

# Civil Society and Community Capital

## Yorkshire and the Humber – shifting power to communities

For the past three years, a cross agency, cross sector and cross regional network in Yorkshire and the Humber has been sharing practice and learning about what works in mobilising local people. Under the umbrella of the Yorkshire and Humber Empowerment Partnership, the informal alliances that have been built have raised the bar in terms of active citizens and social responsibility.

This strong local presence (involving the local authorities of East Riding of Yorkshire, Sheffield, Leeds and Barnsley; 'Altogether Better' - pioneers of a Community Health Champions model; funded and unfunded voluntary and community sector bodies such as the Regional Forum, the Faiths Forum, Development Trusts Association, the Workers Education Association, a refugee community organisations network and the Community Development Network) alongside active support from Government Office Yorkshire and the Humber, and Local Government Yorkshire and Humber, has sparked innovation and shown how getting communities involved can transform services and results.



Picture courtesy of Westbourne East Community Group

# What do we know in Y&H?

## YHEP knows that<sup>1</sup>:

- Communities aren't just places with needs but networks of people with assets and resources. A focus on strengths rather than deficits is the best way to engage, energise and enthuse people and to tap into the 'core economy' as reflected in everyday neighbourliness and acts of kindness.
- The public sector should create *new spaces for participation* but not seek to fill those spaces itself. This means helping *communities mobilise* and take the initiative rather than stifling them in formal structures and bureaucracy.
- *Community resilience and responsibility* is what matters, especially when faced with reduced finances. If people are asked to help identify priorities, protect core functions and find creative ways to avoid negative impacts, the process forces them to agree what's important and this can make the community stronger - even when faced with tough choices.
- Whilst durability is important, projects have a natural 'eco-cycle' - they come and go (and sometimes reform) - but ultimately are less important than relationships, support networks, real community involvement and the sustained involvement of key stakeholders, including those with a community development role.
- The *culture of public agencies* can make it difficult to break through the layers and address complex problems at all levels. Although public sector staff must work within a system, we need a shift in power that frees up the frontline. It is within civil society initiatives and approaches that we see a more rounded approach to improved quality of community life. Dedicated staff with appropriate freedoms to respond to community agendas, matched with trained para-professionals such as community wardens and ambassadors can transform relationships between communities and public bodies.
- We need to better *understand the complexity* of issues like poverty and inequality and how community organisations can make a difference. We need different and better ways to value and measure those changes at local level – not just to assess benefits in financial terms, but also by capturing and sharing the personal stories that demonstrate change and have the *capacity to inspire others*. We should support such individuals to play leading roles at community level and invest in building community facilitation and mentoring skills.
- Let us keep the good practice; share it and use it rather than think we always need to start with something new?

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<sup>1</sup> Several of these points are taken from a regional residential workshop held in March 2010, Champions of Participation. Participants were drawn from the region's public sector, both officers and elected members, voluntary and community sector representatives as well as overseas guests from 4 different countries

## How do we know?

YHEP's understanding and knowledge is built upon several years of doing, watching, recording and sharing learning about what works. The 50 + learning and networking events and the 30 'Voices from Experience' publications emphatically demonstrate the value of enabling civic participation and appropriate support roles for 'those groups and organisation that are committed to supporting our communities'

## Community strengths

*"Would you deny the value of 1000 years of experience sitting round this table?"* (Voices February 2009). The City Council supported Expert Elders Network in Sheffield is made up of over 200 people drawn from all social backgrounds and representing the diversity of the city. They volunteer their time and use their experience and views to improve services and the quality of life for older people. For example:

- the job descriptions for Rapid Response nurses were changed to include mental health skills to better meet older people's needs.
- Expert Elders helped the Council's Private Sector Housing team to draw up the eligibility criteria for the Minor Works Assistance Grant (to help financially vulnerable older owner occupiers).
- older people have been trained in research techniques and carried out research for the Simplified Access project – in addition to a greater response rate, this has helped to increase social interaction.

*"One of the biggest changes they have made may be to have affected the way officers think about, and plan services for older people..... By applying their vast and varied knowledge and experience, they can challenge assumptions, provide alternatives and suggest innovative solutions which may never have occurred to officers or staff....."* (Nick Partridge from the City Council Communications Team)

Under the auspices of the YHEP, the Community Alliance researched the value of 'community anchor' organisations in overlooked or 'remote areas' (Voices January 2010). Examples of case studies showed a renovated church turned into a nursery, a community organisation serving 42 isolated villages, and an all-encompassing organisation at the seaside. The organisations surveyed pride themselves on being at the heart of their community, and understanding local need, therefore developing the most appropriate services for the area.

There are many YHEP stories illustrating the vast amount of community capital that exists, often in 'overlooked' communities. As the YHEP 'Writer in Residence' reflected after meeting residents in The Viking Centre, North Lincolnshire: *"this centre has been the hub of every endeavour locally to affect changes on the estate" .... "the labour and effort contributed on a completely voluntary basis rarely finds its way onto project balance sheets"... "her experiences ought to be required reading for policy makers, community planners and strategists"*. (Voices March 2010)

### **Audit of Faith Related Community Activity, Sheffield.** (Voices 2008)

30% of respondent groups were involved in activities that contributed towards a strong economy.

62% carried out activities that contributed towards the neighbourhood being a better place to live.

46% had premises used for activities that contributed towards a successful neighbourhood.

80% were involved in activities that promoted inclusive, healthy communities. 44% had their premises used in this way.

52% provided services and facilities for children and young people.

## Community mobilising

*'I approached this as a local official would, who thought I was in charge and I knew best. I was very firmly told by the residents that I wasn't in charge and I didn't know best – and they were absolutely right.'*

Stuart Pudney, Deputy Chief Executive. North Yorkshire Police Authority, describing his involvement in a participatory budgeting pilot in Scarborough, North Yorkshire; (Voices October 2009).

There is a lot to be proud about in Yorkshire and the Humber. There are many examples like the one above of public sector agencies working in different ways to ensure greater community led development. In Rotherham a YHEP commissioned project has seen young people influence land use. The Rotherham United Community Sports Trust has worked with a group of young people who have been trying for a very long time to get a piece of land for sport – especially football. The project enabled a workshop to take place using a flip video camera to record key messages and opinions, as well as recording the process of communication. As a result of the workshop the RUCST manager reported:

*"Tonight's session went really well, we had all three Ward Councillors down at the session .. it has been agreed to dedicate some land .... depending on what young people want. The councillors were honest about some of the land earmarked for development but a small area will be given for sports. Young people are going to consult other young people in the area, Area Assembly staff will help with making it a fun young people's event rather than one of those boring consultations, the PCSO will be bringing PS3 games, one of our lads is going to DJ."*

## Community resilience

*"Communities that are not nurtured will inevitably disconnect"* (Charmian Pike, Resident, (Voices, March 2010).

The region's 2009 Communities Conference, (organised by the Regional Community Panel - members are all experienced community activists and leaders and provide a crucial element in the Empowerment Partnership) enabled residents and community groups to share ideas and experiences around three concepts: Recession, Responses, Resilience. Clear messages were fed back into YHEP:

- Funding pots should be small with simple criteria
- Local councils must really listen to residents and take real account of residents' action plans
- Communities and their groups and supporters are vital – if government wants strong communities...support community action
- Communities want more than service delivery roles through procurement
- Politicians need to realise they should really support community groups to get people involved in politics, in people's own issues
- Local councils are not better than communities in managing services – they are risk averse and they need to trust communities more
- And .....Remember that voluntary groups are not paid; *"idea - people involved in community work should get a discount off their council tax'*

*Normally it's terrible (getting someone) to sit through a meeting but something like this (participatory budgeting), people get really excited about, because it's something for Eastfield and they're part of it.'* Graham Elliott. Resident (In Voice your Choice, Voices October 2009).

The Respect Funhouse is a story of grass roots empowerment (Voices, February 2009). The Respect Funhouse is a community run children and young people's centre - started from the vision of a local resident which spread through a community. It also highlights the benefit of cross sector support in addressing major local issues and finding solutions to navigate through "red tape" to make things happen.

The Respect Funhouse is located within the one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK, Nunsthorpe and Bradley Park (North East Lincolnshire). The number of lone parent households with dependents is three times that of the national average, 36.4% of residents in the area are under 19, the area is blighted from a historical prejudice as a "no go" estate, suffers from high crime rates and has endemic drugs problems. Incidents of personal robbery are five times that of the rest of the North East Lincolnshire and 12% of the residents have never worked.

The Respect Funhouse is the story of one community's determination to do something about the area. After chatting to a number of local people Steve Hill found that a number of the older residents didn't have anywhere to go. He set up a weekly bingo session - buying the machine and prizes with his own money and convincing the local vicar to allow him to use the church hall. The popularity of the bingo grew and enabled a number of residents to join Steve as volunteers to set up an action group to look at other things they could do. The group used the church hall for their meetings and arranged days out and a range of social functions for the local community. After discussing other local issues the group started extending its remit to local families and children that were isolated. At the same time, the local police commander had started to take a keen interest in the impact on crime statistics and started attending their meetings. By 2005 the group's activities began to have a significant impact on the local community.

The result is the Respect Funhouse – a multifunctional facility, open seven days a week and is staffed by 46 volunteers.

**The figures speak for themselves:**

Burglary: decrease of 11 offences (-6%)

Car theft: reduction of 150 offences (-58%)

Fraud and forgery: decrease of 13 offences (- 25.5%)

Criminal damage: decrease of 264 offences (-29.53%)

Burnt out vehicles: decrease of 75 incidents (-54.35%)

Youths causing annoyance: figure stable during traditional increase across summer of +50%.

The Police Divisional Commander believes that the centre has helped to reduce anti-social behaviour and street crime on the Nunsthorpe estate:

*"The impact of the Fun House goes beyond the obvious .... it gives children an interest, a sense of belonging and builds their aspirations – as well as keeping them away from street crimes."*

And as the group of volunteers said:  
*"Wouldn't it be great to see one of these in every neighbourhood?"*

## Building relational and support capacity

Social capital – the links and relationships within communities - is significant for all of us – it's not just for communities but needs to be developed up and down and across. YHEP is about extending our networks and spheres of influence and finding others, across all sectors, who will work with us to champion participation and an effective civil society.

This means recognising the valuable role provided by local authorities and their partner public agencies, the voluntary, community and enterprise sectors, as well as the significant contributions that individual residents can bring.

As GOYH Director, Isobel Mills, commented at a recent YHEP event, we need to *"build a different relationship between a smaller, smarter state and citizens"*.

And as participants at a recent YHEP workshop for local government learnt: it often means connecting people within their own communities before expecting them to deal with government and others in authority. Indeed at the same event, an overseas colleague talked of '*Connecting the dots, untying the knots*'.

Local authorities across Yorkshire and the Humber have responded to the challenge of meeting neighbourhood priorities and working with community organisations. Of all the lessons highlighted through the regions sharing of practice, the one about getting things right at neighbourhood level sticks the most.

Barnsley MBC's exceptional success in neighbourhood arrangements – whether it be through formal neighbourhood management arrangements, light touch support for community contracts between communities and service providers or its endeavours to empower those with frontline roles to tackle cohesion tensions - illustrate that the details of effective joint working between agencies and communities need to be worked out at the local level. Barnsley's approach to neighbourhood management focuses on building relationships between elected members and residents, changing relationships between service providers, and improving their responsiveness to local needs and building a sense of shared responsibility on the ground.

Other examples are Bradford which pioneered neighbourhood action planning at a very local level and has since piloted an outcomes focussed approach to social care through Total Place; North Lincolnshire which has recently restructured to enable a greater neighbourhood voice and is supporting the development of community ambassadors alongside community contracts and a model for a community hub: "*empowering our communities to be more sustainable, to do it for themselves, to be involved*", and Wakefield where partner agencies are beginning to build cross sector teams to give communities a greater capacity and voice.

The YHEP itself has seen networking across sectors and across the region as a key priority; "*The Regional Empowerment Partnership is a vital network for developing work at a regional level*" (Interim Evaluation, University of the West of England 2010).

Building relationships and relational capacity (including the skills and confidence for collaborative working) has been central to the co-ordination of empowerment activity across the region.

*"We can say there has been a sharing of different ways of working and practice; we've pushed up knowledge; organisations have been able to come together. Relationships have been forged that would not have been forged.... So what evidence do we have? Relationships, an ability to point to the numbers involved – elected members, front-line workers, community activists... The number of local authorities involved and other partners."* (Interim Evaluation, University of the West of England 2010)

## **Rounded approaches**

Often, interventions only serve to "put on a sticking plaster" or address a single community issue. Community groups often use multiple activities and are clear about a wider goal of "improving their area". The 'total approach' of community activity, and how one thing leads to another, is well demonstrated by a small neighbourhood based community group in Hull, Westbourne East. Established as a neighbourhood watch group, this resident led group has completed 22 projects in nine years, covering issues and activity around the environment, education, culture, health and community pride (Voices March 2010). There is no doubt in our minds, that community organisations are

the experts in realising activities that meet the breadth and depth of the 'lived' community life.

## 'Leading lights'

All partners in YHEP have been fortunate enough to see how things can work well, to learn from focussed local authority interventions and to meet a broad church of inspiring individuals. We have met such people in all sectors but at the end of the day respect must surely go to those individuals who day in day out, work without financial recompense to improve their communities and tackle the most pressing issues.

The YHEP Community Panel is a unique grouping of 20 community activists and grass roots workers who between them represent the diversity of our communities. They share their different perspectives on community life with each other, (*"it helps us not to be blinkered"*), identify themes for informal learning lunches, establish working groups around specific policy areas, and meet with policy makers and delivery bodies on a regular basis. Their knowledge and experience helps to keep local initiatives grounded in reality.

YHEP has many inspiring stories:

- from the woman who set up a Beaver Scout group, organised village galas, delivered Meals on Wheels, became a parish councillor, helped organise Parish Council conferences with Leeds City Council, became a member of the YHEP Regional Community Panel, elected as a trustee of Rural Action Yorkshire (the rural community council), supported her community to write a Village Design Statement (which became part of the City Council's supplementary planning guidance) and a Parish Plan (a 5 year social, economic and environmental assessment and action plan for the community.- resulting in an enrichment of community spirit as a whole. (From Active Citizens Learning Alliance 'Share your Story' workshop)
- to the woman who describes herself as a typical resident who went from volunteer to activist to local worker; she went along with a friend to the local Resource Centre, gave it a try, and was hooked instantly; studied and gained several qualifications there; concerned by actions of a service provider, she joined a local community group, then volunteered at the local Community House - dealing with the residents and helping them interact with the council and service providers; applied for a temporary Clerical Officer post in the Neighbourhood Management office; then for the job of Neighbourhood Participation Worker and is now studying in Community Regeneration and Development.

*"Who would have thought that I would have come from the so called typecast "single parent" living on benefits, on a deprived council estate, to someone that has made a difference, in a job I love, in a community I love more, studying for a degree, and now buying my own home.".... "I soon realised that the people that were once described as the little people could actually make a difference."* (Voices 2008)

## What can we offer?

*“We have probably undertaken a wider range of activities than expected initially - I guess it shows what small amounts of money keeping a network going can achieve”*

YHEP demonstrates the importance of light touch infrastructure support – the knowledge about what works illustrated here is the very tip of an iceberg. As a result of sharing practice and enabling agencies and communities to network and learn from each other, the Yorkshire and Humber region has become a centre of expertise and innovation.

*“It’s an extremely worthwhile grouping - I gain an opportunity to liaise, link, network and develop work with a range of ... bodies which I would not otherwise get access to. So my work is made a great deal easier ....”*

The YHEP offer to government is to come and see for yourself – we would be happy to help make such stories ‘living’ examples of what works in creating a civil society and building community capital.

We would be pleased to help you follow up any of these stories and suggestions, and indeed to provide more!

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May 2010

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We know that having a big vision – and not being afraid to be ambitious – raises people’s sights. We recognise the significance of inspiring people to believe in the potential for change.

*YHEP continues to be the most active and visible regional empowerment partnership ...”*

(All quotes above from Interim Evaluation, April 2010, University of the West of England)

There are many more stories than given credit here – indeed another 27 case studies of partnership working and community empowerment are to be published by the end of June 2010. But the written word doesn’t compensate for meeting the people on the ground who are ‘doing’ it everyday.



The Yorkshire and Humber Regional Empowerment Partnership brings together a range of statutory agencies, voluntary and community organisations, networks and people running community empowerment activities. It is managed by COGS



National  
Empowerment  
Partnership

Managed by the  
Community  
Development  
Foundation

Funded by the  
Department for  
Communities and  
Local Government