

# Empowerment and engagement ... networks



**‘Networks are multifunctional. No matter which way you look at these networks they clearly fit into the current desire to promote, encourage and support empowerment among individuals in communities’**

## **Goals of engaging the community:**

Increase the **capacity** of people to **influence** decisions that affect their lives

Improve the **quality and function** of **relationships** between citizens and government



## what engagement means

**Giving communities the confidence, skills and power to shape and influence what public agencies do for or with them. Making the effort to talk to the communities you serve and listen to what they want from you and other public agencies**

## this is important because ...

- **As of 1 April 2009 you will have a new statutory duty to involve local people in the work you do and your decision-making, the Duty to Involve**
- **You will be judged by the Audit Commission on how well you 'build more cohesive, empowered and active communities' using the new set of PSA 21 indicators**
- **You will be judged by local people through the 'Place' survey, which will ask how they perceive the area they live in. The results will be used as evidence for 20 new national indicators, including PSA 21**
- **You will be judged on your success in empowering people in places where National Indicator 4 is chosen as a local area agreement improvement priority. NI4 measures the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality**

This briefing looks at the positive contribution networking plays in empowering individuals and minority interests in the South West region. It also identifies areas of good practice and the difference that small amounts of funding can make by supporting the activities of networks

## Why you should read it

THIS is one of a series of briefings, based on fuller case studies by Evaluation Trust and South West Foundation, that illustrate examples of good practice for others seeking to consult and inspire local communities.

The focus here is on ways to give disparate and usually isolated individuals a way to get support and information relevant to their situation. Crucially, it can make them much more effective in using their experience and knowledge to influence and lobby for change.

Plugging into the enthusiasm and knowledge found in networks has genuine benefits for local authorities and they can offer an especially useful and cost-effective way of learning more about a particular community's needs and aspirations.

One lesson that comes across strongly is that piggybacking on existing structures for communication and representation is an efficient and effective way to engage with local people. The drive and enthusiasm are already there; the onus now is on the statutory organisation to see what value it can add.

# Background

NETWORKS give people a way to share ideas, knowledge and experience with others, to socialise, offer mutual support and organise activities for the benefit of the wider community. At community level, they are ideal vehicles for self-help. But with support, and that includes funds, networks can be very effective vehicles for influencing change.

They are an important tool for empowerment, making people feel less isolated and putting them in a stronger position to improve their own situation. There is strength to be had in numbers – the more people a network can reliably represent, the more seriously its views will be taken by others.

In the South West networking offers a useful and valued way of connecting populations separated from other parts of Britain by geography and a restricted road and rail network.

It can also bring together those living in the more sparsely populated rural areas common to the region.

Networks can empower and support community or minority interests. But they also provide an important source of support and information exchange for professionals who may be isolated specialists within an organisation, and who lack contact with their peers. In the South West, for example, there are networks for people who give free funding advice and support to voluntary and community organisations, and for community development workers.

Networks in the South West region can be loosely divided into two types: those set up by members of the public and those established ‘top down’ by the authorities. The value of both is enhanced by linking them together.

## what works

Bringing people and organisations together to build on and share **existing** community networks and specialist areas of knowledge and expertise

Letting networks develop **naturally** to include activities and services its members find useful and cannot carry out in other ways

Creating a regional network for experts in engagement and empowerment, with **‘champions’** willing to help showcase and spread best practice in networking

Supporting networks by offering **twinning** arrangements, visits and joint activities across district and county borders and between community activists, grassroots and community organisations

### idea: the purpose of networks

- giving individuals and organisations a **stronger voice** and, with it, greater **influence** over others
- sharing **information**
- meeting **like-minded** or useful people
- improving individual and collective **skills**
- more effective **campaigning**
- giving or getting **support**

## what to avoid

Inventing new networking structures: **new names** and labels cause confusion and drain money away from other networks that could achieve the same aim

Failure to build on existing network models. These may have taken many years to establish and **refine**

**Top down only** approach. Look for common causes then offer opportunities for people to meet to consider the advantages of working more closely together

**Assuming** common interests: individual preferences and choice, geography, history, and many other factors will determine the extent to which people may feel common cause with others

### example 1:

## SMALL VOICES SHOUT LOUDER TOGETHER

**Caradon Community Halls Network** acts as a lobby group for community halls, a vital resource in small communities where venues for networking and socialising are few and far between.

The network represents 30 village halls, community centres and senior citizens meeting rooms and acts as conduit for sharing information and advice on relevant topics, such as health and safety and disabled access.

More recently, a small amount of funding (£200) from the Network Development Fund has enabled the community halls in Caradon to come together and the network has found itself in a new guise - that of a lobby group.

Faced with a proposal by Caradon District Council that would have ended grants for village halls, the network responded with a campaign to persuade councillors of the real value to the community of village halls. Their lobbying paid off and a district councillor has since taken on the role of community hall ambassador.

### Results

The value of the network can be summed up as including:

- lobbying and campaigning on issues affecting community halls and, consequently, community life in the Caradon area
- 'decoding' complex legislation
- passing on vital information
- better partnership working with statutory and voluntary organisations
- sharing best practice.

### example 2:

## PEER NETWORK: PARENT PRESSURE

Backed by Disability Wessex, parents and carers of children and young people aged four to 21 with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), in an area spanning Bournemouth, Exeter and South Somerset, formed the **ASD Parent Support Group Network**.

The network's purpose is improving quality of life for the young people and their careers through peer support and a reduced sense of isolation for the parents and carers and better understanding and knowledge about the condition.

In addition to the personal strain, many parents and carers face daily hurdles with public services including education authorities and council benefits and social services teams. ▶▶

▶▶ **Results:**

- The parents and carers are much more confident about challenging authorities that refuse support or use of their services. For example, one insisted on getting a social services assessment that had initially been refused
- Young people are getting better support from employment services, with at least one now in paid work

example 3:

## **NEGLECTED MINORITIES**

Minority communities in the South West are notably smaller than in many other parts of Britain. Poor understanding of sensitive matters can reinforce their sense of isolation and impotence.

**Pulse**, a network based in Bournemouth and Poole was set up to tackle issues affecting minority groups in the Dorset area. A quarterly newsletter, now in its eighth issue, goes to a membership of 300 and its meetings regularly attract audiences of 60 or more.

Pulse also provides an eloquent voice highlighting the problems people can encounter in the county, including recently forcing one school to take seriously a problem of racial abuse against children.

example 3:

## **COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT NETWORKS**

Recent research has found that people representing the 'community' often struggle to be heard at higher levels in decision-making process, with consultation often patchy or a token gesture. A government drive to redress this imbalance, with a specific focus on regenerating disadvantaged areas, saw in 2001 the launch of **community empowerment networks** (CENs).

The way these were established and have since been funded offers useful lessons in what not to do. The message came down from on high that CENs were to be new and distinct, so in some areas permission was refused to adapt existing structures.

Funding for the CENs also began generously then tailed off, with a resulting shift in priorities to raising funds to secure their own future rather than focus on the task of empowering local people.

In the South West, two CENs offer a useful contrast. In Cornwall's Penwith and Kerrier districts, the existing **Penwith Inter-link** was extended throughout west Cornwall as the mechanism for a community empowerment network. ▶▶

## **Community empowerment networks (CENs)**

### **CENs were designed to:**

- **encourage more people to get involved in their neighbourhood's regeneration**
- **help people build up the skills and knowledge they needed to take an active role in neighbourhood renewal**
- **support the input of community and voluntary groups as equal players in local strategic partnerships.**

## find out more

**This briefing is one of a series produced by Empowering Communities, the South West partnership of a national programme, the National Empowerment Partnership, funded by the Department of Communities & Local Government to improve the quality and functioning of relationships between citizens and government, and to enable people to influence decisions which affect them.**

**To find out more about Empowering Communities and the National Empowerment Partnership visit the Creating Excellence website at: [tinyurl.com/5tsuj9](http://tinyurl.com/5tsuj9)**

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**The full report on which this briefing is based (Engagement and Empowerment Report 6) can be downloaded from the Creating Excellence website at: [tinyurl.com/58myhf](http://tinyurl.com/58myhf)**

▶▶ The **West Cornwall Community Network** has over the years built up a membership of 1,200 which is kept actively informed through newsletters, website, email, discussions and briefing groups. Its main focus is providing a link between residents, the voluntary and community sector and the local strategic partnership. Grant funding has brought many small groups under the WCCN's wing. Voluntary and community group representatives get training and support to make them active players on decision-making bodies.

Though funding for CENs has ended, with some difficulty ongoing funding has been secured to roll out the Inter-Links structure across Cornwall. It is expected the new unitary authority will have up to 19 community networks.

In Bristol, however, the long established local Community Volunteer Service, VOSCUR, was told to develop **CNET** – a new empowerment network for neighbourhood renewal – with funding shared with the Black Development Agency.

The move bypassed an existing framework based on geographical areas and themes and caused confusion for the wider public. A subsequent change of funding vehicle, budget cuts and the set up of a third infrastructure organisation further muddied the waters, directly hitting community representation.

There is now no central government funding for voluntary and community sector representation on the local strategic partnership. While VOSCUR continues to offer them its support keeping them on board has been a struggle and it is felt there is insufficient funding for one to one support, regular bulletins, information packs or training.

## Useful contacts

### **South West Foundation:**

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