

**Workshop at the Delivering Sustainable Communities Summit  
1 February 2005 - report from Alice Hindle**

**GETTING COMMUNITIES INVOLVED**

Lord Rooker gave the first contribution to the workshop.

In his speech Lord Rooker outlined how it was a part of human nature to want to solve problems and that getting communities involved was in part a question of how to best harness this desire.

Getting communities involved is positive and necessary. He said that the Government is committed to community empowerment and that they and the National Audit Office considered that this was good value for money.

Sustainability - this gives stronger local democracy. By getting people involved we transform people's lives and get the community empowered and involved.

There are tensions with local councils – their democratic mandate compared to the mandate given by elections to community/regeneration organisations.

He clearly acknowledged that it is not easy to get people involved. We need to get over the apathy that is common and the fact that many people are not self-starters. He also said how hard it can be for projects and areas when individuals who have been inspired to become community activists get on and move on. Because of this we need to make sure we are not just relying on individuals but that we need a structure to build on.

Whitehall can provide the monetary structure. £43 million in community structures in addition to the New Deal and New Deal for Communities - 25,000 community projects in three years.

There is no single solution, shared experience is important.

He was clear that communities need training – we can't just dump money on them and expect results. Our greatest asset in the country is our people and where they have been ignored for years they need training and facilitation. And, when people are active and come back to government and say, you have got something wrong, we have to be open to criticism.

In answer to questions from the audience:

Should communities be in charge? He said that the Government considers that community is at the heart of sustainable communities in partnership with Local Councils.

How do we get working people involved? People in work shouldn't be excluded from involvement, we need to strike a work/life balance.

How do we keep consultation fresh? Matters need to matter and they need to be genuine. We must not mislead people on what we are consulting about.

How do community organisations fit in? Local organisations have to be fit for purpose. Local government needs to be in partnership with private and community organisations. No one group or form of election is better, its function is different.

### **The workshop then heard from Ed Cox from Community Pride Initiative Manchester**

This organisation helps communities to get involved in regeneration projects.

We heard from two members of two communities who have worked with Community Pride.

#### **Clare from Withenshaw Voices, a community empowerment network:**

Clare outlined how a strategic regeneration framework is being developed. How the network has actively promoted involvement using videos and a local radio station. It has given people the opportunity to have their say and to get information.

#### **Clare from Openshaw, a housing action group:**

Clare said that there were 265 houses in Openshaw in the middle of an industrial estate. They had particular problems with fly-tipping and abandoned cars. Nobody paid attention. They developed a housing tenants association. Amongst many things they started a repair surgery and got repairs done, and got training for the organisation.

In answer to questions they said:

There had been some negative history with the RDA and the regeneration team with a lack of trust. Gradually this had improved and they were clearer on the relationship they had with government organisations.

They had been disappointed by the way in which when a project starts to get going it suddenly goes in a glossy brochure and all kinds of people start taking the credit, rather than the community.

The link to the local strategic partnership for local people is not really taken seriously.

They outlined a problem with consultation that can arise when people who are 'suited and booted' try to go door-knocking round a community – no one opens the door as they haven't got a clue who these people are and what their agenda is. People wanting to consult the community need to get an active member of the community to explain to other people what is going on first and to go round with them to be introduced to people.

This all takes time and it is difficult for activists to go to all the meetings and they need to learn to prioritise and say no when necessary.

Consultation needs to be a two-way process.

Participatory budgeting – Ed Cox outlined that Community Pride has just launched a booklet/toolkit to help undertake this.

The importance of ensuring leadership succession in communities was discussed.

The difference between participatory democracy and representative democracy was discussed.

A concern was raised about the lack of a statutory framework for community involvement. Local Strategic Partnerships (Manchester) – a community involvement toolkit is being launched in March.

It was pointed out that partnerships are not equal. One partner often has the money and the others have the ideas.

**The workshop then heard from John Kelleher from the Tavistock Institute about conflict and from Wendy from Castle Vale.**

He outlined that communities are often not cohesive, there is intolerance and a lack of means to address the problem.

We need people with the skills of community facilitation.

The aim is to move towards the 'competent community'.

We heard from Wendy from Castle Vale about barriers her community had experienced.

Wendy outlined three key barriers: baggage, skills, and agenda

Barriers: how people can turn negative to positive? Learning points would be to identify the common purpose and facilitating people back down to reason, to be able to let off steam privately.

Skills: we need to grow our own activists from school level.

Agenda: people need to understand different people's agendas.

**The workshop then broke into groups of two people**

Each pair was asked to put their biggest barrier to getting communities involved in achieving sustainable communities on a plate to put up on the wall. People were also asked to rate the workshop on a simple chart when leaving.