

The Citizens Research Network: Linking Grassroots and Government

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Abstract

The paper outlines an embryonic project that aims to empower and resource residents in disadvantaged areas to undertake their own research (surveys and interviews) in their communities and, through networking these groups, to produce periodic national surveys. In so doing it offers the hope of increased community self-reliance, better research, better quality assurance and exchange of best practice and increased opportunities for such research. The paper outlines which citizens will be involved, how they will be selected and also looks at what types of research might be undertaken. The capacity building process and the methods of validating training and certificating trainees are both discussed. The final aspect of the paper looks at the co-ordination and future development of the Citizens Research Network (CRN). There are several possible outcomes from the efforts currently underway – the most ambitious of these is a sustainable national enterprise that supports and networks numerous local-level resident research teams that are themselves social enterprises. The CRN offers the chance for thoughtful and engaged residents in disadvantaged areas to gather knowledge locally, to share this with each other and to develop better communication channels with Government whether it be town hall or Whitehall.

Key words resident research; disadvantaged areas; community empowerment; social innovation

Introduction

The Mission Statement of the Citizens Research Network (CRN) is that it should be a resident-led network that champions and

supports more research on disadvantaged areas being done by local residents and which gets these findings heard locally and nationally in order to deliver positive change. This statement itself is resident-led – having been designed at the recent inaugural CRN project meeting.

The CRN has two key aspects – the first of which is to empower residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods to do research (surveys and interviews) in their areas. The research addresses issues local people care about, asks them questions in a language they understand and makes sure the research leads to action or, at least, that residents are informed as to why no action has resulted. Empowerment will initially take place through (often unemployed) residents delivering research commissions (hopefully on a trainee wage rate) and providing them with appropriate on-the-job training that leads to a recognised qualification. Longer-term sustainability, at least as a business, will depend on being able to secure research and training commissions.

The second key aspect is the Network itself – to be overseen, initially at least, by the British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA)¹. By different member community research teams collectively designing and (when back in their own areas) conducting the same research, the project offers the opportunity to show central government and others that networked research groups can deliver national findings. This research is particularly valuable because of residents' increased ability to access their own (or similar) communities. More generally the Network can serve as a form of trade association that identifies best practice resident research and promotes such work (for example, by changes in public sector research procurement or changes in benefit rules that affect residents' ability to undertake paid work on community projects).

¹ BURA, formed in 1990, is an independent membership association for the exchange of ideas, experience and information for the regeneration sector. Members are drawn from the private sector, the public sector and the not-for-profit sector.

At time of writing (early November 2006) eleven New Deal for Communities² programmes from across England are working with BURA to pilot the model. Staff and residents from many of these NDCs met with community research experts and others such as the Government-funded Academy of Sustainable Communities in Nottingham in mid-September 2006 – so there is already a degree of momentum behind the process and a Resident Steering Group is now emerging. A Research Advisory Group is being established to work with this Group to devise, cost and timetable a full research capacity building process. A Resource Bank of people willing and able to deliver training locally will then be recruited and a full budget proposal for a pilot project developed. A very large database of invitees has already been created.

As the reader will already be aware this an unusual paper in that it is about a project that is in its embryonic stages. Writing the piece has helped the author to further crystallize one or two key aspects of the project but the main aim for writing the piece is that the readers are exactly the sorts of people that the Network needs to engage with – as advisors or trainers. The author has tried to reflect on what the CRN experience thus far can offer to those interested in the broader yet little understood process of ‘social innovation’. However, since the project is very much at a critical stage the article avoids discussing its evolution – suffice to say this has not always been smooth!

Rationale for the CRN

The Network can address various needs in poorer areas through five main ways. The first of these is ‘*Empowerment*’. This involves giving groups of residents the skills to do research and the rights to do research their communities want. It also involves the right/responsibility to feed the results through to Government (whether it be town hall or Whitehall) and the responsibility to tell

² There are 39 New Deal for Communities (NDC) projects across England. They each have populations of roughly ten thousand and each have some £50m each to spend over a ten year period to improve service delivery in disadvantaged areas. Each NDC has a Board or Partnership on which elected residents are well represented. These make decisions on resource allocation that are then carried out by professional staff.

their communities about how research findings are being acted upon.

The CRN should also provide '*Better Research*' because local researchers are more likely to get access to households due to these households being more likely to know the purpose of the research, how it was devised, what will become of it and who is doing it. Either they will know the researchers or someone who knows them – the researchers will all have their names and streets on a website so that people can identify them. Clearly there may be some sensitive issues where people might be more reluctant to divulge personal details to neighbours than to strangers and there may be some issues where people are reluctant to speak out against their neighbours. The former should not be a problem as the CRN is unlikely to be delving into peoples' personal lives. The resident research teams need to reflect on the latter issue and, if it seems to be a problem, to devise appropriate methods whereby people can make their views on some issues heard anonymously.

A paper by MORI's Regeneration Research Unit (Duffy and Williams 2003) noted, of their work in regeneration areas, that local residents, trained as interviewers, got lower response rates than MORI staff. However, they suggested that this could be due to the former group's lower experience and training. They noted too that locals appeared more reluctant to push interviewees – again this should be overcome where, as would occur with the process outlined here, the whole process is much more embedded in the community regeneration process and where interviewers are aware of the MORI points.

There is also a belief that '*Better (Research) Training*' should result in subsequent years if it is done by residents who have successfully been through the learning process – learning will be between peers (people who are from similar areas and who have 'walked the walk').

The CRN can also have a '*Trade Association*' arm. At present the resident research field is both embryonic and lacking in organisation. The CRN could offer quality standards for resident research, oversee some form of national certification system and create a community of resident research teams. Some of this community have now met for the first time and a formal email mail-

base is imminent. The CRN team also has a large collection of electronic documents on resident research that could become the basis of an online CRN library of materials. The Network could also lobby for policy changes that would make resident research more commonplace.

Lastly, there is the fact that the areas in question are often the recipients of Government regeneration money. This leads to the final benefit of the CRN approach – namely that it can assist with ‘*Localising Money Flows*’. Here the idea is simply that money for research on regeneration programmes and projects is almost invariably spent on academics and consultants from outside the regeneration areas. So, regeneration money could have a larger local multiplier effect if more of such work were conducted by a local resident research team or nationally by networked teams. In sum, it’s about getting more for bang for the regeneration buck.

There should also be collateral benefits which might include greater receptiveness to social science research findings amongst resident researchers, increased soft skills (team-working, problem-solving) and confidence amongst residents, increased informal contacts between resident researchers within and between different areas and better university-community links.

The Citizens

Any resident who is 16 or over can get involved in the project as a researcher. The definition of ‘disadvantaged area’ has yet to be formalised but the aim is to try to focus on neighbourhoods or place-based communities. Neither of these terms have firm definitions although the Government’s use of the terms (in NDCs and Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders) generally refers to areas of between six and ten thousand people. This is further complicated by the fact that official boundaries, particularly where new, can differ from natural/organic neighbourhoods.

The term disadvantaged has also not been formalized. The Index of Multiple Deprivation can be used to identify lower level super output areas (SOAs) that are in, say, the bottom decile of the national IMD and then several of these might be added together to make an eligible area. At present the participating community groups are all in Government regeneration areas thereby

postponing the need to agree a more concrete definition of eligibility.

Ideally the local teams (of between five and ten residents) should be representative of their areas in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. This is because it should increase the chances of accessing and interviewing/surveying the different communities and types of people – for example, a Muslim woman researcher would be more likely to know a local Muslim with whom an interview was required and, ideally, of getting that same woman to agree to being interviewed. Linguistic diversity within the resident research team is also a bonus where it exists – in translating letters of introduction (prior to door-knocking), in translating questions into the interviewee's chosen tongue and in translating the responses back into English. Ideally, residents might also be linked into major local community groups

The ultimate criteria for entry to being a resident research trainee is good conduct and (willingness to gain) competence as a researcher. Just what good conduct consists of will be decided by the Resident Steering Group. Where potential participants lack basic literacy there would need to be other forms of assistance given first although that would be something the CRN would struggle to fund itself as it is tangential to the main aims. Often (and certainly initially) local resident research groups will be generated by a community organisation (for example, a Community Development Trust). If these groups wish to exclude individuals they must give a reason that is deemed acceptable to the Resident Steering Group. Invariably personal differences between residents will mean that some people won't want to get involved as researchers or, if they have become involved, will drop out – that is an unavoidable but hopefully minor obstacle.

One key issue is not to exclude people who are interested and have a contribution to make but who are too busy to do research and/or who are physically unable to get involved. These people may still be able to assist with translations, report-writing, letter-writing or with general advice and may have skills that allow them to serve on the Resource Bank referred to earlier. For example, a carer may have great insight into community care issues that might be something a resident research team was looking at – in which case they could be enlisted to help with the questionnaire design.

As many residents as possible should be made aware of the opportunities to become resident researchers. This means a wide outreach strategy that takes in key community figures and bodies but also tries to get well beyond them. It should entail contacting tenants and residents associations (TARAs), faith groups, sports and leisure groups, pubs, clubs, self-help groups, political parties, schools, youth groups, unions, local community/area newspapers and informal gatekeepers (hair-dressers, shopkeepers, launderettes etc.). The recruitment process also offers the opportunity to raise awareness of the process amongst residents (thereby making interviews easier to secure).

The Research

The term 'research' is here used to refer to surveys and interviews. Ideally, there will be a combination of the two methods within projects – so there'll be some numbers but also some case studies and a healthy smattering of quotes from resident interviewees. The research will also hopefully not simply ask respondents to list likes and dislikes but also ask them to suggest ways of (respectively) preserving and rectifying these.

The issues researched would, ideally, be on whatever residents, when consulted by research teams, said they want it to be. This could mean looking at delivery of public services or could extend to anything on life, work and play in disadvantaged areas. The range of people and institutions that might be researched is considerable. It might take in householders, local businesses, ward councilors, community leaders and others.

If national research is commissioned from a network of the different resident research teams it should be possible for local teams to also 'piggy-back' some local questions onto the nationally-set questions they ask. Similarly, if a large number of local teams are doing surveys at roughly the same time it should be possible to attach some national questions – to be determined through the Network.

The one problem with just doing what residents want is that (sustainable) funding may be harder to come by – public bodies will want to fund projects that help them address their concerns. There may be calls for research proposals that are fairly open-ended – for

example, from Joseph Rowntree Foundation - however the most likely source of funding for resident-led research will be a dedicated funding stream from Government. This would certainly be valuable in that it would reflect the public's concerns rather than those of Government. Perhaps a more realistic (middle-way) target is to get local or national commissioning bodies (which may include the private sector) to set the broad questions and the CRN to decide the details and wording. This will surely add legitimacy to work commissioned.

The CRN needs to make a good early impact if it is to stand a chance of being sustainable. Residents need to be encouraged by the researchers to suggest questions that they are interested in and that Government Ministers and/or the national press might be interested in too. The team also need to know if the work that is being considered as a research topic, or something like it, has been done before. It would also be sensible to choose issues where it should be possible to take action – thereby avoiding raising hopes falsely.

In order to establish the issues that residents want to see researching there is a need to strike a balance between consultation that reaches out to a wide and representative group of people and actually doing a survey within a survey. The CRN will look to identify and draw upon best practice in community outreach techniques in order to reach the parts other researchers can't reach. This might include events that are part-social and part-consultation/-discussion. The CRN will also need to identify and draw upon best practice in methods for prioritising which issues get researched – for example, 'Open Space' meetings for outlining issues and 'Preferenda' methods for finalizing which issues will be researched. To navigate best practice the CRN project manager and the Resident Steering Group will liaise with the UK Community Participation Network.

Research Capacity Building

The CRN Research Advisory Group will mainly be made up of research experts, particularly those who have had experience of working with community groups. The Group will, however, also include people with outreach and training expertise. The BURA-based project manager has been collating names of people to be

invited to participate on this Group. This Group will work closely with the Resident Advisory Group to identify an ideal-type research capacity-building project and to suggest a provisional timetable. The research experts will highlight what the project should have to deliver good research and the residents will be able to work out what will be realistic in terms of how much time people might give, when they will want training and how they will want it etc. The two Groups will also devise an application form for prospective trainers (the Resource Bank – see below) that will require details of experience, skills, availability and fees³.

Resource Bank members are those with expertise in research and will, if selected at interview by resident research teams, be paid for working with them. It is hoped that there will be enough people on the Resource Bank for local resident research teams to have a choice – and be able to interview/meet prospective trainers. The training work will mainly be done in the areas by academics from local/regional universities. For training that is less popular with residents there may be some training that will be run for two or more teams. Considerable effort has gone into identifying the individuals and institutions that will be invited to apply to join the Bank – this includes identifying all the social research courses and all the regeneration courses and modules in UK universities.

In the medium-long term areas would hopefully become self-sufficient in terms of providing their own training and more and more resident research teams would be added to the Resource Bank – trained teams providing training to others in their area and elsewhere in their region. Not everyone will be cut out for working with resident researchers so, over time, some may drop out or not be recommended by groups that have used them (groups will be asked to submit an end-of-project report on their trainers).

In each area there will be a Resident Research Team Leader. These will take the lead in recruiting team members, organizing meetings, liaising with Resource Bank trainers, ensuring that interviewees are notified if a researcher has to cancel and giving moral support to their colleagues. They will also check interview material for usability – indeed the first interview done by a researcher will be checked *before* they conduct their second. The team leaders will

³ Whether people can be on the Advisory Board as well as the Resource Bank has yet to be decided.

also need to monitor the response rates achieved by different researchers and assess (and diplomatically rectify) any wide variations.

The training will be driven, from start to finish, by resident research teams addressing on-the-ground problems. Trainers will offer feedback on what researchers are doing – it will not be ‘chalk and talk’ classroom style teaching. The time, place and day will be decided by local teams in liaison with their Resource Bank trainers. The trainers should also be willing to be at the end of a phone for emergencies that crop up between scheduled sessions. Ideally, the research will take place in the mid-Summer months when the nights are light and the weather temperate - and therefore amenable to door-knocking and, if an in-house interview hasn’t been arranged, interviewing on the doorstep.

Not all of the resident researchers will want or need to work on all elements of the research project in their area – some people may be better at interviews and others at number-crunching. The key thing, in terms of local sustainability, is that each element of the research process should involve one or more residents. The ‘guesstimate’ is that the exercise should take a maximum of six months from start to finish – this should be much less once teams are trained. If there is a national pilot involving different resident research teams the resulting Research Report will be overseen by BURA but will need to have some residents who want to get heavily involved in the editing and there would also ideally be residents who will contribute vignettes on best practice or shorter sections of analysis. There will also hopefully be local reports led by a resident, supported by their Resource Bank.

The resident research teams will need some sort of meeting space within a local community building and access to computers at several stages of the work. In planning for the longer-term sustainability of local work this should probably be costed for – simply to get an idea of real costs. There also needs to be a local budget-holder in the team or a local community development body who can administer up-front expenses (child-care, travel etc.) and local event costs – resident researchers will often have little cash.

Table 1 : Stages in the Research Capacity-Building Process

Managing the process using Excel
Outreach events to get residents to suggest research
Question Finalisation
Sample Design & Size
Preparing for Interviews
Piloting the Questionnaire
Doing the Research
Data Entry
Data analysis (SPSS and N-Vivo)
Communicating the Findings: Written
Communicating the Findings: Verbal
Local Market Feasibility Study
Design of Local Dissemination Strategy
Assistance Producing CRN Manual (occurs throughout)

Evaluation, Validation and Quality Control

The CRN can only succeed if it pays the utmost attention to high standards. Specifically, this breaks down into:

- how a national standard will be set
- how individual trainers can be certificated
- how materials (the CRN Manual⁴) can be assessed
- how the performance of individual trainers can be evaluated
- how the individual researchers' learning-by-doing can be certificated

The overall capacity building process itself will be devised by the Research Advisory Board who will also sign off the learning materials generated for the CRN Manual. Resident researchers views on their training will be crucial too. In time resident research teams can be asked their views on the CRN Manual.

Certification will be important for resident research teams seeking future commissions and for resident researchers seeking other employment opportunities.

One key issue that has been raised is the need to ensure that residents with an axe to grind (in this case with a local NDC) didn't have the opportunity to falsify or wreck results. This probity issue is clearly just a part of the broader issue of research quality. If an

⁴ A prototype of this Manual already exists

interview is done it will be recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service outside the area⁵ – so it should be harder to falsify this (unless someone had large numbers of equally embittered friends who were convincing liars!). There could also be a random follow-up on 10% of interviewees by an external team/individual. Another method might be to get researchers, who have little prior connection, to work in pairs. The wider view amongst the residents involved in drawing up the CRN is that people intent on wrecking something are unlikely to stay the course of a full training process.

Initial discussions are now taking place with a range of different bodies (see Table 2) that might be able to support the CRN in its efforts to preside over high standards in resident research. Some of these may be inappropriate in terms of direct involvement but, if this is the case, they might instead offer some useful general pointers on validation and what makes for good training.

Table 2 : Key Bodies Being Approached on Quality Control and Certification

British Market Research Association
British Polling Council
England Standards Board
Federation for Community Development Learning
Interviewer Quality Control Scheme
Learning and Skills Council (Regeneration Section)
Learning City Network
Market Research Quality Standards Association
Market Research Society (Accredited Interviewer Training Scheme etc.)
National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
National Open College Network

⁵ In the spirit of localising money flows this typing can hopefully be done through the Network – with community-based still limited to doing interviews that were conducted outside their areas.

Open University, Faculty of Social Sciences
PAULO (national body for community-based learning and development)
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
Quality Assurance Agency
Workers Educational Association

Taking the CRN Forward

The key at the time of writing (early November 2006) is for BURA to find a small amount of funding to hold the residential weekend during which the future programme will be drawn up by the Residents Steering Group and the Research Advisory Group. The course validation bodies will also need to be contacted and a dialogue started with those that are best placed to assist. Once a course has been designed there will be a more coherent offer to put before residents when it comes to recruiting the local research teams. Once these teams are recruited BURA can then contact the various institutions and individuals already on the database of Resource Bank invitees. When these have been identified for each of the areas taking part in the national pilot (this might be one area or it might be ten – the Resident Steering Group will decide) a full project bid can be drawn up. As the funders will already have been contacted prior to this they will hopefully have been involved and the project can get started quickly. Ideally then the CRN research might start next Summer. If it takes longer this will be frustrating but the people involved need to remember that the aim is to build something that can be here in twenty or fifty years time – and beyond. In the medium-to-long term the need is to identify possible local/regional market commissions – for example, a Local Strategic Partnership or a Registered Social Landlord may want a survey conducting. For the networked research, national markets/commissions will be sought – for example, the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit may want some work doing on disadvantaged areas.

There is also the question of which areas the Network expands to beyond the initial participating areas and the NDCs. The intention was always that the CRN would expand to one or more disadvantaged areas in all the major urban areas of England and, ideally, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The NDC teams

might become a theme group under the CRN banner – with a separate group for the Government’s 22 Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder teams (like their better-resourced NDC counterparts these are concerned with improving public services in disadvantaged areas). Both NDCs and NMPs will however be wound down in the next five years.

The model of expansion envisaged is a ‘mushroom’ one. So there could be one initial area that pilots the approach monitored by representatives from one area in eight other regions of England. These representatives can then lead on a second wave in their respective areas (that is, in turn, monitored by representatives from aspiring resident research teams in other areas of their home region). This way the country could be covered fairly quickly. Numerous organisations have been identified that could be approached if the Network is to be expanded geographically. Examples include the Regeneration Teams in the nine Government Offices across England, the UK Community Participation Network, the Community Sector Coalition and the National Community Forum.

Local markets may grow when research commissioners see evidence that community research can be done well. However, geographical proliferation of resident research teams cannot occur indefinitely - an individual local authority area may not generate sufficient work to keep several resident research teams operating as sustainable businesses. Teams with no local competition may need to supplement their work with other research or perhaps general community development work. There is a clear tension between having resident research teams that are rooted in their communities and having a market that is large enough to sustain several such teams as businesses. The idea of residents doing research in similar areas to their own also has its attractions but the local roots element is lessened. As long as there are resident research teams across the country, the national networked research element will not suffer.

There are also international organisations that could be approached in the longer run. In Europe there is Living Knowledge (the International Science Shop Network), the Community Researchers mail-base (run from the National University of Ireland) and the International Network on Urban Research and Action

(INURA). In North America there is the Society for Amateur Scientists, Community Research Network Community-Based Collaborative Research Consortium and the Institute for Community Research (all US) and Citizen Science Network (Canada). These organisations all differ to the Network being proposed here but they might have some lessons more generally about community research and maybe this Network can inspire some international mechanisms. International work between Networks is some way off but shouldn't be ruled out. Links have already been made.

The expansion need not just be geographical. Other groups might be youth, BME groups, rural areas or Muslims – but all still within disadvantaged areas. The nature of the Network might extend to sharing other relevant research findings – for example, distributing the highly readable Joseph Rowntree Foundation Findings. Residents might share results with similar areas. The more sustainable different theme groups there are the easier it becomes to provide permanently funding for an over arching CRN Secretariat.

Managing/Co-ordinating the CRN

In close liaison with the Resident Steering Group, BURA will oversee the entire programme although in the longer-term this management/co-ordination role might spin-off as a separate social enterprise – ideally run and staffed by residents who have been involved as researchers. In the meantime this (BURA) role will not just entail co-ordinating various activities and contacting key participants (notably the two Advisory Groups and the Resource Bank), it will also entail approaching funders for the national pilot, co-ordinating purchase of technology and software for the data recording and analysis, serving as the 'trade association' function, taking the lead on a 'national (networked) research' market feasibility study; overseeing production of the CRN Manual (a how-to guide) and of the research report. BURA will also lead on efforts to get the training validated, collating best practice and certification for residents' work. Anything the Project Manager does will need to be in tune with the direction set by the Resident Steering Group.

Summary and Recommendations

How the CRN pans out over the next five months, let alone over the next five years, is still uncertain. The worst-case scenario is that funding cannot be secured for a pilot. Even this may not be disastrous. Governments always need to know what is going on in communities up and down the land. So the project could be revived at some later date.

A middle way might be a more lay operation where people participated in research on a voluntary basis maybe once a year – perhaps as part of a national panel looking at regeneration areas. This would still need some resourcing (staff to co-ordinate the process, software and computers, transcription of interviews etc.) but the main inputs would still be resident researchers' (freely given) time. If this national exercise did not occur there might still be local teams that did their own research every so often – probably under commission from a local development trust.

At the opposite extreme there would be sustainable community enterprises up and down the land undertaking research in their own areas and in similar areas in their towns and cities. These would be part of a national network that undertakes research commissions for Government (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and others) and maybe the private sector and that occasionally also makes applications for original research to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and others. Local teams might also do commercial work to make ends meet and may even double up on community outreach and community development work. It is still early days and this more ambitious model should still be pursued as the ideal.

The author, who initiated the CRN and has led on its development, welcomes the thoughts of RadStats readers – there may be methodological design questions that have been missed. Anyone wishing to get involved – on the Research Advisory Group, on the Resource Bank of trainers or merely to be 'kept in the loop' - is very welcome to get in touch with the author. The CRN Project Manager is particularly keen to secure a statistician, perhaps someone recently retired, who would serve as a mentor in developing the CRN Manual.

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