

VOICES

FROM EXPERIENCE

Eight short stories about community empowerment

A workshop about empowering rural communities was held in York in March 2008.

At lunchtime participants shared stories about community empowerment. Eight of these are shown in this publication.

The conference was organised by the Yorkshire and the Humber regional community development network. A full conference report is available at the National Empowerment Partnership in Yorkshire and the Humber website yhep.org.uk

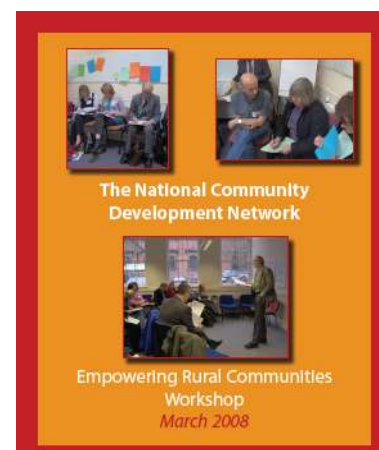
An older peoples charter was developed (by a multi agency group) to inform older people what standards they could expect from social / health care services. The local authority funded a community worker employed by an infrastructure organisation to help set up and support groups of older people to monitor the charter. Seven groups were set up across the authority region. The agenda at the charter group meetings was set by the older people and they each devised a 'work plan'. They were given a link person high in social services and also in the PCT. They invited other key people to discuss issues with their group and they visited residential care homes and hospitals to monitor the services from an older persons perspective. This was successful in giving groups access to statutory services at senior level. Groups felt they had been listened to and not just patted on the head. It was recognised that it was not always possible to get the changes they asked for but it is important to be told why. The structure and method of involvement needs to be comfortable to all – not everyone is comfortable with formal committee procedures.

Sharon Clay

Warming Skeffling Village Hall, not the planet

The Parish council approached a multinational energy company about wanting a new gas boiler to heat their village hall, having seen some other facilities in neighbouring parishes. They were referred to the company's grants officer for Corporate Social Responsibility who talked to the PCC and Village Hall committee and the local authority, and took a member of the Parish Council to a Northern Rural Network event on bio fuels and renewables which sparked ideas for a wind turbine project, an energy audit of the village hall and erection of a turbine to power the hall and sell power back to the grid in order to repair and modernise the building. It also led to the decision to start on a parish plan which is on-going.

Karen



Self help group for women with mental health issues group. The members received training to be a volunteer within the group. This was empowering because it improved their self-esteem and confidence. The Health Forum members identified these needs in inner city Leeds and facilitated the group over 2 years, and the group is now self-sustaining. The members have gained skills in obtaining funding and have established their constitution and bank account. They work with health agencies. They are based in a community centre, and its location in the heart of the area is important. They have made their own DVD about their group, supported by a local arts project, and this is available for community groups, it is about women and mental health.

Sharon Hodgson

Graduate Training Programme for the East Riding; a 12 week project, with individuals being based with the Organisational Development Team. They produced a short DVD to empower employees in understanding the positive contribution and diversity that employing disabled people in their workforce would bring. This DVD challenged a lot of perceptions about perceived barriers of why it might be difficult to employ disabled people. It showed how adaptations that could be made to buildings, support staff could visit and discuss settling people into employment, empowering local businesses, a range of agencies getting together – health and education for example

Kate Jackson

Can Do

Empowering local people to make decisions on small-scale projects that benefited their community. In Whitby, local people gave small grants and local Residents locally assessed them after some initial training. This created lasting change as residents were doing it for themselves and their own community. It is difficult to sustain in some areas because of the lack of support from other agencies (RSLs, Local Authority). Small grants need to be replenished but 'delegating' power was not something that these agencies were keen to engage with.

Anthea



An older persons forum arose from a consultation done by Teesside University on older peoples needs. A part time worker was funded to facilitate the start up, and it now has 600 members. Speakers are organised on areas of interest to older people, there are serious meetings and also a social side outside of these meetings. Other funds have been found in response to identified needs (yoga dance etc.). This enables older people to have a much greater say in what is happening in Ryedale that affects older people. There are now representatives on the strategy groups for Older Peoples Forum. There is a very strong committee, with older people now recognised as an untapped source of talent; new friendships and support networks have developed; the reduction in social isolation has led to better physical and mental health.

Pauline Reeve

Whitby and district area forums

These were designed to involve local communities in local decision-making. It hasn't really empowered anyone because it's the same people who do everything – Town, Parish councillors etc. So it hasn't attracted normal residents, only ones with their own agendas on previous issues, and who are not willing to work in a forward thinking, positive way. No new real issues came up from previously unengaged residents.

Putting on activities that draw people in, such as women's days, where people can have a manicure or head massage etc. and where they also have the opportunity to network and learn about things going on locally. This provides a non-threatening environment which helps people to see that it is easy to get involved in community activities and training. If you make something interesting and easily accessible people will join in, but they have to be able to see a benefit for them.

Liz Dowson

An arts festival

The post office in the village closed. There is no public meeting space. A relatively new resident – an amateur artist - organised an arts festival in the church over heritage weekend in September, with refreshments. Older people of the village came, not to see art but to talk to each other – they hadn't met since the post office closed. The withdrawal of local services disadvantages those without cars and often the older residents, a social focus is needed in each community; not least so you can see older people walking about. If there is nowhere to go, no milkman etc., then they become invisible. This means you have to deliberately visit them, which they do not like, to ensure they are safe. The church can be a valuable community asset if it can be opened up again for community use as it was until the 19th century.

Graham Ward

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This study has been produced by the National Empowerment Partnership in Yorkshire and the Humber. For further information contact COGS, 0114 2554747 or email mail@cogs.solis.co.uk

More VOICES are available on the regional empowerment website www.yhep.org.uk