

# Public officials and community involvement in local services

Findings  
Informing change

November 2008

This study examines community involvement in local services with an emphasis on the role of public officials – officers and managers employed by public bodies.

## Key points

- Most public officials had very positive views and feelings about engagement. Some felt they were part of the community or a community advocate; some were committed to professionalism in engagement; and others derived personal enjoyment and satisfaction.
- Almost all felt community engagement was valuable in principle but there was more uncertainty about putting it into practice. Officials sometimes dismissed community input as ‘unrepresentative’, or preferred ‘good engagers’ who understood the complexities involved. These attitudes had the potential to exclude some people from governance.
- Officials’ ability to undertake engagement and act on its outcomes was shaped by organisational context. Key resources were time, staffing and senior management support. Performance incentives were also important in enabling officials to prioritise engagement.
- Informal processes used by officials were also important in facilitating engagement, such as making structures accessible, communicating effectively and managing conflict.
- The diverse range of engagement practices on the ground helped to suit different purposes and communities, but there was insufficient co-ordination at the local level. There was a lack of co-ordination between community input at the neighbourhood and borough levels, and between input into operational and strategic issues in service planning.
- Officials saw some types of engagement as particularly effective. Ongoing dialogue was valued because it facilitated feedback, built participants’ understanding of complex issues, and developed trust.

## The research

By researchers at the Policy Studies Institute, based on interviews in a local authority, police service and Primary Care Trust (PCT).

# Background

## A variety of measures have been introduced in recent years to encourage public engagement in local governance.

The role played by public officials – paid officials employed by public bodies – is important in affecting the extent to which community views can have an influence.

This includes the way public officials interact with communities and their role in influencing what happens to the views expressed. The research explored this through a case study of one London borough (Haringey).

### Officials' attitudes, views and feelings

The attitudes, identities and feelings of public officials influenced the extent of their community engagement, the types of engagement that they preferred and the extent to which they took the 'results' on board. They expressed a range of feelings, related to organisational context and personal experiences. Officials were a diverse group and did not always see themselves as distinct from the community they were trying to engage. Some expressed a personal identification with the community or as an advocate of the community. Others said they were committed to professionalism and carrying out good quality community engagement, often among more senior managers and those responsible for designing engagement. Another group of officials spoke of the personal enjoyment and satisfaction they derived from community involvement.

While almost all officials were positive about community engagement in principle, there was more uncertainty about putting it into practice. Sometimes officials wanted to limit community input to issues that the public could 'easily understand' such as day-to-day operational issues rather than strategy or policy. Some also expressed scepticism about the value of community participants' views; they were seen as unrepresentative or self-interested:

**"You end up with people who have their own agenda for wanting to be involved in something, rather than perhaps, you know, regular people at grassroots level who haven't got a vested interest." (PCT official)**

Another widely held preference was for working with 'informed participants', i.e. those who were aware of the issues involved and the constraints that officials were working within. These attitudes can potentially exclude certain voices and issues from shaping the agenda of local public services.

### Officials' behaviours, processes and skills

Officials used a variety of informal processes, behaviours and skills that facilitated engagement. These included:

- making the timing, location and format of engagement forums accessible;
- using participatory methods;
- 'going to where communities are';
- effective communication skills;
- the ability to manage conflict; and
- feeding back on the results of previous engagement.

The skills and capacity of officials shaped the kind of interactions that took place in engagement settings. Engagement was less effective if these skills were lacking. Officials felt it was particularly helpful to engage with people through an ongoing dialogue. It provided them with an opportunity to feed back on the results of earlier engagement and allowed community participants to develop a better understanding of the issues involved.

### Organisational enablers and constraints

Organisational context shaped officials' ability to undertake engagement and act on its outcomes. Five key factors included:

- senior management and/or political support;
- resources (staffing and funding);
- performance management systems;
- time frames; and
- organisational culture.

Resources were a critical factor. Both those planning services and those carrying out engagement expressed frustration at the way in which resource constraints limited engagement. However, there were clear contrasts between the organisations. Within the Safer Neighbourhoods structure in the Metropolitan Police, community engagement is a high priority and is resourced accordingly. Housing and children and young people's services also had resources and staff dedicated to engagement. Resources were much more limited in the PCT, particularly in the context of recent financial cutbacks, so engagement practices were often undertaken by partner organisations.

More 'creative' engagement techniques were required to reach disadvantaged or marginalised communities, which had particular resource implications in terms of staffing and time. One response was to 'piggy back' on the engagement processes and resources of other organisations. Health staff had done this successfully and there was considerable scope for further partnership working.

Officials felt that there was a need for both specialist engagement roles and mainstreaming engagement responsibilities within organisations. This combination worked well in housing (see Box 1). Performance incentives for both individuals and organisations to prioritise engagement were crucial in enabling engagement to take place. Despite Government attempts to strengthen the local accountability of the

NHS, in practice PCT officials experienced conflicts between the demands of local communities and the pressure to meet central performance targets.

Staff across organisations felt more supported and empowered to carry out and act on engagement when it was championed by senior managers. Support 'from the top' was thought to 'trickle down' throughout organisations; it facilitated internal cooperation around engagement; and helped ensure that officials were not side-tracked by other roles and responsibilities.

## Engagement structures and practices

Officials felt it was necessary to have a diverse range of engagement structures and practices, for different organisational contexts, different purposes and to engage different communities. They rejected a 'one size fits all' approach to engagement practice, but also felt that the many current structures lacked coherence. This was reinforced by organisational restructuring, which affected engagement in all the service areas to differing degrees. Officials felt there needed to be a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to community engagement locally.

Some officials reported that community influence was more effective in shaping the delivery of services and managers often struggled to find effective mechanisms for community engagement to feed into policy or strategy. There was a lack of co-ordination between local neighbourhood and wider area-level structures.

Officials felt that formal community involvement in decision-making on boards and panels was sometimes ineffective because community participants had little control over the agenda. Officials felt these structures worked better where there were effective routes for broader community influence to feed into them. It was felt that this happened effectively in the police

### Box 1: 'Embedding involvement' in housing

In Homes for Haringey (the organisation that manages council homes in the borough) there was a specialist resident involvement team, but also attempts to embed engagement throughout the organisation. For example, Involvement officers supported the development of residents' associations, but the day-to-day work of consulting and working with residents' associations was undertaken by mainstream tenancy management staff. Similarly, mainstream senior managers chaired panels in which resident representatives and officials planned policy and practice on specific service areas. This was felt to be effective in '*embedding involvement*' throughout the organisation.

(see Box 2) and in housing. Informal dialogue allowed community participants more leeway to get their own concerns onto the agenda, although there were challenges in how far those views were able to influence policy and practice. Some officials acted as advocates or champions of community views within their organisations to ensure that community views were put on to the agenda of senior decision-makers.

## Purposes of community engagement

Officials had a range of purposes for carrying out engagement. They did not use engagement methods unquestioningly, but thought about the purposes and tried to adopt appropriate techniques. Still, there was sometimes a lack of clarity about the purposes of engagement, who should be involved and their role, particularly where participants had a place on engagement structures as a 'community representative'. Numerous different definitions of 'representative' were found, which were often contested. In forums where participants were seen as 'stakeholders' or 'partners' there were fewer tensions because participants were valued for their skills or expertise rather than their representativeness. Structures that were unclear about community members' roles – and their legitimacy – could result in tensions between the expectations of different parties. Better training could provide greater clarity for those involved in designing community engagement processes. However these issues also need to be negotiated in a collaborative way between different participants on the ground.

## Policy and practice implications

The implications from the research suggest some ways in which public officials might be better supported in conducting and acting on community engagement.

### Box 2: Ward consultations and ward panels in the police

Each Safer Neighbourhoods team had a ward panel, which provided a structure for maintaining accountability to the local community by deciding and ratifying local policing priorities. Local police teams presented a range of possible priorities to the panel based on the results of ward consultations, which got a good representation of resident views in a variety of ways (including 'Have a Say' days outside schools, supermarkets, transport hubs or places of worship; public meetings with interactive crime-mapping events; and visits to community organisations). Ward panels, consisting of residents, councillors and other local service officials, then selected local priorities and monitored police progress in meeting them.

*For organisations:*

1. A mapping exercise within public bodies (or individual departments) could identify responsibilities, skills and performance incentives for community engagement across all levels of staff.
2. The balance between having specialist engagement staff and/or making all staff responsible for engagement needs to be struck differently in different organisational contexts.
3. People are unlikely to prioritise community engagement unless it is clearly built into staff performance frameworks.
4. The development of organisational training strategies for community engagement would be useful to help ensure that staff possessed appropriate skills for engagement.
5. Greater provision of learning events on community engagement would be helpful, including events that brought together officials and community participants across sectors. These events could challenge stereotypes and assumptions within organisational cultures, and address the purposes of community involvement and possible roles of the participants.
6. There is scope to expand and formalise the role of engagement champions within organisations, maximising, supporting and rewarding the enthusiasm and commitment among many public officials.
7. Community engagement also needs to be actively championed at a senior level within organisations, including elected members within local authorities.

*For local areas:*

8. Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) could be encouraged to develop strategic plans for community engagement in governance at a local level.
9. Local engagement strategies need to consider:
  - how to share resources for engagement more effectively across organisations;
  - identifying opportunities for rationalising and merging engagement structures and where to preserve separate structures;

- how to generate more inclusive engagement in governance, and effective accountability mechanisms between third sector representatives and the wider community; and
- ensuring there are effective links between community engagement mechanisms at neighbourhood and area-wide levels.

10. Local centres of expertise on community engagement within LSPs could be developed, linking to the work of Regional Empowerment Partnerships.
11. Local strategies need to be reviewed regularly, involving a range of stakeholders.

*For central government:*

12. Officials would welcome clearer recognition from central government of the complexities and challenges in listening and responding to the views of all sections of the community.
13. Greater priority needs to be given to resourcing community development and outreach work, now that central government funding for Community Empowerment Networks has ended.
14. Officials are experiencing conflicts between national performance targets and local needs, particularly within the health sector.
15. The new Comprehensive Area Assessment could review the LSP's role in co-ordinating, developing and improving the local framework for public engagement to ensure it is coherent and effective.

## About the project

The fieldwork took place between February and September 2007 and involved interviews with officials across five different service areas within a local authority, police service and a PCT. A small number of other stakeholders were interviewed to gain their perspectives on the role of public officials in community engagement. Finally, a workshop was organised for public managers to validate and discuss the research findings and to generate policy and practice implications.

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## Further information

The full report, **Public officials and community involvement in local services** by Kathryn Ray, Maria Hudson, Verity Campbell-Barr and Isabel Shutes, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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