Connected Communities

Towards the affordable workhome

A community-based initiative with home-based workers in social housing

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Background

Executive Summary

This interdisciplinary project used innovative Open Space, Participatory Design and Community Journalism methodologies to achieve a high level of engagement with a previously hidden and disconnected community.

Four community-based events were held, at which participants engaged with each other and with a research team consisting of architects, a sociologist of home-based work and a community journalist, to explore the issues that stand in the way of residents of home-based work engaging in home-based work. The Housing Trust partner reversed their policy towards home-based work at the outset of the project, from prohibition to support and encouragement. This provided a secure base from which to run the project. Legitimising existing, and supporting prospective, home-based working social residents, the project contributed to the development of social and economic connectivity and a sense of community amongst a previously illicit workforce. This project has an ongoing legacy in the form of a lively and productive monthly Enterprise Club, an Emerging Enterprise pilot project for home-based workers run by the Housing Trust and a dedicated page for home-based work on the Housing Trust's website.

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Key words

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Introduction

This project was a result of networking and collaboration at the June 2010 Connected Communities summit at which home-based work was identified as an area of strategic cross-cutting interest where further research is needed.

Its aims and objectives were:

- To carry out a baseline study of home-based work in social housing that will add value to previous research on home-based work;

- To contribute to legitimising existing, and encouraging prospective, home-based workers amongst social housing residents;

- To contribute to the development of social and economic connectivity and a sense of community both among social housing resident home-based workers and with other people in their neighbourhoods, thereby reducing social and economic isolation and exclusion;

- To make connections between housing associations in Preston and London, in order to transfer knowledge developed in AHRC and EPSRC funded research projects;

- To develop connectivity between academics from different disciplines working in the same field and enable them make a connection with a housing association;

- To explore spatial and environmental problems raised by home-based work in social housing and involve social housing residents in the development of design briefs for future affordable workhomes;

- The test the feasibility and assess the requirements for a future full-scale affordable workhome prototyping project.

Process

A series of innovative and participatory events were held, in which academics engaged with a community of social housing residents. The project centered on an Open Space meeting on home-based work in social housing. Follow-on workshops included a Participatory Design Workshop, a Business Advice Fair and an IT/Networking workshop. Open Space is a way of holding meetings that means people self-organise. There are no speakers, no set agenda, and timings are loose. The people who come generate the agenda and organise their own discussion groups.

At the start of the project, at our instigation, Newlon Housing Trust [Newlon] changed their policy and standard tenancy agreement with respect to home-based work. They moved from prohibition to support and encouragement, in line with the coalition government's 2010 policy to 'lift the ban on social tenants starting businesses in their own homes'. A letter was sent to 7000 residents informing them of the new policy and inviting them to an Open Space meeting to discuss the question: 'How can we work together to make working at home a real possibility for all?'

More than sixty Newlon residents made contact with the academic team prior to this event to find out more about the project and to talk about their existing, or prospective, home-based work. These included a wide range of largely practical occupations, from childminder or removals man to hairdresser or sushi-maker. Most occupations involved members of the public entering the home of the home-based worker.

Forty people attended the Open Space meeting including twenty-eight residents.

Ninety-two percent of participants were female; seventy-six percent were of black or ethnic minority origin. Participants were confident, communicative and engaged; they raised a wide range of issues relating to home-based work in social housing. 'Diary Room' filmed interviews collected a range of individual experiences of home-based work in social housing.

Thirteen people attended a follow-up Participatory Design Workshop at which they were invited to design their ideal workhome based on the requirements of their home-based occupation. The process was filmed, and material gathered for the development of design briefs for affordable workhomes.

The project originally intended to deliver three community engagement events. However as a need for business advice became apparent, an additional event was arranged that brought participants together with local third-sector business advice providers to discuss a range of issues, from writing a business plan or making grant/ loan application, to Health and Safety issues for childminders or home-based caterers. This was set up as a Business Advice Fair, with participants browsing the 'wares' that were on offer and selecting those that were relevant to them.

The original bid included an event to develop a community website for home-based working residents of social housing. However a concern about the long-term maintenance and funding of this, and the active involvement in the project of Newlon's Enterprise Manager, led to the official Newlon website hosting a dedicated webpage for Newlon's home-based working residents, maintained [and financed] as a part of Newlon's core operation. The IT workshop was therefore redesigned to facilitate Newlon's home-based workers in developing their own websites. Fifteen people attended, and by the end of the workshop there were ten websites live.

Learning from experience in engaging with communities

This project is considered to have involved a successful engagement with a previously disconnected and hidden community of home-based working residents of social housing. The following strategies have contributed to this.

- A letter sent to each resident at the start of the project announced the reversal of Newlon's policy re home-based work. This had a positive impact on existing and prospective home-based working Newlon residents from the start, encouraging engagement.

- The invitation to the central Open Space event involved an inclusive question that encouraged a response from anyone with an interest in home-based work.

- Personal telephone contact was offered with the Principal Investigator; every participant took this up. The development of ongoing one-to-one relationships between research team members and participants encouraged engagement.

- Personal contact was made with a community worker embedded in Newlon's Bangladeshi community. Her support of the project contributed to the high level of community engagement achieved.

- Open Space methodology meant each participant's voice was heard equally; this encouraged continued involvement in the project.

- All events were held in same location, a community centre embedded in one

of Newlon Housing Trust's estates. Participants became comfortable with the location and started to 'own' the meetings, setting up the furniture, making coffee etc.

- Childcare was offered and fares paid, sending the message that the project wanted to make contact with people in economic difficulty and those who had dependents.

- A free hot meal was offered at the Open Space event and home-made cake at the follow-up meetings, prepared by local home-based workers; indicating to participants that the project supported this workforce in practice as well as in theory.

- Filmed 'Diary Room' interviews were popular. They offered each participant a further, in depth, opportunity to have their voice heard, underlining the value attached to each contribution.

- Participatory Design Workshops supported participants in articulating design issues related to their own home-based occupation. By reclaiming a process usually undertaken by professionals, this was empowering to participants. Filming this reinforced the value given to the contribution of each participant.

- A responsive and flexible approach was adopted to the research, which was empowering to participants and contributed to the success of the engagement. When it became apparent that many participants needed business advice, an additional event, a Business Advice Fair, was organised and run. In addition, when it became apparent that the interest and involvement of participants was ongoing, a monthly Enterprise Club was set up and run.

- Networking [involving regular emails, follow-up phone calls, the use of the Facebook page and the Enterprise Club meetings] has contributed to successful engagement. Participants use all these means to make contact with each other and the research team, and vice versa.

The less successful aspects of the project and its community engagement were:

- The research was not designed around people with little or no literacy. The methodology was amended immediately when it was found that 3 out of 28 Open Space participants [11%] were in this situation.

- A lack of follow-up on the IT/ website workshop meant that individual websites have not been developed.

The following issues were identified as relevant to future community engagement projects:

- Care not to raise unrealistic expectations.

- Ongoing commitment to participants requires funding for both researcher and research partner.

- Venue needs to be as close as possible to the target community.

- Long-term management and financing of websites needs to be considered at the outset. Free software packages such as WordPress and the ability to take advantage of the Project Partner's website provide a reliable, free ongoing platform.

Outcomes and potential benefits of the research for communities and other stakeholders'

- Newlon Housing Trust has changed its policy and standard tenancy agreement to encourage and support home-based work.

- The project has legitimised existing and encouraged prospective home-based work in Newlon's social housing. Residents working illicitly, or discouraged from starting businesses, can now work openly and receive support from Newlon in this. It has also increased social and economic connectivity in the previously hidden and disconnected community of Newlon's home-based working residents.

- The project found that current social housing does not generally provide appropriate space to accommodate home-based work, and identified ways of achieving appropriate space.

- An ongoing Enterprise Club has been set up to provide monthly support and encouragement to existing and prospective workers amongst Newlon's residents. New members continue to join.

- Newlon Housing Trust set up an ongoing 'Emerging Enterprise Pilot Project' to provide support identified in this project for their home-based workers.

- A home-based work webpage has been set up on Newlon's main website. It outline's Newlon's support for home-based work and includes a brief introduction to two 'home-based workers of the month' from the project, with links to their websites: *www.newlonfusion.org.uk/news.html*

- A Facebook group has also been set up and is working well, in which members of the group [essentially any Newlon resident who has made contact with the project] can contact each other, share information, advertise events etc.

- Holliss and Wolkowitz are working on a joint article for peer-reviewed journal *Work, Employment and Society* titled: 'Stretched Domestic Space and the New Economy'

Recommendations or plans for future research

- This project is considered to have been an unqualified success by Newlon Housing Trust, participant residents of Newlon's housing and the academic team. Legitimising existing and encouraging prospective home-based work amongst Newlon's residents, it has run a series of community engagement events and set up ongoing structures that are contributing to the development of a sense of social and economic connectivity, and a sense of community, amongst home-based working residents of Newlon's social housing.

- Designed as a pilot, this project offers an effective methodology that has the potential to be tested and refined in other parts of the country and then offered to Registered Social Landlords [RSLs] across the UK as a means to encourage economic activity, and social mobility, amongst their residents. There is a need for housing providers to implement the coalition government's policy to lift the ban on social tenants starting businesses in their own homes; this project offers a tool to enable this.

- A bid was made to the AHRC/ESRC Community Engagement programme to develop this research by expanding the pilot and testing/ refining it through an engagement with home-based working residents of RSLs in urban, suburban and rural contexts in England [Coventry, Dagenham and Cornwall]. This bid was unsuccessful. The academic team is in the process of considering the Anonymised Feedback and deciding whether to resubmit the bid in Responsive Mode.

Open Space Meeting

Participatory Design Workshop

Website and Networking Workshop

Business Advice Fair

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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx