

# What is community empowerment?

*'Community empowerment is local government's core business'* (Sir Simon Milton, Chair of the Local Government Association)

Community empowerment is high on the current policy agenda. The Department for Communities and Local Government is leading the drive to *"enable more people to play an active role in the decisions that affect their communities"*. It produced a Community Empowerment Action Plan in 2007 to outline its own plans, and the new Community Empowerment White Paper will set out cross-Government commitments.

But what does 'community empowerment' really mean? What does it look like? What does it achieve? How will we know if we're contributing to it?

Practical mechanisms are being introduced which it is hoped will contribute to community empowerment, such as citizens' juries, community kitties and local charters. But we also need a comprehensive understanding of what community empowerment looks and feels like.

This short guide is designed to help you to get to grips with what is meant by community empowerment. It takes the sometimes vague concept of 'community empowerment' and breaks it down into five clear interlinked dimensions. It describes the processes and outcomes of each, and provides examples of how you can use the dimensions to ensure your work is empowering.

**This guide argues that an empowered community is one which is:**

- **confident**
- **inclusive**
- **organised**
- **co-operative**
- **influential**

By asking questions about each of these five dimensions when planning and evaluating work, we can ensure that we are taking an empowering approach and contributing to community empowerment.

# Values ..into action

## Community Development Values

Real community empowerment is the result of putting community development values into action. These are values of:

### Learning:

recognising the skills, knowledge and expertise that people contribute, building on these and what has gone before

### Equality:

challenging discrimination and oppressive practices within organisations, institutions and communities

### Participation:

facilitating democratic involvement by people in the issues which affect their lives based on full citizenship, autonomy and shared power, skills, knowledge and experience

### Co-operation:

working together to identify and implement action, encouraging networking and connections between communities and organisations

### Social justice:

enabling people to claim their human rights, meet their needs and have greater control over the decision-making processes which affect their lives

When thinking about community empowerment we draw on decades of theory and practice concerned with developing and understanding community development.

*“Community development is about building active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect... it is about changing power structures to remove the barriers that prevent people from participating in the issues that affect their lives”*  
(www.cdx.org.uk)

## Dimensions of Community Empowerment

Community empowerment has five dimensions:

### Confident

...working in ways which increase people's skills, knowledge and confidence, and instill in them a belief that they can make a difference

### Inclusive

...working in ways which recognise that discrimination exists, promote equality of opportunity and good relations between groups and challenge inequality and exclusion

### Organised

...working in ways which bring people together around common issues and concerns in organisations and groups that are open, democratic and accountable

### Co-operative

...working in ways which build positive relationships across groups, identify common messages, develop and maintain links to national bodies and promote partnership working

### Influential

... working in ways which encourage and equip communities to take part and influence decisions, services and activities

These five dimensions provide a framework for planning work which is empowering for communities, however 'community' is identified and whichever area of work is being planned. They can also be used as a framework for identifying indicators and evaluating the work, helping us to make judgements about whether the processes and outcomes are leading to community empowerment. They offer a broad and comprehensive definition of community empowerment, and can act as a basis for developing collectively understood indicators.

## *Example: the community centre needs a new roof*

### The 'short-cut'

You contract with a builder, based on lowest cost, and ask them to carry out the work. As a result:

- a quick job is done within budget
- the community centre has a new roof
- local people do not understand how choices and decisions are made – they complain about the design of the roof and say the money could have been spent more wisely
- local people hold the council responsible for the mess left by the builders
- other communities complain that the council has prioritised the people using this community centre but not theirs



### A community empowerment approach

#### Confident

You involve local people in discussions about the roof, about what the planning, budgeting and work entails, about how you go about getting building work done. You make sure that the information you provide is accessible, and you take time to ensure people understand. As a result local people gain skills, knowledge and confidence, which will help them take part in this and future projects.

#### Inclusive

You are aware of the make-up of the group you are working with – how reflective are they of the local population and users of the centre, in terms of age, gender, race etc? You find ways to involve people who have not used the centre so far, but might have an interest in doing so. You encourage discussion. As a result you gain a cross-section of views, experience and expertise, people learn more about each other and work together.

#### Organised

You encourage people to work as a team and work to each other's strengths. You support them to develop processes for discussions and decision-making which are understood by everyone there. As a result, they all understand how the decisions will be made about which contractors to use, what the design will look like, what the budget is and why. They have collective responsibility for the project.

#### Cooperative

You encourage the group to look at projects elsewhere. How have other groups worked with contractors, what did they learn, who did they use and what happened? As a result the group learn from the experiences of others, they widen their field of contact and may create some support networks. They find out about different models of working, which may inform this project and the way the community centre is run in the future.

#### Influential

You encourage the group to make decisions and they do this within known parameters. They decide on the design and timescale of the work, based on aesthetics, ecological considerations and the practical and economic context. As a result, they can see the benefit of their involvement in the change that takes place and feel collectively responsible for the new roof.

**Taking a community empowerment approach, based on the five dimensions, is about making the most of opportunities. The short-cut may be easier, quicker and financially cheaper, but it misses out on the long term benefits – for the individuals taking part, for the community working together, for your organisation and for society more widely.**

# Dimensions of Commu

Our overall aim

Empowered community

A community that is:

We can contribute by...

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## Confident

... working in ways which increase people's skills, knowledge and confidence, and instill in them a belief that they can make a difference

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## Inclusive

... working in ways which recognise that discrimination exists, promote equality of opportunity and good relations between groups and challenge inequality and exclusion

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## Organised

... working in ways which bring people together around common issues and concerns, in organisations and groups that are open, democratic and accountable

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## Co-operative

... working in ways which build positive relationships across groups, identify common messages, develop and maintain links to national bodies and promote partnership working

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## Influential

... working in ways which encourage and equip communities to take part and influence decisions, services and activities

# Community Empowerment

## *Dangers of ignoring this dimension include*

- people don't contribute in meetings
- people don't understand your constraints, have unrealistic expectations
- people don't believe that change is possible or that they have a role

- you only hear from the 'usual suspects' or the 'same voices'
- some groups feel isolated in their neighbourhoods
- people feel that others gain favours at their expense

- you're not sure that 'representatives' are accountable or speaking on behalf of others
- initiatives or activities are short-term and fizzle out
- 'communities' can't seem to agree on ways forward

- communities compete with each other for your time and resources
- work happens in silos or is duplicated
- communities feel hard done by compared to others

- communities have consultation fatigue and become cynical
- you fail to deliver the most appropriate services
- you hit your targets but miss the point!

## *Benefits of addressing this dimension include*

- people are more confident about taking part, they ask questions and play an active role
- people understand the information being discussed
- people understand the constraints of the work
- people recognise their own and each other's skills knowledge and expertise

- there is greater understanding and awareness between different local communities
- you hear diverse voices
- people are more likely to find common ground
- people understand the rationale for the allocation of resources

- there are thriving community groups
- people are more likely to work collectively
- people work together and understand each others' strengths
- people negotiate and identify shared solutions

- there is strong community infrastructure where groups network and support each other
- people understand the needs of other communities and the resources allocated to them
- people learn from each other
- people see themselves as part of a bigger picture

- communities are heard and their contribution makes a difference
- communities take responsibility for the services and activities provided
- communities receive appropriate services

## Example: commissioning training services

The manager of a community centre is commissioning trainers to provide a range of classes and activities for older people. The manager wants to make sure that the centre offers a community development approach to what they do, to build community empowerment.

To achieve this, the manager draws up a 'statement of expectation' based around the five community empowerment dimensions. These expectations become criteria for commissioning, which are discussed with potential trainers.



### Statement of expectation:

*"It is expected that trainers working on these premises will adopt a community development approach to their work. By this, we mean that you will work in a way which helps build communities which are confident, inclusive, organised, co-operative and influential."*

### We expect trainers to:

#### Confident

- recognise the existing skill levels of individuals and ensure that everyone knows what is expected of them
- recognise the increase in skills needed to undertake the activity and share your knowledge and experience with others in a way that helps them understand
- help people feel good about themselves and encourage people to believe that 'they can do it'

#### Inclusive

- be aware of who is contributing in sessions, who is not and why
- be aware that running the class or session in particular ways excludes some people from taking part and you take steps to address this
- deliver your class or sessions in a way which recognises, appreciates and builds on the differences and similarities of those taking part
- challenge discriminatory language and behaviour

#### Organised

- encourage people to come together in groups, to share experiences, knowledge and skills
- identify common interests in the group and arrange activities around these
- where appropriate, encourage people to undertake group projects requiring a range of skills, recognising strengths within the group

#### Co-operative

- illustrate how the activities you are working with link to others, encouraging groups to work together on wider projects
- encourage the group to consider how their activity links to wider issues or global concerns
- where possible offer opportunities to visit related classes or activities

#### Influential

- provide opportunities for the group to contribute to the development of the class or session
- encourage them to suggest ideas and structures for future classes or resources.

# Is your organisation empowering?

Looking at community empowerment in this way helps clarify what an organisation or department needs to have in place to work in an empowering way and contribute to community empowerment.

Community empowerment is not just about communities changing as they 'become empowered'. It is also about agencies changing the way they work, to take more 'empowering approaches'.

The five dimensions suggest questions you can ask about your organisation's approach to community empowerment.

For example:

## Confident

- do staff have the necessary skills, knowledge and support to work effectively with communities?
- do staff understand the principles, processes and time needed to take community empowerment approaches to their work?

## Inclusive

- are staff aware of power differences between and within communities?
- do staff recognise that discrimination exists, promote equality of opportunity and good relations between groups?
- does the organisation have strategies for dealing with competing demands and working constructively with conflict?

## Organised

- does the organisation have a shared understanding of 'community empowerment' and what it expects to achieve?
- does the organisation monitor and evaluate community empowerment activity?
- is the organisation creative about the way in which targets are delivered to maximise empowerment opportunities?

## Cooperative

- is the organisation prepared to broker relationships between elected members and communities?
- does the organisation support effective community networks and infrastructure, to help community groups work together?
- does the organisation support local and national networking among staff to strengthen their community empowerment skills and knowledge?

## Influential

- does the organisation have clear routes for communities to influence what it does?
- do staff feed back to communities what has happened as a result of their involvement?
- does the organisation record evidence of community influence?
- are staff able to challenge targets or processes which compromise community empowerment?

## *Authentic community engagement happens when:*

people in communities create structures and processes that are empowering for themselves and others

**and**

people in public agencies create structures and processes that are empowering for themselves and others.

# *More opportunities to put the dimensions into practice*

We have provided a few examples of how people have used the five dimensions to ensure their work contributes to community empowerment. There are many more ways you could use the dimensions:

- to develop locally meaningful indicators, i.e. what would success look like for each of the dimensions?
- to plan and write funding applications, using the dimensions to provide a clear way of explaining and planning for community empowerment
- to carry out work reviews and appraisals – in what ways is the staff member addressing each of the community empowerment dimensions in their work?
- to develop shared understandings of terminology and practice – what do the dimensions mean to each partner? what would it mean for everyone to try to address all of them?
- to help identify good practice in community empowerment – is your project addressing all five dimensions? where is it strongest? where is it weakest?
- to help develop strategies and plans, using the dimensions to help with process and structure
- to develop business plans which help you to make a business case for your project or service.

## *Where did the dimensions come from?*

The five community empowerment dimensions illustrated in this booklet are part of a framework designed for planning and evaluating community development. This framework is called DiCE (Dimensions of Community Empowerment). It was developed by **changes** and builds on eight years of development, application, review and practice. DiCE originates in the ABCD (Achieving Better Community Development) framework developed by the Scottish Community Development Centre in 2000 (available from [www.cdf.org.uk](http://www.cdf.org.uk)).

Using the whole DiCE framework (from which the five dimensions are drawn) you can plan, monitor and evaluate community empowerment.

## *Who we are*

The **Community Development Exchange** (CDX) is the UK-wide membership organisation for community development. We work to ensure that community development is recognised and supported as a powerful way of tackling inequality and achieving social justice. CDX reflects a diverse range of interests in community development across all sectors and fields, and has members from across the UK. Find out more at [www.cdx.org.uk](http://www.cdx.org.uk)



**changes** is an independent consultancy specialising in community engagement, community development and active citizenship. Based in the West Midlands, we work across the UK and Europe offering expertise in facilitation, training, research, evaluation and consultancy. Find out more at [www.changesuk.net](http://www.changesuk.net)



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