

# Report of the Evaluation of Hartlepool Action Lab

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This report outlines the findings of an evaluation of the 'Hartlepool Action Lab' (HAL). The Hartlepool Action Lab aims to tackle poverty in Hartlepool and is supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). The evaluation was largely qualitative and was carried out between October 2016 and February 2017.

The work in Hartlepool has built upon the presence of the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) in the shape of the Hartfields retirement community. The work has taken a collaborative approach by bringing together local organisations and individuals and was underpinned by the belief that community members must be at the heart of any change that makes a lasting impact on poverty. The approach has put local workers at the forefront of development and has prioritised listening to local people about what they believe the challenges and solutions to be. By adopting this approach JRF aims to learn through action about the existing strengths and resources in the town and how these can be mobilised to address poverty. The work is also part of longer term learning on the part of JRF, examining ways in which poverty can be tackled by using the knowledge and expertise of local communities.

The work in Hartlepool was initiated in September 2015 with a period of scoping and relationship building by JRF staff. This was followed by 'community research' in March 2016 where local people were supported to gather feedback in the town. Following these initial stages a US consultancy, Community Solutions, facilitated a four-day 'Action Lab' workshop in June 2016 that generated three Action Lab projects working towards achieving goals in three different areas: housing for 'looked after' young people, strengthening communities and a time banking project to improve skills and employability. The work of these three projects is ongoing.

The evaluation examined all stages of the work completed so far with a specific focus on the Community Solutions' Action Lab approach which uses 'Agile Problem Solving' as a method to facilitate positive change in communities.



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## 1. Summary of findings

This evaluation focuses on the approach taken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) in their work in Hartlepool. This work built upon the existing presence of the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) in Hartlepool which manages the successful Hartfields retirement community and is well regarded in the town. Building on the reputation and local knowledge of JRHT, JRF was keen to explore how it might play a wider role in tackling poverty in Hartlepool. JRF also wanted to ensure that the Hartlepool work drew on learning from grant-making by its York Committee and other trusts; was shaped by local research and relationship-building; and built on wider knowledge and networks. To enable this, the Hartlepool work involved relationship-building, community research, community action and was underpinned by the belief that community members must be at the heart of change which makes an impact on poverty<sup>1</sup>. By adopting this approach JRF aimed to learn how the existing strengths and resources in the town might be mobilised to address poverty. The work is part of longer term learning by JRF and others about ways in which poverty can be tackled by using the knowledge and expertise of local communities.

The work in Hartlepool was initiated in September 2015 with a period of initial scoping and relationship building by JRF staff. This was followed by 'community research' in March 2016 where local people were trained and supported to gather feedback in the town. Following these initial stages a US consultancy, Community Solutions (CS), facilitated a four-day 'Action Lab' workshop in June 2016 that generated three Action Lab teams working towards identified goals in three areas: housing for 'looked after' young people, strengthening communities and a time banking project to improve skills and employability.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's work in Hartlepool, whilst at an early stage, has been largely successful.

- The JRF team have built positive relationships across sectors and at different levels and the reputation of JRF/JRHT has ensured buy-in from a wide range of stakeholders. The desire to be open and exploratory helped to facilitate involvement and a sense of ownership from the outset.
- This exploratory approach was continued into the community research which provided valued training to local staff and community members. The research created a pool of committed local people who were motivated and interested in the work. They were a diverse group and were able to access community groups who are often not reached.
- The Action Lab workshop, delivered by CS, was highly successful in initiating three local projects which would not have otherwise been developed.

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<sup>1</sup> Crisp et al. (2016) Community-led approaches to reducing poverty in neighbourhoods: *A review of evidence and practice*, Sheffield Hallam University <http://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/crest/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/community-led-approaches-to-reducing-poverty-in-neighbourhoods.pdf>.

- The workshop motivated and inspired most participants to take action. The pace and intensity of the training, the challenging concepts and highly interactive exercises were very effective in giving impetus to the first 100 days of project development.
- Many participants took concepts from the workshop into the projects, and the training enabled participants to 'think differently' and reframe their perspective of seemingly intractable social issues.
- The workshop was effective in creating teams with an egalitarian structure and a user-centred focus, which reinforced JRF's 'bottom-up' approach and maximised engagement. There has been a high level of buy-in from people in Hartlepool.
- The three project teams have largely achieved their first 100-day goals and are now moving into a longer term phase of project development and delivery.

The work has been exploratory and while the three stages of relationship building, community research and Action lab workshop/project delivery were not specifically designed to work together, there were similarities in ethos and approach across the stages which resulted from the thinking of the JRF team. Together the stages created an interlinked whole that reinforced messages and encouraged ways of working. The work is now moving into a more sustained period which presents specific challenges and suggested areas for development are outlined below.

- **Defining the approach** - JRF team members had slightly different understandings of the Action Lab approach. Some felt that the approach referred largely to the workshop and its role in kick-starting projects, others saw the Action Lab as an overarching long-term approach which involved new ways of thinking and working together. To date the work has been experimental and there has been no written description of what the approach involves and how it is intended to create change. With the impending departure of the JRF lead worker it would be a good point for the team to clarify and agree how they intend to use the Action Lab approach in the future. The way in which the approach is defined will determine how the work is supported, planned and evaluated; capturing the thinking in some written form of the JRF lead worker before her departure will assist with this process.
- **Clarifying the role and measuring the success of the JRF team** - Whilst the project teams have well defined goals, it is not clear what success would look like for the JRF team itself. Once the team has clarified the Action lab approach that they will take forward, it would be useful to establish some criteria for success in the facilitation of their work.
- **Increased focus for the work** - The JRF team have already identified that they would provide a clearer focus to future work. The broad remit of the community research did not help Action Lab participants to focus on the specific issues that

impacted on poverty. JRF have now published their 'Solving Poverty Strategy'<sup>2</sup> and the team has begun to think through the implications of the strategy for the Hartlepool work. This is a good starting point for a team discussion about how they might want to frame future work to ensure a focus on poverty whilst responding to local sensitivities about the use of the term 'poverty'.

- **More guidance** - The desire to keep the work 'open' and exploratory meant that there was sometimes a lack of guidance. For example, people wanted more information in advance about the role and time commitment involved in the community research and the Action Lab before they agreed to participate. The team could develop some simple handouts for participants and ensure there is a clearer brief for future research and Action Lab workshops.
- **Definition of community** - JRF's definition of 'community' was anyone living or working in Hartlepool. This meant that there was no specific strategy to recruit community members who were not acting in a professional capacity and these people were under-represented in the Action Lab process. This was not felt to be an issue by the JRF team, as most workers in Hartlepool were long-established local people with a strong commitment to the town. In this sense the work in Hartlepool was 'bottom-up', but in other localities it might be worth considering the profile of workers who may not have such strong local ties.
- **Community-led or community-informed** - Similarly, the approach was often described as 'community-led', which in Hartlepool was arguably the case. However, the strong presence of local services and organisations meant that it might more accurately be described as an effective form of partnership working which was strongly informed by community knowledge. It might be useful for the JRF team to clarify what they mean by 'community-led' and their rationale for the inclusion of specific participants in future work.
- **Movement building** - After productive initial relationship building it was then unclear whose role it was to ensure that people who were more peripheral to the work were kept engaged. The JRF team were conscious that they had not fully used the expertise of Community Researchers who were not involved in the Action Lab workshop. Their limited ongoing involvement also meant that more marginalised communities reached through the community research were not as well included going forward. The team were also aware that they had not maximised the expertise of wider stakeholders, who were part of the workshop but not the resulting Action Lab teams. The team had organised two successful and well attended events for wider stakeholders, but despite this there was sometimes a lack of communication with more peripheral stakeholders and a need for less digital and more personal communications with senior managers or business people. The JRF team had

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<sup>2</sup> *We can solve poverty in the UK* <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/we-can-solve-poverty-uk>

initiated a newsletter which could potentially be used, alongside direct contact, to provide ongoing opportunities for involvement.

- **Challenges of the Action Lab workshop approach** - The complexity of the workshops presents a challenge for JRF moving forward. The skills, experience and personal attributes of the Action Lab workshop facilitators was key to the success of the work in Hartlepool. Having trainers with experience of delivering Action Labs in the US had a great impact on the participants, yet, for some, using US based facilitators did not align with the locally led approach. Equally, the training required skilled facilitators to maintain sufficient pressure without causing people to become fatigued. The JRF team should carefully consider the risks and benefits of how any future Action Labs are delivered and work closely with CS to ensure they are effective.
- **Project planning and management** - The project planning and management aspects of the workshop were not as engaging as earlier conceptual sections and participants felt that the project planning and management section was rushed. This section could be reviewed to ensure that enough time is devoted to project planning and the tone and delivery could be better aligned with the more engaging earlier elements of the workshop.
- **Sustaining the work** - Successful delivery of the projects' work has largely relied on the commitment of a small group of people and the teams could be better supported to maintain and develop active Action Lab membership and participation. Overall people felt there was a need for more resource in terms of project coordination. A useful starting point would be a mapping of the involvement and roles of organisations and community members across the Hartlepool Action Lab and identification of how these might be utilised by different teams. Within project teams, an audit of skills and interests would help to identify strengths and gaps in membership.
- **Sustaining the approach** - Over time there was a sense of 'falling back to old habits'. For some team members this was not seen as problematic, however if the aim is for the Action Lab approach to inform ongoing project delivery then simple mechanisms could be integrated into delivery to facilitate reflection. These could include ongoing review sessions within meetings, with less regular external review supported by JRF staff. People needed regular reinforcement and reminders if they were to work in a different way.
- **Recording learning and success** - the groups sometimes struggled to record or effectively track their work and the project management tools did not appear to be sufficiently 'agile'. The JRF team could work with CS to develop more user friendly 'agile' tools which build on existing habits within the groups. For example, the groups tend to minute their meetings and the workshop could provide minute 'templates'

which prompt people to review their work and record relevant information as an integral part of delivery.

The work has been successful to date but it is now entering a period of uncertainty with the departure of the current JRF lead and as the projects move into the longer term phase it would be easy to lose momentum. At this point it might be useful for the JRF team, ideally with their new lead, to spend time agreeing a written statement of intent about the work, to define their role as facilitators including some success criteria, to develop tools such as information for participants and a communication plan and to consider how they will plan future work in the light of their learning to date. This would lay the groundwork for discussion with CS about the shape of future Action Labs and help them to devise more effective project planning and recording tools to aid monitoring and evaluation moving forward.

The team could also carry out a more regular formal review process, both within the JRF team and with the project teams, in order to identify any support or delivery issues. Formalising review in this way would enable the team to ensure that learning from the work informs development and would enable the learning to be recorded for evaluation and for wider dissemination.

## 2. Background

This evaluation focuses on the recent work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) in Hartlepool. The work is largely exploratory, taking a collaborative approach that emphasises building relationships, developing capacity and building on existing strengths in Hartlepool. It has been informed by community research which was facilitated by a consultant from 3Ps consultancy and conducted by local workers and community members who were trained in participatory appraisal. The Action Lab approach, devised by the US consultancy CS, uses a change method called 'Agile Problem Solving' (APS). It involved a 4-day 'Action Lab' workshop in which participants identified three projects to take forward into a 100-day 'sprint'. JRF has commissioned this evaluation to examine the effectiveness of the overall approach.

Solving poverty is at the heart of JRF's work and their national Solving Poverty Strategy, published during the work in Hartlepool, recognises the role of local communities (along with the state and businesses) in developing sustainable responses to poverty. When approaching the Hartlepool work, JRF were keen to learn from their previous locality based work<sup>3</sup>, where their role as a place based funder had the potential to raise unrealistic expectations or develop relationships of dependency which did not always result in sustainable change. In response to this learning, the JRF team were keen to explore different approaches to facilitating change in Hartlepool and to ensure that the existing good relationships established by JRHT in the town were enhanced.

Prior to the work in Hartlepool, staff at the National Housing Federation (NHF) had made a connection to CS through their work in the US around homelessness. CS used small multi-sector, action-focused workshops which drew on good practice in industry and on insights from psychology in order to precipitate change. In the course of these 'Action Lab' workshops, groups were formed which took forward their ideas into real life projects. When the NHF proposed running 'Action Lab' training in the UK that outlined the APS method, staff at JRF saw the potential benefits of the approach and arranged for several JRF and JRHT staff to take part. The training, delivered in January 2016, was well received by participants and when JRF committed to broadening their work in Hartlepool, it was agreed to pilot this approach.

We outline below the key chronological stages to the work in Hartlepool, but it is important to remember that the work was exploratory, without a pre-planned structure to the overall process and that the JRF team were responding to the contexts they found in Hartlepool. The initial scoping was conducted prior to the decision to use the Action Lab approach and the intention was to continue the emphasis on relationship-building throughout all stages of the project. Key stages have been:

- Initial scoping and relationship building by JRF staff (September 2015 – ongoing).

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<sup>3</sup> For example, JRF had made a 10-year commitment to carry out place-based work in Bradford between 2001-2013. A summary of key learning points is available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/what-makes-effective-place-based-working>.

- Community research where local workers and community members were trained and supported to gather feedback from communities (March – May 2016).
- Action Lab involving a 4-day workshop (in June 2016), a 100-day goal oriented 'sprint' by 3 Action Lab teams (up to 24 October 2016) and a move from the 'sprint' towards a 100-day 'marathon' (ongoing up to 24 March 2017).

The evaluation examined all three stages of the work with a specific focus on the CS Action Lab approach. It is useful at this point to describe this approach, which uses APS as a method to facilitate positive change in communities. It is eclectic and draws on good practice in industry and design, insights from psychology<sup>4</sup> and the idea of 'Change' or 'Social' Labs<sup>5</sup>. The summary of the method below was developed by the evaluation team and confirmed by CS.

### Key Principles of APS

CS propose that to create change we need to recognise that social problems are complex, which means they exist in a context which is constantly changing, with a constant flow of information and peopled by actors who regularly adapt their behaviour. Because of this, simply 'planning' an intervention will not work; in order to create change interventions need to be:

- *Social* - with diverse participants who understand and address the human elements that effect change i.e. the 'psychology' of all involved.
- *Experimental* - with testing and iterative learning, with good information and rapid feedback loops.
- *Action-focused* - with measurable goals, focused on the core problem, and urgent deadlines.

### Key tools to achieve change

- Use intensive workshops with multi-agency/multi-partner participants to build trust and create a cohesive team that can address the problem holistically.
- Use the 'Switch' approach - an approach which addresses the human elements of change, both the emotional ('the elephant') and the rational ('the rider').
- Use methods that allow for creativity, passion and empathy with the 'end user'.
- Set goals that are scary yet achievable.
- Use timescales that create urgency, allow for iteration and early success.
- Iterate - test and review, especially with end users, make this the core of the work.
- Collect good data and use it in the iteration process.
- Track progress and evaluate.
- Build a movement - create a stir and bring people with you.

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<sup>4</sup> Heath, C. & Heath, D. (2011) *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, Random House, New York.

<sup>5</sup> Hassan, Z. (2014) *The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges* Berrett-Koehler, New York.

CS use a huge range of tools and techniques in their workshops but all reflect the three core principles – be *social* by engaging people, both participants and end users; be *experimental* by constantly re-inventing and testing ideas, using data to rigorously examine work; and always focus on *action* by having goals and timescales that drive change.

This approach was of interest to JRF for a range of reasons. It seemed to avoid some of the pitfalls of previous work because it enabled local people to take the lead, offering more chance to be sustainable, and the flexibility in the method allowed for experimentation in shaping the work. Equally, CS’s experience in addressing homelessness in America offered a method with potential for tackling other complex social issues<sup>6</sup>.

Section 4 of this report examines how the work took shape, focusing on the early thinking of the team and relationship building across the town. This is followed by an examination of the community research in section 5, the Action Lab workshop in section 6 and finally section 7 addresses the Action Lab method in practice, successes to date and some of the challenges going forward.

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<sup>6</sup> Leopold, J. & Ho, H. (2016) Evaluation of the 100,000 Homes Campaign: *Assessing the Campaign’s Effectiveness in Housing the Chronically and Vulnerable Homeless*, Urban Institute, Washington.

### 3. Evaluation aim and methods

The purpose of the evaluation was to help JRF to capture learning and inform future development in Hartlepool. The evaluation started in October 2016 as the project teams were moving towards the 100-day deadline at the end of the 'sprint' and ran until February 2017, part-way through the 'marathon'. It was largely qualitative and explored people's perceptions of the effectiveness of the work in Hartlepool with a specific focus on the Action Lab workshop and subsequent Action Lab projects. The evaluation considered some key questions:

- What was the 'theory of change' of the commissioners, the staff and the participants and how did they envisage that change would be created?
- How good was the 'fit' between the methodology, JRF and the local community?
- To what extent was the methodology effective in achieving its aims?
- What is the quality of the relationships built between organisations and individuals and how do these relationships impact on the work?

Interviews were conducted with 35 people; both face to face and by telephone/Skype and 9 informal conversations took place with participants at events. Of the 35 interviewees, 27 had taken part in the Action Lab workshop, 8 had taken a lead role in the Action Lab teams and 7 had acted as Community Researchers. The interviews included JRF workers (along with JRHT staff and a consultant involved in the work), a CS facilitator, the 3Ps Consultant, community members and a range of wider stakeholders including staff from Hartlepool Borough Council (HBC), funding bodies and the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

In addition, observations of Action Lab project meetings and events took place, including a celebration event at the end of the 'sprint' phase and the 'sprint' to 'marathon' event which acted as the planning session for the next phase of the work. To ensure the inclusion of those who were more peripheral to the work a brief survey was completed of organisations that had pledged their support and people who had declined to attend the Action Lab workshop. The survey received 11 responses with responses from at least 7 different organisations (not all respondents elected to provide their details). Finally, four short interactive workshops were held with the three Action Lab teams and the JRF team in order to test early evaluation findings.

## 4. Early stages of the work

This section describes the early stages of scoping and relationship-building and the thinking and planning in the run-up to the Action Lab workshop.

### 4.1 Rationale for selecting the Action Lab approach

The evaluation team wanted to explore how the JRF team understood the approach they were taking. Whilst the JRF team did not have a fully articulated theoretical position, the CS method was chosen because it resonated with the ethos of JRF and was thought to address challenges the organisation had faced in previous community engagement initiatives. Perhaps most importantly, the JRF team felt that the approach would build on existing strengths and enable local communities to have ownership and develop their own solutions to the issues they had identified in their communities.

“We were really conscious about making sure our work was part of what already existed rather than to impose something from outside... and looking at what role we could play...”  
JRF worker <sup>7</sup>

In this sense the Action Lab workshop, with its diverse membership and ‘flattened’ hierarchy, had a clear resonance with the thinking of the JRF team viewing local people as assets. There was an implicit belief that, if communities were given inspiration and freedom to design their own solutions within a supportive environment, the resulting work would be more likely to be both successful and sustainable.

It was also recognised that there can be cynicism about the possibility of creating change, particularly in areas of high deprivation, where communities had seen a range of programmes achieve only limited success. The JRF team felt that the CS approach, with its emphasis on motivating people to take action could address some of these concerns.

“The workshop was great, very intensive, it was a way of raising ambition but also connecting with communities, people and evidence, it was challenging and inspiring and opening.”  
JRF worker

JRF’s experimental approach aligned with the iterative learning cycles involved in APS. JRF workers believed that learning, reacting and making rapid change would be more effective and engaging for community members.

“Many people in communities have great ideas about things that they could do to make their communities better, but so easily get mired in side issues or bureaucracy, tedium. And so there was something about ... being fleet of foot, responding quickly. There was a really strong emphasis on learning, learning continually, not making

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<sup>7</sup> JRF is used here to refer to JRF or JRHT.

long term plans. And in this changing, rapidly changing environment, you know, a plan for six months will be out of date by the time you get to month four.”  
JRF worker

The ‘open’ nature of the work was valued by JRF staff who referred to it often. All the team members valued the chance to be exploratory and felt it was important that the process was led and informed by local people. However, the team members had different understandings of the method. Some saw the workshop more as a useful tool to ‘kick-start’ multi-agency projects in Hartlepool, whereas the lead saw the APS method as something that was ongoing and would suffuse the work of the teams and change their ways of working on a long term basis. This was reflected in different uses of the term ‘Action Lab’, with some people identifying the Action Lab as simply the workshop which started the work and others using the term to refer to the process of relationship-building, delivering a workshop from which projects emerged and supporting the long-term delivery.

These differences highlighted a lack of clarity in the work. Neither CS nor the JRF team had a written statement which defined the approach and much of the thinking about the work was in the heads of the facilitators. With the JRF lead now leaving her post, it would be useful for the team to spend time discussing their approach and reaching agreement as to how the method is, or is not, to be carried forward into the Action Lab teams. Having some clear definition of how the method is to be used will be important in informing how the work is planned, monitored and evaluated. It will also enable the team to identify some clear goals for the facilitation of the work and some criteria for successful facilitation.

## **4.2 Relationship building**

JRF’s emphasis on community-led change meant that relationship building was key in identifying potential collaborators. With this in mind, JRF began a period of relationship building in September 2015 starting with existing JRF/JRHT contacts but aiming to reach a wider range of stakeholders.

“I was keen to meet with anybody that was working in the general field of poverty, social disadvantaged, health inequalities, all of those things, across the public statutory. And community groups, I really wanted to hear the view on the ground.”  
JRF worker

JRHT’s local reputation through the Hartfields community meant that people were receptive to approaches from the team and they were successful in engaging workers at all levels across the statutory, voluntary and (to a lesser extent) private sectors. It is also hard to overestimate the positive impact of having JRF as the convener of the work. Throughout the evaluation people stressed the interest generated by the JRF name, seen not only as a respected funder, but also as a trustworthy organisation effective at facilitating change.

“We had people, you know, from the private sector, the voluntary sector, firstly, which I thought was a really good thing. But secondly, the people, and this is down

to JRF again, the people that they were able to attract. I mean we had the Chief Executive there, we had the Principal of the College, the Head of Children's Services, we had various others; it was like the glitterati.... Fantastic, absolutely, and I thought, you know that's what you can do if you're JRF. You've got this clout, you've got this power."

Action Lab workshop participant

The effectiveness of the relationship-building was also due to the skill, attitudes and persistence of the JRF team. They were very well regarded and several respondents spoke about JRF staff as highly engaging and positive. They were professional, able to cut across local politics and model an 'agile', action-focused approach. The JRF team also had expertise in the shape of a local consultant who was brought on board in the early relationship-building phase and has supported the work to date.

There was also a real willingness on the part of Hartlepool organisations and individuals to take part in the work. Hartlepool is a relatively small town with dense networks and 'thick'<sup>8</sup> ties. There was a sense of pride about the town and its people and a genuine desire to be involved if there was a chance to create change.

Despite this, it was difficult at times to get buy-in from some organisations, in particular those from the Health and private sectors. JRF staff felt that the Health sector struggled to identify how to engage with the JRF approach. Similarly, it proved difficult to engage people from business - it was hard to identify the right people and the process took much longer than the JRF team expected.

In contrast the approach was successful in engaging public and statutory sector organisations, wider stakeholders such as funding organisations, and those from the VCS. After initial discussion, organisations such as HBC also nominated staff to take part. Although the work has been largely led by paid workers from the statutory sector and VCS, there has been extensive input from a few unpaid community members and some workers have gone 'over and above' the remit of their paid role. Although most of those workers were local people, their involvement as part of their organisational role meant they brought a different perspective to that of an unpaid community member. The JRF team were aware of these issues and have considered the possibility of running future training with specific sectors. They were conscious of the need to recruit more community members and this was commented on by participants.

"Give more of an open invite to the original community research to involve, for example, neighbourhood groups and resident groups from different wards. When we all turned up there were lots of community development workers and people thought 'why are there lots of council workers?'"

Community Researcher

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<sup>8</sup> Putnam, R. D. (1995) *Bowling alone: America's declining social capital*. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), pp. 65–78 - describes the dense social networks and close ties in more traditional communities.

The community research did consult with over 400 local people, but the Action Lab projects might be shaped differently if community members, who were not paid workers, had been more active in leading.

Overall however, the initial relationship building was successful and participants in the Action Lab workshop were impressed that JRF had succeeded in attracting both senior management and grassroots workers from a range of sectors.

“To get the common man round the table and to get the movers and shakers round as well, that seemed to me to be really dynamic and really powerful.”  
Community member

However as the Action Lab projects got underway it was not always clear whose role it was to keep people informed and engaged. This was particularly the case for those who were interested in the work but not actively involved in the projects such as Community Researchers, business pledgers or more senior managers.

“It would have been good to be kept in the loop, the only information I had about the work was because I followed the groups on Twitter.”  
Wider Stakeholder

While one of the business pledgers consulted during the evaluation remained committed to the work and was looking for ways to contribute, he commented that he didn't use social media and had no sense of how work was progressing. This feedback reflected a sense that sometimes wider stakeholders were not being 'brought along'. 'Movement Building' is a key aspect of the CS approach - where a 'buzz' of interest is created around the work. In the Hartlepool work it wasn't clear whose role it was to facilitate this. The Action Lab projects were focused on achieving their initial goals, and whilst the JRF team had carried out some effective communication the lack of clear definition in respective roles meant that some elements of the method seemed to slip through the net. The JRF team circulates a monthly email newsletter providing updates for stakeholders. This is a good tool to maintain engagement and could potentially be developed to present ways for wider stakeholders to get involved.

The JRF team were very aware of the tensions involved in using such an 'open' approach. Whilst it allowed experimentation and gave space for local people to bring their own ideas, it also meant that JRF roles were sometimes undefined and there was a lack of focus in the overall aim of the work.

### **4.3 Learning**

- Early relationship building was successful overall. The reputation of JRHT and JRF, along with the skills and attitudes of the JRF team and willingness of local people and organisations, enabled the successful establishment of relationships across

sectors and at different levels.

- The desire to be exploratory facilitated involvement and gave people ownership during the relationship building phase. However the JRF team felt they would give more focus to this aspect of the work in future using JRF's Solving Poverty Strategy.
- The need to ensure participation across sectors may have resulted in a focus on the involvement of organisations rather than unaffiliated community members. This may have been the aim of the work, as a broad definition of community was used, but the team need to be aware that this resulted in limited engagement from community members.

The open nature of the work meant that although the project had the general aim of addressing poverty in Hartlepool, the JRF team did not seem to have clear criteria for the success of their own work as facilitators of the process. This also meant it was sometimes unclear whose role it was to 'build the movement' and communication was limited, sometimes being only digital which did not suit all stakeholders.

## 5. Community research

Between March and May 2016, 24 people were trained in participatory learning and action techniques and supported to carry out research into the issues that local people felt were important in the town. The research was led by 3Ps Consultancy and supported by the JRF consultant. Most Community Researchers were workers in local statutory and VCS organisations. The researchers ran 27 research sessions in community centres and other VCS spaces and collected feedback from over 400 people. While the research was commissioned in order to recruit local people and feed local knowledge into the work in Hartlepool, the process of recruiting researchers was rushed and lacked clarity which meant that potential researchers were not given clear information about the research process or its purpose. The research did not focus on poverty and team members had different recollections and views about this. JRF's Solving Poverty Strategy had not yet been published and while some members felt that this contributed to the lack of focus on poverty others felt that there was a lack of clarity rather than a conscious decision to maintain an open focus. Some team members were keen to stress the strengths and resources in the town and conscious that having a strong focus on poverty might not aid getting this message across. As a result the brief for the work was very broad and led to the research being framed around the following open-ended questions:

- What are the best things about Hartlepool?
- What are the worst things about Hartlepool?
- What would be your ideas to improve Hartlepool?

### 5.1 The research process

The community research was commissioned to ensure that the work was rooted in the concerns of local people. With hindsight the JRF team recognised that the community research was also a way to:

“Get members of communities in the room, feeling like they have their own credible perspective, that other participants would, therefore, put them on an equal, it was about equalising the power in relationships, essentially.”

JRF Worker

While the aim of the research was primarily to provide local intelligence, it also worked to build the skills of local people and empower them to give community members a voice. The inclusion of some Community Researchers in the later Action Lab workshop also had a 'levelling' effect as they brought recognised knowledge and expertise. When organisations use Community Researchers in project development this usually refers to the recruitment of community members who are not workers. In reality, this community research training was largely taken up by paid staff from local statutory and VCS organisations. This appears to have been a pragmatic rather than conscious decision, as the community research training was arranged at very short notice. There was also a lack of information for participants about the nature of the research, what their involvement would be and the expected time

commitment.

“It was only at the end of the first day that the penny dropped that we would be going out and doing research. You could tell there was a feeling across the room that some people hadn’t realised what it was going to involve.”

Community Researcher

Equally, whilst the remit of the research had been purposefully broad, with hindsight some of the team felt that they could have done more to guide the research or focus it more specifically around issues that were directly related to poverty.

“There was a lot of emphasis on the research process, as well as the outcome ...so the weaknesses are, it was not very funnelled... We’ve been less successful in engaging the community than I hoped because the people who are participating as members of communities, are also people who work in, or have had experience of working, in community organising, community based organisations.”

JRF worker

The broad remit, combined with the lack of information about the role, made it appear vague and undefined and one person commented that this may have made it hard to recruit and retain researchers. The concerns of the team to avoid the negative connotations attached to the term ‘poverty’ are understandable, but there was a feeling across the team that there could have been more of a steer given to the research which might have made it more useful in the Action Lab process. The JRF team has begun to identify ways in which the Hartlepool Action Lab currently aligns with the national JRF Solving Poverty Strategy and has identified actions to further enhance this. As the team moves into a new phase of the work there is an opportunity to review this analysis and see how they can more effectively frame the work whilst being aware of sensitivities around ‘poverty’ and the need for local ownership.

## **5.2 Outcomes of the community research**

The community research was successful in providing skills to a large group of local people engaged in the JRF work, who then became an available pool of skilled local researchers. Participants were very positive about their experience of the training.

“So for me, it was new, even the techniques and things were new to me because I’d never been in community development before.”

Community Researcher

Many researchers commented on the participation of people from diverse community organisations which had enabled them to access the views of a wide range of Hartlepool residents.

“Because we had so many good links in the room, we could talk to refugees and

asylum seekers, which you wouldn't always have a link. We'll go and talk to them next Tuesday, brilliant. I'll go and talk to homeless people in the café, brilliant. And so, you know, we had a, very quickly, a network of people that could talk to people that don't usually have their say."

Community Researcher

The research resulted in a report 'Conversations in Hartlepool' which outlined issues and ideas highlighted by local people in relation to a range of themes including health, housing, transport, employment, education, safety and community provision. The lack of research focus was raised by a range of participants who felt, in hindsight, that the broad research findings did not help Action Lab participants to focus their thinking on poverty.

"It was very vague about where it might be going and how it might result... The strengths of it were, you know, they'd reached into communities, that are often not heard, but they'd asked very, very big open questions, not focused."

JRF worker

Equally, the limited number of places available in the Action Lab required the JRF team to make some difficult decisions. As a result only five places were reserved for Community Researchers and those places were allocated randomly. This meant that the majority of Community Researchers were not taken through into the project stage and a range of people commented that the potential of this group was not maximised.

"There were about 20 or 30 Community Researchers who had been involved, were energised and were captive but these were whittled down to 5... there could have been a way to keep everyone involved in some way."

Community Researcher

With hindsight the expertise of the Community Researchers might have been well used in the projects and the work would have benefited from an alternative strategy to maintain their engagement.

### 5.3 Learning

- The community research was highly valued by participants who highlighted the skills they had gained and the opportunity to access groups in the community who are often not reached.
- The community research created a pool of committed and skilled local people who were motivated and interested in the work and could be used in other contexts.
- The process of recruiting and training Community Researchers was conducted at short notice and the commissioning lacked focus and information for participants, which may have made it harder to recruit and maintain interest. The JRF team were aware that they could provide guidance and frame the work more whilst still retaining local ownership.

- The remit of the research meant that its findings were broad-ranging and a clearer framing for the research may have enabled Action Lab participants to focus more on issues that impacted on poverty. The JRF team identified that they would provide a tighter focus in future work.
- JRF's default definition of 'community' was anyone living or working in Hartlepool. This meant that there was no priority to recruit local residents who would have strengthened the community voice and benefited from the training offered.
- The work would benefit from a strategy to enable the continued engagement of Community Researchers who were not involved in the Action Lab workshop. Their limited ongoing involvement particularly meant that the diversity of people reached in the community research did not appear to be reflected going forward into the Action Lab.

## 6. The Action Lab workshop

In the introduction we outlined the CS approach, which used workshops to inspire groups to address social problems using iterative learning and ‘human centred’ design. In this section we examine how the Action Lab workshop was set up in Hartlepool and the participants’ experience of the method.

The Action Lab workshop took place in June 2016, over 4 days, with 32 attendees representing the VCS, local authority and several funding bodies. These included 5 Community Researchers and several JRF/JRHT staff. The majority of those in attendance were paid staff attending with the support of their organisation. Only 3 people attended in a voluntary capacity, of which 2 were Community Researchers. While most of the staff who took part lived and worked in Hartlepool, and had a great commitment to the town, there was little representation from community members.

CS agreed with the JRF team which elements of their ‘toolkit’ would be used in the 4 day workshop, but the delivery was that of CS, fast paced and with an ‘inspirational’ tone which aimed to break through cynicism and motivate participants. Overall the training was very well received, although there were a minority of participants who found the American style off-putting.

### 6.1 The Participants

One of the key elements of an Action Lab workshop is the participation of a wide range of stakeholders, including those with influence and those who have grass-roots experience. The Hartlepool workshop achieved this with the exception that there was little involvement of local residents who were not also attending in a work capacity. However, even though the majority of the participants were employed in local organisations, because of the nature of Hartlepool, most were also long-established local residents who brought local knowledge and a commitment to create change for Hartlepool people and the town. People were impressed by the range of participants.

“It was an impressive achievement (level of involvement and range of sectors). I don’t know how they did it and this has carried on to a certain extent. There were people from Hartlepool and those working regionally and nationally. It was led by those from Hartlepool, as it should be.”

Action Lab workshop participant

Again the range reflected the reputational pull of JRF/JRHT and skills of the team in building relationships. In the APS method having a good range of people in the workshop is key to identifying new solutions and the team worked hard to achieve this.

“...trying to get a really good cross section of the people who could influence the outcome and people working on the ground who knew what already existed, who could maybe be really quick to identify where there are gaps...there were limited places and it was quite a balancing act... to ensure all the different representation was there and not exclude anybody but to ensure the numbers were manageable

was quite a process.”  
JRF worker

Despite the challenges of this ‘balancing act’ the Action Lab workshop achieved a good cross-section of organisations. Participants particularly mentioned the ‘egalitarian’ nature of the Action Lab workshop, which enabled all the participants to have an equal voice throughout the 4 days.

“The dynamics and networks were really interesting – people from all different walks of life bonded. It was fast-paced and it was hard to get the project ideas together as there were strong opinions and tensions. But this wasn’t a problem, it showed something was happening.”  
Action Lab workshop participant

Despite the range of people involved, some questions were raised about the ideal makeup of a workshop. With hindsight, the projects chosen by participants were practically orientated and largely based in community settings. Some who attended felt they were either too senior to have a role in implementation or that the work bore no relation to their organisations’ priorities. The benefits of including more Community Researchers was again highlighted, given that they were more community-focused and had links with more marginalised communities:

“When I realised the level of commitment I knew I wouldn’t be able to be involved in the group, I just don’t have the capacity unless it’s connected to my work priorities.”  
Senior VCS Worker

“It should have been identified, that actually, 40 or 50% of the people around the table would be very little use to what’s going on in stage three or stage four, because they don’t have the time. That’s where the Community Researchers would have come in; Volunteers should have been part of the process from the start to the finish. I know X is a volunteer, but apart from that I don’t know who else is a volunteer.”  
Action Lab workshop participant

This quote highlights the difficulty of getting the right balance in the make-up of the Action Lab. Although grassroots workers might be key in the initial development stages, more senior staff would potentially come into play at a later point. It was a complex task to engage all groups and sustain that engagement through the different phases of the work. In order to assist this process it might be helpful to consider the balance between organisational and individual involvement and the roles of different stakeholders at different stages. JRF/JRHT team members also suggested that it would be useful to map the involvement of individuals and organisations across the Action Lab.

## **6.2 Commitment and length of the workshop**

One of the achievements of the JRF team was convincing the range of participants to commit to 4 full days of training.

“It was hard over the 4 days... it was being out of the office for 4 days in one full block, that was difficult as well. Because .... you had all that work to go back to.”  
Action Lab workshop participant

Some participants thought 4 days was too much time commitment, others that there was too much to communicate within the time or that the days should be spread out over a longer period in order to allow participants to digest the learning. The format was also shaped by the use of trainers from the US, since consecutive training days minimised costs.

One of the outcomes of having a 4 day block of training was a ‘bonding’ experience on the part of the participants. The training was fast paced and involved people working in groups on testing exercises - this broke through previous organisational allegiances and people bonded by working together under pressure on shared tasks. Spreading out the training might dilute this effect.

Equally, there were different levels of participation across the group. Some participants had agreed with the organisers to only attend for part of the time and a few, who felt the method was not for them, missed days or dropped out before the end. Whilst this was a minority of participants the way the work was organised meant that their absence was noticed.

“There was a few of them seemed to be dipping in and out, where we were originally told that it was 4 days, they were all mandatory.”  
Action Lab workshop participant

There was also a feeling that some participants had less ‘buy-in’ to the method.

“Like some people were there but they weren’t there. They weren’t as involved, they didn’t really, they weren’t bothered...”  
Action Lab training participant

Many people also said that they were surprised by the ongoing investment of time that was expected. For those who worked on the front line, involvement in the selected projects might more easily be aligned with existing work, but for others the fit was not as clear. At this point in the development of the work it might be useful for the team to discuss the time investment with potential participants and have a more structured plan about how and when to draw on the input of different stakeholders.

### **6.3 Inspiration and motivation**

A significant achievement of the workshop, mentioned by many participants, was the inspiration it gave them to take action.

“I loved it. I found it really sort of inspiring, it really sort of got you, I don’t know, getting a bit of fire in your belly, wanting to make a change, type thing... I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it.”

Action Lab workshop participant

People were engaged emotionally and so prepared to commit time and energy to the Action Lab projects going into the 'sprint'. This was achieved in part by the expertise of the trainers; even participants who were less engaged with the style or content agreed that the trainers were highly skilled and good communicators. Equally, the fact that the trainers had come from the US, where they had dealt seemingly successfully with the issue of homelessness, suggested that it was possible to turn around an intractable issue.

"That anything's possible. That's what I've took away. And that did really help us with the last hundred days... I mean you hit all sorts of barriers but it's kind of, and I think, to be honest, I think if I hadn't done that training, I could quite easily have given up a few times."

Action Lab workshop participant

Whilst for a few the American style was perceived as 'hand-clapping and self-congratulatory' most participants valued the contrast between this approach and the usual way of doing things. The trainers' completely different perspective contributed to the experience.

"I think a lot of the time it was a different approach to tackling poverty, if you like. And I think a lot of the time you can put up your own barriers up and, you know, that's been tried before, well that won't work because... it made you strip back all of that and not let anything stop you."

Action Lab workshop participant

People thought there may have been a divide between grassroots workers and people in management roles, who may have encountered similar ideas previously. Some managers struggled to engage with the ideas.

"It felt like a lot of stuff that I'd done before and it wasn't a good use of my time, I didn't feel I was learning anything. There was nothing new or original..."

Action Lab workshop participant

This reaction was confined to a minority of participants; the majority, in all positions, engaged with the training. However, it is possible that familiarity with the subject matter or techniques might mean that the workshop has less impact on future participants. It is something to be aware of if the training is to be used again with the same participants. Equally, Hartlepool has a relatively small pool of organisations and workers and if the method is used on an ongoing basis there is a need to be aware of how the workshop is tailored to meet the needs of participants with varying degrees of knowledge and experience of Action Labs.

## 6.4 Pace and intensity

There was mixed feedback about the pace of the workshop. Those who felt they had knowledge of the content sometimes felt that the pace was too slow. However, most participants described a fast, intense pace that sometimes meant it was difficult to assimilate ideas, although this was not necessarily problematic.

“Some of it, don’t get me wrong, I didn’t understand, but I don’t think you needed to. The fact you were working as a team to solve a problem and what you didn’t know your colleague might have known. I liked the way, because you could see there was blank faces and it was very intense.”

Action Lab workshop participant

The pace created an urgency which was engaging and added to the sense that what they were doing was important. It also set the tone for the subsequent projects as it was clear that the teams were meant to think quickly and move into action rather than spend long periods deliberating.

“It was the hardest work I’ve ever done. It was brilliant, intense, challenging and engaging. JRF got their money’s worth from CS ... It was fast-paced and it was hard to get the project ideas together as there were strong opinions and tensions. But this wasn’t a problem, it showed something was happening.”

Action Lab workshop participant

This fast delivery of a wealth of new concepts, described by many as ‘intense’ could be experienced as both exhilarating and exhausting. The downside was that the participants could reach a point where they were unable to process information.

“I don’t know whether we’d have survived a fifth day. We were quite, we had had enough. That was like probably the right length. Because I can remember the last, by the afternoon on the last day, I think we were all pretty much brain dead.”

Action Lab workshop participant

This sensation of being unable to think was echoed by more than one participant. This was one of the tensions in the method; there was a need to put people under pressure in order to challenge them to think, change, bond and move into action, but too much pressure could simply make people give up. Once this had happened it became difficult to make effective decisions.

“So we’re getting loads of ideas. And now choose some, how do you want to choose them? Just choose some, you’ve got two minutes. Well who’s going to choose? Who’s the leader? We all are. So what’s our criteria? Not too sure. Well we think we’ve chosen one. OK, because we’ve only got two minutes and everything starts to be two minutes, two minutes, two minutes. I understand why because they’ve got to get through it, but it felt quite rushed, quite pressured.”

Action Lab workshop participant

The desire to let people take the lead appeared to be counter-productive at times as the

complexity of the workshop demanded strong framing and support in order to help people make decisions. The desire not to impose a framework sometimes meant there was a lack of clear direction - an issue which threaded through from the community research into the workshop.

“I’m not convinced that we came up with the best ideas we could have in that time period, and I think one of the problems with that was, that we, we had too much scope, there was too much to cover. We needed some focus, we needed some things to be put in a way to make us think creatively.”

“So we got given documentation from the community research, which again, in hindsight, it would have been better to have before, but we didn’t. But there was just so many topics in it, there’s transport, there’s health, there’s everything like that, and to then, if we’d been directed to one.”

Action Lab workshop participants

CS were highly skilled and experienced facilitators who took time to review the way the workshop was progressing but people still struggled. Whilst the majority of participants came away with ‘a fire in their bellies’, the issue of fatigue is something that needs to be balanced in the process of delivery and is a consideration as the teams move into action.

## **6.5 New concepts and ways of thinking**

Many participants could point to concepts that they had taken forward into the project work. One concept which was particularly highlighted by participants was that of ‘failing forward’.

“Failing forward and you’ve got to make mistakes to learn and things like that. I found that sort of quite, it was like a different way of looking at mistakes.”

Action Lab workshop participant

The participants valued being given ‘permission’ to fail as it enabled them to be more creative in their thinking and take risks in the work. There were a range of concepts in the training which seemed to act in a similar way including those related to developing a growth mindset, using human centred design and identifying bright spots.

“So day one was all about positive mindsets and then we did our feedback from the research and talked about bright spots and human centred design. So that was all a real eye opener for me and everyone else, trying to get our heads around that. And day two, theory of change and complex problems, playing around with those, and the social labs approach and switch thinking and those kinds of things. Great thoughts, really great.”

“The complex problem solving ideas, the little exercise that we did. It was deep... it was techniques I’d never sort of come across.”

“The growth mindset and how the training promoted a positive vibe, encouraging taking risks and building relationships...”

“To use the word ‘yet’ about things that haven’t been completed or tried.”

Action Lab workshop participants

The idea of ‘thinking differently’ or thinking in new ways about existing issues was used often by participants to describe the impact of the workshop. The fast pace, new concepts and motivational drive combined to create change in many of the participants by taking them out of their ‘comfort zone’.

“You were looking at things and you were, you were trying to think about things differently. There was a lot of brain work. I mean they did have little activities but even the activities that they did were linked to making you think differently.”

Action Lab workshop participant

## 6.6 Exercises and tools

The trainers used a range of exercises which were largely well-received and participants remembered a variety of these that they had found useful in terms of changing their thinking.

“...You’re just throwing a ball in a team, between you in a certain order, and then they say, right, they give you some criteria, they give you three rules... And then they’re like, OK, 10 percent of people finish this in less than however many seconds, so many do it in this, can you beat it? And having the rules made, you think about how you could work round them and still fit with the rules, but come up with a creative way, rather than throwing a ball across.”

Action Lab workshop participant

The first two days of the workshop were described as conceptual, interactive and challenging. The trainers included exercises that were ‘fun’ involving opportunities to change position or interact with different people. However during the latter part of the training, where tools which involved project management were introduced, participants did not seem as engaged.

“The issue for me, was as you went, got to sort of day three, and particularly day four, it might be a personal thing, but the driver diagrams and the strategic and the strategising became formal, maybe it needs to, but it became formal, it became wordy. It became quite academic-ish and I think it, on the table I was on, it started to lose people a bit.”

Action Lab workshop participant

There is a challenge in making project planning engaging, yet the collection and use of good information is central to the Action Lab method. This was a point in the training where the different levels of knowledge and experience of the participants created a particular challenge for the trainers.

“I mean people that are used to the driver diagram approach and strategic planning approach, as we moved into that, I’m making an assumption, but possibly, some of the more statutory and management level of the voluntary sector staff, might have found that easier to deal with than others who’ve not, don’t see that so much.”  
Action Lab workshop participant

Some participants found the project-planning approach to be energy-draining, which may also have been because the section was at the end of the training when people were tired, however there was also a sense that the planning section of the workshop felt rushed. Feedback indicated that the driver diagrams and action planning systems were not as user friendly as the rest of the approach. One of the greatest challenges in project development is finding a way to collect data and record. It might be possible to introduce a more ‘agile’ system of planning and information gathering that aligns in tone with the earlier ‘conceptual’ section of the training and makes recording and evaluation a routine part of the project work.

## **6.7 Choosing an Action Lab project**

In the workshop, participants were tasked to come up with an area of work which reflected the concerns of local people through the community research and in which they had a personal interest. Two projects were initially selected, one focusing on the housing needs of young care leavers (Housing Heroes) and another which aimed to establish a time banking project to develop skills for unemployed people, the Poolie Time Exchange. Some participants felt there was a need to address the concerns of communities around cohesion and isolation and a third group formed - Stronger Neighbourhoods.

Overall the participants were happy with their project choices, but they felt the process of selecting the projects was rushed and there was not enough time to consider what skills, expertise and time commitment might be needed for the leads. Questions were also raised about what would happen to the other project ideas that had been suggested as part of the workshop.

The chosen projects were independent of any one organisation and as participants were free to select projects with little guidance from JRF, the projects were diverse and the goals and timescales varied widely. This diversity can be seen as positive in terms of allowing people to follow their interests, increasing the chance of action, and in testing varied models. However, it might be argued that the lack of initial focus on poverty in the community research and also in the workshop meant that some of the consequent projects address poverty tangentially rather than directly. This was raised by both participants and JRF staff. The JRF team has begun to map the ways in which current Action Lab activities align with JRF’s Solving Poverty Strategy and to identify further actions to address ‘material’ aspects of poverty. Some of the projects are already taking such action, for example by including service providers in events to provide advice to attendees. However, in future more guidance on tackling poverty and more time to reflect and test choices might result in projects that impacted more on the material aspects of poverty such as finance or debt.

## 6.8 Learning

- The ethos of the CS approach, which valued diverse knowledge and promoted a 'flattened hierarchy', reinforced the JRF community-led approach and maximised engagement.
- The workshop was highly successful in motivating most participants to take action - this was due to a combination of the trainers' skill and experience; the pace and intensity of the training; the challenging concepts and highly interactive exercises.
- The pace of the training, methods and tools such as the 100-day goal were highly effective in creating an impetus for action and the development of the three Action Lab projects.
- The training enabled many participants to 'think differently' and to reframe their perspective on seemingly intractable social issues.
- While the diversity of participants' experience and skills aided understanding and problem-solving, at times it also presented challenges in keeping everyone's interest and providing suitable content.
- The JRF team highlighted the need to provide a framework for the Action Lab workshops which was more clearly focused on poverty and JRF's strategy.
- People wanted more information about the training and the ongoing time commitment before they agreed to participate. This was particularly important for those who were nominated to take part by their organisation.
- The Action Lab seemed to work better with participants who were new to the concepts and methods. If the workshops were repeated with the same participants it might lose impact over time.
- The training is complex and requires a skilled facilitator to keep enough 'pressure' on in the training without causing people to become fatigued and 'switch-off'.
- The project management tools were experienced as energy-sapping by some. It might be possible to use a simpler tool, allow more time and devise a more interactive delivery method in line with earlier parts of the training.
- The projects that were chosen to take forward did not engage all the participants - the JRF team could have a strategy for future Action Lab workshops to ensure the ongoing participation of participants even if they are not central to the Action Lab teams.

## 7. Action Lab projects in practice

### 7.1 The Action Lab projects

That all three projects were taken forward was a significant achievement in itself. The openness of the workshop allowed three very different Action Lab projects to emerge and the teams were then set the task of identifying a long-term goal, to be achieved by 2020, and shorter-term goals to be achieved within 100 days. The goals set by the projects at the workshop are given in boxes below, followed by a description of the team membership.

**Housing Heroes** aimed to provide the opportunity to every young person leaving care in Hartlepool, to create, through the refurbishment of empty properties, their own sustainable home, by 2020. Their 100-day goals were to:

Involve  $\frac{1}{3}$  of 18-25-year-old young people looked after by HBC to discuss what they would want from the project.

Identify and confirm commitment of stakeholders including potential funders.

#### **Housing Heroes team membership**

The project started with a team of 6, with members from an estate management organisation, a housing research charity, HBC, JRF and JRHT. The group was relatively small but most members were active during the 'sprint' phase and the team has successfully retained these members and attracted new members during the 'sprint' and moving into the 'marathon'.

The team also attracted 15 'Pledgers' (who made offers of help to the teams) from 11 organisations. These included people from HBC, VCS organisations, charitable companies, a housing group and a local employer. Pledgers also included 4 Community Researchers.

**Poolie Time Exchange** aimed to provide community resources to support 1,000 people, to share and develop skills to lift themselves out of poverty, by March 2020. Their 100-day goals were to:

Identify 50 community members and their skill sets (to take part in the time bank).

Test 'community resources' (energy efficiency support, bank accounts, job interviews etc.) on 50 people in Owton Manor and Dyke House, to see which, if any, are useful.

Engage 20 organisations which could provide 'community resources'.

### **Poolie Time Exchange team membership**

The project started with a team of 15 members from a range of VCS organisations, funding organisations and local businesses as well as HBC, JRF and a community member who was not attached to an organisation. It was a relatively large group at the outset but of the total about seven members were actively involved throughout the 'sprint' phase. The group also lost 5 members in the 100-day 'sprint' phase but they attracted 1 new member at the beginning of the 'marathon' phase.

The group attracted 33 Pledgers from at least 18 organisations including HBC, VCS organisations, charitable companies, a housing group, the fire brigade, a local church, colleges, a funding organisation, a bank and local businesses

**Stronger Neighbourhoods** aimed to engage 1,000 Hartlepool residents in 10 neighbourhood areas by involving them in making their communities stronger, by 2020. Their 100-day goals were to:

Produce an evidence base to enable us to choose the 10 neighbourhoods and to choose one of these to hold an event in one community before 29/9/16 (with the community deciding on the type of event).

### **Stronger Neighbourhoods team membership**

The team started with 9 members including an independent consultant and people from VCS organisations, funding organisations, a social housing provider, a local church, and HBC. Only a few of the original members were active throughout the 'sprint' phase, however they attracted 2 new active members during the 'sprint' and a few more new members as they moved into the 'marathon' phase.

The group attracted 22 Pledgers including 2 community members and people from at least 17 organisations. Organisations include HBC, VCS organisations, charitable companies, a housing group, the fire brigade, a local church, colleges, a funding organisation, a bank and local businesses. 4 pledgers were Community Researchers.

These figures illustrate the breadth of support across organisations and sectors in Hartlepool. The membership of the teams was drawn from a wide range of organisations but the majority were paid workers, often doing the work in addition to their core role.

## **7.2 Implementing the Action Lab Projects**

All 3 Action Lab projects had largely achieved their stated goals within the 100-day 'sprint' and for many participants the fact that the teams had managed to establish and sustain themselves was an indicator of success in itself.

"All 3 groups are still meeting and have configured themselves, got project leads,

identified the resources that they need to start to move forward on some of those objectives which I think is a success. Having brought people together from all sorts of different organisations with all sorts of other priorities and pressures, to have sustained that momentum and to be looking at next steps of delivery...”

JRF worker

Even those who were not directly involved in delivery had a sense that things were happening. This was reflected in attendance at the November 2016 planning event for the next ‘marathon’ stage of the work, where all the Action Lab teams were well represented and shared insightful reports on their work. There was clear willingness to explore the challenges faced, which is not always the case where projects are tasked to report back on progress against clearly identified goals. There is often an emphasis on celebrating success, which whilst clearly of importance, can mask valuable learning about things which were not so successful. Action Lab teams, JRF workers and other participants all demonstrated a commitment to reflect on the process and identify responses to challenges in the ‘marathon’ phase. Some challenges were specific to each team, however common themes also emerged relating to the sustainability of the projects and particularly the time and commitment required, maintaining engagement and resourcing.

These issues will be considered further at the end of the section, but next is an examination of which elements of the Action Lab workshop were taken into the projects and the challenges of using this approach.

### **7.2.1 Maintaining a people-centred focus**

One of the aspects of the workshop that translated well into the Action Lab projects was a culture where all members were equal and people were concerned to hear others. One participant commented that they had learned to ‘listen to the people’ in the workshop and the open process had led to shared ownership. There was an egalitarian approach in meetings that felt different to the usual top-down approach. This extended to listening to the end users - a key element of the APS approach. The Stronger Neighbourhoods team conducted their own local research using Community Researchers in an attempt to ensure that their work was shaped by a strong community voice. Housing Heroes and Poolie Time Exchange also emphasised this approach.

“In terms of listening to what young people want, that is an aspect that we’ve really taken on board.”

Housing Heroes team member

“We don’t ask the volunteers. We listen to the volunteers.”

Poolie Time Exchange team member

This approach of listening to the end-user which emerged from the workshop was reinforced both by the initial relationship building which was carried out as a ‘listening’ exercise and by the community research which was broad and allowed community members to define the agenda. These three stages were not pre-planned to work together,

however there were similarities in ethos and approach which emerged from the thinking of the JRF team. Together the stages created an interlinked whole that reinforced messages and encouraged a people-centred focus.

### 7.2.2 Using new concepts

Similarly, people had taken many of the concepts from the workshop into the Action Lab projects. Participants talked about being 'agile' and thinking differently, they were very conscious that this project did not have the usual constraints and allowed them to think creatively.

"It's being agile, not scripting it out and just thinking, right, this is the project and this is what we're going to do for the next 4 years. It will develop and it will change as we go along and as we hit, you know, barriers..."

Action Lab team member

Participants mentioned the 'growth mindset', believing that change was possible and the notion of 'failing forward' as concepts that were useful in helping them deal with challenges in the work. It was also clear that the motivation and inspiration they found in the training was carried at least into the early stages of the projects.

"I'm doing everything differently...I feel like I've been totally taken out of my comfort zone. I mean I'm not somebody that works in the community...what we've learnt just inspired you to kind of, to do it. You know what you want to achieve, go for it."

Action Lab team member

Not all team members remembered the detail from the workshop and people did not feel equally confident in using the concepts. As a consequence some weren't sure that what they were doing was in any way measurably different from how they would have worked before the training.

"It's great to think like that, with all of it, with all that growth mindset and complex problem solving techniques and things. So we're looking forward to using these on but I'm not entirely convinced that we have embraced the new techniques greatly."

"I don't know if the group would say they've done it significantly different to how we would have done it before."

Action Lab team members

The amount of content that participants had to absorb in the training meant that the learning could be easily confused or forgotten. The participants were aware that they were meant to be working in a different way but they found themselves falling back into familiar patterns.

"It's almost like a computer reset, you go back to how you were before. And so, we'll run these events in the same way. No, no, you have to think about what we've learnt."

“I can hear little voices now, like oh we can’t do that though, can we? And it’s like it’s starting again, it’s like it’s wearing off, the effects that we have.”

Action Lab team members

Participants reflected on ways to sustain their new mindset, such as scheduling a review at the beginning of each meeting. Some also said they would have liked a ‘refresher’, something to remind them of the techniques and concepts which would help the ideas to ‘stick’.

“We get stuck on the output, who’s going to do the food, health and safety, bus stops, over those things, which, you know, to an extent, portray the fact that we, it’s almost like we need a refresher on the growth mindset.”

Action Lab team member

As this was a new method it might have been useful for the teams to meet together to review some of the challenges during the 100-day ‘sprint’ and how they could draw on the concepts and tools provided to deal with these. Alternatively, the JRF team could support a process to integrate this reflection into Action Lab team meetings.

### **7.2.3 Maintaining pace and urgency**

Just as the Action Lab workshop was fast paced, the 100-day deadline certainly gave drive to the groups as they moved into the project stage. There was a continued sense of urgency which, combined with the inspiration gained from the training, kept people moving forward.

“Sticking to the deadlines; but it’s more the thinking, the mindset and enthusiasm that they give you.”

Action Lab team member

Yet, since for most the work was in addition to their core role, the resulting activity could feel disjointed. The combination of the pressure of deadlines and the part-time nature of the work could be a strange experience.

“We did some bits of it on really high speed, because it was 100 days we rattled through the action plan and the goals at times, some elements felt like they went at breakneck speed. Yet at the same time because it was something I was doing outside of my core work I felt like I didn’t always have enough time to dedicate to it.”

Action Lab team member

This highlighted one of the challenges of the 100-day ‘sprint’. Whilst it was a very short time in project development terms, for these small teams, it could feel like a long period to sustain this motivation and level of activity. Participants felt the need for additional support at times.

“I think maybe somebody needed to get everybody back together, all of the teams, maybe halfway through, something like that... to see where everybody was at, to

give a bit of, you know, a bit of a morale boost. Because, like I say, I did kind of feel a bit of a lull in the middle.”  
Action Lab team member

JRF had arranged for some Skype support from CS, but this was sporadic and only for the team leads. Whilst the leads found the contact useful, there was a need for support during the ‘sprint’ for the whole team. CS acknowledged that they usually give more support during a ‘sprint’ as participants need to be ‘reminded’ of the concepts. This highlights a challenge for the approach - whilst it was effective in forming teams and galvanising people into action, it made high demands on participants in a context of little resource and minimal support. The JRF team were aware of the need to consider this moving forward.

#### **7.2.4 Using the project management tools**

The workshop used a theory of change approach to project management in which participants set long terms goals and then identified ‘drivers’ or things that needed to happen along the way. These drivers and goals were put into a Google based spreadsheet as ‘action plans’ and were circulated to the teams. For those who had project management experience this approach was familiar, but others struggled.

“We kind of like created, it was like, right, this is our, I can’t remember what they were called, something like primary driver. These are our secondary drivers, this is how we’re going to achieve the secondary drivers, I think it was like that anyway.”

“We take minutes and send round agendas, that’s kind of what we’re doing. We don’t, I know that we got shown dashboards, which I like because I like numbers and graphs and stuff, but we haven’t used them. But then we haven’t, we haven’t really had anything solid yet to put in a dashboard, I don’t think. But again, it’s not even come up, I think perhaps we could do with some reminder of these tools that we’ve learnt.”

Action Lab team members

Again, those who had previous project management experience felt more comfortable using the tools. One team had said that they were useful in designing the initial plans for the project however it was difficult to see any evidence that they had been used on an ongoing basis and it was not possible to track the progress of the projects through the plans.

“We used the drivers and things like that. And we did like driver diagrams and, that helped us sort of plan out what we were wanting to do.”  
Action Lab team member

Most people that we spoke to said that they had not used the action plans. For some there was an initial attempt to refer to the documents, but this was not sustained and the documents were sporadically updated.

“It was a really good place to start on our driver things but, to be fair, we haven’t actually been back to them since probably our second meeting, second or third

meeting... we've just gone back to the old way of doing things.”

“It was a bit naughty of us that we spent all that time on the action plan and didn't use it.”

Action Lab team members

One of the difficulties highlighted was the format of the spreadsheet, as to access the document people had to have a Google account and access to Google sheets. Signing up and arranging access was easily passed over in the face of pressure of work. The action plans were used differently by the groups. Stronger Neighbourhoods used them on several occasions as a reference point to check their original goals. Housing Heroes and Poolie Time Exchange also referred to the action plans early in the work, but they were seen largely as a reference point rather than a working document.

“Perhaps as a group we should show more interest in exactly what was being done, you know, what is the thing and what's, have a, let's dig out our theory of change diagram and really try and get our heads round it, but there's never been an attempt to do that.”

Action Lab team member

One of the challenges of using the action plans was that it involved time to update the sheets and record information. Keeping minutes, recording and updating was a task that sometimes slipped by the way in the of speed delivery and in the face of a lack of administrative support.

The APS method stresses that teams should be actively seeking information in order to make informed decisions. Whilst the theory of change approach allowed participants to think through their projects, moving into action the tools did not seem to align with the agility of the method. It was not clear how the projects were intended to record evidence or track their own progress. There was a need for 'user friendly' tools which fitted the approach and made recording simple and routine.

### **7.3 Sustaining the Action Lab projects**

It was clear that the Action lab projects had largely been successful in achieving their goals. They demonstrated many features of 'agile' thinking from the workshop and were fast paced and action focused. However, all we spoke to recognised that there were some clear challenges in taking the projects forward.

#### **7.3.1 Time commitment**

We spoke earlier in the report about the time commitment involved, because the investment of time was not made clear at the outset people were often taken aback by how much time participants had to devote to the projects.

“I don't think the time commitment was made very sort of clear, of like how long this would be ongoing afterwards. I think maybe, it was kind of like promoted as a 4 day event, when really it's like, however many month event really because it's ongoing,

isn't it?"

"The amount of time was tough - I've done a lot out of work time that could have been a job in itself alongside our main jobs."

Action Lab team members

This was exacerbated as people dropped out and the burden of the work was left in the hands of a few. This meant that valuable time had to be spent chasing individuals or recruiting new members for the team.

"At the first team meeting the enormity of the task was realised and how attendance/membership depleted after this - not many turned up. It's been a very small group and the leaders have found it hard."

Action Lab team member

Some level of dropout is inevitable and over time the groups will have to recruit new members. The groups are largely comprised of paid staff and over time roles change, are lost or redefined and people may drop out as the work becomes less relevant to their central role.

"... less involvement with the project since September due to having other stuff going on internally. Not been to the last few meetings... my role can no longer accommodate working on it so future involvement is uncertain."

Action Lab team member

Some participants commented that if people had been aware of the commitment involved then JRF would have struggled to recruit to the workshop, which returns us to the issue of who should be invited. Whilst it is important to have a range of participants, this needed to be balanced with interest and commitment.

"The challenge is having the right people in the right role to do the job and not just say, you're part of this, you'll have to do this, because that's probably why they're pulling away a bit because it's not part of their everyday role, is to do things like this."

Action Lab team member

Some workshop participants attended because they were simply representing their organisations. In reality many people were too busy to be involved in the project stage which meant there were fewer places available for those who may have been more committed to the work. Several people felt in hindsight that they needed more community members who would volunteer time to work on the projects.

"I would do things differently because I think what, what we found is the, our project group, and this is, I suppose it's chicken and egg, it's very difficult, because nobody knew what the projects were going to be, to know who now, who would need to be involved."

"We left the researchers behind, when we moved on to the Action Lab, I thought that was a little bit disappointing. A lot of the researchers were already well involved with

the communities. And I think now a lot of people at the Action Lab have broke away where I think the researchers would have committed the time.”

Action Lab team members

The exploratory nature of the work meant that the nature of the projects was unknown at the outset and so it was difficult to create a profile of ‘suitable’ participants for the workshop. However, all potential participants could be made aware of the broader role that the workshop played in defining and enacting Action Lab projects.

The Action Lab approach relies on people acting out of personal interest and commitment, voluntarily in addition to their core work. Questions emerge about the desirability, as well as the sustainability, of this approach in times of austerity when workers are already under pressure to deliver more with fewer resources. The approach was developed in the US which has smaller state provision, longer average working hours than the UK and a tradition of little paid leave. Whilst the approach addresses poverty, it also engages people to work for longer hours without pay, which needs consideration moving forward. To date the projects have succeeded due to a small number of people putting in a great deal of time and energy. The motivation generated by the workshop propelled people through the initial ‘sprint’ but feedback indicated that people were struggling to sustain this. The JRF team recognised these tensions.

“We’re getting very committed but very stretched and resource-poor community representatives, community organisers, who have got previous experience of working, of organising and doing community work, slogging their guts out.”

JRF worker

### **7.3.2 Supporting and funding the projects**

The time commitment, pace of delivery and the fact that most participants were carrying out the work in addition to their core work roles meant that, for some, the work seemed unsustainable moving forward.

“We need someone to dedicate some time to look at what, what’s been done before, what our options are. And that’s difficult because it’s, yes, we can commit maybe a couple of hours a week to a meeting, but then to commit a couple more hours, researching outside of that or whatever, is, it gets difficult for people.”

Action Lab team member

The JRF team had been supportive but much of their time had been taken up with facilitating the stages of the work. Equally whilst the CS Skype support had been useful it was limited in time and scope.

“Yes, we had, we had conference calls (with CS) but it’s not the same as face to face. I think it would have been good to sort of get back together with the other project teams as well, and sort of see what difficulties they were facing... I mean JRF did send along people to support us, and they have been great, but I think it was just,

it was more like, not community development workers, if you like, that we wanted. We wanted more normal, not normal, you know what I mean, like more sort of people like us from other agencies, or even like people from the area, residents getting involved.”

Action Lab team member

Other people spoke about needing administrative support or having more information or facilitation. The groups also varied in terms of the participants' experience and skills and some felt they needed help to develop specific skills.

“The team needs more team building and to look at leadership. Have felt a bit lost sometimes, we need stronger foundations like the other groups.”

Action Lab team member

Participants weren't sure what should be put in place but recognised that there needed to be more structured support. A review of the roles and skills of the different stakeholders would enable the team to identify support needs and how these could be met.

JRF were not offering project-funding, other than small amounts of seed funding. This approach allowed JRF workers to maintain their role as facilitators, which may have been distorted if they were regarded largely as potential links to funding. Few questioned this approach and several commented that the lack of funding enabled people to collaborate rather than being distracted by the opportunity to attract funding for their own organisation.

“It's built relationships with other organisations and other people. When funding's been put in stuff, they've got quite insular and closed the door and tried to do their own thing. It's brought people back, and that needed to happen and it's brought different people together.”

“JRF don't hold your hand. Other organisations give you the money and then you work very hard but this is not just about giving money it's about pulling together.”

Action Lab team members

However, as the projects moved into the 'marathon' phase, the question of resources was raised. There had been some success in attracting external resources: two teams had secured input from statutory sector workers whose core work aligned well with project aims. Another project had succeeded in attracting a little partnership funding. The projects identified the need for different types of funding, for example, capital funds in the case of Housing Heroes and running costs to cover some salary in the case of Poolie Time Exchange. However, there was discussion in Poolie Time Exchange about whether this need could be met by sharing tasks amongst existing members. The need for funding to cover co-ordination costs was the focus of much discussion, the teams weren't sure if funding should be provided for individual projects or if there should be funding for an overall co-ordination role. At a time when JRF are planning to deliver future Action Labs in Hartlepool, attention will need to be given to the capacity of local people to become

engaged in further work and that of JRF/JRHT to support these alongside current projects.

“I do think it will come to a standstill if it doesn't attract some funding, because there's other big contracts that are up next year and when people lose them, they reduce what (time) they offer again. And then they will have to offer less to things like, or maybe not be able to offer anything to the Action Lab.”

“The worry for me is that it's down to a small number of people and they're committed but we should really be looking at how we can shore it up... and if we can do that with volunteers, great, but it may well be that we need some paid staff in now.”

Action Lab team members

The possibility of JRF running a grants programme was raised and there are clear benefits to the projects having access to funds with criteria aligned to the ethos of the Action Lab and delivered by staff with an understanding of the approach. Most funders require projects to fix outcomes in advance which may not fit with projects adopting an 'agile' approach. Yet offering grant funding may put the facilitation role of JRF at risk and potentially build dependence on JRF, which contradicts the highly self-directed ethos of the Action Lab process. However, there is a role for JRF to actively liaise with other funders to develop their understanding of the Action Lab approach and to support project teams to access funding. Some of the funding organisations who are stakeholders in the Hartlepool Action Lab have already begun to explore supporting elements of the work and how they could use the approach within their own organisations.

### **7.3.3 Movement building**

A key aspect of the CS method is that the work creates a buzz of interest and people are drawn to get involved. The teams had tried to work in this way, all had websites and the JRF team had set up Twitter feed and online content was updated. The activities and events generated by each of the projects also created a positive reputation for the work.

“The Brighter Brus event Stronger Neighbourhoods ran ... was the beginnings of creating a movement and that learning from this has huge potential for the other areas. It has built a model and come up with a blueprint of working in a very short timescale and connecting with different people.”

Action Lab team member

“Poolie Time Exchange has managed to gather 'incredible support'.”

Wider stakeholder

The work has drawn interest and this is reflected in the investment of HBC which has now dedicated the time of a worker from Children's Services to support the Housing Heroes project and identified a worker to lead the Stronger Neighbourhoods team.

“We didn’t have anyone from child services, basically, and that was very important that straightaway we got someone. And they’re very engaged in it ... think it’s a great idea and, therefore, willing to come to the meetings and support it...they’ve just employed someone new, who they’ve kind of put in this as part of their job description as well, to help support it going forward.”

Action Lab team member

The JRF team also organised a launch event in July 2016 which was attended by 80 people representing a wide range of local and national VCS organisations, funders, local authority and local business people. A celebration event at the end of the ‘sprint’ phase in November 2016 also attracted 50 local individuals and organisations.

Despite this work there was a sense amongst participants and the JRF team that there were wasted opportunities and people who were interested were not found an ongoing role in the work. Some of the JRF team felt this particularly about the workshop, where they had ensured a range of participants, including senior staff and funding bodies, yet when those people were unable to engage at an operational level in the subsequent Labs it was felt that their expertise was not engaged.

“The thinking behind how you make the most of people at the Action Lab who are based out of town....and whose roles aren’t suited to getting involved on a day to day basis. I think there is a question about how we’ve utilised the human capital that we have.”

JRF worker

Some had found themselves a role in the process, for example some funding organisations had identified that they would assume a greater role later in delivery and this was beginning to be demonstrated. Also some of the teams had sought support from wider stakeholders as exemplified by Poolie Time Exchange when they took up the offer of support from the local FE College to access college places for members.

“The commitment from higher up (at the college) was there and we’ve tested it and it’s still there. It hasn’t just been a blancmange army, we support this.... that’s solid and that’s really, really good.”

Action Lab team member

Whilst the early relationship building was clearly the JRF team’s role, the open nature of the work resulted in a sense that there were no specific jobs, just work that needed to be done. When workloads were high, the project goals were prioritised and people who were not directly involved tended to drift away. At this juncture it would be appropriate to look at how those who are more peripheral to the work can be drawn in and given an ongoing role.

The JRF team are also exploring the delivery of future Action Labs and how they will be

taken forward. The fact that the trainers who ran the workshops were based in the US, and had an in-depth understanding of the approach, greatly increased the impact. At the same time, using US based consultants does seem to be counter-intuitive to the grass-roots approach and their impact does have to be offset against the cost of the trainers. This was a difficult issue for the participants; some people queried the decision to fund US workers to deliver an anti-poverty project, feeling that it would be more appropriate to use local workers. However, most highlighted the innovative approach they brought that was enhanced by their significant skills, experience and personal styles. The CS trainers did play a key role in the success of the workshop and in kick-starting subsequent projects. The work is still at an early stage in Hartlepool and it would seem desirable that there is still involvement from CS, especially considering the 'drop' in energy that the projects seem to have experienced. There are many issues to consider in the delivery of the workshops such as the high level of skill required, the knowledge and experience of the approach and the individual attributes of trainers. It may not be sustainable or desirable to continue to make use of US-based consultants long-term, however if the decision is made to move to the use of local facilitators then a process could be identified to develop local capacity in collaboration with CS.

## 7.4 Learning

- The Action Lab approach in Hartlepool has been highly successful in kick-starting projects which would not have otherwise been developed. The workshop provided motivation which successfully propelled the participants through the first 100 days of project development.
- The training built teams with an egalitarian structure, a user-centred focus and an openness to identify and learn from challenges.
- The pace and urgency of the training was sustained by the 100-day deadline and enabled the 3 Action labs to largely achieve their 100-day goals.
- Many Action Lab participants were using concepts from the training such as failing forward, thinking differently and the growth mindset. However there was a sense of 'falling back to old habits' as time went on indicating a need for reinforcement.
- Successful delivery of the work has largely been reliant on the hard work and commitment of a small group of people - this is not advisable or sustainable and attention needs to be given to maintain and develop active Action Lab membership.
- The project management tools were not as 'agile' as the method and whilst they helped some participants with planning they weren't well used in tracking or recording the process.
- The time commitment needs to be made clearer to potential participants as this might reduce drop-out in the move to the Action Lab projects.
- While some Action Labs were successfully drawing in new members, the work tended to fall on a few key people who, in some cases, were experiencing fatigue and a drop in morale at the prospect of continuing high levels of activity.
- The input of some wider stakeholders is not being maximised prompting the need for

a strategy for engaging those who are not involved in direct Action Lab delivery. Attention needs to be given to developing a range of communication methods, including those that do not rely on social media.

- There is a need to more clearly define the role of JRF in the work including the allocation of tasks such as movement building.
- There is a need for JRF to develop an approach to identifying resources needed for co-ordination and implementation of the next stage of the work.
- The skill, experience and attributes of Action Lab workshop facilitators are key to the success of the work in Hartlepool - if future Action Labs are delivered the team should work closely with CS to ensure delivery is effective.

## 8. Conclusion

The JRF work in Hartlepool has been largely successful. The team have built effective relationships with a range of organisations and these relationships have been translated into action in the form of the Action Lab workshop and subsequent projects which met their initial goals. This success has depended on a number of interlinked factors such as the skills of the JRF team, the reputation of JRF/JRHT as the lead partner, the close community ties within Hartlepool, the skills and experience of Community Solutions' Action Lab trainers, the motivational power of the interagency workshop, strategies such as the 100-day sprint and the dedication of a core group of members of each project team. These factors are interdependent and it would be important to consider carefully how to make changes in future design or delivery of the work. Equally, such an approach may not work as well in another setting where participants do not have such a strong connection to the locality.

The work is now at a transitional point with the departure of the current JRF lead who held the original vision for the work. The projects are also now moving into a longer-term stage and there is a risk that some of the early impetus and ways of working will be lost. This would be a good point for the JRF team to take some time to review the work to date, building on the findings of this evaluation and identifying the best way to take the work forward. This would also enable the team to develop a more structured framework for their work including clarity on JRF's facilitation role, agreement about the Action Lab approach in Hartlepool, support mechanisms for the project teams going forward and generic tools, such as a communication plan and information sheets for participants. This framework would lay the groundwork for discussion with CS about the shape of future Action Lab delivery and help them to devise more effective project planning and recording tools that would aid monitoring and evaluation moving forward.

Whilst the JRF staff and the project teams are 'agile' and responsive, there is a need for a more formal review process where the JRF team take time out on a regular basis to identify and address any issues in delivery. Equally, the JRF team could provide support to the project teams to carry out a similar review process. Formalising review in this way would enable the team to ensure that learning from the work informs development and would enable the learning to be recorded for evaluation and dissemination purposes.