SupportNet Evaluation report -

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Introduction

The Centre for Social Action was commissioned by Nottingham City Council to undertake a small scale, independent evaluation of the SupportNet project. SupportNet is a project based in the Beechdale and Bilborough areas of Nottingham City to explore how local people can be involved in the creation of social support for each other. Originally it had been intended that SupportNet would link in with the development of Self-Directed Support and be a pilot to develop a working model of Self-Directed Support. However due to the slower than anticipated development of Self-Directed Support in the city the links between the two initiatives were not able to develop to the extent envisioned.

SupportNet was funded from Jan 2009 to March 2010. However in June 2010 the funding was extended until the end of March 2011. The work of SupportNet is led by an independent more-than-profit partnership **What Really Matters.** For the first 12 months (March 2009 to March 2010), there were two full-time Community Development Workers (CDWs) based with City Council colleagues in Radford. One left the project in April and it was decided to appoint a Communications Worker to the project instead to reflect the developing needs of the project, at the time of writing this report the post had not yet been filled.

SupportNet had the following aims:

Aims

SupportNet will combine the models and methodologies of participatory leadership, accountability-based civic engagement, living systems, the practice of continuous evaluation, i.e. harvesting, within an action research framework, social and community work in a radical approach to community empowerment. It will aim to:

- *inspire the community to contribute to the thinking about the possibilities for relevant and local social care support*
- *seek broad contribution from a diverse range of people and organisations to co-create a new shape for social care support*
- *bring new practices to convening community conversations that build citizens' accountability and commitment, offering the structures and opportunities for co-production, self organisation and active involvement*
- *inform the implementation of SDS across the City and nationally, through a continuous process of evaluative social action research.*

(from SupportNet: Project Initiation Document)

What Really Matters works to a particular set of values and processes that they have brought to SupportNet. This is a combination of a 'strengths-based' approach to citizen engagement with 'living system' 'hosting'

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practice. It brings people from all parts of the 'whole system' – disabled and able-bodied residents, front-line professionals, strategic leaders - together to contribute to strategic inquiry. This invites co-production rather than 'us and them' positions. 'Hosting' is a form of leadership practice with the potential to create systemic improvements: not just working more efficiently towards a specific shared goal or outcome but, additionally, building strategic conversations into everyday ways of leading so that decisions are based on the wisdom of many perspectives. See Appendix One for more information about the approach used by **What Really Matters.**

The principles agreed by the Steering Group are that the SupportNet pilot will:
- *work through collaboration and co-creation*
- *build community capacity*
- *offer opportunity for learning and practising*
- *enable creativity in a context of informed risk-taking and the spirit of 'trying things out'*
- *engage with the community through a 'whole system' approach*
- *improve access to information and support*

(from SupportNet: Proejct Initiation Document)

The SupportNet workers undertook extenisve out-reach work and made contact with local people via existing groups and at communty events as well as by leaflets, emails and speaking with people on the street. Initial meetings (Conversations) within the community identified four major issues that people wanted to work on. These were: transport and access, activites, communication and Personal Budgets. These four areas were the focus of SupportNet activity with 'theme groups' being set up as working groups for each theme. Records of all conversations were created and widely distributed. In addition there were regular newsletters distributed, drop-in sessions at Bilbrough Library and other events. For a more detialed account of the work of Support Net see Appendix Two

The evaluation

Information for the evaluation was collected in a variety of ways. The evaluator had a number of conversations with the workers from **What Really Matters** and the CDWs. She attended some of the SupportNet meetings and spoke with residents there. She also undertook a number of telephone interviews with people who work in the area (both paid and unpaid). Local residents also had the opportunity to complete a questionnaire about SupportNet.

Information collection for the evaluation

Participants in the evaluation were selected on the basis of convenience sampling. Residents were approached and invited to take part by the researcher at 2 separate meetings; residents were also given questionnaires at 7 different meetings (for example at Big Conversations, Drop-in sessions, coffee mornings) by the SupportNet team. This means that residents had had variable contact with SupportNet – ranging from having been actively involved in a number of ways since the start, to only having attended one meeting.

The researcher was given a list of workers the project had had contact with by the SupportNet community develop workers, they were asked to divide the list into those who had had considerable contact with SupportNet, and those who had had less contact. The Director of Adult Services and Health also emailed all City Council workers informing them of the evaluation and encouraging them to take part. The researcher then emailed people from the lists ensuring that all key organisations and individuals were contacted and that people from the 'considerable contact' and 'less contact' had the opportunity to take part. Many people responded positively straight away, others needed follow up calls or emails. A few people asked to be emailed the questions and offered to respond in writing – however no written responses were actually received.

The information for evaluation came from:
13 residents were spoken with at a Transport Conversation about the transport theme and about SupportNet in general.
11 residents were interviewed face to face specifically for the evaluation (different to those above)
24 residents completed questionnaires (some of these would include those also interviewed face to face)
12 paid workers in the area were all interviewed on the phone
3 unpaid workers/volunteers responsible for specific services were interviewed on the phone
2 paid workers completed questionnaires
4 members of the SupportNet team were interviewed face to face
Review of documents and records created by SupportNet was conducted.

Whilst information for the evaluation has been collected throughout the evaluation period – most of the interviews and questionnaires were completed in June and July 2010.

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Findings

Purpose of SupportNet

Residents were not specifically asked this question, so the responses are from workers and volunteers. Almost without exception people understood that the purpose of SupportNet is to bring local people together to find out their views of the area and then work with the community and local services to try and find solutions to the issues raised.

"To bring people together and identify needs and then support those best placed to do something about it - working with people to push those ideas forward."

A number of people pointed out its purpose in bringing together agencies and encouraging partnerships between organisations as well as with local people.

"Engaging professionals on subjects chosen by community and to see how people can help."

Only a few local workers mentioned any specific connection with care services generally or Self Directed Support and Personal Budgets in particular.

"If I have understood it right it has two aims. First to make people aware of Personal Budgets and second looking at Beechdale and Bilborough communities and how they need to change to get support from each other."

Many saw the project as aiming to improve the lives of local people.
The project workers saw SupportNet as a multi-faceted project to create the conditions for the community to care for itself by bringing people together through the process of hosting and appreciative enquiry. They also recognised the intention to link with Self-Directed Support but pointed out that even if this element could have been more developed, SupportNet was always intended to be more than this as social care is just one element of people's lives.

How people heard about SupportNet

People heard about SupportNet in a wide range of ways, reflecting the emphasis the team had given to ensuring as many people as possible knew about the project and its activities and the comprehensive outreach work they undertook.

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Word of mouth was very important as a way of people finding out about SupportNet. Both personal contact with the workers and also a number of local people said they had heard about SupportNet from friends and neighbours.

Ways people mentioned that they had heard about SupportNet included: emails, letters, leaflets (through the door and handed out in person) posters in shops, being told by a friend, meeting one of the CDWs at a wide variety of events or groups in the community or on the street, from colleagues. A number of people remembered hearing in a number of different ways.

"It was launched with a fanfare, so I had posters, fliers, emails all in my range of vision and they also made a direct approach."

The impact of SupportNet

All people were asked what they considered the impact of SupportNet to have been within the community. Whilst the responses are clearly interlinked, many people made a distinction between the impact on local residents and the impact on workers and organisations in the area.

Impact on individual local residents

From the questionnaires most residents felt that they themselves had benefited from SupportNet, saying that they thought they personally knew more people, knew more about what was going on in the area, are able to get out more and know better where to go for help with problems. More generally they identified the benefits of people getting together to talk about problems, working on transport, access and other problems identified by the community. However two people said they did not know enough to be able to say what impact SupportNet had had and three said it had not made any difference locally.

Whilst SupportNet was seen as extremely valuable by most local residents, their motivations and the way in which they got involved varied quite considerably as the following quotes from interviews show.

"It is not just about eating the chocolate biscuits – there are conversations and information as well."

"It is very interesting; I think they do a good job. I have not been able to come that much as ill health has stopped me. I sit and listen a lot of the time but I find it interesting."

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"I come as a local resident in case I can help anyone and also I come to find out anything useful about things going on in the area."

"I like meeting people and come here to see some familiar faces. I don't belong to any other groups so this is one of the places I can meet with people."

Many people attended a range of different events and groups.

"I have been to transport meetings but transport not really a problem for me – I can use the bus, but I can see it is important for others. I came to the Sunday event here at the library – that was really good. It would be nice if that happened again, but people need to volunteer to help. We had games and the scouts came and helped; we had singing. I would like it regularly – but I have not heard about another one. I get sent all the reports – I have kept them all and look back on them."

Most workers in the area also felt that local people had benefited through information, connections, communication and being listened to. Some saw it had developed local people personally.

"For local people a significant testament is the uptake and that people keep coming back. You see new and re-occurring faces at each meeting. It is empowering certain people as community champions; they are taking ownership for certain things. [It is] of value to those who are pro-active and do come forward as well as a wider group."

"For the people who have gone – and I have seen a core of people who attend a lot of events, it has impacted quite a lot. They have enjoyed having their say, the power of being heard; in that setting they have really been valued and their opinions heard; they have felt listened to."

The SupportNet team had similar impressions about the project's impact on individuals.

"Some people have blossomed and made friends and found things to do. It has improved their lives; they access more what is available. They pass on information to each other, for example; good taxi firms."

Impact on workers and organisations

For themselves and their organisations almost all workers (paid and unpaid) were very positive about the impact of SupportNet. The benefits they identified included the following:

- better contacts, new links and connections

"I have got contacts I would not otherwise have, and have already got benefits from those contact (resources, information, networks)"

"In my work – it has been important for networking. I have met the local councillor for example, who I had not met before and given him information about services in the area for over 60s, which he did not know about, that he can use - I have given him contacts for when residents come to his surgeries, and he has also passed me useful information."

- Information

"Small bits of information can make a big difference, so I think the sharing of information and resources – bringing people in touch with each other has been good. It has got the community more active and I am a real believer in communities doing things for themselves and being responsive to their members; it fits with my philosophy and political view."

- more joined up thinking

"More people are talking to each other and understanding what each other does – it creates more joined up thinking."

"Have seen the value of partnership working and moving outside silos."

- more direct contact with local residents

"Definitely to my work. I have got to know more local people in an area I didn't know that many people in. Now I have a number of links."

- seeing a new way of working

"I have pinched the idea of the more open and informal meetings – an open space meeting - and I have used it instead of the more formal ones I used to organise – it worked better than my more formal approach before."

"They have seen a way of working that is not like normal community development work. Some have a real interest in the 'Art of Hosting' and 'Appreciative Enquiring' - gatherings rather than meetings, the way the room is arranged, all these things."

"They have seen there is nothing to be fearful of in meeting with residents – they have sometimes had bad experiences in the past. But if you introduce respect for all parties in to the design of an event, they find it can be OK."

- support for their work

Many people talked of how SupportNet had been useful to their own work. An example of this would be the connections made between a statutory youth service and a community project which led to young people supporting community activities. The unpaid worker at the community group was as equally enthusiastic as the worker quoted below.

"It has been a brilliant placement for young people. The woman who runs it is brilliant, she has been very accommodating and gone out of her way to support the young people and make it interesting to them too – it is supposed to be a punishment, but they can learn new things at the same time. Some young people are now wanting to do volunteering with the elderly once this placement has finished."

"At a professional level they have been very supportive to me; they have introduced me and my role to the wider community and helped me make links and connections through their contacts and networks."

For a few workers this support related specifically to Self-Directed Support.

"I have made contacts and it is useful for people to see social worker at meetings and answer questions about Personal Budgets and Self-Directed Support – that has been really valuable – getting the message out."

As with local residents there were also a small number of people who could not identify any impact of SupportNet on community members, themselves or their organisation.

Impact on community as a whole
Most residents felt that there had been positive impacts for the community as a whole from the work of SupportNet. In terms of the impact of SupportNet, transport was the issue mentioned most by residents and workers.

"People realise that small steps can make a difference. Like the bus drivers radioing to the next bus if a wheelchair user is waiting at a stop. Very shortly after the meeting a resident had experience of this working and was so pleased and reported it at the next transport meeting."

Other activities around transport that were talked about were plans for local residents to be involved in training for bus drivers around disability and also for wheelchair users to have the opportunity to 'practice' getting on a bus. The impact of better information and communication was also mentioned by residents and workers.

"There is a lot of networking at meetings and I have made really good contacts – like connections with residents that I did not know. I can find out what is going off and pass that back through the forums I am part of. It is really really good because they have managed to get a lot of different people involved. The numbers are unusual for community meetings in the area in my experience – I feel SupportNet are particularly good at getting people to meetings. It is pleasing to see so many people had heard about it."

Some of the activities resulting from the SupportNet meetings, for example the Tea and Cake Sundays organised by 2 local residents or the widening of eligibility for a local lunch club and bingo session were seen as beneficial to the wider community. Linked with this is also the contact between different groups of people in the community, particularly inter-generationally – for example the work with the YOT, Scouts, the school where young people and older people were enjoying each others' company in ways they had not done before.

It is important to note that many people (both residents and workers) spoke of the community bus, TimeBank, SmallSparks and the directory as if they were definitely happening. I understand that the community bus has met with such barriers that it is unlikely to happen as initially envisaged. At the time of the evaluation local people were not aware of this and it is likely that their views of the impact could change once they are aware. However I also understand from the worker team that all these aspects are still being developed and, for example, the first draft of the directory was launched in August after the information collection for the evaluation.

"If SmallSparks and TimeBank get going, they were talking about it at last meeting I went to. They are ideas of how people can support each other but

it is early stages and they have not all happened yet. The directory too would be good. For example, recently I found a bowls club for a gentleman, who did not want to go to a day centre but it took me a long time to find it – a directory would help enormously."

A few people mentioned that the 'Big Conversations' had brought groups in the community together and *"it has broken down some of the territorialism there can be in the area".*

On the other hand a few workers spoken with for the evaluation expressed some concern about what they perceived as the lack of impact of SupportNet.

"It has not had much impact as far as I know. It runs the risk of having raised expectations and not being able to fulfil them. The team have been careful and have not over sold what they are doing - but it can happen."

The SupportNet workers felt that, whilst there had been considerable impact already, there was still more to be done.

"The foundations have been laid and now the sprouts need to grow."

What has contributed to the successes of SupportNet?

Without exception people identified the workers and their relationships with people as central to the successes of SupportNet. Time and again both local people and workers in the area commented on the team's friendliness, how approachable they are, their commitment, their care and attention to detail, passion and dedication.

"The workers' commitment and dedication, passion is clear."

"[name] is a rock and has a heart of gold."

"The organisers are so passionate about things; [name] was very passionate about getting us support – and did so."

"I was struck by how [name] delivers what she says and how she talks; if it comes across to me it must to local people as well."

"The whole team is superb: I have worked in number of other areas but think their facilitation is exceptional. They are extremely approachable, talk to the person and are very organised."

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Residents mentioned the importance of feeling listened to, the variety of people coming together to solve local issues, sharing of ideas and experience, the relationships formed and readiness of people to put forward their ideas, as all contributing to the success of SupportNet.

Workers sometimes pointed to the particular method of SupportNet and how it had contributed to successes. Only one person made any negative comments about the approach. Both workers and residents – whether they acknowledged the approach or not – talked of the outreach, the presence of workers in the area, the way the meetings were organised, the listening, all having a voice, respectfulness, sharing.

"The approach was unusual – a very well thought out and delivered engagement process. I was impressed by the way the team did that and followed it through. They stuck with it."

"The meetings have all been really great - great atmosphere. There are lots of people at meetings. The way they lead meetings is fantastic, people getting really involved. They make it fun for people to take part; people are all together at tables – residents and people from the council together. It's bringing people together and putting people in contact with each other. They make things fun and interesting, put all information up for everyone to see, so everyone knows what has been said."

"The way the meetings are run is very important - very relaxed but they get a lot done and get a lot out of people without it feeling like work. Everyone is allowed their say; there is no 'us' and 'them', no rivalry, no telling people - everything comes from local people."

The SupportNet workers feel very strongly that the principles and approach has been key to the project's successes.

"The art of 'hosting' is key and starting from what local people are interested in social care. The respect and listening tends to stop people 'ranting' – it is not about conflict."

"The work that goes in before is important, the planning and preparation in creating spaces for people to have conversations. We are clear about inclusion and equality and start from the basic fundamental belief that people have things to contribute."

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"We take real care with how we say things – what words we use, what posters and newsletters look like."

One person commented on how they felt the meetings created a level of equality.

"As a council rep it felt slightly exposed but it was managed well; things did not get heated. We were all asked what are the problems? What are the solutions? It was about drawing everyone in. It is different to normal public meetings – more shared and more equal, open discussion. The agenda was not set but created by all. The boundaries feel less because of how they set it up."

The SupportNet team pointed to the commitment of the City and professionals (such as Nottingham City Transport) to engage in the processes, and support from Adult Support and Health (ASH), Communities and Councillors, as key factors in the successes there had been. Both local people and workers also commented on how crucial it was to have influential people from the City Council, who are responsible for providing services, present at the meetings – to contribute and listen.

A number of people commented positively on the range and diversity of the people (both workers and residents) that were engaged with SupportNet: *'having the right people in the room at the same time'*; and how the issues for action had been identified locally.

Finally, how SupportNet has built the capacity of local residents and supported them to get involved and start to take responsibility for activities was seen as an important contribution to the success of SupportNet.

"The people encourage and motivate each other. There are a lot of people with a lot of skills and you can see the potential for them fitting in with Self-Directed Support packages."

Residents commented that their involvement was positive for them as well.

"It makes me and [name] feel good. We are both disabled but we can do something for others. It feels nice."

Shortfalls, missed opportunities or things that hindered.
Whilst many people could not identify any negatives, some, both residents and workers, could. The major issue was concern about what has actually

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happened as a result of SupportNet – and a fear that there could be *'false promises'*. A few of those spoken to expressed concern that the expectations of the community having been raised could, once more, not be met.

"Talking about things, but nothing getting done."

"Will things actually get off the ground? Maybe people have made promises they cannot keep? There is always the concern about raising people's expectations."

Another issue was how the link with Self Directed Support (SDS) had not developed as strongly as some people (both residents and workers) had hoped. This was not an issue for many but it was strongly felt as a missed opportunity by a few. Most of those who mentioned this recognised this was beyond the control of SupportNet as the roll out of Self-Directed Support in the City had not developed within the timeframe of SupportNet. In consequence information and resources were not available in the way that had been expected and, as a result, the services and possible social enterprises that people had been keen on had not developed.

"They are promoting Self-Directed Support – but no one knows how it is going to work – so what is the point?"

"Being unclear about Personal Budgets has been a hindrance and barrier from where I am sitting. They have been restricted by the lack of clarity about Self-Directed Support. They have done well on raising awareness and consultation."

 "To some extent its downfall was that no one knew anything about Self-Directed Support. If they had known more when it started, it would have been better; if people had had even a rough idea about Self-Directed Support it would have been better. Lack of knowing about Self-Directed Support was a major issue..... [it] was before its time really."

Whilst many people said in their view SupportNet had been successful in engaging with a wider range of local people than usual – there was a core but diverse group – a small number also said that there were still many in Bilborough and Beechdale who were not engaged.

"I am not sure they have really engaged with a cross section of the community. At events it is often the same people – they have not broken

through I don't think. Like young parents, people who work, they are not present. The Sunday event was not that well attended; it is same core people."

"The work they put in to getting people there was endless but I do feel that more people could have been engaged. They have a core group – it is a diverse group – who come to most things but there should have been more people involved, given the size of the area. The core they did have are not all those who go to things anyway. They did make contacts beyond that group, definitely reached beyond the ones that go everywhere, but still not as wide as might have liked. I don't know what more they could have done."

"Need more younger people involved and more people without disabilities."

The SupportNet team felt the work had been hindered by not being able to use the ASH data base to make contact with a wider group of people earlier in the project. There was also a view that some services run by the City Council were less involved in the project that had been hoped at the start. This was acknowledged by some of those organisations themselves – recognising that their involvement had been limited by other issues, for example, reorganisation, redundancies and the disruption these had caused.

A few people felt that the project had concentrated on transport and so had not addressed some of the other issues – isolation was mentioned by more than one person.

It was mentioned by a few people that the rest of the City Council was out of step with the approach and ethos of SupportNet – which both created a challenge for SupportNet in how it worked with council officers and services and also led some to question how serious the council was about SupportNet.

"SupportNet is out of step with how City behaves in other areas. The City is cutting services in other areas without consultation, so you wonder how real is this? How can we trust SupportNet or it is just PR? How serious are City about SupportNet?"

A few people mentioned the fact that community change takes time and that SupportNet is a short term project. This was seen as a limiting factor.

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"The tight time-scale was a problem – we needed two years from the start. Whilst there was an extension, it came late in the day and so made planning difficult."

Sustainability

People were keen that the foundations laid by the work of SupportNet in terms of community engagement and networking should continue and be sustained. Concern was expressed by some that without designated worker time and clear accountability for ensuring the work continued to develop, there was a danger that it would not be able to respond to new ideas and could just 'peter out'.

"It could be another 'they came and went' initiative which people have seen before. There is a danger that the good work could disappear and then there would be a loss of morale and people could become disillusioned."

However, some people did think that when the SupportNet workers left the area, some things could and would continue. For example, the new contacts and networks, the confidence and greater experience of residents will remain.

"We would still have the links in the community but it might be harder to develop new ones. I think the relationships we have now are strong enough to sustain – it would be a shame if they didn't last."

Many people, both residents and workers, saw an increasing and developing role for residents.

"I would hope the community would take over, at least bits of it. There are good people already running things. There is no reason why things like the Tea and Cake should not continue."

 "The local people who come are strong characters and I think they could sustain it if they wanted to. People like me and NDT [Neighbourhood Development Team] are about and could help sustain things."

Most but not all local people wanted to continue to stay actively involved. However one worker in the area did express some reservations as to how viable this would be. In their experience, '*we often start things in the hope the community will take them over – but it never happens*'.

Some workers pointed out that they and others in area could take on aspects of the facilitation as part of their continuing work. Some specifically said they

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would be in a position to do this and would also able to offer some resources to support this, for example, time and room space.

"I would be prepared to do things that fitted in my role. We could find out who is prepared to pledge what to sustain the work."

Some workers talked of the need for an exit strategy and suggested that maybe a coordinating group of residents and local workers could be set up. A number of both residents and workers expressed an interest and commitment to such an idea.

What is needed to ensure sustainability of gains of SupportNet

During the evaluation people suggested a number of things which they felt would need to be in place to give the best chance of the work of SupportNet being sustained and further developed. Some of these are tasks that the SupportNet workers could ensure are accomplished before they leave the area:

- Ensure that as many of the projects that have been started are completed – TimeBank, SmallSparks etc and firmly established.
- Ensure that local people (residents and workers) are skilled up and able to continue the work.
- Further training for residents and workers. Suggestions were in leadership skills, the art of 'hosting' and associated skills.
- Wider contacts within the community in order to have a broader base as well as higher numbers; also, more contacts in Beechdale.
- Close links with organisations in the area.

Other suggestions are for things that could be set up before the workers leave the area but which would continue to support the community in taking action on the issues that are important to them.

"It has solid foundations but more development needs to be done to building on those foundations to build even more capacity at grass roots. There are things they would need to do before they go if it is to be sustained, like building up local people and developing a co-ordinating group of residents and organisations."

The main suggestion was to establish a coordinating group made up of residents and workers in the area. It was suggested that this could have some designated worker time from at least one organisation. This was seen as crucial to ensure SupportNet has the ability not just to work on existing issues but also to be able to develop further, taking on new issues, making

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wider contacts, developing work on Personal Budgets and Self-Directed Support. It was suggested that a 6 monthly or annual review should be established to check how these are going.

"There would need to be some co-ordination, central communication and at least some designated time to continue and see through what has been started."

Linked to this was the suggestion, made by some, that the SupportNet initiatives should be more closely linked with Council services generally as part of supporting the most vulnerable people in the area.

A few people mentioned that, as more information about Personal Budgets and Self-Directed Support was becoming available, it might be possible to develop some of the community based initiatives originally envisaged. This would enhance a more mixed local economy of providers including the *'genuinely voluntary and community sector.'* It was suggested that a mentoring scheme could be developed for more experienced projects to support new social enterprises to develop by sharing their knowledge and expertise.

"Contracts with the public sector are demanding at the level of monitoring, training, supervision, personal, payroll etc and the projects themselves are taxing – that is why they are tendered. It can be very hard for local groups to get in. One way would be for larger more experienced local projects to give support to newer or smaller organisations and share what they know. Peer support and education within the sector. Things do need to move more to the front line."

The SupportNet team is aware of the need to develop self-sustainability and have a range of plans to do this over the coming months.

Replication of SupportNet in other areas
Most people felt that a SupportNet type project could be replicated in other areas of the city, as long as certain things were in place for such a development to have a good chance of success. The same approach and team of committed and dedicated workers were most mentioned as things that would be needed to facilitate success in another area.

"The same quality and skill of workers. . . . The methods: treating people as people, being approachable, not preaching and telling people what to do;

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working alongside people and having a strong belief in what you are doing - and enjoying it. These are skills not everyone has."

Additionally, in response to the question about what would be needed to support the replication of SupportNet in another area, the following points were made:
- an area with a large population of older people and disabled people.
- a good variety of venues.
- interested local groups and networks.
- good communication with local people and groups, organisations and workers, in the area.
- recognition that all areas are different and not to expect it to be the same.
- adequate funding.
- recognition that such initiatives take time.
- real commitment from the City Council at all levels and engagement from its departments locally to such a holistic approach.
- ideally, a local base.

It was also mentioned that, if a similar project was developed in a new area, the link to Self-Directed Support and Personal Budgets might be more successful as these are now more developed in the city. However, another person thought there was not yet enough clarity about Self-Directed Support and Personal Budgets and, until there was, it was not yet worth replicating. They did suggest that once this greater clarity existed there was the potential to develop a more ambitious project based on the SupportNet model.

Some people pointed to the role residents, who had been active in SupportNet in Bilborough and Beechdale, could have in sharing with residents in any new area their knowledge and experience, to ensure the learning from this pilot project was available to others. It was also mentioned that some City Council employees had city-wide briefs and so, if SupportNet was to be replicated in another area, there would be people there who already knew about SupportNet and it could build on this existing knowledge.

A few concerns were expressed about replicability. A small number of people questioned how committed the City Council really were to engagement with local communities on the issues they raise. One person raised questions about ensuring the safeguarding of vulnerable adults in community responses to local social need. Another asked whether some people with social needs could actually be more isolated if they chose not to take part in a SupportNet type initiative; they were concerned that not all

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people feel able, and indeed some are not welcomed, to join in with the type of group activities supported by SupportNet and questioned if such initiatives became more common place such people could become even more isolated. Another questioned whether in these financial times SupportNet was a luxury and the money might be better used ensuring core services.

Conclusions - lessons learnt and recommendations.

SupportNet is a small scale pilot project that has been successful in using specific methods and approach to support local residents and workers to come together and identify issues that are important to them and take action on them. Some aspects of the project have not had the impact that was anticipated due to decision making processes outside the control of **What Really Matters** and the SupportNet team.

Through speaking with local people and workers in the area and the SupportNet staff, the evaluation has found and set out in this report evidence of listening to local people about what their social care concerns are and evidence of local people together with workers in the area taking action to address issues raised by the community. Finally the evaluation has identified some benefits to local people individually – knowing more people, getting out more, meeting with others to identify and work on local issues; evidence of benefits for workers and organisations locally – more contacts, direct contact with local residents, support for their work; as well as some early evidence of benefits for the wider community through things like more events, the directory, transport and SmallSparks.

The findings of the evaluation show that SupportNet has made significant contribution to meeting its aims:

- *inspire the community to contribute to the thinking about the possibilities for relevant and local social care support*
- *seek broad contribution from a diverse range of people and organisations to co-create a new shape for social care support*

SupportNet has been successful in bringing a range of local people and service providers together to identify issues relating to social care and many of the solutions have arisen from and been taken forward by the local community. SupportNet has contributed to the creation of an empowering environment that raises the aspirations of local people.

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Whilst there is broad agreement that SupportNet has engaged well with the community, there is also an acknowledgement that more could, and can, always, be done to widen engagement, both in terms of local people and better engagement from some services within the council.

The solutions/activities that have arisen from SupportNet are, in the main, true to the practice model in that they have not created dependency. SupportNet has not gone off and done things to 'solve local problems' but has engaged with local people in their solution. Initiatives like the 'Tea and Cake Sunday' in one couple's home, whilst small scale, are a model that can be replicated elsewhere.

- *bring new practices to convening community conversations that build citizens' accountability and commitment, offering the structures and opportunities for co-production, self organisation and active involvement.*

This is perhaps the aim where there is felt to have been the greatest impact. The SupportNet team has been very successful in demonstrating methods of achieving meaningful community engagement with local people and workers in the area; they have shared a vibrant and creative apprach to local engagement. However, alone, this it is not enough – the process needs to lead to the successful addressing of issues raised.

- *inform the implementation of SDS across the City and nationally, through a continuous process of evaluative social action research.*

This is the aim where the least progress has been made, due to the previously noted delayed roll-out of Self Directed Support and Personal Budgets in the city which is outside the control of SupportNet. However the workers have raised the issue of Self-Directed Support, have started conversations with people locally about the potential benefits and, also, have explored some of their anxieties about the changes.

Elements of the community and service providers have been energised and may be, as a result of SupportNet, better placed to play a role in galvanising and enabling citizen activism at local community level and adapting to the evolving political and economic environment.

The lessons than can be taken from SupportNet have relevance more widely. How to deliver services in the current era of both cuts and the development of Self-Directed Support in a way that is flexible and personal enough to meet needs of a diverse range of people, is a challenge facing service providers. It is possible that efficiencies could be made across the city if a team of people

with the skills utilised by SupportNet was developed that were available as resource to any area.

What Really Matters has facilitated a specific approach to community engagement; however it has some similarities with community development work as it has been practiced in Nottingham in the past. The withdrawal of community development work in the city and erosion of the community development worker role has led to the loss of many of these skills within the city. This was observed by more than one person during the evaluation.

"It is to pick up where we left off in the 70's and early 80's, in terms of the community developing solutions and very locally focused community responses to care and support. Building cohesive communities is the current language."

Over the decades, services have become increasingly disconnected from the communities they serve and have, hence, lost much of the creativity of local engagement. However it is the ambition of Nottingham's Putting people First Programme – from which SupportNet arose – to meet the changing needs of our communities by giving people choice and choice to enable them to live their lives as they wish (www.mynottingham.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=7708). The building of community capacity that SupportNet has achieved contributes to this aim and is a timely example of what is needed to support communities to develop the capacity to be able to take an active role in the transformation of how services are delivered .

Messages for the City Council
- SupportNet has demonstrated the strength of a particular model of working.
- SupportNet has demonstrated that, when the council (members and officers) is seen to be close and in partnership and confident about local engagement, benefits can arise.
- To be successful, the process needs to be facilitated by skilled workers and have access to people with strategic and operational authority and accountability within the LA.

Challenges to the City Council
- The severity and depth of problems faced by communities mean they can only be addressed by a robust community engagement model that is not isolated from decision makers and has clear links with those in authority, for example, councillors, heads of services etc.

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- Sustaining and replicating this model of supporting community engagement.
- Ensuring the approach taken in transforming how social care needs are met includes all who are in need.
- Achieving consistency within the council: it will be necessary to consider carefully the potential consequences for other parts of Council work of adopting a SupportNet approach. Consideration needs to be given as to how all elements of the council's work support or mitigate against this model.

The Putting People First agenda will rely on community empowerment and the direct influence of citizens on services. The model explored in this pilot offers a transferable and sustainable approach which works from the bottom-up, avoiding the tokenism, disempowerment and weakness of top-down remote consultation processes.

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Appendix One - Participatory Methodologies

The theoretical and practice base of SupportNet combines 'asset-based' and 'hosting strategic inquiries' approaches to civic engagement, inviting wide and intentional participation through community dialogue. We have sought to find out what is important to residents in terms of being able to live their lives to the full, and to engage all stakeholders (the whole system) in creating change together to move towards the visions of the future that they see.

The hosting practice of **What Really Matters** invites and supports people to come together and engage in meaningful conversations about what is important to them, discovering new insights and collective wisdom. (http://www.artofhosting.org/) It uses a range of different methodologies to create the space for people to participate, explore and gather information, and to make sense of it. Some of these methodologies are:

Appreciative Inquiry http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu
> This focuses on generating and applying knowledge that comes from inquiry into moments of excellence, periods of exceptional competence and performance – times when people felt most alive and energised. It emphasises collaboration and participation of all voices in the system, approaching change as a journey rather than an event. Learning from what works, and 'what is your best experience of....?' is more effective and sustainable than learning from problems and pathologies

World Café http://www.theworldcafe.com
> An innovative yet simple methodology for hosting conversations about questions that matter. These conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into the questions or issues that are most important in their life, work, or community. As a process, the World Café can evoke and make visible the collective intelligence of any group, thus increasing people's capacity for effective action in pursuit of common aims. We have successfully used World Café with large diverse groups of people.

Open Space Technology http://www.openspaceworld.org
> In Open Space, participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of importance to them. It is firmly based on the principles of self-organisation, and with groups of any size creates powerful connections that strengthen learning, responsibility and participation. Open Space works best when the work

to be done is complex, the people and ideas involved are diverse, the passion for resolution (and potential for conflict) is high, and the time to get it done was yesterday. The SupportNet event on 16 October 2009 showed the power of Open Space.

Circle Practice   http://www.peerspirit.com

The circle, or council, is an ancient form of meeting that has gathered human beings into respectful conversation for thousands of years. The circle has served as the foundation for many cultures, and is regularly used in SupportNet gatherings. What transforms a meeting into a circle is the willingness of people to shift from informal socialising or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening and to embody and practice particular structures.

Harvesting:

The purpose of the harvest is to serve the wider system by capturing the wisdom, creating a tangible collective memory, seeing patterns, making meaning, and making this meaning visible and accessible. Planning the harvesting process is an intrinsic part of any hosting project. In SupportNet the records of events, newsletters and the Directory are examples of 'artifacts' that are part of the harvest.

Mind Map: http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk

A Mind Map is a diagram used to represent ideas, tasks or other items, linked to and arranged around a central key question, word or idea. By presenting ideas in a radial, graphical, non-linear manner, Mind Maps encourage lateral thinking and ideas that evolve in real time. Mind Maps can be an aid to studying and organising information, making decisions and solving problems. In SupportNet, Mind Mapping has been used to enable everyone in a large gathering to come up with their own answers and ideas in response to a key question. All these - sometimes conflicting - ideas are shown for all to see, so that ideas evolve and move in new directions.

Creative Arts: Providing a familiar safe and welcoming space within which to create pictures, sculptures, photographs, as individuals and in groups, is a gentle and powerful medium to describe or express a vision, hopes and dreams, opinion, ideas and a story.

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Appendix Two - SupportNet Milestones and Calendar of events

September 08: First gathering of Steering Group: established purpose, aims and principles

December 08: Second Steering Group: choosing the location

March 09: Appointment of two workers: Arun and Julianne

April/May 09: Five open information sessions - testing local interest in the project
"What could make care and support better?"

13 May 09: Report to City's West Area Committee

June 09: Two gatherings (60+ people) to plan a big event
All?"

June 09: Newsletter

07 August 09: 'Whole-system conversation' (73 people)
"What could a new type of caring look like in Beechdale and Bilborough?"

September 09: Core Group gathering - developed principles and 4 themes

September 09: Different Theme Groups identified their ambitions for each theme

October 09: Newsletter / invitation to next conversation

16 October 09: 'Open Space' session (55 people) - 7 different conversations
"What do we need to do now to get closer to our ambitions?"

Oct/Nov 09; Theme Groups continued to gather and work on ideas

04 December 09: First 'Tea and Cake Sunday' (40+ people)

25 February 10: 'Better Transport for All' big conversation (69 people)

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March 2010:   Case study produced for Dept of Health and we featured in their   'Creating Social Capital' video

31 March 10:   One of CDW's contracts ended: agreement to create a 'communications' post

16 April 10:   'Stocktake' conversation (29 people) - looking at achievements and what next.

May 10:   Stocktake summary document produced

18 May 2010:   Helen Jones presented SupportNet at 'Community Care Live'

14/15 June 2010:   'Getting more involved' gatherings (36 people)

June 2010:   Regular weekly 'Drop-in' sessions started at Bilborough Community Centre

10 August 2010:   Big conversation (46 people) - launch of Directory and Small Sparks

September 2010: Continuing conversations about a community minibus; starting to develop self-sustaining directory and newsletter.

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