# Active governance: The value added by community involvement in governance through local strategic partnerships

*Kath Maguire and Frances Truscott*

*A review of the experiences of those involved in local strategic partnerships (LSPs) in England*

One of the Government's explicit aims when they introduced LSPs was to enable more and different people to become involved in the development of priorities for local services, as well as in their continuing governance. This report, the result of in-depth interviews with a range of people currently involved in LSPs (including elected representatives, service providers and community representatives), considers how effectively LSPs are meeting these objectives. It explores the challenges and difficulties encountered in getting involved, and the personal economic and social costs and benefits to participants. It also examines the value of community involvement in partnership working from a range of perspectives. Drawing on the words and experiences of participants, the report offers a number of practical suggestions to policy makers and practitioners on how to maximise the value of community engagement. The findings have implications not only within LSPs but also more widely in the context of community participation in governance

**JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION**

# Active governance

## The value added by community involvement in governance through local strategic partnerships

*Kath Maguire and Frances Truscott*

JOSEPH ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION

**Future Perspectives Co-operative Ltd**
policy and practice

*Further copies of this report can be obtained  from the JRF website (www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/).*

# Contents

# Acknowledgements

# List of abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ALMO | Arm's length management organisation |
| BME | Black and minority ethnic |
| CD | Community development |
| CDRP | Crime and disorder reduction partnership |
| CEN | Community Empowerment Network |
| CEO | Chief executive officer |
| CPA | Comprehensive Performance Assessment |
| CPD | Continuing professional development |
| CSR | Corporate social responsibility |
| DETR | Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions |
| DoH | Department of Health |
| HE | Higher education |
| IDeA | The Improvement and Development Agency |
| LSC | Learning and Skills Council |
| LSP | Local strategic partnership |
| NDC | New Deal for Communities |
| NHS | National Health Service |
| NRA | Neighbourhood renewal adviser |
| NRF | Neighbourhood Renewal Fund |
| NRU | Neighbourhood Renewal Unit |
| ODPM | Office of the Deputy Prime Minister |
| PCT | Primary care trust |
| RSL | Registered social landlord |
| SLT | Strategic leadership team |
| SME | Small to medium-sized enterprise |
| SRB | Single Regeneration Budget |
| VCS | Voluntary and community sectors |

# Key findings and recommendations

## Key findings

### Value added

- The single most valued outcome was the creation of links between service providers and communities, widening *'policy networks'*, increasing community influence and improving information to service providers. It was also seen as strengthening the petitions of service providers asking government for more, or more flexible use of, resources.

- The *holistic* experience of service provision at the level of community allows explicitly 'joined-up' thinking on service provision locally. Effective relationships between community representatives and service providers identified gaps and enabled solutions using *'how can we?'* thinking, as opposed to *'it's not our fault'*.

- The police service was frequently cited for commitment and success in engaging with communities. This is particularly notable because it explicitly approaches the community as *'citizens'* rather than 'service users'. Senior officers acknowledged engagement had been led by government policy but saw the benefits of increased legitimacy and public confidence as self-evident at neighbourhood level.

- Community representatives felt 'putting a face' on concerns about poverty, access or inclusion leads partners to *ask these questions of themselves* in other circumstances.

- *'Little changes that really affect people's lives'* were frequently valued by community representatives over large-scale transformational changes, sometimes experienced as threatening.

    > … tomorrow I may not say this – but I think there are much better relationships and much greater understandings about where we're all coming from than we did have. Whatever anyone else says about the LSP *[local strategic partnership]* for that reason it's a good thing.
    > (Local area representative)

### Costs and difficulties

■ Community representatives contribute significant amounts of *unpaid work*, often at personal economic and social costs. Without *feedback* about how their contribution has been used they become discouraged from future engagement.

■ Responsibility for *communication* between partnerships and communities frequently fell to community representatives rather than to the partnership as a whole.

■ Some partnerships had quite *acrimonious disputes* leaving individuals damaged and compromised in their communities. Where contentious issues were suppressed, communities did not feel heard and accused the partnership of tokenism.

■ Concentration on engaging poor and marginalised groups can add more pressure on those already facing significant problems, sometimes experienced as *blaming the poor* for the degradation of their neighbourhoods.

■ For structures to become *more accessible* professionals need to learn to *work more accessibly*. This means developing processes and language that address the needs of all potential participants.

■ Community engagement can realise its potential added value only if structures and support are *adequately resourced*, either by central government or other partners.

> One of the difficulties is how you deal with the potential for conflict. You can manage that by just having one proposition people can react to. You have two propositions and people are in disagreement – how are you going to get your decision?
> (LSP co-ordinator)

## Key recommendations to government

### National

■ Building on 'Together We Can', there needs to be an explicit cabinet-level commitment to wider community engagement in governance at all levels.

- Appoint a *community engagement champion* within government.

- Using the model of the tenant auditors project resource (Tenant Participation Advisory Service, 2003), part-time *'community practitioner auditors'* to evaluate community engagement as required in Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) 2005 – particularly to address governance key line of enquiry 1.1: 'Does the council understand the needs and opportunities of the area?'

- Through the Academy for Sustainable Communities, encourage development of training programmes that involve statutory body 'professionals' and community-based activists *learning side by side*, to cover technical subjects such as engagement, audit and evaluation (CPA) and process subjects like active listening.

### *Regional*

- Extend the Improvement and Development Agency (IdeA) 'Peer Challenge' scheme by engaging councillors, service providers and community activists to provide benchmarking to promote *cross-sectoral* learning.

- Explore how basic skills training – already funded by Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) – can include more elements of *engagement and citizenship skills*.

- Promote 'visible leadership' at chief executive or corporate head level, working on a community or voluntary *'front line'* for a few days each year, following best practice in the private sector.

- Extend the concept of neighbourhood renewal advisers to build a pool of *part-time, practitioner-based* experts skilled in community participation and conflict resolution to work with all partnerships.

### *Local*

- Develop and *increase opportunities* for peer mentoring, shared staff training, secondment or shadowing between the voluntary and community sector (VCS), local government and other statutory agencies, connecting with opportunities currently available through regional centres of excellence as well as other local and regional training providers.

- Actively consider how to *increase the accessibility* of meetings, see where language can be simplified and create a dynamic 'jargon buster' for essential technical terms.

- Publicise activities and achievements of LSPs and other partnerships through *mass media* (local radio, TV and free newspapers) to demystify and make wider contact.

- Link up with *workplaces, retail outlets, cafes and other places* where people naturally gather, as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, to provide accessible places for elected members and partnership representatives to answer public queries and make wider contact with communities.

## Key recommendations to the voluntary and community sector

### Umbrella and networking groups

- Play to strengths people have at *different points in their life cycles* when inviting community involvement in governance.

- Be *clear about boundaries*: community development workers need to develop community capacity and support representatives, not take governance roles.

- Encourage paid staff to see their role as being to make each job *unnecessary* as community empowerment and capacity increases. Training and career development need to encourage staff to be ready to *move on to the next challenge*.

- Encourage ordinary members of the community to *'just turn up'* to meetings, council discussions, etc. to demystify the process.

- Play an *advocacy role* to ensure equal respect for community representatives' time.

- Ensure national and local *Compact* arrangements are understood by all parties.

■ Ensure that community representatives attending meetings in a voluntary capacity are paid full out-of-pocket expenses.

■ Examine *diversity of membership* and take active steps to identify and reduce barriers or perceived barriers to engagement.

■ *Actively* invite statutory and private sector staff to apply for shadowing, secondment and other joint working opportunities within umbrella groups and VCS organisations of all sizes.

■ Offer *staff/volunteers* as shadows, secondees, etc. to statutory and private sector organisations.

■ Encourage buddying, peer mentoring and work-based training among *staff and volunteers*.

> There seemed to be a lot of goodwill to make the LSP work as a forum to catalyse action that otherwise would not occur between the various agencies and interests.
> (Independent observer at an LSP meeting)

# 1 Introduction

> I think we've got to somewhere we might not have got to without the LSP,
> because there wouldn't have been a mechanism to have those kinds of
> conversations.
> (Community representative)

Field research for this report took place between the summers of 2004 and 2005. It included an initial desktop study of 22 partnerships. Detailed study then focused on six: three in city council areas, two in rural districts and one that served a London borough. Five covered local authority areas among the 88 in receipt of Neighbourhood Renwal Fund (NRF) money. One partnership spanned more than one local authority area. Two were chaired by the local council leader, one by the elected mayor, one by the chief executive of a housing association, one by the head of a higher education (HE) college and one by a VCS activist.

Our literature review identified *two main strands* of debate about the potential for wider community engagement in governance to add value. These focused on whether worth rested primarily on its ability to achieve improved services and outcomes or on its 'activity value' (Bolton, 2002, p. 11), i.e. by increasing inclusion and accountability in itself (Tables 1 and 2).

We have also tried to integrate values *identified by participants* throughout the study. This means looking at the value added by community involvement had to be more than a simple cost/benefit assessment. The values involved are frequently implied, complex and sometimes contradictory.

Our approach has been to engage with a *wide range* of people involved with local strategic partnerships (LSPs) including: elected representatives, service providers, representatives of both geographical communities and communities of interest, as well as some community activists who chose not to be involved in the partnerships.

As well as attending partnership meetings and conducting over *60 hours* of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, researchers ran three participatory events, including an *'Open Space'* in Bristol's 'Community at Heart' New Deal for Communities (NDC), involving practitioners and community activists from across England, and two expert seminars. We found participants from all sectors enthusiastic and vocal about both the value and costs of involvement. Their words have been used in the report wherever possible.

**Table 1    Framing the debate: improvement of services and outcomes**

| | Findings |
|---|---|
| **Claim 1**<br>Governance results in more efficient services | Widely aspired to; seen by many as increasingly delivered. |
| **Counter-claim (a)**<br>Partnerships are merely talking shops and don't impact on services | Acknowledged that this sometimes happens in formal meetings. However, attendance at meetings built relationships that facilitated understanding and enabled partnership working.<br><br>Meetings observed dealt with a number of practical and sometimes urgent issues. |
| **Claim 2**<br>By winning buy-in of non-state agencies and public, governance changes attitudes and values, promoting co-operation around agreed goals | Widely aspired to and seen as something increasingly delivered by many participants.<br><br>Many goals were seen as long term and there was widespread concern that political short-termism means the sustained support needed for fundamental improvement may not be maintained. |
| **Counter-claim (a)**<br>Partnerships don't successfully engage people and have little effect on conduct | Partnerships criticised for being too invisible. More use could be made of local and national media to celebrate achievements of partnerships and 'normalise' engagement in governance. |
| **Claim 3**<br>Governance increases trust in public institutions and services giving legitimacy | Those engaging in governance developing greater understanding of problems faced by service providers and enhanced respect.<br><br>Generalised achievement of trust inhibited by lack of public awareness. Wider publicity for processes and achievements of partnerships seen as vital to developing public confidence. |
| **Counter-claim (a)**<br>Partnerships aren't more democratic or inclusive and don't improve services, so don't increase trust and legitimacy | What was considered democratic varied widely (see Table 4 and Figure 1 in Chapter 3).<br><br>Partnerships widely seen to enhance inclusivity to some extent, though this is rarely seen as adequate. One partnership had particularly poor history of engagement with black and minority ethnic (BME) residents. Co-ordinator identified lack of transparency leading to board being experienced as 'institutionally racist', echoed by a former partnership member describing it as 'white, male and middle class' and 'like a closed club'.<br><br>Growing trust and a belief in legitimacy of emerging processes widely experienced by participants, but partnerships were too invisible to the public to create wider trust and legitimacy. |

**Table 2    Framing the debate: wider inclusion and accountability**

| | | Findings |
|---|---|---|
| Claim 4 | Democracy enhanced | Widely accepted by participants, though what was considered democratic varied enormously (see Table 4 and Figure 1 in Chapter 3). |
| | Democratically elected local government takes steering role over full range of local public services | Frequently perceived by a range of other partners as the aim of the local authority; sometimes cause of tension. |
| Counter-claims (a) | Elected government is unrepresentative and remote | Widely accepted by community participants, although growing personal respect for some elected members. Partnership working with the community was frequently seen as addressing this problem. |
| | | Some elected members took the view that they were the only legitimate representatives. |
| | | What was considered representative varied widely (see Table 3 and Figure 1 in Chapter 3). |
| (b) | Elected government has no real power over 'partners' and isn't in the position to 'lead the community' | Coercive power over partners is not widely seen as essential to effective leadership by community participants. Community leadership is seen as a responsibility of local government. |
| (c) | Lines of accountability are unclear and decisions are made in private | Clear issue in some partnerships but by no means all. |
| (d) | Public finds it hard to understand how government works | Widely accepted by participants. In particular, the use of 'gobbledy-gook' changing periodically – just as community members began to understand it – was experienced as excluding. |
| Claim 5 | Community groups are involved in decision making; consulted and engaged through a wide variety of democratic procedures or have a place on the board | Widely experienced as positive and useful process. |

**Table 2**    **Framing the debate: wider inclusion and accountability –** *continued*

| | | **Findings** |
|---|---|---|
| Counter-claims | (a) Consultation is costly, doesn't reveal anything important and findings aren't acted on | Community involvement as a central element of governance widely seen as addressing this issue. |
| | (b) Community representatives on boards are ignored | Community representatives were not exactly ignored. However, in some partnerships, they found it difficult to bring issues to the table. Reluctance to deal with potential conflicts sometimes led partnerships to be presented with bland, uncontroversial propositions. |
| | (c) Governance places heavy burdens on representatives | Widely accepted. |

LSPs were chosen as the arena for this study because they were brought about specifically with an aim of widening involvement in governance. LSPs are a long way from uniform institutions. Their history, composition and working arrangements vary enormously. The 'board' of an LSP may include anything from 12 people to more than 60. Board members may be nominated by sub-groups or partner organisations, or invited by the board, or recruited through public appointment processes, or elected by community forums. In this study we have looked at the advantages and difficulties encountered in integrating community-focused perspectives into this broad family of partnership structures.

LSPs were introduced by the Government as a means of improving inclusion in the development of priorities for service provision on a local level as well as in its continuing governance. In its 2002 report 'We Can Work it Out' the Local Government Association said:

> LSPs have been established to support localities in their attempts to work together more coherently *in the pursuit of community wellbeing and good governance* by providing a single strategic focus within a locality.
> (Local Government Association, 2002, emphasis added)

It went on to say:

> There is a big agenda for LSPs to develop in assuring good governance and effective accountability. LSP boards are often composed of the local 'great and good' – and ways need to be found to ensure they have an effective accountability relationship with their communities … The ways in which LSPs ensure good governance and added value may be key factors in demonstrating their long term importance to locality based strategic policy making.
> (Local Government Association, 2002)

From the outset, *community participation* was an element of the measure of a successful LSP (particularly in the 88 NRF areas where the LSP had to be accredited before the local authority could access Neighbourhood Renewal Funds), though the intended value of this inclusivity has tended to be assumed rather than expounded. As Hillary Armstrong wrote in the DETR Local Strategic Partnerships Consultation Document of October 2000:

> We do not want to start setting central requirements over how partnerships should work, or even over what they should do. But we do want to ensure that partnerships are inclusive – with genuine involvement from the community, business and voluntary sectors as well as from local government.

# 2 Overview

The single most valuable outcome of community involvement in governance through local strategic partnerships identified by participants was the creation of bridging links between service providers and the communities they serve. These links enable local area, interest or faith group representatives to access senior managers and policy makers, and inform them of directly experienced impacts of decisions they are making (see Table 2, claim 5 in Chapter 1).

In their role as members of communities people experience their lives *holistically*, not as a series of distinct compartments. Access to health and education services depends on transport provision, not just on the surgeries, hospitals, schools and colleges. Perceptions of public safety influence how other services and businesses are accessed. This means community representatives can explicitly 'join up' thinking on local service provision.

Community representatives argued their presence at the table enables a range of other interactions that produce *'little changes that really affect people's lives'*. Sometimes this was as straightforward as learning at which level decisions are made, so as to know who best to approach when problems develop. This is, in effect, widening and providing new entrances into 'policy networks' (Rhodes, 1981; Scott, 2001) – defined as lasting social relationships between actors in the policy domain seeking to exercise power – making these slightly more accessible and inclusive.[1]

Some of the most impressive examples of effective partnership working that we found, like local authority provision of facilities for NHS dentists and a rapid response to bridge a funding crisis for youth services, happened where the community *identified a gap* in provision and service providers had the will to address the issues. The resources and powers to achieve desired outcomes flowed from this. They were the results of *creative co-operation* and 'how can we?' thinking processes as opposed to a defensive 'it's not our fault'.

## Pebbles in the pond

There was also a more subtle level at which relationship building functions, which was described as 'dropping pebbles in the pond'. The role of community representative in LSPs often acts to *humanise and personalise* the implications of policy decisions, in clear contrast to professionalism, which creates objectivity. It was felt that, by frequently voicing the perspective of their community or group whenever issues affecting them were raised, representatives could 'put a face' on concerns

about poverty, access or inclusion, leading partners to ask these questions of themselves in other circumstances.

Of course the danger of dropping pebbles in the water is you may wake monsters below the surface. Some partnerships had gone through *acrimonious disputes* leaving individuals feeling deeply damaged and compromised in their communities. However, some of the most bitter conflicts were those that had *never been allowed to surface*. Where lack of clear processes or support in conflict resolution led to the suppression of potentially contentious issues, community representatives were left feeling sidelined and tokenised.

As Marilyn Taylor has argued *'dissent is essential to democracy'*.[2] The surfacing of disputes can be vital to effective partnership building and dealing with them as they arise can prove more efficient and effective than barricading the doors against them. If representatives feel the value of what they bring is disproportionately measured from the service providers' perspective they may be less willing to continue contributing in the future. This is not to say they naively expect always to get their own way, but they do need to feel their voice is heard and valued.

Skidmore and Craig (2005) make a convincing case for a statutory mechanism encouraging local authorities to develop and actualise proposals coming from the community that have sufficient support, what they term a *'right of initiative'*. This goes further than the more consumerist model of the neighbourhood-level negotiation of services suggested by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Home Office (2005) in *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*. That sees 'rising expectations, coupled with economic and demographic changes, put pressure (and will continue to put pressure) on public services to respond' rather than identifying the need for a mechanism for citizens to make a creative input into social development.

## Community contributions

One reason it is particularly unhelpful when issues that community representatives try to address are squashed is that it prevents them from delivering the 'bottom-up' input into policy making often argued to be a *major contribution to governance*. The National Audit Office (2005, p. 23) takes the view that: 'Services designed and delivered without community input risk wasting public money because they will be unused or underused if they are not what people need'. Rydin and Pennington (2000, p. 155) have also argued that the public 'hold key resources or knowledge that policy actors need to achieve policy goals'.

In addition *indirect social goods* result from active participation. Health benefits have been identified by a range of authors (Health Development Agency, 2004; Rogers and Robinson, 2004). These include lower reporting of ill health, reduced smoking and improved outcomes. In local development planning, 'front loading'[3] community consultation at the outset is widely accepted as cost effective. By involving people throughout planning processes there is *wider ownership* of projects, so expensive and divisive public enquiries are avoided. Active involvement by parents through signing contracts and participation as governors has been argued to have changed the culture of some schools (Halpern *et al.*, 2004).

While many service providers engage with the public as 'users', 'customers' or 'patients', it is interesting to note that the service frequently reported in this study as most successfully engaging, the police service, explicitly approaches the community as *'citizens'*.[4] Senior officers we spoke to, while acknowledging their engagement had been led by government policy,[5] argued the benefits of increased legitimacy and public confidence were so self-evident that other service providers could learn a good deal from them. Community representatives frequently cited the police as *'unexpected allies'* and spoke of growing mutual respect.

These messages are arguably becoming increasingly appreciated by politicians who see: 'renewal depends not on smarter or more expensive interventions from the centre but on engaging citizens as the active co-producers both of new and better services' (Skidmore and Craig, 2005, p. 81). It is what Henkel and Stirrat (2001) have called *'the new orthodoxy'* of development, which holds empowerment of poor and marginal groups, through encouraging them to actualise 'bottom-up' initiatives, as the only way to make real impacts on deprivation and social exclusion.

## Is 'community' code for 'poor'?

However, an excessive focus on the engagement in governance of members of the *poorest and most deprived communities* may militate against the perceived legitimacy of this process. Increasingly, activists are asking why should the poor, who are already struggling, make the effort to participate in the improvement of public services while those in neighbourhoods that are well resourced do not need to attend meetings to ensure their streets are cleaned. As Chanan (2003) has identified, the community activism needed to rebuild a deteriorating locality involves 'a conscious major input with its own opportunity costs in terms of their personal life and household strategies'. Our findings strongly support this. It seems unreasonable for the bulk of this cost to be met by those who have least.

Equally, overemphasis on identified 'hard-to-reach groups' can leave those not so identified feeling *marginalised and disenfranchised*. Rawls' (1971, p. 464) concept of a just social system that provides: 'willing and meaningful work within a just social union … in which all can freely participate as they so incline' implies making involvement easy to reach rather than capturing those currently on the margins. While we accept the argument that 'governments can't do it alone' (Halpern *et al.*, 2004, p. 3), we would equally claim that neither can the most disadvantaged be given the major responsibility for enabling them.

The social problems addressed by emerging governance structures are *deep rooted* and, for them to be tackled successfully by communities, we need 'buy-in' from the better off. One of the most emotionally shocking moments of silence during our research was when, during a workshop on participation, a community activist asked a group of community development professionals which of them were involved as volunteers in the communities in which they lived.

## Cultures and structures of governance

Almost a century ago, M.K. Gandhi (1997) argued that, in England, there was a developing 'farce' in which rights are demanded without the performance of 'the duty to which those rights should correspond'. In order to challenge this culture in which disengagement is the norm and valid engagement merely a response to failed service delivery, institutions have to be reshaped to *simplify participation*. Individuals need to be able to find different forms and degrees of engagement throughout their life course, and to find accepted and accessible routes into and out of governance structures that support them.

However, it is important these changes are achieved *incrementally* and are built on the foundations of work already done towards these ends. One of the most frequent complaints community representatives made was they had just begun to understand how a system or process worked when a new policy wave swept it away and deposited a baffling layer of silt on a totally changed landscape. When people are using their valuable free time to grapple with complex procedures and understand the responsibilities implied by roles they take on in their communities, they need this knowledge to continue to be useful for some time without the language and rules changing drastically. An environmentalist said of their experience of partnership restructuring:

> Someone somewhere has decided it should have achieved more, so they have thrown everybody up in the air to see where they land.

This need for structural continuity can be seen in direct contrast to the role of most community development professionals. Their purpose, to provide communities with access to skills and resources they currently lack, implies that work will largely be *short term and project based*. We met a number of extremely effective community development officers, advising community groups on writing funding bids and providing valuable briefings to partnership representatives, identifying barriers to engagement and signposting resources to help overcome them.

However, we also met those who sought to represent the communities in which they worked on partnership boards and sub-groups, and they were sometimes experienced by communities as gatekeepers, necessary in order to access funding. This can represent a high hidden expense in terms of the *opportunity costs* of capacity building not achieved, or even undermined.

## The long view

An activist in London voiced concern that recent government policies implied: 'control and the ownership going back to local authorities'. He had experienced previous partnerships that had been disbanded and told us:

> A major private sector company … likewise our local football club were saying 'we are never going near another partnership' because their experience is, when it doesn't do what the local authority want, it's closed down.

But many argued that the LSP process was *qualitatively different* from previous local partnerships, in part because there are LSPs across the country but also because community engagement is deeply embedded in them. The local area representative for a deprived area of London was guardedly optimistic:

> … tomorrow I may not say this – but I think there are much better relationships and much greater understandings about where we're all coming from than we did have. Whatever anyone says about the LSP, for that reason *it's a good thing*. It's surprising we never had this idea before.

# 3 Legitimacy

> The LSP can consult and get feedback from the local community till it's blue in the face, but, until there are direct elections to the LSP board, the authority of the LSP can only come from having the blessing of the local authority.
> (Council leader)

While there is a great deal of commitment and enthusiasm for wider inclusion, the fast-changing shape of local area governance has sometimes left people struggling to see how to characterise the legitimacy of their role. Words like 'representative' and 'democratic' are often used inconsistently and confusedly, and adversarial political structures have, at times, been experienced by some groups and individuals as obstructing participation in local decision making.

The introduction of new and evolving governance structures has, understandably, provoked debate about their *legitimacy*. While this is often a healthy and useful part of shaping processes to fit the needs of different communities, it can, if not dealt with openly and with a degree of sensitivity, lead to the entrenchment of dogmatic oppositional stances or *failure to engage*, which can block or delay benefits.

The leader of one city council, which had only recently become fully engaged with their LSP, told us: 'If I'm honest, the city council didn't recognise the importance of that agenda … *we've been running to catch up ever since*'. The chair of another partnership told us it was difficult to get clear commitments from the local authority because members tended to be 'preoccupied with the internal politics of the council'. Both of these authorities had experienced at least one change in political control during the life of the partnership.

On the other hand some authorities with stable political control were experienced as over-controlling and unwilling to allow discussion of issues they found *politically discomfiting*. A senior statutory agency officer told us he found that 'political positioning' by local councillors to control the LSP agenda was unhelpful:

> Sometimes we get bogged down in what the meeting can or can't do. Perhaps at that point we've lost sight of what we're all trying to do – make this a far better place to live and work in.

He felt the local authority was sometimes squandering the goodwill of community representatives by failing to respect their need to feel heard.

Equally, community and voluntary groups have had to develop systems for appointing representatives to partnerships. As one member told us, this could sometimes be:

> … *a blooming nightmare*. The politics of that are just as bad as any other organisation. You get all the petty jealousies, and the battles, and all of that.

## Representation

The words *'represent'* and *'representative'* were used by partners from all sectors to describe a range of roles and issues (see Table 3). Often the complexity of layered representation was explicit:

> You leave behind your own personal representational issues and represent that board's view to your organisation. And you make sure the board actually understands, and you bring the knowledge and the expertise from your sector or representation, but you're not there to solely represent that group.

Others felt that giving voice to the concerns of a particular group was central to their role: 'if you are representing some sort of constituency, to be effective, you have got to know what the members want'.

**Table 3    Range of meanings for 'representative' implied by respondents**

| | Meaning |
| --- | --- |
| Elected by | Has achieved a majority vote in a process agreed as legitimate by those represented |
| Similar to | Has characteristics, experiences, interests or skills in common with the group, community or organisation represented |
| Nominated by | Has been asked, invited or appointed by a group, community or organisation |
| Presenting a case for | Is present to advocate a particular cause or protect a particular interest. This may be on behalf of group, community or organisation or for a more abstract constituency – e.g. the environment |
| Answerable to | Will in some way be held accountable for their actions and decisions. This may be at formal meetings, through briefings and reports, or what was described as 'walking on the streets', i.e. by living in close proximity to those they represent |

*See also Table 2, counter-claim 4a in Chapter 1.*

Representation was also used to claim *privileged legitimacy* in contrast to an 'unrepresentative' other. One council leader told us:

> I represent the authority – the LSP can consult and get feedback from the local community till it's blue in the face but, until there are direct elections to the board, the authority of the LSP can only come from having the blessing of the local authority *[see Table 2, 4 and 4a]*.

## Party politics

The functioning of the party system at a local level was often felt to leave councillors obliged to privilege party policy over community views:

> *Councillors are effectively whipped* so their number on the LSP board gives a very strong steer, and that has led to some fairly sad moments when progress looked like it was about to happen, and then we didn't get anywhere.

Some community and voluntary sector representatives were put off by party politics:

> Sometimes the debate can get really hijacked by the opposing political representatives. I find that tiresome.

A public service provider on one partnership said:

> I do sometimes feel that I'm sitting on *a bit of a fence*, where some politicians are either not understanding, or are not prepared to be more accommodating to views coming from fairly forthright members of the community network.

While some hoped political parties could be removed altogether from representation at local area level, others felt this would be seen by government as against the interests of their own parties: 'loads of MPs have made their way through local government, you know it's not going to happen'.

Recent reforms of local government were sometimes seen as having left 'local councillors *feeling a bit unloved*', which led them to approach the VCS with suspicion, even hostility. In particular, it was felt some local councillors, impelled by central government policies to transfer the housing stock to arm's length management organisations (ALMOs) or registered social landlords (RSLs), were

extremely reluctant to allow tenants' and residents' groups to raise these issues at partnership meetings. Members of one partnership reported a senior local politician as, on several occasions, attempting to intimidate community representatives to prevent them raising issues he felt should not be dealt with by the LSP:

> He threatened me over the phone! He actually said 'we know you from old on this – just watch your back'.

Activists widely believed that 'the council legally, and probably rightly, has the responsibility of being a community leader' (Table 2, 4 and 4b), but did not feel their own role was equally respected. One told us:

> Some councillors don't believe in allowing anybody other than elected people a voice. I understand that point of view but, if you think with an 18 per cent vote – of which you've got 50 per cent – you represent everybody, you're a plonker! There are other constituencies, *other voices*, who need to be involved.

A faith representative said that councillors are:

> … democratically accountable as elected representatives, which is fair enough. But then all the VCS members of this partnership are democratically elected.

## Democracy

This was the other major concept used with widely differing implications – being *'democratic'* (see Table 4). For some, democratic legitimacy comes only from election through the state system, while others saw a variety of processes as equally valid:

> We effectively had hustings and nominations and then voting. The council tried to say it was done *undemocratically* – it was probably more democratic than the way they choose councillors to stand in seats, because it was an *open process* and anyone who turned up at the meetings got a vote.

**Table 4     Range of meanings for 'democratic' implied by respondents**

|  | Meaning |
|---|---|
| Elected through the state electoral system | This applies only to MPs, councillors and directly elected mayors |
| Elected by defined group by secret ballot | Often organised for the VCS by the Community Empowerment Network (CEN) |
| Chosen by majority vote at open meeting | This method was sometimes found in small VCS groups and local area groups |
| Open to everyone | If everyone is seen as having an opportunity to contribute and involve themselves this may be seen as 'democratic'. However people who put themselves forward in these circumstances are often perceived as undemocratic |
| Properly and transparently recruited | Some LSPs appoint members through a public recruitment process and interview; this was also described as 'very democratic' |

*See also Table 1, claim 3 and Table 2, claim 4 in Chapter 1.*

Openness was frequently a key feature in the 'democracy' of a process. The selection of members for one partnership board was described:

> They had an open meeting where people could come. Everybody supported whatever applications went in. It was a democratic way they did it.

Another partnership had gone through a process of auditing essential skills before recruiting new members:

> I went through a process, a *democratic person* to apply to be on the panel. I was interviewed formally and they obviously thought I could bring what they needed.

## 'Usual suspects'

Others have seen the same sort of systems as being less than fully open with the *'usual suspects'* often invited to apply for posts. The independent chair of one partnership described it as having been:

> … quite a closed shop of people who know one another and I kept thinking, as I rose up the partnership ladder, somebody is going to say: 'well who the hell is this person and what is his legitimacy?'.

Many saw a challenge in making the best use of the *skills* and *social capital* embedded in the community and often personified by those identified as the 'usual suspects'. It was argued that community representatives could end up effectively disenfranchised if they were seen either as too ill equipped and under-skilled to work in partnership with service providers and professionals or, once they had made the effort to gain the requisite skills and knowledge, as no longer representative of their communities. In effect their willingness to invest in engagement was seen in itself as disqualifying them.

The categorising of opinion as either 'uninformed' or 'unrepresentative' was particularly experienced as a way for authorities to dismiss community views that were inconvenient or contrary to their own. One researcher has dubbed this the '*Catch 22* of community participation'.[1]

## No contradiction

Having looked at these issues, researchers could find *no logical reason* for any of the positive definitions of 'representative' and 'democratic' to be seen as either contradictory or mutually exclusive. There is as much validity in a representative looking out for a particular interest as in one being like those represented or another elected or held accountable in some other way. Equally, forms of representative and participative democracy can co-exist without the necessity for them to be in conflict.

The use of a specific definition to deny the legitimacy of other forms of representation or democracy is therefore likely to arise from some underlying problem not being clearly surfaced and dealt with. In particular it can indicate a *lack of respect* for and willingness to engage with other diverse viewpoints. This disrespect is likely to block the potential added value of community involvement in governance unless it is acknowledged and tackled.

**Figure 1    Matrix of the relationships between democratic and representative roles as presented by LSP participants**

| | Representative | | | | |
| | **Meanings** | **Elected by** | **Similar to** | **Nominated by** | **Presenting a case for** | **Answerable to** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Democratic** | Elected through the state electoral system | MPs; mayors; councillors | | Sometimes seen as party political nominees | Sometimes seen as constrained by 'party whip' | Through the next ballot and/ or 'party whip' |
| | Elected by defined group by secret ballot | Some VCS reps | Some VCS reps see themselves as having been chosen as sharing interests or characteristics | VCS groups frequently hold some form of election when invited to nominate LSP members | Some VCS reps see their role as advocates for their sector, community or group | Through the next ballot or reporting back to their group |
| | Chosen by majority vote at open meeting | Some VCS reps | Often see themselves as having been chosen as sharing interests or characteristics | VCS groups frequently choose to hold some form of election when invited to nominate LSP members | Some VCS reps see their role as advocates for their sector, community or group | Through the next ballot, reporting back to their group and by 'walking on the street' |
| | Open to everyone | | Some community and business reps have stepped forward to represent particular communities with whom they share interests or characteristics | | Some community and business reps have stepped forward as advocates for their sector, community or group while some business reps have also seen themselves as representing the interests of deprived/workless communities | By 'walking on the street', may also liaise with other groups and organisations in their sector |
| | Properly and transparently recruited | | | Some service providers nominate an employee whose legitimacy is based on their status as a properly recruited employee | Some appointments are made to provide the LSP with information and expertise from a particular sector. Appointees may see themselves as advocates for that sector | Employees of service providers may have to report back to their organisations. Some VCS and business appointees may be members of an organisation they report to, or 'walk on the street' |

17

# 4  Barriers to effective engagement

> Sometimes we get bogged down in what the meeting can or can't do.
> Perhaps at that point we've lost sight of what we're all trying to do, which
> is actually to make this a far better place to live and work in.
> (Senior officer, statutory agency)

Partners from all sectors were able to identify barriers to effective engagement
between service providers and communities. However, bringing local government,
service providers and the VCS together in partnerships was experienced as
valuable, even by some who found the process personally costly or challenging.

Frequently, people felt these challenges had been underestimated at the outset:

> I think just having to work together as a body with all those different
> people and organisations is a *huge task*.

In particular, expectations of the time needed to embed new working practices were
experienced as unrealistic. Sometimes this was expressed in terms of building
relationships: 'partnerships are people, and people take time', and sometimes in
terms of culture:

> It is difficult for the public sector to come out of their silos because they're
> comfortable. They understand the jargon and how it works and are quite
> defensive … it's a bit like turning the Titanic *[see Table 2, 4d]*.

## Blocks and brakes

For the most part, community representatives felt the benefits of participation were
becoming accepted at senior management level within statutory organisations and
there were also a number of very committed 'front-line' staff. However, a major brake
on progress was often *middle-ranking officers*, some of whom experienced changes
as personally threatening while others saw engagement as a passing political whim
and a diversion from their real job.

An LSP co-ordinator suggested that, while 'some effective decisions get made, the
bit lacking is that middle-management co-ordination underneath it'. And a local area
representative thought that: 'at the top and at the bottom things are moving a bit

closer together. It's that bit in the middle that is sort of squashed.' A vice-chair told us this was an issue for all partners, including larger voluntary organisations, which had sometimes become *'a bit stuck'*:

> There is an issue about peeling back the layers and getting everyone at every layer, from front-line workers, to middle managers, to senior managers on board.

This lack of buy-in by middle-ranking staff was seen as *squandering many potential benefits*. Community representatives from all partnerships we visited and at consultation events identified a need for statutory organisations to build *skills necessary for participation and engagement* into the training of workforces. One voluntary representative asked: 'We had information about the LSP, but did they have an induction about the VCS?' Bridging silos by building cross-sector secondments, shadowing and mentoring programmes into requirements for continuing professional development were mentioned as ways of helping develop skills.

In spite of an impressive awareness of training and support needs in the VCS, reciprocal concerns about the need to build the capacity of their own organisations to *engage effectively* was something that public sector representatives did not always appreciate. One told us, in relation to meetings with training providers to which community representatives were not invited:

> Dearly as I love the community representatives, they're not particularly going to want to take part in a discussion which looks for a more efficient way we can recruit clerical staff.

A community representative felt mismatched expectations were inevitable, as there had been insufficient initial focus on what should come out of the process:

> If you truly want to influence the key decision and policy makers, it comes down to a clear vision of partnership.

## Lack of agreed purpose

This lack of clarity about the overall purpose of including community representatives was frequently cited as a block on progress. This was sometimes seen, particularly by local authorities and other service providers, as being due to some extent to professionals feeling unreasonably pressured to enable bottom-up participation in

strategy while being legally obliged to deliver 'top-down' targets. This was experienced as 'moving goalposts'. One told us:

> Firstly, we need to understand what the *government agenda* is, and that's constantly changing.

Views about what participation is for were sometimes clearly divided. A partnership co-ordinator said of community representatives:

> Some people are on the boards because they see it as an opportunity to hold public bodies to account, to be there when some of the key decisions are made, which isn't necessarily *what we want*.

A community representative in the same partnership felt: 'it is all about governance, checking up on the council, isn't it?'.

From the perspective of another co-ordinator it seemed that:

> You have the private sector, interested in *making money*, you have the VCS, who are about *finding money* to keep their groups going, and the public sector, that's only interested in *keeping government happy*. When all three come together, there can be a bit of a battle.

A county council officer saw this as implying 'a kind of marketplace, brokering between issues and possible solutions'. But, sometimes, divisions between sectors were experienced as *deep rooted* and difficult to address:

> I would like to see an LSP that has all its partners equal. But now you have three divisions, voluntary, private and public sector, to change that attitude and to become one, I think, will be the challenge.

## Lacking action

A CEN officer told us he experienced the lack of agreed purpose as tending to paralyse the partnership:

> You would have three or four presentations, purely for information. I was prompting our reps to say 'well, OK, what's the action?'. The chair would say '*the action* is the partners go away and *think about it*'.

He experienced this as paying lip service to community engagement. Councillors and some service providers feared giving the community representatives real influence or power. This, he felt, squandered the potential resources that community representatives could bring to bear on local problems; rather than accessing their experience and expertise, professionals tended to present them with decisions and plans already made.

A senior public service official on the same partnership board felt: 'not to actually agree that we're going to take action, it is pretty discourteous to the people who came along and did all that work', but he saw this as the problem of a bureaucratic culture sometimes finding it difficult to connect with the more applied knowledge of community activists. 'Sometimes these very *strategic bodies don't see themselves as actually getting things done* – they see that as a more practical level.'

The chair also saw this partnership as unable to address practicalities:

> I did find not being able to get into a conversation about *operational issues* frustrating; only small issues, but things that a public service body needed to be doing to make a difference in the borough. Neither the full board nor any of the sub-groups of the LSP seemed able to do that; so we created a separate body, which brings together the chief executives of all the key service providers, and, interestingly, brings in one or two for whom there isn't room round the LSP table, like the fire service.

This was intended to separate the strategic management and governance roles in the area, and the new body *did not include* any community representatives.

A local government aide explained that:

> … it deals with some big things, but they are operational, tedious and boring often, and require a great deal of *sensitivity*. Those sort of difficult discussions that, if you had them in an open public forum, could cause havoc. I mean you don't want to have public debates about that sort of thing because, actually *you might never do it*.

The chair himself added:

> I think those kind of discussions are really very important and they are not about NRF funding, they are about how major service providers do their jobs better.

The feeling that some issues were suited to community scrutiny while others were too *complex, contentious or prosaic* seemed to be widely held by professionals, though this had been successfully challenged in some partnerships. A representative from the business community told us:

> It was a rocky ride at first. When I joined they split the meeting into two parts – one where non-statutory people could be and one only for statutory people. I said: 'Hang on a minute'.

Others saw this as part of inevitable political manoeuvring: 'Someone always wants to feel one step ahead'.

## The role of professionals

This problem was also framed in terms of professionals claiming *privileged knowledge and understanding* over community representatives who they experience as 'amateurs'. One tenants' representative described things as being *'too officer led'* or *'we know what's best for you'*. Indeed, as well as meeting a number of community development professionals who provide high-quality research and support for representatives, both in preparation for and at meetings, there were also some who attend meetings in their own right to represent the communities in which they work.

While this provides other partners with a colleague skilled at working in the public sector, it may actually *retard capacity building* and the embedding of skills needed to enable all partners to engage effectively in the longer term. The diversity officer of one partnership strongly argued that, in order to achieve wider social inclusion, the values that underpin engagement and the skills and practices needed to achieve this have to be mainstreamed into public service culture, not kept as the specialism of a few community development (CD) professionals.

Community representatives also argued the distinction between their role and that of professionals was vital:

> If you're an employee who's there as part of their paid work, you've got a different perspective than if you're a community activist giving their time voluntarily.

For some it was a distinction between empowerment and control:

> If they feel passionate about their communities, they should be able to stand up and say something without someone else putting their *hand up their back* saying 'you can only say this'.

In some places, input from an effective CEN officer was *highly valued*, bridging this resource and power divide – particularly through the provision of briefings enabling community representatives to prepare in advance of meetings:

> … they might be hand-written and jotted down between three million other things he's doing, but it does mean now that we get a *lot more things agreed*.

Another representative told us:

> The CEN officer comes along, same as they have council officers, and sits with us. We try to have pre meetings and I'm gradually becoming empowered to ask questions.

## Managing conflict

Decision-making processes sometimes seemed:

> … weak and feeble. It's 'do you agree that …?' and of course you can't help but agree, there's always broad consensus … I can't think of an instance when something's been *complicated or contentious*.

This was explained by the co-ordinator for the same partnership as a reluctance to allow disputed issues onto the agenda in an arena including non-professionals:

> One of the difficulties is how you deal with potential conflict. You can manage that by just having one proposition. You have two and people are in disagreement – how are you going to get your decision?

Some of the most bitter disputes arose about the issue of agenda setting, which was frequently experienced as being inaccessible to community influence.

Awareness of differences as well as shared goals was identified as essential. A co-ordinator told us:

> Individuals and the organisations they represent will all have different agendas, that's the nature of partnership working. Partnerships can be strengthened if *everyone is open* about that kind of thing, rather than pretending we're all terribly cosy.

The failure of some LSPs to allow contentious issues to be raised was frequently experienced as *frustrating and excluding*. It sometimes seemed: 'they're ticking that community sector box, as opposed to genuinely involving the community people'. A former representative from a BME group said:

> You got a feeling that those decisions had been made by a few people already, and then it came back to the LSP, almost for endorsement.

That partnership was acknowledged as having failed to develop transparent processes and, at the time of this study, was undergoing a major restructuring. The chair told us:

> As well as the board, which is supposed to make decisions, we've got the executive team, whose role also seems to be making decisions, and the chair's group, which is me and the two vice-chairs, which is supposed to make decisions as well *[see Table 2, 4c]*.

This lack of clear processes was seen by some as allowing real decision making to function through some *'old boys' network'* that excluded community representatives. They felt unsupported by other partners in the dissemination of information about decisions that were made and in placing issues that concerned their communities onto the partnership agenda (see Table 2, 5b).

The Government's desire to avoid over-prescription of structure and working practices was often seen as failing to provide sufficient mechanisms for resolving disputes, leaving inexperienced partners from the community particularly vulnerable. A CEN officer saw conflict as inevitable, especially in local authority areas with historically entrenched political control:

> Saying we believe in LSPs and being good partners, that's motherhood and apple pie. It's actually a *messy process, very painful*, and if you don't put a safety net underneath it we *[the community sector]* are going to get bashed with no recourse … Government Offices' role is accreditation, mediation, facilitation – in fact they pretty much do none of those things.

While there was often a feeling that conflicts had led to potential benefits being lost or delayed, people also argued that working through these difficulties could provide gains. One area representative said:

> I wouldn't say we are equal. We are getting there slowly and I think if we can get on a little bit more and see that *we are all there for the same ends*.

## NRF a diversion?

Some saw the LSP as a mechanism for administering NRF money. One representative felt:

> Most community organisations only think the LSP is about Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, giving it out. They do not think about all the *wider strategies* and policies.

Our experience was, not only community groups fell into that trap. Local authorities in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas were frequently perceived as having lacked real commitment to engagement, beyond complying with NRU funding requirements, at least at the outset. An LSP co-ordinator remarked:

> Everybody came to the table with a view to trying to get their hands on some of the money. So that kind of distorted the way the partnership worked for a while; but we got over that.

A prominent local politician revealed that his authority had seriously considered turning down NRF funds as coming with *too many strings*. That partnership had experienced bitter conflict between local councillors and community representatives, who sometimes felt personally intimidated. A local area representative said:

> I don't think the board would have been set up if there wasn't a requirement for it. The community and voluntary sector has fought very hard to be involved more fully and represented at the table.

## Getting to the table

Histories of failed initiatives and community tensions have left legacies of suspicion and misunderstanding that continue to inhibit engagement. We were told:

> You hear of SRB *[Single Regeneration Budget]* programmes – we should have just flown an aeroplane around the area and dropped £5 notes out the sky for the good it's done – there's got to be a better way.

A business broker working with small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in a deprived and ethnically diverse neighbourhood added:

> The business community we are working with, when New Deal came along said – *we have heard all this before*, for 25, 30 years.

This meant there had to be *demonstrable investment* in engagement to encourage these often marginal businesses to develop sufficient trust to buy into the process:

> We can't just go out there and say we are going to offer you the world. So we delivered a grant scheme and local business directory before we even tried to engage. We could go and say 'Look it is real, this is your 60-page directory, you have free entry. If you are on the main thoroughfare we can give you a grant for security or shop frontage.' So we got there.

Historical rivalries between communities and service providers have to be addressed by LSPs. The vice-chair of one described voluntary and statutory sector youth service providers as having been: '*at each other's throats*, seen as grabbing each other's money, now they are having to work together'. Elsewhere working relationships were also being transformed by the need to engage in financial negotiations:

> If it hadn't 've been for the money … it was a problem to sit at the same table and agree on anything. People are becoming much less parochial.

Another consequence of the lack of prescription on partnerships' structures and management is that not all agencies were *equally engaged*. The chair of a city partnership said:

> We can't make particular organisations do things or not, or even make them work together. We can facilitate but not impose it.

Engagement was often patchy:

> The police have been very committed at a very high level and have been putting up shared resources. Health partners – education partners – it varies.

Another representative said:

> We get some contact with the police, and the health – the mental health trust, they're not on the LSP.

Community representatives often expressed frustration with service providers for not engaging. A faith group representative in a two-tier local authority district identified that: 'Social Services being a player is *absolutely fundamental*, they're just not present'. This absence was also apparent at some other partnerships we visited, although in the non-NRF area:

> There seem to be very good links between health and the local authority; Social Services has one fellow who turns up to every meeting.

While community engagement in partnerships was seen as valuable, it was felt the full commitment of some statutory agencies is needed: 'If the council doesn't buy in, you're *wasting your time* trying to make it work.' A business representative told us:

> We have some prime examples where everyone said: 'This is the way we want to move forward'. Next meeting, someone did turn up from the council and said: 'We don't agree, we weren't here'.

This was experienced as lacking respect for the time and views of other partners – and community representatives in particular – as it is the only decision-making arena to which they had access.

This was widely seen as having been recognised by central government, which was starting to address it through tightening the Comprehensive Performance Assessment: 'Because of the CPA regime they have to demonstrate how the council is responding to the LSP agenda' – although the Audit Commission relying on local authorities to identify VCS partners to feed into the assessment was seen as a potential mechanism for distorting the results. A CEN officer told us:

> Certain organisations that get a local authority contract – they can't speak out critically without repercussions in terms of funding and being reminded of that relationship.

This problem was seen as potentially deepening with more unified funding streams coming through local area agreements.

**Box 1   Examples of blockages to effective community engagement in partnerships**

Feedback and learning

> They're producing reports, but communicating, evaluating and sharing good practice, is often something that's missed. There is analytical work, identify the need, implement the plan but often what's missing is 'well, did it work?'

What could we suggest: communication, very much a capacity for the LSP to develop; effective mechanisms for communication of what we're doing; evaluating, looking for good practice and sharing that.

NRF – diversion from mainstreaming?

If we didn't have Neighbourhood Renewal funding, which has to be administered through the LSP, and that's a piddling amount of money anyway, I can't think really what the LSP would have achieved.

Failure to mainstream inclusion in regeneration planning

> The one thing that's associated with the LSP is the vision for the city – as a BME person who is (a) a resident, (b) working professionally within the sector, (c) an activist – I feel completely outside that vision.

It's not easy to change the culture of a large organisation like the city council, which has always worked on the basis of 'here we develop a service, then, oh yes, we have a BME population as well, so let's develop something so they can access this service' – rather than making the additional measures you have to take to ensure accessibility for BME communities, making that part of the mainstream agenda.

> It said 'Accessible room required' each time there's a diversity meeting, because I was there. It wasn't a requirement for another group, because there wasn't a wheelchair user in that group. I said 'Hang on, this is wrong!'

# 5 Perceptions of costs

> It's the only show in town, it's deeply flawed in lots of ways, but we need to use it, occupy the rhetoric, to hold it to account and make it really work. (Community activist)

Those who come to the partnership table through jobs in the statutory sector are often seen to underestimate the cost of involvement by community and voluntary representatives. The chair of one partnership told us:

> There is an expectation that they can contribute time and pay their own way, the truth is a lot of them can't afford to do so and their organisations can't pay for it either.

For a small community project, representation on the LSP had to be balanced with their core activities: 'if I had to go out today to a meeting it would mean there would be no day care service' and a representative from a small business said: 'My involvement with the LSP has probably been detrimental to my business, but I am on a mission'.

Because community representatives are *accessible* in their communities, they can be held to account for unpopular partnership decisions in a way that professionals are not. They also do not have the buffer of office hours to protect their privacy or families. One participant reported having seven phone calls on New Year's Day, another reported personal attacks being posted on a website and activists being threatened in their homes (Table 2, 5c).

Professionals were sometimes failing to appreciate the commitment they demand from voluntary partners. Activists report being seen as *ungrateful* for turning down offers of training or consultations that conflicted with work or family commitments. One proposal, for an organisation intended to facilitate the inclusion of social housing tenants in regional governance, was to have neighbourhood associations delegate a representative to a district association, which would send a delegate to a county forum, which in turn sent a representative to the regional committee. Information was then to be cascaded back down through the layers. This would, in practice, lead to a social housing tenant acting as regional representative in a *voluntary capacity* having to manage communication of complex needs and policies in both directions across four layers of governance. This seems a lot to ask.

Overburdening activists can undermine confidence, leading other community members to see engagement as too costly. It was often felt professionals, used to their work being supported by organisational structures, fail to appreciate costs incurred by community representatives in terms of time, money and opportunities foregone. A local representative felt:

> At the end of the day, the professionals should supply me with information, because I haven't got that experience … they can go back and get their secretaries to do all their side of it. I haven't got a secretary or an office, *facilities everybody else takes for granted [see Table 2, 5c].*

We were also told of representatives who were asked to make decisions based on an 84-page document, which was only presented to them *during the course of the meeting*. One said:

> The stink I had to make to ensure we get it at least ten days before. For decisions to be meaningful you need time. It means that I'm up at 5.00 trying to read two hours' worth of stuff before I start the normal day.

He went on:

> I sometimes work out how much meetings cost. I look round and see it's four and a half thousand pounds an hour for these five people – it's costing them nothing to have me here.

## Feedback and publicity

When paid officers were then unprepared for meetings or failed to give feedback from projects, voluntary representatives felt *under-respected* and frustrated. One told us:

> We didn't receive feedback about how projects are progressing – unless we have feedback, I cannot say whether we are effective or not.

And another:

> Some people on the steering group are probably not in a position to know whether the public service has improved or not.

It was acknowledged that too much time spent on reports could get in the way of new business: 'There is a danger that the steering group becomes a *repository for progress reports* and business gets swamped'. This was sometimes seen as being used to 'keep representatives occupied'. Another community representative told us:

> We do get presentations by officers from the city council who have got responsibility for particular service provision. Some of them are far more convincing than others.

Senior managers and elected representatives were often seen as out of touch and unaware of the impact that policy has on the ground. A local area representative felt: 'The powers-that-be have their *little castles* where they are far removed from the street' (Table 2, 4a). Sometimes the burden of bridging these gulfs falls heavily on community representatives. A co-ordinator from a CEN felt that, while 'the network's role is to reach local people, the LSP needs to be part of that relationship as well'. A representative from the business community also felt under-supported in the dissemination of LSP policies and achievements: 'At the moment there's the personal mechanism I have – there's nothing the LSP provides'.

Publicity about activities and achievements was often seen as important to widening engagement. Partnerships were experienced as having too *low a profile* locally. Local press and media coverage publicising issues, events and consultations, and, vitally, giving feedback about how public involvement has influenced decisions, can be key to encouraging and sustaining participation (Table 1, 2a and 3). It was frequently emphasised that people were *less willing to participate* if they failed to receive feedback on the impacts of previous involvement. However, it was vital that feedback and publicity were realistic and grounded.

In one area it was strongly felt that the local authority sometimes used the work of community groups to enhance its own image. We were told:

> In government circles this is looked upon as a very active LSP. It's actually the Community Network that is very active.

An activist remembered being approached by groups from other areas:

> You get this *embarrassing situation* where people want to come down and see the wonderful things happening. I ask them what they have heard and they say 'Well we've got this brochure or lovely strategy'.

This was experienced as undermining appreciation of real achievements.

Both local and national government were widely criticised for sometimes creating documents that were insufficiently grounded and so created an *expectation gap*. The view of one representative was that:

> You've got the overall strategy for the LSP, you've got NRF strategies, you've got strategies coming out of your ears! The meaningful implementation of those lovely glossy documents involves making sure that they really reach the people they should benefit.

This was supported by a senior police officer:

> All these fancy documents – *'looks good the strategy'* – where do local people have a chance to influence that? Get involved? Take some ownership? Hold the police and other agencies to account?

There was frequently a perception that partnerships need to communicate more effectively at neighbourhood level. A senior police officer explained:

The LSP and CDRP *[crime and disorder reduction partnership]* are asking 'Where's the local voice?'.

## Supported involvement

The Government has funded Community Empowerment Networks to engage communities in some of the most deprived areas. Some are extremely effective in supporting grass-roots action and development. However, some community activists feel there is an *unintentional imbalance* in the desire to engage those in the poorest, most vulnerable communities. They argued more should be done to connect the better off with deprived areas, rather than charging those who have the least with responsibility for the most challenging tasks in regeneration. One activist from an NDC area asked:

> Professionals live somewhere too. If the streets are dirty, do *deprived communities* really need to go to meetings in cold halls on wet nights for the council to find out they need cleaning? Do they hold meetings about it in their own neighbourhoods?

For communities without a tradition of involvement, it is often important for their *first steps in engaging* to be supported. A local representative described his experience encouraging residents to attend meetings as observers:

> 'Even if you don't understand what's going on', I used to say, 'for goodness sake, *just turn up'*. They hadn't a clue what's going on half the time, it's so council-orientated. Its style is so dry. But what was good was that they came out afterwards and said 'Well what the hell's all that about?' and one of them has got elected this year onto the Community Network.

This type of low-risk engagement in which people can begin to find out about procedures and process, without making commitments they feel unequipped for, can be valuable in enhancing skills and confidence.

The presence of a CEN with officers skilled in *briefing, training and mentoring* reportedly increased the confidence and effectiveness of experienced community representatives, as well as providing a supported route into greater participation for newer members; although, equally, low-quality community development work in some places has the contrary effect, becoming focused on perpetuating the organisation and encouraging dependency.

Widening the pool of participants was frequently seen as requiring long-term commitment by all partners. It was argued service providers and local councillors can support this by *opening meetings* to the community, making language as accessible as possible and engaging with business, community and voluntary groups in mutual mentoring and training programmes to help 'de-sector' partnerships. The costs of these processes need to be borne by central government or service providers (see Box 3 at the end of this chapter).

Working in an LSP with a well-run CEN was seen by some experienced activists as creating a *more stable platform* for influencing services than previously existed, something qualitatively different from previous consultations. A tenant representative said, in the past, 'they have consulted and whatever happened was not what they agreed to. That has caused us nightmares.' Past failures caused some activists to feel personally compromised, but experiences in the tenants' movement provided valuable insights into the difficulties of working with local authorities:

> There are a lot of people that want it yesterday. We have always had to work at it, so maybe we stick in there longer than others.

## Timescales

The protracted nature of this commitment was difficult for the VCS:

> Nothing was happening and in the last five months it's accelerated steeply. The achievements are starting to happen, things you can see. Sadly, because it was stagnant for so long, we lost a lot of voluntary community organisations.

In particular, delays in *influencing mainstream spending* were widely experienced as frustrating. It was argued: 'we should ask those in receipt of NRF what they have done to bend their mainstream activities and *who they work with in a neighbourhood*'.

Different cultures of decision making in private and public sectors were seen as sometimes leading to misunderstanding and tension. One SME representative said:

> For me, being a tiny straightforward business where you make decisions and you act on them and things happen, to suddenly being in this multi-stakeholder scenario with lots of politics going on around.

Those in the public sector, used to working slowly with a range of *checks and balances* to ensure accountability, could feel pressurised and harried by the expectations of other partners. 'I'm realistic about the inertia in the system. But once you get things rolling things do happen and there have been huge changes.' It was recognised that change could not be embedded rapidly.

Sometimes this is incompatible with a political system demanding 'quick fixes': 'LSPs work at long-term, grinding, iterative change, not to ministerial timescales'. Pressure to achieve against external targets was sometimes derided:

> I got asked: 'What effect has three years of neighbourhood renewal had on life expectancy?' – *Come back in 60 years* and I'll tell you!

The chair of a city partnership was clear who to blame for unrealisable expectations:

> There is unreality in government when they say 'within ten years nobody will be disadvantaged by where they live'. Inequalities are *deeply structural*, they evolved with the city and will take a generation or more to remove. Targets like that devalue the process.

## Target setting

The importance of achievable targets that progress improvement without setting up a *cycle of perceived failure* was acknowledged by many. A council officer explained:

> We can have this lovely vision, but can't tackle all the ails of the world. We need to focus on something practical, tangible, that will make a difference.

Creating a balance between stakeholders when setting targets was generally experienced as problematic. The 'holy grail' for the chair of one LSP is to: 'have a set of meaningful objectives that *everybody's signed up for*'. For a partnership co-ordinator it's 'about building shared commitment in an area, so you're all working towards a shared agenda'. A rural partnership felt they had 'successfully managed a bottom-up approach to developing a community strategy. But this created a tension with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's top-down approach.' Others found the NRU floor targets a useful guide:

We will have *demonstrable improvements* in health, educational attainment and fear of crime by the end of the processes the LSP set up.

For many, restructuring partnerships to focus clearly on targets was a sign they were maturing and making themselves *fit for purpose*:

> We're getting a better grip on performance management. Building trust, understanding the development needs of partners.

For others, having learned to work within one system, change caused anxiety. Community representatives often interpreted reorganisation as an attempt to take back ground they had gained, sometimes with good reason. Yet others simply felt frustrated that appropriate structures had not been in place sooner: 'the first call on funding should have been mechanisms to structure delivery at neighbourhood level'.

## Managing inclusion

Some partnerships found it a major challenge to make themselves approachable. A former representative from a BME group described their experience of the LSP as 'like a *very insular* schoolboy network' (Table 1, 3a). Another representative from the same partnership explained:

> They don't mean to be exclusive but they work in a place, with colleagues, so when there's a public event a member of the public goes in and wanders around – everybody is in their little groups.

This lack of intention was of little comfort to the former representative who *felt disempowered and discredited* by their experience. They felt the predominantly male, white, middle-class culture of the partnership gave it a blinkered view of regeneration: 'When investment comes into the city, how does the LSP include those most excluded and marginalised? That hasn't happened.' In particular they felt personally exposed by the LSP seeming to offer more than it was able to deliver to a faith community:

> There were promises of investment, promises of support, huge promises were made. A year on, in fact more, nothing has happened; that community no longer speaks to me. As the facilitator of the meeting, I am seen as having broken promises, lost the trust that had taken years to develop.

That partnership had been undergoing a major reorganisation and current representatives felt some of the issues that had led to it being experienced as *institutionally racist* were being addressed. One told us:

> A year ago, businesses wouldn't have seen inclusion as something that concerned them, but they now discuss why they're not achieving more BME staff. In the past, the VCS have been seen as the only people concerned with BME issues.

**Box 2  Examples of the costs experienced by community representatives**

In time and opportunity

> Another tenant actually resigned. Although he's got some issues round his health, he was being pressured to do all these other committees, told he must attend all these other meetings and everything else. Like he said, what he'd done in his own community was being dropped aside. He'd been quite happy doing what he was doing in the first place. So he's happier now he's dropped out of the LSP, he's back doing what he was originally doing – in his community. I can see his point – sometimes you

*Continued*

are, especially being a volunteer and unpaid – some of these big statutory organisations and all, some of their representatives tend to push or pressurise you, put the responsibilities on people like myself to deliver something when actually, that's not my job.

In money

The thing is, I don't have an office. I have to try and invoice for everything I use – that's a bit of a fag. When you're part of an organisation, you just use what's there, don't you? But every single thing I have to provide – my computer, the broadband, paying for the printing and the servicing – everything that goes with that is down to me. There's a facility to claim it back, but it's all extra effort, at the end of the day, I'm not very good at looking after myself, in terms of claiming the finances back.

In reputation

There were promises of investment, promises of support, huge promises were made. A year on, in fact more, nothing has happened; and what's happened is that community no longer speaks to me any more, because, as the facilitator of the meeting, I am seen as the person who has broken promises, broken the trust that I had taken years and years to develop with that community. I feel a bit used and abused if I may say so.

---

**Box 3  Examples of the costs as perceived by other partners**

We have two full-time members of staff. I'm funded through the city council, so is the other post at the moment, but it's not a permanent contract, so what we actually have is matched funding with NRF to put into the scheme.
(LSP co-ordinator)

We have project leaders from the police for both of those *[community]* projects to drive them forward.
(LSP co-ordinator)

Within the team – there's now seven of us – we started up about two-and-a-half years ago, with two, so we've grown as a team, and we've got a communications officer, so that helps. The focus of that work's been

communicating within the partnership, very much, rather than external promotion. We've got a skills and knowledge manager, who is looking at the development needs of the partners, *particularly the VCS reps*. We've a seconded policy officer from the city council. Everybody else is funded by the NRF.
(LSP co-ordinator)

The main resource is people's time, and that's resourced by whichever organisation people are representing. The resources for the partnership team and the support team are largely NRF, but there's a city council contribution for a seconded post, and we've had contributions from the police and the Learning and Skills Council as well.
(LSP co-ordinator)

In terms of the funding, the top board has a number of partners on it who make financial contributions to the running costs of the board, including this team; the council, the universities, the police, the college, etc.
(LSP co-ordinator)

# 6 Benefits experienced

> It's an opportunity to sit with the good and great and one can actually in
> time, having got to know the partners, bring up and influence and
> empower some practical matters.
> (Community activist)

In spite of having encountered frustrations and difficulties, the overwhelming majority
of people we interviewed felt their district had benefited from local strategic
partnerships, particularly through improving communication between service
providers, the VCS and community representatives. The elected mayor who chaired
one partnership went so far as to say: 'If the LSP hadn't existed already, I would
have had to create something that looks a lot like it'.

The chair of another LSP, from the public sector, told us having 'activists' as well as
managers and strategists at the table 'adds *strength and depth* to certain areas of
our discussions and our activities'. A third chair said:

> What creates good decisions is the involvement of the full range of
> stakeholders, deploying their own expertise, their own aspirations and the
> sum of those parts is greater than any small leadership group.

## View from the ground

Representatives identified a key element of their role as advocates for their
communities, helping service providers to understand the impact of strategic
decisions on service users. Their viewpoint from *'ground level'* provides an insight
into the consequences of decision making, not always apparent to professionals:

> A few thousand here and a little change in a policy here – affects people's
> lives, it's not just 'I'm going home at 5 o'clock' – it's what happens the rest
> of the time.

Decision makers were seen as having been out of touch with service users in the
past:

> It was the chief executive of this, or the chairman of that – they didn't really know what was going on below their organisation. Now they've got the community and voluntary sector involved, they find out what is at *grass-roots level*.

So, in spite of difficulties and challenges, the involvement of community representatives in LSPs was seen as a valuable achievement.

For the community:

> It's an opportunity to sit with the good and great and one can actually in time, having got to know partners, bring up, influence and empower some practical matters.

This was also described by an LSP co-ordinator:

> The partnership's survived in a good-natured way despite some difficult debates. Slowly but surely we are *starting to have influence* over some statutory partners and the way they do things. The outcome is more relevant services, accessible and related to people's needs *[see Table 1, 1 and 2]*.

The link between neighbourhood renewal and the inclusion of the community in decision making through LSPs often led to community representatives being seen as representing the *poorest and most marginalised* in regeneration planning. But, increasingly, people are developing a wider vision of joining a strategic view with a practical hands-on picture of what is experienced:

> The LSP is to ensure strategy is being placed into practice and should reach the grass-roots level, so people benefit.

## Targeting resources

At one partnership meeting we witnessed discussions of a particularly vulnerable transient community whose pressing need was identified by a public sector agency. They were unable to *intervene directly*, because of legal constraints, and were exploring what support they could offer VCS groups, freer to act. The partnership co-ordinated intelligence of a developing problem with a range of community activists and service providers who could signpost potential sources of funds enabling urgent action. It was argued this could only happen because the wide range of knowledge and resources within the partnership as a whole was together in one room (Table 1, 1a).

Communities bring skills to the table that *enrich* the target-setting process. An environmental campaigner told us: 'I bring expertise in my own field, waste/recycling. I can help develop targets and identify organisations likely to realise them.' Another representative had identified the lack of NHS dentists in a rural district as: 'a small business problem as well as a health issue'.

A senior police officer saw benefits from improved community relations:

> It's a way of *communicating better* than we have done before … The partnership often is seen as a 'back of house' type function but crucially important to us, partners and communities.

This was echoed from a local authority perspective: 'the LSP is the sort of governance arrangement essential in any area to create the ambience for people to work together'. This was seen as allowing partners to develop more sensitive and efficient ways of working.

In an area with a strong local voice on the partnership a police view was:

> Ideas from the LSP have meant we're questioning whether we need a CDRP board, because that's a governance role as well. It's avoiding duplication and *streamlining structures*.

A community representative from another partnership told us that, by collecting the partners together, groups were able to avoid attending separate meetings with a range of statutory service providers, which 'cuts down a lot of duplication and so saves time'.

## Different perspectives

Businesspeople and community representatives often have a *particular freedom to raise issues* difficult for those dependent on public sector funding to address directly. One told us: 'Colleagues within some statutory organisations welcome the private sector being able to question things others can't'. This was echoed by community representatives: 'We basically say what we like and get away with it. Sometimes we are used to saying things they can't.' While this freedom was utilised by individuals in the public sector unable directly to raise issues that might discomfit their own organisation, it sometimes led to community representatives being 'experienced as a pain in the arse to the partners'.

The *enthusiasm and commitment* that community representatives bring to LSPs was generally recognised. Representatives saw themselves as: 'there because we're passionate about our communities and getting better represented, so decisions reflect a more people-centred and bottom-up way of working'. This was contrasted with the statutory sector where 'people change jobs so quickly you rarely see the same person at more than two or three meetings'. Local area representatives in particular were described as 'knowledgeable and gobby' and more likely to have done the background reading across the board than some statutory sector partners.

## Unexpected alliances

The most fruitful relationships within partnerships were sometimes unexpected:

> The police, who I wouldn't have picked out as immediate VCS allies and partners, are doing *tremendous work*. The private sector reps also emerged as allies, which wouldn't have happened if the LSP hadn't been there.

The commitment of senior police officers and neighbourhood officers to work with communities was frequently praised. 'Police to me are one big statutory agency that are fully committed to the LSP, especially within community involvement', although there was sometimes still a question about the commitment of middle-ranking 'men behind desks'.

Senior police officers were clear their involvement in partnership working, while initially stemming from government requirements for improved engagement, was continuing and building because they were reaping *clear benefits* for the police service and crime reduction. They showed a commitment to pushing the agenda forwards faster than some partners. One told us:

> What they're looking for is some kind of subtle influence on different agencies and whatnot. *I just wonder if we could be a bit bolder*.

Organisations perceived as most successful at engaging had developed clear structures for *disseminating feedback* through their organisation. A police commander told us:

> I brief my senior management team and strategic leadership team, which is the superintendents and the business manager. I brief them all on what's happened at the LSP, what the key issues are.

Another approach to encouraging engagement at all levels within organisations was *cross-sectoral training*. A private sector representative described this as:

> … a series of community development workshops where local housing officers, or social service officers, whatever it is, are brought together, to discuss local problems, to learn how they can be dealt with at a local level.

The co-ordinator of a different LSP talked of making sure staff in organisations *not at the partnership table* were able to access joint training.

In some sectors, for example registered social landlords, staff training on issues including equality and diversity, sustainability and accessibility has already begun to be routinely rolled out to involve tenants and residents. A tenant told us:

> A lot of them might be professionals but they've got some other people on there that aren't in that profession, but they're learning. Something like that will make them understand the process of housing and building – homes for life in a sense.

This process was experienced as helping to disseminate best practice on specific issues and creating a *culture of co-operation* and partnership.


## Steering services

Sometimes the real *steering quality* of community representatives has been in what they have decided not to do:

> There are instances where we've said – 'This is not the right way forward'. They are rare, but it has certainly been acted upon. So you feel you are being listened to.

An example of this was given by a number of partners from one area. The local public health strategy had failed to address an issue that was both prominent in their community strategy and part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) floor targets. A representative at that meeting said:

> That was something where the LSP actually said 'no, we won't accept that, you need to come back to us with a new document', but that's the strength of having a variety of people at the table, it meant other issues got included.

A senior police officer told us:

> What the LSP's done is start to ask questions, and hold crime and disorder partnership and the police accountable for delivering targets in the community plan … Where to pitch funding as a matter of priority, is that the *police deciding? No, that's the LSP*.

Another service provider believed:

> Instead of having a service done to you, the concept is, 'what is it you think you need? – this is what we can deliver', and trying to meet the community expectations as well as giving people a greater say. You might eventually end up with an area committee saying: 'we want our rubbish collecting on this day and that day'.

The non-NRF partnership had pioneered joint resourcing for NHS dentistry between the primary care trust (PCT) and the local authority. They saw their role in terms of enabling and negotiating the delivery of services that were decided on and identified as a priority during consultations on the community strategy. The partnership did not make the decision but provided a *pool of expertise and resources*, including the perspectives of service users and a retired dentist, which enabled it to be acted on effectively. Their co-ordinator told us:

> The main thing to come out of the partnership is to understand the main issues of the *district as a whole*, so we can deal with things that couldn't be tackled by individual organisations.

She argued that the PCT and local authority were able to win government support for this project because they had demonstrable backing from their community as well as other service providers.

Experienced community activists, veterans of decades of regeneration programmes, frequently expressed guarded optimism about the potential of LSPs. One, from a deprived rural area, judged that:

> In some respects it's delivering in communities left to decay for years. We've had organisations come before and do fancy reports that get put on the shelf in big offices. At the end of the day, communities were left with nothing. They've had balloons and T-shirts but no building for the community to use.

Many participants felt partnerships had travelled through an enormous learning curve and were finally starting to create structures needed to support effective change. A faith group representative told us: 'The LSP has evolved, changed its structure and ways of working, to move forward and achieve more'. Four of the six partnerships we visited have been undergoing major reorganisations. A local government officer in a London borough saw: 'the LSP as a resource that can help people open up the opportunities of community engagement and participation'. This goal was shared by local area representatives:

> What we would all hope to come out of it would be a borough where *more voices are heard and more people share power* and responsibility for decisions.

## Getting a voice

This is not a naive expectation that services can be shaped round personal requirements. A representative from a group campaigning for disability awareness said:

> I'll maybe not agree upon what they've said, but I've had the opportunity to say it … we may be only a small organisation with 60 members, but *we've got a voice!*

Having the opportunity to voice opinions and feel heard was often most valued, and feeling unheard most resented.

Community involvement in LSPs was seen to open the potential for the community to raise issues of concern, rather than waiting to be consulted once the agenda had been set:

> You've been consulted in the past, talked to, and then the box has been ticked … I think the LSP will force things to change, because something that needs to change – it will be *spoken about more openly* than in the past.

For a tenant representative the LSP 'has helped shape the change, rather than make the change'.

It was clear that processes experienced as 'exciting and transformational' by some were a cause of *insecurity and anxiety* for others. Speaking of a major technology park that was planned in his area, a representative from a disability group explained his ambivalence:

> People coming in are on £30, £40, £50 grand a year – fantastic revenue into the city. But people like ourselves, on benefits, will suffer because you'll have a *two-tier system*.

Through the LSP, he was able to make senior managers and policy makers aware of the unintended consequences of these processes and think about ways to mitigate them.

The involvement of *well-informed and networked* community representatives was seen as changing the relationship between communities and decisions made on their behalf:

> Somebody is there to personalise some of their difficulties. That's the gist of it, making sure there's proper consultation and empowerment – words that are just bandied about all the time, very difficult to achieve.

This was seen as giving professionals important insights otherwise unavailable to them: 'the set-up now is more aimed, because they are listening to people like myself, at grass-roots level'. According to a partnership co-ordinator, some professionals found this:

> … a very useful challenge, to have somebody from outside those professional organisations point out that what they are doing isn't necessarily the best thing to do.

The development of conversations between communities and service providers was often the *real achievement*:

> Sometimes the fruits that have come out of it have been as much about inter-relationships and connections that people have made outside of the meeting.

The decision making, which may still rest with partner organisations, becomes enriched with deeper understandings from *different perspectives*. For the VCS chair of one partnership this meant:

The meetings, by and large, are kind of talking shops but, by *the discipline of holding them*, a reporting-back mechanism, progress gets made between meetings *[see Table 1, 1a]*.

## The long haul

Most people were aware that widening power networks is an *ambitious goal*, which implies a long-term commitment to developing a new co-operative culture among service providers and communities: 'It takes a lot of patience on a partnership, and a lot of co-operation'. Most people saw *a lot of work still to be done:*

There are so many people involved in the consultation and decision-making process. Obviously that's a big ideal, and we are only so far along the road.

But community representatives were often remarkably focused and upbeat about their project. One diversity sub-group had a role across the entire partnership to *ensure targets were inclusive;* an activist said:

We spent six hours with representatives of each sub-group and looked at their targets. We're putting diversity issues at the forefront of everybody's mind.

Faith representatives also saw themselves bridging diverse communities and individuals:

There is a great appreciation from the statutory agencies of what the voluntary and faith communities actually do provide.

Some, while they saw the LSP as far from an ideal structure, felt it could still be a mechanism for progress:

It's the only show in town, it's not great, in fact it's deeply flawed in lots of ways, but we need to use it, occupy the rhetoric, and try to hold it to account and make it work.

Another faith group leader argued the process may be far enough along the road to be practically unstoppable: 'if you allow people to have a voice and they get more power, it challenges the way society runs. *You can't allow anarcho-syndicalism in and then expect people to continue to be like they were* '.

It's a very useful challenge, to have somebody from outside those professional organisations point out that what they are doing isn't necessarily the best thing to do.
(LSP co-ordinator)

---

**Box 4   Examples of where community involvement in partnership has worked well**

Accommodation for NHS dentists in local authority premises

People from the local authority had felt things like dentists just weren't part of our job. But the community consultation showed it was a priority. The PCT were saying 'we can't do anything about this, we're tied by legislation and can't deliver'. So we sat down, our Chief Exec, a councillor who was a retired dentist, plus some other dentists, and the other partners sat around the table and we really had a think about what we *could* do.

In the end our Chief Exec went up to Whitehall with the Chief Exec of the PCT and our MP to lobby for our plan. Now we are freeing one of our council buildings, that's being turned into six dentist surgeries for the use of NHS dentists. We still retain the building but give it to the PCT on a low rent. This will wipe out the waiting list of NHS dentists here because we will have provided for 21,000 more patients.

It has a huge impact in terms of the quality of life for people locally.

There we were, together, with a problem that we were all trying to solve, and we did. That is a leap forward.

Jointly funded neighbourhood wardens

Nuisance phone calls to the cops went down by a very large percentage. People could see this guy in the street and talk to him, there were huge benefits.

Focus on targets

… the community reps were the people who were saying to the Director of Public Health: 'those targets are wrong. They are not the ones set out in the community strategy.'

*Continued*

---

The LSP went potty around the table because the health strategy had missed two of our major targets.

Summer play scheme

> … people were saying – nobody's done anything about the youth summer programme and the Government's changed the rules. The borough police commander went potty, because he knows how his crime figures are connected to the youth programmes. He said to the council officers, and was backed by all the LSP, 'right, I'm putting so many thousand on the table, you go back, you sort them', and we had a summer programme.

Improved efficiency

> We can work together so that work is not being duplicated, so people are not working in little silos, it gives you much more strength.

> The point is, are we working together? Are we all facing the right way? And the LSP gives us that opportunity – that's why they're important.

# 7 Realising potential added value

> In some respects it's delivering in the communities left for years to decay. We've had organisations come before and do fancy reports that everybody in the big offices see and put on their shelf to look nice, but communities at the end of the day were left with what they had in the beginning – nothing. They had balloons and some T-shirts but they haven't got a building for the community to use.
> (Community activist)

The value of community participation in local strategic partnerships, in terms of both giving service providers access to 'grass-roots' knowledge and providing communities with more routes to access policy networks, was widely acknowledged. However, it was also clear to partners from all sectors that there have been hidden costs that tend to fall disproportionately on those least able to bear them.

Mainstreaming support for developing wider engagement in governance throughout partner organisations is essential for the *true potential value* to be realised. This will involve commitment of resources to training, engaging, supporting and monitoring across the public sector. As one participant at the 'Open Space' told us:

> It is not just a matter of us learning the rules of the game, the rules need to be changed. Accessibility is only meaningful if it means accessibility to everything.

Included in this chapter are some problems that have surfaced, to which respondents have offered solutions, identifying the potential for further value to be added. As has been suggested repeatedly throughout this report, researchers formed the clear conclusion that the *surfacing of disputes* and difficulties is vital to finding solutions and fully realising value, so we have not shied away from doing so. LSP structures and processes are experienced as enabling these discussions to take place and win a wider audience than otherwise would have been the case, though this needs to be built on.

## Widening accountability

Widening the pool of people involved in governance is already starting to change the sort of discussions taking place (Table 2, 5). *Transferred learning* from programmes

like SureStart and NDCs was seen as having enabled people not previously engaged in governance to come to the table. An area representative saw this breaking new ground:

> I think we've got to somewhere that we might not have got to without the
> LSP, because there wouldn't have been a mechanism to have those
> kinds of conversations.

However, not everyone felt included in profound change affecting their communities. In one city, where the LSP had, until recently, been largely business led, a major plan had been commissioned from an internationally renowned architect. A BME activist told us:

> I'm not aware of any structure where you could contribute to the process.
> There's a sense of grey suits determining the vision for that city, and all
> these changes go on around you, I feel no investment in it.

Another community representative agreed that there had been inadequate community engagement in this process:

> The powers-that-be have made plans around a table, not on the street.
> To get people's 'feel' you need to get on a bus – they should get on a bus.

This was one of a number of examples where communities felt consulted only after major decisions were already made. They were then asked to comment on relatively inconsequential details. People, it was argued, get involved if they see it having a *tangible impact* on their lives, but are put off by fruitless, trivial engagement. They are not keen to attend consultations when they just want systems that work. This implies the need for a greater clarity on the part of government and service providers about the scope and purpose of community engagement generally – an explicit 'joining up'.

Piecemeal, project-based consultations, with little or no mechanism for feedback or review by those consulted, can tend to *undermine community ownership*. If the ethos of community engagement was mainstreamed throughout partner organisations and supported by clearer shared processes that were managed through local strategic partnerships, a good deal of 'consultation fatigue' and developing cynicism could be avoided.

Developing a reinvigorated culture of engagement in governance within the population is central to this process, but overcoming previous negative experiences will necessitate an investment of time and resources. The chair of one partnership

felt, while there were opportunities for participation, these were *not trusted by communities* :

> There remains suspicion that this is tokenistic, their presence doesn't really matter and they don't have any real influence – I think they have the potential to mobilise much more effectively.

But trust can only be developed over time, with positive feedback within relatively stable structures.

Despite some fairly negative comments, on the whole, consultation and engagement was experienced as becoming more meaningful. Legal developments like the Race Relations Amendment Act and the Disability Discrimination Act were cited as changing the landscape:

> Now they will have to *show evidence of discussion* and what's come out of it, as opposed to just ticking a box.

## Building relationships

Trust was identified as growing most effectively from informal personal relationships developed over time: 'There is now *dialogue*, a greater understanding, a greater appreciation of what other sectors are about, we are evolving', a faith leader told us.

Another found himself more able to prompt action to prevent problems in his neighbourhood because of the understanding and mutual respect developed with the police commander through working on the LSP:

> We needed some police input over a local issue causing racial tension; I was able, because of my personal relationship, to say to the commander of police, 'this needs sorting out'. Within a day a rather offensive banner got taken down. Now, those kind of connections are very useful, because they *get stuff done*.

A number of community representatives described themselves acting to connect members of their community to those with the power to influence the outcomes of particular problems on the ground. One explained:

> If some of us weren't *sitting at the same table* we would never have that opportunity, we would have tried to get through, maybe we'd have been fobbed off.

This was seen as reciprocal humanising of people previously experienced as 'them'. For communities, 'they' are professionals – shadowy figures reluctant to share information. For service providers, the community can be a demanding and unreasonable 'them' obstructing 'us' from delivering legally binding targets. This can only be overcome by *better communication* of both problems and resources.

## Healing divisions, increasing respect

Community activists frequently brought a pragmatic 'sleeves rolled up for work' approach to partnership tables and saw their role as 'telling it how it is':

> People always criticise services, no matter what. Everyone will have their particular little need or whatnot. It's vital not to bring to the board the feeling of *'them and us'* because, as soon as you get that, you're at a full stop.

Partners from the community and business sectors, even in partnerships with significant tensions, frequently spoke of feeling *increased respect* for public service providers. They were developing greater understanding of the complex problems that public services grapple with. A business representative said:

> I have a much deeper and greater respect for the problems of the major service delivery people. I have grown massively in respect for all of them – not quite all of them, there's one or two who I haven't, but by and large.

It was hoped this understanding could help create 'a greater sense of unity and harmony about trying to live together'.

Building communities' confidence to engage in renewal and developing trust relationships at all levels was seen as an important outcome of LSPs by many participants. A tenant representative experienced partnership working as helping to achieve buy-in to neighbourhood renewal:

> A lot of people took it – there's a big wad of money down there – statutory agencies will gobble it up and won't give someone else the nod. The LSP's brought *everybody round the table*, it's building those bridges.

## Improving publicity

For most people, however, the LSP was still effectively flying below the radar. It is not possible for the wider community to develop trust in the legitimacy of the process, because *they don't know* it's happening:

> If you ask somebody on the street 'what's the LSP done for you?', they'd probably answer 'what's the LSP?'

This was seen as wasted opportunity:

> I think people on the ground know very limited about the LSP. They may have different services, the outcome of the work the LSP is doing, but there is a gap. The LSP could raise awareness of the people at grass-roots level about their role.

This is a missed opportunity to capitalise on those gains already made.

Representatives felt the community would have greater ownership and more individuals would engage if achievements, even small wins, were *celebrated* and issues discussed more openly:

> It could do a lot more, going out to places to say 'the LSP representative's raised this issue and this has been discussed, we're delivering this building'… It lets the community know.

One business representative argued it was important to dispel the *'mystique'* around governance, to enable people to understand what engagement could entail. This was echoed by the activist quoted earlier, encouraging members of the community to 'just turn up' at meetings and see how they work. It was widely felt that government at all levels could make better use of mass media to explain processes and advertise opportunities to influence policy:

> When a McDonald's ad comes on, alongside that should be a council ad – what are they doing or want from the people sitting in armchairs.

## Changing cultures/challenging mindsets

The challenges faced by LSPs were acknowledged as formidable. They have to identify community aspirations, co-ordinate service providers, evaluate achievements

and adjust targets. And the mechanisms to do this are largely *designed on the hoof*. The chair of the LSP pioneering partnership delivery of dentistry said:

> The district council saw they had to do something for the health of the community and the PCT saw it was worthwhile working with another organisation. But there wasn't an example of how it could be successful.

Although lack of transferable models is a problem in achieving community strategy targets, this is mitigated by the *creative potential* of community engagement:

> People are bringing different skills and ways of working. The important thing is not changing the ways they are working but the ways they are thinking.

One business representative told us a developing culture of co-operation meant:

> Problems are starting to be looked at as opportunities rather than things to deal with.

This was echoed by the former chair of a city LSP with a background in business advice and regeneration:

> If anyone came up with an idea on an SRB board, the reaction would be 'it won't work here'. That's changed, it's very much a *'can-do' attitude* – 'When's it going to happen?', rather than 'It can't happen'.

This was seen by a faith group representative as a fundamental culture shift, not dependent on NRF funding:

> The LSP focused the need to work together, so, when the initiatives stop, I don't think the partnership will.

For a police representative, this grew naturally from closer contact with partners: 'what you see developing are links between what we're trying to deliver and what other people are trying to deliver'. A commander in another force agreed: 'I hear what other agencies are saying. It's created an *external focus*, a context we can try to take into account'. A co-ordinator felt that this applied to all partners: 'the LSP has opened our eyes to the outside world'.

However, steering this culture change demands *commitment at a senior level*. While this was not seen as sufficient in itself – 'if there isn't buy-in at the top you can't

change an organisation, or a city either' – the success of both neighbourhood renewal and city regeneration was viewed by many as resting on this process. The VCS chair of a city partnership told us:

> What needs to come out of it is confidence that we are in charge of the future of the city – outcomes and outputs flow from that, otherwise they are meaningless.

## Future concerns

A public sector representative from the non-NRF partnership felt concerned that demonstrable outcomes might become more difficult to deliver as partnership working bedded in. He believed, as they 'move into less tangible project areas, outcomes will be *more diffuse*'. The vice-chair of another LSP saw: 'remarkable successes' of engagement to date cannot guarantee the future:

> Things have happened, which would not have happened without the partnership – the challenge is to make it effective in all sectors. Was it effective because of the issues– or are solutions *transferable*?

Even where there had been substantial gains, people were concerned these might not be sustainable if funding of local services through *local area agreements* led to the restructuring of local authorities, particularly in two-tier areas. One representative said:

> I think we are all struggling with whether we are fit for purpose because the purpose is evolving. We have deliberately taken a bottom-up approach to what we are doing. Yet, if we just become that arm of government for local delivery of central strategies, we lose what is important to the quality of life for people.

Practitioners from all sectors felt it was important for partnerships to avoid being too controlled by new government initiatives. The value of LSPs was seeing that new opportunities do not always need to signal the creation of a new partnership. This means that existing partnerships need to be *flexible* enough to configure themselves in a variety of ways in order to deliver what is needed in different circumstances, still keeping hold of the kernel of their purpose. This does imply having a clear 'vision statement' of the purpose of participation and partnership, which is regularly reviewed and revisited.

# Looking ahead

Highlighting good practice and exemplar projects[1] from districts and neighbourhoods that have achieved *significant success* in engaging communities was described as extremely useful. But so was the opportunity to look at what has not worked and why. Participants frequently told us how valuable they found the opportunity to reflect on the governance processes they were engaged in.

All this strongly implies governance networks and peer mentoring programmes would be both valuable and welcome. Building lasting links between communities with *significantly different experiences* will enable this as well as peer audit and the sharing of skills and the learning. Private sector organisations with multiple sites could help to support this, working with local authorities and partnerships to develop cross-sectoral and trans-district mentoring and secondment schemes that built on ideas like business bridge[2], the IDeA councillor mentoring scheme[3] and the concept of town twinning.[4]

A number of agencies, including the police and the environment agency, have undertaken internal reviews in order to engage more effectively with communities and other partners. There is some work to be done in *drawing out the lessons learned* in these processes and making them available to others. The onus has to be on service providers to learn to communicate effectively and make their organisations pervious to input from the community.

Formal opportunities for partners from different sectors to work together – job shadowing, secondments, joint training, mentoring, etc. – can lead to a more creative and imaginative joint utilisation of each other's resources. These need to be balanced with *informal networking* opportunities. Formal and informal contact between partners at all levels helps to build links and foster good working relationships. Building empathy and understanding between people throughout different sectors, groups and organisations is a cost-effective way of improving services. One practitioner described this as 'just doing stuff'.

Critically, service providers need to develop skills necessary to receive and understand messages from their communities at every level. Enhanced engagement skills can provide swift and reliable feedback on what is really needed – and often more crucially on *what is not needed*. When initiatives or services do not work and are unhelpful to the people they are supposed to support, a swifter, tighter *feedback loop* could provide earlier warnings of problems – giving an opportunity to stop, regroup and try something else, with the potential to save taxpayers' money and staff time. This will require appropriate flexibility in the planning and delivery of public services.

It needs to be understood by partners that involvement of community representatives is *qualitatively different* from that of paid representatives of service providers and larger voluntary or private sector organisations. Often, the knowledge, access to social networks and sheer commitment they bring are not accessible elsewhere. However, there are resources embedded in organisational structures – often not fully appreciated by those used to working that way – not available to community representatives. In particular, access to some types of information and, most frequently mentioned, administration can be extremely *resource/time costly* to community representatives.

Neither do representatives from loose networks of community groups have the same facilities to *disseminate information* as the chief executives of service providers. Effective community representatives are sometimes stepping down because they exhaust themselves trying to bridge the gulf between partnerships and communities. If LSPs and other structures were more able to engage through the media and through holding activities where people already were (workplaces, shops and leisure centres, for example), this burden could be lightened and more of the community's creative energy could be released. The private sector could use this opportunity to develop programmes of corporate social responsibility.

## Embracing opportunities

A range of opportunities to engage with governance are becoming accessible to people who might not have thought of themselves in those roles in the past. This brings the opportunity for organisations to benefit from a *pool of knowledge* and experience to which they have previously had only limited access. For example, lessons learned through community involvement in SureStart and the administration and allocation of NDC and NRF funding, as well as participatory budgeting experiments internationally (e.g. Baiocchi, 2003) are increasingly being built on to develop models of participatory local budgeting for use in the UK[5], which could have a profound influence on ownership of future service provision.

But grasping these opportunities will demand central government providing a clearly assigned *co-ordination role* and support for research, communication and administration. This needs to be high quality and therefore has a significant cost. For this to be achieved, all partners must come to understand the need for these services and to value them.

Participation in governance is not an 'all-or-nothing', nor is it usually experienced as linear progression or as a 'ladder' (Arnstein, 1969), which increasingly empowers as

it is climbed. In our experience it is more of a fuzzy *spectrum of activities*. People may engage at different depths, in different parts of the spectrum, at various times in their life. The easier it becomes for people to become involved, and, crucially, to *disengage at personal need*, the more likely they are to feel able to act. Currently we are at a stage where confidence in these processes needs to be fostered. Vulnerable individuals whose first steps into governance result in severely negative experiences might not only be reluctant to step forward again themselves but also act as a signal to their community that it is too *costly or unsafe* to do so. It is often where this pattern has been repeated that groups are left with a few well-weathered *'usual suspects'*.

The startlingly simple finding from our research was that interviewees felt a new process had begun whose *legitimacy and appropriateness* was obvious to them. 'If LSPs didn't exist, we would have had to invent them' was repeated in several different ways by actors from all sectors. Community involvement in governance has provided a valid mechanism for *more and different voices* to be heard and for developing skills needed to widen the pool of potential participants in a range of public bodies. Those articulating these voices and those hearing them, are, in many cases, beginning to appreciate and understand the value of creating dialogues. In the longer term, it has the potential to help shift deeply held attitudes and beliefs about where capacity building needs to happen, and where transformational change is needed. The longer-term impact of such attitude changes could be profound. Government needs to give clear signals that genuine community participation is an integral strand of good governance and as such is a vital ingredient in all vibrant, healthy communities:

> What we would all hope to come out of it would be a borough where more voices are heard and more people share power and responsibility for decisions.
> (Local area representative)

# Notes

## Chapter 2

1  This is clearly a form of what elsewhere is called linking social capital, e.g. Woolcock and Narayan (2000).

2  Professor Marilyn Taylor, public lecture, 29 May 2003, http://info.uwe.ac.uk/news/UWENews/Default.asp?item=354.

3  http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_planning/documents/page/odpm_plan_031155-06.hcsp.

4  http://www.policereform.gov.uk/implementation/projects_capacity.html#13.

5  http://www.communityengagement.police.uk/workspace/guide/index.htm.

## Chapter 3

1  The term 'Catch 22' was used to describe this phenomenon in conversation, but the concept is developed in Orton (2004).

## Chapter 7

1  For example, Beacon Council scheme: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_localgov/documents/page/odpm_locgov_609390.hcsp.

2  http://www.business-bridge.org.uk/.

3  http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=433262.

4  http://europa.eu.int/comm/towntwinning/index_en.html.

5  http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/.

# References

Arnstein, S.R. (1969) 'A ladder of citizen participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 35, p. 216

Baiocchi, G. (2003) 'Participation, activism and politics: the Porto Alegro experiment', in A. Fung and E.O. Wright *Deepening Democracy*. London: Verso

Bolton, M. (2002) *Voluntary Sector Added Value*. London: NCVO

Chanan, G. (2003) *Searching for Solid Foundations: Community Involvement and Urban Policy*. London: ODPM

DETR (2000) 'Local Strategic Partnerships: Consultation Document'. Nottingham: University of Nottingham. www.nottingham.ac.uk/sbe/planbiblios/bibs/cenloc/03/05e.html

Gandhi, M.K. (1997) *Hind Swaraj*. Cambridge: CUP

Halpern, D., Bates, C., Mulgan, G. and Aldridge, S. with Beales, G. and Heathfield, A. (2004) *Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour: The State of Knowledge and its Implications for Public Policy*. London: Cabinet Office

Health Development Agency (HDA) (2004) *Social Capital*. HDA Briefing No. 21. London: NHS

Henkel, H. and Stirrat, R. (2001) 'Participation as spiritual duty; empowerment as secular subjugation', in B. Cooke and U. Kothari *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London/New York: Zed Books

Local Government Association (LGA) (2002) *We Can Work it Out*. London: LGA

National Audit Office (2005) *Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal*. London: National Audit Office

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)/Home Office (2005) *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*. London: ODPM/Home Office

Orton, A. (2004) 'Community involvement and development work in Easington

district: civil renewal in practice?', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Durham

Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: OUP

Rogers, B. and Robinson, E. (2004) *The Benefits of Community Engagement: A Review of the Evidence*. London: Active Citizenship Centre

Rydin, Y. and Pennington, M. (2000) 'Public participation and local environmental planning: the collective action problem and the potential of social capital', *Local Environment*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 153–69

Rhodes, R.A.W. (1981) *Control and Power in Central–Local Government Relationships*. Farnborough: Gower

Scott, J. (2001) *Power*. Cambridge: Polity

Skidmore, P. and Craig, J. (2005) *Start with People: How Community Organisations Put Citizens in the Driving Seat*. London: Demos

Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) (2003) *A Toolkit for Tenant Auditors and Inspectors*. London: TPAS

Woolcock, M. and Narayan, D. (2000) 'Social capital: implications for development theory, research, and policy', *World Bank Research Observer,* Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 225–49