



Informing and influencing policy: Launch event report

21 October 2011

NCVO, Regent's Wharf, London

01 Introduction

On 21 October 2011 at NCVO, the **Pathways through Participation** project team launched '**Informing and influencing policy**', a briefing paper summarising the findings and implications of the project for a national policy audience. The event was chaired by Karl Wilding, Head of Research, Policy and Foresight at NCVO and attended by over 35 people from government and voluntary and community organisations.

02 The project

The Pathways through Participation project is a joint research project led by NCVO in partnership with the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and Involve, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. It explores how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives and within the communities they belong to. Through improved understanding of the reasons for, and the contexts of participation, the project also aims to influence policy and practice, and encourage the development of opportunities for participation that are better suited to people's needs and aspirations. It focuses on the following questions:

- How and why does participation begin and continue?

- Can trends and patterns of participation be identified over time?
- What connections, if any, are there between different forms and episodes of participation and what triggers movement between them?

The research methodology placed individuals' own experiences throughout their lives at the centre of the research and looked at participation in three different geographical locations and contexts (suburban Enfield, rural Suffolk and inner city Leeds). The researchers conducted over 100 in-depth interviews, enabling people to tell their story in their own words.

03 The presentation

After a welcome from Karl Wilding, Véronique Jochum (NCVO), Tim Hughes (Involve) and Ellie Brodie (NCVO) summarised the findings from the research. Véronique started with an introduction to the project, including the research questions and approach, followed by Tim who summarised some key overall findings (see the **summary report**); covering:

- why participation starts, continues or stops,
- how people's participation changes over time, and
- some key conclusions.

Ellie then presented the [Informing and Influencing policy briefing paper](#), covering the current policy themes of giving (both time and money) and localism. She drew out key findings and implications from the Pathways through Participation research that relate to these agendas that focused on:

- suggestions for encouraging giving that understand and focus on the personal reasons people have for taking part;
- implications of entrenched barriers to participation;
- the importance of structured entry points to participation (e.g. school programmes) and of the places and spaces that support and foster participation (e.g. community centres).

Slides from the presentation can be found on the [Pathways through Participation](#) website. The presentation was followed by a Q&A and discussion session:

Q: The research raised the issue of some negative aspects of participation. Could you say a bit more about that?

A: It can put pressure on people, cause tensions within groups and more widely in the area. There are also some negative perceptions of labels e.g. 'political', 'volunteering' and 'do gooder'.

Q: I'm interested in participation as framed by 'situated practice'; in different places and spaces. What differences did you find in the three areas?

A: If you'd like to know more about 'situated practice' Andrea Cornwall's work is worth looking at (she coined the term). We did find differences between the areas based on culture, geography, etc. but we need to caveat that these are not local case studies – the research takes the individual as the unit of analysis (see section 2 of the final report for more on differences between the three areas).

Q: Can you give examples of the types of people spoken to at the start as stakeholders and did they point you to volunteers?

A: We did interviews with 15-20 stakeholders in each area, starting with the head of the local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) and those in the local authority working with the voluntary and community sector (VCS). We then snowballed; mostly VCS and local authority people. The Head of local CVS chaired the local stakeholder group (LSG).

Q: I'm interested in building capacity especially for leadership. Did you find anything in the research about which roles people took and moved into leadership and how that happened? What can we do to support and empower people to take on leadership?

A: Clear paths exist in some organisations that people can follow; in others there is no process to support people over time. We need to value the people who are already engaged rather than referring to them as NIMBYs or the 'usual suspects'. Other recommendations include improving the quality of meetings and introducing fixed terms in specific roles so new people can take part and take on leadership roles.

Q: I like the key factors identified in 'starting' participation - especially motivations. My experience is that it works if it feels good and people get something they want and need. We need to think more about reciprocity through initiatives such as time banking and local currencies. These embed participation in everyday life.

A: Participation can be more informal e.g. just exchanging things. There were lots of examples of this in the research e.g. recycling, local food co-ops, food foraging. We didn't find examples in the people we interviewed of alternative currencies. In terms of reciprocity, it doesn't have to be sometime tangible like time credits - getting something out of it can be

simply wanting to feel needed, living in line with their value system etc.

Q: This raises questions about whether these reciprocal motivations displace traditional volunteering.

A: People have multiple motivations; participation can be altruistic and self-interested.

04 Speakers' reflections

The three speakers, Hulya Mustafa (Deputy Director, Big Society Strategy at the Department for Communities and Local Government), Sophie Chapman (Policy Manager Giving and Volunteering, Office for Civil Society) and James Allen (Policy Manager at NCVO) gave their reflections on the research.

Reflections from Hulya Mustafa, DCLG

- Really good piece of research and good for her to put in front of Ministers to explain participation.
- Impossible to generalise about participation; we shouldn't simplify. Need to think about it more widely.
- Quite a good reminder that participation is personal, and giving an external agenda can be off-putting. Government should stay away from personal motivations and triggers.
- Government can show why it works. Can have examples of where it has worked and how people's lives have improved.
- People galvanised often to prevent change - Ministers would say that is a good thing. Community right to challenge and planning issues are important now and this fits that policy well.

- Key concerns around resources and opportunities: CLG has a 'barrier busting' website so they agree this is an issue. Sometimes mediation around local conflict is needed.

Reflections from Sophie Chapman, OCS

- Really useful piece of research and really liked it being qualitative because it explored the subtleties and nuances of people's motivations. Also liked it being 'user-focused'. Government always focuses on levers and formal volunteering.
- Chimed with own experiences of volunteering – the importance of a motivating force that can keep you going, and how formalised processes can be really off-putting
- Also really liked the 'participation equations' about how people start, stop and continue participating.
- What can government do to instil those values from a young age – citizenship?
- In terms of triggers, Government has a role to play in providing information, and thinking about taking the opportunities to where people are e.g. Facebook. Government needs to focus on the opportunities and resources e.g. Social Action Fund and Innovation and Giving Fund with NESTA etc.
- Liked the point in the research about the importance of spaces to associate, including online spaces. In the Giving White Paper there was a lot of focus on digital and there were criticisms of this. Whilst digital is not the only thing, there is huge scope for development, particularly with micro-volunteering.
- There are indeed entrenched barriers to participation, but these are beyond the remit of OCS. Because there is

such buy-in from such a high level in this government, support for participation bodes well. Will take evidence like the Pathways research reports into that ongoing process.

Reflections from James Allen, NCVO

- This is an important and significant piece of work for NCVO. It is really hard to achieve the step change we want in opening up opportunities for participation. There are real and significant barriers.
- Feels like the primary responsibility is with 'us' - volunteers and the VCS.
- Government can facilitate and co-ordinate discussions, frameworks and opportunities, and preferably not make things worse. Messaging is important - participation does not happen because a government or minister says to do it.
- Helpful focus by government on bureaucracy and red tape. But (e.g. CRB) this is not the reason why people don't participate. Need bigger change in culture of public sector.
- Recent riots brought this issue into sharp focus. Could be part of the 'dark side' of participation - people don't always participate in the way we want.
- Organisations are vital for building these relationships and many are suffering huge cuts, which makes supporting participation more difficult.
- Role for local government and central government role in promoting good practice and encouragement. Including not having a tick box response to consultation.
- Need for policy to be as joined up as possible. There are tensions e.g. the Work Programme which aims to

involve voluntary organisations and practice on the ground. If people's experience of participation is bad, they won't come back.

- Citizenship education in schools is also very important and it would be a real shame if it disappeared from the curriculum.
- Some areas of the country will continue to need a lot more resources than others.
- Community assets and right to buy - as an organisation, we view that as extremely positive. Want more power in town halls and local people. *How* that happens will be crucial though.
- Communities of place can be hugely important - their square mile - but that is changing; communities of identity also important and need to be recognised in government.

Questions following the reflections from speakers

- Recognise that we should take as much time taking care of existing people as well as getting new people. Thoughts on what the VCS can do to do that? Answer: CLG: we are looking at how existing groups can be taken onto the next level of involvement. At the same time, Secretary of State very keen on street parties - so very basic level involvement. NCVO: not sure this is a government responsibility. Some very basic things can be done - he has volunteered quite a lot and no-one has ever said thank you.
- There are lots of concerns about the Neighbourhood Planning Framework and how that can reduce the voice of local communities. So shouldn't just be able to have a voice at the plan making

stage. Tenant management work (including by Urban Forum) is a good example. Government can help with them spreading and developing in the housing sector. That will be an issue beyond the public sector and related to contracted out services.

- In 1980s government was saying everything local and public bad, and everything private good. Now everything in Westminster bad and everything in Town Halls good. Where will the checks and balances on bad local behaviour be? An ill-informed pronouncement by a Minister can be very damaging at local level. Who has the power in local decision-making? e.g. some communities have real power and others have none. Answer: CLG: people share nervousness about decentralising power locally because of concerns about equality. But central statements can be inappropriate for all areas. Need to work together to move forward, so people feel comfortable with what is happening. Ministers do genuinely believe in localism and do want to leave local government alone.
- What about cabinet government and taking power away from councillors who feel they have no say at all. Answer: CLG: There will be a debate about how local authorities commission services. Cabinets work well to do that. So backbenchers can represent their local area and don't see role for community organisers.

05 Group discussions

Participants were invited to reflect on the implications of the research in groups. Topics that participants grouped around included:

- Public services

- Localism
- Giving (time and money)
- Accountability and democracy

Key points from the group discussions include:

- Differences between politically engaged and 'political' e.g. parish councillors not on party ticket.
- Participatory democracy - shifting from old school notions. People do participate in many other ways. Government needs to recognise ways people *are* participating.
- So much independent participation - all depends on 'the ask'. What is the role of government? Who does the 'asking' or 'nudging' - if it is government can have a negative impact (see Gerry Stoker's report on 'nudging').
- Message and style is crucial. Get member of community to announce things, maybe on behalf of government.
- Better if government were to resource where people come together - work with that rather than try to get people coming to participate in government agenda. Government can open doors.
- How can really marginalised and isolated people be supported to develop the power they have? (e.g. Roma, gypsies, young black people, older people).
- Central government still has role to support others. Simple interventions could be useful.
- To be involved, citizens need to know what is going on: data, data, data! If anyone takes money to deliver public services, those providers regardless of

who they are have to share/publish data

- Need to speak the truth about objectives and resources, and have an honest conversation
- What is the point of good information if the process people have gone through makes them hate you? Lesson: don't strip-mine information.
- Co-production and citizenship: Department of Health done some good research among civil servants and the public in which you can see impacts.
- It is easier to get volunteering and giving in areas of high social capital - so invest in building social capital in areas with weaker levels.
- Social capital – a chicken and egg situation. Those who participate acquire capital. It's hard to know what to do first.
- Neighbourliness – could this be a way of mobilising people?
- Important to engage children throughout and not just through citizenship education formally.
- VCS organisations look at the very short term but they need to think about people's life stories and being engaged in the long term.
- And allow people to be dormant - they can be brought back in.
- Can't separate people's participation from the rest of their lives - and life is messy.
- Pathways to participation in more 'intensive' forms e.g. participatory budgeting.

- Citizenship survey – has now been cancelled so lost any comparators to show whether the Big Society is working.

06 Further information

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project visit the website

<http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/>