

## **Routes and barriers to citizen governance**

*Santosh Rai*

### **An exploration of the influences and barriers that impact on citizen participation in local governance.**

The government drive for greater community-based governance requires public bodies to ensure that all communities have the opportunity to participate in local decision-making structures and influence local service delivery. How effectively citizens from different communities and neighbourhoods are able to participate, however, can vary considerably due to structural, environmental, cultural and personal factors.

Drawing on the experiences of people from a range of backgrounds, councillors, LSP members and representatives from the voluntary, community and faith sectors this report:

- highlights the factors that encourage different communities to get involved;
- identifies the challenges and barriers that prohibit involvement;
- explores the governance experience of black and minority ethnic women;
- considers in what contexts place disadvantage or affluence influences governance choices and participation;
- explores the importance of leadership within local governance with particular emphasis on the role of local government.



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# List of abbreviations

BME	Black and minority ethnic
CEN	Community Empowerment Network
CEO	Chief executive officer
CIC	Commission on Integration and Cohesion
DCLG	Department of Communities and Local Government (now Communities and Local Government)
DSP	District strategic partnership
EOC	Equal Opportunities Commission
LSP	Local strategic partnership
NDC	New Deal for Communities
PCT	Primary care trust
VCO	Voluntary and community organisation
WEU	Women and Equality Unit

# Executive summary

Successive government policies for neighbourhood and civil renewal, race equality and devolution have placed onus on local government (and indeed other public agencies) to adopt a participatory approach to service delivery and community development. A range of structures are in place, designed to engage citizens and communities in determining how and what services are delivered, and to promote citizen participation and equality in local democratic decision-making processes.

While governance opportunities are ostensibly open and available to all, some communities are clearly better equipped at getting their voices heard, influencing change and raising members to take an active part in community and public life. Others face very distinctive challenges that impinge on their ability to access governance opportunities. Clearly, as neither citizens nor communities are homogeneous, what works in one neighbourhood may not be appropriate in another.

In this report we set out participants' motivations, experiences and testimonies about civic life, community participation and local governance. Interviewees included individuals from a number of disadvantaged and affluent wards in Birmingham, representing various ethnic backgrounds and a group of black and Asian women from Birmingham and Wolverhampton (see notes at the end of the Introduction for definitions). Nearly all 115 participants were active in formal and/or informal governance structures and included councillors, representatives from local strategic partnerships, primary care trust members, neighbourhood forums and members from the voluntary, community and faith sectors.

## Reasons for engagement

Active engagement rarely commenced in isolation. The research revealed a number of key themes relating to participants' motivations and backgrounds that played a crucial part in influencing participation. We heard from participants who aspired to make a difference in their communities and others who were challenged by a specific issue. Some responded to difficult life experiences by 'getting involved' and others acted from a foundation of religious faith. In some cases, the environments and community settings to which participants had been exposed as part of their upbringing, education and work life created the basis for governance participation.

Nearly all participants were positive about the importance of engagement and expressed a desire to pursue further governance opportunities. The consensus view was that effective community governance was as dependent on the co-existence of all types of structures, both formal and informal, as it was on the formation of strong partnerships between various groups. Some participants emphasised what was significant was the goal rather than the type of governance structure through which it was achieved. Others, however, clearly viewed informal community-based structures as being more accessible. Indeed, some participants viewed involvement within formal governance as aligning with the establishment and abandoning their community routes.

## **Governance experience of BME women**

The research revealed a determined group of women who were committed to pursuing their goals and influencing change in their neighbourhoods and communities. Many advocated for greater participation by other BME women and believed they were paving the way for others.

More than three-quarters of the women, however, had encountered prejudices and discrimination as part of their governance experience. Participants found that the attitudes and behaviours of some people leading, managing and participating within governance structures limited their access to and progression within all types of structures. These included negative perceptions about their abilities, being undermined because of race, gender and faith stereotypes, and the persistent 'glass ceiling'.

Cultural factors also impacted the ability of some women to participate within public life. Female participation among Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities was sometimes perceived as being contrary to cultural norms, leading to negative and in some cases hostile responses from their communities. Some Muslim women pointed out that mixed-gender settings would be an obvious barrier for some women from their faith community.

More generally, across all ethnic groups, it was the lack of confidence that was perceived to be the major challenge requiring targeted support to encourage and equip more women for engagement.

### Role of place

Affluence of an area in itself had little bearing on the initial reason for participation in civic life. Across all wards we found a strong correlation between civic engagement and a sense of commitment to the area in which participants were involved. As participation broadened and deepened, so did the connection to an area.

The research highlighted more similarities than differences between the views and experiences of participants from disadvantaged and affluent wards – for example, the following.

- Community governance was perceived to be easier for individuals from middle-class and certain socio-economic backgrounds, and to be dominated by professionals, elected officials and well educated people. Other groups represented included community workers and activists, and those concerned about a specific local issue.
- Participant response indicated that, while community cohesion and diversity within governance structures was perceived as important, there was still some way to go before inclusive governance became a reality.
- People were generally perceived to be apathetic, but not entirely uncaring about what happened in their communities. Residents from affluent wards were more likely to have the view that dealing with community issues was the State's responsibility and not the local community's.

### Leadership issues

Participants viewed the role of front-line leadership, both appointed and elected, as being vital for the well-being of their communities and integral for engaging communities in local governance. Satisfaction with local leadership structures, however, was varied. Leadership perceived to be dispensed through impersonal 'institutional structures' inspired less confidence and trust than leadership by known individuals. In this context, the role of councillors was recognised and supported. Nearly all participants believed that partnership working was essential for effective local governance but were often dissatisfied with existing partnership arrangements. These were often marred by friction caused by a hierarchical approach, conflicting agendas and accountabilities, poorly articulated vision, differing values and principles, and poor communication between partners.

The qualities displayed by leaders also contributed to both positive and negative views of local governance. Participants believed leaders should be of ‘good’ character and particularly valued traits such as trustworthiness, integrity and honesty. Leaders were also expected to be suitably skilled and ‘connected’ to the communities they were serving, whether that be physically, emotionally or even spiritually.

## **Barriers to participation**

The research found that the culture of citizen participation was often ill aligned with the ambitions for local governance advocated by public bodies. Although participants were committed to being involved, they often expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with the operation of governance structures.

Participants found that excessive bureaucracy hindered, rather than facilitated, governance participation and highlighted poor communication channels, conflicts of interests between community needs and personal and organisational agendas, and restrictive ‘top-down’ approaches. Others pointed to a distinct lack of community confidence and trust in the process of engagement and views that participation was largely a futile exercise. In the view of some, ideological conflicts limited the scope for faith groups to take a more active part within local governance.

More general barriers included the ‘lack of time’, lack of awareness of the opportunities to engage and practical barriers such as the timing of meetings and inadequate childcare facilities.

## **Conclusions and implications**

We found that a mismatch exists between governance ambitions and governance reality. To redress this imbalance, this report contains a set of implications focusing on the development of a governance culture that inspires ‘trust and confidence’, and is inherently more accessible and inclusive.

- The role of front-line leadership such as councillors, chairs of boards and appointed officials is vital for widening the reach and impact of local governance. Effective, visible and connected leadership that is empowered, trained and equipped is essential for maximising partnership potential, counteracting discrimination within governance structures and increasing the ability of diverse communities to engage.

- To increase trust, there is a need for local government and partners to continue to demonstrate a commitment to the highest ethical standards, strong public accountability structures, and exemplary character and behaviour from those in leadership positions.
- Practical measures such as mentoring programmes, use of positive role models and capacity building and training support are needed to enable more black and minority ethnic (BME) women to access and progress within local governance structures.
- Faith groups have an important role within local governance. Open and honest dialogue is necessary to explore and address ideological conflicts and to ensure that the capacity of such groups is built to facilitate effective participation.
- Essentially, creating a more positive environment and establishing a 'listening, can-do' culture is needed to increase community confidence. Procedurally, effective governance requires that communication is timely and appropriate, that governance opportunities are primarily issue-led, and that the needs and concerns of communities have been taken into account in the design, timing and location of meetings.
- Governance participation meant different things to different people. We contend that a broader and inclusive definition of governance that encompasses civic engagement in all its forms is pursued, and that all types of active citizenship are encouraged rather than signposting only limited structures.

# Introduction

In recent years, Government has progressively sought to engage citizens in the governance of their communities and neighbourhoods. Increasing participation at the community level, it is argued, is good for improving and targeting local service delivery, empowering communities, raising local accountability and developing cohesive communities in pursuit of citizen well-being and better governance. This approach is also deemed to be vital in reconnecting citizens with the processes of government, improving satisfaction with electoral democracy and reversing the current trend for poor turnout in local elections.

The principles of citizen engagement being advocated across government departments are increasingly being incorporated into local government and partnership strategies for local service delivery, community cohesion, race equality, neighbourhood renewal and devolving power at a local level. Delivery mechanisms include both established partnership structures, such as local strategic partnerships, and new ways of engaging with citizens, such as specialist groups leading on cohesion, partnerships dealing with crime, the Birmingham Civic Pioneer scheme and various other forums for dialogue.

Despite the growing emphasis on citizen governance, recent research seems to indicate that many citizens and communities remain disconnected from local democratic processes and are failing to engage with the structures of governance that have been established for their benefit (Ellison and Ellison, 2006). Apart from the 'lack of time', citizen engagement appears to be limited by factors such as:

- disillusionment with the bureaucracy of formal governance and perceptions that engagement will not make a difference (DCLG, 2006a);
- lack of confidence and community capacity (ODPM, 2006);
- lack of awareness and knowledge of governance roles and routes into them (DCLG, 2007);
- lack of meaningful consultation and inadequate follow-up (Maguire and Truscott, 2006);
- the mechanisms that exist to facilitate participation at a local level are often ill-equipped for reaching and engaging all sections of society, and fail to recognise the diversity that exists or to discern the needs of those being targeted (Taylor and Wilks-Heeg, 2007).

This report sets out to examine the reality of citizen governance from the perspective of active participants from selected Birmingham wards and BME women from Birmingham and Wolverhampton.

### Policy context

Participation by citizens in the governance of their communities and public services has been a cross-cutting theme that has been emphasised in a number of government strategies and policies emerging over the past few years from departments such as the Civil Renewal Unit of the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), Women and Equality Unit and Home Office Units such as the Community Cohesion Unit, Faith Communities Unit and Active Citizens Units. In this section, we have provided an overview of the policy context, which relates to the key themes covered in this report.

### Citizen participation in governance of place

Over the last decade, the need for greater local engagement has been embodied in both legislation and government policy. The 1998 Local Government White Paper (DTLR, 1998) emphasised the importance of giving local people 'a bigger say and a better deal'. This was followed by the Local Government Act of 1999, which required all authorities to engage in formal consultation with local interests and encouraged the establishment of local forums to act as the setting for democratic debate (Alcock, 2003).

The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (SEU, 2001) indicated a need to reduce the gap between disadvantaged neighbourhoods and more affluent areas, and advocated that decision-making structures be developed at a local level to facilitate 'local solutions to local problems'. This was strengthened by the Sustainable Communities agenda, which promoted 'effective engagement and participation by local people, groups and businesses especially in the planning, design and long-term stewardship of their community, and an active voluntary and community sector' (ODPM, 2003). The cross-departmental action plan *Together We Can* (CRU, 2005) similarly highlighted that improving the quality of life for communities required increased community engagement. This was to be achieved by supporting active citizenship, strengthening communities and developing stronger partnerships with public bodies.

Progressively, the spotlight at a policy level has been focused on broader structural matters such as decentralisation, localisation and devolution. Structural reform proposed to streamline and distinguish between the role of local and central government seeks in particular to clarify the nature of the role, powers and responsibility of local government within a devolved framework. Citizen participation in the renewal of whole cities, towns and neighbourhoods has been emphasised in the 2006 Local Government White Paper (DCLG, 2006b) and by Sir Michael Lyons (2007) in his inquiry into local government. Most recently, the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill seeks to reduce the amount of top-down control from Government, placing more power at a local level, and imposes a greater duty on local authorities to consult.

### **Governance and leadership**

The crucial role of leadership within local governance strategies has been emphasised in the Local Government White Paper (DCLG, 2006b). This White Paper proposes that local government should provide a clear and strong strategic leadership role for whole places and communities. Furthermore, it emphasises the need to promote and develop stronger local partnership structures for the purpose of agreeing and achieving local priorities that really matter to communities and citizens.

Sir Michael Lyons (2007) promotes the notion of ‘leadership of place’ and ‘place-shaping’, and advocates for a local government that is able to operate at different levels, is in touch with its citizens and has its finger firmly on the community pulse. His report describes a new wider strategic role for local government, promoting a shift from an inward, target-driven approach to an outward-facing one in dealings with communities, local partners and others with a stake in an area. The model of leadership is less definitive. It is recognised that what might work in one area might not be appropriate in another. The focus is increasingly, however, on the attributes of leaders. Among its ‘ten prerequisite skills’ the Leadership Centre for Local Government (no date) talks about ‘listening and engaging’, and emphasises the need for leaders to be able to empower and actively engage citizens in local decisions and outcomes.

The role of local councillors is particularly emphasised and deemed pivotal in whatever type of leadership structure is established (DCLG, 2006b). The White Paper focuses on the need for councillors to assume the role of ‘community champions’ and to step up their accountability to local people. Reinforcing this stance, the DCLG has recently established a commission to look at how the role of councillors might be strengthened in their ability to serve and interface more effectively with communities.

### Inclusive governance

Race equality is a key government priority. Following the Race Relations Act (1976), successive legislation has been introduced to address associated issues. For example, in light of the Macpherson Report (Macpherson, 1999), the Race Relations Act (2000) was strengthened, obliging major central and local government bodies, the police and educational establishments to ensure their workforce reflects their communities, and that policies and practices do not indirectly discriminate. More recently, the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 were established to provide protection from discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the areas of employment and vocational training in response to the growing concern that such discrimination has become more widespread.

In 2005, Government set out its plans for increasing race equality and creating cohesive communities (Home Office, 2005). This strategy sought to enable people from all backgrounds to have opportunities to participate in civic society and to help more people from disadvantaged backgrounds to be active in their communities and engage with public services. The inclusion of ethnic groups in local partnership structures has also been emphasised as a means of achieving meaningful engagement by BME communities to influence the provision of services and to shape the places in which they live and work (DCLG, 2006b).

Faith group involvement has become integral within strategies for community cohesion, particularly in the light of high-profile events such as 9/11 and the London bombings. The DCLG remit includes a continuing commitment to talk directly with faith communities and to ensure that the dialogue is reflected in the policies and actions that are developed at local, regional and national levels (Home Office, 2005). Most recently, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC, 2007) proposed a set of recommendations aimed at placing integration and cohesion at the centre of community policies, both locally and nationally.

Participation in governance structures, however, continues to be a challenge for members of some communities more than others. The lack of engagement by BME women in public life in particular is well established. The Women and Equality Unit (WEU, 2006a) identified that women hold only 35 per cent of national public appointments, of which BME women hold little more than 6 per cent. If public bodies are to reflect the communities they represent, then the number of women, particularly from minority ethnic groups, must increase.

## **The local context**

The devolution and neighbourhood renewal agendas involving governance restructuring have been embraced by Birmingham and Wolverhampton where various initiatives and strategies are in progress in pursuit of a participatory agenda.

In Birmingham, for example, the locally agreed Community Strategy (Birmingham City Council and the Birmingham Strategic Partnership, 2005) gives high priority to neighbourhood renewal, development of local governance and the promotion of active citizenship. Devolution has also been embraced as the city's strategy for the local management of service delivery. District strategic partnerships (DSPs) bring together key public agencies and representatives of the business, community and voluntary sectors to achieve more effective joined-up action.

The City Council also set out its aspirations to have a socially inclusive society in which faith communities play an active part in the development and implementation of local community strategies including the formation of a faith forum (Birmingham City Council, 2002). In recent times, consultation with faith organisations was of critical importance in defusing the civil unrest in Lozells.

Similarly, Wolverhampton City Council (2005a) cites that one of its key priorities is to create 'a city of communities and neighbourhoods ... [where] we will respect and celebrate racial, cultural and religious difference and live harmoniously together. No one in the City will be seriously disadvantaged by where they live'. Consultation and involvement of the voluntary and community sector including faith groups is now a key aspect of the Wolverhampton partnership structures.

The Community Plan by the Wolverhampton Partnership (2002) sets out the partnership's objectives for the neighbourhood renewal agenda to 'explicitly reach and benefit all of the city's neighbourhoods, including its most popular and affluent areas, through improved service delivery and partnership working, and also strengthened local governance'. Wolverhampton's Local Area Agreement (Wolverhampton City Council and Wolverhampton Partnership, 2005) sets out explicit targets for engaging with communities to increase numbers of citizens who feel they can influence local decision-making.

## **Aims and objectives**

In this research, we set out to identify the consistent themes and distinctions that can be made between different groups and communities and their views and

experience of local governance. We aimed to explore the ability of participants to access opportunities to engage in governance structures, critical factors that led to ongoing involvement within civic life and the routes they had taken to reach positions of power, influence and responsibility. In particular, we aimed to explore the issues of local community governance and civic participation from two perspectives.

- *BME women from Birmingham and Wolverhampton:* women from minority ethnic communities often suffer from multiple disadvantages as a result of factors including but not limited to their gender, ethnicity, culture, religious background and locality. While there is a growing body of research on BME communities, the perspectives of women from these communities are often limited. The project therefore aimed specifically to investigate the views of women from ethnic communities across Birmingham and Wolverhampton in order to learn from their experiences of governance structures and to articulate the implications for practice.
- *Participants from affluent and disadvantaged wards in Birmingham:* in the West Midlands, as in other UK regions, there are areas of severe deprivation and more affluent areas, often alongside each other. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods suffer a range of deprivations, lack of opportunity, poor image and confidence about the future. These neighbourhoods often have a larger concentration of BME populations and other marginalised groups. The reverse is true of affluent areas. These areas are often characterised by more confident communities that have better standards of living, higher levels of educational attainment, more social facilities and resources, better housing and less crime. The research sought to explore the relevance of the place of residence and related socio-economic factors on the views and ability of participants to engage.

## Methodology

The primary research method was a consultation programme involving one-to-one interviews with 115 participants. The research was mostly qualitative in nature and structured to draw out participants' motivations, views, experiences and testimonies about civic life, community participation and local governance. The subject areas covered in the interviews included: current participation, neighbourhoods and community leadership, upbringing and background, personal ambitions and motivations, faith, ethnicity and culture, education and training, networks and connections, and gender issues (BME women only).

Local government is in many ways at the centre of developing strategies and partnerships that engender the principles of participatory governance. In this research, most participants had either an active involvement or an ad hoc association within one or more of what were defined as ‘council-led’ governance structures (lists in Table 1 were compiled through advice from council representatives). As part of the research objectives, we sought specifically to ascertain views about such structures and directed participants at certain points during the course of the interview to consider governance from this perspective. With direction from Wolverhampton City Council, it was decided to focus the Wolverhampton-based research on BME women only.

**Table 1 Council-led governance structures**

<b>Birmingham structures</b>	<b>Wolverhampton structures</b>
District strategic partnership (DSP) (now constituency strategic partnership)	Area forums
Neighbourhood forums	Regeneration boards
Ward advisory boards	Citizens’ panel
Tenant liaison boards	Area housing committee/boards
Ward committees	Tenant strategic consultative committee
District committees	Local strategic partnership (LSP)
People’s panels	
Regeneration boards	

Pioneer-Links formed a project team, which included the Policy Research Institute of the University of Wolverhampton and researchers from Transformations Community Partnerships Limited, Cornerstone People and Balsall Heath Forum. An advisory group with representatives from academia and local government as well as local community groups was established to provide guidance and input into the project at all stages of delivery. Examination of national and local policy contexts was also undertaken through a review of policy documents and other relevant literature.

This research mainly targeted individuals who were active governance participants. Interpretation of what is meant by ‘governance’, however, was broadly defined. Our approach was firmly on how individuals viewed their involvement, the emphasis being on participation in civic activities, and encompassed both formal and informal community structures. Some participants, for example, viewed their community activities through voluntary organisations as a form of governance. Less than 10 per cent of individuals were not currently active within any governance structure.

Interviewees included DSP/LSP members, members of neighbourhood forums, ward committee members, school governors, primary care trust (PCT) members and elected councillors. Other participants were involved in governance structures

as part of their professional, employed and volunteer capacities, which included civil servants, volunteers and employees from the voluntary and community sector, health professionals, council officials and community activists.

The research programme was divided into two parts: the ward sample (65 interviews) and the BME women sample (50 interviews).

### **Ward sample**

Interviews were conducted with five individuals with a Birmingham-wide involvement and 30 individuals from three affluent wards and 30 from three disadvantaged wards:

- affluent wards: Sutton Four Oaks, Edgbaston and Hall Green;
- disadvantaged wards: Shard End, Lozells and East Handsworth and Sparkbrook.

Fifty-five per cent of the sample were male and 45 per cent female, of which approximately 75 per cent were from white British backgrounds. The remainder came from Indian, Pakistani and other Asian backgrounds, black backgrounds, white Irish and 'other' white backgrounds (as per census classifications).

The wards were selected (see Appendix) by reference to the 2001 census ward profiles and socio-economic deprivation indicators, and through consultation with Birmingham City Council. To shortlist potential participants, we identified structures that operated on a ward basis, such as neighbourhood forums, community empowerment networks (CENs), ward committees, DSPs and elected council posts. We targeted individuals within similar roles and functions from each ward while seeking to be representative of ward demographics. We also made contact with voluntary, community and faith organisations as a means of identifying suitable research candidates. In many cases, however, participants were involved in more than one capacity.

Participants in most cases both lived and were active in the same ward. In a few instances, however, participants were involved in structures outside the ward of residence. In these cases, participant response is based on their ward of involvement and not on the ward of residence.

## **BME women sample**

The second part involved 50 BME women from Birmingham and Wolverhampton: 25 of the women selected came from black backgrounds and 25 from Asian backgrounds (as per census classifications). These included twelve Indian, ten Pakistani and three Bangladeshi participants. It was agreed with the advisory group that we would target women who were currently or had been involved in formal and/or informal governance structures primarily within the education, regeneration and health sectors. We sought to identify candidates from the following structures:

- education: school governors, members of education forums, boards and council education department;
- health: members of community health forums, primary care trusts and council health department;
- regeneration: New Deal for Communities, regeneration boards and partnerships, and area forums.

We approached appropriate neighbourhood offices and public sector departments in order to obtain contact details of suitable candidates. We also targeted voluntary and community organisations operating within the above sectors. A significant number of referrals came from advisory group members and research participants.

## **Report structure**

- In Chapter 1, the report looks at how and why participants came to be involved and explores the background influences and motivations that led to civic participation (Part A). Part B looks at participants' intentions for the future.
- Chapter 2 identifies what participants perceived to be the main barriers impacting citizen governance within formal governance structures.
- In Chapter 3, we give voice to BME women, drawing attention to their specific experiences and challenges.
- As part of the continuing debate about the importance of 'place', in Chapter 4 we explore in what contexts (if at all) place disadvantage or affluence influences governance choices and participation, focusing on six Birmingham wards.

- The broader issue of leadership emerged as one of the most significant factors in how local governance is both viewed and positioned within communities and is specifically highlighted in Chapter 5, with particular emphasis on the role of local government.
- Chapter 6 – in the conclusions, we sought to draw together the key messages that emerged and to highlight the implications for policy and practice.

### Notes

- To distinguish quotes by different participants from voluntary and community organisations (VCOs), quotes have been numbered as follows: VCO member (1), VCO member (2), etc.
- As per census classifications, references to Asian backgrounds in this report refer to Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi participants and other Asian backgrounds (in the ward sample, three participants identified themselves as other Asian 'Kashmiri').
- Participants from black backgrounds have been identified in this report as 'black'. Participants' self-classifications were as follows: nine black participants, three black African, 17 black Caribbean and two black British. As only three participants identified themselves as black African, the sample was too small a number to make any meaningful comparisons.
- Birmingham and Wolverhampton City Council are referred to respectively as Birmingham Council and Wolverhampton Council.
- For abbreviations – see the list at the front of this report.

# 1 The reasons and routes to civic participation

## Introduction

Increasing opportunities are being made available for citizens to engage in governance structures and to influence local decision-making. The purpose of this chapter is to:

- explore factors that either motivate or demotivate active citizenship within both formal and informal governance structures (Part A);
- highlight views about preferences and future involvement (Part B).

The findings in this chapter are based on the views of both the ward and the BME women samples.

## Part A: reasons and routes to engagement

Nearly all participants identified one or more reasons that led to their involvement in civic life. These included among other things a desire 'to make a difference', personal interests, life experiences and faith. In some cases, the environment in which interviewees happened to find themselves was conducive to civil engagement but, more often, individuals took a particular course of action because it served a purpose or met a personal objective.

### 'My reasons to engage were ...'

Although the specific reasons and routes for involvement were as diverse as the individuals participating in the research, nevertheless there were some common threads. The main themes identified were:

- personal interest and aspirations;
- background and personal life experiences;

- community work and volunteering;
- expression of faith;
- work-based involvement;
- by personal invitation/networks.

### Personal interests and aspirations

#### *'Making a difference'*

Personal interests and aspirations were among the most highly motivating factors given across the research sample for participation in civic life, and were particularly emphasised by the sample of BME women. Participants spoke of 'wanting to make a difference' and 'putting back', and were motivated by an underlying vision for advancement and change within their communities. The word 'passion' was commonly used to convey the strength of the conviction that many felt about their involvement.

A DSP member said he believed in the 'philosophy and theory behind social justice' and 'wanted to do something useful and felt that this was a way to make a difference to people'. A participant involved in a community project said, because she 'didn't have a religion', she felt she 'should be giving back in other ways'. Similar sentiments were given for involvement in local community groups and public sector bodies, and for pursuing elected office.

Although civic involvement was clearly not without its pressures, challenges and disappointments, nearly all participants felt that contributing to civic life was a worthwhile activity and not without its rewards. They described the enormous sense of satisfaction felt by bringing about change in a community or making a difference in someone's life, as well as a sense of worth that came with helping others. These participants were not involved simply because it seemed like a nice idea or were engaging for its own sake – it was often driven by sense of purpose and in some cases akin to a vocation!

It's very, very important. It gives me a reason to get up of a morning. I get a thrill when I've organised anything, whether it's been fundraising or the carnival. I get a feeling of self-satisfaction when things go right. (LSP member)

### *Response to a local issue*

A significant number of participants described being 'fired up', 'exasperated' or 'sick and tired' by a specific local issue. In these instances, recognising that waiting for others was no longer an option, participants had actively taken *personal responsibility* for making something happen. The story below describes how the actions of a resident, who is now the chair of the neighbourhood forum, contributed to a significant change in the life of the local community:

Things got so bad here that this became a red light area. Everything was terrible here, we had drug abusers, prostitution, and child exploitation, everything was going on in this neighbourhood. Somebody had to make a stand! I would have moved away years ago had it not been for my wife ... So then I called a public meeting at the church, where we had about 500 people turn up. They elected me as the spokesman. I as a person had to do something; I couldn't stand what was going on. I have a family like other people on the estate ... and, for the family's sake and for the future, we had to address the problem. (Chair, local neighbourhood group)

Similar stories involving local action instigated by citizens are repeated throughout the research. Participants often emphasised that it was their commitment and passion that ultimately achieved results rather than a well executed master plan. On a few occasions, it was helping a person in need that led to ongoing civic engagement. One councillor described assisting a neighbour with a housing problem involving the local council:

I realised that there are problems out there in the community and that I as an individual could represent the less fortunate but also just be a mouthpiece. And I think that's where it all started.

### *Political interests*

An interest in party politics, political ambitions or a desire for change through political means was the driving force for engagement for a small number of participants. Not surprisingly, such reasons were mainly given by some councillors, party workers and those engaged at a strategic level. Although the initial routes taken by those with political aspirations varied, there were some familiar patterns, such as party involvement and a local government background. More often than not, those motivated by politics had been exposed to politics while young, although the

opportunities to engage may not have materialised until much later. Here a councillor describes the role her father played in introducing her to party politics:

I got involved with communities as a child because my father was a party worker. He was not a member at all, he only served on the residents' association. More like an area association. He was very interested in helping the Conservative Party. He took me along as a child and I was hooked. (Councillor)

Although BME women gave similar reasons for engagement to other participants, one notable distinction surfaced in the context of 'political motivations'. Though only one BME woman said an interest in 'party politics' was her primary reason for engagement at the outset of her journey, there was clear evidence that other women had political ideologies that influenced their participation, although there appeared to be a tendency to engage in non-political ways. As explored in Chapters 2 and 3, the existence of barriers to entry appears to be among the main reasons for this, rather than a lack of interest.

### **Background and personal life experiences**

How participants were brought up, including their culture of origin, community dynamics and the type of family background they had experienced, led to both positive and negative views of community participation.

#### *Ethnicity, culture and community*

The community setting or the social climate in which participants grew up was found to be a significant influence. A councillor believed that 'most British people are reasonably private and they want to get on with their lives and don't want to be told they've got to get involved in a community meeting'.

Participants from BME groups and 'other' white backgrounds in particular tended to have a stronger cultural identity and displayed a greater sense of community. Nearly half of the ward sample, most of whom came from such backgrounds, said their ethnicity and cultural background had been an influencing factor. A black participant involved in various community forums believed 'being brought up in a family and in a culture of giving back to the community, to be supportive and respectful of others' shaped her view on participation. An Irish participant expressed similar views and

highlighted the 'community-oriented' nature of Irish families and their tendency to 'support one another'. In some of these cases, the transition to civic engagement was almost seen to be a natural progression.

Only a small minority from a white British background felt their ethnicity or culture was a determining factor in taking part in governance activities. Being a part of the dominant culture, most white participants appeared to be less overtly conscious of their ethnicity and their 'Britishness'. Those from minority cultures of course were more acutely aware of their difference and the associated challenges and disadvantages, and consequently were more likely to give such reasons for involvement than participants from white British backgrounds.

The evidence suggests that a number of participants from BME and 'other' white backgrounds had specifically chosen to take up governance opportunities as a means of helping others from the same cultural group. An Irish participant said it was her concern about the lack of representation of the Irish community within Birmingham that led to her eventual involvement as a ward support officer. A council officer involved in an array of governance structures was motivated by a desire to raise the profile of the black community and, more specifically, by the challenges faced by 'black boys' within the education system:

The underachievement or perceived underachievement of black boys is something we've been struggling with for a long time. I still think that it's not high on the agenda when we talk about inequalities because of lack of resources, lack of direction, lack of being able to put it at the level that it needs to be placed on the political agenda really ... We still have the situation where a majority of our black workforce is at the bottom of the employment ladder. Back in 1991 black women were said to be among the most educated in England and yet we don't have them at the top of the employment scale. (Council officer)

### *Childhood encouragement*

The research revealed a link between those who had received encouragement and exposure to community activities through clubs, groups or as volunteers as young people and civic involvement in adulthood. Over half the sample said they had been encouraged as young people to take part in the community by parents, teachers and others, and this had contributed both directly and indirectly to their current governance activities.

My parents have been involved in the community. It hasn't taken over their lives, but I saw that they were involved in schools and had an interest in the local area. My parents have given me an appreciation for living in a nice area, etc. Dad's been involved on the Chair of Governors and Mom's a classroom assistant. My parents encouraged me to get involved in the Duke of Edinburgh awards, up to the gold award, where I had to do volunteer work, which was beneficial. It was definitely a positive thing. (LSP member)

It is important to note, however, that participants who had not received such encouragement (nor had a role model – see below) are nevertheless contributing to their communities. Some Indian and Pakistani women, for example, highlighted that it was not culturally acceptable for young women to take part in external groups and clubs. Consequently, many of these women did not have early experiences of taking part in community-based activities other than those involving the family at culturally acceptable venues.

Occasionally it was the lack of encouragement or the lack of opportunity that later provided the impetus to get involved. Others reiterated the significance of 'personal motivations' as a key driving force, as asserted by this DSP member: 'when I was growing up there were no community places or clubs, or anything like that. No, there was just something that was within me!'

### *Role models*

Role models, including parents, relatives, teachers, colleagues, community members and historical figures, played a significant part in shaping the views of many participants about civic responsibilities. Over two-thirds of the ward sample said they had been influenced by a role model, who was normally someone known personally rather than a public figure. These included colleagues as well as local activists. References to historical figures were usually from philosophical and ideological perspectives.

Participants most commonly cited parents as role models and highlighted characteristics such as empathy, determination and their engagement with and treatment of others. The influence of recognisable and active community members also cannot be discounted. Several participants had been greatly motivated by the actions of others who were making a difference in their communities:

I would happily name that person as [Mr X]. Not a boxer, not a sports person but a local activist. Not a politician. I admired his tenacity in being involved with the community for over 40 years. When we first met he had the same enthusiasm, as I've now been told, as he did when he started. (DSP member)

Nearly all the BME women said they had role models and many of them had been influenced by other strong females such as their mothers, female colleagues or community members who had achieved much or who had simply survived through adversity:

My mom, because she came over here and her work career was based in working in factories but she had the belief in standing up for what you believe in. If something is right she will stand up for it and she's a fighter. (Ward support officer)

### *Challenging life experiences*

Challenging life experiences, such as domestic violence, social injustice, lack of educational opportunities, racial discrimination, emotional abuse, disability and illness, were the motivation for a significant number of participants to take part in their communities. Such experiences appeared to have been immensely influential in shaping how some participants viewed themselves and their role in society. Some participants sought opportunities to make a difference in their communities, driven by the belief that something positive could come out of their experiences. A very personal account is given below of circumstances that contributed to this participant becoming actively engaged within the community:

I'd been at home for years with my children, with a violent husband and not being able to do anything. But then my son died, and that gave me the strength to go back to college, and I started doing things that I've always wanted to do, you know. Nothing can keep you down; whatever you want to do you can do it. It gave me a bit of passion then to help others, and to help others move forward. (VCO member [1])

Some participants, having experienced life challenges, described being attracted to community organisations that appeared accessible and provided the type of environment that engendered trust. Engagement for others commenced through active employment in areas that were perceived as being conducive for making a

positive societal impact. Backgrounds within certain sectors, such as social work, counselling, education and health, were not uncommon.

### Community work and volunteering

The route into civic engagement for many participants began with involvement in the community and voluntary sectors. The connection between community sector involvement and civic engagement is already well documented and is supported by the findings of this research (DCLG, 2007).

Voluntary organisations tend to be grounded in the community, well known in their localities and perceived to be 'in the interests of the community', which therefore makes them a more accessible route for citizens to participate in civic life. Consistent with research highlighting the connection between social capital and governance, many of those involved in these sectors spoke of the links and networks that were created leading to further opportunities to engage (Demos, 2006).

The research revealed many stories where participants had either volunteered their services to a local community organisation or received invitations to help, which led to years of ongoing civic engagement. Some participants had indeed assumed positions in formal governance structures but most continue to be active in the community and voluntary sectors as employees and volunteers. A DSP board member reflected that his introduction to governance started over 40 years ago when he volunteered at the local cubs after his son brought home a letter from the group saying it needed someone to help. Similarly, a councillor described that his involvement stemmed from 20 years of volunteer work, which in 1991 led to him standing for election. As a result of her extensive experience within the voluntary and community sectors, the following participant is now a community representative within the National Community Forum set up to advise Government on matters relating to neighbourhood renewal within disadvantaged areas:

I think for the last 25 years I have been involved in the voluntary and community sector in one form or another. I think this has brought a lot of observation and experience in terms of seeing what is going on in the community scene and its needs and then looking at them ... and saying well, yes, can I make a difference and then sort of linking up with other colleagues and friends and just trying to help. (National Community Forum member)

## Expression of faith

### *Influencing role of faith*

For nearly a third of participants, religious faith was a key driving force for engaging in civic life while a further third said this was 'of some importance'. Although the research sample was not selected according to the religious belief of participants, the emerging evidence testifies to its significance within civic life. The former group of men and women demonstrated strong personal convictions and were clearly passionate about their faith. They pointed to its centrality in defining who they were and what they did, as well as why they did it. Religious beliefs in these cases informed personal values and principles, and directed personal life plans, but also underpinned activity or 'good works' within the community and public arena. Several participants in particular spoke of the public nature of their faiths and the importance of being actively engaged within the community:

To me my whole life is based around my Christian faith and my relationship with God. It's the central point of my life. Absolutely my faith has been a motivating factor. It is my destiny. All the great social reformers were faith based and what faith does is give you a kind of platform to say, how does this measure against this ideal? How does our society measure up to social justice and decency? I hate injustice against people. Faith provides me with the vision, the energy and with the answers. (Ward advisory board member)

These participants spoke about being relevant within society and proactively connecting with what is happening around them rather than taking an insular approach. Some went as far as to say that engagement by faith groups with Government and its structures was not only paramount but also a responsibility if political decisions were to be influenced or real change in society was to be achieved:

I think it is crucial that we do that if we are to have any sphere of influence that you work with the local authority, but it's not religious 'religious'. We are just living the life that God's called us to be. I think it is important to work with the local authority but not with this religious hat on. I am certainly not going to go in there with my bible and bash the councillor on the head with it. You go in there with information and awareness of what is happening and how as an organisation we can help. (VCO director and PCT member)

For another group, the significance of faith was derived from its inextricable link with their cultural identity. Faith as a motivation for civic engagement in these instances varied considerably. Its relevance seemed largely associated with cultural activities and for informing upbringing and family life rather than as a spiritual driving force. Some participants, however, had embarked on civic participation because of a desire to create opportunities for others from the same cultural/faith backgrounds or to address barriers associated with their ethnicity. The motivations for such action usually had little direct link with spiritual faith or a religious belief:

I was brought up in an Indian religion. It's not very important; I'm connected more culturally than spiritually. I'm not very involved in terms of a faith organisation but my faith is a motivating factor through how I was brought up within the local temple in the context of the community. (VCO member [2])

A third group described having 'an inner faith' and emphasised private devotion and its role in informing personal morals rather than as an overall value system. Similarly, some claimed Christianity as a faith largely because it was perceived to be the 'national religion' rather than it being a personal conviction. These participants tended to view faith as a fairly insignificant reason for their civic involvement in comparison to other motivations covered in this chapter.

### *Faith organisations and civic involvement*

A significant number of participants were actively involved in both religious institutions and other faith-based community organisations, and were providing services to the community such as training opportunities, drop-in centres, youth clubs and parent and toddler groups. Those involved in running and managing such projects often viewed their participation as 'an act of faith'. They spoke of compassion and helping others, and believed that, by doing so, they were actively impacting their neighbourhoods, communities and even the whole city for good. One participant described a health project that was initiated by members of a Pentecostal church. It links faith with social action and is now having citywide implications:

The church in 1986 set up a health centre. What we found in the church, it's a black-led church, we found that people were going into hospital and not being given the right information. We found out that the majority of that congregation was suffering from hypertension leading to diabetes. A number of us at the time were nurses and we began offering screening in

the church. It now serves the whole city and has moved to being a charity employing people and going out and screening for blood pressure and testing blood sugar levels. (Council officer)

We found that it was relatively common for involvement in broader governance structures to have stemmed from participation in a faith organisation. A recent study draws attention to the importance of social capital created through 'bonding, bridging and linking' within and across faith communities and the wider community (Furbey *et al.*, 2006). Faith organisations are increasingly a part of wider networks and those leading or working within them are often both well known and influential in their local communities. Leaders of some faith groups are also becoming ever more outward looking as one Baptist minister explained, 'it's the policy of the church to get involved in the social improvement of the area'. Another asserted 'I am interested in seeing my role in the church in terms of the whole community and the whole area'. He is now an active supporter of various community organisations, as well as being a school governor and member of the DSP. An LSP member traced his current participation in the 'youth theme group' back to his role in working with teenagers as part of the leadership team within the church where he grew up.

The role of faith organisations, however, varied considerably depending on the gender of the participant and the faith in question. Some participants identified them simply as venues for hosting cultural activities or as an intermittent place of worship, rather than as a means of linking to governance structures or contributing to civic life. Women from the Muslim faith, for example, described having little direct involvement with the local mosque and this as a route to civic participation was consequently limited for Muslim women in comparison to men. Although some accepted this as a part of the cultural norms, others were far more vocal about the perceived inequity in opportunity this brought about. A Muslim woman who was an equality and diversity representative for a public institution, while critical of the lack of board membership and involvement by Muslim women in religious institutions, felt that this would be an inappropriate way to engage with women from her faith.

### **Work-based involvement**

#### *Personal social responsibility*

In numerous instances, participants described 'having their conscience pricked' through exposure to sectors that involved interaction with communities or addressed social issues. Working within areas such as social work, health care, youth work, community development, housing and education contributed to an acute awareness

of personal social responsibility and often led to both a desire and an opportunity to engage further within community structures:

I trained as a nursery nurse and started work in a private nursery. I then went from the private sector to social services and saw a big difference in the way families were treated, the opportunities for children, and felt like I was giving back a bit more. There was a cut-off point, the whole bureaucracy thing that you can only go so far in helping a family. So, when the opportunity came up with Sure Start, there was a big element of community involvement and working with different agencies in order to support a family. (VCO member [3])

A significant number of BME women in particular commenced their journey through their work, both in the public and voluntary sectors. Numerous jobs require a level of engagement with local communities, some directly and many indirectly, which inevitably led to opportunities for ongoing involvement within both formal and informal governance structures. This work-based involvement created the environment for many women to gain exposure to community issues and first-hand experience of the structures, funding, networks and opportunities to effect change. This, combined with a desire for progress, wanting to make a difference or interest in particular social issues, has resulted in many of these women (and others) continuing their civic involvement.

### *'It's just a job'*

Some participants indicated that their engagement within governance structures was not driven by a personal conviction but was simply the requirement of the job. As one ward committee manager put it, 'because I do it as a job I think it would be awful to do that in my spare time too'.

Although some of these participants appeared not as 'passionate' as others, there was nevertheless a high regard for the nature of work they were engaged in. Others involved primarily through their work, however, highlighted the profound impact that engaging with communities had made on them – leading to what started out as 'just a job' becoming a personal conviction. Through working with the community empowerment network one participant, for example, described her growing desire to be actively involved in changing the structures that were perceived to be failing communities:

It was my main activity at work. I came very much unaware of the social issues in this area and quite ignorant of Birmingham and its demography, and quite unaware of the structures for local communities to get involved. All of these issues came up slowly years later in the course of meeting people and getting introduced to the structures and criticisms of the services leading to a desire to change them for the better. (CEN member)

### Personal invitations and networks

*'I was asked to'*

Several participants became involved in governance structures following a request from a family member, friend, colleague or even an acquaintance who was already actively participating. Occasionally it was simply the availability of time that prompted the invitation, while in other cases it was believed that the individual could help meet a specific knowledge, skill or delivery gap. Those seen as possessing relevant knowledge, skill and experience are as sought after in the community sector as in any other.

A person might be more likely to say 'yes' if someone were to take the time and trouble to approach them (with a convincing argument), rather than if they had to make a decision in isolation. Indeed a personal invitation can be difficult to turn down, as had been found by this individual:

I got involved because I was asked to by people whom I found it very difficult to refuse. Some people came to me and said they needed to raise £50 to run a local nursery 35 years ago. So initially I got involved as a fund-raiser. (Co-ordinator, neighbourhood forum)

### *Importance of networks*

While a significant number of people commenced their journey through 'word of mouth', more had become involved in governance activities through other routes. Contacts and networks, however, appeared to become more important as participation progressed. Partnerships, collaboration and forming alliances were perceived to be essential for achieving any measure of success within the realm of community governance.

We consistently heard from participants where one opportunity had led to another. It was not unusual for individuals active in the community to become well known and noticed by others, resulting in a majority of the participants holding dual or multiple roles. This, however, also gave rise to the 'usual suspects' syndrome and seeing the same old faces at meetings and the same names arising time and again for other governance opportunities (Demos, 2006). Some found themselves being sought after as the perceptions of their skills, networks and experience made them attractive propositions. One participant described how a simple petition to address a local nuisance led to an invitation to form and chair the local neighbourhood forum. A manager within the regional development agency who was already involved in numerous governance positions stated that she regularly received requests to join 'all sorts of panels and boards'.

### **Part B: a future in governance**

Crucially, the research indicated that nearly all participants were planning to remain involved and indeed pursue further governance opportunities. Only those approaching retirement did not anticipate future activity and those with other pressing commitments, such as young children, did not feel able to commit more time to civic activities.

#### **Preferences**

A mixed response was given to the question about how participants preferred to be involved in the future. The consensus view was that effective community governance was dependent on the coexistence of all types of structures, both formal and informal, as it required the formation of strong partnerships between various groups. Most anticipated continued involvement in the sort of structure they were currently engaged in but were not opposed to engaging through other mechanisms should the opportunities arise. Some participants emphasised that the type of structure that they chose to participate in was of less importance than the result – what was significant was the goal rather than the route!

I would get involved through all of them. I am a firm believer in building networks and I think it is having strong networks that allows you to tap into resources and have an impact on the community. So I would like to take a little bit from each one, maximising each one really. (VCO director)

## Grass-roots involvement

A common preference expressed was the desire to be involved at a grass-roots level, 'getting their hands dirty' so to speak. Some perceived formal governance boards and structures to be 'talk-shops' where a lot was said but not much achieved. It is not surprising, then, that people spoke of wanting to get involved through informal structures, which were perceived to be more conducive for community action and change. These structures were seen to be less bureaucratic, more accessible and indeed more grounded in the community. Conversely, the bureaucracy, unclear motives and rigidity of formal structures were common hindrances to participation, as reflected in the following comment of a director of a voluntary organisation:

With most statutory organisations they are mostly ineffective because they are out of touch with the people that they are there to serve because they are wrapped up in red tape ... I would contend that organisations like ours are much more effective, who work in a more holistic way. (VCO director)

Even some participants who were currently active in formal structures had some misgivings about the way such structures operated. A ward support officer expressed a preference for participation through a local community organisation because 'it's a more realistic approach to community issues, having less a burden of bureaucracy, more flexible and more willing to experiment'.

## Formal governance – joining the establishment?

A number of participants described a 'them and us' attitude felt by many in the community. Those choosing to participate through formal structures were sometimes viewed as having joined the ranks of the establishment and abandoning their community routes. A director of a community organisation described being disappointed at a contemporary's perceived change in alliance:

I suppose I do prefer the community route. What I'm doing somehow gives certain autonomy. Yeah, I don't think I could work for a council. Don't think I would go down well in one of those. They break you. I've seen people and one particular individual was, you know, involved in one of my favourite Asian community organisations and I remember calling him and saying 'God! You have changed so much' and I hated it. He used to really articulate some of the needs of the community. I mean take them on and then he joined them! (VCO director)

And clearly many who *do* join the established structures become embroiled in paperwork, meetings and progressively seem to have less time for direct involvement in communities. The more formal they become the more removed they appear. One participant decided to relinquish several of the governance positions he held, as he felt that the decisions he was making 'were somehow beneficial for individuals but not for the community'. A DSP member commented 'you can get wrapped up in a number of boards and end up working for them rather than for the community'. Similarly, a DCLG (2007) study found that governance roles were seen as potentially cutting people off from their communities rather than making them champions for their communities. Nevertheless, a few participants saw formal governance structures as the route to 'real' influence and believed that, if citizens wanted to have a say, it was these structures that really mattered. Others accepted that there is a role for formal structures, as they are integral to the democratic process, but more needs to be done to improve their effectiveness.

### Summary

- Participation is strongly influenced by the motivations, current circumstances and backgrounds of individuals, which determine whether governance opportunities are taken up.
- There were more similarities than differences in the types of reasons given by BME women and other participants, although the emphasis varied among different groups.
- Nearly all active participants were committed to ongoing governance involvement. Some expressed a preference for future engagement through informal structures, which were perceived to be more accessible and grounded in the community.

## 2 The barriers to governance

### Introduction

While there has been some progression in citizen engagement, local government and its partners continue to face challenges in communicating their aspirations and changing the perceptions that prevail about their efforts, approach and intentions. In fact we found that governance opportunities often failed to have the intended impact or were viewed as being no more than rhetoric.

In this chapter, we have highlighted some of the key challenges that had personally impacted participants from both research samples or were perceived to be barriers for the wider community. These include the following:

- the prohibitive culture of governance;
- meeting times, location and awareness;
- personal circumstances, attributes and skill;
- faith-related ideological conflicts.

We have focused on race, faith and gender barriers as highlighted by BME women in Chapter 3 and specific issues associated with place of involvement in Chapter 4.

### The prohibitive culture of governance

#### Structures, bureaucracy and officialdom

Participants' main concern was not so much the lack of opportunity but rather the prohibitive culture that surrounded citizen governance. Some of the recurring themes hindering effective and broader participation were seen to be:

- complicated and inaccessible structures;
- excessive and restrictive bureaucracy;

- impersonal management and leadership;
- obstructive red tape and confusing jargon.

Many participants, themselves frustrated by 'pointless bureaucracy', believed this factor was a barrier to wider engagement by their communities. Identifying and negotiating through the various structures, committees, accountabilities and responsibilities serves to hinder and prevent engagement, as a neighbourhood forum member commented: 'I think it shouldn't be taken for granted that people will find out about it themselves and volunteer their services'.

To those on the outside, the meeting environments and structures can also appear intimidating, as can the officials who are fully integrated within them (Ellison and Ellison, 2006, p. 341). Indeed, the lack of confidence to engage with the structures and the accompanying officialdom was considered to be a significant barrier preventing broader participation:

In some meetings for the community, the councillors all shout up and it is intimidating! In some meetings, people aren't allowed to have a different identity, so people don't speak up. (VCO member [4])

The lack of understanding of the systems and processes, awareness of 'who's who', the relative power and authority of those present, the background policy agendas and the jargon all contribute to a perception of 'them and us'. As one participant put it, a term such as 'speaking through the chair' has no relevance to ordinary citizens and reinforces the view that participation is only for a select group. Such views are not easily changed. Certainly, few people willingly want to appear 'stupid' and be embarrassed unless they have a burning issue or are confident enough to participate despite potential information and knowledge gaps.

A participant with extensive experience of various council-led governance structures believed that, although devolution seemed to be widening participation, current structures were actually becoming increasingly detached because of their nature and size and there was a need for a realignment with communities at a grass-roots level (Taylor and Wilks-Heeg, 2007).

### **'What's the point?'**

Past failures, lack of response to issues previously raised and fruitless consultations had contributed to the cynicism about formal governance and the individuals charged

with making things happen. The intentions of authorities to involve and consult with communities were sometimes perceived as being no more than tick-box exercises where the outcomes had already been determined. Participants believed that many citizens from their communities had little faith or trust in the agenda and process of governance, and felt there was little point in engaging. Indeed, as a member of a PCT health forum pointed out, 'there is a process locally that people can engage in, but they feel very cynically that people don't listen'.

## **Meeting times, location and awareness**

### **Logistics and practical arrangements**

Participation was viewed by some to be an exercise fraught with logistical and practical challenges. In some cases lack of proper consultation and thought given to the needs of communities prohibited involvement in governance structures.

The timing of meetings, venue location, childcare requirements and use of unsuitable venues were regularly highlighted. A ward committee member advised that their next meeting was to be held at a public house and was interested to see if attendance increased. While this was in an area with a predominantly 'white' population, such venues might be inappropriate in areas with greater Asian populations, particularly if targeting women. Daytime meetings were also seen to be problematic for those in employment. Travel arrangements were seen to be a challenge for some people, as the location, distance and timing of some meetings made them inaccessible to those using public transport.

Although it is difficult to meet the needs of every individual, some participants felt more should be done to ascertain the requirements of the target communities. A participant inputting into local partnerships advocated the need for consultation on matters that truly 'reflected community priorities and problems' and provided 'legitimate steps forward toward community participation in governance'.

### **The communication gap**

The lack of engagement was often attributed to the existence of a communication and information gap. A school governor pointed out 'there's not much advertised by the council for getting people to come forward and sit on a panel'. Other participants

said it was the lack of awareness about the opportunities to engage, lack of information about the issues to be discussed and late notification of forthcoming events that contributed to poorly attended meetings and failure by citizens to engage in the governance of their communities.

### **Personal circumstances, attributes and skill**

Not all hindrances to engagement stemmed from external factors. Personal circumstances, personal attributes, skills and competences also determine the extent to which citizens are able to participate.

### **Fitting governance into your lifestyle**

Shortage of time because of the increasing demands faced by individuals in today's society was among the primary reasons given for the lack of citizen participation. Commitments such as family and work responsibilities and even social life were seen to take priority, unless there was a specific reason or motivation to engage.

On a personal level, although nearly all participants had intentions to progress their involvement, the major constraint was perceived to be time factors. Through experience, participants were acutely aware of how much time could be involved in taking part in governance activities, particularly if they wanted to do it justice, as described by this councillor:

The biggest barrier to anybody getting involved is time. Even if you're only involved in something that meets once a month, it's not just that one night, it's all the other nights that goes on around it. Most people cannot give up the time required to serve on the council. It can only properly be done on a full-time basis so it limits it to people who are retired or unemployed. (Councillor)

Family priorities and responsibilities were one of the main limitations given by BME women. In many cases, women were still the main carers of children, had responsibilities for ageing parents and often formed the hub of wider family life, as a consequence of which they frequently felt they had less time available for civic engagement than their male counterparts. In order to 'fit governance into their lifestyle', women with young children felt they either had to have support from

others or rely on suitable childcare facilities before they could contemplate extra involvement. This was not seen to be as great a challenge for younger women or women without children, but, nevertheless, gender-based expectations were prevalent from family members in some communities more than others.

### **Attributes, skill and local knowledge**

#### *Confidence*

Possessing confidence was seen to be paramount in accessing governance opportunities. This attribute is needed for public speaking, dealing with conflict, presenting an argument and interacting with a range of people from diverse backgrounds and, as one participant commented 'even being able to say I don't understand takes confidence.' In fact participants frequently gave the lack of confidence for the low level of engagement by citizens and communities. BME women in particular believed that other women from their communities often lacked the confidence to engage and required support to do so.

#### *Communication skills*

Although many acknowledged that their education had been an advantage, it was felt that the broader skills and competences they had acquired in the process were more important than a higher-level qualification in itself:

You have to have effective communication, written and oral, because if you are gonna work in structures that are jargonistic, these have barriers to entry in terms of understanding, contexts, content, oh lord, you name it! (VCO director)

In particular, communication skills (listening, spoken and written), ability to process information and people skills were considered to be essential for both accessing opportunities to engage and contributing effectively. These were important for clear and articulate self-expression, interpreting jargon, hearing, understanding and responding to the views of others.

### *Local knowledge*

Effective engagement was considered not to be possible without some knowledge of local issues, local politics and local community dynamics. Being in possession of local knowledge and data, statistics and information to back up the issues raised not only increases credibility but also commands greater attention from those present. Lack of such knowledge therefore was often seen to prevent individuals who had neither the time nor capacity to gather the information needed from attending governance meetings:

If you want to do something for your local community and that is the whole point in getting involved, if you're not aware of the issues what's the point? (VCO member [5])

### **Ideological barriers and faith**

In Chapter 1, we found that faith was an important motivator for a third of participants and of some significance for another third. The research, however, suggests there is some uncertainty among faith groups about their involvement in matters of governance and that conflicts sometimes occurred between religious beliefs and practices and engagement, which supports findings in other studies (Commission on Urban Life and Faith, 2006).

### **Values, principles and religious practices**

A Christian DSP member suggested that the reason why Christians might not pursue active governance was because of its 'association with political parties, which they don't regard as a proper area for ministerial involvement'. Another Christian participant believed that, while people of faith felt a need to be involved, they viewed such engagement as moving away from their core values and as 'tainting themselves.' Muslim participants highlighted conflicts in relation to issues such as prayer times and mixed-gender settings. One Muslim PCT member stressed that she would rather not get involved if it meant compromising her beliefs and values by attending meetings at unsuitable venues.

Essentially, where involvement was perceived to collide with strongly held beliefs or the values and principles of the faith group, some individuals would rather not participate and chose instead to disengage from wider community connections.

## Separation of faith and community agendas

The research suggests that conflicts exist between perceptions about the motives and drivers of faith groups and the expectations of public bodies and other community stakeholders.

A minister and chair of governors believed there was ‘an anti-Christian thing in the council, not by members of other faiths but by white agnostics. I think we were looked down at.’ A Christian chief executive officer (CEO) of a community organisation said ‘people do not believe they will be allowed to become involved in a meaningful way and see it as going through the motions’. Faith groups, on the other hand, were viewed as having biases that were in the interest of a particular group but not necessarily in the interest of the wider community and therefore had the potential to isolate and exclude others.

Some participants felt that faith groups should more clearly distinguish between the faith agenda and community needs, and put aside their personal religious beliefs when engaging within a community context. One participant, while accepting that faith provided the underpinning strength and motivation, was of the view that individuals ‘should do the work because of the principles and it should not be linked to their religious or faith structure’. A member of the West Midlands Local Government Association, however, questioned the extent to which such a separation was actually possible: ‘it’s a difficult one to call. I would say some people struggle to divorce the faith issues.’

These are ongoing challenges. Promotion of faith is fundamental to the world view of some faith groups and cannot be detached. Some participants stressed that, while they were motivated by their faith, their aim was to benefit the community. One Muslim participant reinforced this stance saying she would be ‘more reluctant to join something based on the faith issue alone – it’s got to be other issues as well’. Other participants, such as this LSP member, however, clearly highlighted faith motives for engaging in local youth activities:

My faith is where it has all come from. Initially it was altruistic but it soon became obvious in working in the community and working with the church. Christianity is a missionary faith, youth work for me in this context is about meeting local youth and showing the love of God and witnessing in the community in such a way that young people raise questions, and ask ‘What’s it about?’. (LSP member)

### Summary

- The culture of governance was viewed as being prohibitive because of complicated and inaccessible structures, excessive bureaucracy and obstructive red tape, and confusing jargon. Overall, participants believed that communities had little faith or trust in governance processes.
- Other barriers included the lack of time and logistical and practical challenges such as the timing of meetings, venue location, childcare requirements and lack of timely information.
- Confidence, communication skills (particularly listening), people skills and good local knowledge were seen to be essential for both accessing governance opportunities and contributing effectively.
- Underlying ideological conflicts can limit the extent to which faith groups are able to, or are prepared to, engage in formal governance.

# 3 BME women: the governance experience

## Introduction

In this chapter, we sought to identify the particular issues that impact women from ethnic and minority communities in their involvement within formal structures of governance and more broadly within civic life. The specific areas covered include:

- how the women viewed their participation and their experience of engagement;
- the challenges they had personally faced en route and the perceived obstacles for other women from their communities.

Fifty women from black (including black Caribbean and black African) and Asian backgrounds (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) were interviewed. Nearly half were in their 30s and approximately a third between the ages of 40 and 59. Five participants were aged 60 and above, while three were in their 20s. The participants were clearly a capable and well educated group of women demonstrating commitment to ongoing self-development. More than half had degrees, 44 per cent had professional qualifications and 40 per cent had attained postgraduate qualifications.

The women were engaged at various levels within formal and informal governance structures (see 'Methodology' in the 'Introduction'). In their professional capacity they were employed as officers, managers and senior advisers within the public sector, head teachers and other education staff, CEOs, directors, managers and project workers within the voluntary and community sector, and leaders and employees of faith-based organisations.

## The experience of engagement

### Facing up to prejudice and discrimination

Many BME women continue to experience multiple barriers and prejudices despite government steps to promote race equality, tackle discrimination and engage ethnic

communities. Participants described being impacted by the negative attitudes and behaviours of some people involved in leading, managing and participating in civic governance structures. Though some might argue that claims of 'prejudice and discrimination' might be due to perceptions rather than actual verifiable incidences, in this chapter we have sought to highlight the feelings, responses and challenges articulated by the women rather than to second-guess the intentions of third parties and determine whether actual malice was intended:

I have not been listened to and because there are few black women involved in certain arenas there is a feeling of 'what are you doing here?'. These barriers however do not stop me. I just talk myself into going.  
(Church strategic group member)

The research revealed a well educated and highly motivated group of women – a group that wanted to 'move on and up'. Three-quarters of the women believed they were influencing what happened within their neighbourhood or community of involvement and nearly all the women had aspirations to broaden their participation and sphere of influence, and have a greater impact in the communities around them.

Most striking, however, was the determination displayed by the women in pursuit of their goals and the commitment to succeed despite the existence of direct and indirect discrimination. In order to address and mitigate the effects of prejudices, the women spoke of being forearmed so they could competently tackle questions and challenges in meetings. Some described confronting discriminatory behaviour, others talked about voicing their opinions despite attempts to sideline them and about their personal resolve or sheer persistence when such obstacles arose. Many felt they simply had to be better than their white and male counterparts – better equipped, better aware, better trained, better educated ...

It was for these reasons there was a recurring theme about the type of BME women that engage – those that are confident, educated, with strong personalities and are determined, self-motivated and assertive.

### **It's a matter of choice**

Some believed that participation was simply a matter of choice and that anyone with appropriate skills and confidence had the capacity to become involved if that was a real aspiration. In the words of a regeneration board member: 'those women who want to can and do! The only thing that might restrict them is the timing and crèche facilities and the language'.

Personality clearly plays a significant part, as demonstrated by the women in this research. However, without specific and targeted intervention, the opportunities to take part in governance structures will be accessible only to those women who have the strength of personality and the ability to overcome the barriers while making a positive contribution. Engagement on this basis would most likely preclude many women.

Talking about why BME women do not engage, a community officer believed that the 'stereotyping, racism and sexism to some extent might have an impact on some people and causes them to have a lack of confidence in themselves'. Indeed it was argued that the lack of confidence (not the lack of skill or the desire) was a major barrier for BME women. Confidence is required for public speaking, being assertive, negotiating with others, getting your voice heard and challenging discriminatory practices. It was for these reasons there was almost unanimous agreement that targeted support was needed to encourage and equip more women for governance roles.

## **Barriers of race, faith and gender**

Despite the growing number of qualified and skilled women emerging from ethnic communities, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC, 2007) highlighted some challenging facts about the ability of BME women to access, integrate and progress within employment life (including the public sector) as a result of racism, sexism and prejudice based on widespread stereotypes. Such stereotypical views were perceived not to have diminished significantly despite the increasing number of qualified and capable BME women engaged in public sector settings. Parallels to these findings are drawn in this research. A New Deal for Communities (NDC) board member believed there are 'loads of barriers', but saw these as challenges that can be overcome:

There are loads of barriers ... I'm female! I don't see them as barriers, I see them as challenges. The difference is that challenges can be overcome. And don't forget, I'm a black individual and, as we live in a male-dominated world, so I see that as a barrier. In council-led structures, as far as I'm concerned, there are people who want to hold you back. There are cultural/race issues. I'm a very determined person, assertive and aggressive. Racism is not an issue, not my issue because regardless of your colour you can challenge these. (NDC board member)

The existence of such barriers was almost exclusively described by BME participants and particularly emphasised by women from ethnic communities. More than three-quarters of the BME women said they had *personally experienced* discrimination because of their gender, race and/or faith while engaging in community governance structures. This was perceived to exist in the attitudes and behaviour of some individuals involved in existing governance structures and manifested when interacting with people professionally, in meetings, in the submission of proposals and ideas, in applications for governance positions and sometimes in the dismissive response received when issues that impacted BME communities were raised. This ward advisory committee member believed that it was due to her ethnicity that attempts were sometimes made to exclude her from discussions and meetings that affected the local community:

When there's a very powerful opportunity coming along they all collude together – that is, the officers, people who sit on the ward advisory board. They don't stop me but they say we'll go for a vote or they'll think about whether we should have her on or not. They take it up to the limit to keep the process going and it's mainly the men on the ward advisory group. They've got their own personal interests. I think sometimes at meetings they come up with their own agendas and they don't discuss what they've come there to discuss. They've already discussed things in their offices and all they want to do is to pass a motion to say 'yes' or 'no'. When you try to implement something you need to discuss that with the local people as well and sometimes that doesn't happen. (Ward advisory committee and DSP member)

Over two-thirds of women believed the barriers were due to their ethnicity while similar numbers claimed they had experienced discrimination as a result of their gender. This represented nearly half of the black women but four-fifths of women from an Asian background. Although less than half associated the barriers they had experienced with their faith, these were again mainly women of Asian origin.

Gender barriers and those associated with race and faith were often difficult to distinguish. It was usually felt that the prejudices experienced were due to a combination of factors, although some participants clearly felt it was because they were black or Asian women more so than because of their faith. (It was accepted, however, that women from certain faiths were more likely to experience prejudices.)

Nearly a quarter of women said they had not personally experienced any such barriers. Most, however, were not oblivious to the prejudices and discriminatory practices that existed through hearing about the experiences of other women and

because they were just aware of the world about them. A retired housing board member explained her stoical view below:

I haven't had any barriers or challenges. I don't know if it is because I have thick skin, or I am stupid but I don't let stuff like that affect me. I am aware of situations out there, but I don't let it affect me. Sometimes what could affect you, I look at it and it just doesn't affect me. (Retired housing board member)

### **Negative race and gender stereotypes**

Women from Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds felt that they were unjustifiably stereotyped as being submissive, compliant and passive, and were often viewed as lacking in strong opinions of their own. Consequently, they perceived that their contribution at governance meetings was often undervalued or not taken seriously in comparison to the views of other members. A PCT member believed she was viewed as being 'thick, or incompetent, or oppressed, or all of these things' because of the negative stereotypes associated with wearing a headscarf:

Yes, there is racism! I may wear a headscarf, people think I'm thick, or incompetent, or oppressed, or all of these things. It's people's stereotypes! When you enter a room, the first thing they see is a headscarf and automatically make assumptions, and you have to work hard to break these down. (PCT member)

Conversely, some black women felt that the stereotypical views about black women being 'demanding and overpowering' were still prevalent. They believed that, because of such views, deliberate attempts were sometimes made to marginalise and exclude them from certain groups and meetings in order to avoid having to deal with issues that were important to them or their communities:

One of the problems for black women is how black women are perceived. Sometimes you can be perceived as very demanding and overpowering and that can be stereotyping. That in itself sometimes creates a barrier for you to progress in an organisation. (VCO director)

### Male-dominated structures

There were mixed feelings among the women about how comfortable they were in governance structures that were more often than not male dominated. While some were undaunted, others clearly found such settings intimidating. A few women said this was simply a confidence issue. More, however, described being at the receiving end of inappropriate comments about their race or gender and being ignored or excluded from discussions and opportunities. A number of women attributed this to the 'sexist' attitudes of some men, although some conceded that exclusion might not have been intentional but stemmed inadvertently from how men approached group settings.

Despite these challenges, nearly all of the women intended to press ahead and believed that by doing so they were paving the way for other women. A magistrate emphasised 'it is time women were actually formally allowed to represent themselves for what they have been doing in the shadow of the opposite sex'.

On a practical level, it was suggested that more skilled leadership and chairmanship would contribute to fairer meetings, preventing certain individuals and groups from being excluded or overshadowed.

### Glass ceilings

Although many of the women aspired to higher-level governance positions, they described coming against the proverbial 'glass ceiling' that some had found to be impenetrable. A member of a community organisation believed that 'the one or two who do get through have to be playing a part and not be real, and who wants to do that?'

In the view of some women, their participation was seen as challenging the status quo and threatening prevailing views and agendas. They believed that certain individuals did not want confident and outspoken BME women in positions of influence and power, and consequently applications for governance roles had been deliberately obstructed. A black women active at a local and national level believed that a potential secondment was 'blocked' for such reasons:

I know definitely that when I was working in a particular place they wanted to see if they could second me to I think a governance position ... but it was blocked. I was told that it was blocked and that's basically because I suppose I'm not a 'yes' person and I will speak my mind and it's not always easy. (Race equality group member)

### **Perceived lack of ability**

Even highly educated, skilled and experienced participants felt an underlying pressure to prove and justify their involvement in formal governance structures. They believed that their skills and abilities were often underestimated and felt frustrated that in order to be heard they repeatedly had to try much harder than their white and male counterparts. A housing board member said she had at first faced barriers in accessing council-led structures because 'people were sceptical about my abilities and I was seen as a threat'. She described 'sticking at it, making progress and using inner strength to push through'.

Some participants clearly felt the need to be better trained and more astute than other members to establish their credibility and to counteract negative perceptions of their abilities.

### **Networks and cliques**

Forming alliances and accessing networks was believed to be essential in making a real impact within communities. While the majority of BME women felt they had access to a range of agencies, groups and individuals, some had experienced challenges in accessing certain networks and groups. There is little evidence to suggest this was always deliberate but constructive exclusion can arise through the existence of cliques and sometimes through cultural differences. A number of women, however, spoke about the parochial nature of some groups, and of 'collusion' and 'discussions behind closed doors'.

### **Faith discrimination**

Asian women generally and Muslim women in particular believed they faced more barriers than other women and other faiths. Negative stereotypes, as already discussed, were believed to be one of the main contributory factors. Anti-Islamic prejudice, however, was perceived to have increased because of events such as 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings in London (DCLG, 2006d). A school governor strongly voiced concern that 'there's a lot of bad press about Islam and being a Muslim' and emphasised that 'Islam is my faith and we're not all related to Osama Bin Laden and we're not all terrorists'. Hostility may also have been exacerbated by external factors such as the portrayal by the media of faith groups and the handling of current affairs. Muslim women in particular believed that by wearing the headscarf, a garment associated with Islam, they were the targets of increased discrimination.

BME women from the Christian faith did not think the challenges arising from their faith were as apparent as the barriers due to their gender and ethnicity, as these were clearly a more obvious part of their identity (see Chapter 5 for broader ideological barriers):

When I get involved in council-led structures I don't sort of say I'm a Christian woman. I go along and do what I need to do. I don't announce the fact that, you know ... I don't see the need to announce it ... I think more of a barrier is the fact that, well sometimes it can be a barrier because I'm an African-Caribbean woman, that's what is seen first not my faith or my religion because it's not overt. I'm not wearing a particular religious outfit, which I think might be an issue for some Asian religions such as Muslims. (VCO director)

## Attitudes of the community

### The community of origin

Cultural factors and internal community politics impact the ability of some women of Asian backgrounds and certain faiths to participate within civic life. In some patriarchal cultures, engagement with the external world is the domain of men – women have been brought up to deal primarily with matters relating to the family, home and children. Although this viewpoint is slowly changing and being challenged by younger women (EOC, 2007), there were significant numbers of Asian women and women from the Muslim faith who felt that their engagement in community structures or having political views was at odds with the cultural norms:

Elder ladies and gentlemen feel I've transgressed the faith but I am assertive and it's becoming more acceptable. (PCT member)

Some participants described being actively discouraged while others felt their involvement and contribution was often disregarded or minimised. More than half believed their involvement was viewed indifferently, cautiously and in some cases with outright hostility or 'disgust at a woman being involved'.

Negativity and opposition was more prevalent from men than other women from their communities. Some put this down to the fact that some men felt threatened and challenged by women who were proactive and aspired to leadership positions or

simply operated outside of the social norms. A Pakistani woman claimed she'd been told 'it is all a pack of lies and you're not going to get anywhere' and that 'they are not going to listen to you here'. Another said she'd been accused of abandoning her family responsibilities and for 'wearing the trousers'.

For some women, particularly of the Muslim faith, it is unacceptable for them to be involved in structures where men are present (DCLG, 2006d). Comments by a number of Muslim women highlighted that this fact 'would be a problem' for other women from their faith who were seeking to engage in civic life.

There were a number of Asian women, however, who felt encouraged by their families and communities and gave anecdotes of positive support. Their participation was perceived to be 'good for the community' in raising issues that affected them. Community opposition was rarely seen to be a problem by black women, nearly all of whom felt their participation in civic activities and governance structures was viewed positively. They were more likely, however, to highlight challenges in engaging with the wider community (see below).

### **The wider community**

Where a governance role involved interacting with the wider public, the more likely it was that individuals encountered prejudices from others. This councillor had been confronted by 'verbal abuse' from white people when canvassing and by an obvious reticence to engage with her because of her race:

As I've canvassed people, I've been told that they don't want my kind on their doorstep. By phoning they don't connect to your voice and when they come to meet you they are like 'oh, I'm here to meet the councillor'. I do not treat people based on how they treat you, I'm very outgoing, I can be reluctant if people treat me nasty. I try to break the ice when people just stare at you. Personality-wise, I'm a very confident person. I try not to let things get to me, I know they do, I try not to cry. (Councillor)

Other specific instances were highlighted by a number of black women who claimed that challenges existed in working with other ethnic communities where preconceived ideas are held about black people. The particular incidences highlighted concerned situations involving Asian men, who were sometimes seen to be particularly hostile or rude.

### Summary

- During their governance journey, many of the BME women encountered indirect discrimination and incidents of overt racism and sexism, as well as obstacles and challenges, however subtle, arising from prejudices based on their gender, ethnicity and/or faith.
- Governance participation was more of a challenge for some women from Asian and/or Muslim backgrounds as a result of the cultural norms and societal expectations of their own communities.
- The prerequisites for engagement were often seen to be a strong personality, confidence and a determination to push through. Nearly all the women, however, advocated that further support was needed to help more women become active within their communities.

# 4 Role of place

## Introduction

In this chapter, we aim to compare and contrast the views and experiences of those participants engaging in governance structures in affluent areas with those from more disadvantaged wards. Ten participants were interviewed from each of the six selected Birmingham wards (see the Appendix). The key aim was to explore:

- the role of 'place' as a motivation for engagement in civic life;
- neighbourhood challenges to civic involvement.

## Place affiliation

### As a reason for involvement

We found that the affluence of an area had little bearing on the initial reason for participation in civic life, with only a few participants saying they had been influenced by the 'type of area' in which they lived (in terms of its wealth) in comparison to other factors. This differed little whether the participant was from a disadvantaged ward such as Shard End or a highly affluent ward such as Sutton Four Oaks. Other research has found that there is a 'lack of a clear association between the wealth of an area and participation in civic activism' (DCLG, 2006c) and attributed the propensity to engage with 'people' factors. On this point we found that participants had not been influenced so much by where they lived as by what mattered to them. At the outset of the journey, personal motivations, faith, commitment to a local cause, involvement in a community organisation and opportunities created through work were found to be more significant (see Chapter 1).

### Correlation between place and ongoing civic engagement

The research revealed a strong correlation between civic engagement and a sense of commitment to the area in which participants were involved (which for most was also the ward of residence).

I live in the area and my children have grown up in it. It has had all sorts of unpleasant and not very nice features to it and as a matter of course it makes sense to work in it with other people to make it an area we can be proud of rather than being ashamed of. (Neighbourhood forum member)

As participation broadened and deepened so did the connection to an area. Those participants who lived in one area but were involved in another similarly demonstrated greater commitment to the area in which they were investing their energy, time and resources rather than to the area of residence:

Participants from both affluent and disadvantaged areas said they were committed not simply because of sentimental reasons or because they liked the area. A strong affiliation had in fact been forged through participation in civic activities, which had led to the creation of links and relationships, a deeper sense of civic pride and a greater awareness of local issues. Only slightly more participants from disadvantaged wards than affluent wards said they were increasingly motivated by the specific issues faced by their local communities and that these were important factors in their continuing involvement. Participants invariably described a desire to be integrated more fully within local life and wanting to shape the area, influence change and improve the quality of life for the wider community:

Now I'm actually working in the area too I still think it's a nice area, but I'm more aware of the drugs and the alcohol and of the great impact that it has on the area. As I've met more and more residents I feel less isolated as a parent and as a resident because I'm obviously speaking to more people. (Community project manager)

Although the research involved only a small number of 'inactive citizens', these participants all felt little sense of connection to the area in which they lived. On a similar note, the 2005 Citizenship Survey found that more people who participated in civic activism felt they belonged to their neighbourhood compared to those who did not participate (DCLG, 2006c).

I'm not really committed because I'm not really doing anything. It's just a place where I live, rather than something I have to be part of. (Ward resident)

## **Influence and influencing**

### **Having local influence**

A significant majority of participants from both affluent and disadvantaged wards believed they were having an influence locally. The concept of 'influence' was subjectively and broadly interpreted and not perceived by participants to be limited to involvement in formal decision-making structures, having leadership responsibilities or even the ability to determine resource allocation. Delivering a local project that met the needs of the local community, contributing to networks and partnerships, influencing others to become involved, promoting a particular idea, being a part of the local residents' association, running a church-based Alpha course were all seen by their proponents as contributing to changing and shaping the localities in which they were involved:

I sit on various committees and it was down to me for getting the council to spend £3 million on the flats and doing the flats up instead of demolishing them. (Housing executive committee member)

The slight variance noted between wards was due to the responses of those not actively engaged in local community structures. These individuals had little expectation or experience of influencing local decision-making or impacting their communities.

### **Is it real influence?**

Some participants clarified that they did not perceive their influence to be 'personal' but that it was by proxy through association with the capacity, strength and abilities of the organisations that they represented. There was some scepticism, however, about whether individuals or even organisations could really influence local decision-making. A few participants believed that decisions were 'preordained' and that individuals had little real influence on final outcomes. Others were more philosophical and felt that what little influence they had was insignificant in view of the enormity of the task at hand. Some individuals from affluent wards believed that, as the wards were perceived as being particularly affluent, they were at a disadvantage in terms of attracting funding and influencing how resources were allocated:

Sometimes when you try to apply for funding it's difficult if you come from what is perceived as a good area. That is something I'm trying to change. Young people can't pay for everything all the time. Slowly we are getting that across. External funding charities also do not like to fund here because it is looked on as a good area. (Youth forum member)

## Challenges to engagement

In this section, we have drawn attention to ethnic diversity and the types of people who participate, and the bearing this has on neighbourhood engagement (more general barriers have been covered in Chapter 2). Participant ethnic backgrounds are representative of ward demographics.

### Diversity within governance structures

The benefit of diverse representation is that you get to hear about factors that you possibly didn't think about before because they didn't directly impact you. I've learned a lot about other religions and cultures through contact with these groups. (VCO member [6])

There was broad affirmation and support for the Government's drive (DCLG, 2006e) to engage all ethnic communities in local governance structures. There was consensus that, without such engagement, a gap in understanding and a lack of appreciation of the real needs of different communities would exist. Communities jointly contributing to local development was considered to be a vital factor from a cohesion perspective and enriching for local community life.

Participant response about their experiences and views of diversity within governance structures indicated, however, that there is still some way to go before inclusive governance is a reality. Among the issues highlighted were:

- communication and language barriers;
- lack of capacity within certain communities to actively engage;
- conflict arising from different communities pitching for the same resource;

- disproportionate power and influence held by different communities;
- the lack of drive to engage women from ethnic communities;
- lack of integration by BME communities in some neighbourhoods;
- the parochial nature of some neighbourhoods;
- lack of consensus due to the lack of trust between communities;
- increasing representation through ‘tokenistic’ gestures.

A DSP representative noted that ‘one of the hardest things for people to do is to build relationships between the cultures’. Particularly in areas such as Sparkbrook with larger BME communities there was concern about the polarisation of neighbourhoods along racial lines. In these neighbourhoods, those from white British backgrounds sometimes felt that their concerns and priorities were secondary to the needs of the BME majority, leading to tension between communities and mistrust in the structures of governance. Several participants were of the view that sometimes more effort was invested in achieving diverse representation but not actual unity. A ward support officer described the situation within his neighbourhood:

Because the cultural groups are very powerful with powerful voices, there are some occasions when the white community finds it hard to be a part of the voice for the forum. They feel outvoted on some issues and that can cause tension. (Ward support officer)

### **Who participates?**

Across all wards, descriptions of the types of people that were more likely to participate in formal governance structures included:

- people engaging in their professional capacity, e.g. local government officials, police officers, health professionals, teachers, etc.;
- those holding elected office, e.g. councillors, MPs;
- community workers and activists;
- the politically motivated, committed party supporters;

- people committed to a cause or who are concerned about a particular situation;
- well educated, knowledgeable and confident people;
- affluent people;
- older/retired people with time on their hands.

Along similar lines, previous research suggested that 'wealthy executives' and 'prosperous professionals' were more likely to engage in civic activities (DCLG, 2006c) than those with no formal qualifications or in routine occupations. There were, however, also some negative undertones, with not infrequent references to individuals described as 'the usual suspects', 'do-gooders', 'busybodies' and 'those with axes to grind'.

We also found references to class distinctions, which suggested that participation was viewed as being simpler for individuals from certain backgrounds (Ellison and Ellison, 2006). As one neighbourhood forum member put it 'it is dead easy for people like me who have been brought up as a white middle-class person'. Such references were usually made in the context of the type of person rather than the type of area in which they lived. Being of 'white middle-class' background in the context of ability, confidence, education and opportunities to participate inferred that engagement was more of a challenge for people from other socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Whose responsibility is it anyway?**

A third of participants from affluent wards believed local residents felt the responsibility for dealing with local issues lay with local government and not the community, in comparison to just over a tenth from disadvantaged wards. There were, however, sharp contrasts between affluent wards, ranging from over two-thirds in one ward and only a tenth in another.

Although no one reason was identified, it was probable that these differences had a number of causes including, among others things, greater satisfaction with local services and firmer belief in the democratic process and in the responsibilities of elected representatives. Other research suggests that the greater visibility of disadvantage in some areas can lead to increased propensity and desire to engage, particularly in informal community structures (Demos, 2006).

On the issue of 'citizen apathy', participants perceived that this was the prevailing mood in their neighbourhoods rather than residents not caring about what happened in their communities. While the level of apathy appeared to be a little higher in affluent wards than in disadvantaged wards, it was the lack of awareness and time factors that were believed to be significant factors contributing to resident lack of engagement.

## **Summary**

- Overall, there were more similarities than differences between the views of participants from disadvantaged and affluent wards. Active participants across all wards said they were committed to the area in which they were engaged and felt positive about the influence they were having on local community issues.
- Communities working together was considered to be a vital factor from a cohesion perspective and enriching for local community life. The research, however, indicated that there is still some way to go before inclusive governance is a reality.
- Participation in formal governance was seen not only to attract certain types of people but also to be easier for individuals from middle-class backgrounds.
- While communities were perceived as being apathetic they were also viewed as caring about what happened in their neighbourhoods. Lack of awareness and time were among the reasons for the lack of involvement.

# 5 The leadership challenge

## Introduction

As the modernisation of local government progresses, community leadership is increasingly viewed as being integral to its role. For example, the White Paper promotes a broader 'strategic leadership and place-shaping' role (DCLG, 2006b) and requires that closer links be established with communities.

Both Birmingham and Wolverhampton City Councils have incorporated ambitions for stronger and more accountable community leadership in their strategic vision and plans. Essentially, these set out the drive for community engagement at all levels, efficient structures for the scrutiny of local decision-making and partnership approaches to policy development and delivery.

In this chapter we have sought to:

- explore how existing leadership is perceived with particular focus on local government;
- highlight both structural and people factors deemed essential for strong local leadership.

Leadership in this chapter refers primarily to those in front-line leadership positions such as councillors, chairs of boards and council officials in community-facing roles. The broader principles highlighted, however, might equally be applicable to others with leadership responsibilities in a community context.

The findings in this chapter are based on the views of 90 participants from Birmingham and 25 from Wolverhampton (BME women only). Because of the disproportionate representation, we have focused on the key themes rather than on direct comparisons.

## Views on local leadership

### Is it important?

Almost unanimously, participants viewed local leadership as being vital for the well-being of their communities, which clearly resonates with government policy (DCLG, 2006b). The reasons given included:

- providing vision and direction;
- instigating and delivering change;
- being an accountable point of contact;
- bringing together different groups at the right times;
- building trust with communities and partners;
- addressing conflict and promoting unity and consensus;
- ensuring that the voices of citizens are heard so that the things that matter to them are achieved.

### Community leadership – is it effective?

Birmingham Council in its recent Comprehensive Performance Assessment stated:

... we accept and take seriously our responsibilities to lead the community. Our particular role includes working with key players ... building consensus on the way forward; ensuring the city's basic physical and service infrastructure is effective; and taking the lead where appropriate. (Birmingham City Council, 2006)

Wolverhampton Council Corporate Plan (2005–08) similarly states that:

... we are committed to providing excellent services for all our communities, and delivering strong community leadership to advance the social, economic and environmental well being of our city. We will

continually strive to meet the needs and aspirations of our customers and citizens and secure improved levels of customer satisfaction.

(Wolverhampton City Council, 2005a)

Despite such positive messages, there was some concern about the approach to leadership and operation of the structures through which it was being administered. The evidence suggests, for example, that a crucial distinction exists between what is perceived to be leadership by an institutional structure and leadership by recognised, visible and known individuals.

### *Elected members*

Where council leadership was perceived to be dispensed through elected members, this received greater support, as this defined role provided an accountable and recognisable reference point. The MORI 'public attitude survey' commissioned by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (Ipsos MORI, 2006) found that front-line or local public servants are more trusted than other types of public officials and that 'the closer the public are to an individual or institution (or at least the closer the public perceives them to be), the more likely they are to trust them'.

Nearly two-thirds of the ward sample and almost half of the BME women viewed elected members as being key players in local leadership structures, testifying to the importance of the councillor role in front-line community engagement. Their role was seen to be instrumental in bridging the gap between communities and Government. Where councillors were visible and perceived to be championing the interests of their constituents, participants demonstrated a high level of satisfaction and trust in their ability to lead successfully. A member of a housing committee said of his local elected representative: 'the councillor lives on the same road as I do. Everyone knows him. He's good. He comes down and does estate walkabouts. I think he's in tune with his community.'

Where participants expressed dissatisfaction it was often due to mistrust or a lack of visibility and responsiveness, which some noted seemed to coincide with the timing of elections. Others expressed the following views.

- In some cases councillors were perceived to ignore issues raised by those who did not/do not vote for them.

- Councillors who did not appear to be genuinely interested in the community they had been elected to serve but seemed to be motivated by self-interest or prioritised party and organisational interests (DCLG, 2006a).
- Some BME women were concerned about the ability of councillors to provide effective representation within highly diverse communities or to appreciate and address the complexities that arise in areas where a range of cultures coexist.

To counteract such issues, the 'championing' role of local councillors is currently being emphasised by Government promoting the need for greater visibility and accountability (DCLG, 2006b). Recent research also emphasises the need for councillor involvement in council decision-making structures to be strengthened so that they are more effective in their representational capacity (Gardiner, 2006).

### *The council – 'the institution'*

Leadership by the 'council' often attracted greater criticism than other community-based leadership structures. Action led by the 'institution' appeared to be driven by officialdom and distant bureaucrats with little connection to the community. Local successes were often attributed to community organisations and well-known councillors, while hardly any were attributed directly to the intervention of the 'council'. This appeared to be due to the lack of visible leadership at an officer level presenting the 'human face' of council-instigated local action. Ultimately, communities want to be led by people they can know and trust and not by faceless officials. According to the 2005 Citizenship Survey, trust in institutions was higher for the police and the courts than for Parliament and local councils, which were trusted by less than two-fifths of people (DCLG, 2006c).

Although BME women from Wolverhampton were somewhat more positive than BME women from Birmingham, the issues raised about council structures were similar across the research sample. Community interests, for example, were often considered to be lower down the list of priorities after targets, internal bureaucracy and organisational interests resulting in a lack of trust and confidence. The Audit Commission (2007a) recently said of Birmingham Council that 'the community leadership offered by the Council is weak', although its assessment of Wolverhampton Council (Audit Commission, 2007b) was more positive stating 'there is good community leadership. The ambitions are based on a good understanding of local needs with detailed data analysis at a local level and good community engagement'.

### The people factors – the qualities, traits and behaviours

It's something about the human condition. Having bad leadership is worse than having no leadership but there is something about having people who live by a moral code, who work for the good of the community and who can bring about that cohesion. Give people a focal point if you like. (VCO member [7])

The qualities, traits and behaviours required of any good community leadership, whether they be councillors, council officials or community members, fell into three main categories: character, community connectedness and competences.

#### Character

Integrity, honesty, trustworthy, reliability, empathy, sincerity, committed, respectful, values people, approachable, transparent, fairness ...

Integrity, trust and honesty – these are human qualities; so therefore, if you want to have a leader, I think you have to *look at the person first*. The integrity of the person, the honesty of the person, exactly where did that person come from? I'm not saying his family details, but in other words where does he stand? If he wants to become a leader, what does he have? Or what can he present to lead? (VCO member [8])

Character and behaviour were found to be among the primary factors impacting how leadership is viewed and the degree to which it has community buy-in. We found that integrity, honesty and trustworthiness were among the key traits that participants most valued in those in leadership positions. They emphasised them over and above factors such as personal charisma and positional authority, which supports the findings of the 'public attitudes survey' (Ipsos MORI, 2006). Community leaders were expected both to adhere to high standards of personal conduct and to display positive attitudes and behaviours towards citizens and communities and their needs. On this theme, Sir Michael Lyons (2007) emphasised that it was the 'spirit' within which leadership is affected and the 'attitudes' of those leading that was far more important than the structures of leadership.

We found that conduct by those in front-line leadership most likely to cause concern was linked to appearances of questionable ethics, hidden personal agendas and

duplicity. In fact the motives and the 'genuineness' of individuals, particularly those who had been elected, was a recurring theme impacting the degree to which local leadership was trusted. On this point, a ward advisory board member voiced strong concern that 'councillors prostitute themselves to get elected, they'll promise anything, to anyone, anywhere in order to get elected'.

### **Connectedness**

Responsive, representative, accountable, not in pursuit of own agenda, committed, has community knowledge and understanding, has a heart for the community ...

It was important to participants that those leading their communities not only had local knowledge but also were connected to those communities – whether physically, emotionally or even spiritually. This school governor believed it was vital that community leaders have strong local connections and 'know what it's like to live in this ward, what sorts of people live here and what the problems are' rather than 'people miles away deciding what happens here'.

It was expected that the men and women appointed or elected to lead actually cared about what happened, and not solely because it was their job to do so. The prevailing view was that leaders within governance structures should be accountable advocates and champions for the community that they were supposedly leading. Leaders of communities were also expected to have their fingers on the pulse. Being connected was of paramount importance for building credibility, rallying support and encouraging and supporting others to become active participants. In the experience of this council officer, a vastly different response is received when communities are able to connect and identify with those leading local action:

Communities need to know that their contribution has been valued. That is because a lot of the council people do not live in the area, do not have any connections. They come in for their meetings ... and then they leave at the end of the day, they don't even live in Birmingham. The vast majority of the council top people and managers do not live anywhere near Birmingham. There was a big difference when I worked in Regeneration and that was a consortium not headed by the council but the council was a part of it. There was a big difference in the response that I got because I was local and people knew me and there was far more tendency for people to attend things that I organised. So I think

the collectiveness, the connection to the community, information on how things are arranged, the timing, practical things all matter. (Council officer)

### Competence

Leadership skills, visionary, listening skills, communication skills, negotiation skills, people skills, able to enthuse people, deal with pressure, conflict resolution ...

The need for relevant technical competences was of course clearly evident. The skills deemed most important, however, were softer 'people and communication skills', particularly the art of listening. Individuals and communities want to be heard and expect those in leadership positions to take the time to really listen. Strengths in people and communication skills were also considered vital for resolving conflict, bringing unity, inspiring, enthusing and motivating others, bringing together disparate groups and achieving consensus.

### The structural factors – partnerships, community and people

In this section we have drawn out some of the key messages that emerged about the components that contribute to successful local governance.

#### Partnership-driven

In line with current strategies, participants placed value on strong and appropriate partnerships. They recognised that the diverse and conflicting needs of communities could be met only through structures that encompassed all those with a stake in the well-being of communities, such as local government and other statutory bodies, community and faith organisations, BME groups, local activists/community champions, councillors and MPs. The contribution of each, while different, was seen to be equally valid and important.

While the centrality of partnership structures is embedded within the governance arrangements of both Birmingham and Wolverhampton, partnership working was viewed as being full of complexities. Participants claimed that the effectiveness of local partnerships was often hindered because of friction caused by conflicting agendas and accountabilities, poorly articulated vision, differing values and principles, and poor communication between partners:

I think the partnership is disjointed – it's all about me and power and control. It's not about working together. You can read a lot of things and there seems to be a lot of rhetoric but to put it into practice is totally different. (VCO director)

In particular, partnership structures were often regarded as being 'top-down' and authoritarian in the way they were constructed and operated. Councils are normally the key partners in local structures because of their specific responsibilities and the powers vested in them by Government in relation to community development and civic leadership. However, they were often perceived to dominate local structures because of their comparative size and strength, and greater accessibility to power and resource. Other groups, particularly those representing communities, felt relegated to the position of the 'poor relative' in the current partnership and leadership hierarchies.

Sir Michael Lyons (2007) also highlighted this, saying 'too often key partners find local government tending to confuse leadership with dominance, where partners feel that their views are not sufficiently valued'. On a similar point, the Audit Commission (2007a) said of Birmingham Council that 'too many key partners feel that the Council is insufficiently committed to working with others to make truly effective partnership working possible', revealing a need for more work to be done in some areas.

### **Community-focused**

Participants advocated for local governance structures that were inherently more outward looking, community focused and had the interests of the community at their centre. These interests were often seen to be in conflict with organisational priorities and political and personal agendas, particularly of those in 'council' leadership positions.

A majority of participants believed there was evidence of leadership emerging from community and/or faith organisations and supported their greater involvement within local partnership structures. Over a third of participants also supported

the 'selection' of local people to take an active part in local leadership structures. Variations on this theme included support for 'community champions' or people who were clearly active and integral in local community dynamics and 'committed to community service'. Participants frequently described known individuals operating within their communities who were not only connected to the community but also influential in highlighting issues and spearheading local action. Such individuals were often respected for the work and time that they had invested in the community, over and beyond the call of duty. The need for caution concerned the lack of clarity surrounding such roles, the strength of the mandate to lead and issues of accountability. The activities and motives of such individuals would clearly need to be examined to ascertain whether they truly reflected the wishes of the wider community:

It's important to have champions that get the support providing they represent whom they say they are representing. Sometimes that can be a hindrance in that people put themselves forward as being champions or representatives of the community and no one signed up to them being the representative. (Council officer)

The Local Government Association (2005) recommended that 'local people should be involved in the design of local arrangements, without any external constraints being applied by central government or the local council'. Although various measures, such as the compact arrangements in Birmingham with the voluntary, community and faith sectors, have been established to ensure that local views are reflected in decision-making, participant response indicated some dissatisfaction with the consultation processes in place. A representative from the Children's Services believed that the council had a tendency to 'impose its own structures' and that the biggest stumbling block 'is not talking to the communities about the structures which actually suit them'.

### **People-centric**

Participants often described a form of leadership where the empowerment and enablement of individuals and communities were key attributes. Stephen Covey (2004, p. 98) defines leadership as 'communicating people's worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves'. The business world, which is leading much of the thinking on leadership models, is increasingly advocating this people-centred approach. Leadership in this sense is more than a management function or a way of discharging authority (although inherent within the role) but emphasises an attitude that essentially values and prioritises people. Ultimately, the research

emphasised the need for leadership to 'really listen' and to demonstrate that they have taken on board what the community has to say:

I think the skill of the leader is possibly to also lead from behind and not to be arrogant with it but to be humble and to realise that it's about opening opportunities for others. I might be a leader for only a year but create the opportunity for someone else to step in. It's about the community. That's right! And that's what I'd like to aspire to rather than be led by someone where it's more about them and promoting the skills they've got rather than committing to the community themselves. (VCO director)

### Summary

- Community leadership is seen as being vital to the well-being and development of communities. A crucial distinction exists, however, between what is perceived to be leadership by an institutional structure and leadership by recognised, visible and known individuals.
- Participants advocated structures that were inherently more community-focused, placed value on people and were partnership-driven. The effectiveness of local partnerships was often hindered by friction caused by hierarchical structures and inequalities in power between partners.
- Structures in themselves are ineffective if the leaders appointed or elected are ill-equipped for the role. The qualities and behaviours consistently highlighted were character traits (such as integrity, honesty and trustworthiness), community connectedness and key competences.

## 6 Conclusions and implications

Increasing governance participation is among the priorities of Government for the creation of communities that are empowered, inclusive and actively involved within local democracy. Although communities have a role to play in their own well-being, the impetus for championing governance rests largely with those in power. Both national and local government clearly have a responsibility to understand the motivations and the challenges faced by its citizens, so they can make informed policy decisions and demonstrate responsive leadership. Failure to do this not only causes dissonance between the elected and the electorate but also leads to communities that are disenchanted and ultimately dissatisfied with those in power.

On balance, the culture of citizen participation appeared to be ill-aligned with the ambitions for local governance advocated by public bodies and consisted of a minefield of mixed messages, miscommunication and mistrust between citizens and Government. Although participants were positive about the importance of engagement, gaps were consistently highlighted between what is stated in 'corporate plans' and community perceptions and reality on the ground. Changing such a culture, like any regime change, needs to be addressed at all levels – at a philosophical, policy and practical level.

In this chapter, we have summarised the key messages and implications emerging from this research.

### 1. Changing the culture of governance

A message that emerged loud and clear was the need to build trust and confidence in both local governance structures and those charged with leading and managing. There is little dispute that local government has a legitimate role within community leadership or that councillors have an essential part to play within democratic processes. However, ongoing investment is required in the leadership of communities so the potential of community-based governance can be fully realised. In this section, we have highlighted three key areas.

#### **Increasing trust – character, behaviour and accountability**

A healthy ethical culture is more likely to produce individual and organisational behaviours that increase public trust in the organisation.

This in turn makes it more likely that the public will engage with the organisation and utilise its services. Excellent service delivery will then itself increase public trust in the organisation, so creating a virtuous relationship. (Sir Alastair Graham, Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2006)

Leaders with responsibility for directing, shaping and changing the course of a community cannot be defined only by their skills and competences (although important) but also by the character and behaviours they display.

Participants had high expectations of individuals who had been elected or appointed to serve in leadership positions in terms of ethical standards, accountability and character and conduct. We found that qualities such as integrity, trustworthiness and honesty were particularly valued and felt to be essential for gaining and maintaining public support. Sir Michael Lyons (2007) highlighted this in his definition of effective place-shaping leadership, while Sir Alastair Graham (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2006) emphasised the link between a strong ethical culture and public trust. Other studies advocate a need to address the 'vacuum of trust in politicians' to increase engagement (NLGN, 2005).

Addressing such issues, the Committee on Standards in Public Life is charged with informing policy development and promoting propriety within public life. Locally ethical codes of conduct are embedded within governance frameworks, while overview and scrutiny committees are responsible for ensuring transparency and accountability within local government decision-making structures. Recent recommendations seek among other things to improve councillor accountability and responsiveness. The 'Community Call for Action' is proposed to increase the ability of citizens to demand a response to questions through elected members (DCLG, 2006b). Birmingham Council is in the early stages of implementing a programme designed to introduce a new behaviour culture known as the 'BEST' values (belief, excellence, success and trust).

It is important that those charged with developing and implementing local governance strategies promote a culture that has clearly embedded within it the need for exemplary character and behaviour, highest ethical standards and strong public accountability. This is among the fundamental challenges that local government, or indeed any organisation with a stake in the leadership of a community, must take seriously if they want citizens to take hold of and be a part of the governance of their communities.

### Empowering leaders to lead

Strong, effective, visible and connected front-line leadership is required to raise the profile of local governance. Such leaders are in a position to enthuse, encourage and empower citizens to take part in their communities through both formal and informal structures. This requires leaders such as councillors, chairs of boards and appointed officials that are empowered, trained and equipped for the task.

Successful leaders within community governance structures require diverse skills such as casting vision, conflict resolution and the ability to operate at both grass-roots and strategic levels. There is also a need for leadership to have the capacity and scope to deal with complex issues associated with community cohesion and the skill to interface with diverse communities with cultural sensitivity and knowledge. Gaps in these contribute to poor community relations. In the view of the Audit Commission (2007a), in Birmingham 'collectively, political and managerial leadership has been ineffective in delivering a corporate approach to equality and diversity. In particular its approach to community cohesion has been slow and has not adequately engaged with communities and other key stakeholders'.

Leaders can also become isolated and lack the back-up support structures that will enable them to meet the challenges involved in working with communities and delivering on commitments and promises. In the context of councillors, research has found that, because of onerous council responsibilities, they sometimes felt frustrated and disempowered in their ability to carry out their representative roles effectively (Gardiner, 2006).

Some notable progression is taking place, however. In the West Midlands, a charter has been developed to ensure local authorities deliver quality leadership and services to the public, through supporting and training councillors. Wolverhampton Council has recently achieved the Full Charter Award from the West Midlands Local Government Association. Both Birmingham and Wolverhampton City Councils are working with the Improvement and Development Agency to increase leadership capacity of cabinet members and councillors. The approach to staff deployment is being revised by Birmingham Council, enabling staff to be matched to where their skills, knowledge, experience and aptitude can be most useful, thereby potentially facilitating the positioning of the most appropriate officers in community-leading roles (Birmingham City Council, 2006).

Providing appropriate support to those in front-line and community-facing leadership roles is critical so they have the capacity and resource to lead effectively. This includes ongoing training and development so that leaders are able to be more responsive and versatile in the context of community governance.

### **Valuing partnership**

Community leadership is most effective when delivered through a partnership model involving individuals with complementary skills, abilities and personal qualities. Strong partnership working is emphasised by the Birmingham Strategic Partnership, which has adopted formal governance frameworks, including protocols for resolving conflicts with partners and best practice on partnership working. Wolverhampton Council indicates that it seeks to ‘lead, support and inspire effective partnership working ... and ensure they have the capacity to respond positively to what is required of them’.

The research revealed, however, that local partnerships were often marred by conflicting agendas and underlying battles for power and control. Without consensus, trust and equal commitment to a shared vision and aims, partnerships designed to regenerate local governance will be less effective in achieving this objective.

To develop stronger partnership structures and ensure that buy-in is achieved from all members, more emphasis must be given to the establishment of the foundations. This includes defining the partnership culture, agreeing the principles and values, clearly articulating the vision of the team and appointing representatives with a suitable fit.

## **2. Building inclusive governance**

### **Counteracting discriminatory practices and promoting equality**

This research revealed that BME women face discrimination and prejudices limiting both access and progression, while other studies have highlighted their disproportionate representation within governance roles (WEU, 2006a). Intervention continues to be needed to radically address such issues so that active participants are able to engage effectively and that others are not deprived from the opportunity to do so.

Legislation is important for providing the mechanisms for challenging discrimination and establishing good practice. Indeed, in 2002, in response to the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, Wolverhampton City Council approved a generic Equality Scheme covering not only race but also disability and gender equality issues (Wolverhampton City Council, 2005b). Most recently, the Gender Equality Duty, which requires public authorities to promote equality of opportunity between women and men and eliminate unlawful sex discrimination and harassment, came into force in April 2007.

Research indicates, however, that the tendency for strategies to take a broad-brush approach to BME groups conceals the degree to which different communities experience specific types of disadvantage and discrimination. Consequently, policies often fail to target BME women in a meaningful way (EOC, 2007). Reinforcing this point, at a recent WEU event, Muslim women stressed the importance of specifically targeting Muslim women when seeking the views of Muslim communities, as their voices are rarely heard (WEU, 2006b). The EOC recommends that policy-makers and employers join up strategies on race, faith and gender to inform and counteract discrimination.

While leaders within governance structures have a responsibility to be aware of their duties under anti-discrimination legislation, they must also clearly communicate and demonstrate their commitment to promoting equality and challenging discrimination at all levels. This must be underpinned by a better understanding at a local level of the issues faced by different groups, implementation of real practical measures to counteract these and effective structures to support those who have been victimised.

### **Promoting diversity with unity**

We found that, while diversity within governance structures was welcomed, in reality the concept of communities engaging and working together was seen to be challenging because of a lack of trust between groups, parochialism, preconceptions and community stereotypes.

Diversity programmes can certainly provide information about different cultures and raise awareness, but reducing prejudices based on upbringing and deep-rooted attitudes and mindsets cannot be achieved simply by attending a one-off course. There is a need to change hearts as well as inform minds! The EOC advocates for the development of 'cultural intelligence' so that people in workplaces have the awareness, understanding, confidence and competence to communicate and relate positively to people from different cultural backgrounds.

A change of heart is more likely to be achieved through relationship building and increased opportunities for people from different cultures and faith communities to work and proactively learn together. Emphasising this point the CIC (2007) said: 'fundamentally, most negative perceptions of people from different backgrounds are based on ignorance and fear and the best way to counteract them is for different communities to get to know and respect each other in the neighbourhood, school and workplace'. For example, to improve community relations following the Lozells and Handsworth disturbances, Birmingham Council facilitated the 'Breaking Bread' scheme, which brought together young people from the Asian and black communities in the area to work for community cohesion.

Essentially, promoting a governance culture that is truly inclusive is based on co-operation between all community stakeholders and understanding and acceptance of different communities and individuals, whatever their identity. To achieve this, there is a need for local government and leaders within governance structures to re-evaluate the values and principles of 'equality and inclusiveness' that underpin governance and to examine how effectively they have been embodied throughout local structures.

### **Encouraging engagement by BME women**

In addition to the above broader issues, practical measures are needed to support and encourage participation by BME women. (Although the research did not specifically explore gender discrimination that might have been experienced by white women, it found little anecdotal evidence when questioning them more broadly about the barriers to engagement. This is not to say that white women are in as strong a position as white men, only that it was not a matter sufficiently covered to make reliable comparisons.)

As more BME women access governance positions, the more likely it is that discriminatory practices and prejudices will be challenged. This is clearly, however, a 'chicken and egg' scenario, which calls for intervention that will help BME women gain access to governance roles in the first place. However, placing inexperienced people in governance roles, employing a tokenistic approach or even pursuing a positive discrimination agenda is not the answer, as these reinforce negative stereotypes rather than counteracting them.

### *Access to governance roles*

Improving access requires getting the message out there in workplaces, community centres and religious venues, and promoting real opportunities so more women can learn about how they can be involved. There is some evidence that programmes designed to provide opportunities for BME women to shadow other women who are already involved are effective tools for raising awareness and equipping those interested in learning about governance. In the West Midlands, the Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS) programme, for example, seeks to enable women to find ways of generating greater community involvement by gaining access to decision-makers.

More tailored opportunities are required for building leadership capacity, shadowing and mentoring women who are hesitant but keen to get involved.

### *Celebrating success*

The lack of visibility of positive role models perpetuates the notion that few BME women have the desire, skill or capacity to engage in the governance of their communities.

Profiling more BME women who are active and making a difference in their communities is a positive way of changing negative perceptions and stereotypes. Learning about women who have succeeded in breaking through the barriers or who are successfully pursuing their goals would encourage, empower and pave the way for others.

Events involving active women targeting others from similar backgrounds would provide the opportunity to openly and honestly explore the benefits, successes and objectives of community governance as well as the challenges of engagement. Ignoring the barriers that exist would undermine rather than encourage participation. Such forums, highlighting the successes of both BME men and women and the benefits to the community resulting from their participation, could also be opened to the wider community.

### *Capacity building and training support*

On a personal level, some participants felt that further skills and knowledge development might be useful in helping them to progress within governance structures or be more effective in their current roles. Training needs that were particularly highlighted were confidence building and assertiveness training, IT skills, public speaking, and training in local democracy and local government structures.

Well placed training is particularly needed to equip and enable more women to progress into higher-level governance roles, such as leadership training and training in board-level engagement covering matters such as accountabilities and legal responsibilities. As a result of the perceived existence of 'glass ceilings', the number of women that are put forward for such training clearly needs to be monitored as well as access to subsequent opportunities.

### **Working with faith groups**

As a result of their specific connections and roles within communities, it is important that more faith groups take the opportunity to have a voice within local and national governance structures. In order to achieve this we have highlighted two key messages.

#### *Open and honest dialogue*

Although changes are afoot, it should not be assumed that all faith groups are seeking opportunities to engage or have the capacity to engage. Challenges arise from conflicting ideologies, differences in values and principles, and perceptions about religious practices. Various studies suggest, for example, that attitudes persist, making it difficult for religious organisations to obtain public funding, particularly when the group had as one of its objectives 'the promotion of religion' (Furbey *et al.*, 2006). The CIC (2007) recently highlighted that 'secularists may be particularly prejudiced against faith representatives in public life and this needs to be faced through open dialogue'. It also suggested that 'a broader debate may be required about the nature of faith, not just religion – in particular the motivational nature of faith, said to be largely unexplored by government and other agencies. There is a perceived need to train local government officers on how faith relates to the equality and diversity agenda.'

To achieve greater unity of purpose, ongoing open and honest dialogue is clearly essential to explore the motivations of faith groups and how they might operate from their value base of compassion/volunteer spirit without compromising the faith commitment that inspires the values. Reassurances are also important to reinforce the message that autonomy is not at risk through engagement. Rather, involvement by faith groups in partnership structures brings an added and valuable dimension.

While structures, such as the Faith Forum in Birmingham and the Community Cohesion Forum in Wolverhampton, exist to facilitate dialogue, it is inevitable that trust and mutual understanding will be built over time and will require periodic assessment and reflection.

### *Building capacity*

Faith organisations generate significant social capital and have a tremendous amount of influence through their ability to galvanise support and mobilise communities. There is great potential for faith groups to contribute even more to the development of community cohesion, participate in local partnerships, deliver local services and tackle civil unrest.

To harness, strengthen and increase the confidence of faith groups in their ability to engage effectively, appropriate support, capacity building and resource allocation are needed. Existing examples of this include the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund, which has been set up to support capacity building and interfaith programmes.

## **3. Strengthening engagement**

Policies to engage communities are intended to empower citizens to inform service delivery and influence change. However, one of the main challenges facing local government is convincing communities that citizen governance (in all its forms) is not only a good thing but can also really make a difference. Changing expectations cannot be achieved, however, simply by stating intentions but must be demonstrated by making real commitments followed through by action.

### **Becoming a listening, can-do culture!**

We discovered that many participants were disillusioned and cynical about the process of engagement, which was seen to be characterised by excessive bureaucracy, poor response to community concerns and complicated structures controlled by those who shout the loudest or have the most power. These issues were highlighted across all wards and ethnic communities.

Fundamental to creating a 'can-do' culture is improving dialogue between citizens and local leadership, and encouraging ownership by communities. Such a culture values a more honest approach that prioritises responsive communication even when a positive outcome is not immediately possible.

Important aspects of building confidence are listening to the needs of communities, finding out what really matters to them, keeping communities informed of the outcome of consultation and responding promptly.

For example, a special panel of older people said they were particularly worried about safety on buses, which resulted in an investment of £750,000 by Birmingham Council and West Midlands Police. Indeed, many participants in this research felt they were making a positive difference in their communities. A housing executive committee member felt, however, that 'people don't realise that local people are involved in making decisions and can make a difference if they bother to turn up to meetings'.

Success stories of partnership working and community intervention need to be profiled and applauded so citizens know what difference their participation has made and can make in the future.

### **Increasing confidence**

The research revealed that communities and individuals often lack the confidence to engage because of fear of public speaking, feeling intimidated by others with more skill and knowledge, lack of understanding of how governance structures work and preconceptions about what might be involved.

Thorough consultation is needed to learn how people from different communities might want to be involved, what format meetings should take and to ascertain any training and support needs.

### *Meeting design*

On some occasions, it was felt the council's usual modus operandi was deployed in the way meetings were conducted and this was felt to be inappropriate for targeting communities.

Ongoing effective and responsive communication is needed to ensure that meetings and governance opportunities are conducted appropriately and sensitively.

One size does not fit all and different styles might be more effective in some communities than in others. How meetings are chaired can also go a long way in preventing individuals or communities feeling excluded, as can better understanding of the communities being targeted and the dynamics that exist within them.

### *Governance workshops*

We found not only those on the outside but also many on the inside were confused by the labyrinth of structures and partnerships.

There is a need to improve understanding of local democracy, its structures and the changing relationship between local and national government.

This might be achieved through the provision of neighbourhood-based workshops and open days for communities to learn about the structures of local governance, the opportunities that exist for engagement, such as people's panels, neighbourhood forums, housing committees and health forums, etc., and the level of commitment, skill and personal qualities required. To ensure successful turnout, the location, hosting, timing and of course publicity will need to be carefully considered. This might be a joint venture between two or more public bodies, or led by the LSP.

### Issue-led approach

It is unrealistic to expect all citizens to be motivated equally by all issues arising within their neighbourhoods. On the contrary, individuals tend to respond more positively to those issues that are important specifically to them, such as the Birmingham Reducing Gang Violence partnership.

Governance strategies are clearly more likely to be effective if local concerns are approached in a more targeted manner. It is important, therefore, that issue-based forums and partnerships that exist, first of all, raise awareness of their existence and, second, communicate their message more effectively.

With the lack of time being seen as a limiting factor, an issue-led approach also gives citizens the opportunity to act and be involved in a focused way, rather than participating in meetings that are designed to cover multiple issues and consequently span hours.

### Making it simple

#### *Awareness*

If people don't know they can't get involved. Participants highlighted that the lack of relevant and timely information about the location, timing and subject matter of meetings limits engagement. Filling the information gap is a comparatively simple challenge.

More thoughtful communication and publicity that is advertised within an appropriate time-frame in places that are relevant for the target audience is needed.

Birmingham Council indicated that it is working towards this through targeted meetings, summary versions of local plans, articles in the *Forward* newspaper that is delivered to all households and making full use of websites.

### *Practical barriers*

Those responsible for engaging with communities must ensure that the needs of communities have been taken into account as far as possible through more sensitive and informed planning, e.g. venue location, timing of meetings, transportation requirements, childcare and language needs.

Although in some instances, such as the 'Talking Tent' event facilitated by Birmingham Council that enabled young Muslim women to contribute through provision of women-only areas, this is clearly happening, consistency is required.

Some practical measures, such as the avoidance of jargon and the use of plain English, have been repeatedly advocated and need to be used more consistently in written material, as well as in the way meetings are conducted and chaired. While key council documents within both Birmingham and Wolverhampton have been accredited as plain English, there might be a need to hone the communication skills of those leading meetings that are intended for public participation.

## **4. Harnessing motivations**

The desire and propensity of citizens to play an active part within the governance of their communities is determined by a combination of factors, such as personal motivations, current circumstances, environment and networks, past experiences, upbringing, culture, faith, education and time.

### **Those that want to**

While citizen apathy is a recurring theme in all studies exploring the disconnectedness of citizens with local democratic structures, we contend that there are more citizens with a reason and a desire to engage living and working in communities. Dormant activists, potential volunteers, people who want to make a difference, philanthropists, people with a passion for a cause – such individuals exist in the fabric of society, in all communities and in all types of neighbourhoods.

Some will actively pursue engagement despite the obstacles or lack of know-how, but others are more likely to be looking for the right opportunity or for something that strikes a chord. These individuals may well eventually take the plunge of their

own accord, but it is important that those responsible for engaging communities continue to raise awareness, ascertain local issues and highlight them appropriately so that those who want to participate can! While there was more commonality than differences between the views of participants from different communities and neighbourhoods, the ability of some citizens to engage is impacted by race, gender, class and other socio-economic factors.

To ensure that all citizens have an equal opportunity to participate in shaping the communities in which they live and work, local government and its partners must continue to examine and challenge the specific barriers that prevent citizens and communities from different localities taking up the opportunities to engage.

## **5. Redefining governance**

It was clear from the outset, as research parameters were being defined, that understanding of governance meant different things to different people. To those outside formal governance structures or on their periphery, volunteering and participation through community and faith organisations was seen as a form of governance that was an equally valid and effective way to contribute to their communities (Demos, 2006). Some maintained that influence at a local level was as equally possible through these structures as participation in formal governance mechanisms and intended to pursue future involvement through these. Indeed, some saw participation in formal governance structures as distancing themselves from their community routes and loyalties.

### **Broader definition**

While it is necessary to improve understanding of different governance roles in terms of the different responsibilities and accountabilities that they carry, it is important to avoid creating a tiered system of citizen engagement. Such systems seem to promote certain types of involvement, endorsing the contribution of one group of citizens while effectively minimising the contribution of another and advocating progression from a 'lower' form of governance to a 'higher' one. This may well be a challenge for policy-makers and local government whose focus is on the development and promotion of the formal routes to engagement.

We contend that a broader and more inclusive definition of governance that encompasses civic engagement in all its forms is pursued and that all types of active citizenship are encouraged, rather than signposting only limited structures.

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# Appendix: Ward profiles

**Table A.1 Birmingham ward sample**

Ward profile	
<i>Affluent wards</i>	
Edgbaston	Edgbaston ward is situated to the south west of Birmingham city centre. It has an age profile broadly within the city average, although distorted by large numbers of students. The percentage of minority ethnic residents is slightly above the city average, the largest group being those from an Indian background (9.4 per cent). Unemployment is below the city average at 8.08 per cent.
Hall Green	Hall Green ward is situated to the south of Birmingham. It has an age profile slightly older than the city average. Twenty-three per cent of residents are from minority ethnic backgrounds, which is less than the city average of nearly 30 per cent. Unemployment rate of 5.29 per cent is below the city average of 9.46 per cent.
Sutton Four Oaks	Sutton Four Oaks ward is situated to the north of the city. It has an older age profile than the city average. The percentage of minority ethnic residents is significantly below the city average at 4.85 per cent, one of the smallest BME populations in Birmingham. It is one of the most affluent wards, with only 3.10 per cent of the ward population unemployed, which is among the lowest in Birmingham
<i>Disadvantaged wards</i>	
Shard End	Shard End ward is situated in the east of the city. It has a slightly older age profile than the city average. Ninety-two per cent of the population are from white backgrounds, which is much higher than the city average of 70.35 per cent. Unemployment is only slightly above the city average (9.46 per cent) and stands at 10.47 per cent.
Lozells and East Handsworth	This ward is situated in the west of the city. It has an age profile younger than the city average. More than 80 per cent of the population are from minority ethnic backgrounds, consisting of sizeable Pakistani, Indian and black communities. This is significantly above the city average. The rate of unemployment of 20.30 per cent is well above the city average.
Sparkbrook	This ward is situated to the south of the city centre. It has a younger age profile than the city average. Nearly 80 per cent of the population are from BME groups compared with a city average of 30 per cent. Sixty-four per cent are from Asian backgrounds – mainly Pakistani/Muslim. Unemployment at 20.48 per cent is significantly above the city average and is the second highest in Birmingham.

Obtained from Birmingham City Council website: [www.birminghameconomy.org.uk/wards.htm](http://www.birminghameconomy.org.uk/wards.htm) (accessed February 2007).

Main source data: Census 2001.

