

A scoping study concerning community empowerment issues relating to children and young people

A final report to the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services on behalf of the Speaking Out project

Demos

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Background

Speaking Out is a joint project between the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) and Children England that sets out to build a voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector across Government as part of a strategic partnership funded by the Office of the Third Sector within the Cabinet Office.

The project aims to develop closer links between a range of Government departments and the voluntary and community sector in delivering cross-departmental agendas, focusing on the direct implementation of initiatives which affect children and young people.

The project's key policy priorities for 2009-2011 are: youth employment, education and training; community empowerment; health and well-being; youth justice; housing and homelessness; and financial capabilities.

The project's aims are to:

- work collaboratively with Government to ensure the voice of members is heard in policy development and implementation;
- encourage best practice and avoid duplication;
- influence national policy through particular experience or expertise, either directly or through the experience of members; and
- act as advocates and provide a credible voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector.

The Speaking Out project seeks to take on policy initiatives that lead to better outcomes for children, young people and families, ensuring that the policy making process engages the sector effectively. Through our activities we facilitate dialogue, information and best practice sharing.

This report is a Demos research paper, commissioned by NCVYS as part of the Speaking Out project.

Introduction

*"A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm."
- Henrik Ibsen*

Across the contemporary political spectrum, the rhetoric of community empowerment is central to the vision of our country, and our collective future. Politicians, commentators and academics are seemingly united in the core belief that the direction of travel is local. The future of democratic renewal and the key to better government lies not through the doors of central government but at the doorsteps of our neighbourhoods. In a sense, this idea is not new. Throughout the history of British politics, the tension between central direction and local autonomy has been a central theme. Even though the particular models of empowerment discussed today took root in the 1960s, they also echo back to the direct democracy of ancient Athens.

What is perhaps unique, however, is that children and young people are increasingly recognised as central to the lives of vibrant communities, if not always for positive reasons. Of late, negative perceptions of children and young people have dominated the political agenda and have played out in public depictions of young people as part of a 'broken Britain'. This does not, however, reflect the experience of those working with children and

young people across the country. Since 1997, children and young people have been a focus of New Labour, with the result that some of the government's most successful initiatives have been in this area. Children's well-being and the recognition of their place as valuable members of society is not just a domestic phenomenon. Across the world, from America to India, the right of children and young people to actively contribute to their communities is not only being recognised, but also valued and encouraged.

The children and young people's voluntary and community sector has been at the heart of both advocating for children and young people's rights and abilities to participate as well as facilitating such participation. As the agenda both nationally and locally has shifted from service delivery to place-shaping, the role of the third sector has become an established part of every political strategy. Although an evaluation of the voluntary and community sector's (VCS) contribution to the public service agenda is limited, the role of volunteers and community groups has long been a recognised part of our civic life. The networks, relationships and understanding of the VCS has always been a vital part of community development, well before its contribution was recognised by central government.

This aim of the this report is to provide an overview of the policy issues involved in the community empowerment agenda in England and the effect of these issues on the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. Specifically the remit of this research is as follows:

- Trace the development of the 'community empowerment' agenda over the last ten years
- Examine the role given to children and young people within current community empowerment policy
- Examine the contribution of the VCS (with a focus on the children and young people's voluntary and community sector) in shaping community empowerment policy
- Examine the effects of government community empowerment policy as it currently stands, with particular reference to the impact on, and of, the children and young people's voluntary and community sector
- Consider the political and economic trends that may influence the community empowerment agenda in the future, and the future opportunities for the VCS (with a focus on the children and young people's voluntary and community sector) to contribute to, and influence, community empowerment policy

Summary of report recommendations

For national and local government:

- Create a more stable funding environment for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector
- Central guidance on community empowerment infrastructure
- Move from children and young people's participation to children and young people's empowerment
- Consolidation of community empowerment initiatives/approaches

- Duty to involve children and young people in all aspects of community empowerment
- Clarity over the boundaries between participatory and representative democracy
- Participation should be linked to accredited programmes of skill development for young people
- Recognition of voluntary contribution to local communities

For children and young people's voluntary and community sector:

- Greater incentives for children and young people's voluntary and community sector's involvement
- A proactive approach to developing local empowerment networks
- Development of protocols for co-operation between larger and smaller voluntary and community organisations
- Greater skills development in participation across VCS
- The children and young people's voluntary and community sector must advocate for children and young people's community empowerment with their local authority
- Improving interactions between participative and representative democratic approaches
- Primary research on the impact of the community empowerment on children and young people and the children and young people's voluntary and community sector
- The children and young people's voluntary and community sector should have a greater engagement with all political parties and their policy organisations

See Part 6 (page 34) for full recommendations

A note on methodology

This report is the result of desk-based research, supplemented by a series of expert interviews. (A list of interviewees is provided at Appendix A). It is important to stress that this report is intended to give an overview of the development of the community empowerment agenda in England and its effect on the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. As a time limited study, it is not possible for this report to be as rigorous and comprehensive as a systemic literature review, but it is hoped the research highlights the main issues involved and gives a fair indication of the general assessment of these issues.

The definition of community empowerment used for this report is as defined by Communities and Local Government (CLG):

“Community empowerment is the process of enabling people to shape and choose the services they use on a personal basis, so that they can influence the way those services are delivered. It is often used in the same context as community engagement, which refers to the practical techniques of involving local people in local decisions and especially reaching out to those who feel distanced from public decisions.”¹

Whilst there is a large body of research concerning community empowerment, the research for this report yielded a very limited amount of work on the effect of the agenda on the children and young people’s voluntary and community sector at a national level. As a result, some of the findings in this report are extrapolations of findings at a local and regional level, where they appear to be of application to the situation manifesting nationally. Obviously, without further detailed research, it should be stated that these are therefore assumptions, albeit assumptions informed by current experiences of some within the sector. The report is therefore not evaluatory in nature, and cannot claim to make definitive statements about the extent to which these issues are experienced across England, nor whether these issues fully reflect the experience of the children and young people’s voluntary and community sector, rather than the limited literature reviewed.

Whilst the views and opinions of the expert interviewees have informed this report, it should be noted that the findings and arguments expressed within this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the interviewees. Any errors and omissions are the author's own.

¹ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/> [Accessed July 2009]

Part 1: The Development of Community Empowerment as a Policy Agenda

It's almost impossible for anyone working in the arena of local politics or community-based activism to avoid the term 'community empowerment'. In the last ten years there has been a raft of policy initiatives with the self-professed aim of empowering communities. Political parties across the spectrum, from the big three all the way through to the Green Party, and even the British National Party (BNP), all emphasise their commitment to the 'local'. The leaders of all the main parties stress the need for decisions to be made locally, the centrality of communities to the good of society, and the role of volunteers and civic service.

But what does the phrase community empowerment really mean? As with much policy language, a quick peek under the covers reveals an uncomfortable mix of vagueness, differing perceptions and varied goals.

To understand the ideas and principles of the concept, we have to take a glance back into our political and social history. Although community empowerment is currently in vogue in contemporary British politics, it would be a mistake to view it as purely a modern phenomenon. Whilst the community empowerment agenda as a distinct policy strand is relatively new (emerging as it has over the last decade) the ideas underpinning it have been part of our political culture since the 1960s.

Though perhaps the earliest seeds of modern community activism in the west can be traced back to Saul Alinsky in 1930s Chicago, it was the heady cocktail of post-war affluence, feminism, civil rights, anti-war movements and a generation brought up within universal comprehensive education that led to a radical shift in British attitudes towards each other, democracy and the state. The ideas of community empowerment and participation emerge from this background of social, cultural and economic change; declining deference, rising consumer power and (within the context of children and young people) the emergence of youth culture and a desire to create constructive outputs for people's energies.²

Rooted in the political theory of populism, and a version of liberal democratic thought termed 'neighbourhood democracy', the message of development from the ground up took hold, primarily in the field of international community development in the poorer areas of the world. Arguing that citizens had a right to participate in decision-making, participatory theory posed a new approach that challenged solely representative models of democracy, partially influenced by anti-statist anarchist political thought which viewed the state as a barrier to freedom, and a view that representative democracy did not create enough meaningful opportunity for the masses. Whereas the unit of representative democracy was national government, neighbourhood democracy advocated small scale institutions to realise the political aspirations of people in villages and urban areas. This reached a critical point for those working to develop communities across the world with the publication of two key documents by the United Nations in the 1970s.³

The 1980s saw a rise in participatory approaches in local decision making⁴ in the UK, though it was only with the election of the Labour Government in 1997 that participation

2 *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

3 *Community Participation, Social development, and the State*, James Midgley et al., 1986

4 *Active Citizenship and Effective Public Services and Programmes: How Can We Know What Really Works?*, Tessa Brannan et al, *Urban Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 5-6, 993-1008 (2006)

and community empowerment became a central part of government policy. It is indicative of the current government's emphasis on community empowerment that out of the 139 government documents concerning community empowerment, 137 were published after 1998.⁵ Though the majority of community empowerment policy originates from within Communities and Local Government (CLG), the presence of policy documents from a diverse set of government departments such as the Department of Health (DH), the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA) and the Home Office suggest that there is a foundation upon which to build a cross sectoral strategy.⁶

As a result, local authorities have invested millions in new structures, partnerships and governance arrangements to encourage citizen involvement as part of the New Localism agenda.⁷ The Local Government Act created new freedom to local areas, allowing them to determine their own priorities and plans based on local needs. In addition, a duty to involve⁸ introduced in 2007 created a step change in the way that local authorities (and other public service providers) were expected to involve people in decision-making about service provision and other areas. In April 2009, a strengthened duty to involve came into force making citizen involvement a requirement. The aim of the duty is to embed a culture of engagement and empowerment. This, in conjunction with the new Comprehensive Area Assessment, means that authorities must consider, as a matter of course, the possibilities for consultation and involvement of local people and their representatives, across all authority functions.

As alluded to in the previous historical context, the philosophy of community empowerment has been applied across the world, and in radically different environments and situations. If the universal goal of participation is to increase citizens' control over the decisions that affect their lives, the effects and aims of community empowerment strategies can vary. These can be summed up in three categories; the effect on participants, the effect on communities and the effect on decision making.

Effect on participants involved in the process⁹

- The extent to which participants have developed skills linked to empowerment (e.g. confidence, social networks, specialist policy knowledge) and whether they have increased their sense of internal political efficacy (the perception that they can influence their local place and services).

Effect on communities

- The effect of empowerment mechanisms on improving a community's level of political efficacy, social capital and social cohesiveness.

Effect on decision making

5 *Empowering Communities to Influence Local Decision Making: A systematic review of the evidence*, Communities and Local Government, 2009

6 *Ibid*

7 *Mapping Governance at the Local Level*, Kirsten Bound et al., Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005

8 Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007

9 *Empowering Communities to Influence Local Decision Making: A systematic review of the evidence*, Communities and Local Government, 2009

- The degree to which participants and communities are able to exercise more influence on decision making and if a sustained shift in power has taken place (towards communities and, in particular, previously excluded groups).

An examination of the political landscape of community empowerment, however, reveals that these three effects are not necessarily emphasised equally in different approaches leading to variations in what community empowerment is seen as, and used for.

Although, the main developments of the community empowerment agenda are encapsulated in the key policy documents listed below, they are only a small segment of the 137 policy documents that address community empowerment in some form. The spread of the policy, whilst indicative of government commitment, also highlights one of the current difficulties for those trying to engage in the policy debate.

Timeline of Key Policy Developments¹⁰

2000: *Modern Local Government: In touch with the people* (July 1998) – Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions – brought into being through the Local Government Act 2000

2001: *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal* (January) – Cabinet Office

2004: *The Future of Local Government: Developing a 10-year Vision* (July) – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

Local area agreements: A prospectus (August) – Communities and Local Government

2005: *Vibrant Local Leadership* (January)

Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why neighbourhoods matter (January)

Securing Better Outcomes: Developing a new performance framework (March)

2007: *Strong and Prosperous Communities: The Local Government White Paper* (October 2006) – Communities and Local Government - brought into being through Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007

Sustainable Communities Act 2007 (October)

Representing the Future (December) – Councillors Commission

2008: *From the Neighbourhood to the National: Policing our communities together* (July) – Home Office

Communities in Control: Real people, real power: The Empowerment White Paper (July) – Communities and Local Government – informed the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill 2008

2009: *Comprehensive Area Assessment: Framework document* (February) – Audit Commission, Care Quality Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation and Ofsted

Despite, or perhaps because of, the array of government policy work in this area, there is confusion over the definition and aim of community empowerment. For New Labour, civic renewal meant not just changing the relationship between citizens and the public realm but

¹⁰ Summary of key policy and legislation, Improvement and Development Agency website, accessed July 2009 [<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=9594791>]

also their relationship with representative democracy. Communities were seen as both a good in themselves but also a means to an end.¹¹ The goal of community empowerment strategies has therefore never been singular, the three main justifications for it being that it improves the delivery of public services, builds social networks and individual capacity, and that it counters disengagement in politics.¹² Research has shown that community development workers make the connection between formal mechanisms of representative democracy and more participative ways of working, such as community level consultations and informal networks. Community workers are often in a position to both support the involvement of marginalised communities and represent perspectives from overlooked voices.¹³

This multi-faceted approach has, however, drawn criticism for conflating two separate aims (improving service delivery and tackling democratic disengagement) and utilising participatory engagement as a universal solution. It has been argued that each problem is distinct and therefore requires different forms of engagement, and that the community empowerment agenda has not clearly articulated the relationship between mechanisms and aims.¹⁴

One of the most recent key interventions in the empowerment agenda, the *Communities in Control* White Paper, highlights another tension within empowerment policy. The White Paper sees community empowerment as something that is manifested primarily through the actions of individuals, rather than communities. Community empowerment is therefore the result of aggregated individual actions rather than collective organisation, relegating the VCS to the background. Whilst, of course, individual action is a key element of empowerment, wider networks and community organisations are also key. One of the problems with a focus on the individual citizen is that it doesn't easily lend itself to addressing the discrimination and inequality particular groups may face, or address systemic challenges.¹⁵ But if that is so, what does an empowered community rather than an individual look like? According to the Community Development Exchange an empowered community exhibits five dimensions. * These are that it is confident, inclusive, organised, co-operative and influential.¹⁶

The term 'empowerment' implies change: people's capacity and propensity to influence decisions that affect them (in their locality and in other aspects of their lives). An element of this is subjective; do people believe that they can influence decisions (as measured by the Government's National Indicator 4), and applies to individuals as citizens, consumers or service users. The Community Development Foundation states, in a community development context it usually refers to a collective, community-level change, resulting in improved collective efficacy. This has been defined as 'a shared belief that by working together we can make things happen for our community or in our area'.¹⁷

The various contexts and long history of empowerment themes has also lead to confusion

11 *Measuring Public Value: A competing values approach*, Colin Talbot, Work Foundation, 2008

12 *Community Participation: Who benefits?*, Kirsten Bound et al., Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006

13 *Community Development's Role in Empowerment*, Community Development Foundation, 2008

14 *Disconnected Citizens: Is Community Empowerment the Solution?*, Jessica Prendergrast, Social Market Foundation, 2008

15 *Reaction to the Empowerment White Paper* (Urban Forum Policy Report), Toby Blume, Urban Forum 2008

* DiCE (Dimensions of Community Empowerment) Framework

16 *What is Community Empowerment?*, Community Development Exchange, 2008

17 *Community Development's Role in Empowerment* (Briefing Paper), Community Development Foundation, 2008

over the definition of community empowerment. The words themselves are often replaceable for example, community by terms such as user, citizen or a specific such as 'youth' and empowerment by terms such as 'involvement', 'participation' or 'engagement'. These variations are often used interchangeably at all levels from front-line to strategy, even though they actually describe different goals and outcomes. The importance of words in this context is far more than a semantic quibble. In particular, empowerment implies a far more profound shift than can be found in involvement and participation. It implies a transfer of power though this is often not what occurs in practice.¹⁸

Perhaps the biggest criticism of government approaches to community empowerment is that despite the raft of initiatives, there has not been a significant shift of power as a result of the strategies. Out of the range of methods available for community empowerment (see box below), only two have been found to create spill over benefits for communities beyond the immediate participants; citizen governance and participatory budgeting.¹⁹

Methods of Community Empowerment²⁰

consultative mechanisms: written consultations, public meetings, citizens' panels, community forums, focus groups, petitions, Planning for real etc.;

deliberative mechanisms: citizens' juries, consensus conferences etc.;

co-governance mechanisms: participatory budgeting, youth councils, citizen governance, partnership boards etc.;

direct democracy mechanisms: referenda, town meetings, citizens' initiatives etc.

Ultimately, whilst participation is a necessary component of community empowerment, it is not sufficient. Community empowerment also implies a reconfiguration of power relations, and the removal of barriers to engagement, that prevent people from having influence over the decisions that will affect their lives. Not unnaturally government has seen community empowerment through a prism of itself, it is seen as the process by which people can shape and choose decisions, and the service delivery of statutory organisations, at both a national and local level. Whilst this is undoubtedly an essential element, there is a further dimension; the ability of communities to take action and affect change independently of the state.

Part 2: The Role of Children and Young People within Community Empowerment Policy

A specific interest in youth participation can be traced as far back as the 1960s, when the upheavals of the famous decade led to the Labour Government responding with youth policies and programmes. The trend continued throughout the seventies and eighties as central and local government opened up space for a more active role for young people.

18 *Disconnected citizens: Is Community Empowerment the Solution?*, Jessica Prendergrast, Social Market Foundation, 2008

19 *Empowering Communities to Influence Local Decision Making: A systematic review of the evidence*, Communities and Local Government, 2009

20 *Disconnected Citizens: Is Community Empowerment the Solution?*, Jessica Prendergrast, Social Market Foundation, 2008

Youth workers (in the public and voluntary sectors) were at the forefront of supporting youth participation in youth and community concerns whilst schools developed mechanisms for student participation in school governance. These developments in turn informed the wider dialogue about public participation that was emerging.²¹

A key development in the rights of children and young people to have their voices heard was the UK ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. Article 12.1 of the convention required that states 'shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'.

Following the election of the Labour Government, examples of young people's participation in public services could be found across numerous government programmes such as the Investing in Children initiative, Connexions, the Children's Fund and New Deal for Communities. Bringing the learning from these experiences together, the core principles of children and young people's involvement were set out in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) guidance *Learning to Listen* in 2001, and was co-ordinated across English government departments by the (now defunct) Children and Young People's Unit.

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 placed a duty on local authorities, working with partners, to promote the well-being of young people aged 13-19 through securing access to educational and recreational leisure-time activities (positive activities) and consult young people about youth provision in their area and take their views into account. In the same year, the Youth Opportunity Fund (YOF) and Youth Capital Fund (YCF) were established, as part of the proposals in the Youth Green Paper *Youth Matters*. The Funds comprised a total of £115 million of ring-fenced funding, which was distributed between all local authorities (LAs) to work with young people to administer over two years. Subsequently, the YOF and YCF were extended until 2011. The overall aim of the Funds is to improve the provision of positive activities for young people, by giving young people the power to decide how this funding should be spent in their area.

Empowerment was a key theme of *Aiming High for Young People: A ten year strategy for positive activities* (July 2007) and it included a commitment to increase the direct influence young people had over youth spending provision, building on the experiences of the Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Fund. It set out two specific targets: that local authorities should devolve five per cent of their budget for youth services to young people by 2010-11, and a longer-term ambition that by 2018, 25 per cent of local authority budgets for youth services or positive activities should be devolved to young people.

Youth participation is generally understood by the statutory and voluntary sectors to be the involvement of children and young people aged 10-25 in public decision making (i.e. decisions made by public sector agencies or organisations delivering public sector provision).²² Clearly, however, empowerment for children and young people spans a much wider range from the personal (skills, confidence and capacity) to the organisational. The *Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment*²³ paper identified young people as an underrepresented group in local decision-making across the UK, and the

²¹ *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

²² *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

²³ *Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment. A Guide for Local Authorities on enhancing capacity for public participation*, Communities and Local Government, 2006

Government has stated its commitment to include those groups who have traditionally not been included. However, as discussed in more detail later, these groups' involvement is not simply a matter of inclusion into a process, but also one of personal capacity building to enable participation. In this sense, approaches to children and young people's community empowerment cannot be divorced from the goal and methods of personal empowerment.

It is clear there is a government commitment to participation, evidenced by the endorsement of the UNCRC, early publications of the Children and Young People's Unit, the guidance on the creation of the Connexion service, Every Child Matters and the National Framework for Health Services for Children. The call to consult and involve children is a common theme. Whilst the rhetoric of commitment is advanced, in reality children and young people's influence on the political agenda is limited.

Children and young people are seen only as being contributors to issues which are perceived directly to involve them, such as youth provision and services, rather than necessarily having a part to play in larger decisions which shape the communities and neighbourhoods they live in, which all effect citizens, not just those in their age group. If participation is considered a fundamental right of citizenship, then children and young people should be able to put forward their views and are entitled to be listened to. Within this context, children and young people's participation is the assertion of their fundamental right to be part of the democratic process, and to be accepted as legitimate contributors. As some have written, the denial of this can therefore legitimately be construed as a denial of their human rights.²⁴

The purpose of children and young people's involvement is often assumed rather than implicit. As participation is often seen as a good thing in itself, different participation projects are accepted as making a contribution to an undefined purpose, and are not evaluated critically. Some commentators have questioned whether the priority at a local level is to be seen to be promoting children and young people's participation rather than actually making it worthwhile.²⁵ As has been discussed earlier, true empowerment results in the transfer or gaining of power. However, many local level approaches to children and young people's community empowerment still see that power rests with adult institutions, not only in determining the nature, extent and range of participation but also to evaluate and determine the effectiveness of such practice.²⁶

Children and young people's participation can be seen as being located solely in participative events, involving them as stakeholders, for example young people's Question Time or participatory budgeting. A slightly different, more integrated approach can, however, be seen in areas such as youth work, where not only is a young person's right to contribute recognised but where there is also a more equal balance of power between young people and the provider, characterised by youth-led practice and voluntary participation.²⁷ Viewing children and young people's participation as a static rather than progressive act, misses the ultimate empowerment goal which is to help children and young people to move to a position where they are directing and setting agendas rather than simply responding to adult imperatives, as encapsulated by the NCB below.

24 *Participation with Purpose*, Liam Cairns in *Children, Young People and Social Inclusion*, E. Kay M. Tisdall et al (eds), 2006

25 *Ibid*

26 *Ibid*

27 *Squaring The Circle? Findings of a 'modest inquiry' into the state of youth work practice in a changing policy environment*, Bernard Davis and Bryan Merton, De Montford University, 2009

“Children and young people’s participation can be thought of as a journey – where children, young people and adults work in partnership to increase the empowerment of children and young people.

Participation will often begin with children and young people being given a platform to speak to adults. Adults then begin to consult children and young people about what they need and what they want to happen. As confidence in participation grows, and trust and respect develops, children and young people will start to initiate activities with support from adults.

At some point in this journey of participation, children and young people will become empowered enough to initiate, take action and ask adults if they want involvement.’²⁸

Initiatives such as the Participation Works²⁹ consortium demonstrate a sector-led approach to promoting the participation of young people. The consortium is made up of six national children and young people’s agencies including NCVYS, the British Youth Council (BYC), Children’s Rights Alliance for England (CRAE), National Children’s Bureau (NCB), the National Youth Agency (NYA) and We Save the Children (England), and is funded by the Big Lottery Fund. This has collectively developed a comprehensive programme of activities and resources on participation to assist third sector organisations, including workshops, training sessions and supportive practitioner networks, designed to support organisations and practitioners who work with children and young people between the ages of 10-25 years old to develop good practice and a shared understanding of the benefits of youth participation across the sector.

Whilst concepts such as 'youth proofing' have become more widely utilised across central government, there is perhaps a lack of a common approach to children and young people's participation in decision making, hampering the development of sustainable participatory practices. There is a commitment within central government to youth participation, though unfortunately it can often be reduced to consultation and box-ticking rather than a meaningful engagement in policy development.³⁰

Part 3: The Impact of Community Empowerment Policy on Children and Young People, and the Children and Young People’s Voluntary and Community Sector

On the whole, the community empowerment agenda had been well received by the voluntary and community sector and other commentators.³¹ Although the themes of empowerment and participation have a long history, community empowerment as a distinct policy drive is still relatively new. In truth, the consequences of the flurry of policies enacted by the Labour Government (most of them after 2000), have yet to be fully understood on the ground. Whilst there exists a significant amount of policy and academic

28 *Participation in Our Village: Involving children and young people in the development of parish and town plans*, NCB/Forum for Rural Children and Young People, 2004

29 <http://www.participationworks.org.uk/>

30 *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

31 *Sector welcomes community empowerment white paper*, Matthew Little, 11 July 2008, Third Sector Online [<http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/News/Article/831027/Sector-welcomes-community-empowerment-white-paper/>]

evidence, there has been a lack of understanding as to what works and how³², perhaps in part due to the fragmentary nature of the policy agenda, and its cross-over with other elements of community development work. As a result, evidence of concrete outcomes from community empowerment has been limited, and it is still unclear how much public demand exists for participatory engagement.³³ In response, CLG commissioned De Montfort University in 2008 to analyse the evidence base on community empowerment, with the first set of initial findings published in May 2009. It is, however, estimated that almost a quarter of the adult population has taken part in some form of citizen involvement.³⁴

What is clear from the literature available is that community empowerment lives or dies at a local authority level rather than centrally. Local authority approaches and attitudes to children and young people's participation and empowerment are key, and the fate of the agenda is intimately tied in to the workings of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), Local Area Assessments (LAAs) and the children and young people's voluntary and community sector's ability to contribute and play an active part. The new performance framework sets out a number of explicit community empowerment national indicators, which local authorities can choose to be held accountable to.

- NI 1 – percentage of people from different backgrounds who believe people get on well together in their local area
- NI 2 – percentage of people who feel they belong to their neighbourhood
- NI 3 – level of civic participation in the local area
- NI 4 – percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their local area
- NI 5 – overall general satisfaction with the local area
- NI 6 – participation in regular volunteering
- NI 7 – environment for a thriving third sector.

Community empowerment and local authority agendas

Local authorities have been making progress in empowering young people in public service decision making, in part because, as the Carnegie Institute noted, some of the current policy makers, planners and service managers had been involved in the early waves of youth and student activism themselves.³⁵ In 2004 a comprehensive survey of participation activity in England showed that 4 out of 5 statutory and non-statutory organisations reported involving children and young people up to the age of 19 in decision making. Furthermore, almost 90% of statutory respondents and 75% of voluntary sector respondents said that the amount of work they did to involve children and young people had increased since 2000.³⁶ In addition, local authorities were the biggest group of participants in the Hear by Right! programme.³⁷

32 *Empowering Communities to Influence Local Decision Making: A systematic review of the evidence*, Communities and Local Government, 2009

33 *Disconnected Citizens: Is Community Empowerment the Solution?*, Jessica Prendergrast, Social Market Foundation, 2008

34 *Making Representative Democracy More Representative: Can new forms of citizen governance in the UK open up democracy?*, Peter John, Institute of Political and Economic Governance, University of Manchester, 2007

35 *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

36 *Ibid*

37 *Ibid*

Though many policy makers and service managers were receptive to youth participation, they were unsure of how to do participation well and meaningfully.³⁸ Although a range of national and regional infrastructure resources exist to support the participation and empowerment of children and young people, much of it is invisible to those who are not working in the field.³⁹ Local government still faces the challenge of building capacity across its organisations rather than just relying on youth and community workers.⁴⁰ Raising the profile of children and young people's participation in departments not directly working with them also represents a wider challenge, as too often children and young people may become defined as 'hard to reach'.

In addition, there are wide variations in the levels of commitment and styles of engagement exists a lack of evidence as to the impact and sustainability of this activity. There is an array of local government initiatives but a lack of coherence to these efforts. The challenge for youth services in local authorities in empowering young people is to take the next step, beyond high quality one-off decisions and into strategic decision making and planning, not just for youth services but across departments.⁴¹ This movement, from consultation to a deeper involvement is developing however, as approaches such as Youth Parliaments, Young Mayors etc. are starting to become more popular.⁴²

One of the most established mechanisms of community empowerment for young people is participatory budgeting. In fact, of any sector it is probably the children and young people's voluntary and community sector that has the most experience and skill in participatory budgets, learning which would be invaluable to other sectors as participatory budgeting gains a greater prominence. International evidence highlights that young people's involvement in wider budgeting decisions (and not just for young people-centred provision) can draw young people further into the decision-making process. The challenge is to encourage local authorities and other public bodies to open up their mainstream budgets to greater influence by communities, including young people.⁴³

The government's national strategy on participatory budgeting aims for it to be used in all local authorities by 2012. In terms of children and young people's empowerment, local authorities appear to be receptive to the participatory budgeting goals of Aiming Higher for Young People, but do see challenges in implementation, namely a lack of resources to support young people properly, attitudes of elected members and staff in departments not focused on youth activity and financial systems being too complicated and inflexible.⁴⁴

As discussed earlier, the two key initiatives in this area are the Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds. Evaluation of the funds has been positive, indicating positive benefits for those young people who took part in funding allocation decisions and those young people who were involved in projects which were given funding. Local authorities

38 *Ibid*

39 *Participation and Empowerment of Children and Young People in the South West: A Case Study* (Report 3), Empowering Communities Consortium, 2008

40 *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

41 *Public Officials and Community Involvement in Local Services*, Kathryn Ray et al, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008

42 *Every Organisation Matters: Mapping the children and young people's voluntary and community sector*, Gary Craig et al, Speaking Out (National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations/ National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), 2008

43 *Young People's Involvement in Participatory Budgeting*, National Youth Agency, 2007

44 *Budget Devolution: Survey and Seminar Report*, Local Government Association/National Youth Agency, 2008

considered young people to have done a good job in administering the funds. Importantly the funds had a wider set of effects on community organisation. As the funds became established, they received higher numbers of applications from the voluntary and community sector, and they acted as a catalyst for young people, who hadn't previously participated, to form their own community groups and apply for funding. In addition, as the funds became embedded, young people applied to carry out increasingly more creative and inventive projects.⁴⁵

Within the YOF/YCF programme the VCS has played numerous roles such as raising awareness about the scheme (particularly to disadvantaged groups), helping to manage the YOF distribution and having a seat on adult panels and steering groups helping to raise and resolve issues and concerns with bids. The VCS has also provided work opportunities for those who were ready to progress beyond the YOF/YCF initiatives. The sector has also benefited from the initiative as organisations are able to help or provide services young people wished to funded.⁴⁶

The relationship between the children and young people's voluntary and community sector and local authorities within the community empowerment agenda

Despite children and young people's participation rising up the agenda at a local authority level, the children and young people's voluntary and community sector has perhaps struggled to influence the agendas impacting on children and young people's community empowerment at a local level. The experience of the voluntary and community sector's involvement with Children and Young People's Plans (CYPP) appears to be reflective of the wider challenges the children and young people's voluntary and community sector faces⁴⁷ though it is by no means universal. Despite initial barriers, the voluntary and community sector was usually consulted during the initial development of CYPPs but its involvement diminished as the process progressed. Although explicitly mentioned as a partner during plan development, the VCS was seen as a provider without being acknowledged as being able to contribute to assessing needs or defining priorities (either directly or through accessing community views). Whilst the VCS is generally mentioned as a strategic partner, CYPPs rarely refer to the Compact and do not involve the VCS in commissioning.

The VCS had made good progress on meeting protocols on representation, accountability and communication. The structures and approach of CYPPs favour larger VCS organisations, and so there had been little development of partnerships or consortium arrangements to support the involvement of smaller VCS organisations.

However, research examining community engagement in the North East of England demonstrated a more positive story. It found that LSPs were meeting their statutory requirements with regard to Compacts or protocols with the VCS, and expressed a commitment to community engagement. There was also evidence of a range of indicators and targets specifically linked to engagement, and targets in some, though not all, community strategies and LAAs.⁴⁸ LSPs appear to be meeting statutory requirements on

45 *Outcomes of the Youth Opportunity Fund/Youth Capital Fund*, Sarah Golden et al, DCSF, 2008

46 *YOF/YCF Good Practice Guide*, National Youth Agency, 2008

47 *VCS engagement in the development of Children and Young People's Plans 2006/07: Current Status and Good Practice*, Sue Wade, VCS Engage, 2008

48 *Local Authority Approaches to Community Engagement, Empowerment and Development*, Lynne Humphrey et al, Centre for Knowledge Innovation, Technology and Enterprise, Newcastle University, 2008

community engagement in terms of the value of VCS inclusion, with formal representation being sought at all levels. Community Empowerment Networks were also recognised as vital to the co-ordination, facilitation and support of VCS access and input and there was also evidence of a commitment by LSPs to the engagement of a wide cross section of local community.⁴⁹

There was also a recognition within some community strategies that community engagement, and the required partnership working involved, required different skills, mechanisms and structures than currently existed within local authorities. Local authorities acknowledged the need to invest in the capacity building of community and VCS infrastructure as well as local authority officer and staff training in response to the new demands of engagement, partnership working and local service procurement and delivery.⁵⁰

Not all within the children and young people's voluntary and community sector have found such willing local authority partners. For some in the VCS engagement with the public sector amounted to little more than tokenism, with statutory partners still taking decisions unilaterally. This perhaps reflects a wider tension of government attempts to devolve power but within the context of a centralised political culture. Community empowerment is necessarily messy if it is to break down the borders between decisions and people, though this is perhaps an area of ambiguity that government (at both a central and local level) find difficult, despite any best intentions. As a result, the public sector initial response has been a more rigid 'command and control' approach to third sector participation, which rewards those partners that respond appropriately.⁵¹ Community participation also presents several challenges for community groups, including rivalry between local groups over funding and issues, and a lack of network.⁵²

According to research conducted by Children England on small organisations, 25% of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector is not involved in influencing structures, the majority of whom are smaller organisations with an income less than £50,000. The majority of those that are, however, represent only their own organisation, raising questions as to how well-networked the children and young people's voluntary and community sector is, and how much capacity smaller organisations have for participating in local authority networks.⁵³ The research found that the most common way for organisations to be involved in influencing structures was as advisors on services, helping to identifying needs and plan services. Structures that commissioned services and or distributed funds were the least likely to have children and young people's voluntary and community organisations involved.⁵⁴

The ability of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector to engage with the community empowerment agenda

Although the focus of this report is specifically 'community empowerment' it must be noted that the work of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector involved

49 *Ibid*

50 *Ibid*

51 *Community and Public Policy: the opportunities and pitfalls of new governance spaces*, Marilyn Taylor, University of the West of England, 2003

52 *Ibid*

53 *Under the Radar: A survey of small voluntary and community sector organisations working with children, young people and families*, Jordan Thompson, NCVCCO, 2008

54 *Ibid*

in this agenda usually spans beyond the concept. In fact, the work of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector is more often than not aimed at creating the prerequisite capacities needed for interaction in community empowerment initiatives. In this sense, it is perhaps artificial to separate out this work from the implications for community empowerment. For example, the work of the West Bowling Youth Initiative in Bradford has been recognised as helping the young men who take part in developing a sense of citizenship, leading them in volunteering opportunities within their communities on a wide range of activities.⁵⁵ Key to this successful engagement was the development of long-term relationships with young people and the wider community, something which short-term funding limits.

It is recognised that a good VCS infrastructure helps to enable public participation by offering a point of access for decision makers and allowing groups to act as conduits for participation. This infrastructure can be formal and informal, linking organisations to each other and policy makers.⁵⁶ But projects such as the West Bowling Youth Initiative illustrate that the children and young people's voluntary and community sector has a much deeper and longstanding role than simply being a conduit for public participation; it exists ultimately for a much wider role of enabling children and young people to become empowered in their own lives, not just as civic participants.

That is not to say that the children and young people's voluntary and community sector has not been a significant part of the community empowerment agenda. Since the late 1990s, there has been a significant increase in the number of designated youth participation workers in the public and voluntary sectors. The English Participation Workers Network* established by the Carnegie Young Peoples Initiative went from less than 70 members in 2002 to almost 2000 by 2007. This is not a new occupation however; the majority of the networks are teachers and youth workers, but number are from other sectors such as health, indicating the widening of the youth participation agenda.⁵⁷

As well as facilitating participation, the children and young people's voluntary and community sector are themselves participatory in nature, having a rich tradition of involving young people in their governance and services. The children and young people's voluntary and community sector's participation in the delivery of its own services is widespread, such as having 'Youth Steering Groups' on projects and involving young people in management committees.⁵⁸ However, despite rhetoric to the contrary, outside of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector, there is little evidence that the wider VCS has a culture of participation that is notably different from that of local authorities.⁵⁹

As has been discussed, children and young people's services and the children and young people's voluntary and community sector have a long history of being involved in the participation and empowerment of young people. Research in some regions, however, has found that the networks and expertise of the children and young people's voluntary and

55 *Lessons from West Bowling Youth Initiative: Then, now and the future*, Santokh Singh Gill, Joseph Rowntee Foundation, 2008

56 *A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Benefits of Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure*, Report for the Infrastructure National Partnership, Dr Rob Macmillan, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, 2006

* Now part of Participation Works, a Big Lottery funded programme.

57 *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

58 *Every Organisation Matters: Mapping the children and young people's voluntary and community sector*, Gary Craig et al, Speaking Out (National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations/ National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), 2008

59 *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

community sector can be 'locked up' within a single organisation or department, and does not influence the wider strategy planning and approach of local authorities.⁶⁰ There is space for the voluntary sector to drive community empowerment from the bottom up. For example in Hackney, two part-time Participation Workers appointed by the CVS, developed a joint working document called *Pathways to Participation*, which every local authority department has signed up to, facilitating the participation of young people.⁶¹

Whilst listening to children and young people is seen as central to the way grassroots organisations have always worked, it should not be assumed that all children and young people's voluntary and community organisations are automatic participation experts. Not all groups have the skills and capacities for deeper engagement, and further training is needed in the sector.⁶² Grassroots engagement can often be flexible using as it does an informal approach and a range of contacts. Experience of listening can however be patchy.⁶³ There is still a lack of professionals skilled in youth participation, without whom embedding high-quality, participatory practices will be difficult.⁶⁴

Empowerment has been successful in areas where the local authority has focused on developing the capacity of the VCS, especially smaller community organisations, for example Camden Council's work with Voluntary Action Camden to help small community organisations apply for YOF.⁶⁵ However, according to the Audit Commission, capacity building programmes within the VCS have not shown substantial local impact to date, and smaller voluntary organisations are sceptical of the potential of these programmes to improve their position.⁶⁶

The issue of VCS independence from local authorities also arises as a theme from the research, and is likely to be applicable to across the VCS including the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. The move from centrally administered Single Communities Programme (SCP) funding and to locally administered Safer Stronger Communities Fund (SSCF) means that community activity and community participation will be far more reliant on local authority support in the future. This could limit the extent to which communities and community organisations feel able to challenge and influence local authority policies.⁶⁷ The new arrangements will make communities and community groups more vulnerable to coercion where local authorities do not appreciate the benefits to be gained by genuinely involving citizens. This is in direct conflict with the original aims of the Single Communities Programme which was established to enable community and voluntary sector involvement as equal partners with public service providers in Local Strategic Partnerships and more widely.⁶⁸ In addition, the process of engagement with local authorities poses challenges to the identity of some within the VCS, especially smaller groups. Within Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and faith-based groups, there are

60 *Participation and Empowerment of Children and Young People in the South West: A Case Study* (Report 3), Empowering Communities Consortium, 2008

61 *Every Organisation Matters: Mapping the children and young people's voluntary and community sector*, Gary Craig et al, Speaking Out (National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations/ National Council for Voluntary Youth Services), 2008

62 *Ibid*

63 *Ibid*

64 *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

65 *YOF/YCF Good Practice Guide*, National Youth Agency, 2008

66 *Hearts and Minds: Commissioning from the voluntary sector*, Audit Commission, 2007

67 *Active Governance: The value added by community involvement in governance through local strategic partnerships*, Kath Maguire and Frances Truscott, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006

68 *Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal*, National Audit Office, 2004

those that reject the term 'hard to reach' believing that in actuality local authorities prefer to work with more visible, larger voluntary and community organisations. Therefore some groups actively seek to stay out of the reach of local authorities due to fears over the impact of partnership on their ethos, independence and autonomy.^{69 70}

Terms such as 'hard to reach' and 'marginalised' have little clear definition for many children and young people's voluntary and community organisations. Some in the field view such work as tokenistic and that time spent trying to prove they had reached these groups took up activity time. In research focused on the North East of England, youth participation was seen as voluntary and therefore too much targeted work was seen to be damaging infrastructure and weakening services. A one-size-fits all approach via directives from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), passed through local authority structures, was felt to be diverting away resources from those most in need. Those working with children and young people felt that targets needed to be more reflective of local need, drawing on local experience of informed youth work professionals.⁷¹

However, there are also tensions about partnership working within the VCS itself. For example, some smaller BME and faith-based voluntary and community organisations feel that the process of partnership within the VCS is limited. Opportunities for collaboration with larger VCS organisations is seen to either be a 'closed shop' of already established partnerships or an unequal partnership where smaller organisations are responsible for delivery and evaluation while the larger partners have responsibility for strategy development and funding.⁷²

The proliferation of participatory initiatives, whilst providing many opportunities for the VCS, has also led some within the children and young people's voluntary and community sector to find that there are demanding requests for engagement, stretching their capacities and resources. These new mechanisms for engagement can disrupt previous relationships and responsibilities leading to confusion as to suitable partners. The limited opportunities for engagement in local strategic planning processes can be problematic due to the difficulties in representing the full diversity of the voluntary and community sector providers. However, good representation and diversity are both key to successful empowerment; where there is the right range and variety of groups to organise participation, there tends to be more of it.⁷³

Infrastructure support for community empowerment

One of the recurring themes within community empowerment literature is the need for the VCS to be supported by infrastructure in order to deliver on community empowerment. Until recently, the key infrastructure for community empowerment was the Community

69 *Engaging 'Hard to Reach' Groups: Communicating and collaborating with the BME and faith-based VCS*, Annette Leader, VCS Engage/DCSF, 2008

70 *Faith Communities Contributing to LSP priorities*, Voices From Experience/National Empowerment Partnership in Yorkshire and the Humber, [publication date unknown]

71 *Youth Participation in the North West: Improving Youth Participation*, North West Regional Youth Work Unit and Liverpool Youth Service Youth Engagement Team, 2008

72 *Engaging 'Hard to Reach' groups: Communicating and collaborating with the BME and faith-based VCS*, Annette Leader, VCS Engage/DCSF, 2008

73 *A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Benefits of Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure*, Dr Rob Macmillan, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, 2006

Empowerment Network (CEN). Since 2001, £43 million a year was invested in developing community empowerment networks through the Single Community Programme. The aim was to foster community involvement in neighbourhood renewal initiatives. These networks, in turn, funded 25,000 community projects, provided the LSPs with access to a wider community network and led community development work. This funding ended in 2006, when the government decided that local areas should have more say in how their empowerment funding was spent. As a result, there has been a rapid decline in the number of CENs as many local authorities choose not to fund the networks themselves.

Evaluation by the Audit Commission found that CENs allowed community groups to have some success in influencing local public service providers' decisions and getting services that people wanted.⁷⁴ CENs allowed groups outside the board of LSPs to work with the public sector and also helped to bridge LSPs with the needs of community groups on the ground through developing accessible channels such as neighbourhood sub groups.⁷⁵ Where they worked well, CENs allowed the voluntary and community sector to accommodate the differences within the sector. CENs were most likely to succeed where the voluntary sector saw its role as supporting community groups,⁷⁶ though less well-developed grass roots community groups did become disillusioned where they felt dominated by the larger and more established voluntary sector within the CEN.

Following the withdrawal of CEN funding, there has been a lack of central guidance on providing support for the infrastructure required for engagement and empowerment. This lack of central government leadership means that it is left to negotiations between local authorities and the third sector to determine the investments in such issues, possibly leading to uneven provision in this respect. In addition, a further reduction in funding for community groups and infrastructure organisations has resulted from Local Area Agreement funds being pooled into a single pot and localities having more freedom to set priorities.⁷⁷

Infrastructure organisations have been equally important within the CYPPs, as they have not been funded at a local level, leaving VCS networks reliant on short-term government programmes like VCS Engage. Without structured support, VCS partnerships have tended to be the result of individual influence rather than a systemic approach.⁷⁸ This reflects other findings, which have found that successful collaboration is often reliant on key individuals with good networks, and a willingness from all parties to set aside organisational hierarchies. Whilst the reliance on individuals may or may not be inevitable, it does underline the fragility of many community level collaborations.⁷⁹

Sustainable funding for children and young people's voluntary and community organisations

In tandem with empowerment infrastructure, funding cycles have also proved to be a

74 *Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal*, National Audit Office, 2004

75 *Ibid*

76 *Ibid*

77 *Reaction to the Empowerment White Paper* (Urban Forum Policy Report), Toby Blume, Urban Forum 2008

78 *VCS Engagement in the Development of Children and Young People's Plans 2006/07: Current status and good practice*, Sue Wade, VCS Engage, 2008

79 *Remodelling the Third Sector: Advancing collaboration or competition in community based initiatives?*, Linda Milbourne, Birkbeck College/Birkbeck e-prints, 2009 [Available at: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/755>]

crucial factor affecting the involvement of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector in community empowerment initiatives. There is recognition that participation and empowerment requires a sustainable approach. Participatory mechanisms such as New Deal for Communities (NDCs), Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders (NMPs), Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are all designed to be long-term initiatives. However, policy is still implemented at local and neighbourhood level as a series of time-limited programmes. This drains the capacity for long-term community work, as development organisations divert energy to deal with the constant search for short-term funding.⁸⁰

The short-term nature of funding arrangements and the top down aspects of planning and change processes, has had effects on organisational stability, staffing and resources within the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. A large proportion of participation funding is project-based, putting large amounts of pressure on often very small staff teams to enable delivery. A lack of strong core budgets may therefore continue to impede delivery until this is addressed.⁸¹ Areas where there has been longer term (three-year) funding arrangements for VCS infrastructure support, reported greater stability and capacity to develop effective engagement processes.⁸² Resources come under further pressure due a lack of co-ordinated area based strategies, as changes in commissioning structures are seen as another set of procedures that have to be engaged with.⁸³ As locally flexible procedures, commissioning structures also demand variable forms of monitoring information, which has meant that the national picture for assessing the cost-benefit analysis of the impact of community empowerment approaches is not fully understood. Without burdening local agencies further, a model to assess the practical costs and true value of community empowerment initiatives is needed, particularly if these are to remain priorities for local funding following the next comprehensive spending review.

Short-term funding approaches have also undermined sector specific networks, such as local councils for voluntary youth services, as has the move of Connexions services into local authorities.⁸⁴ In addition to external limitations on funding, sections of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector have a lack of understanding about the opportunities available to them. Smaller groups in the sector are unaware that their experience and skills in participation can confer advantages when applying for funding.⁸⁵

There is also a perception within the VCS that the methods of funding are changing, with service contracts replacing grants to the detriment of the sector. Research indicates that grant funding has declined by 13% over the last three years,⁸⁶ and contracts now make up a greater proportion of VCS funding than grants.⁸⁷ Evaluation by the Audit Commission found that however, local authorities were not reducing total grant expenditure, but instead

80 *Removing the Barriers to Community Participation*, James Morris, National Community Forum, 2006

81 *Youth Participation in the North West: Improving Youth Participation*, North West Regional Youth Work Unit and Liverpool Youth Service Youth Engagement Team, 2008

82 *VCS Engagement in the Development of Children and Young People's Plans 2006/07: Current status and good practice*, Sue Wade, VCS Engage, 2008

83 *Remodelling the Third Sector: Advancing collaboration or competition in community based initiatives?*, Linda Milbourne, Birkbeck College/Birkbeck e-prints, 2009 [Available at: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/755>]

84 *Response to the Third Sector Strategy for Communities and Local Government*, NCVCCO/NCVYS, 2007

85 *Every Organisation Matters: Mapping the children and young people's voluntary and community sector*, Gary Craig et al, Speaking Out (National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations/ National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS)), 2008

86 *The Decline of Local Authority Grants for the Third Sector: Fact or fiction?*, Finance Hub, 2008,

87 *The UK Civil Society Almanac*, NCVO, 2008,

were aligning them more closely with their own strategic priorities.⁸⁸ These grants however, often came with service level agreements and were effectively viewed as contracts by the VCS, and 'strategic alignment' served to create proscriptive funding programmes.

Local authorities, following national guidance increasingly utilise a competitive commissioning process for services. Whilst larger children and young people's voluntary and community organisations are better placed in such a context, smaller and less experienced organisations felt that they lack both the time and skills to compete in bidding. The use of larger contracts by local authorities reduced costs local authorities but for small organisations the additional arrangements required to negotiate and manage combined bids and contracts are often more onerous than separate undertakings. In addition for small organisations with limited capacity, joint bids with bigger organisations were potentially more beneficial but also posed threats to loss of autonomy over values and ways of working.⁸⁹

A competitive tendering environment has also been reported to heighten tensions within the VCS, undermining partnership working. Fragile relationships with statutory agencies gave way to mistrust and demoralisation as new arrangements forced community organisations to compete with each other and new providers. Small and inexperienced groups, heavily dependent on volunteers, felt most vulnerable. Whilst even experienced community representatives found their relationships re-defined by funder-contractor power relations, their familiarity of the system meant that they were better able to participate and influence, leading to hierarchies of inclusion among community organisations. Competition also undermined trust in local partnership working highlighting the complex weave of purposes and interests involved.⁹⁰

Conceptual issues within the community empowerment agenda

Alongside practical issues of implementation, the community empowerment agenda has also experienced policy level challenges.

Approaches to participation are often not connected at neighbourhood, local and national level. Local authorities, departments, and delivery agencies tend to have their own interpretation of the value, purpose and best methods for participation. This has led to many different mechanisms operating in parallel. Community and voluntary groups involved in local policy making can find the range of structures confusing, leading to time and resources being spent simply on navigating the complex web of structures intended to facilitate participation. In addition, the lack of a universally understood definition and application of the term 'community participation' can differ not just between statutory bodies, but also within them. These variations can make it hard for different organisations to work in partnership with each other and with communities.⁹¹

The question of power transfer is still itself an issue. Participatory mechanisms need to be meaningful. Empowerment is not the same as consultation or engagement. Empowerment implies a control, the exercise of power. Participation doesn't necessarily mean increasing influence; barring a few exceptions (such as asset transfer or participatory budgeting),

88 *Hearts and Minds: Commissioning from the voluntary sector*, Audit Commission, 2007

89 *Remodelling the Third Sector: Advancing collaboration or competition in community based initiatives?*, Linda Milbourne, Birkbeck College/Birkbeck e-prints, 2009 [Available at: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/755>]

90 *Ibid*

91 *Removing the Barriers to Community Participation*, National Community Forum, James Morris, 2006

many initiatives leave power with those who already exercise it, leading to disenchantment.⁹² For example, reforms in children's and young people's services are potentially built on two conflicting premises where there is on the one hand an 'outcomes-led' planning model which draws on young people's and families' views in designing services, but on the other cross-sector partnerships who are responsible for delivering targets and strategies defined 'top-down'. In the current UK re-modelling of children and young people's services, centrally driven planning and performance priorities, linked to the ECM framework, potentially limit the scope of local authorities to respond to communities' needs.⁹³

Despite the policy aim of participative democracy reinvigorating engagement in politics in wider sense it can also come into conflict with more traditional representative models. Tensions can arise between councillors and those from the VCS involved in participatory governance approaches, as they perceive their role as democratic representatives are being undermined.⁹⁴ A situation of rivalry between the two community based actors is a somewhat ironic side effect of empowerment approached and one that therefore requires some thought by the VCS as to how councillors can be partners in community empowerment and where the relevant boundaries lie between differing responsibilities. The gap between the two is perhaps not as distinct as first appears; the increasing adoption of Young Mayor and Youth Parliament initiatives amply illustrate that participatory and representative models are not mutually exclusive ideas.

Young people's experience of empowerment

Whilst there is perhaps a need for more information on the desire for the wider population to participate, recent evidence suggests that youth participation in civic activities is strong. Half of all young people surveyed had given help to a group, club or organisation in the previous year. Participation in informal volunteering was highest among young people aged 16-24 (40%), whilst a quarter of young people in this age group participated in formal volunteering.⁹⁵

Despite this appetite for involvement, children and young people's experiences of decision making in public services are inconsistent, perhaps reflecting the lack of wider skills and experience within many public bodies in consulting them and the complexity of effective empowerment. Children and young people's opinions are not consistently sought or valued, and their ability to contribute is affected by a range of factors such as class, geography, ethnicity, social capital, personal skills and access to adult decision-makers⁹⁶ and those groups that have been involved in participation were often not linked to other groups or wider structures.⁹⁷

Where children and young people are consulted they often find themselves less valued than adult 'experts'. According to experiences reported by the North West Regional Youth

92 *Disconnected Citizens: Is Community Empowerment the Solution?*, Jessica Prendergrast, Social Market Foundation, 2008

93 *Remodelling the Third Sector: Advancing collaboration or competition in community based initiatives?*, Linda Milbourne, Birkbeck College/Birkbeck e-prints, 2009 [Available at: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/755>]

94 *Active Governance: The value added by community involvement in governance through local strategic partnerships*, Kath Maguire and Frances Truscott, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006

95 *Communities and Local Government Citizenship Survey: April – June 2007 (England and Wales)*, Communities and Local Government, 2007

96 *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust*, Carnegie Trust, 2008

97 *Youth Participation in the North West: Improving Youth Participation*, North West Regional Youth Work Unit and Liverpool Youth Service Youth Engagement Team, 2008

Work Unit, where there was a lack of interest from senior leaders, young people and their views were often brushed aside, which was demoralising.⁹⁸ For example, as part of the work by the National Empowerment Partnership, young people in Yorkshire and the Humber voiced their concern that they felt that interaction is still very much 'them and us' (adults and young people) and that statutory bodies needed to engage with young people as they would their adult peers. Importantly they also felt that they had a bigger potential to contribute than was currently being recognised, after all as young people they spent the majority of their time within their communities and were uniquely placed to offer insights into social and economic issues.⁹⁹ In addition, public agencies are reluctant to reflect and review youth participation processes, seeing it more as something to be done than something that should have an impact. According to the research of the Carnegie Trust, young people also perceived youth participation to be dominated by an 'elite' of regular middle class participants who had greater skills and confidence and shared a closer sensibility to the adults involved.¹⁰⁰ This highlights the clear complexities within definitions of empowerment. Without a certain degree of personal empowerment, young people without the necessary skills and confidence are at risk of being shut out of a wider community involvement. Unsurprisingly, there is a lack of knowledge and communication about local and regional empowerment mechanisms amongst marginalised young people* and there is a need for more personalised incentives to participate in empowerment initiatives such as an accreditation of the skills and personal development that occurs during empowerment participation.¹⁰¹

Accreditation for participation is a clear example of the blurred boundaries between personal and community empowerment, and this third space contains space for greater control of empowerment initiatives by young people themselves. As discussed earlier in this report, empowerment should ultimately result in self direction and agenda setting. The possibilities of peer-to-peer empowerment mean that there may need to be a greater recognition of youth-led organisations working with marginalised young people.¹⁰² Young people need to see other young people making change¹⁰³, and many express a desire to lead on empowerment activities, such as designing empowerment mechanisms and feel that there is a strong role for youth led organisations to run these initial stages and have more involvement.¹⁰⁴

Empowering young people to take control rather than merely have a say does not, however, mean that local authorities or the third sector can take a step back. Another important factor in engaging young people in empowerment is the need for some form of formal structure with clarity about their role and the extent of the power and influence they are able to exercise, even though this may seem counterintuitive when compared with the informal and participatory way that empowerment actually needs to work. What is central

98 *Ibid*

99 *The Power of Young People: What empowerment means to us, Voice From Experience/ National Empowerment Partnership, 2009*

100 *Empowering Young People: The Final Report of the Carnegie Trust, Carnegie Trust, 2008*

* There are several groups prone to minimal engagement with mainstream activities. These groups are BAME, the disabled, refugees, asylum seekers, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), offenders, ex-offenders, young parents, travellers and gypsies and those not in education, employment or training.

101 *Empowering Young London: A youth-led investigation into what works & what doesn't, Independent Academic Research Studies, 2009*

102 *Ibid*

103 *Youth Participation in the North West: Improving Youth Participation, North West Regional Youth Work Unit and Liverpool Youth Service Youth Engagement Team, 2008*

104 *Empowering Young London: A youth-led investigation into what works & what doesn't, Independent Academic Research Studies, 2009*

to the process, however, is the need to be honest, open, to communicate clearly and clarify realistic expectations about what is possible.¹⁰⁵

Part 4: Projects Empowering Children and Young People in Communities

Voluntary and community organisations have long invested in developing local communities through a variety of approaches which contribute to more empowered children and young people. As demonstrated by the case studies below, these projects achieve a multitude of outcomes for children and young people and in doing so, help to also create a stronger sense of empowerment amongst some of the most disengaged in society. The full value of these projects in contributing not only to the intended outcomes for each project, but to those that also enhance community empowerment as part of the overall programme of work should be acknowledged and understood in terms of the overall benefit to society in funding this work. The following are offered as a flavour of the practice which exists in the sector to empower communities.

BANG Edutainment – empowering disengaged young people through skills development

BANG Edutainment's B Logic programme is delivered in Brent and Harrow in partnership with local youth services and colleges helps young people aged 14-18 already not in education, employment or training (or at risk of becoming so) to access training, personalised support, information, advice and guidance and work placements to encourage future employment prospects.

As well as the key focus of gaining skills and knowledge needed to access a career path, the project is typical of activities delivered by the sector which in effect empower some of the most disengaged young people to more proactively engage with their local communities. Young people engaging in the programme are encouraged to use the support they receive to more strongly exercise their voices within their local communities through using the BANG Radio station. BANG works closely with councils, schools, faith groups and other voluntary and community organisations to further ensure young people at risk of disengagement are more likely to participate and move towards a more actively empowered role in their local communities.

For more information contact:

Alex Mastihi, Project Director

T: 0208 963 9564

E: alex@bang-ed.com

W: www.bang-ed.com and www.bangradio.fm

105 *Participation and Empowerment of Children and Young People in the South West: A Case Study* (Report 3), Empowering Communities Consortium, 2008

PARCA – empowering disengaged local communities

Working with the African community PARCA is a Refugee community based organisation set up by Refugees and Asylum Seekers. One of the projects delivered by the organisation was a youth event to mark Refugee Week 2009. The aim of the event was to bring together members of the local Peterborough community including Refugee and Asylum Seekers from different countries as part of an integration and cohesion agenda. The project empowered young people to speak out: to build their confidence and self esteem, and give them the opportunity to speak out at the event.

For more information contact:

Moez Nathu, Project Coordinator

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E: ukparca@yahoo.co.uk

W: www.poor-refugee.org and www.parcajs.com

Streetspace – developing community facilities

Based in Chard, Somerset, Streetspace is a project working with marginalised young people on the streets through detached youth work, undertaking research into street based approaches to engaging young people at risk, and delivering training and consultancy on engaging young people in developing local community facilities.

Over the past three years the project has worked with over 50 local young people and have raised £35,000 in funding towards local community projects, including funds to enable a skate park to be extended and install lighting that will not only light the skate park but also the adjacent multi use games area. A good response has been received from the local community, council and newspapers who have been positive about this example of young people working together in their community and a reduction in crime around the local skate park has been one of the many positive outcomes achieved.

For more information contact:

Richard Passmore, Project Leader and National Youth Work Development Advisor at Frontier Youth Trust

E: admin@streetspace.org.uk

W: www.streetspace.org.uk

Jewish lads and girls brigade – creating long term sustainability of communities through the sector

The Jewish Lads' & Girls' Brigade (JLGB) is the oldest Jewish youth movement founded in 1895, which brings together young people aged 8 to 18 from virtually every Jewish area in the UK to offer training, leadership and social development opportunities for young people.

Young JLGB members gain support in a number of key areas including through activities to promote personal development in creativity, active and healthy living, citizenship and community, social and emotional development, leadership, and the Jewish identity.

Young people give back to the community as volunteers, passing on experiences through generations. The JLGB community creates a sense of belonging for young people from all Jewish backgrounds and acts as a glue to strengthen and empower communities as a very high proportion of them grow up to become adult volunteer leaders and a more connected to their identify, community and peers as a result of the opportunities offered.

For more information contact:

Neil Martin, Chief Executive

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W: www.jlgb.org

Prince's Trust - Strengthening Communities: Start a chain reaction

The Prince's Trust is a charity which helps disadvantaged young people overcome barriers to achieve their potential. They work with those who struggle at school, are in or leaving care, are long-term unemployed or have been in trouble with the law. The Trust works in some of the most fractured areas of the UK, be this through high unemployment, poverty, racial tensions or criminal activity.

Core to The Trust's work are youth-led projects that bring benefit to the area, involving a mix of young people. These young people, who are often dismissed as troublemakers, can also be the most perceptive to the issues that need to be addressed. They have much to contribute to policies affecting communities. These young people have transformed their local communities through 1,000 Prince's Trust projects last year, an investment worth £6 million. The Trust supported 40,000 young people this year, benefiting their families, their communities and society as a whole. The Prince's Trust has produced a report outlining key findings from a seminar held in 2009 on strengthening communities involving representatives from various youth-led projects around the UK and puts forward a series of recommendations for policy makers: *Strengthening Communities*¹⁰⁶.

For more information contact:

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Young Pioneers – developing a voice for young people

Young Pioneers were commissioned to carry out a youth participation research project to enable young people to have a 'voice' about how their outside play space. Primarily this was aimed at children from 8-13 as outside play area provision for them in the area is the poorest, but it also incorporated the views and opinions from all local young people through onsite, and observation work. Young Pioneers worked in Primary and Secondary schools to identify young people's concept of 'play', what spaces they like to

¹⁰⁶ *Strengthening Communities: start a chain reaction*, Prince's Trust, 2009 [http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/news/strengthening_communities.aspx]

play in, where they like to play and what their ideas for improvements. Schools used interactive key pads to show their thoughts and ideas and discussions took place during and after each question to enhance pupil voice and understanding. This information was then presented to the council to help with decisions over final designs. Thus enabling young people to have an actual say in something in their community.

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Part 5: The Future Direction of the Community Empowerment Agenda

To date the community empowerment agenda has been the beneficiary of good political fortunes. In recent times in particular it has been advanced by David Miliband and Hazel Blears, both of whom were committed to the empowerment agenda as Secretaries of State. Although the Blears era has been criticised by some for being stronger on rhetoric than it has been on delivery¹⁰⁷, others have been more optimistic viewing the developments as a promising start, especially a clearer reconfiguration of the role of central and local government and the duty for involvement.

However, the initial indications are that the community empowerment agenda may slide far down the priorities of both central and local government in the short term. The draft Communities Empowerment Bill has been scrapped, and it has been indicated that no further provisions from the Bill will be put forward. This on its own may not pose a substantial problem; most measures did not require legislation and the majority of those that did have been included in the local democracy bill currently before parliament.¹⁰⁸ However, John Denham has also indicated that economic regeneration and skills development will be the top priorities for CLG under his tenure.¹⁰⁹

In the short to medium term, the factors that will have the biggest effect on the future of community empowerment are the economy, a change in government and the direction of travel in localism.

At the time of writing, it appears that there is a strong likelihood of there being a change of government at the next election. Statements by David Cameron and other shadow cabinet members of the Conservative Party indicate that localism and the third sector will be key policy areas under a Conservative Government, such as the policy pledge to create an Office of Civil Society. However, the Tory emphasis differs from that of the current Government. The Conservatives display a strong commitment firmly on reforming local representative democratic processes, and there is little mention of participative approaches to local decision making in its current policy documents. The Local Government Policy paper¹¹⁰ makes no mention of participative democratic models except for the right to instigate a referendum through petitions instigated by the public.

The motif of 'people power' is a recurrent theme in current Conservative statements. Recent speeches by David Cameron have indicated that 'social action' is seen as a core part of a strategy of political re-engagement. Whereas Labour conceptions of 'people power' centred on having a say in state services, the Tory conception rests more on involvement in community projects outside of the remit of state, so as to "broaden what politics is about"¹¹¹. This is perhaps an indication of where a future Tory Government will seek to locate discussions about citizens' influence in the decisions that affect their communities. As David Cameron has said, a Conservative Government will seek not to "automatically think about what the government should be doing in a top-down way - we

107 *Who will give more power to town halls?*, Peter Heatherington, The Guardian, 10th June 2009 [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2009/jun/10/local-government-david-cameron>]

108 Ministers scrap community empowerment bill, Herpreet Kaur Grewal, Regen.net, 18 May 2009 [<http://www.regen.net/news/ByDiscipline/Community-Renewal/login/906241/>]

109 *New communities secretary to focus on skills*, Allister Hayman, Regen.net, 29 June 2009, [<http://www.regen.net/news/916171/New-communities-secretary-focus-skills/>]

110 *Control Shift Returning Power to Local Communities* (Responsibility Agenda Policy Green Paper No.9), The Conservative Party, 2008

111 *Making politics relevant to people*, Speech by David Cameron, July 1 2009

[the Conservative Party] start from a position of asking what each of us as individuals, as communities, should be doing.”¹¹² Such an approach may therefore shift attention to different areas, and different types of organisation, within the VCS. This, however, still leaves unanswered questions about a Conservative approach to community issues that reside within the remit of the state, and how 'people power' will translate.

An indication of the future direction of travel is the pledge to encourage co-operatives as a mechanism for delivering and commissioning public services, through the transfer of public assets and revenue streams to such bodies (for example schools run by parent co-operatives). This clearly poses an opportunity for empowerment where co-operatives are run and managed locally but the proposal lacks details about what duties co-operatives would have to involve non-members in governance and decision making. The challenge for empowerment under a Conservative Government will be the right of involvement where the state is not the service commissioner or deliverer. It should also be noted that at the time of writing, in terms of empowerment for young people, the Conservative Party has not directly addressed their vision for children and young people.

The question of funding for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector is an area where future change is highly likely; whichever political party constitutes the next government, there is likely to be considerable variation in this area. The two funding streams (the Capacitybuilders programme and the Empowerment Fund) within the *Communities in Control* White Paper demonstrate the direction of the Labour Party. Grant-run organisations are less in favour, continuing a trend towards contracts in the community sector which, as discussed earlier, is felt to hamper long-term planning and strategies. In addition, an emphasis on social enterprise (which comprise a small section of the VCS, but make up half of VCS total income¹¹³) is seen as problematic as many small, less formal community groups will not be able to operate as income-generating businesses, and loans (25% of the Capacitybuilders fund) may not be the best option in the current financial climate. To date, however, no funding has been distributed by the Fund.¹¹⁴ The Empowerment Fund has also disenfranchised smaller organisations by setting an arbitrary threshold below which organisations cannot apply, irrespective of their ability to contribute to the programme's aims.¹¹⁵

The Conservative Party has taken a different approach on the issue of VCS funding.¹¹⁶ It intends to replace the Big Lottery Fund with a Voluntary Action Lottery Fund, which will solely fund VCS activity, and has issued a fair deal on funding which promises:

- Multi-year funding as the norm
- Simplification and stability of funding streams
- Grant to be specified as lightly as possible, with a significant proportion of largely unspecified demand-led funding
- Greater diversity in the size of grants made available
- Localisation of grant funding decisions

112 *Ibid*

113 *A Stronger Society: Voluntary Action in the 21st Century* (Responsibility Agenda Policy Green Paper No.5), The Conservative Party, 2008

114 *£70m Communitybuilders fund has spent nothing so far*, John Plummer, Third Sector Online, 22 May 2009 [<http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/channels/Fundraising/Article/907741/70m-Communitybuilders-fund-spent-nothing-so-far/>]

115 *Reaction to the Empowerment White Paper* (Policy Report), Urban Forum, Toby Blume, 2008

116 *A Stronger Society: Voluntary Action in the 21st Century* (Responsibility Agenda Policy Green paper No.5), The Conservative Party, 2008

This action on grants is also accompanied by an emphasis on voluntary organisations maximising their voluntary donation income, independence from the state and a desire to increase the participation of volunteers. VCS organisations delivering public services will also benefit from a modernised full cost recovery system that is in line with standard commercial practice. In common with the Labour Party, there is also a strong emphasis on social enterprises, including a pledge to make involvement of social enterprises in public service delivery as a strategic priority.

The financial prognosis for both central and local government is bleak as public sector debt is projected to increase and real term spending frozen¹¹⁷ with the need for fiscal tightening to bring public borrowing to pre-credit crunch levels continuing into the early 2030s.¹¹⁸ Whilst it is clear that the funding regime for local government will be severely affected, the economic slowdown will not affect all areas equally¹¹⁹, thus raising the possibilities of a variety of responses at a local level. This context suggests that the immediate concerns for local government will not be on further embedding community empowerment. Whether this means a retraction from the participative approaches already in place is difficult to say at this moment in time.

Whilst not directly related to community empowerment it is also worth considering the wider effects of the change in political and economic trends on the VCS briefly, as this will undoubtedly affect which organisations will be in a position to interact with community empowerment work. Greater pressure on public finance and an increased emphasis on the role of non-statutory actors may give the VCS greater political influence, as politicians come increasingly under pressure to deliver as resources decline. However, this is also a double edged sword as a more prominent role will also put the VCS under greater scrutiny and responsibility. In a wider sense, the role of the VCS in government policy may undergo a series of changes. Both the Labour Government and the Conservative opposition are strong advocates of the role of the VCS in public service delivery and civic regeneration. However, in 2008 the Public Administration Select Committee reported that there was still a lack of evidence against which to measure the performance of the VCS. In conjunction with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Barrow Cadbury Trust, the Office of the Third Sector established the Third Sector Research Centre to investigate the effects and the performance of the VCS. As more evaluatory data emerges, the potential for shifts in the way local councils work and commission the VCS could be radically different.

In addition, whilst the total income of the sector may not necessarily decline, recessions tend to polarise the VCS. Large organisations tend to get larger but small organisations struggle, due to a lack of funding diversity, less strategic planning, smaller assets and a lack of flexible capacity. Income from private donations tends not to change, though corporate giving and legacies may be adversely affected. Evidence from previous recessions indicates that funding from central and local government is likely to be cut. For example, the YOF and YCF are provided as ring-fenced budgets from central government until at least 2011. As most budgets for services for young people contain very little unallocated money or project funding, the future of YOF/YCF beyond 2011 is likely to be

117 *IFS Green Budget 2009*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2009

118 *Public services warned to prepare for three-year freeze*, Tash Shifrin, Public Finance, 20th February 2009 [<http://archive.publicfinance.co.uk/news/Public-services-warned-to-prepare-for-three-year-freeze.cfm>]

119 *From Recession to Recovery: The local dimensions*, Local Government Association, 2008

much smaller than the current YOF/YCF allocations¹²⁰, if it survives.

Sub-sectors within the VCS will fare differently.¹²¹ The recession is likely to directly affect the capacity of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector to engage with community empowerment work. Funding from statutory agencies for young people services is most precarious in areas where there is most need, as it is here that local resources are most stretched. It is highly likely that children and young people's services generally, but especially in these areas will suffer from a reduction in funding. In addition, children and young people's charities obtain a significant proportion of funding through charitable trust and corporate donations, which have in the past declined in line with falls in income.¹²²

Part 6: Recommendations

Whilst the overall findings of this report have been largely positive about the direction of travel of the community empowerment agenda, a number of key issues arise as a result of the research. It is clear that although there has been a general willingness to engage in the community empowerment agenda, there is quite some distance to travel before we embed empowerment as a daily reality in the lives of both local authorities and the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. There are a number of areas which require work from both national and local government, and the children and young people's voluntary and community sector and the following recommendations make suggestions as to the direction that policy initiatives should pursue.

For national and local government:

- **Create a more stable funding environment for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector**

Short-term funding cycles have created instability within the children and young people's voluntary and community sector, and impeded the core work of many organisations, especially smaller organisations. Funding for organisations rather than projects should be the default for children and young people's voluntary and community sector involved in community empowerment programmes. Where project funding is appropriate, empowerment work should be funded on a rolling basis, allowing organisations that meet agreed outcomes to continue service provision. Grants should be restored to their previous role, as a support for the VCS, not as mechanisms for the local authorities to meet their strategic objectives, through the encouragement of VCS-defined bids based around themes rather than local authority determined project specifications. Grant awards should be determined in conjunction with children and young people. A significant element of grant funding for community empowerment should be administered nationally to maintain VCS independence from local authorities.

- **Central guidance on community empowerment infrastructure**

The lack of central funding for empowerment infrastructure leaves space for the

120 *Budget Devolution: Survey and Seminar Report*, Local Government Association/National Youth Agency, 2008

121 *What do we know about what happens to the sector in a downturn?*, Megan Griffith-Gray, NCVO Third Sector Foresight, 2008 [<http://www.3s4.org.uk/news/what-do-we-know-about-what-happens-to-the-sector-in-a-downturn>]

122 *Rethinking Recession: Needs and opportunities for sector change*, Report to The Prince's Trust, Professor Jenny Harrow and Professor Cathy Pharoah, ESRC Research Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy (CCGAP), Cass Business School, 2009

development of large variations in VCS support networks across England. In the absence of national funding, central government should issue clear guidance as to the expectations of local authorities in encouraging and supporting a thriving local voluntary and community sector. The provision of community empowerment infrastructure funding and support should be incorporated into assessments of National Indicator 7 (environment for a thriving third sector)

- **Move from children and young people's participation to children and young people's empowerment**

Participation of children and young people is well on its way to becoming established practice. Local authorities need to now move beyond involvement to true empowerment. The duty to involve should be supplemented with a duty to empower. Children and young people need to be empowered to be involved in strategic conversations and agenda setting, and defining the terms of engagement. This must also include a greater emphasis on youth-led initiatives and peer-to-peer engagement strategies.

- **Consolidation of community empowerment initiatives/approaches**

There is a lack of clarity within the VCS due to the plethora of community empowerment initiatives emanating from a number of national level sources and interpreted differently by individual local authority departments. At a national level, there should be a Community Empowerment Commissioner whose responsibility it is to co-ordinate the various empowerment initiatives across government and provide clear guidance to the VCS and statutory agencies as to the opportunities and duties presented by the various strands of community empowerment policy.

- **Duty to involve children and young people in all aspects of community empowerment**

Children and young people should be empowered to contribute to any issue that affects the communities they live in, not just children and young people's services. National Indicator 3 (civic participation in the local area) should include a specific measure of children and young people's participation, and the default position for any empowerment initiative should be the inclusion of children and young people unless there is a strong case that it is inappropriate or not relevant. At a local authority level, this should also include a specific agenda to embed a culture of children and young people's participation across all departments.

- **Clarity over the boundaries between participatory and representative democracy**

An increase in genuine empowerment raises legitimate issues about decision making, accountability and representativeness. Central guidance is needed to ensure that the participatory approaches and representative models (such as councillors and elected mayors) are complementary not conflicting, and that decision making within empowerment initiatives does not conflict with the principles of local democracy. Councillors should receive training as to how they can work with participatory initiatives.

- **Participation should be linked to accredited programmes of skill development for young people**

The link between personal empowerment and community empowerment needs to be strengthened, especially for children and young people who require a greater focus on their capacity building. Participation in community empowerment schemes should be accredited and recognised through a personal development and skills accreditation, which

can contribute towards entrance into a further education or training.

- **Recognition of voluntary contribution to local communities**

Recognition for volunteers should be encouraged to incentivise greater community contributions to the local voluntary and community sector. NCVYS 's volunteer accreditation scheme provides a mechanism for celebrating and recognising volunteering without placing costly and unnecessary expectations on the sector to implement qualifications which could act as barriers to involvement.

For children and young people's voluntary and community:

- **A proactive approach to developing local empowerment networks**

Without a guarantee of funding for community empowerment networks, the children and young people's voluntary and community sector should be pro-active in creating collaborative networks using informal mechanism and social media. VCS groups should also seek to create these links with their local authority and other statutory agencies.

- **Development of protocols for co-operation between larger and smaller voluntary and community organisations**

Tensions exist within the power dynamics of the VCS. National children and young people's voluntary and community organisations need to develop protocols to strengthen collaboration to ensure that smaller VCS organisations are able to contribute to local participation arrangements, particularly with reference to ensuring a fair distribution of strategic input, risk, development and responsibility within partnership working. Larger, more established voluntary and community organisations should ensure that the smaller grassroots and community groups are involved in LSP/LAA conversations.

- **Greater skills development in participation across VCS**

Larger voluntary and community organisations, supported by statutory authorities, should co-ordinate empowerment and participation mentoring networks for community organisations to facilitate capacity building at a grassroots level. A focus should be on engaging with local authorities and statutory services at a strategic level, and accessing funding based on organisational skills in participatory approaches. It should be based on a developmental, vocational approach to encourage take-up.

- **Children and young people's voluntary and community sector must advocate for children and young people's community empowerment within their local authority**

Despite the good progress to date, there is clearly more work to be done to spread awareness of children and young people's participation and it's benefits, particularly amongst local authority departments that do not work directly with children and young people. Children and young people's voluntary and community organisations must take responsibility for engaging with senior officers to spread the value of existing work and make the case for children and young people's participation and empowerment as important components of local community strategies.

- **Improving interactions between participative and representative democratic approaches**

The children and young people's voluntary and community sector should actively seek to develop strong relationships with their councillors and elected Mayor (if applicable).

Activists, staff and children and young people should be aware of how to lobby and campaign elected members, and bridge the gap between participative and representative approaches. In particular, the children and young people's voluntary and community sector should be made more aware of the fact that they can lobby their councillor (as can others), and try to persuade them to launch a Community Call to Action forcing the local authority to duly consider the issue raised.

- **Primary research on the impact of the community empowerment on children and young people and the voluntary and community sector**

There exists little detailed national level research on the children and young people's voluntary and community sector, and how it has been affected by the community empowerment agenda. In addition, there is very limited evaluation data as to the impact of children and young people's participation and the cost benefit of this to local communities.¹²³ Detailed primary research is required to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues and benefits involved.

- **The children and young people's voluntary and community sector should have a greater engagement with all political parties as well as their respective policy organisations**

At the time of writing, a change in government the next election is a real possibility, and one that the children and young people's voluntary and community sector needs to do more to prepare for. Conservative Party policy on community empowerment and the role of children and young people in society at present is general and presents an opportunity for organisations within the sector to influence and shape Tory thinking on these issues, as well as gain a greater understanding of the policy environment they may be operating in, within the next few years. As this agenda evolves, the VCS will be an important driver of its future direction and needs to work with policy-making bodies across the political spectrum, and associated research and academic institutions, in order to influence future planning and implementation of this important policy agenda.

Conclusion

The indications are that the children and young people's voluntary and community sector, alongside the third sector as a whole, will continue to have a central role in public policy for the near future. However, the ability of the sector to contribute to community empowerment will require a shift in emphasis from current mind-sets and practice. In an environment of budgetary cutbacks and the inevitable smaller state, the children and young people's voluntary and community sector will have to be both pro-active and enterprising if it is to survive and thrive. An entrepreneurial approach will be required to build and sustain networks, and advocate for children and young people's rights to participate. As localism takes root, the terrain of political battle looks likely to be the neighbourhood as much as the nation. If national and local priorities shift to the difficult terrain of service reduction, and the third sector is expected to be both independent and business-like, the responsibility for safeguarding the role of children and young people's participation in civic life will fall on the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. The challenge will be to maintain a strong voice and push the agenda of community empowerment closer to its true meaning - the transfer of power to those without it.

¹²³ *Participation and Empowerment Among Children and Young People: A Case Study*, The Evaluation Trust & South West Foundation, 2008

Appendix A: Expert Interviewees

- Toby Blume, Chief Executive, Urban Forum
- Gary Buxton, Chief Executive, Young Advisors
- Professor Gary Craig, Professor of Social Justice, Hull University
- Nina Jatana, Policy Manager, Bassac
- Sharon Long, London Regional Manager, VCS Engage
- Hannah Peaker, London Empowerment Partnership Co-ordinator, London Civic Forum
- Omar Salem, Lead UpRising Leadership Programme, The Young Foundation
- Professor Gerry Stoker, Professor of Politics and Governance, University of Southampton
- Professor Marilyn Taylor, Professor of Urban Governance and Regeneration, Brunel University
- Gethyn Williams, Policy and Networks Manager, London Voluntary Service Council

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