



REPORT 1

An Overview of the Learning from the South West Empowerment Development Project:

*A little more conversation...
...and a lot more action, please!*

EVALUATION
TRUST



A Report to the Empowering Communities Consortium

Note about this Overview of Learning

This *Overview of Learning* was commissioned by the South West Regional 'Empowering Communities' Consortium of the National Empowerment Partnership. It forms part of a set of reports reflecting research and other activities undertaken through the South West Empowerment Development Project (October 2007 – March 2008). All the reports may be downloaded from the Creating Excellence website at:

www.creatingexcellence.org.uk

- Report 1** An Overview of the Learning from the South West Empowerment Development Project
- Report 2** Engagement and Empowerment among Black and Minority Ethnic and other Equality Communities in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 3** Participation and Empowerment of Children and Young People in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 4** Engagement and Empowerment among Older People in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 5** Engagement and Empowerment in Rural Local Authorities in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 6** Engagement and Empowerment in an Urban Unitary Authority in the South West of England: A Case Study
- Report 7** No Boundaries: A Study of Networks and Empowerment
- Report 8** Engagement and Empowerment: Measurement and Indicators

All the reports were researched and written by a joint team from The Evaluation Trust and South West Foundation, with support from Professor Marilyn Taylor, Professor of Urban Governance and Regeneration at the University of the West of England. The team members were:

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These reports, as with all research, reflect the views of those who took part and are a snapshot in time and there may be other perspectives that are not recorded.

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Acknowledgements

The members of the research team working on the Empowerment Development Project would like to express their sincere thanks to all the people who have contributed their time and shared their knowledge, observations and insight into community engagement and empowerment across the South West region.

Although not all of this material could be referred to within the reports, it has certainly informed the project's wider learning and will form part of a continuing regional resource on community empowerment.

Front cover photograph: Courtesy of SEEDS

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1. Introduction

This overview summarises the learning from the Empowerment Development Project, which was commissioned by the South West region's Empowering Communities Consortium to undertake a programme of work on its behalf between October 2007 and March 2008.

Empowering Communities is the Consortium of public and voluntary sector bodies formed to carry out the objectives of the National Empowerment Partnership in the South West region.

The overview draws on the findings from a series of much more detailed reports produced by the Empowerment Development Project (listed at the front of this report), all of which may be downloaded from the Creating Excellence website at: www.creatingexcellence.org.uk

2. Background

2.1 The National Empowerment Partnership

The National Empowerment Partnership (NEP) is led by the Community Development Foundation on behalf of the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The NEP was formerly known as 'Every Voice Counts' and 'Together We Can'.

Currently there are countless community empowerment activities and projects taking place across England, but they are often scattered, have unstable funding and are of variable quality. Some are brought forward by communities themselves and others stimulated by government. However, there is very little central information about what works in practice at a local, regional or even national level, or co-ordinated action to stimulate and support activity where it is absent or weak. The NEP is seeking to address these problems and to support existing projects by:

- improving the quality of practice through exchange of information and good practice;
- quality assuring processes which aim to achieve empowered communities and citizens; and
- centrally gathering information about community empowerment.

In these ways, the NEP intends to increase the numbers and capacity of people able to influence the decisions that affect their lives and improve the quality and function of relationships between citizens and government.

The work of the NEP has been driven by the central intention of government to improve public services, local democracy and the capacity of communities to have greater influence over the conditions of their lives. These policy objectives have been expressed through the:

- Local Government White Paper (October 2006);
- Planning for a Sustainable Future White Paper (May 2007);
- Governance of Britain (July 2007);
- and most recently by the Action Plan for Community Empowerment (October 2007)¹.

Other important drivers for the NEP's work have included:

- the 'new' national set of PSA 21² indicators announced by the Treasury in October 2007 to measure local authority performance in building more cohesive, empowered and active communities;
- the proposed 'Place' survey³, which will ask local people for their perceptions about the area in which they live. The results of the survey will provide data for 20 of the new National Indicators including those in PSA 21.
- the new local authority 'duty to involve'⁴, which will come into force on 1 April 2009.

Building on these initiatives, Communities Secretary Hazel Blears announced on 5 March 2008 that a new White Paper focused on empowering citizens is to be published in Summer 2008. She also confirmed that a further year's funding is to be awarded to the NEP and its regional Consortia for 2008-2009, to continue the work started in 2007-2008.

2.2 The Empowering Communities Consortium

Empowering Communities (EC) is the Consortium of public and voluntary sector bodies that formed in July 2007 and was initially funded until March 2008 to carry out the initial objectives of the NEP in the South West region.

It is led by Creating Excellence (CE), as the accountable body and Regional Centre of Excellence (RCE) for Sustainable Communities in the South West. Regional Centres of Excellence aim to support the people, partnerships and public and private organisations in delivering better communities and in improving the quality of life across the regions.

The intention is to broaden representation on the Consortium over the coming year to include other relevant statutory and voluntary partners. The Executive Board currently comprises all the members of the Consortium, which are:

- Black South West Network
- Community Counts, Gloucester
- Creating Excellence
- Equality South West
- Exeter CVS
- Government Office South West
- Help the Aged
- Local Government Association
- Penzance Central Initiative
- Plymouth City Council
- Plymouth University
- South Somerset District Council
- South West Acre Network
- South West Foundation
- South West Forum
- South West Neighbourhood Training & Resource Centre

Following its formation, the Consortium drew up an Action Plan for 2007-08, setting out a regional programme of activity to meet the immediate objectives of the NEP.

2.3 The Empowerment Development Project

The overall aim of the Empowerment Development Project (EDP) was to support the EC Consortium in delivering its Action Plan for 2007-08 and carrying out the objectives of the NEP in the South West of England. The project had four main objectives designed to support this aim:

Objective 1: *Identify*

- Identify where effective engagement and empowerment activity is taking place in the region, how it is measured and how well it is working.

Objective 2: *Review*

- Review and document effective engagement and empowerment activity, distilling learning about what works and how it can be reproduced elsewhere.

Objective 3: *Share*

- Share learning about effective practice throughout the region and nationally to improve practice.

Objective 4: *Develop*

- Help the consortium to plan its activities for 2008-10 and develop a network of Empowerment Champions to improve practice.

In order to carry out this programme of work, the EC invited tenders from suitable researchers, and the work was awarded in October 2007 to a joint research team from The Evaluation Trust and South West Foundation, with external guidance and support provided by Professor Marilyn Taylor, Professor of Urban Governance and Regeneration at the University of the West of England. The project has been managed by Creating Excellence, as the lead agency on the EC.

3. Initial Project Definitions and Requirements

Following discussion with the EC Consortium, the EDP took as its starting point the DCLG's definitions of engagement and empowerment, which had also been adopted as working definitions by the NEP:

Community empowerment is the giving of confidence, skills, and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them.

Community engagement is the process whereby public bodies reach out to communities to create empowerment opportunities.

(DCLG (2007) An Action Plan for Community Empowerment)

However it was agreed that these definitions would need to be tested by the project against the experience of participants across the region.

In order to fulfill the brief set by the NEP and EC Consortium, the project was required to produce a set of tangible resources by March 2008:

- A database of regional contacts (organisations and projects undertaking engagement and empowerment work) for future use by the Consortium in developing a regional network of empowerment 'champions';
- A set of 5 case studies drawn from across the region (including two focused on local authority areas), plus one 'vivid' case study by the end of November 2007;
- A report reflecting the potential role of networks in supporting and enabling effective engagement and empowerment across the region;
- A report reflecting experience of using indicators and different systems of measuring engagement and empowerment across the region;
- An overview of learning from the project.

It was also agreed that the research team would play an active part in the Consortium's wider programme of activities between October 2007 and March 2008, by:

- Attending regional Consortium meetings and national research meetings convened by the NEP;
- Attending 2 key national conferences;
- Participating in the Consortium's regional launch of the project in October 2007;
- Running workshops at two events in Bristol and Bodmin in December 2007, which brought together a cross-section of agencies and projects with an interest in community engagement and empowerment to share experience and identify future needs;
- Providing research back-up to a number of third sector organisations undertaking their own independent case studies, using the NEP's proposed '6 box model' for the evaluation of engagement and empowerment activity;
- Providing briefing materials, including examples of poor practice and responses to DCLG information requests;
- Briefing the lead officer within Creating Excellence, to feed into reports and the development of the Consortium's ongoing plans;
- Collecting photographic resources illustrative of engagement and empowerment work across the region.

4. Methodology

4.1 The Database and Case Studies

The research team was aware from the outset that there are literally hundreds of community empowerment projects and activities going on across the South West region. Many are led by local authorities and other public sector agencies; many are also led by third sector organizations and by small 'grassroots' community groups. Some rely on the passion and commitment of just one member of the community, acting entirely voluntarily. They therefore range from the most personal and informal (a woman running a launderette that effectively doubles as a community and youth centre on a deprived estate), to the large and highly structured (Bristol City Council's 'Citizens Panel'). These initiatives may also cut across many different sections of the community at different times, to engage with:

- All citizens;
- Rural / urban communities;
- Particular communities of interest and equalities groupings, e.g. black and minority ethnic (B&ME) communities; faith communities; younger or older people;
- Geographical communities (at many different levels from local to regional);
- Residents of particular neighbourhoods or housing providers;
- Users of particular services.

Given this complexity and the short timescale for the project, the research team was not expected to undertake a comprehensive mapping of all engagement and empowerment activity across the region, but rather to identify a good cross-section of local authorities, key agencies and projects that might be expected to have useful experience to share.

An initial 'snowballing' exercise, in which the researchers asked all the Consortium members and other key stakeholders around the region to identify examples of engagement and empowerment activity, yielded a database of over 150 organisations and projects spanning the public and third sectors. This database of contacts has continued to grow over the duration of the project, and will now be held by the EC Consortium to support its ongoing work.

The research team used the database to produce a 'long list' of over 60 examples covering the region and spanning a wide range of engagement and empowerment activity by local authorities and other agencies and groups. They undertook telephone interviews with all of these in order to build a more detailed preliminary picture and to inform the choice of the project's case study areas.

It was agreed with the EC consortium that, in selecting the two Local Authority case study sites required by the NEP, the team should seek to include:

- A contrast between urban/rural; large/small; 1st tier/2nd tier;
- At least one Local Authority that is an acknowledged leader in the field of engagement/empowerment (e.g. 'Empowerment Champions', Beacon authorities, Civic Pioneers);
- At least one LA that has already been using the 'new' PSA 21 indicators to measure community empowerment.

In selecting these and the wider case studies, the aim was also to include as far as possible:

- Examples of participatory budgeting / asset transfer / the role of community anchors;
- Examples of the use of other indicators / measures of effective engagement / empowerment;
- Work to engage with and empower B&ME communities and other equalities groupings;
- Examples of the work undertaken by grassroots groups;
- Sites that provide real evidence of impact;
- Case studies that offer innovation / real learning;
- The best possible cross-section of urban/rural; different parts of the region; mix of organisational types; different interest groups and sectors.

After considering all the telephone interview material against these criteria, it was agreed with the Consortium to broaden the focus of the five case studies, to cover:

- A range of engagement and empowerment activity in urban Plymouth, including work by the Local Authority (a unitary authority identified by DCLG in October 2007 as one of a new national network of 18 'empowerment champion' local authorities);
- Engagement and empowerment work in three rural Local Authorities: Wiltshire (the region's second identified 'empowerment champion'); South Somerset (a district council with Beacon status); and Lyme Regis (the 'vivid' case study);
- Work among B&ME communities across the region, with a particular focus on Bristol and Plymouth, and including Gypsy and Traveller and new migrant communities;
- Engagement and empowerment among older people across the region, with a particular focus on the growth of independent older people's forums and on the links made between the Senior Forums in Dorset and the DH-funded Partnership with Older People Project (POPP);
- A range of work going on across the region to enable the participation and empowerment of children and young people, with a particular focus on Gloucestershire and the Young Advisers programme.

This approach enabled the research team to incorporate and build on the rich material gathered in the initial round of telephone interviews. Site visits were made to each of the case study areas and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held with a range of key stakeholders, using a prepared interview schedule.

In Plymouth and Wiltshire, members of the research team also conducted focus groups with representatives of local community groups, to gather views about their local experiences of engagement and empowerment. A focus group was also held with some of the children and young people who have participated in local engagement and empowerment initiatives, and with three older people who are Senior Forum members and Board members of the Dorset Partnership for Older People Project (POPP). Finally a focus group was held with street reps and other key activists from a neighbourhood management project, which focused on the way local residents have become involved in the collection and use of evidence in relation to the Police and Street Cleaning.

4.2 Networks

A separate study was undertaken to support this aspect of the EDP, looking at a sample of the existing networks in the South West Region, many of which were funded by both the South West Foundation and Creating Excellence through the Network Development Fund. As part of this work, a snapshot view was taken of the Community Empowerment Networks in the South West Region, in Bristol, Plymouth and Cornwall.

Community Empowerment Networks have been developing since 2002 and have played an important part in the empowerment agenda, in assisting people to take part in and influence the Local Strategic Partnerships.

4.3 Measurement and Indicators

Building on the initial interviews and the materials emerging from the case studies, this aspect of the research involved:

- a wide review of written materials and some interviews exploring the use of measurement of and indicators for engagement and empowerment in the South West, amongst a range of agencies;
- a case study that focused on the use of measurement and indicators in a single project, 'Community Counts', and on the way local residents have become involved in their collection and use in relation to the Police and Street Cleaning.

4.4 Events

The research team collated and incorporated into its analysis the feedback from the EDP launch event and Bristol and Bodmin events.

4.5 Analysis

Having identified the learning from each of these different elements of the project, the research team met with Professor Marilyn Taylor to draw together and re-appraise all the evidence and to identify the main learning points under a number of key thematic headings. This summary of learning is presented in the following section.

5. Summary of Learning

5.1 Definitions of Engagement and Empowerment

- The EDP case studies and feedback from the events very much challenge the assumption contained in the DCLG and NEP working definitions that community engagement and empowerment are essentially 'top down' activities that are 'done to' communities by public authorities.
- In terms of community engagement, there is strong evidence to suggest that much engagement is stimulated by the community itself, working 'bottom up' to raise issues with public authorities in order to effect change. It also seems that some of the best outcomes arise from a process of mutual engagement, in which both 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches are mediated within a community partnership. This is not to deny the importance of public bodies taking action to reach out to the community and create empowerment opportunities, but rather points to the need for a more inclusive definition that acknowledges the reciprocity inherent in community engagement.
- In terms of community empowerment, participants have also challenged the idea contained in the working definition that empowerment is within the 'gift' of public authorities, or that empowerment is itself a process or project:

Engagement and empowerment are a journey.

Empowerment is not a project.

Empowerment is an outcome... the process that underpins it is something else.

- These concerns about the working definition of community empowerment have also been reflected at national level in a meeting of government researchers and empowerment practitioners and researchers that took place in December 2007, resulting in the suggestion that the definition should be adjusted to read:

Community empowerment means assisting people in communities to acquire the confidence, skills and power to influence their conditions both directly and through what public bodies do for and with them.

- This would certainly appear to bring the definition closer to the experiences of engagement and empowerment reported to the EDP in the South West region.

5.2 The Importance of History

- The case studies highlight the importance of history in shaping the community's perceptions and trust of local public bodies, and their willingness to engage with them.
- Where there is a strong history of local community activism, and a strong third sector with a history of advocating for and seeking to empower communities, this appears to provide a helpful foundation for productive partnership working with the local authority and other public bodies.
- The focus groups held in Plymouth and Wiltshire showed, however, that members of the community have long, shared memories. Their ability to trust the public sector in the present time may still be affected by historical events that are completely outside the knowledge and experience of the public sector officers, who often have only recent memories.
- This may be particularly true of the B&ME communities, which have very different histories of being in Britain, and often difficult histories of engagement with public bodies. Understanding and acknowledging these histories can be very important in unlocking relationships and enabling new opportunities for engagement and empowerment to be taken up.
- Local engagement may also be affected by the historical impacts of central government policies, the arrival and departure of particular time-limited funds, and the local impacts of national cuts and targets.
- History is important too in terms of how local systems and structures have evolved to support community engagement and empowerment. Much of the successful community engagement in South Somerset, for example, can be traced back to the decision in 1996 to form four Area Committees where elected councillors can meet regularly with the community to discuss and support the delivery of the Area Development Plans. This work has also been underpinned by a long history of local investment in community development.

5.3 Tensions within Communities

- It is equally clear that engagement and empowerment can be affected by tensions within communities, creating a competitive environment in which the empowerment of one section of the community may be perceived to be at the expense of another. In Plymouth, for example, the competition between priority neighbourhoods for desperately needed resources and investment is thought to have encouraged communities to be somewhat inward-looking and to have discouraged their engagement with city-wide issues.
- The B&ME case study also highlights a number of examples of this sense of 'divide and rule' affecting the ability of the different B&ME communities both to work together co-operatively and to feel there is any opportunity for their

different needs and voices to be heard and listened to. The Children and Young People's case study also demonstrates conflicts over different priorities in a community.

5.4 Awareness, Commitment and Leadership

- The commitment of local authorities to engage fully with the community, and understanding of the time and effort needed for effective engagement, have to be embedded at all levels and given high level support.
- As the case study on empowerment among B&ME communities demonstrates very clearly, public bodies need to understand and address the particular barriers to engagement faced by equalities groupings and other vulnerable groups.
- Learning can easily be locked up in particular departments and fail to spread across the organisation unless it is recognised and shared. As was noted in the case study on involving children and young people, for example, the insular nature of the Youth Service can mean that young people's issues fail to get into wider strategic planning.
- Community engagement and empowerment therefore need to be given strong leadership within local authorities and to be championed across the whole organisation to raise profile and get cross-departmental work going, changing hearts and minds to achieve cultural shift.
- As part of this process, senior local authority staff can be very influential 'champions' both inside and outside the authority, helping to spread awareness and winning wider support and trust through their own personal drive and commitment. In Dorset, for example, the supportive 'championing' role of the County Council's Director of Older People's Services was identified by the Dorset older people's forums as *'invaluable in opening doors and influencing hearts and minds'*. The same is true of the work of senior officers to champion the involvement of children and young people in Gloucestershire and through Young Advisers.

5.5 The Value of Self-Empowerment

- All the case studies highlight the important role played by members of the community who, through their own passion and commitment, have empowered themselves to bring about change. Examples include children and young people developing their own menus of participation opportunities, and the residents of Pembroke Street Estate in Plymouth, who formed their own Estate Management Board and effectively transformed local living conditions, thereby gaining recognition as a Guide Neighbourhood. Older people across the region have similarly empowered themselves through the formation of independent local older people's forums, and are steadily achieving increasing influence across the South West region.

- The research suggests that there are considerable mutual benefits when such initiatives are well supported by public bodies, but not swamped or taken over. In Devonport, for example, participants have stressed the value of public sector commitment to bottom-up, community-led regeneration, underpinned by strong empowerment values.
- The strengths of independent, autonomous community groups need to be recognised and built on so that, if they wish, they have the capacity to extend their reach and to participate in wider partnerships.
- As the experience of some older people's forums shows, groups such as these can feel very disempowered if they see their own activity being duplicated through other structures, created by public bodies under their own control.

5.6 Structures

- A number of the case studies emphasise the helpfulness of structures which place the community in the majority, for example on the Board of Devonport Regeneration Community Partnership in Plymouth, and on the Board of the Dorset Partnership with Older People Project (POPP).
- The most successful initiatives appear to have spent significant time putting robust systems (infrastructure and capacity) in place to act on the identified issues and work towards tangible outcomes.
- Community participants all say they prefer clear structures to more 'woolly' processes – something that may seem counterintuitive to workers seeking to adopt more informal and participatory ways of working. Perhaps surprisingly, children and young people particularly appreciate having formal structures and clarity about their role and functions. They want to know the extent and limitations of the power and influence on offer, and expect there to be honest, open, realistic communication about what is possible.
- A number of examples were identified of commissioners of services now building effective engagement into their commissioning structures. In Plymouth, for example, the new Children's Trust has worked with young people to develop a User Participation Strategy to underpin all its commissioning activity and inform service delivery. Commissioners also say that hearing users speaking for themselves is immensely powerful in bringing the reality of their experiences to the forefront.
- The Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and Local Area Agreements (LAAs) are viewed as really important structures and absolutely key points of influence for different community groupings to connect with.

The LAA is the only game in town. We need to learn how to use it.

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- In Dorset, for example, the Dorset Age Partnership (a multi agency partnership that includes older representatives from the County's Senior Forums) has achieved good links with the LSP, but the same is not true of the DH-funded Dorset POPP. Other older people's forums, B&ME groups, young people's groups and some more locally-based rural initiatives also report difficulty in accessing and influencing their LSPs and LAAs.
- The research therefore suggests there is a need for each local authority to work with its Local Strategic Partnership in developing and implementing a coherent Community Engagement Strategy, setting out a vision of effective engagement with all sections of the wider community and attaching a prioritised work plan.
- The role of community representatives on the LSP structures appears to need further 'unpacking'. In Plymouth, for example, representatives themselves acknowledge that they cannot possibly represent the whole city, and have concerns about the engagement of the wider community. It is also widely recognised that achieving good representation by the third sector is not the same as involving the community. Some participants have therefore talked about the need to build intermediate structures between local communities and the LSP that bring together much wider groupings of community stakeholders to feed views into and take feedback from the LSP community representatives.
- Some of the rural 'area' structures offer good models in this respect, in providing very local routes for engagement with representatives who link up with the wider district and county structures, as in South Somerset, Lyme Regis and parts of Wiltshire.
- Neighbourhood management has also offered the potential for local partnership working with the community to effect improvement, although participants in this research reported somewhat variable experiences of their local initiatives. Much appears to depend on the local history of partnership working and what other resources are available within neighbourhoods to support change.
- Such local partnership approaches may be particularly difficult for local authorities to coordinate, given their fragmented departmental structures. Examples of local community partnership structures that have achieved tangible benefits include the work on street cleaning undertaken by 'Community Counts' in Gloucestershire and the 'Lengthsman' local repair scheme' in South Somerset.
- It is important to note that many participants from B&ME communities reported that local government, statutory agency structures, and increasingly large local infrastructure organisation structures, are not felt to be compatible with / accessible to the cultures and preferred communication methods

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among B & ME people, and that further work is therefore needed to enable them to participate effectively at this level.

5.7 Support and Resources

- Numerous research participants have emphasised the need to invest time and resources in community development work, to engage directly with local communities, identify aspirations and goals, and decide how to measure outcomes.
- This investment is needed within both geographical communities (as in South Somerset and the priority neighbourhoods in Plymouth) and within equalities groupings and other communities of interest (such as the B&ME communities; older people; children and young people).
- Participants stress the value of seeding money from independent, outside agencies such as the Lottery, and independent charitable trusts and foundations such as South West Foundation, in enabling communities to develop their own voices '*without any strings attached*'.
- Funding is needed that is both sufficient and sustainable, otherwise community engagement and empowerment initiatives may fade away without leaving any meaningful legacy. This is the fear in North Prospect, Plymouth, for example, where Neighbourhood Renewal Funding is about to end.
- The core funding required to support community engagement initiatives may in some instances be very modest. The older people's forums, for example, cost very little and are often supported largely through older people's own fundraising efforts. However, helping them to develop into more influential and sustainable bodies, as in the Dorset Forum Development Project, does require more substantial ongoing funding.
- The case studies suggest that the need for flexible resources to support community engagement and empowerment is best met by dedicated, community anchor organisations (such as Fata He in Plymouth, the Balsam Centre in South Somerset, the Lyme Regis Development Trust, or the statutory project Community Counts), providing a hub of local capacity – so long as their own management and practice are of a good quality. Some organisations would however require help to develop roles as community anchors and to apply lessons about effective community engagement and empowerment to their own practice. They would benefit from a set of self-assessment questions to work through in order to identify areas for improvement and development.
- Some of the case study examples have highlighted the value of asset transfer in providing a tangible focal point for local engagement and a legacy of resources for the community, for example in Devonport and at Tamar View in Plymouth. However, it is clear that in these examples the community has

benefited from considerable support and expertise to help them manage risk and maximise sustainability. Experience in other parts of the region, for example in Malmesbury, suggests however that, if not adequately supported, asset acquisition can be a very damaging experience for already vulnerable communities.

- The value of both formal and informal networks in providing support and access to wider knowledge and expertise is also clear from the research. Participants across the board, i.e. in communities and within agencies, said they value both networking opportunities and the chance to share experience with their peers through exchange visits, and twinning / mentoring arrangements. Some participants would also like to be able to access regional sources of knowledge and expertise.

5.8 Levers for Change

- A number of research participants identify the forthcoming 'duty to involve' as an important lever for change, focusing the attention of local authorities on their own performance and reinforcing the need for more coherent and participative community engagement strategies. The role of the Government Office is also thought important to underpin the new duty, in driving and supporting the spread of good practice.
- The involvement of local Ward Councillors has been widely identified as an important lever for change, in that they are well placed to hear local issues and concerns and reflect them at the political level. In Plymouth, for example, neighbourhood 'walkabouts' by local Councillors have become integral to efforts to engage the community in the Local Development Framework.
- In the rural shire Counties, Parish and Town Councils have also been found to be important, in leveraging resources and influence for local community engagement initiatives.
- As already described, the availability of an asset can provide a real focus for community engagement. More generally, all the case studies demonstrate the value of something to fight for, or against, as a catalyst for engagement and empowerment. In North Somerset, for example, both the older people's forums have become real forces for change on a range of issues, through their initial passion to do something to ease the burden of Council tax on older people.
- Funding, if the right funding is in place for long enough, is widely viewed as one of the most powerful levers for change. This has certainly been borne out in Devonport, where substantial funding from New Deal for Communities over a ten year period has enabled real progress to be made in enabling community-led regeneration.
- Local economic development is also viewed as a potential catalyst for community benefit, if properly used. Some participants felt local authorities

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should make much better use of section 106 provisions, requiring local developers to include investments in local communities within their plans, and involving the community in deciding what those investments should be:

There should be no economic development without community development.

5.9 Helpful Processes

- Numerous community participants have talked to the researchers about the importance of processes that start where they are, that are local, and that take account of the unequal power relationship that exists between them and the representatives of public authorities. Only when people feel reasonably comfortable and safe can trust begin to develop.
- The Police are mentioned by a number of participants as undertaking some really helpful and sensitive work to engage with and empower communities, for example with young people and, in the SEEDS project, with survivors of domestic violence.
- It can be hard for committed and well-intentioned public sector officers to understand how unsafe and disempowering the process of engaging with agencies can feel, even for people who are usually quite confident and powerful in their own lives. One participant likened it to 'putting the community in pyjamas':

It's like going into hospital. As soon as they get you into pyjamas, you feel completely helpless.

- These experiences may be especially acute for people from the B&ME communities, who may have experienced institutional racism, and for whom barriers of language may be exacerbated by very different cultural norms around communication. For some B&ME people, the written word may have much less value and meaning than approaches that focus on their oral traditions and the use of music, drama or other visual media.
- All participants highlight the value of community engagement approaches that have a social element, that are fun, and that blur the boundaries between the community and paid staff. In Dorset, for example, the Senior Forums were supported by local agencies in re-enacting the trial of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, to draw attention to older people's needs. Sarsen Housing Association's 'Am I Boverred?' campaign likewise involved local residents in workshops to highlight key issues in their communities and identify priorities for change. This is a key feature of all the work with children and young people.
- Training and support are also identified as very important to participants, in empowering them to take on more influential roles, for example through the Active Citizenship, Active Learning (ALAC) initiative (now 'Take Part'). In

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some cases (as in Exeter CVS's 'Learning to Involve' project), participants have gone on to develop roles as trainers, to improve the engagement and empowerment practice of public sector workers, with very positive spin-offs for themselves and the agencies involved.

- Some participants have talked about the importance of training in how to operate effectively 'on the inside' of structures, after a long period 'on the outside'. They need training not only to build their confidence but to help them acquire knowledge of the structures and develop new influencing skills more appropriate to partnership working (as in the Dorset Senior Forums, and the preparation and training provided for LSP community representatives by VOSCUR in Bristol and Plymouth Community Partnership).
- Some community activists feel however that they are more effective in an oppositional role, and in that role can probably achieve more on the outside of structures than on the inside. They feel there is a tendency in modern democratic structures to avoid confrontation at all costs, and therefore to sideline dissenting voices, when in fact conflict can be healthy and productive.
- There is sometimes a need for strong leadership to safeguard plans made in partnership with less powerful members of the community such as children and young people. For example, a project developed through 'Communities at Heart' in Bristol, which achieved the involvement of young people in plans for a local park, was disappointingly derailed by a small but vociferous group of local adults. Re-engaging the commitment of young people may be very difficult following an experience such as this.
- Independent 'intermediaries' can be extremely useful in situations where the authorities do not have the full trust of the community. The researchers identified a number of examples where independent workers have undertaken engagement work on behalf of the local authority and have thereby facilitated improved relationships, for example in some of the local consultations over the Local Development Framework in Plymouth.
- More powerfully, the research identified a number of examples of community members (older people, younger people) themselves taking on roles as 'consultants', 'researchers' or 'evaluators', reaching out into their own communities to involve their peers. This has the benefit of being often more acceptable to other community members, because of their shared knowledge and experience. Difficulties can arise, however, when some people are carrying out these roles in a paid capacity alongside others who are doing the same work voluntarily.
- Many participants talked about the danger of 'consultation fatigue', and the need for community engagement activities to be much better planned and coordinated to avoid duplication and overload. There was support for the idea that 'rolling stones can gather moss', i.e. engagement in one area can usefully 'piggy back' on another so that good practice cascades outwards, as has

happened in some of the work with children and young people in Gloucestershire and Devon.

- Participants also emphasized the need for differentiated opportunities for engagement and participation in decision-making structures, i.e. a whole menu of choices ranging from the sporadic and informal through to formal representation roles.
- All community participants highlight the importance of receiving good and continuing feedback about the outcomes of their involvement, to demonstrate that they have been listened to, that their contribution has been valued, and that something has actually happened as a result of it. Receiving no feedback is described as disempowering, and means that people are unlikely to want to participate next time around.

5.10 Outcomes

- It is evident from the research that some participants have taken important individual journeys and enjoyed real personal growth (empowerment). Sometimes this has come about as a result of the opportunities created by particular engagement initiatives (e.g. those aimed at children and young people); often it has come about through the self-empowerment of a like-minded group of residents or older people.
- For this kind of empowerment to happen, however, all the community participants involved in the research talk about the importance of being listened to, respected, taken seriously, and achieving real influence. Influence here seems to mean seeing things actually change as a direct result of their engagement.
- Many of the older people's forums, for example, feel that they have been able to achieve this kind of influence, and point to outcomes such as changes in local health strategies and Home Improvement Agency plans.
- Long term neighbourhood initiatives such as Devonport Regeneration Community Partnership and Pembroke Street Estate Management Board can also point to tangible outcomes of engagement with the community, reflected in measurable shifts in local pride and satisfaction. People in the Community Counts area have 'hard' evidence about the benefits of the partnership with the local Police to their area. The hope is that by investing in informal social capital, these changes will stick and bring lasting benefits.
- A number of public bodies also identify positive outcomes of their own engagement with the community, in terms of improved commissioning, better services and performance, and improved democracy, e.g. in South Somerset, Dorset and Malmesbury.

5.11 Sustainability: the Need for Continuous Reinforcement

- Many research participants have emphasized the need for continuous efforts and resources to sustain effective community engagement, rather than treating it as a time limited exercise or project. They seem to be advocating a cycle of 'plan, do, check, review'.
- Given the sometimes difficult local experiences of community engagement, and perceptions in the community that 'nothing ever really changes', participants have talked about the importance of celebrating success and making it highly visible.
- Some of those identified as 'champions' of engagement within local authorities appear to be in quite lonely positions. They emphasise the need for ongoing support not only within their authorities but from external sources, to help them sustain their own energy and commitment.

5.12 Measurement and Indicators

- There is general appreciation of the importance of baselines, the need to identify the outcomes of engagement and empowerment and link them to interventions, as well as the need to access independently collected evidence.
- The key evaluative questions identified in all the case studies in different ways appear to be:
 - Are people being included and genuinely listened to in areas that affect them?
 - Do people who are playing leadership roles have access to the right kind of information and support that enables them to change things for the better for their community?
 - Do people work in partnership with local services and agencies to change things for the better for themselves and their community?
- Within community and 'grassroots' organisations, the research has found little monitoring or evaluation of community engagement activity. People often do understand the need and benefits of evaluation, and view tools such as the '6 box model' as potentially helpful, but feel they do not have the capacity, time or motivation to use them.
- The cost of even small statistically robust surveys is also a concern. Often, the most important local insight to be gained from such surveys relates to significant difference in views between age or ethnic groups.

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- There is widespread concern about the use of the PSA indicators as simplistic measures because of issues about their validity - *'a proxy attempt to apply objective criteria to subjective experience'* - and interpretation. Although testing people's general perceptions of their area is useful, these sorts of measures only make sense when set alongside other local intelligence about local people and their views. This means that these indicators are primarily diagnostic and that 'judgement' evidence should also be valued. As the Community Counts street reps group noted: *'If you had asked us whether we felt we could influence decisions in this area we would have been unable to answer as we could only respond in relation to particular decisions or areas of decision. The answer would be 'yes' for the Police and 'no' for Street Cleaning at present.'*
- Within local authorities and other public bodies, however, there is currently a fixation on indicators, particularly given the drive to establish baselines, implement the new PSA 21 indicator set, and plan for the new Place Survey. Again little evaluation work is being undertaken so learning about what works and why is not well shared and is often not built into the work. It is the NDCs and the Neighbourhood Management projects, who built evidence collection into their work, that are able to demonstrate their outcomes.
- The research suggests overall that indicators are only a small part of the picture, and that there is a need for measures for the assessment of empowerment that are realistic and achievable. Although there is a recognition of the need to engage with local people, tenants, and users in defining outcomes and the indicators of success **and** in collecting the evidence, the research identifies a general lack of knowledge of existing models and tools where they exist.
- For many practitioners, statistically robust surveys and independent evaluation will not be available because of time and cost. The alternatives are a peer evaluation approach now increasingly used in LSPs, Beacon Councils and the third sector. What is clear from the interviews is that any peer review system must also involve residents, members of interests groups and service users in the teams.
- There is clear evidence that almost all those involved in the case studies are struggling with measurement issues but have important experiences to share through e-groups, visits, small group working sessions, localised learning sets, networks and low level research support.

5.13 Disempowering Practice

A number of examples of disempowering practice have been reported to the research team during the course of the project, which would appear to run counter to the whole thrust of current policy on community empowerment. These include:

- The failure to support B&ME representatives on LSPs in Cornwall, Torbay and Devon, and a widespread struggle to find good practice in the engagement and empowerment of B&ME communities outside Bristol and Plymouth.
- Plans by North Somerset Council to close its Community Development Unit, and by Salisbury District Council to disband its Community Engagement Team and the South Wiltshire Funding Advice Service;
- The accidental failure to include the nationally acclaimed First Steps Nursery in the BANES Early Years Action Plan, thereby leaving it largely unfunded;
- The adoption by Cheltenham Borough Council of a new third sector procurement process, without any consultation;
- The closure of Gloucestershire Children's Fund preventative play projects despite highly positive external evaluations;
- The many difficulties reported by community groups across the region in trying to get information about how to access their local LSPs or have input to the LAAs;

The research has generally identified a mood of considerable weariness and frustration across the region in relation to government support for engagement and empowerment work. Participants tend to perceive the current initiative as yet another short term drive to advocate good practice ('giving with the left hand') while at the same time removing funding and dismantling worthwhile existing structures such as the Community Empowerment Networks ('taking away with the right').

6 Some Reflections on the Learning

The learning from the Empowerment Development Project very much mirrors the findings from recent work elsewhere.

For example, a report published by DCLG in 2007⁵ as part of the national evaluation of the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder Programme, *Neighbourhood Management and Social Capital*, drawing on case studies from three Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, highlights a number of important 'engagement and empowerment' ingredients in building social capital:

- The importance of physical and social improvements that help to build trust and confidence amongst residents by making the area look and feel safer.
- The value of community hubs – neighbourhood offices, community centres, radio stations, local parks – in giving the neighbourhood an identity that people can relate to and opportunities for people to come together.
- The faith capital that can be tapped if faith communities work together.
- The need to celebrate strengths in order to challenge the poor image that many disadvantaged neighbourhoods have both internally and in the outside world.
- The importance of the skills, resources and experiences of partners.
- The importance of involving residents themselves in the design, development and management of their programmes.
- The need to put resources into outreach and trusted intermediaries who can connect up people, communities and institutions;
- The need to promote face-to-face contact and embed formal structures in looser, more wide-ranging informal contacts;
- The importance of recognising the time that it takes to build sustainable networks and promote trust.

The EDP findings are further mirrored in a newly published JRF report, *Community empowerment in practice: lessons from Communities First*⁶, which examines the Communities First regeneration programme in Wales. This was an early attempt by the Welsh Assembly Government to promote engagement by community members which now provides five years of experience of a policy centred on the achievement of community empowerment. The research presents findings from nine case studies of Communities First partnerships to provide insights into the achievement of community empowerment. It considers:

- how far partnerships have developed and evolved to empower communities;
- the relationships communities have with other representative channels;
- the extent to which communities have influenced other agendas;
- the overall impact of regeneration partnerships.

The researchers conclude that government will need to provide incentives and sanctions to promote a greater statutory sector response to processes of community empowerment. They suggest consideration should be given to allocating specific functions and resources to local partnerships which they can deploy, and assert that the continued commitment of community members will be conditional on 'purposeful' community involvement.

These are not unfamiliar messages. They echo messages from a mass of literature dating back at least a decade. Yet there continues to be a widespread 'implementation gap' between the intentions of policy and the outcomes experienced by ordinary people on the ground. To paraphrase Elvis Presley, the plea everywhere seems to be:

A little more conversation... and a lot more action, please!

7 Future Work by Empowering Communities

Against this background, the feedback from all the activities undertaken through the Empowerment Development Project indicates that the key role of the Empowering Communities Consortium is to work with local authorities, the Police and other authorities, PCTs, the VCS, and community activists, bringing them together to change hearts and minds and promote good practice across and between sectors.

In order to carry out this role effectively, it is suggested that the Consortium will need to work at a range of levels, from national to local, by:

- Acting as a high level regional advocate for engagement and empowerment in the South West, and mediating at national level on behalf of the region;
- Identifying and building relationships with regional networks and specialist sources of knowledge and expertise;
- Disseminating the messages from the research about helpful processes of engagement and involvement;
- Showcasing good practice through the Creating Excellence website – perhaps through an awards scheme – and on the websites of other partner agencies such as Equality South West;
- Making existing resources more widely available and helping to develop new materials and resources;
- Continuing to identify and share useful tools, for example in relation to the measurement and evaluation of engagement and empowerment;

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- Developing a regional network of engagement and empowerment practitioners, and identifying a 'hub' of engagement and empowerment 'champions' willing to help spread best practice;
- Facilitating networks and other arrangements that enable mutual support and the sharing of good practice, between local authorities and Town and Parish Councils, e.g. through twinning arrangements, visits, joint activities;
- Enabling similar networking and sharing between community activists, grassroots and community organisations;
- Mapping the extent to which engagement and empowerment are embedded in LSPs and LAAs in the region and advocating the value of engagement and empowerment for public service delivery;
- Working to develop the knowledge and skills of elected members within local authorities, Town and Parish Councils, to enable them to play more active roles in engagement and empowerment;
- Taking training and other events out to the local areas and encouraging participation by all sectors together with community activists.

Drawing on this feedback, the Empowering Communities consortium has now developed and agreed a set of key outputs and outcomes to guide its work over the coming year, as shown in Appendix 1.

APPENDIX 1: EC Consortium selected key outputs & outcomes

Theme	Output	Outcomes
Cohesion and Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build relationships with regional networks and specialists • Identify existing activities and knowledge and make this more accessible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased knowledge amongst practitioners of what works when trying to engage with diverse communities and some lessons about some specific communities.
Engagement, Involvement and Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing and showcasing the elements of the research that demonstrate the value of the processes for engagement and involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared understanding by practitioners and policy makers of how empowerment and inclusion impact upon service delivery and the quality of life in communities
Empowerment and Community Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making existing materials (e.g. training programmes) more widely available and highlighting their value • Acting as an advocate and broker for existing and developing networks supporting engagement and empowerment (e.g. Take Part, SW Neighbourhood Training & Resource Centre, CD Network, and others) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understanding of the role of CD, especially amongst partners with less experience of the agenda
Empowerment across/different sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An analysis of the extent to which engagement and empowerment are embedded in LAAs in the region • Advocating the value of engagement and empowerment for public sector delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All service delivery agencies understanding and applying effective empowerment processes
Empowerment and local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working to develop the knowledge and skills of elected members (esp. Parish and Town Councils) on engagement and empowerment • Brokering exchange visits and joint activities between LAs and Parish and Town Councils to share best practice (e.g. Quality Parishes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected members receiving support to involve and engage their constituents
Empowerment and quality assurance/evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development work is national work. Our research contribution to this has been to identify what approaches are being used in the SW region, and to attend national research meetings. 	
Empowerment Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of regional network of engagement and empowerment practitioners • Development of bank of engagement and empowerment champions to spread best practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective Empowerment Champions in the regions where this theme is being developed • Champions able to 'cascade' understanding and skills to improve empowerment within communities and between agencies

APPENDIX 2: References

¹ DCLG (2007) An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success. Available at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communityempowermentactionplan>

² The new PSA Delivery Agreement 21 contains 6 indicators for measuring LA performance in building more cohesive, empowered and active communities:

- 1) % of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area
- 2) % of people who have meaningful interactions with people from different backgrounds
- 3) % of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood
- 4) % of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality
- 5) Number of people regularly volunteering & number of FTE staff employed in 3rd sector (as a measure of a thriving third sector)
- 6) % of people who participate in culture or sport

For more information see www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/E/9/pbr_csr07_psa21.pdf

³ See information at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/newplacesurvey>

⁴ Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. Information at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/lpffags/healthact/healthact/?id=614963#question>

⁵ Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (2007) *Research Report 35 – Neighbourhood Management and Social Capital*. London: DCLG. Available at: <http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=1921>

⁶ Adamson, D. & Bromiley, R. (2008) *Community empowerment in practice: lessons from Communities First*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Summary at: <http://josephrowntreefoundation.cmail2.com/l/359073/11d1id1i/www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/2195.asp>