Our Place is all about ensuring that communities and service users can influence and design local services. At the heart of any successful Our Place project there must be a systematic approach to genuinely involving people in identifying issues and solutions and if possible implementing those solutions too. There are many approaches to doing this. Sometimes we talk about community consultation, engagement or development.

This guide introduces another approach – Community Organising. Whilst community organising enshrines many of the same principles of involvement and empowerment, there are some distinct elements which can provide a real boost to an Our Place project that genuinely wants to shift power and build services from the bottom up.
What is Community Organising?

Community organising is the work of building relationships in communities to activate people and create social and political change through collective action. A community organiser starts by building one-to-one relationships with people, builds a network or membership organisation which select priorities and targets for action, nurtures leaders in the community and activates the members of the network to take collective action to create social change.

The target of the action can be the community itself or an organisation which holds the power to make change. For example, the community might tackle the problem of derelict land and eyesores in the area by:

- hosting community clean-ups and guerrilla gardening
- putting pressure on landowners to clean up their land and put it to productive use
- asking the Council to deal with fly-tippers and use compulsory purchase powers to deal with absentee landlords.
- negotiating a lease and starting an urban agriculture enterprise on the land

The critical thing is that the action is planned and led by the community with the support of the community organiser and other agencies where needed.
The community organising process always begins with a series of conversations between the community organiser and local people (residents and workers). These conversations are structured and open. There is no specific agenda beyond asking the person what they care about (their loves and concerns), what they would like to change (their dreams and ideas) and what they are prepared to do (lead, take part, vote, communicate, support).

Unlike consultation, the purpose of the conversation is not to gather ‘data’, but to build trust and create a network of people who are ready and willing to engage and be active. The intelligence from the conversations will be analysed and used by the community organiser and network to help determine priorities and where necessary, provide evidence for campaigns, projects and actions. When the time is right it will also be shared with public service agencies to help influence service design and spending.

During the conversation or ‘listening’, the community organiser is actively challenging individual apathy and encouraging people to think about how things might change and what they can do. From this process, volunteers, leaders and activists step forward. This network that develops should be democratic, accountable and have the ability to speak to power (government, business, agencies) on its own terms about the needs of the community. This contrasts with the more traditional route of appointing ‘representatives’ to sit around a table and speak on behalf of a community, with little accountability.

How can Community Organising help an Our Place process?

The first challenge in any Our Place process is to engage people, especially those that don’t usually step forward and may feel that they have nothing to offer, or that no-one is listening. By going door to door and using their skills in building relationships, Organisers are able to reach people who are unlikely to respond to a leaflet or an invitation to a public meeting. Anyone who responds well is encouraged to bring a group of neighbours and friends together for a facilitated conversation. It is from this dialogue that ideas and solutions emerge and people start to commit to taking action.
Our Place Guide to Community Organising

One of the drawbacks of traditional consultation is that it often encourages us to focus on what we dislike and what we want changed, yet doesn’t ask us what we can do to help change things. In a community organising conversation, people are encouraged to reflect on their own role as a citizen and what they can do to get the change they want. From these conversations people step forward as volunteers, as leaders and as catalysts for change.

We often talk about community engagement as if there is equality of power between members of the community and those who make decisions. This is rarely true.

Communities are not equal partners in the process because they lack resources, knowledge and organisation. A community organising process helps a community to pool its resources and develop leadership and power so that it can be a more equal partner in its own development.

What do Community Organisers do?

1. Go door-to-door in an area and stop and talk to people in places where they go or gather. Engage people one at a time in a structured (and recorded) conversation which uncovers their views and interests about the neighbourhood and local services.

2. Start to form and listen to small gathering of neighbours and friends to meet and talk about their neighbourhood and their ideas for change.

3. Train people in the network to listen to their friends and neighbours as well.

4. Build gradually a network of people who want to see things change and are willing to listen, lead and take some kind of action.

5. Identify leaders who will activate the process, act as spokespersons and get others mobilised.

6. Share the intelligence (the concerns, visions, ideas of the community) with the network and use it to plan action.

7. Support people to take action: to influence, campaign, collaborate, initiate, develop projects and services which will make life better for the neighbourhood.
Our Place Guide to Community Organising

WHERE COMMUNITY ORGANISING MAY CHALLENGE THE OUR PLACE PROCESS

Data-sharing
Whilst a community organiser may be willing to share broad themes and issues at an early stage, they will not share detailed intelligence until they have had the chance to build a network of people in the community who take ownership of the information. Agencies and organisations may have to negotiate to gain access to the intelligence and not assume that they have the right to see it.

Timescales
There are pressures in the Our Place process to produce plans and strategies. The timing may not suit the community and the imperative to meet deadlines may result in a rush to agree solutions that haven’t come out of the dialogue process and are less likely to actually work. Listening should be a continuous process throughout the project to create accountability, feedback and leadership.

Power
The goal of a community organising process is to shift power, not just improve services incrementally or make short-term changes. If the Our Place leaders are not genuinely able or willing to offer more power over resources to the community, then there may be a sense of disillusionment and resentment.
Our Place Sharrow project builds on the successes of the Community Organising programme and will create a climate for building the confidence and skills of local people who are at the heart of the operational plan.

Sharrow Community Forum is a small community–led organisation serving the Sharrow and Highfields neighbourhood of central Sheffield. The project is led by the forum in partnership with two other community organisations. Over a two year period, community organisers and their volunteers have knocked on hundreds of doors and listened to several hundred people in the area. The conversations helped to identify a number of themes which became the focus of the Our Place plan. These were:

- green spaces and local environment
- services for families and young people
- social isolation
- opportunity.

Focus groups were set up to develop ideas around these themes and alongside the conversations and the focus groups, community organisers supported individuals to develop a number of pilot projects and also run several campaigns. This included a campaign to save the Adventure Playground, a community food-growing project, and a project to tackle elder isolation. Around 100 people have been mobilised through the process so far to take action. ‘Love Sharrow’ is a new initiative to tackle local environment concerns. The next stage in the process is an event which brings together service providers with the new projects and action groups, to look at how to develop ‘Love Sharrow’ further. Jonathon Sharrow of SCF says:

“Community organising is a really effective approach to engagement. For us it has been the key to reaching new people and bringing them into the conversation about Sharrow. We have redesigned how we work as an organisation and service providers are now coming to talk to us.”
CASE STUDY
Hastings

Our Place Hastings project puts local people and businesses at the heart of economic regeneration and uses community organising to develop local leadership and power.

The White Rock Trust, based in Hastings, is located in an area described as ‘a small neighbourhood with enormous potential but some challenges’. The key issue that the project is addressing is the lack of footfall for businesses which creates a cycle of decline. When the refurbished Hastings Pier opens in summer 2015, there is an opportunity to attract up to 325,000 people to the area. The plan is to work in innovative ways with public and private partners to improve the ‘flow’ of people and resources to and through the area and to kick start economic regeneration. A Neighbourhood Plan is being developed alongside the project to address planning issues.

The community organisers and volunteers have undertaken systematic door-knocking throughout the area and have grown the membership of the Trust to 405. As well as door-knocking, there were three intensive workshops relating to neighbourhood planning and Our Place, at different days and times to ensure wide accessibility. The idea of ‘flow’ emerged at all the workshops, so the Trust began a series of White Rock Walks, offering an excellent opportunity for ideas-sharing and to build relationships between local residents, businesses and public sector stakeholders. Three key targets have now crystallized:

- Strong community engagement in place-making and destination management that goes beyond consultation and involvement to local leadership and management of services, for both residents and businesses.
- Increasing footfall leading to improved profitability for local businesses, reduction in vacant properties and more employment for local people.
- Locking in affordability for local residents and businesses so that improvements will not lead to displacement of existing local people.

One already tangible result is the that the Trust are working closely with the Council and are about to sign a lease on seven derelict tennis courts and an old pavilion in the White Rock Gardens. These will be used from April to October this year as a focus for discussions about the future strategy for the gardens, which is the next big priority.

Jess Steele of WRT says:

“We are sure that our proposals can provide better value for money for the simple reason that we are adding assets to the process of placemaking and destination management. White Rock Trust has loyal and enthusiastic support from dozens of businesses and hundreds of residents. If we can find ways to work together, to develop a shared strategy for neighbourhood improvement that combines local knowledge, technical expertise, political will and creative input, we can generate far greater benefits for the same public input.”
CASE STUDY

Halifax

Our Place Halifax project aims to address the problems of loneliness and isolation, mainly amongst older people in the area and to start to do this through listening.

Our Place Halifax project is led by the Halifax Opportunities Trust (HOT), a community based development trust in West Central Halifax, West Yorkshire. It was set up by the Park Ward community in 2002 to help open up employment and business opportunities and support children and families. Thirteen years on, it offers this support across the whole of Calderdale.

The vision for project is to make Park Ward a more supportive area for those who feel isolated or lonely and to create a coordinated and sustainable menu of options to address the problem. The plan is to do this by listening to those experiencing loneliness and to develop with partners a stronger infrastructure of volunteering, improved access to existing and new local facilities and opportunities.

The Trust has been working with community organisers for nearly two years now. Listening had already identified isolation as an issue. The first stage of the project was designed to:

• carry out more listenings, especially with older people who would be using new or redesigned services
• to use the community organising process of building trust and identifying leaders to find people interested in joining planning groups
• support people to set up and develop their own groups and projects.

Barbara Harbinson of HOT says:

“If the project was going to be different, I wanted it to start with listening. We already think we understand the needs. But it’s a new area of service for us. We wanted to start from scratch. We wanted the discipline of listening.”

The project has been more challenging than originally envisaged. It has been hard to find places to listen to older people. GPs did not respond well to the idea of listenings taking place in their premises. Nor did sheltered housing complexes. However the community organiser has listened in supermarkets, existing clubs, on the door step, at one GP surgery and one sheltered housing block.
One thing the community organiser has learnt is that people don’t want to be labelled as ‘in need’ of services because of their age. What works best is to go through the usual listening process which doesn’t stigmatise. Once trust is built then they can ask about any issues which particularly relate to age or vulnerability. If someone is very interested, the community organiser will arrange to return and meet a group of friends or neighbours and work with them on an idea or action plan. These can then be fed to commissioners or become self-supporting projects. The Trust is now developing a hub at their Hanson Lane Centre where the community organiser can bring together volunteers and leaders they discover and start developing ideas and designing services.

**Natalie Ratner**, Community Organiser in Halifax says:

“Community organising is not just consultation. It’s about motivating people to get involved.”