



Urban Forum Response to 'Unlocking the Talents of the Community'

May 2008

Introduction

Urban Forum is a membership organisation that seeks to reflect the views and experience of the community groups we work for to inform policy making. Our work supports community engagement and empowerment, working closely with our members and with central and local government, to improve performance and enable local people to influence decisions. We work across a range of policy areas, under three strategic priorities;

1. Local governance and neighbourhoods
2. Equalities, diversity and cohesion
3. The planning system and the built environment.

Urban Forum's response to 'Unlocking the Talents of our Communities' sets out the major issues and challenges we see in the development of a Community Empowerment White Paper. It draws on current and previous research into key themes relating to empowerment, including; equalities and LSPs, community leadership and Community Empowerment Networks.

Urban Forum welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the White Paper's development, but we also want to express the view that we do not feel further legislation is required to deliver empowerment. The new performance framework and the provisions of the Local Government Act 2007 provide much of what's needed to embed empowerment but they must be given time to be implemented. Central government should provide strong leadership and guidance from the centre to encourage local government and other Departments to truly empower communities and citizens.

- 1. How can government at all levels work together to tackle worklessness and promote enterprise in the most deprived areas?**
- 2. What are the best means of coordinating social, economic and physical regeneration?**

- 1) It is essential that the barriers are broken down between social and economic regeneration. For example, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) focus predominantly on economic outputs/outcomes (e.g. full employment targets) with a lack of creative thinking around how funding for social outputs/outcomes (e.g.

confidence building for people who have been excluded from the labour market for a long time) can support economic objectives. Research carried out by Urban Forum on the wind down of the Single Regeneration Budget¹ in 2001 highlighted the critical role of the third sector in ensuring community-led regeneration and effective capacity building of all sectors. RDA single pot funding has not adequately taken forward the lessons learnt from SRB and the fact that if social regeneration is not supported, this has a negative effect on communities.

- 2) At the local level, research undertaken by Urban Forum in 2007 entitled “Where are the women in LSPs?”² revealed that women are significantly under-represented on Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and that this poses a real risk to LSPs effectiveness and ability to reflect the whole community. The research found that the vast majority of LSPs are not monitoring the representation of women on their boards and sub-groups in spite of their responsibilities under the Gender Equality Duty to tackle discrimination. Local Authorities must take the lead in examining the responsibilities of the partnership.
- 3) The focus on worklessness and economic development is much too narrow to deliver widespread empowerment. The broad range of inter-related and complex issues that need to be addressed to tackle deprivation and inequality have been acknowledged by the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (NR). In the NR strategy, empowerment encompassed skills, confidence, engagement, health and well-being, civic pride and jobs. Working Neighbourhoods Fund (WNF) if successful will deliver economic development and jobs. If unsuccessful, it will disempower people, waste money and be highly bureaucratic. CENs and other empowerment structures can, and do lead to greater economic activity as people gain confidence and skills through their engagement.
- 4) The largest part of the VCS workforce comprises volunteers and this should never be under-estimated as a valuable route to employment. Often working with those at greatest risk of social and economic exclusion, the VCS offer a range of voluntary, flexible and part-time and full time employment opportunities in a gradual manner to ensure personal and professional development³. Support and resources to assist the VCS to continue this work offers a sensible long-term and step-by-step approach, concentrating on Social Return on Investment (SROI).
- 5) Government should take the opportunity to further develop and mainstream participatory budgeting and (ring-fenced) community kitties to support sustainable development practice in local economies. This could assist communities in areas of high unemployment and deprivation to develop skills and training around running local food cooperatives and greening homes for example.

¹ ‘Out of SRB Into the Pot’ - what are the implications for the voluntary and community sector, Urban Forum 2001

² ‘Where are the women in LSPs?’ - Urban Forum, 2007

³ ‘State of the South West 2008’ (South West Observatory) – extract written by South West Forum

6) Government should consider how both 'community anchors' (at the neighbourhood level) and Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) or similar bodies which have years of expertise in inclusive and accountable community representation (at the district level) can co-ordinate the resources, networks etc that can support economic/enterprise initiatives. It should then ensure that these bodies are supported and resourced adequately.

3. What is the role of government in encouraging and supporting citizens to be active?

4. What steps need to be taken to revive involvement in local civic and democratic roles?

- 1) It was considered that an alternative or additional question should have been '***what is the role of government in responding to the needs, ideas, challenges, desires and demands of citizens once they have become active?***'
- 2) Government needs to demonstrate that active citizens actually have real power to influence things and so it is essential that a clearer, holistic model of participation which is transparent about the menu of options for participation is developed. Mobility between roles should also be demonstrated clearly, for example, how can a local community volunteer or community representative be supported to be active in a local community partnership and then become a councillor?
- 3) The role of technology, social networking technology and other emerging communications channels should also have a strong role in giving people opportunities and increasing diversity around participation.
- 4) Empowering, community engagement is resource intensive and requires adequate time, money and expertise. Properly resourced engagement not only empowers people, it also saves time and money in the long run because decisions are more likely to reflect community needs and therefore receive the commitment of local people. Recent work carried out by Urban Forum around 'Community involvement in places and the built environment'⁴ reported that people literally feel 'gazumped' by government when their energy is put into engagement only to find that decisions are then influenced by policy changes or political considerations (events outside their control basically). Strengthening community involvement in the Planning System is one of the aims of the Community Empowerment Action Plan but considerable work needs to achieve this. Involvement must include strategic decision making, particularly influencing Local Development Frameworks for example. The Urban Forum research found that the Planning system is perceived by community groups as:
 - Difficult to influence, bureaucratic and hard to understand.
 - Being something to respond to when there is a problem, rather than proactively influencing it to set a positive vision for the locality.

⁴ 'Places and the Built Environment Policy forum, conclusions and recommendations, 2008 – Urban Forum

- 5) Community Empowerment Networks are a mechanism for enabling community voices to be heard (that otherwise might be missed) and have been invested in heavily by government over the years in order to guide local decision making bodies such as LSPs. These mechanisms are essential to deliver Duty to Involve and the new Policy Performance Framework. Research conducted by Urban Forum around CENs⁵ this year has found that CENs faced average funding cuts of 40% from April 2008 and as a result they would be doing less neighbourhood based work and less representation and advocacy. In some areas local authorities have decided to take the CEN functions in-house and this of great concern to Urban Forum as this will mean no independent community voice and the loss of significant expertise and knowledge that exists within CENs.

Urban Forum cannot reiterate strongly enough that this crucial engagement role needs to be outside political structures and party politics of the local authority and to have consistent presence, un-affected by the change in political leadership within local authorities.

There must also be clarity over the distinction between third sector infrastructure (e.g. CVS or community anchors) and engagement mechanisms and structures (e.g. community empowerment Networks). Both need funding. Both are important. There is increasing evidence however that these are being lumped together and saving costs for local authorities.

Government guidance and leadership in these matters is crucial. We believe that government should be championing engagement structures independent of local authorities.

5. How can the power of consumers be better used to improve local services?

6. How can social housing tenants be given more choice and voice?

- 1) Access to shops and services is very important for thriving communities. During Urban Forum work undertaken around community involvement in places and the built environment, it was agreed by the members taking part that what was missing in their local community was access to shops. Out of town developments are putting 'local' shops out of business and there needs to be a more supportive environment for local independent shops. Policy recommendations by Urban Forum members included:
 - There must be a move towards 'green' sustainable shopping. This includes weighting the business rates to favour the development of smaller local shops.
 - More effective Government initiatives to look into the phenomenon of 'Clone towns' with a view of changing the planning laws
 - Communities should be actively encouraged to shape the Local Development Framework (LDF) as early as possible. There should also be a mechanism for communities to monitor the LDF.
- 2) Local Strategic Partnerships hold the key and are central to decision-making and co-ordinating improvements in public and local services. LSPs must therefore be able to properly reflect the needs and opinions of all groups and communities in an area. If

⁵ CEN Research – Urban Forum April 2008

LSPs don't encourage the involvement of under-represented groups there is a risk that decisions will not take account of marginalised communities. Women and BME groups are significantly under-represented on LSPs and that represents a significant risk to achieving cohesive, thriving communities with services to meet all needs.

- 3) Community engagement must be enshrined as a continual and transparent process of Informing, asking, involving and redesigning.

7. What more is needed to encourage consistently strong local leadership?

8. How best can we increase opportunities for communities to hold local public official and representatives to account?

- 1) Current research being undertaken by Urban Forum around local leadership revealed that the strengths respondents' felt were the most important for being an effective local leader were:
 - Reaching out to the community
 - Understanding the issues in the community
 - Being good at representing the community
 - Promoting the work of, and commitment to the VCS
 - Being approachable – easy to access.

Only 10% of respondents thought that their local councillor was effective, which mirrors the findings from the Councillors Commission that 90% of people think their Councillor could be more effective. 46% of respondents thought that their councillor was not effective at all, and 44% felt that their councillor was effective in some respects, ineffective in others.

The three aspects of effective representation were:

- 1) Representing the full diversity of community, not just a particular group.
- 2) Effectively linking community/resident and the council.
- 3) Actively engaging with the community.

Truly effective leaders need to combine all three of the above. It is not sufficient to effectively represent a narrow portion of the community.

- 2) When asked what would make the biggest difference in improving the relationship between local councillors and community representatives, the most common topic mentioned was better communication (61%), including:
 - Councillors and community representatives spending more time together
 - More face to face involvement and regular meetings
 - More open surgeries

The second most popular comment on what would improve relationships was having less regard for party politics and all councillors in fact being independent of party politics.

Third, was more support for the VCS, and this included: resources, support for CENs and supporting community engagement in the LAA.

Finally mentioned, was more openness and transparency by local councillors in addition to more training for community leaders and councillors to work together. Other comments made were around greater diversity of councillors, electing mayors with full power to act; greater power devolved to cities, towns etc; seeing actions occurring because of councillor involvement, and councillors not being paid unless the community is satisfied with their work.

- 3) A new trust has to be built up in communities. Faceless, centralised control from government departments has meant that the public know full well that councillors or community leaders have very little real influence over decisions affecting their local community, never mind the fact that most members of the public don't know who their local elected representative is? What happened to all the talk of Neighbourhood Councils in the Local Government White Paper? The development of these type of bodies could have more control and budgets devolved to them, specific neighbourhood well being powers, and a specific duty to develop both local 'social capital' and local economic initiatives in conjunction with other agencies?

Conclusion

It is crucial that the government revisits strategies such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and appreciates the reasons why it was welcomed as an important step and commitment to alleviate poverty. Economic development alone cannot deliver empowerment. The Working Neighbourhoods Fund has a very narrow focus for what is a very broad and multi-faceted agenda.

The alarming decline of funding for CENs raises fears of a major dissonance between government rhetoric and practice on empowerment. Uncertainty over funding and diminishing resources have compounded the fragility and uncertainty surrounding CENs and there is a real danger that a great deal of expertise and the ability to engage with the most at risk from social exclusion will be lost.

If LSPs are to effectively represent the opinions and aspirations of the whole community and empower those who tend not to have their voices heard, then greater attention must be paid to their composition. Attention must be given to who is represented within formal decision making structures and in particular, the under-representation of women and BME groups within LSPs.

In order for people to get engaged and local leadership to emerge and be involved in representative democracy people need to feel that their time and energy is respected, noted and meaningful. By working with, and through the voluntary and community sector, local leaders should be able to communicate and reach out to communities more effectively with greater accountability and trust as a result.

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