

Enabling social action

Methodology



Department
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The *Enabling Social Action* project, a collaboration between the Social Action Team in the Office for Civil Society and the New Economic Foundation, took place from November 2015 to August 2016. Its aim was to develop learning and resources for commissioners and other public sector leaders to enable social action. Many of the tools gathered in this toolkit were produced during the project.

The New Economics Foundation gathered information and insights about how public sector leaders can enable social action from four main sources: 1) desk research and expert interviews, 2) dialogue with our advisory group, 3) a network of 'learning partners', and 4) pilots with three implementation sites. Our methodology for each of these is outlined briefly below.

DESK RESEARCH AND EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Desk research and interviews were used to identify and evaluate existing materials and guidance. The desk research was conducted using the New Economics Foundation's extensive network in local government and with the support of the Office for Civil Society's networks. We interviewed experts who have led research and/or managed grant funds focused on social action approaches (e.g. the Nesta Social Action Innovation Fund, NHS England, Locality, and local authority officers), to understand what best practice looks like.

ADVISORY GROUP

We brought together a range of commissioners and national experts to act as a sounding board for the project as it developed. The group deliberated on key questions emerging during the project, such as the conditions necessary for social action to thrive, the role of social action in managing demand for acute services, and the broader relationship between the state and social action. The group also pointed us to existing resources on enabling social action, helped us identify the gaps in the available guidance, and peer reviewed the tools we developed.

LEARNING PARTNERS

A group of 36 local authorities, 3 clinical commissioning groups, and 4 voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations applied to become learning partners for the duration of the project. These partners were kept updated by email and asked to contribute key pieces of information and example documents (such as service specifications) on three occasions. This network provided us with useful

feedback on important questions, such as: how best to fund social action, how to evidence the impact of social action, when the public sector should let social action develop autonomously, and more. The partners also peer reviewed the tools and guidance we developed throughout the project.

IMPLEMENTATION SITES

From January to June 2016, we worked with three implementation sites in Staffordshire, Islington, and Cornwall, partnering with the local authority in each of these areas, and engaging with members of the VCSE sector as well as with other local commissioners and citizens. We provided each site with several days of training and support regarding social action, co-production, and commissioning, and sought to capture learning about how the public sector can enable social action and the barriers to doing so.

The three examples inform the learning contained throughout these guidance documents. In brief, we worked to:

- Support Staffordshire County Council's ambition to develop a social action strategy, aligned with the recruitment of a new strategic capacity building partner in the VCSE sector.
- Learn from the work of Islington Council and Age UK Islington in developing a tool for measuring the impact of preventative services, and support them to measure the outcomes created by social action as part of this.
- Understand Cornwall County Council's libraries devolution process and think through the role co-production and social action could play in this.

Staffordshire County Council

Our work with Staffordshire County Council focused on supporting it to develop a social action strategy, aligned with the recruitment of a new strategic capacity building partner in the VCSE sector.

The social action strategy was developed from January to June 2016, informed by three workshops with key stakeholders, as well as our learning from across the project. The three workshops engaged with partners in the public, voluntary, community, and private sectors to help shape the strategy. The strategy aims to create active, resourceful communities and outlines four key approaches to doing so. First, Staffordshire Council wants to develop

people who can lead and champion a social action approach at all levels and across the public, voluntary, community and private sectors. Second, it wants to work closely with its new VCSE strategic capacity building partner to create a targeted, preventative social action approach. Third, it plans to change its commissioning model to facilitate more social action projects. Fourth, the strategy outlines how the Council will evaluate local social action projects and draw on existing research to underpin the work.

Staffordshire recruited a new VCSE strategic capacity building partner during the time we worked together. This new partner's role is to support the local VCSE sector to work effectively with residents and the county, district, and borough councils to co-design solutions to local challenges and encourage social action. The partner will work closely with existing social action projects in Staffordshire's district council areas to increase their impact and pilot new activities. Work will focus on four council priorities: Children and Families, Youth, Adults, and Place. We supported Staffordshire Council in defining the role for the capacity building partner.

In addition, we reviewed social action projects underway in Newcastle-under-Lyme and South Staffordshire, providing these borough and district councils with advice on ways to extend and deepen social action in their areas. In working with the districts, we were also able to understand how the countywide social action strategy could be embedded in local practice through effective working relationships between the two tiers, the wider public sector and civil society.

Islington Council

Our work with Islington Council focused on understanding the best way to evidence the impact of preventative social action.

In late 2015, Islington Council commissioned Age UK Islington to develop a co-produced outcomes framework to help it understand and evidence the value of preventative services delivered by the voluntary and community sector, partly through social action. To co-produce this outcomes framework, Age UK held extensive workshops with local organisations and grassroots community groups that undertake social action. Most of these organisations work in health and social care sectors. We participated in workshops run by

Age UK Islington which aimed to test this outcomes framework with small providers and develop a light-touch system for monitoring progress on the outcomes.

We also convened a roundtable bringing together Islington Council, Buckinghamshire County Council, Community Links, and Kirklees Council, to explore the most effective ways to evidence the impact of social action. Participants were invited to share their best practice in this area, and we gathered several examples of effective evaluation.

Finally, we worked closely with one local befriending start-up – Buddyhub – to understand the challenges that providers face in evidencing the impact of the social action they catalyse and support.

Cornwall Council

With Cornwall Council, we focused on understanding how it was devolving the library service to town and parish councils and community groups. We also worked with the Council to think through the role co-production and social action could play in this process, as well as across the Council as a whole.

Motivated by the need to make budget savings, Cornwall Council embarked on a process of finding a different way of running its 29 libraries in 2015. It started with a public consultation that aimed to gauge public opinion on whether libraries should be: (1) devolved to town and parish councils and community organisations; (2) outsourced to a trust, a commercial organisation, or a social enterprise; or (3) opened to alternative forms of ownership and management. Option 1 proved most popular and we joined the process at the stage when 26 of 29 town and parish councils and community groups had expressed an interest in taking on the running of the library in their area.

Our principal aim was to understand what enabled voluntary groups to come forward and offer to run the library, and what held other areas back. We interviewed a wide range of stakeholders, including the head of the library service, commissioners, parish councillors and clerks, and local community groups to answer this question. We found that community capacity – in the

form of motivated, funded community groups – was a key ingredient in areas where community activists were interested in running the library.

We also held a roundtable with a range of commissioners from across Cornwall Council to discuss the role social action currently plays in commissioning, and to identify the opportunities and challenges for extending and deepening this approach.

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At the implementation sites

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Our learning partners

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