

Assessing a public sector partnership's openness to community influence

Context

echo is a tool for public agencies to use to consider how open they are to community influence, in relation to their potential to respond to that influence. **echo** evolved during research with community networks in Dudley Borough about how they could increase their influence on public agencies and partnerships.

Initial research to inform **echo** was carried out in Dudley Borough (funded by the National Empowerment Partnership), incorporating the views of a variety of key stakeholders, including senior management and frontline staff. Subsequently, Improvement & Efficiency West Midlands delivery consortium (Learning To Deliver - L2D) invited people from across the region to take part in a Rapid Briefing on **echo** from which 8 people were 'recruited' to take part in Action Research to consider if the framework made sense to them and contribute to its further development.

echo is one delivery strand in the Black Country Take Part Pathfinder's work. Through the Pathfinder **echo** training for facilitators has been developed and delivered. Members of the Black Country Take Part Pathfinder in both Dudley and Wolverhampton have been keen to promote **echo** and start using it. To that end Local Strategic Partnerships in both areas have held **echo** half day workshops. As a result of the workshop in Dudley the Children's Trust expressed an interest in **echo**.

Dudley Children's Trust is the key strategic partnership that co-ordinates the delivery of services to children and young people across Dudley Borough. For many years there has been a Participation sub-group meeting as part of the Trust. Officers involved in this sub-group volunteered to pilot **echo** with the group. This would be the first time **echo** had been used in Dudley Borough.

Approaches and methods

echo is a framework for discussion, and so its use with groups of people benefits greatly from an independent facilitator. The session in Dudley was facilitated by **changes** (community development experts who developed **echo**). A number of participants made comments with regards to the need for good facilitation. The facilitator needs to be skilled and confident enough to run the session in an exploratory way and allow the group to take the direction it needs to go in.

The session was a full day session from 10am till 4pm. Participants reflected that this worked better than two half day sessions might have. Some of the detail, discussion and momentum may have been lost or forgotten if the session had ended people had come back together at a later date.

Five members of the Participation Board attended including the chair. There were also two observers who participated in all discussions; this was seen as a useful addition as they asked questions that may have been overlooked by those who were more familiar with the board.

Participants felt that they were using **echo** as a discussion tool to review and evaluate if the group is working to its full potential and engaging in an empowering way and to identify its effectiveness. **echo** was also used to explore the advantages and disadvantages in restructuring and revisiting the groups aims and to set future objectives.

Outcomes

On the whole the majority of participants felt that **echo** was easy to understand and easy to apply however, some of the wording was a bit unwieldy. **echo** provided a framework to direct people's thoughts and reflections and 'allow' people to say things which they may not have otherwise said. It encouraged a wider view on things and allowed everyone involved to have a say.

echo helped participants consider a whole range of risks - obvious ones such as funding and resources, the structure of the board etc. as well as less obvious ones such as different understandings of concepts and terminology, poor communications mechanisms, and lack of strong leadership. The main risk identified was that unless there is strong leadership, the Board will become marginalised and isolated because individuals and agencies won't feel it is effective.

echo gave a foundation and starting point from which to begin to overcome the issues of effectiveness. It identified a number of key issues through discussions, leading to a SWOT analysis which will help inform an action plan. The framework helped people to be honest and frank about the current position and to suggest issues which need to be addressed. Also, by discussing factors identified in the **echo** framework it helped to highlight other fundamental issues which need to be addressed.

"echo is a very positive model and has a way of getting an organisation to have a good look at itself - how it works and doesn't - then to come through with strengths and opportunities."

echo enabled a discussion to take place about the 'usual suspects' versus being inclusive of all groups. This also helped the group discuss being tokenistic in terms of being inclusive in relation to having all agencies represented on the group - you need people to attend the group who will move work programmes forward and take action, not just so that you can say all agencies / departments worked in partnership. It opened up issues around the importance of communication and using different methods of communication for different audiences.

All participants said they would use **echo** in the future. They felt it could be used for a range of things with a range of groups e.g. to think about how open to influence their particular programmes of work are or team is. It could also be used to measure the impact of participation and to analyse consultation.

"Doing this today has really expanded my vision - It makes you think about how things need to be improved."