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WHAT WORKS (4)

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HOPEFUL TOWNS: 'WHAT WORKS?' (4)
TACKLING NARRATIVES OF SCARCITY IN DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES

Ideas about communities being 'full' or there not being 'enough to go around' are common in areas where resources are stretched. Rumours about migrants and minorities 'going to the front of the queue' or taking more than their fair share often take hold where people feel a sense of social displacement.

This learning note summarises key lessons from the fourth webinar in our Hopeful Towns 'What Works' series. The aim of the Hopeful Towns project is to better understand how places can be more resilient to hateful narratives in the first place. Each webinar looks at a different aspect of local policy.

CONTEXT

Our work against the far right has shown how easily resource pressures and economic competition can spill into community tension. In the National Conversation on Immigration, participants often told a broader story about dissatisfaction with their own lives – frequently focused on access to housing or jobs.

In particular, we found that a 'local lens' frames immigration at the national level. In the South East, for instance, housing scarcity meant tensions about migrants' access to social housing. In areas where demographic change had occurred rapidly, meanwhile, issues like school places became points of tension. These sorts of narratives can occur anywhere. But they are most pronounced in communities where is are genuine pressure on services.

At this event we explored this further. What are the communications techniques that can contest 'lump of labour' narratives and counter misinformation about minorities being prioritised? And how can local economic initiatives create stronger feelings of agency within communities?

KEY THEMES

A range of suggestions came through in the discussions. These broke into two broad areas – those relating to resources and those relating to narrative and communications.

A) RESOURCE SHORTAGES

1. Invest in agency at the local level

Fostering aspirations, and reclaiming community power to transform were seen as key building blocks for resilience in communities facing resource scarcity and deprivation.

We heard about a number of initiatives to create economic opportunities, as means of addressing the lack of agency from which narratives of scarcity emerge. The less communities felt they were dependent on external forces to provide jobs, the less able 'lump of labour' ideas were to gain traction.

SPEAKERS

- **PETE ROWLEY**, Director, East Marsh Construction – formerly working with East Marsh United – a community group in Grimsby dedicated to creating local jobs.

- **CLARE BIRKETT**, Associate Director at Economy; a campaign to reclaim economics for people and communities through 'understandable economics'.

- **DAVID BAILEY**, Traveller & Diversity Manager, Fenland Council; who have used of the Controlling Migration Fund to address resource issues around HMOs.

- **NICK OLSEN**, Counter-Extremism Community Coordinator, Cardiff Council, who are part of the Rumourless Cities network, to address misconceptions and stereotypes about migrant and minority groups.

Pete Rowley described his work to set up East Marsh Construction, a social enterprise delivering opportunities in construction for young people. This project is based in a very deprived neighbourhood of Grimsby, where the longstanding economic decline of the fishing industry had provided fertile territory for right populism. Pete described concepts like the foundational economy, community wealth building and the 'Preston Model' as means of building a more rooted local economy.

Clare Birkett also discussed the importance of agency when talking about economics. She argued that economic limitations are too often seen as an unchangeable facts of life, and that the idea of the 'fixed pot' needs to be challenged.

2. Regulate, enforce and prevent

Better forms of regulation and enforcement are clear pathways to addressing some of the 'snowballing' issues that accompany a scarcity of resources, and often create points of community tension.

David Bailey described the challenges he had met in the Fenlands – and particularly the town of Wisbech – where profound deprivation has run alongside very fast East European migration. David talked about rough sleeping and street drinking, as well as issues around HMOs. He described the eco-system of different issues which cause this – such as migrants on night shifts, who wanted to relax with friends after work but were only allowed back to their house at certain hours by a landlord.

As well as talking about efforts to improve enforcement – such as via a robust approach to modern slavery – David discussed the creation of a hostel in the town, as a way of getting to the root of issues about migrant homelessness.

3. Make it easier to access support and funding

In areas with limited resources and high deprivation, it can be hard to bring in external funding. But doing so often makes a big difference.

Nick Olsen described a host of strong case studies in Cardiff, partly made possible with the support of Rumourless Cities – a Europe-wide URBACT initiative. The community interventions he outlined showed the value that small, funded projects can bring.

Pete talked about the difficulty he had had accessing funding, despite having a history of setting up his own company. He suggested that this was even harder for those without a business 'hinterland', and argued that better advice from government agencies would make a big difference.

Meanwhile David Bailey talked us through some really important partnerships with local community and third sector organisations. Much of this had been enabled, he suggested, by a council forum

with the community voluntary and faith sector, to help identify grant pots, choosing compatible partners and supporting them in writing bids.

The new Towns fund creates the potential for local authorities across England to access resources as part of a nationwide scheme to 'level up' areas. We will be working with the network to bring you more details of how this can be used to build resilience.

B) NARRATIVE CHANGE

1. Use tangible measures

The 'maxed out credit card' was successfully used as a metaphor for the deficit, and during the 1980s the parallel between national expenditure and household expenditure was frequently drawn. Often, the populist right discuss immigration much the same way, emphasising that it is simply 'common sense' to reduce access from outsiders to a stretched economy.

Clare Birkett discussed the 'household' metaphor, and stressed the importance of using similarly accessible language to make arguments in the other direction. Rather than abstract arguments about GDP, she suggested talking in household denominations about the contributions of migrants – pointing out, for example, the number of migrants that set up local businesses.

2. Create connections

In discussing these issues an important distinction was drawn, between visible factors and less visible ones. Often more visible factors, such as rough sleeping, could mask less visible ones, like exploitation. Misunderstandings of other groups can arise as a result.

Nick Olsen, emphasised the role of different groups coming into contact as a central way of mitigating this. He described some fantastic partnership work with young people, across mediums ranging from football, cricket and boxing through to amateur photography, local history and music (see this 'Undivided Unity' video, from a Cardiff school). Often, these initiatives involved linking up children from different schools, with different levels of diversity. The central message was that rumours about other groups are less likely to spread if people have meaningful contact with each other.

NEXT SESSION

The next webinar in the WHAT WORKS series will be held on **Thursday June 3rd 2021, between 11am and 12.30pm**. Put it in the calendar if you'd be interested, and we will send out the Zoom invite nearer the time. In the meantime please encourage others who might be interested in the topics discussed to join our Towns Leadership Network: https://www.hopefultowns.co.uk/network