

Reclaim the Lanes presentation

Caroline's bit

- Slides: Vancouver country lanes
- Middlesbrough Longford Street
- Goran Erfani photo

The reclaim the lanes project was made possible by Greening Wingrove CIC and the WEA Greening Wingrove lottery project's community innovation fund and as far as possible it sought to reflect the ethic which had guided the establishment of Greening Wingrove CIC in the first place. The CIC initially came together to address litter and fly tipping issues but found that a positive vision was more likely to encourage people to become active. What developed from that was an ambition to be a sustainable garden suburb, with inspiration including Vancouver's country lanes and Longford Street in Middlesbrough. The reclaim the lanes project was also inspired by a 2003 resident report which considered possibilities such as turning back lanes into allotments and creating 'autonomous terraces'. But, despite New Deal for Communities funding, that report led to any concrete, physical changes. One of the things we wanted to move away from, which affected some parts of the New Deal for Communities programme, was the issue of 'meetings about meetings'. Instead, we wanted to do something practical through trial and error experimentation and see where it would lead us.

Slides: tactical urbanism examples in the US, Netherlands

The approach taken towards engagement began by testing whether some of the CHAT Trust's existing youth work activities could be taken outdoors, using street party legislation to close the back, just as residents have begun to do across the Western world in the wake of the economic crisis. Drawing on Caroline's experience and expertise, this was a diagnostic session: a test to see how young people would react.

During the course of six sessions we ran in the first year, we developed a series of five working principles, which we used to develop and deepen engagement.

Slide on the four principles

Using this four step process, we ran a series of community events in 2015. In part, these built on Newcastle City Council's Global Awareness in Action project and the council's funding for an artist, Karen Underhill, who had worked with some of the young people to raise awareness of waste and recycling. We then held a further series of events in 2016, this time linked with experiments in temporary and physical environmental change.

Slides:

- Phoenix mural
- Deep clean
- Basketball brackets
- Planters
- Street/ spray chalk
- mosaic

- Interviews (trust): leading to social enterprise idea

Dave's bit

- Slide on Chantal Mouffe

One of the aims of work carried out in 2016, as well as to experiment with using physical changes such as art, street games and support for growing, was to reflect on the process taken and what might be learned more broadly about activating communities. This was partly motivated by a need to unpick the coalition agenda of Big Society and also to think through how public services might adapt to austerity in the best way possible. I found that some of thinking of post-Marxist philosopher Chantal Mouffe was helpful in doing this. In her book "on the political", Mouffe argues that traditional forms of liberal democratic institutions operate on what she calls 'aggregative' and 'deliberative' forms of politics – her insinuation is that they are focused on abstract, verbal debate. But in contrast with this, we were working with a community, a large part of which spoke little or no English. This is one reason why a different approach was needed than might normally be used in either youth work or to promote community-led improvements to the local environment.

One of the advantages of the reclaim the lanes approach was its ability to incorporate feelings, particularly to address a lack of trust. As a result of the process we moved from suspicion, particularly around form filling, to participation and then a level of trust that meant parents were keen to be interviewed by a translator within a tent we constructed as part of an event. At the same time, there has been very little damage to the art work produced and a much greater willingness to engage in further action like painting walls and litter picking. What we have yet to achieve is the creation of self-driving initiatives within the community but CHAT trust has become a base where parents now seek advice and any instances of anti-social behaviour can be addressed.

One of the other key emotions encountered through the work was hope, or alternatively apathy. Activities like creating murals or allowing children to spray chalk paint drawings on walls also provided a way of talking more widely to local residents. In contrast with the reclaim the lanes approach some residents were very defeatist about the amount of litter and waste in the streets and for many there was a feeling there was nothing they could do to influence things. In some cases, those who made complaints about reclaim the lanes or argued most strongly for hard surveillance and enforcement were also engaged in littering and anti-social behaviour themselves.

One of the big potential contributions of reclaim the lanes, and the similar approach being taken by Greening Wingrove through litter picks, door knocking and community organisation, is its ability to address these emotional issues. This then implies a kind of viral spread of engagement across the community as people slowly change their attitudes. The downside of this approach is that it takes time and doesn't always create quick visual results.

Almost the opposite is true of traditional ways in which council services have been run. More engineering based approaches, such as the recent replacement of wheeled bins with communal bins, can pay meticulous attention to how people are expected to use a particular system, or to how that system might handle being misused, but completely miss out emotional aspects. The same can be true of zero tolerance enforcement if its not perceived as tackling the worst offenders and only

going for easy wins. But these approaches are still important as they offer the critical mass that's needed to address local problems.

“While council officers are often experts on the difficulties posed by working in the present regulatory environment, they also often lack detailed knowledge of how communities might contribute to resolving those difficulties, what their capacity is and what their potential future capacity might be. The reverse is true of frustrated residents lacking critical knowledge of regulations and service structures.”

“Working with communities has the potential to inform service delivery by highlighting different kinds of relevant knowledge including everyday experience and personal motivations.”

We need to find ways of combining the benefits of both approaches – large scale service delivery and community knowledge, input and faith as neither are likely to work on their own. At the heart of doing this is encouraging a cycle of human involvement in implementing changes to services or adapting them over time. This is to recognise that, since councils don't actually produce outcomes on the ground, they are reliant on others to actually achieve the improvements to places they are seeking.