Building Community-University Partnership Resilience

The issue and why it mattered to us

One of the drivers in community-university partnership working is the potential these ventures have for improving social conditions and tackling inequalities. As government directives and local policies have advanced to require the involvement of citizens in policy decisions and services that affect their lives, so too have our expectations of universities expanded. Traditionally, the primary purpose for UK universities has been to deliver good quality teaching and research. Community partnerships and involvement may well have been a by-product of this, but it was not its focus. Increasingly however, many universities have also made efforts to engage with communities and ensure their activities have wider social benefit (Hart et al 2008; Kapoor 2003; Watson 2007). The growth of community-university partnerships, working with concepts of participation, inclusion, knowledge transfer and mutual benefit have been welcomed by community partners, as the activities involved are increasingly contributing to improving public health and quality of life.

However, there is a major capacity issue for community partners to participate effectively both in individual partnerships with university academics, and in the larger strategic policy-making groups that influence and promote good partnership practice. Whilst many academics have the opportunity to support ongoing learning by attending conferences and securing faculty buyouts, community partners rarely network to share their experiences and increase their knowledge base. Funding for their participation has always been very hard to acquire. The current alarming larger context means UK public and voluntary sector funding cuts appear set to make the strategic inclusion of community partners ever harder. Opportunities for community partners to build their capacity together, harness their expertise and consider solutions to the complex issues community-university partnerships face are almost non-existent.

The majority of what we know about what helps and hinders partnership working has been presented for and from an academic viewpoint. This project sought to tap into the views of community partners, learn from their experiences and feed that learning into efforts to influence and improve related policy and practice that could help make partnership working sustainable. It set out to explore the potential to mobilise a network of experienced community partners that could identify and develop ways to create enduring partnerships for the future. By facilitating the meeting of community partners in their own space, to share their insights, capture their collective knowledge and synthesise learning from local initiatives and beyond, the project hoped to build and sustain community partner capacity and resilience.