

Community participation

Who benefits?

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This report explores whether policies to involve people in making decisions about their own communities are effective in building strong social networks.

Government has made a significant investment in community participation on the back of evidence suggesting that it builds stronger networks between people who live in the same neighbourhood. However, this report questions the accuracy of this belief and looks at whether community dynamics and relationships can in fact make good governance hard to achieve.

Through detailed case studies in two areas, and a review of other research, the authors investigate the key factors influencing participation in governance. They argue that community participation tends to be dominated by a small group of people and suggest ways in which formal participation arrangements could more effectively engage with informal everyday social networks.

This report addresses issues of interest to people at all levels of governance, from politicians and policy makers to those campaigning on local issues.



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION**

Acknowledgements

This report is based on a research project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Governance and Public Services Committee, and we are very grateful to them for supporting the work. Particular thanks to Maggie Jones, Louise Woodruff and Ellen Mooney.

We would also like to thank the organisations and individuals who agreed to be interviewed as part of our case study research – in some instances, on several occasions. This report would not have been possible without their participation.

The advisory group for the project made an extremely valuable contribution to improving our work at every stage. Thanks to Stephen Woollett (South West Forum), Ed Cox (Manchester Community Pride), Chris Aldhous (Capsbourne Primary School Governing Body), Abigail Page and William Isaacs (Torridge District Council).

We benefited greatly from discussing the project and the ideas that underpinned it with others who shared an interest in the topic of community participation. Our thanks to Liz Richardson, Marilyn Taylor, Kevin Harris, Frances Truscott and Kath Maguire, Gerry Stoker and Francesca Gains, Nick Wates and Jeff Bishop.

Finally, thanks to Demos colleagues past and present for their input at crucial stages, including Tom Bentley, Sam Hinton-Smith, Neal Lawson, John Craig, Eddie Gibb, Catherine Fieschi, Elizabeth Hacker and Chris Peck.

Of course, any errors or omissions are our own.

Executive summary

Key concepts

This report uses three key concepts: governance, participation and social capital. We define them as follows.

- *Governance*: any decision-making body or structure that exists within a local authority area and has a remit to affect public service planning and delivery.
- *Participation*: formal involvement by citizens in these decision-making bodies or structures.
- *Social capital*: resources for collective action, such as contacts, friendships or the ability to ask favours of people, which citizens access through membership in particular types of social networks.

Introduction

Politicians are interested in finding new ways to involve people in making decisions about the way public services in their area are run. In the UK and in many other parts of the world, community participation in governance has moved from the margins towards the mainstream.

In Britain, new structures seek to promote community participation in the governance of services like health (e.g. Foundation Hospital boards), economic regeneration (e.g. New Deal for Communities boards) and housing (e.g. tenant management organisations).

Three reasons are put forward for doing this.

- 1 It leads to better and more responsive services.
- 2 It tackles people's disengagement from politics and the democratic process.
- 3 It builds social capital.

This study, by a team of researchers from Demos, tested out the last of these claims. Through a review of the academic evidence and original research in two deprived neighbourhoods, the question it sought to address was ‘Do policies to promote community participation in governance build social capital?’

Background

Policy makers are interested in social capital because of a growing body of evidence that has emerged since the early 1990s, which says that certain kinds of social networks enable citizens and communities to access resources they can use to work together to tackle problems for themselves. Examples might include using your contacts to help a friend find a job, or co-operating with your neighbours to address nuisance behaviour on an estate. These resources are seen as particularly valuable for disadvantaged communities, who do not possess the formal economic power to buy their way out of problems (for example, by moving house or purchasing additional services) in the way that more well-off communities do. Social capital is attractive to policy makers because it holds out the possibility of improving social outcomes more effectively, through means that are more legitimate and cheaper than traditional public service delivery alone.

Policies to promote community participation in governance are concerned with a particular kind of social capital. The theory is that, by being involved in the governance of services, participants build relationships with public institutions or officials, which give their community access to valuable external resources like money, support or political leverage. These relationships are sometimes described as ‘linking’ social capital.

Since its election in 1997, the Labour Government has set particular store by community participation in its public service reforms, resulting in a plethora of new structures and initiatives. Of course, community participation in governance did not begin in 1997. Nevertheless, the current Government is the first to claim explicitly that community participation in governance builds social capital. The breadth, coverage and sheer number of community participation arrangements right across the public services represent a considerable investment, not just of the Government’s political capital, but also of communities’ scarce resources, time, energy and hope. It is therefore right to assess whether these structures are proving to be a good use of those resources by living up to the promises made on their behalf.

What the literature says

Many academic studies have confirmed that the way governance works helps to create social capital. Involving people in governance is one way to do this, because it helps to build 'linking' social capital.

However, social capital is a bit like legal tender – it is valuable to some people at some times and places, and not at all valuable in others. For linking social capital to be valuable, it really needs to be combined with other kinds of social capital in the right way.

That's because there is no reason to suppose that linking social capital will be 'distributed evenly or brokered fairly'. It is more likely to be embodied in key relationships between particular individuals or organisations – for example, between the chair of a residents' association and the housing professionals in the local authority.

Access to linking social capital is shaped by a range of background factors that affect levels of participation, including socio-economic status, geographical circumstances, ethnicity, age and gender. Fewer women, for instance, tend to be involved in formal governance roles than men.

The research also shows that governance arrangements are not neutral. The way that they are designed can intensify or mitigate the impact of these factors. A very simple example is that the timing and location of meetings can affect whether those with childcare responsibilities can participate.

What our research says

Our research found that the key factor influencing levels of participation in governance was the existing pattern of linking social capital – those already well connected tend to get better connected. We found that relatively few people were involved in governance, and the few people involved in one setting tended to be the same few people in another setting – the school governor also sat on the patients' panel as well as being a board member of the regeneration partnership.

Our research also suggests that the way governance arrangements work makes this problem worse. Its origins lay at the level of the system as a whole, not in the bad practices of particular institutions. In particular, a number of forces create 'barriers to

entry' for those who are not involved in governance, and increase the likelihood that those already involved will become more so. Potential participants are often put off from participating in governance by the experience, or the perception, of being excluded by the way that community participation arrangements work. We call these forces 'network dynamics', because they arise from the way people in and around community participation structures relate to each other.

- 1 *Preferential attachment*: the more governance structures you are involved in, the more attractive a potential participant you become to others because of the information or influence you bring with you.
- 2 *The rich get richer*: having some linking social capital makes it easier for you to create more. You acquire knowledge and skills about how the system works, earn a reputation for being a 'good' participant and make contacts with people who are involved in other governance activities.
- 3 *Closure*: the value of linking social capital often comes from preventing others from accessing it. It suits public sector partners to work with some community representatives rather than others, and it suits those representatives to be the community voices that public sector partners privilege in decision making.
- 4 *Self-exclusion*: potential participants may choose to exclude themselves from governance because:
 - they decide it is not for them
 - they think their interests may be better served by shifting the 'game' into other, less formal arenas where the rules work more in their favour
 - being denied the chance to participate becomes a rallying point around which alternative forms of collective action develop.
- 5 *Community dependency*: by routinely taking on a disproportionate burden of governance activities, community participants create a vicious circle, which both increases the burden and dampens the enthusiasm of others for alleviating it. Non-participants expect not to participate because they assume others already will be taking part; participants expect to participate because they assume that, if they do not, others will not be willing to step in.
- 6 *Institutional dependency*: institutions get in the habit of recruiting existing participants who are a known quantity and can be trusted to understand and work within the constraints of a demanding culture of delivery, rather than invest scarce time and resources in attracting new blood who will take time to settle in and may not ever develop the right kind of working relationship.

The bottom line

The three most important assumptions underpinning policy are that:

- 1 if you create structures for community participation, you create social capital from which the community will benefit
- 2 the community will benefit because enough people will want to participate in these structures
- 3 they will want to participate because these structures will be embedded in the everyday spaces of community life and the informal social networks through which people live their lives.

Our findings suggest that these assumptions do not stack up. Community participation tends to be dominated by a small group of insiders who are disproportionately involved in a large number of governance activities.

What social capital is created by opening up governance to community involvement tends to be concentrated in the hands of this small group. The already well connected get better connected. There is no guarantee that the wider community feels the benefit of this social capital, because formal governance structures are often *not* embedded in the informal everyday spaces of community life – mothers and toddlers' groups, book clubs, faith groups – in a way that would make them easy for the average citizen to access or navigate. These institutions, so good at mobilising people to get involved in civic activities, are often not set up or supported to convey that involvement into more formal arenas.

If we want to ensure that there are stronger links between community participation in governance and social capital, then pushing harder on the existing approach is likely to be counter-productive. Simply encouraging more people to participate seems a somewhat forlorn hope given the range of forces helping to perpetuate the current division between insiders and outsiders, while creating even more structures is likely just to increase the burden on a few already over-stretched community activists.

The alternative is to try to find the points where stronger and more effective connections can be made between formal participation by a small group of insiders and the more informal, everyday social networks in which a much bigger group of citizens spend a significant part of their lives. Rather than expect everyone to participate equally in formal governance, we should try to make more people's everyday civic engagement count by designing the formal structures of governance

in a way that taps into the informal spaces of community life that they routinely inhabit. The places with which people are already familiar – the school gate, their place of worship, or their local newsagent or post office – hold the key to engaging them in governance activity. These places and the organisations that occupy them act as the everyday bridge between ordinary people and more formal governance activities.

What does this mean: The 1% Solution

We take the second view. Low levels of participation in formal structures are not going to be overcome by trying harder. Instead, we need to think again about community participation and what we're hoping it will achieve.

We start with three premises.

- 1 More direct participation by citizens in decision making is the *only* credible basis on which democratic renewal will take place. But all citizens do not need to be equally involved for this participation to be legitimate.
- 2 Elites of various kinds have always been vitally important in creating social change.
- 3 Elites are only undemocratic if they are disconnected from processes by which they can be influenced and held to account by the communities they purport to serve.

We need to make sure that the right connections are made in the right places between formal participation by elites in the institutions of governance and more informal participation by people in the institutions of everyday civic life – book clubs, gyms, SureStart groups, faith groups and so on.

Building from these premises, we identify five principles on which a different approach to community participation could be developed.

- 1 It's not getting everyone to participate in governance that matters. It's getting governance to reflect the contribution of a much wider range of types of participation.

- 2 Rather than try to change people's participation so it fits existing structures, we should change the structures so they fit people's participation. Instead of trying to corral the young people who attend a youth club or the mums in a playgroup into getting involved in governance, we should ask how governance can get involved with them. As one of our interviewees put it:

People already congregate in school, church, at the bus stop ... We need to work harder to find them – don't assume if they don't turn up to meetings they're not interested.

- 3 We need to pay much closer attention to the incentives for participation, and these are fundamentally about the devolution of power. Participants in governance will find it much easier to mobilise others and plug into their networks if the formal structures they inhabit are places where real power lies.
- 4 The goal of policy should not be to invent ever more structures of participation, even though this is much easier to do, but to invest in changing cultures of participation in the long term.
- 5 If these principles were adopted, we could begin to realise a system that, not only mobilised 1 per cent of citizens to participate actively in governance, but also was a more legitimate, effective and promising basis on which to build for the future than the one we have now. From this, our approach derives its name: *The 1% Solution*.

In other words, the message from our research is that, no matter how hard people try, existing forms of community participation in governance will only ever mobilise a small group of people. Rather than fight against this reality, the solution lies in maximising the value from the existing small group, while also looking at longer-term approaches to governance that would create a broader bedrock of support for governance activity.

From this, two clear objectives for policy and practice can be discerned: first, to mobilise 1 per cent participation; second, to embed this participation in the wider rhythms and routines of community life. What kinds of interventions might help to realise these objectives?

The seven ideas that follow are not recommendations as such; rather they are intended as illustrations of what The 1% Solution might mean in practice.

- 1 *Backing the best 1 per cent:* if 1 per cent formal participation is the best we can aim for, we can still do much more to ensure that it is the best 1 per cent, and that they are liberated as far as possible to actually get things done for their community. We should recruit a different kind of community elite by *backing more social entrepreneurs to act as the vehicles for local change*. One way to do this would be to replace some community participation structures with ‘community-interest companies’, run by a social entrepreneur and with local people given representative rights as ‘shareholders’ rather than as voters or residents.
- 2 *Disconnecting and reconnecting the 1 per cent:* while it may not be possible to counteract the effects of the network dynamics we have identified, there are almost certainly opportunities to ‘disconnect’ and ‘reconnect’ community elites and their stakeholders in new ways. More participants for governance roles should be *recruited by lottery*, with financial support to encourage those selected to take up their position. This would bring into participation people who had different social connections from the usual suspects.
- 3 *Trusting participation intelligently:* we need to design approaches that gradually develop trust in the community participation process as the cultures around new governance structures strengthen and become more resilient. The more power a governance structure is perceived to wield, the more attractive it is to potential participants. Rather than being given hundreds of thousands or even millions of pounds in single chunks, New Deal for Communities (NDC) partnerships and other community participation structures should be given *geometric funding streams* – small pots of money that then double at regular intervals (say every six months). This would allow partnerships to grow in confidence and effectiveness, and to tolerate a more experimental approach to spending money.
- 4 *Empower the everyday intermediaries:* embedding pluralism at the local level, by finding new and creative ways to bind the 1 per cent into effective forms of accountability through their interactions with the local community, must be a priority if this approach is to sustain its legitimacy in the long term. Power must be distributed so that citizens are not lumbered with a 1 per cent they do not trust and cannot hold to account. This implies a key role for local community and voluntary groups – tenants’ organisations, local parent–teacher associations, sports clubs, faith organisations, mother and toddler groups, and community projects. One democratic innovation that might help would be the establishment of *a local right of initiative*. This would allow citizens to set the political agenda directly by demanding a local body like a local authority or police force to take action on a particular issue of concern. Having a right of initiative ensures that citizens can put something on an institution’s agenda even if their community

representatives are reluctant to do so. Community organisations would be well placed to mobilise the collection of the signatures required to trigger the right of initiative, creating a clear incentive for community representatives to engage them before that became necessary.

- 5 *Long-term capacity building for participation:* a key part of *The 1% Solution* is to ask which interventions, in the long term, stand the best chance of promoting participation among ever greater numbers of people. We should create a local *Community Governance Service* to recruit, train and support participants. Responsibility for delivering this service should be devolved to local community organisations. The long-term goal of such a service should be both to grow and to diversify the pool of people involved in governance, and it should work with existing participants to make this happen by creating succession plans and supporting their networking in the community at large.
- 6 *Making participation a national priority:* if the neighbourhoods agenda truly is a national priority, then Government should start to take seriously a view of community participation as a universal entitlement, and not one that is concerned simply with the poorest neighbourhoods. To symbolise a new universal commitment, we propose that Government introduce, as part of its neighbourhoods 'offer' in the forthcoming Local Government White Paper, a Neighbourhood Participation Entitlement – a package of funding and capacity-building support, provided by a Community Governance Service and available to every neighbourhood that wants it.
- 7 *Local councillors' role should be refashioned around a formal responsibility for community engagement:* we are going to need representative roles that are capable of connecting with and helping to join up those much more distributed patterns of power at the very local level. Though councillors have lost their monopoly on democratic legitimacy, a mandate acquired through the ballot box does make them first among equals in this task. The challenge for councillors is to recognise the responsibility which that implies, to acknowledge the validity of other representatives' claims and to embrace a new, clearer role as the champion of community engagement in their area.

Conclusion

The fact that relatively few people choose to participate in formal governance does not mean we should discard the ambition of community participation, but rather that

we should recast it. As the radical American community organiser Saul Alinsky once wrote, 'the major negative in the situation has to be converted into the leading positive'.¹

Conceptual note

Many of the terms and concepts used in this report could fill an entire book in themselves; many of them, indeed, have done so many times over. For the sake of clarity, rather than comprehensiveness, we define some of the key ideas as follows.

- *Governance*: our definition of governance was supplied by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for this project:

... any body or structure which exists within a local authority area and has a remit to affect public service planning and/or delivery. This definition therefore excludes charitable and private sector organisations but includes partnership bodies in which such organisations may participate.

- *Participation*: for our purposes, participation strictly refers to involvement in governance as we have defined it above, and not the much more diffuse range of informal civic and associational activities attached to the label of active citizenship (e.g. volunteering).¹
- *Social capital*: the most elusive of all, social capital defies easy definition. It is generally taken to refer to the norms and networks that facilitate collective action. But, as Michael Woolcock explains, 'social capital makes most sense when it is understood as a relational (i.e. sociological), rather than psychological (individual) or political (institutional/national) variable'.² This relational aspect of social capital is the one we emphasise in this report. We also follow Woolcock in adopting the distinction, not just between *bonding* and *bridging* types of social capital (popularly referred to as 'strong vs. weak ties'³), but also between a third type – the *linking* social capital connecting communities to power, resources, ideas and information within formal institutions.⁴

Research process

The research for this report was conducted by the research team between July 2004 and May 2005. Researchers drew on a range of data in completing the project. First, a review of relevant literature was carried out, in order to examine the academic perspective on these issues, as well as to establish a clear picture of the national and local policy contexts.

Researchers then carried out extended case study visits to two areas within the UK, which were identified through examining demographic data and the Indices of Deprivation. We chose two areas that were broadly comparable in terms of basic demographic data and also experienced similar types and levels of social deprivation.

Our case study visits incorporated a mixture of individual qualitative research interviews and informal focus group research. Research participants were identified through a process of selecting key individuals playing particular roles within their communities, such as tenants and residents' associations, and researchers then pursued the leads suggested by the people within those organisations about other people we should talk with.

The whole process was overseen by the steering group of the project, which comprised a range of individuals with experience of local governance who met several times during the course of the project, as well as providing ad hoc guidance throughout the research and writing process.

1 Putting the public back into public policy

It is my belief, after a century in which, to tackle social injustice, the state has had to take power to ensure social progress, that to tackle the social injustices that still remain the state will have to give power away.

(Gordon Brown MP)¹

The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you.

(Sheri Arnstein)²

On 31 January 2005, two unusual visitors called at the home of Brenda Gixti, a community worker who has lived in the Benchill area of Wythenshawe, south of Manchester, for the last 35 years. She invited them in for a cup of tea and showed them the plans for the £2.5 million redevelopment of the nearby community centre where she worked as the co-ordinator. The plans, one of her guests told her, were ‘a great example of people power’.

Her guest was due to give a speech later that day at a new £25 million leisure and cultural complex in Wythenshawe town centre, run by a local community trust of which Brenda is also a board member. In the speech, he elaborated on what he had earlier told Brenda. ‘We’ve seen the success of a quiet revolution in places like Manchester’, he said, ‘which shows the success of transferring power to the people’. Taking power and responsibility from Whitehall and local public bodies, and placing more decisions directly in the hands of community-spirited active citizens, had the potential to unleash a wave of grass-roots energy to help rejuvenate neighbourhoods, revitalise public services and re-engage citizens with politics.

This report is about the particular kind of ‘people power’ that Brenda’s guests – Prime Minister Tony Blair and Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott – saw on their visit to Wythenshawe that day: communities participating in the governance of their local services. But it is also about what they didn’t see: the hidden stories about community participation that policy makers tend not, or choose not, to hear. It explores the first-hand experiences of those who have got involved in governance, as well as the experiences of those who have not, to find out who really benefits from them and why. And it uses these insights to offer a practical vision for making community participation work more effectively.

Into the mainstream

The mantra of 'delivery' has dominated the debate about public services for more than a decade in the UK. Now it seems to have run its course and a new reform agenda is emerging in its place, focused on giving local people more say over how public services in their area are run. From housing and regeneration initiatives to schools, hospitals and policing, community participation in local governance has moved from the margins of policy to the mainstream.

Not content to see the Government claim a monopoly on the issue, other political parties have affirmed their own commitment to making services more accountable and responsive to communities. What is remarkable is not what separates the perspectives of different parties and institutions but what they share in common (see Box 1). So pervasive has this ethos become in recent years, it has even acquired its own epithet – the 'new localism' – with politicians, think tanks and pamphleteers endeavouring to provide the definitive version of the story.

Box 1 Singing from the same hymn sheet

Conservatives

Where possible, we advocate devolving power directly to the citizen ...
Where devolution to the individual is impractical, we propose decentralisation to towns and counties, and a proper link between taxation, representation and expenditure at local level.³

Liberal Democrats

Our priority is to make local services, like health and education, work better for people. That means that local communities need to have more influence and say over the issues affecting them.⁴

Labour

Local communities are just better at dealing with their own problems. They have the networks, the knowledge, the sense of what is actually possible, and the ability to make solutions stick.⁵

But there are good reasons to think that this is more than a temporary fad or a half-hearted attempt to find a new political narrative as voters' patience with the pace of change in public services wears thin. All over the world, countries seem to be converging on community participation in governance as a solution to the challenges of twenty-first century public administration. Innovative ideas have emerged from every corner of the globe about how to involve local people in the decisions that affect their lives, from participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to deliberative planning across villages in Kerala, India, to community councils in Lille, France, to the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia, Canada.

The question is: why? What are we hoping community participation will achieve? Three reasons are put forward.

- 1 It leads to *better and more responsive public services*: e.g. 'Transferring ownership and accountability from Whitehall to the local community means that NHS foundation trusts are able to tailor their services to best meet the needs of the local population.'⁶
- 2 It tackles people's *disengagement from politics and the democratic process*: e.g. 'By enabling communities to help shape decisions on policies and services, we will *support civil renewal* and strengthen the legitimacy of the institutions of government.'⁷
- 3 It *builds social capital*: e.g. 'Community participation aims to increase the confidence and capacity of individuals and small groups to get involved in activities that improve their quality of life and build mutually supportive relationships that enhance neighbourliness and hold communities together.'⁸

Our concern in this report is with the last of these claims. The question we seek to address is:

Do policies to promote community participation in governance build social capital?

The report is based on a review of the latest academic thinking and our own in-depth fieldwork in two of Britain's most deprived housing estates: in Ely in western Cardiff; and in the Benchill area of Wythenshawe, south of Manchester.

Why it matters

Policy makers are interested in social capital because of a growing body of evidence that has emerged since the early 1990s, which says that certain kinds of social networks enable citizens and communities to access certain resources they can use to work together to tackle problems for themselves. Examples might include using your contacts to help a friend find a job, or co-operating with your neighbours to address nuisance behaviour on an estate. These resources are seen as particularly valuable for disadvantaged communities, which do not possess the formal economic power to buy their way out of problems (for example, by moving house or purchasing additional services) in the way that better-off communities do. Social capital is attractive to policy makers because it holds out the possibility of improving social outcomes more effectively, through means that are more legitimate and cheaper than traditional public service delivery alone.⁹

Policies to promote community participation in governance are concerned with a particular kind of social capital. The theory is that, by being involved in the governance of services, participants build relationships with public institutions or officials, which give their community access to valuable external resources like money, support or political leverage. These relationships are sometimes described as 'linking' social capital.

Since its election in 1997, the Labour Government has set particular store by community participation in its public service reforms, resulting in a plethora of new structures and initiatives (see Table 1). As the Prime Minister Tony Blair put it:

Along with choice we must also provide the public with a louder and clearer voice. This means direct user engagement whether in school governing bodies, Foundation Trust Boards, tenants' forums. In the bodies we have set up since 1997 ... we have built in user engagement from the start.¹⁰

Of course, community participation in governance did not begin in 1997. Lay magistrates go back to the reign of Edward III in the fourteenth century. The UK's 350,000 school parent governors fulfil a role articulated in the 1870 Education Act. Nor have opportunities to participate in governance been extended only by Labour Governments. Because it suspected the motives of local authorities, the previous Conservative Government arguably put greater emphasis on direct community participation in some of its urban regeneration initiatives (like the Single Regeneration Budget)¹¹ than Labour Governments had in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the current Government is the first to claim explicitly that community participation in governance builds social capital.

Table 1 Opportunities for community participation in governance since the Labour Government was elected in 1997

Sector	Opportunities for community participation in governance
Education	SureStart; school governing bodies; Parent Governor Representatives on education scrutiny committees
Health	Foundation Hospitals; Primary Care Trusts; Public and Patient Involvement Forums
Housing	Arm's Length Management Organisations; Tenant Management Organisations; Home Zone Challenge
Regeneration	Local Strategic Partnerships; Community Empowerment Networks, Community Chest, Community Learning Chest (latterly merged); New Deal for Communities Boards; SRB Regeneration Boards
Local government	Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders; Civic Pioneers; Local Area Agreements
Community safety	Youth Offender Panels; Police Consultative Panels
Planning	Statements of Community Involvement; Parish Plans; Village Design Plans; Town Design Plans

The problem with community participation, as Sheri Arnstein mischievously implies in the quotation with which this chapter began, is that it is hard to be against it, but even harder to be explicit about what you actually mean by it. Without proper scrutiny of the assumptions on which policies to promote participation are based, we risk creating arrangements for involving communities in governance that cannot hope to fulfil the purposes set out for them – including the creation of social capital. The breadth, coverage and sheer number of community participation arrangements right across the public services represent a considerable investment, not just of the Government’s political capital, but also of communities’ scarce resources, time, energy and hope. It is therefore right to assess whether these structures are proving to be a good use of those resources by living up to the promises made on their behalf.

The argument in summary

The three most important assumptions underpinning policy are that:

- 1 if you create structures for community participation, you create social capital from which the community will benefit
- 2 the community will benefit because enough people will want to participate in these structures

- 3 they will want to participate because these structures will be embedded in the everyday spaces of community life and the informal social networks through which people live their lives.

Our argument in the chapters that follow is that these assumptions do not stack up.

Community participation tends to be dominated by a small group of insiders who are disproportionately involved in a large number of governance activities – the familiar ‘usual suspects’ problem. What’s more, the few people involved in one setting tend to be the same few people in another setting – the school governor also sits on the patients’ panel as well as being a board member of the regeneration partnership.

The origins of this problem lie in the way that the system of community participation works at the local level, not in the bad practices of particular institutions. In particular, a number of forces create ‘barriers to entry’ for those who are not involved in governance, and increase the likelihood that those already involved will become more so. Potential participants are often put off from participating in governance by the experience, or the perception, of being excluded by the way that community participation arrangements work.

As a result, what social capital is created by opening up governance to community involvement tends to be concentrated in the hands of this small group. The already well connected get better connected. There is no guarantee that the wider community feels the benefit of this social capital, because formal governance structures are often *not* embedded in the informal everyday spaces of community life – mothers and toddlers’ groups, book clubs, faith groups – in a way that would make them easy for the average citizen to access or navigate. These institutions, so good at mobilising people to get involved in civic activities, are often not set up or supported to convey that involvement into more formal arenas.

If we want to ensure that there are stronger links between community participation in governance and social capital, then pushing harder on the existing approach is likely to be counter-productive. Simply encouraging more people to participate seems a somewhat forlorn hope given the range of forces helping to perpetuate the current division between insiders and outsiders, while creating even more structures is likely just to increase the burden on a few already overstretched community activists.

An alternative, and, we argue, more promising avenue, is to try to find the points where stronger and more effective connections can be made between formal participation by a small group of insiders and the more informal, everyday social networks in which a much bigger group of citizens spend a significant part of their

lives. Rather than expect everyone to participate equally in formal governance, we should try to make more people's everyday civic engagement count, by designing the formal structures of governance in a way that taps into the informal spaces of community life that they routinely inhabit. By passing information about governance through non-traditional means (such as the back of gas bills), as well as targeting people at the stages in their life when they have the most time to give to governance (such as after retirement), governance is made accountable to a much wider cross-section of people within the community.

In short, our hypothesis is that the heavy emphasis placed on creating new structures of community participation has come at the expense of a proper understanding of how their operation is conditioned by the informal cultures that surround them.

If we want to create social capital through community participation, it is not enough just to create new structures of engagement regardless of whether anyone will actually bother to use them. We need to pay attention to the relationship between community participation in the formal structures of local governance, and the broader array of community ties and perceptions that affect the benefits they actually deliver. And, once we understand this relationship, we can think about how to influence it.

Structure of the report

The next chapter delves into the academic literature to uncover the insights it has to offer into the links between participation in governance and benefits in the form of social capital for communities. Chapter 3 weaves together the stories of governance insiders and outsiders in Ely and Benchill. Chapter 4 develops an analysis of the 'network dynamics' that produce the patterns we observe in our case studies. Chapter 5 concludes by looking at the implications of this analysis for policy and practice, identifying the points of greatest leverage on the problem and making a number of recommendations for remedying it.