

Community empowerment in practice

Lessons from Communities First

Dave Adamson and Richard Bromiley

An examination of a community-based programme in Wales that aims to increase opportunities for community empowerment and potential influence over service providers.

Community empowerment in local governance and service delivery has become a key component of government policy in the UK. However, there are critical challenges to achieving this in practice. This study examines the Communities First regeneration programme in Wales, an early attempt by the Welsh Assembly Government to promote engagement by community members and which now provides five years of experience of a policy centred on the achievement of community empowerment.

The research presents findings from nine case studies of Communities First partnerships to provide insights into the achievement of community empowerment. It considers:

- how far partnerships have developed and evolved to empower communities;
- the relationships communities have with other representative channels;
- the extent to which communities have influenced other agendas;
- the overall impact of regeneration partnerships.



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION**



**Available in
other formats**

This publication can be provided in other formats, such as large print, Braille and audio. Please contact:
Communications, Joseph Rowntree Foundation,
The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP.
Tel: 01904 615905. Email: info@jrf.org.uk

Community empowerment in practice

Lessons from Communities First

Dave Adamson and Richard Bromiley



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION**

The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Website: www.jrf.org.uk

© University of Glamorgan, 2008

First published 2008 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

All rights reserved. Reproduction of this report by photocopying or electronic means for non-commercial purposes is permitted. Otherwise, no part of this report may be reproduced, adapted, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

ISBN: 978 1 85935 635 7

A CIP catalogue record for this report is available from the British Library.

Prepared and printed by:
York Publishing Services Ltd
64 Hallfield Road
Layorthorpe
York YO31 7ZQ
Tel: 01904 430033; Fax: 01904 430868; Website: www.yps-publishing.co.uk

Further copies of this report, or any other JRF publication, can be obtained from the JRF website (www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/).

Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Executive summary	vii
1 Introduction	1
2 Communities First: learning from the practice of community empowerment	4
3 The research programme	8
Research aims	8
Research design, methods and analysis	8
Defining power and influence	11
4 The UK policy context	14
Policy trends in England	14
Policy trends in Wales	18
5 Findings	25
Partnerships: structures and processes	25
Representation and democratic relationships	39
Factors in the wider environment	45
Communities First and community empowerment	52
The local impact of Communities First	57
6 Conclusions	59
7 Towards a model of local influence	60
Bibliography	62
Appendix: Case study profiles	66

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) for supporting this research project and staff at the JRF for their contribution to its completion. Tamsin Stirling and Gayna Jones were consultants to the project and their highly valued contributions are greatly appreciated. Members of the Project Advisory Group provided invaluable commentary and advice throughout the project, and helped resolve issues that occurred as the research progressed. We would like to express our considerable gratitude to the Communities First co-ordinators who smoothed our path during the fieldwork and, most importantly, to all those who gave up their time to be interviewed and to participate in the community-led review events.

Executive summary

A strong focus on promoting active citizenship and public involvement in governance has emerged in recent years, highlighted in discussion of 'double devolution' in policy circles at Westminster and leading to the publication of the UK Government's Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (DCLG, 2006b). Although the terminology has varied and current usage focuses on the objective of 'community empowerment', government commitment to increasing localisation of decision-making has been consistent. This research study employs the term 'community empowerment' to describe a process of decision-making and influence at community or neighbourhood level by residents of that community. However, there is little experience of the policy changes needed and the shifts of practice required by local and central government to deliver greater community empowerment in the UK.

This research study examines the Communities First programme in Wales as an example of an early attempt by Government to promote direct community involvement in a programme of regeneration policy and to influence change at a local level. The programme was set up by the Welsh Assembly Government in 2002 and established 132 spatially targeted community regeneration partnerships in the 100 most deprived wards identified by the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 32 sub-ward pockets of poverty and ten special projects based on communities of interest.

The programme has several key features that promote local engagement and decision-making at community level. These include the following.

- A multi-agency partnership delivery structure in which community members constitute one-third of the membership. The remaining two-thirds consist of the statutory sector and a combined business/voluntary sector.
- Actions within the programme are not prescribed by Government but are determined by local community engagement and participation through the development of a community audit, a community capacity development plan and a community action plan.
- The partnerships are expected to promote a 'bending' of mainstream services, adapt service provision and improve service quality in the identified communities where needed, in response to community concerns. In this sense, the community members of the partnership are intended to exercise influence over statutory and voluntary sector service providers.

With a five-year period of activity to examine, the programme provides excellent case study material for identification of the key issues involved in promoting community empowerment, with relevance for the governance of the UK more generally.

This research project has therefore set out to:

- examine the level and nature of community participation in the Communities First programme in a range of areas;
- explore the experience of community members engaged in Communities First partnerships;
- identify local, regional and national barriers and levers experienced in developing local decision-making;
- identify key lessons from the Communities First experience for the delivery of community empowerment in Wales and more generally across the UK.

The primary methods have included a programme of nine case studies of Communities First partnerships and a series of over 50 interviews with stakeholders in the Communities First Programme, including 20 with community members. These have been supported by community-led review events in each case study area, which provided an opportunity for community members of Communities First partnerships to review their experience of participation in the programme.

To guide the research and assess progress, a two-stage typology of power and influence has been used.

- *The one-stage process* occurs where the partnership has the authority and resources to act immediately on a decision. The decision consequently leads to an immediate action.

Decision-making AND direct ability to enact —> action.

- *The two-stage process* occurs where the partnership does not have the initial authority and resources to directly enact a decision. As a result, a level of influence must be used on the partnership members or external agencies that do possess the authority and resources to action the decision.

Decision-making —> influence on service providers —> action.

The two-stage process is much more common within Communities First, as a lack of funding or delegated powers means partnership boards are generally unable to act without the consent and support of statutory sector agencies both within the partnership and external to it.

Research findings

Findings are presented in five domains:

- partnership: structures and processes;
- representation and democratic relationships;
- factors in the wider environment;
- Communities First and community empowerment;
- the impact of Communities First.

Partnership: structures and processes

The Communities First partnership model provides a location where community members are able to deliberate with and influence service providers. Their guaranteed 'one-third' presence on the partnership provides a minimum standard of community participation. Key findings include the following.

- The creation of a structure does not in itself promote community empowerment, as this depends on the working practices of the partnership, including the organisation of voting, the role of the Chair, the differential levels of knowledge possessed by community members and professional representatives of agencies, and the relationships that exist between partnership members.
- The capacity of community members to participate is an essential determinant of their influence on the partnership. While community members clearly have relevant skills, they require support to develop specific skills associated with membership of a regeneration partnership.

- In the clear majority of case studies, community members have developed a very positive 'can do' attitude and demonstrate the willingness of community members to become involved in local forums where community empowerment can be achieved.
- The role of the community development teams employed in each Communities First area has been significant in developing community capacity and facilitating community participation in the partnership.
- In more mature partnerships, community members are impatient with statutory agencies' representatives who do not recognise fully their potential to contribute and with a lack of funding to directly deliver projects in their neighbourhoods.
- It is necessary for Government to clearly define and delineate the expectations of the partnership and its members from the outset, to provide clarity of purpose for both community members and representatives of agencies.

Representation and democratic relationships

The study recognises that local partnerships coexist within an environment where there is a range of alternative mechanisms for representing community views. Any future forums to promote community empowerment need to co-ordinate with existing routes by which local voices are heard and exercise influence over service providers. The following are the principal observations.

- The role of local authority members can be critical for promoting local forums where community empowerment can occur. The case studies point to a critical role for local members as gatekeepers to local authority departments. Where supportive, they operate as champions and important advocates for the Communities First partnership.
- This ability is enhanced when the member is also a member of the ruling political group or occupies a cabinet role of substantial position within the local authority.
- Community and town councils seem to offer a limited option for supporting local partnerships given their restricted power and poor levels of public recognition.
- Existing community regeneration organisations can both assist and compete with newly emerging local partnerships, creating a 'legacy effect' that emerges from

past levels of community organisations. Generally, a history of community activity has a positive outcome on the effectiveness of developing local partnerships.

Factors in the wider environment

The study explores a range of factors that are external to the community partnership but have a significant effect on levels of community participation, the degree of influence achieved by community members of the partnership and the response of government agencies and statutory sector partners.

- The rural case study illustrates specifically rural dimensions to the development of community empowerment, which include problems in participation because of low-density, dispersed populations and poor transport links between scattered communities.
- The role of civil service support teams and local government processes can present bureaucratic barriers to local partnerships achieving influence.

Communities First and community empowerment

The primary objective of this study has been to assess the extent that the community members of Communities First partnerships have been able to achieve an influence through this programme and thereby enable greater community-based decision-making, demonstrated by an ability to influence other partners in their provision of services to the area. Key findings include the following.

- An absence of evidence of mainstream programme bending resulting from the actions of local partnerships.
- Evidence of statutory agencies experiencing difficulties supporting multiple partnerships in areas with many partnerships. Similar issues are experienced in rural areas caused by the geographical spread of partnership meetings.
- Evidence of only minor changes to local actions by mainstream agencies resulting from partnership influence.

The impact of Communities First

Despite the limitations identified in the level of influence by Communities First partnerships, it is important to recognise their impact at local level which includes:

- the achievement of significant levels of community involvement, both directly in the partnership but also in wider networks based on sub-areas and theme-based action groups;
- the rationalising of local regeneration activity following better co-ordination and networking between organisations active in an area;
- partnerships developing the ability to lever funding sources and deliver regeneration projects from other sources beyond the programme.

Conclusions

The study has identified 22 key lessons from the analysis of the operation of Communities First in the nine case study areas.

- Lesson 1: the structural design of any policy instrument developed to promote community empowerment does not in itself guarantee the achievement of community empowerment.
- Lesson 2: different routes for community participation are required to recognise public preferences for different levels of engagement and different abilities to commit time and support to local decision-making.
- Lesson 3: an effective commitment to community empowerment will require consideration of structures that give majority membership to community representatives and access to the important role of Chair of Partnership.
- Lesson 4: community members are able and willing to participate in local processes of decision-making. They may possess some of the required skills and competences but will need support to identify and fill skills gaps, and to learn to apply them in the institutional context of a formal policy programme.

- Lesson 5: a formal support mechanism will be required to develop capacity and support community members in their learning and their development of a 'participation career'.
- Lesson 6: partnership members from statutory and voluntary sector organisations must be assisted to work sensitively with community members, to understand their often different approaches to issues and to recognise their valuable contribution to identifying issues and ideas and making decisions rather than merely responding to pre-existing agendas.
- Lesson 7: local partnerships and forums of the kind represented here by Communities First partnerships must be tasked with real functions and must have resources that they can deploy in order to play a meaningful role as change agents in local regeneration.
- Lesson 8: in developing any policy structure or process to promote community empowerment, clear guidance that delineates the aims and objectives of the policy must be issued.
- Lesson 9: specifically, the role of public sector partners must be delineated and communicated clearly to those agencies. Ambiguity effectively permits avoidance of responsibility.
- Lesson 10: community empowerment is not readily achievable in all areas and greater levels of preparatory capacity building will be required in areas with little tradition of active community and in areas with low levels of social capital. Consequently, the achievement of community empowerment will have an uneven front and major divergence of levels of local participation will be evident in the short to medium term.
- Lesson 11: any structures and processes developed to promote community empowerment must provide a clear role for local authority members that both harmonises with and develops their current local authority role. Structures and processes implemented should encourage, facilitate and reward their involvement.
- Lesson 12: the considerable variation in the existence of, and role and levels of activity of, community (or parish) councils will make it difficult to prescribe their role in any movement towards greater community empowerment. Any proposal should allow space for local practice that reflects the current role of community and parish councils and the standing they have in the community to emerge.

- Lesson 13: proposals to promote community empowerment and local engagement must recognise the role of existing local forums and organisations such as community development trusts and provide clear entry routes for them to become part of the emerging local mechanism for community empowerment.
- Lesson 14: structures and processes initiated to promote community empowerment must be sensitive to rural issues, and recognise the need for local practice that can reflect the specific social and geographical characteristics of diverse rural areas to emerge.
- Lesson 15: the relationship between community membership and statutory sector membership of partnerships reflected in some rural partnerships in Wales provides a useful model for resolving some of the more generally experienced problems with statutory sector support of multiple partnerships and community concerns about statutory sector domination of partnerships.
- Lesson 16: civil service, local authority and public sector staff will require training and support to enable more participative modes of working to flourish.
- Lesson 17: state and public sector organisations will require funding in order to achieve the required changes. This may be provided by diversion of funding from traditional models of delivery to more citizen-centred practice or by new streams of hypothecated funding.
- Lesson 18: the design and implementation of measures to promote community empowerment must be completely aware of and harmonise with other national, regional and local strategies that have similar aims. Unification of structures to promote community empowerment across policy silos is an essential ingredient of sustained community involvement.
- Lesson 19: methods of working more closely with the public and promoting public involvement have resource implications for all agencies intended to participate in the process.
- Lesson 20: in promoting community empowerment, it will be necessary to thoroughly balance local viewpoints with more national and regional strategic objectives. This requirement will at times cut across the desire to promote community empowerment.
- Lesson 21: expectations on the part of Government to promote community empowerment will need to be clearly communicated to statutory agencies.

Mechanisms to achieve community empowerment will need to be carefully designed, thoroughly implemented and carefully monitored.

- Lesson 22: government and public expectations will need to recognise the reality of timescales that might be involved in thoroughly changing the relationship between state agencies and the public.

The research overall suggests that Communities First has promoted community empowerment and active involvement of local residents in all but one of the nine case study areas. Participating community members feel empowered and have a positive ‘can do’ attitude about their ability to promote positive change in their community. However, the statutory sector has largely failed to respond to the community agenda and there is little evidence of community influence over budgets and service delivery, and no evidence of bending mainstream services to reflect the partnership process.

This is a pessimistic conclusion for the overall pursuit of greater community empowerment in the UK. However, it does point to features that will be essential in any policy structure to promote community empowerment at a national level and that will be important in the evolution of the Communities First programme. In particular there need to be the following.

- Flexible models of governance that provide multiple routes and points of participation. These must be, at the first stage, highly local (sub-ward) and based on locality or themes.
- These must link to higher-level (e.g. ward-level) partnerships and, from there, to county and sub-regional forums such as the local strategic partnerships or local service boards (Wales only).
- There must be support for all potential partners to develop the local partnerships and links to wider patterns of public engagement.
- The central role of local councillors should be recognised.

We have termed this a ‘capillary’ model of local influence and decision-making, which feeds community opinions from highly localised structures to higher strategic partnerships. The acid test of community empowerment is whether an issue raised in a sub-ward forum can be endorsed at ward level and communicated effectively to county-level partnerships where it is acted on by a range of public and voluntary sector agencies.

1 Introduction

The use of the term 'double devolution' during 2006 (Miliband, 2006; Mulgan and Bury, 2006) indicated a desire by the UK Government to perform a transfer of power, first from central government to local government and second from local government to citizens and communities. This was underlined by the publication of a set of essays that set out a ten-year plan to 'shift power downwards from Whitehall and Westminster down to town halls, and from town halls to communities and citizens' (Mulgan and Bury, 2006, p. 5). During 2006, the issue was further brought into focus with the publication of the Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (DCLG, 2006b).

This debate reflects the latest development in a steady trend within social policy that has been evident since the mid-1990s. Participation of the community within the policy delivery process has become a key element of mainstream policy in regeneration, housing, health and adult learning (Skidmore *et al.*, 2006). It has become a significant component of government statements (Maguire and Truscott, 2006), such that Burgess *et al.* (2001, p. vii) stated that, 'the government attaches great importance to a community-led approach in which local citizens and stakeholders are encouraged to engage in decision making through capacity building, community planning and devolved forms of local government'.

Numerous claims have been made about the benefits of community participation in local decision-making (Burgess *et al.*, 2001; McAteer and Orr, 2006). Skidmore *et al.* (2006, p. vii) identify three principal potential benefits.

- It leads to better and more responsive services.
- It tackles people's disengagement from politics and the democratic process.
- It builds social capital.

In recognition of these perceived benefits, citizen participation has become embedded in policy statements from the Government in Westminster and from the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. The concept of 'double devolution', which dominated discussions in England in 2006, is therefore a practical expression of the ideal of a more participatory democracy that parallels and complements representative democracy.

Numerous terms have been used since the 1990s to describe the practice of engaging community members in local programmes. The term 'double devolution' itself enjoyed a relatively brief life in the build-up to the publication of the Local Government White Paper but did not appear in the White Paper itself. 'Community empowerment' is the current terminology employed by politicians and civil servants. There is a danger of the fashion for such terms changing rapidly in policy circles, as in the case of the usage of the term 'double devolution' in 2006. However, the term 'community empowerment' enjoys a wider currency within community development practice and literature. It effectively describes recognised practices of community engagement and participative approaches to local decision-making.

Consequently, we will use this term throughout this study to describe policy and service delivery change that more actively involves residents of communities in shaping what happens in their community. In recognising emerging community empowerment, we are effectively witnessing a reworking of the relationship between the State and the community in a way that emphasises the role of the voluntary and community sector to directly influence the delivery of social policy through the neighbourhood agenda (Adamson, 2006). This 'new' governance has already emerged to a certain extent in both central and local state functions and across a range of policy arenas (Chandler, 2001). However, the notion of community empowerment represented in current policy goes beyond what O'Donovan (2000) has referred to as the 'interactive State', in which the State develops a specific focus on the role of agency in citizen–State relations and suggests a 'negotiated' policy process led by policy coalitions. Instead, we suggest that we are seeing the promotion of 'local and very local' decision-making (Stevenson, 2006, p. 4).

Bickerstaff and Walker (2005) recognise the plethora of governance activity in which the objective of enabling deliberation, rather than consultation, has become pervasive. Such 'deliberative' practices involve, 'inquiring and learning together in the face of difference and conflict, telling compelling stories and arguing together in negotiations, coming to see issues, relationships and options in new ways, thus arguing and acting together' (Forester, 1999, p. ix). We can identify an emerging form of community governance in which the community is empowered to participate in an interactive decision-making process that can determine the actions of institutions that are working in an area (Sullivan, 2001; Coaffee and Healey, 2003; Somerville, 2005).

However, there is little experience to inform how the political aspiration of further developing community empowerment might be translated into changes in policy delivery. Policies promoting local decision-making are often focused on two other aims – the twin challenges of improving public services and bridging the power gap between citizens and the local and central state. Attempts to address this power

gap have been implicit in policies that aim to promote community empowerment, especially in regeneration programmes targeting specific spatial areas. However, previous research has identified that there is still an 'implementation gap' (Taylor and Wilson, 2006) that must be addressed if these new structures and policies are to be effective. There is therefore a need to address how policy rhetoric can work in practice through an enabling policy environment with suitable incentives and levers to promote community empowerment.

To address this implementation gap, we need to understand the implications of a more participative policy environment, especially at the local level. Consequently, a finer-grained understanding of the interface between the State and community-based governance is required. This project provides research evidence that informs how community empowerment might be achieved in practice and how key institutions such as local government and the civil service might adapt their priorities and delivery as a result.

The research focuses on Wales and examines the Communities First programme, which represents an early attempt by Government to develop direct engagement in regeneration activities by community members. The research aims to identify the key issues involved in establishing and developing a policy structure that promotes community involvement and local decision-making. We examine this early practice of community empowerment by reviewing the operation of nine Communities First partnerships in Wales. The research is centred on the experience of the community members of the Communities First multi-agency partnerships and their experience of the process of working in partnership with statutory, voluntary and business sector agencies. Full details of the research aims are provided in Chapter 3.

The following chapter identifies the principal characteristics of Communities First and why it may offer lessons for developing community empowerment in local delivery of social policy throughout the UK.

2 Communities First: learning from the practice of community empowerment

Communities First is the principal community regeneration policy in Wales and has been operating since 2002, from an initial ten-year funding stream. The programme is a practical expression of the principle of putting citizens at the centre of policy delivery, one of the drivers for the improvement of public services later set out in the Welsh Assembly Government's publication *Making the Connections* (WAG, 2004). Although designed and delivered by the Welsh Assembly Government, the programme offers considerable scope for informing the achievement of community empowerment in the wider UK context. The experience of the implementation of the programme in relation to localised service delivery and community participation illustrates the issues that are likely to be encountered in any similar UK initiative or policy direction.

In Wales, the Communities First policy programme initiated 132 spatially targeted community regeneration partnerships at electoral division (ward) level or sub-ward level. The programme automatically supported the 100 most deprived electoral divisions identified by the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD). A further 32 sub-ward 'pockets of deprivation' were identified by local authorities and ten additional projects of special interest were supported on the basis of the specific needs of identified groups. These included groups with physical disability, victims of domestic violence and minority ethnic groups. Following revision of the WIMD in 2005, a further 46 areas were identified for support and these are currently being incorporated into the programme. All the case studies in this research are drawn from the original 142 partnerships supported since the launch of the programme.

Key features of the programme design and model of delivery provide excellent case study material to assess the pursuit of community empowerment in practice.

- The primary delivery vehicle is a local partnership supported by a team of community development workers. The role of the development workers is to develop community engagement, promote increased community capacity to participate and facilitate the functioning of the partnership.
- The Communities First partnership model prescribes a 'three-thirds' membership in which 'the community' is defined as one of the thirds. The second third is the statutory sector and the voluntary sector combined with the business sector

— Communities First: learning from the practice of community empowerment

constitutes the remaining third. The ‘community’ component of the partnership consists of individuals resident in the community and members of small-scale and informal local groups. These are distinct from the conventional voluntary sector consisting of local representatives of national voluntary organisations or more regional and sub-regional organisations that are formally constituted and externally funded.

- Funding and partnership management is provided by three potential routes. The Communities First partnerships can be managed by the local authority, a voluntary sector organisation or a mature community organisation. The route is determined by local conditions and the extent of capacity available within local community organisations and the local voluntary sector. Where limited capacity exists, the local authority provides a route for the funding to be delivered to local partnerships. This has been the outcome in the majority of Communities First areas. However, in a small number of communities, including our case study D, there has been direct community control of funding. The organising body that receives funding to manage the partnership and is accountable for this is referred to as the grant recipient body (GRB).
- Actions within the programme are not prescribed but are determined by a very clear process of local community engagement and action planning.
- Three key stages of the delivery programme offer opportunity for high levels of community participation. The community audit, the community capacity development plan and the community action plan are intended to inform the specific localised pattern of remedial and regeneration actions, and the programme guidance places clear expectations on partnerships that community involvement in developing these planning tools is essential.
- The partnerships potentially have the authority to determine priorities at the local level and to influence the allocation of resources by mainstream service providers and public sector agencies. A central assumption of the policy has been that the public sector will ‘bend’ its mainstream programme expenditure in support of the Communities First partnership and its objectives. Consequently, the structural and procedural design of the Communities First programme creates clear opportunities for localised influence over ‘mainstream’ budgets and significant community influence on local and very local decision-making.

These features of the Communities First programme create a potential for community empowerment throughout the policy framework. Each partnership is guided by a published *Communities First Vision Framework*, which identifies key domains for

action. The specifics are identified by the community through a locally led appraisal and prioritisation of issues but are expected to cover:

- economy and jobs;
- education and training;
- health and well-being;
- housing and environment;
- community safety;
- active community.

If the Communities First programme achieves its objectives, it will provide a structure that creates a local process of influence over these key policy domains and a measure of local management of the key issues in each domain. It should also provide a forum where community members are able to engage with representatives of key public and voluntary sector service providers, and where community influence is able to produce changes in the prioritisation and allocation of resources by those mainstream agencies. Study of the programme and the levers and barriers evident in this process over a five-year period of activity can consequently provide considerable insight into whether these aims are achieved in practice and into the issues raised in the pursuit of community empowerment in social policy in the UK.

The pursuit of community empowerment also raises questions about the capacity of the civil service and local government to implement change in modes of working and patterns of service delivery (Mulgan and Bury, 2006). Examining the Communities First programme offers lessons in how to bring about changes in ways of working at the national, county and local ward level. The extent of potential local influence is unprecedented in social policy and the programme promotes an interaction between communities and the public sector that significantly departs from the traditional relationship between them. In this way, Communities First provides an important illustration of some of the reforms of central and local government practices that are required to promote community empowerment. Additionally, an examination of the experience of the programme can inform analysis of the role of key institutions such as police and health authorities, and the changes required to assist more local decision-making in these policy areas.

— **Communities First: learning from the practice of community empowerment**

In summary, Communities First provides a five-year experience of a programme of policy grounded in principles of community empowerment. This study seeks to provide an assessment of its impact and success in promoting local influence over mainstream agencies, and to provide insights into the development of increased community empowerment in social policy. This experience can inform the wider policy environment in all regions of the UK as the principle of community empowerment becomes a central policy feature.

3 The research programme

Research aims

The aims of the research were to:

- assess the level of community participation and localisation of decision-making and influence achieved within partnerships established through the Communities First programme;
- map and analyse the experience of community members engaged with the local decision-making processes within the Communities First programme;
- identify the local, regional and national barriers to, and levers for, change experienced by community members in their ability to influence decision-making through engagement in Communities First partnerships;
- identify the institutional and structural issues that might work against localisation of decision-making, including the roles of local government, civil service cultures, local authority members, and current audit and accountability mechanisms through the lens of experience of participating community members;
- identify key lessons from the Welsh experience for the delivery of the 'double devolution' agenda in the UK.

Research design, methods and analysis

The research operated within a framework of nine case studies in designated Communities First areas within Wales. The aim of each case study was to provide evidence of the experiences of partnership board members, primarily those drawn from the community. The explicit intention of the study is to consider the experience of community members who have become involved in the Communities First programme and its pattern of community empowerment, and the research team has been concerned to prioritise the experience of community members within this research.

The nine cases were chosen to reflect a distribution of the following two key variables that could influence the interaction of state and community.

- A geographical variation of city-urban, rural and valleys-urban communities, which are the main categories used to distinguish Welsh local authorities. These also account for geographic, linguistic and ethnic variables within Wales.
- Varying partnership models to ensure representation of different grant recipient body factors that reflected any variations in delivery of the programme by local authorities, community organisations and voluntary sector organisations.

The distribution of case studies in relation to these variables reflects the overall distribution of Communities First partnerships in relation to their geography and management model. This leads to the pattern of case studies shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The pattern of case studies

Geography	Local authority	Partnership lead Voluntary sector	Community
City-urban	Case study F Case study G	Case study I	Case study D
Valleys-urban	Case study A Case study H	Case study C Case study E	
Rural	Case study B		

Full details of the case study partnerships are provided in the Appendix.

Within each of the nine case study areas the research involved the following.

- *A series of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the case study localities.* Of the 51 people interviewed: 16 were co-ordinators and other Communities First workers; 20 were community members; six were local authority officers; seven were external partnership members; and two were local authority councillors.
- *A participative, ‘community-led’ review of the experience of participation in each case study area.* This involved facilitated discussion with community members of partnerships, with the researcher assisting reflection and review of the experience of participation in the partnership. In all but one event, the Communities First co-ordinator was present for at least part of the conversation. Additional partners included representatives from housing associations, local authorities, local

education providers, religious groups, tenants and residents' organisations, local authority councillors, community councillors, development trusts, councils for voluntary action, charities, police and local health boards.

The research also drew on the following.

- A programme of desk research, drawing on current academic sources, policy documents, government reports and practice-based publications focused on related issues in the UK.
- Two seminars, which presented interim research outcomes to regional actors in the regeneration field. These events provided opportunity for professional and expert reflection on the emerging key themes, which guided the remainder of the research programme. One seminar was held in South Wales and one in North Wales.

Following early discussion with participating partnerships, the researchers agreed to anonymise, as far as possible, the exact location and identity of the nine case study partnerships. This was to assure participants that their views could not be attributed to individuals and to promote open discussion in the community-led reviews. Furthermore, no individual has been identified in the reporting of findings. However, for readers with considerable knowledge of the Communities First programme in Wales, it may be possible by inference to identify the communities involved. The researchers request that, where that does occur, the spirit of anonymity be upheld in any secondary commentary or reporting on the findings of this study.

Finally, this study is a review of the experience of community engagement and influence over decision-making achieved within the Communities First programme. While this inevitably involved examining the Communities First process in some detail at the local level, the research has explored only these and related dimensions of this process. The study therefore should not be seen in any way as an evaluation of the Communities First programme, although it provides insights of relevance for the broader development of this programme. These will be valuable as the Welsh Assembly Government steers the programme through its next developmental stage, which has been termed Communities Next and on which it will be consulting in early 2008.

Defining power and influence

A detailed, academic treatment of the concept of power and related notions of empowerment is not possible in this report. However, it is necessary to outline the conception of power that underpins the research design and delivery. The term 'empowerment' is often used in the context of community-based regeneration where involvement of local populations in the regeneration process is seen as 'empowering'. Generally, this is seen as a rebalancing of power between the state sector and the community and voluntary sectors, and is linked to intentions of promoting community-led change. Similar notions were contained within the double devolution debate and its invocation of a sense of 'direct democracy', a process whereby local viewpoints are captured in the structures of governance and acted on by state agencies. Similarly, any general notion of community empowerment implies some transfer of decision-making from powerful institutional actors to other stakeholders in the policy chain. The notion of 'partnership' has become seen as the central vehicle for the delivery of this increased community empowerment.

Such notions correspond with a fairly simple notion of power based on the principle that a decision is made and then acted on to make the desired outcome happen. This corresponds to what Lukes (1974) terms the 'first face' of power, in which power is measured simply by the possession of an ability to make something happen. However, he argues that there are more complex processes of power. In particular, the State exercises a strong ability to influence the general agenda of what gets discussed or silenced in society. A second tenet of community empowerment therefore must also be the recognition that issues that are important for the community achieve consideration in the governance process and that the community be active in setting the agenda. Finally, Lukes argues that the 'third face' of power rests in the ability to influence the general beliefs and opinions of those around us to act in ways that we want to promote, but that might not be in the direct interest of the other actors.

In the context of community governance, an empowered community would be able to influence statutory agencies in the partnership process to support community-led actions that may not primarily be in accord with the planned actions and priorities of these agencies. This latter concept of influence closely coincides with Foucault's (1977) notion of power as a relational concept in which actors are able to influence the behaviours of others so that they act in ways in which they would not have conventionally behaved. These more complex notions of power suggest an ability to influence ways in which others think, and to promote behaviours and outcomes that favour a desired outcome.

Within the Communities First process, the partnership is a location in which the prescribed 'one-third' community membership offers opportunity for all three models of power identified by Lukes (1974) to operate. Decisions made by the partnership in which community members participate can simply lead to actions and the community members could be seen as part of the power structure that has enabled that to happen. Additionally, partnerships are able to influence the local agenda and to consider issues raised by community members, again enabling community viewpoints to be introduced into the deliberations of the partnership. Finally, the partnership potentially moves beyond the role of a 'deliberative forum' and provides a structure that, theoretically, allows community members to challenge and change institutional and professional world views of the statutory agencies involved. Where this is achieved, it establishes a partnership mode of working in which all agencies involved subordinate their actions to the decisions and ways of working established by the partnership.

For the purposes of this project, we have developed definitions of decision-making and influence that separate these levels of power. The result has been to create a typology of power and influence that we refer to as a one-stage and two-stage process.

- *The one-stage process* occurs where the partnership has the authority and resources to act immediately on a decision. The decision consequently leads to an immediate action.

Decision-making AND direct ability to enact → action.

- *The two-stage process* occurs where the partnership does not have the initial authority and resources to directly enact a decision. As a result, a level of influence must be used on the partnership members or external agencies that do possess the authority and resources to action the decision.

Decision-making → influence on service providers → action.

The two-stage process is much more common within Communities First, as a lack of funding or delegated powers means partnership boards are generally unable to act without the consent and support of statutory sector agencies both within the partnership and external to it.

We accept that this typology is a simplification of some real-world dynamics, which are complicated by a wide range of factors that include the:

- skills and capacity of community members;
- personalities and relationships that evolve within partnerships;
- seniority level of agency representation on the partnership;
- degree of 'fit' between community and agency objectives.

However, this notion of 'influence' represents the reality of operation for the community members of partnership boards in the majority of circumstances. It is this model of influence that will also be the dominant pattern of empowerment within general approaches to community empowerment where the primary objective is to achieve local influence over services delivered by key public sector providers, notably local government. The assessment of the degree of that influence achieved in Communities First partnerships has been the primary objective of this research.

4 The UK policy context

Despite potential difficulties in making participative policy actually work, there has been a plethora of policy proposals drawing on the rationales outlined by Skidmore *et al.* (2006). Such policies try to bring about community participation in decision-making, producing a potentially very different service delivery regime. This chapter examines recent and current policy developments in England and Wales.

Policy trends in England

Under the Labour Government, since the late 1990s, there have been successive policies that have promoted the notion of increased participation by communities in decisions that affect them. In 2000, for example, the Social Exclusion Unit's Policy Action Team (PAT) 4 report *Neighbourhood Management* (SEU, 2000) outlined a vision for services that were joined up and more responsive to local needs. The report stated that community participation was crucial to success: 'unless renewal efforts are led or owned by local people, they are likely to fail' (SEU, 2000, p. 8). It also identified some key tools for neighbourhood management that could provide leverage over existing service providers. These included references to devolved budgets, service-level agreements, monitoring and purchasing arrangements.

The current vision for community empowerment was set out by David Blunkett in 2003/04, and has produced a number of publications under the 'Together We Can' framework – see, for example, *Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment* (ODPM, 2006). This initiative, now led by Communities and Local Government (CLG), has set the scene for a raft of government policy and thinking that has focused on community empowerment. This has been complemented by work by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) established by the Local Government Association (LGA) to help in local government service improvement. Central to this has been the jointly developed CLG/LGA *Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success* (CLG, 2007). The foreword by Hazel Blears confirms the Government's objectives for community empowerment and suggests that the Green Paper *The Governance of Britain* (Ministry of Justice, 2007) marks a 'new relationship between Government and citizens'. She states 'this means making public involvement the rule, not the exception' (CLG, 2007, p. 2). The foreword states:

Bringing Government closer to people, passing power from Whitehall to the town hall and direct to local communities isn't just the right thing to do. It's the best way to revitalise the local roots of our democracy and help build respect. It is the surest way of making local services reflect people's needs. (CLG, 2007, p. 2)

It proposes that empowerment will be an obligation for local authorities and outlines a new statutory 'duty to involve' local people, which has been established by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

Overall, the action plan sets out work towards three key outcomes:

- greater participation, collective action and engagement in democracy;
- changes in attitudes towards community empowerment;
- improved performance of public services and quality of life.

It sets out activities in three key areas:

- widening and deepening empowerment opportunities locally;
- supporting and enabling people to take up empowerment opportunities;
- strengthening local representative democracy.

Considerable impetus was given to debates on community empowerment by the preceding discussions of, and eventual publication in October 2006 of, the Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (DCLG, 2006b). The White Paper outlined a process whereby local government could be reshaped and communities empowered to have a say in how local services are run. The vision put forward in the paper was one of:

... revitalised local authorities, working with their partners, to reshape public services around the citizens and communities that use them. This means changing the way we work – to enable local partners to respond more flexibly to local needs; to reduce the amount of top-down control from central government; and to enable citizens and communities to play their part. (DCLG, 2006a, p. 1)

However, the White Paper also realised that achieving this vision requires reforms to enable the community voice to be part of localised decision-making – for example, the following.

- Public agencies to continue to reform how they work so they can offer individuals and communities the choice and quality of service that modern consumers expect and demand.
- Local authorities to rise to the challenge of working in partnership – to provide strong and visible leadership, and a sense of vision and civic pride for their local area.
- Local citizens and communities to be empowered to hold public services and their local authority to account, and to be able to influence the services in their area.
- Local partners to work together on cross-cutting issues likely to hold back the sustainable economic development of an area. These would be things like climate change, social exclusion and anti-social behaviour (DCLG, 2006b, p. 22).

The White Paper outlined some key issues that could influence the development of local government. It noted the vision of local authorities working with their partners to reshape public services around citizens and communities. Ideas outlined in the White Paper included the ‘community call for action’, as well as neighbourhood charters, neighbourhood policing teams, giving councillors small budgets to tackle local issues and simplifying the process for setting up tenant management organisations.

In addition, the White Paper outlined the role for local strategic partnerships (LSPs) in England, which are in the process of transforming existing community strategies into sustainable community strategies (SCSs). These local plans are intended to establish a shared vision for a local authority area, which will be delivered through local area agreements (LAAs), and the White Paper outlined a tool called the ‘duty to co-operate’, which requires partners in the LSP to agree targets in their LAA and share responsibility for meeting them.

The passage into statute of many features of the White Paper in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 has ensured the continued development of government promotion of community empowerment. Heralded as ‘a new era for devolution’ by Minister for Local Government, John Healy, the Act has established legal status for LAAs, providing local government with local autonomy over key issues. Importantly, it has established a ‘duty to involve local people in local services and policies’, which obliges local authorities to explore greater levels of localism. However, one dilution of intent between the White Paper and the Act has

been the downgrading of 'community calls for action' to 'councillors' calls for action', falling short of empowering communities to request service reviews.

The importance of the Green Paper on constitutional reform must also be considered in this context. *The Governance of Britain* (Ministry of Justice, 2007) states that there should be a strengthening of direct democracy, and notes the power to petition both the Prime Minister and Parliament, and the right for charities to campaign. However, it also notes that 'power should not just be devolved from the national government to the national Parliament: power must also rest with local communities' (Ministry of Justice, 2007, p. 49). It goes on to state that: 'the Government believes it must find new ways to enable people to become active citizens, empowered and fully engaged in local decision-making. The Government will enhance democracy by devolving more power directly to the people' (Ministry of Justice, 2007, p. 49).

The Green Paper calls for consultation on:

- extending the right of people to intervene with their elected representatives through community rights to call for action;
- duties to consult on major decisions through mechanisms such as citizens' juries;
- powers of redress to scrutinise and improve the delivery of local services;
- powers to ballot on spending decisions (Ministry of Justice, 2007, p. 49).

The Green Paper outlines a desire to establish a concordat to govern the relations between central and local government, which will 'establish for the first time an agreement on the rights and responsibilities of local government, including its responsibilities to provide effective leadership of the local area and to empower local communities where possible' (Ministry of Justice, 2007, p. 52). Furthermore, the *Planning for a Sustainable Future* White Paper (HM Government, 2007) outlines channels for the public to be consulted and engaged in planning. This would emphasise a new statutory best value duty to involve communities as the means of ensuring high standards of engagement.

This discussion of policy in England outlines the principal developments in recent years. A comprehensive review of all actions is not within the scope of this research and the emerging promotion of community empowerment is threaded through all government departments and policy streams. However, this short review has established very clearly how issues of community empowerment are central to the future direction of social and public policy in England.

Policy trends in Wales

The policy framework in Wales offers both continuity with and divergence from the situation in England. A similar conceptual approach to the English Local Government White Paper is outlined in *Making the Connections: Delivering Better Services for Wales* (WAG, 2004), the Welsh Assembly Government's vision for the future of public services. This document makes the case for a collaborative model of reform of public services and sets out four principles for better services.

- *Citizens at the centre*: services should be more responsive to the needs of users, accessible and designed and delivered with the active participation of citizens, communities and businesses.
- *Equality and social justice*: every citizen must have the opportunity to contribute to the social and economic life of Wales. Resources will be targeted to where the need is greatest.
- *Working together as the Welsh Public Service*: improving service delivery will be achieved by more co-ordination between providers rather than competition. Services should be delivered by whichever organisations are best placed to secure the outcomes needed.
- *Value for money*: people in Wales should get greatest possible value from the investment in public services.

The 2006 *Review of Local Service Delivery* (the Beecham Report) focused on a mode of delivery referred to as the citizen model. This model 'relies on voice to drive improvement, together with system design, effective management and regulation, all operating in the interests of the citizen' (WAG, 2006a, p. 5).

In November 2006 *Making the Connections – Delivering Beyond Boundaries* (the Assembly's response to the Beecham Report) set out a programme to improve public engagement in service design and delivery (WAG, 2006b). It outlines the intention to establish local service boards on a local authority area basis. The boards will build on the community strategy partnerships and develop local service agreements for service improvement between the boards and the Assembly Government, with the potential to introduce multi-area agreements in some instances.

The Welsh Assembly Government published its policy statement on local government called *A Shared Responsibility* (WAG, 2007a) in March 2007. This further clarifies the framework for Welsh local government. In the foreword to *A Shared Responsibility*,

Sue Essex, Assembly Minister, stated that one aim should be to ‘develop an explicit local community/neighbourhood approach including very local organisations (and communities of interest) to support the development of sustainable communities’ (WAG, 2007a, p. ii). The foreword goes on to state that public services should be centred on the needs and experiences of the citizen. The key local organisation remains the local authority. However, local authorities are expected to develop their role into one that provides community leadership. *A Shared Responsibility* states that local authorities should develop ‘a vibrant and effective, cross-sector model of scrutiny, blending participatory and representative democratic approaches’ (WAG, 2007a, p. 3).

The Welsh Assembly Government has established six local service board development projects in 2007–08 to identify best practice. As part of this, local service agreements will be developed to take account of the four major statutory plans that will remain following plan rationalisation: community strategies, which are a local authority’s overarching document; the health, social care and well-being strategy; children and young people’s plan; and local development plans. In addition, the Welsh Assembly Government explicitly makes reference to the need to consider Communities First area visions within local service agreements. *A Shared Responsibility* also advocates a new, shared role for very local organisations through a collaborative public service programme. This could include: ‘community and town councils; Communities First partnerships; voluntary/third sector organisations (including the county voluntary councils); and area focused local government operations as organisations that collect, share and act on local information and intelligence’ (WAG, 2007a, p. 41).

A Shared Responsibility outlines the promotion of better regional and sub-regional collaboration between local authorities, and suggests: ‘It will therefore be imperative for the very local level to connect to this work, so that the citizen voice can act as a counterweight’ (WAG, 2007a, p. 45). This will build on the idea of local stakeholder groups used by some LSPs, which can generate feedback and identify ideas for the LSPs’ future strategic direction. The role for these groups could provide reservoirs of qualitative information for the local service board, as well as act as a hub for citizen involvement in service design and planning. The Welsh Assembly Government has stated its intention that the role of local voluntary organisations and Communities First is to be embedded more closely in the community strategy statutory guidance and in the development of the local service boards.

More generally, *A Shared Responsibility* notes that a forthcoming policy statement on public engagement across all Welsh public services ‘will include a set of public engagement principles and targeted support to strengthen citizen and community participation beyond the electoral cycle’ (WAG, 2007a, p. 45).

Additionally, the Welsh Assembly Government has published a consultation paper on its revised guidance for community planning to reflect the implications of the evaluation of the initial community planning round, the Beecham Report, the interim evaluation of Communities First and the development of local service boards. Furthermore, a Welsh Assembly Government Task and Finish Advisory Group and Community Planning Action Inquiry Group have reported their findings to inform the revised guidance. The document specifically outlines the relationship between Communities First partnerships and the community planning process, establishing a key responsibility for local government to ensure connection between the consultation processes explicit in both policy programmes:

There will need to be links between the two, since the overarching community strategy will be a way for Communities First partnerships to make vital links to other strategic themes, including the delivery of mainline services, and to other deprived neighbourhoods. Equally, the Communities First partnerships should help to shape the community strategy, in particular to ensure that it adequately reflects the needs of deprived communities. (WAG, 2007b, p. 17)

As in England, despite the policy emphasis placed on community empowerment, research has shown that there are significant barriers to achieving this policy goal. Research by Opinion Research Services (ORS) for the Welsh Assembly Government (ORS, 2007) outlined 13 areas for consideration in order to create the conditions for embedding effective public involvement. Broadly, these considerations focused on the need for:

- process change in involvement practices;
- a need to maximise opportunities within existing involvement mechanisms and processes;
- avoiding threats to embedding involvement;
- monitoring and reporting changes that are instigated through the process of community involvement.

Communities First in context

In its original guidance, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG, 2002, pp. 5–6) identified the aims for the Communities First programme these were to:

- build the confidence and self-esteem of those living in these communities, and develop a ‘can do’ culture;
- encourage education and skill training for work;
- create job opportunities and increase the income of local people;
- improve housing and the surrounding environment;
- improve health and well-being through an active and healthy lifestyle, and by addressing a range of issues that affect people’s health;
- make communities safe and secure places in which to live, work and play;
- drive forward changes to the way in which public services are delivered.

To achieve these aims, the Welsh Assembly Government recognised that local authorities are key to developing an enabling environment for Communities First. The Communities First guidance (WAG, 2002, p. 7) notes the following.

- Local authorities have an important role to play in community leadership and should take the lead in ensuring linkages between community strategies and Communities First community action plans.
- Local authorities have a key role in delivering and improving services within Communities First areas in line with needs identified by Communities First partnerships.

However, evaluations of the programme have indicated strongly that, while the ‘capacity development’ aims of the programme have been largely successful, the impact on key markers of deprivation such as poor health, low educational achievement and poor housing quality have not been achieved. Additionally, the Communities First interim evaluation (WAG, 2006c) concludes that the planned bending of mainstream services has not occurred. This failure is perhaps represented in the change of scope of the Communities First programme. Its emphasis has now evolved from its origins as the Welsh Assembly Government’s ‘flagship programme

for tackling poverty and social disadvantage in the most disadvantaged areas of Wales' (WAG, 2002, p. 5). The Communities First interim evaluation (WAG, 2006c) notes that, despite the original stated aims outlined above, 'there is now more clarity among partners that Communities First is the capacity building programme that Welsh Assembly intended and not a regeneration programme' (WAG, 2006c, p. 73).

Underlying this ambiguity is a model of regeneration developed in the *Community Regeneration: Best Practice Review* (Adamson *et al.*, 2001), which suggests that regeneration can be achieved only when it is led by active communities able to define and delineate the problems they experience and develop solutions in partnership with key public sector agencies. This approach assumed that many communities within the Communities First programme would require periods of capacity development to raise collective skills to participate in the regeneration process. However, in the initial stages of policy development, it was envisaged that there were communities where that capacity already existed and that they would be able to engage directly in regeneration activities without a period of capacity development. However, the political context of the launch of the programme established a 'big bang' approach, which simultaneously launched the programme for all 142 partnerships, ensuring that the capacity development requirements of the majority of participating communities would quickly come to characterise Communities First as a capacity development programme.

The Communities First interim evaluation undertaken by Cambridge Policy Consultants (WAG, 2006c) notes that, in the first four years of the programme, considerable progress has been made in capacity development and that the majority of partnerships were functioning well, even where they had experienced early difficulties. The majority of Communities First partnerships are now at a level where they can achieve both community engagement and a platform from which to engage with statutory partners. However, the review found no evidence of the long-term and sustained mainstream programme bending that was anticipated would lead to service provision in deprived areas being more effective in addressing local concerns.

It identifies the following outstanding concerns.

- The non-prescriptive approach has produced problems because of misperception and lack of budgetary control at the local level.
- Public sector partners need to change their ways of working for service delivery in local communities to build on community engagement and local understanding of root causes of problems.

- The evaluation concludes that: ‘at a national level, there are no strategic connections for Communities First with local authorities and other agencies, or policies for collaborating with other organisations working locally’ (WAG, 2006c, p. 141).

The evaluation suggests that, as a whole, the Communities First Programme is failing to achieve its aims as set out in the original guidance, and it also demonstrates the ‘implementation gap’ raised by Taylor and Wilson (2006).

Second, further to the Assembly-commissioned interim evaluation, the Anti-poverty Network Cymru (APNC) carried out three case studies to ‘provide an opportunity for community groups and individuals to talk about their experience of Communities First and the extent to which it has really helped those communities’ (APNC, 2006, p. 11). The APNC evaluation is based on a limited sample, which included some atypical partnerships with limited partnership development, but does give voice to community members who have engaged with the Communities First programme. It identifies three main requirements for the programme (APNC, 2006, p. 3):

- the need to ensure that the Communities First process is participatory;
- that there should be a focus on building the capacity of local people to take part in Communities First;
- that power should be transferred to the local community (meaning that those in charge need to be prepared to give up some of their power).

Finally, it should be noted that the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government has announced a new phase in the development of the Communities First programme, which he has termed Communities Next. Following a consultation paper to be issued in early 2008, the programme will be refocused around SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time) objectives and ‘entail a focus on outcomes and activities rather than capacity-building’. Furthermore, the Welsh Assembly Government will be: ‘looking to see successful evidence of programmes that are working with other partners such as local authorities and local health boards to adjust or “bend” programmes’ (Leighton Andrews, AM in a speech to the Communities First Support Network Conference, 11 October 2007). The Welsh Assembly Government’s intention is to identify the basis for a new three-year funding process commencing in 2009–10. It will issue a consultation document in early 2008 outlining the main features of Communities Next.

Communities First exists within a complex policy environment, which has established a clear commitment by the Welsh Assembly Government to the pursuit of community empowerment in service delivery by the full range of statutory agencies. It offers an opportunity to consider an early attempt at community empowerment and citizen involvement.

This study attempts to learn from this process and explore the implications for community empowerment in the UK. The next chapter sets out the key findings.

5 Findings

The research findings point to a wide range of factors that affect the extent to which community empowerment is actually achieved in the Communities First programme. To facilitate the analysis, the findings have been separated into five domains, which are examined in turn below.

- *Partnerships: structures and processes.* This section explores the impact of the prescribed partnership membership structure and the factors that determine the experience of community members who participate.
- *Representation and democratic relationships.* Partnerships operate within a complex series of relationships with alternative sources of community 'voice'. Here we examine the importance of those relationships and the positive and negative effects on partnership effectiveness.
- *Factors in the wider environment.* Communities First partnerships are affected by a wider environment, which can include rural-urban dimensions, relationships with civil service programme managers, local authority grant managers and other national policies that promote community engagement. This section reviews the impact of these issues on the achievement of community empowerment in Communities First partnerships.
- *Communities First and community empowerment.* The central concern of this study is to review the level of community empowerment achieved within the programme and, in this section, this issue is examined, especially in relationship to partnership influence over statutory sector partners.
- *The local impact of Communities First.* This section reviews the community-level impact of the Communities First programme and illustrates the community capacity development that has been achieved in the majority of the case study areas.

Partnerships: structures and processes

The policy design and delivery model of Communities First provides favourable conditions for the achievement of community empowerment and for community members to exercise influence over service providers in their local community.

The Communities First partnership is the key delivery mechanism and in theory should constitute the actual site where community empowerment is achieved. The Communities First model suggests that the partnership will have power and influence to affect change, both directly through its own activities and indirectly through working with other agencies and service providers in the Communities First area. Community members of the partnership are able to participate directly in the deliberations of the partnership and have a guaranteed pattern of numerical representation, set at one-third of the overall partnership group. In practice, however, this research points to a number of constraints that militate against the achievement of active influence on voluntary and public sector agencies and the private sector by community members involved in the partnerships.

The partnership structure is one of the few prescribed features of the policy and the requirement for a 'three-thirds' pattern of representation of community, statutory and business/voluntary sector interests provides space for active involvement of the community. In practice, in the nine case study areas, there is variation in the pattern of community representation and the programme has offered some flexibility in terms of the time taken to achieve one-third representation from the community. However, in all but one case study (case study F), the one-third community representation has now been achieved. In case study F, there is no current active partnership following withdrawal by community members from the Communities First process. The partnership is currently being re-established following a complete revision of the Communities First structure by the local authority and the appointment of new community development teams. In case study B, the 'community' members are drawn primarily from the membership of four community councils in the dispersed rural area.

Voluntary sector membership of partnerships is strong, with the county-level county voluntary councils active in the majority of partnerships. In contrast, business sector participation is minimal. The few business members present on partnerships are also residents of the communities and, in most respects, function as community members of the partnerships. Only one of the case study areas (case study F) has sizeable employers within the partnership boundary and there is a clear pattern of failure by those employers to recruit from within the community or cross what is effectively a highly segregated business and residential boundary.

The pattern of statutory sector representation is also variable and is in part determined by the priorities that the partnership has established in its community audit exercise. All partnerships have local authority representation. A key issue explored below is the seniority of that representation and the ability of statutory sector partners to support and implement partnership decisions.

The following paragraphs explore key partnership issues and their impact on the achievement of community empowerment.

Structure and governance of partnerships

- The 'three-thirds' model of partnership provides a structure that should give voice to community interests. However, the structure itself cannot do this without commitment from all other partners. Community members have, in general terms, reported feeling overwhelmed by the 'professional' representatives of agencies within partnerships. Inequalities of language usage, knowledge possession and professional expertise are not resolved simply by having adequate numerical representation from the community. A dominant theme in discussions with community members in all case study areas has been the need 'to find my feet'. This has been described variously as a process of learning to feel confident, acquiring an understanding of complex issues, learning the 'jargon' used in meetings and becoming more assertive:

... yes, of course. I did feel that I had power. If I had a bit more knowledge I'd have had more power. It was not about them withholding things from me; it was to do with me simply being not involved in it. I'm just a resident. And you've got to get up to speed and you become fully involved with everything, but it's not your job. (Case study F, community member)

- In order to promote accountability (especially where a community organisation was the grant recipient body) all case study partnerships had adopted quite formal procedural practices. This 'committee-style' practice was generally felt to be discouraging for community participation. The requirement to commit to what was seen in the community as a major role, the long-term nature of that commitment and the heavy time commitment involved were mentioned as barriers even by those taking part. In case studies A, C, D and I, some of these issues were resolved by the creation of wider community-led forums. These report to the partnership board and have allowed a stronger community voice to be heard. This widens participation and gives additional channels for community views to be fed into the partnership board. This considerably strengthens the role of the community members on the actual partnership, which becomes identified as more of an 'executive' body implementing the views of the wider forums.
- Where partnerships develop a practice of voting on issues, there is a feeling on the part of some community members that they can be 'outvoted' by the remaining two-thirds, effectively silencing the community viewpoint.

- In one case study (case study C), community members felt that the views of the employed Communities First co-ordinator and the development staff predominated where there was a divergence of views.
- In the majority of partnerships (five of nine), the role of Chair was not performed by a community member. This raised concerns among community representatives that the influence deriving from this role was not directly available to the community.

Lessons from Communities First

This discussion of issues relating to the partnership structure and its impact on the achievement of community empowerment points to three lessons from the Communities First experience.

Lesson 1: the structural design of any policy instrument developed to promote community empowerment does not in itself guarantee the achievement of community empowerment.

The 'one-third' quota of partnership memberships assigned to the community appeared radical and unprecedented in 2001 when the policy was designed but the review of case studies suggests that it does not in itself provide a counterweight to the professional knowledge and numerical weighting of the remaining two-thirds. Rather, the level of community influence develops as community members' skills and confidence mature.

Lesson 2: different routes for community participation are required to recognise public preferences for different levels of engagement and different abilities to commit time and support to local decision-making.

The provision of diverse routes to participation provides the means to develop a broader base of participation by community members. This points to the importance of the development workers within the Communities First structure who play a key role in developing participatory mechanisms that reflect issues, interests and skills in each specific community. Providing different levels of participation also promotes community learning and the opportunity for escalating levels of participation as individuals develop participation 'careers'. Low-threshold entry points to engagement, initially in informal activities, can gradually build confidence and enable participation in more formal and regulated roles at partnership level.

(Continued)

Lesson 3: an effective commitment to community empowerment will require consideration of structures that give majority membership to community representatives and access to the important role of Chair of Partnership.

Several of the community-led reviews discussed the minority membership of community representatives within the Communities First partnership and the ability to be 'outvoted' by the statutory, voluntary and business members. Clearly this raises the distinction between community influence and community control. The Communities First partnership approach suggests a joint mode of working in which professional expertise is brought to bear on issues identified and delineated by the community. Community aspirations for change are developed and refined by the partnership process, which mediates between local aspiration and the capacity and capabilities of agencies to deliver. However, the evidence from the case studies suggests that few community priorities have been taken up by partnerships and have influenced statutory partners to the level of 'bending' mainstream delivery in the Communities First area. This issue is discussed fully in the section on 'Communities First and community empowerment' later in this chapter.

Concerns about the ability of community members of partnership to think strategically, to step outside immediately local interests and to 'see the bigger picture' have generally prevented discussion about majority community membership of regeneration partnerships and will be true for more general programmes of community empowerment. Consequently, current considerations of arrangements for increased community empowerment are likely to remain within the partnership paradigm that situates community influence within a structure of effective professional control.

Capacity of partnership members to interact successfully in partnership

Several points raised in this discussion of partnership structures refer to the capacity of community members to engage with the more trained, educated and supported members of the partnership drawn from the statutory agencies and the established voluntary sector. The need to promote community capacity to participate was identified in the design of the Communities First programme and the creation of a capacity development plan was the first requirement of each Communities First development team on their appointment. However, capacity development has been interpreted in a very wide sense. It has generally been looked at as overall community capacity and much of the action implemented in capacity development

plans has been about raising general levels of community participation and broader aspects of social capital, especially through the organisation of community events and festivals.

While this has clearly provided a participative and organising experience for many community members, it has rarely specifically addressed the personal development and skills development needs of partnership members. However, despite the limited evidence of specific preparation for a role on the partnership, we have witnessed very high levels of community capacity to engage with Communities First.

- The community members of partnership boards have generally shown themselves to have significant skills and local expertise. In the community-led reviews with partnerships, which were part of this research, community attendance and engagement have been exemplary and the level of analysis, commentary and critique emerging from the contributions of community participants has equalled the contributions of the statutory sector representatives. Community members demonstrated considerable knowledge of local issues and their links with national policies. In all but two of the nine case study areas, we have seen partnerships that are capable of local area management, devolved budgeting and local decision-making.
- In eight of the nine case study areas, there was evidence of considerable commitment and enthusiasm on the part of community members about their involvement and a clear belief that they are able to effect change in their communities. This emergence of a 'can do' attitude is perhaps one of the most striking of the outcomes of Communities First to date, especially in areas with little history of community activity. In case study F, there was also evidence of strong community involvement in the past. The current absence of an active partnership is a result of community members disengaging from the Communities First process because of failed delivery by the local authority, which is currently the grant recipient body. A renewed development team is rebuilding the partnership following intervention by the Welsh Assembly Government.
- Community membership is drawn from a wide range of social categories in the nine areas and includes professional people who live in the designated community as well as residents with low levels of qualifications. The diversity of community membership should be valued and stereotypes of poor communities as entirely occupied by a poorly educated, apathetic and ill-informed public are far from the reality indicated in these case studies.

- Many community members have long individual ‘careers’ of community engagement. These careers often provide experience of community representation and attendance at regional and national events and forums. This level of experience is embedded in every community visited in this study.
- Community members often have overlapping roles in other local organisations such as community councils, churches and faith groups, tenants and residents’ organisations. This can lead to an overburdening of the few, although this was not evident in any of the partnerships visited where activities to develop wider participation had generally been successful.
- Despite this embedded pattern of community skills, capacity development is an important part of the process of engagement and it is unreasonable to expect community participation at partnership level without support, training and personal development opportunities. This is particularly important in the development of wider patterns of participation and ensuring participation by ‘difficult to reach’ groups. For example, only one of the case studies (case study A) had a specific policy for ensuring youth participation at partnership level.
- The role of the Communities First development teams has contributed significantly to the capacity development of community members of the partnerships. This has been evident in formal ways through the organisation of training but also informally by providing knowledge and support to community members:

... to be honest we went into it blind ... X [*community development worker*] is our forum leader, and she has been a wealth of knowledge. And still is. She’s a guiding light to us ... so a lot of things we’ve achieved, she’s done all the background work for us. I think we all went into it blind, we just started from the beginning, and we are where we are now. (Case study C, community member)
- It is notable that, in the two case studies currently experiencing partnership difficulties, the local authority grant recipient bodies have not followed the usual route of assigning an area-based development team directly to the community. In both instances, a central team that has not been located directly in the community has been established. In case study F, central teams were assigned specific portfolios – for example, youth – and worked across all the Communities First areas within the local authority. In case study H, centrally located development workers were assigned to specific communities but covered more than one community. Both models appear to have lacked the ability to develop close

working relationships between the development team and community members of the partnerships, as well as the wider community. The value of a community development team in promoting participation is very clearly evident in the remaining case studies. Case study F now has a specific development team of a co-ordinator and two development workers. Case study H currently has a difficult relationship between the partnership and the development workers employed by the local authority and is seeking a new grant recipient body.

- In partnerships where a high level of capacity has been achieved, community members were impatient about the level of statutory sector response (case studies A, C, D, I). In these partnerships, there was a palpable sense of irritation with public sector partnership members who it was felt had not fully recognised the capabilities of the community members. This can be described as a 'perception gap' in which local residents are still not being recognised for their considerable potential contribution and are still regarded by some representatives of statutory sector organisations as conduits for consultation rather than as joint decision-makers.
- In these same partnerships, there was additional frustration that the programme did not provide funding to permit them to deliver projects directly. Staff and community members could offer evidence of programmes and projects being successfully delivered at community level. They felt that there should be some direct funding so that partnerships could deliver actions independently of the statutory sector and where the statutory models of delivery had failed.

Lessons from Communities First

Capacity development is an essential component of any attempt to promote public engagement and participation in local decision-making. This study fully illustrates the existing embedded capacity that exists in any community but there are specific sets of skill, knowledge and understanding that have to be developed if structures such as Communities First partnerships are able to effectively promote community empowerment. Community members enter the process with generic skills and experience, but can require support and learning opportunities to develop some of the specific skills involved in partnership working. These can include personal skills of self-presentation and communication in the formal context of meetings as well as the ability to think strategically.

(Continued)

Furthermore, there is a capacity issue for statutory and voluntary practitioners who must be enabled to work in partnership mode with community members and to recognise fully the value of their contribution. These issues suggest a number of clear lessons to be derived from the Communities First experience.

Lesson 4: community members are able and willing to participate in local processes of decision-making. They may possess some of the required skills and competences, but will need support to identify and fill skills gaps, and to learn to apply them in the institutional context of a formal policy programme.

While skills levels will vary between communities and individual community members, the partnerships studied have clearly demonstrated that communities can meet the challenges of empowerment, engagement and participation. Community members are working effectively alongside statutory, business and voluntary sector members of partnerships.

Lesson 5: a formal support mechanism will be required to develop capacity and support community members in their learning and their development of a 'participation career'.

The Communities First development teams have performed this role to the considerable appreciation of community participants in the majority of our case studies. The instigation of a capacity development plan has also ensured that the general levels of community engagement have been developed and that participation has been extended beyond the typical core of community volunteers to establish wider community involvement. This research shows that support for community members is essential in developing their ability to participate in local structures.

Community members in the case study areas have clearly needed and valued the support provided by a dedicated community development team. However, providing such support at a national level raises major issues about resources and the reservoir of skilled support workers that might be required to effectively develop community empowerment. In a national programme of community empowerment, the levels of support provided by the Communities First programme would be impossible to achieve and alternative, less resource-intensive patterns of support will be required. These might include web-based resources, short course provision through adult and community learning agencies, and provision of resource materials and practice guides for emerging partnerships.

The Local Government White Paper (DCLG, 2006b) identifies the need to develop a support network to enable communities to respond to the new opportunities for engagement. Components of this approach include strengthening the 'Third sector's own ability to build community capacity' (DCLG, 2006b, p. 46). An emphasis is also placed on information services delivered through the 'Together We Can' website (www.togetherwecan.info) and learning for active citizenship opportunities within the Take Part programme. The experience of the Joseph Rowntree Neighbourhood Programme and its support programme for 20 communities provides useful experience to inform the design of any support services delivered by a national programme to promote greater community empowerment. First, the low take-up of internet information services provided by the Neighbourhood Programme should be heeded and alternative routes for information are necessary. Three successful features of the programme of 'light touch' were:

- providing community organisations with access to a facilitator to offer support and advice over an extended time period on issues determined by the community organisation;
- provision of funding to assist development of the partnership;
- provision of opportunities for networking with other communities in the programme and for sharing information and models of practice (Taylor *et al.*, 2007).

Lessons from Communities First

Lesson 6: partnership members from statutory and voluntary sector organisations must be helped to work sensitively with community members, to understand their often different approaches to issues and to recognise their valuable contribution to identifying issues and ideas and making decisions rather than merely responding to pre-existing agendas.

Creating a framework for public engagement does not in itself change values, attitudes and working methods of the representatives of public sector agencies involved. There can be resentment about new roles that require partnership working with community members and there may be an absence of skills and training that equip individuals to work in this way. Additionally, there may be tensions between the requirements of the partnership and the regulatory frameworks that control officers' actions. Training is an essential component of

(Continued)

creating better community-based working practices and of challenging values and beliefs that militate against effective partnership working.

For example, to support the Communities First policing teams, the South Wales Police commissioned a three-day course that developed skills in community liaison and effective partnership working, as well as raising knowledge about the social impact of poverty and social exclusion. Most importantly, the course was delivered jointly to Communities First partnership community members and the mutual learning opportunity radically altered perceptions and expectations on both sides.

Lesson 7: local partnerships and forums of the kind represented here by Communities First partnerships must be tasked with real functions and must have resources that they can deploy in order to play a meaningful role as change agents in local regeneration.

Continued commitment of community members is conditional on them feeling empowered and functional within the partnership. Many participants in this study felt that they would not participate in a mere talking shop. The term 'purposeful participation' is emerging in discussions on Communities Next, the follow-through phase of Communities First. Purposeful participation must involve partnerships delivering real regeneration projects in their neighbourhoods. It must also involve participatory budgets set at levels that can make a real difference in the quality of life at neighbourhood level. Purposeful participation also requires responsive public and voluntary sector partners willing to attend to community concerns, and to genuinely redirect and reshape services accordingly.

Expectations, aims and objectives of the partnership

Community members of partnerships, both in interviews and the community-led reviews, have provided a clear opinion that community involvement at the inception of a partnership is a product of a desire for change and an intention to influence the quality of life in the community. Those who were involved demonstrated a very clear perception that their participation could lead to positive change for their community.

In contrast, there was a belief on the part of community members that statutory sector involvement was triggered initially by the early expectation that Communities First would provide funding opportunities for the statutory sector and by an organisational obligation to be involved. When the Communities First approach

became more widely understood, it was felt that many statutory agencies effectively withdrew from partnership, providing only the minimal engagement required:

I felt that representation from external agencies dwindled. I think that was partly because in the early stages of Communities First they thought that there would be something on the table for them. Partners were hanging around for that reason rather than what they could bring to the table. Which is some of what the community were afraid of. (Case study A, Communities First staff)

This lack of clarity of expectations has been identified within the Communities First interim evaluation (WAG, 2006c) as a product of the poor guidance provided initially by the Welsh Assembly Government, reinforced by poorly informed civil servants who were required to deal with enquiries on these issues. The initial expectation of Communities First as a major regeneration initiative was that large-scale funding would be available:

... it was kind of to do with the way Communities First was mis-sold to communities. When people felt there was going to be a pile of money on the table, they could maybe feel important and sit round to divvy that up. (Case study A, community member)

In reality, no WAG statements promoted this expectation and the intention to bend mainstream expenditure had been the stated regeneration approach throughout the consultation period. However, the £83 million dedicated to the programme for the initial three-year period was an unprecedented level of funding for community-based action and created a clear impression of a major funding boost to the sector. In practice, the majority of the funding was to establish the Communities First development teams, develop the partnerships and assist infrastructural development in local authorities, the voluntary sector and the Communities First Support Network. However, the announced level of expenditure clearly shaped expectations in both communities and the statutory agencies that were entering partnerships. The failure of that expectation has had long-term consequences for relationships between community members and statutory sector members of partners, as community members feel that statutory sector members have failed to live up to their initial enthusiasm for Communities First.

Similar confusion has surrounded the description of the programme in its early days as a flagship regeneration project and the emergence of terminology in more recent WAG guidance documentation, which describes it as a 'capacity development programme'. The ambiguity of the policy intent of the programme has highlighted

the lack of a clear connection between processes of empowerment and tangible regeneration outcomes. The evidence from the case studies clearly suggests that the capacity development intentions have been realised in seven of the nine case studies and that those communities are ready to move into a more outcome-based programme, which Welsh Assembly Government ministers have indicated will be the focus of Communities Next from 2008/09 onwards.

Lessons from Communities First

Again, this points to some clear learning from the Communities First experience.

Lesson 8: in developing any policy structure or process to promote community empowerment, clear guidance that delineates the aims and objectives of the policy must be issued.

The terms of reference, parameters of operation and limits of function for any instrument established to promote community empowerment must be clearly and unambiguously defined at the outset. Many historical regeneration programmes have raised false expectations in the communities targeted, a cardinal sin in the field of community development. Communities First also managed to raise false expectations in the statutory sector. A policy promoting greater community empowerment must avoid similar failures if it is to gain acceptance by community members and support from statutory agencies involved in its delivery. Initial expectations should be realistically determined and carefully communicated.

Lesson 9: specifically, the role of public sector partners must be delineated clearly and communicated effectively to those agencies. Ambiguity effectively permits avoidance of responsibility.

Communities First has lacked clear guidance for statutory partners, partly as a result of the non-prescriptive pattern of the policy, but also because no definitions of key terms such as 'programme bending' and 'mainstreaming' were provided in guidance documentation. Without clear expectations and defined responsibilities for statutory partners, especially local government, significant variation of practice has emerged. Within that variation, almost total avoidance of commitment to the Communities First process by statutory agencies has been possible. In any national programme to promote community empowerment, the policy intentions and roles and responsibilities of statutory agencies must be clearly defined by Government and its policy authors.

Developmental stage of the partnership

The observations of the case studies demonstrate that partnerships are at different stages of maturity and this affects the manner in which the partnership is able to interact with and influence outside agencies. Two main categories can be identified.

- *Passive partnerships* – where the partnership lacks maturity and is a ‘recipient’ of more consultative-type relationships with external agencies. These partnerships require further opportunity for capacity building and development of more participative ways of working.
- *Active partnerships* – where there are effective community members able to engage with statutory agencies with confidence and competence. The experience from the case studies suggests that, with support from a development team, this can be achieved quite quickly. However, the evidence is variable and determined by complex relationships between localised factors, which include past experience, individual personalities, the experience of the development team and the receptiveness of statutory agencies to the role of community members on the partnerships.

The interim evaluation of Communities First (WAG, 2006c) identifies issues caused by the simultaneous launch of Communities First in 142 identified cases. In particular, the shortage of skilled community workers significantly undermined initial progress in areas where inexperienced teams failed to develop effective partnerships in the early stages of the programme. Clearly, there are significant implications here for any programme of community empowerment that is launched nationally. While no national UK programme for community empowerment could adopt such an intensive community development model of support (see section on ‘Capacity of partnership members to interact successfully in partnership’ earlier in this chapter), the provision of a sufficient infrastructure to allow partnerships to achieve maturity will be essential.

Lessons from Communities First

Lesson 10: community empowerment is not readily achievable in all areas and greater levels of preparatory capacity building will be required in areas with little tradition of active community and areas with low levels of social capital. Consequently, the achievement of community empowerment will have an uneven front and major divergence of levels of local participation will be evident in the short to medium term.

The factors discussed in this section have been very much grounded in the practice and experience of the partnership process itself. However, the patterns of representation of community interests achieved in partnerships and the relationship between partnerships and other modes of democratic representation raise issues that are dealt with in the following section of the report.

Representation and democratic relationships

In any community there will be a number of alternative routes for the expression of local views, some of which also provide mechanisms of local influence. Proposals for increased community empowerment will not emerge into a vacuum of public engagement but will require integration with a range of structures and processes that currently provide opportunity for local 'voice'. As well as the periodic opportunities provided by local and national elections, there is a range of channels for community influence, which include:

- local authority members;
- community and town councils (where they exist);
- local area forums;
- pre-existing community regeneration organisations.

These multiple forms of local representation raise the difficult issue of the relative legitimacy of different modes of representation of local opinion. This presents problems for those agencies and external partners who are attempting to work at community level.

Local authority members

Locally elected ward councillors can see Communities First either as a threat to their status or as an opportunity for local action and community engagement. The local member potentially has an important role as a gatekeeper. First, as part of the structure of governance, a councillor is able to directly affect council policy and practice, and influence strategic direction. Second, local members have relationships with officers and teams within the local authority, and can secure resources and support for community objectives.

The promotion of a changing role for local members has been a key feature of local government reform and service improvement strategies in the last ten years, and the role of the 'front-line councillor' has come to the fore as a preferred model. There is also a wider debate about the future role of councillors following the perceived marginalisation of non-cabinet members in the local authority structure:

In Strong and Prosperous Communities the government makes a strong statement about the importance of ward councillors as local political and community leaders. It encourages local authorities to adopt a package of powers and responsibilities to empower members, including new opportunities to act on local issues, influence mainstream service choices, be more effective advocates, and hold the council and other service providers to account more effectively. (James and Cox, 2007, p. 3)

This picture of the 'front-line councillor' is supported by the experience of Communities First where, in six case studies, councillors are acting as community champions, providing community leadership and advocacy, and supporting local organisations.

In these six case studies, the local authority councillor is cited as influential in ensuring that local authority officers act on the issues expressed through Communities First. In four of the case studies, the local authority member was also the Chair of the Communities First partnership:

Any problems that we get, we can say to Councillor X [*name of councillor*] and he'll go direct to the council or the officers involved in the local authority and challenge them direct. As his job is, really, to be our representative. (Case study C, community member)

Where I interface with the council, what is very, very definite is that, if I phone as the Communities First co-ordinator, that doesn't cut much ice. But, with the support of the councillor, that does. Where we do have influence, it's because of the involvement of the councillor in this partnership. I'd even get him to email people ahead of me speaking to them so they're clear that he has an interest, because otherwise they just won't bother. (Case study A, Communities First worker)

This 'championing' role means that the councillor is a key power resource, acting as a lever for Communities First to produce action. This ability is further enhanced by two factors.

- *Where the councillor is a member of the ruling party group within the local authority.* Opposition members were reported as having less influence over officers.
- *Where the councillor has high status as a cabinet member or as a senior figure within the authority.* In case study E, the councillor member of the partnership was also Deputy Council Leader and was seen as a major resource in terms of the partnership achieving its objectives with the local authority.

The importance of the role of local authority members in supporting regeneration programmes has also been noted in the findings of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Neighbourhood Programme (Taylor *et al.*, 2007), which clearly identifies the impact that a supportive local councillor can have on community-led regeneration initiatives. The councillors' calls for action initiated in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 will also clearly support the development of this role for councillors.

It is also true that councillors can feel threatened by community-based initiatives, which present an alternative voice of the community to their own representational role and can oppose actions taken by local partnerships. While, in our case studies, there was no evidence of deliberately obstructive local members, other research suggests that this can be a major barrier to the ability of Communities First partnerships to make progress (Scorrer and Adamson, 2007). Examples of hostile and disruptive councillors do exist and both local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government have been reluctant to intervene where this has been the case. However, in our case studies, where a councillor was not performing the 'front-line' role, they were simply being passive or inactive in relation to the Communities First partnership.

This suggests that establishing clear guidance for councillors is essential, and that this should be accompanied by training and support from agencies such as Welsh Local Government Association in Wales, the Local Government Association in England and service improvement initiatives such as the IDeA, which operates its online Member Development Community of Practice, and the associated Local Leadership Academy (LoLA).

Community councils

In four of the case study areas there were community councils, but we were not able to assess how active they were. Many areas in Wales do not have community or town councils and their scope and role vary considerably. Generally seen as the first tier of local government, they are largely identical to the parish councils in England. Funded by a local precept included in the general Community Charge, they have limited powers and generally low levels of influence over unitary authorities. They are consulted on planning decisions and usually provide local services such as community halls, public conveniences, bus shelters and care of local public spaces and parish footpaths and bridleways. In all but one of the case study areas, there was no evidence of community or town councils playing any role within the Communities First process and they do not seem to have engaged with the local partnership to any measurable extent. Some community councillors were also members of partnerships but operated more as residents than in their role as community councillors.

The raising of the profile of parish councils for England in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 suggests a government desire to strengthen the presence of parish councils in local governance. Parish councils will now be easier to establish on request from communities and the role of establishing them passes to unitary and district authorities in order to streamline and speed the process. They will also be extended to London and can be given alternative names other than parish or town councils. Established parishes will also be able to apply for quality parish status to recognise their good practice. However, Government also recognises that they are not appropriate for all communities and the experience of the case studies here suggests, in the majority of cases, these councils have limited impact and command little public credibility.

However, as recognised in the Local Government White Paper, they may have greater impact and public attachment to them in rural areas and, in case study B (our fully rural area), the four constituent community councils have provided an organisational structure and source of community representation for the Communities First partnership. In this instance, they have helped compensate

for the perceived lack of community identity caused by the wide dispersal of the communities in the partnership.

Existing community regeneration organisations

The presence of prior forms of community action affects the way in which Communities First operates. In all but one of the case study areas there were existing community development organisations that pre-dated the Communities First initiative. In most instances these were independent community organisations operating as development trusts, with high levels of income and complex portfolios of community action. In two case study areas they had received support from the People in Communities programme (a Welsh Assembly Government precursor to Communities First). These trusts were long-standing organisations that had developed good relationships with councils and partner agencies. In most areas there were also long histories of community self-organisation of sporting and cultural activities.

The presence of past activity of this kind creates a *legacy effect* that the Communities First partnership operates within. In most respects, this legacy effect is a positive influence on the ability of Communities First to engage the community. There is a clear link between past community activities, the level of social capital and the current willingness of the local community to engage with Communities First. This was most evident in case study E where a strong mining community tradition of self-organisation had been reflected in active support for the 1984/85 strike and the development of a major community organisation in the wake of pit closures. However, the legacy effect can also be negative in a number of ways.

- For partnership agencies engaging with the community, multiple points of contact can cause a confusion or dilution of work. This may lead to inaction, as partners do not want to decide/define with whom they should work. Ideally, all local players will identify common objectives and establish roles for their achievement.
- Coherent strategies may be difficult to develop. Where there are significant numbers of existing community organisations, Communities First may be best suited to playing a facilitating/co-ordinating role.
- In two case study areas (case studies A and D), there was considerable conflict between the newly established Communities First partnership and longer-standing community organisations. In both instances, the new Communities First partnership was managed by the local authority and pre-existing local organisations felt that its establishment undermined their long-standing work

in the community. In one instance, that conflict has been resolved following participation in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Neighbourhood Programme and the provision of mediation by that programme. In the other, it remains a major barrier to the Communities First partnership achieving some of its community development objectives. However, the partnership has successfully established a very high level of community participation and the longer-standing group is largely moribund but with continued control over key local resources.

Lessons from Communities First

Any policy to promote community empowerment will necessitate the creation of a local mechanism that provides a location for the community voice to be heard and acted upon. Inevitably, there will be connections and disconnections with local structures that already exist and that may already be performing a vital and popular role in local development, service delivery and influence over statutory agencies. The role of the local authority member for a community is clearly a central concern.

Lesson 11: any structures and processes developed to promote community empowerment must provide for local authority members a clear role that both harmonises with and develops their current local authority role. Structures and processes implemented should encourage, facilitate and reward their involvement.

The experience derived from the case studies suggests a limited potential contribution from community and town councils. However, their variability in levels of activity and their complete absence in many communities present a critical difficulty in establishing a fixed role within any local mechanisms for community empowerment.

Lesson 12: the considerable variation in the existence of, and role and levels of activity of, community (or parish) councils will make it difficult to prescribe their role in any movement towards greater community empowerment. Any proposal should allow space for local practice that reflects the current role of community and parish councils and the standing they have in the community to emerge.

Additionally, experience in our case studies points to a very positive outcome where the experience, knowledge and commitment of pre-existing community organisations is harnessed in the emerging local partnership (case studies

(Continued)

B, C, E and G). It also points to potentially very negative outcomes where the emerging structure replicates and duplicates existing activities and is imposed from outside the community. Consequently, proposals to develop community empowerment need to engage carefully with existing structures of community representation and participation, and to develop their role rather than replace it.

Lesson 13: proposals to promote community empowerment and local engagement must recognise the role of existing local forums and organisations such as community development trusts and provide clear entry routes for them to become part of the emerging local mechanism for community empowerment.

Factors in the wider environment

The discussion has identified a number of critical issues associated with the design and implementation of the structure of community empowerment represented by the Communities First partnership. However, it is important to recognise the complex environment in which Communities First operates alongside additional programmes and initiatives delivered by a wide range of agencies in the policy community. In some areas and in some policy domains this creates both competition and duplication, and can have a significant effect on the functioning of Communities First and the success of community involvement in the process. These factors are considered below.

Rural issues

In general terms, there has been no great difference between the urban, valleys-urban, and rural communities studied. The majority of issues are shared and the conclusions from the case studies demonstrate considerable uniformity. While one case study (B) operates within a rural environment, case study E, although characterised as valleys-urban, also has a large rural hinterland and experiences many of the isolation and transport difficulties associated with rural communities in Wales. The North Wales seminar held to discuss emerging findings also involved participants from rurally based partnerships and their views have been incorporated here.

Several specifically rural issues that affect the patterns of community involvement in partnerships can be identified.

- Transport – although not confined to rural locations, the paucity of public transport generally in Wales is more acute in rural areas. In the rural partnership with a wide geographical spread of communities, this has clear implications for public participation in hindering access to meetings.
- The lack of significant populations in single communities has necessitated the ‘necklacing’ of communities within single partnerships. This has implications for community identity and cohesion within partnerships. The rural partnership reports that it is difficult to overcome insularity and promote cohesion across its four constituent communities.
- The dispersal of poor populations over wide geographical areas makes identification of need, and the design of programmes to meet that need, difficult.
- In the rural case study area, there are complex and cross-cutting social divisions. There are divisions between Welsh speakers and English speakers. To some extent this corresponds with divisions between the established local population and incomers.

As a result of these dynamics, there is a potential diversity in the way in which Communities First operates in rural areas. In case study B the partnership was seen as an enabling and facilitating device rather than as an agent for delivery of projects. It provided support for more local organisations to achieve their objectives. Engagement with the community was achieved partly through working with the community councils and by each ward providing two representatives to join the partnership board.

One response (identified in the North Wales seminar) to issues of dispersion and community representation was to build partnership membership around community members and forego significant statutory sector involvement. The partnerships were seen as community forums and statutory sector organisations were co-opted when specific issues or projects required their presence. The positive effects of this approach appear to be a more ‘community-friendly’ partnership process where local people are not intimidated by a large professional presence. The approach also offers some relief to agencies struggling in terms of obligatory attendance at meetings whether or not their service provision was an agenda item. It was believed by participants at the seminar that this provided better relationships with statutory agencies, which were then more likely to respond positively when approached for support. However, it was also felt that this approach prevented the building of relationships between a community and its service providers, which the Communities First Partnership was designed to provide. Unfortunately, none of the case studies employed this approach and this report can only draw attention to this practice but is not able effectively to consider its impact on local decision-making.

Lessons from Communities First

The rural dimension presents specific difficulties for an area-based mode of local decision-making. Population dispersal, highly localised community identities and lack of population critical mass in specific target groups all present conditions that are not evident in highly concentrated populations experiencing poverty in valleys-urban and urban communities. Despite these potential difficulties, participants in case study B and in the North Wales seminar felt that the Communities First partnership model had been useful and was able to deliver local engagement. However, this had been achieved by reshaping it towards rural conditions. In particular, the practice of a largely community populated partnership with ad hoc issue-based attendance by statutory agencies resolved a number of issues associated with the problem of population dispersal and coverage of large geographical areas.

Lesson 14: structures and processes initiated to promote community empowerment must be sensitive to rural issues and must recognise the need for the emergence of local practice that can reflect the specific social and geographical characteristics of diverse rural areas.

Lesson 15: the relationship between community membership and more ad hoc statutory sector membership of partnerships reflected in some rural partnerships in Wales provides a useful model for resolving some of the more generally experienced problems with statutory sector support of multiple partnerships and community concerns about statutory sector domination of partnerships.

Although not observed directly in any of the case studies, the reported model of a more community-focused partnership with ad hoc and co-opted statutory sector attendance could offer a less resource-intensive approach to local forums for community empowerment. The model could resolve a number of key issues.

- Meetings would be more community friendly and less intimidating for community members, especially those ‘finding their feet’.
- Less statutory agency resource would be needed and may favour more senior representation when required.
- Statutory agencies might be more responsive to community issues if they were not continually involved in the minutiae of partnership functioning.

The role of the civil service and local government

In all the case study areas, reference has been made to the bureaucracy associated with the Communities First programme. There has also been a strong theme running through the interviews that the civil servants delivering the programme lacked an understanding of community-based delivery and of the capacity development objectives of the programme they were administering. Additionally, partnerships have been particularly concerned with the delays in funding decisions.

The interim evaluation of Communities First highlighted concerns about civil service capacity, both in numerical terms to handle the programme and in knowledge terms to understand the ways in which capacity development has to be delivered on the ground:

The Assembly Government's internal team in the first two years of the programme was overstretched in terms of resources and the expertise needed to both administer the programme and provide advice and guidance. (WAG, 2006c, p. 31)

Similar concerns have been expressed by partnerships about the role of local government, of critical importance where the local authority is the grant recipient body. Here the experience is varied. Several of the local authorities in which the case studies were located had initiated internal reorganisation to facilitate the Communities First process and have established effective support teams (case studies A, C, E, G, H, I).

In case study H, the relationship between key community members of the partnership, including the Chair, had recently broken down amid partnership perceptions that the process was 'top-down' and that the local authority was effectively making decisions for the community. While it is not possible to comment here on the situation, it does point to the critical nature of the relationship between the partnership and the local authority. In this instance, the partnership is now looking for an alternative grant recipient body within the voluntary sector.

In case study F, there is a general consensus that the local authority failed to understand the implications of the Communities First model in the first few years of delivery and to establish an effective area-based model of working. Following Welsh Assembly Government intervention in 2006, a full reorganisation was undertaken, new staff appointed and the Communities First process revived. However, negative perceptions remain within the community and the attempted rebuilding of the partnership is a lengthy and complicated process in which community trust of

the local authority is at an all-time low. In contrast, case studies A, B, C, E and I identified generally positive relationships with local authority members and officers. Relationships in case studies D and G were more subject to tensions and required more sustained work to maintain effective working relationships across the range of the local authorities' service departments.

These findings suggest that the ability of civil servants and local authorities to work in ways that promote community empowerment cannot be taken for granted. Involving citizens and communities in the way that services are delivered, and empowering community members to make decisions is a reversal of the general role of both the local and central state that has developed over the last century and more. In particular, a model of service delivery based on the municipal role of the local authority has minimised the community role in the process and distanced the local state from its constituents (Adamson, 2006). In this historical model, communities and citizens have been perceived as passive recipients of services. Decisions to promote community empowerment consequently require considerable support and professional development of both civil servants and local authority staff to work in new ways. This is an issue of both cultural and structural change and requires reform of deeply entrenched processes, especially those associated with financial audit by both central and local government.

This is also a resource issue, as the expectation that public sector agencies work closely with their public requires a reorientation of a wide range of organisational features. These may include the location and accessibility of offices, improved public access to staff resources and time, involvement of staff in community forums, retraining of staff in community-based working practices and, ultimately, redirection of policy and delivery mechanisms to reflect public concerns.

Lessons from Communities First

This discussion points to some key institutional barriers associated with the capacity of civil service, local government and public sector staff to engage with a greater localisation of decision-making. This suggests that a combination of institutional and personal capacity within the public sector makes the achievement of community empowerment difficult, even where there is strong will in all partners. Key lessons are as follows.

(Continued)

Lesson 16: civil service, local authority and public sector staff will require training and support to enable more participative modes of working to flourish.

Proposals for increased community empowerment will need to promote professional, social, cultural, institutional and organisational change at a complex number of levels if community empowerment is to be achieved. This is inevitably a medium to long-term process. Proposals such as those contained in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 will be difficult to achieve and will require active promotion and support by agencies such as the Local Government Association in England and the Welsh Local Government Association.

Lesson 17: state and public sector organisations will require funding in order to achieve the required changes. This may be provided by diversion of funding from traditional models of delivery to more citizen-centred practice or by providing new streams of hypothecated funding.

In the Communities First context, there has been financial support provided for local authorities to develop central support mechanisms and to enable the local authority to reorientate itself around the Communities First provision. Nationally, 58 posts in local authorities have been directly funded. Five of our case studies are situated within local authority areas where considerable infrastructural change has occurred within the local authority to underpin the Communities First process. Additionally, following a slow start and a low resource base, the Welsh Assembly Government has developed a central resource consisting of six staff and two secondees. Additionally, there are five regional implementation teams consisting of a further 18 staff.

Additional support has been provided to the wider voluntary sector by Welsh Assembly Government funding of the Communities First Support Network, which is a consortium of eight third-sector organisations. In total, 17.5 full-time staff have been funded. Collectively, this represents a significant resource in addition to the 800 plus Communities First Development Team posts. While it is not suggested here that a UK programme to promote community empowerment could be funded to similar levels, these resources are indicative of the requirement to provide a firm foundation for local decision-making.

Relationships with other structures of community engagement

One clear failing of the Communities First process has been its lack of influence over the community planning process established by the Local Government Act 2003. The Act requires local authorities to actively engage communities in determining local priorities and to influence the strategic planning process at local authority level. Only one Communities First partnership was able to cite evidence of its influence over this process and to identify priorities it had established at partnership level in the community plan. In other partnerships, they were either unaware of the process or felt unable to influence the development of their local plan.

In part this is a failure derived from the parallel developments of the two policies. Communities First was established in some areas prior to local authorities beginning to fulfil their obligations on community planning. The implementation of the community planning process was very uneven in Wales and the level of community consultation in the process highly variable. The failure to join up these initiatives in Wales represents a clear outcome of the structure of policy silos in central and local government. This issue was identified in the Communities First interim evaluation as indicative of a lack of connection between the Communities First programme and wider national strategies:

This multiplicity of strategies creates a problem for both Community Planning and for Communities First. Both frameworks are seeking to influence the delivery of services, and ultimately create the conditions for regeneration with holistic solutions. (WAG, 2006c, p. 135)

This duplication of community involvement has caused confusion at community level and, for several partnerships, is regarded as a missed opportunity to convey community concerns to the local authority.

Lessons from Communities First

This failure of two major national strategies to connect at local level underlines the need for effective 'joining up' of initiatives. Community involvement is a fragile process and easily eroded by duplication of participative and consultative structures. Where this occurs, it undermines community belief in the processes, especially where there is divergence in the proposals that emerge from parallel activities.

(Continued)

Lesson 18: the design and implementation of measures to promote community empowerment must be completely aware of and harmonise with other national, regional and local strategies that have similar aims. Unification of structures to promote community empowerment across policy silos is an essential ingredient of sustained community involvement.

This issue will become increasingly important as reforms promote greater community empowerment. The revised guidance for community planning in Wales draws specific attention to the need to engage with the Communities First process and hopefully this will be evident in the next round of community planning. Similar issues will emerge as the local service boards (LSBs) are established and there will be a clear need for Communities First partnerships to have very effective communication and working relationships with the LSBs. Parallel issues in England exist in relation to the roles of local strategic partnerships, sustainable communities strategies and the local area agreements. Additional engagement routes through petitioning and citizen juries will complicate the situation further. Bringing the full plurality of engagement routes together will represent a significant challenge for local and central government.

Communities First and community empowerment

The primary objective of this study has been to identify the ability of Communities First partnerships to provide a vehicle for community engagement and empowerment of community members. We have employed the term 'community empowerment' to describe a localisation of decision-making in which community members are directly involved. We have suggested that this is most likely to be achieved through a two-stage process of influence (i.e. indirect influence), rather than directly exercising power to make things happen on the part of residents.

The Communities First partnership provides the organisational structure where that influence can be exercised and is a space where community members and representatives of the statutory, voluntary and business sectors meet to deliberate and discuss local issues, and to design remedial, regenerative actions. The Communities First policy puts the community viewpoint centre stage through the community audit and the community action plan, both of which must be derived from active community involvement. We have seen in the section on 'Partnerships: structures and processes' earlier in this chapter the active response of community members to the challenge of involvement and the effectiveness of their participation in all but one of the case studies. However the test of the ability of the Communities

First programme to deliver community empowerment is whether it has achieved influence over the other sector members of the partnership.

The virtual absence of business sector representatives in the case study partnerships has precluded business responses to partnership interests. This failure is a contributory component of the general failure of Communities First to tackle the jobs and economy domain of the *Communities First Vision Framework*. This failure is of central concern in the ministerial statements about Communities Next. The voluntary sector response has been favourable and the voluntary sector is represented on the majority of partnerships through the county voluntary councils (CVCs). CVCs have received funding for 36 posts to provide this support, again underlining the need to resource initiatives to promote public engagement.

However, the major test of the promotion of community empowerment within the Communities First programme is whether it has successfully promoted 'bending' of mainstream services provided by the statutory sector. This was a primary intention of the policy and was promoted as an alternative model of regeneration to the direct funding of regeneration projects. This approach originated from an analysis during the consultation stage of Communities First, which found that many aspects of the patterns of social exclusion evident in Wales were the result of poor service delivery and service exclusion experienced by poor communities (NAfW, 2000). However, the interim evaluation of Communities First (WAG, 2006c) concluded:

However, there has been no evidence so far of the long term sustainable mainstream programme bending that would lead to service provision in deprived areas being more effective. (WAG, 2006c, p. 141)

That conclusion is supported by this study and the following observations can be made on the basis of this research.

- In the majority of case studies, there has been little evidence of significant programme bending by statutory agencies. Influence of the partnership is at the lower end of decision-making and we have seen no evidence of a major redesign or alteration in service provision as a result of the partnership processes. Where we have seen changes to local service delivery models, these have generally occurred as a result of a national level of agreement, with associated funding, to enable organisations to alter delivery patterns. The best large-scale example of this was the formation of Communities First police teams by the South Wales Police, which was funded by WAG to deliver intensive community policing in 16 Communities First areas. However, when funding for this initiative ended, so did this particular form of service delivery. This is also the only example identified by the interim evaluation.

- In the majority of partnerships, there was evidence that statutory agencies experienced resource problems in supporting multiple partnerships. This was especially true in areas of high concentration of Communities First partnerships, such as Rhondda Cynon Taff where there are 23 partnerships. These problems tend to influence the seniority of representatives that agencies are able to assign to partnership support. Similar problems are experienced in rural communities where the dispersed nature of partnerships can create logistical difficulties in servicing them. In the partnerships studied, there was no evidence of high-ranking personnel (e.g. directors or heads of service) from the statutory sector being involved in direct support of partnerships, although this was an expectation set out in the original policy guidance.
- In the case studies there are a small number of examples where small-scale localised bending of delivery has occurred. This appears to be where the decisions of the partnership largely coincide with the pre-existing objectives and policy direction of the statutory agency. In case study I, there was evidence of local health board responses to partnership concerns in revising care patterns for older residents. In case study C, local authority planned expenditure on new fencing for a local park was diverted to provide play facilities more favoured by the community. In case study B, the partnership has worked with the local authority to determine the location of a small social housing provision. Conversely, case study A failed to influence a regeneration project being delivered in the Heads of the Valleys sub-region through a consortium of local authorities.

The findings point to a general failure to achieve mainstream programme bending, which in many ways is the main objective of the Communities First programme. Programme bending is also the acid test of the extent of community influence that has been achieved. The implications for questions of community empowerment are critical. While we have identified that community members are willing and able to take part in effective decision-making at the local level, it would appear that agencies have not responded effectively to this.

This is an area where further research is required. This study has approached these issues from the perspective of community participants and we are not able to comment effectively on agency perceptions. However, the case study community-led reviews offered some opportunity to observe the interactions between agency representatives and community members, and a number of observations can be made about the key dynamics.

- Coincidental agendas: action and collaborative working is likely to result where the agendas of the community and the agency coincide. Policing is one area where this has been possible, as the desire to reduce crime is easily shared, but sustaining this has been problematic.
- The level of seniority of statutory sector representatives: where lower-ranking representatives are sent to the partnership, there are limits to the influence that can be exerted on the partner organisation. A lack of decision-making power by representatives might lead to discontent within the partnership because of lack of action. The representative will have to perform a further negotiated process within their own agency to bring about action, which may or may not occur.
- The extent of organisational commitment to the Communities First process is important: where there is a corporate understanding of the importance of Communities First, and officers are given flexibility to undertake actions that emerge from partnerships, there is greater potential for Communities First partnerships to exert influence.
- The density of Communities First partnerships within an area: where this is high, agency capacity to effectively support multiple partnerships and respond to local agendas and priorities may be low.
- Discussion of the lack of mainstream programme bending with members of the programme advisory group and other experts in the field suggests that the expectation of programme bending has not been effectively communicated by the Welsh Assembly Government, and that few agencies understand how the process is intended to work. This is exaggerated at local level where representatives have few powers to affect the delivery of national policy programmes in their field. This is indicative of tension between community empowerment and strategic programmes with national or regional objectives. Such objectives may be at odds with community expectations. This might be most apparent, for example, over contentious issues of school or hospital closures.
- The ability of service providers to bend programmes to Communities First areas may be proscribed by legal and statutory requirements to deliver particular patterns and distributions of services. Budget restraints may limit the ability to divert expenditure and human resources to disadvantaged communities. There may also be issues of the legitimacy of such approaches in the eyes of wider constituencies for those services.

- There are also clear difficulties in local authority areas with high concentrations of poverty. In such areas, diversion of resources to Communities First partnerships will inevitably come from communities only marginally separated from Communities First status in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation and largely experiencing identical issues of poverty and social exclusion.

Lessons from Communities First

The general failure of Communities First partnerships to exert influence over statutory agencies represents a serious challenge to any ambitions to promote community empowerment elsewhere in the UK or in other policy domains. Despite the existence of a highly facilitative structure, community support mechanisms and a strong steer from Government, key public agencies have not responded adequately to this policy agenda. Full explanation of this is not possible given the research design of this project. However, the observations above point to a number of lessons that can be learned from this process.

Lesson 19: methods of working more closely with the public and promoting public involvement have resource implications for all agencies intending to participate in the process.

Those resource requirements can be met by the allocation of new resources or by recognising these methods of operation as alternatives to current practice and, as a consequence, redesigning existing delivery models. Constrained public expenditure suggests that the latter approach is the most realistic. However, this may involve redefining the terms of reference of statutory agencies and a reform of their performance measurement by central government.

Lesson 20: in promoting community empowerment it will be necessary to thoroughly balance local viewpoints with more national and regional strategic objectives. This requirement will at times cut across the desire to promote community empowerment.

This study has not been able to fully capture the nature of the tensions between localism and more strategic patterns of service delivery determined by national, regional and sub-regional delivery plans. However, this issue underlines the need, identified in the section on 'Relationships with other structures of community engagement' earlier in this chapter, to fully mesh structures and processes promoting community empowerment with other national and local initiatives.

(Continued)

Lesson 21: expectations on the part of Government to promote community empowerment will need to be clearly communicated to statutory agencies. Mechanisms to achieve community empowerment will need to be carefully designed and thoroughly implemented.

Policy mechanisms need to include incentives such as hypothecated funding to promote public sector engagement with community-led partnerships and sanctions when agencies consistently fail to meet government and community expectations. The Communities First experience suggests that, where funding to promote service changes exists, agencies are likely to respond positively. For example, the staffing resources provided to the CVCs and the Communities First police teams have promoted a shift in provision.

Lesson 22: government and public expectations will need to recognise the reality of timescales that might be involved in thoroughly changing the relationship between state agencies and the public.

Current structures have emerged over a century or more and their reorientation towards community empowerment will require long-term commitment to organisational change. In particular, the patterns of local government reform currently being promoted by central government and agencies such as the LGA and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) will require time to mature and achieve impact at community level.

The local impact of Communities First

Despite the low level of mainstream service bending evident in this study and the interim evaluation of Communities First, it is important to recognise that the programme has had an impact at the local level. It is not the task of this study to evaluate the Communities First programme, but it is necessary to draw attention to the local impact of the programme observed in the case study areas. The following observations can be made.

- The community involvement discussed in the section on ‘Capacity of partnership members to interact successfully in partnership’ earlier in this chapter is in itself a significant impact, especially in those areas where there was no prior evidence of community-based action. Community membership of partnerships, and the community participation evident in the wider forums identified, represents an extension to local democracy and the widening of opportunities for community ‘voices’ to be heard. This can be described as a political impact in that it challenges the passivity often associated with marginalised communities and has raised community capacity to vocalise and present the desire for change.

- In the majority of case studies, the Communities First partnership has provided an opportunity to rationalise community activity and more fully integrate community organisations. This has not occurred in case study A where conflict between community groups still exists, but the majority experience is characterised by the resolution of conflict and competition, and a better co-ordination of community activities.
- Most importantly, partnerships have demonstrated an ability to deliver at community level regeneration projects that reflect issues arising from the community audit and the action plan. Partnerships have demonstrated success at securing external non-Communities First funding from sources such as the Big Lottery, European programmes and private trust funds. They have used these funding sources to deliver imaginative and innovative programmes that reflect a community-based model of delivery. This study can only briefly outline some of the actions in the following paragraph.
- Case study A has completed an educational and skills audit, and has initiated a project to meet the specific needs of socially and educationally excluded young people. Case study B does not have a project-based approach but facilitates local groups to develop projects. It has assisted groups to secure over £150,000 from the Communities First Trust Fund. Case study C has been the most successful at physical and economic regeneration initiatives, and has acquired a major property-based asset for the future development of social enterprises. Case study D has led a community education programme supporting school leavers without qualifications to return to education. Case study E offers a wide range of adult education provision. Case study G has developed a number of community facilities including a crèche, a community café and IT training facilities. Case study H has obtained a grant to fund a cyber café and maintains projects including a food co-operative. Case study I has acquired extensive assets in the community. It is using them as a base for social enterprise development and provides critically acclaimed training opportunities for young people.

6 Conclusions

This study has identified 22 key lessons that can be derived from the experience of Communities First over five years of delivering a community-centred regeneration process. The description of the programme in Chapter 1 outlines a policy structure that is potentially capable of delivering a high level of community involvement and a clear mechanism for community empowerment. Our case studies have illustrated a variable process with mixed outcomes.

Two central conclusions emerge from the study. First, Communities First has promoted community engagement and the partnership model adopted has promoted active involvement of local residents. In eight of the nine areas examined, community members of Communities First partnerships feel empowered by the process and have developed a positive 'can do' attitude in relation to changing the quality of life in their communities.

But, second, the statutory sector has largely failed to respond to the community agenda and there is little evidence of community influence over budgets, service delivery, prioritisation of issues and general bending of mainstream services to reflect the partnership process.

These conclusions have clear implications for the wider achievement of community empowerment. First, with appropriate funding, support mechanisms, development opportunities and participative structures, citizens are able and willing to engage with and participate in local decision-making. In the more mature partnerships examined, we have identified a clear ability to deliver complex programmes and a desire to be key actors in the delivery of mainstream programmes. However, it is also clear that traditional modes of operation in the public services do not readily respond to this enthusiasm and capacity within the community. Further research is required to fully understand the multiple barriers that exist and their relative strengths. This study points to a range of cultural, procedural and organisational barriers that have some resilience to both the 'top-down' pressures for service reform and the 'bottom-up pressures' for community participation. Achievement of community empowerment will require concerted effort by Government and a lengthy commitment to both promoting and resourcing organisational change in the public sector.

7 Towards a model of local influence

Key features of the case studies have suggested a number of practices that have promoted successful community involvement and engagement with the Communities First partnership by members of the community. These include the following.

- *Flexible governance:* the creation of secondary forums that widen community participation and underpin community involvement in the partnership. These have been variously based on lower-level spatial communities within the electoral division (ward), exemplified by the community forums in case study C. Others have developed strongly supported theme groups based on issues of local importance. Case study A provides a good example of groups meeting on health, education, youth and environmental issues. Case study D has a community-wide forum that provides focus for a densely populated community with a wide range of community groups in the area. It is able to channel disparate community opinions to the partnership, which provides an 'executive' function in developing priorities.
- *Need for links between local partnerships and county and sub-regional forums:* these emerging local practices also suggest that the spatial level at which community empowerment takes place is of crucial significance. Communities First is itself based largely on electoral division. However, all case studies have developed forums that secure public engagement at lower spatial levels. This suggests that the local strategic partnership or local service board county level of engagement is not sufficiently local to promote effective community empowerment and that more local mechanisms are required to feed local opinion from the very local, through electoral division partnerships, into the county-level strategic forums.
- *Support to develop partnership working:* the role of the Communities First support teams has been important in developing the capacity of community members to engage with the partnership process. The value of supportive development workers who can impart knowledge and confidence is evident in case studies A, B, C, D, E, G and I. In case study H, the relationship has broken down following disagreement with the local authority and, in case study F, the relationship is currently being established following replacement in 2006 of the former development team with new staff.
- *Critical role of councillors:* the role of the local authority member as 'champion' for the partnership has yielded considerable gains where it exists.

- *Necessity of links with wider patterns of public engagement:* it is important that local mechanisms for community empowerment mesh effectively with other instruments of local engagement. The lack of fit evident between the Communities First action planning process and the local authority community planning mechanism provides perfect illustration of the disempowerment of local communities where local deliberations do not find their way into the local government process.

These patterns evident in an analysis of Communities First suggest what we have termed a ‘capillary’ model of local influence and decision-making. This model effectively begins the process of local deliberation in highly localised theme or geographically based sub-groups. These channel views to the electoral-division-level partnership (the equivalent of the Communities First partnership and based on the ‘three-thirds’ model.) Opinion drawn from these localised groups is further negotiated and mediated by the partnership and priorities determined within the partnership process. These then need to link into and inform wider local authority strategic plans and the strategic agendas of other statutory, voluntary and business sector agencies. The structure also permits dialogue between the different levels of the structure to promote better understanding of strategic issues and constraints on change at community level.

The isolation experienced by partnerships and the risks of creating highly localised and parochial responses to issues must also be protected against by ensuring effective communication *between* partnerships in the local area. Links between Communities First partnerships have generally not been evident, despite close geographical proximity and the sharing of a very similar profile of social issues. This lack of connectedness emphasises the potential tension between localism and more strategic responses within a sub-region of a local authority.

Finally, there must be a mechanism where all electoral-division-level partnerships are able to represent views and influence outcomes at the county-level strategic partnership, whether they are local service boards in Wales or the local strategic partnerships in England. The measure of community empowerment will be whether an issue raised in the very local forum can find its way to the county strategic partnership and influence outcomes at that level. It is at this level of the ‘capillary’ system that tensions between localism and strategic initiatives should be resolved.

Bibliography

Adamson, D. (2006) 'Community regeneration, the State and civil society', in D. Dunkerley and A. Thompson. (eds) *Civil Society in Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales

Adamson, D., Dearden., H. and Castle, B. (2001) *Community Regeneration. Best Practice Review*. Cardiff: NAFW

APNC (Anti-Poverty Network Cymru) (2006) *Walking the Talk: Communities on Communities First*. Merthyr Tydfil: APNC

Bickerstaff, K. and Walker, G. (2005) 'Shared visions, unholy alliances: power, governance and deliberative processes in local transport planning', *Urban Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 12, pp. 2123–44

Burgess, P., Hall, S., Mawson, J. and Pearce, G. (2001) *Devolved Approaches to Local Governance: Policy and Practice in Neighbourhood Management*. York: York Publishing Services/Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Chandler, D. (2001) 'Active citizens and the therapeutic state: the role of democratic participation in local government reform', *Policy and Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 3–14

CLG (Communities and Local Government) (2007) *Action Plan for Community Empowerment*. London: The Stationery Office

Coaffee, J. and Healey, P. (2003) "'My voice: my place": tracking transformations in urban governance', *Urban Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 10, pp. 1979–99

Cooper, T.L. (1983) 'Citizen participation', in T.D. Lynch (ed.) *Organization Theory and Management*. New York: Marcel Dekker

DCLG (Department of Communities and Local Government) (2006a) *Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper Summary*. London: HMSO

DCLG (Department of Communities and Local Government) (2006b) *Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper*. London: HMSO

Europa (2007) 'Glossary: subsidiarity', http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/subsidiarity_en.htm (accessed 18 December 2007)

Forester, J. (1999) *The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin

HM Government (2007) *Planning for a Sustainable Future: White Paper*. London: The Stationery Office

James, S. and Cox, E. (2007) *The Future Role of Frontline Councillors*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Lukes, S. (1974) *Power: A Radical View*. London: Macmillan

McAteer, M. and Orr, K. (2006) 'Public participation in Scottish local government: strategic and corporate confusions', *Public Money and Management*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 131–8

Maguire, K. and Truscott, F. (2006) *The Value Added by Community Involvement in Governance through Local Strategic Partnerships*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Miliband, D. (2006) "'More power to the people", urges Miliband. Speech to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations' annual conference', *The Guardian*, 21 March

Ministry of Justice (2007) *The Governance of Britain*. London: The Stationery Office

Mulgan, G. and Bury, F. (eds) (2006) *Double Devolution: The Renewal of Local Government*. London: The Smith Institute

NAfW (National Assembly for Wales) (2000) *Communities First: Regenerating our Most Disadvantaged Communities. A Consultation Paper*. Cardiff: NAfW

O'Donovan, O. (2000) 'Re-theorizing the interactive state: reflections on a popular participatory initiative in Ireland', *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 224–32

ODPM (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) (2006) *Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment. A Guide for Local Authorities on Enhancing Capacity for Public Participation*. London: ODPM

ORS (Opinion Research Services) (2007) *Beyond Barriers: Identifying Conditions for Embedding Effective Public Involvement*. Swansea: ORS

Scorrer, J. and Adamson, D. (2007) *Communities First in RCT: Community Focus Groups and Professional Panels Baseline Report*. Pontypridd: University of Glamorgan

SEU (Social Exclusion Unit) (2000) *Report of Policy Action Team 4: Neighbourhood Management*. London: The Stationery Office

Skidmore, P., Bound, K. and Lownsborough, H. (2006) *Community Participation: Who Benefits?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Somerville, P. (2005) 'Community governance and democracy', *Policy & Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 117–44

Stevenson, W. (2006) 'Preface', in G. Mulgan and F. Bury *Double Devolution: The Renewal of Local Government*. London: The Smith Institute

Sullivan, H. (2001) 'Modernisation, democratisation and community governance', *Local Government Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 1–24

Taylor, M. and Wilson, M. (2006) *The Importance of the Neighbourhood: Tackling the Implementation Gap*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Taylor, M., Wilson, M., Purdue, D. and Wilde, P. (2007) *Changing Neighbourhoods: Lessons from the JRF Neighbourhood Programme*. Bristol: The Policy Press for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

WAG (Welsh Assembly Government) (2002) *Communities First Guidance for Local Authorities*. Cardiff: WAG

WAG (Welsh Assembly Government) (2004) *Making the Connections: Delivering Better Services for Wales*. Cardiff: WAG

WAG (Welsh Assembly Government) (2006a) *Beyond Boundaries: Citizen-centred Local Services for Wales. Review of Local Service Delivery: Report to the Welsh Assembly Government*. Cardiff: WAG

WAG (Welsh Assembly Government) (2006b) *Making the Connections: Delivering Beyond Boundaries*. Cardiff: WAG

WAG (Welsh Assembly Government) (2006c) *Interim Evaluation of Communities First*. Cardiff: WAG

WAG (Welsh Assembly Government) (2007a) *A Shared Responsibility: Local Government's Contribution to Improving People's Lives. A Policy Statement from the Welsh Assembly Government*. Cardiff: WAG

WAG (Welsh Assembly Government) (2007b) *Local Vision: Preparing Community Strategies. Consultation Draft. Statutory Guidance from the Welsh Assembly Government on Developing and Delivering Community Strategies*. Cardiff: WAG

Young Foundation (2007) *Transforming Neighbourhoods: Lessons from Local Work in Fifteen Areas*. London: Young Foundation

Appendix: Case study profiles

Case study A

Location: valleys urban

Partnership coverage: single ward

GRB: local authority

Partnership meetings are held quarterly, with an additional two open (public) partnership meetings per year. The three-thirds principle is not now generally adhered to for partnership meetings. All three sectors are represented at the partnership meetings but not in equal proportions – it is now accepted that local people must always be the majority. Attendance rates for external partners are often poor unless they have been asked to give a specific presentation.

The chair of the partnership is the local authority councillor, who is also a member of the ruling party in the local authority. The councillor has often been able to aid the Communities First co-ordinator in access to local authority officers.

A partnership steering group made up entirely of community members but chaired by the local authority councillor has also been set up. This meets every two to three weeks, and provides a forum for prioritisation and decision-making that can be acted on independently or taken to full partnership. Further resident influence is through a company limited by guarantee, which is directed by local residents.

Themed project groups are also operated, with meetings that operate as and when necessary.

Case study B

Location: rural

Partnership coverage: multiple ward

GRB: local authority

The multiple ward geography of the case study makes representation in the Communities First partnership difficult. Up to 20 representatives may be on the partnership. Each of the four geographic areas within the Communities First area has two representatives, who also represent the community sector. The remaining spaces (up to twelve) reflect the three-thirds principle (six to the business/voluntary sector and six to the statutory sector). The partnership meets at least six times per year, with one special meeting per year.

The town and community councils are strong in the area and provide an alternative, more localised form of decision-making. Most community sector representatives on the Communities First partnership are also representatives of local community councils and, as such, also represent these organisations. Consequently there is limited attendance from lay members of the community, although this is counterbalanced by the fact that most of the business/voluntary sector members are also local residents.

Seven themed sub-groups have been developed, which generally have good representation from residents as members. These sub-groups then report to the partnership as a whole. Much practical work is done by other local regeneration initiatives and agencies. The partnership has a key role in co-ordinating and facilitating the existing community groups and regeneration organisations that work in the area.

Case study C

Location: valleys urban

Partnership coverage: single ward

GRB: independent

The partnership aims to meet the three-thirds principle. However, when it comes to voting rights, some agencies have declined the 'right' to vote, as they do not want to become 'directors'. The partnership is chaired by a local authority councillor. Two local councillors are active on the partnership; both are members of the ruling party within the local authority.

The Communities First area also has five themed groups. These groups look at developing local actions for community needs in each theme. The groups meet monthly and are open to residents from the area and to professional agencies.

Within the Communities First ward are five distinct village areas, which each have a village forum. These allow residents the opportunity to discuss and agree the issues of most concern to them and to determine local needs, services, initiatives and actions. Each forum also has a steering group consisting of members elected by local residents. The forums are linked to the full partnership by steering group representatives who sit on the full partnership board. Key issues that are raised on the village forums can be placed on the agenda of the full partnership where appropriate.

Case study D

Location: urban

Partnership coverage: full ward and additional sub-wards

GRB: community

The full partnership aims to meet the three-thirds principle. Community members have been recruited to fill places on the partnership (referred to as the executive board).

Partnership meetings are held monthly and include partners from the local area from all the three sectors. The partnership is chaired by a community member.

As well as themed sub-groups, the key linkage between Communities First and the local area is an advisory group, typically comprising 30 to 50 people. Community-led, the group is open to community members and development staff. This is an open working group to discuss key themes and to prioritise actions that can be taken to the full partnership. Statutory partners can also be asked to attend advisory group meetings as and when needed.

The Communities First area has five wards with a different councillor representing each ward. Only two are represented on the executive board and the decision of who is elected is made by the council.

Case study E

Location: valleys urban

Partnership coverage: multiple ward

GRB: independent

The partnership consists of representatives from all three sectors, but partnership meetings are open meetings with community members able to attend. The focus to participate is not just on community members but also on representatives of local community organisations. The Communities First partnership is chaired by a local resident, who is also a representative of the business sector. Two local authority councillors are present on the Communities First partnership, and play an active role in championing the partnership and the area within the local authority. One councillor is deputy leader of the local authority.

The partnership has a number of themed groups that operate more regularly than the partnership. These are typically community-led, with input from external agencies as and when required.

In addition to the Communities First partnership, there are two key local organisations that are active in the spheres of social, environmental and economic regeneration, and community education. These operate alongside the Communities First partnership to help produce a co-ordinated strategy for the local area.

Case Study F

Location: urban

Partnership coverage: single ward

GRB: local authority

The partnership aims to have three-thirds representation but has not met during the period of this study. Following significant restructuring of the Communities First delivery by the local authority and appointment of a new development team, the partnership is being revived but it is struggling to achieve participation from all sectors. The local authority councillor, a member of the ruling group, is on the partnership.

Case study G

Location: urban

Partnership coverage: sub-ward

GRB: local authority

The partnership has combined with a local development trust, which is incorporated as a company limited by guarantee. Its primary role is delivery of Communities First. The partnership decided that being a development trust also provides an opportunity to have long-term economic impact and financial self-sustainability. The board is made up of a maximum number of 15 voting directors. In all, seven directors are local residents. The board distinguishes between 'residents' and 'community/voluntary groups', rather than calling them all 'community sector'. Local residents can serve as individuals and do not need to join another group in order to have a voice at this level. The chair of the partnership is from a statutory sector organisation that has a long-standing presence in the area and that is involved in significant community regeneration activity. One local authority councillor from the ruling party is present on the partnership and helps provide a link to the local authority.

The board is complemented by regular community development team meetings that are open forums for discussion, including residents, partners, and community and voluntary groups. Statutory agencies and partners will be invited to participate in particular themed discussions. These offer significant opportunities for community participation in the activities of Communities First. The development trust offers

significant opportunity to enhance the community development role of Communities First with wider economic, social and environmental projects. Working as a development trust also offers many informal points of contact with the community through its education and community outreach programmes.

Case study H

Location: valleys urban

Partnership coverage: multiple ward

GRB: local authority; now independent

The three-thirds principle has been aspired to but not yet achieved by the Communities First partnership because of recruitment difficulties in the business sector. Business sector recruitment has now been prioritised by the partnership. Community members make up over a third of places on the partnership. There are members from the statutory and voluntary sectors who attend regularly; others attend on a more ad hoc basis when invited. The chair and executive of the partnership are all community members. A local councillor is a member of the partnership, and previous councillors in the ruling group in the local authority have been champions of the partnership and the local area.

Monthly partnership meetings are open to all and there are themed project sub-groups that are open to all community members. Sub-group meetings are convened when required.

The partnership has been undergoing difficulties in its relationship with the former local authority grant recipient body. This led to a more proactive approach by community members who took the lead on a number of local initiatives. The partnership is moving to an independent GRB and it is hoped that this arrangement will allow the Communities First partnership to develop fully.

Case study I

Location: urban

Partnership coverage: multiple ward

GRB: independent

The three-thirds model has been successfully achieved and has been a guiding principle in the development of the partnership. The partnership is due to expand its geographical coverage but will still reflect the three-thirds principle. The partnership is chaired by a local resident. Two local councillors are present on the partnership and they are also members of sub-groups. These councillors are also members of the ruling group in the local authority.

There are currently 20 members of the full partnership. This is complemented by seven themed development sub-groups, which meet quarterly. These feed into the main partnership and there are channels for sub-groups to add items to the main partnership agenda. Community members on the main partnership or sub-groups provide a significant linkage between Communities First and the area as a whole.

Projects are controlled by a traffic light system that allows the partnership to easily identify which projects are currently active (green), or either awaiting funding or coming to the end of a funding stream (amber), or inactive (red).

The partnership is complemented by a development trust that operates in the area and that is the GRB for the Communities First partnership. In order to avoid duplication, the GRB and partnership have now merged. The development trust has been active in providing local education opportunities, training opportunities, employment opportunities and youth facilities. These have provided useful nodes of engagement with the local population and have led to participants becoming involved in the Communities First programme.

The partnership has been innovative in developing a database of residents who constitute a panel for consultation on specific issues. This allows the Communities First partnership and the development trust to gauge a section of local opinion at reasonably short notice.