for some people but not for others – particularly longer standing Directors. One theme raised then is the difficulty for a Board of finding ‘a process’ for their forward planning that fits with the full range of people joining in. A key question is when does it make sense to seek ‘outside’ support in doing planning and when does it make sense to stay with the existing ways of working and skills of the Board or Committee?

Two workers told of similar pieces of planning work they had used with local organisations:

- A planning session with a group to identify their priorities that would fit with their aims and objectives from their constitution. It involved doing a ‘tardis exercise’ looking to 10 years time and then building a realistic action plan. This led to a report and applications to the Social Inclusion Partnership for funding.
- A development day with a Committee that included looking at the constitution to revisit objectives, looking at problem areas and thinking about solutions, thinking about forward planning, priorities and funding.

Comment on learning: Finding the right style of planning for a Board or Committee, that both inspires and is of practical value to that organisation, may take time and persistence. New approaches need commitment to see if they are going to work and bear some fruit. This would be an area for further research to uncover the range of approaches to planning that prove to be useful so that Boards and Committees can select approaches that fit with their needs and style of doing things.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s report, ‘Lending a hand: the value of ‘light touch’ support in empowering communities’, describes ‘the lessons from the JRF neighbourhood programme’ across England, Scotland and Wales, and says of action planning¹:

“Despite reservations from some groups, action planning has proved a useful resource to most projects, especially those who have not engaged in similar exercises before. However, this was not always the case. Some projects already faced demands to produce action plans for workplaces for other funders or other purposes; this additional planning was a step too far.”

¹ Quote is on page 11 of the report; the report (July 2005) can be found on the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website at: www.jrf.org.uk. The JRF Neighbourhood programme is working with 20 groups across England, Scotland and Wales from Jan 2003 to June 2006.

For a learning programme, creating a wider discussion about what is possible and why it could be useful would be a clear starting point: asking people who are active to consider what sorts of forward planning they would consider for their organisation. If people are willing to explore different options and share their experiences and learning then Craigmillar can build a resource of learning about action planning that would be valuable for others in the area and outside the area.

Good communication

Many Board Directors and Committee members emphasised the need for good communication at meetings and for a learning approach:

Listen first, then say what you have to say. I don't holdback, it gives me a strong voice.

Working 'hand in hand' is important. Bouncing ideas off each other is very important. You have to learn to wait your turn as a group – put your hand up to show you want to speak.

You learn something new at each meeting – what to do and what not to do.

Some members of one Bingham 50+ Management Committee spoke of the value of training in communication, through watching and then discussing a video of different situations that can arise at a committee meeting. They learnt about:

The importance of keeping the meeting in order

The importance of committee decisions – not individual decisions

Keeping personal feelings to yourself unless they are relevant to the discussion

The importance of working with difference – different people/ different lifestyles

It's useful to find out what other people do.

Another Committee had held a development day during which they had considered good communication through:

- individually and confidentially completing a communications questionnaire and then discussing and learning from the results
- considering the different roles on the committee – who has responsibility for what.

Several people highlighted that discussion within committees can be tough going. Not everyone has the same vision, you have to convince people of your views, but also recognise that this is not always possible ... sometimes the group may come half-way along, other times not at all – but that's democratic working:

There are no guarantees that it will keep working; you have to use the force of argument. It's hard to come to terms with failures or lack of support. For example, I wanted to fundraise for a millennium show, but

couldn't get the support – I couldn't find the right argument and there's nothing to be gained in falling out with people.

That's how democracy works. You have to wait for people to catch-up ... Your common sense has to ask, how can we get half-way for everyone ... all depends on individuals in committees – and you need to carry people with you and there are will be many spheres of thought on how to reach the target.

Comment on learning: Active people are thinking about the value of good communication within meetings. There isn't one answer and getting it right is an ongoing process of re-thinking, trying new ideas and asking the hard questions. This process is something that a learning programme can support people in learning about and exploring.

Finances

Several people were clearly thinking about how to support an organisation's or group's finances through fundraising and had strategies for building up financial strength:

Bands pay a nominal fee which helps cover costs. It builds a sense of ownership, 'ring fences funding', and people are careful about how it's used or abused

I got roped in to organising fundraising. I don't really enjoy it but can do it ... I have to sort out fundraising for tours and events. Recently been doing: fundraising events – sponsored full body wax, women's only nights, bag packing ... a regular weekly bonus ball

People also had experience to draw upon of applying for grants and how to prioritise which funding to apply for:

We know how to make successful funding applications – some people know how to do this. Too often we end up applying for funding just because it's there – not because of a community-led thirst for something.

... applying for grants from the Capacity Building Project and Social Inclusion Partnership ...

One person also spoke of a strong sense of the financial possibilities in the area and of taking a more enterprising approach:

It (the organisation) needs to be more sustaining. It is surrounded by companies making profit so why not try cold calling, after all only need 1-2% success rate in order to make a big difference. Finding a way to be self-sustaining where you're reliant on yourselves, that's an inherent desire in the area. People are not daft; they need a sense of ownership.

Comment on learning: Board and Committee members are working with strategies for finding income in particular by applying for grants, but also by raising income, what could be described as a more social entrepreneurial approach.

The Social Enterprise model is often raised as the new way forward for voluntary and community organisations – that is an approach that looks to make income by selling services rather than by applying for grants. Senscot (Social Enterprise Network Scotland)² raises a word of warning however, that it is hard to make this change:

² Find out more about Senscot at: www.senscot.net

“Whilst it is certainly possible for a voluntary organisation to convert from a culture of grant applications to trading - it is more likely that a true social enterprise will contain the 'business gene' from the outset.”³

That is, a business way of thinking is hard to bring in if it is not already there within some members. Some active people and community organisations may not value this approach, seeing the real strengths that already exist within their voluntary-style organisations.

Should organisations be clear which approach - ‘voluntary’ or ‘social enterprise’ - they aspire to? Or is it possible to draw knowledge from both and to work with the variety of aspirations that members bring to a Committee or Board? A learning programme can at least support people who are active in the community in asking these questions and exploring some answers, even if it cannot actually provide an answer in advance.

One worker from outside Craigmillar highlighted that an organisation in East Lothian was providing training for treasurers⁴. This was not an area raised within discussions here, but is one to consider with local people and organisations. In a later discussion outside of the research interviews one local person raised the issue of knowing, as a Board member, of how to understand balance sheets and finance reports, and having a sense of how an organisation’s finances are going – whether to feel confident or concerned.

³ See <http://sencot.spl21.net/> for comment in bulletin (03.06.05) within the news bank, past bulletins, section.

⁴ The organisation CyBIL, Capacity Building in the Lothians has a website at: <http://www.cybil.org.uk/index.htm> - there is no detail of the treasurer training on the website.

Legal responsibilities

People also spoke of legal responsibilities connected with their work on Committees and Boards:

A big responsibility is the paperwork for Company's House. All Directors are registered and you have to remove those who resign. If you don't hand in paperwork on time, you're fined ... I got a day's training about what being a Director means e.g. legal side of things such as you can't be a Director if you've been banned from another Directorship.

Several organisations had had a recent training session with a solicitor with particular knowledge of the legal issues which was useful:

It was very well presented and educating. I found out lots of things I didn't know.

The session covered a Board Director's legal responsibilities including:

- their role, and their accountability to members
- the limitations on what they can do
- their duty to act in good faith and exercise proper care
- their duty not to trade 'wrongfully'

Comment on learning: Surprisingly, perhaps, the training session on legal responsibilities was generally upbeat and people found it very relevant to their work as Board and Committee members. It was also very helpful to have a down to earth assessment of what these responsibilities entail, and in general it meant 'acting in good faith' and doing your best to understand what is happening within the limits of your time and knowledge. It would be valuable for active people to share their experiences with others involved on Boards and Committees and to build the pool of knowledge and experience within the area - clearly an area for a learning programme to work with.

Other issues:

Working with the members of and/or people using the organisation

Two people spoke of the need to value the views and potential of the broader body of other people connected with the project – often called the members:

The best asset for an organisation is the resourcefulness of its people, not its money. Make do with what's around you.

The Active Women course gave me the confidence to join the Board. There are other women on the Board who have been trainees. I didn't want to lose contact with the organisation. It's a good way to be still involved and to give something back.

One committee spoke of doing an annual consultation with its members about its programme – see section on forward planning in this chapter.

Partnership working and good community relations

Some members of Bingham 50+ Management Committee discussed the range of organisations and people that they aimed to sustain good relations with:

The Community Centre, we keep it tidy and have a good relationship. They are busy and do a lot for young people.

Partnership working with: Computer class, Local Aqua fit facilities, Castlevue Community Centre

Local councillors: Come to the AGM, can approach them at other times but are busy.

Working with an organisation's policies

One Board member spoke of the importance of taking up health and safety issues:

An Industrial background as a shop steward helps with health and safety issues at the centre; key issues including blocking-up floor spaces and smoking.

Other policy areas that were raised included: child protection, the Disability Discrimination Act and Equal Opportunities and data protection. One person highlighted that you needed to keep up to date as things change so often:

Policy keeps changing.

One person spoke of taking the long-term perspective and not being frightened by change.

I've seen social change over lifetime – gaslights when growing up, teenager in the 60s when ordinary folk found a voice, became a hippy and haven't stopped.

Comment on learning: People are highlighting the breadth of knowledge that it is useful to develop and this includes working with an organisation's membership, its relationships with other organisations and services, partnership-working, working with policy and managing change.

Being an effective, knowledgeable Board Director or Committee member involves a wide range of skills and knowledge that can only be built up over time and through commitment from an organisation to supporting your development. A learning programme can support this process.

Training, learning and support:

Board Directors and Management Committee members spoke of a range of training that they had undertaken. Already mentioned in sections above are training and support in:

- planning and development
- good communication at meetings
- legal responsibilities

Other training and learning people spoke of as being useful included attending conferences and seminars with other committee or board members:

*Builds up a complex knowledge (of issues and responsibilities).
Interesting and good to have when you're working with Scottish Homes.*

One person spoke of doing the 'Active Woman' course, run by Women onto Work⁵.

The Active Women course gave me the confidence to join the Board.

The course mixes working in groups to build confidence and learn from each other, learning directly from community activists, and a placement to practice the skills and knowledge you've been learning – and so allows people to gain confidence and skills to be effective in amongst other situations working on committees.

Most people valued training opportunities they had had – although one person who had experience on more than one committee commented that not all committees provided extensive training:

Other management committees (only) have meetings in rooms.

Committees and Boards work closely with project staff, and staff have a crucial role in supporting their work. One group spoke of the value of staff support:

It's there if you look for it. You have to ask for things. The worker guides us as to what we're doing wrong particularly when you first start. There's an information pack which says what is expected of the committee, different roles, and is now updated ... the worker can't say to the Committee you must but gives you choice.

One member particularly valued the support from staff when they were ill:

⁵ For more information on Women Onto Work go on the internet to: www.womenontowork.org

People are getting older and have ill-health. You can lose faith in yourself to get back into the routine – it's important to have positive thinking when recovering. I did try to retire but the worker still had faith in me so I came back. I'm just finding out that I can do it again, 'I can do that and I can do this', making decisions for the whole membership that suits everyone.

Comment on learning: Board Directors and Committee members in general value training and support from organisations and are looking for more of the 'right sorts' of training and support in order to develop their work. By building a long-term and supportive relationship with its Directors or Committee members an organisation is building valuable resources for keeping it healthy.

A community education student working with the Craigmillar Capacity Building Project produced a report⁶ in 2001 on volunteering in Craigmillar, which raised many of the themes in this section, in particular the importance of:

- flexible support and supervision for volunteers from local organisations
- ongoing commitment to volunteer development from local organisations.

A learning programme needs to emphasise commitment and flexibility within its approach to work with local people.

⁶ Copies of Alison Miller's report is available from the Craigmillar Capacity Building Project – for contact details go on the internet to: www.craigmillarcapacitybuilding.org

Final commentary on learning programme for people who are active in the community

There is a considerable range of learning for Board Directors and Committee members to take on as they develop their knowledge, skills and roles within their organisation. One staff member commented that:

It can be overwhelming if you give people the full facts about their responsibilities ... some people haven't 'grown up' being on a committee – they're first timers ... some committee members have to learn skills of meetings but only meet every 6 weeks so in a year it's hard to learn everything ... (and) you have to learn about the projects you are managing.

A learning programme aimed at those on Boards and Committees or who aspire to be active within them will need to work with people to integrate a wide range of knowledge and skills. It will also need to draw upon the experience and knowledge of those who are already in leadership roles to make sure that it remains relevant to what Boards and Committees 'actually do'; that it is of practical use rather than too grand and overwhelming in scope. People need to come out of it feeling clear about what their responsibilities are and how to handle these, and also clear about what roles they want to play in a committee and how to do that.

The same member of staff also raised the importance of organisations and workers being flexible in their approach to supporting committees. For example, a committee that includes older people will need to recognise that older people are more likely to have a disability such as deafness or blindness, and that time spent sitting for too long can be hard.

It is valuable for organisations to spend time with their Board and Committee members thinking through what training and support will help them do the job, and what individual members aspire to – what roles they want to play and what areas of work they want to undertake with the organisation, its staff and volunteers.

This can be seen as part of a '*committed dialogue*' within a community, the idea put forward by Jane Thompson⁷ and discussed in Chapter 1b. This dialogue is about a community considering what sorts of resources it needs to have a thriving and diverse community sector of organisations, networks and groups. It is the vitality and inventiveness of this community sector that allows a community to effectively represent and advocate for itself in the wider world.

⁷ See Chapter 1b pages 12-13 and 17, and also Jane Thompson's (2001) report, 'Rerooting lifelong learning: resourcing neighbourhood renewal.' Details from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education on the Internet at: <http://www.niace.org.uk/>.