

The value added by community involvement in governance

Wider community engagement in governance is frequently argued, across the political parties, to be vital to improving public services and tackling the 'democratic deficit'. Future Perspectives Co-operative Ltd has looked at participant experience of value added by community involvement in governance through Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). The benefits, costs and difficulties identified hold lessons for community engagement in other governance structures, particularly those also including professionals and multi-agency groups.

- Outcomes identified as most valuable were increased influence for communities and improved information for service providers; allowing 'how can we?' to replace 'why don't they?' *"We've got somewhere we might not without the LSP, because there wouldn't have been those kinds of conversations."* Community representative
- Holistic experience of service provision at the level of the community explicitly 'joins up' thinking across services. *"I hear what people say, so I take that to the meeting."* Senior-citizens' representative
- Community involvement in decision making can strengthen the hand of service providers petitioning government for more, or more flexible use of, resources. *"Community engagement can provide essential 'on the ground' evidence of real needs that funders cannot ignore."* Expert at seminar
- Community representatives contribute significant amounts of unpaid work which often has personal economic and social costs. *"My involvement with the LSP has probably been detrimental to my business."* Businessperson
- Professionals increasingly need to work accessibly, developing processes and language suitable for potential participants. *"[Community members] came out of the meeting and said 'What the hell's all that about?'"* Community activist
- Successful community engagement requires adequate resources in terms of funding, training and staff time. *"It was clear our commitment needed to be tangible, we needed a partnership department."* Senior police officer
- Bringing conflict to the surface and resolving it are vital to building effective partnerships between communities and service providers. *"Saying we believe in LSPs that's motherhood and apple pie. It's actually a messy process, very painful."* Community Empowerment Network officer
- Effective community activists are frequently considered unrepresentative by reason of their effectiveness, labelled 'usual suspects'. Others are deterred from stepping forward by what seem over-burdensome, open-ended commitments. *"It's deeply flawed in lots of ways, but we need to use it, occupy the rhetoric, hold it to account and make it really work."* Community activist



Background

This project deals with the experience of a range of participants in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in England, the value they place on the process of community involvement in partnership working, the costs of that engagement and the barriers encountered.

How effective did participants find the process?

Most participants felt that community engagement in governance was a valuable and useful process. This included a number of people who had negative or personally costly experiences, including ones of conflict and intimidation. The single most valuable outcome was identified as the creation of formal and informal social connections between service providers and the communities they serve, widening 'policy networks'. These can both provide increased influence to communities and improved information to service providers.

The creation of effective relationships between community representatives and service providers enabled the identification of gaps in provision and the creation of solutions based on thinking through 'how can we?' rather than 'why don't you?' and 'it's not our fault'. The experience community members have of services as a whole provided a perspective that explicitly 'joined up' thinking across services. Community representatives felt they 'put a face' to concerns about poverty, access or inclusion that would lead partners to ask these questions of themselves in other circumstances, described as 'dropping pebbles in the pond'.

Members of the police service were frequently singled out for their commitment and success in engaging with communities. What was particularly notable was that the police explicitly approached the community as 'citizens' rather than 'service users', 'patients' or 'customers'. Senior police officers acknowledged that their engagement had been led by government policy but argued that the benefits of increased legitimacy and public confidence were becoming self-evident at neighbourhood level.

"The police, who I wouldn't have picked out as immediate [voluntary and community sector] allies and partners, are doing tremendous work." (Local area representative)

The achievements of partnerships were often valued differently by community representatives than by those working in the statutory sector. Community representatives valued "little changes that really affect people's lives" over large-scale transformations, which they sometimes found threatening. Many professionals and elected representatives tended to be more focused

on the achievement of flagship projects; community involvement in decision-making was sometimes seen pragmatically as strengthening the hand of service providers when petitioning government for more or more flexible use of resources.

Barriers to effective participation

But these achievements are not without their costs. Community engagement can only realise its potential added value if structures and support are adequately resourced in terms of funding, training and staff time, either by central government or by other partners. Community representatives are currently contributing significant amounts of unpaid work; this often has personal economic and social costs. In particular, the responsibility for communicating between partnerships (and often service providers) and communities was frequently assumed to fall to community representatives rather than remaining with the partnership as a whole.

"People phone up – Come to a meeting tomorrow, and give us an update on the LSP – I have to say – hang on a minute. I can't fit everybody in." (Local tenants' representative)

Community members were frequently unfamiliar with and intimidated by the formal language and structures of governance roles. They felt that by stepping forward to find out about these things they were in danger of being swept into commitments they felt unready to shoulder. This implies that in order for governance structures to become more widely accessible, not only do communities need to learn how to access them, professionals also need to learn to work in a more accessible way. This means developing processes and language suitable for the full range of potential participants. This will take time, as structures of engagement need to 'bed in' developing relationships, trust and learning. Where community representatives do not get feedback about how their previous contribution has been valued and used, they may be discouraged from future engagement.

"If they just all spoke proper language then people would understand it." (Community activist)

How representative is participation?

The accusation of being 'unrepresentative' was frequently used to undermine those community representatives expressing views that were unwelcomed by service providers. This has been described as the 'Catch 22 of participation', where non-professional opinion is dismissed as 'uninformed' or, when clearly informed, portrayed as the concoction of undemocratic 'usual suspects' promoting their particular hobby horses.

The words 'democratic' and 'representative' can cover a wide variety of meanings and concepts. The researchers

found no reason why different forms of democracy and representation should not co-exist within the same organisation; there is as much validity in a representative looking out for a particular interest as in one being similar to those represented or another being elected or held accountable in some other way. Equally, forms of representative and participative democracy can co-exist without the necessity for them to be in conflict. Generally disputes about the 'representativeness' or otherwise of particular groups masked other underlying disputes that participants were finding it difficult to bring to the surface.

“Sometimes we get bogged down in what the meeting can or can't do. Perhaps at that point we've lost sight of trying to make this a better place to live and work in.” (Statutory sector officer)

Some partnerships had clearly gone through acrimonious disputes, leaving individuals feeling deeply damaged and compromised in their own communities. Where contentious issues were suppressed in an attempt to manage conflict, communities did not feel heard and accused the partnership of tokenism. Professionals were sometimes reluctant to raise potentially contentious issues in a forum including community representatives until a decision had been made as, “you don't want to have public debates about that because actually you might never do it”, as one council officer put it.

Professionals equally sometimes felt that community representatives would not be interested in issues that were of importance to their own organisations, like staff recruitment and training. This caused some frustration and resentment among representatives who saw these as issues with profound impact on how service providers work with the community.

The linking of community engagement to Neighbourhood Renewal Funds seemed a mixed blessing. It was widely acknowledged that, without government prescription, community representatives would not have been invited to the table at all in many places, and having to engage in financial negotiations had bridged some historical or geographical gulfs between and within communities. However, some partnerships had become stuck in their focus on Neighbourhood Renewal and participants felt that opportunities for wider engagement and benefits had been missed. Those already facing significant problems have sometimes found concentration on engaging poor and marginalised groups as adding more pressure, often for what are experienced as trivial reasons. As one participant said:

“If the streets are dirty, do deprived communities really need to go to meetings in cold halls on wet nights for the council find out they need cleaning?” (New Deal for Communities area resident)

Policy implications

The researchers conclude that there are a number of steps that **central government** could take in order to give a clear lead on maximising the value added by community engagement in governance. These include:

- building on 'Together We Can' to give explicit cabinet level commitment to community engagement in governance at all levels;
- appointing a community engagement champion within government;
- leading on the development of training programmes involving statutory body 'professionals' and community activists learning side by side;
- these could explicitly link the IDeA 'Peer challenge' scheme with the 'Active Learning for Active Citizens' programme;
- from this, encourage the development of 'community auditors' with experience of participative working to evaluate community engagement, for local authority Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPAs).

Regional bodies could help co-ordinate the process by:

- exploring how basic skills training (already funded by Learning and Skills Councils) can include more elements of engagement and citizenship skills;
- extending the concept of Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers to build a pool of part-time practitioner-based experts skilled in community participation and conflict resolution to work with all partnerships;
- promote 'visible leadership' at chief executive or corporate head level across their region, working on a community or voluntary 'front line' for a few days each year, following best practice in the private sector.

Local authorities can:

- develop and increase opportunities for peer mentoring, shared staff training, secondment or shadowing between the voluntary and community sector, local government and other statutory agencies, connecting with opportunities currently available through local and regional training providers;
- actively increase accessibility of meetings, both physically and in terms of language, creating a 'jargon buster' for essential technical terms;
- publicise the activities and achievements of LSPs and other partnerships through the local mass media to demystify the processes and make wider contact with communities;
- connect with workplaces, retail outlets, cafés and other places where people naturally gather to provide accessible places for elected members and partnership representatives to answer public queries and make wider contact with communities as well as creating different relationships with businesses, as part of their corporate social responsibility programmes.

Voluntary and community sector (VCS) umbrella groups and networks also have a vital role to play. In relation to those working in community development, this includes:

- ensuring they remain clear about developing capacity within communities by supporting representatives, not by taking on governance roles themselves;
- helping paid staff to see their role is often to make each job unnecessary as community empowerment and capacity increases;
- encouraging training and career development to enable staff to be ready to move on to the next challenge;
- offering staff/volunteers as shadows, secondees etc. to statutory and private sector organisations;
- actively inviting statutory and private sector staff to apply for shadowing, secondment and other joint working opportunities within VCS organisations of all sizes;
- encouraging 'buddying', peer mentoring, and work-based training amongst staff and volunteers.

In addition, they need to play to strengths potential volunteers have at different points in their lives when inviting community involvement in governance. This can be helped by:

- encouraging ordinary members of the community to 'just turn up' to meetings, council discussions etc. without making any longer term commitment, so processes become demystified and more accessible;
- ensuring equal respect for community representatives' time and work;
- ensuring national and local Compact arrangements are understood by all parties and that community representatives attending meetings in a voluntary capacity are paid full out-of-pocket expenses;
- examining diversity of membership and taking steps to identify and reduce barriers or perceived barriers to engagement.

About this project

This research took place between the summers of 2004 and 2005. It included desktop study of 22 partnerships and detailed study of six: three in city council areas; two in rural districts; and one serving a London borough; five covered local authority areas in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal Funds; one spanned more than one local authority area. They were chaired by: two local council leaders, an elected mayor, chief executive of an RSL, head of an HE college and a VCS activist.

The researchers engaged with a wide range of partners including: elected representatives, service providers, representatives of geographical communities and communities of interests as well as some community activists not involved in LSPs. As well as attending meetings and conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews researchers ran three participatory events, including an 'Open Space' involving practitioners and community activists from across England, and two expert seminars organised by IPPR, who also produced an early evaluative framework. Participants from all sectors were enthusiastic and vocal about the value and costs of involvement: "... tomorrow I may not say this – but I think there are much better relationships and much greater understandings about where we're all coming from than we did have", local area representative.

For more information

The full report, **Active governance: The value added by community involvement in governance through local strategic partnerships** by Kath Maguire and Frances Truscott, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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