

Community Development Foundation, 25 vi 07

Developing Quality Assurance on Empowerment

Initial guidance for Every Voice Counts

Purpose and definitions

The main purpose of Every Voice Counts is to improve community empowerment and engagement by showing where they are taking place, how well they are working, what makes them work well, and disseminating and applying those lessons widely and thus bringing about over a period of time a clear improvement in the quality of community empowerment across England.

This note is primarily to propose to the EVC consortia how to approach quality assurance (QA) and in particular to guide the regional consortia on certain points to take into account in their action plans, as part of the overall package of activities.

Community empowerment and engagement are closely connected but not the same. Empowerment is the action taken to empower people and the outcome in terms of the level of empowerment which people attain. Engagement is the strategy and process by which public institutions engage with people and create opportunities for, and action on, empowerment. Quality Assurance on empowerment is *the application of agreed standards to action on engagement and empowerment so that both immediate and wider stakeholders can know that the action has achieved a certain level and quality of empowerment outcomes.*

In the development of the EVC idea since the original brief for regional expressions of interest, the quality assurance element has been brought out more strongly and is now seen as the leading purpose of the programme. The ultimate aim is the establishment and application of a nation-wide QA framework in England. CDF will also be exploring the application of such a framework across the four nations. (However the other aspects of the consortia's programmes should be pursued in parallel, not wait for the establishment of the QA framework.)

Developing the national QA framework will need collaboration between the national and regional consortia. But even from the start there are some specific factors that need to be built into the regional plans, and action on QA that should be begun immediately. This will entail some adjustment of emphasis and resources as between the original expressions of interest and the practical action plans, without eliminating the other elements.

A higher profile for QA will furnish evidence to back up policies for better investment by government and other resource holders in community empowerment, better local empowerment strategies by local government and its partners, and better practice by front line workers, both those designated as community development workers and others with scope to use empowerment methods in a particular social policy field.

Common core and regional variations

Each regional plan will have its own character, but there should also be some common core activities, including networking and learning between the national consortium and the regions, and across the regions. This applies in particular to the QA element. We would expect the regions to build in time and cost for networking with the centre and each other for absorbing and contributing to the development of what will eventually be a common QA framework.

The initial stages on QA will inevitably be exploratory but there are three clear givens:

1. From the start, both the national and regional consortia will need to take account of the system of local government outcome indicators now being put in place, and in particular the empowerment indicators within them.
2. The consortia will also be expected to take account of, and contribute to, evidence on empowerment being produced and disseminated by DCLG.
3. The national consortium will in due course pull together a national framework for quality assurance in empowerment, to which the regions will have contributed and which they will then be expected to use and disseminate. It will have a common core and allow for additional regional and local variations.

What does Quality Assurance mean and what should regional action on it look like?

The central criterion of successful outcome is seen as the capacity of people to influence public bodies. Quality will primarily be known by a combination of results (**outcomes, impacts on stakeholders, impacts on social issues**) and processes (**strategies, inputs, methods**). Neither inputs nor outcomes on their own can tell you the quality of actions which aim to empower people. Linking these two will be a major objective of QA.

Numerous community engagement initiatives and community empowerment projects are already taking place, and some have a long history. In other areas investment in engagement and empowerment is sparse or spasmodic. Some initiatives go under the name of community development, some are

within regeneration schemes, neighbourhood renewal, neighbourhood management, health involvement, neighbourhood policing and many other areas. What is not always clear is:

- what should count as community empowerment, and what simply as some form of service delivery to a community
- how to map where engagement strategies and support for community empowerment are adequate and where they are not;
- where such initiatives are working successfully and actually empower people, and where they do not; and above all
- what are the replicable factors that made empowerment work well or not.

Facts and judgements

In order to marshal evidence of quality an important distinction needs to be made between **factual indicators** and **judgement indicators**:

Factual indicators are unambiguous single statements, deliberately pared down in order to be able to be open to collectable evidence. Those that matter most to the development of QA are the kind of *outcome* indicator on which local government performance will be judged in the new LA performance framework now being put in place by government. These kinds of indicator are quantifiable facts like 'exams passed' in education, 'jobs created' in employment, 'hospital beds available' in health. In the empowerment field they are facts like the % of people in a particular population who say they can influence local decisions and the % who say they have participated in public affairs such as by signing a petition, contacting a councillor, responding to a consultation or going on a demonstration.

Factual outcome indicators are still unfamiliar in the empowerment field, and many practitioners tend to regard them with suspicion. This is a misunderstanding of their function. Factual indicators do not explain what goes on in the field, but everyone can see that they are key points within more complex issues. Precisely because these points are simple and factual they facilitate public awareness, debate, policy, investment and improvement of strategy and practice.

There can also be factual indicators about inputs and processes, such as amount of money invested in an engagement programme, number of workers deployed, number of community members contacted, issues addressed by community groups, numbers of people attending meetings. It is equally important to collect these facts in order to see whether they correlate with outcomes.

A handful of factual outcome indicators of empowerment are being embedded in the new Local Authority performance framework. This is a huge leap

forward for a field which was formerly regarded as too vague, obscure and marginal to warrant high level policy attention and investment. Empowerment practitioners and strategists must use the evidence authentically to consolidate this advance.

The few indicators chosen for this purpose have not been arbitrarily imposed by funders but drawn from the field itself. They are commonsense minimal answers to the question 'What verifiable results would you expect as a result of efforts to empower a given group of people?'

Judgement indicators are complex statements of judgement which may be made by a group as part of their evaluation of a situation in which they are involved. Here there is scope for the deeper judgements which factual indicators do not provide. Communities Scotland's 'National Standards for Community Engagement' use indicators of this kind to judge processes taking place between a public agency and a community group (www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpage_s/lccs_008411.pdf). For example, an indicator for the standard of involvement is that 'Agencies and community groups actively promote the involvement of people from groups that are affected but not yet organised to participate'. You could not reduce this judgement to a simple scale of collectable information, and it would be difficult to make your evidence for it visible to people outside the situation. We would recommend considering the Scottish national standards as a source for judgement indicators on community engagement processes.

Judgement indicators can also be used for outcomes, such as whether a particular programme has had a beneficial effect on the morale of a local community.

Hitherto, empowerment and community development have often been assessed by judgement of processes, with little clear information about inputs and outcomes. But this has also meant that the evidence is not visible to a wider audience, empowerment has remained marginal in policy, and improvements in practice have been by 'folk wisdom' rather than evidence.

The new local government performance framework in England will consist entirely of factual outcomes. But LAs, their partners and empowerment practitioners need to understand and reveal the inputs, processes and judgements, and improve them in the light of the factual outcomes.

Scope for added depth

It is important that the QA system gives a central place to the official factual outcome indicators. However, it can also explore the use of additional indicators and insights to give a fuller picture.

In looking to additional indicators, QA should make sure of considering other factual outcome indicators that are already tried and tested and have accumulated findings behind them, such as those in the national Citizenship

Survey, Best Value Performance Indicators and research on New Deal for Communities. There is a huge advantage in using a tried and tested indicator with a track record. DCLG will feed information about these and other sources to EVC. After considering those, however, there may still be scope to create new ones.

Linking with DCLG evidence

There is no established framework for linking complex empowerment actions with factual results. There is, however, a substantial body of experience, research and evaluation which throws light on these issues. DCLG is putting in place plans to upgrade and reanalyse this evidence in order both to drive government policy on empowerment and inform practitioners. DCLG evidence will be fed into the EVC dialogue, and will also look to EVC's QA work to enhance DCLG evidence.

Major new vehicles are now coming on stream which can link evidence with local strategy and practice. In particular DCLG will look to:

- the National Improvement Strategy and Regional Improvement (Local Authority) Partnerships;
- the Local Area Agreements, new Local Government Performance Framework and Comprehensive Area Assessment; and
- the national and regional stakeholder consortia of Every Voice Counts

as key transmitters of evidence to and from local authorities and community empowerment practitioners.

To feed both the DCLG policy and external channels, DCLG research staff and the Community Empowerment Division will:

- reanalyse existing data to draw out empowerment findings that have previously been under-recognised and under-used
- trawl local evaluations to identify valid small-scale studies which can illuminate how intervention initiatives work, in a more rounded way than can be shown by large statistical studies
- support and draw on external projects which test innovative methods of local empowerment experimentally
- devise and disseminate guidance to local evaluators on how to ensure validity and quality in local studies
- work with Regional Improvement Partnerships, Government Offices and Every Voice Counts to package and channel key

evidence to local authorities and practitioners to raise the quality of empowerment and shift practitioner culture onto a more sound evidence base.

What are the key factual outcome indicators?

Information given here is provisional - the final set of Local Authority indicators will be published in October or November. However, nearly all are based on indicators that have already been used for Best Value and/ or the national Citizenship Survey or some other major programme.

There are only two factual outcome indicators which will probably be used to judge the state of empowerment itself across a Local Authority population, collected by local household survey:

- (i) whether people feel they can influence what goes on in their locality (*which is also used as an indicator of cohesion*)
- (ii) whether people participate in public affairs, by such means as signing a petition, contacting a councillor or official, responding to a consultation, going on a demonstration (*which is also used as an indicator of equalities*)*

Each of these is embedded within a wider group of indicators, one set on cohesion and one on equalities. To relate these to wider facts and issues it will be useful to adopt a fourfold structure of questions which is being used by DCLG to approach the way it will present evidence on empowerment, ie:

A. How much empowerment is there amongst a given population at a given time? This will be judged by the two core survey outcome indicators cited above.

B. What associated outcomes of empowerment are there? This will be judged by whether the two core outcomes of question A correlate with:

(i) other indicators of **cohesion**, which are:

% of people who believe that people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area

% of people who mix socially with people from different backgrounds

* In the Citizenship Survey from which this is drawn three separate questions are grouped under 'Influencing political decisions and local affairs': civic *participation* is taken to be **contacting** elected representatives or public officials on a public issue; civic *activism* is taken to be **attending** a public meeting, rally or demonstration, or **signing** a petition; and civic *consultation* is taken to be **responding** to consultation by public authorities or being involved in a local group to **discuss** local issues. It is still under discussion whether the new framework would use all three parts of the indicator or only one or two, or whether it might be modified.

% of people who feel they belong to their neighbourhood

% of people who trust people in their neighbourhood

(ii) other indicators of **equalities**. Here the indicators will be in terms of differences between the average outcome for people with known disadvantages and the average for the local population as a whole. The main indicators are likely to be on:

- ◆ hourly wages
- ◆ personal safety in the neighbourhood
- ◆ perceptions of personal dignity and self-respect
- ◆ flexible working to sustain family relationships, independent living and caring arrangements

(iii) possible indicators of **social capital and a thriving local third sector**, which are still being worked out

(iv) improvements in **housing, health, safety, education and employment**.

C. What are the drivers of empowerment?

These would include all the inputs that may be necessary to achieve empowerment: investment in community engagement and empowerment, strategies to achieve them, workers deployed to implement them, community development skills, the deployment of community workers, Local Authority community development policies, the roles of Government Offices, the roles of other LSP partners, the role of key national organisations like the Local Government Association, IdeA, Academy for Sustainable Communities, and factors within communities themselves, such as engagement and empowerment policies of the local third sector.

There are two aspects to the importance of this question for EVC:

(i) for consortia to ensure that they are connected with all the right actors and resource-holders affecting empowerment

(ii) to ensure that all relevant key input factors are taken into account in their analysis of what is happening to empowerment in a given locality.

D. What empowerment action works best?

This question is the link between input, process and outcome. This is the place for linking factual outcomes with facts about input and with complex

judgements, group self-evaluations and all other sources of insight into what combination of factors bring about verifiable improvements in empowerment.

Applying factual indicators at micro levels

One of the problems in linking factual indicators with empowerment practice is that practice usually takes place through intensive small-scale projects whilst factual outcome indicators are collected across whole populations of a Local Authority. However, whilst the indicators have been developed and established for large scale application they can be used at any level. Where possible they should be applied at neighbourhood or parish level and even below. There is potential for links with small scale practice, and we would like to see many experiments at this level.

At the macro level there are, in England, already baselines and arrangements to collect factual indicators periodically through a national sample (Citizenship Survey) and at local authority level (new Local Authority performance framework), and in some cases below Local Authority level, eg in particular neighbourhoods.

But they can also be applied at local project level *so long as you specify the target population numerically*. This could be in such a form as 'the 55 members of the X club' or 'the 345 residents of Y street' or 'the 750 people in the catchment area of the Z community centre'.

The indicators need to be applied either to the whole or a sample of the target population, and they need to be applied both before and after the specific initiative so that you can see if it has made a difference. They should also be compared either with a 'control' group if that is feasible or with averages for a larger population in which the test group is embedded, such as the average for whole population of the local authority area.

You can also add other indicators or questions which would yield more explanation, but don't alter the wording of the original indicator. For example, after asking whether people feel they can influence what goes on in their locality you could ask *why* they feel they can or can't. From this you would get explanatory information which can help your interpretation even if you cannot add it up statistically.

Furthermore, you can inject appropriate action within the initiative specifically in order to affect the outcome indicator, for example, making sure that the community project in question tries harder to give people opportunities to influence decisions and encourage them to take up participation opportunities. These are after all fundamental objectives of empowerment, but sometimes overlooked. Since the key indicators are authentic reflections of these

empowerment objectives, part of the purpose of instituting the indicators is indeed to boost efforts to achieve these particular objectives.♦

Here is an example of a small study (carried out before the establishment of the present indicators) which used factual indicators appropriately and related them to inputs:

The community development project was aimed at improving life and community involvement in a disadvantaged neighbourhood over a period of two years. Two workers were allocated to the project and succeeded in establishing four new residents' groups, a neighbourhood watch scheme, a newsletter, an area forum, a park improvement plan, a summer playscheme and a youth-club. The exceptional aspect of this is that it was done within the framework of a baseline-and-results study of residents' feelings about the locality, carried out for the council by OPM. This showed the following results:

- the number of residents saying they felt settled in the area increased by 13% compared with 3% for the borough as a whole
- the proportion who said they enjoyed being out and about in the area increased by 17% compared with 4% for the borough as a whole
- the proportion who felt the area was improving increased by 12%
- the proportion wanting to get involved in local events increased by 10%.

[Southwark, London Borough of (2000), *Southwark Community Development Audit 2000*, Appendix One, Local Case Studies, Consort and Friary Development Project. London: Southwark Council]

The collection of before-and-after data on these questions, and setting them against the background of figures for the whole area, gives the study much more authority than most community development evaluations. Even stakeholders remote from the situation can see that there is every likelihood that the establishment of new residents' groups, amenities and communications caused the improvements in the residents' morale. Deeper analysis of process could usefully have illuminated *how* the workers established the groups and activities and *why* they were successful.

Conclusion: what action on QA should regional consortia build into their plans?

Regional consortia should therefore build into their plans:

♦ *The Community Development Challenge*, published by the Department of Communities and Local Government in 2006, sets out how the distinctive set of CD techniques relates to outcomes.

- (i) Accessing and interpreting results of relevant official local authority indicators in their region.
 - (ii) Commissioning, carrying out or finding, interpreting and disseminating relevant evaluations of community empowerment initiatives within their region.
 - (iii) Extracting lessons for practice from these sources, and ensuring they are disseminated and acted on.
 - (iv) Promoting and bringing about better community empowerment investment, initiatives and practice in their region based on the growing clarity about what works and what results can be achieved.
 - (v) In parallel with action in their own region, using the EVC network and national consortium to compare experience and methods across regions and contribute to a national framework.
 - (vi) Feeding the national framework and experience from other regions back into their own region, and strengthening the evidence base for community empowerment policy-making across their region.
 - (vii) Monitoring the take-up of the learning and improved methods in their region and reporting periodically on them and on accompanying debate and developments.
-