

JUNE 2009

South Yorkshire Community Engagement Improvement Partnership

South Yorkshire has adopted a unique partnership approach to developing community engagement 'improvement programmes' which explore the menu of options identified by in the CLG Empowerment White Paper and 'Communities in Control' – the empowerment White Paper.

The partnership was established in 2007 to build capacity and improve community engagement practice within South Yorkshire's local authorities and LSP's. With funding from the regional capacity building programme of the Regional Improvement Partnership (hosted by Local Government Yorkshire and the Humber and a predecessor of the current RIEP), the community engagement partnership has provided a sub regional networking opportunity to share policy and practice at a time when the government agenda is heavily oriented to community empowerment.

The South Yorkshire local authorities have developed very strong relationships through the partnership, which has led to a close working relationship with the National Empowerment Partnership in the region. This has allowed both programme resources, experience and intelligence to be pooled, delivering far greater impact and opportunities for improvement practice associated with community engagement and empowerment.

Lessons – making such a partnership work

- » Select the right people (Principal Officer level is suggested) to be involved in the steering group from each agency e.g. people with community engagement knowledge and strategic thinking skills but also operational expertise, (otherwise, it can be a bit like we are providing a training course for colleagues re what is community engagement, or very senior people don't prioritise the time to make it work)
- » Ensure one person takes on a leadership role for the partnership – people are busy and need to know someone is performing this role
- » Identify one key contact per agency / locality
- » The partnership now meets quarterly but more frequent meetings were needed at the start
- » Build common clarity about the nature of the partnership and its function e.g. a training function, information sharing / research function, projects function etc
- » Find mechanisms internally to share information with colleagues – 'drip-feed' ideas from agencies elsewhere
- » Local authorities need to recognise the value of networking and training and enable officers to take the time to do this
- » Identifying a lead authority area and paying for officer time has enabled dedicated resources to be allocated to shaping the programme effectively, whilst maximising engagement from partners (in this case it was Barnsley MBC).

An initial conference held in Sheffield in November 2007, provided a first opportunity for over 100 stakeholders to meet up and to contribute to the shaping of the partnership's training and development improvement programme. Themes have focused on community engagement strategies and standards, neighbourhood development and support for 'champions' of participation in public agencies.

Learning and development events have included:

- » National Standards for Community Engagement
- » Participatory Budgeting training course
- » Neighbourhood Agreements/Charters development programme and tool kit
- » Regional 'Champions of Community Participation residential workshop
- » Regional seminar on community engagement strategies, practice and standards

Neighbourhood Agreement Training Programme & Tool Kit

One of the key ideas featured in the Empowerment White Paper is Neighbourhood Agreements - are often referred to as Local Charters or Community Contracts. Agreements were identified as an initiative to be explored in more depth by the Partnership and a major sub regional conference, through the development of a training programme and tool kit. The community anchor organisation for Kendray in Barnsley, was commissioned to develop a sub-regional training programme and share its experience.

Agreements involve residents, service providers, elected members and other bodies with an interest in a defined locality working together to improve conditions. They are voluntary agreements in which all signatories have a role to play in delivering better outcomes for the area – public services which are more responsive to the needs of the community, more satisfied residents, and greater accountability. Essentially, the process of negotiating, agreeing and monitoring an agreement provides a structure in which all the benefits of place-based management can be realised – with a ‘tangible’ outcome, in the form of an agreement, that people can relate to.

The Keeping Kendray Clean and Tidy Neighbourhood Agreement is recognised as one of the best examples of an effective Agreement that has delivered better public services through an effective working partnership between residents and service providers. In addition to the

Kendray experience, local authority officers and residents involved in the development of Neighbourhood Agreements in two other areas (Oldham NDC and York Bell Farm) were contacted to take part in the programme.

The training package was delivered to a group of 35 delegates from across the South Yorkshire sub-region during a residential 2 day workshop in September 2008.

The toolkit includes copies of respective Neighbourhood Agreements from Barnsley, York and Oldham, alongside more detailed information on the Kendray Monitoring Framework, administration and management systems associated with the Agreement.

The event identified the following key aspects of developing a successful agreement:

» A successful neighbourhood agreement benefits local residents, service providers and local councillors. Through the agreement process, residents will be more actively engaged in local decision making, feel more empowered to change things in their area and feel a stronger sense of pride in their local neighbourhood.

Service providers have the chance to hear the thoughts of the people they serve and react accordingly, either through changing the pattern of service provision or simply by clarifying and publicising what they already do. Local councillors will be able to use the agreement as a reference point to help hold both service providers and residents to account.

» A successful agreement will look different in different places – every place has its own challenges and its own way of tackling them. But successful agreements do share some common features:

- broad community engagement
- local councillor involvement
- the support of local service providers
- residents being able to set priorities for local decisions
- basis on trust
- a focus on practicality and feasibility
- celebration of success rather than punishing failure
- plain, accessible English

» Supporting this process will ideally be a local place-management team which knows the residents, the area and issues and is best placed to keep the agreements process on track through local knowledge and public recognition that it has the interests of the local community as its main driver. Such a place-management team can be a local VCS organisation or a representative department within the local authority.

A final learning and dissemination event for the Kendray Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder was held in early 2009, to bring together key pieces of information from the seven years in a pack including the action research project, Clean & Tidy Neighbourhood Agreement and Barnsley’s plans for roll out of the principles of neighbourhood management within its new neighbourhoods and community engagement framework.

All of the South Yorkshire local authority areas are now looking at the development of neighbourhood agreements as a key element of their respective community engagement strategies.

‘For the council it was the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills to do jobs on the ground. Relief for them to know that their practice is good.’

‘Good to see how different places are doing’
‘Like having the time for reflection and tried to build this into work’

‘The challenge will now be not just services taking all the plaudits but continuing to engage their communities in this to better understand their needs, respond to local priorities and be accountable.’

Community Engagement Standards workshops

An initial awareness raising day was held on 17 March 2008. All of the South Yorkshire local authorities and the SY Fire and Rescue Service were represented and feedback was very positive. A further event went ahead in June 2008 with a focus on the practical use of the standards by a set of specialist facilitators.

Champions of Participation Workshop

In 2007, two of the partnership steering group attended a CLG sponsored 'International Champions of Participation' conference. They were so inspired by its content and the networking opportunities it presented, that it was felt a regional event should be organized on similar lines.

In October 2008, the Yorkshire and Humber 'Champions' workshop brought together a range of people from local government and other sectors to explore how 'empowerment' might be better understood and implemented across the region. Addressing the challenges and the opportunities through a 2-day

residential programme, the workshop provided a unique **learning opportunity** for the 45 participants with direct experience of community empowerment from different perspectives - elected members, local government officials, other public sector providers, community activists, regional agencies, academics and policy-makers – and the chance to explore ideas and opportunities through cross-sector dialogue and learning.

The workshop focused on how **local government** and other public sector agencies could support citizen and community engagement in a way that is empowering for all concerned. The workshop also drew on examples of good practice from the UK and from

international models of participation and open democracy.

Without the South Yorkshire partnership, this event would not have happened. It drove the idea forward and the sub regional partnership working ensured that there was 'buy-in' from a range of partners. The event is seen by many to have been seminal in instilling inspiration and feeding the knowledge base of those who got involved – one delegate said the Champions workshop had been the most significant intervention in their career to date.

For summary and full report go to www.yhep.org.uk.

Community Engagement Strategies, Standards and Practice workshop

This was an event hosted in Barnsley which shared strategy and practice in Barnsley, Rotherham and Doncaster. The content as outlined below was drawn from the previous 2 years capacity building programme as delivered by the South Yorkshire Community Engagement Improvement Partnership:

» Approaches to strategy development and implementation – why and how;

- » Learning from a pilot to embed standards for community engagement – what they are, their contribution to improving understanding and practice, their relevance to LAAs;
- » Examples of community engagement at grass roots level – what locality wide strategy means for the very local level, how it feels to residents;
- » The relationship between community engagement and empowerment – what's the difference, how do they relate?
- » The role of sub regional partnerships in supporting the community empowerment

agenda – the opportunities presented by peer learning networks

Presentations from the three authorities outlined their rationale for, and process of, strategy development, as well as their experience of piloting the Scottish Standards for Community Engagement.

A full conference report including presentations is available on www.yhep.org.uk.

'We need to continue to fight for citizen participation in civic society and ongoing community empowerment. SYCEIP fantastic way of building confidence and knowledge so that can properly participate (not only sub-regionally but regionally too).'

'Towards the end got more people coming along to training courses etc as information passed onto other managers'

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Spreading the learning

Internally within the authorities

The partnership steering group has been kept deliberately small but each representative takes responsibility for passing on information and knowledge to colleagues. For example, Doncaster MBC become involved at a time when it was developing its community engagement standards. Doncaster's learning during this period was shared and developed through this programme and Rotherham MBC has looked at its model of web communication.

In Doncaster, information is passed and shared via Doncaster's democratic infrastructure, and in Rotherham a formal briefing of learning from events is produced for other council staff and LSP partners – these tend to follow a format of a description of information presented at the event, a summary of how the theme/ learning relates to RMBC activity and recommendations for future strategy and activity.

Across the partners

Sharing practice has useful learning outcomes – and it also recognises the value of what's already being done and what's working.

The close working relationship has enabled joint working in a way it is unlikely to have done otherwise. A particular example is the Take Part Pathfinder programme – usually aimed at a single authority but in South Yorkshire Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster councils are working together.

Across the region

The existence of a sub regional work stream of local authorities enabled very effective links to be made with the Regional Empowerment Partnership. This has supported access to learning from elsewhere e.g. the REP Learning Exchange around 'How Your City/Neighbourhood Works' courses stimulated similar approaches in Barnsley and Rotherham, and the South Yorkshire Partnership which is represented on the REP consortium potentially acts as a model for other sub-regions.

The future

There are hopes that SYCEIP continues in its own right but also adds value to the regional Empowerment Partnership as it brings together skills and knowledge from South Yorkshire. Further training events and research have been suggested – focusing on implementation of engagement and empowerment strategy. One proposal is to hold a South Yorkshire workshop around the NI 4 evidence framework. Another is to develop a common community engagement database – hosted individually by each local authority but with a common format, so that the impact of community engagement can be evaluated.

A key point for the South Yorkshire Partnership is the need to build on past learning through sub-regional working with the RIEP and with the REP: Structures are needed to enable us to work collaboratively, in a safe space, whilst allowing for recommendations on learning to be progressed that then improve community engagement practice! The SYCEIP has provided this at a very fortunate time, (emergence of the) REP, the national agenda and CAA.

To find out more about the partnership or for more information such as the Neighbourhood Agreement Resource Pack contact **Joe Micheli** on JoeMicheli@barnsley.gov.uk.

For the Regional Empowerment Partnership contact COGS, **0114 268 7070**, mail@cogs.uk.net. More VOICES are available on the regional empowerment website www.yhep.org.uk

