

# Evaluating Local Conversations 2016



**Local Conversations is an innovative funding programme that aims to support communities experiencing disadvantage to come together; engage in dialogue about local needs, assets and aspirations; take action to make their area an even better place to live; and, as a result, increase the control they have over the things that are important to them. The ultimate aim is to help support the empowerment of local residents and, in turn, address health inequalities.**

**The New Economics Foundation (NEF) is beginning a four-year evaluation of the Local Conversations programme. This is one of People's Health Trust's key programmes that aims to tackle health inequalities through addressing social determinants of health. People's Health Trust is funded by the good causes money raised by 51 society lotteries through The Health Lottery.**

**The Trust believes that supporting local communities to take greater control over what happens in their neighbourhood is key to creating new and stronger relationships, improving confidence and encouraging a greater sense of belonging. Common to all aspects of the Trust's work is the desire to ensure that control is in the hands of residents and that local wisdom and assets possessed by each neighbourhood drive what happens on the ground.**

**This report highlights emerging learning from NEF's longer-term programme of evaluation into Local Conversations that will report annually over the next four years. For full details of the reports and to be informed of further research, please use the contact details on the back page.**

# Introducing Local Conversations

Local Conversations provides long-term funding to communities experiencing social and economic disadvantage. Typically up to eight to nine years, the funding supports people to come together and decide local priorities based on their aspirations, and to take action to improve things locally. A local lead organisation helps to engage local people deeply over the long-term. Local people are central to decision-making through neighbourhood events and fora such as steering groups or people's panels. The aim is that the programme will help to make improvements in the local social determinants of health, increase the individual and collective control of local people, increase health and well-being, and ultimately reduce health inequalities.

## The evidence behind the programme - how control improves health

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It is already known that the level of control that a person has over their life is associated with their health. For example, the influential Whitehall II study showed that:

**'People in jobs characterised by low control had higher rates of sickness absence, of mental illness, of heart disease and pain in the lower back.'**<sup>1</sup>

There is also some evidence that health outcomes are affected by the amount of control that residents have over decisions that affect them collectively. Initiatives that aim to promote collective control, for example through co-production and community engagement, have been shown to increase sense of control, self-esteem and self-confidence<sup>2</sup> among individuals, and to increase social capital, social cohesion and social connectedness<sup>3</sup> in communities. All of these outcomes have been shown<sup>4</sup> to have a positive influence on health.

## Evaluating Local Conversations

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The Local Conversations evaluation is an important opportunity to add to the evidence-base around collective control: what it looks like, how it can be facilitated, and what difference it makes for individuals and neighbourhoods. To stay in keeping with the Trust's people-led approach, an evaluation was designed that includes an action research ethos, ensures that local people and organisations have the opportunity to be closely involved in the evaluation, and has the flexibility to respond to and further explore emerging issues throughout the programme's development.

## Evaluation methods

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There are four strands of the Local Conversations evaluation, which will take place over the next four years:

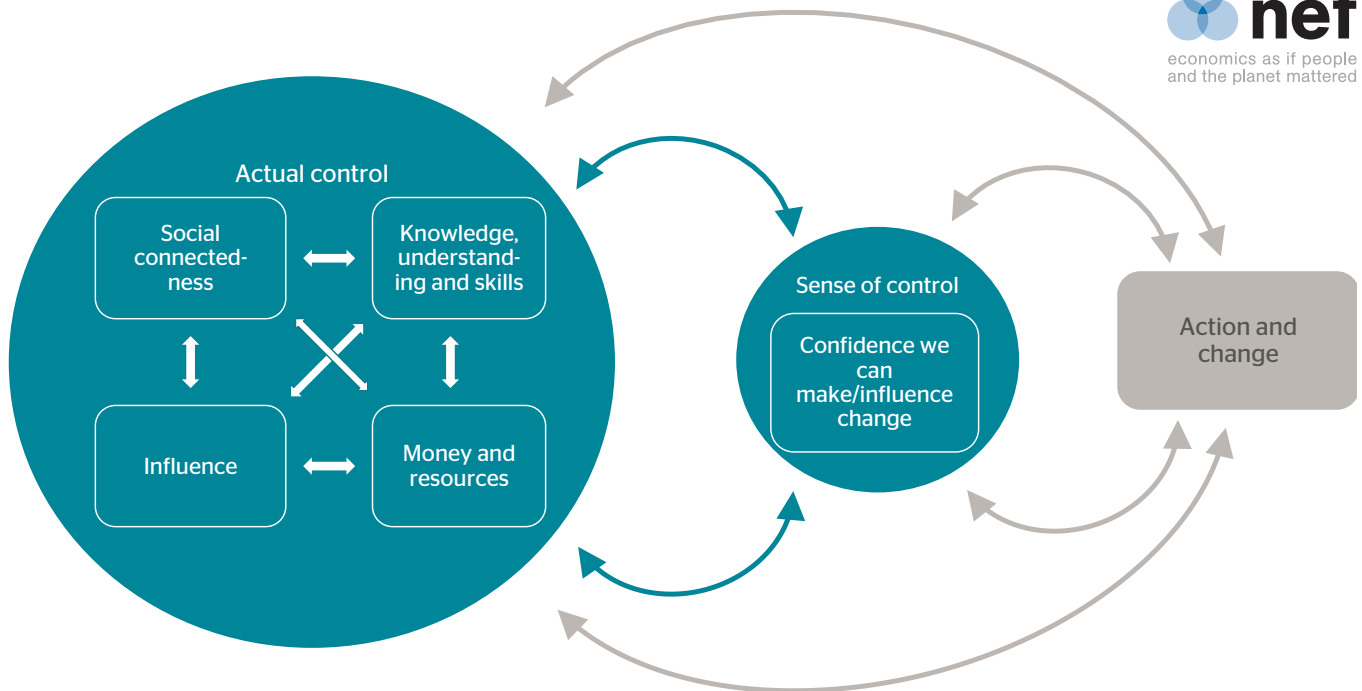
**Strand 1** includes self-appraisal and action research and involves all local areas.

**Strand 2** includes in-depth case study research in five Local Conversations areas, repeated annually so we can observe in detail how local areas change over time as a result of the programme.

**Strand 3** covers surveys of lead organisations and local residents to understand wider changes across the programme and track these over time.

**Strand 4** includes deep dive research and provides flexibility to explore emerging issues in detail as they arise to support programme development.





## A dynamic model of collective control

Based on the existing research into Local Conversations, NEF has supported the Trust to develop a dynamic model that describes the components that make up collective control, and shows how these interrelate. This is based on a review of the literature, a series of in-depth interviews with professional and academic experts on control and health inequalities, and discussions with local people living in neighbourhoods involved in the Local Conversations programme.

This model distinguishes between **actual control** (the external conditions that make control possible) and **perceived control or sense of control** (an individual's belief about how much control is available). NEF's research suggests that control is made up of five components, which form part of the Theory of Change for the programme. The first four components are related to 'actual control' and the fifth is related to a mediating 'sense of control'. The five components of control are:

- **Money and resources** - material assets such as money and places to meet.
- **Social connectedness** - social connections within communities and a sense of solidarity, belonging and trust.
- **Knowledge, understanding and skills** - particularly around local power structures and routes to change.
- **Influence** - over those in positions of power locally, such as the local authority.
- **Confidence** - that the community can make or influence change.

Collective control manifests in social action, and, where genuine control is in place, this results in positive change.

Actual control and a sense of control can reinforce each other in a virtuous cycle. Where both of these are present, this can lead to people taking action and making or influencing positive change in their area. In contrast, where the components of control are very limited, negative rather than positive feedback loops can result. Where an action leads to no change, sense of control can decrease.

Local Conversations aims to approach all of these different forms of collective control together, but particularly aims to support residents to strengthen their sense of control and transform their local areas over time.



# An introduction to the case study areas

The Local Conversations programme is operating in 23 neighbourhoods. In-depth research will be conducted in five of these, with annual visits planned to explore how things change over time as a result of the Local Conversation. Initial research with lead organisations and local residents have given a picture of life in four of these areas. The neighbourhoods will receive further grants in future years to support this long-term relationship.

## Lozells, Birmingham

(supported by **Aspire & Succeed**)

Population: 5,000

Started 25 April 2014

£347,975

Lozells is an inner city area in Birmingham. The Local Conversation area is geographically small and densely populated. The community includes people from a range of ethnic groups – most prevalent are more established Bengali, Pakistani, African Caribbean, Irish and white British communities living alongside more recently settled communities such as Somalis and Eritreans.

People living in Lozells really like living there and are proud of their neighbourhood. The community is close knit and supportive, and this is seen as a great strength. Historically, the area has had a 'bad reputation', with some stigma attached, but this has been changing over recent years and people expressed pride in living there.

Language barriers can mean that some people are socially isolated and can find it hard to know how to deal with issues such as housing or benefits, meaning that their needs can remain hidden.

There is a need for more employment opportunities and accessible, affordable activities for young people, providing a nurturing, encouraging space:

**'A high number of boys [who attend our football club] have been expelled for misbehaving. A lot feel very disappointed with their schools - a lot of schools like their good kids but it gets worse for the others. They're not naughty, they're just showing off, being one of the lads.'**

Local resident

On the whole, the community is not engaged in taking social action, but this is starting to change as a result of the Local Conversation. Litter and dumping of bulk waste on the streets is a very visible problem in the area, and local people have begun to take ownership of keeping the streets clear of rubbish, with some success.

The Local Conversation project is building strong links with people in positions of power, including through the project steering group and as an active member of Citizens UK.

**The project's priority areas are:**

1. Children and young people.
2. Jobs and money.
3. Place, environment and safety.

## The Roma community in Govanhill, Glasgow

(supported by **Community Renewal**)

Population: 2,500 – 4,000

Started 17 September 2015

£366,078

The Roma community in Govanhill primarily consists of Slovakian and Romanian Roma\*, most of whom arrived in this small urban area around ten years ago. These two groups have little interaction because they speak different languages. Other prevalent local ethnicities include Asian, white Scottish and Irish.

There are strong social bonds within the Slovakian Roma community locally. For many people, all of their social interactions take place within the community, with lack of spoken English cited as a reason for this.

English skills also makes securing employment and accessing services difficult. The community is vulnerable to exploitation by private landlords – and sometimes live in very poor housing conditions – and by employers – since they are commonly employed in jobs that pay significantly below the minimum wage.

Interviewees described widespread and systemic discrimination in Slovakia. Professionals interviewed thought that this history might partly explain why the community engages in little social action: because life is far better in Govanhill, despite some hardships and stigma. The people interviewed did not express any sense of being able to take social action in order to influence larger decisions.

People have a strong sense of aspiration, and interviewees said that good schooling for their children was one of the best things about living in Govanhill. They reported that there were some good services and amenities in Govanhill.

**The project's priority areas are:**

1. Environment.
2. Places to socialise and bring people together.
3. Reducing communication barriers – improving language, literacy and employment skills.

\*This stage of research focused on the Slovakian Roma, who are at present more closely involved with the Local Conversation.

## The Upper Afan Valley, South Wales

(supported by Neath Port Talbot CVS)

Population: 5,257

Started 17 February 2014

£299,868

The Upper Afan Valley is a small community of around 5,000 people living in three villages: Cymmer, Gwynfi and Glyncothrog.

The great strengths of the area are the community spirit of local people and the beauty of the countryside, which attracts mountain bikers. Neighbours are close and supportive and people go out of their way to help each other.

The valley has experienced deprivation since the closure of its mines in the 1960s and 70s, when it lost much of its employment and transport infrastructure.

Many local amenities and services have been closed in recent years. The community has taken ownership of many of these, including sports fields, a library, community centre, and village hall, and there is the prospect of the community working in partnership with others to take over the local community swimming pool as well. However, residents see this not as an indication of empowerment, but as a position they have been forced into:

**'We're all at our wits end and most of us wish we didn't have to do it. We do it as a last resort. People don't want to run the pool, we just want it to be there. It's the job of the local authority to run it.'**

Local resident

Residents interviewed described a sense of a deep lack of control when it comes to large-scale issues affecting them, such as poverty, lack of employment, lack of services, and very poor transport.

A new wind farm is expected to bring substantial income into the area, and influencing how this will be spent may be an opportunity for the Local Conversation project.

**The project's priority areas are:**

1. To support anchor voluntary organisations to develop sustainable community facilities and services.
2. To support voluntary activity in the Upper Afan Valley through a community-led small grants scheme.
3. To link and access to activity in the local natural environment.
4. To link communities and activities through improved transport.

## Netherfield, Milton Keynes

(supported by Community Action: MK)

Population: 1,594

Started 24 March 2015

£367,009

The Netherfield estate was one of the first housing grids to be constructed as part of the Milton Keynes new towns project. Housing is spacious, and Netherfield has plentiful green space. However, houses are becoming run down, which is affecting aspirations for the neighbourhood. A planned regeneration project is causing anxiety among residents and undermining people's sense of control.

Netherfield is a friendly place to live and people help each other out. There is a lot of community activity locally, and a strong residents association. However, many of the community activities are attended by the same set of people, and they have struggled to reach out to the broader community.

**'Sometimes, you've got all the same people going to the events. And sometimes you see the same people going to the community groups because you've got the time and you're committed. It's not a clique, but we need to broaden out.'**

Local resident

Local services and amenities have dwindled over time, meaning that residents have to leave the local area to buy essentials. However, there are no bus routes through the centre of the estate, which makes getting shopping home difficult.

There is a community council that has strong links with the broader community. Following previous consultations from the unitary authority, some residents told the lead organisation that they felt that their views did not affect the end result and that plans for the area are imposed rather than controlled by the community.

There has been some political and social action by community members since the Local Conversation started. One resident, who was new to volunteering in the area, kick-started landscaping work on the estate. As well as joining the Local Conversation steering group, this resident was persuaded to run as a councillor during the community council elections.

**The project's priority areas are:**

1. Decreasing fly tipping and improving landscaping.
2. Increasing the number and range of activities for children and young people.
3. Improving communal green spaces.
4. Decreasing anti-social behaviour.

## Key learning so far

**NEF's first visits to Local Conversation areas have found People's Health Trust is proving to be a genuinely different funder. Their observations about the early development of Local Conversations included:**

- Local Conversations is helping people come together and engage in dialogue to support connections to grow, networks to expand and a sense of control to develop.
- Steering groups are giving people real opportunities to make their voices heard, influence local decisions, and make a difference in their community.
- Early outcomes include increased social connectedness, improved confidence and skills, and an enhanced sense of control for those most closely involved in the Local Conversation.

Building a Local Conversation can be a complex process and requires deep engagement to move forwards. NEF's research suggested that:

- Community engagement should be a tool to harness strengths, assets and enthusiasm in the community.
- Community engagement is founded on trusting relationships - and this can take time.
- A low sense of control can make it harder to identify what you want.
- It is important to identify and nurture emerging leaders.
- Power relationships are complex - and important.

## What next?

Working closely with People's Health Trust over the next four years, NEF looks forward to deepening their research across the Local Conversations programme. Specifically, they aim to build on the existing learning to discover more about the development of control within neighbourhoods, and the contribution this plays in transforming other social determinants of health.

The next Local Conversations report will be due in summer 2017. Please get in touch with the Trust to stay up-to-date with the evaluation as it develops. See back page for contact details.



**'I feel a sense of self-worth,  
I feel happy in myself. I've got  
so much more get up and go,  
I've got a spring in my step,  
because I feel it's possible I  
could be making a difference,  
whether it's small or big. I'm  
getting the communities  
together.'**

Local  
resident

<sup>1</sup> Bell, R., Britton, A., Brunner, E., Chandola, T., Ferrie, J., Harris, M., Head, J., Marmot, M., Mein, G., Stafford, M. (2004) *Work, Stress and Health: the Whitehall II Study*. Cabinet Office, London, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> Attree, P., French, B., Milton, B., Povall, S., Whitehead, M., Popay, J. (2011). 'The experience of community engagement for individuals: a rapid review of evidence'. *Health and Social Care in the Community*. 19(3).

<sup>3</sup> Milton, B., Attree, p., French, B., Povall, S., Whitehead, M., Popay, J. (2012). 'The impact of community engagement on health and social outcomes: a systematic review'. *Community Development Journal*. Vol. 47, (3).

<sup>4</sup> Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Layton, J. B. (2010) *Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review*. PLoS Med. 7(7): e1000316. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316.

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