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### **Understanding community empowerment in urban regeneration and planning in England: putting policy and practice in context**

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# **Understanding Community Empowerment in Urban Regeneration and Planning in England: Putting Policy and Practice in Context.**

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## **Abstract**

Community involvement in the fields of town planning and urban regeneration includes a wide range of opportunities for residents and service users to engage with networks, partnerships and centres of power. Both the terminology and degree of the transfer of power to citizens varies in different policy areas and contexts but five core objectives can be identified. This article approaches the subject of community empowerment by exploring the theoretical literature; reviewing recent policy pronouncements relating to community involvement in England and by discussing a recent case study of an Urban II project in London. The conclusions suggest that community empowerment is always likely to be partial and contingent on local circumstances and the wider context.

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# **Understanding Community Empowerment in Urban Regeneration and Planning in England: Putting Policy and Practice in Context.**

## **1. Introduction**

Much has been written about whether participation represents the ‘New Tyranny’ (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), a process which could lead to the ‘Emancipatory City’ (Lees (ed.) 2004, Defilippis, 2004) or whether it lies somewhere between romance and regulation (Defilippis et al. 2006). A key aspect of the debate has been about the most appropriate theoretical context within which to analyse examples of community engagement and participation in planning. The debate has therefore moved on from simply evaluating case studies to exploring the variety of rationalities which best explain the way power is used and exploited by stakeholders in different public policy arenas. Thus Brownill and Carpenter (2007) draw attention to the potential, and limitations, of adopting any one of the many frames of reference relating to any particular ‘rationality’ or concept of power in increasingly complex systems of governance and policy making. While the dominant ideas of collaborative planning set out by Healey (1997), and often reflected in government guidance literature, suggest that communicative rationalities will promote ‘empowerment’ through participatory democracy, others argue that rationality will inevitably be distorted by the uneven distribution of power. Yet others express cautious optimism based on the detailed investigation of individual examples. Taylor, for example, notes from her research that ‘[there is] potential for communities to become ‘active subjects’ and manipulate prevailing discourses to their own advantage, drawing on social movement theory to identify the opportunities that new governance spaces have opened up’ (2007: 314).

There is thus much confusion about the terminology and the ultimate objectives of this growing trend towards participatory democracy. Terms such as public participation, community engagement and empowerment are increasingly used interchangeably and with little regard to their original meanings. Each suggests that local communities have a role to play in contributing local knowledge to decision-making but have very different assumptions with regard to the transfer of power and authority to determine outcomes. Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation provided the best known set of definitions but this has been criticised from a number of different perspectives. A full investigation of the meanings of all the terms will not be possible here but the following broad categories can be identified. Public participation suggests the provision of information and consultation on Arnstein’s ladder where tacit knowledge contributes to decision-making by a variety of stakeholders. Community engagement suggests the involvement of local residents and service users in partnerships, fora and other decision-making bodies over an extended period as part of a collaborative process (Healey 1997). Empowerment goes beyond the other two terms in that it means ‘to give authority or power to’ (OED online) individuals or groups engaged in decision-making. As well as uncertainty about terminology, there are significant, and often implicit, differences about the ultimate objectives to be achieved. At least five core objectives can be identified:

- To provide information and to enable people to express opinions about policies which will affect them;

- To improve the quality of local decision-making by drawing on tacit knowledge;
- To improve the quality and responsiveness of local services by engaging users in management decisions;
- To re-engage local people with local democratic processes and renew civic society;
- To transfer to residents and recipients direct or indirect powers to manage assets or deliver services for themselves.

It should be noted that these objectives are very often multiple and overlapping and for the purposes of this article community involvement is used as the collective term for all these objectives.

Much depends on the arena in which citizen involvement or participation takes place. In the fields of planning and development certain rights to be consulted are embodied in the legislation and in local authority Statements of Community Involvement (Baker *et al.* 2007). Here local people are rarely engaged as members of local partnerships or similar bodies but often express opposition to developments through informal action groups and protest movements. Ball (2004), for example, carried out a series of interviews with stakeholders involved in major property-led developments. He found that these developers were critical of current consultation processes and question whether the 'local community' can fully assess the impact of a development which may affect a wider city region. He concludes:

The survey results indicate ....that it is far from clear to non-community agents that 'communities' actually always become heavily involved in regeneration. Instead, they frequently deal with a series of local activists, whose representativeness is often dubious. Those activists, in turn, find it difficult to build up trusting relationships either with other partners or the local population. (Ball 2004: 139)

In the field of urban regeneration community representatives are either co-opted or elected onto management boards or partnerships, such as with the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme and local strategic partnerships, where disputes may arise about the strategy or mode of delivery, but not about the fundamental purpose of the programme. In this context, residents are often elected or invited to sit on boards and partnerships as equal members to other stakeholders and, as in the example of NDC, may be in the majority. Extending from this is the broader concept of co-production, which combines both improvements to service delivery and a degree of empowerment:

The idea is that, by working alongside the people they are supporting, public services can dramatically increase their resources, extend their reach, radically transform the way they operate and be much more effective. Co-production makes strengthening the core economy of neighbourhood and family the central task of all public services. (Boyle & Harris 2009: 14)

In this rapidly developing field the common theme is that residents and service users should have an input into decisions affecting the quality of their lives. The extent to

which power and authority should be or is transferred to these interest groups is rarely made explicit. As has already been suggested, different assumptions about empowerment operate in different policy areas and, as will be discussed, recent government guidance in England has only added to the confusion. This paper sets out to explore the concept of empowerment and to investigate how it might be applied in relation to individuals, community organisations and governance structures. The traditional view is that community involvement can be added onto existing decision-making and service delivery bodies but increasingly it is being argued that these agencies need to be completely recast in order to give primacy to service users (see for example Leadbeater & Cottam 2009). Thus the intention here is to investigate how far the promotion of 'empowerment' may lead to the transformation of these agencies and to explore the various dimensions of empowerment manifested in one recent example which embodied this particular objective.

The paper is divided into four parts. The next section reviews the theoretical debates about empowerment and changing governance structures. It then goes on to discuss the recent Government consultation paper (relating to England) on community empowerment and to evaluate the likely impacts of the changes being proposed. Through a case study of the Stockwell Partnership Urban II project, the third section examines one example of community involvement where some elements of empowerment can be identified. It concludes with a broader discussion about the multiple and overlapping objectives of community involvement.

## **2. The Concept of Empowerment**

The concept of empowerment has been used in relation to community involvement for some time but has only recently entered into the vocabulary of government policy (CLG 2008). Empowerment implies a transfer of power between stakeholders. This can happen at a number of different levels: individuals may acquire new skills or powers in relation to others, groups and their representatives may gain in influence and exert greater power over decision-making; and the balance of power may change between organisations involved in partnerships or secure increased resources or compliance from a higher tier authority. To further understand empowerment, we need to explore the contexts in which it may occur.

Much has written about the 'modernisation' agenda associated with New Labour after 1997 and the growth of multi-level governance. This has been defined as 'negotiated, non-hierarchical exchanges between institutions at the transnational, national, regional and local levels...[which] do not have to operate through intermediary levels but can take place directly between, say the transnational and regional levels, thus bypassing the state level' (Peters & Pierre 2001: 132). These institutions often take the form of partnership arrangements between a variety of stakeholders from different tiers of government in order to deliver specific programmes at the local level. As Sullivan *et al.* (2004) note, this does not mean that the power of the state has declined, rather that new 'steering' mechanisms have been developed such as, for example, requiring public participation and community representation as conditions for funding at the local level.

In assessing the potential for ‘participatory governance’, Gaventa (2004) stresses the importance of exploring the power relations within the new forms of participation. ‘Power analysis is thus critical to understanding the extent to which new spaces for participatory governance can be used for transformative engagement, or whether they are more likely to be instruments for reinforcing domination and control’ (Gaventa 2004, 34). Thus an investigation of these ‘new spaces’ may well reveal whether and in what forms empowerment has occurred. But as Cornwall observes ‘spaces for participation are not neutral, but are themselves shaped by power relations that both surround and enter them’ (Cornwall 2004).

Defillippis *et al.* (2006) take this debate one stage further by asserting that a study of community participation should not be solely introspective but that ‘such processes are part of a wider analyses of social and economic inequality, and such analyses necessarily include a role for conflict’ (Defillippis *et al.*, 2006, 686). They go on to stress the importance of working ‘within a place’ rather than simply being ‘about a place’ where ‘local activities are limited to local processes and there is little interest in going beyond these boundaries’ (Defillippis *et al.*, 2006, 686). Thus, rather than taking the subject of research as an enclosed participatory ‘space’, as most of the literature suggests, Defillippis *et al.* are urging us to take account of the broader socio-political context in which empowerment can occur.

If the government’s approach to modernisation in a global world has been towards creating new governance spaces, these need further investigation. Just because engagement is now an essential pre-condition, it does not mean they automatically lead to the empowerment of previously disempowered stakeholders. As Gaventa suggests, we need a more nuanced approach which asks how governance spaces are created, in whose interests and with what terms of engagement (Gaventa 2004: 35). Those who create a space may influence who has power within it and that new spaces can be taken over by ‘old power and vice versa’ (Gaventa 2004. 35). Gaventa defines three types of spaces:

*Closed spaces*: Here ‘decisions are made by a set of actors behind closed doors, without any pretence of broadening the boundaries of inclusion’.

*Invited spaces*: ‘Efforts to widen participation involve the creation of new or ‘invited’ spaces, i.e. those into which people (as users, as citizens, as beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities, be they government, supranational agencies or non-governmental organisations’ (Cornwall 2002: 24).

*Claimed/created spaces*: ‘spaces which are claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power-holders, or created more autonomously by them’ (Gaventa 2004: 35). These might arise out of mobilisation around issue-based concerns or where organisations are formed to represent local interests.

These spaces exist in a dynamic relationship to one another: ‘Closed spaces may seek to restore legitimacy by creating invited spaces; similarly, invited spaces may be created from the other direction, as more autonomous people’s movements attempt to use their own for a for engagement with the state. Similarly, power gained in one space, through new skills, capacities and experiences, can be used to enter and affect other spaces. From this perspective, the transformative potential of spaces for

participatory governance must always be assessed in relationship to the other spaces which surround them. Creation of new institutional designs of participatory governance, in the absence of other participatory spaces which serve to provide and sustain countervailing power, might simply be captured by the already empowered elite' (Gaventa 2004: 36).

Thus we can conclude that the current trend towards multi-level governance has created important opportunities for increased community involvement and enhancing local democratic processes in a wide variety of public policy fora. New institutional arrangements for engaging stakeholders have created a variety of spaces where citizens can have much greater influence over decision-making, particularly at the local level. However, the analysis of power relations is necessary in each case to assess the potential for challenging 'entrenched interests of the status quo' (Gaventa 2004: 39) and achieving transformative potential. The empowerment of local communities may be partial and temporary and subject to both the internal dynamics of the space created and the wider socio-political context. The next section will go on to examine recent government guidance on this topic.

### **3. Communities in Control?**

The UK government has for many years espoused the concept of community participation in a number of policy areas, initially in planning but more recently in relation to urban regeneration, the health service and the police. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Department of Communities and Local Government was promoting a more concerted and strategic approach across central government departments. Local government has always been seen as the primary agency for increasing citizen involvement as part of a broader strategy towards the modernisation of public services and the creation of devolved administrations at the national, regional and city levels. The Department of Communities and Local Government has taken the lead and to date has produced two White Papers (CLG, 2006; CLG, 2008a). The first endorsed the role of local government in developing strategies of 'community leadership' and 'place-shaping' whereby a series of formal and informal partnership arrangements would engage service providers and local communities. The second White Paper – *Communities in Control* – set out more detailed arrangements with 39 commitments for empowering citizens and groups. It will be the main provisions of this White Paper which will be discussed here to explore the underlying meanings of empowerment and how it is intended to promote it.

The White Paper begins by accepting that in general people feel alienated from political parties, are increasingly unwilling to vote at national and local elections, and feel they lack power in influencing elected representatives. It argues that political disengagement can be put down to 'a sense of powerlessness on the part of most citizens that their voices are not being heard, their views not listened to, their participation unwelcomed or their activity unrewarded' (CLG 2008a, 21). Yet research evidence suggests that people want a greater say in how the country is run and how their taxes are spent but 'the structure and culture of politics alienates and deters them' (CLG 2008a, 21).

In response, the White Paper maintains that the answer lies in empowerment: 'passing more and more political power to more and more people, using every practical means

available, from the most modern social networking websites, to the most ancient methods of petitioning, public debates and citizens' juries' (CLG 2008a, 21). It is argued that community empowerment brings real benefits to the individual as well as supporting more cohesive and integrated communities, helps revive civic society and local democracy, drives forward improvements in service delivery, and enables civic organisations and social enterprises to promote social change.

A number of new legislative and administrative changes are proposed. The first is to give local authorities a 'duty to promote democracy' through a variety of measures to improve communications and engagement of specific groups. 'We will empower local councils to present themselves as democratic centres, with a new culture which sees democratic politics as respected, recognised and valued' (CLG 2008a, 24).

The second will extend the 'duty to involve' beyond local authorities to 14 other public sector agencies which provide services at the local level, including the police, the Environment Agency and the Homes and Communities Agency. This power came into effect in April 2009 and is designed to 'embed a culture of engagement and empowerment. This means that authorities consider.....the possibilities for provision of information to, consultation with and involvement of *representatives of local persons* across all authority functions' (original emphasis) (CLG 2008b: 19). The Guidance notes that representatives of local persons refers not just to local residents but also includes those who work or study in the area, visitors, service users, local third sector groups, businesses, parish councils and anyone else likely to be interested or affected. Authorities are required to consider how representatives of local persons can: influence or directly participate in decision-making; provide feedback on decisions, services, policies and outcomes; be involved in the commissioning of services; contribute to the delivery of services; contribute to the scrutiny and improvement of the quality of services (CLG 2008a, 21-22).

Recent legislation has established a number of mechanisms for setting out strategic plans for planning and regeneration at the local level. These include the Sustainable Community Strategy, the Local Area Agreement and, for planning purposes, the Local Development Framework. These cannot be discussed in any detail here but all include requirements to consult and involve local interests. In relation to the Sustainable Community Strategy, the Guidance requires each local authority to establish a panel for consultation purposes and requires the inclusion of 'persons from under-represented groups'. Each local authority is required to consult widely on 'which communities of interest may be underrepresented in civic and political activity, in particular those who are hardest to reach, and invite people who are representative of these communities to join the panel' (CLG 2008a, 54). This is the first time that the need to include 'hard to reach' groups has been identified in central government guidance. Other parts of the White Paper address ways in which local authorities can promote a more active citizenship through, for example, volunteering, gaining access to information, influencing and challenging decision-making, standing for office and setting up third sector organisations, such as voluntary associations, trusts and social enterprises.

So what conclusions can be drawn about the government's commitment to community empowerment? The White Paper contains many small scale changes addressing a wide range of issues concerning local government and the delivery of



local services but do these changes promote a genuine transfer of power, and if so, to which groups and interests? At the same time, it is worth identifying those aspects of 'empowerment' which are not discussed. The overriding question is what are the underlying aims and objectives we can deduce from the White Paper and do they provide the foundations for a new form of participatory democracy which genuinely empowers local communities.

The first point to note is that the White Paper introduces a large array of new duties and responsibilities, new programmes, enhancements to existing practices and new ideas to be tested which relate to multi-level governance and the delivery of local services. At the same time, and possibly to off-set criticism that the national level is overlooked, the Ministry of Justice issued its own discussion document entitled *A national framework for greater citizen engagement* (Ministry of Justice 2008). One of the positive features of the White Paper is that it contains multiple objectives designed to create stronger links between civil society and government by the requirement of local government and other agencies to inform, consult and engage citizens. This raises the question as to whether these changes add up to a comprehensive programme of change or are merely piecemeal changes which are fundamentally designed to make the present system of representative democracy work more effectively. The duty to promote democracy and the duty to involve may simply represent top-down directions which are largely cosmetic if authorities only implement the letter of the law or if citizens are unwilling or unable to engage fully in the process.

This leads on to the nature of the governance systems to which citizens are being encouraged to engage. The White Paper fails to address the extreme complexity of many of the governance systems currently operating at the local level where overlapping partnerships and administrative arrangements are designed to manage and deliver a wide variety of strategies and plans. Reference has already been made to Sustainable Community Strategies, Local Strategic Partnerships, Local Area Agreements and Local Development Frameworks. Each has different powers and procedures to consult and engage local citizens and organisations and each has a different membership where some key roles may be overlapping. The extent to which community empowerment can be achieved in any of these fora needs to be tested empirically. Furthermore, a fundamental weakness of the guidance is the lack of definition of the roles of members of local communities: Are they selected or elected onto these fora or panels because of their individual knowledge or as representatives of wider communities, which in turn may be divided by sectional interests? Government rarely acknowledges that local communities may reflect very different viewpoints on local issues reflecting differences of age, housing tenure or ethnic origin, for example, and instead only seeks to ensure that 'persons of from under represented groups' are included.

As well as uncertainties about the roles of community representatives, the bigger issue concerns the power relationships between different stakeholders. The guidance is silent on this issue since the assumption appears to be that all those involved are of equal standing and have equal power and influence in determining strategies. Research tends to suggest that many of these fora are 'invited spaces' where members of local communities are entering a new and unfamiliar bureaucratic environment where the technical dialogue may be unfamiliar and intimidating. Relatively inexperienced community representatives may also be confronting seasoned

politicians and senior officers with excellent professional skills. Barnes *et al.* (2008) have identified some of the disadvantages of citizen-centred governance in that it often lacks transparency and accountability. Those not directly involved are often unaware of, or not widely consulted about, decisions made in their name. Again, there is no further clarification of these issues in the guidance discussed here.

A further aspect of power relations is the circumscribed boundaries of what can and cannot be discussed in these fora. Agendas are largely set by the more powerful stakeholders, such as the local authority, and pressures of time and the need to make decisions mean that the broader issues of deprivation, unemployment and social exclusion arising from a neo-liberal understanding of globalisation are often avoided. Is it reasonable to expect a local community to be empowered when much stronger, external forces creating inequalities and disadvantage are not addressed?

Finally, the use of terms such as to inform, engage and empower imply very different degrees of change in current governance systems. There is no guidance on what the ultimate objective should be. The White Paper sees empowerment as being about 'passing more and more political power to more and more people...' but there is little discussion about how this might be achieved. Overall, the White Paper proposes many minor reforms which will assist many individuals and organisations in exerting greater influence over local agencies. Yet these reforms will operate at many different levels and will help promote all five core objectives identified above.

In the next section the Stockwell Partnership Urban II project is evaluated to see how far evidence of community empowerment can be identified, and what form it takes.

### **The Stockwell Partnership Urban II Project**

Lambeth is one of 33 boroughs in London which extends south of the River Thames from the central area to the outer suburbs. In the 2001 Census it had a recorded population of 266,170 of which 37.5 per cent are made up of a wide variety of ethnic minority groups. It has a very mixed urban form with an equal variety of land uses and public open spaces. The housing also represents the entire spectrum of urban development from historic streets and squares to post-war social housing estates. Thus areas of affluence are frequently intermixed with areas of relative poverty. Overall, Lambeth is the twenty-third most deprived local authority in England.

The government produces a regular Index of Deprivation drawing on Census data from 2001 (CLG, 2004; LB Lambeth, 2004). Each local authority area is divided into a number of super output areas (SOA) for which data on 10 indicators of deprivation are recorded. Lambeth contains 177 SOAs. These demonstrate high levels of deprivation with 50 SOAs in the top 5 per cent in London in relation to crime and disorder, 24 SOAs in relation to deprivation affecting children and 11 SOAs in relation to income levels. 19 SOAs in Lambeth are in London's top 5 per cent for deprivation affecting older people.

Lambeth has a buoyant economy with over 24 per cent working in knowledge-intensive jobs and a third employed in public services. The total number of jobs has increased by 18 per cent between 1998 and 2005 and Lambeth ranks ninth in London in terms of its productivity (Local Futures Group, 2007). However, qualifications and

skills levels are low by London and national standards while educational attainment at secondary school level is below average. Approximately 20 per cent of the population have no educational qualifications. The proportion of the population in employment (61.5%) is low by both UK and European Union standards. Youth employment is the third lowest in London (Local Futures Group, 2007: 5).

The regeneration of the borough is co-ordinated by the Council and a series of overlapping partnership arrangements based around the Local Strategic Partnership, in this case called *Lambeth First*. This is largely advisory in that it has no statutory powers and is made up of representatives of the Council, public service providers and community organisations.

The Urban II project area is made up of two wards (Stockwell and Larkhall) in the north west of the borough, as well as some additional estates in Clapham. In 2001 the population of the area was 29,279. Stockwell is very mixed in terms of the ethnic composition of the population, income levels and housing conditions. It has a higher proportion of households renting from social landlords and a lower proportion of owner-occupation and car ownership. It also has a relatively higher proportion of unemployment and more people without educational qualifications than the borough average. Almost one in ten households is headed by a lone parent. In summary trends in the Stockwell area demonstrate:

- A high proportion of social housing with poor basic amenities;
- A high and increasing proportion of younger people;
- An increasing cultural diversity in the population;
- Declining employment opportunities in traditional employment sectors;
- Higher unemployment amongst the male population;
- High dependency on public transport and access to local amenities;
- An increasing proportion of the population which is economically inactive;
- Increasing dependency on public welfare services;
- High crime rates and fear of crime;
- A shortage of open space and play space for children.

(Stockwell Partnership, 2002: 4)

The Stockwell Partnership was founded in 1996 and in 2000 consultants were appointed to prepare a master plan for the physical and environmental improvement of the area. This plan formed the basis of consultation carried out in order to bid for European Union funding under the Urban II programme. In 2001 the Stockwell Partnership was awarded a total of £12.2m from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and matching UK sources to develop the Urban II strategy to be spent over six years. The five objectives of the project were to:

- build capacity in the target community to increase local participation and improve access to services;
- improve the participation of excluded groups in economic and social activity;

- strengthen and sustain local economic activity in the area through social enterprise;
  - remove barriers to employment through training, advice and confidence building;
  - improve and sustain the quality of the environment in Stockwell.
- (Stockwell Partnership, 2002: 2)

The Urban II programme was managed by a board of 16, seven of whom were also board members of the Stockwell Partnership and local residents. In addition, there were three ward councillors, four tenants and two representing the Environment Agency and Government Office for London.

Thus although the strategy included objectives to improve services, employment opportunities and local amenities, the primary focus was on building the capacity of the local community and increasing the involvement of local people. Only in this way would the regeneration of the area, which had benefited from previous initiatives, such as Single Regeneration Budget funding, be sustained:

The challenge for the Urban II Community Initiative is to make local residents central to the process of urban renewal, harnessing the strong and vibrant foundation in the community sector which will build a more diverse economic base, encourage local enterprise and innovation, and empower local residents in the process of regeneration and development. (Stockwell Partnership, 2002: 3).

Over the past seven years at least 45 projects have been funded, many being delivered by local voluntary and community organisations. By the end of 2007 the Urban II funding was coming to an end and the Stockwell Partnership, together with Lambeth's regeneration officers, began to consider options for the future.

### **Forward Strategy, Employment and Training Project (FSTEP)**

In order to combine both a retrospective evaluation and to develop a strategy for the future, it was decided to seek funding to train unemployed local people as community researchers in order to carry out interviews with a representative sample of local people in order to assess their perceptions of the area and how it has changed over the last seven years. This approach received enthusiastic support from Lambeth regeneration officers, and from *Lambeth First*. A consultant was engaged as Project Director while High Trees Community Development Trust was selected to deliver the training programme.

Funding for the FSTEP project was secured from a number of different partners: a further bid to the ERDF, Job Centre Plus, *Lambeth First* and the London Borough of Lambeth. The intention was to recruit up to 30 people in two cohorts from the Stockwell area, who would undertake a specially designed four week training programme, and on successful completion 18 would be employed at £10 per hour as community researchers. In order to access the funding, potential recruits needed to be resident in the area and meet one of the following criteria:

- A lone parent not in work;
- On incapacity benefit;
- Unemployed for more than six months;
- Unemployed and disabled but able to work;
- On benefits for more than six months

The project generated a great deal of interest in the area and 50 applications were received and 34 enrolled for the training programme. All applicants were required to undertake an assessment of literacy, numeracy and IT skills. The training programme ran for 14 hours per week over four weeks and covered:

- Personal development, action planning, interpersonal skills;
- Training for community consultants;
- Introduction to interview skills, questionnaires and data entry;
- Piloting the questionnaire

All those successfully completing the training course were invited to apply for the community researcher posts and applications were assessed by an independent panel. The ten appointed (later increased to 18) were offered 14 weeks of employment (later increased to 20 weeks of 16 hours per week) doing interviews and running focus groups, as well as spending one day a week on literacy and numeracy courses. The researchers reported on initial findings to a community meeting in May and to Council officers and members in June 2008 and by then about 12 of the researchers had formed a social enterprise in order to seek similar work from other agencies and were successful in securing a number of contracts.

Many of the community researchers now feel empowered by the training programme and in their role in determining the future of the area. Molly Kenlock, one of the 18 selected community researchers, wrote:

Forward STEP is a ground-breaking community-led project enabling benefit claimants in Stockwell to apply their local knowledge and experience of living in the community to consult with other Stockwell residents and assess the effectiveness of the regeneration projects in the Urban II programme.

I have lived in Stockwell all my life. I saw the flyer in the local Job Centre and jumped at the chance to participate. Having attended the informal induction, I was thoroughly impressed with the potential accredited training and employment opportunities it offered. For the first time I felt part of the process of 'history in the making' in Stockwell. (Stockwell Partnership, 2008a)

The community researchers carried out at least 900 interviews with local residents (Stockwell Partnership, 2008b). The sample was broadly representative of the current gender, age and ethnic origin distribution, over 60 per cent of whom had lived in the area for eight years or longer. At least 21 per cent of respondents had heard of the Urban II project and 56 per cent thought the area had changed for the better: 46 per cent thought it was better or much better. 49 per cent considered it more tolerant, while 14 per cent thought it less tolerant. Other questions asked about their perceptions of Stockwell Cross (a transport interchange and local retail centre), and

the quality of a number of local services and facilities in the area. The detailed analysis of the results of the survey has provided valuable evidence for both evaluating the Urban II programme and repositioning Stockwell in relation to the strategic priorities of the borough.

It is possible to draw three main conclusions about the outcome of the FSTEP project. First, there have been immediate benefits to the individuals directly involved as members of the Urban II project board and more especially to those selected as community researchers. Many of these have progressed to further education or new jobs and have acquired confidence and new skills to enable them to acquire new contracts elsewhere. Second, a large number of community projects have been funded in Stockwell which have made it a more cohesive community with many more services and facilities than existed before it began. Finally, and perhaps most important, Stockwell has a new master plan and neighbourhood action plan which are based on extensive community involvement. These will enable the Partnership to continue into the future with a clear set of priorities. In addition, Stockwell is now seen by the borough, *Lambeth First* and other local agencies as an area which has been able to reverse its negative image as an area of deprivation and it is now likely to receive additional funding as one of the borough's 11 neighbourhood fora. The Chair of the Stockwell Partnership has been appointed as the chair of the council-supported Stockwell Forum and she plays a leading role in an informal network of forum chairs. A borough conference was held in March 2009 with key stakeholders to review its achievements and to confirm its strategy for the future. In addition, the Council presented the achievements of the FSTEP project in securing Beacon status for best practice in community engagement and it was also selected for a regeneration award by the Local Government Chronicle.

## **Conclusions**

The broad concept of community involvement is highly contested and has many different meanings and dimensions. As noted its ultimate objectives are rarely made explicit and can range from giving residents an opportunity to comment on policies and plans to a radical transformation of the way services are provided. In addition, different services operate under different legislative or governance processes which promote varying levels of empowerment to those seeking engagement. Gaventa (2004) and others discussed in the second section talk in terms of closed, invited and claimed spaces where very different 'rules of engagement' operate. The White Paper discussed above has advanced all five core objectives in various ways, some of which represent genuine advances towards co-production and community empowerment. However, empowerment is always constrained and contingent on the wider distribution of power within any particular local context.

The Stockwell Partnership, and particularly the FSTEP project, is just one example of many in England which have demonstrated what can be achieved by concerted organisation and supportive local agencies willing to embrace the principles of community involvement. Local community representatives, working closely with sympathetic local agencies, have been able to secure a mix of funding which have resulted in new governance structures. Moreover, many of the changes discussed here have occurred before the provisions of the White Paper have taken effect but the area

will no doubt benefit in the future from them. While much of the funding has come from European and UK government sources, the outcomes demonstrate the strengths of building from the bottom-up, rather than responding to top-down initiatives. The FSTEP project represents an innovative approach which both delivered real benefits to local residents and achieved wider community engagement in assessing outcomes and identifying future directions for the area. This approach drew heavily on Sam Aaronovitch's concept of democratic evaluation (Townley & Wilks-Heeg, 1999).

Empowerment has many dimensions and meanings but each example has to be assessed empirically. In the case of Stockwell, the area has gained from new and innovative approaches to the delivery of services which have created real benefits, such as training and employment, and enhanced social capital. Governance structures have also been changed in that the neighbourhood is now playing a leading role in the wider delivery of Lambeth's regeneration strategy. Much depends on how far the area can secure new and sustainable sources of funding, since levels of deprivation are still relatively high compared with other parts of the borough. Thus any assessment of empowerment must be recorded as modest, partial and relative to wider changes in society which are beyond the reach of a local organisation of this type. Perhaps a further dimension of empowerment relates to perceptions that change is possible at the local level, particularly amongst the residents themselves but also for officers and members of the local authority and other agencies. In terms of Gaventa's (2004) terminology, Stockwell has secured a claimed or created space in which residents have been able to achieve an element of self-determination.

Thus in reviewing both current government guidance and the example of Stockwell we concur with Defilippis *et al.*'s (2006: 674) conclusion:

'...we put forward an understanding of community that is neither dismissive nor celebratory, but instead argues that communities need to be understood as simultaneously products of both their larger, and largely external, contexts, and the practices, organisations and relations that take place within them. Thus, communities, because of their central place in capitalist political economies, can be a vital arena for social change. But they are also arenas that are constrained in their capacities to host such efforts.'

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