

Stakeholder Perspectives of TogetherWeCan: Intergenerational Community-Building in Action

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1. BACKGROUND

The potential benefits and ethical drivers to put neighbourhoods and communities at the centre of designing and delivering support has long been recognised in public policy and practice. For example, within public health, building on local community assets is vital for a more preventative and holistic approach that addressed structural health inequalities, and within social care, strengths-based working is embedded in legislation to promote individual and family wellbeing. Despite this emphasis, there are limited examples of successful and sustained community development in action in recent times, particularly those which are holistic (i.e. not related to the priorities of a discrete policy area) and driven by local people (i.e. not developed by agencies with limited opportunity for genuine co-production).

On this basis, the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration West Midlands (ARC WM) contacted TogetherWeCan (TWC) as an example of a long-term, values driven and inter-generational community partnership. The research group wanted to learn more about the approach which was being taken and to explore opportunities for longer term collaboration around researching implementation and impact. As a starting point, ARC WM agreed to explore stakeholder perspectives of TWC to inform the next stage of their strategy and to provide a foundation for future research design. This report provides insights in relation to the benefits for local people and agencies from TWC, and how the partnership is seen to achieve these outcomes.

2. OVERVIEW OF TOGETHERWECAN

TogetherWeCan (TWC) is a long-term community project in Firs and Bromford, run by three local organisations – Worth Unlimited, Open Door Community Foundation, and Firs and Bromford Neighbours Together – working side by side with residents since 2017. Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and Big Local, TWC supports neighbours to work together to make their local area a place where people feel welcome, connected, and able to flourish.

TWC is not primarily about delivering specific projects or services. Instead, staff walk alongside neighbours, helping people to connect, belong and take part, so that long-lasting local change is done with and by the community, not for them. TWC creates welcoming spaces, groups, and events where people can meet others, share what they know and love, and support one another. As confidence grows, more residents step into leadership roles, encouraging others to join in.

In summary, TWC project activity focuses on four main areas:

- **Connecting** – bringing neighbours together through groups, events, youth clubs, green spaces and Places of Welcome.
- **Support** – helping people through life's challenges with practical advice, food support, and youth support.
- **Learning & Mentoring** – offering training and opportunities for residents and volunteers to grow in skills and confidence.
- **Sharing Our Story** – supporting local people to tell their stories and celebrate our neighbourhood.

Further information about the TWC project can be found at <https://worthunlimited.co.uk/birmingham-draft>.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research was undertaken by an independent researcher based at the University of Birmingham. Ethics approval for the research was provided by Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Birmingham.

The process of identifying stakeholders began with the TWC Team identifying a longlist of stakeholders with an understanding of the activities and/or impacts of the partnership. This included those who had been involved in its development ('insiders') and those who were connected in relation to a discrete activity and had less knowledge of its internal workings ('outsiders'). This long list was then shortlisted by researcher to ensure that a mix of roles and sectors were included. TWC Team contacted shortlisted stakeholders to invite them to participate and those who agreed were sent further information and consent details by the researcher prior to an on-line or telephone interview. Interviews were recorded, transcribed by external agency, and then thematically analysed.

In total, 15 people participated – seven 'insiders' (i.e. those who had been directly involved with the development of TWC) and eight 'outsiders' (i.e. external partners who had collaborated with TWC). Insider roles included: Fundraiser, Volunteer, Community Leader, Artist, Independent Consultants. Outsiders were employed within the local authority, NHS, school and charities with their roles including: Regeneration Officer, General Practitioner, Community Development Officer, Social Housing Officer, Community Network Officer, and School Pastoral Lead.

4. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF TWC FOR LOCAL PEOPLE?

Stakeholders identified a range of tangible differences which TWC had made to lives of people who lived in the local area. Central was enabling a greater sense of belonging and pride in being part of the community, and encouraging people to feel confident to share their ideas on how the 'place' could be improved:

"When you look back on what they've achieved, that is a huge achievement for the community groups that have these ideas. The citizens who give the ideas in the first place must feel really satisfied that their ideas have been implemented and listened to." (City Council)

"they've got some very passionate people on board, almost all locals that work and volunteer there. And then even those that aren't from the local area, I think once they get involved, sort of like brought into the local family."
(National Charity)

TWC also provided coordination and practical support in relation to local people turning their ideas into practical actions, and connected them with external bodies which could provide investment and support:

"Volunteers painted it and begged and borrowed things from B&Q like pallets and made things.... is very artistic and she got it all up and running. The gardens are beautiful and what they've found since then is that all the children look after the garden. It's well-maintained." (School)

"Absolutely marvellous with the community members by setting up all the assets. There are lots of different pilot projects happening at the moment and they're all community led." (City Council)

Firs & Bromford is an area of growing diversity through migration of people from different countries and cultural background. TWC was seen to have recognised the importance of welcoming new people to the area and supporting existing residents to see this as a positive contribution not threat to their community. This was facilitated through developing inclusive opportunities for personal connections and mutual support, and holding regular open events for celebration, wider social networking, and creating a sense of community:

"Weekly events here, like the women's group come in, areas from all over, different places, mixture of immigrants and asylum seekers and other things...they use the kitchen and they cook together and they so that kind of thing. So, it's like a homely atmosphere, rather than being in a big hall or something like that." (Community Artist)

“The events that happen during the year, the sort of big summer events and things like that that's often a point where all the different organisations are working together to create something for the community. And they're always really well attended, and you always get quite a big cross section of local people who come along.” (Community Developer)

The physical hub was an important element of creating a welcoming environment, as this was seen to provide an informal and accessible space in which people could feel safe and in which they could seek support and guidance. Being able to see someone in person, rather than virtually, was thought to be vital for those who found difficulty in using digital technology due to finances or technical confidence. The inclusive nature of the hub was seen as particularly important for those who were experiencing a time of crisis such as domestic violence and those who arrived in the area as asylum seekers as they may not feel confident or safe in accessing mainstream environments:

“Because they had a physical presence in the Hub. So patients that didn't do great or didn't do very well with phones or internet and that sort of thing. They could just pop in and they would see a person.” (Primary Care)

“How they prevent the crisis happening because when people come... even from different countries as well, there's a barrier there. There's got to be a safe place for them to go to and to feel welcome. I think the hub is that safe place.”
(City Council)

Alongside developing connections, creating a more welcoming environment and encouraging local agency and leadership, stakeholders saw the practical supports delivered or facilitated by TWC as being invaluable to individual residents and families. These supports ranged from enabling people to understand better options for financial, legal, housing and other supports, organising activity and / or therapeutic groups, and meeting people's basic needs such as decent food and a warm place to live:

“there's lots of opportunities really for patients who didn't really know simple things like what benefits they're entitled to and making sure that they are getting as much economic help as they can do. So they would often set up lots of drop-in centres and sessions for people to go to.” (Primary Care)

“I would hold them up as being an example of being like the top quality this is the way places should be.” (Advice & Guidance Charity)

“This is like a hub where they are literally catering for all ages. They're even catering for the After School Club and the lunch meal for those who are less fortunate.” (City Council)

“They have a mental health men’s group and a women’s group. They have groups for the children like the after-school clubs and things in the holidays. You can go and see if you’re getting the correct benefits. For some families that we’ve had, they’ve needed legal intervention.” (School)

5. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF TWC FOR EXTERNAL AGENCIES?

In addition to the direct benefits for local people, TWC was seen as helping other agencies to better achieve their purpose and duties. Central was the ability of the partnership to facilitate responsible access and meaningful engagement with members of the community. This saved considerable resources and time for other agencies through avoiding the need to create new processes and infrastructure. The involvement of TWC also encouraged local people that the agency involved could be seen as trustworthy and acting in the interests of the community:

“Engagement and development has to gain traction. It has to gain credibility. It has to be a trusted resource. From what I’ve seen, the impression I get is that has been built up over many years. When a commissioner does commission them, like the lottery or the council, that footprint is already there. You’re not building it up from scratch.” (Housing Regeneration)

“working on such a hyperlocal project, it just wouldn’t have worked without them as a local partner and their wider, local partnerships. Because we just wouldn’t have had that trust, we wouldn’t have had the local knowledge, we wouldn’t have had the sort of ready to go engaged audience, especially in that short time frame.” (National Charity)

Alongside facilitating engagement, TWC was seen to hold a deep understanding of the history, assets, priorities and challenges of the community. This was viewed as invaluable to other bodies when seeking to develop a new initiative or adapt a wider policy to ensure that this reflected the interests of local people and built on the existing assets within the place:

“They’ve done our job for us, to be honest. They’ve done a lot of research in the area. They have conquered a lot of gaps. In terms of diverse populations, they literally cater for everybody. Nobody is left out.” (City Council)

“They know their community. They’re more likely to pick things up than more of a formalised service in some ways because they are on the ground.” (Housing Regeneration)

Working with TWC helped professionals to overcome inequitable access to services due to barriers related to cultural appropriateness and language. Being a valued part of the community encouraged local people that it would be safe to access support through the partnership and its Hub, including in a time of crisis such as the Covid

pandemic. Its association with positive activities such as community events and the arts helped to reduce the stigma and labelling which can prevent people from approaching more formal services.

“we’ve noticed that the Covid vaccination uptake was much lower than our sister practice. I think that stemmed from mostly cultural beliefs and that triggered an open meeting on Zoom for anybody that wanted to attend, to go through some vaccine myths. TWC was instrumental in helping me to advertise that, publicise that, being helpful to try to get it out there.” (Primary Care)

“Normally, you get an over-50s club, an over-30s club... or children’s services but they cater for all. My involvement with this group is if they’ve got anybody who needs support, they’ll signpost them.” (City Council)

“A lot of families have a fear of professionals like Family Support Workers, the police and social workers. There’s a stigma around that. Around the hub, there’s no stigma because, to them, they’re real humans living in the real world.” (School)

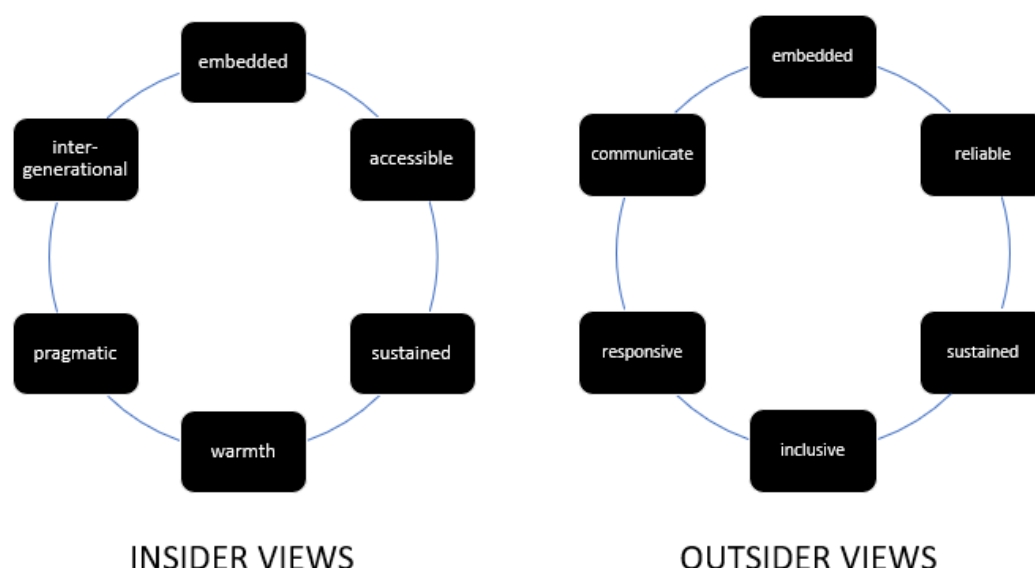
6. WHAT IS DISTINCT ABOUT TWC AS A PARTNERSHIP?

Both *insider* and *outsider* stakeholders had considerable experience of working with community organisations in other areas and whilst these other approaches may have similarities, TWC were seen to be more effective and impactful (Diagram 1). When asked what they saw as being different about TWC, they highlighted its ‘embedded’ nature through the leadership team living in the area and being delivered by local people, the focus on being ‘accessible’ and ‘inclusive’ to the diverse and changing needs of the local populations, and the ‘warmth’ and ‘respect’ which they involved and engaged with local people:

“They’re really embedded in the community .. when you walk in somewhere, you get a feel of it and you can tell just every time I go, there’s people there, there’s people outside, it’s busy, the staff the way that they are, they’re very good at engaging with people, people feel comfortable in that space, it’s a very open space.” (Advice & Guidance Charity)

“They’re the right people for the right job because they all live on the estate. They are people who are very passionate about where they live and having an impact on the families but particularly the children... something to look forward to. There has been very good consistency with the staff.” (School)

Diagram 1: What is distinct about TogetherWeCan?



TWC were also seen as good delivery partners who could successfully move from a shared idea to achieving change. For *insiders* this was related to their ‘pragmatism’ and for *outsiders* through their ‘reliability’ and ‘responsiveness’. At the heart of this collaborative working was an open and respectful attitude to the contribution of partners, willingness to consider new opportunities, and an ability to practically coordinate and implement a project:

“Although very locally focused they still very collaborative with us and let us in and were very welcoming and made us feel part of the initiative. And then that in turn I guess, helped us build those local relationships as well directly with people, which was crucial.” (National Charity)

“Communication was good and clear. If they said they would do something, then they did, which was really helpful. I think the fact that they were so local, they were very, very much based on a few streets in and around our practice which really meant that they had a really firm understanding of our patients.”
(Primary Care)

The emphasis on building local skills through recruiting, training and supporting volunteers and employing local people was also seen as crucial both in terms of growing capacity to deliver projects in the short term and increase the likelihood that these would last beyond the initial period of investment and development:

“Building that sort of wider base of people invested in a project is important, which I think they are doing with building sort of regular group of volunteers that are quite self-sufficient, but I think that’s very key for the sustainability.”
(National Charity)

The final distinctiveness highlighted by both insiders and outsiders was in relation to the long-term nature of TWC and its related activities. This has enabled the partnership to provide a 'sustained' focus on facilitating and supporting the community to build on its assets and to develop a relationship of trust.

7. CONCLUSION

Stakeholders within the public and voluntary sector highly value TWC as a community- based partnership which has considerable value to local people and to their work as agencies. Benefits for the community included being: connected (through engaging people peer-support and inclusive events), welcomed (through safe spaces for new arrivals and those in a time of crisis), belonging (through creating pride in the people and environment of the estate), celebrated (recognising 'unsung heroes' and volunteering) and supported (through responding to practical need and facilitating access to advice and guidance). TWC was seen to assist other agencies to more effectively carry out their work through providing access to the community, having a good understanding of the interests and aspirations of local people, and increasing uptake of services and support which is available. Going forward, stakeholders were supportive of TWC continuing and further developing its offer through providing more consistent reach across the whole of the locality and reflecting greater diversity in its staff and volunteers.