Assessing community networks' capacity to influence

Context

Voice is a tool which helps community groups and networks to assess and improve the influence they have on agencies and partnerships. The two axes in **Voice** plot existing capacity to influence against how influential the group feels. It can be used to: assess and monitor community influence, prompt discussion and debate within groups and help plan how to become more influential.

Voice was developed over one and a half years with a range of community networks in Dudley Borough. The work was commissioned by Dosti, Dudley's Community Empowerment Network and delivery partner in the Black Country Take Part Pathfinder. Members of community networks were interviewed, took part in workshops and a series of 'action learning' sessions to:
- talk about influence – what it means and how it happens
- contribute to, and comment on, the detail of V**oice**
- test **Voice** out
- make changes
- put **Voice** into practice

Interviews were also carried out with people from statutory sector agencies to get a fuller picture of how influence happens

Three community networks in Dudley Borough agreed to test **Voice** out in the early stages. Since then, V**oice** has been used by different groups around the country, including community anchors, residents associations, neighbourhood management projects and police consultative groups.

Voice is one delivery strand in the Black Country Take Part Pathfinder's work. Through the Pathfinder **Voice** training for facilitators has been delivered. Through prior training for facilitators commissioned in Dudley officers in both Dudley and Wolverhampton were already trained to use **Voice**. Networks in Dudley were already using Voice and Wolverhampton started to use **Voice** in relation to the Pathfinder. Through the Pathfinder use also spread in Dudley.

Approaches and methods

Voice is a framework for discussion, and so it's use with groups of people benefits greatly from an independent facilitator. **Voice** sessions in Wolverhampton and Dudley were facilitated by voluntary sector officers who had been trained to use **Voice.**

Voice sessions with groups and networks are flexible and change to meet need. However most begin with a 2 to 3 hour introductory session during which ideas around influence are explored and the group is introduced to **Voice** and what it can help them to do. They might also undertake a quick and dirt assessment of their capacity to influence. This is then built on in further sessions in which conversation around **Voice** steps and indicators in more

detailed. Evidence is recorded and actions are developed. This can take from one to two more half day sessions. Some networks in Dudley now use **Voice** annually as a monitoring, evaluation and action planning tool. Others are arranging **Voice** sessions every six months or so to ensure they continually develop their capacity to influence.

Outcomes

14 Voice sessions involving 3 Wolverhampton-based networks and 8 Dudley-based networks were delivered in 2009.

Feedback from network in Dudley such as Action for Disabled People and Carers, the Children, Young People and Families network, Shell Corner Partnership and engaging (a network of older people's groups) indicate that **Voice** is a really useful tool. All four networks have committed to working with **Voice** in the future. Shell Corner Partnership and Action for Disabled People and Carers have written **Voice** into their action plans.

Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Forum liked the systematic approach **Voice** offers for analysing where you are, identifying gaps and challenging assumptions. They recognised that **Voice** gets people, to open up and think differently – and to ask questions differently.

"The session was Inspiring, I learnt a lot"

In one instance **Voice** challenged a network member's understanding of leadership. This issue was raised as a result of looking at the indicator *share a common goal with other people.* This did lead to rather heated discussion but hopefully clarified that the "shared" goal is important.

"Voice acknowledges positives"

Shell Corner Partnership found the sessions useful in valuing their capacity as a network which surprised them and made them feel more enthusiastic. All the networks who have worked with **Voice** have found it useful in taking time out to reflect on how they function and what they are trying to achieve. Many have used **Voice** as a springboard to action planning. The tool works well when combined with practical actions and steps.

"Voice is helpful because it helps you to work out where to pitch your energy"

It has been interesting to discover through using **Voice** how many groups have never discussed their common aims and this has been recurrent in the Black Country. There are lots of instances when some people are very clear about vision, mission and/or aims and others just aren't at all – it has shocked some of the individuals we have worked with who have consequently made efforts to amend this. It raises the question – how can there be joint ownership if no-one has the same understanding of what they are owning?

Voice has also helped networks to think about celebrating their success more. Voice helps them to recognise what they have achieved.

"It provides motivation to make change and a difference"