Community-Led Regeneration
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People’s Empowerment Alliance (PEACH) is a group of residents and local businesses located in Custom House, an area in the London Borough of Newham (LBN) – the same local authority as Greater Carpenters Neighbourhood Forum and Focus E15. The difference between PEACH and other case studies discussed in this book is that PEACH is not fighting against demolition and redevelopment, but making sure that all residents ‘have a home at the end of it’. PEACH started in 2013 when a group of residents, local leaders, church leaders and a local councillor came together and created the group. The community was successful in securing £1m in grant funding from Big Local (a part of the National Lottery Fund which targets deprived communities), to be spent over 10 years. Since Custom House was a deprived area that had not received investment for many years and already had a steering group of residents, it became one of the 150 areas across the UK to receive such funding to invest in local projects.

The first step was to decide what the funds could be used for. While initial discussions focused on small businesses and local projects, as other Big Local areas had done, it was quickly realised that the funds would be rapidly disbursed and would have little impact on the local area. The group thus made ‘a conscious decision to use community organising as (…) the method of change’. Uniquely for a community group that has received a big pot of funding, the grant was initially used for hiring community organisers for the purpose of ‘building the power of the community’. The first community organiser helped with both the door-knocking campaign and meeting residents. The community subsequently voted for the four key topics that PEACH would concentrate on: jobs, housing, safety and health.
The council’s plans for regeneration were initiated well before PEACH was founded. While residents started to hear about these proposals in the early 2000s, information since then has not been consistent. The regeneration of Custom House is part of a larger programme led by LBN called ‘Custom House and Canning Town Regeneration’ which involves 19 different areas. Some of this regeneration had already occurred in Canning Town, but the reduced proportion of social housing in the regeneration areas alerted residents and raised their concerns about housing, one of PEACH’s key topics.

Tools used

One of the key strategies for PEACH is community organising (discussed in Part III, ‘Next Challenges for Community-Led Regeneration’). As noted above, PEACH made an important initial decision to spend their funding mainly on community organising, with the specific aim of strengthening the resident and local business voice. One of the community organisers and one of the founder members of PEACH were interviewed in November 2017, at the time when they had six community organisers (one working full time, and the others working part time). These community organisers were responsible for the different projects that PEACH were running. They are not members of the steering committee, but they coordinate projects, organise events and help with the door-knocking and other activities to bring the community together. The interviewee defines PEACH’s relationship with the council as ‘respectful’. They think it is important to keep a respectful relationship with those who have decision-making power in order to achieve change. At the same time, they need to apply pressure on occasion to ensure that the voices of the community are heard.

Community organising and the work of dedicated residents and shopkeepers have made possible a very well-developed structure of governance. PEACH’s steering committee, formed of residents and shopkeepers, is the body that makes decisions and decides on the allocation of financial resources. In addition to the steering committee, there are different ‘projects’, such as the Housing Club, the Workers Coop or the Parents’ Group, among others. Two people from each project sit on the steering group and all projects are represented in this way.

The Housing Club ‘project’ deals with the regeneration of Custom House; as of November 2017, it had 114 members who pay £1 each to join. The group meets regularly, discusses what is happening and takes appropriate action. Through that group, PEACH decided in December
2015 to prepare their own community-led plan (equivalent to a People’s Plan, chapter 12) in order to develop a vision of what the community wanted for the area. Although the council already had a masterplan dating from 2007, as well as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) for the whole area of Custom House and Canning Town from 2008, the community wanted to prepare an alternative plan in which they could present their own vision.

During 2016 a team of 10 people, consisting of six community organisers and four architects, was hired to work on the community-led plan. Each of the team members was hired for one day a week and received the same hourly rate, while five of the six community organisers were local people. The team was thus very transversal. There was little differentiation between the work of the architects and that of the community organisers, with the architects contributing to the door-knocking campaign and other types of work normally the responsibility of community organisers.

The process for preparing the plan began with door-knocking and workshops which were hosted in different community buildings. From this initial work, three main themes emerged: housing, economy of services, and community and public space. Separate workshops were then held for each of the topics in order to identify solutions, not just problems, and a series of aims and principles were identified for each of the themes.

Further work on the community-led plan continued from April to September 2017, particularly through the Housing Club. It held meetings to discuss issues of possible concern, such as the massing and height of the buildings. People did not want tower blocks, so the community plans proposed buildings of mainly four to six storeys. These were mostly perimeter blocks with shared courtyards and gardens in the middle, the latter features being a priority for the community members. The master-plan proposed many changes to the public spaces and communal areas, including shops with housing above, a community centre with housing above, and a market square. The team produced two versions of the community-led plan, one that proposed substantial refurbishment and another one that included full demolition. The demolition option would start with building housing in one of the sites for the people to be moved first. This strategy would allow a phased demolition, in which people have to move only once.

In July 2017 PEACH asked the council to organise a monthly collaboration workshop, with a lead consultant from the council and PEACH as a partner in the process. This was agreed. In September 2017 the team...
presented the draft community-led plan to a meeting of the Housing Club; over 50 members attended and voted to support the plan and present it to the council. In November 2017 PEACH showed the community-led plan to the council. The result of the meeting was very positive. At that time the council told PEACH they were going to look for a design team and that they would include PEACH’s community-led plans as part of the brief. PEACH contributed to the evaluation criteria for choosing the design team, one of the criteria being that the successful bidder should have experience of previous work with communities.

### Current and future challenges

In May 2018 the mayorship of Newham changed; it remained Labour, but the new Mayor was from a different faction of the party. PEACH has developed a good relationship with the new Mayor. The council has committed to a co-production process with PEACH and to a ballot. This co-production consists of two parts. First, the conditions for the project have been prepared together with community representatives. Half of the regeneration steering group are community representatives. There are still some questions about whether that steering committee is an advisory group or a decision-making body, but the relationship between LBN and PEACH can be seen as close to a ‘partnership’ in the terms described in Arnstein’s ‘ladder of participation’.

PEACH has also created a Community Land Trust (CLT): E16 CLT. Although no agreement has been reached on the role that E16 CLT will have in the delivery of affordable housing, the CLT is working towards a goal of delivering affordable housing in the regeneration area. This is significant as the Mayor of Newham has a manifesto commitment to support the establishment of a Community Land Trust in the borough. There is an agreement, about E16 CLT starting to manage up to 10 empty properties, which could be a pilot project as they set up as a CLT.

Through campaigning and adopting a negotiating attitude towards the council, PEACH has managed to influence the decision-making process. It has been able to co-produce the brief for the regeneration project with the council, together with residents and the architects responsible for the design. The latter were chosen by a panel composed of two council officers and two elected community representatives. PEACH has also managed to have six people from its community, 50 per cent representation, on the steering group; these representatives are elected by residents in a
local vote.9 One of the main challenges that PEACH will face is to sustain that partnership, and to ensure that the voices of the community continue to be heard and considered in further regeneration. There are also questions on the decision-making power of the steering group, which they will have to keep negotiating with the council.

**Key lessons**

- Having a ‘respectful’ relationship with the council and, at the same time, being ready to put pressure on them for the community to have decision-making powers is a good strategy, enabling a group to work towards a partnership with the local authority.
- Investing funds and resources in community organising is very important to ensure the community has a stronger voice.
- A People’s Plan is an effective way to bring together a collective vision from the community. It is less burdensome, in terms of time and resources needed, than a Neighbourhood Plan and, although non-statutory, can be used to influence decision-making.
- Creating your own team of community organisers and architects to put together a community-led plan gives further community control for making decisions.

**Notes**

1. Interview with community organiser Dan Barron and with one of the founder members of PEACH, 16 November 2017. This quote is from the founder member of PEACH.
2. Interview with community organiser Dan Barron and with one of the founder members of PEACH, 16 November 2017. This quote is from the founder member of PEACH.
5. All of this information comes from an interview with Dan Barron, the community organiser responsible for the Housing Club, 16 November 2017. Updates after November 2017 come from a talk Dan Barron gave in our final event on 11 June 2019.
6. Interview with Dan Barron, the community organiser responsible for the Housing Club, 16 November 2017.
8. This paragraph comes from the talk that Dan Barron, community organiser at PEACH, gave in our final workshop on 11 June 2019, and from correspondence with him, 31 July 2019.
9. From correspondence with Dan Barron from PEACH, 1 August 2019.