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Creating sustainable communities

Research Report 15

Making Connections: An evaluation of the Community Participation Programmes

Executive Summary



Neighbourhood
Renewal Unit

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Authors' Preface

During this research the three separate elements of the Community Participation Programmes were combined into the Single Community Programme and, as the report documents, this will in turn be integrated into the new Safer and Stronger Communities Fund. Despite this shifting policy background, feedback in discussions during and since the research with practitioners and policy makers confirms that the findings of the evaluation, together with the recommendations, will have continued relevance in the new policy environment, particularly if community participation is to make its full contribution to future programmes in neighbourhood renewal and local governance.

Contents

Foreword	5
Executive Summary	6
• The Community Participation Programmes	
• Evaluating the programmes	
• What the programmes have achieved	
• Challenges and policy implications	
1. Introduction	13
1.1 Background	
1.2 What the Community Participation Programmes were set up to do	
1.3 The aims of the evaluation	
2. How programmes operate	16
2.1 Setting up the programmes	
2.2 The Community Chests and Community learning Chests	
2.3 The Community Empowerment Fund	
2.4 Guidance, monitoring and support	
2.5 Implications for policy and practice	
3. How far have the programmes achieved their aims?	24
3.1 Developing capacity, confidence and skills	
3.2 Networking, cohesion and co-ordination	
3.3 Governance and service delivery	
3.4 Impact	
4. The future of the programmes	37
4.1 Added value	
4.2 The need for continued support	
4.3 The Single Community Programme	
4.4 Policy implications	
Glossary	42

Foreword

The Community Participation Programmes (CPPs) were designed to:

- stimulate and support community activity in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, so that more people may become involved in the regeneration of these neighbourhoods;
- help residents in these areas gain the skills and knowledge they need to play an active role in the renewal of their neighbourhoods; and
- support voluntary and community sector involvement as equal partners in local strategic partnerships.

The CPPs recognised that effective community participation needs a strong foundation of activity and learning opportunities in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They also recognised that, if the diversity of community interests is to be represented effectively in Neighbourhood Renewal, investment in the infrastructure is needed to allow groups and residents to work together and make an informed contribution.

This report shares the findings of a year-long evaluation designed to assess the extent to which the programmes were contributing to the delivery of the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy, to share good practice and to inform future development.

Neighbourhood Renewal is a long-term strategy. This evaluation reports on the first two full years of operation of the programmes. They have now been merged into the single Community Programme, which will run until 2006. This will then be merged into the new Stronger and Safer Communities Fund. Their progress so far reflects local context – there is considerable variation across the country. Overall, however, the evaluation suggests that:

- by supporting groups within their own communities, the programmes are building capacity, confidence and social capital;
- by funding small-scale activities and learning, they are making small but significant contributions to Neighbourhood Renewal;
- by developing networks, they are improving cohesion and co-ordination across the sector, although more still needs to be done to engage the most marginalised groups; and
- by giving voluntary and community sector representatives an acknowledged place on Local Strategic Partnerships, they are building links with service providers, gaining the respect of partners and influencing the way that Neighbourhood Renewal monies are spent. However, their progress depends on Local Strategic Partnerships development and they tend still to be treated as junior partners.

Executive Summary

1 The Community Participation Programmes

The Community Empowerment Fund (CEF), Community Chests (CCs) and Community Learning Chests (CLCs) were introduced in 2001 in the 88 Neighbourhood Renewal priority areas. They were designed to:

- encourage more people to become involved in the regeneration of their neighbourhoods;
- help residents gain the skills and knowledge they need to play an active role in Neighbourhood Renewal; and
- support the involvement of the local community and voluntary sector as an equal partner in local strategic partnerships (LSPs).

CC and CLC have each provided grants of up to £5,000 to local community groups, aiming to give particular priority to marginalised and/or newer groups in Neighbourhood Renewal priority areas. The CEF has supported the development of Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) in the 88 areas. These aim to build local capacity and networks, improve communication and co-ordination between local groups and support community participation in LSPs and other partnerships.

From April 2004, the three programmes are being integrated into the single Community Programme. This aims to build on the Community Participation Programmes (CPPs) by encouraging a more integrated, strategic and focused approach to community participation. The single Community Programme has also introduced a fourth goal: supporting neighbourhood-level partnerships.

2 Evaluating the programmes

In 2003, the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) commissioned an independent evaluation of the CPPs to:

- assess the extent to which the programmes were contributing to the delivery of the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy;
- share good practice; and
- inform future development.

The evaluation explored the extent to which the CPPs have:

- encouraged a range of groups to get involved in Neighbourhood Renewal, especially those that are harder to reach;
- provided opportunities for learning within and across neighbourhoods;
- improved communication, cohesion and co-ordination within the sector;
- helped the range of local communities to contribute effectively to local governance through local partnerships; and
- had an impact on decision-making and service delivery locally.

This executive summary describes the main findings of the evaluation.

3 What the programmes have achieved

Community Chests and Community Learning Chests

Community Chests and Community Learning Chests are:

- giving many groups access to funding for the first time and providing a 'step up' that allows them to find out more about funding and other support, increase their profile locally and become involved in neighbourhood- or borough -wide activities;
- giving people in neighbourhood renewal areas access to training and opportunities to learn from each other;
- involving many people in decision-making for the first time as members of grants panels; and
- contributing to building social capital within neighbourhoods and, in small-scale but significant ways, to renewing local neighbourhoods.

Giving groups small sums of money upfront with no strings attached has been a crucial factor in enabling these achievements:

“Neighbourhood Renewal Community Chest funding is wonderful. It has provided an accessible means of development for many small groups”.

“The Programme is working very well here, making valuable developments in small groups, new start-up groups and developing the whole sector”.

“When asked what the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) does well and what should be continued the CC/CLC is always mentioned. The fund is oversubscribed and results in well-received community projects being delivered in the most deprived neighbourhoods”.

LOs in different areas

The Community Empowerment Fund

The progress of CENs depends to a great extent on local circumstances and capacity, as well as the history of relationships between local players. In general, however, they are:

- building links between local groups, developing networks and improving cohesion and co-operation within the VCS;
- influencing the ways in which LSPs are run;
- giving marginalised groups greater access to decision-making;
- gaining influence over the way in which Neighbourhood Renewal funds are spent; and
- establishing credibility as partners that can make an important contribution to Neighbourhood Renewal.

Government recognition of the CEN as a channel for representing community interests on the LSP has been crucial to the progress they have made so far:

“The voluntary and community sector is the glue that holds [the Partnership] together. The LSP has a balanced view [from the VCS] and we would be a very different partnership without that ... it works very well and gives a common sense view of what matters to local people. LSP chair (from the local authority)”

Experience so far suggests that, if engagement is to be widespread and not dependent on the few who are already committed, it is important to allow adequate time and resources to build a strong and sustainable foundation both at CEN and LSP level. This has been the focus of activity over the first two years and the evidence suggests that, in many areas, this foundation is being established. Small-scale change is being achieved at neighbourhood level through activities supported by the Chests and through Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) initiatives secured by CEN representatives. The evaluation concludes that the strongest CENs and LSPs are approaching the point, with effective processes in place and relationships established, where tangible influence on mainstream service delivery can be expected.

Comparison with two areas just outside the 88 Neighbourhood Renewal priority areas suggests that, although there is a lot of community activity and commitment, without CPP funding, it is difficult to move beyond pockets of successful activity or to sustain community interest beyond the immediate concerns of the individual neighbourhood. It is not just the absence of the CPPs that disadvantages voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) in these two areas, but also of the NRF and other resources only available to the 88 Neighbourhood Renewal priority areas, such as Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers (NRAs). These areas still rely on Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding for their neighbourhood renewal activities and the wind down in this funding will have implications for their sustainability.

4 Challenges and policy implications

Crucial to the success of the programmes so far has been:

- their capacity for outreach (especially in getting small grants to hard-to-reach and new groups);
- access to central government funds that are independent of the local authority and other partners on the LSP;
- the requirement that LSPs have representation from the VCS; and
- the importance that central government has given to community participation.

The most successful CPPs are embedded within a wider infrastructure of support and development services for both the voluntary and the community sectors. Where this is in place the programmes have been able to build on existing resources, build effective networks and focus their energies towards influencing Neighbourhood Renewal. Success also depends on the commitment that the local authority and other LSP partners make to community participation. Nonetheless, progress varies from area to area, reflecting different starting points and varying capacity to engage – among partners as well as the VCS. All partners have been on a steep learning curve and this evaluation suggests that it will take time for the programmes – now consolidated into the single Community Programme – to achieve their aims.

This has a number of implications for the future of participation post-2006:

- If participation is to be maintained, especially in areas where progress so far has been slow, it will be important to safeguard current levels of funding, to support small grants and CENs in the new Safer and Stronger Communities Fund.
- Future plans for community participation need to recognise that ‘one size does not fit all’ and to reflect and respond to the different circumstances that exist locally.
- If communities are to engage in Neighbourhood Renewal outside the 88 priority areas, government will need to consider how best to support VCS participation at neighbourhood and LSP level in these areas.
- It is vital to share learning and good practice both regionally and nationally. The NRU, Government Offices (GOs) and infrastructure organisations in all sectors have an important role to play in promoting opportunities to share experience.
- Continued political support for community engagement in Neighbourhood Renewal is likely to depend on evidence that it makes a difference. However, measuring the impact of the single Community Programme on Neighbourhood Renewal targets will pose many challenges, given the complexity of the policy environment, the timescales for change and the difficulty of demonstrating the links between practice and outcomes. In the light of this, we would urge the NRU and CENs to take steps to ensure that the added value offered is tracked as systematically as possible.
- We would also urge government to consider how it can capture the continued learning from the single Community Programme and evaluate its progress towards the goals that have been set for it, so that lessons from the next two years can inform the design and operation of the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund and more general LSP developments. It is important that community participation remains a central feature of the overall evaluation of the national strategy.

There have been a number of challenges in making the CPPs work and a number of lessons can already be learnt from this.

Developing capacity and cohesion

- **Reaching out**
The programmes are charged with supporting groups at local level and especially those who are defined as ‘hard-to-reach’. Although many local programmes have made progress in this respect, there is still some way to go. While most CENs recognise that they need to do more, they have limited resources to carry out the community development that is needed to underpin widespread community participation:

CENs and other lead organisations in the single Community Programme need to do more to engage hard-to-reach groups, especially at neighbourhood level, but LSPs need to ensure that they have the necessary community development strategies in place to underpin widespread community engagement. This cannot be the sole responsibility of the CEN.

- Engaging black and minority ethnic (BME) communities

A constant theme in the evaluation has been the problem that both LSPs and the CPPs have had in engaging BME communities successfully:

If the single Community Programme is to engage all local communities, it will be essential that government, CENs and all LSP partners work creatively with BME communities to find ways to overcome the current barriers and ensure that the BME sector has the resources, skills and infrastructure to engage effectively.

- Achieving cohesion

Local VCSs are extremely diverse and sometimes conflictual. It takes time and skill for CENs to develop a coherent voice that can still reflect the diversity of local need:

Expectations of the single Community Programme need to reflect the time it takes to build cohesion and trust, especially in fragmented and divided communities and to ensure that seven skills and resources are on hand to address conflict and fragmentation where these occur.

Engaging in governance and service delivery

- Being realistic about representation but ensuring accountability

Representing the diversity of local communities presents many challenges. Local Strategic Partnership partners want to see new people coming forward to represent the Voluntary and Community Sector locally, but they also want skilled representatives who can make a strategic contribution. However, getting the right balance between experienced representation and wider participation can be tricky. Establishing legitimacy in the sector and with partners will depend equally on the transparency and accountability of the Community Empowerment Network. The priority that an increasing number of Community Empowerment Networks are giving to communications will help to address this but the evidence from our research suggests that both need to be kept under constant review. CENs need to ensure that they are widening the pool of people who can represent the sector and that they are able to represent the diversity of community views, but also that representatives can develop the skills to negotiate effectively and strategically with Local Strategic Partnership partners. For their part, LSP partners need to have realistic expectations of representatives and support them in this complex role.

- The capacity of the LSP

Success in influencing policy makers and service providers depends not only on the capacity of the VCS to represent the diversity of local interests and needs; it also depends on the capacity and willingness of LSP partners to work with the CEN as an equal and valued partner. LSPs vary considerably in their approach to community participation and most CENs still feel they are treated as junior partners.

Some partners felt that CENs were preoccupied with process and had not really addressed substantive issues of service delivery. But until the process is accessible, it will be difficult for CENs to exert any influence:

LSPs need to be run and agendas set in ways that allow all partners to make an effective contribution. Central government needs to provide more effective incentives to ensure that LSP partners and service providers take community participation seriously, reflecting this in the next round of CPAs, in Local Area Agreements, in LSP performance management exercises and other appropriate vehicles.

For their part, CENs should take as much initiative as possible in setting agendas for LSP meetings and theme groups.

- Bringing a positive but distinct voice to the table

VCS representatives often feel that disagreement is seen as obstructive and that partners are impatient with any criticisms that they may have. This is disempowering. CENs should be prepared to engage constructively and not get 'stuck in opposition', but they also need to maintain their autonomous and distinctive voice:

LSPs need to recognise that there will not always be a consensus between partners and to ensure that they have the facilitation and mediation skills to work through difference and conflict when it occurs.

- Complementing not competing

CENs do not operate in a vacuum. In most areas, they have had to establish their own distinctive identity in relation to the pre-existing VCS sector infrastructure and this has created some tensions, especially in the early stages. In some areas, significant players still operate independently. Many areas also have a range of other mechanisms for participation – in some these have been successfully synchronised with the CEN, but in others they still pull in different directions:

All partners need to ensure that different mechanisms for community participation at local level are integrated and can work together.

Operational learning

- Getting the best staff

Short-term contracts, uncertainty about the future, a failure to appreciate the skills that will be needed and the frustrations of working in an environment that is not supportive have made it difficult in some areas to attract and keep skilled and experienced staff:

Trying to economise on staff is a false economy. CENs need to invest in skilled staff. LSPs need to make a commitment as soon as possible to ensuring the longer-term future of CENs under the proposed Safer and Stronger Communities Fund, if good staff are not to be lost.

- Monitoring progress

Future support for the work that the programmes are doing depends on accurate information about their reach and impact. Current monitoring systems need to be improved if they are to provide a reliable evidence base for tracking progress and demonstrating the value of the programmes. It is important to maintain a flexible approach that is fit for purpose and does not prevent hard-to-reach groups from getting access to funds and support:

All partners need to work together to develop meaningful systems for monitoring which can provide reliable and useful information without compromising the flexibility of the Programme or community access to funds and support.

- Support

GOs and NRAs have been a major source of support but their effectiveness can be affected by the resources available to them and by relationships between staff responsible for the LSPs and the Community Participation Programmes at GO level:

GOs need to ensure that there is synergy between those responsible for Local Strategic Partnerships and those responsible for the Community Participation Programmes and the Voluntary and Community Sector in their support to localities.

Effective liaison is also needed at central government level between departments that have a stake in the Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Community participation is at the heart of current Neighbourhood Renewal and urban regeneration policy. There are a number of reasons for this. Community participation can not only strengthen local communities, a community perspective can also bring local knowledge to bear on problems and solutions, improve the coherence of strategies and provide feedback to increase the effectiveness of services. If communities are involved in strategies for change and can establish a sense of ownership, it is also more likely that changes will be sustained.

However, in the past, efforts to secure community participation in Neighbourhood Renewal have encountered many difficulties:

- too little attention has been paid to the need for basic community development and capacity building at neighbourhood level as a foundation for engagement in decision making;
- pressures to implement policies quickly have meant that too little time has been allowed to bring communities on board;
- there has not been enough investment in voluntary and community infrastructure to support local activity, bring groups together and provide a channel for representation in decision-making arenas;
- too little attention has been paid to the need to build capacity for community engagement among partner organisations and among professionals;
- too often community involvement is paid no more than lip service and participation structures have been alienating and off-putting; and
- strategies for participation have not reflected the diversity of the voluntary and community sectors (VCSs).

As the Prime Minister said:

Too much has been imposed from above, when experience shows that success depends on communities themselves having the power and taking the responsibility to make things better.

Social Exclusion Unit, *Bringing Britain Together* (1998:2)

It is against this background that government put community participation at the centre of its National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR), the aim of which is to close the gap between the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the rest of England. Flagship programmes like the New Deal for Communities (NDC) and the Neighbourhood Management (NM) Pathfinders aim to put communities at the heart of change. Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), which have the responsibility of putting the strategy into action in all the 88 priority Neighbourhood Renewal areas, are required to involve communities as equal partners in developing and implementing local Neighbourhood Renewal strategies:

Effective engagement with the community is one of the most important aspects of LSP work, and they will have failed if they do not deliver this.

The National Strategy Action Plan, 2001

1.2 What the Community Participation Programmes were set up to do

The NSNR makes clear that engaging the community effectively is one of the most important aspects of an LSP's work. In addition to placing a responsibility on LSPs actively to promote engagement, the government has given communities direct access to resources of their own to support their participation in Neighbourhood Renewal decision-making:

- Community Chests provide small and easily accessible grants to stimulate and support community activity, so that more people can become involved in the regeneration of their neighbourhoods.
- Community Learning Chests help residents in these areas gain the skills and knowledge they need to play an active role in the renewal of their neighbourhoods.
- The Community Empowerment Fund (CEF) supports the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to engage as an equal partner in local strategic partnerships (LSPs), through developing Community Empowerment Networks (CENs).

The programmes were originally designed to run from April 2001 until March 2004. A total of £86 million was committed across the three programmes during this period – the amount given for the Chests varied from area to area, but the CEF provided an average of £400,000 over three years to each area.

Following a review of the programmes, which was completed in 2003, funding was extended until March 2006 as part of the single Community Programme, which integrated the three programmes from April 2004 in order to promote a more strategic and focused approach to community participation in Neighbourhood Renewal. In April 2006, funding for this programme will be merged with other regeneration funding in the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund.

1.3 The aims of the evaluation

In June 2003, the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) commissioned an evaluation of the programmes to run for a year until June 2004. The aims of the evaluation were to:

- assess the extent to which the programmes were contributing to the delivery of the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy;
- share good practice; and
- inform future development.

As a framework for the evaluation, the evaluation team drew on the four goals that the NRU adopted in 2003 for community participation. These are – social capital, social inclusion and cohesion, service delivery and governance. Using these headings, the evaluation addressed the following broad questions:

Social capital

How far have the programmes:

- stimulated local activity and encouraged a range of groups to get involved in Neighbourhood Renewal;
- built local group capacity, confidence and skills; and
- provided opportunities for learning within and across neighbourhoods?

Social inclusion and cohesion

How far have the programmes:

- reached out into all parts of the sector, especially those that are hard-to-reach; and
- improved communication, networking, cohesion and co-ordination within the sector?

Governance

What evidence is there that the programmes have:

- helped local communities to contribute effectively to local governance through the LSP and other local partnerships;
- represented the range of local communities in the LSP and other local partnerships in a way that is well-informed and accountable; and
- had an impact on decision-making on the LSP?

Service delivery

What evidence is there that the programmes have:

- had an impact on service delivery locally?

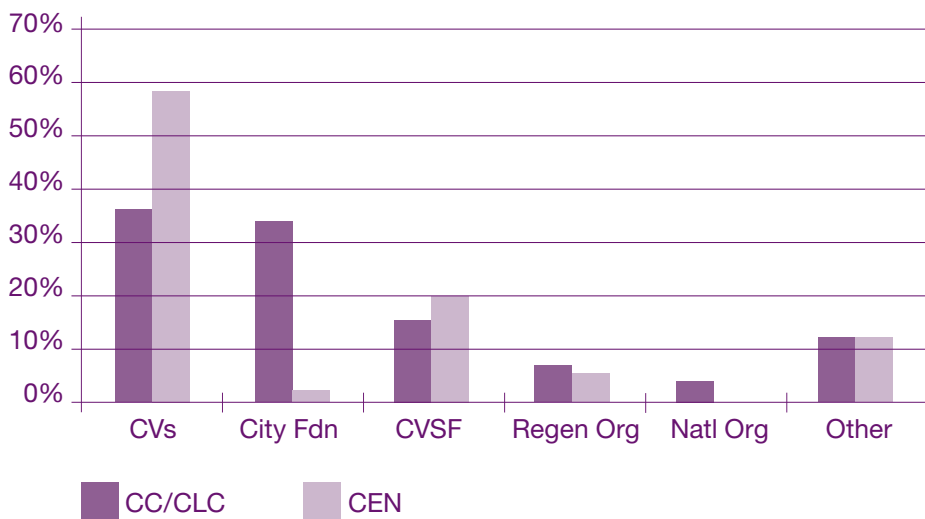
2. How the programmes operate

2.1 Setting up the programmes

When the programmes were introduced, Government Offices for the Regions (GOs) identified lead organisations (LOs) for the three programmes in each of the 88 Neighbourhood Renewal priority areas. The way they went about this task varied. In some places, the voluntary and community sector (VCS) infrastructure was poorly developed and the GO and local voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) had to start virtually from scratch; elsewhere cross-sector agreement was established through meetings or through competitive tender. In several areas, a consortium was formed specifically to take on some or all of the programmes.

Only in half of the areas that responded to our survey were the LOs the same of for both the Chests and the CEF. LOs for the Chests were generally the local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) or local Community Foundations. For the CEF, LOs were generally the CVS or Community and Voluntary Sector Forums (CVSFs).

Fig. 1: Who the lead organisations were



- Nine of the LOs administering the Chests covered more than one area.
- In ten cases (five for the Chests and five for the CENs), the LO had changed – usually where local organisations took over from a national body in the case of the Chests or where CENs took over from their ‘parent’ body.
- Four areas had no CEN at the time of the survey and in one, the CEF had more than one LO.

Getting buy-in from local groups and organisations was essential. This was most difficult where VCOs felt the LO had been imposed from the top down, without adequate consultation or awareness of existing networks and forums. Where the existing infrastructure was weak or non-existent, CENs provided an important opportunity to fill the gap. However, where there were already existing arrangements in place and they were generally felt to be adequate, the new bodies could feel like a cuckoo in the nest. On the other hand, where VCOs felt the existing infrastructure was not serving the sector effectively, CENs provided an important opportunity to make a new start.

Getting buy-in

In Ealing, the local CVS set up the 'largest ever consultation' with the VCS, through a postal questionnaire and 14 local consultation meetings. Groups were specifically asked for their views both on key priorities and issues for the CEN and different options for the structure (e.g. a network of networks or an open membership structure). Local forums were paid through the CEF to carry out consultations within their communities of interest (CoI) and this achieved a sense of community ownership from the start.

2.2 The Community Chests and Community Learning Chests

Applications and grants

Funding for the Chests varied from area to area. In the case-study sites, the amount allocated in 2002–2003 varied from just over £90,000 to nearly £350,000.

During 2002–2003, LOs received an average of 181 applications for the Chests and awarded an average of 104 grants. On average, three out of five applications were successful.

There are many more applications for the CC than the CLC, which started later and has generally been less well understood. CC grants are also generally larger than CLC grants. In most cases, LOs advertise and administer both Chests together – some transfer applications between the Chests where this is appropriate.

Size of grant

LOs vary in their approach to grant-giving. Some give the full amount that groups ask for; others give less than this in order to be able to fund a larger number of groups. One case-study LO prefers to give smaller grants and has set a low income ceiling for applicants (£15,000) so that only small groups can apply. However, another argues that the £5000 limit on Chest grants is too low to achieve anything meaningful:

“Little grants produce piecemeal results and little obvious impact”.

Some also set more generous eligibility criteria (in one case, allowing groups with incomes up to £100,000 to apply). This raises questions about the purpose of the grants – there is a danger that the Chests might be used by more established groups to shore up gaps in other funding.

Where does the money go?

Two-thirds of LOs give Chest funds mainly to priority Neighbourhood Renewal neighbourhoods – a quarter give grants only in these neighbourhoods. It is more difficult to tell how many groups receive funds for the first time through the Chests, although respondents to the LO survey do see this as a major strength of the funds. Generally, BME groups were significantly more likely to receive grants than would be expected given the proportionate size of the local BME population.

The largest proportion of funds is given for equipment, general group development costs and social activities. CLC grants fund training visits and materials. Training is mainly in specialist skills, IT skills, general meeting and leadership skills, and diversity/equality awareness.

How are decisions made?

In the great majority of areas, grant recipients are involved in grant-making panels. In some cases, panel members serve for a period of a year or more; elsewhere the panel is drawn each time from a wider 'pool' of grant recipients who have been trained in grant decision-making. Several respondents stressed the fact that their grants panels are made up of people from small community groups, usually in the majority and sitting alongside a smaller number of paid professionals. Panel members are also often provided by CENs. A case-study LO stressed the importance of separating development tasks from grants appraisal and decision-making: the single Community Programme should serve to make this clearer.

Reaching out

LOs use a wide variety of mechanisms to publicise grants, although word of mouth is reported to be the most effective form of publicity. Most agree that the support offered to applicants is a key factor in reaching new groups. LOs hold workshops for applicants, run advice sessions, advise applicants on the phone or carry out visits. Most work with unsuccessful applicants to help them reapply as well as doing follow up work and running events for successful candidates.

Supporting applicants

When people apply for Chest grants in Brighton, they are referred to a development worker to work through their idea before putting in an application. If they get a grant, they will be invited to a briefing meeting that offer the chance to network with other groups and to identify training needs. Not all grants are given out straightaway. Groups who are not formally constituted or who do not have a bank account can have their applications put forward and, if agreed, they are given the help they need to establish themselves before they can receive the grant.

Once they get the money, grant recipients get a monthly information sheet and the development officer will phone them one or two months into the grant to see how things are going. There is also a part-time peer support facilitator who will invite groups to informal lunches and put them in touch with each other. Twice a year, there are 'brilliant and buzzy' celebratory events that give groups more opportunities to meet and celebrate their achievements.

Monitoring

LOs all have monitoring systems in place. However, information on the kinds of group and activity supported is highly variable and does not provide dependable information across the country on where grants are going and what activities they are supporting.

2.3 The Community Empowerment Fund

Structure

The Community Empowerment Fund (CEF) is designed to support the development of Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) within each area to support voluntary and community sector (VCS) involvement in local strategic partnerships (LSPs). Most CENs in the LO survey are new: only one in four are located in pre-existing networks. While some have a membership of individual local organisations, others act as 'networks of networks' – with the networks rather than individual local organisations as members. Some have a completely open membership. Some have associate members and a small minority reported that they have local authority personnel as full members.

Most CENs have a steering group, meetings for the whole membership and meetings of member networks or theme groups. Where the membership is made up of individual organisations, meetings of the steering group often alternate with full membership meetings. Where the CEN is a network of networks, the steering group normally consists of representatives from each network – the constituent networks also elect their own representative to the LSP. During the year, most meetings take place at the level of individual networks, although there might be an annual CEN meeting that brings the members of all the networks together.

Three-quarters of CENs in the LO survey said their meetings are open to non-members and just over a third do not have any eligibility criteria for membership.

Staffing

All LOs in the survey employ staff to support the CEN. The number ranges from one part-timer to nine, with an average of 3.6 full-time equivalent staff. Some LOs prefer to keep core staffing costs to a minimum by commissioning out most of their work to local organisations and networks. Over half the CENs in the survey have access to other financial and in-kind support. Some use the funds to attract match funding – three quarters have support from other staff in their LO or elsewhere.

There have been considerable problems with staff turnover. The reasons for this include:

- uncertainties about the future of the programme post-2004 and now post-2006;
- competition for skilled staff in the Neighbourhood Renewal field; and
- uncompetitive salaries, where LOs/CENs underestimate the quality and skills that staff would require.

CEN teams need a range of skills: supporting individual groups; developing and mediating links within the sector; and supporting the work of CENs with partners at strategic level. As CENs evolve and the scope of the task becomes more apparent, several are making changes to their staffing structure. However, retaining these skilled staff to support Neighbourhood Renewal will depend on the security CENs and LSPs can offer post-April 2006.

Activities

The main activities of the CENs have been community development and network development.

- Community development has been particularly important where there is no previous history of investment at this level. CENs have also supported neighbourhood mapping and planning exercises, and this will assume more significance with the increased emphasis on the neighbourhood in the single Community Programme.

The Neighbourhood Improvement Fund

In Ealing, a Neighbourhood Improvement Fund (NIF) has been set up, using Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) money, to support residents in delivering change at neighbourhood level. The fund is used not to provide grants but for direct commissioning of services by local residents. NIF panels are primarily resident-led and are supported in conducting surveys of their areas and identifying small projects that can be carried out to improve the local environment and facilities in their areas. The panels discuss first what their priorities are for service improvements and it is then the role of both the CEN and the two neighbourhood renewal co-ordinators to identify and commission appropriate service providers to deliver these (which can be from the voluntary, community or statutory sectors).

This is a very new approach in the borough and something of an experiment, but it has substantially over-achieved its targets both for the number of residents involved in NIF panels and also for the number of estate service improvements – the original target for NIF improvements was 6–8 per year and in fact it has delivered over 40 in two years.

- LOs have approached their strategic work through developing subnetworks based on neighbourhoods and communities of interest (Cols) that can focus on their constituency's particular concerns and then bring them into the wider arena. Some do this by dedicating a significant part of the CEF to grants or commissions for network development.
- Other common activities include: organising consultation and information sharing events; and producing an audit of the VCS both to inform strategy and to raise the profile of the sector more generally.

The programmes aim to widen participation. Apart from making sure their regular network meetings are relevant and attractive to the range of local groups, CENs also invest in Websites, newsletters, e-mail discussion lists and briefings. Effective communication requires a variety of approaches and the evidence from the evaluation is that there are many LOs who feel that this is an area that they still need to improve, especially to reach those who are not well-networked.

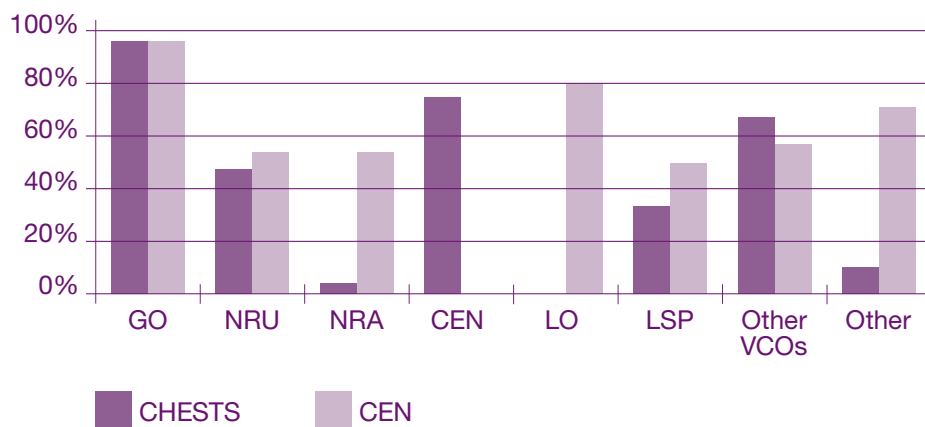
Representing the sector on the LSP

Most CENs elect their representatives to the LSP and other partnerships, often allocating places between the VCS and/or between neighbourhoods and Cols. In about half of LSPs, the CEN provides all VCS representatives, but elsewhere the CVS or other key local organisations have been allocated a place. Some CENs also organise elections for other partnerships, where these do not come under the umbrella of the LSP.

2.4 Guidance, monitoring and support

Figure 2 shows the extent to which CENs and Chest LOs used different sources of guidance and support.

Fig. 2: Sources of support



Government Offices

GOs are the source of support most frequently mentioned by respondents to the LO survey, who are generally very positive about this support. The nature of the support varies between GOs, however, with some GOs very 'hands-on', others less so. One of our case-study sites, for example, would have liked the GO to take a more active role in promoting the CEN with their LSP. Early problems over interpretation of guidelines and understanding of the sector have generally been ironed out although there have been problems with GO staff turnover in some regions. In some regions GO liaison staff were overloaded.

GOs are also structured very differently – some organised functionally, some regionally – and this affects the breadth of experience they can draw on (as indeed does the prevalence of Neighbourhood Renewal areas within the region, which varies considerably). The quality of support can also be affected by the relative status of LSP and CEN staff at GO level and there is some evidence of weak corporate relationships between the two.

Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers

NRA support, used by half the CEF LOs, is also highly valued. However, where LOs and LSPs were drawing on the support of several NRAs, this support has not always been well co-ordinated. Respondents also felt that the NRU could make more use of NRA experience. NRAs are rarely used by Chest LOs.

Neighbourhood Renewal Unit guidelines

LOs have found the NRU guidance increasingly useful over time, although its interpretation sometimes varies from region to region and guidelines for the CLC were particularly unclear when this was introduced. The late arrival of guidelines in some cases, for example in relation to protocols, creates problems for LOs – deadlines are rarely adjusted to take this on board. Getting the timing right and finding the right balance between clarity and flexibility is likely to be a continued problem and this needs to be recognised in the demands made on LOs and CENs.

Views of the Performance Management Framework (PMF) vary. Some find it too complex. However, those who have adapted it to their use or brought NRAs in to facilitate the process, have generally found it very beneficial.

Other sources of support

Other important sources of support are LOs (for CENs), the CEN (for Chest LOs), other VCOs and LSPs. The 'other' category in Figure 2 mainly consists of consultants, who are much more likely to be used by CEF LOs than Chest LOs.

Regional meetings

Some GOs have convened meetings for LOs to share experience across the region. Regional CEN networks that have been set up as part of the regional VCS infrastructure in some areas. Both are highly valued.

2.5 Implications for policy and practice

- One size does not fit all
A flexible approach is needed to the development of the programmes, which can reflect different local circumstances. This has been recognised in the guidance for the single Community Programme's neighbourhood strategy.
- A 'Year Zero'
Many respondents feel that the 'rushed start' was counterproductive. A longer – or phased – lead-in time would have eased the pressure locally, especially in the four areas where it had not been possible to establish a CEN because of tensions and mistrust within the sector.

The lack of VCS experience in some GOs and the pressure to get the programmes up and running was also reflected in underspend during the first year while everyone got up to speed. However, flexibility to carry over this early underspend meant that most of these initial difficulties were overcome.

- Monitoring and evaluation
The future of the work that the programmes are doing depends on accurate information about their reach and impact. It will be important not to compromise the accessibility of the programmes by overloading them with bureaucracy and there was some criticism of the pressure caused by overlapping demands from different sources. But several LOs called for a more systematic approach, citing other long-term evaluation programmes in the Neighbourhood Renewal field and elsewhere.
- Staffing
CPPs need to invest in skilled staff – infrastructure bodies could support this by providing exemplar job descriptions and person specifications. Retaining staff will also depend on the security that can be offered post-April 2006.

3. How far are the programmes achieving their aims?

In this section of the report, we use the four Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) goals for community participation to assess how far the Community Empowerment Programmes (CPPs) are making progress towards these goals.

3.1 Developing capacity, confidence and skills

To increase the confidence and capacity of individuals and small groups to get involved in activities and build mutually supportive networks that hold communities together.

Achievements and challenges

Reaching new groups

LOs – including well-established CVSs – frequently comment that the Chests have allowed them to reach into parts of the sector they hadn't reached before. The strengths of the Chests are:

- their flexibility, with application systems that are easy to use and money provided 'upfront';
- independent funding – this keeps bureaucracy to a minimum and encourages people to apply who might be wary of official funding sources like the Council; and
- the support they provide to both successful and unsuccessful applicants.

The Chests build social capital and contribute to civil renewal by supporting people's engagement in local activities. The information, equipment, IT and basic training the Chests provide allow groups to function more effectively. In many places the Chests are able to reach groups that might not even have a constitution or a bank account and help them get these basics into place. In this way, they provide small and new groups with a 'step up', which allows them, if they want, to attract further support and engage with the wider sector:

"Small grants can remove worry and small irritations and enable groups to get on with things".

Lead organisation

"The [LO] has the time to offer support to groups and it can access hard-to-reach groups better than us... Sometimes we pick up organisations from them, where they have given funding and grown them to the point where they can come to us. It gives people with a lot of energy and a good idea a way of getting into action quickly that we couldn't offer".

Council grants officer

"Having grants available to small groups has helped to build local capital – having to have a constitution and so on acts as an incentive to be better organised".

Lead organisation

Despite this, there is still evidence that black and minority ethnic (BME) groups are not accessing the Chests in some areas and most LOs feel that they could do more to ensure that grants reach the most marginalised groups.

Introducing people to learning

Although the CLC took longer to get off the ground, there are now an increasing number of examples where it has been used successfully. Where LOs understand its role and have taken active steps to promote it, it can introduce people to formal learning opportunities for the first time outside school and encourage them to think about their learning needs. It can train local people to carry out local research and development work, making them less dependent on professional help. For non-traditional learners, it can provide the first step in a progression route that can even lead to a university degree.

Growing capacity, skills and confidence

The Youth Council have had a teambuilding training weekend and a trip to visit another young people's council to help them set up a youth forum at the Young People's Centre. It has had both CC and CLC money (see below).

One outreach worker visited a depression self-help group. It relies on the energy of one person, and the forum enabled him to tap into a network of like organisations and increase his income so he could run three sessions a week instead of one. By linking into networks, the group was helped to grow and deliver what it does to three times as many people. He is now part of the mental health network and has met with the chief executive of MIND. He met up with the CC/CLC LO and got money, attended forum meetings and did facilitator training, as a result of Chest funding and outreach work.

A small community group applied some time ago for a CC grant but was unsuccessful. This group was completely new to the CVS. A funding adviser followed this up and offered feedback and support. As a result the group started to attend the Children and Young Peoples' Groups Forum and the group was supported in discussions with youth services about a youth worker. With support the group soon made a successful CC bid and went from strength to strength, and recently got a BBC Children in Need grant. A number of the groups' members attend training courses – one is now a Community Network ambassador (see below). The chair has joined a CVS learning groups and is taking an OU Certificate in Management (funded through the CLC).

Using local skills

Some LOs have trained local people to carry out work for the CEN – research and mapping, for example. Our case-study work also suggests that it is common to commission local organisations to carry out network development, while a few have commissioned local enterprises to provide Website/publicity support. This practice could usefully be extended, with appropriate training where necessary.

Using local skills

Burnley CEN is training members of local groups as community apprentices and employing them to provide development support to that group. Preston is using the Chest to train local people as football coaches so they don't have to buy coaches in. It is also providing level-2 youth work training to volunteers. Coventry CEN has trained 12 people on a research course so that they and neighbourhood level partnerships can be used in neighbourhoods across the country to carry out community consultation and research.

Involving people in decision-making

A further achievement of the Chests has been involving people in decision-making. As one person put it, the Chests do not only benefit groups directly; they also 'give panel members new skills by involving them directly for the first time in decisions on a major funding programme'. This gives them valuable experience and the confidence that comes from being recognised and acknowledged as partners.

Community development

In areas with no previous history of investment at this level or where resources prior to the introduction of the programmes were thinly stretched, several CENs are supporting the development of new groups. Elsewhere, several CENs are building capacity at neighbourhood level through neighbourhood mapping and planning exercises to feed into the Community Strategy and neighbourhood-level partnerships.

Implications for policy and practice

Reaching out

More needs to be done to reach the most marginalised groups in the population, especially at CEN level and to explain what they can use the Chests for. This will take time – future expectations of the programmes need to allow for this.

You can't reach people by letters. You need to be out there; you need community development to enable people to participate. Trust is crucial; they won't go to anyone they don't trust and you can't establish that in a month or two.

BME umbrella group

Resourcing outreach

Effective administration and outreach are crucial, especially if new and small groups are to negotiate access to funding. Despite the effectiveness of the Chests' outreach, most LOs in the survey feel that the percentage of Chest funds that they have been allowed to spend on outreach and support is too small – this is a particular problem for LOs whose allocation for the Chests is already low. In a number of cases, LOs subsidise this allowance from other parts of their operation and this helps them to reach further than they would do otherwise; elsewhere the lack of access to outreach has been a major factor in failed applications and underspend.

Putting community development in place

While some CENs have made an important contribution to community development, their limited resources mean they cannot take responsibility for this on their own. It can be particularly difficult to balance a neighbourhood focus on the one hand with the strategic, city-wide level focus of the LSP. One LO, which has put a lot of time into building community associations, felt that this has created demands that it simply cannot meet. While the increased neighbourhood focus of the single Community Programme will enhance the CEN role at neighbourhood level; LSPs will need to recognise that the community development this requires cannot be the sole responsibility of the CEN.

3.2 Networking, cohesion and co-ordination

To develop empowered communities capable of building a common vision, a sense of belonging and a positive identity where diversity is valued.

Achievements and challenges

Reducing isolation

It is easy to underestimate the isolation of many groups within the VCS, especially when they are starting up. Through their celebratory events and outreach the Chests have reduced that isolation. Where Chest LOs work well with the CEN, this has allowed grant recipients to tap into the CEN's wider networks, advertise their existence to others and find out more about what is going on elsewhere. This should become more widespread with the introduction of the single Community Programme.

Getting smaller groups involved

Where the links between the programmes are good, Chests are a tangible way of getting people to know about the CEN and the LSP. Some LOs make Chest grants conditional on membership of the CEN, but others feel this is too exclusive and prefer to use the Chests as a 'stepping stone', giving grant recipients information about the CEN and encouraging them to join. The Phase-3 survey of local groups found that while Chest grants encouraged recipients to network with other groups, fewer than half of the groups responding to the survey had heard of the CEN, even though three-quarters of them had received Chest funding. This echoes the findings of the National Audit Office survey.

Encouraging participation

Last year Chinese groups in Brighton began to participate in the CEN. They had had money from the CC/CLC LO and were quite keen to come along to meetings. As a result, they have tapped into a wide range of organisations and built links. As a result, they feel more integrated. Simple things can make people feel integrated (e.g. being in the directory and in the newsletter - the last issue of the CEN newsletter had a picture of them in it).

Our case studies suggest that where the LO was already providing infrastructure services prior to the introduction of the CPP, the programmes have often helped them then to reach out to a wider range of groups. Certainly, membership of the CEN in the case-study sites is increasing. Many CENs actively identify gaps in membership and employ an outreach worker to promote the CEN, and where CENs have engaged in neighbourhood planning exercises they have reached new people. However, the CEN and the LSP can be 'a bit of a dry old thing to sell', especially to smaller groups – whose few resources are focused on their immediate problems and issues. Even if they do engage, maintaining their interest is difficult in the absence of tangible returns.

Engaging BME groups

Most CENs find it particularly difficult to engage BME groups. Although there are some that have a strong BME presence, in many areas, the BME infrastructure is itself poorly resourced and struggling to pull increasingly diverse and divergent communities together. Where BME networks are developed from scratch, they often need time and space to establish themselves before engaging with the wider sector, but sometimes divisions within BME communities or between the BME leadership and the mainstream VCS can become entrenched. A significant BNP presence in some areas exacerbates all these difficulties.

The best LOs provide publicity in a number of languages and display it in specialist venues, including specialist food shops and faith venues used by BME communities. Some employ dedicated BME workers and one Chest LO has recruited and trained up a staff member from the local BME community to do outreach work – this LO has been praised locally for its ability to reach out to BME and refugee groups. In some areas where interpreting services do not exist, CENs have persuaded the LSP to fund this.

Improving links between groups – bridging social capital

In most of our case-study areas, respondents feel that cohesion and co-operation within the sector has improved and that CEN's have proved a useful framework for bringing groups together. The CEN also provides a forum where links can be made between different interests and common ground established. Many CENs have set up new networks, both at neighbourhood and Col level. Some of our case-study sites are exploring ways to improve training and support for network development.

Cohesion in the face of adversity

In Ealing, the improved cohesion in the sector was demonstrated by the way the sector responded to proposed LA funding cuts. This was particularly beneficial to smaller organisations, because the whole sector was able to speak with one voice and to offer counterproposals that would provide a more equitable distribution of the available funds. At one point in the grants negotiation process, CEN members each agreed to take a 1% cut in their grants in order to reduce the impact of cuts on a community transport scheme. As they were able to negotiate a reduction of the total amount of proposed cuts, this did not need to be followed through, but it is an indication of the strength of the solidarity in the VCS.

However, in many areas, links between the voluntary sector and the community sector are still weak, while BME groups have, in many areas, been difficult to engage.

Adding value

In most of our case-study localities, CEN funds complement and add value to existing infrastructure support. In this way, the CEF has enhanced the resources available to support community participation in many different arenas and helped existing resources to work more effectively.

Implications for policy and practice

Selling the CEN and LSP

CENs need to find creative ways to engage smaller groups, to make them feel welcome and ensure that the CEN is relevant to their needs. The increased neighbourhood focus of the single Community Programme may help with this as well as better links between the Chests and the CEN. However, maintaining interest will also depend to some extent on the capacity of the CEN to deliver change at LSP level. Expectations of the CEN also need to be realistic – groups with few resources will always find it difficult to engage more widely.

In many areas, the route for engaging groups has been through network development – where CEF grants are given for this purpose, one LO suggested these should be accompanied by training to help networks themselves to widen participation. Another uses the grants to promote inclusive principles.

Network development

Ealing CEN has set up a local network development fund that is geared both to supporting existing forums and developing new ones. In the latter case, the CEN has identified gaps and worked to encourage new forums – in 2003–2004 these were a Disability Network and a Parents Network. In order to ensure that forums are inclusive, those who apply for support must:

- demonstrate how they publicise their activities and encourage new members;
- demonstrate that they have effective equalities policies;
- demonstrate how through their meetings and events they encourage direct involvement by the people the networks exist to serve; and
- if they are applying for a second round of funding, have submitted a monitoring report demonstrating how they used the previous funds in accordance with the above principles. This helps to influence the structure of networks and establish clear good practice guidelines.

The evaluation found that many CEF LOs are making the development of their communications skills and strategies a priority for the coming year in order to reach beyond those already involved. One has trained local people from hard-to-reach groups to act as ‘ambassadors’, while the Doncaster CEN has allocated some of the fund to providing IT equipment and technical advice to groups with no IT access.

Promoting the CEN

The Community Network ambassadors in Bolton are a team of local people from BME groups and other small community groups in one CEN, recruited, trained and employed for just a few hours a week to promote the network among their own communities. They have recently completed a training needs analysis of groups that face barriers to involvement in the network and are now helping to set up a training programme in response. The ambassadors will be providing one-to-one support as needed to participants. Some of the local recruits have gone on to full-time jobs.

Engaging BME groups

Most CENs have found it difficult to engage BME groups. It will be essential to share good practice and work with the LSP to find ways of reaching out more effectively (see next section). NRAs could also play a greater role.

Overcoming conflict and fragmentation

Progress has been made against an unpromising background in some areas – one public-sector respondent described the task of bringing a diverse and sometimes conflictual sector together as ‘herding cats’. Expectations of the CENs need to reflect this, allowing time and providing support to work through tensions. NRAs have an important role to play here, but skills also need to be developed within the sector and in GOs.

Resources

Many networks rely on match funding and/or in-kind support to fulfil their role. While this creates significant added value, it can lead to instability and leave gaps in the programme if the supporting organisation suffers cuts to its funding. This is likely to be an increasing problem as Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding comes to an end.

3.3 Governance and service delivery

- To develop a community voice that enables communities to participate in decision-making and increase the accountability of service providers.
- To ensure that local communities are in a position to influence service delivery and, where appropriate, participate in service delivery.

Achievements and challenges

A place on the Local Strategic Partnership

If the task of bringing a diverse sector together is difficult, ensuring that this diversity is effectively represented on the LSP and other partnerships is even more so. In our LO survey, many feel that actually getting the network together and represented on the LSP has in itself been a major achievement:

- the number of CEN representatives on LSP Boards ranges from none to 26;
- in our case-study sites, the total proportion of VCS representatives (CEN and others) ranges from 13% to 42% (a separate study in the North East has found that representation there varies from 19% to 54%);
- half the surveyed CENS are also represented in other LSP structures and on LSP steering groups (where these exist); and
- half of the CENs elect representatives onto other partnerships.

The evaluation found three cases where the CEN provided the chair, normally as part of a rotating system of chairing. In some areas, CEN co-ordinators are now being routinely invited to meetings around co-ordination in the local authority and elsewhere and have an established presence in local policy networks.

Developing an effective voice

The most effective CEN representatives are clearly gaining the respect of LSP partners and establishing credibility as partners who can make an important contribution. However, CEN influence is diminished when representatives are seen to be 'stuck in opposition'. This does not mean that the VCS should never disagree with LSP partners – on the contrary, there are examples where CENs who have picked their battles well have gained in influence and respect as a result. However, those who take a routinely adversarial stance do not get far. CEN representatives are also often criticised for not being strategic enough, speaking for their own group rather than for the VCS as a whole and for being uncoordinated. Where CENs organise pre-meeting briefings between representatives, these help to ensure a unified and thus more effective voice.

Influencing the way the LSP operates

Some CENs are influencing the processes of LSPs to make them more accessible, to provide better and more timely information to CEN representatives and to give the CEN a greater role (e.g. through rotating the chairing role). In just over a third of areas surveyed there was an agreed protocol between the LSP and CEN in the autumn of 2003, although it is likely that now more will be in place.

However, LSPs were established before CENs were introduced and some CENs have been struggling to catch up ever since. The commitment of LSPs to community participation varies considerably. Particular problems include:

- tensions between elected councillors and community representatives – especially in authorities with less experience of participation, when elected councillors see the CENs (and sometimes the LSPs themselves) as eroding their traditional role;
- a feeling that, as in other partnership initiatives, they remain the junior partner in the LSP. They are rarely able to set agendas and often have to adjust to traditional local authority ways of doing things. Some also feel that the LSP itself is poorly run and ineffective; and
- a consensus culture, where disagreement is seen as ‘rocking the boat’.

Increasing contact with service providers

The case studies demonstrate improvement in the relationship between local authorities and the VCS – although sometimes from a very low base. Even in the most beleaguered of our case-study localities, the community view is that:

“The very fact of being in the same room talking has meant a slow development of trust between the Council and the VCS”.

Regular face-to-face contact is breaking down barriers while, in some areas, thematic subgroups and informal meetings between the formal LSP meetings have greatly increased the ability of the VCS to make a full contribution. In one site, BME groups say that, because of their participation in the LSP, Council departments are now contacting them direct. The National Audit Office research found that communities and public-sector service providers were increasingly working together outside LSPs.

Influencing the NRF

In some cases, the CEN has changed the priorities of the fund and the way the LSP commissions its projects, opening it up to a much larger constituency. There are a number of areas where CEN representatives chair the LSP subgroup that is responsible for this fund and/or have good representation on it. However, there are also areas where CENs have had little influence.

Influencing policy towards the VCS

There are several examples where policy towards the VCS had changed as a result of the LSP. In some areas, the LSP has signed up to a local Compact or is developing one. In some cases, protocols are also addressing wider VCS issues.

Influencing diversity policy

In some areas, the VCS have also promoted the diversity agenda with LSPs.

The BMER Involvement Fund

The CEN in one case-study site lobbied for and achieved a specific BMER Involvement Fund through the main NRF programme when it became clear that throughout the entire NRF programme in the borough, none of the main service projects was being delivered through BMER groups. In the first NRF round this was spent mainly on small capacity building grants, but CEN has also secured a second round of the fund that will be used to employ freelance project workers to build the long-term capacity of BME-led groups to access and participate in future service delivery programmes.

Promoting the diversity agenda

The CEN in Sefton has taken a strong stance on equalities. It has extended the number of special interest groups recognised by and represented on the LSP to include people with disabilities, lesbian, gay trans-sexual and bisexual (LGTB) groups, and faith communities, and argued for a stronger statement on equality in the LSP's code of practice. It has ensured that special interests are engaged in consultations on LSP initiatives (e.g. Housing Market Renewal). It has worked with local neighbourhood action panels to produce a 'Race Equality Toolkit'. It has analysed attendance at the partnership and thematic groups to demonstrate links and gaps and through the LSP's VCS development thematic group it organised a well-attended multi-agency diversity conference. It is now arguing for a children and young people's thematic group.

Open and transparent representation

Because LSPs were set up before CENs, initial VCS representation came through various channels. But by the time of the LO survey two years later, three-quarters of CENs were electing their LSP representatives, often allocating places to reflect the diversity of the sector. As a local authority partner said:

“Without the CEN, representation would have been friends of friends”.

Generally, this has improved openness and transparency. However, while many CENs are working to improve communication, some CENs have been criticised for failing to be open and transparent about their dealings with the LSP. Even for those who are committed to transparency, finding effective ways to demonstrate accountability is still a challenge and this was identified as a major area for improvement in the National Audit Office study.

According to our LO survey, half of LSPs have VCS representatives who are not elected by the CEN – usually the CVS or tenants' federations, but sometimes directly elected residents. In some areas, major VCOs are not members of the CEN. Sometimes this is their choice, because they feel they already have a direct route to influence; sometimes they stand for election as LSP representatives but are not elected, perhaps because they are seen by others in the VCS as already having a lot of power. A number of partners feel that this weakens the VCS voice.

The success of the partnership message means that the VCS is having to produce an increasing number of skilled representatives from a busy sector that is responding to all sorts of policy changes. Meetings are often held at times that are difficult for community members and the high level of demand on representatives also limit the number of people willing to stand for election. Being a CEN representative takes time away from people's own organisations, while those in work have found that they cannot be compensated for loss of earnings. Some LOs use CEF funding to compensate these organisations for this loss of time.

Getting a good mix of representatives is also a challenge. For example, the need for skilled and experienced representatives can be in conflict with the need to spread participation and get new people on board. However much partners say they want to see new faces around the table, they can be impatient with their lack of experience and skills at this level. This reinforces the message that LSPs need to promote a variety of opportunities for engagement at different levels.

Implications for policy and practice

Developing the capacity of the LSP

The capacity of the CEN to influence Neighbourhood Renewal depends on the willingness of LSP partners to take them seriously. Some LSPs need to improve their understanding of the VCS and recognise that CENs are part of the Neighbourhood Renewal package. It should not be acceptable to provide the minimum of places under sufferance. More effective incentives are needed to reinforce this message, backed up by GO support.

Representatives are often criticised for being 'preoccupied with process', but steps do need to be taken to make LSP meetings more accessible – through theme groups and encouraging informal contact at all levels between meetings. Good and imaginative practice in engaging BME groups in particular needs to be shared.

CENs also need to hone their skills to operate effectively at this level, to develop a strategic approach and, while maintaining their independent and distinctive voice, to resist getting 'stuck in opposition'. Pre-meeting briefings are a good way of ensuring a coherent and effective voice, so long as LSP agendas are set sufficiently well in advance and papers circulated.

More accessible meetings

Some LSPs have changed to a workshop/round table style of meeting, where people break up into small groups to discuss a key issue and do some problem solving and then report back. Some also held meetings in different venues, including social clubs.

Others have introduced informal themed development meetings in between the quarterly themed meeting, which has proved more accessible to VCS representatives and much more popular with them.

Being realistic about representation, but improving accountability

CEN representatives often comment that they are the only partners who are expected to demonstrate representativeness or accountability to their constituency. Expectations of VCS representatives are often unrealistic – it is difficult for a handful of CEN members to reflect the diversity of the local VCS. One CEN has therefore decided to call its delegates to the LSP ‘champions’ rather than representatives and others have called them advocates. What is important is that CEN representatives are informed by and accountable to their diverse constituencies, insofar as CEN resources allow. Themed CEN subgroups and networks help to achieve this, but sometimes the links between CENs, through member networks to groups on the ground, are very tenuous.

Accountability

One Network Development team has produced a feedback form that representatives use to record and feedback issues raised at the LSP to their networks (via the network co-ordinator). Completed forms will also appear on the CEN Website. Another keeps records of representatives’ attendance at meetings to inform the election process.

Many CENs have developed codes of practice for representatives and introduced training. Good practice in this respect should be shared and GOs and national infrastructure bodies could play a role here. LSPs and CENs should also consider compensation for organisations whose staff or volunteers are CEN representatives.

Fitting in with other participation mechanisms

In a number of areas, the LSP is one of many representative structures. This creates confusion and problems of co-ordination. Both central government and LSP partners need to ensure the different structures work effectively together.

3.4 Impact

It has not been possible within the timeframe of this evaluation to measure the impact of the programmes more precisely. Nor is it possible as yet to track the impact of the more informal contacts with individual partners and local authority departments that engagement at LSP level has made possible. Indeed, measuring the impact of the single Community Programme on Neighbourhood Renewal targets will pose many challenges, given the complexity of the policy environment, the timescales for change and the difficulty of demonstrating the links between practice and outcomes. Thus, although two thirds of LOs direct Chest grants largely to Neighbourhood Renewal priority areas, many respondents feel that it is unrealistic to expect such small amounts of money to have an observable impact on ambitious neighbourhood renewal floor targets. Others feel it is too soon to expect such outcomes.

Nonetheless, most agree that the money available through the Chests, dispersed as it is among a variety of small groups, has contributed in small ways. The example below is just one of many where the Chests have helped to increase activity and build links between people – and thus contribute to social capital and social cohesion.

Breaking down barriers

A grant of £1,782 funded a day trip to a theme park for 106 members of a tenants' association. The group included asylum seekers and young people and 'barriers were broken' as a result of the trip. Future community events are now being planned – in a mixed community that has seen a rapid influx of asylum seekers and refugees in the past two or three years.

It is also possible to argue that Chest grants are contributing to floor targets by: providing alternative activities to crime for young people, improving the general sense of well-being, introducing people to training and formal learning, and helping new groups to form who play an important role in getting services to marginalised groups (e.g. asylum seekers and refugees). Both Chests and NRF initiatives that CENs have secured are directly addressing liveability issues, while CENs also report that they have put key issues, such as teenage pregnancy, onto NRF agendas.

However, monitoring systems are patchy and there is little systematic tracking of impact through GOs. Future support for the work that the programmes are doing depends on accurate information about their reach and impact. It will be important to ensure that steps are taken to track the added value that the single Community Programme can contribute to Neighbourhood Renewal more systematically.

4. The future of the programmes

4.1 Added value

The evidence from the evaluation suggests that the programmes are enabling the sector to develop on a number of levels – from developing capacity and skills at neighbourhood level, through developing an effective infrastructure to making an effective contribution to Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and other partnerships. The strongest Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) and LSPs are approaching the point, with effective processes in place and relationships established, where tangible influence on mainstream service delivery can be expected. However, respondents in our research emphasised two critical factors in the development of participation:

- Time

A number of conditions will have to exist to allow the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to fully participate in Neighbourhood Renewal; well-resourced and widespread participation in and across neighbourhoods and communities of interest, a variety of ways to get involved, and plenty of opportunities for communication with government actors at many different levels. Establishing this foundation takes time.

- Context

The context in which the programmes are developing is crucial. The evaluation identified five different scenarios according to how well developed the sector was prior to the introduction of the programmes.

The importance of context

1. Where there is little history of infrastructure and investment in the VCS, the programmes have provided an essential starting point for community engagement in Neighbourhood Renewal. Here initial work needs to focus on developing capacity, confidence and skills, and it will take time to develop an effective infrastructure and deliver effective community engagement in decision-making.
2. In areas that have developed some infrastructure and some involvement in service delivery and governance, the Community Participation Programmes (CPPs) provide the opportunity for the existing infrastructure to extend its reach and to engage more effectively with power holders. Where the community sector is still only partially involved or there are other significant gaps, there will be some social capital and capacity, but there will still be work to do to widen and strengthen participation if the aims of the programme are to be achieved.
3. In areas where there is a lot of activity and a vibrant sector, but where there is fragmentation or division, parts of the sector may well be involved in service delivery and governance, but there is likely to be competition for recognition and funds. Here the CPPs provide the opportunity to tackle the difficult task of social cohesion in order to ensure that the sector can work together to make a more effective and inclusive contribution to governance and service delivery (developing 'bridging social capital'). However, setting up the CEN may expose underlying tensions and there may well be a 'storming' period before progress can be made.
4. Where the VCS is well-developed and developing a working relationship with other sectors, the CPPs offer the opportunity to fill existing gaps, cement links between groups and strengthen the sector's role and status.
5. There were a minority of areas where respondents feel that the CPPs have not added value. In these areas, respondents argue that adequate arrangements are already in place and the CPPs have added an unnecessary extra layer. It is important to assess how far this judgement is shared by local groups and organisations, while acknowledging that, in some areas, this might be a valid assessment.

4.2 The need for continued support

The evaluation studied two areas that did not have Neighbourhood Renewal or CPP funding. In terms of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's (ODPM's) indicators of multiple deprivation, they rank similarly to the case-study areas: one is 'just outside' the 88 areas, the other is comparable to the area that was the 'least deprived' of our main case studies. One is a district council covering a city that is the main (but not the only) urban centre within a predominantly rural/small town area; the other is a district council in a mixed urban/rural area that includes an urban centre in receipt of a range of regeneration funding.

Neither area is a desert in terms of community capacity building and in both there is evidence of successful Neighbourhood Renewal activity, led by capable and committed individuals in the VCS. Both areas have Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) – one long-established, the other new – but although both CVSs are committed to making community participation in their LSP work, they only have very limited funds – £5,000 each – to support the CEN role. This has made it difficult to move beyond pockets of successful activity or to sustain people's interest in activities beyond their own neighbourhood. There are no significant resources dedicated to networking and there is limited capacity to support VCS representatives to speak for and be accountable to the whole sector. And while there are working links between the small-grants providers and the CVS in both areas, there is no explicit strategic dimension to this.

It is not just the absence of the CPPs that disadvantages VCOs in these two areas, but also of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and other resources (such as Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers (NRAs)) available only to the 88 Neighbourhood Renewal areas. Nonetheless, both statutory sector and VCS respondents identified the lack of resources for supporting the CEN's involvement in the LSP as a major hindrance to its ability to operate effectively. The fact that a significant amount of Neighbourhood Renewal activity locally has been dependent on Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) has major implications for the sustainability of the work local CVSs have been able to do to support community participation. However, in one area, the CVS took the view that forthcoming infrastructure funding from the Home Office might help to fill the gap.

4.3 The single Community Programme

The introduction of the single Community Programme aims to ensure that there is synergy between the different programmes and a stronger focus on neighbourhoods. This should help to ensure that there is a stronger link between the small-scale funding of the Chests and the wider Neighbourhood Renewal agenda. However, our research suggests that the foundation is in place for this in many areas. In half of the areas surveyed for the evaluation, there is already a single lead organisation (LO) for all the programmes, and others were moving towards this at the time of the survey. However, there is still a minority who feel that their present arrangements, with two LOs, are working well. Whatever the LO arrangements, there is evidence of strengthening links between the programmes with CEN members on Chest grant-making panels, Community Empowerment Fund (CEF) LOs providing outreach for the Chests, regular sharing of work plans and Chest LOs providing publicity for the CEN (in some cases grant applicants have to be CEN members).

Generally, the single Community Programme offers the opportunity to maximise limited outreach resources, while its increased emphasis on the neighbourhood will help to address the issues of engagement that have been identified in this report, by bringing the work of CENs closer to the ground. However, it will be important that:

- the work that many CENs have done with communities of interest is maintained, so that diversity issues continue to be addressed;
- the allowance for overheads reflects the combined demands of both programmes, and particularly the need for outreach in relation to the Chests;
- the money available for small grants is not eroded in the single Community Programme – some want to see Chest funding ring-fenced; and
- the specific learning objectives that the Community Learning Chest (CLC) is beginning to address are not lost.

Some respondents were also concerned that if CEN LOs took over Chest functions in-kind support that Chest LOs had provided would be lost to the programme.

In 2006, Community Participation will be absorbed into the new Stronger and Safer Communities Fund, which will be attached to LSPs. Much of the detail has yet to be sorted out, but many of our respondents – from both sectors – feel strongly that a key factor in the success of the programmes so far has been its access to funding that is independent of the local authority and other local partners. It will be important to safeguard the status and autonomy on the LSP that this independent funding has provided. It will also be important to ensure through Local Area Agreements, backed up by Government Offices (GOs), that adequate funding for community participation continues to be available. This will be especially important in those LSPs where partnership and participation is currently least developed, and where the loss of SRB and other funding changes in 2006 affect their capacity to draw on resources from elsewhere.

4.4 Policy implications

Central government – in Whitehall and through GOs – should:

- recognise the different circumstances that exist in different areas and provide the flexibility to reflect this;
- consider ring-fencing funds to support small grants and CENs in the new Safer and Stronger Communities Fund, especially in areas where progress has been slowest;
- provide incentives to ensure that LSP partners and service providers support communities as genuine partners, reflecting this in CPAs, in Local Area Agreements, in LSP performance management exercises and other appropriate vehicles;
- ensure that different mechanisms for community participation can be integrated at local level;
- develop the skills and resources through GO to support both CENs and LSPs in handling difference and conflict – NRAs have an important role to play here;
- work with LOs (or as they will now be called Responsible Bodies (RBs)) to develop monitoring systems that provide reliable and useful information on how Chests are being spent across LOs, while safeguarding ease of access to the grants;
- provide more clarity about the relationship between CENs, LSPs and the community development that will be essential to underpin effective participation (much of the recent guidance refers to residents rather than the VCS);
- ensure that the single Community Programme and subsequent measures to ensure community participation are fully covered in the overall evaluation of the national strategy;
- provide or support opportunities for information sharing that bring together LOs and CENs from across the country;
- consider how the VCS outside the 88 priority areas for Neighbourhood Renewal can be supported in their relationships with LSPs; and
- capture the learning from the single Community Programme and track more systematically the added value it can contribute to LSPs and through them to Neighbourhood Renewal, so that lessons from the next two years can inform the design and operation of the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund and more general LSP developments.

LSPs and partners should ensure that:

- CENs are represented in sufficient numbers at all levels to exert influence and make a full contribution;
- all partners have the necessary support and induction to fulfil their roles;
- other partnerships and mechanisms for community engagement are co-ordinated with the LSP;
- their structures and ways of working allow diverse voices to be heard – ensuring both that BME and other hard-to-reach groups are fully represented and that the BME infrastructure is supported to make a full contribution;
- the CEN is engaged through theme groups and other subgroups – opportunities for informal contact outside formal LSP meetings can make a major contribution to ensuring that service delivery meets the needs of disadvantaged communities;
- the CEN is fully involved in developing priorities for, and deciding on, NRF allocations;
- CENs play a full part in setting agendas for LSP meetings and papers are sent out in adequate time for them to be fully prepared for LSP meetings;
- meetings are accessible in terms of timing, location and style; and
- they have a strategy for community development to support community participation.

VCS responsible bodies and CENs should:

- ensure that staff and participants understand the rationale behind NRU funding for network development, and the specific nature of their role vis-à-vis other local development and infrastructure agencies;
- ensure that they invest in skilled staff to support VCS engagement in LSPs and Neighbourhood Renewal more generally -- infrastructure bodies could support this by providing exemplar job descriptions and person specifications;
- continue to develop and share creative ways of both spreading engagement and enhancing accountability;
- develop and share experience on how to engage BME groups in the single Community Programme – more use could be made of NRAs to mediate where relationships are difficult;
- avoid getting ‘stuck in opposition’ and take a positive, if robust, approach to partnership development;
- take more initiative, as far as possible, in setting agendas for LSP meetings and theme groups;
- aim not only to secure NRF funds for the sector but also to influence the way that funds to other sectors are spent;
- share good practice in monitoring in order to improve information through fit-for-purpose monitoring systems.

Glossary

ACD

Active Communities Directorate

BME(R)

black and minority ethnic (and refugee)

CEF

Community Empowerment Fund

CEN

Community Empowerment Network

CLC

Community Learning Chest

CoI

Community(ies) of interest

CPP(s)

Community Participation Programme(s)

CVS

Council for Voluntary Service

CVSF

Community and Voluntary Sector Forum

FTE

full-time equivalent

GO

Government Office

LA

local authority

LGTB

lesbian, gay, trans-sexual and bisexual

LNRS

Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

LO(s)

lead organisation(s)

LSP

Local Strategic Partnership

NDC

New Deal for Communities

NIF

Network Initiative Fund

NMP

Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders

NR

Neighbourhood Renewal

NRA

Neighbourhood Renewal Adviser

NRF

Neighbourhood Renewal Fund

NRU

Neighbourhood Renewal Unit

NSNR

National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal

PCT

Primary Care Trust

PMF

Performance Management Framework

SRB

Single Regeneration Budget

VCO

voluntary or community organisation

VCS

voluntary and community sector

VSF

Voluntary Sector Forum

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