

A 'CAN-DO' APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ACTION: WHAT ROLE FOR RISK, TRUST AND CONFIDENCE?

Dr Meg Allen, Sarah Clement and Yvonne Prendergast

This report explores the impact that concerns about risk have on the behaviour of community activists.

There is evidence in the UK that individual behaviour is shaped by concerns about risk and litigation. This research examines how these concerns affect people working together to create change in their communities, and how support organisations' approach to risk can affect community activism.

The report:

- is based on the experience of activists from four different neighbourhoods in Yorkshire;
- outlines the challenges faced at different stages of the activists' journeys;
- reveals that fears about liability did not deter people from volunteering, but some activists had concerns about public visibility and risk to reputation;
- shows how concerns about risk, health and safety and bureaucracy shaped activists' decisions;
- highlights strategies developed by activists to address risk;
- identifies how organisations can support activists to manage risks positively rather than discard ideas.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a general belief in UK society that concerns about risk and liability have resulted in the greater regulation of everyday life. The media also promotes the notion that public action is more and more restricted by concerns about ‘health and safety’, and there is some evidence that people’s behaviour is increasingly shaped by a fear of risk and litigation.

In this study we focused on the impact of such fears on the behaviour of small activist groups in four neighbourhoods, who were giving their time to make positive changes in their communities. In our findings we focus on a wider concept of risk – both the personal risk of engagement and the potential risks of action.

At the outset the activists were often concerned about the personal risks to reputation and could be fearful of engaging with others in their communities, and of becoming a visible and public figure. We also found that concerns about risk and red tape influenced the kinds of activity that activists chose to engage in. However, by being flexible and creative, and, in one group, by building self-confidence, they were often able to overcome these challenges. As groups began to put their ideas into action and faced the reality of dealing with risks, activists largely responded positively and pragmatically. This sometimes came more easily to experienced activists. The risks of taking on too much began to emerge as activities got successfully under way and activists managed increasing workloads and responsibility.

The activists in this study were supported by a small team from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation/Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust programme ‘Neighbourhood Approaches to Loneliness’, and we used their experience to identify how organisations can safely nurture community activism and resist pressures that are brought to bear by fear of risk.

Learning for local groups who want to make a difference

- **Develop respect** – Attending a group or meeting can be a ‘risky’ activity, especially for those new to activism. Key to attracting and keeping

members is developing a culture of acceptance and respect from the outset. Group members can establish such a culture by welcoming diversity and encouraging all members to be heard. Trust, and an element of confidentiality, will allow for honesty about different local and personal agendas, and for discussion about how those agendas can be managed.

- **Respond to concerns about being visible** – Group members need to understand why individuals may be reluctant to engage in public activity. Taking time to identify the risks, or perceived risks, of being visible, sharing strategies to address these, and supporting members to get involved in ways that suit them, will maximise engagement.
- **Use an appropriate venue** – Activities can fall at the first hurdle through poor choice of venue. Identifying a venue that is comfortable and friendly, but also neutral, can be challenging, so check out potential venues with people from the communities you want to engage.
- **Find out the facts** – There are enduring myths about red tape and regulation. Check what the facts are in each situation and understand the point of regulation. Rules are usually not as onerous as people perceive, and many activities are relatively easy to organise.
- **Make risk management your friend** – Understand the benefits of identifying what could go wrong and thinking through reasonable responses. Including sensible risk assessment as an ordinary step in planning helps activities to run smoothly and can build the confidence of activists and groups.
- **Have a champion** – Having someone who is passionate about an idea, who can ‘champion’ it to others in the group or community, can ensure that an activity doesn’t get taken off the agenda simply because it is perceived as difficult or ‘regulation bound’.
- **Be flexible** – Be prepared to redesign, rather than throw out, ideas. Understanding the applicable regulation and its benefits will allow groups to achieve goals while working within these constraints.
- **Link up** – Some obstacles can be overcome by using partners with specific expertise. Partner agencies can help with issues like insurance, health and safety, and premises, and can also offer advice about working with groups such as children or older people.
- **Share the load** – One of the greatest risks faced by community activists is that of overload. Groups can often share the responsibility for particular positions or tasks. It is possible to have co-chairs or more than one secretary or treasurer for a group. Being outward-looking and building in regular recruitment means that there will be more people to share the load.
- **Recognise failure as an opportunity** – Not all activities are successful, but successful groups use these failures as learning opportunities.

Some learning for supporting organisations

- **Be risk aware, not risk averse** – Support staff can adopt an approach that makes activists aware of any risks or potentially applicable regulation without discouraging them or causing them to discard an idea.
- **Support your staff** – Staff will be more likely to adopt a positive approach to risk and regulation when they have support from their organisation. Providing regular supervision and access to information and advice will enable staff to be risk aware, not risk averse.
- **A staged and tailored approach** – No two areas are the same; the approach, timescale and potential outputs need to be specific to the

group and place. One-to-one support work, rather than formal group work, may suit some communities or activists, and single-sex groups and confidence-building activities can help engagement. If there are lots of members with little previous experience, it is important to ensure that actions are staged, achievable and small-scale.

- **Offer support for independence** – Inexperienced community activists may lean on the support of an organisation in the early stages, and may be unclear about the role of workers. Staff can support activists while making it clear that this may be a transitional situation and enabling them to become independent.
- **Take the risk of failure** – Risk taking is an inevitable part of supporting community activism and enabling local people to try and get different activities off the ground. Much can be learnt from a project going wrong or not delivering as expected, and transparency about 'failure' is a valuable learning opportunity.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades there have been increasing concerns about risk and liability in the UK. There is a common perception that the ‘litigation culture’ of the US, where some victims have been awarded large sums in damages, has been gradually imported into British society. These concerns have been heightened by a burgeoning of ‘no win, no fee’ legal services and media attention paid to high-profile cases where individuals who are seen as undeserving sue for compensation.

At the same time the press has developed a concern for the ways in which everyday life is increasingly regulated. In response to fears of risk and liability, it is argued that government has over-reacted by bringing in a raft of regulatory measures to protect the public from any potential harm and resultant claims for compensation. This has made good copy, and articles with a focus on ‘health and safety gone mad’ regularly appear in the print press.¹ Such coverage does much to nourish a fear of risk and feeds a common perception that public action is increasingly constrained by red tape and regulation (Young, 2010).

However, the evidence suggests that this ‘fear of risk’ does not always result in substantial change in behaviour. In 2008, Wright *et al.* carried out research with 650 decision-makers on the impact of health and safety concerns on a range of activities including those of local government, education and the emergency services. They concluded that, while there was some limited ‘over-interpretation’ of health and safety law, activities were rarely ‘banned’ (Wright *et al.*, 2008). There did not appear to be an over-reaction by decision-makers, who relied on their own judgement and experience in responding to risk. However, perhaps because of a high media profile around risk, the same respondents believed that there was excessive concern about health and safety in organisations other than their own:

... three times as many respondents think the UK has a problem with disproportionate Health and Safety than think their organisation has a problem.

– Wright *et al.* (2008), p. viii

This heightened awareness is linked to a fear of litigation and the potential impact of subsequent compensation awards on organisations and individuals (Young, 2010; Hodgson, 2011). Yet the government's own task force was at pains to stress that there has been little increase in litigation costs (Better Regulation Task Force, 2004). In fact, the total cost of compensation cases in Britain has remained static, in real terms, since 1989 (Monbiot, 2004). Even though society may not be as litigious as we have been led to believe, an increasing focus on risk assessment and the gradual introduction of measures to reduce risk can have an impact on social activity (Berry, 2011). As that same task force points out, 'the compensation culture is a myth; but the cost of this belief is very real' (Better Regulation Task Force, 2004, p. 4). What matters is that behaviour is shaped by the fear of litigation and popular perceptions of risk.

Just as concerns about risk can influence the activities of organisations, they can also shape the choices of individuals. Katherine Gaskin, in a review of the impact of risk on volunteering in 2006 found that:

... volunteers are put off by stringent recruitment procedures, the responsibility of upholding risk management standards and the fear of being sued ...

– Gaskin (2006a), p. 6

These concerns have prompted governmental action, including commissioning David Spiegelhalter, a Cambridge professor and statistical expert, to write *A Worrier's Guide to Risk* in an attempt to allay staff and volunteer concerns (Spiegelhalter, 2009). Gaskin also produced a guide for voluntary organisations, which focused on practical advice for those working with volunteers and concerned about risk (Gaskin, 2006b). Further governmental efforts led to the production in 2011 of a white paper, the engagement of a range of partners, and the encouragement of civil servants to spend at least one day a year engaged in volunteering.² Through such work the government aims to make it easier for ordinary people to give time in their communities.

In this research we focus on how concerns about risk can shape the thinking and behaviour of people who come together, mostly in informal groups, to create change in their communities. We wanted to find out if these concerns influenced the kinds of activity they chose to engage in, and the ways they carried them out. We also look at how organisations can nurture community activism and resist pressures brought to bear by fear of risk.

The work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

This report is part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) programme 'Risk, Trust and Relationships in an Ageing Society' (RTR).³ The programme seeks to build understanding of the role of informal support in people's everyday lives, and to foster conditions in which people make positive decisions about helping others. Over the last year RTR has been working informally with a sister programme 'Neighbourhood Approaches to

Loneliness' (NALP),⁴ jointly run by JRF and the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT). NALP is a three-year action research programme that examines how community activities can improve the well-being of people at risk of, or experiencing, loneliness. The aim is to place people at risk of loneliness at the heart of activity, and to enable them to identify solutions to loneliness and effect change. NALP uses a small team of workers to engage directly with people to develop activities that suit their communities. It is hoped that this kind of ownership will mean that activities can be sustained after JRF/JRHT support ends.

There are common features of interest across the two programmes. In differing ways, both address the issue of increasing isolation and fragmentation in society and the barriers to the construction of cohesive and supportive communities. This research was commissioned, in part, to explore some of those commonalities.

For the first two years, NALP enabled community members in four neighbourhoods of Bradford and York to undertake research to identify the causes of, and potential solutions to, loneliness in their communities. Following this, in three of the four areas (Carr Estate, Denholme and New Earswick), the activists⁵ selected a handful of ideas to put into practice. The neighbourhoods and ideas are different in each location, and include a walking group, film nights, a craft fair and a pop-up café. In the fourth area, Bradford Moor, it became clear that a different approach was required, involving more direct support from the JRF/JRHT team. Rather than initiate activities, a 'Confidence and Community' group has been developed to enable community action by first building individual confidence.

NALP offers an opportunity to draw out wider learning for community members who come together to take action. In this research we focus on how the activists' perceptions of risk influenced their decision making and their activities.⁶

An introduction to the four neighbourhoods

The involvement of four very different neighbourhoods allowed us to explore the impact of locality on the ways in which risk was negotiated. The four neighbourhoods are briefly introduced below.

New Earswick is a parish and a 'model village' two miles north of York with a population of 2,737 (ONS, 2011). The housing in the area was built by Joseph Rowntree with the aim of providing a balanced village community, and much of the housing is still managed by JRHT. It is a predominantly white area with an ageing population.⁷ According to the 2011 Census, the ward also has the highest proportion of people with a limiting long-term illness in York and District. The village hosts two retirement housing developments.

Bradford Moor is in the north-east of Bradford city with a population of 21,210 (ONS, 2011). The population is ethnically mixed; the largest ethnic group (64 per cent of the ward's population) described themselves as Pakistani in the 2011 Census. The ward also has a youthful population and a high proportion of families with children, in comparison with the rest of the Bradford district.⁸ There are significant issues of deprivation and poverty in the area: in 2000 the Office for National Statistics ranked Bradford Moor as the 81st most deprived ward of 8,414 wards in England.⁹

Denholme is a rural village in the heart of Bronte country, with a population of 3,489 (ONS, 2011). Like New Earswick, it has a slightly older age profile than the general population¹⁰ and there is a large sheltered housing complex at the centre. It also has a higher proportion of white residents; 93 per cent describe themselves as white British, in comparison with 64 per cent in Bradford and 80 per cent across England.

Carr Estate is part of Acomb Ward in the west area of York, $2\frac{1}{4}$ miles from the city centre. The ward population is 8,604 and it has a higher proportion of white British residents, 95 per cent in comparison with 90 per cent in York and 80 per cent across England.¹¹ The Carr Estate differs from the rest of the Acomb Ward in that it has higher levels of unemployment; this was reflected in its being chosen as an area for the first wave of Children's Centres that were built in areas of high deprivation.¹²

The groups in each locality reflected the diversity of the area. They had varying degrees of confidence and different experiences of community action. The differing profiles inevitably shaped how the activists worked and the kinds of activity they engaged in.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

To find out how activists' perceptions of risk and trust influenced decision making, we used a combination of research methods.

Five of the community activists across Denholme, Carr Estate and New Earswick agreed to keep a diary record of their involvement from February 2013 until July 2013. The diaries were kept in a format convenient to the recorder (i.e. electronic or paper). The three JRF NALP staff also kept diaries of their experiences of implementation, and these were used to inform the findings. The diaries were supplemented by individual telephone conversations to clarify and explore issues raised.

The content of the diaries was collated and analysed in April 2013 and again in July. This allowed us to carry out an initial analysis and to identify areas where we could ask for supplementary information in the second round of data collection. We were able to use this second round to focus more closely on issues of risk, and ask the activists directly to reflect on any instances where they had considered issues relating to health and safety or 'red tape'.

We also carried out group discussions with each group of activists in Carr Estate, Denholme and New Earswick, and held a group discussion with the NALP team. These were semi-structured, allowing for free discussion, but also exploring issues identified during the diary analysis. The group sessions allowed us to draw out collective responses to the implementation process and to contrast individual interpretations with group perceptions and understandings.

Since, at the time of our research, Bradford Moor was at the stage of group formation, we ran two discussion sessions with them to explore the different experiences and challenges in setting up a group in a largely Pakistani neighbourhood. We had several interviews with the group facilitator who, for the purpose of this study, had kept an audio diary of conversations with five group members in June and July 2013.

3 ACTIVIST JOURNEYS – NEGOTIATING THE LANDSCAPE OF RISK

NALP's open and inclusive approach to recruitment resulted in a very diverse membership where individuals had different strengths and reasons for engaging. This diversity was also reflected in their different levels of experience of organising activities, of community engagement and of working as part of a group.

Despite this diversity, the activists often had similar ways of approaching risk in their work. At the outset, their focus was on the 'risk' of engagement and how to negotiate the challenges of joining a group and working with others. At this stage even the more experienced activists did not discuss risk as a primary concern in their work, and none used the language of risk or risk assessment. However, as the activists moved from researching the causes of and solutions to loneliness in their communities to actually implementing activities, concerns about risk began to come to the fore. Again the activists did not use the formal language of risk, but it was clear that issues of health and safety, and worries about bureaucracy and red tape, were shaping their choice of activities.

This highlights the different challenges that can be faced by activists at different stages of their 'journeys'. In response to our activists' concerns we have used a much broader idea of risk in the following section, one that encompasses personal reputation and fear of conflict, as well as the more usual, though narrower, definition of risk as something that may result in harm or litigation.

Starting out – what are the risks of engagement?

Why people take the first step to become active in their communities is a perennial question. We know that people often struggle to fit additional,

unpaid activities into already busy lives (Kitchen *et al.*, 2006). However, more recent research has begun to explore whether risk has an impact on people's decision to get involved. Gaskin (2006a) found that people were put off volunteering by concerns about risk and liability. This finding was reinforced by a national survey of volunteering (Low *et al.*, 2007), which found that 40 per cent of those who had not volunteered said that fears of risk and bureaucracy had put them off giving their time.

In our study we first explored our activists' early concerns about giving their time, joining the group and engaging in community action.

1 The risk of engagement – trusting others: For those new to community action, the act of joining a group and attending a meeting could be a daunting experience in itself. People had concerns about joining a group of people they had never met, and the formal group context was off-putting for some:

“... thought it was a social group, was ‘taken aback’ to find a committee!”¹³

Although on the whole the groups worked well together, their very openness and diversity could sometimes cause friction. People came to the group with very different agendas, some because of their own personal experience of loneliness, others motivated by a desire to make change in their localities.

“Some people joined the group thinking it was a loneliness alleviation group, they didn't understand the research role.”

The different areas also generated different group profiles. The Denholme group members were experienced in community activism:

“... there's lots of social capital in Denholme, JRF dropped their seed on fertile ground when they came here as there are lots of people who are able to carry a project like this through; we didn't need the workers in the same way.”

The Carr Estate group members were less experienced, and although unfamiliar with the structures and processes of working as a group in their community, they were keen to act. One of the activists had developed a one-to-one relationship with an elderly woman in her area and was visiting weekly, helping with small domestic tasks.

“I visit her weekly; take her shopping. I feel privileged that she shares stories about her life with me.”

This illustrates the importance of tailoring an approach to a specific area; while Carr needed development and support, Denholme activists were comfortable taking the lead:

“We had a residential about project management – members of our group are professionals with a lot of experience and it was

too basic. It put some people off. It was very costly and the money could have been better spent.”

The different motivations and agendas of the group members and the workers also had to be negotiated during the work, and sometimes re-emerged during decision making and at times of change or action.

2 The risk of being visible in the community – ‘twitching curtains’: One of the activists’ greatest concerns was what other community members would think of them. They knew that putting themselves forward would make them a focus of attention in their localities, and were concerned that their motivations would be questioned. One of the activists described this as being seen as a ‘glory hound’. She had experience of other organisations where individual volunteers had taken the credit for the group’s work, and was wary of being seen as one of these people. Others talked about fears of being seen as a ‘busy-body’ or ‘do-gooder’ who had little to bring to the community. This meant that people were often reluctant to take on a role that involved a high level of visibility, for example doing street-based research in their local communities:

“Hitting the streets – we were all pretty terrified, some more than others. I for one though was bricking it ... this was real life. Real people, out there, people who might have stories to tell that I didn’t necessarily want to hear. Or they might just tell me to do one and keep on walking.”

“I was very nervous about standing in the street doing research, but my confidence soon grew, and I was pleasantly surprised to find that even the people who didn’t want to talk to us were very nice about it!”

As the activists became more engaged they were sometimes asked to carry a higher profile, speaking at meetings or being the visible organisers at events. For some this was equally exposing, such as when they were asked to line up and tell their story at an event for partnership agencies:

“Some people found that really, really daunting, they felt exposed and judged and I think it possibly drove a couple of the more nervous types to drop out.”

The fear of drawing public censure or disapproval is very real for those who take the ‘risk’ of action. In some communities, even the act of engagement is a risky venture. In the following case study we highlight some of the issues faced by women in the largely Pakistani community of Bradford Moor. In this area, the group had been established but stalled, and did not move on to implement community activities. In response, JRF relaunched the group in January 2013 with the aim of building the confidence of community members, so that they felt able to act in their communities.

The group facilitator had promoted the group to both women and men; however, only local women responded, and in initial sessions it was clear that some were unlikely to attend a mixed group. Men had not responded to publicity, perhaps put off, in the facilitator’s view, by the emphasis on confidence building, so the group became women-only.

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Since we were conducting our research alongside the development of this new group, we recognised the opportunity to reflect on the process of community engagement in a particular locality. The group and its facilitator were very open to this, and enabled us to gather detailed information and focus on the group as a case study. This case study outlines ways of working that enable engagement, and again highlights the need for a tailored approach in individual communities.

Case study – Bradford Moor Community and Confidence Group

The Bradford Moor group reflects the make-up of the local community, in that it is largely Pakistani and the members have a range of experiences and home circumstances. Some are recently arrived in the UK and do not speak English, while others are fluent English speakers and well settled in Bradford. While some are expected by their families to work within the home, others work outside and have wider aspirations.

Women joined the group for a variety of reasons: to find out what was going on locally, to identify where to go with problems, and to improve the local area. One woman wanted to gain confidence in order to overcome her shyness. Only two of the women had previous experience of community activity, and they recounted instances where family or community members had questioned their involvement. Both had been described as being “English, not Muslim” by friends or ‘boys in the street’.

“I fought hard to go to the corner shop. Some people don’t have the confidence to come out, or might not be allowed by husband or in-laws. I had to fight for things with my family and husband. My husband wanted me to wear the veil but I said no, I compromised though. I’d love to walk around in a cardigan, but I don’t. I have to think about it, but most people are more bothered than me.”

Women attending the group managed these pressures in different ways. One woman had strong support from her parents, whereas others felt the weight of community and family disapproval. This could be a powerful deterrent to engagement. They talked readily about the factors that might make it difficult or easier for a woman to engage in a group such as this:

1 Talking outside the group: Women were mindful that information could travel quickly through the close-knit Pakistani community. They stressed the vital role of confidentiality: if there was any possibility that their views or feelings would be shared outside, with a potential impact on their reputation, women would be reluctant to attend. Women were more likely to speak freely when only the Pakistani facilitator was present, as they felt there was a shared basis of understanding. The facilitator’s ability to speak community languages was also vital to involving a range of women.

2 Being too visible: Women were expected to remain in the background in their community, to ‘blend in’. One woman attending a public event was questioned by her brother, who noted that men would be present. She explained to him the potential benefits in terms of improving the area, and continued her involvement. She saw the underlying fear as one of women

becoming ‘too English’ or ‘modern’, and so risking losing traditional values and breaking away from their community.

“Some people just don’t like women going out or getting involved in things. [The fear is that] being independent could lead to the next step of leaving the family.”

Women who had been involved with the initial research were put off when there was talk of finding solutions to issues and doing outreach work.

3 Engaging in legitimate activity: It was sometimes necessary for women to convince family members that their time would be well spent. When one of the members was accompanied to the group by her family, the facilitator welcomed them and answered their queries. This enabled her to continue her attendance. The women felt that the notion of ‘confidence building’ was too unclear, and that it was more useful to describe the group as a training course in which women would gain skills or qualifications.

“... women like it to be called training rather than a session – they liked to know that they were learning things ... we’ve now made it much more structured so they can explain it to people.”

4 Understanding the concept of ‘confidence building’: It was hard to convey to women the meaning of confidence building, particularly when the concept does not translate easily into Urdu and Punjabi. For some women, the link to the Loneliness programme was also off-putting.

“There are no words in Urdu and Punjabi for confidence so people say it’s not important.”

“Don’t say it’s for lonely people; this put me off at first. Say it’s to get what you want in the community.”

Indicating that it was possible to make things happen helped give meaning to activity. The starting point needed to be small-scale and achievable, and in this case focused on the organising of a summer trip. Even though it was small-scale, the women had concerns about failing and needed considerable help from the facilitator. With this help, the group successfully organised a coach trip for more than 50 mums, dads and children to the beach at Scarborough.

5 Meeting in a ‘legitimate’ venue: Some venues were not considered acceptable places for women to meet, and careful thought had to be given to the choice of venue. This group was consciously located in the community room of a local school where other courses already ran and a crèche was available. A session held at a local community centre was not as well attended.

“There’s a huge issue of legitimacy of places where women go – basically the mosque, school or doctors are OK. Where you meet is vital to who you can reach. The main issue is a mix of genders; another is that it’s so open.”

6 Providing women-only space: The risk to reputation would make it impossible for some women to attend mixed-sex groups, although the women themselves also preferred a women-only space, as this felt safe. A key benefit of participation was the chance to share experiences in a place where people felt free to be themselves. However, as the group developed, women increasingly invited male workers along and participated in mixed events. The facilitator identified significant shifts:

“This has been a big change – working with men. It was women’s fear of what would happen that stopped them. It was self-censorship really.”

7 Fitting around domestic responsibilities: Women talked about the pressures of meeting the domestic expectations of both family and the wider community. Rising early to complete tasks, using the crèche provided and making the most of available support enabled women to attend.

“I’m at home on my own most of the time. I’m always alone. It’s hard work and my tasks and everything. I do my cooking in the morning and then I can be free for the day. I love being free.”

8 Respecting difference: From the start, the facilitator worked with the group members to create a safe space where the women felt respected, diversity was valued and the need for confidentiality was understood. This enabled them to speak openly.

“In order to help the community we need to understand what people are feeling. This is what they were trying to get across to us – I got that in the end. We need to understand everyone’s feelings and how people are different before we can go out and help the community – you can’t force things on people.”

This case study highlights the importance of tailoring approaches to specific neighbourhoods. Williams (2003) argues that formal group work can feel alien to communities unaccustomed to working in this way, and he proposes one-to-one support work and networking as a gentle introduction to community development. In this way, single-sex groups and confidence-building activities may be effective in some communities.

The responses in the case study also give us a much wider sense of the ‘risks’ that people take when they choose to engage. People may fear exposure and run the risk of attracting criticism by putting themselves forward. This is not how we had originally conceptualised risk, but the risk associated with engagement was something that shaped both people’s choice to engage and how they engaged. In the next section, we look at some of the issues related to trust and risk that arose when the activists in the three groups at Denholme, New Earswick and Carr Estate began to put their ideas into action.

Doing the work – building relationships and cutting through red tape

Many of the activists' fears were not borne out in their activities, or, if they were, it was seen that they were not insurmountable, and that the benefits of being involved in meaningful activity with other community members far outweighed any difficulties. The group discussions and diaries identified some of the key issues that activists overcame.

1 The risk of conflict – trust between local groups and community politics:

In most areas, activists encountered some difficulties when getting started in the locality. A range of issues made it hard to gain trust, not least the perennial problem of being seen as an 'incomer', or someone who was not local to the area. Other members of the community could also be distrustful of any new initiative, and this was magnified by existing divisions within communities.

“The people involved are all incomers; locals are quite different ... there are rifts between groups. Quite hard to get the local 'natives' to come along and get involved.”

In some areas, the 'territorialism' of pre-existing groups added to the challenge. Long-established groups felt they could claim a legitimacy that newer groups lacked:

“There's lots of groups and some have been here for years. It's territorial.”

This experience highlighted the need to work closely with existing local groups from the outset, engage with them and, wherever possible, recruit champions for the work from within communities. Sometimes creating a new project or changing the way things were done brought the criticism feared. In one area, the redesign of a community pamphlet attracted negative attention from some local people:

“Changing the pamphlet – it was painful and difficult, it met with lots of criticism.”

However, despite initial distrust, the redesign had gone on to be successful.

2 Cutting through red tape – dealing with risk: While concerns related to regulation did not on the whole influence the activists' decisions to give their time, those concerns did come into play when choosing the activities and carrying them out. An aversion to dealing with bureaucracy led to some ideas being dropped before ever being tried. Activities that were pursued involved activists developing ways to manage risk in effective and sensible ways. The choice of activity seemed to be shaped by a range of factors, such as how time-consuming it would be to stage, or whether the activity had a 'champion' within the group.

“The health walks were great because they required no technology, no permits etc. All you had to do was put a notice in the newsletter then turn up and walk.”

The group that put on the walks had accessed training on how to organise them, but as a group they had considerable experience of community action, and as a result felt confident in taking a pragmatic approach to managing risk.

“Stuff about safety seemed a bit over the top, e.g. Hi Vis jackets and forms with next of kin and medical details. We did learn things but we take a common sense approach.”

This approach avoided excessive procedures, but the activists needed confidence in order to make such pragmatic decisions. If they were less confident, then perceptions of additional work could generate a sense that an activity wasn't viable. At this stage, activists often had little knowledge of what was actually needed and could be put off by the perception of bureaucracy.

“... the idea was to get local women who were good at cooking to run sessions for others in the area. There were lots of issues which put her (another activist) off though; did she need a food hygiene qualification? Or a certificate in food prep? She got bogged down in the detail. She thought all the paperwork could be really complicated and unwieldy, you have to establish that the event is going to be a success before you put in all that effort.”

It is important to note that some ideas with potential were dropped where a licence, certificate or qualification was required. However, when activists were committed to a particular idea, such as organising a pop-up café, they often managed potential risk very ably and were not put off:

“There were lots of concerns about serving food but I had a hygiene certificate so we were covered in this respect. Also about health and safety – whether we were allowed to bake cakes and have hot drinks as there would be children running about. We did have them – we had a seating area where there were hot drinks and parents had to supervise their own children.”

A champion for an activity helped overcome potential barriers:

“... the film nights were something I really wanted to happen ... there were lots of difficulties in setting it up, insurance, licensing, equipment, etc, etc. I found the number of an existing film club and rang them. We visited the club and they gave us all the answers and provided us with some old equipment. All the massive barriers were removed by visiting this other club and it became relatively straightforward.”

This was a confident group with experienced activists; for others the fear of being overloaded by regulation did shape choices, yet working with a partner like the JRF/JRHT often enabled activists to check out a range of issues around health and safety and to deal with issues of liability:

“... at the craft fair, we could only get insurance if every small stall holder had their own insurance, this was impossible so JRF did it.”

3 Involving vulnerable members of the community: Activists encountered particular difficulties when involving children or young people, or if they wanted to support older people who could be seen as vulnerable. While they often identified a need in their localities, they were unsure of how to go about working safely with these groups. In one area, activists were unsure about the legalities of keeping young people’s contact details, and this stalled development of the idea. Across all areas, activists were aware that work with vulnerable groups could require Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks (formerly known as Criminal Records Bureau/CRB checks) and befriending schemes often fell at this hurdle:

“It would take lots of organising and lots of volunteers. We didn’t do it. Again it would be hard to identify people and volunteers would need CRB checks. These are barriers that would put people off.”

However, in one of the groups, where there were less experienced members, two activists felt their involvement had made them more open to reaching out to others, and both had befriended older people on an individual basis. Neither had concerns about this, although one recognised that working with older people formally, through an organisation, would have required DBS checks, which she felt would have been off-putting. She was aware that her friend was vulnerable, and took steps to avoid any potential misinterpretation of their relationship:

“She’d had problems with money with a neighbour and wanted me to sort it out, but I said I wasn’t dealing with her finances. Whenever I did her shopping I got a receipt. I just wanted to be sure, if anyone ever thought about why I was helping.”

In some areas, even if an idea had a real champion, barriers were put in place by workers from local organisations who were very aware of the regulations surrounding childcare and the potential risks:

“There was a local children’s activity that was coming to an end because of funding changes. There were about nine people who were really keen to keep something going but the worker did everything to put us off – warned us we’d have to do training, become a constituted group, set up a bank account, etc. It probably weeded out a few people.”

While activists often wanted to do something for parents in their localities, the difficulties in working with children were often stressed, as evidenced by the contribution from an activist who had knowledge of childcare provision:

“There is SO MUCH red tape, procedures, policies and rules ... it’s not just the case of having a member of staff – there’s ratios,

In some areas, even if an idea had a real champion, barriers were put in place by workers from local organisations who were very aware of the regulations surrounding childcare and the potential risks.

OFSTED approved premises, etc ... The legality of looking after children is so involved.”

Yet these were not insurmountable obstacles. In the first case, the worker knew the activists involved and a compromise was eventually reached whereby the group ran a play-and-stay at the venue, which already hosted children’s activities. In the second case, the activist successfully worked through options with the other members of the group. They adapted their original idea of offering childcare where parents could leave their child, to organising a café where a play-worker led children’s activities and parents could have some space to chat.

”... the Community Centre was already assessed as a safe environment and the parents were staying with the children which made it OK. We didn’t need training and it’s actually been quite simple.”

It was possible to work with partner organisations to redesign ideas, and to carry out some simple safeguarding measures that enabled activity to happen. In a couple of cases the ‘solution’ involved parents being required to take responsibility for supervising their children. Support from the NALP team enabled activists to ‘see things from a different angle’ and to be creative, which provided a positive counterbalance to more risk-averse workers. Running activities engaged the activists in complex decision making. This process was not always transparent or acknowledged, but it involved a careful consideration of the risks and effort involved in carrying out a particular activity.

Navigating long-term risks to sustainability

In the long term, activists found that they had to manage increased workloads and responsibility. This was reflected in their perception of risk as the groups moved towards independence from their partner organisation, the JRF/JRHT.

1 The risk of ‘burnout’: The greatest constraint on volunteering, identified across all the literature, is lack of time, and this was reinforced by the activists we spoke to. As people successfully organised activities, they became a focus for organisations that attempted to recruit them to other initiatives.

”I’m at that dangerous state where local groups are starting to realise I am a competent person and people are trying to rope me in to lots of things, and I just don’t have the time or the energy!”

Community activism can become a burden unless carefully managed, and there is a responsibility on both the individual and any support organisation to lay down boundaries and manage activists’ input.

2 The weight of responsibility: While people might be happy to be involved, they were often wary of taking on responsibility. Even at one-off events, activists were often keen for NALP staff to ‘be the manager’ on the day.

Confident activists were comfortable with the idea that they would take on ownership of the group as the JRF/JRHT support came to an end. For others this was a difficult transition, and some struggled with the idea of assuming responsibility for managing the group and its finances, as well as running activities. Some of the activists spoke of the group as a 'weight' on their shoulders, and thought it was too much to take on and to sustain.

3 The risk of failure or disillusionment: People often chose activities because they believed they would succeed, so when things failed there was an understandable loss of momentum. In many ways the risk of failure shaped activities – people discarded ideas with a high risk of failure, and redesigned others in order to ensure the maximum chance of success. Most importantly, they often recognised the need to learn from failures and move on.

"I'm setting up a Pilates class. Will anyone come? I'm on my own. It's also about accepting that some things will fail and that we'll learn from this."

4 THE RISKS OF SUPPORTING ACTIVISM

It is important to remember that there are risks for organisations and staff that support community activism. As well as needing to consider the risks that activist groups are exposed to, they must also navigate risks for themselves and for the organisation. Establishing a programme in such diverse areas, where JRF and JRHT might already have a presence, brought its own challenges.

Reputation of the organisation

Organisations that have an existing role in communities may struggle to establish themselves in the role of credible partners, enabling local people to implement their own ideas. They may experience distrust and people may not want to engage, believing that they are pursuing the organisation's own agenda. Equally, organisations take a risk when they engage with communities; working in localities means encountering different agendas, politics, and ways of acting and thinking.

One of the areas chosen as a focus for NALP was also the site of a social housing estate managed by JRHT. Many residents in the area associated the name Joseph Rowntree with their landlords, and there was some suspicion about the motives of the team. One of the workers described attending a residents meeting in order to introduce the programme:

“However, I became the face of JRHT and therefore residents used this as an opportunity to tell me all their complaints about the Trust and what needed fixing.”

There is inevitably conflict at times, and this has the potential to translate into 'bad press', or loss of reputation. There was also conflict at one point in one of the groups, and this impacted on the workers:

“The risk in my mind after this incident was that I would not be able to work with them in future. The possibility that [the group] would disband and all the work they had done being wasted and the possibility they would go to the media.”

Such fears are real for the organisation, and stressful for staff who manage the organisation's interaction with communities.

Managing risk on the ground

Just as the activists had concerns about engaging with children or involving vulnerable adults, so did the workers. Indeed, staff had a greater awareness of the issues, and were mindful of the risk to the organisation as well as themselves:

“I organised and ran a contest involving a lot of local children. At the end a few played with rope hitting one another with it. I wondered if I was responsible if any of them got hurt, but also felt like I couldn't challenge them too hard as I wasn't a parent or teacher, and where would I stand on disciplining a child I had no connection to?”

Workers were aware that their own, sometimes heightened, awareness contrasted with the more relaxed approach of communities:

“Residents ... were happy to prepare food for the event and for their children to take part and play in the area, with no issues being made towards whether the event was insured, whether adults had CRB checks or who was behind the event.”

Although the programme team was more aware of the potential risks, they stressed the importance of working with activists in a way that did not highlight these as difficulties. The NALP team tried to walk a line that enabled, rather than discouraged, the activists. This was a demanding role and, just as the activists ran the risk of burnout, so did the staff.

The risk of failure

When an organisation invests in a programme of this kind there are expected outputs, and programme members can experience the pressure of having to deliver to the organisation's agenda. In areas where the activists were less experienced, the NALP team could experience frustration as the group members struggled to identify or agree the activities to take forward. As the NALP programme neared its end, efforts were redirected to support the groups in becoming self-sustaining. The following reflection from one of the activists highlights that this might not be possible in all areas:

“I’m not sure it’s going to work that well, people locally aren’t that involved; they aren’t interested. I can’t do evenings or weekends because of my child ... I don’t feel hopeful as there just isn’t the capacity in the group to put any of the ideas into practice.”

The risk of ‘dependency’

Although it was made clear to activist groups that the NALP team would support them for a limited time, it was easy for activists, particularly those who were less confident, to become reliant on workers. This was a particular issue as the organisation began to wind down its involvement and the groups became aware that they would have to sustain themselves. For some this was not a challenge:

“I have no doubts or fears about the group carrying on. We will miss the JRF team; they are friends, but it won’t make a massive difference to the activities.”

For others, the picture was very different:

“We’ve been a bit sheltered by being part of the JRF project. We’ve had to start paying for things lately and this has made us much more aware of how little money we will have when JRF go and how we will have to watch it ... we’ll have to take more control.”

In less confident groups, any break in contact with the support organisation could be experienced negatively or with a feeling of abandonment:

“There’s the four areas and one in particular was quite a lot behind and they were getting more input ... I knew that we’d had our bit of input but others felt like they had been left in the wilderness. It was a difficult stage. People’s motivation dwindled. For me, I understand how organisations work and that you need to put funding in place and report back. Some people aren’t used to that and think ‘What’s happening?’ ... some ... said they felt abandoned.”

Managing the expectations of the groups was one of the most difficult aspects of the work. The workers needed to provide support and encouragement, while enabling the activists to be self-supporting and proactive. In the last chapter we look at some of the ways both organisations and individuals addressed these concerns.

5 RESPONDING POSITIVELY TO RISK – LESSONS FOR ACTIVISTS AND FOR SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

In this final chapter, we highlight ways in which both activists and support organisations can deal positively with risk as they pursue their goals.

NALP was unusual, in that groups had access to ongoing support from the programme team. This included help with planning activities, hands-on support with delivering some events, insurance, managing group dynamics and providing training. In contrast, people who want to take action in their local area may access some support from Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations, but more often they will be reliant on the skills and experience of group members.

Learning for local groups who want to make a difference

Supporting engagement

One of the greatest concerns people had in engaging in activism was the ‘visibility’ of public action, and what other community members might think of them. NALP activists demonstrated that these issues could be effectively addressed.

1 Develop respect: Members of the group need to develop a culture of respect from the outset. Take the time to build trust by engaging a range of people and allowing time for the group to gel. Diversity should be welcomed and all members encouraged to voice their opinions and be heard. In the

group comprising Pakistani women, confidentiality was essential; an element of confidentiality is important in all groups though, as this helps promote openness about different agendas and enable discussion about how those agendas can be managed.

2 Respond to concerns about being visible: Group members need to understand why individuals may be reluctant to engage in public activity. Take time to identify the risks, or perceived risks, of being visible, share strategies to address these, and support members to get involved in ways that suit them.

3 Use an appropriate venue: Venues need to be accessible to local community members. They can be unsuitable for a range of reasons, including location and access. Identifying a venue that is comfortable and friendly, but also neutral, can be challenging. Check out potential venues with people from the communities you want to engage – meeting at the school was very acceptable to the Pakistani women, and to their families and community.

Cutting through red tape and facilitating action

The greatest lesson was that the burden of ‘red tape’ was not as great as many activists feared, and there were often simple solutions to what seemed like insurmountable difficulties.

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1 Find out the facts: There are enduring myths about red tape and regulation. Check what the facts are in each situation and understand the point of regulation. The activists in this research often found that the rules were not as onerous as they had thought, and they found it relatively easy to do things like serve food and hot drinks, or organise local public events.

2 Make risk management your friend: Understand the benefits of identifying what could go wrong and thinking through reasonable responses. ‘Risk management’ may sound off-putting, yet in our lives we assess risk and take precautions on an everyday basis. Including sensible risk assessment as an ordinary step in planning helps activities to run smoothly, and can build the confidence of activists and groups.

3 Have a champion: If someone has a passion for an idea, they can act as a ‘champion’ for the activity. They don’t have to do all the work, but they can promote the activity with other community members, research some of the barriers and solutions, and help present a case to the rest of the group or to the local community. This can ensure that an activity doesn’t get taken off the agenda simply because it is perceived as difficult.

4 Be flexible: Regulation is there for a reason, and understanding its benefits will allow groups to achieve goals while still working within these constraints. Be prepared to redesign ideas if necessary. For example, while it was complex to set up childcare sessions, it was much easier to run play-and-stay sessions with the parents, or to employ a worker who could run activities with the children while the parents had time out nearby.

5 Link up: Activists can overcome some obstacles by having partners with specific expertise. In one case, partnering with a Children’s Centre meant that premises were already health-and-safety checked, and staff could give advice. Getting information and support from a proactive organisation that

works with young people or vulnerable adults can also make it easier to involve these groups. It is important not to discount an activity because it might touch on 'sensitive' issues. Partner organisations can also help with issues like insurance, which is often a sticking point for events and activities.

Sustaining activity – 'in it for the long haul'

In some cases it was relatively easy to set out to make change, but the difficulty was in sustaining action for the long term. Issues of burnout and disillusionment can hamper community activity, and it was important to work to reduce the risk of this in the long term.

1 Say 'no' if it is too much: Local groups can encourage boundary setting by being clear about the time their involvement will be expected to take. Be clear from the outset about how much time you are prepared to commit. New members can be offered a gradual introduction to the work of the group and need not be pressurised to take on tasks immediately.

2 Share the load: Groups can often share the responsibility for particular positions or tasks. It is possible to have co-chairs or more than one secretary or treasurer for a group. Be outward-looking and build in regular recruitment: this means that there will be more people to share the load.

3 Recognise failure as opportunity: Not all activities are successful, but successful groups use failures as learning opportunities. When activities did not attract as many people as hoped for, the groups learned to analyse what could be done better. One group responded to a disappointing turn-out at an event for young people by identifying a local youth worker who was willing to partner with them.

Some learning for supporting organisations

Although the rewards are often great, the work of supporting community activism is complex and challenging. For communities that have limited experience of collective action, the chances of engaging people will be substantially increased by the involvement of a skilled worker who understands the local area and culture. Most importantly, support staff can guide community members through the intricacies of regulation.

1 Be risk aware, not risk averse: Support staff can make activists aware of any risks or regulation that potentially applies without discouraging them or causing them to discard an idea. This can-do approach to risk management was demonstrated by the NALP team, and was fostered by active discussions within the staff group and a continuing awareness of their role as facilitators.

2 Support your staff: Staff will be more likely to adopt a positive approach to risk and regulation if they have support from their organisation. This includes providing access to information and advice, ensuring staff have space to discuss issues within their team, and offering regular supervision.

3 A staged and tailored approach: No two areas are the same; the approach, timescale and potential outputs need to be specific to the group and place. One-to-one support work, rather than formal group work, may suit some communities or activists, and single-sex groups and confidence-building activities can help engagement. If there are lots of members with

little previous experience, ensure that actions are staged, achievable and small-scale.

4 Offer support for independence: Inexperienced community activists may lean on the support of an organisation in the early stages, particularly around more technical issues and complex regulation. Staff can support activists in this way, while making it clear that this may be a transitional situation, enabling them to become independent over time.

5 Take the risk of failure: Risk taking is an inevitable part of supporting community activism and enabling local people to try and get different activities off the ground. However, organisations are under great pressure to demonstrate success and produce outputs. Much can be learnt from a project going wrong or not delivering as expected. Workers need to be encouraged to say when things do not go well, and given time to reflect on the reasons.

This report has shown how activists encountered challenges and actively managed risk to make positive change in their communities. We have presented some of their 'best practice' and addressed the role of support organisations which can, as Lynne Berry stresses in her 2011 paper:

... champion a positive view of public risk management and avoid the traps of moral panic.
– Berry (2011), p. 20

In this way, workers can create an environment that nurtures activity and treats regulation as a necessary, but not onerous, aspect of community action. The organisation can be realistic while encouraging creativity and assisting activists to work positively within regulation.

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NOTES

- 1 See 'Jubilee Bunting in Hadleigh Banned', *Suffolk Free Press*, 31 May 2012, and HSE Response at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/press/record/2012/suffolkfp310512.htm> [accessed 10 December 2013].
- 2 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/promoting-social-action-encouraging-and-enabling-people-to-play-a-more-active-part-in-society> for more information.
- 3 See <http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/risk-trust-relationships> for more information about the programme [accessed 10 December 2013].
- 4 See <http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/neighbourhood-approaches-loneliness> for more information about the programme.
- 5 We are using the term 'activist' to refer to community members who remained engaged after the research and were active in implementing ideas that emerged from the research. The term includes a wide range of roles and we acknowledge that it may not be how some people define themselves.
- 6 An independent evaluation of the NALP programme will be available in early 2014 and is distinct from this research, which focuses on risk and adopts a reflective rather than evaluative approach.
- 7 Information is taken from the Neighbourhood Statistics website at: <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>, Huntingdon and New Earswick Ward, Table KS201EW [accessed 17 October 2013].
- 8 Information is taken from the Neighbourhood Statistics website at: <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>, Bradford Moor Ward, Tables KS102EW for age structure and KS201EW for ethnic breakdown [accessed 17 October 2013].
- 9 Information is taken from the Neighbourhood Statistics website at: <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>, Bradford Moor Ward, Indices of Deprivation 2000 for Wards, Table [accessed 17 October 2013].
- 10 Information is taken from the Neighbourhood Statistics website at: <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>, Bingley Rural Ward, Table KS102EW for age structure and KS201EW for ethnic breakdown [accessed 17 October 2013].
- 11 Information is taken from the Neighbourhood Statistics website at: <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>, Acomb Ward, Table KS102EW for age structure and KS201EW for ethnic breakdown [accessed 22 October 2013].
- 12 For more information about the profile of York Children's Centre areas see: http://democracy.york.gov.uk/Data/Executive%20Member%20For%20Education%20&%20Children%27s%20Services%20and%20Advisory%20Panel/20051011/Agenda/evidence_to_support_childrens_centre_decision_making.pdf [accessed 10 December 2013].
- 13 When we quote activists we avoid identifying the area in which they are based as much as possible. This is in order to minimise the chance of individuals being identifiable as the groups are relatively small and the areas well known.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Meg Allen is an independent researcher and evaluator with wide experience in the fields of community cohesion and widening participation. She completed her PhD at the University of Manchester in 2001 and has worked for the last fifteen years with a range of health, education and social care organisations, most recently working for the Open University as National Evaluation Officer in widening participation.

Sarah Clement is an independent consultant and trainer with extensive experience of working with community groups. Her background is in housing, with tenant and resident involvement being at the forefront of this. Roles include managing tenant and resident involvement and community research programmes. Sarah has worked on community health programmes running a number of projects promoting health and well-being. Sarah works creatively and is committed to communities identifying practical and realistic solutions to improve their lives and where they live and work.

Yvonne Prendergast is an independent researcher and trainer whose interests lie in promoting equality, enhancing well-being and widening participation. With a wealth of experience as a frontline worker, manager and consultant in the public, private and third sectors, her professional focus is on exploring and developing practical strategies to enable people and organisations to maximise their potential.

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