

Speaking Out Briefing No. 23

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

In August 2009, Demos, commissioned by Speaking Out, produced a report setting out its findings from a scoping study concerning community empowerment issues relating to children and young people. This briefing paper introduces the Demos study and summarises key points and recommendations for Government and the children and young people's voluntary and community sector.

This briefing paper is part of the Speaking Out series.

Speaking Out

Speaking Out is a partnership between the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) and Children England, which seeks to build a voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector across government.

The project aims to develop closer links between a range of Government departments - including the Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Department of Health, Communities and Local Government, Cabinet Office and HM Treasury - and the voluntary and community sector in delivering cross-departmental policies, such as Every Child Matters and *The Children's Plan*, and the direct implementation of initiatives that affect children and young people.

Speaking Out aims to support voluntary and community organisations that work with young people to better understand the impact of government policies on their service users and provide routes to influence policymaking.

The project is funded by the Office of the Third Sector in the Cabinet Office.

Who are these briefings for?

This series of briefings intends to provide members of both NCVYS and Children England and other interested parties with background and analysis on specific policy items affecting the sector.



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Other activities

In addition to these briefings the Speaking Out project is developing work streams around the policy themes which include:

- organising a series of seminars and events;
- establishing communities of interest amongst members and other organisations on specific policy themes;
- making representations to government; and
- linking with wider NCVYS and Children England campaigns.

To discuss this briefing or any other aspect of the Speaking Out project please contact Hannah Dobbin, NCVYS's Policy Officer on 020 7278 1041 or email hannah@ncvys.org.uk, or Sophie Griffiths, Children England's Policy and Information Officer on 020 7833 3319 or email sophie@childrenengland.org.uk.

1. Introduction

Community empowerment is one of the policy priorities for the Speaking Out project 2009-10. To inform thinking in this area, Speaking Out commissioned the think tank Demos to conduct a scoping study into community empowerment issues relating to children and young people. A final report was published in September 2009.

Community empowerment is an important area which is increasingly forming part of Government's agenda. This is reflected in recent Government strategies, for example the *Communities in control: real people, real power* White Paper¹ and developments around the Empowerment Fund² which aims to provide support for existing national third sector organisations operating across England to help local communities turn key proposals into practical action on the ground.

To debate community empowerment it is important to understand what is meant by the term. The Demos study used Community and Local Government's (CLG) definition: '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.'³

This Speaking Out briefing paper is primarily intended for voluntary and community organisations that are involved, or wish to become involved, in developing the community empowerment agenda and supporting children and young people. It summarises key findings of a scoping study commissioned by the Speaking Out project and carried out by Demos. We are grateful to Demos for their work on the scoping study and for their permission to share their findings in this way. Copies of the full report are available to download at www.ncvys.org.uk and www.childrenengland.org.uk

¹ Communities and Local Government (2008) *Communities in control: real people, real power*. Available via:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/communitiesincontrol/>

² Further information on the Empowerment Fund is available via:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/empowermentfund>

³ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/>

2. Policy context

The development of community empowerment as a policy agenda

The 1980s saw a rise in participatory approaches in local decision-making in the UK, with the recognition of the value of citizens participating in decision-making. Participation and community empowerment only became a central part of government policy after 1997, and a review of the evidence around community empowerment is found in the Government paper, *Empowering Communities to Influence Local Decision-making: A systematic review of the evidence*⁴. Recent legislation has culminated in a Duty to Involve which came into force in April 2009⁵, which makes citizen involvement a requirement for local authorities (LAs), embedding engagement and empowerment. This will work in conjunction with the new Comprehensive Area Assessment.

The goal of participation is to increase citizens' control over the decisions that affect their lives. The effects and aims of community empowerment strategies can be summed up in three categories: the effect on participants – the skills developed and their level of political efficacy; the effect on communities – the level of political efficacy, social capital and social cohesiveness; and the effect on decision-making – the degree to which participants and communities can exercise influence on decision-making and the shift in power that has taken place. The goals of community empowerment include: improving the delivery of public services, building social networks and individual capacity, and countering disengagement in politics.

There is some tension within community empowerment: between the different goals and the use of participatory engagement as a universal solution; between individual actions and empowerment and community actions and empowerment; and within the fact that empowerment implies a far more profound shift in power than can be found in involvement and participation. Government approaches to community empowerment have not seen many spill-over benefits for communities beyond the immediate participants.

The role of children and young people within community empowerment policy

Since 1997, examples of young people's participation in public services could be found across numerous government programmes (e.g. Investing in Children, Connexions, the Children's Fund and New Deal for Communities). The Education and Inspections Act 2006⁶ and the establishment of the Youth Opportunity Fund (YOF) and Youth Capital Fund (YCF)⁷ reflect the Government's attempts to increase consultation of young people about youth provision. *Aiming High for Young People: A ten year strategy for positive activities*⁸ set targets for LAs to devolve a percentage of their

⁴ Communities and Local Government (2009) *Empowering Communities to Influence Local Decision-making: A systematic review of the evidence*. Available via: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1241955>

⁵ Communities and Local Government (2008) *Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities Statutory Guidance*. Available via: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/885397.pdf>

⁶ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/ukpga_20060040_en_1

⁷ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/Youth/youthmatters/youthopportunity/youthfunds/>

⁸ Department for Children, Schools and Families (July 2007) *Aiming High for Young People: A ten year strategy for positive activities*. Available via: <http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=PU214>

budget for youth services to young people.

*Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment. A Guide for Local Authorities on enhancing capacity for public participation*⁹ shows Government commitment to include those groups who have traditionally not been included in local decision-making. It is also recognised that empowerment for children and young people spans a wide range from the personal (skills, confidence and capacity) to the organisational. Personal empowerment and capacity building is especially important for underrepresented groups.

There is a Government commitment to participation, but 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 in larger decisions. The ultimate empowerment goal is to help children and young people move to a position where they are directing and setting agendas.

⁹ Communities and Local Government (2006) *Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment. A Guide for Local Authorities on enhancing capacity for public participation*, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/143519.pdf>

3. The impact of community empowerment policy on children and young people, and the CYPVCS

The success of community empowerment is determined at the authority level rather than centrally. The majority of statutory and non-statutory organisations reported involving children and young people up to the age of 19 in decision-making, and that this involvement had increased since 2000. Policymakers and service managers were receptive to youth participation, but were unsure of how to do participation well and meaningfully. One of the most established and successful mechanisms of community empowerment for young people is participatory budgeting such as the YOF and YCF.

Key issues around the impact of community empowerment policy on children and young people, and the CYPVCS, are discussed in the Demos study and summarised below.

The relationship between the CYPVCS and LAs

The CYPVCS has struggled to influence the agenda. LAs acknowledged the need to invest in the capacity building of community and voluntary and community sector (VCS) infrastructure. For some in the VCS, engagement with the public sector amounted to little more than tokenism.

The ability of the CYPVCS to engage with the community empowerment agenda

The CYPVCS is often involved in creating the prerequisite capacities needed for interaction in community empowerment initiatives and it exists to enable children and young people to become empowered in their own lives, not just as civic participants. Outside of the CYPVCS, there is little evidence that the wider VCS has a culture of participation that is notably different from that of LAs. Further training is needed in the sector and there is a lack of professionals skilled in youth participation.

The issue of VCS independence from LAs is an issue; new funding arrangements make communities and community groups more vulnerable to coercion from local authorities. The process of engagement with LAs poses challenges to the identity of some within the VCS, especially smaller groups.

Infrastructure support for community empowerment

Until recently, the key infrastructure for community empowerment was the Community Empowerment Network (CEN). An Audit Commission evaluation found that CENs allowed community groups to have some success in influencing local public service providers' decisions and getting services that people wanted.¹⁰ CENs were most likely to succeed where the voluntary sector saw its role as supporting community groups. Following the withdrawal of CEN funding, there has been a lack of central guidance leaving community level collaborations in a somewhat fragile state.

Sustainable funding for CYPVCS organisations

Funding cycles have also proved to be a crucial factor affecting the involvement of the CYPVCS in community empowerment initiatives. There is recognition that participation and empowerment requires a sustainable approach, but policy is still implemented at local and neighbourhood level as a series of time-limited programmes. The short-term

¹⁰ National Audit Office (2004) *Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal*. Available via: <http://www.nao.org.uk/idoc.ashx?docId=7916d0a6-849f-49e0-9d82-a6ff02ad2c77&version=-1>

nature of funding arrangements has had effects on organisational stability, staffing and resources and reduces the capacity to develop effective engagement processes.

There is a perception within the VCS that the methods of funding are changing, with service contracts replacing grants to the detriment of the sector. A competitive tendering environment has also been reported to heighten tensions within the VCS, undermining partnership working.

Conceptual issues within the community empowerment agenda

Approaches to participation are often not connected at neighbourhood, local and national level. Furthermore, 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.

Young people's experience of empowerment

Recent evidence suggests that youth participation in civic activities is strong, with participation in informal volunteering highest among young people.¹¹ Yet 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 where children and young people are consulted they often find themselves less valued than adult 'experts'. Importantly they also felt that they had a bigger potential to contribute than was currently being recognised. There are issues surrounding minorities, since young people without the necessary skills and confidence are at risk of being shut out of a wider community involvement.

Community empowerment in practice

As part of the Demos study, a number of case studies were collected showing how CYPVCS projects achieve a multitude of outcomes for children and young people. Thereby creating a sense of empowerment among some of the most disengaged in society. These include:

- BANG Edutainment in Brent and Harrow is a social enterprise which in partnership with local youth services and colleges is helping those not in education, employment or training (NEETs) (or those at risk of becoming so);
- PARCA is a refugee community based organisation empowering young people to speak out;
- Streetspace is a project working with marginalised young people on the streets through detached youth work, undertaking research, and delivering training and consultancy;
- The Jewish Lads' & Girls' Brigade (brings together young people to offer training, leadership and social development opportunities for young people);
- The Prince's Trust helps disadvantaged young people overcome barriers to achieve their potential through youth-led projects; and
- Young Pioneers carried out a research project to enable young people to have a voice in shaping their outside play space.

¹¹ Communities and Local Government (2007) *Communities and Local Government Citizenship Survey: April – June 2007* (England and Wales). Available via: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/corporate/pdf/citizenshipsurveyaprjun2007.pdf>

4. The future direction of the community empowerment agenda

There are indications that the community empowerment agenda may become less of a priority for Government. The Conservative Party indicates that localism and the third sector will be key policy areas under a Conservative Government. There is a contrast between Labour's conceptions of 'people power', centring on having a say in state services, while the Conservative conception rests more on involvement in community projects outside of the remit of state.

Debates over funding for the CYPVCS are likely as grant-run organisations are becoming less favoured. Real term spending is likely to be frozen with the need for fiscal tightening. An increased emphasis on the role of non-statutory actors may give the VCS greater political influence but this will also put the VCS under greater scrutiny and responsibility. Smaller organisations may struggle, due to a lack of funding diversity, less strategic planning, smaller assets and a lack of flexible capacity.

5. Scoping study recommendations

The Demos study put forward recommendations to Government and the CYPVCS to take the community empowerment agenda forward.

Recommendations for national and local government:

- **create a more stable funding environment for the CYPVCS** – funding for organisations rather than projects;
- **central guidance on community empowerment infrastructure** – guidance as to the expectations of LAs;
- **move from children and young people’s participation to children and young people’s empowerment;**
- **consolidation of community empowerment initiatives/approaches** – there should be a Community Empowerment Commissioner;
- **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;** and
- **recognition of voluntary contribution to local communities.**

Recommendations for the CYPVCS:

- **a proactive approach to developing local empowerment networks;**
- **development of protocols for co-operation between larger and smaller voluntary and community organisations** – help smaller voluntary and community organisations contribute;
- **greater skills development in participation across the VCS;**
- **the CYPVCS must advocate for children and young people’s community empowerment within their LA;**
- **improving interactions between participative and representative democratic approaches;**
- **primary research on the impact of the community empowerment on children and young people and the VCS;**
- **the CYPVCS should have a greater engagement with all political parties as well as their respective policy organisations.**

6. Conclusion

The Demos study concludes that the CYPVCS will continue to have a central role in public policy. However, the ability of the sector to contribute to community empowerment will require a shift in emphasis from current mind-sets and practice. The CYPVCS will have to be both pro-active and enterprising if it is to survive and thrive. 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.

The full report that this briefing paper is based on, *A scoping study concerning community empowerment issues relating to children and young people*, carried out by Demos, is available to download from www.ncvys.org.uk and www.childrenengland.org.uk

7. Other Briefings

- Briefing 1** Knife, gun and gang crime
- Briefing 2** The Government's Social Exclusion Agenda
- Briefing 3** Access to Services in Rural Areas
- Briefing 4** Public Service Delivery
- Briefing 5** Community Cohesion
- Briefing 6** Local Government Reform
- Briefing 7** Place-shaping
- Briefing 8** The Comprehensive Spending Review
- Briefing 9** Rural migrant children, families and young people
- Briefing 10** Gang, Gun and Knife Crime: Seeking Solutions (Part 2)
- Briefing 11** Ministry of Justice Third Sector Strategy
- Briefing 12** The Youth Crime Action Plan
- Briefing 13** Communities in control: real people, real power
- Briefing 14** 2012 Olympic Legacy
- Briefing 15** The 2008 Drug Strategy
- Briefing 16** Environment
- Briefing 17** Children, young people and disability
- Briefing 18** Small Grants Programme
- Briefing 19** Healthy Lives, Brighter Futures
- Briefing 20** Financial capability
- Briefing 21** Education, employment and training
- Briefing 22** Health and well-being: an overview

All the briefings are available at www.childrenengland.org.uk or www.ncvys.org.uk

Free hard copies are also available to order. Please contact Hannah Dobbin, NCVYS's Policy Officer on 020 7278 1041 or email hannah@ncvys.org.uk, or Sophie Griffiths, Children England's Policy and Information Officer on 020 7833 3319 or email sophie@childrenengland.org.uk.