

north west
together **wecan**

an arena for
empowerment

North West Together We Can
annual report 2007/08

North West Together We Can

Our role is to ensure that good practice, which enables communities to be active in influencing and shaping their local area, is shared and learned from across the North West.

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Foreword

When I was invited to be part of the North West Together We Can partnership, I was unsure about its purpose. Looking back over the last year and the number of projects, learning seminars, research and activities that have taken place, I am now very clear about what it can achieve.

Our role is to ensure that good practice, which enables communities to be active in influencing and shaping their local area, is shared and learned from across the North West.

The delivery of this work is due not just to the many partners we work with, but also to Ed Cox, from whom I took over as Chair in November 2007. In addition, a big thank you to Eve Davidson, who was appointed as Programme Manager in late 2007 and hit the ground running, organising and putting into effect an ongoing work programme in a very short space of time.

To continue to achieve this, and expand this work, we will in the coming year work closely with Neighbourhoods NW and the North West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership.

We will also review our partnership structure to enable us to work more effectively and expand the range of partners we work with to promote community empowerment.

Margaret McLeod

Voluntary Sector North West
Chair of North West Together We Can

Who we are

North West Together We Can exists to help create an arena for empowerment.

Empowerment means citizens having more say about the decisions that affect them and the services they use – whether they're communities of place, such as a housing estate, village or neighbourhood, or communities of interest, such as people with disabilities.

For several years empowerment has been an important theme in government and public services. In 2005 the government launched 'Together We Can', a strategy to offer local people more control within their communities. In 2007 this was followed by an action plan for community empowerment, closely linked to legislation in the form of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act. A government white paper on empowerment is due in summer 2008.

But strategies on their own aren't enough. They need to be accompanied by opportunities to discuss and learn, to share what works well and what doesn't. That's where North West Together We Can plays its part.

Our role is to help develop collaborative learning, practice and research about community empowerment and engagement across the North West. We co-ordinate activities among a range of partner organisations, share learning, develop knowledge, and explore the best ways to fill gaps.

The North West Together We Can network was launched in 2006, building on a network of local authorities known as 'civic pioneers', which had been recognised for their proactive approach to community involvement. It is a partnership of third sector organisations, public sector agencies, local authorities and academic institutions.

We support and work alongside Neighbourhoods NW, the regional gateway for access to training, information and support for people who are involved in improving local neighbourhoods.

Our objectives are to:

- increase the proportion of local residents who feel they can influence decisions affecting the areas where they live
- increase the proportion of public services delivered by voluntary and community organisations
- facilitate shared learning, leading to changes in policy and practice

We want the North West to be seen as a region that is innovative and influential in empowering communities and developing services that are more responsive to citizens' needs. We want to expand the North West Together We Can network so more can be achieved.

Our role: Inspiration

North West Together We Can doesn't just highlight inspiring projects. It also provides opportunities for people to share inspiration.

The active citizens

A key element of our work is to inspire local authorities, service providers and voluntary and community organisations to help people make the most of their choices in life. The North West Citizenship and Take Part Network aims to increase people's involvement in society, looking at the challenges some of our most disadvantaged citizens face.

The network has organised courses and events, including a conference that brought deafblind people together with service providers. This took the first steps towards creating a network where deafblind people could support each other and service providers could start to understand their needs.

Deafblind people have very individual and complex requirements and so they are often lonely, isolated and ignored. Sometimes they can't even go shopping on their own. Family, friends and volunteers provide most of their support. A lack of specialist training combined with poorly targeted resources means that public services often fail to meet deafblind people's needs. These difficulties frequently lead to depression and anxiety.

The event gave deafblind people a space to articulate their views and highlight the need for greater awareness of the issues they face. Young deafblind people were able to point out their potential as employees, which is often overlooked. A network is being developed and the issues raised are being brought to the attention of policymakers and service providers.

Sharing inspiration

One event highlighted the Green Villages programme in Cheshire, which showcased renewable energy generation at Tiverton Village Hall and the work of local residents in Ashton Hayes, which hopes to become Britain's first carbon neutral village.

The foundations are now in place for a network of community groups across Cheshire that can share information and experience of environmental projects.

In November 2007 there was a high turnout for the Inspiring Communities conference, run in partnership with Cumbria Community Development Network. This sought to rekindle the vision of community activists and workers and encourage them to inspire others.

Judging by the responses of some of the participants, it achieved that – one attendee said that 'seeing so many people coming together who are working in the same field and share common dreams leaves it hard for one not to be inspired'.

Empowerment in action:

Wilson Carlile House

One example of how inspiration can turn into action is the 'school of participation' for residents of Wilson Carlile House, a hostel for homeless men in Longsight, Manchester. The hostel had recently had a change of management and the school focused on the way this was affecting residents and staff.

Around 38 men took part in the school, which included a total of 14 two-hour sessions, and one third managed to attend regularly despite their difficulties. They explored issues such as confidence building, listening skills and working as a team, looking at their personal feelings, relationships as a group and at wider society.

'One of the most inspiring things was that over the course of the programme we managed to meet every week for two hours,' says Anne Stewart, link worker at Community Pride, the organisation that facilitated the school. 'These are men who have been on the streets and have alcohol and drug issues and mental health issues. We had so much support and enthusiasm.

'Their ability at the end to listen to each other and engage in productive debate and conversation had improved tremendously, and they themselves feel listened to and feel more in control of their own lives and situations.'

The school was able to highlight the way the change of management at the hostel was affecting the men, and as a result a regular forum for residents – the house meeting – has been reinstated. A key part of this meeting is a communal meal, organised and cooked by residents.

The school of participation also drew attention to wider problems – in particular, the lack of accommodation for homeless people to move into once they leave the hostel.

'You have men sitting in the hostel for nine months. A huge issue was the men were feeling they weren't making any progress,' Anne says.

'People are being recycled through the hostel over and over again and the men sensed they weren't getting a quality service to help them move on.'

By investigating these issues, residents and staff became aware of a programme called MOPP – move-on plans protocol – which offers a clearer plan of action to enable hostel residents to find support outside the hostel environment. This process has now been adopted in Manchester, and staff and residents at Wilson Carlile House were able to use it to audit the barriers they face.

Our role: Innovation

As well as sharing inspiration, North West Together We Can shares innovation: we bring people together to examine what is new and different and to find out what can be learned and applied in other situations.

At its launch conference NWTWC demonstrated how participatory budgeting can work by inviting the 200 delegates to share a budget of £40,000 between 14 different projects.

The money goes round

North West Together We Can has promoted participatory budgeting, an innovative approach to public spending that enables ordinary citizens to help steer the spending decisions and priorities of public agencies.

Participatory budgeting is a method for involving local people in the major budget-setting decisions of organisations like local authorities. It has been tried and tested worldwide, and ten local authorities are running pilot projects across England.

At its launch conference NWTWC demonstrated how participatory budgeting can work by inviting the 200 delegates to share a budget of £40,000 between 14 different projects. The funded projects included a range of innovative ideas: for example, in the Wirral the British Red Cross has a scheme to recruit and train a first-aider on every street, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged areas where health risks are highest.

In another project funded through the participatory budgeting event, Proud City, a Salford-based social enterprise, supported two community activists in learning skills as team leaders. Bernadette Wright is the founder of a club which uses local history and digital photography to bring people together, while Louise Englefield helped set up Pride Sports for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

‘We have a lot of energy and enthusiasm and we’re determined to be practical. We want action not words. We just want the levers of government – local, central and agencies – to connect better with us’

Empowerment in action:

Action Climate Change Tattenhall

Tattenhall is a thriving Cheshire village with a population of around 2,500. But its residents are starting to wake up to the fact that life will be very different in a few years’ time.

Just how different is the message that Action Climate Change Tattenhall is communicating. ACCT was established 18 months ago to alert local people to climate change issues, and it hopes its softly, softly approach is beginning to pay dividends for a long journey.

Progress has been inch by inch rather than in giant leaps, but there are a lot of positive signs. ACCT is working with the local primary school, which is now applying for an eco-award. An education officer from Energy Projects Plus has teamed up with children to raise environmental awareness, and EPP conducted an audit of the school’s energy efficiency, funded by North West Together We Can through the participatory budgeting event.

ACCT chair John Plummer explains: ‘The primary school has a trainer swimming pool: it costs a packet because of problems with insulation, the roof and air heating. It relies on the school’s heating

system to heat the water, which is wasteful in the holidays. EPP’s feasibility study proposed a solution, but it’s beyond the capital finance of the school at the moment. But at least they know what it will cost and what needs to happen. We are searching for grants.’

Similarly, ACCT worked with EPP to arrange an energy audit of 12 house types in the village, with a range of sizes and designs. It found a stark contrast between two homes, both owned by a housing trust: one was well insulated and double-glazed, while the other, a more recent conversion of former stables, was poorly insulated and used expensive Economy 7 storage heaters.

‘We’re talking to the housing trust about this – there’s one householder, at least, who’s paying through the nose for Economy 7 which is just heating her roof space,’ Mr Plummer says.

‘We have a lot of energy and enthusiasm and we’re determined to be practical. We want action not words. We just want the levers of government – local, central and agencies – to connect better with us.’

Mind the GAP

Another example of innovation is the work of the Gender and Participation (GAP) Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University. The unit has worked on a wide range of projects to raise awareness of gender issues in community engagement.

The GAP Unit’s work with women councillors has revealed that many still face strong barriers to their progress as decision-makers and representatives of local communities. A total of 59 councillors from 29 local authorities have been involved in the Women in Governance project, which has included a focus group, surveys and interviews to explore how women fare as elected representatives.

The unit spoke to councillors from all the major political parties as well as independents, and will produce a report highlighting the findings from this work.

Comments from the focus group show how women councillors face the same obstacles as many other women in the workplace. One described how it was assumed she would take responsibility for childcare, despite her duties as a councillor.

Another told how her ideas and suggestions were disparaged by male colleagues in the council chamber: ‘When we have a meeting I could come up with a very good idea, a very good suggestion, but it is sort of ignored. And a man comes up with the same suggestion and that’s minuted and taken in because the man has said it.’

As a result of the project’s findings, the GAP unit hopes to arrange seminars and networking events to provide women councillors with practical support.

Finding out for ourselves

North West Together We Can has also supported original research into the future of community empowerment activity funded through Local Area Agreements. This has been an important issue to investigate because there are widely differing views about whether public support for community empowerment is sufficient.

The research, by SPN Associates, found that in the North West, most local strategic partnerships considered their funding for community empowerment networks to be adequate – but at the same time funding for some community empowerment networks was being scaled down or stopped. Most councils for voluntary service did not receive funding for their community engagement and empowerment work.

The research highlights the uncertain future for current models of community empowerment activity and the differing views within local government and the voluntary and community sector about whether enough funding and support is being offered. The study will help inform the continuing debate about how such activity should be supported.

Our role: **Interaction**

We believe learning takes place when people come together. That interactivity is at the heart of everything we do.

Action Learning Sets

One way of encouraging people to work together and discover shared interests is through Action Learning Sets. These bring people who are working or volunteering in similar situations together with a trained facilitator. Participants take it in turns to present each other with a challenge they are facing, and then members of the Action Learning Set ask questions to help the questioner come to a deeper understanding of the issue, consider their options and decide on an action.

NWTWC supported Faiths4Change in running very successful Action Learning Sets for community development workers in Liverpool, Burnley, Preston and Manchester. Each meeting focused on a different theme, such as community engagement, environmental sustainability, and diversity and equality.

Another group of Action Learning Sets involved local authority workers and focused on how community engagement could be factored into local area agreements. The idea was to enable practitioners and local decision-makers to share their experiences and consider the challenges they faced.

The sessions, facilitated by the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (I&DeA), highlighted the challenges of gaining support for community engagement activities, and the need for performance indicators that reflect the extent and quality of activity taking place at ground level.

The idea was to enable practitioners and local decision-makers to share their experiences and consider the challenges they faced.

‘By the third session we were at a point where we could phone each other up for support and advice. Having a skilled facilitator was really useful because it moved us on quickly.’

Empowerment in action:

Faiths4Change

Helen Dawson had only recently been appointed as a project officer with Faiths4Change when she took part in the Action Learning Sets. She found the approach of sharing challenges, discussing them with other participants and agreeing actions in response particularly helpful.

‘Whatever concerns you had in your job, you didn’t feel you had to say the right thing,’ she says. ‘If you were struggling with something you could bring it and no-one would judge you about it.’

‘I was quite new as a project officer and it was really useful to hear people saying that the things that concerned me were quite normal in community work.’

‘By the third session we were at a point where we could phone each other up for support and advice. Having a skilled facilitator was really useful because it moved us on quickly.’

One sign of the success of the Action Learning Sets is that one group of participants, from Burnley, has decided to continue independently and run their own course.

Annie Merry, project director at Faiths4Change, feels the events enabled participants to learn from each other in ways that aren’t possible at formal events.

‘The good thing about the Action Learning Sets was meeting real people who had done things. A common comment about community engagement was hearing people saying, “I thought I was the only one struggling with this”.’

Learning Exchange seminars

Another way NWTWC has encouraged interaction is through a series of Learning Exchange seminars in the spring of 2008. These have zeroed in on the hot topics in community engagement for local authorities and voluntary and community organisations.

Topics have included participatory budgeting; the new 'duty to involve'; the concept of 'bottom-up performance management'; and community charters and arrangements for local scrutiny of councils' policies and actions.

Billy Maxwell, Head of Neighbourhood Engagement at Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, says the seminars' approach has helped local authority staff and their partners get to grips with new policies.

'It's absolutely essential to have a network of people who are going through the same thinking processes about how to adapt the latest ideas from government,' he says.

'Because these events are more informal and have a consultation element to them, they feel like less of a showcase and more of an honest dialogue. People feel less self-conscious and very comfortable about having a frank debate.

'It's very much about taking a step back from the treadmill of the work we do and asking what's going on. It's a combination of practical ideas and thinking space.'

Claire Wilson, Community Development Manager at Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council, says information gleaned in the seminars on neighbourhood charters and bottom-up performance management has already been of practical use in her work.

'Sharing good practice is always positive and the learning from the seminars has been invaluable,' she says.

Community development challenge

Plans to move from a 'top-down' to a 'bottom-up' approach to tackling inequalities are central to much recent government policy. Last year the Department for Communities and Local Government published the Community Development Challenge report, which explains what community development is, how it can make a difference, and how the quality of community work can improve.

The North West Together We Can network is working hard to build on the report and raise standards. In particular, it is concerned to improve quality and the way outcomes are measured. It also wants to act urgently on the need for training. This work has been developed through a series of events in autumn 2007 and spring 2008.

'It's absolutely essential to have a network of people who are going through the same thinking processes about how to adapt the latest ideas from government'

Billy Maxwell, Head of Neighbourhood Engagement

'Sharing good practice is always positive and the learning from the seminars has been invaluable'

Claire Wilson, Community Development Manager at Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council

The next stage

North West Together We Can has ambitious plans to build on what has been achieved. Our work plan for the next three years shows how we hope to keep inspiring, innovating and interacting with those who share our vision for empowered citizens and responsive services.

A vital aspect of this activity is the work of building partnerships and networks. We'll expand our local authority network, organising Action Learning Sets and seminars and commissioning relevant research. We'll examine issues such as participatory budgeting, asset transfers to community organisations, the roles of councillors and the national indicators on community involvement.

We also plan to produce a set of baseline figures so that our own work and achievements can be monitored.

We plan to continue our work on active citizenship and community development, focusing especially on opportunities and barriers facing young people, black and minority ethnic citizens, older people, and people with disabilities.

All this work will be supported by our own learning events and conferences, and the development of a website and publications that will signpost users to useful resources and activities.

And finally...

This report features just a few examples of the learning approaches and opportunities that have been possible through the work of North West Together We Can.

We benefit from the support of the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership for the North West, and continued funding from Communities and Local Government Department supporting our work as a Regional Empowerment Network. In turn, these funds have supported activity by partner organisations with a total value of around £1.5m. This funding comes from a wide range of sources including central government, European funds, regional and local agencies, and grant income. We would like to thank all our partners for their support and look forward to achieving more together in the future.

We plan to continue our work on active citizenship and community development, focusing especially on opportunities and barriers facing young people, black and minority ethnic citizens, older people, and people with disabilities.

North West Together We Can Board Members 2007/08

Brian Wroe	NWTWC Local Authority Network	John Devine	NW Forum of Faiths
Carrie Packham	North West Take Part Network	John Tench	Centre for Local Governance The University of Manchester
Dave Hannay	Community North West	Lesley Graham	NWTWC Local Authority Network
Dennis Artess	North West Improvement Network	Liz McQue	North West Employers
Eamon Greene	Government Office North West	Margaret Mcleod	Chair, NWTWC from January 2008 Voluntary Sector North West
Ed Cox	Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) Chair NWTWC to December 2007	Paul Harris	One North West
Hazel Catt	RENEW North West	Sally Wyatt	Trafford Hall
Helen Platt	IDEA	Steven Pleasant	Tameside TLC Beacon Project
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