

## COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT



Supporting individuals and organisations to work in ways which are empowering and achieve empowerment

### **An introduction to community empowerment**

There are many assumptions connected with the term and practice of 'community empowerment' which make both concept and application problematic, confusing and potentially meaningless. These include assumptions that:

- There is an existing and collective understanding of what 'empowerment' means
- Individual empowerment is the same as community empowerment
- 'Empowerment' is a task rather than an integral part of how we work (in empowering ways) and what happens as a result (empowerment)
- If communities cooperate with public agencies, then public sector demands and targets will be met
- Communities are homogeneous and that anything to do with 'community' is inherently good
- Community empowerment is a threat to representative democracy

Research indicates that a lack of empowering approaches in the past may have left a legacy of people, and communities, feeling: disillusioned, cynical, 'apathetic', disinterested, angry, confrontational and over-consulted.

Staff working in both public and voluntary sectors often face this reality - and, whilst focusing on priorities around community empowerment, it can be helpful to remember how easy it is for people to feel disempowered and how engagement can take place in ways which are 'more empowering' than others

### **Our perspective on community empowerment**

Four key points:

1. Community empowerment should be seen as involving far more than just shaping and choosing services and 'empowered' individuals do not necessarily mean that we have empowered communities
2. Community empowerment should be happening in a collective, rather than only personal, setting
3. Community empowerment should be seen as an integral part of working, as a *process* which focuses on how we work in empowering ways; and as an *outcome* - for both communities and agencies; a change which is enduring, which is intended to improve the quality of life for communities and their environments
4. Despite the terminology, 'community empowerment' is not just about communities, it is also about organisational structures and processes being 'empowering'

### **Community empowerment dimensions**

Community empowerment is about working in ways which empower people - ways which mean that people feel '**confident**', that they - and the groups they are involved in - are **inclusive** and **organised**, that networks are formed, are **cooperative** and support each other and - ultimately - they are **influential**. These are the 5 **Community Empowerment Dimensions** which inform all our work at **changes**.

By '**confident**', we mean, working in a way which increases peoples skills, knowledge and confidence - and instils a belief that they can make a difference  
By '**inclusive**', we mean working in a way which recognises that discrimination exists, promotes equality of opportunity and good relations between groups and challenges inequality and exclusion

By '**organised**', we mean working in a way which brings people together around common issues and concerns in organisations and groups that are open, democratic and accountable

By '**cooperative**', we mean working a way which builds positive relationships across groups, identifies common messages, develops and maintains links to national bodies and promotes partnership working

By '**influential**', we mean working in a way which encourages and equips communities to take part and influence decisions, services and activities

Community empowerment is the product of putting the values of community development into action.