Report on the National Empowerment Partnership resources catalogue 2008/09

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Communities
and Local Government

National
Empowerment
Partnership

community
development
foundation

Executive summary

Community empowerment has a demonstrable and positive impact on individuals, community groups, communities and public agencies. This is the clear message from the work of the first year of the National Empowerment Partnership (NEP).

Community empowerment activities can encourage citizens to be more active, increase the capacity of community organisations, strengthen community cohesion and bring about a change in the way public agencies work, making them more responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

In order to achieve these benefits, public agencies need to take a strategic approach to community empowerment. This should include support for community development, community based organisations and the infrastructure organisations (such as networks) which make community empowerment possible.

One of the barriers to be overcome is stakeholders' lack of capacity. Individuals, community organisations, officials and elected members all need specific support if community empowerment is to be realised.

There are numerous debates around community empowerment. These include lively discussions over the definition of the term itself, differences over the best way to measure the extent of community empowerment in an area, and several competing models for evaluating the effectiveness of various community empowerment initiatives.

Finally, although the NEP has produced a large amount of work, some areas still require further investigation, notably the business case for community empowerment.

Background

The NEP is a partnership of organisations set up to improve the quality, coordination and evidence of community empowerment across England. The practical work of the NEP programme is carried out by organisations working together in regional empowerment partnerships (REPs), which are based in the nine English regions. Each REP brings together a range of statutory agencies, voluntary and community organisations, networks and individuals who are running community empowerment activities. They use their collective expertise to support local authorities, statutory agencies and community organisations in working together.

A number of materials were produced about community empowerment during year one of NEP, commissioned nationally by NEP and regionally by the REPs. Sixty-five documents have been catalogued; all are available as downloads from the CDF website (www.cdf.org.uk). This report is an analysis of the findings and policy messages included in these documents. It presents findings on the impact of community empowerment, the factors for success, barriers to be overcome and ongoing debates.

Reference system

The documents are listed at the end of the report. Each has been assigned a number, which shows its position in the NEP resources catalogue.

The sections below give brief details of the messages highlighted, followed by the number(s) of the document(s) in which they appear.

The impact of community empowerment

Successful community empowerment activities make a positive impact on individuals, community groups, communities and public agencies.

Individuals

Individuals who take part in community empowerment activities report a number of benefits. Many have **increased confidence** (5, 7, 8, 13, 42, 46, 60), **raised aspirations** (13, 41) and feel **satisfied that they had been listened to** (42). Others gain **new skills**, such as the ability to chair meetings, and find employment as a result (5, 8, 9, 13, 41, 42). Several demonstrate **an improved knowledge of how local government works** (5, 7, 33, 41, 46) and report an **increased likelihood to vote and volunteer** (8). There are several examples of individuals who are **more willing to take on new responsibilities** (13, 33, 46) as a result of successful projects.

Community organisations

Community organisations involved in community empowerment activities can benefit through **greater capacity** (9, 28, 55), **increased membership** (13) and **improved finances** (9). Their **relationships with other community organisations are improved** (13) and they are more likely to be treated as **equal**

partners by public agencies (7, 13, 19, 55). Community empowerment activities also often result in the creation of **new community organisations** (42, 64).

Communities

The communities in which community empowerment activities are supported benefit from **strengthened and new social networks** (5, 28, 42, 54). There is an **increase in social capital** of all types (bridging, bonding and linking) (28) as well as **improvements in health** (9, 42) and **greater feelings of influence** (7, 41). Finally, communities benefit from an **improved physical environment** (7).

Public agencies

Public agencies involved in community empowerment are **more aware of the needs and aspirations** of the citizens they serve, including those from so-called 'hard to reach' groups (5, 19, 57, 60). Their **services are improved** and new services are identified (13, 32, 60, 64). They are better able to **work in partnership with community organisations** (7, 13, 19, 55). By enabling and facilitating community empowerment, public agencies such as local authorities have **greater legitimacy** in the public's eyes (32, 40). They also benefit from **improved relationships between staff and users** of public services (13, 60) and **between elected members and the public** (40, 41).

Factors for success

An analysis of the materials produced by the NEP shows several factors that go towards successful community empowerment.

The primary message is that, to realise the potential benefits of community empowerment, there has to be an **overriding focus on the community** (5, 9, 13, 19, 40). In practice this means working at the community's pace and to its timetables, on issues that are important to the community and in a way that builds on existing strengths. Making the experience **fun** (13) will improve the chance of success. Wherever possible, **bureaucracy** and **technical terms** should be minimised (9, 11, 57).

In order to arrive at this point the public agencies involved in community empowerment need to take a **clear and strategic approach** which includes **commitment of time and resources** (5, 9, 11, 18, 40, 41, 60). They must also show a degree of **flexibility**, responding to issues that may arise from community

empowerment work and demonstrating that they have taken into account, and acted on, the views of the community (13, 18, 19).

All parties involved require support and, on occasion, **capacity building** (5). This is true for **members of the public** (13, 55, 57, 60) and also for **elected members and officers** (18), who may require specialist training which should be incorporated into their development plans.

Infrastructure such as networks should be supported (9, 14, 18, 21). Networks can facilitate and promote empowerment opportunities and enable participation in activities from people who might not otherwise be able to do so. **Support for community development** is vital for ensuring the success of community empowerment (7, 18, 19, 41). Investment in community development means that more people, including those who might normally be excluded from such activities, are able to participate in community empowerment initiatives. It also helps public authorities to work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

Sustained support for grassroots **community based organisations** (CBOs) is one of the key factors in the success of community empowerment. This is partly because people feel better able to exert influence when they are part of a group rather than a lone voice (6, 7, 9, 11). Support may come in the form of grants, using CBOs as delivery agents for public services, or in the support of 'community anchors' (multi-purpose community-owned buildings).

A public agency deciding to pursue all these recommendations might have to change significantly the way it operates. To bring about such change there needs to be substantial **support from senior members of staff and elected officials** within the public agency (11, 13, 40, 60). Having this support is therefore one of the key factors for successful community empowerment.

Barriers to success

The work of the NEP identified several key barriers that must be overcome for community empowerment to be successful.

For some senior members of staff and elected officials within public agencies **community empowerment is seen as a threat** to their legitimacy and authority (5, 11, 13, 18, 40, 41). This can lead to **resistance** to the implementation or funding of community empowerment initiatives (5, 13, 40) or to **community empowerment being seen as an add-on**, rather than something that should

be embedded in public agencies' ways of working (11). It also means that there can be a **lack of follow-up action** which, in turn, can lead to feelings of disenchantment and disempowerment (40, 64).

Community empowerment brings together the sometimes **conflicting cultures** of community groups and public agencies. This can lead to incomprehension and suspicion on both sides (11, 18, 40, 41, 57). It can also lead to **unrealistic expectations** being put on community members who are, for example, asked to read and understand long, technical documents with little or no support (5, 13, 57). From the perspective of the public agencies this partly explains why there is a continued problem with certain groups of people being 'hard to reach' (5).

Members of the community have to overcome a number of barriers in order for community empowerment to be realised. They might **lack confidence** (18, 4) when dealing with public officials. They may experience **practical problems** such as no affordable transport or childcare (18, 41, 64) or be excluded by **institutional racism** (57). They may also have had **previous bad experiences** of community empowerment, the legacy of which may be mistrust, frustration or disempowerment (18, 57).

The VCS also needs to overcome barriers. For example, the sector may suffer from a **lack of capacity** (19, 40), which could be explained by a lack of funding or support for community development (14, 19). This can, in turn, contribute to **public agencies not treating the VCS as an equal partner** (5).

Debates

There are several active and lively debates taking place within the field of community empowerment. The **definition** is contested (18, 38). The Government's definition (that community empowerment is 'the giving of confidence, skills, and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them') has been criticised for being too focused on the perspective of public bodies and not enough on the view from the grassroots. There is also **confusion over the meaning of terms** such as 'engagement' 'participation' and 'involvement' (18, 38), partly a result of the sheer **diversity of empowerment related activities**, which vary enormously in scale and nature (6, 21, 38).

At present one of the main ways in which the success of community empowerment activities is judged is by measuring any increases in 'the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality' (National Indicator 4, one of the

measures used by government to monitor national priority outcomes). The NEP has commissioned work to further our understanding of this indicator. However, there are calls for a **broader measure of community empowerment** that, for example, takes into account the importance of community cohesion and a thriving third sector (6, 40, 49, 50). There is also a need for any quantitative measures of community empowerment to be complemented with **qualitative data** (18, 40, 50, 51).

On a more local scale there are **a number of ways for measuring and evaluating community empowerment activities** (44, 49, 50, 51), although no one method is universally accepted and **most methods are not widely known** (58). The result is that, in many areas, **activities are either not evaluated or are evaluated poorly** (18, 21, 48, 50), often without making a distinction between the benefits to those who were involved in the activity and the benefits to the wider community (50). This has led to calls in some quarters for **a new framework**, building on existing methods such as ABCD, DiCE and the 6-box model, (40, 48).

It is clear that one of the reasons that community empowerment projects are not always properly evaluated is **insufficient support**. Policy makers often do not appreciate the time and money required and the complex questions that need to be addressed in any evaluation (48, 50). Although this is true in many fields, it is perhaps particularly so within community empowerment, where there is **a need for evaluations to be empowering** and use community development techniques (44, 48, 49, 50).

Future work

Further work within the field of community empowerment is needed. In particular **the business case for community empowerment** needs to be more clearly and rigorously spelled out. This work is being undertaken by, among others, the South West Regional Empowerment Partnership (see, for example, The SW Regional Empowerment Partnership (2009) *Valuing Community Empowerment.*) The **link between community empowerment and community cohesion** needs to be further examined and evidenced; the NEP will undertake this work during 2009/10. There needs to be much work in identifying what types of support can be offered to public agencies to help them become empowering agencies in which empowerment is part of their day-to-day operations. The NEP is taking up this work in the remaining years of the programme.

References

All documents can be downloaded from www.cdf.org.uk

No. Title of document and author

1   **What is community empowerment?** CDX and Changes

5   **Empowering ways of working** Yorkshire and Humber REP

6   **A little more conversation and a lot more action, please!**
Evaluation Trust and South West Foundation for the South West REP

7   **Empowerment at the grassroots** Yorkshire and Humber REP

8   **Empowerment and small grants to individuals 2004–06**
Novas Scarman Group for the North East REP

9   **Inspire East – research on community empowerment activities in
the East of England** Ove Arup & Partners for the East of England REP

11   **From engagement to empowerment – champions of participation**
COGS and Learning Exchange for the Yorkshire and Humber REP

12   **The external case studies commissioned by Creating Excellence**
Evaluation Trust and South West Foundation for the South West REP

13   **The external case studies** The Evaluation Trust and The South West
Foundation

14   **Assessing the contribution of empowerment networks to
communities, voluntary and community and public sector
partners in the North East** Bassac, Regeneration Exchange and
Transformation and Change for the North East REP

18   **Community empowerment research project** South East REP

19   **Engagement and empowerment in an urban unitary authority
in the South West of England** Evaluation Trust and South West
Foundation for the South West REP

21   **Interim report into the mapping of community empowerment
activities in London** London Civic Forum for London REP

28   **Releasing the power of the people** East End Community Development
Alliance for the North East REP