



REACTIONS TO URBAN FORUM'S RESEARCH ON COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT NETWORKS

July 8, 2008

Hazel Blears MP, Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government
Extract from a letter to Urban Forum

"I am aware that in granting greater flexibility to local authorities in determining local spending, some local community groups may disagree with those spending decisions . . . However, local authorities are generally better placed than central government to consider how best to improve the empowerment of local people . . . Where there have been effective practices developed by CENs, we will arrange for these to be shared with community bodies through the regional network of the National Empowerment Partnership . . . I recognise the valuable work undertaken by Urban Forum in championing the community sector and would like to arrange a meeting with you and your members to discuss how good empowerment practices can best be supported."

Phil Hope MP, Minister for the Third Sector
Extract from a Letter from to Urban Forum

"Where the CEN or representative structure is being decommissioned for reasons other than quality issues, the Partnership should think carefully about the consequences of this, including the role the CEN might play in meeting the

Duty to Involve. The Partnership should also be sure that there are sound reasons for deconstructing a system which may need to be immediately replaced, and they should be aware of the issues with other models, such as those you raise.”

Andrew Collinge, Director of Policy and Public Affairs, Local Government Information Unit.

“Choppy waters ahead then for community empowerment networks (CENs). The widespread uncertainty around – or indeed loss of – funding has the potential to send a good proportion of CENs into a Bermuda Triangle from which they may not re-appear.

There are a couple of concerns as the money dries up and a more focused approach to neighbourhood renewal is adopted in the form of the Working Neighbourhood Funds. Outreach work is one of the best aspects of CENs. This valuable work which ensures that the voice of the most disadvantaged in our communities is heard and properly represented at the partnership table is under threat.

Also, if small grants disappear, community groups will be hamstrung – unable to make use of innovative approaches such as participative budgeting. CENs will simply not have the money in their pocket to share out.

The Empowerment White Paper is imminent. We welcome the Government’s ongoing push to empower and strengthen our communities, but this has to be achieved alongside support for action to foster involvement in the very communities that need it most.

Hard-earned local commitment and capacity cannot be neglected. To do so would be seen as talking the talk, but not necessarily walking the walk.”

Neil Cleeveley, Director of Information and Policy, NAVCA

“This is a vital piece of research by Urban Forum. It seems perverse that, just at the time when the Government is putting empowerment centre stage, we should

be talking about the decline of Community Empowerment Networks as the result of cuts in funding.

We know from previous studies by the National Audit Office and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, what a difference a good CEN can make to an area and more importantly to the local community. Whether its small grants, outreach work, helping under-represented communities speak up about their concerns or the wide range of activities in which they are engaged, CENs have proved their value repeatedly.

Whatever the formal mechanism for community engagement, it will require funding if it is to function effectively. So why not continue to support something that has been a success and look to support those that may need it. I fear that the Government won't know what it's got 'till it's gone.'

Matt Scott, Director, Community Sector Coalition & former Manager of Lewisham CEN

"Crucial research, timely and extremely worrying in terms of the example it sets for independent community activity.

Someone really needed to do this research, and fortunately Urban Forum were there to contact all the existing CEN's to check out with them, in their own words, as opposed to more distanced and nuanced Town Hall interpretations.

Trying to get clarity from the various arms of government on why they took the de facto position of dispensing with CENs was like chasing shadows. Arguing on the basis of facts, on the basis of research was and is key.

I agree that there is nothing intrinsic in the model of CENs that is necessarily worth fighting for, but the resource, the knowledge, the social capital that came and is now haemorrhaging is worth standing up for.

This report has ensured the issue is kept live against the backdrop of the Empowerment White Paper. A 'New Deal for Local Authorities' (sic) has in many cases permitted a winner takes all approach to community empowerment locally. Not the best place from which to start, but even more important to know about and tackle.

Rhiannon Bearne, Policy Officer, Voluntary Organisations' Network North East (VONNE)

“Urban Forum’s recent work highlights the impressive fact that Community Empowerment Networks nationally work with over 35,000 groups. This represents a significant proportion of the voluntary and community sector, particularly small organisations playing a major role in representing community voices in local government structures.

This timely work reinforces the trends infrastructure organisations like VONNE are seeing at a local level. With declines and uncertainty around funding putting a major strain on outreach and neighbourhood work undertaken by Networks, there is major concern regionally that an important existing mechanism for community engagement could be seriously compromised.

With councils gearing up for the new Duty to Involve in 2009 and many choosing to include targets around people’s perceptions of influence in their new local area agreements, the policy context for networks, and the sector, arguably couldn’t be stronger. So it’s worrying to see some of the good work undertaken by networks in the last seven years under threat.

Urban Forum’s work provides an important snapshot of the state of CENs at a key time of change. We hope this evidence will be used by the statutory sector to think seriously about the implications of losing networks, and their role in the new local policy landscape.

Alison Rigg, Senior Partnership Officer, Gateshead Council

“This timely research presents a mixed picture for the future of CENs across the country.

However, in Gateshead, we have a strong commitment to involving residents in decision-making and Gateshead Community Network (GCN) has been, and will continue to be, a core component of our strategy.

Gateshead Strategic Partnership (GSP) and GCN have developed together and we have learnt along the way what works and what doesn’t. We have found that:

- Community representatives need a high quality of support provided by GCN staff team to ensure that representatives have credibility round the partnership table.
- GCN can give partners greater reach into the community by providing consultation support to individual partners.
- It is important for GCN to link into community development activity across Gateshead.
- GCN has also been an important champion in raising the profile of engagement across the GSP, which is reflected in both our community strategy, Vision 2030 and our new LAA, The Gateshead Agreement.
- At an individual level, we have seen people grow and flourish, having taken the opportunities provided through GCN
- This only works where good communication and trust exists between GCN and partners.

Whatever mechanisms local areas choose, it is important that effective engagement structures continue to be provided for residents, even where CENs are no longer being funded.

Jeremy Crook OBE, Director of the Black Training and Enterprise Group

“BTEG welcomes the Urban Forum’s latest research study on CENs. It is clear from the findings that there is now a gap between the Government’s commitment to community empowerment and the reality on the ground for CENs. It seems the resourcing of community voice and outreach through these networks has become a lottery. It is hard to see how communities across the country will have sustainable voice unless funds are set aside for this vital purpose. I think the black and minority ethnic voluntary and community sector will question the Government’s commitment to deliver real and sustainable change.”

Fran McKeown, Development Officer, Hastings Voluntary Action

“Hastings is in a two tier local authority and as such the processes available to influence the LAA are fairly inaccessible. There have been no resources

allocated to enable third sector organisations to directly influence the new LAA. Nothing in the Research surprises me really.

The Hastings Community Network Development Officer post funding ran out in March and Hastings Borough allocated 'transitional funding' to cover the post till September, when Working Neighbourhoods Funds may pick up those costs through a commissioning process. The question of the County LAA picking this up was a non-starter from the beginning.

Some community engagement posts have been retained, again at a borough level, and again through Working Neighbourhoods funding) and the Network is doing its best to ensure that lessons around community involvement and resident participation learned through Neighbourhood Renewal are not lost.

It seems that long term planning and good use of policy to inform processes are not embedded in practice and an 'all change' culture is accepted as normal for every new funding stream that arises. We have been able to hang onto some principles by being persistent at the LSP and writing in our own community strategy target around 'community activity' but these are very open to interpretation. Without the development post and associated costs it is all likely to get assimilated under a statutory agenda.'