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## 'We are the ones we have been waiting for': the work of community mobilisers in Milton Keynes

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## **Chapter 6 - “We are the ones we have been waiting for”: the work of community mobilisers in Milton Keynes**

**Katy Simmons, Anna Laerke, Danny Conway and Martin Woodhead**

*This chapter reports on an Open University evaluation (MK Children’s Fund, 2008) of the Community Mobiliser (CM) service for Milton Keynes Children’s Fund. This service has been developed as the basic means of ensuring delivery of the local Children’s Fund Plan, offering an effective participatory approach to intervention in areas of disadvantage and potential social exclusion. We hear the voices of managers, workers, parents, children and community members and see the value of a participatory approach based on respect for service users and an acknowledgement of their central role in the development of local provision that is relevant to their values and aspirations.*

### **Introduction**

‘Soup kitchen culture is when you just lay everything out for people. When you serve them services. The Mobiliser doesn’t do that. He makes people take responsibility. But that’s hard work. There is much that drags you the other way’  
*(Interview with Agency manager)*

‘It’s simple. They help us get things going or keep them going’ *(Parent explaining to another parent what the Community Mobiliser does)*

Community mobilisers work with children and families to develop preventative services across their neighbourhood. Their work involves engaging diverse groups of people of all ages working for a common cause – the well being of children and families. Most of their work involves building people’s confidence, skills and qualifications, for example, training up a community group to keep open a school swimming pool that normally shuts during school holidays or running a family Fun Day in a local park.

The CM service had its roots, both ideologically and methodologically, in development practices overseas, where community mobilisers have been widely employed in village-based health and agricultural projects. The fundamental presumption, adopted by the Milton Keynes service, is that long-term sustainable change is only really possible if people recognize the needs addressed as their own, along with the methods used, the actions taken, and the institutional frameworks developed. The aim of the CM service was the prevention of social exclusion through the development of local participation and through the empowerment of local communities. The emphasis has been on long-

term, sustainable change, owned by local people, rather than on 'quick wins'.

By 2009, 8 CMs were working on estates, employed as one team, for Milton Keynes Council for Voluntary Organisations (CVO). Each CM had a separate working base at primary schools in their area. In an average week, CMs worked with approximately 1,200 different children and their families, supporting them in articulating their needs, identifying appropriate solutions and developing services. The basic premise of the CM service is that those who use the service are the experts on what they need and want.

It is this underlying philosophy about the understanding of poverty and social exclusion and on approaches to intervention and prevention that makes the CM project so different from many initiatives with disadvantaged communities. Social policies and interventions are frequently based on very particular theories about the way poverty impacts on children's development. They often hinge around single solution approaches, as if solving complex problems was no different from fixing the starter motor on a car or prescribing antibiotics to clear an infection. Deep appreciation and respect often seems to be lacking for the very particular circumstances that shape peoples' lives, their feelings about themselves, their children, their environment and their future. Taking account of the personal, social and community dimensions is the first step towards harnessing the energies of all involved, towards long-term sustainable solutions.

The efficacy of social action based on the participation of children, families and communities as an alternative to top-down (and all too often simplistic) solutions to complex and changing situations is increasingly compelling. Such principles are underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) especially the emphasis on respecting the interests and perspectives of the individual child as the principal stakeholder. Participatory work requires a more enabling, responsive, flexible way of working, as well as sensitivity to the imbalances of power, especially between the 'expert' and the 'client'.

The vision for the CM service has, from its beginning, embodied all these principles. It involves harnessing the power within members of a community, to enable them to act together on the problems that affect them.

### The national context

The Children's Fund, initiated by the New Labour government in 2000, played a key role in larger social, health, education, and employment policies aimed to reduce social exclusion and target

disadvantage. The Children's Fund aimed to develop services so that children and young people at risk of social exclusion were identified early.

Nationally, the Children's Fund had 7 objectives:

- To promote attendance in school by 5-13-year-olds.
- To achieve improved educational performance among 5-13-year-olds.
- To ensure fewer young people aged 10-13 commit crime and fewer children aged 5-13 are victims of crime.
- To reduce child health inequalities.
- To ensure children, young people, and their families feel the services are accessible.
- To develop services which are experienced as effective.
- To involve families in building the community's capacity to sustain the programme and thereby create pathways out of poverty.

Guided by various deprivation indicators, local partnerships were charged with identifying areas, communities, or groups in need and with allocating funds to support a wide range of services for children and families.

#### The Children's Fund in Milton Keynes

The Milton Keynes Children's Fund Partnership was set up in 2003/2004 as part of the Third Wave of Children's Fund local initiatives in England. Prior to this locality mapping had been carried out which had identified pockets of deprivation in the city. In addition to 7 national objectives, 2 further objectives were added locally:

- To increase the amount of affordable and accessible play provision for children and young people in the Children's Fund areas.
- To increase and improve informal support for parents of children in the Children's Fund areas. (Milton Keynes Children's Fund, 2010)

Key to the delivery of the Children's Fund work in Milton Keynes was the CM service.

#### Listening to paid workers

From the start, the managers who established the service explicitly took an anti-stigmatizing approach, based on respect for individual needs and choices and described by one manager as

“targeted universalism”:

“ Someone might choose to get involved in the community mobiliser service...So they choose to do that, it’s a natural choice rather than someone saying you’re a problem family, as an individual family ... Whereas what this is actually saying is here is a series of services that you can use.”

Most CMs had extensive experience working with children, young people, and families, but only one was professionally specialized in such work. In explaining recruitment criteria, the Team Leader pointed to what he saw as a fundamental difference between the CM approach and that of other services. He saw a candidate's personality, and his/her ability to communicate with a range of different people as paramount, whilst previous training and work experience were less important in the recruitment process. He explained that a CM with extensive experience in more traditional and long-established agency-work might be “already too settled in their ways”, and there would be a risk of such a professional perceiving community mobilisation as “narrow agency work under another name”.

CMs emphasized the importance of being able to mediate, communicate, and 'think out of the box' in terms of preventative community intervention. All the CMs characterized him/herself, in some way, as “a people person”.

I've worked very hard at my relationships with people. I'm a very easy-going kind of person, I don't hold grudges, you know, I think that's such an important thing – to be somebody who can talk naturally with people in the community. I don't see myself as an important person, I'm another person that lives and works in Milton Keynes, as important as anyone else[...] (Community Mobiliser)

The CMs had a highly individualized view of their role, with mobilisers responding to the particular needs of the area where they were based. They were committed to community participation, empowerment and prevention as a response to the problems of disadvantaged communities. They emphasized the importance of local ownership of initiatives:

And once they've gone through all that, and it's been achieved, they actually sort of take ownership, because they were part of the whole process. So you're just helping people to achieve what they want rather than just doing it for them. (Community Mobiliser)

The mobilisers' perceived role was “different” from the role of other agency workers: mobilisers explained the difference:

It's definitely a different style of approach that we've had. It's quite... it's a very different way of thinking. In my last job [at a children's charity], they would put on activities for children and families, whereas we are asking the families and children to put on activities for themselves. That's the difference. (Community Mobiliser)

When asked directly what they thought a mobiliser's role might be, CMs gave answers such as:

I see myself as a kind of community member who can make changes in that area and support others to do it.

Basically it comes out differently every time, but the way I describe it to people is community mobilisers are people who help communities get things going and started. So we support parents and children to talk about and to action some of the things they would really like to do in the areas that they live.[...] That doesn't mean necessarily giving them answers and quick results but it does mean that we, you know, are somebody who is there to listen to their opinion and hopefully support them to action some of those ideas.

The variation in practical approaches can be seen, for instance, in different CMs' description of how they make themselves available to, and communicate with, members of local communities, and their different perceptions of how well they know the people they target:

I don't go in there saying I'm a community mobiliser because I don't like that approach myself, I don't like saying, well, I'm this and I'm going to do that. I just go in as I am and if they ask me what to do then I'll tell them, but I don't go in preaching 'I'm this' or I've got to get this group going and you're going to part of it'. I hate that in-your-face thing.

All CMs stressed the importance of communication, information, and accessibility; all spoke of the crucial importance of 'getting the message across'. Although aspects of this 'message' varied from CM to CM, there were some key notions that are expressed by all CMs. The following statements are typical:

[My role] is to find out what they want to do. And help them achieve it rather than them tell you 'we'd like this and you do it'. Have them involved in the whole process.

So, we are trying to give them that support, that freedom, and then obviously that opportunity to change their lives for the better. Because no way can you go into the community and say 'I know what you need, you need this and that'.

The very consistent reluctance to – or even inability to – identify service users in terms of social class, education, cultural background, or family background, testified to a deep-seated reluctance to

stigmatize.

Some mobilisers, in particular experienced workers who had been in post for longer, emphasized the crucial link between sustainability and allowing children and families to identify their own needs.

So I look for... I look for sustainability. When we put on basketball or football, I look to see for those fathers that would be interested and become coaches themselves.

And once they've gone through all that, and it's been achieved, they actually sort of take ownership, because they were part of the whole process. So you're just helping people to achieve what they want rather than just doing it for them.

They were highly sensitive to the perceptions of local people, some of whom deeply resented the presence of 'people in fleeces with clipboards' who ultimately disappeared, leaving local residents facing continuing challenges.

#### Listening to parents

*What's changed? Everything's changed! He's changed my life. (Mother of two)*

*She's given me a life, basically. (Mother of five)*

*She's made a thirty four year old do life guard training - what more can I say? (Mother of four)*

*The minute they see him, they rush up, hang on his arm, he lifts them up and they do a headstand – and that's just the mums. (Group of mothers)*

The CM service was highly valued by families who used it. It was seen as de-stigmatising, thereby developing the potential to reach families considered to be 'most excluded'. One mother described her experience of working with her local CM:

The Mobiliser's approach deals with elements of the cause as well as the effects. If you get labelled, you feel labelled and then you can get stuck in a rut, and – even worse – you distrust anything or anyone that comes along and offers anything. The Mobiliser's softly softly approach is so effective. She isn't forceful, but she listens to the community and individuals very carefully. It is their comments that generate the projects that she supports. The Parent and Toddler group is a superb example. Here was a group of parents with an array of skills, who were very unhappy with the facilities on offer and who – with support – had the ability to do something about it.

Parents described how work with the CM had enabled them to take control over their own lives:

On a personal level, the Mobiliser has been working with me with the view to me utilising my IT training skills by enrolling on 'Train to be a Trainer' certification. And,

more crucially, she has within the past few days introduced me to an organisation who may assist me in achieving my ultimate goal of running my own business.

In summary, I would say that without many of the projects that the Mobiliser has supported, there is no doubt in my mind that parents would not have achieved this on their own. And, more crucially, the self-realisation that parents had the power to achieve despite their circumstances would never have evolved. EMPOWERMENT!

With support from the CM, another parent had written an article for the local community magazine about her children's summer in the local community. One mother of five, embarked on a child minder qualification. A single mother of four was encouraged to start an Open University degree to qualify as a Teaching Assistant, when her youngest child started full-time schooling.

Many adults commented that the Mobiliser Service had helped them break the isolation they had previously experienced:

*I used to take the children to school and walk straight back home again. I used to be at home all day. Now I'm never at home. (Mother of four)*

*I didn't know any of you a year ago - and look at us now! (Mother of one speaking in a focus group discussion)*

Another mother described the difference between her older children and her younger one who has benefited from the presence of a Mobiliser:

*I can really see a big difference between my two older ones and my youngest. She's four and has had the Mobiliser, and she's a completely different kind of person, because she's had all these things going on and she's made friends with other kids through the activities the Mobiliser has set up. It has given her social skills. She is much more out-going. It's going to be easier for her to start school - she starts now, this September, full time. My older ones, they used to keep themselves to themselves.... they still do. (Mother of three, Grandmother of one)*

A number of service users talked about their growing confidence:

The Mobiliser has given me confidence. I feel more confident than I ever used to be. And I'm quite proud of that. For instance, I don't like phones. I don't like phoning people. I used to never use the phone. I'm still a bit nervous, but now I'll do it.

The Mobiliser was very important to me during a difficult period in my life. I was seeking custody of one my sons, and the Mobiliser helped me out, she supported me. She knew I was nervous about going to the mediation the first time, and she asked, 'do you want me to come with you?', and she did. She didn't go in with me, but she was

there, and she brought me back again afterwards.

One of the important things the Mobiliser has done for me is taking me seriously. She takes me as a real person. She has helped me get on courses. She's even paid for some of them. She is involved in our lives. It isn't just a job. She makes you feel you are wanted. We love her. Our kids love her. Yes, the children do love the Mobiliser.

(Mother)

On a simple level the Mobiliser Service gave children and families 'something to do'. Especially during holidays, families on low income found it difficult to keep children from being 'bored' and parents from 'going mad at home'.

*You get new ideas about what to do with your children. It allows all children to have the same experience. Sometimes, you know, when holidays are over and children go back to school, some children will have done lots of things and will say 'I've done this... or that...'. Others won't have anything to say because they haven't done anything. But with these activities, everyone has the same and they have something to talk about. (Local parent)*

*'When he said we were going to a forest, I thought... why go to a forest?... there'll only be trees [general laughter]. But it was really good. After we did the walk together, we went and did it again ourselves. We never would have done that.'*  
*'Yes, we did that. That Secret Garden. I've lived here 29 years and I didn't know it existed. So that night I went right back with my husband and just sat there. It was great'*  
*(Two parents in discussion group)*

It is clear that recognition of individual concerns is at the heart of the Mobilisers' success:

*The Mobiliser doesn't just ask us [parents] what we want... he asks the children. You know, he has set up a local action group for the children and they meet at school and he listens to what they say'. (Mother of two)*

*He looks out for everyone... he takes every one at an equal level' (Mother of one)*

*Have you noticed? When he talks to the kids, he bends down - we don't even do that... we just shout over their heads. (Mother of three, focus group)*

CMs are uniquely well placed and experienced to act as facilitators and instigators of inter-agency collaboration. However, such inter-agency work can be challenging. One employee who has embraced the local Mobiliser and the Mobiliser role as 'an asset to the community' explained that not all agencies and agency workers do so. As he put, 'it's about changing a culture... it's about challenging the soup kitchen culture'. The difference in approach between 'providing services' and

responding to community need is profound and, for some agencies, challenging.

As one parent said, 'Don't just provide activities to support low income areas. Develop the areas by listening to the aspirations of the residents'.

### Listening to young people

The CM initiative has 'punched above its weight', in two important respects: through what the Mobilisers call their 'mediator' role, the service has overcome barriers to inter-agency collaboration; and with their unique non-specialist approach, they have reached a broad base of service users by creating a non-stigmatizing environment for service provision

As far as children were concerned, it was the provision of a service that does not stigmatise its users that had the greatest influence, though 'de-stigmatisation' was not a word children used. Children distinguished between the CMs and other agency workers:

The Mobiliser is a friendly face for the community to recognise – someone you can relate to, who you know (young person)

[The Mobiliser] is completely different to the others [agency workers]. The others just come in and do their thing. They come in, maybe a couple of hours, on the Estate. [The Mobiliser] is quite often here all day, she is flexible and she can listen - whereas the others, they can't listen (young person)

[The Mobiliser] helps out in the community, and our parents get involved. And it's good because children have a say in what they want to happen – like holiday activities and sports and clubs and that (child, aged 9)

When asked what Mobilisers do, children typically replied:

We do fun things with other children and learn about things... like [how to] not talk to strangers. Don't take sweets from strangers (child, aged 10)

It's all about recognising each other... on the street, in the shops, you recognise people and they're more approachable (young person)

For many children and young people, simply having something worthwhile to do was an important part of what the Mobiliser service offered.

We help each other, you feel you have achieved something when you help with the younger children (child, aged 11)

I can kick a football now! [The Mobiliser] got the footballer from the Dons to come and show us... (child, aged 12)

We made pizza and brownies and my brownies are better than my mum's now (child, aged 10)

One boy aged 9 had taken part in the interviewing process to appoint three new Community Mobilisers.

Interviewer: how do you think you'll get on with the new Mobiliser?

Boy: I think I'll get on really well. I helped to choose her. She's fun, but sensible. Being sensible is really important. You know...having fun: (squeaky voice) 'let's all have fun...! Wheeee!!!' Then they are not paying attention and... Bang! ( he collapses onto desk)... too late. Yes. Being sensible is really important... You know, I got 4 letters. They started 'Dear colleague' (he laughs) I know who the new Mobilisers are. I know what they'll spend the money on. I know who's going to be where. And I know how much money they will spend on things.

When asked what the Mobiliser service 'is about', a group of young people from the Lakes Estate had this to say, in an extract from an interview that is fully recorded in the full report:

Young Person 1: providing opportunities for youngsters..... get fit...

YP2: get fit the cheap way – gyms are expensive

YP3: and you have to be of a certain age as well

Interviewer: Ss there one thing that the Mobiliser has done which has really made a difference?

YP2: what she's done is a MIRACLE

YP3: she's made me a better person...

YP1: yeah, and not only has she helped us, sort of mentally, but then we can pass that on down to the kids... like a chain reaction.

YP2: things have just grown and grown... how long have we been doing this?

YP1: we started last summer... we weren't in charge then... we were under [the Mobiliser]... but now we are in charge.

YP: must have been six half-terms [holidays] now...

Interviewer: you said it has grown?

YP2: yes, last time we had something like a hundred kids coming to our activities and of those there would be about 90 kids off the Estate... you can't really ask for more... than 90 kids coming to do sports and fun activities... it gives them something to do... instead of going round causing trouble.

YP1: we started off with about ten to fifteen kids...

Interviewer: and am I right in thinking that you planned these activities?

YP1: yeah, we take responsibility for our services

YP2: we organise it and plan what areas need improving, and we meet up and finalise it and then we advertise it and we end up with one hundred, two hundred kids...

Interviewer: have you learned anything in particular from that whole process of planning?

YP1: we're learning some stuff that didn't work last time, some things that need improving.. so we're all learning different things, like

YP2: like, for the first time this term we've done arts and crafts, and it worked really well, so we'll probably do it again

YP3: and team work... before we worked more on our own, but we learned some great management skills, and it obviously paid off

YP1: I haven't been involved in anything like this before... it's just so well organised... and when I started, the team just took me in straight away... I didn't feel any pressure... I just went straight in... I started this year, and I've learned a lot from it already

These young people, supported by their local CM, had brought about considerable positive changes in their local community in terms of the accessibility, safety, and pleasantness of public spaces, and in terms of out-of-school sports activities for children who would otherwise have had very little to do 'other than hanging about making trouble', as one of the children put it.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Lakes Estate project is its potential for longer term sustainability. In terms of individual students' lives, the impact of this programme is likely to reach well beyond the student years. The initiative has enabled these young people to pursue interests and careers which they readily acknowledge would most likely have been out of their reach otherwise. The CM has, as one put it, started 'a chain reaction'. By passing on their skills and experience to younger recruits, and by acting as 'role models' for the children they work with, the students speaking here appear to have succeeded in developing enough momentum and interest to secure the service's long-term sustainability.

### What made a difference?

During the Evaluation, the following aspects of the CM service emerged as the most highly valued by adult service users:

- Training and education opportunities which have led to improved social and parenting skills, to better quality of life for individuals and families, and to improved future employment prospects.
- Development of mutually supportive community networks and pathways out of individual / family isolation.
- Increased communication between local residents which has led to increased confidence and improved access to sources of information.
- The experience of being taken seriously and not 'spoken down to' as 'just a mum in a deprived neighbourhood'.
- 'Having something to do': opportunities for both adults and children to get involved in all stages of activity planning. Affordable holiday activities for children and opportunities for adults to meet other adults.
- Empowerment.

The children and young people identified as important the following outcomes of the Mobiliser service:

- Feeling safe as a means to becoming more involved and familiar with one's neighbourhood and local community. Or: becoming streetwise.
- Having access to and use of safe, clean places outside school.
- Having fun through regular, reliable activities/clubs and planned one-off events.
- Learning new skills and being proud.
- Getting to know and make friends with new people.
- Being listened to and treated with respect.

Both young people and adults saw a distinct difference between the CM service and other agencies that worked in their localities. The CM service did not come with ready-made answers, but rather engaged with local people to identify the questions that really mattered to them.

### Overview

The greatest strength of the CM service is its direct engagement with local people and its readiness to adapt to changing local need:

They can really glue...they are massive agents for change and communities...boy do these communities need change...I think it is about challenging the status quo for

people...reaching out to people who need it, who really need it...' (Interviewee)

The community mobiliser service is now established as an innovative way of supporting communities to engage directly with the issues that affect them most. It is long-term work and there are no 'quick fixes'. The mobilisers do not 'deliver solutions' but rather work alongside communities to bring about sustainable change:

They are brokers for things...they light a little touch paper and things happen...they don't necessarily do all of it themselves, but they start off...so, for example, the local action group, that was very much kicked off by the community mobilisers...But it is now almost a sustainable and self-running thing, so yeah, they still need guidance but it's them doing a lot of it...(Interviewee)

The service is actively working to promote the participation of families and children in their communities, creating opportunities for self development in families previously at risk of social exclusion.

Those who work with people on the ground – service providers and service evaluators – know that inclusion is crucial to sustainability. They experience in practice how complex are the interrelationships between inclusion, sustainability, participation, trust and empowerment. Perhaps most importantly, practitioners also know that genuine inclusion takes a great deal of time. The CM philosophy of working alongside communities, helping them identify solutions to problems that concern them both individually and as part of a neighbourhood, provides a new model for genuinely inclusive practice.

#### References

MK Children's Fund (2010) ' About the Children's Fund', accessed from <http://www.mkweb.co.uk/mkchildrensfund/DisplayArticle.asp?ID=31560> on January 15 2010)  
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*Activism can take many forms. It can function at micro and macro levels. Many of us have the ideas and commitment to generate considerable change within our communities, but lack the connections and confidence to initiate that change. Frequently it takes someone from outside our immediate environment to provide us with the spark and initial support we need; we, of course, have to be alert to the opportunity and be ready to listen to each other.*