



## **Champions of Participation Regional workshop, March 2010**

### **HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP AND VOICE**

#### **Framing the issues**

##### ***Introduction***

This workshop is the fifth in a series of events<sup>1</sup> that have brought together 'champions of participation' from the UK and 20 other countries around the world. It will be the third such gathering in the Yorkshire/Humber region.

These workshops provide a rare opportunity for people who are committed to participation and empowerment to 'think outside the box' and to explore issues from different perspectives. Participants come from across the sectors - politicians, officials, activists - and include leading practitioners from other countries. Their experience provides inspiration and also an opportunity to review our own practice in the light of international developments. The workshops also model a participative approach, allowing participants to help shape the agenda and making the process as important a part of the learning as the programme itself.

The purpose of this paper is to help frame the issues for this event by summarising prior learning, outlining the context that will inform future developments, exploring some of the issues (already identified at a previous workshop), and suggesting how we might approach them.

We feel it is important that you are able to give this some thought beforehand, so that we can get as much as possible out of our two+ days together.

##### ***Aims of the workshop***

The workshop will build on the outcomes of the first regional workshop in 2008<sup>2</sup> and pick up themes identified by participants in a follow up event, held in September 2009. The focus will be on:

- exploring the balance between participatory, deliberative and representative democracy,
- identifying practical and creative approaches that help overcome the challenges to engagement and empowerment,
- developing approaches that value participation and recognise success,

---

<sup>1</sup> Champions of Participation 2007; 2008; 2009 x 2 (for UK, Yorkshire/Humber, southern Africa

<sup>2</sup> 'Voices' - From Engagement to Empowerment, Jan 2009. Full report available from YHEP

- building relationships that will sustain participation and engagement into the future<sup>3</sup>.

There will be an opportunity to share ideas and good practice from across the region and we will take inspiration from work being done in the USA, Canada, Nigeria and Jamaica. The workshop will hopefully help deepen our understanding of participation and lead to new ideas and action plans for local areas and for the region.

### **Why this kind of event**

The ‘champions of participation’ workshops<sup>4</sup> have tapped into an explosion of interest, around the world, in more participatory forms of governance. Despite different national histories and contexts, there is widespread recognition that participation is central to the tasks of revitalizing democracy, delivering local services and strengthening local communities. It involves what Professor John Gaventa<sup>5</sup> describes as “a shift from narrow ideas of **local government** to broader concepts of **community governance**, in which multiple actors play a part in public policy and the delivery of public services....” In many countries, changes in the legal framework have made participation a **right of citizens**, creating opportunities for involvement in planning, decision-making, monitoring and budgeting processes. Older democracies like India for example, have enshrined in law the rights of minority groups and women to be represented in village councils. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, the newly elected democratic government in the late 1980s decided to open up information and decision making on the municipal budget to local people, and now hundreds of cities around the world are using participatory budgeting as a way of devolving decisions, undertaking joint planning and supporting local action plans.

### **Background - Where have we got to in the UK**

In the UK, we have a long history of community involvement, especially at local level. For decades communities have organised and fought for their rights – for improvements in housing, welfare rights, better child-care and area regeneration. In 1997 the Labour government adopted the language of community participation as a central part of its agenda for neighbourhood renewal and, a few years later, local government reform. Since then, there have been some important breakthroughs as legislation, guidance and funding<sup>6</sup> opened up new ways for citizens and communities to become engaged and more active at neighbourhood, local authority, regional and to some extent at national level.

By 2007, key aspects of the neighbourhood renewal approach were being mainstreamed through Local Strategic Partnerships with an increasing emphasis on community empowerment. Hazel Blears, the Secretary of State, demonstrated her own commitment to participation and empowerment with a series of White Papers, Actions Plans, legislation and implementation strategies. They led to:

- A new statutory ‘duty to involve’ citizens and communities in decisions that affect their lives, implemented in April 2009

<sup>3</sup> ‘Voices’ – Making the case for Participation, October 2009

<sup>4</sup> Partners in southern Africa prefer to use the term ‘pioneers of participation’. In the UK we use the term ‘champion’ to mean people who are ‘championing the idea of participation’ rather than as a personal accolade of achievement!

<sup>5</sup> Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

<sup>6</sup> ‘National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal’ 2001; Community Participation programmes 2001 – 2006; ‘Strong and Prosperous Communities’ 2006; ‘Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act’ 2007; ‘Communities in Control’ 2008.....etc

- New powers for local councillors and communities to call for action and require a response from the Council on issues of concern
- A national strategy to encourage participatory budgeting, supported by an independent Participatory Budgeting Unit
- Endorsement of community-based models of service delivery such as Tenant Management Organisations, Neighbourhood Management and local charters to safeguard service delivery
- A strategy to promote the transfer of assets (land/buildings) to local communities and funding to underpin this through the Asset Transfer Unit
- Recognition and support for 'community anchor' organisations and funding to encourage their development through Community Builders
- Resources for a national empowerment partnership and a number of regional partnerships to promote these strategies across all sectors
- And the prospect of a new 'duty on local authorities to promote democracy'.

In addition to building strong communities and improving public services, these measures were also part of a wider local government reform agenda that would bring ward councillors closer to the people they represented, emphasising their role as champions and advocates of their local communities and hopefully strengthening their relationships with voters. To ensure that these reforms were taken seriously, a new performance management framework was established, managed by the Audit Commission, which included empowerment indicators as an important part of their assessment of local authority improvements.<sup>7</sup>

Political priorities however never stay the same for long, and following Hazel Blears' departure in 2009, the new Secretary of State, John Denham has put less emphasis on empowerment. His concerns are:

- the lack of social capital and the 'breakdown of community controls', as evidenced in a growing problem of anti-social behaviour
- the fear that diversity is leading to a more fractured society and tensions between disadvantaged communities
- the economic impact of the recession on marginalised communities
- the continuing 'democratic deficit' and the public's disillusionment with politics and politicians.

In October 2009, he launched 'Connecting Communities'<sup>8</sup>, a programme of action to support communities that feel left out, ignored and alienated from government and from mainstream society. His priority is to counter the threat of extremism by improving community cohesion and investing in communities that are under the most pressure due to the recession. In launching the programme he said:

*"We will make it clear that Government is committed to making sure, in every community, in every corner of this country, people know we are on their side. No favours. No privileges. No special interest groups. Just fairness."*

The programme focuses on:

- **Leadership** – investment in councillors, other leaders and front-line staff to build the confidence and skills to listen to communities and address problems head on
- **Voice** – giving people the chance to have an honest and open debate about the issues that matter most to them, even if those issues are difficult and uncomfortable, and encouraging community champions to have a say in local decisions
- **Opportunities** – raising awareness of the opportunities available to local people.

<sup>7</sup> See national indicators: NI-4 and NI-7

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1357214>

John Denham wants to increase the power of local government by strengthening their scrutiny role, giving them a right to challenge other services and by providing new powers to deal with issues like climate change. He wants citizens to engage with local government and better understand how it works, with more access and influence. But he is also clear that it is local government that needs to be making the decisions and that the representative framework is central to our democracy.

### ***Implications for the community sector***

Many people have described the past few years as a '**unique opportunity**' – to reconnect citizens and the state, devolve decision making, invest in the capacity of local communities and build a network of 'anchor organisations' that could support participation and empowerment over the long term. They were keen to seize this unprecedented opportunity for change. Others had reservations. They were concerned that a government-led empowerment agenda was a **contradiction in terms** and questioned the very idea that government could '.....give empowerment to local communities'. There was concern that participation was being used to achieve goals defined by government, managed through government programmes and regulated by government targets; that community capacity was being built so people could join 'partnerships', share responsibility and work within the system, as well as on the outside. Emphasis on the citizen as consumer, suggested that empowerment was more about personal choice than the ability of communities to act together for the common good.

So alongside the enormous strides that have been made in participation over the past few years, there remain many questions:

- about the role of the community and voluntary sector, increasingly tied into service contracts as their main source of revenue, and the loss of independence that this can imply
- about the culture change that comes with government programmes, targets, funding regimes and the management systems they require
- about the risk that radical ideas (like participatory budgeting) will be diluted into more acceptable forms of involvement (like 'community kitties')
- about the potential loss of edginess that was always the hallmark of community participation and organisation.

### ***Key issues that still need to be addressed***

Many of these questions have been explored in previous workshops. The insights reflect experiences that are common across many countries and are worth summarising here. The challenges include:

- Changing the **attitudes and behaviour** of those in power as well as those who are used to being on the other side of the equation – elected representatives and professionals can have entrenched views of local communities and may be reluctant to share power. Local communities may be locked into an adversarial, 'them and us' mentality.
- Recognising and valuing **community leaders** and accepting that they have an important role to play alongside elected politicians – both represent their communities in different ways.
- Supporting '**expert citizens**' – the people who have the difficult task of straddling community and partnership structures.
- Being genuinely **inclusive and outward looking** – reaching out to people at the margins, supporting new voices, welcoming new perspectives.

- **Building relationships** based on trust and mutual understanding, so even when conflict arises, people can work together to find acceptable solutions.
- Ensuring that **participation is embedded** in 'the way we do things round here', and not seen as an added extra that can be cut when savings need to be found.
- Dealing with **complexity** - multi-agency partnerships, different stakeholders, government targets, timetables and financial constraints, can make participation seem like one more complication!

We will be keen to hear how you have approached these issues in your own community or workplace. As well as sharing good practice and success stories, the workshop will be a chance to develop further insights to what we know are complex questions. Even where there is a real commitment to participation, it isn't necessarily easy to put it into practice!

### ***What have we achieved so far***

At the end of the 2008 Yorkshire/Humber residential one of the participants said 'The real challenge now is to make change happen.' A list of recommendations had been agreed – they provide a useful framework to assess how far we have come:

- To what extent are local authorities, LSPs and others connecting better with grass-roots communities? What has been done to improve these links? To what extent is community development support in place and are fresh voices being heard as a result? Is this front-line work better understood and valued?
- How is the relationship between councillors and local communities changing? What difference is the 'duty to involve' making? Are 'new spaces' developing for joint deliberation and problem solving? How is the balance between more participatory forms of democratic engagement and representative democracy being achieved?
- To what extent are people in the public sector developing the skills and capacity to strengthen participation? Are these skills being spread out so that more officers understand participation - how to initiate it, how to respond to demands for involvement and how to handle conflict when it arises? What sort of good practice is emerging – is the region raising the bar?
- Is an understanding and commitment to good participation shared across the LSP? Does the case for participation still need to be made? What evidence is there of the impact of participation and is this being mapped and used to inform and embed good practice?
- How is the regional strategy for participation developing? Are learning networks helping people share experience and avoid having to reinvent wheels? To what extent are community voices included in regional forums and do they feel they are listened to? How strong is the participation agenda at regional level?
- To what extent are we drawing on the expertise and wisdom of communities themselves and also on the experience of front-line staff who have become 'champions of participation' through neighbourhood renewal and other programmes?
- To what extent are we using participative processes to make decisions about budget priorities and spending? Are we investing enough in participation and is this sustainable?

At the first workshop, participants were keen that Yorkshire/Humber should remain at the cutting edge of participation and empowerment. **Isobel Mills and YHEP members** will reflect on how far we have come. But we also hope that you will come with lots of examples and stories to share about how you have been working towards this end!

### ***Current and future context for this workshop***

Two years is a very long time in politics! This workshop will take place at a time when we all face serious political and economic challenges and the stakes are high. Despite the positive impact of neighbourhood renewal programmes, overall inequality in the UK has increased. The financial crisis has heightened awareness of these injustices and bank bonuses have provoked outrage. But many would argue that the policy response to poverty and inequality is inadequate. General disillusionment with politics remains high, made worse by the MPs expenses scandal. With an election looming, huge questions are being asked about the efficacy of our democratic framework. And there is concern that in some areas extremist groups will be able to fill the political void left by the mainstream parties. We are also told that the next few years will be marked by tight budgets and cuts to public sector services – though in the run-up to the election, no-one is willing to say how deep these are likely to be. It will take some very nimble footwork on the part of local authorities and other LSP members to find efficiency savings and new ways of delivering services that do not undermine improvements and further marginalise the poorest in society. Plus there are major global issues like climate change, food security, migration and conflict that impact increasingly on people's everyday lives and require citizen involvement if they are to be tackled effectively. Against this backdrop, **Davy Jones** will give his perspective on UK politics, participation policy and practice, and offer some ideas for how we might meet these challenges. **Jenny Pearce** will explore how citizens can rediscover the value and importance of democratic action – suggesting that perhaps 'democracy needs to become a little dangerous in order to be meaningful'.

### ***Moving forward***

Participants at the 2009 regional workshop identified a number of issues that they wanted to explore further. They have informed the programme for this workshop and include:

- ***Putting the 'P' back into participation:***  
The 'P' could stand for 'politics' or it could stand for 'power'. Participation is only worthwhile if it makes a difference, if it influences the decisions that matter to people and changes things for the better. For the most part, simply consulting people about their views will no longer do. Many communities expect to be actively involved in co-designing solutions, and successful long-term change depends on getting their 'buy-in' and co-operation. So the 'P' referred to here reflects recognition that participation has to be factored into how decisions are made, who makes them and how they are implemented.

It also invites service providers to be more open to criticism and to recognise that conflict is inevitable, especially when confronting complex or controversial issues. This can be positive if it leads to better outcomes, but it is often easier said than done. The language of partnership can imply a more cosy relationship than is often the case and dissenting voices may just be labelled as 'trouble-makers'. Perhaps we need better ways to encourage genuine dialogue and deliberation, 'safe spaces' where people can be self-critical and where dissent and disagreement are accepted as part of the process? Many have argued that

'power' is not a zero-sum affair and that community empowerment can be a 'win:win' – for citizens, service providers and also for politicians. Making that a reality is never going to be a smooth ride!

- *Getting the right balance between participatory, deliberative and representative democracy:*

Linked to this are questions about whether there are other democratic models that we can learn from, in order to improve and enrich the way people and politics connect. There is still a lot to do to convince many people with a stake in the status quo that participation is necessary and desirable. It requires more accountability between elected representatives (whether councillors or community reps) and the people who vote for them - and that can be threatening. But it could also make for a much better deal on both sides.

In a discussion about improving democracy, many would identify the political parties as the 'elephant in the room'. They form the bedrock of our democratic system, but they are struggling. The need to open up politics and encourage new voices, fresh blood into public life has been behind many of the reforms of the past few years. At local level elected members need to connect better with the communities they represent so that they can advocate on their behalf. Decision-making needs to be more transparent and citizens need to be able to hold their representatives to account.

New approaches such as participatory budgeting<sup>9</sup> and ideas such as co-production<sup>10</sup> provide potential ways forward. London Citizens is another example, where broad-based organising, originally developed in the USA, has made it possible for local communities to become a force to be reckoned with in London. Whether they are talking to the Mayor, the Olympic committee or to city bankers, they are taken seriously because they can mobilise large numbers of grass-roots organisations, including many groups who otherwise would remain voiceless. Similar initiatives in other parts of the UK are trying to create new democratic spaces so that citizens can engage with politics and power in a fundamentally different way.

- *Learning for and through participation – doing it for real:*

Charting new territory is tricky. Councillors, officers and community reps, all need new ideas, skills and support. So how can we make sure that the training on offer is delivered in ways that deepen our understanding of participation and provide the skills and confidence for us to be able to take risks and be innovative in our work?

- *Valuing participation and recognising success:*

Not everyone is convinced about participation. If it is to develop through informed debate rather than ideological argument, we need to be able to monitor progress, and gather evidence of impact to make a 'business case' for investment in participation. This will be even more important if, as expected, public sector budgets come under pressure in coming years. But we struggle to measure soft outcomes and more work is needed to identify what to measure and how to assess progress and impact resulting from participation. If we want participation to become embedded in future strategies, it will be important to crack this particular nut.

- *Making sure that everyone is being heard:*

---

<sup>9</sup> Participatory Budgeting Unit: <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> 'The Challenge of Co-production' David Boyle and Michael Harris - NEF

In exploring all these issues, the question of who is being listened to, whose voices are being heard is crucial. Groups and individuals not already 'well connected' need to be part of the dialogue. Outreach work will always be a key part of good practice, if we are to avoid simply working with a narrow group of 'participation experts' in the community and in the public sector.

### **Workshop programme**

The workshop will explore all these issues, with a particular focus on:

- How we strengthen local democracy, voice and influence.
- What happens on the ground in terms of connecting with communities, developing and supporting local champions, ensuring that participation makes a difference and delivers better outcomes, especially for disadvantaged communities.

We will draw on experience and insights from **Jim Diers** who has worked for many years as a community organiser and also as director of Seattle's department of Neighbourhoods. We will also hear from **Amina Salihu** who participated in the first 'champions' workshop, has been a policy adviser to the minister in Abuja and is working to develop a strong voice for women and young people in Nigeria. We will hear from **Liz Weaver** who has managed an award-winning poverty reduction programme and multi-sector strategy in Canada, and also from **Teddy Noble**, who has been working with a London borough for 12 months, applying participative, community-led monitoring methods, developed in Jamaica.

### **Conclusion**

Funding for the national Empowerment Partnership programme comes to an end in 2011. What happens after that will depend to a large extent on the 'relational capacity' that exists between communities and between local government and other 'champions' of participation and empowerment in the region. A great deal of work has already been done to support individual 'champions', to build strong networks, to encourage mutual learning and support, and to strengthen the voice and capacity of all sections of the community. We hope this workshop will contribute to this work and help ensure that the YHEP leaves a lasting legacy in the region.

*Tricia Zipfel*  
*March 2010*