Evaluating the impact of Local Conversations 2016-2021

Contents

Introduction

The Local Conversations programme, funded by People's Health Trust, supports local people in 13 neighbourhoods across Great Britain which experience high levels of disadvantage.[1] The long-term grant programme supports residents to get together and engage in dialogue, decision-making and action, in order to increase the components of collective control: social connectedness; knowledge, understanding and skills; confidence and aspiration; money and resources; and influence.

The intention is that this will ultimately help to increase people's control in life. As those taking part grow their networks to form a closer social bond, see the positive results of their work, and their skills, confidence and aspirations grow, they will be able to improve local services, impact social determinants of health, and support better neighbourhood-level health and wellbeing. Ultimately, the aim is to reduce the health inequalities experienced by the people living in these communities.

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[1] People's Health Trust invests in Local Conversations in Caia Park, Wrexham; Govanhill, Glasgow; Haverhill, Suffolk; Highercroft, Blackburn with Darwen; Holyhead, Anglesey; Kirkley, Suffolk; Longbenton, North Tyneside; Lozells, Birmingham; Merstham, Surrey; Muirhouse, Edinburgh; on the Old Ford and Nest Estates, Gateshead; Penparcau, Ceredigion; and Stanwell, Surrey (2021).

New Economics Foundation (NEF) were commissioned by the Trust in July 2015 to undertake a four-year independent evaluation of the Local Conversations programme. This included initial baseline research in 2015-16 and, following delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, concluded in early 2021.

The evaluation was designed to both refine and test the efficacy of the programme Theory of Change (Figure 1) and to monitor the programme's impact. A number of thematic pieces of deep-dive research were also commissioned, which emerged from main evaluation findings as well as People's Health Trust's internal learning. The Trust has published summary findings of each year's evaluation, and NEF's findings have influenced programme development, changes to grant management processes and tailored support for individual Local Conversations.

This report provides a summary of the findings of the final evaluation report, which synthesises findings from the four-year evaluation. It also tests the programme's Theory of Change by examining whether, how, and to what extent its shorter-term and longer-term outcomes have been achieved. The report begins with a discussion of enablers of and barriers to Local Conversations' progress. This is followed by a

discussion of the impact of the Local Conversations on their neighbourhoods and residents. The conclusion explores implications for the Local Conversations programme, the Trust and beyond.

Primary research methods include case studies[2] of Local Conversations projects, a longitudinal survey of residents participating in the Local Conversations over four years that included 2,852 responses from 21 Local Conversation areas, and an annual survey of lead organisations' staff. Community researchers were also trained in each of the case study areas and self evaluation support was provided for all Local Conversations to ensure there were strong participatory elements to the evaluation.

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[2] There were eight case studies in the research conducted in 2020: the Local Conversations in Lozells, Birmingham; Govanhill, Glasgow; Claremont, Blackpool; Caia Park, Wrexham; Merstham, Surrey; on the Old Ford and Nest Estates, Gateshead; Penparcau, Ceredigion; Stanwell, Surrey.

Theory of Change

The Theory of Change for the Local Conversations programme is presented in Figure 1. This describes a model of collective control, focusing on the outcomes of social connectedness; knowledge, understanding and skills; confidence and aspiration; money and resources; and influence. By building these foundations of community power, the programme creates the conditions for action on the fundamental conditions for good health - around housing, jobs and income, a supportive local environment and economy, to improve social justice and equity.[3]

The Theory of Change outlines how the programme aims to reduce health inequalities and improve health and wellbeing through two main pathways:

- Direct results of actions taken by residents to improve local services and the social determinants of health, such as housing, income, employment and local environments.
- The process of involvement in Local Conversations, through which residents increase their social connections; knowledge, understanding and skills; confidence about their collective ability to create

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[3] World Health Organization, *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* (1986)

or influence change; influence over powerful local individuals and organisations; and resources.
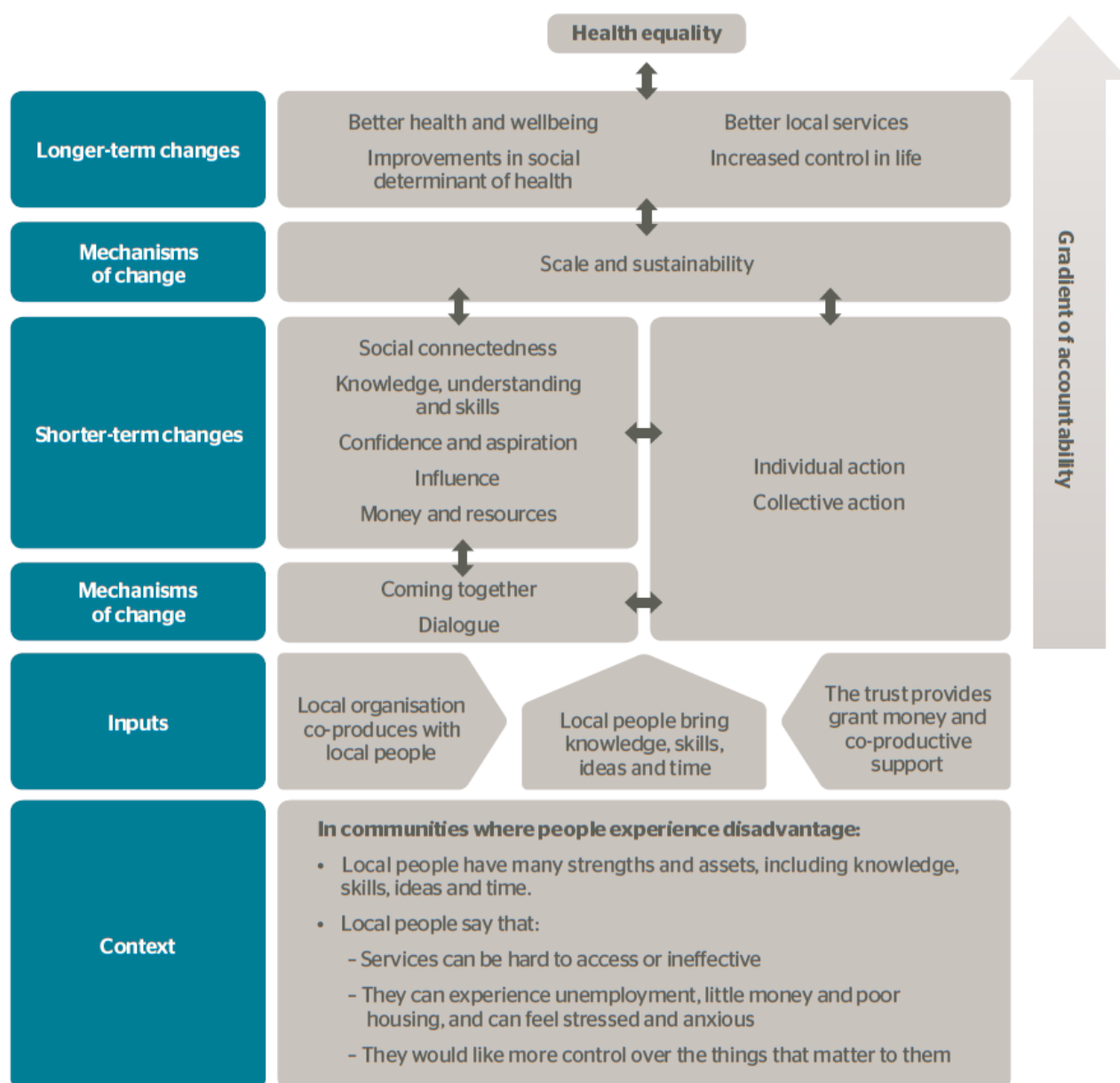
The expectation is that these outcomes will increase the amount of control people have over their lives and neighbourhoods, both individually and collectively.

Control is a key driver of improved health and wellbeing, both individually through increased opportunities and choices, and collectively as a driver for increased power over the conditions impacting health at a neighbourhood-level.

The relationships between collective control and health are both direct and indirect.[4] When communities collectively make or influence change, they may prevent or mitigate risks to health and generate the capacity to do so in the future; build social connectedness, networks and trust; and reduce isolation and distress. This can overcome powerlessness, or lack of control, which increases stress and has adverse health and wellbeing effects.

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[4] Whitehead, M., Orton, L., Pennington, A., Nayak, S., Ring, A., Petticrew, M., Sowden, A & White, M. (2014) *Is control in the living environment important for health and wellbeing, and what are the implications for public health interventions?,* Public Health Research Consortium

Figure 1: Local Conversations Theory of Change

Health equality	

Longer-term changes

Better health and wellbeing

Improvements in social determinant of health

Better local services

Increased control in life

Mechanisms of change

Scale and sustainability

Shorter-term changes

Social connectedness

Knowledge, understanding and skills

Confidence and aspiration

Influence

Money and resources

Individual action

Collective action

Mechanisms of change

Coming together

Dialogue

Inputs

Local organisation co-produces with local people

Local people bring knowledge, skills, ideas and time

The trust provides grant money and co-productive support

Context

In communities where people experience disadvantage:

- Local people have many strengths and assets, including knowledge, skills, ideas and time.
- Local people say that:
  - Services can be hard to access or ineffective
  - They can experience unemployment, little money and poor housing, and can feel stressed and anxious
  - They would like more control over the things that matter to them

Gradient of accountability

Prior research NEF have undertaken has expanded on the mechanisms through which action on the social determinants develops, outlined in Figure 2. This indicates it is a dynamic process that requires specific material conditions and capacities to be developed,

with collective control the key driver for action and change.

Figure 2: Dynamic model of collective control
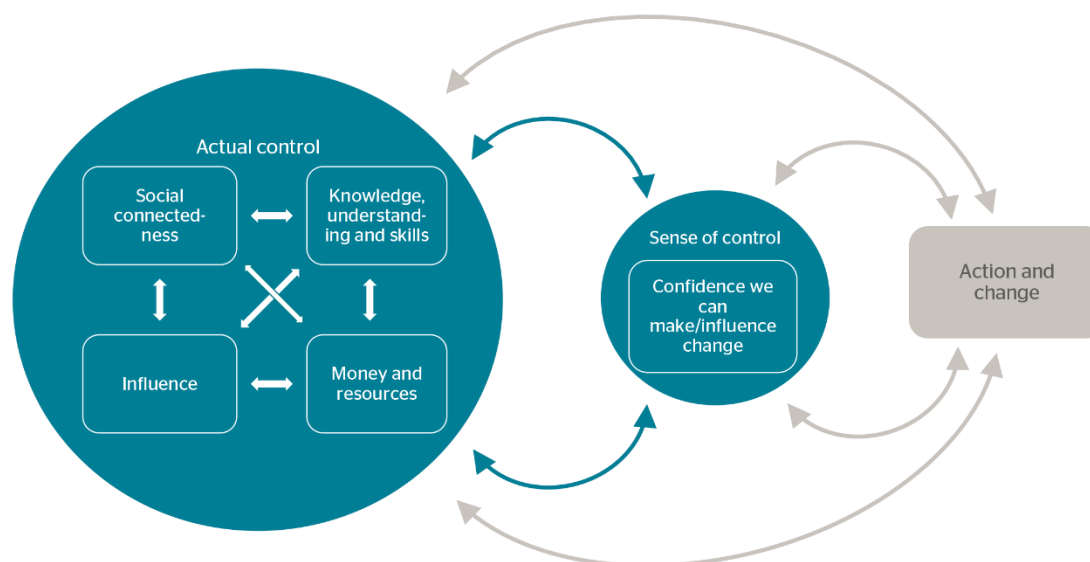
Key process findings

Four years of data collection have provided in-depth evidence detailing how Local Conversations operate and have developed at the local level. This section focuses on aspects of the process by which residents come together, engage in dialogue and decision making, and take action.

Enabling factors

There are five key elements of the process by which the Local Conversations operate that are particularly enabling:

- Strong steering groups made up of local residents;
- Dedicated project leads;
- Physical space for residents to get together;
- Community-led ethos;
- Investment in residents' skills and leadership development.

Most Local Conversations have established resident-led steering groups, which have strengthened year-on-year. Steering groups are the primary means through which residents regularly convene and engage in dialogue and decision-making. They help develop residents' skills and confidence, as well as enable residents to feel a sense of ownership over the

projects. Steering group members are more likely to have been involved with their Local Conversation for two or more years, and almost all members feel more influential in developing their Local Conversation than those residents volunteering or participating in activities. In many areas, local resident-led subgroups also emerge to take forward specific pieces of work and provide opportunities to develop skills, confidence and capacity.

In addition to strong steering groups, having paid and dedicated staff members is crucial for two reasons. First, it helps ensure continued momentum, structure, and leadership, especially when residents are unable to fulfil their responsibilities due to physical or mental health issues. Second, having paid staff helps cultivate relationships and build trust, on both an individual and community level. During the Covid-19 pandemic, staff were pivotal in supporting the transition to online and socially distanced activities, as well as identifying ways to reach out to and support more vulnerable members of the community.

Having a dedicated physical space for residents to gather (for example, community hubs or centres, and lead organisations' offices) is another key enabler of progress in the Local Conversations. A defined and

dedicated space for Local Conversations' activities gives the project a focal point. This creates opportunities for informal support for residents from staff and peers, as well as collaboration with other local organisations and services. It also supports local people to get out of the house and go somewhere where there are other people to spend time with and where there is no pressure to spend money. This has a positive impact on residents' mental health, social connectedness, and confidence, which directly contributes to the programme's desired outcomes.

Across case study areas, staff and residents have commented on how the Local Conversations programme is unique in its resident-led approach, which seeks to empower residents to build control and take collective action. While the community led ethos is widely valued, there is also a recognition that a truly resident-led programme does not establish itself rapidly and is not without its challenges. Staff across case study neighbourhoods highlighted that building trust and confidence between the lead organisation and residents takes time. In this respect, the relatively long duration of the Local Conversations programme is beneficial.

Finally, investment in residents' skills and leadership development also enables the progress of the Local Conversations. While a focus on developing residents' leadership skills is widespread, some Local Conversations also invest in residents' broader skills with a view to supporting their path to employment. For example, the Local Conversation in Govanhill has offered a comprehensive employability service since 2018, consisting of tailored support with CVs and interviews, as well as bespoke English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes.

However, many neighbourhoods experience profound structural challenges such as a local labour market lacking secure, well-paid and good quality jobs. These systemic issues undermine the potential growth and sustainability of the Local Conversations. Staff in some neighbourhoods feel that without an economic boost and an increase in employment opportunities for example, residents who have been empowered by the project will not have the opportunity to transfer that empowerment into tangible outcomes, such as gainful employment and a decent income.

Barriers

Barriers that the Local Conversations have faced include:

- Austerity and worsening economic conditions;
- Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying restrictions;
- Disillusionment, apathy, and mistrust;
- Residents' complex personal circumstances;
- Difficulties in engaging residents and deepening participation;
- Staff morale and burnout;
- Interpersonal conflicts;
- Lack of clarity over financial and budgetary processes.

The UK's worsening economic situation is deepening the levels of disadvantage in Local Conversations neighbourhoods. Over the past decade, austerity has led to an entrenchment of social, economic, and regional inequalities.[5] These increasing inequalities, alongside cuts to government spending and real cuts to people's incomes, have led to health deteriorations and have significantly contributed to a decline in life expectancy, particularly for those living in areas of high disadvantage.

Residents across Local Conversations neighbourhoods have suffered heavily during the Covid-19 pandemic,

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[5] Marmot, M., Allen, J., Boyce, T., Goldblatt, P. & Morrison, J., Institute of Health Equity, The Marmot Review: 10 Years On, (2020).

which exacerbated health and other inequalities. Lead organisation staff have spent significant amounts of time and energy supporting residents with their urgent needs. As a result, delivering beyond that can be a challenge. Moreover, continuing restrictions on personal mobility and social gatherings undermined the very essence of the Local Conversations approach, which is to bring people together to act collectively to take control of their lives. This is outlined in greater detail in reports the Trust has published on funded partners' experiences of the pandemic.[6] Resident disillusionment, apathy and mistrust towards local authorities, programme staff and other professionals working in the area have also been barriers for the Local Conversations since the programme's inception. Although residents across all funded neighbourhoods recognise and appreciate the positive impacts of their Local Conversations, they do not feel there has been substantial change in other areas (for example, good local jobs and services). Negative experiences of engaging with local services and local authorities can also leave residents feeling sceptical about the potential of the Local Conversations to elicit any

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[6] People's Health Trust, Working alongside local communities responding to COVID-19 (2021)

meaningful change when the structures that sit around it remain unyielding.

High levels of socioeconomic disadvantage within Local Conversations neighbourhoods mean that many residents experience instability and complex problems that hinder their ability to engage. This partly explains why many Local Conversations struggle to deepen the level of participant engagement within the local population. Often lead organisation staff find that they need to put considerable effort into supporting residents with personal challenges often associated with poverty and poor mental health before they are in a position to even consider getting involved with Local Conversations activities.

As socioeconomic conditions have worsened due to Covid-19 and ongoing restrictions, the pressures on residents, and therefore on staff, have only intensified. The risk of staff burnout and low morale, concerns raised throughout the evaluation, have heightened during the pandemic. Difficult interpersonal dynamics among residents and Steering Group members also remain a challenge in some neighbourhoods. This can stem from strong personalities, residents' limited experience of community work, and overdependence

on a small number of leading individuals to run activities.

Finally, residents and staff find the bureaucracy around financial and budgetary processes confusing, cumbersome, and frustrating at times. Projects have struggled to strike a balance between putting processes in place to ensure financial oversight while also enabling residents to have autonomy over how they choose to use the funding. Residents need time to understand and appreciate the need for check-and-balance processes; staff need time to understand how to make oversight processes as straightforward as possible.

Key impact findings

This section discusses the impacts of the Local Conversations, framed around the Theory of Change outcomes and additional outcomes identified through the evaluation.

From 2019, residents involved in the Local Conversations were increasingly achieving a number of shorter-term outcomes identified in the Theory of Change, compared to previous years. However, Covid-19 has significantly affected all projects and its ongoing impacts will likely pose barriers to achieving

the longer-term outcomes. However, there remains strong evidence from the 2020 case studies, staff survey, residents' survey and beyond that the programme is achieving the majority of the shorter-term outcomes. These are:

- Increase in social connectedness;
- Increase in knowledge, understanding and skills;
- Increase in confidence and aspiration;
- Increase in influence;
- Increased access to money and resources.

Increased social connectedness

Since the programme's inception, Local Conversations funded projects have organised a wide range of events and activities (for example, litter picking, community gardens, CV support, IT training, religious and cultural festivals) to provide residents with opportunities to come together regularly. These events and activities are popular, well attended, and the main mechanism through which residents meet other people, make new friends, and increase their social connectedness.

Targeted outreach to specific demographics, including cohort-specific provision (for example, youth clubs or activities for women and girls), has been an effective way to diversify participation in some Local Conversations and this has improved over time.

The community ties put in place and strengthened by Local Conversations have been a crucial lifeline for residents throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic derailed many attempts that emerged in 2019 to influence those in power locally, and lockdown restrictions meant that many activities and events ground to a halt. Despite this, many projects remained busy, with lead organisations launching various emergency relief efforts to support local people (food deliveries, translation of public health messages, and telephone buddy systems, for example) and were able to rapidly respond due to the strength of social networks in place as seen in Figure 3 below (2852 responses).

Figure 3: Local Conversations residents' survey, connection with neighbours

How often do you chat to any of your neighbours, more than just to say hello?
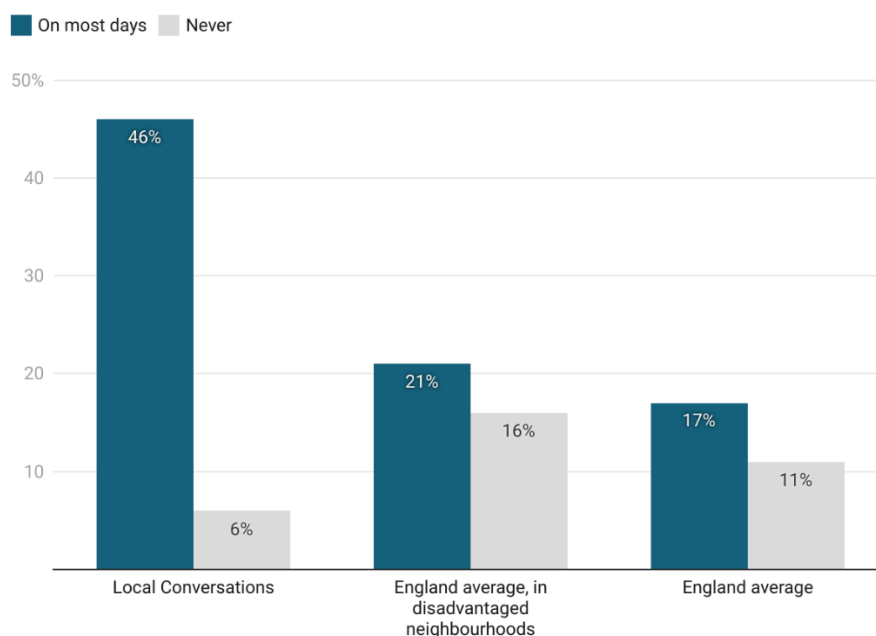
■ On most days ■ Never

Chart: People's Health Trust • Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-20, New Economics Foundation; Community Life Survey 2018-19. • Created with Datawrapper

It is unclear what the long-term impacts of Covid-19 and further lockdowns will be on social connectedness in Local Conversation neighbourhoods, although project leads were key to ensuring Local Conversations were there for residents and acted as a vital hub for social connections to be maintained as the pandemic took effect. While the pandemic has significantly impacted Local Conversations, staff and participants immediately took action to support vulnerable residents in crisis. While core activities had to take a back seat and centres had to close, the strong social connections and sense of agency the programme has

developed were observed to create a lifeline for many residents.

Increase in knowledge, understanding and skills

Residents have improved their knowledge, understanding, and skills across different domains (for example, new hobbies and leisure activities, leadership and community development skills, and employability skills) through participation in Local Conversations. Consistent with previous years, the majority of residents' survey respondents in 2020 (62%) either agree or strongly agree that their Local Conversation has helped them develop and learn new skills. Findings from case studies and the residents' survey suggest that those who assume greater responsibility in projects and/or have been involved for a longer period of time (for example, Steering Group members and project leads) experience a greater increase in knowledge and skills development. This infers a relationship between the depth of participation and strength of positive outcomes.

The residents' survey findings demonstrate that Local Conversations are actively improving residents' confidence. 65% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that their Local Conversation has made them feel more confident. In the 2017-2018 survey

waves, 18% of volunteers reported the project had helped increase their confidence; this almost doubled to 33% in 2019-2020. As with knowledge and skills development, steering group members were most likely to agree or strongly agree that the Local Conversations programme has made them feel more confident (78%), followed by volunteers (68%), and participants (66%).

Increase in Influence

Compared to the first two years of the Local Conversations evaluation, there were promising developments in 2019 demonstrating that across case study areas, Local Conversations were increasingly attempting to influence those in positions of power locally. According to 2019 staff survey responses, 14 out of the 16 Local Conversation neighbourhoods at that time attempted to influence those with power locally, including local councillors, local MPs, and decision-makers in the NHS.

Despite residents' increasing attempts to influence local decision-makers, there are limited examples of tangible changes as a result – possibly impacted by COVID-19. The case studies illustrate that projects have been building residents' capacity for influence

primarily by developing good relationships with other local organisations and increasing residents' engagement with local decision-makers. These are precursors to influence and have enabled incremental gains across various projects.

Increased access to money and resources

The staff survey and case study findings indicate that the programme has helped organisations secure additional money and resources for lead organisations, Local Conversations and other local groups, as well as money and resources for individual residents. The average amount received was between £192,000 and £216,000 per Local Conversation lead organisation. The community-led approach of the programme and the ethos of working with residents seems to be a model that works, helping to draw attention and approval from potential funders. One Local Conversation achieved an additional grant of nearly £800,000 for work in another part of the city they were based in due to the strength of their Local Conversations work. Besides money, projects have also succeeded in acquiring other important resources, such as space for meetings, activities, and events.

Several Local Conversations have tried to help individual residents secure more income, through work or benefits. For example, the Local Conversations in Lozells and Govanhill have well-established employability services to help residents with their CVs and to prepare for interviews. However, in the absence of broader structural changes in the labour market and the economy, employability support services alone are unable to increase residents' access to well-paid and secure employment.

A key unintended negative outcome of the Local Conversations programme is that many projects have stepped in to fill gaps left by retreating local authorities and local services. Many residents have benefitted from the services provided by Local Conversations. Overall, however, when responsibilities for meeting needs are shifted from the public sector to local communities, the results are too often patchy, precarious, and burdensome for residents – a concerning reflection of the long-term harm that can be inflicted by austerity and a retreating state.

> *'Several projects have supported residents with issues around welfare, immigration, Universal Credit, and Housing Benefit. Though this has been valuable for residents, especially during the pandemic, it illustrates an unintended negative outcome of Trust funding, in which residents take it upon themselves to provide vital services that have disappeared from the local area.'*

New Economics Foundation, Local Conversations evaluation

Wellbeing outcomes

Figure 4: Local Conversations residents' survey, neighbourhood-level trust

Thinking about people in your neighbourhood, to what extent can they be trusted?

▪ Some or many can be trusted ▪ A few or none can be trusted

Local Conversations

| 72.9% | 27.1% |

England average, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

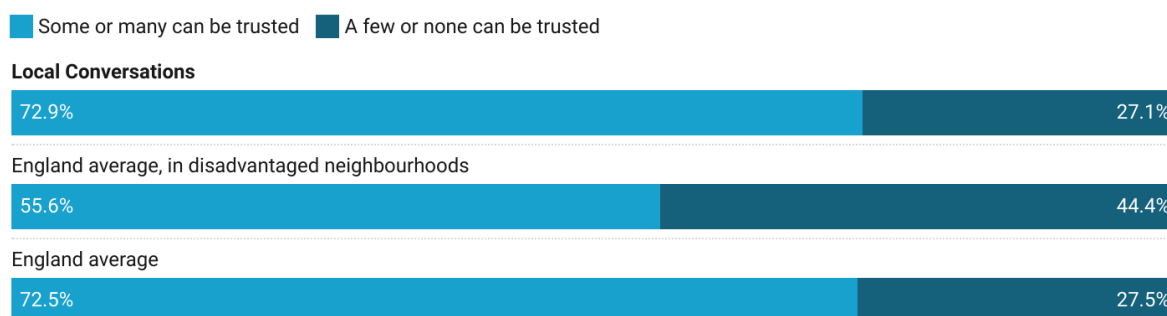| 55.6% | 44.4% |

England average

| 72.5% | 27.5% |

Chart: People's Health Trust • Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-20, New Economics Foundation; Community Life Survey 2018-19, Cabinet Office • Created with Datawrapper

There are also positive impacts for those who are involved in terms of their sense of connectedness (Figure 3), trust (Figure 4) and belonging (Figure 5) which are all highly correlated with wellbeing and are an essential foundation for the wider transformation of neighbourhoods.

Figure 5: Local Conversations residents' survey, Sense of belonging

In your immediate neighbourhood, how strongly do you feel you belong?

■ Very or fairly strongly   ■ Not very strongly or not at all

Local Conversations

| 81.0% | 19.0% |

England average, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

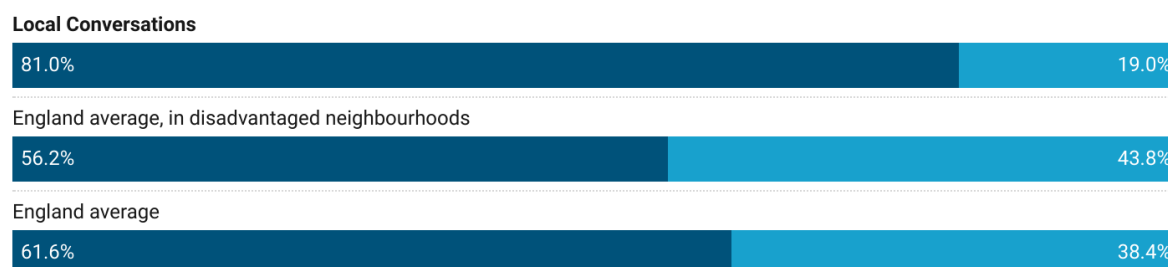| 56.2% | 43.8% |

England average

| 61.6% | 38.4% |

Chart: People's Health Trust • Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-20, New Economics Foundation; Community Life Survey 2018-19, Cabinet Office • Created with Datawrapper

Those involved in Local Conversations report levels that are much higher than would be expected in similarly disadvantaged areas and even to England averages in some cases (Figure 6). Considered together, these are very positive shorter-term changes and a strong foundation for community-led transformation.

Figure 6: Local Conversations residents' survey, Connectedness, trust and belonging

Connectedness, trust and belonging

◼ Local Conversations ◼ England average in similarly disadvantaged neighbourhoods ◼ England average

How often do you chat to any of your neighbours, more than just to say hello?
On most days, or once or twice a week

- 74.1%
- 49.3%
- 51.2%

Thinking about people in your neighbourhood, to what extent can they be trusted?
Many can be trusted, or some can be trusted

- 72.9%
- 55.6%
- 72.5%

In your immediate neighbourhood, how strongly do you feel you belong?
Very strongly, or fairly strongly
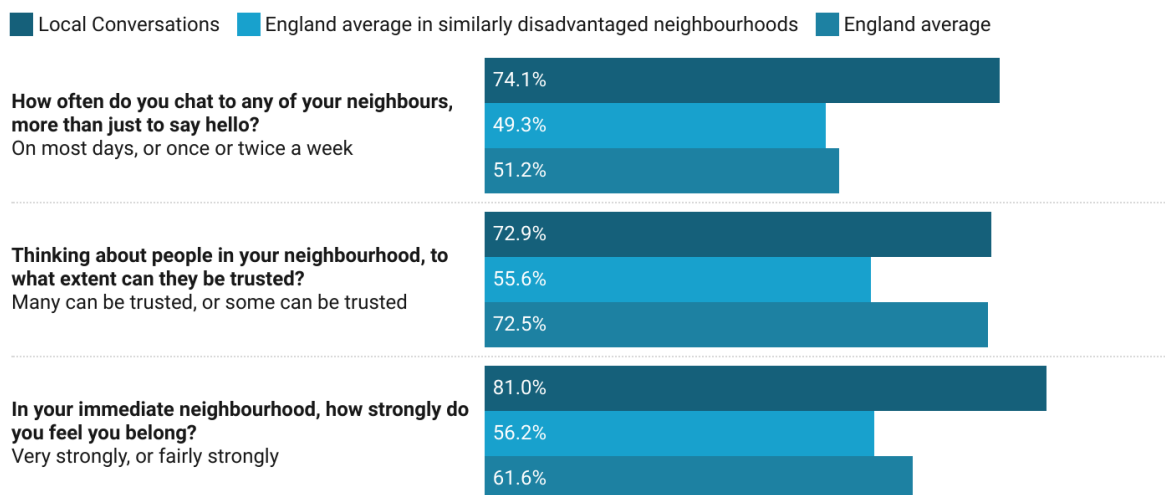
- 81.0%
- 56.2%
- 61.6%

Chart: People's Health Trust • Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-20, New Economics Foundation; Community Life Survey 2018-19, Cabinet Office • Created with Datawrapper

Longer-term outcomes

Many of the longer-term outcomes in the programme's Theory of Change have not yet fully materialised. This is mainly because four years is not enough time to achieve the scale of change outlined in the theory of change, and many of the aims will require working with other partners to co-produce the outcomes. The efforts of Local Conversations must be supported with wider systemic change to drive these ambitious outcomes.

This section does not seek to measure how well the Local Conversations programme has done against the longer-term outcomes, but rather, map where things stand in relation to each of these outcomes:

- Increased control in life
- Better local services
- Improvement in the social determinants of health
- Better health and wellbeing.

Control in life

Control has been recognised as a critical determinant of health by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for nearly four decades. The work of Professor Sir Michael Marmot in the UK has consolidated the importance of control in his work exploring the roots of health inequity since 2010[7]. In the WHO's words, '*people cannot achieve their fullest health potential unless they are able to take control of those things which determine their health*'.[8]

This means that if people do not have control over conditions that fundamentally impact their health including access to affordable and secure housing, a local environment that includes safe public and green spaces, access to good jobs that pay at least the real Living Wage and a local economy that is responsive to local needs and builds community wealth, then they

[7] Marmot, M, et al., Fair Society, Healthy Lives (2010)
[8] World Health Organization, Ottawa Charter (1986)

will experience negative impacts on their health. Building individual control supports better opportunities and choices that will impact health, while building collective control supports collective action through community power to influence these wider determinants of health at a neighbourhood level.

Local Conversations has been successful in building both individual and collective control. In general, residents report increased feelings of control in life. Significantly more Local Conversations residents agree that people in their neighbourhood pull together to improve their neighbourhood (76%) than in similarly disadvantaged neighbourhoods (47%) and in England as a whole (58%), indicating they have gained an increased sense of collective agency from being involved.

Figure 7: Local Conversations residents' survey, To what extent do you agree that when people get involved in their local community, they can really change the way their area is run?

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'When people in this area get involved in their local community, they really can change the way that their area is run'

■ Definitely or tend to agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Definitely or tend to disagree

Local Conversations

83%		13%	4%

England average, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

50%	34%	16%

England average

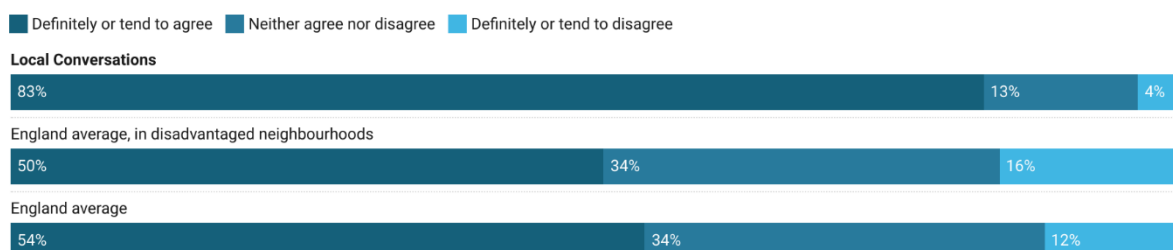| 54%	34%	12%

Chart: People's Health Trust • Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-20, New Economics Foundation; Community Life Survey 2018-19, Cabinet Office • Created with Datawrapper

Local Conversations residents are also much more likely to agree that when people in the area get involved in their local community, they can really change the way the area is run (83% compared to 50% in similarly disadvantaged neighbourhoods and 54% in England as a whole), demonstrating the strong sense of agency built through this approach.

Improvement in the social determinants of health

Gaining a sense of individual and collective control is critical to health but the everyday conditions residents experience – the social determinants of health - will fundamentally influence their health outcomes. While residents may feel connected and in control of their

Local Conversations, many do not feel an increased sense of control over these material conditions in their lives that could improve their health and wellbeing (for example, over housing conditions, gainful employment, or transport infrastructure).

Evidence from the case studies suggest that the increased confidence, sense of ownership, and empowerment that residents have gained from the Local Conversations are potential precursors to increased control, but it is clear that this may not always translate into wider action on the social determinants.

However, residents and staff across all case study areas spoke of how instrumental Local Conversations have been in improving the reputation of the local area among residents, local authorities, and local organisations.

Increased positivity and pride in the local area are important because they help to raise residents' aspirations. Action on improving the local environment has been critical in achieving this, demonstrating that improvements in targeted social determinants can result in the kinds of neighbourhood level changes to people's wellbeing that the programme aspires to.

Better local services

This reflects findings from the case studies, residents' survey, and staff survey that local public services are not improving and residents' satisfaction with local services remains low (Figure 8, 2852 responses). The wider socioeconomic and political context has meant that the Local Conversations have not been able to work on improving the availability and provision of local public services. Instead, many have taken it upon themselves to plug the gaps left by retreating public services. While this helps residents in the short term, it means Local Conversations have limited opportunities to influence, strengthen, and improve public services.

Figure 8: Satisfaction with local services and amenities

Generally, how satisfied are you with the local services and amenities in your area?

■ Very or fairly satisfied ■ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied ■ Very or fairly dissatisfied

Local Conversations

| 65% | 16% | 20% |

England average, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

| 67% | 22% | 11% |

England average

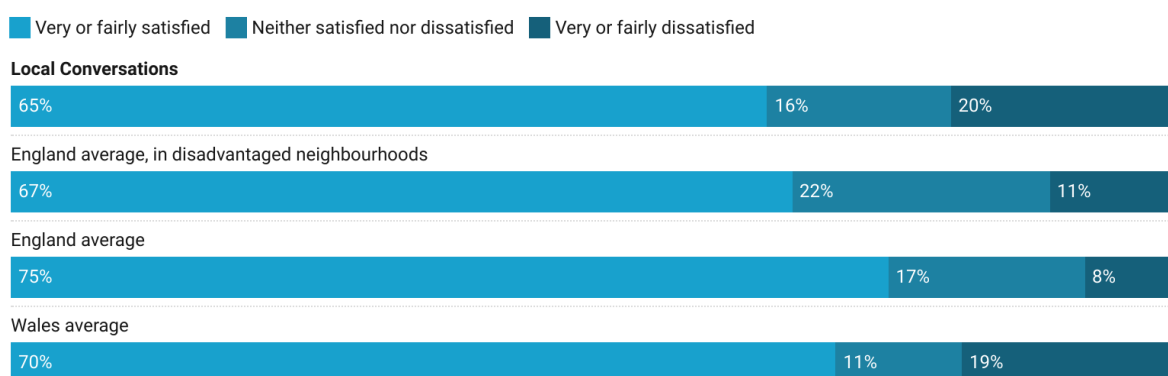| 75% | 17% | 8% |

Wales average

| 70% | 11% | 19% |

Chart: People's Health Trust • Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-20, New Economics Foundation; Community Life Survey 2018-19; National Survey for Wales 2018-19. • Created with Datawrapper

The pandemic has also exacerbated health inequalities and underscored the inadequacy of local services to address them. Staff and residents across case study areas shared concerns that local services will continue to deteriorate due to the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 and associated restrictions, which will in turn continue to have an adverse effect on residents. Without greater and sustained investments in local services from local and national government, projects' efforts will continue to have a limited impact on the quality and quantity of local provision.

Staff across case study areas have seen an increased need for mental health services in particular because of the ongoing impacts of Covid-19, as more residents are experiencing bereavement and anxiety related to job loss, economic insecurity and potential infection. However, staff are concerned that the fundamental lack of statutory services means residents' increased mental health needs will not be met, and therefore population mental health will continue to decline.

Although many Local Conversations have recognised and initiated actions to try and improve social determinants of health in their neighbourhoods, there have been limited changes overall. Projects have had the greatest success in making incremental

improvements to residents' access to quality green space, but quality housing and employment continue to remain out of reach for many.
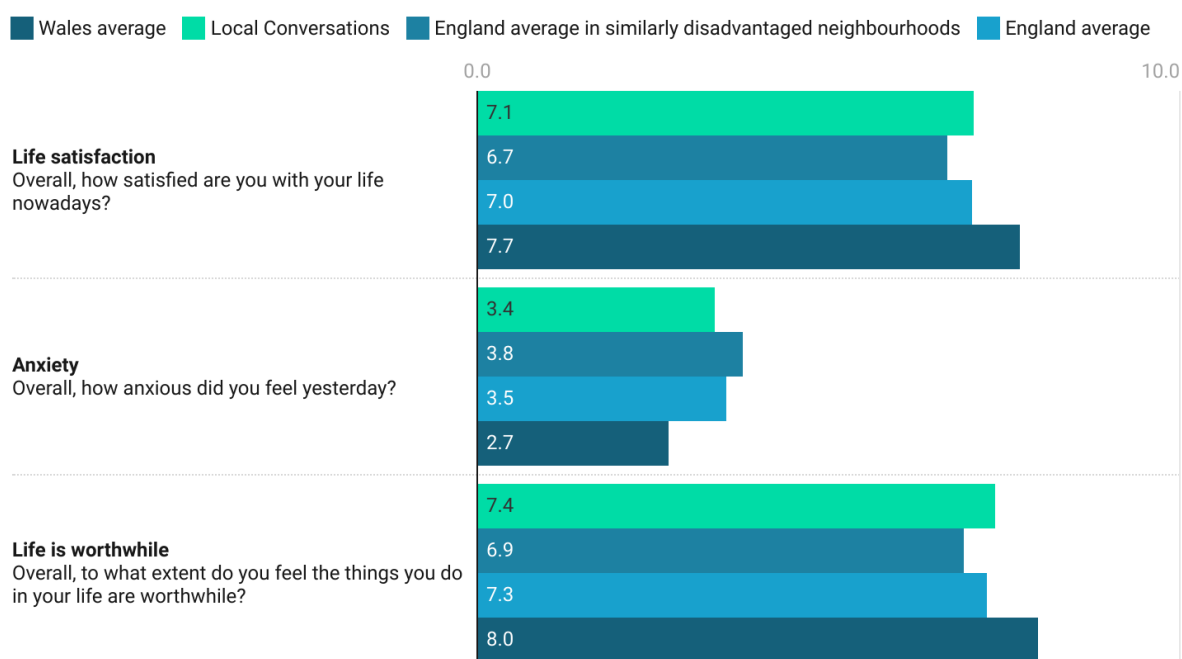
Health and wellbeing

Participation in Local Conversations has been found to support specific aspects of residents' wellbeing, including their social wellbeing (for example, social connectedness, sense of belonging) and personal wellbeing, in terms of their confidence, knowledge and skills, sense of purpose, and sense of control.[9] The residents' survey demonstrates that Local Conversations participants are more satisfied with life, less anxious, and more likely to feel that the things they do in life are worthwhile, compared to averages for both England and similarly disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England (Figure 9).

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[9] Aked, J., Marks, N., Cordon, C. & Thompson, S. (2008). *Five Ways to Wellbeing*. Retrieved from: https://neweconomics.org/2008/10/five-ways-to-wellbeing

Figure 9: Local Conversations residents' survey, Life satisfaction, anxiety and things feeling worthwhile (in comparison to ONS wellbeing questions)

Life satisfaction, anxiety and life feeling worthwhile

■ Wales average ■ Local Conversations ■ England average in similarly disadvantaged neighbourhoods ■ England average

Life satisfaction Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?	7.1 6.7 7.0 7.7
Anxiety Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?	3.4 3.8 3.5 2.7
Life is worthwhile Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?	7.4 6.9 7.3 8.0

Scores are from 0-10.

Chart: People's Health Trust • Source: Local Conversations survey of project participants, 2017-20, New Economics Foundation; Community Life Survey 2018-19, Cabinet Office • Created with Datawrapper

Relative to England averages, Local Conversations residents are also more positive about their neighbourhood and community, indicating that they have positive interactions and a strong feeling that the community can come together to create change.

However, despite these demonstrable wellbeing benefits, Local Conversations participants have consistently reported slightly lower levels of good or very good health than Wales averages, and similarly disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England. Local

Conversations residents were also almost twice as likely to report bad or very bad health (10%) than the England average (6%).

Close analysis of how health has changed over time demonstrates that Local Conversations residents experienced a greater decline in health between 2017 and 2019, which was more prominent among women than men. This is in line with findings from the updated Marmot Review: that austerity has led to a deterioration of health and life expectancy across England, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and especially those in the North of England, over the past decade.[10]

At the same time, it is important to note that it is unlikely that the same cohort of Local Conversations participants have responded to all six waves of the residents' survey. It is possible that Local Conversations have been attracting more diverse and marginalised residents who experience poorer health, and staff surveys supports this. Furthermore, rising rates of obesity, mental health issues, and an ageing population compound the negative impacts of austerity on health, which could also have influenced survey

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[10] Marmot, M, et al., *The Marmot Review: 10 Years On* (2020).

findings. What is interesting is that Local Conversations seems to yield very positive wellbeing outcomes for those involved but these appear to be distinct from an experience of improvements in self-reported health. This requires further research.

Outcomes beyond the theory of change

Beyond those outcomes identified in the Theory of Change, there is evidence of two key additional key outcomes that the Local Conversations programme is contributing to:

- Improved community reputation, positivity, and pride;
- Sense of structure and purpose.

Case study research has revealed that, in addition to experiencing high levels of disadvantage and underinvestment, many Local Conversations have also struggled with a poor reputation locally. This is largely because Local Conversation neighbourhoods experience many of the challenges associated with disadvantage and inequality (for example, crime, high unemployment and poor maintenance of homes). Residents and staff across all case study areas spoke of how instrumental Local Conversations have been in

improving the reputation of the local area among residents, local authorities, and local organisations to overcome stigma. This is particularly positive: a wealth of evidence demonstrates the impact of stigma on individuals and neighbourhoods facing socioeconomic disadvantage, as well as the consequences of inaction.[11, 12, 13]

Across case study areas, it is evident that residents find a new sense of meaning from their involvement with their Local Conversation. For some, particularly those who have experienced long-term unemployment, this manifests as increased structure, as they are now attending regular meetings or fulfilling an ongoing commitment. For others, their ongoing relationship with the Local Conversation enables them to get involved in something that is community-focused, has a wider social purpose, and therefore is more worthwhile.

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[11] Ponsford R, Halliday E, et al., (2018). *Area reputation as an under-acknowledged determinant of health inequalities: evidence from a systems evaluation of a major community empowerment initiative in England*, The Lancet, Meeting Abstracts: Vol 392 (S72).

[12] Halliday E, et al., (2020). *The elephant in the room? Why spatial stigma does not receive the public health attention it deserves*, Journal of Public Health, Vol. 42, Issue 1, Mar 2020: 38-43.

[13] Halliday E, et al., (2021). *'It is surprising how much nonsense you hear': How residents experience and react to living in a stigmatised place. A narrative synthesis of the qualitative evidence*, Health Place, Mar 2021; 68: 102525.

Implications

Findings from this evaluation illustrate the ways local services, such as those associated with education, health and care are vital to the functioning and wellbeing of society and strengthen the case for increased investment in public services to 'level up' after the pandemic. Many Local Conversations have been working towards greater integration in the ecosystem of local services and third sector organisations to strengthen service provision, quality and delivery – with various degrees of success.

Following the onset of the pandemic as well as the conclusion of this evaluation, the Trust has undertaken a programme review to assess how best to achieve the long-term changes within the theory of change. This work has included a stronger emphasis on more systemic ways of working to maximise impact on health inequalities, and an critical focus on work addressing local social determinants of health. The Trust is also exploring the potential of pilot programmes to test ideas and methods to undertake this place-based work through partnerships with public, private and third-sector stakeholders.

These strategic partnerships could help the programme have longer-term impact and embed the incremental gains projects have made, the participatory structures they have created (for example, residents' sub-groups) and the services they have delivered in the places where they operate. This includes embedding co-production in service design and delivery, and may, for example, also include establishing more formal partnerships with local housing providers to try to effectively address residents' concerns about the quality and affordability of local housing.

Local Conversations have created the necessary pre-conditions for on-going co-production in the future. There is great value in the trust and sense of community that has built up between residents and lead organisations, as well as the individual projects and local partner organisations. Crucially, these strong social connections have enabled projects to mobilise rapidly during the pandemic to provide emergency relief for vulnerable residents. The resilience created in Local Conversations is hugely valuable. However, neighbourhoods continue to need stronger local systems and greater emphasis on applying the Theory of Change.

In many areas, Local Conversations have created a strong foundation from which to continue moving towards concerted collective action on targeted and specific social determinants. Residents continue leading the way to build community power based on the success of much of the Local Conversations model. Securing the support and cooperation of local authorities, integrated care systems and other statutory partners remains a challenge to the success of co-productive approaches. The support of all parts of local systems will be required to drive more systemic change that can impact social determinants and facilitate a movement towards greater health equity.