

What is Community Engagement?

A notable change in public policy thinking over the last ten years is the refocusing of programmes to the needs expressed by communities themselves and involving communities in the decisions made about those needs and as programme deliverers, this community led focus is a basis of community development activity. However the field has developed its own theoretical framework and debate.

In this section we define the challenge and review some of the issues which need to be considered in engaging with the community.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is emerging as the phrase used to describe the *processes* and *strategies* employed within a programme, organisation or project to involve the community or ensure community participation.

Within CAG Consultants review of community engagement within the context of sustainable development four types of activities were identified as taking place. These included

1. involving community members and / or organisations in decisions about that affect their neighbourhoods
2. encouraging community members to become involved in activities and / or services delivered at a neighbourhood level
3. community members working with others to address needs they have identified in their community
4. activity that creates strong communities, which in turn contribute to wider social goals

This multiple usage has led to a lack of clarity about what the term community engagement actually means. This lack of clarity is not helped by the fact that the definitions may produce activity which looks the same on the ground. For example a local development of cycle routes may have come about with or without community engagement.

Below we outline the above 4 identified areas in more detail

Involving community members and / or organisations in decisions about that affect their neighbourhoods

This type of activity has a two fold aim. Firstly to find ways to address a need, but to do so in a way in which those affected by that need, are involved to the maximum. For example in the health sector (below) there has been an increase in activity which involves communities and community members in decision making about services.

A significant example from health is the Patient Forums which are located in every Primary Care Trust inform service delivery in a range of ways.

Patient and Public Involvement Forums (PPIFs)

A Patient and Public Involvement Forum has been set up for every Primary Care Trust and NHS trust, to:

- monitor and review the services arranged and or provided by the trust from the perspective of the patient - this includes both the range and operation of services;
- seek the views of patients receiving services provided or arranged by the trust;
- inspect premises where NHS services are delivered;
- make reports and recommendations based on the views and experiences of patients and carers to the trust management. These may be included in the trusts annual prospectus, along with the trust's response;
- refer matters of concern to OSCs and the CPPIH (below), Strategic Health Authorities, CHAI and the National Patient Safety Agency etc - and to any other person or body the forums deem appropriate, including the media;
- be represented on trust Boards at Non Executive Director level (PPIFs will select one of their number to be put forward for appointment to trust boards by the Appointments Commission. Their appointment be treated in exactly the same way as every other Non Executive Director).

Department of Health web site information

Encouraging community members to become involved in activities and / or services delivered at a neighbourhood level

Within this review we have many examples of agencies or groups of agencies delivering services at a neighbourhood level which are designed address local needs. For example the Newcastle Community aims to provide:

- "a drop in for local residents
- basic practical healthy cooking sessions
- fun group cook and eat sessions
- guidance on cooking healthy low cost family meals
- Accredited courses: Open College Healthy Cook and Eat Course Basic Food Hygiene Course"

This is clearly a very locally based service which is responding to a community needs around food and health, but it is service led. The community have very little control over such activities, although community members may have been involved in an initial agency led consultation about the needs of the area and possibly in some of the day to day planning of the service.

Commonly the aim of activities of this type are to address a need by either changing the community infrastructure (eg providing healthy food locally) or by changing individual behaviour (cook and taste sessions teaching people healthy eating skills)

Community members working with others to address needs they have identified in their community

Activities where community members work together to address a commonly addressed need are sometimes referred to as community action or community development. The key distinguishing factor of these activities is that the community members are driving the process, from identifying the need, to

developing options to respond to the need and commissioning or carrying out the chosen response.

For example in Tyndrum, Scotland, the local people are undertaking a full range of activities to regenerate their area. They have established a Community Development Trust to oversee the process. This Trust is a registered charity and a Company Limited by Guarantee. The vision for the whole project is for a regenerated Strathfillan, brought about through increased local control and influence over local land, resource use and housing in order to create opportunities for locals and visitors alike. The ways in which this regeneration will be brought about are through:

- creating more affordable housing for local people
- increasing leisure and recreational opportunities for visitors and locals
- boosting the local economy
- improving the natural and physical environment and making the area more attractive

Tyndrum Community Woodland has been identified as one of several ways of encouraging visitors to come to Strathfillan. This woodland has been developed by the Trust whilst on a long term lease from the Forestry Commission.

Activity to create stronger communities and thus contribute to wider goals.

We have traced an increasing emergence of this type of usage of community engagement within UK policy. There is currently a significant policy focus on community engagement within the UK and in some context, in particular policing, the aim of the engagement is based on emerging evidence that strong communities have a positive impact on issues such as crime and health and therefore if resources are directed to creating strong communities these positive impacts will follow.

An example of the evidence being used to inform this new policy context is the practice and results produced from the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy.

Chicago Alternative Policy Strategy – An outline (adapted)

Beat and rapid response officers, as well as gang and tactical officers in the districts, are being trained to work together on solving problems of crime and neighbourhood disorder-not just reacting to their symptoms. Beat profiles-comprehensive records of the characteristics, resources, and chronic crime problems on each beat-help the police and the community to prioritize problems and plan strategies. Beat plans are used by the police to document the problem-solving process.

Block by block ... beat by beat ... step by step. Problems are identified, and problems are solved. It's pure CAPS: residents, police, and City services working as partners in the problem-solving process.

- Step 1: Identify and Prioritize the Problem
- Step 2: Analyze the Problem
- Step 3: Design Strategies
- Step 4: Implement Strategies
- Step 5: Evaluate and Acknowledge Success

Concluding thoughts

These differing, but interlinked usages of community engagement make a review of what has been happening within the sustainable development context and the outputs and / or outcomes of that activity both a daunting and complex task. However they may be a clear split between community participation, community activities and community development. This split links with the four identified areas of activity thus;

1. involving community members and / or organisations in decisions about that affect their neighbourhoods ([community participation](#))
2. encouraging community members to become involved in activities and / or services delivered at a neighbourhood level ([community activities](#))
3. community members working with others to address needs they have identified in their community ([community development](#))
4. activity that creates strong communities, which in turn contribute to wider social goals ([community development](#))

Here we revisit some of the literature to clarify definitions for these activity areas.

Defining the Challenge – community participation

There is a great deal of debate among communities, community development workers, community participation practitioners, regeneration practitioners and others about the issues involved in and the nature of community engagement. Here we review some of the key definitions and in the following section we review the key concepts within engagement processes.¹

Community Consultation

The processes of community consultation are sometimes identified and used as the starting point for community engagement. Undertaking consultations within communities is not in itself community engagement, but may be an element of or starting point for more meaningful engagement.

Dictionaries define consultation as taking counsel, seeking advice and information². Such definitions imply an element of 'expertise' on the part of the person being consulted and a willingness to proactively seek and act on views on the part of the person undertaking the consultation. This is certainly the case when seeking to consult with community members, who are experts in their own right.

A key element to further defining 'consultation' is to take a closer look at what is actually happening during a consultation process. To do this we need to pose some fundamental questions, for example:

- What are people being consulted about?

¹ The context put forward in this section is for illustrative purposes, to bring some clarity to the local debate, it is not intended to be definitive.

² Adapted from the Chambers dictionary

- Are people being given an opportunity to change ideas and/ or plans?
- At what point in an overall process, project or programme is a consultation exercise taking place?

Through asking questions like these we can begin to form a clearer view about what is going on in consultation exercises. For example if an engagement process is involved in taking pre-formed and agreed plans to community members for them to discuss, but without a great deal of scope for change, we may think that this is a limited level of community consultation.

Arnstein³, Wilcox⁴ and others have developed ladders, which illustrate identified levels of community participation, which, in turn, lead from community consultation to community engagement. Wilcox identifies five interconnected levels of community participation. These are shown in the figure below;

Information
Consultation
Deciding together
Acting together
Supporting individual community initiatives

Figure One: Wilcox's levels of participation

The ladder described by Arnstein has similarities, but goes further to finish with Citizen Control. What ladders like these tell us is that consultation is a fairly low level and low impact way of working with communities.

Community Involvement

While initially we might place community involvement on a higher 'rung' of Wilcox's ladder, perhaps around 'acting together' or 'deciding together', there are problems with the definition within many settings. Again we have to consider who holds power and who is in control. For example regeneration programmes, unlike some other activities at a community level, do not tend to organically emerge from communities taking an agreed, collective response to a community identified need.

Instead such programmes tend to be, to a greater or lesser extent, imposed on communities and communities are subsequently invited to become involved. The invitation may imply a commitment to the involvement of communities, but this has to be balanced with considerations of why the community's presence or views is being sought.

Community Participation

³ Arnstein S. *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, in the Journal of the American planning Association, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224

⁴ Wilcox D. *An A to Z of Partnerships*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1999

Community participation has begun to be used to describe activities that involve communities more meaningfully, where considerations of exchange of power and influence are made within the processes.

Participation implies a more equitable balance of power and influence. Within an effective participative structure, roles and responsibilities will be clear and transparent. Skinner⁵ suggests that a community will adopt five roles if fully participating within a programme (Here Skinner is referring to regeneration programmes). Within these five roles community members will act;

1. as beneficiaries of the programme and users of services
2. as consultees and representatives of local opinion
3. as the source of general community activity
4. as the source for the delivery of regeneration programmes
5. as potential long term partners in regeneration.

Through analysis of the exchange of power, and observation of Skinner's five roles, it is possible to make an assessment of the level of community participation within any given process.

Other analyses of participation suggest a more richly woven tapestry. For example Windle and Cibulka⁶ propose a three dimensional assessment based on Arnstein's ladder and using the ladder as an indicator of involvement levels, but exploring two further axes. Firstly a 'functional dimension', in which different stages in policy cycle are identified including;

- Programme evaluation
- Service Giving
- Governing
- Planning
- Enabling
- Authorising

Secondly they identify a 'participant dimension', which in the context they were reviewing included communities, citizens, employees and consumers. Windle and Chibulka's work suggests that the picture of participation is a complex one.

The analysis suggests that to develop or assess community participation we need to look at not only the level of involvement, but what actions people are participating in and who is participating, and thus by implication who is not participating.

Defining the Challenge – community activities

This phrase is used to define activities or events organisation at a community level by a third party. This third party could be a large statutory organisation or a voluntary sector organisation or even a local community group. The key defining feature about these activities is that they are set up for others to join in with.

⁵ Skinner S. *Building Community Strengths*, Community Development Foundation 1995

⁶ Windle and Chibulka, *A Framework for Understanding Participation in Community Mental Health Services*, 1981

Defining the Challenge – community development

Community Development, as described by the by the England Standards Board for Community Work Training and Qualifications is;

“about the active involvement of people in the issues which affect their lives and focuses on the relationship between individuals and groups and the institutions which shape their everyday experience.

It is a developmental process, which is both a collective and individual experience. It is based on a commitment to equal partnership between all those involved to enable a sharing of skills, awareness, knowledge and experience in order to bring about change.

It takes place in both neighbourhoods and communities of interest, whenever people come together to identify what is relevant to them, and act on issues of common concern.”

It may be tempting to read this definition and take away the idea that community development might be just a very sophisticated method of community participation (as we have use the terms here). However it is important to bear in mind that community development is very different from community engagement in that it “involves a commitment to:

- starting with the issues which people in communities identify as being important to them, rather than starting with the issues that an outside agency wants to tackle
- helping people understand why the issues they want to tackle have come about, and why some groups have more power or resources than others
- working towards changes which reduce inequality and poverty.”⁷

⁷ CDX Information Sheet “What is Community Development”