

**‘WE ARE SITTING WITH THE BIG PEOPLE NOW’
FINAL REPORT ON THE PSE’S PILOT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
PROJECT IN NORTHERN IRELAND
(MARCH 2012 - AUGUST 2013)**

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1. Northern Ireland pilot: Summary¹

1.1 Inputs

PSE support and resources provided and work undertaken in collaboration with CFNI and CIA partners: March 2012 – August 2013

- Collaborative process (Queens and OU)
- Engagement project design/development and management (OU)
- Academic support and Northern Ireland expertise (Queens)
- Focus Group workshops training for Community practitioners (Queens)
- Guidance on focus group question sets linked to PSE research (OU and Queens)
- Digital recording equipment and first round of transcripts (OU)
- Storytelling, evidence sharing and film-making community workshops (OU)
- Ad hoc technical support with FG recording, digital media production and media management (OU)
- CiA/ PSE Community webpages linking local findings to PSE research, text editing and digital dissemination via the PSE website (OU)

1.2 Collective findings and outcomes

Resources and findings

- Focus group discussion transcriptions from 8 communities on questions sets linked to the PSE Survey forming a rich knowledge resource
- Community webpages created on the PSE website to share individual and collective findings: www.poverty.ac.uk/community/northernireland/communities-action
- 3 communities have produced films based on local research (more are planned)
- 2 CiA / CFNI reports on findings have been produced
- CIA presentation held in the long gallery Stormont
- SPA Conference presentation
- PSE Research Working paper
- Academic papers (pending)

Capacity building and empowerment

- New skills and capacities amongst low income groups and practitioners
- Wider community participation in research projects

¹ This is a collaborative engagement project linked to an existing CFNI run project, Communities in Action. As such this report documents the collective outputs and impacts emerging from this collaboration, from the perspective of the PSE engagement team.

- Basic community research toolkit

Longer term Impacts

- Strengthened academic and community partnerships
- Greater understanding of benefits of research
- Greater awareness of PSE project amongst grassroots groups
- Increase in academic/ community knowledge exchange
- Increase in awareness of local needs to create tailored projects
- Increased public profile and 'amplification of voice' of local communities
- New lobbying role in public policy debates and greater political participation

2. Overview

As part of our commitment to encouraging public engagement, stimulating debate and informing policy, the PSE sought to develop new approaches to engaging with grassroots lobbying groups, community practitioners and people directly affected by poverty and social exclusion. In particular the OU engagement team was keen to develop an approach to support community research to amplify these stakeholder voices and promote community engagement with the PSE's national research and PSE website, through the use of digital media tools.

2.1 The collaboration: PSE, CFNI and Communities in action

Between April 2012 and August 2013 the PSE ran a pilot 'community research and data collection' engagement project in collaboration with the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI)² and 8 local community groups in Northern Ireland³.

PSE team members involved in this pilot project include: Gabi Kent, PSE community engagement lead (Open University) and members of the PSE Northern Ireland team, Mike Tomlinson, Grace Kelly and Paddy Hillyard (Queens University).

The pilot project was designed to support an existing 3 year community research programme, *Communities in Action (CiA)* set up and run by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) in 2012 to: 'chart experiences of deprivation, disadvantage, poverty and marginalization and to ascertain the impact of the proposed changes to welfare on people's lives'⁴.

In total 8 Catholic and Protestant community groups located in areas of high deprivation (rural and urban) participated in this collaborative project including a total

² CFNI is an independent charitable grant making trust which supports work in areas of deprivation and with disadvantaged groups across Northern Ireland. CFNI funding for the Communities in Action project has been supplemented the BBC's Children in Need Trust. For more information see www.poverty.ac.uk/NI-communities-in-action/ or www.communityfoundationni.org/ accessed May 26th, 2012.

³ Participating CiA Community groups are: Grace Women's Development LTD, Ardoyne, Belfast; Cregagh Community association, Belfast; Donegall Pass Community Forum, Belfast; Doury Road Development Group, Ballymena; Taghnevan Community Development Association, Lurgan; Lettershandoney District Development Group, Derry; The Villages Together (Bready, Donemana), Co Tyrone; Fountain Street Community Development Association and Springhillpark Community Development Association, Strabane.

⁴ At the end of 2011 CFNI requested support from QUB towards the design of the CiA and advice on appropriate methodological approaches. With the understanding that the CiA would be first and foremost directed by the community groups themselves and guided by issues chosen for their relevance to local communities, a commitment was given to support the process where possible, for the duration of the PSE research study (September 2013). The early stages of the collaborative process between QUB and CFNI coincided with the planned development of a pilot community engagement project by the PSE team based at the Open University (OU). Since April 2012, the PSE team at QUB and the PSE team at the OU have worked in partnership with the CFNI and eight local community groups to support the gathering of local evidence to advocate effectively on local poverty issues. (Source: Kelly and Kent (2013), Project note on community research in NI)

of 60 to 80 participants on low income. Our project entailed working with marginalized and 'hard to reach' communities during a period of unprecedented social welfare changes and increased sectarian tension making this an unusually challenging project.

The pilot phase of this engagement project between the OU, Queens and CFNI was completed in August 2013 and the process and findings documented in a PSE research working paper and other publications. CFNI's CiA programme is a three-year project (2012-2014) and continues using this approach, with support from the PSE team at Queens University, as part of their long-standing collaboration work with CFNI. It is anticipated that the PSE webpages will also continue to be updated on the PSE website.

2.2 Pilot aims and objectives

Our aim was to devise a process, which enables local community groups to conduct research that can be linked with the PSE research findings (Necessities survey and Living Standards Survey). An accompanying aim was to support these communities to have a public "voice" and a wider platform for their work, through for example the PSE website (www.poverty.ac.uk), drawing on the OU's experience in media production and media outreach using digital platforms.

This pilot project also sought to answer a number of questions to inform the development of an engagement model linking local to national research.

2.3 Process

Following a series of meetings between PSE team members, CFNI project managers and community practitioners from March 2012, a process was devised to support local community needs and to make use of resources and opportunities available through this collaboration:

1. Qualitative data collection through 'community conversations'. Training to be provided to local practitioners to enable them to run their own community focus groups. This would facilitate a systematic and sustainable research process using a 'conversation' rather than survey based format. PSE would provide digital recording equipment, transcripts for the first round of focus groups and questions sets tailored to community research needs, which linked to the PSE research methods (Living Standards Survey).

2. Identify and share key individual and collective findings using digital media tools: A sustainable process to be devised, which enabled community participants to identify key themes from their research, gather digital evidence such as photos and produce photo-films. The process would need to: ensure anonymity where required, use accessible technology; and be cost effective. Training through a series of workshops, would provided in the participating communities. Community-produced media could then be used for lobbying and awareness raising and online sharing.

3. Digital dissemination: Local findings to be linked to the PSE's national research project and findings online via the PSE website. This would provide a wider platform

for local communities and amplify local voices. It would also provide experiential data to enrich the PSE research.

2.4 Outcomes

“The development of the collaboration with PSE has brought additional valuable dimensions to the Communities in Action Programme and new opportunities for the participating groups. For CFNI the collaboration with PSE has added greatly to Programme’s credibility with a wide range of audiences including local elected representatives, local and visiting academics, workers in other community-based organisations, NGOs, etc. The PSE website has provided us with a respected platform for highlighting our findings to an international audience. The consistent support by the local PSE research team Queen’s has also added academic weight to our local findings.” *CFNI Communities in Action project worker, Geraldine Wilkins*

This has been a mutually beneficial process and surpassed initial expectations in terms of outcomes⁵. This collaborative process has increased public awareness of and engagement with the PSE research including engagement by a range of grassroots stakeholders and hard to reach communities, directly affected by poverty and social exclusion. Local data provides contextual information for the PSE survey on Living Standards on the website, building a richer picture of the impact of poverty, low income and of welfare and local service cuts, as seen and experienced by those living in poverty in Northern Ireland. The resulting data, in conjunction with PSE research findings, have assisted local groups in their anti poverty campaigns and strategies.

Overview of CIA Outcomes during the pilot collaboration with the PSE: April 2012-August 2013:

- 60-80 participants from low-income communities across Northern Ireland taking part in regular community conversations and focus group sessions. There are plans for new focus groups to be added as of August 2013.
- Numerous CFNI, CiA funded projects created to address local needs, identified through community focus group research
- Digital dissemination of project findings and films through the PSE website and also via you tube and screenings of films to key policy and decision makers including MLA’s, MEPs, local councilors and NGOs at Stormont and locally.

These outcomes are complimented by a range of additional and in some cases, unexpected impacts including: skills and confidence building; peer support and increased community cohesion; targeted interventions based on community

⁵ In early meetings between PSE members, CFNI and CiA practitioners community groups raised a number of concerns about community research and the collaboration such as: trust; lack of community research skills; concerns about levels of local interest in and support for research and how to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. A key point raised by practitioners was that research should be not just for research sake but should to lead to action.

evidence; community empowerment and greater political participation; community led lobbying around poverty issues at local and national level.

3. Impacts

3.1 Scientific impact

This pilot engagement project has supported the creation of new research capacities and skills with low-income communities. This in turn has led to greater community empowerment, active community engagement in poverty research and policy debates, and targeted community projects based on a greater understanding of local needs⁶.

This collaboration has increased the PSE's academic understanding of effective engagement models; the needs of these low income communities when undertaking research; methods and tools to engage low income communities and local lobby groups in poverty research; and the potential of such collaborations to lead to 'meaningful impacts' at an individual, community and national level.

OU/ PSE outputs include: Project note on community research (Grace Kelly and Gabi Kent, April 2013); Presentation and paper on *Community engagement in challenging times*, SPA conference, Sheffield (Gabi Kent, July 2013); PSE research working papers (Gabi Kent, 2013). Journal papers are also planned. Joint papers and community reports are also planned with CFNI in 2014.

3.2 Economic and social impact

At the end of the pilot phase in August 2013, while levels of engagement by community practitioners and local participants has varied⁷, the process overall is widely considered to be a success. This is evidenced through extensive outcomes and impacts and supported by testimony provided by community practitioners and CFNI in project meetings and in impact feedback.

Through this 3-way partnership groups have had their voices amplified and their profile raised, building confidence and skills in lobbying for local needs.

Community groups in areas of high deprivation across Northern Ireland have used their new skills to gather data on local needs and issues. Through the process communities have increased their understanding of how research can be used to

⁶ To assist in evaluating and gauging impacts from this pilot process, semi structured interviews were conducted, by the author, with participating community practitioners in June/ July 2012. In September 2013, follow up feedback was gathered from 3 community group practitioners from Ardoyne, Doury road and Lettershandoney, who took part in community based workshops to analyse their data and produce community films. Quotes from these interviews are included here, with permission. GRACE WDL in Ardoyne also conducted an independent evaluation of their participation in this project in 2012, sections of which were quoted here.

⁷ This is to do with a range of complex external factors.

evidence needs, to design projects, to stimulate debate, to raise awareness and to lobby decision makers.

Groups have also been assisted in their anti poverty campaigns and strategies through the gathering of media evidence and presenting their work to local and national decision makers through digital storytelling. This has proved to be a valuable aspect of this project.

“Support from PSE has allowed groups to acquire practical skills, introducing the groups to accessible techniques for communicating effectively through a short video. As a project worker I too have learnt new skills in the video workshops. Most important for me has been to realise how community groups can be empowered to generate web content of their own and how a two minute film can allow you to convey a message that would otherwise go unheard”. *CFNI Communities in Action project worker, Geraldine Wilkins*

Through a launch event organised by CFNI, participants from the 8 community groups presented a report of their first findings to their political representatives at Stormont. At the event, the Ardoyne group introduced their short film ‘Surviving on the edge’, about the reality of life on low income.

“Having gone to Stormont for the CiA launch in long gallery the group say they want to do bigger campaigns...the film is a great lobbying tool. It is a fantastic way of getting their voices heard and tells the real story.” *Community practitioner, Ardoyne, Belfast*

For the three community groups who chose to make pilot films, this process has had a tangible impact, building local capacities in gathering evidence and sharing research, generating new digital media skills, enhancing self esteem and provided an effective community led lobbying tool.

“The group learned new transferable skill. The DVD (film) was a “brilliant experience”, for some not only was this the first time they used a camera but also the first time they had seen an ipad. They have a great sense of achievement that the DVD (film) is online and easily accessible by others but also that it was brought to Brussels⁸”

An Independent evaluation “Participation by GRACE WDL, Ardoyne in the Communities in Action project” (Campbell, June 2013)

A visiting academic from the University of Pittsburgh noted the capacity of Ardoyne’s community produced film to serve as:

⁸ The local MEP for Ardoyne, Martina Anderson requested to use their community film for a presentation on welfare reforms in Brussels, showcasing the work of the focus group on a European stage

“a policy tool to humanize and personalize the story for those who might change adverse public policies and as a story that speaks to our humanity, sense of justice and community.”

Kathy Buechel, University of Pittsburgh, GS Public and international affairs

Another community group, Doury Road Development Group, used their findings and short film ‘The forgotten estate’, to advocate for local needs with the Minister of Social Development, the NI Housing Executive and local councillors, and to ensure deprivation in their estate is on the political agenda.

“Our film has turned into a strong lobbying tool ... And the feeling it gives the likes of me from the making of the film... it makes us feel good that people see it and we feel it that it really gets the messages across.” *Community Practitioner, Doury Road, Country Antrim*

Practitioners however, also raised the importance of continuing to build people’s capacities and providing support to share the findings and to generating action, as illustrated by Lettershandoney:

“It unified people by doing the DVD (film). But they still have to go home and find the money and then reality kicks them in the teeth. So, there has to be a sustained high to people to get off their knees....”,
Community practitioner, Lettershandoney, County Derry

More broadly, this collaborative process has increased public awareness of and engagement with the PSE research and the PSE website and based on practitioner feedback, has led to greater trust from participating low-income communities. Local contextual data, alongside the key findings of the PSE surveys, have been presented in an accessible format online, for use by communities, pressure groups, academics and policy makers. Through CFNI’s local networks in NI the visibility of the PSE has been expanded.

3.3 Impact testimony:

What has happened as a result of taking part in this pilot collaboration?

“The collaboration brings along expertise and skills and research and particularly access to different resources. Being part to a wider research project means its not just about Ardoyne” *Community practitioner, Ardoyne, Belfast*

“The whole process ...has helped us as community workers to make resources and help available. I would say at least half of the 2 groups are now involved in the cookery on a budget course ... and we are starting another”, *Community Practitioner, Doury Road, Country Antrim*

“I just loved the whole thing of getting people’s voices heard in such a unique way ...Through making the film I found out about gaps in community services and so I

have started writing up a couple projects as a direct result of the whole process”,
Community practitioner, Ardoyne, Belfast

“We are finding out more about people needs and what is going on ... So we can see things we can do to help....’ *Community practitioner, Doury Road, County Antrim*

“We know how people are coping now, it helped us find a baseline and gave us the opportunity to get up to date information from people through having the discussions. It tells the real story... The focus group participants also learned that they could have control over research and that it could help them improve their situations”,
Community Practitioner, Ardoyne, Belfast

“Off the back of the first focus group, we held a public meeting on the estate allowing people to become more aware of the cuts – 40 or 50 people came along. The school endorsed it and we had people from the housing executive came along and they were given advice and questions were asked. At the end people were coming up to me the next day saying I should have been at that meeting. It was a huge success... If we had done it before it wouldn’t have worked’, *Community practitioner, Lettershandoney, County Derry*

“Our group identified issues in the community and have agreed actions to help solve the issues such as we have done things like the *Community Newsletter*. Then recently we ran an event to keep the community informed about the benefit changes - a joint project getting service providers together....It was also a cross community event and about 70 people attended.” *Community Practitioner, Ardoyne, Belfast*

“We had the Minister for Social Development down in the estate to make an announcement on regeneration for the area. ...We invited relevant MLA’s, MP’s and councillors as well as housing executive and council officers... on the day they actually led off with showing the film ... It really set the scene and it will help us to keep the pressure on to make sure the scheme goes ahead. *Community Practitioner, Doury road community group*

“If I am doing a funding application I hope to use the statistics (on the PSE website) to back up the need for the project that I am applying for’, *Community practitioner, Ardoyne.*

Overall comments at end of the pilot

“The tools (our film and focus group evidence) is something we can use as a descriptive picture of what people are suffering and the Queens and PSE findings have a royal seal of approval - with their name it means that it is serious. By being up on the PSE website, by being part of this collaboration means we are sitting with the big people now. We are sitting with reputable organizations so people know we exist now’, *Community practitioner, Lettershandoney. Country Derry*

“Through this project, that was the first time I was in Stormont and I had 2 MLAs walk up to me and shake my hand and say “you are doing a great job” ... we are being noticed. So we are part of the bigger picture.’ *Community Practitioner, Doury Road*

“I would say seize the model. I thought that everyone involved in the partnership

became like colleagues and we all had different skills to offer What we have done so far as a partnership has lead to members of our focus group taking further actions on issues that they have identified through the recorded sessions and for me that is the key in terms of community development...’, *Community practitioner, Ardoyne, Belfast*

3.4 Impacts timeline

- December 2012: A report based on the evidence from the first round of community conversations was produced by CFNI and formed the basis of a written submission to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Social Development on the Welfare Reform Bill in October 2012.
- Feb 2013; Stormont launch: The short film and photographic evidence which evolved from the media based research formed the main focus of the official launch of the CiA in an event held in Parliament Buildings, Stormont, on 11th February 2013. Representatives of the voluntary and community sector, political representatives, charities and other third sector organisations attended the event. CFNI, together with members of the community groups and the OU chaired a question and answer panel. QUB presented the work of the PSE, as part of the backdrop to the research. A community report (In Brief) was produced based on the first round of community focus groups findings.
- March 2013: Ardoyne (GRACE WDL) film screened at a community event as part of the ‘North Belfast Respect Programme’ organised by the Ashton Community Trust, aimed at raising awareness and understanding around a series of themes ranging from conflict transformation to socio-economic deficits. The programme is funded by the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) through the North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme and Belfast City Council Good Relations Unit though the European Union Peace III Programme.
- April 2013: Ardoyne’s short film is screened by the OU at a National housing Federation conference in London, stimulating debate and discussion.
- May 2013: local MEP for Ardoyne, Martina Anderson requested to use their community film for a presentation on welfare reforms in Brussels, showcasing the work of the focus group on a European stage.
- July 2013: CiA webpages including the first set of community findings and short films go live on the PSE website and reach an international audience.
- July 2013: Initial findings from the engagement project are presented by the OU at the SPA conference in Sheffield.
- August 2013: Academic researchers from the University of Pittsburgh visiting GRACE WDL in Ardoyne, view the film ‘a piece of powerful testimony’ and share with students⁹.
- August 2013: A short film by Doury Road CiA, ‘The Forgotten Estate’ which highlights poor housing, area deprivation and its impact on local residents in the Doury Road estate, is presented to the Minister of Social development during a high profile fact finding visit to the area leading to a tour by the minister of the estate.

⁹ See appendix 2

- August 2013 The Federation of Northern Ireland Housing Association request to use the Doury Road film at their conference as an example of having seen it on the PSE website.

Future events:

- 27th November: Coalition on Fuel Poverty NI annual conference - GRACE/ Ardoyne film to be screened
- January 2014 Ardoyne's film on debt is to be screened at the Lord Mayor's Convention on Poverty in Belfast.

Other CiA impacts:

- Community practitioners are using their focus group findings to inform funding applications and devise projects and priorities
- Community research has led to a range of targeted local interventions funded by CFNI through the CiA programme including: Budgeting classes, welfare advice, cookery classes, newsletters, support for stress and anxiety
- Community films produced through the project are used by academics at Queens University for research and teaching purposes.
- Northern Ireland NGOs such as Save the Children, Youth bank and Child Poverty Action Group as well as campaign organisations have been made aware of the work of the PSE/ CFNI collaboration project and the PSE website.
- CFNI and communities have used community findings to ink with other lobbying groups in Northern Ireland and to organise joint actions and interventions for example, around debt and fuel poverty. Follow on initiatives are being developed between two groups, Ardoyne and Cregagh including: Oil/gas boiler free servicing for people aged 60+ - this is going ahead facilitated by CFNI; Engagement with Bryson Energy who want to support the set up of local oil buying clubs (this is currently under discussion between Bryson and the groups).
- This collaboration project with PSE is promoted on the CFNI website and through sister networks.

4. Unexpected and potential future impacts

The combination of different skillsets and resources (CFNI, OU, Queens and community groups) has proved particularly effective in this partnership enabling lobbying, advocacy and impact at community, local, national and international levels.

Community practitioners have used the information they gathered through focus groups to provide targeted response, for example; budgeting classes, cookery classes, welfare rights support, psychological support for stress and anxiety, with support from CFNI/CiA funding.

Participants and community workers cite the process of undertaking research, gathering and sharing evidence as a source of community support and empowerment. Regular community conversations also provide a local forum to discuss poverty related issues and provide both peer support and a mechanism for devising community solutions. As a researcher and practitioner I have learned a

great deal from this unique partnership and been enriched by the process.

Future impacts

'Opportunities clearly remain for the PSE team to work with communities to analyse these findings and to gain further insight into the needs of communities from the perspective of communities themselves ...' (Kelly and Kent, April 2013)

A basic toolkit could be developed for use by other community groups to research poverty and social exclusion in their communities, based on the PSE methodology.

Impact limitations

Collaborations like these can be highly effective but also require constant negotiation and management as well as extensive support and capacity building with community practitioners to build sustainable partnerships.

Building trust and confidence in research, even when community led, is labour and time intensive for all involved. Community practitioners in particular, face a number of external socio political factors can influence the pace and take up or maintenance of these kinds of processes.

Further thought is needed on how to expand public awareness of the project, findings and the PSE website locally in Northern Ireland through PR and media outlets. Additional support may be needed to build confidence amongst community practitioners, in using online resources and PSE research findings.

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