Developing a Children’s Community in the West End of Newcastle: A feasibility study

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DEVELOPING A CHILDREN’S COMMUNITY IN THE WEST END OF NEWCASTLE

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Introduction

This report is the culmination of a series of consultations with local practitioners in the West End of Newcastle to look at the possibility of establishing a Children’s Community in the West End of Newcastle. Children North East commissioned Professor Liz Todd and Karen Laing from Newcastle University to look at the feasibility of developing such an approach in Elswick, Benwell and Scotswood, and what would need to happen to make this a reality.

What is a Children’s Community?

A Children’s Community (otherwise known as a Children’s Zone) brings together a range of existing services in a specific geographical area to work in a co-ordinated way to tackle childhood disadvantage, with a specific focus, from cradle to career across all the contexts in which children live and learn.

All organisations could be involved who provide a service for children and/or their families to enhance their wellbeing (e.g. housing, GP practices, Sure Start, schools, voluntary organisations) ¹.

A children’s community needs several ingredients to make it work:

- A robust assessment of needs
- A willingness to work together

¹ The Children’s Community has been developed by Alan Dyson and Kirsten Kerr (Manchester University) and Chris Wellings (Save the Children) (Dyson et al, 2013). It is based on research carried out by Liz Todd, Karen Laing, Colleen Cummings (Newcastle University) and Alan Dyson and Kirsten Kerr (Manchester University) (Cummings, Dyson and Todd, 2011).

Why a children’s community? Better outcomes, of course!

There is evidence that the Harlem Children’s Zone, on which a Children’s Community is based, has a positive effect on a wide range of outcomes for children and young people. Having a range of co-ordinated interventions and services, it is more likely to meet a range of needs (ie educational, physical health, mental health, social needs). The impact of single interventions can fade. A children’s community avoids this since children can access other services that they need when required (Dyson et al., 2013). There is considerable evidence that children and young people – often along with their families and communities – achieve a range of better outcomes as a result of multi-strand approaches (Cummings, Dyson and Todd, 2011).

Children’s communities are attractive to funding bodies. Instead of funding single areas of need, funding bodies can have increased impact on a whole area and its population. In addition, impact can be to prevent problems arising.
Wallsend Children’s Community: an example

Wallsend is the site of a potential Children’s Community. It includes an alliance of 2 secondaries, 13 primaries, one special school, children’s centres, play services, the FE college, the LA safeguarding team, the police, charities and vocational training. The Children’s Community draws on existing networks such as a learning trust that involves all the schools. Its core strands include: ‘getting things right early’ (language, communication, and parenting); being fit for life (a focus on physical and mental health; and realising aspirations (empowering the community to support children to achieve their aspirations). The costs to run a children’s community may include salary costs for strategic leadership and co-ordination; funding to make good gaps in provisions; the cost of research and evaluation; and seed funding to trial new provisions.

The feasibility study

Karen and Liz have approached the study in several ways, as follows:

- Interviews with 40+ representatives of organisations working in the area, including the statutory, private and voluntary sectors
- An online consultation survey (27 responses)
- Two consultation events (18 attendees)

We explained the concept of a Children’s Community to those taking part and conducted conversations designed to answer three key questions:

1. Is there a willingness and a need for a Children’s Community to be created in the West End?
2. If so, how could a Children’s Community work, in terms of governance, range of organisations involved, and activities
3. What would need to happen next in order to create a Children’s Community?

Data from the consultation has been analysed and presented here.
Can a Children’s Community work in the West End?

There was considerable support for creating a Children’s Community in the West End. It was felt that the time was right, in the face of austerity and substantial cuts, and that a new way of configuring services needed to be found, that made better use of existing resources and was based on a thorough needs assessment, rather than on what ‘has always been done’.

People spoke of a ‘professional heritage’ within the area, of practitioners that had worked in the area a long time, and had extensive knowledge and experience which could be harnessed and co-ordinated. There are many existing networks and collaborations, and ‘horizontal’ working (i.e. across organisations for a particular age range) was felt to be very good in some ways, but what it was felt is needed is ‘vertical’ working, extending these networks across transition points in children and young people’s lives, and across child, youth and adult services. Some organisations have a culture of working to output indicators (such as numbers of clients) and what is needed is a focus on end outcomes for children and young people.

I think, to be honest, even if we didn’t do a children’s community or a children zone, elements of it would absolutely happen anyway. The question, I suppose, would be, does it give people the confidence to, on the one hand understand what their individual contribution to a shared, collective responsibility or ownership of a problem would be, and two, give them the confidence to know that they’re not being missed out, you know, in those important conversations, that, you know, people can, we can formalise certain things. We can formalise equal status, we can formalise shared value, we can formalise a little bit of this, can we collectively describe what the ambition is for a particular community.

It was felt a Children’s Community was a good idea because it has the potential to challenge current service delivery. Existing services and structures are sometimes seen as plugging
gaps or ‘patching up’ rather than being based on the needs of the area, or on what residents themselves want. Some structures were seen as actively working against collaboration, such as payment by results (meaning that organisations retain clients for their own financial benefit). A Children’s Community would offer the chance to have a collective voice on these issues. It could be a larger entity to leverage funding.

Community involvement is seen as very important in this collective voice. There is a feeling that communities in the area have raised expectations of services, following a period of investment in area based initiatives and interventions, and that due to the economic situation at present, these expectations were difficult to meet, and that a Children’s Community could address this, and perhaps more quickly than would be possible without collaboration.

There were a number of challenges outlined, however. Smaller organisations often do not have the capacity to engage fully in strategic thinking, and are thus excluded from usual forms of discussion such as meetings, as they are concentrating on front line delivery. There was also a perception that, although relationships and understandings are getting better, there were still organisations who were hard to engage, or professional groups with negative perceptions of the area, or hierarchical and patronising methods of service delivery. Some trust was jeopardised by recent commissioning methods which meant that funding was distributed to large organisations.

The areas suggested seemed to make sense, although there was the suggestion that deprived parts of Wingrove, Westgate and Fenham were included and ward boundaries are often not the best indicator of how services deliver. It was also pointed out that the area is diverse, with some racial tensions and these communities needed a very specific local response.

It takes a holistic view of the factors which may cause a child to fail to meet their potential. There are many worthy initiatives led by different agencies but to a large extent these focus on a single aspect and operate in isolation from, or with a loose connection to, other initiatives. Hence overall progress on changing the landscape for these vulnerable children is, at best patchy and unreliable, and, at worst, structurally ineffective in bringing about change.

None of these challenges were perceived to be insurmountable, and the support for considering a Children’s Community was almost unanimous in the people we consulted.

To kind of articulate very succinctly what it is that we want to happen with very different jargon, with the outcome being better education, better jobs.
How should a Children’s Community work in the West End?

Much conversation concentrated on what a Children’s Community would look like. It was generally agreed that it should build on the networks that already exist, and build on the strengths of the area, such as a strong and vibrant third sector. Suggestions included a hub for people to sign up to, a wide partnership made up of people with decision making capacity and a locally based structure. It was seen as important that any structure had a strong element of coproduction with young people and other community members, and that a variety of accountability structures should be in place, including an element of accountability to the beneficiaries of services.

It was felt that a Children’s Community would need strong leadership from an organisation or consortium with the role of ‘honest broker’. It was felt that this organisation or consortium needed to be one which had substantial in-depth knowledge of families in the area, and was known and trusted by professionals and families alike. Some suggested this should be a new independent entity, or a combination of small organisations - others that existing large organisations should take the lead. It was also felt that there should be a person, a ‘human face’ to co-ordinate the work, who had a commitment to the area, and experience in multi-agency working. The focus/ shared vision might be a goal that all could sign up to – something like ‘ready for school every day’, ‘getting things right early’ or ‘linking people with opportunities’.

Several key roles or activities for the Children’s Community to concentrate on were suggested, including:

- Becoming a forum for discussion, with new and creative ways to communicate clearly and without jargon, and without conflict
- Developing shared goals and common issues and an understanding of how everyone could contribute to that. This would include transcending professional culture to work openly and collaboratively
- Exploration of effective use of resources. Although this included funding (including ideas of pooled budgets) it was felt that conversations about funding could distract from thinking more widely about resources (e.g. knowledge, experience, space, time, both existing and potential and how they could be best utilised.
- A focus on impact and end outcomes for children and young people and tackling community and family need rather than always being focused on the individual, and becoming a community that values children and young people
- Continual evaluation of effectiveness to aid planning, implementation and delivery of new ways of working locally
- Ways to engage previously under-utilised partners such as local businesses
Several suggestions were made for the kinds of issues that the area needed to tackle including isolation, school attendance, complex family issues, poor mental health, transience, poverty, diet, lack of opportunity or choices, drug and alcohol misuse, poor housing conditions, community tension, community safety, perceptions of crime, and inequality. These suggestions need to be discussed and transformed into shared priorities for action in the context of whole family services. Many said there should be a focus on outcomes based on need, rather than what services currently deliver.

There is a need for a much more co-ordinated approach, a need to identify good practice, prevent duplication, bring extra resources where necessary and for local partnerships to decide how best to use/co-ordinate these resources. The Children’s Zone model offers a vehicle for this to take place it would support the development of an integrated ‘cradle to career’ approach for children, young people and their families working in partnership with education, health, social care, VCS, Police and other key partners agencies.

I think something new would be good to wobble the existing status quo, and almost to give it that focus and kudos that it is something different, you know, it’s not just trying to patch up what we’re doing this is a new thing.
What needs to happen next?

Given the wide interest in the concept of a Children’s Community for the West End, a series of next steps have been identified in order to continue to develop this idea. We invite individuals and organisations working and living in the West End to volunteer to be ‘Ambassadors’ to generate interest in the need for a West End Children’s Community. Then together, the ambassadors will need to do the following:

1. **Trust building.** Continuing discussion in order to build consensus, develop relationships, establish confidence
2. **Robust needs assessment.** Scoping what is already happening in the area, and building on available knowledge and supplementing that where necessary
3. **Strategic planning.** Deciding on a common purpose and shared vision for the future. Identifying the priorities to tackle in the area, and developing a theory of how change is expected to happen to meet those outcomes for young people and families
4. **Find the right partners.** Deciding what role everyone can play, and what and who should take action and in what ways. Involving young people and others in the community
5. **Resourcing.** Identifying the resources available to achieve that vision, and exploring how to harness further resources
6. **Evaluating.** Develop robust evaluation strategies to find what works locally.

Those of us working face to face with children, young people and families, need to put our service users first, we need to put our service users first, we need to pool resources, identify shared goals, stop duplication, and work together better instead of putting personal politics, competition and professional jealousy in the way.

Within those steps, there are also several key issues to consider including:

- Capacity, both in organisations and in the community. Some smaller organisations are key in involving the community, and yet lack the capacity to engage. Community capacity is seen as a strength of the area, and this should be utilised effectively
- Encouraging strategic thinking at all levels and in all sectors
- How to communicate in new and effective ways, including an element of constructive support and challenge
- How to involve local businesses and major organisations – and the community
- The need to think differently about service delivery models
- Prioritising the development of a children’s community – not trying to do everything at once
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Resources

Harlem Children’s Zone http://hcz.org


Authors

Karen Laing and Liz Todd are members of the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching (CfLaT), based within Newcastle University School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences. They have considerable expertise in research, evaluation and project management on a local, national and international basis. The Centre has a strong orientation towards applied research and impact, developed through a range of work exploring a variety of innovations, and is widely recognised as being an effective University partner in developing research-led practice.