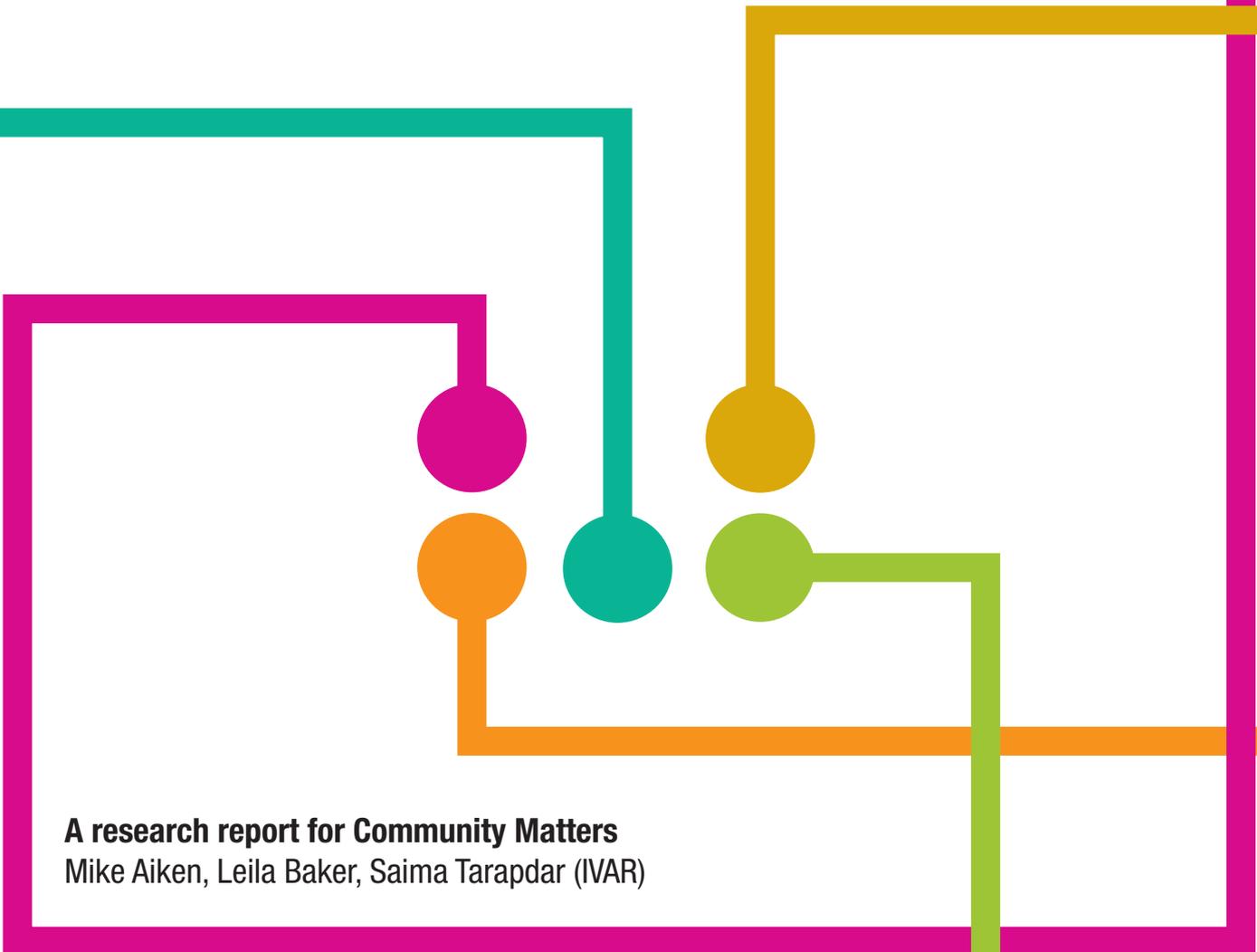
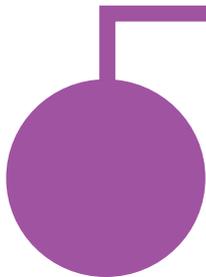


# Encouraging participation:

## the role of community-based organisations

An abstract graphic consisting of several thick, colored lines (teal, yellow, orange, green, and magenta) that form a complex, interconnected network. The lines are rectangular and right-angled, creating a series of nested and overlapping shapes. At the intersections of these lines, there are solid-colored circles in matching colors: teal, yellow, orange, green, and magenta. The overall effect is that of a stylized circuit board or a network diagram.

**A research report for Community Matters**  
Mike Aiken, Leila Baker, Saima Tarapdar (IVAR)



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## Foreword

This report marks the end of a two-year investigation by Community Matters into exactly what difference community organisations make to political participation in their neighbourhoods. It was born out of a realisation that in order to understand this we needed to know not just about our members but about the people and the places they interact with and serve. Our movement has always believed that our aims are best achieved through collaboration, mutual self-help and democratic organisations, and that in turn our members contribute to a thriving civil society. Many people have looked at the individual's path to participation; we wanted to add some knowledge of the local organisation as an actor in civil society to those insights.

Community organisations sometimes seem to be all things to all people; never more so than at the moment with the Big Society agenda searching for vehicles for the emotive but elusive virtue of neighbourliness. If anything this is a testament to their openness, versatility and success as a force for collective well-being. The Coalition Government has said that its aim is for every adult to volunteer locally, and that this will make us more civic-minded, more concerned for one another's wellbeing and more involved in making local decisions.

As part of our Department for Communities and Local Government-funded Empowerment Programme our research would try and understand what part our members' practice had to play in contributing to that local culture of connectedness, social action and political self-confidence. In particular we wanted to understand what works in which context, as no two of our members are exactly the same.

In order to get the perspective of users and local residents we took the decision to work collaboratively with a team of locally-recruited community researchers. These volunteers were given support by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research but were very much allowed to shape their research projects. Undoubtedly they have returned data that visiting researchers would have taken far longer to access, and maybe never would have done.

The resulting report and the research that informs it suggests that there is a rich and nuanced story about community organisations' and particularly community centres' role in not just getting local people involved with one another and in local debates and campaigns, but also in opening up space for debate and to grow into the kind of neighbours they want to be, in their own time. The psychological impact of having an open, community-run space in an area emerges as an important force in communities; the sense that they have resources and networks and a supportive community that they can mobilise for change.

We at Community Matters believe that this report provides several lessons for practitioners and policymakers. Firstly, we need to change the way we think about how civil society feeds into political life away from the current dichotomy of activism versus apolitical do-gooding to something that is more holistic and nuanced; our social and associational life is where the bonds and the links with others are created which we mobilise when we want to make a stand about something we care about. Promoting one model of community development over another could have serious consequences for political participation.

On a more practical level this research suggests several ways that policy makers, funders, infrastructure organisations and community based organisations themselves can support political participation, particularly in deprived

communities. Firstly, it highlights the importance of a particular sort of leadership; the perceptiveness and confidence to build connections between people and groups. Anyone involved in spotting and training future leaders in our sector should nurture these talents as an integral part of their offer. The importance of the community-run building or open space is once again underlined by this research; we reiterate our call for more community assets to be controlled by local residents but with the proviso that they can be financed and maintained long-term without pricing the poorest out.

Finally, continuity and permanence emerged as a key theme for us; the political benefits of a community based organisation are only felt if it has the emotional and material resources to invest in its future, make connections and take an interest in others' work. For anyone involved in developing or investing in community organisations long-term finance for political participation work is essential; funders and organisations themselves should allow resources to be dedicated to the linking and brokering role of volunteers and staff. The current lack of access to finance and investment experienced by the community sector should be reframed as a threat to political and civil life as well as to services and institutions.

Community Matters is committed to developing new products and practices informed by this report; we welcome input and collaborations from other organisations, from funders and from Government who wish to work with us.

Finally, a huge thank you to all our members and volunteers and to IVAR who carried out this research; without your hard work and tenacity this report would not have happened. Thanks also to Rosie Anderson, Community Matters' Policy, Research and Media Manager, who created and co-managed the project with Monika Hofman, the Resource Programme Manager.

**David Tyler**  
Chief Executive  
Community Matters  
July 2011



## Executive summary

Getting people involved in their local community is a key government objective, with an emphasis in the Localism Bill (2010) on communities doing things their own way and having greater power and autonomy over local services. There is an expectation that community-based centres like the 1,200 that are members of Community Matters will encourage participation and help realise the government's objectives.

Community Matters is a national membership organisation whose members manage community centres, encourage people to take part in community life, organise events, deliver services or facilitate social or leisure activities. Sometimes these organisations act as a base from which other organisations can run services. Community Matters has always advocated that open, accessible and democratically run community centres have a positive impact on civil and political participation. By commissioning this report Community Matters hoped to better understand the work of its members in political participation and how their contribution could be best supported.

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**Community Matters (the National Federation for Community Organisations) 'champions voluntary and community action at neighbourhood level, as a means of local people taking control of issues in their area and fostering community spirit'.<sup>1</sup>**

**It promotes: 'stronger bonds between neighbours... stronger bonds between all communities... active and enterprising neighbourhoods... self help... space for open debate... [and] community identity, where local people have a sense of belonging and pride in their neighbourhood'.<sup>2</sup>**

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### The research approach

This research was led by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) and the fieldwork was carried out between December 2010 and April 2011. A key feature of the approach was to recruit and support 'community researchers' to lead on data collection within their local organisations, a strategy intended to bring forward local residents' perspectives and also to yield data of use to Community Matters and its members.

The aim of the study was:

To understand and explain the contribution of community-based multipurpose voluntary organisations to maintaining and building good levels of formal and informal political participation in otherwise deprived areas.

### Findings

#### Encouraging participation: the role of community-based organisations

In this study we learned that community-based organisations (CBOs) mainly encourage informal participation in social and associational life; in other words, group activities that individuals may take part in as part of their day to day lives. The study identified four overlapping roles that CBOs play in encouraging formal and informal participation locally:

- **Delivery:** services and activities are directly run by the organisation
- **Partnership:** services and activities are managed or nurtured through working with others

- **Co-location:** services and activities are delivered by different organisations based in the same building
- **Hosting:** services and activities are hosted by the centre, which makes space available to the groups or organisations that run them.

### **Benefits to individuals and communities**

The study identified the following benefits to individuals and to the wider community arising from the work of community-based organisations to encourage participation and also from the CBO's presence in a community which has few other amenities:

- improving mental and physical wellbeing
- reducing social isolation
- enabling people to find out what's going on
- developing people's confidence to try something new
- providing affordable space for people to meet
- bringing diverse groups together including different ethnicities and age groups
- building community knowledge
- communicating local people's views to public sector consultations

### **Resourcing participation**

Study participants said that CBOs need a blend of financial, human and physical resources in order to encourage participation. All the organisations in this study received money from several sources including local government, earned income through trading or renting space, and foundations. They all identified finance as a major concern and a significant barrier to widening or improving their services.

The numbers of staff varied significantly across the seven CBOs but all of them relied on volunteers to extend their capacity, skills and reach into the community. Similarly, we learned that organisations' networks and long-term partnerships were in themselves an invaluable resource; the more they worked with local residents, statutory bodies, private business and other voluntary groups, the more they could contribute to empowering their communities.

## **Key recommendations**

### **For policy makers, funders and programme planners**

- The presence of a community building in an area of high deprivation means that local people living on low incomes have somewhere affordable to meet, have fun, learn and get involved in community life. The capital and revenue costs of community-based buildings need to be built into funding and programme planning including new social investment models.
- An allocation of time and resources for the formation and management of networks and partnerships needs to be built into funding and programme planning.

### **For CBOs**

- Leadership training and skills development of CBO staff should incorporate network and partnership formation as well as an understanding of the role of CBOs in encouraging formal and informal political participation.
- Organisations will benefit from modernising the way they communicate including the introduction of new technologies.

# 1

## Introduction

This report sets out the findings from a study about formal and informal political participation in seven areas of high deprivation in England. Drawing on material collected by researchers, including community researchers from seven community-based organisations (CBOs), the study sheds light on local people's participation and generates insights to inform current policy and practice.

### Aim of the study

The research was commissioned by and developed with Community Matters (the National Federation for Community Organisations), whose mission is to 'champion voluntary and community action at neighbourhood level, as a means of local people taking control of issues in their area and fostering community spirit'. The fieldwork for the research, carried out between December 2010 and April 2011, formed one strand of Community Matters' wider Empowerment Programme. The study's aim was:

- To understand and explain the contribution of community-based multipurpose voluntary organisations to maintaining and building good levels of formal and informal political participation in otherwise deprived areas.

The research was led by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) which specialises in action research in the voluntary and community sector. A key feature of the approach was to recruit and support 'community researchers' to lead on data collection within their local organisations.

Community Matters wanted to investigate their members' impact on participation in their communities because this is one of their key aims and values as a network and support organisation. The intention was to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the role community-based organisations play in civil and political life in their localities; and how they relate to other types of activity and structures. In this way Community Matters was seeking to contribute to debates about how best to strengthen and promote a thriving civil society. It also hoped to suggest ways in which Community Matters could better support its members' work in sustaining democratic spaces and advocating for communities and individuals.<sup>3</sup>

### Policy context

The coalition government has described supporting participation in local communities as the starting point for many of its recent reforms. The government's 2010 Localism Bill sets out several principles two of which are implicated in this study. First, it stresses that there is a need to 'empower communities to do things their way – by creating rights for people to get involved with, and direct the development of, their communities'.<sup>4</sup> This builds on the Coalition's programme for government which sought to drive forward 'decentralisation and democratic engagement' through 'radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government and community groups'.<sup>5</sup> Second, it seeks to 'strengthen accountability to local people – by giving every citizen the power to change the services provided to them through participation, choice or the ballot box'.<sup>6</sup> A Conservative Green Paper in 2011, which set out five principles to shift power to councils and local people, proposed giving local residents the 'power to veto high council tax rises via local referendum' and to offer scope for people to seek votes on other local issues.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of ‘getting involved’ was seen by the Prime Minister as an important part of the Big Society agenda with the government’s role being to ‘help people come together in their communities and ... remove the barriers that get in their way’.<sup>8</sup>

These policies aim to address deeper issues as set out in the manifesto of the Conservative Party in 2010 where the ideas of rebuilding the ‘frayed’ social fabric’ and building better ‘bonds’ between people were given prominence.<sup>9</sup> Neighbourhood groups in particular were seen as offering a way to ‘empower communities’ and there was a bold bid ‘for every adult in the country to be a member of an active neighbourhood group’ with a promise to stimulate and develop these groups.<sup>10</sup> Contracts to deliver on this promise via 5,000 community organisers have subsequently been announced.<sup>11</sup> The Liberal Democrats’ manifesto also argued for the importance of supporting this work: ‘society is strengthened by communities coming together and engaging in voluntary activity’ and this ‘sets people and neighbourhoods free to tackle local problems’.<sup>12</sup>

Empowerment was also an important policy theme for the previous Labour government. This meant, in part, attempting to reconnect people with more formal democratic structures but also entailed other forms of participation.<sup>13</sup> This study grew out of the previous government’s Empowerment Fund, for example.



## The role of community-based organisations

Community-based organisations (CBOs) – particularly community associations operating from multi-purpose community buildings – are well placed to take forward many of these policy aspirations. They can encourage local people to come together around their common interests and facilitate their participation in their communities.

A commitment to neighbourhood democracy has always been of great importance for community associations. In the 1930s, Sewell Harris argued that it appeared that one of the major functions of the movement was providing ‘a basis for training in democracy’.<sup>14</sup> More recently Community Matters, the inheritors of that constituency, pointed to this when it argued that ‘for over 60 years we have been promoting the role of community organisations in a strong civil society’.<sup>15</sup> Table 1 provides a lengthier description from Community Matters of the role their members play in building cohesive communities and contributing to local democracy. It illustrates how they seek to undertake this work through facilitating or organising a wide variety of activities. Community Matters’ work reflects the needs of this membership; it provides a free advice line, a legal clinic, training and consultancy covering a wide range of issues such as owning and running a building, intergenerational working and business planning.

**Table 1: How Community Matters describes the role of CBOs**

from Community Matters' Vision for Neighbourhoods

'Community Matters represents a large national network of grass-roots community organisations. Our core membership of community centres and volunteer led community associations provide a home for some of Britain's 600,000 community groups, citizen organisations, social movements, interest groups and neighbourhood forums.

We believe that these local voluntary groups are the backbone of civil society and bring incalculable value to both the neighbourhoods in which they operate and the individuals that live there. This value includes:

- Stronger bonds between neighbours, where friendly relations build trust and a mutual support network and prevent social isolation.
- Stronger bonds between communities, where relationships between diverse groups are strengthened and the risk of social breakdown is minimised.
- Active neighbourhoods, where local people come together to participate and contribute to a vibrant community life.
- Self help, where people take more responsibility for themselves and for each other and for finding their own solutions to local concerns.
- Robust democracy, where local people practice democratic engagement through local organisations and where wider political engagement is fostered and nurtured.
- Community identity, where local people have a sense of belonging and a pride in their neighbourhood.

This activity may also bring improvements in participants' employability, physical and mental health. It may raise individual aspiration as well as reducing anti-social behaviour, improving community safety and creating less dependence on the State.<sup>16</sup>

There is a need to understand the scope and depth of this day-to-day work and how it can create and sustain local people's formal and informal participation. That is the subject of the research set out in this report.

## ● How the research was carried out

The study was carried out in five stages:

- review of the literature about participation
- facilitated participatory meetings with participating CBOs
- facilitated training sessions with community researchers
- fieldwork carried out by community researchers in participating CBOs
- facilitated participatory review of the material collected

Taken together, the findings presented in this report are based on:

- interviews with ten senior managers, including CEOs, in seven CBOs
- interviews with 21 staff, 27 service users and five stakeholders in seven CBOs
- observation notes from five events or activities in CBOs
- questionnaires completed by community researchers before and after carrying out the research
- interviews, documents, web resources and Community Matters records about the seven participating CBOs and their areas

## How terms are used in this report

In this report, terms are used in the following ways.

**Community-based organisation (CBO)** is a generic term understood as organisations located within a physical community, which may consist of a neighbourhood, village, town or conurbation. The focus of the organisation's work is to seek benefits for certain defined people or places in the locality where it is based. It will have a governance structure independent from public or private sector organisations. This study worked with members of Community Matters, but CBOs may also be affiliated to other organisations, and many operate without affiliation to any formal networks.

**Community associations** are a sub-set of CBOs distinguished by a particular model of local democratic engagement and often based in a community centre where a wide variety of activities and services take place. Many of Community Matters' members are community associations.

**Community researchers or peer-to-peer researchers.** A 'community' is a group of people who are connected by a geographical community, a community of interest or by using a particular kind of service. Community or peer-to-peer research is a term used to describe an approach where people are, for example, interviewed by others from the same community.

Informal and formal political participation is understood to cover three broad, and overlapping, types:<sup>17</sup>

- **Public and political participation** – 'the engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy'.
- **Social and associational participation** – which involves 'collective activities that individuals may be undertaking as part of their everyday life'.
- **Individual participation** – which is based on an individual's 'personal values and worldview'.

These terms we use to refer to political participation are discussed in more detail in Part 2 of this report.

## Structure of this report

In Part 2, we describe our approach to the study and examine the key concepts and issues involved. Part 3 sets out our findings about the range, nature, organisation and benefits of formal and informal political participation and examines the contribution of community researchers. These findings are discussed in Part 4 followed by conclusions and recommendations in Part 5.

# 2

## The approach to the study

In this section we set out what we mean by formal and informal political participation for the purposes of this study. Next, we describe how the research was carried out, including our research questions, approach, methods and work with community researchers. Finally, we describe how the seven participating organisations were selected.

### Understanding formal and informal political participation in this study

The boundaries between ‘formal democracy’, ‘participation’, ‘empowerment’ and even ‘improving local service delivery’ through partnership arrangements are often close. In this section, we consider what we mean by ‘political participation’ in the context of the activities of Community Matters members by drawing on previous research and other studies currently underway. We have used the lessons from these other studies in the design and execution of this study for Community Matters.

#### What we can learn from previous research

Carnegie’s investigation<sup>18</sup> into power and influence cited John Gaventa’s threefold distinction between ‘closed’, ‘invited’ and ‘created/claimed’ spaces for participation. Community Matters members are most likely to be occupying – or creating – those latter two locations in relation to voicing local concerns and these are now considered.

‘Invited spaces’ would, according to the Carnegie report, encompass citizen’s juries, panels, user’s groups in public programme delivery and similar mechanisms. Indeed, local government has been required to consult and involve local residents and communities in their activities since the 2006 Local Government White Paper – while Local Strategic Partnerships provided joint planning opportunities for the community and voluntary sector. Such settings may offer benefits to community organisations although they may also, at other times, be strongly steered by the agendas of public officials.

‘Created/claimed spaces’, particularly at a local level, involve a wide set of actions. These may range from campaigns against hospital closures to demands for a public inquiry into police behaviour, or from the Transition Towns movement seeking to reduce dependence on oil to ‘reclaim the streets’ protests against traffic levels. More modest but equally important local actions might be included, for example, against graffiti or vandalism, or in favour of better children’s provision in a park or the installation of a pelican crossing until 2010. These activities were often included within the ‘empowerment’ agenda particularly under the Labour administration.

Many Community Matters members are likely to be involved to some degree in both ‘invited spaces’ (for example on the level of local services, or, in developing a new environmental initiative with the council) and ‘created/claimed spaces’ (arguing for better recycling facilities or the promotion of local small business or on parking facilities). However, beyond these arenas Community Matters members also undertake a range of important activities which encourage associational life – from organising street festivals, to hosting arts or recreational activities and encouraging ‘streets in bloom’ gardening competitions. These are in addition to the more formalised ‘invited’ or ‘claimed’ events such as arranging

public deliberations or hosting local councillors' surgeries. Often these organisations will have access to a community building which will be used by other local groups to meet and organise. This, arguably, encourages and facilitates a variety of civil engagement activity at a grass roots level that also has a place in informal political participation. For this reason a broader framework was felt appropriate for this study.

### **Types of participation: building on current research**

An extensive literature review on 'Understanding Participation' as part of the Pathways through Participation project and undertaken by Brodie et al (2009<sup>19</sup>) classified a wide range of activities and summarised contrasting approaches to conceptualising these by both breadth and depth. This provided a rich resource for the research. The authors pointed to the diversity of participatory engagement from voting, signing a petition and being a member of a trade union through to completing a questionnaire on local issues, being a school governor or helping a neighbour.<sup>20</sup> They drew initially from the work of the Citizen Audit for Britain which, in 2000, drew a distinction between 'political participation' (acts that seek to directly influence laws or policy) and 'associational activities' (ranging, for example, from bringing people together who have common leisure or social welfare interests to supporting informal groups and neighbourhood support networks).<sup>21</sup> Their analysis built on this to offer a threefold categorisation which distinguished:

- 'public participation' – 'the engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy'
- 'social participation' – which involves 'collective activities that individuals may be undertaking in as part of their everyday life'
- 'individual participation' based on an individual's 'personal values and worldview'<sup>22</sup>

They argued that distinguishing between different kinds of participation is in practice difficult as they may blend together. Taking this three level approach provides a way to understand the diversity of work by Community Matters members. The first two kinds of participation presented a particularly important focus. It was intended that the third level of 'individual participation' would also be noted where it emerged.

### **Participation: depth of engagement**

The section above examined the breadth of participation. The depth of engagement can also be considered. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) examined a range of public participation goals, providing examples of activities aimed at achieving these. This was undertaken by asking where each type of participation sat on a spectrum (no hierarchy is implied) including: 'Informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, empowering'.<sup>23</sup> Hence organisations may play different roles in various activities from being actively engaged or leading, to facilitating or supporting activities. This was seen as important for Community Matters members where they may see themselves as facilitating involvement rather than always taking a direct stance on every issue.

In addition, a number of other dimensions could be considered, such as frequency or degree of structure involved in the activity. This would mean, for example, asking of a given activity whether it is undertaken as 'one off or on-going' or organised in a way that is 'very informal' to 'very formal'. This was

important so as to take account of not only the long term political participation work of a Community Matters member (for example improving road safety) but also the more episodic micro work ‘between the cracks’ (for example making a single phone call to link two diverse groups together to consider a funding bid). Both may be of equal importance. It was anticipated, however, that it might be hard in practice to gather detailed and consistent data on episodic activities.

### Implications for this research

At a practical level the preceding discussion on public, social and individual participation offered the research ways to clarify and classify a range of formal and informal political participation activities undertaken by Community Matters members. In order to fit closer to terms used by Community Matters members the three ‘labels’ (but not their meanings) were modified slightly as follows:

- Public and political participation. Examples include individuals engaging in formal statutory processes such as voting in elections for MPs and councillors; decision making in Local Strategic Partnerships; responding to planning proposals; participating in statutory initiatives to improve service delivery, reduce crime or to meet other government policy goals.
- Social and associational participation sometimes referred to as ‘associational life’. Examples include engagement in cultural, leisure and social groups and involvement in voluntary and community organisations.
- Individual participation. Examples include situations where individuals take action based on their own beliefs such as deciding to recycle goods, purchasing fair trade goods or being a good neighbour.

## Summary

In summary, by drawing from – and building on – existing frameworks in the field the research intended to (a) use a typology which broadly distinguished between different types of formal and informal political participation according to their focus; (b) build a picture of the different activities undertaken under those respective headings; (c) consider the dimensions of that participation including depth and breadth where possible. Operationally, this approach also suggested ways of constructing interview scripts, questionnaires, show cards and prompts to assist community researchers in gathering data in individual cases.

## Approach and research methods

### Research aims and questions

The overall research aim was:

- To understand and explain the contribution of community-based multipurpose voluntary organisations to maintaining and building good levels of formal and informal political participation in otherwise deprived areas.

In order to meet this aim, the following research questions were developed:

- What are the different types of formal and informal political participation which Community Matters members seek to support in deprived areas (e.g. public and political participation; social and associational participation; individual participation)?

- Which activities do Community Matters members undertake in deprived areas in order to support formal and informal political participation by local people?
- In which ways do these activities bring benefits and which kinds of people and community groups gain most and least?
- What is the profile of resources (financial, human, networks, and other) utilised by the people in the Community Matters member who are most engaged in this work?
- In which ways can community researchers (from, in, or around the Community Matters member) be best engaged in helping to find answers to these questions?
- How can Community Matters members be best supported to develop their activities to encourage local people in formal and informal political participation?

The research questions were tackled by examining the work of Community Matters members in seven localities to build a series of case studies. The focus of our analysis in each case was the Community Matters organisations' activities which were thought to encourage formal or informal political participation.

### **Working with community researchers**

This was a participatory study in which researchers from the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) worked closely with community researchers in the seven organisations that took part. The community researchers were recruited by the case study organisations using their networks, but it was recognised that they would not necessarily be experienced in conducting research. IVAR was responsible for developing a programme of support to enable them to carry out this work.

The support programme included written materials, which detailed the purpose of the research, expectations in terms of outputs and commitments, ethical issues and guidance on how to conduct and record interviews. Each community researcher could access support from their project lead in the participating organisations and from their IVAR contact.

The main steps in the research process are listed below. Our approach to the study was informed by IVAR's experience of action research.<sup>24</sup> This led us to continuously review the research process and adapt or amend our approach and methods as necessary:

- Contact meeting with key contact and community researcher in each organisation to discuss the scope of the project.
- Briefing meeting to provide some training and support; refine/contextualise the methods and research 'tools' for their organisation.
- Materials and briefing pack containing questionnaires, show cards and reflective 'before' and 'after' sheets for the community researchers to record their experience alongside tips on undertaking interviews.
- Telephone or on-line help as required from IVAR staff to the community researcher or key contact.
- Participatory session organised nationally where community researchers could collectively meet with Community Matters and IVAR staff to discuss emerging findings.

## Research tools

The research tools were designed with two aims in mind. First, a range of tools were provided to community researchers so they could adopt and adapt those best suited to their context, skills and interests. All of these tools could provide useful data to address the research questions. Second, providing standardised tools meant that IVAR could gain some consistency of data collection across the cases. It was recognised that this would mean that whatever data was collected would have some congruence between cases but that not exactly the same set of data items would be collected in each individual setting. The approach was a means to balance different research priorities. Community researchers had the potential to access and explore important local contextual features, which might be less apparent to outside researchers. Nevertheless many might be new to research and need readily useable materials. Further, in order for the research to have validity across cases some degree of consistency was required.

An organisational profile sheet was compiled against a standard template, usually before the research began, either by IVAR or Community Matters staff. This gathered some consistent data about each organisation.

The tools devised are listed in table 2, below.

**Table 2: Research tools**

- Interview scripts for three to five key people in and around the organisation including:
  - a person who has responsibility for running the organisation (a paid or unpaid, volunteer, trustee etc)
  - a person who works in a different public place nearby (e.g. school, café, pub, library, shop)
  - people who organise a regular activity that takes place in the building or in the locality
- Short 'vox pop' style questions to ask people at an event or gathering with which the organisation has a connection.
- Show cards to consider the range of activities undertaken.
- Network map to show the range of organisations/groups to which their organisation linked (optional).
- Questionnaires about community researchers' own experience of undertaking the study which were to be completed before and after the research.
- Organisational profiles of each organisation compiled by Community Matters staff nationally, or IVAR, usually prior to the study.

In practice all community researchers were able to return scripts from interviews of people in and around their organisation. The short questions at an event were undertaken in five cases as were the questionnaires about community researchers' own experience. Use of the show cards and network maps was mixed. They were either enthusiastically deployed or were found either too complicated or less relevant. Organisational profiles were completed in all seven cases. The bespoke approach meant that many community researchers could use the material with a degree of flexibility, and some found ways to directly use the material for their internal organisational discussions.

## Organisations selected to take part

All seven of the organisations that took part were located in areas where there was high local participation (as measured by the Place Survey of 2008<sup>25</sup>) and high deprivation indicators, five being in the lowest decile of poor areas in the country (as measured in the Index of Multiple Deprivation<sup>26</sup>). It is important to note that community organisations were selected and profiled on the basis of the places they operated in and that they are themselves a diverse group of community organisations. They were:

- 4CT, Manchester
- Arbury Community Centre, Cambridge
- Bridge Renewal Trust, London
- Foresight Limited, Grimsby
- Lonsdale Community Association, Hull
- Riverside Community Health Project, Newcastle
- St Georges Community Hub, Birmingham

These organisations also had in common that they:

- Had access to a building from which they undertook activities – even though many of them were not confined to working solely from this base. Most rented out space and encouraged other groups to use their facilities.
- Ran a range of activities, delivered some services and engaged with different groups of people: these were not single issue organisations.
- Had partnership arrangements with other voluntary and statutory organisations.

All the organisations had local people on their boards and most of them employed less than ten staff (although paid staff from partner or spin-off organisations may have been based in their buildings). They had charitable status, or were seeking this, and some had associated companies limited by guarantee. Annual income in the seven organisations ranged from £38,000 to just under £600,000 although only three had incomes above £100,000. Individual profiles of the seven organisations are presented in Appendix 1.

# 3

## Findings

In part three, the findings from the study are set out under the following headings: the activities which the seven Community Matters members undertook; the benefits these activities brought; and the kind of resources used. Finally, the contribution of community researchers to this study is considered. Short profiles of each of the seven organisations which took part are provided in Appendix 1.

'Study participants' is used throughout this report to refer to individual people or groups interviewed by the community researchers. Direct quotes from study participants and community researchers are placed in italics.

'Case study organisations' refers to the seven Community Matters members that took part and recruited the community researchers.

## Activities undertaken by the organisations

The study confirmed two things: a wide variety of activities take place in community-based organisations; and high numbers of local people visit these organisations every week. For example, one of the smaller participating organisations had recorded over 54,365 contacts with individuals using their centre every year. And a study participant at St Georges Community Hub said that their organisation:

*'supports the local community through events and meetings that it organises and hosts, in particular leisure, educational, social and political events, for example, art classes, exploring the history of local industries, seasonal celebrations, community meetings and community fun days...'*

Overall, study participants said that the most important activities undertaken by CBOs were 'hosting community meetings and providing a venue for social and leisure activities.' Below are some examples of CBOs' activities.

- At Bridge Renewal Trust an individual pointed to the way the centre had provided support to enable participation: 'I am part of a group supported [by the organisation] which enabled me to also increase my individual participation, being a good neighbour and getting involved in sustainability through the garden project.'
- A study participant at Arbury Community Centre commented that it facilitates contact with public bodies and elected officials: 'we arrange an open meeting for local people to meet the police ... ward councillors hold surgeries in the centre and we often have information stalls in the foyer area...' Their activities covered sport, leisure, culture and social events through to local action on recycling, food production or global issues. Direct services for unemployed people, young children and the elderly were also offered. This was also true at Lonsdale where it was reported that 'we deliver a range of user-led learning, training, leisure and social activities for disabled adults and children.'
- Pendower Good Neighbour Project played a prominent role in ensuring the standard of housing and repairs had been maintained to avoid the area declining as had happened ten years earlier. It assisted residents with welfare benefits and represented their views to the local council on issues such as transport policy: 'It brings the voice of the community to the council.' It also rented out rooms for social activities, undertook informal community development work and created strong links with other local groups.

- As well as undertaking its own activities, 4CT had agencies co-located within its centre including adult education, credit union and a community accountancy service. It emphasised cross-agency partnership work with statutory and voluntary sector organisations to deliver services.

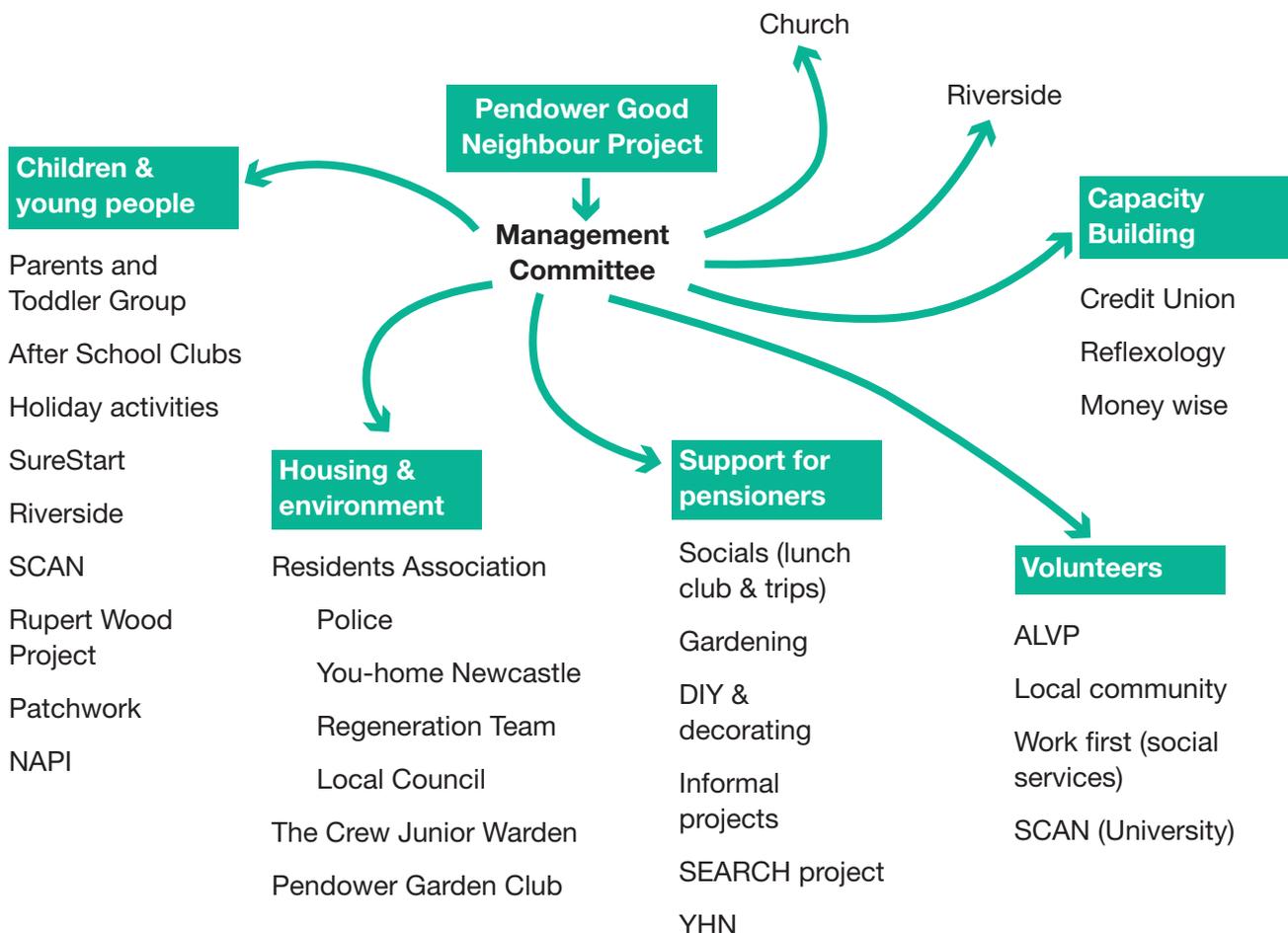
Despite their many commonalities, each organisation had a different combination of activities and issues of concern. Several of them pursued specialist areas alongside their generic work. Bridge Renewal Trust, for example, had a particular interest in health and well-being and a variety of partnerships with public bodies; Foresight had started as an organisation dedicated to blind and partially sighted people and still maintained this aspect of its work alongside a broader community mission.

It was not the purpose, nor was it within the scope of this research, to conduct an audit of all the activities occurring at each location. Nevertheless Table 3 overleaf gives a flavour of the range of activities. Study participants thought it was important for these social and leisure activities to take place regularly.

### Networks: facilitating participation

For most of the organisations networking and partnership working were important activities. Some community researchers drew a network map, which revealed their range of links with other agencies. In one organisation a complex web of relations was depicted, see Figure 1, which showed connections to statutory agencies such as the police and regeneration teams through to local residents groups, parents and toddlers groups, pensioners clubs, and other leisure groups.

**Figure 1: Pendower Good Neighbour Project (PGNP)**



## Encouraging participation: the role of CBOs

Four main roles played by the CBOs that took part and these reflect the different ways that they organise the activities discussed above:

- **Delivery role:** activities directly run by the organisation.
- **Partnership role:** activities managed or encouraged through partnership arrangements with others.
- **Co-location role:** activities delivered by different organisations which are based in the building.
- **Hosting role:** activities hosted by the centre via room bookings.

In Table 3, these roles are illustrated with some examples of the activities that were found in the study.

In practice, these four roles may overlap. All of the organisations were making space available for local people and groups to come together and to participate. However, depending on the scale and nature of the organisation, they used a different blend of roles to secure the desired range of services and activities. So, for example, Foresight Project Limited did much direct service delivery, whereas Arbury Community Centre tended to host many services through room bookings. St George's Hub, appeared to give equal weight to both hosting and delivery roles. Fundraising for wider causes was an important additional role undertaken there.

The way organisations managed their roles (whether they deliver, partner, co-locate or host services) required a great deal of interaction between them and local people, groups and organisations. An important behind the scenes activity was networking and linking work although this may not be so apparent to many people who use the centre for room hire or for some leisure activities.

### Table 3: Examples of activities

**Note:** the lists below do not represent the total set of activities and services occurring in each agency but aim to illustrate the breadth of work taking place. The division of activities into categories is intended to provide an illustration of how they could be analysed and not to offer a definitive picture.

- **4CT Limited**
  - Agencies co-located there: adult education; credit union; community accountancy service; people's voice media volunteering experience service; partnership work to deliver cross-agency.
  - Activities delivered: supporting local groups by capacity building; rooms to hire (training room, IT suite, activities room, hall; supporting city-wide services such as youth provision; local clubs.
  - Activities hosted: ballroom dancing, indoor bowls, playschemes, sing-along club for over 50's, art class, bi-polar group meetings, street dance, karate etc.
- **Arbury Community Centre**
  - Activities delivered: room hire; community café and bar; supporting local community groups; organising community events; encouraging people to recycle; in-house catering; providing notice boards; leaflets; arranging for local people to meet police; friendship group; writing to local newspaper about activities; plastic recycling project.

- Activities hosted: community church; ethnic cultural society; English for speakers of other Language (ESOL) courses conferences; local MP and councillor's surgeries; ladies group; Sure Start children's activities; narcotics support group; carnival group; art group; bingo; bowls clubs; mind group; NHS Mental health group; drama group; dance school; colleges nursery; fathers group; experiential workshops; fitness (aerobics); older people's club; mosque; Pakistan Cultural Association; parents and toddlers; polling station; railway circle; Sikh group; clubs trade union meetings; Townswomen's Guild; stamp fair; healing group; weight loss group; yoga etc.

#### ● **Bridge Renewal Trust**

- Activities delivered/co-located: a pharmacy is being developed; foot-care service offered; developing a preventative mental health service; Saturday school for children; youth activities; tots group; managing a building for the benefit of other groups based there, over 50s services.
- Partnership activities: employment and training initiatives; organising social events; encouraging neighbours to meet; supporting residents to govern and manage local groups such as a community hut; library hall; intergenerational centre; community garden.
- Activities hosted: offering a large room as a space for local groups running activities related to core aims.

#### ● **Foresight Project Limited**

- Activities delivered: IT courses; training in life skills; literacy and numeracy courses; lip reading classes; befriending services and digital photography classes; courses and learning opportunities aimed at the user group. Local history projects. A wide range of training courses for independence and life skills including: managing personal budgets; introduction to understanding and achieving personal learning goals; introduction to assertiveness and decision making; recognising skills for personal development; lip reading classes for the hard of hearing; arts and crafts programme including creative card making; ceramic art; water colour painting and tactile art; drama group.
- Partnership activities with groups such as area action groups and other local strategic partnerships.

#### ● **The Lonsdale Community Centre**

- Activities delivered: community café; shop; office and room hire etc.
- Activities hosted: the provision of toddler groups; dance and exercise classes; health walks for adults; SureStart programme; accredited training for local youths; smoking cessation classes; senior and youth clubs and formerly the Citizen's Advice Bureau until recently.

#### ● **The Pendower Good Neighbour Project**

- Activities delivered: monthly newsletter, delivered to every resident; support for residents' association and other estate groups.
- Activities hosted: parent and toddler group; children's after school clubs; family events; gardening and DIY services for pensioners; pensioner's lunch club and social outings; credit union collection; reflexology.

## ● St Georges Community Hub, Birmingham

- Activities delivered: youth club; youth work; residential trips, health and fitness programme; community environmental project; homework club; gangs' and guns partnership project; road awareness and bike project; renting rooms.
- Fund-raising activities: sponsored walks; car washing; raffles and concerts for sixth form students and other users of the centre to reach out to those in need across the world. The centre has raised monies for Christian Aid, Malawi Relief fund and various organisations in Goa, India, for the education of street children; an appeal in 2004 for Grenada led to £3,000 being raised; three tonnes of aid was taken to Grenada from the Centre.
- Activities hosted: A range of facilities is available to centre users including a flexible learning centre; staff room; multi-faith meeting room; cafeteria; sports hall; weights room/fitness suite; dance studio; conference suite. A variety of groups and individuals use the centre's facilities in the evenings, or rent rooms for meetings and conferences. These include the City Council, connexions youth service, the diocese meetings, various local housing associations and independent Christian churches.

## ● Benefits arising from activities

Community researchers spoke with individuals that attended activities and events organised by the community organisation. They discussed the benefits they perceived arising from the activities undertaken by the organisation. It was possible to distinguish benefits to individuals and wider benefits to the community and these have also been indicated.

### Benefits to individuals

The following benefits to individuals were identified:

- Reducing isolation: study participants said that these community organisations provided them with a reason and a means to go out and meet people. This was thought to be especially important for people recovering from a recent bereavement or serious ill health although other groups made similar comments.

*'When my husband died, coming to the club helped to keep me going and means I am not stuck at home on my own all the time.'*

*'It helps people suffering with manic depression and some other mental problems get out of the hospital and get somewhere they can socialise with the community.'*

*'You get out of the four walls, you're not sailing off to the doctor for tablets.'*

- Having fun and taking exercise: individuals appreciated the chance to meet new people, including people of different ages, in an environment where they could have fun and get fit or learn something new.

*'It helps keep them fit and enjoy life...make new friends...it reduces stress and tension.'*

- Finding out what's going on and getting involved: study participants said that these organisations were a good place to start getting involved in their community, because they were not only a good venue for finding out what activities and opportunities existed, but also for developing the confidence to try them out.

*'It is a good way of finding out about what is going on.'*

*'This is not the only group I come to and it gives me confidence to go and try other activities.'*

*'[The centre] helps break down barriers, makes people feel part of something and gives those that are able the chance to contribute. The centre gives people a focal point and a sense of ownership.'*

## Wider benefits to communities

Benefits to the community identified by study participants are described below.

- **Providing affordable space:** study participants said it was important for local people to have a community building in which to gather for social, educational, community or other kinds of event or activity. They thought that the community building could draw in diverse groups of people, bring them together and that this 'mixing' of different groups was itself beneficial to the wider community.

*'[The centre] is offering affordable space for local residents to arrange social gatherings, keeping youngsters out of trouble and encouraging inter-cultural friendships.'*

*'Because the community centre hosts so many different activities and has good contacts with other organisations coming to the centre weekly, it allows us to find out about other events...'*

- **Mixing diverse groups:** the range of activities taking place in the building enabled individuals and minority communities to meet people in their own and other groups.

*'All the activities [at the centre] help people to interact and build relationships...the community is so diverse and some people are frightened of mixing.'*

*'...it breaks down barriers, makes people feel part of something and gives those that are able the chance to contribute...the centre gives people a focal point and a sense of ownership.'*

- **Building confidence, skills and knowledge in communities of interest and neighbourhoods:** as well as individual benefits, study participants said that CBOs could help to address knowledge and skills gaps across whole communities. Through targeted health or training initiatives people could gain skills and knowledge and also realise that they are not alone: 'meeting people facing similar issues' was helpful, they said. By giving people the chance to do something new and succeed, study participants thought that community organisations were helping to raise confidence across the local resident population.

*'The project culminated in an exhibition of the member's local stories and artwork...individual self-esteem and confidence grew as a result.'*

*'It gave me knowledge for a healthy lifestyle in order to save me from preventable diseases caused by poor lifestyle...it brings different communities together to tackle their problems and build a stronger society.'*

*'Educational aspects of these activities [for me] are learning new skills, including leadership, communication, gardening and less crime...'*

*'I came because I wanted to find out about the balance of good healthy food, it is my first time to take part in this kind of workshop.'*

- Developing links between public and voluntary sector organisations: there was a variety of activities occurring in the community building. In the same location there was often a range of agencies working in close proximity. This meant that collaboration and information sharing could happen informally.

*'Sharing information across statutory and voluntary sectors.'*

*'Having a chance to organise events and activities in partnership with other organisations and to present united views to both council officials and police representatives.'*

Assessing benefits from the work of one agency will not be easy in any community setting where many agencies and factors intervene. Nevertheless the above perspectives illustrate the range of benefits that study participants attribute to their community organisation.



## Resources used to undertake the activities

In this section the resources that are required to enable organisations to encourage participation are examined. This includes not just financial inputs but also human and physical resources. Networks and partnerships formed by CBOs were seen as a resource in themselves.

### Financial resources

Nearly all the organisations were financed by a mixed economy. Income streams to support their participation activities came from public and private sectors, foundations and rental fees, and included support from local authority contracts or grants, the Big Lottery, Heritage Lottery Fund or Social Enterprise Investment Funds. They also benefited from income generated by renting space to organisations based in their buildings or for occasional hire.

One member created a trading arm so that surplus income could be:

*'reinvested to finance... the social objectives [and] establish... a broad income and resource base.'*

In order to build on their success in securing these kinds of financial support, the participating CBOs said that the next step was to develop more sophisticated marketing strategies; for this they needed new resources. One idea put forward in this study was that local businesses might be willing to sponsor these activities.

### Human resources

The organisations that took part in the study employed anything from three to 12 paid staff and engaged between 14 and 125 volunteers. Their governance mechanism consisted of a non-executive board with between six and ten members.

The organisations recruited local people as volunteer workers and trustees. They were good at engaging with other local people. One community researcher who was also a trustee said: *'... you just don't realise how much work they [volunteers] do. They just get people [into the community centre] and spend so much time with them and get to know them.'* In particular, their *'knowledge of the local community [was used] to extend services, e.g. Volunteers could use their own unique skills and interests to find other ways of service in the neighbourhood'* and they demonstrated *'the ability to visit or meet with similar organisations to exchange ideas'*.

In addition, study participants stressed the importance of having an active management committee, because this could help the organisations be more committed to addressing local needs. Tapping into the local knowledge of volunteers or trustees was crucial, but some organisations found it hard to attract such people.

### **Networks as a resource**

The study found that CBOs rely on a complex network of relationships between themselves and statutory agencies, volunteers, board members, users, partners and ‘friends’. One community researcher found that, for example, arranging one event involved staff at the centre, healthy living project adviser from the NHS, dietician, volunteers and management committee members. The onus in these situations was on the organisation to engage in more outreach activities to inform local people about the opportunities available.

### **Managing resources and limitations**

Responses from events managers and participants provided a snapshot of the complex set of arrangements and resources used in the running of an effective centre for their users. CBOs used and required a mixture of financial and human resources, efficient estate management, equipment, and internal administration systems to co-ordinate programmes. The experience of tutors, trainers and organisers was vital particularly in undertaking outreach work with users from different ethnic backgrounds and special educational needs. It was important to have adequate levels of funding to coordinate activities and ‘to pay for... providers [of activities] and publicity materials.’

Examples of their unmet requirements included larger facilities to deal with the expanding demand in services, bespoke support such as interpreters and leaflets available in other languages, and transport to pick up and drop off users to enable residents to take part. Both organisers and users described the necessity to provide access to more classes or events and to extend their programmes in order to bring in more local people. One user pointed out the ‘café could open longer. Weekends are particularly lonely for those of us on our own.’ A significant challenge was the demand for their centre outstripping supply and where there was a need to ‘expand the services and activities to outlying areas.’

Addressing changing needs was also problematic but integral to the future of the centres. One study participant pointed out the need to provide a ‘constant variety of educational and sporting and leisure activities to maintain participation to avoid tired and worn provision’ and investment in ‘technology to interact with a variety of users and their needs.’ Up-to-date marketing and publicity materials, such as notice board information and newsletters, was sometimes neglected due to a lack of funding. It was seen as important to overcome this since it provided a space for information exchange and a space where local people could express their voice. One person described it as enabling:

‘pressure to be put on the council to be accountable for issues in the area by being present at community meetings’ and ‘in signposting for our service users and the local community.’

## Summary

Community-based organisations were set up to encourage and enable participation however this requires resources, which may be scarce. All of the participating organisations felt constrained and sought greater capacity to remain engaged with their communities and respond to their needs. Without adequate finance CBOs may not be able to fulfil their potential in facilitating formal and informal political participation.



## The role of community researchers in a study about political participation

The role of community researchers in this study has provided another example of participation. Understanding how community researchers can be best engaged in this research can throw light on the wider issues of formal and informal political participation. This section examines why the community researchers chose to take on this role, what they gained from the experience and what challenges they faced.

### Motivations of community researchers to take part

The reasons for community researchers and their organisations participating in the research fell into three broad areas. First, the study gave them an opportunity to learn more about the organisation and there was often a desire to build more participation into the organisation's work. They cited examples of how the study had helped them by gathering a cross-section of views to 'help the long term development of the organisation' and to gain 'a different perspective' on 'what we could be doing better to engage both our service users and our local community'. In particular, they were keen to listen to service users and local residents. Second, they wanted to capture and articulate the needs and the benefits of local people; derived from the organisation's services and activities, especially with 'hard-to-reach' communities. Third, most community researchers were motivated by a personal interest in developing their skills and understanding. One pointed out the desire to 'enhance my own skills and learn more about another cultural and geographical perspectives' and a commitment to participation, describing it as a personal value: 'people participation and community empowerment are among my personal [issues to] advocate on.' These three aspects are now considered in turn.

### Working with community researchers: understanding the benefits for the organisation

Community researchers found the process had provided organisational gains, in some cases, by helping their organisation to both understand and use research. One community researcher felt it meant 'we now feel research should not be feared but embraced as a good tool to improve what you do.'

It was also seen as 'affirming and developing working relationships' and providing information 'that will be relevant for funding applications.' Exercises like this could be more regular it was argued: 'we should consider a generic document that could be used on a regular basis by community groups to measure how they are doing...'

For some, the research had offered unexpected benefits. It had prompted an excitement and desire to look more regularly at their work. This was evident with comments such as 'it's a wake up call... [to] look at why we are here' and

the research process ‘helps you think outside the box.’ Other community researchers saw the need to ensure that results were fed back to stakeholders in the organisation. One argued strongly for the role of CBOs which play a crucial role in raising consciousness/awareness of people especially in eradicating apathy and breaking the culture of silence among people.’

Another pointed out the powerful effects arising from community researchers undertaking research with people in their own community. It was possible to gain knowledge about their organisation’s activities: ‘asking questions and reflecting upon the answers was a real eye opener...I think we often make the assumption that we know best – but we don’t listen or consult enough with our users.’ Such insights could be immediately fed back into board meetings and management processes to improve services – implementation in such processes can thus be rapid.

### **Working with community researchers: understanding local people’s needs**

There was also an increased understanding about local people’s needs by some community researchers: ‘people need opportunities that include having an accessible and affordable space, contacts, and confidence to participate in community action...’ For others ‘regardless of race, age, gender or class people always have the capacity to make a difference in their community... certain circumstances may impede them from taking an active role but these should not prevent them from making things better for their community.’

### **Community researchers: developing their skills and knowledge**

After the research was completed some community researchers said they had developed the skills in conducting research, and their understanding of how their organisation could contribute to participation. One person commented, for example, that taking part ‘honed my communication skills... [and provided]... a tool for me to synthesize my observations and insights about the project and the people involved.’ For some ‘understanding more fully the connection between my voluntary work and political participation’ was an important outcome.

### **Challenges**

Initially, some community researchers had been concerned about participating in the research. One community researcher was worried that ‘my cultural background and communication skills would make it difficult for me to do the interviews.’ Others were concerned that study participants would not feel ‘able to express themselves.’ For another, who was well known and involved in the community, ‘I had to try to get people to be open and not just say things that they thought I would like...’

At the end of the project these fears had lessened and the concerns were at times more practical in nature. ‘I have never carried out this type of operation before... I underestimated the time it would really take.’ For some the briefing materials and questionnaires were too long and complicated. In other cases funding problems and redundancies within their organisation had created pressures. Changes in personal circumstances also meant completion of the work became problematic.

Community researchers said that the support they received either from other volunteers, staff in their organisation, or from IVAR was important. Nevertheless, they often felt they needed more. A common view was that ‘other community

workers and supporters and volunteers were helpful ‘ while others pointed to their lead contact: ‘I am thankful that my Project Lead [in my organisation] was very much supportive and available to make this research possible.’

### **Learning from community researchers about participation**

There were a number of important gains community researchers and their organisations derived from participating in this research which relate to the wider experience of political participation. Some reported an increase in their own skills, understanding and confidence. Others had fed back ideas to their organisation in order to seek improvements in the service for local people. Taking part also presented challenges. The time commitment was demanding and processes were not always easy to follow. Participation in a project of this type required expertise and support to facilitate it.

## **Summary**

The findings point to a broad range of activities undertaken by CBOs in this study. Four roles were identified: delivering, partnering, co-locating or hosting services and activities. The benefits of these CBOs’ work cited by study participants included providing affordable space; mixing diverse groups; building confidence, skills and knowledge; and developing links between statutory and voluntary sector organisations. While these organisations were well placed to facilitate formal and informal political participation this was not a cost-free activity. The financial resources used to undertake their work included a mixture of statutory contracts, grants, social enterprise investment funds and rental income from agencies based in their buildings and local organisations booking rooms. Study participants cited the important resource provided by the skills and hours offered by staff, board members and volunteers. The next section provides further analysis.

# 4

## Discussion

In this section the work of Community Matters members in formal or informal political participation is examined by analysing the roles of the organisations; their activities in support of these roles; the benefits delivered through this work and the resources required. Finally the ways community researchers may be best supported in research of this nature is discussed.

### Types of engagement of Community Matters members in formal and informal political participation

In Part 2 a framework was suggested for understanding three kinds of political participation: public and political participation; social and associational participation; individual participation. These are now considered in turn.

#### Public and political participation

Contributing to public sector consultations and representing views to local councillors and other agencies was an important function of the organisations. Some members operate directly in the local political scene through engagement with local councillors and consultations, some provide information to inform debate while others are acting as a bridge to enable others to act and participate. Even participants in leisure activities stressed the importance of this kind of role. This may be because in areas of high deprivation any associational activities provide opportunities to gain support and pass views to public agencies. Community-based organisations such as Community Matters members can thus make an important contribution to public and political participation.

#### Social and associational participation

The research found many examples of leisure, education, cultural, sport and religious groups meeting in these organisations' buildings. It also showed the range of self-help groups which were either organised or encouraged by these CBOs. They played a role in activities ranging from street festivals to youth parliaments; from local meetings on safety, crime and planning to providing space for farmers' markets and environmental education. There was also direct delivery of services from childcare and mental health to elderly support. Where they had a building this provided a base from which other agencies could operate. The number of services run at these centres for generic or specific groups of disadvantaged people provided another strand of activity. The many 'open access' facilities such as community cafes, open days and special events offer further examples. In addition Community Matters members created spaces to foster associational life through offering physical resources (such as rooms and equipment) and access to skills, local knowledge and networks. There was some evidence of people from different groups mixing together as a result of the range of activities occurring under one roof. Community Matters members can make a particularly important contribution to encourage social and associational participation. Social or leisure groups provided opportunities for people to find common cause, for example, on local transport. They also found support through other activities or networks operating in the building to take issues further.

## Individual participation

Individual participation provides another arena where Community Matters members had much to offer. This was not an area where it was easy for the research to find direct evidence. Nevertheless, there were indications that individuals may be able to change their behaviour, for example gaining confidence or self-esteem, or enact their values, for example, though undertaking activities such as community gardening either individually or through projects, or increasing their awareness and action on issues ranging from recycling to personal health and diet.

## Understanding the contributions and challenges facing CBOs' engagement in formal and informal political participation

### Understanding activities of CBOs

Table 3 offered an illustrative picture of the breath of activities taking place in the organisations. It also provided a preliminary way of analysing the nature of that work into four categories:

- **delivering role** (directly running services)
- **partnering role** (encouraging activities through partnership arrangements with other organisations)
- **co-locating role** (activities delivered by other agencies which are based in the building)
- **hosting role** (acting as a host or encourager of activities via room bookings)

The four categories were not intended to be definitive but nevertheless can offer insights into the blend of activity streams in different members: some organisations tended to have a high concentration on hosting (such as Arbury), others on direct service delivery (Foresight) or partnering (Bridge Renewal Trust). All of them undertook work in several categories. Some community researchers who took part in the participatory analysis workshop towards the end of this research argued that there were indeed different styles of engagement by organisations. Their particular blend may arise from their origins, the nature of local needs, the type of building they use and available funding. However, it may be that the combined effects of these roles are crucial in fostering a rich mix of local political participation.

A concentration of partnering or co-locating work, for example with childcare provision on the premises, favours opportunities to gain access to and influence public service provision. A high degree of hosting, whereby groups rent a room to undertake a leisure or cultural pursuit, may be linked with facilitating social and associational participation.

However, the dynamic of any given activity cannot always be mapped in any self-evident way onto the three types of political participation: it will differ according to the context and the nature of those involved. A Greek dance group which meets in the evening might be offering participants an opportunity to enjoy leisure time; increase self-esteem; identify with a given culture and tradition; it may be providing a location to associate and bond with others; or fostering a local campaign to improve public transport at night. It may be offering all of these things to different people in the same group simultaneously. The breadth of activity uncovered and the interviews with participants does suggest that these organisations' work touches all three of these levels.

Community researchers involved in the participatory analysis workshop pointed out that there could be objections to the term ‘political participation’ which carried negative associations of party politics. Nevertheless, it was felt that a range of activities – including leisure activities and even unconventional approaches to organising, such as flash mobs – provided locations where people could include themselves in ‘political’ dialogue about local or national issues. These approaches could also offer staging posts for engagement in public and political participation.

### **Understanding the benefits of activities**

Some areas of the research – such as gaining an in-depth insight into benefits accruing to individuals and groups active in the centre – are highly complex. To explore this theme more fully would require an examination of the multiple causes affecting individuals. This was not the central aim of this study. However the research has yielded some important insights about the gains for local people arising from the organisations’ activities. The benefits cited appear to be both individual and collective in nature. Several community researchers engaged in this research argued that most activities taking place in their organisations were meeting multiple objectives simultaneously. This implied that a more detailed analysis of benefits would need to understand not only the activities which are taking place but also the way staff or volunteers are working with people. A group that self-identifies as an informal leisure club has the potential to take on a more activist role if its members use it as a support network or are encouraged to do so by staff or volunteers at the centre. The data suggested that the relationship and dialogue between the activities that occur in and around a community-based organisation are as relevant to understanding the effect that an organisation has on formal or informal political participation as the types or styles of activity.

### **Understanding the resource profile of CBOs**

The range of activities undertaken as a result of these organisations’ work is considerable. They are also engaged in a large number of networks. Their range of funding sources itself represents a mixed economy of income and offers a network of contacts and organisations. Taken together with the contribution of board members and other volunteers, this represents a significant resource. To fulfil their potential in facilitating participation they may need to argue for the cumulative effect of their work. Funders supporting individual projects in that setting may not always adequately recognise this point. However, without sufficient resources CBOs may not be able to fulfil their promise of facilitating political participation.

### **Understanding the contribution of community researchers**

The community researchers were able to contact a variety of people and groups. In some situations the results from the research could immediately feed back into the work and planning. Some even considered taking on – or adapting – exercises such as these as a part of the regular cycle of events. For many the topic area was important for them or their work even if the term ‘political participation’ could be off-putting at first. For some community researchers their capacity, confidence and skills were increased as a result of taking part in this study and they showed much skill in interviewing and recording. An important body of evidence was collected from their organisations that showed the range of activities taking place with a direct relation to formal and informal political participation.

## How organisations in the study compare to the wider Community Matters membership

The seven organisations studied here had annual incomes ranging from £38,000 to nearly £600,000 and deliver, encourage or facilitate a wide range of services. Only one employed more than ten staff. This represents an important membership constituency and their profile is not untypical of Community Matters members. For example, three quarters of member organisations have incomes of less than £100,000 a year and one quarter of them have incomes below £20,000.<sup>27</sup>

## Recognition of the organisations as undertaking formal or informal political participation

Many people within Community Matters' membership – including some involved in this study – would not initially recognise their work as consisting of, or entailing, formal or informal political participation. This may only emerge after a discussion about what those terms entail. It could be understood by many as a by-product of the activities undertaken rather than an explicit aim.

## Summary: organising, facilitating, encouraging

The research has shown that the CBOs which took part in this research are engaged in an extensive variety of activities. The study demonstrated the capacity of Community Matters members to engage in formal and informal political participation through delivering, facilitating, partnering or co-locating of activities although the dynamics of this are hard to disentangle. These members could enrich the lives of those involved, for example, by reducing isolation and giving access to social, leisure, educational and cultural activities as well as offering important social services. They could also strengthen communication and relations with people in the wider community and provide channels to influence public services, address local concerns and initiate new community actions. Their reach was such that users and non-users could become direct and indirect recipients of their services.

In many of these settings Community Matters members are working at the less-organised and less-resourced end of the community. This may be particularly true in the deprived areas in which the organisations in this study were operating. The activities they are undertaking entail a high volunteer involvement, few paid staff and a self-help orientation. Adequate resources to support and fuel these roles will be important.

The research points out the potential of Community Matters members to address current policy needs by organising, facilitating and encouraging participation. As such their potential in this field is high. However, local people could face difficulties finding spaces or outlets where they can participate in important decisions about services if these organisations are not well enabled. Part 5 argues that certain conditions may need to be in place in order to fully activate these possibilities and explores how they can be best nurtured.

# 5

## Conclusion and recommendations

Community Matters members and similar CBOs can underpin the implementation of important parts of the current policy agenda. At its heart the notion of Big Society anticipates greater empowerment for communities to develop in ways that are responsive to needs. The Localism Bill, for example, entails changing local services either through participation, choice or ballot while the network of community organisers being co-ordinated by Locality seeks to support this work. Community Matters members, and other similar organisations, are engaged in encouraging or facilitating associational life as well as organising service delivery. Their activities contribute significantly to formal and informal political participation in order to empower communities.

Historically, Community Matters members have always envisaged and frequently realised a role in<sup>29</sup> building political participation and associational life at a neighbourhood level. This was often alongside, or in collaboration with, local authority officers and members. The physical manifestation of that joint local government/community project was often a community centre with a degree of co-responsibility for financial and management arrangements. Recent research undertaken with UK practitioners suggested that after the 1970s different strands of community development were apparent, with the community association approach one of several.<sup>29</sup>

Today, despite the changing composition of communities and new outlets for leisure and associational life – often in the home – that role can still be identified in community associations and other smaller, newer organisations. They have potential to harness and understand the multiple needs of people they work with and encourage them to articulate their voice. Their roles – understood as delivering, partnering, co-locating and hosting services and activities – show the different styles of support they can offer to local people. Meanwhile, Community Matters nationally has developed the VISIBLE quality standards to provide a framework for organisational development in order to enhance their work.

The stage is thus set but how can Community Matters members and other CBOs strengthen their activities in relation to formal and informal political participation? What do they need to do themselves? How can funders and commissioners support this work? This section looks beyond this study at how our understanding of the way community-based organisations encourage political participation can be built and how the capacity of organisations and individuals to encourage political participation can be developed.

### Building understanding of political participation

#### **Political participation may be encouraged by people and organisations which do not self-identify as ‘political’**

Many community-based organisations, including Community Matters members, are unlikely to suggest that political participation is one of their stated aims. They will explicitly define themselves as non-party political and may resist the use of the term ‘political’ to describe themselves. Nevertheless they are part of an ecology of groups, clubs and associations that allow local residents to meet, involve themselves in each other’s lives and share resources and experiences.

### **Community based organisations cannot be grouped into those which do or do not encourage political participation**

This research has suggested that an organisation's potential to encourage political participation may lie in the configuration of different groups and activities, the way they interact and the nurturing skills of key individuals. This may be much more important than the specific activities undertaken. Therefore, it may be crucial to understand the networks of relationships between local groups which form within and around community-based organisations and how these help encourage local people's engagement in political participation. The proposed Community First small grants programme, aimed specifically at empowering people in deprived areas, seeks to 'encourage social action through new and existing neighbourhood groups'<sup>30</sup>. Such programmes could encourage approaches which involve attention to the local context of networks, connections and relationships.

### **Mapping political participation**

The research suggests it may not always be helpful to divide community activities into 'political' and 'non-political' types or suggest a hierarchical ladder towards participation. The experiences highlighted in this research indicate that groups which may appear as purely social or leisure in nature can play a vital role in shaping a community's potential and actual political influence. By increasing the breadth and quality of participants' social networks, acting as a forum for sharing and comparing experiences, and by creating a sense of local place these organisations can help communities create change.



## **Building capacity of organisations and individuals**

In each of the participating CBOs, the research found that specific individuals played an important role in creating the conditions for participation to thrive. These individuals could be the director or chair of an organisation, but they could also be a local volunteer. These are skilled individuals, capable of spotting resources and opportunities for political participation, developing networks and engaging with marginalised or isolated local residents.

The study has also demonstrated that CBOs are good at creating networks and relationships between local people, groups and public, private and voluntary sector organisations. However, this takes time and resources which may be difficult to find in organisations where staff, trustees and volunteers are fully absorbed in the day-to-day business of running activities and managing a building.

It is clear from the organisations in this study that much can be achieved with relatively small resources but additional support could make an important difference. Currently, CBOs enable individual projects or small groups to associate or develop and can facilitate their wider participation. Without this underpinning work much of this activity could not be sustained. This represents a hidden contribution to supporting local engagement. They offer a vital platform to enable formal and informal political participation, yet, the business model employed by CBOs to support these activities is not well recognised by funders or policy makers. The combination of CBOs' roles as deliverers, partners, co-locators and hosts needs to be acknowledged in funding and commissioning processes. This goes beyond finance for individual projects. Capital and revenue investment is required to build the capacity of CBOs to provide physical spaces and tangible resources; to link together people and groups; and to facilitate

linkage with public, private and third sector providers. Participating CBOs were looking at different financial options, such as working with local businesses and strengthening links with public and voluntary sector agencies. Capacity building of staff and volunteers in CBOs will also be required so that they can better realise their potential to play these roles.

In addition, study participants identified a number of specific areas which they felt could enable CBOs to reach more people and encourage participation including:

- interpreting and translation
- community transport
- using new communications technologies
- outreach workers (paid or volunteers)

## Maintaining community buildings

The study confirmed that a physical community building in a deprived area is important because it offers a place to bring diverse groups together; a base from which to create and strengthen networks and relationships between local people, groups and organisations; and an affordable venue for parties and other activities or events. These benefits are in addition to the actual services, activities and facilities available in the building.

An analysis of the impact of policy needs to take account of the effects on community buildings of, for example, payment by results which may create an uncertain operating environment for small organisations. Similarly, the current interest in asset transfer needs to consider the long term impacts on civil society and people's participation if venues become too expensive to rent out to local groups.

## Recommendations

### Building understanding:

- Time and resources for the formation and management of networks and partnerships need to be built into funding and programme planning.
- Funders and policy makers need to recognise that many CBOs will not always self-identify their role in participation work. Their contribution should, however, be acknowledged in policy and programme planning.
- Multi-purposeness and co-location are valuable combinations to civil and political participation because the interaction between groups and activities creates new possibilities for local people to be involved with cases and interests that matter to them.

### Building capacity:

- Leadership training and skills development in CBO staff should incorporate network and partnership formation as well as an understanding of the role of CBOs in encouraging participation.
- Foundations and umbrella bodies need to offer training, consultancy and development expertise to foster the role of these CBOs in participation work.
- CBOs will require greater capital and revenue investment if they are to realise their potential. This lack of investment is a challenge to the delivery of services and to associational life but also threatens the stepping stone to wider political participation.

- Organisations will benefit from modernising the way they communicate including the introduction of new technologies.

**Maintaining community buildings**

- The presence of a building in an area of high deprivation means that local people living on low incomes have somewhere affordable to meet, have fun, learn and get involved in community life. The capital and revenue costs of neighbourhood-based buildings need to be built into funding and programme planning including new social investment models.
- An analysis of the impact of policy needs to cover the effects on community buildings of, for example, payment by results which may create an uncertain operating environment for small organisations.

## Appendix 1: Profile of case study organisations

With Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) figures  
(see explanatory note following the tables)

### **4CT Limited**

4CT Limited is the name of the new company formed by the successful merger of three local community groups from the Beswick, Clayton and Openshaw areas in Manchester. 4CT manage the Grange Community Resource Centre on behalf of the City Council. It also hosts the Sporting Edge centre since April 2007, Parent and Family Support Fund, Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP) and other direct services throughout the community. Their aim is to work in partnership with a range of voluntary and statutory agencies to improve the quality of life for residents and contribute to the regeneration of East Manchester. This includes providing a range of accessible, responsive and flexible services and activities for the communities they work with, whilst supporting the development of new and existing community and voluntary sector groups.

Agencies based there include adult education, credit union, community accountancy service, partnership work to deliver cross-agency. They also provide rooms to hire (training room, IT suite, activities room, hall); support city-wide services such as youth provision; local clubs and run ballroom dancing classes, indoor bowls and bi-polar group meetings, and street dance.

It has an income of £588,000 and is currently working towards charity status. Its income comes from a variety of sources, namely Local Authority contracts and grants, rental space, catering and cafes, credit union and other direct services. It employs around twelve staff, most of which are local people. It has a board of six local residents and a local steering group who plan the activities and services delivered by the organisation.

4CT Limited IMD: 1,729; (5.32%)

### **Arbury Community Association**

Arbury Community Association is a registered charity and limited company based north of Cambridge City. It was originally run by local residents in the 1960's where it became the first community centre in the area to allow people to meet for social, educational and community purposes. In 1974 it was established as a registered charity to meet the expanding needs of the community. In 2000, there were fears of its closure, but initial funding from sources such as SureStart ensured it remained open. Since then, it has become a hub for external organisations to host regular meetings as well as facilitating and arranging meetings for Narcotics Anonymous, Pakistan Cultural Association, English for Speakers of other Language (ESOL) courses and has a community café.

It now has an annual income of £66,035 and employs four members of staff and has ten trustees. It has a footfall of 1,000 people per week and 54,365 users per year; 64% of which are from the voluntary sector, 20% for social purposes and 16% from local businesses, 83% of which have become regular users of the facilities. Since 2006, it has continued to work local stakeholders such as local healthcare providers and Locality and Area Committees to ensure their work is and continues to be community-led.

Arbury Community Association IMD: 6,152 (18.94%)

## Bridge Renewal Trust

The Bridge Renewal Trust is a registered charity limited by guarantee which has a trading arm to develop its social enterprise portfolio – Bridge Renewal Services Ltd. It is the independent successor body of Haringey's DCLG-funded New Deal for Communities regeneration programme. The Trust works within the deprived, yet vibrant, ethnically diverse communities of Tottenham, North London to tackle acute health inequalities and promote wellbeing. It is governed by a board of trustees led by a core of founding local resident members. The organisation has inherited income from NDC community assets to fund its core activities.

Since operations began in January 2010, the Bridge Renewal Trust has quickly developed a track record of delivering responsive and tailored local services in a collaborative model of working with a wide range of partners and development and management of its facilities portfolio. The Trust's activities and facilities include: provision of wellbeing and foot care services for the over 50s with a fun activities drop in and welfare and advice element; Helston Court Community Garden – for local food growing; the Bridge Community Hut – an intergenerational community activities centre; the Bridge to Wellbeing Community Hub providing organisations which share the Trust's charitable objectives with flexible space to co-locate and collaborate; the Bridge to Work Club – facilitating unemployed people find their routes back to financial and social wellbeing and developing a social enterprise community pharmacy set to open in spring 2012. The Trust is also responsible for ensuring the community development and empowerment legacy of the Bridge NDC is sustained. Its ambition is to establish itself as a sustainable social enterprise with a broadening income and resource base, consolidating and extending its existing strong links and connections with the local community and partner organisations and above all to empower the communities of Tottenham to live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives.

Bridge Renewal Trust IMD: 4,007 (12.34%)

## Foresight Project Limited

Foresight Project Limited is a charity located in Grimsby, Lincolnshire founded in 1999 by a group of volunteers with an original mission to assist blind and partially sighted people to lead more fulfilled lives which has been extended to encompass all disability. It has since become a mainstream support organisation addressing the varied and complex needs of its disabled client group through the provision of IT courses, training in life skills, literacy and numeracy courses, lip reading classes, befriending services and digital photography classes. There are 300 users a week which include the families and carers of users and they are the only centre to offer this wide and varied selection of courses and learning opportunities aimed for this user group. All courses are funded by the Humberside Learning Consortium (HLC), with additional funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to run local history projects to develop its work for the wider community. It has twenty one employed members of staff, twelve trustees and an income of around £1 million per annum.

In partnership with the local resident led community group who after consultation with residents, have identified the demand for the wider community to access activities and services outside of the community centres normal operating hours with the aim of becoming a One Stop Shop for the East Marsh. Foresights are working in partnership with the community organisation East Marsh Involve to offer their centres facilities to facilitate this. This coupled along with the

organisations work with Pilotlight will help the organisation develop a long term business plan to secure the long term sustainability the organisation needs to meet the increasing and changing demand of both its growing client base and support the community where they are based.

Foresight Project Limited IMD: 16 (0.05%)

### **The Lonsdale Community Centre**

The Lonsdale Community Centre is a charity and company limited by guarantee located in West Hull, an area with a high immigrant population covering two wards with Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors. It was founded in the mid 1980's with the aim of; 'releasing local people's potential' for the unemployed, immigrants, and youths. Polish and Iraqi immigrants experienced serious housing problems since the withdrawal of the Housing Market Renewal Programme which subsidised housing over the last eight years. In addition, the decline of the retail industry had detrimental effects on employment rates, particularly those in living in the city centre although the main employer continued to be the NHS. In the past, the Centre worked with Hull University in participatory appraisals with the aim of completing local-level research to continue to meet the needs of a heterogeneous population.

They have an annual income of £150,000 per annum with part of their income from their local community café (which breaks even), shop, and office and room hire. They have seven paid staff and seven board members and their activities include the provision of toddler groups, dance classes, health walks for adults, SureStart programme, accredited training for local youths, Smoking Cessation classes, senior and youth clubs and formerly the Citizen's Advice Bureau until the contract went out to tender.

The Lonsdale Community Centre IMD: 2,542 (7.83%)

### **The Pendower Good Neighbour Project**

The Pendower Good Neighbour Project in Newcastle became a registered charity in 1998 after members of St James' Church, The Riverside Community Health Project and later the Local Authority's Priority Team (LAPT) sought to tackle the youth problems on the Pendower Estate through the creation of a small community centre. However, opposed by residents, the LAPT wanted the Centre to be located away from the Estate, fearing security problems as it was left unoccupied overnight. A compromise was met which saw the Local Authority donate a house to the volunteer coordinators recruited from the International Assumption Lay Volunteering Programme. This allowed volunteers to occupy the house rent free whilst allowing the Church to maintain a Christian presence within the Estate.

The Project now works with residents to improve the quality of life of residents and support initiatives which contribute to the Estate's sustainability. This includes providing training to residents, managing toddler groups, providing DIY services to pensioners, lunch clubs, Credit Union Collection and a monthly newsletter to residents. It employs three members of staff, has fifteen board members and an income of £86,694 per annum.

The Pendower Good Neighbour Project IMD: 2,045 (6.30%)

## The St George's Community Hub

The St George's Community Hub was founded in 1996 as a charity and company limited by guarantee with the aim of delivering high quality youth and community work to the people of Aston and Newtown area. It aims to inspire, resource and house local and regional organisations (real and virtual) to help sustain Birmingham's urban environment. It was originally the local Church of England Secondary School until 31 August 1995. Whilst the school closed due to falling secondary rolls, there was an identified need for local post-16 education and training to ensure sustainable regeneration within the area. The Hub was created by the Diocesan Board of Education who were the owners of the premises; the former South Aston and Newtown City Challenge who funded the initial refurbishment; Birmingham City Council who provided the project with a range of support and City College Birmingham who were the largest tenant partner.

It has an income of £38,864 and is located in an area with 51% of the population of Asian origin; 23% from Pakistan, 16% from Bangladesh and 12% from India. Their main local employers are for the Royal Mail, local transport services and construction industry.

Their core activities include a learning centre, multi-faith meeting room, cafeteria, sports hall, weights room/fitness suite, dance studio, conference suite, rental of rooms from Birmingham City Council, Connexions, the Diocese of Birmingham, Monday night youth club, homework club, B-United 'Guns And Gangs' Partnership Project and the Road Awareness & Bike Project. It now has ten members of staff and a Board of Directors consisting of local residents, centre users and church representatives.

The St George's Community Hub IMD: 979 (3.01%)

### Note:

Figures for the organisations' deprivation indicator is based on the lower super output levels of the postcode of the main organisational base (this may not always be identical to the area served which may be wider).

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) figures relate to the 2010 (published March 2011). The IMD levels cover all areas of England and are ranked from 1 to 32,482 with the higher number indicating the least deprived area.

Source: [www.imd.communities.gov.uk/InformationDisplay.aspx](http://www.imd.communities.gov.uk/InformationDisplay.aspx)  
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