Community engagement and community cohesion

Government policies for community engagement have been high profile, as have community cohesion agendas – but these have been developed in parallel. This study explores the challenges of bringing them together. It examines ways of enabling new arrivals to become involved, promoting solidarity and cohesion rather than competition and conflict between newer and more established communities.

Key points

- The views of new arrivals, as well as those of established communities, need to be heard and resources allocated with visible fairness. New communities are keen to get involved and to have their views heard.

- The research identified challenges about who speaks for whom when new communities are represented. Informal networks can provide valuable ways for local authorities to communicate with new communities, but traditional leaders do not necessarily represent the voices of women or younger people.

- New communities are diverse themselves. But despite this diversity, new arrivals experience a number of common barriers, such as lack of information, difficulties in the use of English, lack of time, or barriers to recognition, making it more difficult for them to get involved or be heard.

- These barriers are exacerbated by the growing fluidity and fragmentation of governance structures. This complexity poses problems enough for established communities who are already used to navigating their way around. For new arrivals the shifting landscape of service provision and governance is even more bewildering, making community engagement correspondingly more problematic.

- The most appropriate way of engaging new communities, who may be dispersed across local authority areas, is not necessarily at the neighbourhood level. In addition, some of their concerns, such as jobs and language skills, may not be managed at neighbourhood level. Community engagement structures are needed at other levels too.

- Concerns about racism and prejudice were identified as barriers affecting engagement in structures of governance. However, more positively the research has identified a range of examples of promising practices addressing these challenges, involving new communities as part of wider strategies to promote cohesion. Community development support emerged as an important factor here.

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Background

The government is committed to promoting community engagement. But services are being delivered by an increasingly diverse range of providers, with correspondingly diverse opportunities for user and community involvement. There is growing concern about how to join up these different structures of local governance, through Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), for example.

But there has been less focus upon the implications of engaging service users and communities effectively when communities are themselves diverse, with differing needs and priorities. Globalisation has been associated with increasing migration, although these changes are difficult to measure, owing to gaps in the available data. This poses major challenges for the community engagement and community cohesion agendas.

Being heard and not being heard

New communities want their views to be heard, and they want to participate. For many new arrivals, 'being heard' means being recognised, having a safe space to meet, providing mutual support and gaining the knowledge, confidence and skills to engage more widely. 'Being heard' also means being listened to with respect, knowing that resources are being allocated with visible fairness. Established communities typically share this view of community engagement, and they also face problems in getting their views heard, but newer communities find it even harder.

New communities faced practical barriers, such as lack of information (exacerbated by the fluidity and fragmentation of governance structures), personal barriers such as difficulties in the use of English or a lack of time to participate due to working long/unsociable hours, and barriers to recognition (e.g. newer communities often do not have formally constituted community organisations so are not being consulted and are not eligible to receive public funds).

Groups particularly at risk of not having their views heard effectively were asylum seekers and refugees, and new migrant workers from the accession states, such as Poland. Amongst these groups, women and younger people were identified as having even less chance of being listened to than older men. Meanwhile some established minority communities, and some established white working class communities, had been less successful than others in making their views heard.

These findings highlight the importance of linking strategies that promote community engagement with strategies that promote community cohesion. Otherwise, the result could be increased competition for scarce resources between established communities and newer arrivals.

The research also highlighted the importance of continuity and sustainability in governance structures. In two of the three local areas studied there had been recent changes in neighbourhood-based structures. Participants spoke about how difficult it was to know how and where to make their views heard; this fluidity in structures exacerbates these difficulties.

Much of the emphasis on community engagement has been directed at the neighbourhood. But the research found that neighbourhood forums aren't necessarily the most appropriate levels for some issues. The Olympic development in east London was an example of this in the Newham case study; transport infrastructure was another example. The neighbourhood level is particularly problematic for communities that are geographically dispersed across towns and cities, as many new arrivals are, and given that many of their concerns – e.g. jobs, refugee/asylum status and language skills – are managed outside the neighbourhood.

Promising practices

The research identified a range of approaches that would enable newer community members to be heard, whilst promoting strategies for community cohesion and social solidarity. These include:

- welcome packs providing information about where and how to access services and how to express users' concerns;
- outreach work to engage with new arrivals, including outreach work with informal leaders and networks;
- community development support, from both statutory and voluntary sector anchor agencies, including support to enable new groups to constitute themselves formally and so gain increased recognition;
- ways of challenging negative stereotypes, used most effectively when part of wider strategies to promote increased understanding between communities;
- shared events, including community festivals, sports events, outings and welcome events as part of wider strategies to promote community cohesion.

Case studies

Coventry New Communities Forum Through the city council housing department's contacts with new arrivals, links have been developed with some 45 informal networks and fledgling organisations. As one of the officers reflected, "If those working in formal structures of governance really want to reach new communities then they need to tap into these informal networks rather than waiting for new communities to come to them." This has led to the formation of a New Communities Forum, supported by senior council members, as a two-way channel of communication.

Oldham's Youth Council The Youth Council consists of 47 young people, representing different communities in Oldham. In 2007 over 4,600 young people voted in authority-wide elections. Supported by professionals based in the youth service, they organise quarterly meetings on a range of issues, having regular contact with senior officers, the LSP and elected members. This opens up ways for young people to engage, from different communities across the borough. "It's a positive thing – it's getting young people's voice heard," a young British Bengali representative concluded.

Shared community events in Newham Newham Council have established Active Community Teams in nine areas, made up of volunteers, to work with local councillors to help shape and strengthen their community through holding free events that will help community lead councillors to identify and address the priorities in each area and to help inform future service priorities. The challenge will be to ensure that this approach does indeed enable local people to influence the decisions that are made about their communities.

Who speaks for whom?

Both established and new communities face challenges in terms of who speaks for whom. Outreach work with informal leaders and networks may reach the 'movers and shakers', and these key individuals can and do play key roles. But this research also found evidence of the importance of ensuring that other people can also be heard, including women and younger people.

For example, the Coventry Voluntary Services Council has supported the Coventry Ethnic Minorities Action Partnership to do outreach, and so to develop more inclusive forms of representation. And Peace House, a community-based organisation, has been providing space and support to enable the Eve Group, made up of refugee and asylum seeking women, to meet together and find ways of speaking for themselves rather than being spoken for by the men from their communities.

Local councillors play key bridging roles. Political parties can do much to encourage representation from new communities as well as from more established communities. Local councillors can benefit from support to enable them to perform this role, facilitating community engagement in the context of wider strategies to promote community cohesion and social solidarity.

Promoting community engagement by building community cohesion and social solidarity

Governance structures have a key role to play in challenging racism and promoting community cohesion. Minority communities expressed anxieties about racism, based upon experiences of harassment and discrimination. Suspicions about unfair access to resources can also fuel resentments against newcomers, highlighting the importance of visible fairness through accountable forms of governance.

On the positive side, there were examples of strategies to promote mutual support and solidarity, to ensure fairness and equality of treatment in the provision of services and employment opportunities and to facilitate community engagement, enabling diverse views to be heard in the structures of local governance.

Conclusions and recommendations

Community engagement policies have not yet taken sufficient account of increasing diversity and population turnover in modern Britain. The fragmentation and fluidity of structures of governance pose additional challenges. This research has identified a number of barriers that need to be addressed if new communities are to have their views heard alongside those of more established communities.

The research has also identified a number of promising practices, ways of reaching out to engage with new arrivals whilst promoting agendas for community cohesion and social solidarity. These cannot simply be transplanted from one area to another without adjustment, of course. But there are implications here for government as well as for local authorities, local strategic partnerships and the voluntary and community sectors.

The following recommendations are geared to the English context, although there is clearly learning to be shared among devolved administrations.

National government policies and approaches
- Build on the Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* and the *Action Plan for Community Empowerment* by ensuring that the impacts of demographic change as a result of migration, population turnover and increasing local diversity are taken into account in the design of policy, guidance and central government initiatives relating to citizenship, community empowerment, community engagement and community cohesion.
- Include representatives of new communities, refugees and other mobile communities not currently represented by mainstream community organisations and groups in government strategies and structures to implement community engagement and empowerment.
- Prioritise the provision of reliable and standardised data on the population turnover experienced by a community, in order to facilitate effective service planning, user and citizen involvement, and equitable resource allocation.

Local government and local strategic partnerships
- Ensure that community and citizen engagement strategies take account of diversity and the dynamics of population change and turnover.
- Provide clear and comprehensive guides to services and the criteria for allocating resources fairly and transparently, with welcome packs for new arrivals, explaining where and how service users' concerns can be addressed, and including information about how to get involved.
- Develop proactive communication strategies, including challenging negative stereotyping within and between communities.

- Provide community development support to new community organisations, groups and informal networks, both directly through council officers and indirectly through resourcing third sector anchor organisations, ensuring that equalities issues are prioritised
- Support the organisation of shared events, including community festivals, sports events, outings and welcome events, as part of wider strategies to promote community cohesion and community engagement.
- Recognise the limitations of neighbourhood participation structures and support the complementary development of effective city/ borough-wide structures.

Voluntary and community sector organisations, including faith-based organisations

- Work proactively with new communities, including working through informal networks, whilst taking account of equalities issues, ensuring that all views are effectively heard, including relatively marginalised groups such as young women and young men.
- Act as hosts to support new arrivals, including supporting them to develop and gain recognition for their own community organisations and groups.
- Respect, support and facilitate new communities in exercising their rights to self-organisation, rather than speaking on their behalf.

About this research

The research included focus groups, direct observations and over 100 interviews with community activists, local authority officers, councillors and professionals from voluntary sector organisations in three local authority areas, Coventry, Newham and Oldham.

Further information

The full report, **Community engagement and community cohesion** by Geraldine Blake, John Diamond, Jane Foot, Ben Gidley, Marjorie Mayo, Kalbir Shukra and Martin Yarnit, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

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