

# Citizen involvement in local governance

**Round-up**  
**Reviewing the evidence**

June 2009

This Round-up looks at the involvement of citizens in decision-making and governance in their local area. It outlines the challenges and dilemmas that local partners, central government, councillors, staff and communities must resolve if citizens are to have more power and influence over local services and their neighbourhoods.

## **This paper:**

- draws on the findings of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Governance and Public Services research programme and other related JRF work;
- looks at how citizens are involved, how they influence decisions and how diversity and population change affect citizen and community involvement.

## **Key points**

- Citizens and communities want more power and influence over their services and in their neighbourhoods. New statutory duties that apply to all partners in a place allow for a more strategic and considered approach to defining the respective roles of citizens, communities, councillors and public officials in local governance.
- There is confusion about the reasons for involving citizens. Is it to make use of local knowledge about different needs and perceptions? Or is it to include local representatives directly in decision-making? This question is critical to improving the design and practice of citizen governance.
- The number and complexity of local governance processes and structures, and the speed at which they change, is confusing and challenging for both communities and officials.
- Principles of democracy, transparency, accountability and visible social justice are fundamental to citizen and community involvement in decision-making.
- The goodwill and skills of councillors and staff are key to effective citizen governance, and their role should be included in its design. They need support and resources to improve their knowledge and skills, alongside investment in community development and support for neighbourhoods.
- Community engagement must take account of diversity, migration and mobility, as these are permanent features of neighbourhoods. If community voices are not heard or respected, this can result in a loss of trust and social cohesion. Currently, community engagement policies are being developed separately from policies to increase social cohesion.
- The author concludes that there is enthusiasm for greater involvement, but it needs a more integrated and coherent approach, which is developed through local debate, and supported by government leadership.

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## Introduction

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) Governance and Public Services programme originated in the Foundation's long-standing interest in community participation and the involvement of citizens and users of services in decision-making. The objective was to explore the emerging and existing forms of governance at a local level, the impact on citizen engagement and on public services, and particularly the experience of disadvantaged communities and groups. The projects considered in this Round-up (see pages 19-20) looked across the spectrum of public services and initiatives – not only local government – between 2004–2008.

JRF's programme looked specifically at the *involvement of local people in shaping services and policies, including both consultation and direct involvement in decision-making*. It did not set out to explore the wider field of community activity, voluntary organisations or third sector service providers.

The researchers explored the experience and perceptions of communities, councillors and public officials involved in a range of governance processes. The insights and learning from the research will provide useful pointers to those involved in policy and practice, as the new legal duty on councils in England to 'inform, consult and involve' local people (and similar duties for other local partners) comes into force in April 2009.

The difference, diversity and continuous change – or fluidity – that characterise the population of local areas are a recurring theme in the research and pose particular problems for local governance.

Barnes et al (2008) use the term 'citizen-centred governance' rather than community governance because of the ambiguity of the term 'community'. Other researchers did use 'community' or 'communities', but these terms can imply homogeneity, stability, and a sense of belonging that does not necessarily reflect reality.

## Context

The purpose of involving citizens in governance is to devolve power and influence to citizens, communities and service users. It seeks to recognise local diversity by engaging with the variety of people and groups within local communities and involving them in making decisions about public services. It aims to improve services, enhance democratic accountability and contribute to social justice.

Over the last ten years, citizen and community involvement in governance has become a key component in government policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion, modernise services, renew democratic institutions and build social cohesion. Councils, health services, police, schools, New Deal for Communities, Sure Start children centres, community housing associations, and services for children and young people, for instance, have all evolved ways to involve local citizens and service users in decisions about how their needs can be met, and how public services can improve their lives and their neighbourhoods. Voluntary and community organisations are full members of multi-agency partnerships, such as the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP), alongside public and private sector partners. These developments have taken place in a context of reduced turnout for elections, both locally and nationally, and concern over civic engagement more broadly. There has also been much discussion about the ward and community leadership roles of local councillors and improving their recruitment from underrepresented groups (see the Councillors Commission<sup>1</sup>).

There are conflicting views about how far communities and citizens can exercise substantial influence over decisions about public services. There is limited scope for local decision-making on policy priorities and outcome targets, as these are specified by central government. Local people are not sure who is responsible for what, as public services are fragmented and tied to particular departments and institutions. And some very important issues for disadvantaged communities, such as changes in the housing market and the loss of employment, remain difficult to influence at the local level.

Community empowerment has risen up the current Government's agenda, with the publication of an Action Plan for Community Empowerment in October 2007 and a Community Empowerment White Paper (Real People, Real Power) in Summer 2008. The recent emphasis on localism and place shaping – as seen in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (LGPIH) – offers more scope for locally distinctive approaches shaped through citizen involvement. This is coupled with the statutory responsibility of councils and Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) partners to co-operate to deliver local priorities through their Local Area Agreement.

The new legal duty on councils and other partners 'to inform, consult and involve' all local citizens represents a major opportunity to expand citizen governance, but also the potential for greater confusion (Barnes et al 2008). From April 2009, the right to be consulted will be a universal entitlement, not only applied in poorer and more deprived communities. It will apply to mainstream services and wellbeing, not only to area-based initiatives. Each public sector partner will have to consider how they implement the duty in the context of partnership working and shared outcomes. These developments reinforce the importance of the conclusions by Barnes et al that there is 'a powerful case for governance structures to be designed bottom up' with greater clarity about the principles of good governance, the expectations on citizens and the links with the agencies and partnerships with formal decision-making powers.

The changing nature of local areas is a key element of the context in which community engagement in governance is developing. The traditional idea of community is one of place, i.e. the people in a particular geographical area will share a set of interests and relationships. But rapid population change as a result of mobility and migration, and government action for more mixed communities, means greater heterogeneity. The notion of a community of identity has been equally significant. This refers to people who share characteristics – such as ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or who have shared experiences of public services such as older people, people with disabilities, and young people – being able to express a shared view. This categorisation does not recognise the multiple and interacting identities that any one individual has. The complexity and pace of these changes make it much more difficult to design local governance structures and community involvement arrangements that can reflect and respond to the full range of local needs and perspectives.

Most of the research considered here refers to initiatives and structures in England and Wales. However, although the policy and practice context in all four countries will be different, the general principles should be relevant.

This paper sets out to answer the questions:

1. What is citizen involvement in governance for and what impact does it have?
2. What do communities and citizens contribute? What is their role?
3. Who gets involved, what motivates them and what barriers do they face?
4. What is the impact of difference and diverse community voices?
5. What is the impact of changing local governance processes?

## Objectives and outcomes of involving citizens in governance

Those who design citizen governance need to be clear about their intended objectives and how involving citizens and communities will affect those objectives and the outcomes. Advocates of citizen involvement argue that there are three main objectives:

1. to improve the design and responsiveness of services and thereby improve outcomes such as social inclusion, equality, and service satisfaction;
2. to create links between communities and providers, and between different communities; this builds social capital and improves social cohesion, i.e. it improves networks, understanding and co-operation;
3. to improve the quality of decision-making and the legitimacy and accountability of local governance institutions and partnerships; this builds trust in democratic institutions and encourages civic participation.

### 1. Improving services

The modernisation and improvement of services is the most significant benefit of citizen and user involvement and also an incentive to get involved: citizens will not engage if there are no tangible improvements. The new approach to public service reform (Cabinet Office 2006; Department for Communities and Local Government 2006) relies on greater pressure from citizens and customers demanding public service improvements, instead of 'top-down' regulation and inspection. Users and residents – as individuals and as members or representatives of community organisations – are given opportunities to shape service delivery, influence priorities and hold providers to account; this is intended to make services more responsive to the diversity of local needs and to increase citizen satisfaction.

### **The experience of community engagement**

The research did not set out to establish whether citizen or user involvement makes a measurable difference to local services, or to identify a correlation between community involvement and improved service quality or satisfaction. It was concerned with the experiences of communities, citizens and councillors.

Ray et al (2008) interviewed public officials across five service areas in one borough about how different community engagement processes affected their everyday working lives. The officials found it difficult to identify whether and how community views were influencing policy or practice, and they felt that communities were more often able to influence operational matters than strategy; informal contact was thought to be most influential in raising issues but was less effective at identifying solutions.

In contrast, Maguire and Truscott's (2006) study of community involvement in LSPs found a range of ways in which community participants felt that their presence benefited services. The participants valued influence over the 'operational' since small changes could affect people's lives, and the community could raise issues that statutory partners were not aware of or not able to bring up. Their 'people-centred' view of services was thought to help to 'join up thinking' across services and inform change. By getting involved, they provided new networks and local knowledge that was of use to partners and service providers. Community representatives felt that 'putting a face on poverty' changed the way officials thought about the issues. The most successful example was when the community identified a gap in provision and the providers had responded positively by asking 'how can we act?' This had led to tangible improvements, such as council buildings being used for community dentists, and jointly funded summer play schemes and neighbourhood wardens.

### **Barriers to community influence over services**

As Ray et al (2008) noted, 'community engagement does not automatically translate into community influence'. Therefore questions of power and accountability are common themes. And in the main, where communities were engaged it was only on the basis of influencing decisions rather than being in a position to determine decisions and actions (Adamson and Bromiley 2008).

- The extent of the influence that users and communities can have depends on how far mainstream services can be persuaded to do things differently. This means that 'local knowledge' gained from dialogue with service users is often in competition with professionals' 'privileged knowledge', and, in some cases, the knowledge gained by councillors from their political values and constituency work.
- While community organisations may be involved in partnerships, they have less power to set the agenda, or to influence how the statutory agencies think and behave as they implement decisions (Adamson and Bromiley 2008).
- While people from deprived neighbourhoods get involved, the social problems they are addressing are deep rooted. To tackle these successfully, they need to persuade people from the more affluent and socially influential neighbourhoods to ally with them (Maguire and Truscott 2006).
- Organisational constraints that affected officials' attitudes to community engagement and the extent to which communities were influential were: the level of senior management/ political support; the availability of resources; performance management systems; time frames; accountability; and organisational culture (Ray et al 2008).
- Local partners are constrained by national standards and targets and do not necessarily have the freedom to respond to local evidence and circumstances. Barnes et al (2008) and Ray et al (2008) contrasted the approach of the health services, where users' views are not central to decision-making, to the police, who have put citizen and community engagement and confidence at the heart of their neighbourhood approach.
- One feature of partnership bodies, which often include citizen or community participants alongside other partners, is that these bodies are not where the 'real power' lies; the ultimate accountability for services lies elsewhere (Barnes et al 2008).

The challenge is to design governance arrangements that meet their expressed purpose of putting pressure on those who manage services to improve the performance and satisfaction for users.

Slowly but surely we are starting to have influence over some statutory partners and the way they do things. The outcome is more relevant services, accessible and related to people's needs. (LSP community participant quoted by Maguire and Truscott)

### *Differing objectives*

Differences between what community members understand as the benefits of their involvement and the assumptions of partner agencies can lead to disenchantment on both sides.

Adamson and Bromiley's work on the Communities First programme in Wales found that community members thought their involvement would lead to positive changes in mainstream services. The first phase of government funding was spent on community development and on supporting local people to get involved in governance. But the researchers concluded there was little evidence that this approach had led to increased community influence over statutory services, and there was no evidence of significant changes in mainstream programmes. The statutory partners had been motivated by the prospect of new funding rather than a desire to facilitate increased community influence over existing provision. The second phase of funding will be spent with the specific aim of leveraging changes in statutory services.

Maguire and Truscott noted that communities put more value on 'little changes [in services] that really affect people's lives' whereas the professionals and councillors were more interested in flagship projects and major service transformations. Officials were pragmatic and involved communities when it strengthened their case for more funds or the more flexible use of funds.

## **2. Creating valuable links and networks: social capital**

A second significant benefit from involving citizens and communities in governance is that it creates links and networks between communities and service providers, and between different communities. By being involved in consultation or decision-making, participants build relationships – 'linking social capital' – with public institutions or officials, which gives them access to influence, resources and 'political leverage' (Skidmore et al 2007). And it creates meaningful relationships – 'bridging social capital' – between different communities, increasing understanding and improving social cohesion (Blake et al 2008).

### *Vertical links*

Research into community involvement in LSPs (Maguire and Truscott 2006) found that communities most often cited the 'creation of links between service providers and the different communities' as the most valued outcome. By being involved – not just on the LSP but in the networks and community activity that supported the work of the LSP – communities felt they had access to senior managers in partner agencies, leading to increased influence and shared knowledge. By bringing different groups of people together, the LSP enabled both communities and providers to 'see life in the round'. The challenge that LSPs were no more than 'talking shops' was countered with the view that the meetings in fact facilitated mutual understanding, joint working and a greater mutual respect.

Ray et al found that staff valued the opportunities to build trust between themselves and communities and improve understanding of complex issues; this was a factor in how influential communities' views were in decision-making.

However, Skidmore et al argue that community participation in governance does not necessarily increase this bridging social capital or spread it more evenly: disadvantaged groups do not necessarily gain increased access to – and influence over – those with power. And those who are already involved get more involved, rather than including new people.

### Horizontal links

The valuable links created by community involvement are not only the vertical links between providers and communities. Horizontal links – the links between different neighbourhood networks and communities and between community participants on governance boards and their ‘constituency’ interests and communities – are also essential.

The Common Purpose Local Links programme (Hay 2008) actively set out to create local networking between communities, which would benefit locally based governors, decision-makers and active citizens. School governors would make links with tenants’ groups, who would make links with the single parents’ group and the Sunday football league. The idea was that this would give them the same benefits that senior managers and other decision-makers take for granted: the result was better networks, more dialogue and the chance to ‘see the world through others’ eyes’.

Blake et al (2008) explored the impact and challenge of mobility, migration and new communities on governance. They found that community involvement created valuable opportunities for ‘meaningful contact across community divides’ and helped to build trust and social solidarity. The lack of such links can generate dangerous levels of incomprehension, misunderstanding and fears about competition for resources.

Adamson and Bromiley (2008) emphasised the importance of a ‘capillary’ model of local influence and decision-making, in which flows of information are created, both horizontally and vertically. The governance design should build in ways for issues raised in very localised forums to be debated within the community, but also to find their way onto the agenda of the partnerships and into strategic planning by councils and other local partner agencies.

Skidmore et al (2006) concluded that since only a small proportion of people – possibly one per cent – will ever be active in governance, the important thing is to ensure they are connected to the networking processes that can influence them and hold them to account. This can be done by including horizontal links and networks in the design of the processes, and supporting these links.

## 3. Improved legitimacy

A third objective for citizen involvement is that it enhances the legitimacy of governance institutions and the decisions they take (Barnes et al 2008). Decision-makers need access to the knowledge and experience of users and residents so that they can design and target services that will be appropriate to diverse needs. Partnerships and local services can be held accountable for their priorities as well as their performance. Conflicting needs and priorities can be explored and resolved more transparently and with the value of ‘visible fairness’. Involving more people and voices helps to re-establish trust in local democracy and public services.

**Having activists as well as managers and strategists at the table ‘adds strength and depth’ to discussions.**  
(Chair of LSP)

**What creates good decisions is the involvement of the full range of stakeholders, deploying their own expertise, their own aspirations and the sum of these parts is greater than any small leadership group.**  
(Chair of LSP)

**What we hope would come out of it [the LSP] would be a borough where more voices are heard and more people share power and responsibility for decisions.**  
(Local area representatives)

**Quotes taken from Maguire and Truscott (2006).**

If, as argued, the legitimacy of decision-making is a key outcome of citizen involvement, the crucial questions are which citizens and communities are included in executive boards and other decision-making bodies, and how they are to be held accountable. The legitimacy of citizen governors has to be comparable – but not identical – to the legitimacy of elected councillors. This is particularly difficult in the context of demographic change and diversity, including differences of race and class.

## The role and contribution of communities and citizens who get involved

The role and contribution of citizens and service users who are involved in governance is ambiguous: what is their input and value to governance? Dean et al's study (2007) of school governing bodies, and Barnes et al's study (2008) of the different models of governance arrangements in Birmingham both identify this as a key question in designing governance arrangements. They found that different players understood the role of citizen governors very differently, leading to competing expectations of the participants and a lack of legitimacy for their contribution.

### Differing conceptions of the role of school governing bodies

School governing bodies are amongst the longest-standing initiatives in community governance, and are a prime example of the kind of arrangements now being proposed for other services. Dean et al found three different conceptions of the role of local parent and community governors:

1. managerial – the job of the governors is to make sure the school is run effectively and efficiently, by overseeing the work of the head teacher; their legitimacy comes from their ability to drive up standards in line with government targets.
2. localising – governors use their local knowledge to implement national instructions in the light of what will work in local circumstances; their value is the depth of their local knowledge and networks.
3. democratising – governors represent local views and wishes to the school governing body: the assumption is that schools are able to respond to those wishes and make decisions. This may lead to schools having different priorities from their peers.

The researchers found that these different understandings affect decisions about how to select or recruit governors, the basis of their legitimacy both for the school and the community, the kinds of skills and support that governors might need, and ultimately different definitions of how to measure the success of a school.

## Uncertainty about the role of citizens in governance

Barnes et al's (2008) study included detailed studies of ten local governance structures, and explored the implications for communities in disadvantaged areas. The research found considerable uncertainty about the role of citizens and users: are they being involved for their individual knowledge or for their 'representativeness'?

**Are they there as individuals to provide their views and expertise as people who live in a community, have particular needs or interests or use specific public services or are they there to represent a wider community and to speak for and be accountable to this constituency?**  
(Barnes et al 2008)

### Local knowledge and expertise

Local citizens offer distinctive knowledge, based on their experiences and insight into local issues, which complements professional knowledge. If this contribution is the primary value, then governance processes need to be open and informal so that a wide range of knowledge and experience can be shared. Opportunities for different communities, providers and councillors to talk and think together allow knowledge and perceptions to be challenged and new ideas to be generated. The objective is to improve decisions by having a better understanding of local issues and the options for change – but those decisions are made elsewhere.

### Represent local views

If the main principle is that communities should be represented on the decision-making body, so that those institutions become more democratic and their decisions are seen as more legitimate, then different criteria are needed. The fundamental question here is whether those who take part can legitimately be seen to represent the community or communities that they speak for (Maguire and Truscott 2006). The governance arrangement should be designed to provide the support and infrastructure citizen governors need to be able to gather and represent a range of views, and to clarify their accountability to local people.

Often it appears that while the agreed purpose is to gather knowledge to inform decisions, only a small range of participants are asked for their views and those views can then be challenged as being 'unrepresentative'. Conversely, where representativeness and legitimacy are critical, no support is offered to communities to help them ensure that governors are selected democratically and are accountable to their constituents. Maguire and Truscott (2006) described this confusion in their study of LSPs: people believed they were nominated to sit on the LSP as an individual – on the basis of their knowledge – and were then expected to speak for the voluntary and community sector as a whole.

## Motivations and barriers

Several studies highlighted that the organisational culture of involving citizens was not necessarily in line with the ethos or aspirations for citizen-centred governance. While those citizens who are involved expressed positive feelings about the potential benefits for their community as well as their own capacities, they also expressed frustration about the barriers that limited their involvement. Staff and councillors both facilitate this change and are affected by these changes.

### *Motivating the community*

A consistent message is that community participants put a high value on the principle of being able to 'have your say'. Being involved in governance was seen as a valuable and useful process, often in the face of negative experiences, including race, gender and faith discrimination. Blake et al (2008) explored what 'being heard' meant for both new and established communities: the meanings ranged from getting their needs fulfilled, getting funding for their own community activities, and being listened to respectfully. The value put on 'being heard' was not a naïve expectation that services can be shaped around personal needs: they wanted honest communication and transparency, where differing interests can be 'articulated, heard respectfully and negotiated transparently' according to the values of equity and social justice.

Another strong motivation for communities to get involved is the feeling that they can 'make a difference' to their own and their neighbours' lives. As we have seen above, it is sometimes hard to point to tangible improvements as a result of community participation. But even where the structures – of LSPs for instance – are 'deeply flawed in lots of ways', community representatives are determined to make use of the space and try to make it work (Maguire and Truscott).

Skidmore et al (2006) found a strong correlation between engagement and commitment to the area where people were involved, usually the ward where they lived. This affiliation came about through community activities: those who participate also feel they belong. Rai's (2008) study found that the affluence of the area was not linked to levels of participation; it was more a question of values. In poorer areas, people were more likely to get involved initially because of a specific issue they wanted to change.

Those who are already well connected tend to get better connected (Skidmore et al): for example, a residents' association chairman who develops a good relationship with the housing professionals is then invited to sit on the regeneration board and on the LSP.

### *The barriers for citizens*

Rai, Barnes et al, Maguire and Truscott and Blake et al all highlight that the complexity and the pace of change of local governance structures is a major challenge.

**Continual restructuring of the structures for public consultation has the potential for creating confusion and disengagement among all those trying to engage.**

(Blake et al)

**Someone, somewhere decided [the partnership] should have achieved more, so they have thrown everybody up in the air to see where they land.**

(Partnership community member quoted by Maguire and Truscott 2006)

Bureaucracy causes significant frustration. Many local areas have responded to this barrier by creating more flexible and informal arrangements for consultation. But as Barnes et al (2008) noted, this has reduced the 'transparency of decision-making and accountability' which in itself increases citizens' disillusion and confusion about where decisions are made and how to influence them.

Barriers relating to culture, language, organisational structures, management, and a lack of information make it difficult for community participants to feel valued and effective. Maguire and Truscott (2006) found that a lack of respect for community representatives was a key factor. Paperwork was too complex and long. No account was taken of the time that was demanded, leaving people feeling overburdened and asked to attend meetings where they could have no influence. Representatives of key services did not attend meetings of the LSP, but then overturned decisions because they had not been present.

Community representatives reported that their reputations, carefully built up through their community activity, had suffered. They had been criticised for decisions taken by the partnership when they did not have the power to change them, or for promises that had been broken. Rai found that those who get very involved in formal structures had less time for involvement in their communities: 'You get wrapped up in a number of boards and end up working for them rather than for the community.' (District Strategic Partnership member quoted in Rai (2008), page 16). Governance roles potentially cut people off from their communities rather than making them champions of their communities.

Another significant barrier was a lack of obvious changes or learning. If there was no impact on mainstream services, no learning from time-limited projects, and no change in organisational culture, it was hard to motivate people to get involved and hard for those involved to show what they had achieved.

A willingness to get involved at the local level does not necessarily translate into involvement in formal governance. Feeling they did not have the time or expertise to take that step, local residents concluded that they preferred informal and community activities that were more accessible and grounded in local concerns.

Many government policies for community engagement have been implemented in deprived areas, with the poorest and most excluded communities. Maguire and Truscott reported that this had led some to question whether 'community is code for poor'. Why should those who are poorest be called on to participate in the improvement of services that are taken for granted by those in more affluent areas?

**Professionals live somewhere too. If the streets are dirty, do deprived communities really need to go out to meetings in cold halls on wet nights for the council to find out they need cleaning? Do they hold meetings about it in their own neighbourhoods?  
(Activist in New Deal for Communities area  
Maguire and Truscott)**

### **Councillors as 'connectors'**

The role of frontline or ward councillors has become a pressing issue, caught between the drive for community empowerment and citizen governance, the creation of executive councillors, and in some areas elected mayors, and local partnership working. They can feel distanced from council decision-making. They also feel they have less of a voice on partnerships than the community or private sector, and can react by not facilitating greater involvement of citizens.

Communities and community organisations have mixed experiences of councillors' willingness and ability to enhance citizen involvement. But they generally see the potential role of councillors as supporters of community engagement (Maguire and Truscott 2006) or as people in leadership positions who can help communities that are not well connected (Blake et al 2008, Choudhury and Jayaweera 2008, Rai 2008).

There are long-standing tensions between representative democracy – including elected councillors and mayors – and participative democracy, which includes elected or volunteer community representatives, as well as more informal and deliberative processes (Gaventa 2004<sup>2</sup>). The Government's approach to empowerment is to make these two ideas complementary and interdependent, with non-executive councillors and committee members being empowered to act with and on behalf of communities to improve accountability. In some local areas this will represent a major change in the relationship between councillors and the community sector.

James and Cox (2007) recommended that councillors need support to act on their desire to be 'connectors' between communities, the council and partnerships. They need skills in community engagement and advocacy, better information about their local area and recognition of their role to influence strategic decisions and take action in support of their ward interests. However, this role requires major changes in the way local councils, partnerships and political parties work with councillors.

### **Staff as facilitators**

The attitudes, skills and behaviours of public officials are an important help or hindrance to local communities and citizens who get involved in governance, and also affect the impact of their involvement.

John Gaventa (2004) has highlighted the need to 'work both sides of the equation' by simultaneously focusing both on empowering citizens and communities, and enabling local officials and civil servants to understand and respond to community empowerment. Ray et al's (2008) work reinforced this point and also emphasised the importance of organisational change to make community involvement in governance possible. The alignment of performance targets and personnel incentives, the availability of specialist staff, long-term resources for outreach and support work, and timescales that take account of community processes are all required.

Managers are often responsible for the design of citizen governance and 'put into practice complex democratic principles such as "participation", "representation" and "accountability"'. As Barnes et al pointed out, this has seldom been part of their professional training. 'Limited awareness of the issues involved in constitutional design and a reluctance or inability to negotiate roles of all participants can create confusion and demotivate citizens and users from becoming involved.' (Barnes et al 2008).

They need guidelines and support from central government and local government training and improvement agencies to ensure their knowledge and skill matches the complexity of the task ahead.

## **The impact of diversity**

A paradox often emerges in discussions about citizen governance. One of the reasons for involving a wider range of communities in decision-making is to take account of diversity. But the policy is often underpinned by an assumption that neighbourhoods or shared identity groups are homogeneous, static and have – or can have – a single point of view.

Mobility, migration, and changes in housing tenure and employment patterns mean that neighbourhoods often contain varied demographic groups with different origins and interests. There are concerns that neighbourhoods are divided along lines of ethnicity and wealth. Increasingly, individuals have many possible points of identity e.g. they are both a person with a disability and a member of a minority ethnic group. This 'super diversity' and movement of people makes it a challenge to design inclusive, accessible, representative and welcoming engagement structures. It cannot be assumed that shared identities or interests mirror shared characteristics such as ethnicity, gender and age.

### **Barriers associated with diversity**

Rai interviewed 25 black and 25 Asian women involved in community governance in Birmingham and Wolverhampton. Over three quarters of them had experienced gender, race or faith discrimination that affected their involvement in governance. They had the skills and desire to get involved, but were held back by a lack of confidence.

Blake et al found that community engagement policies were being developed separately to policies to increase community cohesion. New communities are keen to get involved and to have their views heard, but concerns about racism and discrimination, lack of formal community organisations at neighbourhood level and a reliance on informal networks and traditional leaders all mean that new communities are often not involved. Blake et al identified a range of 'promising practices' that promote solidarity and cohesion – rather than competition and conflict – among new and established communities.

Choudhury and Jayaweera's research amongst Muslims, looking at integration, cohesion and engagement, found that civic and social participation was perceived to be key to greater cohesion, but that there were barriers to involvement that would have to be overcome, including unfamiliarity with the language and structures of governance, and a low level of confidence that it was possible to have an impact on decisions locally or nationally. 'The minority who were actively involved in an organisation were not more likely than others to feel they could have an impact on decision making' (Choudhury and Jayaweera 2008).

Muslims' low levels of participation in local mixed organisations did not reflect an indifference to local issues. Multicultural events, residents' groups and, particularly, educational institutions were seen as places to create meaningful interactions across boundaries and bring people together, as the Commission on Integration and Cohesion<sup>3</sup> recommended in its report.

## Responding to conflict

Engaging a wider range of people and their diversity of perspectives and priorities means that governance arrangements must be able to manage conflicting views and needs in a transparent way. Resources and time are needed to enable communities to have honest and open discussions, to build consensus and to feel confident that resources are allocated with visible fairness. Maguire and Truscott (2006) found that LSPs are sometimes unwilling to raise potentially contentious issues in a partnership forum that includes community participants, in case it raises expectations they can't match or delays a decision. Ray et al (2008, page 25) found widespread unease among officials about community participants who challenged officials and held them to account; this was perceived to undermine the trust between officials and the community, with trust being defined as 'an absence of conflict'. It could result in strategies to discredit the contributions of such participants.

## Who speaks for whom?

A consistent theme across the research is the question of who is a legitimate representative, qualified to participate in governance and to have their views taken seriously. This tension usually surfaces in the twin issues of '(un)representativeness' and 'the usual suspects', and can seriously undermine the legitimacy and credibility of citizen engagement. Communities have found that authorities or partners categorise opinion as unrepresentative or not authentic to dismiss community views that are inconvenient or contrary to their own.

This has been described as the catch 22 of participation, where non-professional opinion is dismissed as uninformed, or when clearly informed, portrayed as the concoction of undemocratic usual suspects promoting their particular hobby horses. (Maguire and Truscott 2006)

## Representativeness

Ray et al (2008) found considerable unease among officials about the value of community participants' views, which could be seen as unrepresentative or self-interested. They were reluctant to engage with community groups outside established structures and networks (mirroring the finding that new migrant communities who have not yet established their organisations and networks feel unheard). Some groups were dismissed as a 'nuisance' when they opposed, for instance, parking schemes or health service closures. The researchers commented that 'a number of officials appeared to be searching for the "authentic public" who did not have strong views and were not motivated by personal interest'. Barnes et al, Skidmore et al and Rai, amongst others, found that it is precisely personal interest that motivates people to participate in the first place. Simultaneously, the officials expressed a preference for working with 'informed participants' who could make 'a sensible contribution' and were aware of the issues and the constraints that officers were working with.

Ray et al (2008) argued that the relative value of informed or 'grass roots' participants depended on the objective of the engagement: if the point is to gather knowledge then the views of authentic or grass roots community members are of value, but if the point is to 'get things done' then better informed participants are required. This mirrors Barnes et al's point that the purpose of the engagement is important to whether representativeness is a critical principle.

Maguire and Truscott found that in practice the term 'representative' implies a range of meanings: elected, having similar characteristics to a specified demographic, nominated by a community organisation, presenting a case for and accountable to. They argued that all these forms of representativeness were equally valid and could co-exist in a single governance body. Barnes et al also distinguished between an individual 'who was selected to speak on behalf of a "defined local constituency"' and one who was selected to speak on behalf of a 'group whose identity they share'.

### **Usual suspects**

Skidmore et al understood the 'problem of the usual suspects' was due to systems rather than individuals or institutions. There will only ever be a small proportion of people who get actively involved in governance: indeed Skidmore et al (2006) argue that local areas should aim for one per cent of the population. The comparatively few people who get involved in one governance forum are more likely to be involved in another forum. Such people are often sought out and valued by officers and councillors as they are well connected and bring wider knowledge.

While such community participants become familiar with 'the way things work', others exclude themselves or are not invited to join because they find it difficult to deal with the bureaucracy, they 'don't fit' or they feel they can have more effect as an outsider. Blake et al (2008) described the way in which community groups and individuals moved between being insiders and outsiders, as a result of their interaction with governance and with consequences for their power and influence.

### **Gatekeepers**

Similar concerns about 'who speaks for whom' are heard in the views of community members. Those who are involved in governance bodies can be seen as 'gatekeepers' rather than representing their views. The reliance on established and more formal organisations – often dominated by traditional leaders – tends to mean that the voices of women and young people are not heard, and the complexity of identity is not reflected. Recently settled communities or migrant groups, more likely to work through informal groups or national or city-wide organisations that do not fit into the neighbourhood model, find it hard to engage.

As more powers and influence are devolved to communities, and the duty to involve draws in communities that are ethnically diverse, transient and with significant inequalities in wealth, the questions of representativeness and legitimacy must become a more important element in the design of community governance.

## **Changing processes: complexity, confusion and opportunity**

There has been widespread experimentation with new forms of citizen-centred governance. The fast developing agenda has spawned a plethora of community engagement initiatives and new governance and partnership bodies. In 2007/8 in Birmingham, Barnes et al found over 30 different types of governance institutions and 650 different individual bodies as well as 18 partnerships. Ray et al described a 'myriad of engagement practices' in Haringey, across the council's environmental and children's services, the police, the Primary Care Trust (PCT), the Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) and the council's own neighbourhood management service.

In 2007 in Birmingham, for example, Barnes et al found that a typical inner city neighbourhood will have:

- a number of overlapping regeneration or neighbourhood renewal projects;
- a Children's Fund and Sure Start Project;
- all working alongside district and ward committees of the city council, a district strategic partnership of public, private and voluntary and community sector stakeholders, community networks and a neighbourhood forum;
- within the mainstream agencies of the city council, PCT, police and other bodies;
- and a city-wide LSP shaping overall regeneration policy;
- parents involved in governing bodies for primary and secondary schools, who may wish to stand for further education college governing boards;
- and citizens and patients who may be members of the National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust for the area .

Neighbourhood or place-based engagement arrangements often have inconsistent boundaries, or boundaries that do not fit service delivery. While multi-agency partnership working has become mandatory, engagement initiatives still tend to develop separately, reflecting the different responsibilities and approaches of government departments.

The result, as Barnes et al noted, is that while this flexibility offers the prospect of a 'more vibrant local democracy' it means that towns and cities are now 'governed by a patchwork of special purpose bodies' operating alongside local authorities, NHS bodies, police authorities and other government bodies. They are often disconnected from each other.

The fragmentation of both service provision and engagement arrangements has led to confusion about who is responsible for what. Citizens are trying to influence a web of services and partnerships, join them up and navigate the complications of the relationship between central and local government. People who live in disadvantaged areas are 'doubly disadvantaged' because they have to 'negotiate the complexities of public services to meet their immediate needs and also respond to many consultation and engagement initiatives'.

## Changing structures

It is not just the complexity of the arrangements on the ground, but also the pace of change in those arrangements. Ray et al and Blake et al found that the speed of change in governance structures emerged as a major challenge for both communities and officials. New arrangements are introduced just as the old ones are becoming established, and before the necessary relationships have developed. 'One of the most frequent complaints community representatives made was they had just begun to understand how a system or process worked when a new policy wave swept it away.' (Maguire and Truscott, page 9.) This continual change has even more of an impact on those groups that already face barriers such as a lack of networks and knowledge, or who suffer discrimination.

The Government's approach has been a mixture of prescription – e.g. Local Involvement Networks, school governing bodies – and a more evolutionary and flexible approach, including LSPs and neighbourhood working. Local statutory and third sector partners have designed governance arrangements that take centrally prescribed arrangements and adapt them to local needs and circumstances. This local experimentation has been valuable in testing and developing good practice. Informal structures, without the necessary bureaucracy of a formal decision-making body, are felt to be more accessible to community members. Some officials and councillors are more comfortable with consultative and influencing arrangements, rather than direct involvement in decision-making.

## Loss of transparency

Local flexibility and informality has had its downsides:

- The arrangements can lead to lower levels of transparency and democratic legitimacy, because their objectives and the role of community participants are unclear.
- Partnership or other consultative forums lack incorporated status, which means they cannot hold funds or employ staff; the ultimate accountability for changes in services lies elsewhere.
- There are no clear rules for resolving differences of opinion arising from the diversity of needs within communities.
- Citizen governance bodies tend to be disconnected from the council and other decision-makers.
- Councillors' role as community advocate (James and Cox 2007) is unclear, which can lead to conflict.
- There is no overall strategic approach to citizen governance or to the different ways in which communities can exercise influence or get involved.

Structures that have been clearly and coherently developed, and sustained over a long period, are a significant factor in enabling communities to get involved and creating the relationships necessary for effective influence with officials and councillors. Maguire and Truscott argued that future changes need to build on what is already there, simplifying and co-ordinating arrangements and aligning them with the ambitions for community engagement and with the formal decision-makers. Local innovation should be nurtured, but in the context of an overall local 'design' that brings together community governance, councillors and partnership structures.

# What are the implications for policy and practice?

Community engagement and empowerment have been characterised by their wide range of ambitions and by their constantly changing structures and processes; this research suggests there is a gap between what is promised and what is perceived to have been achieved so far. Central and local government, councillors, staff and community organisations all have a role to play if citizen-centred governance is to make a beneficial impact on neighbourhoods and services.

Councils and councillors have the responsibility to take a strategic overview and design a place-based approach that is integrated, coherent and inclusive; and which is capable of achieving the objectives that it aspires to. Central government has the task of clarifying how citizen engagement can lead to local improvements and providing leadership and support to enable that change process to happen. Councillors and communities have to find a way to work together in the interests of diversity, accountability and social cohesion.

## 1. Place-based design

The new statutory duty on councils to 'inform, consult and involve' is to be extended to other local partners,<sup>4</sup> giving a shared and logical basis for implementation and collaboration. Empowerment and engagement feature strongly in the Government's priorities.<sup>5</sup> A high proportion of Local Area Agreements include citizen engagement targets, which the LSP partners have a joint duty to deliver; this is the basis for local consolidation and rationalisation.

The research reports note a lot of effective work and 'promising practices' locally as well as goodwill and determination on all sides. The weaknesses they have identified are largely because of systems rather than a lack of commitment. Barnes et al (2008) and others have argued strongly for governance structures to be actively and consciously designed as a coherent, place-based system in order to overcome fragmentation and confusion. Communities, citizens and civil organisations must be involved alongside councillors and partners to agree the local strategic priorities, how to build on the most successful elements of engagement and governance in their area and what more can be done to build confidence and trust between all parties.

What are the guiding principles that this design should incorporate?

### a) Integrated on a locality basis

The structures of engagement and the processes by which citizens engage should make sense to people living in the locality. The starting point will be:

- mapping the relationship between different kinds of community engagement and decision-makers, such as neighbourhoods and wards, the council, thematic partnerships, single service bodies such as the police and PCT, the LSP, user forums, participatory budgeting exercises etc;
- being explicit about the remit and purpose of each body and taking steps to eliminate duplication and gaps;
- understanding the different – and equally valid – routes by which people come to be part of formal governance processes. Is it by elections, by appointment, do they volunteer or are they encouraged through informal networks?

### b) Locally coherent principles and objectives

A key element in the design is 'why engage citizens?' Is it for gathering knowledge, widening representation or bringing managerial oversight? And when is it better to use research or survey tools, rather than directly involve citizens?

- Is the engagement practice 'fit for purpose'? Does it account for the constraints on how different the service can be in response to community wishes, or on the possibilities for improving social cohesion and local democracy?
- How clear are the respective roles and contribution of citizens, councillors, partners, managers and staff?
- One of the key challenges has been getting the right balance between flexibility and informality, and transparency and devolving power. Communities say they prefer flexibility and informality, and to be able to get involved in ways that are accessible and acceptable. This makes it possible to include people whose voices may otherwise not be heard, hold participative events and experiment locally. But these kinds of approaches are rarely formal enough to give participants the power to make decisions involving staff or budgets, nor to be transparent about who made the decisions and with what legitimacy.

### c) Inclusive and accountable

One of the objectives is to increase local democracy and ensure diversity is considered in the way decisions are made. It must be clear how knowledge influences decisions and what gives legitimacy and accountability to those who make decisions. This is part of the commitment to 'visible social justice' called for by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

- The design and day-to-day arrangements have to take account of the complexity, turnover and 'super diversity' of the local population.
- Community engagement strategies, including involvement in governance, must be developed together with the local strategies for social cohesion and tackling inequalities. And allow enough time, support and resources to ensure that the structures and arrangements are inclusive of all the different local players.
- While many local people are already involved in their local communities, they may not be interested in a governance role or they may have been put off by their perception that local governance does not make a difference to the things they care about. If an aim is to have a broad range of voices involved, then those responsible for designing community governance need to be aware of the barriers to that involvement and of the financial and time costs to the community participants. How can providers and other partners make the most of local people's time and experiences?

By common consent, there is thought to be a long way to go before community governance is inclusive.

- Some communities have less potential to be influential than others. They may lack skilled and confident people, or connections with those who have power and information; this can lead to further disadvantage.
- It remains hard to involve some groups of people. The research into the experiences of black women found that prejudice and discrimination were bigger barriers to involvement than their lack of interest. In fact, those who were involved were positive about their ability to make a difference as well as their gains in self confidence.
- Some communities are not integrated into civil society or in the voluntary sector networks. Recently settled communities or migrant groups are more likely to rely on individuals, informal groups or national or city-wide organisations; they find it difficult to know where and how to make their views known locally.

- There are real conflicts about values and needs between communities. Groups that feel they are not being heard are unlikely to stay involved.
- There is scepticism that community voices can have real influence, either because they will not be listened to, they do not have the clout or they sense that real power and resources lie outside the local sphere of influence.

Investment in community development and outreach work will be necessary if all voices are to be heard, and to develop processes that enable the different needs to be balanced in a transparent and socially just manner.

## 2. Create and sustain the links – both vertical and horizontal

The key challenge for governance design is to ensure that those who do participate are connected to 'processes by which they can be influenced and held to account by the communities they purport to serve'. (Skidmore et al, 2006 page xii) Without this, community governance can lack democratic legitimacy as well as exacerbate the exclusion of certain parts of the local population (Adamson and Bromiley, Maguire and Truscott, Skidmore et al).

Rai, Skidmore et al, Hay and others emphasise the importance of nurturing community activity and networks for their own sake. Everyday community activities are not only valuable to wellbeing. They are the 'supply line' or pool from which citizen governors can be drawn. If partners want to recruit governors from all parts of the community, then the community networks have to be inclusive. In turn, those who take up governance roles need to have roots back into their communities for 'knowledge gathering' and for accountability; the legitimacy of their role depends on these roots, as does their value to partnerships.

Engagement processes – neighbourhood forums, participative processes, dialogue and debate within areas – are a precious opportunity for meaningful contact across communities, for more understanding of the differences as well as an appreciation of the needs they have in common. As Blake et al (2008) noted, the lack of such opportunities can generate dangerous levels of incomprehension, misunderstanding and fears about competition for resources.

### 3. Active support and development

Community engagement – and the transformation of governance and decision-making that it seeks – requires active support from all levels of government. This was a conclusion from all the JRF research projects, and reflects the recommendations of many previous reports (e.g. Martin et al (ODPM 2006), Taylor et al (JRF 2007)). This support is in three main categories:

#### a) Capacity building – ‘working all sides of the equation’

- Effective citizenship needs all citizens and communities to have ‘knowledge, skills and a sense of empowerment [ if they are ] to play a meaningful role in local decision-making’ (Martin et al 2006).
- Disadvantaged communities need additional support to help them navigate the complexity of public services in their neighbourhoods, as well as tackle exclusion and poverty.
- Ray has shown that investment in public sector staff is critical, as they are both the facilitators of and blocks to effective community engagement and the extent to which citizens can influence service delivery and other local priorities.
- Councillors are central and their frontline activities should be part of the overall governance design, but they also need to be helped to play their part effectively, and James and Cox (2007) recommend the kind of support that will be needed.

#### b) Community development

- Levels of organisation, involvement and social capital are not spread evenly (Skidmore et al 2006), and without active intervention and investment the danger is that community engagement will reinforce unequal access.
- Community development and outreach work is essential to sustain the current community infrastructure and enable it take up the opportunities that citizen governance offers. But it is also needed to support fledgling organisations that represent new communities and diverse voices. And to build the networks and forums that can support local dialogue about priorities and needs, and build social cohesion.

- Those who are active in their communities do not necessarily step up to take governance positions, sometimes because of experiences of discrimination and powerlessness. Support and encouragement is needed to help more people progress through different levels of governance, on the basis of productive relationships, trust and a sense that they are making a difference.

#### c) Leadership and guidance

The Government puts in place the broad policy direction and challenges local partners to implement this in their area. But Barnes et al and others point out that this local flexibility does not guarantee best practice.

There is a need for coherence across government which will help local partners develop an integrated and coherent approach. Guidance is needed to:

- articulate the different objectives for involving citizens and communities in different types of governance body, and how their participation can influence or change decisions;
- clarify appropriate rules and roles for engagement between citizens, communities, elected councillors and officials;
- clarify the expectations on staff, councillors and communities, their scope for influence and power, and highlight the limits on the devolution of decision-making;
- suggest principles for good practice on enhancing democracy, transparency and accountability;
- promote the role of community involvement in social cohesion.

The development of new forms of representation and governance will take time, and involve far-reaching changes in procedures as well as the transformation of culture and behaviours. This change process needs to be properly resourced, with long-term and sustainable funding to both the public sector and third sector organisations.

## Conclusion

Over the period of the JRF programme, citizen and community involvement in governance has been embedded as an integral part of local democracy and public service management. It is a driving force in the service improvement agenda and in work to improve social cohesion. There is a fund of goodwill and commitment for these objectives. At the same time, communities, citizens, councillors and staff are all having difficulties in making it real.

As partners and communities approach the implementation of the new duty to inform, consult and involve all citizens, it is essential that there is a local debate about the principles, practice and dilemmas of citizen and community governance. While it offers an opportunity for a coherent and place-based strategy it could also lead to further fragmentation, confusion and the loss of citizen influence. It must also be clearly linked to the role of elected councillors, and arrangements must take account of the complexity of national, regional and local decision-making in relation to local services and priorities.

The recent focus on empowerment – in the Community Empowerment White Paper *Real People, Real Power* for instance – is not only about the involvement of communities in partnerships, but aspires to a more radical rebalancing of power between local government and the community sector. Improved governance of services will come through direct democratic means, such as petitions, neighbourhood charters, asset transfers, and the empowerment of individuals and communities to hold services to account. Ray et al (2008) found that public officials more readily understood community engagement as listening to, debating with or working with the community ‘rather than devolving power or control’. Part of the implementation of the empowerment agenda will be to clarify expectations about how influence will be exercised, which powers can be devolved and with what safeguards.

One of the main tests of the new duty to involve all citizens will be whether it is able to maintain (or promote) the voice and influence of disadvantaged groups so that services are shaped and delivered to tackle discrimination and inequality. How can community engagement function in the context of population change and diversity, to deliver visible social justice and social solidarity?

It remains difficult to find evidence of the impact of community engagement on service quality. This research nonetheless supports the view that ‘service provider involvement of user communities (especially in deprived areas) has costs that are relatively modest and benefits that are significant’.<sup>6</sup> However, as found in the JRF-commissioned comparison of place-based and people-based interventions to tackle disadvantage: ‘It was rarely possible to explain properly how policy interventions worked or why they failed, because the way they were intended to work was not always publicly spelled out in advance.’<sup>7</sup> This lack of clarity about the purpose and role of citizens in governance and how they can effect change remains a weakness.

These questions about the purpose and impact of citizen governance are not just of interest to policy researchers. Community involvement costs public services significant time and money. Communities volunteer their scarce time and limited resources, taking away their energies from other activities in their community. If neither providers nor communities are clear about the objectives nor perceive any impact on decisions, on service quality or on citizen satisfaction, the policy is not sustainable in the face of tightening finances and difficult decisions about resource allocation.

## The JRF Governance and Public Services programme

The following publications were all published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (York) and are available to download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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## Notes

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2. John Gaventa (2004) *Representation, Community Leadership and Participation: Citizen Involvement in Neighbourhood Renewal and Local Governance*. London: Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU)/ ODPM.
3. Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) *Our Shared Future*. Wetherby: CLG.
4. See s138 Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Community Empowerment White Paper commitment to extend the duty to other partners, now included in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill.
5. See the Public Service Agreement 21 to "build more cohesive, empowered and active communities" and the single National Indicator Set for all local agencies (*The New Performance Framework for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships. Single Set of National Indicators*. CLG & Her Majesty's Government, October 2007).
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