

# Empowering Communities

## Background

Empowering Communities (EC) is a consortium of public and voluntary sector bodies led by Creating Excellence and formed to carry out the objectives of the National Empowerment Project (NEP) in the South West (previously known as 'Every Voice Counts', and part of the 'Together We Can' initiative). NEP is led by the Community Development Foundation on behalf of the Department of Communities and Local Government. NEP is driven by the central intention of government expressed through the Local Government White Paper (Oct 2006), the Planning for a Sustainable Future White Paper (May 2007) and The Governance of Britain (July 2007) to improve public services, local democracy and the capacity of communities to have greater influence over the conditions of their lives. The mission of NEP is to improve the quality and functioning of relationships between citizens and government, to enable people to influence decisions which affect them. NEP is expected to be a three year programme, with the development of Quality Assurance on empowerment<sup>1</sup> the key task to April 2008. The purpose of this is to demonstrate and improve the impact of empowerment programmes across the region, particularly those mounted by Local Authorities and other public bodies.

## NATIONAL STRATEGIC EMPOWERMENT PARTNERSHIP

### Short statement from National Consortium

1. The Local Government White Paper (Oct 2006) embodies a central intention to empower local communities in order to improve public services, local democracy and the capacity of communities to have a greater influence over and involvement in the conditions of their lives; and The Governance of Britain (July 2007) green paper gives further substance to the vision of a truly participative society and the fundamental role of empowerment in achieving a more equal, cohesive and productive society
  2. The government recognises that there is already a good deal of work on empowerment taking place around the country, but of variable quality, unstable provision and sometimes unclear impact. The Community Empowerment Division therefore commissioned the Community Development Foundation, CLG's specialist NDPB in this field, to set up a National Strategic Empowerment Partnership (NEP), spanning the public and third sectors, and potentially the private sector, to improve the quality, coordination and evidence of empowerment across England. An outline plan for three years, 2007-8 to 2009-10, was approved by Baroness Andrews in April 2007 and a more detailed plan resulting from discussions within the emerging National Strategic Partnership has emerged in July 2007. The Partnership will take the lead in ensuring that proper account is taken of the importance of community empowerment in the Central Local Improvement and Efficiency Strategy being developed, and in its implementation through regional improvement strategies from April 2008.
  3. Founding members of NEP are: CDF (convening); the Community Development Exchange; the Community Sector Coalition; Involve; The Young Foundation; the Academy for Sustainable Communities; the Federation for Community Development Learning; Urban Forum; Idea; and the Take Part network. Other contacts include the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, V (Youth Volunteering); the Local Government Association; and Help the Aged. Additional members will be considered as need for further reach and expertise becomes apparent.
  4. In addition to its national members, the Partnership works through a network of regional consortia, supported by CDF, who will carry forward much of the practical work and the relationship with local authorities and their partners. A lead body has been nominated in each English region and each consortium will work to an agreed action plan for their region. Each
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regional consortium will draw members from key public bodies, voluntary and community sector networks and community development practitioners, and will link with its Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership to ensure productive dialogue with local authorities. The regional Government Offices have played an important advisory role in identifying and supporting the regional lead bodies, and will continue to be key partners.

5. The overall mission of the Partnership is to improve the quality and functioning of relationships between citizens and government, in order to increase the ability of people to influence the decisions which affect their lives. The practical objectives are to provide leadership and coordination amongst the many bodies working on empowerment and community engagement in order to raise the quality and impact of their work; to identify gaps in strategy, provision and impact and find ways to remedy these; and to maintain and improve the flow of bona fide evidence on empowerment between central, regional and local government and all local partners, especially communities themselves and the empowerment practitioners and other front line workers who work closely with them.

6. Amongst the principal outcomes aimed at is an increase in the number of people, especially people in disadvantaged areas, who participate in public issues, press for and contribute to the improvement of public services, and help to shape of the future of their locality. The means for doing so will include all the relevant engagement instruments and initiatives unveiled in the Local Government White Paper, including amongst others participatory budgeting, the community call for action, wellbeing powers for parishes, neighbourhood charters, widening the pool of local councillors, and the transfer of assets to community groups, as well as other more established mechanisms such as parish and neighbourhood planning and neighbourhood management.

7. Specific components of the Partnership's work, whether at national or regional level, will be:

- to develop and implement a quality assurance framework which enables local authorities and their partners on Local Strategic Partnerships to build empowerment more clearly, visibly and effectively into the Local Area Agreements and the working cultures of their respective agencies; and to ensure coherence and linkage with the relevant indicators in the local government performance framework;
- to provide tools, models, insights and networks of experience which will enable local authorities and other best value authorities to fulfil their new duty to involve people in their functions;
- to link with the production of better national evidence on empowerment being generated within CLG, transmitting useful information to the regional and local networks and contributing case studies and best practice examples from local experience to the central pool and dissemination outlets;
- to establish a dialogue and joint analysis with the Audit Commission to ensure effective integration of empowerment criteria and insights into the way that the Comprehensive Area Assessment of local authorities is carried out;
- to share learning from local on-the-ground experience with other localities and regions, boosting the effectiveness of agencies' engagement, empowerment and involvement strategies, and amplifying the skills and understanding of front-line practitioners.

8. The NEP will draw on key advances in the modernisation of community development that have been led by CDF over the past ten years, and is well positioned to make a pivotal difference in the coming period to the achievement of the aims of the Local Government White Paper and The Governance of Britain.