
Avoiding Short-Circuits: Taking a 'Thriving Places' approach to consultation

A case study in the Thriving Places series

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Contents

Thriving Places and the case study process	1
Summary	3
Recommendations	3
1. Introduction	4
2. What forms has community consultation taken in Priesthill and Househillwood Thriving Place?	4
3. Results.....	6
4. Discussion and Analysis	7
5. Conclusion	9
6. Recommendations.....	10
7. Discussion questions.....	10
References	11

Thriving Places and the case study process

Thriving Places

Thriving Places is a ten-year commitment from Glasgow Community Planning Partnership (CPP) to combat inequalities and achieve better outcomes for residents in nine neighbourhoods in Glasgow experiencing high levels of deprivation (*Glasgow CPP, 2013. Glasgow's Single Outcome Agreement*). Based on the premise of 'doing with' rather than 'doing to', Thriving Places has a set of integral principles:

- a long term focus on partnership working;
- joint working at a very local community level;
- community capacity building and working with community anchors;
- a focus on co-production between communities and organisations;
- changing the way in which resources are allocated if required; and
- intensive activity to build social capital and empower communities, including making the most of assets in terms of buildings, organisations or people.

Thriving Places seeks the following ten-year outcomes:

- More resilient, sustainable communities, that are thriving, and where people are proud to live;
- Communities have more aspiration and influence over the services delivered in their neighbourhoods; and
- Communities work in equal partnership with providers to develop services for residents.

The Case Study Development Group

Part of the commitment from Glasgow CPP is that Thriving Places seeks to generate and share evidence about promising approaches to combating inequalities and achieving better outcomes. The [Glasgow CPP 2014-15 Annual Report](#) noted that: '*A key task for partners will be to capture, document and share the learning from the first three [Thriving Places] neighbourhoods.*' In 2015 the CPP agreed that What Works Scotland offer a development programme for a small number of practitioners involved with Thriving Places to improve their ability to capture evidence using case studies. Case studies offer an efficient and effective means to evaluate elements of work done, highlighting complexity, nuance and 'real life' contexts to generate in-depth understanding. Case studies do not gloss over complications, so are ideal for learning in the complex context of Thriving Places.

From late-2015 to December 2016, five Thriving Places workers and one community activist worked as a Case Study Development Group, facilitated by [Richard Brunner](#) (Research Associate, University of Glasgow and What Works Scotland) using a collaborative action research model. The group learned about what case studies are and how to do them, and two members completed a case study on an element of work happening in their Thriving Places area.

This is one of those case studies.

It has been produced by **Anthony Morrow**, Community Development Officer for Sanctuary Group in Priesthill and Househillwood Thriving Place.

Avoiding Short-Circuits: Taking a 'Thriving Places' approach to consultation

Summary

- The process of building community and linking people together are vital for successful delivery of Thriving Places outcomes.
- Conversations are fundamental in building community and can be supplemented by other types of outreach events as part of Thriving Places.
- Thriving Places workers should avoid sole reliance on one-off, high-profile outreach events when working with communities.
- Conversations and on-going dialogue are more in line with the ethos of Thriving Places.

Recommendations

- Spending time cultivating relationships of trust with and within the community is vital to the success of Thriving Places.
- Effort should be focused on connecting people to people and so building community.
- This is achieved through conversations and on-going dialogue. It can be supplemented by outreach events as part of Thriving Places.
- If you are planning outreach events ensure they are well-planned and involve the community in their development and delivery.

1. Introduction

I was invited to participate in the case study group by Community Planning South, in my role as Community Development Officer with Sanctuary Scotland Housing Association, actively working alongside the community in Priesthill and Househillwood. This case study compares and contrasts consultation approaches taken in the early stages of Priesthill and Househillwood Thriving Place. It seeks to stimulate thinking about the choices to be made and the opportunities to embody a Thriving Place approach through community consultation and engagement. It proposes taking a conversation-based approach which is compatible with the Thriving Places ethos.

I was actively involved in development and delivery of the outreach events discussed in this case study and also personally carried out the door-to-door conversations. This means that I am well placed to critically analyse both approaches, the results of which are in the Discussion and Analysis section below. The case study is also informed by some academic literature and it also draws on learning from ongoing dialogue with the community as I pursue my community work, and on minutes of the Priesthill and Househillwood Forum.

It is important to note that Priesthill and Househillwood (as part of Greater Pollok) was previously involved in the Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP), an approach to local regeneration that worked to include the community. This sets a context for Thriving Places and Thriving Places partner organisations; because residents remember the SIP, there is a need to be sensitive to that experience when setting up Thriving Places community engagement activities as previous experience had been negative for residents. As Chris McWilliams (2004) who studied the SIP in Greater Pollok in depth remarked:

The paper argues that the processes of community consultation and participation during the early stages of the Greater Pollok Social Inclusion Partnership were woefully inadequate. At best it was tokenistic, and at worst, local people were being 'exploited' to legitimise the policy process.

Respected community development practitioners such as John McKnight and Cormac Russell have for years emphasised the importance of the right approach when working alongside communities, taking time and creating space to stimulate the types of relationships and response that are also of core interest to Thriving Places. As Cormac Russell (2017) from Nurture Development (<http://www.nurturedevelopment.org/>) argues:

Instead of asking how you or your organisation can create more value to/for or with community; ask how you can create more space for community to create what they value.

2. What forms has community consultation taken in Priesthill and Househillwood Thriving Place?

In late-2015, Thriving Places partner organisations suggested to community representatives that running a charrette programme would be a positive start in understanding what the community wanted and needed through Thriving Places. During the charrette process two explicit 'consultation' methods were used, open outreach events and door-to-door conversations.

Timeline of charrette delivery

1. Initial idea proposed to Neighbourhood Forum on October 7th 2015
2. Final application submitted on October 12th 2015
3. Planning meetings for charrettes (including consultant) 1 per week, 21st October – 18th November 2015
4. Househillwood Charrette outreach event, 23rd November 2015
5. Door-to-door conversations, 24th November 2015
6. Priesthill Charrette outreach event, 25th November 2015
7. 'Development Day', 2nd December 2015

Charrette Outreach Events

Two separate full-day events were held on 23rd November (Househillwood Park) and 25th November (St. Christopher's Church, Priesthill). These events firstly provided residents with the opportunity to speak to workers from the area about issues they felt affected community life, but also provided activities for residents to get involved with, including Christmas Wreath making, a raffle, hand massages and rickshaw rides. Hot food and drinks were available all day for those attending. Around 80 residents were engaged to give their opinion over the 2 days. Video of commitments to activity by residents was also made and publicly screened at a later date.

Door-to-Door Conversations

One full day of conversations was held on 24th November, between the outreach events. This was done to reach those who may have not attended the charrette events themselves, and engaged with 7 residents. The length of conversation ranged from 30 minutes to two hours.

To frame the analysis below, it is important to outline the questions that were asked in both approaches:

- What is your wish for your community?
- What is good about it?
- What needs to be improved?
- How would you improve it?
- Who needs to be involved? You?
- What's already been done?
- Where would you start?
- How will you know it's been done?
- Point to a place? Where is the problem worse?

The results from these questions were tabulated by Thriving Places workers and the main recurring themes and issues were considered. Following the charrette outreach events, a 'Development Day' was held for community members, workers and strategic partners to discuss the main recurring

issues and to set-up theme groups that would be tasked with leading on actions that addressed these issues. Theme groups would be made up of both community members and workers.

3. Results

For this case study, the tables of results for both consultation approaches were carefully compared. Alongside the above information this results in the analysis below of the advantages and disadvantages of each method.

Advantages and disadvantages of consultation methods

Charrette Outreach Event	Door-to-Door Conversations
Open event with attractive activities for community	More personal level of engagement
Held in both Priesthill and Househillwood	Opportunity to explore ideas in depth
Good number of participants for time taken (in delivery, although preparation and planning can effect this ratio)	Conversations can be built on in future – specific updates offered and re-engagement through relationships that are built
Range of activities for getting opinions from community (e.g. map, questions, video)	Consistent questions, although with opportunity to talk about other areas of interest without time-pressure of ‘losing’ community member who may be waiting
Partnership working between agencies which is ongoing	Time to focus on community assets and what community can do themselves to improve their situation
Some activity can be immediate – e.g. problem for Glasgow Housing Association tenant was acted on by housing officers present	Deeper understanding of the situation facing the community day-to-day
Community could work directly with architects/artists to capture creative ideas	Building of relationships with community members – trust, respect, shared values etc.
Engaged with children and adults	
Created a visual map of community, informed by the residents themselves	

Table 1: Advantages of consultation methods

Charrette Outreach Event	Door-to-Door Conversations
Self-selecting – if people couldn't make the event, their opinion wasn't gathered	Takes a lot of time to engage with a smaller number of residents
Lack of depth to conversations – not a great amount of personal engagement and time to explore ideas	Only carried out in Priesthill area
Conversations were always grouped into themes, sometimes when this didn't fit particularly well. They were also analysed this way	Large amounts of information can be gathered and is difficult to analyse – especially without demographic information
Different officers asking the same questions could still yield different results – for the community, the experience can be very different depending on who they speak to	Provided only written output to be analysed, no visual or audio output
Not in line with Asset Based Community Development principles – greater focus on what was wrong, rather than what was strong	No engagement with children
Those interviewing can worry about 'losing' a community member who is waiting, rather than concentrating on those they are engaging with at that time	
Very busy during the day with many activities – potentially distracting from the subject	
Requires funding for activities, space hire, refreshments etc.	

Table 2: Disadvantages of consultation methods

4. Discussion and Analysis

As seen above, both methods have a number of advantages and disadvantages which need to be carefully considered when planning community engagement as part of Thriving Places. The outreach events allowed a large number of residents to be engaged in a relatively short period of time but required strict coordination and large investments of funding and time to run. The door-to-door

conversations can be carried out without as much in-depth planning, and with considerably less infrastructure required, but are labour intensive for the individual carrying it out and create in-depth data which can be difficult to analyse.

The outreach events provided the community with a focal point and a visible representation of the commitment from Thriving Place partner organisations which was a great way of raising the profile of the approach within the wider community. However, the flip-side of this meant community expectation was raised, whereby action seemed the next logical step. This has led to a current situation where the community perception following the charrettes is that very little has happened which has impacted on day-to-day lives in Priesthill and Househillwood. This situation was raised in October 2016 at the Priesthill and Househillwood Neighbourhood Forum as:

Residents are also unclear of what benefits came out of the charrettes... the main thing was setting up the thematic groups. There was some concern that the community's priorities might have changed since the charrettes in December last year.¹

From my experience, door-to-door conversations are a low-key starting point for development of reciprocal, long-lasting connections with community members allowing the next-steps to be explored in depth and create a feeling of collaborative momentum. As noted by Robert Stains (2016) who has written widely on the importance of conversation for communities:

Participants seek processes that are characterized by a greater depth of curiosity, trust and conversation.

Thriving Places explicitly states that it will “make better use of existing resources and assets, many of which are already embedded in communities themselves” (Glasgow CPP, 2013. *Glasgow's Single Outcome Agreement*), be they buildings, organisations or people. Physical assets within the area were well-mapped by workers and community members as part of the charrette outreach events, something which was not done as readily in the door-to-door conversations. In terms of people as “assets” to their community, door-to-door conversations allowed deeper discussion about these, and in six of seven conversations those spoken to suggested that they themselves could make use of their skills to benefit the wider community. Although a formal question was included at the charrettes to see what people could offer, time pressures and the more formal setup (with desks, high numbers of workers, councillors, etc. present) created an environment which didn't cultivate promotion of individual skills. It must also be considered that some individuals do not readily speak about their own skills and abilities without feeling they can trust those they are talking to. This takes time.

Delivering an event which is high-profile at a local level and asking questions such as, “What needs to be improved?”, “Who needs to be involved?” and “How will you know it's been done?” can create expectation, which in turn can affect the perception of services in the area if these expectations are not met. This can be unpicked if you have the time to deepen discussion, and the door-to-door conversations allowed this to happen, drawing out what role the community themselves can play

¹ Priesthill and Househillwood Neighbourhood Forum minutes, 06/07/2016

and eliciting a rich amount of information beyond an initial response. Even though the charrette process felt successful at the time and engaged with new people, and whilst several meetings of the theme groups have taken place in the ten months since the charrettes,² the current situation is one where community members can feel that a big event has taken place without much concrete action to follow that has positively affected their lives; this is contrary to the philosophy that Thriving Places is trying to achieve. It is important to note that consultation by its very nature looks at what can be done 'for' a community, placing emphasis on the outsider, whereas conversation can be focused on what is in community control and what they can do about it.

5. Conclusion

As Priesthill and Househillwood have previously been affected by Local Regeneration Plans (such as the SIP), lessons must be learned to avoid a situation where engagement feels tokenistic or exploitative, as McWilliams (2004) previously found. It is now one year since the charrettes took place in Priesthill and Househillwood, a significant period of time in the life of a community. Rightly or wrongly it is perception that counts, and the perception of the community is that work has not moved as quickly as they would have liked, or as quickly as it seemed to promise, following the charrettes.

This case study proposes that to mitigate or even avoid this situation occurring, Thriving Place areas and workers use an approach in which more one-to-one conversations are carried out with community members, avoiding emphasis on high profile outreach events. **Conversations are not really consultation at all, but are the first step in building connections and therefore building community.** They allow a deep understanding of the current situation and allow individuals to define their problems before thinking about how to act upon these – what they can do on their own and what they can do alongside services. From my experience in Priesthill and Househillwood, conversations begin to create momentum rather than expectation at a hyper-local level, whilst exploring subjects in-depth with community members often led to a more pro-active response from community members. This is strongly consistent with the Thriving Places ethos.

There is another important factor for Thriving Places to consider. In Priesthill and Househillwood, the results of the charrettes and conversations are still being used to inform decisions that impact the lives of those who live in the community, despite being a snapshot in time 12 months ago and so potentially not reflective of the current situation. Community life is iterative, organic and changes from day-to-day and as workers we need to be aware of this and work with it. Whilst the charrettes provided an opportunity to raise the profile of Thriving Places within the wider community, it is conversations which allow us to develop the connections we need as workers to successfully serve the community. These connections ensure we support activities and community projects that reflect the situation for those that live there now and are relevant to their changing lives. Thriving Places aims to work alongside the community, and ongoing conversations are fundamental in ensuring this happens. As Robert Stains (2014) reflects:

The sense of community depends on the quality of relationships, and relationships grow from conversations.

² Priesthill and Househillwood Neighbourhood Forum minutes, 05/10/16

6. Recommendations

- Spending time cultivating relationships of trust with and within the community is vital to the success of Thriving Places.
- Effort should be focused on connecting people to people and so building community.
- This is achieved through conversations and on-going dialogue. It can be supplemented by outreach events as part of Thriving Places.
- If you are planning outreach events ensure they are well-planned and involve the community in their development and delivery.

7. Discussion questions

- How do workers take an approach to all aspects of their work that builds real relationships, trust and connections within a community?
- What does a Thriving Places approach to dialogue between organisations and the community look like?
- What is needed to support workers to plan, deliver, record, coordinate and (in collaboration with the community) act on the outcomes of these conversations with the community?
- Is there a conflict between dialogue and action/delivery? If so, how should these be balanced?
- What impact do high profile outreach events have on creating expectation and affecting community perception of Thriving Places?
- If there are outreach events, how do you ensure they are in line with Thriving Places ethos?

References

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