

Community empowerment in practice: lessons from Communities First

Findings
Informing change

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

Key points

- In eight of the nine areas examined, community members responded positively to the opportunities for participation provided by Communities First and, as they began to recognise their own role in promoting positive change in their community, their confidence in their abilities increased.
- Community members brought varied skills and knowledge to the partnership process but required support to develop the skills required for effective partnership working.
- Levels of community engagement were improved by providing multiple routes to participation. Highly localised forums that fed into the partnership widened community empowerment and helped to support community members of the partnerships.
- There was little evidence of community influence over statutory members of Communities First partnerships and no evidence of significant mainstream 'programme bending' where statutory agencies prioritised actions and expenditure in the Communities First partnership area.
- The research suggests that clearer links are needed between strategic partnerships at ward level and those at the local authority level. Local Strategic Partnerships or Local Service Boards are not sufficiently local or connected to the community to facilitate effective community empowerment.
- The researchers conclude that government will need to provide incentives and sanctions to promote a greater statutory sector response to processes of community empowerment. Consideration should be given to allocating specific functions and resources to local partnerships which they can deploy. The continued commitment of community members will be conditional on 'purposeful' community involvement.

The research

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Background

Community empowerment in local governance and service delivery has become a key component of government policy in the UK, culminating in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007). In Wales, the Beecham Report (*Beyond Boundaries: Citizen-Centred Local Services for Wales. Review of Local Service Delivery: Report to the Welsh Assembly Government 2006*) and the Making Connections agenda (*Making the Connections: Delivering Better Services for Wales 2004*) have also prioritised citizen engagement.

However, previous research on policies promoting local decision-making has identified an 'implementation gap' when policy is put into 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.

This study employs the term 'community empowerment' to describe the ideal that decisions are taken as closely as possible to members of the community and directly involve them in the decision-making process.

Partnership factors

Partnership structure

The structure of the Communities First Partnership was intended to develop community empowerment.

Partnerships are based on a 'three thirds' partnership structure consisting of the community, statutory and voluntary/business sectors, thereby giving communities a clear voice at the table. However, community members generally felt they were outweighed by other sector members, both numerically and in terms of knowledge and skills. Communities rarely held the key role of chairperson.

Community members' roles were strengthened where there were additional community forums established by the Communities First process, providing additional opportunities for local voices to be heard. Supplementary forums had emerged in the majority of case studies and were variously based on sub-ward communities, themed interest groups or ward-wide community forums. These supplementary forums provided alternative and less formal routes for engagement and created learning opportunities for community members to develop a participation 'career'.

Capacity of partnership members

The study found high levels of existing skills and a widespread ability among community members to participate in the partnership process. However, it also identified a need for formal support to develop the specific skills, knowledge and understanding required for effective participation in formal partnerships. The Communities First development teams play a critical role in enhancing community capacity but there is also a capacity issue for statutory and voluntary sector practitioners who also require support to work effectively in partnership with community members.

Developmental stage of the partnership

Partnerships in the study were at different stages of maturity and this affects the manner in which the partnership is able to interact with and influence service agencies. Two levels of maturity were identified – first, passive partnerships, where community members have a largely consultative relationship with statutory and voluntary sector partners; and second, active partnerships in which community members have developed a deliberative relationship with other partnership members and are more actively shaping the agenda.

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/or low levels of social capital. Outcomes may be uneven in the short to medium term. Any UK national policy to promote community empowerment will be unlikely to provide the levels of support evident in Communities First and patterns of support for communities that are less resource-intensive will need to be developed to ensure that empowerment can evolve in a meaningful way.

Expectation, aims and objectives of the partnership

There were significant, initial misunderstandings about the nature of the Communities First Programme and the scope of its aims. Community members had a perception that their participation could lead directly to positive change in their community. External partners were perceived to be motivated by an expectation of accessible funding rather than a desire to facilitate community influence. Policy structures intended to promote community empowerment must have clear guidance that delineates the aims and objectives of the policy and the respective roles of partners.

Representation and democratic relationships

At neighbourhood level there are alternative routes for the expression of local views that potentially enable communities to influence public service agendas. These include:

- local authority councillors;
- community and town councils (equivalent to parish councils);
- local area forums;
- pre-existing community regeneration organisations.

The research found that Communities First sometimes overlaps with, duplicates or challenges these existing modes of representation. Local authority members have a pivotal role and can act as critical gatekeepers or champions for the local Communities First partnership. The study demonstrates the value of supportive and engaged local authority members.

Community councils were present in only four of the case studies and did not have a significant role in three of those areas. Community councils in the rural case study played a more significant role as a conduit for community representation on the partnership. A legacy effect can derive from the work of pre-existing community organisations, which can be positive where it supports the local partnership. However, conflicts can occur where the Communities First partnership is seen as a competitor to these existing organisations. Consequently, structures and processes developed to promote community empowerment must provide a clear role for local authority councillors, community councils and other forms of representation and provide routes for them to become part of the emerging landscape for community empowerment.

Factors in the wider environment

Rural issues

Communities First arrangements have been adapted in rural areas to address some of the problems of

dispersed populations by varying the frequency of statutory partner attendance at meetings. This illustrates the need for policies promoting community empowerment to allow local practice to emerge that reflects the social and geographical characteristics of diverse areas. Similar adaptation of programmes may be required in other areas with specific features (e.g. ethnically diverse areas).

The role of the civil service and local government

Policy intentions alone will not automatically enable civil servants and local government personnel to facilitate community empowerment. The experience from Communities First points to initial failings of civil service capacity to support the programme and to highly bureaucratic procedures that frustrated community expectations. Six of the local authorities studied have initiated restructuring to support the programme and relationships were generally good. However, two partnerships had poor relationships with their local authority, both of which had adopted a more centralised approach to the programme and had not appointed dedicated, community-level development teams.

Relationships with other structures of community engagement

Communities First has generally failed to link with the local authority-led Community Planning process and the Welsh Assembly Government has addressed this issue in its revised guidance for local authorities. Only one partnership studied could demonstrate a link between its Action Plan and the local authority Community Plan. This illustrates the need for the design and implementation of measures to promote community empowerment to be harmonised with other national, regional and local strategies that have similar aims.

Communities First and community empowerment

Despite the Communities First programme providing a facilitative structure, the research found a general failure of partnerships to exert influence over statutory and voluntary agencies. In particular, the mainstream programme bending, in which public sector policy and resource allocation shifts to prioritise Communities First areas, has not occurred in any of the partnerships studied. Statutory agencies reported difficulties supporting multiple partnerships in urban areas and dispersed partnerships in rural areas. This failure of community empowerment to affect change in public service provision represents a serious challenge to 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.

Responding to community empowerment has resource implications and these are a barrier to its achievement. Bending mainstream programmes to meet highly localised needs meets budgetary barriers, clashes with existing strategic priorities and can conflict with legislative duties to provide services universally. It can also be problematic to justify to wider constituencies the prioritising of spending in specific localities. Policy mechanisms to promote community empowerment should include funding incentives to promote public sector engagement with community-led partnerships as well as sanctions when agencies consistently fail to meet government expectations. Support is also required for organisational and cultural change in statutory and voluntary sector agencies to promote recognition that community empowerment can improve service delivery.

The impact of Communities First

Despite the failure of Communities First partnerships to develop influence over statutory partnerships and achieve the predicted bending of mainstream services, it is important to note their impact at community level. This can be seen firstly in the degree of community engagement achieved in eight of the nine case studies, and secondly in the successful delivery of significant regeneration projects, where partnerships have worked together to access funding from other sources.

Conclusions

Based on the nine areas examined, the two primary conclusions are, first, that community engagement has been achieved through the Communities First Programme and that residents feel empowered to manage positive change in their community. Second, the statutory sector has largely failed to respond to the community agenda. The study concludes that it is possible to achieve community empowerment but that

it will need to be carefully designed into policies and actively resourced and promoted by government.

The study points to a model of community empowerment that begins at a highly localised sub-ward level of community forums. These feed community views into ward-based partnerships that in turn interact with county-level forums such as Local Strategic Partnerships or Local Service Boards. Such structures will need to carefully connect with the community planning process and fully engage local authority members in an active role as advocates for their community.

About the project

The project team conducted nine case studies of Communities First partnerships to provide evidence of the experiences of partnership board members, with particular emphasis on community members' experiences. The nine cases were chosen to reflect a distribution of two key variables:

- geography – to include city-urban, rural and valleys-urban communities;
- different management models – to include delivery led by local authorities, community organisations and the voluntary sector.

The research involved a combination of semi-structured interviews and 'community-led' reviews. In each case study, the co-ordinator of the Communities First partnership and partnership members were interviewed with a primary emphasis on understanding the experience of the community members. In total, 51 people were interviewed. In addition, up to 20 members of the Communities First partnership were present in each community-led review, which reflected on their partnership experiences to date.

For further information

The full report, **Community empowerment in practice: Lessons from Communities First** by Dave Adamson and Richard Bromiley, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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