



**Regional Forum
Research Digest No. 2**

So What? Community Engagement Research in Yorkshire and Humber

Themes:

Evidencing the Value & Impact of Community Participation
Alternatives to the way we currently do Engagement

April 2006

So What?

Community Engagement Research in Yorkshire and Humber Research Digest 2 – April 2006

Contents

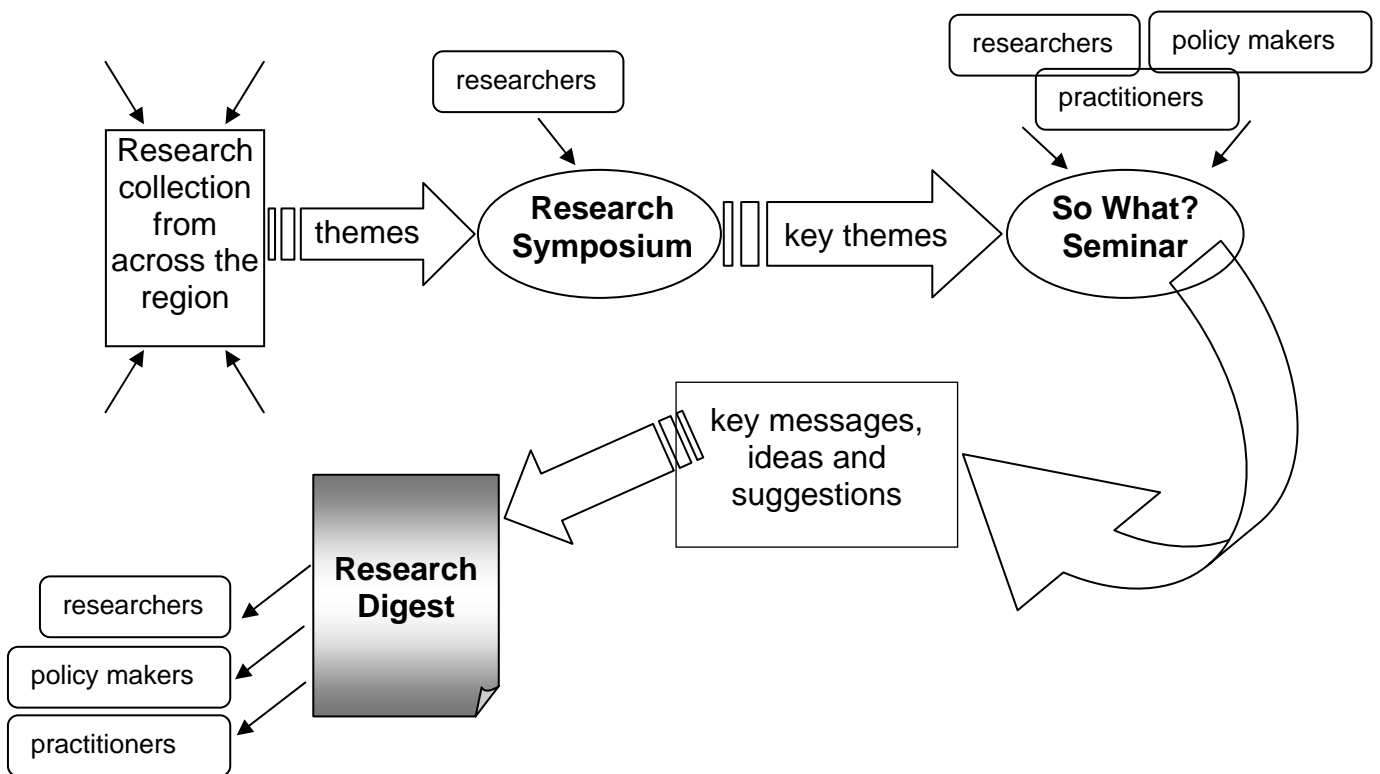
Foreword	2
The So What? process.....	3
The Research.....	4
Evidencing the Value and Impact of Community Participation	11
So What can we do to improve evidencing the value and impact of community participation?	13
Alternatives to the way we currently do engagement	15
Customary issues in community engagement	15
So What are the alternatives to the way we currently do engagement?	16
So What have we learnt?	17
Acknowledgements	19
Appendix	20

Foreword

Research is undertaken – but what difference does it make? Often research is directed at a specific situation and makes a huge difference in that one place, but are there lessons to be learnt across the whole region? What are the common themes across different pieces of research? And what does research say we need to change in our policies and our practice?

Funded by the Active Citizenship Centre of the Home Office, the “So What?” pilot process (see diagram below) seeks to find answers to these questions. The second round of symposium and seminar identified two key themes to form the basis of detailed discussion:

- Evidencing the Value and Impact of Community Participation
- Alternatives to the way we currently do Engagement



The “So What?” process identified clear issues and generated ideas to tackle issues and move forward. It is important that the “So What?” process doesn’t end here. At the Regional Forum we will be looking at how we can turn the ideas into reality and looking for how we can work with policy makers, practitioners and researchers to make changes. I would challenge you to consider the same – what ideas can you use to change your policies or practice and where can you exert influence on others?

The So What? process

The research collation phase identified twelve pieces of relevant research; however a decision was taken to focus on six particular pieces of research (detailed below with a synopsis included in the next section) during the so what? process. Research was selected that encompassed a community engagement element and had reference to the Yorkshire and Humber region. This allowed the identification of academic, regional and locally based research. The decision to focus on the six pieces of research was based on the wish to focus closely on the messages contained in the research and the implications for community engagement policy and practice.

1. Making Connections: an evaluation of the community participation programmes – Research Report 15 (ODPM, 2005)
2. Improving delivery of mainstream services in deprived areas – the role of community involvement – Research Report 16 (Home Office, ODPM, 2005)
3. Usual Suspects or Community Leaders? (Blakey, Heather and Richardson, Peter, 2004)
4. Improving neighbourhoods and supporting active communities – the impact of the Single Community Programme (Heeney, Jackie and Wilson, Mandy, 2005)
5. Full Circle – Valuing Communities: Valuing Culture (Eventus, 2005)
6. Evaluation of the Building Relationships Mentoring Pilot in Sheffield (Shilkoff, Alex, 2005)

A symposium was hosted by the Regional Forum and included a group of researchers from the Universities of Bradford, Hull, and Sheffield Hallam and a representative from COGS (an independent research consultancy). Prior to attending the symposium, each participant read a piece of research and prepared a short précis of key issues to present to the group. The group then reflected on each piece of research, noting down any additional issues, so building up a body of knowledge based on the research findings. From the range of issues identified, two overarching themes were identified to be taken forward to the so what? seminar for analysis and discussion by the wider group. Theme selection was based on identifying key issues where there was potential for significant improvement in the engagement process. The themes chosen were:

- Evidencing the Value and Impact of Community Participation
- Alternatives to the Way We currently do Engagement

The So What? seminar then brought together the researchers with a group of policy makers and community engagement practitioners to consider these themes and to identify what changes and improvements could make community engagement more effective. The focus of the event was to get beyond simply identifying issues and to use the collective expertise and experience to creatively identify actions and activities that could make a positive difference.

The Research

1. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

Making Connections: an evaluation of the community participation programmes – Research Report 15, ODPM, 2005

This research evaluates the various participation programmes (including community chest and community learning chest) set up as part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. The evaluation suffered from not only the usual difficulties of appraising a programme which was still in progress, but additionally of trying to evaluate a programme which was to be twice reshaped ending up via the Single Community Programme with the Stronger and Safer Communities Fund which critically is to be administered by local authorities (from April 2006). This new structure seems to close down some of the issues raised by the evaluation in terms of the position of weaker partners, particularly community groups and black and minority ethnic (BME) groups.

Key issues

The evaluation starts by setting out key issues emerging from programmes such as the Single Regeneration Budget and City Challenge, pointing out that there has been:

- Little community development to help build capacity to engage people.
- Policies are introduced too quickly.
- Voluntary and community sector (VCS) infrastructure is weak.
- Participation is tokenistic.
- Diversity issues have been ignored.

Many of the conclusions drawn from earlier programmes are echoed in this evaluation. What is needed to ensure effective community engagement is:

- More time: to help build capacity and work with community groups – this requires government political agendas to be slowed down.
- More flexibility and accessibility in terms of the various funding streams – the tendency seems however to be in the opposite direction.
- More support alongside community groups, especially directly with BME groups and with other currently weaker communities of interest.
- Better recognition of diversity in outreach and representation.
- Working with Local Strategic Partnerships to improve their capacity to engage with communities.
- Clearer measures of accountability for the VCS especially to communities.

Download from www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/document.asp?id=1418

2. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
Improving delivery of mainstream services in deprived areas – the role of community involvement – Research Report 16 (Home Office, ODPM, 2005)

This research poses the question:

Does service provision in which communities are meaningfully involved produce better outcomes in deprived areas than services delivered in other ways?

The research concludes:

Community involvement is a key element in the Government's drive to improve public service and such involvement is, indeed, a crucial factor in improving services, especially in deprived areas. Through a review of the evidence base and 15 case studies, the report demonstrates the growing extent of involvement and the benefits it can bring to service delivery. However, it shows that complementary changes in service providers' behaviour and performance are also needed. The study considers the constraints on more comprehensive and intensive involvement of communities in deprived areas and what more might be done to encourage it.

How can we involve communities in improving the delivery of services?

A) Through information and consultations

These are driven primarily by the service providers to learn about and respond to the needs of service users, potential users and the communities in which they are located.

B) Through deliberative engagement

Service providers engage users and their communities as participating partners in discussions about service planning and design, delivery and review.

C) Through community provision

Community-based organisations – such as community development trusts, housing co-operatives and social enterprises - have contracted or delegated responsibility from mainstream service providers for service design, delivery and review.

How was the effectiveness of community involvement assessed?

The following factors were identified for consideration in assessing the effectiveness of the different forms of engagement:

- ***Process of community involvement*** – the structures and processes for community involvement will influence how effective it is in bringing about improvements in service delivery.
- ***Costs*** – three sets of costs can be considered. These relate to carrying out the engagement activities, associated costs in relation to any time increase in decision making processes and the time and resources committed by community members to getting involved.

- **Benefits in improved service provision** – the service deliverers can provide an improved service, which impacts positively on users and their communities.
- **Sustainability** – the focus is on engagement and participation becoming integral components of any service delivery.
- **Representativeness, accountability and inclusivity** – community involvement needs to strike a balance between representing the interests of communities, service providers being accountable to users and the interests of socially excluded groups being taken on board.

Lessons learned

1. The evidence confirms the view that community involvement is needed to improve service delivery. Through this mechanism, service providers can deliver services which better meet the needs of users and communities.
2. However, providers must adopt different ways of working to make it happen. Whilst user and/or community involvement might contribute to improved service delivery, there also needs to be more effective challenges within the providers to change their ways of working at intermediate management levels and at the front-end of delivery.
3. The different forms of community involvement have distinctive objectives and mechanisms, and it is critical to be clear which form of engagement is being pursued.
4. Community involvement can be difficult to establish and sustain and there needs to be sufficient evidence of improved service delivery to maintain the investment. The overall conclusion from the available evidence is that the costs of community involvement are relatively modest and are often outweighed by benefits which may take some time to emerge and are difficult to quantify.
5. Community involvement tends to give providers better local knowledge, and prompts innovation in service design and delivery. But, it can also yield outcome impacts such as new or improved service provision, increased user satisfaction, and increased employment opportunities for local people.
6. The generally positive and cost-effective contribution to service delivery improvements from increased community involvement is no guarantee that such involvement will necessarily be developed or sustained.

Download from www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/document.asp?id=1561

3. Blakey, Heather and Richardson, Peter
Usual Suspects or Community Leaders?, What's the Difference? Analysis of Online Discussion Forum, 22nd-26th November, 2004, Regional Forum, 2004.

This research comprises an analysis of the online discussion facilitated by Bradford University's International Centre for Participation Studies and the Regional Forum's Active Partners Unit. 62 people, largely though not exclusively people, with a professional focus on promoting involvement and participation either through consultancy or paid work, signed up to the discussion. The research presents the many challenges, which meaningful participation presents to formal decision-making structures.

Purpose

The forum and the research set out to explore the frustration and dissatisfaction with the current reality of participation in formal decision-making structures.

As such it focuses on the following questions:

- Are the 'usual suspects' to blame?
- Are the 'usual suspects' standing in the way of wider participation and therefore change?
- Or are there more fundamental problems inherent in the system, with the consequence that only a limited number of people – the 'usual suspects' – choose to engage with it?

Key issues

1. There is considerable confusion about the difference between consultation on a process and participation in a process.
2. 'Usual suspects' do play a valuable community role.
 - They have many skills to offer in support of the community.
 - They understand and can work within the current decision-making structures.
 - They can be relied upon.
 - They do offer critical feedback and question processes.
3. What is needed to move beyond working with the 'usual suspects'?
 - Clarity and honesty about the level of involvement and/or the degree of power on offer to participants.
 - Support and training for individuals who are looking to become more active.
 - Process needs to focus on the community's needs, so motivating individuals to get involved.
 - Robust communication at all stages of the process.
 - Organisations need to take some risks with their participation processes to encourage different individuals to get involved.

Download from

www.regionalforum.org.uk/publications_resources/knowledgebase/400/150.pdf

4. Heeney, Jackie and Wilson, Mandy

Improving neighbourhoods and supporting active communities – the impact of the Single Community Programme, Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber, 2005

This research aims to assess the role of the Single Community Programme (SCP) in Neighbourhood Renewal and focuses on activity funded through the programme in Hull. The SCP aims to develop community participation through four strategic goals:

- Governance – developing a community ‘voice’ to enable communities to participate in decision making processes.
- Social capital – increasing confidence of people to get involved in a range of activities.
- Service delivery – communities can influence and participate in service delivery.
- Social inclusion and community cohesion – building a common vision where diversity is valued.

Key findings

1. There is a lack of research methods easily accessible to the voluntary and community sector to evaluate its own effectiveness.
2. Community led activity improves quality of life and builds both social capital and community cohesion.
3. The impact of community participation is not easy to measure and not recognised. Challenges include:
 - Timescales – government wants to see results of investment quickly, which is not compatible with longer term development processes. Evaluation studies often take place too early on before real benefits have a chance to become apparent.
 - Communities may not want the same as the government programme. It is difficult to illustrate the impact of genuinely innovative projects using nationally set indicators.
 - Where local people gain control they may choose to be guided by “common sense” rather than the formal “evidence base.”
4. What impact do these challenges have on evidence?
 - Evidence needs to have a strong local contribution.
 - More varied and complex kinds of evidence are needed.
 - Need investment in developing skills for presenting and using evidence.
 - Need to develop wider evaluation techniques.
 - Research needs to look at changes over time.
 - Case studies – need to see “how it works” not just “what works”

Copies of this report are available by contacting the Community Policy and Programmes Team at Government Office on 0113 280 0600.

5. Eventus

Full Circle – Valuing Communities: Valuing Culture, Eventus, 2005.

Full Circle was a capacity building project based in Beighton, Sheffield and funded over two and a half years by Objective 1. The project highlighted the quality of a creative experience focused on heritage and the environment, the quality of people's engagement with the project, and also how that process engages and benefits the community as a whole.

The project came from, and was inspired by, the Beighton Community Partnership. It contained three strands of work:

- public art
- environment
- community heritage

Engagement ranged from involvement in project activities, training and employment, attendance at launch events, steering group membership, formation of new community groups.

Reasons for success included:

- Two full time dedicated project workers to oversee progress
- The delivery timescale allowed time for benefits to be identified.
- The funding level was appropriate.
- Strong support from the community partnership board
- Taking activities to people's normal meeting places.
- Good quality of engagement work and activities.

Outcomes of activity were:

- Initial consultation led to an alteration of the plans.
- Steering group membership led to strong project ownership.
- Local people chose artists based on approach and ideas rather than designs.
- People remained involved even when not much activity was happening.
- Local people were proud of their achievements.

The capacity building element of the project means that local people can continue to participate in the regeneration of their area.

A very positive report promoting the successes of the project. There is no great detail about the community engagement / capacity building work – references to quality of the work but not really how it was done.

Download from www.eventus.org.uk/index.php?page=Full_Circle

6. Shilkoff, Alex

Evaluation of the Building Relationships Mentoring Pilot in Sheffield, Sheffield City Council, 2005.

An innovative staff training project piloted by Sheffield City Council (SCC) for a six month period from November 2004 until May 2005. SCC wanted to offer council officers the chance to develop their community engagement approaches by learning from community activists.

Aims of the mentoring pilot

1. To develop council officers in relation to community engagement.
2. To break down barriers between council officers and communities.
3. To improve partnership working between stakeholders.
4. To develop community activists' skills and knowledge to enable them to work more effectively in their communities.

Methodology

Ten council officers from the Department of participated, some of whom volunteered others were "volunteered" by a manager. Undoubtedly, the frame of mind of each officer impacted on their experience of the mentoring. Staff were offered a training session with Voluntary Action Sheffield prior to undertaking the mentoring but this was poorly attended. This subsequently led to comments in the evaluation process that some participants were unclear about the aims and objectives of the scheme.

Results from the evaluation

- The term "mentoring" indicated a hierarchical relationship, with some council officers expressing the inference being that they are not performing well and needed to be trained.
- Both mentors and mentees felt that the scheme could be more mutually beneficial if a term such as "buddying" could be used. This would place the emphasis on sharing expertise and working in partnership.
- Mentees sometimes felt that they were paired with a community activist whose knowledge and experience was not particularly relevant to their work.
- Less than half of mentees felt that their community engagement skills had improved at the end of the pilot whereas all mentors thought that their mentees' skills had improved.
- All mentees felt that they had developed a number of community contacts by working with their mentors. The community activists are a direct link to a range of grassroots organisations and it would have taken council officers a significant amount of time alone to make these contacts.
- All participants felt that the scheme was a way to work towards breaking down barriers between council officers and communities
- Mentors felt they had gained a better understanding of council officers' work.

Knowledge of communities certainly improved but skills to engage and involve those communities more in Council work were felt to remain at their original levels.

Copies of this report are available by contacting the Community Participation Team at Sheffield City Council on 0114 273 5880.

Evidencing the Value and Impact of Community Participation

What does the research say?

There is universal agreement on the need to keep developing the evidence base for community participation and that currently there are definitely gaps. The *Making Connections* report produced by the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) concludes that the benefits of community participation outweigh the costs but that it is often difficult to accurately measure the benefits. Some of this difficulty in measuring stems from an inability to distinguish the impact of community participation from a range of other initiatives taking place.

It is fair to say that the benefits of community participation can often take some time to emerge and cannot be simply quantified according to a checklist. Community participation programmes may be time limited and any subsequent evaluation will only take account of the period covered by the programme; whereas it may be some time beyond the end of the prescribed programme when the real benefits come to light. Such a situation states a claim for a further impact evaluation to take place a significant time after the formal closure of the participation programme or for the timeframe of evaluation to be adapted accordingly.

How is community participation measured?

The *Improving Delivery of Mainstream Services in Deprived Areas – the Role of Community Involvement* published by the ODPM confirms that if engagement and participation are to be widespread and inclusive – then it is essential to allow adequate time and resources for the process. However, the problem with this approach is that the costs and risks associated with community participation are short-term and perceived to be significant but the benefits are long-term, uncertain and somewhat intangible and therefore can be seen as not a good return on the investment.

There is also the debate about the actual measurement of community participation. Is it an output or an outcome? The Eventus project report lists both outputs and outcomes for its evaluation, distinguishing clearly between short-term, immediate gains and the longer term community benefits from people's involvement. Eventus used the Active Partners' Framework for analysis and evaluation, which takes four themes: influence, inclusivity, communication and capacity, and defines a set of benchmarks for measurement of success in each category.

So What are the challenges in measuring community participation?

- Interpreting the evidence base. How do we decide if some evidence is more valuable, representative or credible than others? How do we treat/present contradictory evidence?
- Measuring hard to quantify outcomes against funders' outputs. Is what we are trying to quantify actually unquantifiable?

- Identifying new ways of measuring the longer-term, qualitative, wider benefits of community participation and moving away from stark quantitative measurements.
- Recognition of success. The importance of being aware of the starting point for the project and the context in which you are working. Success is relative to these original positions. Context + Purpose + Process = Outcome
- Setting appropriate timeframes for evaluating community participation activities. Should monitoring exist purely for the time funded period or does evaluation need to encompass a longer period of time to establish real effect?
- The difficulty of disentangling the impact of community participation from the range of initiatives happening at any one time within a community.
- Identifying the appropriate personnel to undertake evaluation.
- Measuring the non-direct benefits of community participation.
- Resourcing meaningful focused evaluation.

So What can we do to improve evidencing the value and impact of community participation?

Key points	Existing activities	Ideas for moving forward
<p>There is a need to expand the types of evidence submitted as part of a review process and the ways that evidence is collected and assessed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One good example of alternative evidence of effective community participation is the Government Office Yorkshire and the Humber publication “Writing Renewal – see Appendix (p.20). • Tends to focus on good news stories and “best practice.” 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More creativity in the types of evidence gathered and accepted. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling/personal narrative • Photographic • Video evidence • Organisations to build portfolios of evidence. 2. Greater awareness of the audience for evidence eg funders, communities etc. 3. Development of better interfaces between formal and informal engagement processes.
<p>Change the policy agenda - community participation needs to be an integral part of the overall policy for an area.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Centre of Excellence - Integreat Yorkshire • Academy for Sustainable Communities • Requirement for consultation with communities and taking into account their views • Bradford Vision has supported developing Neighbourhood Action Plans 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consider how partnerships (eg Local Strategic Partnerships) can set up generic community engagement projects and programmes so that the generic outcomes can be assessed without problems of attributing impacts to specific programmes. 2. To be able to demonstrate how community involvement has shaped the scheme/activity; 3. To be clear about who “owns” the scheme and resultant work/outputs.
<p>Need a culture shift on targets from monitoring authorities.</p>	<p>Community Fund and Big Lottery Fund now have outcomes based funding.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Capacity building of local authorities and funders to better understand the value and impacts of community engagement. 2. Make active use of soft outcomes and distance travelled 3. Get away from the idea that the outcome of this work is strictly measurable. 4. Develop a “robust cultural credibility” accepted by central and local government.
<p>Matching the audience and the evidence</p>	<p>Funding managers and auditors who want to know that an evaluation has taken place – not what can be learned from it.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Evidence is often only collected for the external agencies (often the funders). There is also a need for “internal” evidence – which is about monitoring the impacts of the project. 2. Create a list of evidence that you will collect (or could collect) and what it is (or could) be used for. Match this against a list of evidence that you need to collect to identify gaps.

Key points	Existing activities	Ideas for moving forward
<p>Widen terminology of “best practice.” Best practice implies that there is a right way of doing things that will work in every situation. What is needed are examples and ideas that can be adapted to suit the particular circumstances. Best practice can be trying something, discovering what didn’t work and improving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice Makes Perfect publication which is looking at a number of organisations’ achievements and challenges annually over a long period of time – see Appendix (p.20). • Regen.net provides a database of practice examples. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Digest of practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A directory that points to the many existing sources of good practice. This directory would need to say what is available, what format, how it is categorised, how it is selected, etc. • Collect and collate “practice” stories – not just “best practice.” Take an issue or theme and deliberately look for stories and examples of what people have done on that issue. 2. Include information about what went well and what didn’t. Increase the focus on learning and improving rather than just celebrating good projects. 3. Try and capture ongoing stories – have other people tried a similar approach, how have they adapted things, what’s worked well.
<p>Plan for evidence collecting in the future. Evidence of impact often doesn’t fit the timeframe of the project – the impact can happen in the future.</p>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When setting up a project, write in impact evaluation and evidence collecting 6 months, 1 year or even longer after the project has finished. Include this in the funding application.
<p>Plan for learning, adapting and trying</p>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Include outputs in the project that are about trying things out, testing new methods, improving and learning. Write these in from the start so that they are “counted.” 2. Include outputs on progress not just on end results.

Alternatives to the way we currently do engagement

The focus within this discussion was firstly on identifying the customary issues, which come to light in community engagement work and then looking at any alternatives to the customary ways of doing engagement and if not, how can we adapt current processes to respond to some of the issues appropriately.

Customary issues in community engagement

Most community engagement processes follow a similar pattern and in many cases, the same issues constantly cause irritation and frustration. Common issues include

- Lack of clarity about the purpose of community engagement.
- Lack of clarity about what will change as a result of getting involved.
- People's expectations being raised and then dashed, so people become disillusioned and less likely to engage again.
- Timescales for the process are ridiculously short.
- Overuse of jargon and specialised, exclusive language.
- Processes can be off-putting and over formalised.
- Use of a narrow range of engagement mechanisms, which suit a small number of people but are felt to exclude many others.
- "Usual suspects" – a small, committed group of individuals, who always undertake a representative role but there are questions attached about their accountability and how effectively they are representing a community.
- How to set aside personal interests in pursuit of the community benefit.
- Developing an appropriate level of community engagement for the issue being addressed.

If these are the issues, which are causing concern in the community engagement process, then how are we able to change what we do to break away from some of these processes?

So What are the alternatives to the way we currently do engagement?

Key points	Existing Activities	Ideas for moving forward
Develop a ladder/menu of community engagement processes to cover a range of circumstances.	A new publication and workshops funded through Together We Can and led by Involve called People and Participation outlines clearly the costs and benefits of numerous methods of engagement – see Appendix (p.20).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional Forum is currently developing a Knowledge Bank of tools and resources for the voluntary sector. Get beyond sign-up and buy-in to these kind of processes and move to implementation.
VCS to change the balance of the relationship with the engaging organisation.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater regional support for local VCS involvement in initiatives and partnerships involving community engagement. Focus on the assets of the community rather than the issues – what has the community got that the engaging organisations want? The VCS to hold regular engagement events – which agencies are invited to. This enables the community to set the style and culture of the event and also helps reduce consultation overload.
Develop a better interface between formal and informal engagement processes.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify the informal processes – what information these produce and develop routes where this information can be fed in. Value these informal processes as highly as formal ones. Informal post office queue conversations can be as valid as formal processes may only give a minority view themselves. A shift towards assessing the impact of projects through qualitative methods. This will probably have to be instigated by practitioners.
Focused training for people undertaking community engagement activities.	Lots of community development work and partnership workshops are taking place; perhaps more is needed for public sector employees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of a discussion forum for training providers to improve targeting. Training particularly for statutory sector workers. Have a recognised standard and or qualification that people have to achieve before undertaking engagement work.
Focus engagement on change and feedback rather than on the engagement itself.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rather than setting up an engagement process, set up a feedback cycle or change cycle. From the outset identify the changes expected from engagement and the processes by which people will know of these changes.

So What have we learnt?

The purpose of the So What process was to improve the effectiveness of community engagement research in the Yorkshire and Humber region and nationally. We aimed to achieve this through answering three questions

- What is community engagement research saying to practitioners and policy makers?
- How can practitioners change their practice to implement lessons from the research?
- How can policy makers implement lessons from the research?

Throughout the process we have been very clear about what we are doing and why we are doing it. However, we have not been as clear about what will come from the process. This is because the issues identified are not within our power to change. Therefore all that we can do is exert an influence on others.

A key point raised at the first seminar was that there needs to be mechanisms to measure the influence of engagement. For us we need to ensure that we have the mechanisms in place to be able to track what has come out of this So What process.

Another message from the seminar was to encourage examples of “what hasn’t worked” and “what we would do differently”. Read on to discover some of our experience.

The So What process has helped increase the voice of the sector. It has improved links between the sector and university researcher. It has also provided a platform where researchers, policy makers and voluntary and community organisations can discuss together with a focus on how to make improvements.

So What has been an effective method of engagement – but where is the evidence? As pointed out in our second seminar it is not easy to evidence the value of engagement. One obvious piece of evidence is the two research digests which demonstrate the range of ideas and thinking. But there is still the So What? question. Will all these thoughts and ideas actually make a difference?

Much of the evidence is still in the future. We cannot yet see if the ideas for moving forward will be taken up. There are positive signs, for example the interest shown by the Home Office’s Active Citizenship Centre, changes we have made at the Regional Forum, and a regional organisation asking how to put the ideas in to practice.

I do believe that this process has made a difference. We have certainly learnt from it and I know that people at the events have also benefited. I hope that you have learnt from this digest and below are a few further lessons of what has, **and has not** worked so well.

- People don’t turn up to free events even if they have booked on. We had limited spaces and had to turn people away from events only to discover some people not arriving on the day.
- It takes time to digest research. Focusing on fewer research papers produced better links between the symposium and seminar.

- Academics are trained in critical analysis and therefore have skills in teasing out the crucial information from 80 page reports.
- So What is a hard question to answer. People are much more comfortable talking about what is wrong rather than what can be done about it. We had to work hard to push people into the So What frame of mind.
- It takes time to write up. Producing the digests took longer than we expected. The symposium and seminar provided all the material but turning this material into a form that could be understood by someone not at the events takes a great deal of work.
- Things get better. It's easier to do second time around – because we knew where we were heading, we had all the contacts and people knew what was expected of them.
- It's not over when the report is written. These research digests provide a starting point but they need to be followed up. To make the most of the process we need to take the report to those with the power and responsibility to make a difference. Sometimes this is ourselves, but often it is other people. We also need to promote the lessons in the report and put time into making changes in our own practice. The digest also contains some great ideas that we want to put into practice and therefore we will need to look for opportunities in the future.
- Allow extra resources for follow through. Our budget for this work ended with the report – we should have included extra to cover the costs of the essential steps concerning distribution and follow through.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all those who have made this research digest possible. Particular thanks to Duncan Prime and the Active Citizenship Centre for financing this pilot project and to Dr Paul Hickman and Dr Rob MacMillan from Sheffield Hallam University, for analysing the results of the research symposium and presenting to the So What? seminar.

Gary	Craig	Hull University
Mark	Crowe	Regional Forum
Colin	Harrison	The Disabled People's Electronic Village Hall
Tony	Herrmann	
Paul	Hickman	Sheffield Hallam University
Stuart	Kielty	Yorkshire Futures
Fiona	Lewis	SOA regen
Rachael	Loftus	Regional Forum
Rob	MacMillan	Sheffield Hallam University
Asim	Munir	Rotherham MBC
Martin	Pearson	ICPS, Bradford University
Chris	Pilkington	Yorkshire and Humber Assembly
Lynne	Richardson	Catcliffe & Brinsworth Community Partnership
Peter	Richardson	Regional Forum
Caroline	Savage	Regional Forum
Mandy	Wilson	COGS
Helen	Wyatt	Rotherham PCT

Appendix

Please find below bibliographic details of reports referred to in this digest:

- **Writing Renewal 2 – Not sat around looking at bubbles....**(Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber in association with InterCulture, 2005)
- **Practice Makes Perfect – Contributions to the Regional Economy** (Regional Forum, 2005) Download from www.regionalforum.org.uk
- **People & Participation – How to put citizens at the heart of decision-making** (Involve, 2005). Free copies can be downloaded from www.involving.org

Supported by



Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum
Suite D10, Joseph's Well
Hanover Walk
Leeds LS3 1AB
Tel: 0113 394 2300
Fax: 0113 394 2301
office@regionalforum.org.uk
www.regionalforum.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 1076540