

'RACE', REPRESENTATION, AND INFLUENCE

Opportunities for improving the integrity of 'race' representation and influence
on public sector services in the West Midlands



**A RESEARCH REPORT COMMISSIONED BY
GOVERNMENT OFFICE WEST MIDLANDS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report was commissioned by Government Office West Midlands to develop an understanding of how the concept of 'race' influences and impacts on public sector approaches to involvement and influence. The report analyses a range of community engagement strategies across the West Midlands to identify best practice and explore the potential for transfer across local authorities. The aims of the report are to:

- examine public officials' perspectives on the purpose of engagement with BME people
- explore the impact of a variety of different consultation techniques on decision-making
- identify local authority attitudes to the empowerment agenda in the region

RECOMMENDATIONS

- local authorities should be encouraged to focus more on the fairness of *processes* and *structures* (how and why people are engaged) rather than the *outputs* of processes (the numbers of BME people engaged, for example)
- monitoring of local authority engagement practices should focus on the degree to which authorities have provided open and accessible opportunities for people from all backgrounds to participate, rather than solely on the 'representativeness' of people that actually participate
- current community engagement in the region should be mapped to provide an understanding of the scope and effectiveness of engagement activity
- local authorities should be provided with advice and guidance on how the rationalisation and harmonisation of equality law may affect efforts to make consultation events representative. This may include developing the following skills of those participating in engagement:
 - a strong commitment to equality and human rights
 - the ability to engage and work constructively with a range of ethnic, faith, and community groups
 - a commitment to sharing expertise and good practice with others
 - an appreciation of human rights as a framework for resolving conflict

- an ability to identify similar barriers to service delivery for different social groups
- Public officials should be trained with the following skills which are necessary for effective engagement:
 - strong, critical knowledge of equality practice
 - an ability to identify similar barriers to accessing service delivery and shared needs across social groups
 - an ability to recognise the relative strengths and weaknesses of particular forms of community engagement
 - an ability to identify practical improvement to service delivery and to make funding decisions that will help the maximum number of local people at the same time
 - an ability to clearly explain how funding decisions have been made to local groups

METHODOLOGY

Research was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of six semi-structured face-to-face interviews with individuals at various levels of the local authority/LSP structure in Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent and Dudley. Interviewees included:

- councillors
- LSP directors
- local authority officers
- LSP community engagement officers

Interviews were intended to compile evidence of existing engagement strategies; identify potential barriers faced when engaging with BME communities; ascertain the reasons for specific targeting and engagement of BME communities; and identify the extent to which engagement (particularly with BME people) led to influence.

The second phase of research consisted of literature reviews of:

- existing research into local community participation governance procedures
- government guidance and policy relating to consultation, engagement, and involvement of communities

This was followed by desk-based analysis of the minutes, reports, and other public documents relating to four consultation events activities and a survey of the minutes and associated documents from six ward committees in Birmingham over the six-month period July to December 2008. The research for this stage was conducted with a view to determining the extent to which there was evidence that involvement of BME people in engagement had an identifiable impact on final outcomes.

FINDINGS

(a) Forms of engagement

The report shows that the different forms engagement takes can be divided into two groups: generic engagement activities that seek to engage with the whole community; and BME-specific engagement strategies.

(i) Engagement with the wider community

The reasons public bodies seek to involve communities in decision making can be simplified to a list of four. They correspond to particular strategies and activities:

- *exploiting grass roots knowledge*
this type of engagement is designed to identify, firstly, whether a particular project, initiative, or programme is necessary or an appropriate use of resources, and, secondly, whether flaws or inadequacies in the design of services can be eradicated before implementation. Typical examples include consultation events.
- *identifying unmet needs in existing service provision*
participants are free to comment upon any aspect of service delivery or local governance that they have experienced as part of their daily lives. Typical examples include petitions, councillors surgeries, and ward committees.
- *verifying the appropriateness of strategic priorities*
public authorities often look to consult on their general direction and function. In doing so, they often attempt to engage with community, voluntary, faith, and 'representative' groups rather than individuals because: local authorities are statutorily required to involve the third sector in the preparation of local area agreements; organisations are more likely to provide continuity than individuals; and group opinions can claim to be more 'representative' than individual opinions. Typical examples include community empowerment networks.
- *building trust in local services, facilitators and decision-making processes*
some engagement strategies attempt to build trust in local governance by giving local residents a direct say in decision-making. Typical examples include the

formal establishment of a post on the executive of committees or panels, or devolved decision-making such as participatory budgeting.

(ii) BME-specific strategies

BME-specific strategies usually consisted of one of three activities:

- additional consultation events
- 'positive action' recruitment
- formal mechanisms within consultation structures to facilitate the communication of views (for example, BME forums)

(b) Rationale for BME engagement

The report identifies two main reasons for undertaking targeted community engagement work with BME communities:

(i) Equating attendance with equality

Most officials cited the absence of BME people at consultation events as a reason to implement measures to encourage greater participation. However, when questioned, all interviewees were clear that it was not just BME communities who were absent from the engagement process, but a wide range of people, including those from other equality strands.

Whilst most officials strove for a representative sample for their engagement activity, this was rarely based on a robust statistical analysis of the area in question.

(ii) Tension over representative status

There was near consensus among the officials interviewed that individuals participating in the engagement processes they were involved with were *not* considered representative of a community or group. This was for two broad reasons:

- a recognition that individuals are unable to represent any other community or group apart from those they have received an official mandate for through membership of a particular organisation, group, or network.
- a belief that engaging with individuals as representatives of a particular group or cause encouraged them to think of themselves as being in conflict with other groups, fighting for limited resources

However, despite the claim that individuals could not be representative of a group they were not democratically elected to speak for, all interviewees expressed a concern that their engagement processes included participation from BME people.

(c) Influence and impact of community engagement

(i) Mainstream consultation

- very few interviewees could easily recall an example where consultation had had an influence on the decisions or direction a local authority had decided to take
- where interviewees were able to recount an example, it usually involved a change to 'operational' issues affecting how a service was delivered on a day-to-day basis
- there are a range of statutory, financial, and 'political' considerations that constrain decisions and weaken the scope for individual input
- the potential for BME people to influence decisions is therefore limited, although this reflects generic difficulties inherent in the system

(ii) Consultation with BME communities

There was little evidence that consultation with BME communities provided an additional or unique insight into either strategic or operational matters. This was largely for two reasons:

- firstly, there was an insufficiently robust evidence base on which to determine the impact of BME-raised issues on final outcomes
- secondly, where interviewees were able to separate the contribution made by a BME-specific consultative event, the issues raised were so generic it was difficult to assess the extent to which they influenced the final decision made

(d) Attitudes of public officials to the engagement and empowerment agenda

The report shows that there are two factors relating to the attitudes of public officials that are perhaps hindering progress of the empowerment agenda:

(i) Mistranslation of policy and aspiration

- the government has variously described the empowerment agenda as the 'noble pursuit' of democracy; a 'new era of greater power and influence' for communities; and 'an activity fundamental to the definition of "citizen"'
- interviewees rarely talked about engagement in this way. Instead, their reasons for consultation largely related to statutory considerations and particular government initiatives

(ii) Lack of councillor support for the empowerment agenda

Many interviewees highlighted the fact that councillors are often indifferent or even openly hostile to the devolution of power to people. Reasons include:

- a perception that the growth in partnership influence reduces the democratic mandate of elected representatives
- a perception that the public lack the requisite skills necessary to make decisions on behalf of communities, such as listening and communication skills, and an ability to think strategically about spending priorities



1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Purpose of the project

Government Office West Midlands commissioned brap to research a range of community engagement strategies in order to develop:

1. an understanding of how the concept of 'race' influences and impacts on public sector approaches to involvement and influence
2. an analysis of existing approaches to community engagement, in three distinct areas of the region, in order to explore the potential transfer of effective practice to other areas

1.2 The policy context

Since the election of the Labour government in 1997, there have been a range of legislative measures designed to increase the involvement of individuals in local and national government decision making. From the recent Communities and Local Government white paper *Communities in Control* (CLG 2008b) it is possible to identify four reasons that explain the government's pursuit of the empowerment agenda:

- an ideological commitment to the principles of democracy, devolution and community/individual control
- a belief that local knowledge and understanding will improve the quality of local service delivery
- a desire to harness the creativity and energy of a wide range of people through partnership working
- a belief that involving people in decision-making will improve community cohesion and social inclusion

Central to the government's vision of an empowered and collaborative community are local strategic partnerships (LSPs) and their associated components: local area agreements, the duty to involve, National Indicators, and the independent Comprehensive Area Assessment (CLG 2008b).

First introduced in 2000, the role of LSPs was strengthened in 2007 when the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act made it a statutory requirement for local authorities to consult “with such other persons as appear to it to be appropriate” in preparing its local area agreement (OPSI 2007). The government underlined this move towards greater partnership working at a local level by granting local strategic partnerships greater financial and political freedom. For example, the 2007 Act also introduced the un-ring-fenced area based grant to provide local authorities and their partners with greater flexibility in the use of funding from central government. At the same time, it was announced that local authorities would be able to choose some of the indicators by which they would be assessed, thereby granting them greater flexibility to choose their own priorities.

An important reason for granting local authorities/local strategic partnerships more autonomy is the scope this provides for greater involvement of local people in governance. It is clear from proposals set out in *Communities in Control*, that the government is attempting to accelerate the rate of this involvement.

Under the new proposals, the duty to involve will be extended to police authorities and cultural, environmental and sporting organisations. A new duty on councils to respond to petitions will ensure that individuals will have a guarantee that issues of concern to a sufficient number of local residents will receive a full council debate. Furthermore, the white paper also contains plans to encourage a range of mechanisms that will allow the public to become involved in decision making, including participatory budgeting, community ownership of unused public assets, and ‘community contracts’ (agreements between service providers and local residents, with each agreeing to certain responsibilities).

However, despite the government’s investment of time, political capital, and the resources of local decision-makers into pursuing the engagement agenda, very little consideration has been given to status of those engaged. As Barnes et al (2008) point out, there is still considerable confusion as to whether people are being consulted as representatives of a wider community or whether they are being consulted as individuals. In the first case, the person engaged has a responsibility to identify and communicate the concerns of a whole group of people, usually comprising one of the six equality strands (age, gender, sexual orientation, race, disability, religion or belief). In the second instance, individuals have no obligation

other than to provide their own views and expertise as people who live in a particular community and use its services and amenities.

Clarifying the role and status of those engaged or consulted is important for two reasons:

- firstly, there is evidence to suggest that uncertainty regarding the basis on which people are asked to participate in governance structures can cause cynicism and disenchantment with the engagement process. Maguire and Truscott (2006) highlight in particular the problem of people from the voluntary and community sector believing they were nominated into governance structures as individuals but then being expected to speak for their sector
- secondly, the construction of effective and efficient engagement structures requires a clear understanding of the *purpose* of engagement. If people are being consulted to ascertain the views of the wider community, for instance, it may well be necessary to formalise that intention within the consultation structure (through the establishment of forums for under represented groups, for example) (see Barnes et al (2008) for a discussion of why the design of citizen-centred governance requires a recognition of the tension between 'local representation' and 'local knowledge')

In summary, the Government is clearly keen to increase the amount and quality of community engagement to ensure public services are meeting the needs of all people in a local area. Yet there are a number of trends in current practice that are preventing full and effective use of community engagement to achieve this. The particular concern of this research is the issues that affect equitable and effective engagement of BME people in this process.

With this in mind, the project aimed to:

- examine public officials' perspectives on the purpose of engagement with BME people
- explore the impact of a variety of different consultation techniques on decision-making
- identify local authority attitudes to the empowerment agenda in the region



2. METHODOLOGY

Research was conducted in two phases.

Primary research

Primary research consisted of six semi-structured face-to-face interviews with individuals at various levels of the local authority/LSP structure, including:

- councillors
- LSP directors
- local authority officers
- LSP community engagement officers

To provide a broad picture of engagement strategies across the West Midlands, interviewees were selected from three different areas: Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, and Dudley.

The key purpose of these interviews was to:

- compile evidence of existing engagement strategies
- identify good practice
- identify potential barriers faced when engaging with BME communities
- ascertain the reasons for specific targeting and engagement of BME communities (to understand the motivations for and expectations of this process)
- identify the extent to which engagement (particularly with BME people) led to influence
- explore what the forthcoming duty to involve means in relation to the creation of involvement strategies for BME communities

It is worth noting that there are limitations to research of this type. The potential for subjectivity to taint the validity of information gathered qualitatively is acknowledged. Within the context of this research there are two concerns of particular importance. Firstly, as Young (1998) points out, political discourse is emotion/value driven to an extent often unrecognised by those engaged in it. As such, it is possible that the responses interviewees gave as to the efficacy of engagement – and BME consultation in particular – was informed by their own, unrecognised, ethical and emotional attitudes towards the whole process of community involvement.

Secondly, the prevailing attitude that community involvement is a public good and that taking measures to increase BME participation is laudable may have influenced some interviewees to exaggerate the extent to which their organisation was engaging with BME communities.

Secondary research

Secondary research consisted of two stages. Stage one included literature reviews of:

- existing research into local community participation governance procedures
- government guidance and policy relating to consultation, engagement, and involvement of communities

Stage two was a desk-based analysis of minutes, reports, and other public documents relating to various consultation activities. The research for this stage was conducted with a view to determining:

- the extent to which there was evidence that involvement of BME people in engagement had an identifiable impact on final outcomes
- the extent to which the transparency of decision-making processes allowed the impact of consultation to be traced

Four consultations events were chosen because they were highlighted by interviewees as examples of particularly open and inclusive practice. Additionally, a survey was conducted of the minutes and associated documents from six ward committees in Birmingham over the six-month period July to December 2008.

3. REGIONAL CONTEXT

A number of different factors affecting people's propensity to participate in community governance can be identified from a review of the relevant literature. Skidmore (2006) simplifies this to a list of six:

- gender
- socio-economic status
- marginalisation
- age
- identity
- patterns of social capital

This section briefly provides the context for engagement and involvement practices in Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, and Dudley through the framework of these factors. Where possible, the findings have been summarised in Table 1.

3.1 Gender

Women are as likely as men to be involved in community governance, although women's participation is more likely to be in an informal capacity, such as work with a voluntary community organisation (Rai 2008). All three areas had a majority female population, with women in each area having worse educational and employment prospects than men.

3.2 Socio-economic status

It is difficult to establish a strong correlation between socio-economic status and participation, not least because of the many ways 'participation' can be defined. For example, voter turnout at the 2005 general election can be strongly delineated along class lines, with 70% of people in the AB group (managerial, administrative or professional workers) voting compared to 54% in the DE group (semi and unskilled workers, pensioners, and those on long-term benefit) (Electoral Commission 2005). However, according to the Home Office Citizenship Survey, people in deprived areas are *more* likely to have been involved in "some form of civic participation at least once a month in the previous year" than those in less deprived areas (Skidmore 2006). Nevertheless, it is clear that poverty can restrict people's time, resources, and ability to participate in community engagement.

In Birmingham, 30.8% of the working age population claim out-of-work benefits, compared with the 19.2% in Stoke-on-Trent and 23.8% in Dudley (see table 1). Similarly, 26.6% of employees are paid less than £7 an hour in Birmingham, compared with 32.9% in Stoke and 28.6% in Dudley (see table 1). However, given the size of the areas covered in this research, and the diversity in socio-economic status of their residents, it is important to view the influence of socio-economic issues on levels of participation with caution.

3.3 'Marginalisation'

'Marginalisation' is a term used in the literature to cover 'minority' groups such as disabled people and people from BME communities. Members of both these groups are less likely to be involved at all levels of governance.

Birmingham's minority ethnic communities comprise 33% of its total population, Stoke-on-Trent's 7%, and Dudley's 8%. By Census categories, the Pakistani community makes up the largest ethnic group in each area. Other sizeable groups include those of 'mixed' heritage, and African-Caribbean and Indian people.

3.4 Age

Young people and those past retirement age are less likely to become involved in community governance practices (although there is evidence to suggest that if participative processes are time-intensive, retired people are the group most likely to be involved).

Due to both declining birth and mortality rates, the population of the UK as a whole is ageing. Stoke-on-Trent and Dudley are indicative of this trend, with their respective over-60 population similar to the national figure of about 21% of the total population. Birmingham has an exceptionally young age structure compared to the UK as a whole, with a higher proportion of people younger than 35 years. The city also has a lower proportion of older residents at every age group above 35 years.

3.5 Identity

An individual is more likely to participate in local decision making if they feel a particularly strong affiliation to their local area and its residents. Reasons put forward for having a strong attachment to an area include: experience of disadvantage or deprivation, having a strong religious faith, being connected with a particular cause promoting social justice, and being aware of being a 'representative' of a group of

people (see Skidmore 2006). The relationship between these causes and having an affinity with a community is obviously symbiotic – in any given case, having an attachment to an area may well encourage the attitudes and beliefs that would lead to an individual participating in local governance.

Indicators of people's attachment to an area are obviously difficult to construct. National Indicator 2, the percentage of people who feel they belong to their neighbourhood, may give some idea of the situation in a small area. Unfortunately, however, none of the three areas in question are currently compiling this information.

3.6 Patterns of social capital

'Social capital', defined by the Department for Communities and Local Government, is "the 'social glue' between people, organisations and communities that enables them to work together to pursue shared objectives" (CLG 2008a). Focusing on social capital explicitly as an expression of social networks and connections, its impact on community engagement is clear. Individuals are often recruited into governance structures by people they know, with women, in particular, drawn into participative procedures through prior involvement with social networks.

The government regards the promotion of social capital as a means of improving community cohesion. Conversely, some have argued that improved community cohesion can be regarded as an indication that people's social capital is increasing. In the same vein, while the government seeks to increase individuals' social capital to promote local engagement, it could be argued that a belief that governance structures are inclusive and accessible is a sign that the 'bridging' and 'linking' aspects of social capital are being fulfilled.

Whatever the limitations of such indicators, it is clear that a sizeable minority of residents in Birmingham and Dudley feel the decision making mechanisms within their local authority are sufficiently open, accessible, and effective (40% in Birmingham and 40.7% in Dudley). In contrast, only 21% of those surveyed in Stoke-on-Trent felt the same way. This may be indicative of the history of engagement practices within these areas. Both Dudley and Birmingham can trace the origins of their engagement structures back to the early nineties or even late eighties. Studies have shown that a tradition of involvement in governance is conducive to greater citizen participation.

The residents' feeling of empowerment in this context is matched by their perception that people of different backgrounds get on well together in their area, with 79% of people agreeing with this statement in Birmingham and 73% in Dudley. Stoke-on-Trent LSP is yet to undertake a survey in its area (for a discussion on the limitations of individuals' subjective perceptions of societal harmony as an indicator of community cohesion, see brap (2004)).

Table 1 below summarises some of this social, economic, and demographic data.

Table 1: Comparative social, economic, and demographic profile of Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, and Dudley

	Birmingham	Stoke-on-Trent	Dudley
Population ¹	1,010,200	239,700	305,400
Gender (% female pop) ²	51.7	51.5	50.9
Ethnicity (% non-white pop) ³	32.8	7.2	8.4
% of people who feel that they can influence decisions in their locality ⁴	40.0	21.0	40.7
% of people who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together ⁵	79	n/a	73
Working age people claiming out of work benefits (%) ⁶	30.8	19.2	23.8
Proportion of employees paid less than £7 per hour (%) ⁷	12.5	9.9	6.7

¹ Office for National Statistics (2007) Mid-2007 Population Estimates: United Kingdom, available from www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_population/Mid_2007_UK_England_&_Wales_Scotland_and_Northern_Ireland%20_21_08_08.zip

² 2001 Census, available from www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001

³ Office for National Statistics (2006) Neighbourhood Statistics: Resident Population Estimates by Ethnic Group (Percentages), available from:

www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination

⁴ figures for 2006/07. Taken from relevant LAA survey

⁵ figures for 2006/07. Taken from relevant LAA survey

⁶ figures for 2006/07. Taken from relevant LAA survey

⁷ average of 2006 to 2008 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings. See:

www.poverty.org.uk/maps/district%20data.xls



4. FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

This section briefly describes the various forms of participative governance taking place across the West Midlands. The section begins by describing generic forms of engagement, many of which attempt to include BME people, and then looks at BME-specific engagement strategies.

4.1 Engagement with the wider community

Talking to people with responsibility for community engagement revealed a variety of reasons why public bodies seek public involvement on policies, initiatives, and service delivery. The range of reasons can be simplified to a list of four:

- exploiting grass roots knowledge
- identifying unmet needs in existing service provision
- verifying the appropriateness of strategic priorities
- building trust in local services, facilitators and decision-making processes

The separation of these reasons into four discrete strands is largely artificial: for any particular consultation the four reasons are likely to overlap. However, these are useful distinctions for the purpose of this research, as they help to identify the types of activities that are being carried out in the region to achieve particular purposes (these are listed in Table 2). This section describes those engagement activities, using those four 'purposes' of engagement as a framework.

Table 2: Purpose of community involvement with associated activity

Purpose	Activity	Example	Role of those engaged
exploiting grass roots knowledge	gathering feed-back on specific proposals	consultation event on how service should be delivered	user of services
identifying unmet needs in existing service provision	encouraging individual input	councillors surgeries, ward committees	user of services
verifying appropriateness of strategic priorities	generating discussion	community empowerment network	community advocate
building trust	shared decision-making	participatory budgeting	local stakeholder

4.1.1 Exploiting grass roots knowledge

Gathering feedback on specific proposals or potential projects was one of the most common reasons officials gave for consulting with communities. Such involvement was designed to identify, firstly, whether the service improvement or modification was necessary or an appropriate use of resources, and, secondly, whether flaws or inadequacies in the design of the service could be eradicated before implementation.

For example, a ward committee in Birmingham decided to consult with its residents over the ward's health action plan. The initial drafts of the action plan had been produced in conjunction with Heart of Birmingham PCT and independent consultants. To garner views, the ward held three workshops: for women, general residents, and healthcare professionals working in the area. The ward officer recalled why the decision to consult on this particular issue was taken:

HoB PCT felt there was a real need to find out what the 'real' health issues were in the management area....partly because local GPs had said there were problems around diabetes, stroke, heart disease. But also as well because we were looking at the practicalities of building a new health and community centre, and so we wanted to make sure that if we did actually build that particular building that...well, the consultation would have to show that it would be an advantage to the residents.

The role of those engaged is explicitly to *inform* decision makers: either by providing the data necessary to form an evidence base for a decision, or by highlighting a particular piece of local knowledge that has bypassed the specialists.

4.1.2 Identifying unmet needs in existing service provision

In many ways, the purpose of this type of engagement is similar to that described above – that is, to draw upon the local knowledge of residents. However, it differs in that people are free to comment upon any aspect of service delivery or local governance that they have experienced as part of their daily lives. Many officials regarded the types of issues raised by this type of consultation as general problems or irritations residents faced when using local service. As one councillor stated:

If all the local services did their job properly, you wouldn't need us. But things will always go wrong; people will always ring up and complain. You can never tailor the service for everyone's individual needs.

The concerns raised by people during this process provide evidence of when and how service delivery is failing. As such, many officials – particularly elected members – regarded engagement on this topic as fundamental to their roles, 'the bread and butter of what we do', as one councillor put it.

The importance attached to identifying gaps in service provision has led to two innovations in the mechanisms used to gauge views in this area:

- *less structured*: it was felt by many officials that while traditional engagement techniques such as ward committees and residents' associations were an important forum for discovering people's complaints, they did not attract a wide enough range of the community. As such, there are a variety of methods employed across the region to engage with people who do not ordinarily become involved in public participation. Councillors in Stoke-on-Trent, for instance, organise 'fun days' in parks or local community centres aimed at children where they will also have a stall to talk with parents about their issues and concerns.
- *greater resident agency*: since the purpose of this type of engagement is to ascertain problems facing individuals, the most effective mechanisms often allowed residents to raise an issue directly with the relevant body. Pre-empting the proposed duty to respond to petitions, Stoke-on-Trent local authority has a system whereby anyone who lives or works in the city can present a petition to a meeting of the full city council providing that it contains at least 50 signatures (much below the threshold currently being considered by the Department for Communities and Local Government). The petition is then referred to the relevant officer who decides whether the issue should be pursued. Further consideration by the council usually takes the form of a task and finish group, with the ultimate outcome being a report that explains what action will be taken and why. At each stage of the process, the petition's originator is informed by letter of the council's decision.

4.1.3 Verifying the appropriateness of strategic priorities

Verifying the appropriateness of strategic priorities differs from the preceding forms of engagement in that public bodies looking to consult on their general direction and function tend to engage with community, voluntary, faith, and 'representative' groups, rather than individuals. This involvement of organisations was explained in some cases by the fact that local authorities are statutorily required to involve the third sector in the preparation and monitoring of their local area agreements. However,

other officials pointed to the fact that structures to facilitate public involvement in local strategy had to be formalised and this necessarily involved using organisations, which are more likely to provide continuity than individuals.

More commonly, many officials pointed to the fact that groups and networks are obviously more representative than single individuals. Since the strategic priorities a local authority decides upon obviously have an effect on a large group of people, it was felt important to consult with as wide a cross-section of the community as possible. In the absence of consulting all residents of a local area, it is inevitable, many interviewees claimed, that guidance and assurance should be provided by those with some claim to being 'representative' of a number of people.

Dudley Community Partnership (DCP) works in close collaboration with its community empowerment network, Dosti. Dosti is a network of networks; as such, its membership is comprised of 17 networks which collectively represent over 750 organisations. The scope and activity of its members encompass a wide range of community, voluntary, and faith organisations including environmental campaigns, scout groups, and residents' associations. Rather than engage with individual groups separately, DCP usually employs Dosti as its main consultative vehicle: collaboration with faith groups is conducted through the umbrella of Dosti's networks, for example.

The Dosti executive is allocated four seats on the DCP board. The board makes no stipulations as to the 'identity' of the representatives, although currently there are representatives from the Centre for Equality and Diversity (the successor of Dudley Race Equality Council) and the area's faith communities. Nevertheless, any compulsion to advocate on behalf of those communities comes from Dosti, rather than the LSP.

4.1.4 Building trust in local services, facilities, and decision-making processes

Building trust in local governance involves giving local residents a direct say in decision-making, either through the formal establishment of a post on the executive of committees or panels, or through devolved decision-making such as participatory budgeting.

One such example is the ward Neighbourhood Management Structure that encompasses local decision-making boards, committees, and associations in Stoke-on-Trent local authority. Each ward is given a budget of £150,000 to spend on

projects the community feels important. Councillors usually consult with the ward's Area Implementation Team (a partnership of agencies including the police, PCTs, fire service, housing associations, and local community organisations) on how to allocate the money to achieve the priorities set out in the ward's action plan. Councillors also hold additional meetings open to local community organisations to discuss funding for other projects and initiatives. Such meetings are advertised in the council's magazine, *City Life*, and through the councillor's own networks.

4.2 BME-specific engagement strategies

Reasons for engaging specifically with BME communities were often vague and rarely well-articulated. However, it is possible to identify two factors:

- a perceived democratic deficit in terms of BME people's participation in local governance
- apathy on the part of decision makers to seek out different perspectives of service delivery

The perceived democratic deficit was by far the most common reason offered by interviewees and is examined in detail in section 5. The perception that key decision makers (in particular, councillors) ignore the needs and concerns of BME communities was not widely held, although the reluctance of interviewees to discuss discrimination in this way is considered in the limitations of the methodology in section 2. Furthermore, section 7 examines at greater length councillors' attitudes towards the engagement agenda in general.

From the secondary research it is possible to identify a third, potential reason, namely statutory targets encouraging 'representativeness' in consultations forums. For example the Audit Commission Key Line of Enquiry that focuses on equality and diversity in housing examines the extent to which housing associations have "taken steps to maximise representation across all groups" in promoting service user involvement. Although it is possible to identify a shift in newer accountability frameworks away from 'representativeness' as an indicator of equality, it is clear that much of the legislative and statutory targets placed on local authorities in the last few years have encouraged the artificial diversification of consultative forums and engagement mechanisms. Whilst none of the respondents mentioned statutory considerations as a driver for BME-specific engagement – indeed, many interviewees expressed uncertainty over their legal requirements – the effect of legislative obligations is worth consideration.

Given the paucity and vagueness over the reasons for BME engagement, it is difficult to identify a correlation between consultation strategies and their particular drivers.

BME-specific strategies usually consisted of one of three activities:

- additional consultation events
- 'positive action' recruitment
- formalised structures

4.2.1 Additional consultation events

Additional consultation events were usually held after the forms of engagement described in section 4.1.1 had been employed but deemed to be non-inclusive in some way (see section 5.1). An LSP official in Dudley explained how the partnership held additional consultation events on its local area agreement priorities:

we brought Asian women's groups in for a training session and trained them as facilitators. They then went back into their communities and ran a number of events. Sometimes we would piggy back off pre-existing events – Asian women come together for cookery sessions or for sessions around children and the family. We used those pre-planned events to engage with them and say, 'well actually, what are the issues for you?'

4.2.2 'Positive action' recruitment

Many local authorities employed some form of positive action recruitment policy when advertising for positions on committees or residents associations. Officials responsible for local ward governance, for example, invited those involved with the city's BME third sector to attend events where the responsibilities and opportunities associated with attendance on ward committees and residents associations were explained.

4.2.3 Formalised structures

Some local authorities have established formal mechanisms within their consultation structures to facilitate the communication of views from BME communities. A typical example is Stoke-on-Trent's BME forum, which consists of 66 organisations who meet four times a year. The forum is represented by a steering group comprising 13 people from BME backgrounds elected by the wider forum. Five members of the steering group are elected onto the LSP board and four of its strategic sub-groups (Economic development and enterprise, Healthier communities and older people,

Safer and stronger communities, and the Children's Trust Board). As part of its remit the forum held a series of consultation events on these four areas. While people from all communities were invited to attend, the forum's main target was expressly BME communities.

5. RATIONALE FOR BME ENGAGEMENT

The reasons for non-participation by BME people in local governance structures have been rehearsed in numerous studies, mostly recently by Rai (2008), Blake et al (2008) and brap (2007). Rather than repeat those arguments, this section examines the attitudes underlying current BME engagement strategies, focusing on the *assumptions held by public officials and their reasons for engaging BME people specifically in community engagement processes.*

We identified two main reasons why official undertook targeted community engagement work with BME communities:

5.1 Equating attendance with equality

Most officials cited the absence of BME people at consultation events as a reason to implement measures to encourage greater participation. However, when questioned, all interviewees were clear that it was not just BME communities who were absent from the engagement process, but a wide range of people, including those from other equality strands. For example, when explaining why they had chosen to hold additional consultative events one LSP official said:

The feeling was – and our experience was through other events – that young people weren't there in large numbers and there was an absence of BMEs, so that's why they were targeted.

As such, BME-specific events are often held in parallel with events designed to engage other under-represented groups.

Whilst most officials strove for a representative sample for their engagement activity, this was rarely based on a robust statistical analysis of the area in question. In part this was because appropriate demographic evidence – data that cross referenced the population with sufficiently sophisticated ethnic categories – did not exist. As such methods for assessing the representativeness of a consultation were often ad hoc. One interviewee, for example, was content to see evidence of 'some' BME participation while another local authority officer strove to ensure that membership of a particular residents association "covered as many of the constituency's BME groups as possible."

The absence of people in participative structures was usually seen as indicative of unfair or non-inclusive structures or procedures; rarely was it considered that absence was the result of an indifference to the whole process of engagement and apathy towards local governance.

5.2 Tension over representative status

Barnes et al (2008) argue that there is confusion amongst those designing citizen-centred governance about whether those engaged are involved on the basis that they are users of local services or representatives of the wider community. In the first instance, consultees are engaged to find out their own personal experience of service delivery: they are engaged on the basis that they are individuals with grass roots knowledge of frontline services. In the second case, individuals are engaged as representatives of entire groups of communities. As such, they are expected to communicate the concerns of a wide range of people.

There was near consensus among the officials interviewed that individuals participating in the engagement processes they were involved with were *not* considered representative of a community or group. This was for two broad reasons.

Firstly, there was a recognition that individuals are unable to represent any other community or group apart from those they have received an official mandate for through membership of a particular organisation, group, or network. This largely stemmed from a realisation that individuals traditionally seen as 'community leaders' were unable to represent the complete range of views held within their community. The complaint one official received was typical of the experiences recounted by most interviewees:

I was at a consultation event and a Muslim woman told us, 'whenever you talk to the community you talk to the elders, to the men. Come and talk to me, talk to my sisters.' That's what we're aiming for.

Secondly, some officials felt that engaging with individuals as representatives of a particular group or cause encouraged them to think of themselves as being in conflict with other groups, fighting for limited resources. As advocates, people feel obliged to argue for the best possible deal for their constituents. The atmosphere of tension and hostility this can create led one local area management team to disband its ward advisory board and advertise for new members with the explicit understanding that:

you are not here to represent other residents. You're there purely as a resident who uses Birmingham city council's services – and other services...PCT, police services, etc – and we want you to bring your own experiences and knowledge to the table.

However, despite the claim that individuals could not be representative of a group they were not democratically elected to speak for, all interviewees expressed a concern that their engagement processes included, at some stage, participation from BME people. Most officials recognised that there was a contradiction in their views that people should be consulted as individuals, but that BME-specific engagement strategies were important.

6. INFLUENCE AND IMPACT OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

6.1 Mainstream consultation

Officials were much happier talking about the various techniques and practices they used to engage with the community than they were discussing the impact such consultation had. Indeed, very few of the interviewees could easily recall an example where consultation had had an influence on the decisions or direction a local authority had decided to take. When they were able to recount an example, it usually involved a change to 'operational' issues affecting how a service was delivered on a day-to-day basis.

In part, this is because the statutory, financial, and 'political' considerations that shape local authority decision-making are more likely to constrain decisions made at a strategic level. Proposals affecting operational, delivery matters are often part a wider strategy that has already been evaluated to ensure it fulfils statutory and financial requirements. Similarly, decisions made on a strategic level obviously have the potential to impact on a wide range of people and therefore are discussed with a wide range of people, making it harder to determine the impact an individual or, indeed, a small group of people may have had.

Arguably, the power that individuals participating in consultative practices possess is limited in all but a handful of instances. The potential for BME people to influence decisions is therefore similarly limited, although this reflects generic difficulties inherent in the system rather than challenges specific to BME communities.

6.2 Consultation with BME communities

There was little evidence that consultation with BME communities provided an additional or unique insight into either strategic or operational matters. This was largely attributable to two factors.

Firstly, there was an insufficiently robust evidence base on which to determine the impact of BME-raised issues on final outcomes. BME representatives on committees and boards are often not identified as such in meeting minutes so it is not possible to 'separate' their contribution. In instances where representatives are identified – or, more likely, can be identified through background research – the decision-making

process was not transparent enough to determine the impact of a particular argument made by that person. Decisions, for example, are rarely explained with explicit reference to the different points of view that have informed them. This was particularly true for specific consultation events (of the type described in section 4.1.1) where evaluation rarely cross-referenced contribution by ethnicity. There was little evidence that officials completed evaluation in a way that would allow them to assess the extent and subsequent impact of BME contribution.

Secondly, where interviewees were able to separate the contribution made by a BME-specific consultative event, the issues raised were so generic it was difficult to assess the extent to which they influenced the final decision made. For example, one community engagement officer recalled after a BME consultation event on local area priorities:

I'm not sure that that event through up anything that was new. The concerns were similar to the generic events – jobs, hospitals, schools – so it's difficult to say what impact that one event had on the LAA.

In this case, the concerns of BME people may well have had a practical impact, but it is more accurate to label such concerns as broad, non-ethnic specific issues common to a 'diverse' range of service users.

7. ATTITUDES OF PUBLIC OFFICIALS TO THE ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT AGENDA

7.1 Mistranslation of policy and aspiration

When discussing why they engaged with their local community, it was rare for public officials to employ the same language used by the government to describe the promotion of the empowerment agenda. Various, the government has talked about empowerment as the 'noble pursuit' of democracy (Bleas 2008) and a 'new era of greater power and influence' for communities (CLG 2007). It has claimed that participative democracy is 'an activity fundamental to the definition of "citizen"' and that the purpose of legislation has been to facilitate 'a devolution of power from Whitehall to town halls' (CLG 2008b).

In contrast, it is clear that those with responsibility for community participation are more likely to see engagement as a series of processes designed to fulfil certain statutory and 'political' considerations including:

- government initiatives such as the Community Empowerment Action Plan, duty to involve, and Community Call for Action ('we're legally obligated to engage with partners')
- a belief that elected officials should utilise procedures to identify and establish the views of the people they represent ('at the end of the day, we're public servants')

Additionally, some interviewees mentioned a third factor:

- an emphasis on residents as funders of local services ('taxpayers have the right to tell us what we're doing wrong')

It appeared that attempts by government to place more power in the hands of communities and local residents was either not understood by local authority officials or was done in a way that failed to generate sufficient enthusiasm or belief in the principles of the agenda.

7.2 Lack of councillor support for the empowerment agenda

Many interviewees highlighted the fact that councillors are often indifferent or, on occasion, openly hostile to the empowerment agenda and the devolution of power to people.

Some suggested that many elected members view the growth in partnership influence as something that reduces their democratic mandate. Indeed, some openly claimed that some councillors had concerns over the public usurping their role. One official recalled:

We had a session on participatory budgeting the other week with a group of councillors there. They started off the day being very interested in what was going on, but by the end all of them had switched off...They were saying, 'we know those views: we do engage with the community, we do consult, so when we set budgets we do it in the knowledge of that. And you're proposing to give them some money, which, actually, we've already had the discussions on.'

Some councillors defended their opposition to greater public participation by highlighting what they perceived to be a lack of the requisite skills and knowledge on the part of the public. In particular, councillors identified poor listening and communication skills, and a common inability to think strategically about spending priorities which culminated in a partisan and confrontational approach to decision making.



8. CONCLUSION

Presently, there is great deal of confusion amongst public officials as to the purpose of engagement with BME people. There is a growing recognition amongst decision makers that 'community representatives' are unable to reflect the diversity of needs and attitudes that exist within communities. Nevertheless, most officials still operate with a model of equality that requires engagement practices to be 'representative'.

The results are often tokenistic consultative measures which are damaging to:

- the individual engaged, who faces the burden of representation
- the public body, which is not presented with the true experience of service users

Ultimately, the most damage is incurred by the process of engagement itself, as frequent, unnecessary, and obviously ineffective consultations undermine the public's confidence in community governance strategies.

However, as the findings of the report show, this is also a period of great change in attitudes towards representation, participation, and equality. With the government's continued pursuit of community involvement there will be more and more opportunities for local service users to share their grass-roots knowledge. Local authorities across the region are already implementing innovative means of engaging and exciting communities about participative governance. If this momentum around the empowerment agenda is not to be lost, it is important to refresh some of the current thinking on engagement.

This report is accompanied with a toolkit with advice and guidance aimed specifically at local authority practitioners. Below, however, are five strategic recommendations designed to position Government Office West Midlands as a champion of engagement by reinvigorating some of the language, attitudes, and assumption around participation and engagement.

Recommendation one

Encourage local authorities to focus more on equality outcomes rather than structures. This will involve a move away from monitoring the *turnout* at consultative events towards a greater tendency to monitor the *issues* discussed. In an ideal scenario, local authorities would be more concerned with meaningfully addressing

genuine issues of inequality – such as poverty or educational disadvantage – rather than merely increasing the number of people attending events from particular groups.

Recommendation two

Obviously, local authorities will also still be under a legal obligation to ensure that their community engagement processes and structures are equitable and fair. However, when monitoring that fairness, focus should be placed on the degree to which local authorities have provided open and accessible opportunities for people from all backgrounds to participate, rather than solely on the 'representativeness' of people that actually participate (measured usually by numbers of people from a particular background). As an example, this more sophisticated approach could involve monitoring the following key elements of an equitable community engagement process:

- **Accountability:** clearly outlining the purpose of a consultation process, identifying the limits or boundaries of influence for those taking part, and sharing the results and decision made with local people
- **Transparency:** being honest and open about how decisions are made, and why consultation recommendations were not followed (for example, when resources of political influence have an effect)
- **Empowerment and capacity building:** taking long term steps in an area to improve the ability of traditionally excluded groups to engage effectively and equally in consultation (for example, developing the skills necessary to put arguments across in public meetings)
- **Flexible and sensitive to the needs of local people:** providing a range of opportunities for engagement that are suited to the needs of local people (identified through previous examples of consultation, such as an unwillingness by women from some ethnic groups to attend local meetings and a preference for email consultation)
- **Research:** taking seriously the need to understand the structural and systemic reasons for under-representation of specific groups and taking steps to improve the community engagement process as a result

Obviously many of these issues reflect common sense and other accounts of 'effective' community engagement practice. And this is exactly how 'equality' in community engagement should be seen, as an important element of effective practice. Arguably, it will be easier for local authorities to demonstrate adherence to implementing practices of this type than it would be to ensure representative levels of

BME attendance in all community engagement processes. Naturally, one would expect that levels of representativeness would increase as community engagement practices become fairer and more accessible. Yet as this report has shown, there are a number of other reasons for un-representative participation in community engagement processes (e.g., socio-economic status, legacy of previous engagement), not all of which are in a local authority's direct control.

Recommendation three

Map current community engagement in the region to provide an understanding of the scope and effectiveness of engagement activity. Using the five values listed above (accountability, transparency, empowering, flexible, and informed) as variables, identify the structures and approaches to conducting consultation that deliver fairness in areas that are conducive to effective and meaningful engagement.

Recommendation four

Produce guidance and advice to local authorities on how the rationalisation and harmonisation of equality law may affect efforts to make consultation events representative. The proposed Equality Bill, for example, will extend current legislative duties for local authorities to promote 'race', gender, and disability equality to the 'strands' of age, sexual orientation, and religion or belief. If local authorities continue with a model of representative participation, they may find the addition of further groups renders the process too cumbersome.

As an alternative, local authorities may benefit from focusing on participants' skill and ability to discuss issues from a range of equality strand perspectives. A particular challenge in the future will be discussing and balancing the needs of a range of excluded groups from a human rights perspective. As an indication, local authorities and LSPs might look for equality focused participants that demonstrate the following skills, recognising that equality and knowledge of human rights issues are actually a learned skill, and one's background or identity is not always a guarantee of having that knowledge:

- a strong commitment to equality and human rights
- the ability to engage and work constructively with a range of ethnic, faith, and community groups
- a commitment to sharing expertise and good practice with others
- an appreciation of human rights as a framework for resolving conflict

- an ability to identify the commonalities in service participation that create similar barriers to accessing service delivery for different social groups

Recommendation five

Provide public officials with the confidence to implement fair engagement strategies that do not necessarily coincide with external pressures for 'representative' consultation. Following from the previous recommendation, this will involve developing the skills of local authority practitioners, seeking to embed, in particular:

- strong, critical knowledge of equality practice (including the ability to recognise the pitfalls with particular approaches to equality such as multiculturalism, assimilation, and others)
- an ability to identify similar barriers to accessing service delivery and shared needs across social groups (and the ability to identify where these barriers and needs are specific to a particular group)
- an ability to recognise the relative strengths and weaknesses of particular forms of community engagement (for example, engagement by community leaders will not always provide a holistic picture of the needs of the whole community)
- an ability to identify practical improvement to service delivery to recognise the influence of political considerations and to make funding decisions that will help the maximum number of local people at the same time
- an ability to clearly explain how funding decisions have been made to local groups

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