

Executive summary

What do we mean by good conversations?

‘Good conversations’ is a shorthand term we are using for the good, equal and constructive dialogue that can exist between professionals and communities. Good conversations are based on community engagement and empowerment that is focused and purposeful and results in practical improvements, more efficient services and more targeted and effective resource application.

Community engagement and empowerment – or ‘good conversations’ – has been on the policy agenda for some time. But as the UK moves into an era of budget restraint policymakers are asking themselves whether the time for good conversations has come, or if they are a luxury we can no longer afford.

Good conversations are often presented as a moral imperative, but if they are to survive the cuts the case for them needs to be made in a different way: their implications for vibrant communities and effective and efficient public services needs to be made. The business case is required.

Citizens in the 21st century are better informed, more assertive and better educated and they expect high standards of public services. Furthermore, some of society’s most intractable problems - lifestyle associated health conditions, climate change and anti-social behaviour – require citizen engagement and involvement with responses. These social changes, combined with the public sector cuts, require a radically different approach to public services.

The business case

Over time, evidence is accumulating for the benefits of good conversations, but the overall quality of the evidence base remains variable. Nonetheless, three key tenets to the business case for good conversations can be identified:

- 1. Good conversations strengthen communities, build trust and social capital:** engagement and involvement in decision-making has benefits for the individuals involved, but it can also have benefits for the wider community. Good conversations can help to build a positive cycle of increased efficacy, greater satisfaction with services and the local area and greater community cohesion. Where this engagement reaches deep into the community and makes use of and strengthens the social networks that exist it can strengthen communities.
- 2. Good conversations can result in more effective public services:** the expertise and resources held by citizens and communities can add value to public services and in some cases – such as reducing social isolation of older people – the involvement of citizens and communities is essential. Evidence shows good conversations can result in services that are better designed, more

user-friendly, more fleet of foot and have higher satisfaction ratings. They can also improve the outcomes achieved through public services.

- 3. Good conversations can result in more efficient public services:** efficiencies can be achieved in two ways. Through good conversations public services can be better targeted and more innovative, which can bring short term cashable savings. Evidence is also mounting for longer term approaches to public services that ‘invest to save’, intervening earlier with more preventative measures to reduce spending in the future. But this requires greater cross-public sector working. It also requires ‘value for money’ to be interpreted in a different way, with longer term social and environmental - as well as monetary - outcomes factored in.

A wide range of techniques are used in the UK and abroad to hold good conversations. Which techniques are appropriate will vary according to the context, how empowered the target community is, and what a local authority or its partners are trying to achieve. But good conversations are not usually a cheap option, and cutting corners will undermine their effectiveness. Ten core principles should be adhered to in order to ensure good conversations are genuine:

1. Adopting best practice
2. Building community trust and capacity
3. Honesty, transparency and realism from service providers and support agencies
4. Being inclusive – engaging with people who are rarely heard as well as those who are always heard
5. Avoiding jargon – presenting written information in plain English
6. Being flexible – adapting techniques and approaches to local circumstances
7. Recognising community differences
8. Keeping everyone well-informed, with regular communication and feedback
9. Respecting local knowledge and particularly community and neighbourhood histories
10. Resourcing the process properly

Prospects for good conversations?

The government’s twin agendas of the Big Society and localism bode well for good conversations remaining on the policy agenda. But as the realities of the public sector budget cuts hits there is a risk that good conversations will fall by the wayside.

It is imperative that cuts are made with long term improvement in mind, not just quick cashable savings. Local authorities, and their partners, need to find radically different ways of working over the coming years. The redesign of services must be founded on the basis of good conversations.

I. Introduction

1.1 Promoting the engagement and empowerment of individuals and communities has been a key aspect of government policy for some years. Broadly speaking there is a political consensus that transferring more power to local people and communities, as well as to front-line staff, will strengthen the democratic process and lead to service improvement and efficiency by making better use of the intelligence, knowledge and skills in communities to improve the way the public sector operates (see for example CLG 2008, HM Government 2009; HM Government 2010).

1.2 The coalition government's twin agendas of the Big Society and localism have embodied its approach to these issues. While the firm contours of these policies are yet to appear, announcements so far suggest a commitment to some greater freedoms for local government, more flexible and localised service delivery and more involvement of citizens and communities in decisions about their local area and the public services they use, including the opportunity to take on the service delivery role (HM Government 2010). The government has declared the neighbourhood to be the key building block for public services and 'Big Society Vanguard' have been established to take greater responsibility for decisions that affect the local area and its residents (Cabinet Office 2010).

1.3 However, this has to be set against the backdrop of the budget deficit and the cuts to public expenditure. This autumn's spending review announced significant cuts to many departmental budgets and this has hit local government hard. There are concerns about how these contexts interact. Local government now has a statutory 'duty to involve', but in many areas 'good conversations' are still seen as an add-on rather than a central element of service delivery. There is a risk that designing and supporting good conversations may simply be seen as a luxury we can ill afford.

1.4 The real imperative - and opportunity - for devolving power and control to local level lies in social changes which increasingly require public engagement and empowerment. Citizens are better informed, better educated and more assertive than in the past, and they expect higher standards of service delivery (Griffiths et al 2009). Furthermore the rise of behaviour related social problems, such as lifestyle related health conditions, climate change and anti-social behaviour necessitates citizen engagement with responses (ippr and PwC 2010).

1.5 The combination of budget cuts and social change mean a radically different way of doing things is needed. This paper has been written by ippr north and Social Regeneration Consultants (SRC) for the North East Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership Community Engagement and Empowerment Board as part of their work on 'good conversations'.

What do we mean by good conversations?

‘Good conversations’ is a shorthand term we are using for the good, equal and constructive dialogue that can exist between professionals and communities. Good conversations are based on community engagement and empowerment that is focused and purposeful and results in practical improvements, more efficient services and more targeted and effective resource application.

1.6 Good conversations have the power to improve the design, delivery and outcomes of public services and they could form a core element of the new way of working. For this to happen, a more cogent case needs to be made for good conversations, to ensure they are not a casualty of budget cuts. This paper considers the evidence for the benefits of good conversations. The first part looks back at research and evaluations already completed, to consider the implications of good conversations for stronger communities and more effective and efficient public services. It also considers some of the key techniques for holding good conversations. The second part looks further afield to see how other parts of the world seek to hold good conversations, before the third section looks ahead to consider the prospects for good conversations in the future.

2. Looking back: assessing the evidence base

2.1 The need for good conversations is often presented as a moral imperative, a good thing in and of itself, which ‘connects people to the public realm’, allows them to identify with services, brings society together and strengthens civic ties (Public Administration Select Committee 2008). While there is intuitive merit in this argument, the severe budgetary constraints currently suffered by the public sector means a firmer evidence base for this way of working is needed. The first part of this section therefore considers the business case for good conversations, exploring the evidence for good conversations resulting in stronger communities and more effective and efficient public services. The second part of this section goes on to provide an overview of the most common techniques used in order to hold good conversations with citizens and communities.

Is there a business case for good conversations?

2.2 As society changes, so the relationship between the state and the citizen must also change to one which is more equal and less deferential, more accountable and less remote and more personal and less universal. Policies to promote engagement, empowerment and influence – or ‘good conversations’ - recognise and respond to these changes. But, at present, good conversations are not sufficiently comprehensive or central to public services to make the fundamental change required in the relationship between communities and service providers.

2.3 There is mounting empirical evidence of the positive outcomes from good conversations between the public sector and citizens and communities, both in terms of improving outcomes and securing efficiencies, as well as strengthening communities. However, a key challenge in this area remains the depth and quality of the evidence base. Many initiatives are small and not subject to formal evaluation, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the scalability of approaches (Young Foundation 2009).

Good conversations can strengthen communities, build trust and social capital

2.4 When done well good conversations can bring benefits both to the participating individuals and the wider community. For individuals, benefits can include the development of new skills, personal development and increased confidence and self-esteem (Brodie et al 2009). For communities, good conversations help to build a positive cycle of increased efficacy, greater satisfaction with services and more pride in the local area.

2.5 Good conversations that bring people from different backgrounds together to engage with shared problems and challenges can help to build more cohesive communities. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion found such 'interactions between people' can contribute to changing perceptions and building a sense of belonging to, and identification with, a local area (Commission on Integration and Cohesion 2007, see also Hotho 2008; Lowndes et al 2006). Furthermore, the careful targeting of good conversations to include all parts of a community can help to diminish grievances around unequal treatment between groups, helping to solidify community ties (Foot 2009).

2.6 Good conversations can also enhance feelings of influence and efficacy, with citizens able to shape interventions in their area or the way in which public services are delivered (Young Foundation 2009). Detailed survey analysis reveals feelings of influence are strongly correlated with a number of other positive community outcomes, including satisfaction with services and with the local area as a place to live; a positive view of quality of life; thinking people from different backgrounds get on well in their area and having higher levels of trust in people. The same research finds citizen involvement in decision making is also positively correlated with the same outcomes, but the relationship with feelings of influence is stronger (Duffy et al 2008).

2.7 An example of this effect in action is found in Balsall Heath in Birmingham, where intensive engagement between community members and frontline public service workers resulted in a considerable improvement to satisfaction and feelings of influence, with 75 per cent agreeing that they can influence decisions in their local area (Savage et al 2010). This has been aided by the identification and training of 22 'street stewards', who act as network lynchpins, spreading information, welcoming new people to the area, identifying local issues and communicating them to service providers. They also convene a residents group for their streets.

2.8 Activity in Balsall Heath has been community led, but to be successful it requires the public sector to be accessible and willing to listen and act on the issues being raised. Where community action and willing public sector workers come together the effect can be empowering. In this way the voluntary sector and active citizens can help to build what is known as 'linking social capital' – relationships with links to people in positions of power or with access to resources (Woolcock 2001).

2.9 Finally, involvement and empowerment for some people can be a critical starting point for wider democratic involvement, with citizens who are active and informed more likely to consider standing as a councillor or be active in other governance roles, such as school governors.

Good conversations can lead to more effective public services

2.10 The expertise and resources held by citizens and communities can add value to public services and interventions to improve areas. Good conversations offer a way of tapping this latent resource.

2.11 Indeed, to achieve some public service outcomes the involvement of the community is essential. For example, while schools have an important role in improving literacy, so too do parents by reading with their children. Similarly, helping an older person to overcome isolation requires a network of informal support (ippr and PwC 2010). On its own, the public sector does not have all the resources it needs to deliver these public service outcomes.

2.12 Some examples of good conversations resulting in more effective public services include:

- An evaluation of tenant-led management pilots found they resulted in improved delivery of housing services such as rent collection and repair work, as well as higher tenant satisfaction and longer term retention of tenants (Cairncross et al 2002)
- In North Benwell, in Newcastle, a neighbourhood management experiment resulted in a 'faster and smarter' way of addressing local problems. An evaluation found a significant improvement in joint working between agencies at street level, enabling lengthy and bureaucratic communication channels to be circumvented and solutions developed and implemented more swiftly (ODPM 2006)
- In Redruth, Cornwall, community leaders brought residents' groups together to work with the police to tackle antisocial behaviour. Part of Operation Goodnight involved asking parents to keep their teenage children at home in the evening – a 'voluntary curfew' – and multi-agency patrols including the police, council and voluntary bodies walked the streets. The scheme led to a

60 per cent reduction in crime while antisocial behaviour was down by 67 per cent, year on year (HM Government 2009)

- Savage et al (2010) highlight the successful community engagement work of Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue. Working with a social enterprise in Tameside, they sought to reduce fire risk in a high risk ward by training volunteers to conduct fire risk assessments and arson vulnerability assessments. They report it helped to reduce accidental fires by 42 per cent in one year
- The national evaluation of Sure Start found the outreach and involvement work of local Sure Start centres resulted in the empowerment of parents, with them feeling less isolated, more valued and more confident in their parenting abilities (Williams and Churchill 2006)
- Large scale evidence reviews have found community engagement to be a key factor driving confidence in the police service, with neighbourhood policing identified as a key mechanism for delivering engagement (Brown and Evans 2009; Rix et al 2009). The National Reassurance Policing Programme tested approaches to neighbourhood working and community engagement. The programme's evaluation compared six of the pilot areas to control areas, and found the programme delivered statistically significant reductions in crime, improved perceptions of five types of anti-social behaviour, increased confidence in the police and increased feelings of safety. The report recommended the roll out of neighbourhood policing but cautioned community engagement needed to be more innovative and inclusive than public meetings, with 'have a say days', street briefings and door knocking highlighted as some of the more effective mechanisms (Tuffin et al 2006)

2.13 As well as improving outcomes, good conversations can also make services more effective in the sense that citizens are more satisfied with them. By winning 'buy-in' from service users, perceptions of service quality rise, as people tend to feel more satisfied with services they feel able to influence (ippr and PwC 2010, Lyons Inquiry 2007)

More efficient public services

2.14 Good conversations can also contribute to a more efficient public sector. By engaging and empowering citizens, the public sector can mobilise underused resources such as the time, energy, social networks, knowledge and skills of individuals and groups. Combining these resources with those of the public sector (money, regulation, technical and professional expertise) add up to more than the sum of its parts (ippr and PwC 2010).

2.15 There are two types of efficiency that can be brought about by good conversations. First, cashable savings resulting from a better understanding of service users and their experience of accessing services; and, second, examples of medium to longer term savings brought about through greater upfront investment

in order to deliver longer term savings to the public purse (or 'invest to save' strategies).

Cashable efficiencies

2.16 Good conversations can help to deliver cashable savings by ensuring public services are well-targeted and meeting need. User involvement reduces the risk of providing unsuitable or inappropriate services, as users are often in the best position to judge the scope and depth of their own need. At the same time, being consulted may help people to better understand these needs, creating a self-sustaining loop of involvement, understanding and targeting (Public Administration Select Committee 2008). Some examples of good conversations resulting in more efficient public services include:

- A housing association, Enterprise 5, was receiving a high volume of calls seeking clarifications in the two days after rent statements had been sent to tenants. This required six housing officers to be office based for those days. Through consultation with a Tenants Panel the statement was redesigned and simplified, resulting in fewer calls and freeing up staff time which could then be redeployed elsewhere (Audit Commission and Housing Corporation 2004)
- In Doncaster, the council involved local communities and social enterprises in the redesign of the collection of bulky waste. As a result, household goods were diverted from landfill to a social enterprise, which in turn refurbished and provided them to households in need. It is estimated that this has saved £20,000 in land fill taxes, as well as providing 130 volunteering opportunities and provided goods to 4,000 families, which would have cost £140,000 if they had been bought second hand (HM Treasury 2010)
- The Expert Patients scheme, where patients advise service deliverers and other service users on managing their illness, has resulted in savings for the health service. The evaluation of the pilot scheme found accident and emergency visits were reduced by 16 per cent and outpatient visits by 10 per cent, producing savings for the health service. There were also positive improvements for patients' quality of life and their confidence (Rogers et al 2006)
- A recent study of ten radical service innovations from around the world found they all share a common theme: commitment to involving communities in decision-making and service delivery. All ten case studies had put good conversations at the centre of their approach, resulting in lower delivery costs of between 20 and 60 per cent across the case studies (Gillinson et al 2010)
- Not only are there efficiencies to be gained from good conversations but there are also costs to not having good conversations. It could result in citizen's feeling less able to influence, having a reduced sense of cohesion, feeling less satisfied with their area as a place to live and less trusting, as well as having monetary costs. Services that do not meet peoples' needs will be underutilised or even unused (National Audit Office 2004)

Investing to save

2.17 There is also some evidence to support 'invest to save strategies' as a means of linking good conversations to longer term savings. However, realising these savings often requires real partnership working between public services, as actions by one service, such as neighbourhood policing, may produce savings for another, for example the criminal justice system. To appreciate the savings produced, a cross public sector approach is needed, rather than one focused on individual service areas.

2.18 The Bradford Total Place Pilot focused on invest to save approaches through preventative services. It focused on services for young people not in employment education and training (NEETs), offenders over the age of 18 leaving prison and older people with mental health problems leaving hospital. The final report makes a persuasive case for redesigning services to better meet individual needs:

By looking at the service provision through the eyes of the service user rather than our own individual organizations we have recognised the tremendous potential to simplify, streamline, make more relevant and hugely influence direct and indirect costs over the long term (Bradford District Partnership 2010, p8)

2.19 Bradford Total Place pilot used a detailed process of engagement, bringing together service users and service providers to better understand what they refer to as the 'customer journey' – the citizens' experience of accessing services – in order to identify and address barriers to improving the service provided. They calculate considerable potential savings to the public purse in the longer term as a result of reduced repeat offending and out of work benefit claims through early intervention and prevention (Bradford District Partnership 2010).

2.20 This way of thinking has strong intuitive logic, but remains relatively untested. It also requires a fundamental change to the way public services are currently delivered. Not only does it mean a more integrated approach to public services, as outlined above, it also requires a reassessment of how 'value' is calculated in public services. Good conversations can provide value for money in the traditional sense, as the examples referred to demonstrate, but value can also be interpreted more broadly to include social and environmental value as well as improvements to quality of life.

2.21 For this reason, the New Economic Foundation (NEF) has developed a method for placing monetary value on the 'social return' to investment. Their analysis of an initiative in Merseyside that took a participative approach to supporting young offenders into employment delivered a 'social return' of £10.50 for each pound invested (Involve 2005).

2.22 An argument can also be made for interrogating more closely quite what we mean by value for money. Moving beyond cost savings this should include the improved outcomes that can be expected from increased user involvement in service provision. As Boyle and Harris (2009) argue:

“[Services designed in partnership with the public] will be cost-effective not necessarily because they cost less – though they can do – but because they produce more effective outcomes, because they insulate people against ill-health, or help people to achieve better outcomes than most services currently do.”

2.23 They stress that the non-monetary resources drawn from individuals, in terms of their time and support, are currently ignored, as are the wider social benefits.

Techniques and methods for good conversations

2.24 Having established the case for holding good conversations, this section provides a brief overview of some of the key techniques available for holding ‘good conversations’, and how to implement them effectively. The box below briefly describes some of them. All have been tried and tested somewhere in the North East region, often with multiple techniques used in combination. While there is a growing bank of knowledge about what works and what does not, evaluations of the application of ‘good conversations’ techniques within the region are limited.

Key techniques used to hold good conversations in the UK

Community engagement

Community engagement exercises are now common-place across most, if not all, parts of the public sector. At one end of the spectrum, a simple household survey or an exhibition may be used to gauge local opinion on a specific issue; at the other end, a whole raft of engagement techniques may be applied in a neighbourhood or group of neighbourhoods as part of a focused initiative. Some of the more innovative techniques have included:

- **Community sounding boards:** when resident or community representatives meet regularly to provide feedback to service providers and help plan engagement programmes
- **Neighbourhood workshops or focus groups:** a group meeting bringing service providers and communities together to discuss future plans and programmes
- **Resident consultancy:** providing training, support and jobs for local people to become consultants to deliver community consultation
- **Schools programmes:** children use art or geography skills as part of their normal curriculum, to contribute to a wider community consultation
- **Participatory appraisal sessions:** a range of interactive or visual techniques are used to enable rarely heard groups to contribute to community engagement programmes
- **Virtual reality modelling:** enabling communities to visualize physical change options through the use of computer modeling
- **E-consultation:** using interactive websites to keep communities updated and encourage regular feedback

Neighbourhood working

Neighbourhood Action Planning: involves residents in identifying strategic goals for their area, and steps for progressing towards the goals. Many innovative techniques have been used in this approach including street workshops, resident ballots, community sounding boards and the development of residents' charters and community design briefs.

Devolving services: responsibility or accountability for a service is transferred to a local level. Neighbourhood Management is an example of this approach, especially where it brings local communities and service providers together to improve services community engagement and empowerment.

Devolving budgets to wards and neighbourhoods: local people are given a measure of influence or decision-making power over how services spend money in their area or the distribution of discretionary budgets assigned to an area.

Participation and empowerment

Participatory budgeting: direct participation of local people in deciding how a budget should be spent in their area.

Co-production of services: service users work with service providers to help design and/or deliver the service. It is an intensive process of empowerment which moves beyond simply consulting people on what services they need.

2.25 Each of the techniques outlined in the box can make a contribution to delivering ‘good conversations’ between communities and the public sector. But it is essential to choose the right techniques for the right jobs. Not all techniques are suitable in all circumstances and for all communities. Furthermore, when public finances are under severe pressure, ensuring that the techniques used are both affordable and offer demonstrable value for money is important. Public bodies will want to be certain that their investment in engagement techniques, both financially and in terms of staffing, can deliver significant and measurable change that improves distribution of discretionary budgets assigned to an area.

2.26 The range of techniques outlined offer different characteristics. Some are intentionally short term, while others require ongoing commitment and support over a long period. Some are expensive and can consume large amounts of public sector staff time; others are low-cost and maximise voluntary input from local communities. While short term, low cost techniques are likely to have appeal in the current financial climate, it should be noted that in areas where community infrastructure is not well developed, such initiatives are likely to have limited impact. Building the trust and involvement of a community is often a resource-intensive and time-consuming process that requires sustained action. Choosing the right techniques and striking a sensible balance between cost and value will be increasingly important for all public bodies in the years ahead. Whichever techniques are used to hold good conversations, their success generally relies on applying them appropriately – in the right way and at the right time. SRC has developed ten core principles for good conversations:

1. Adopting best practice
2. Building community trust and capacity
3. Honesty, transparency and realism from service providers and support agencies
4. Being inclusive – engaging with people who are rarely heard as well as those who are always heard
5. Avoiding jargon – presenting written information in plain English
6. Being flexible – adapting techniques and approaches to local circumstances
7. Recognising community differences
8. Keeping everyone well-informed, with regular communication and feedback
9. Respecting local knowledge and particularly community and neighbourhood histories
10. Resourcing the process properly

(Pete Duncan and Sally Thomas 2007)

2.27 Good planning and delivery area are key, but they take time and resources. Cutting corners may tick some of the equality impact assessment boxes and enable local authorities to claim they are taking steps to hold good conversations, but in practice it is less likely to deliver positive outcomes. Ultimately, poorly delivered conversations result in money poorly spent.

3. Looking further afield: What happens in other places?

3.1 Good conversations are not only on the policy agenda in the UK. Across the world countries are experimenting with different techniques and methods to hold conversations with their communities. The UK has already benefited from this experimentation, for example by adapting participatory budgeting from Brazil. This section provides a brief review of some techniques being used in other countries that we might be able to learn from. It is, however, important to emphasise the term ‘learning’ – rather than replication – as what works in one country will not necessarily work in another, with cultural and historical factors affecting the development and implementation of different approaches.

USA

America Speaks 21st Century Town Meeting

3.2 One-day events were held involving between 500 to 5,000 citizens in deliberating on local, regional or national issues. The most widely discussed America Speaks event is ‘Listening to the City: Rebuilding Lower Manhattan’ that took place in the aftermath of September 11th and attracted 5,000 citizens. Meetings typically involve:

- small group dialogue – tables of 10 to 12 demographically diverse citizens with an independent facilitator;
- networked computers – instant collation of ideas and votes from each table;
- theming – a team distils comments from tables into themes that can be presented back to the room for comment or votes;
- electronic keypads – each citizen has a keypad for voting and providing demographic details;
- large video screens – present data, themes and information in real time for instant feedback;
- specialists and stakeholders – experts help produce balanced materials to guide citizen deliberations and are on hand on the day to provide advice when necessary. A clear link to decision-makers is established from the start of the process and key stakeholders (e.g. from public authorities) are present.

3.3 There are questions about the role of the organisers in collating and synthesising ideas at speed generated in the face-to-face discussions on individual tables – the power of including so many citizens in the process appears to be at the expense of citizen control over the agenda and direction of the meeting.

3.4 An evaluation of ‘California Speaks’ a statewide consultation on healthcare reforms carried out using this method found positive impacts for participants and policymakers. Surveys were carried out with participants prior to the event, immediately after the event and five months after the event. They found participation increased peoples’ feeling of efficacy and their likelihood of taking some form of political action, such as contacting a state official, compared to non participants. It also found policy makers to be positive about the event as a useful way of informing policymaking (see Lukensmeyer and Brigham 2002 and www.americaspeaks.org)

Sweden

Study circles

3.5 A facilitated group of people (usually around 8-12) from different backgrounds and perspectives meet several times to discuss a timely and often controversial issue. It is an opportunity for citizens with different opinions to try to understand the views of others and to look for ways to improve the situation. The study circle movement emerged from cooperative education programmes in Sweden, and the approach has been adopted in a number of countries including the USA.

3.6 Study circles can make a unique contribution to strengthening the community, building community capacity and solving public problems. A large-scale evaluation of community-wide study circles, which focused particular attention on their role in overcoming racism, provides evidence of the impact of study circles at the individual level. There is evidence to suggest that citizens involved in study circles become more informed, aware and attached to their communities, gain courage to take direct stands for racial equality and against racism and form new relationships across racial and other divides. Some study circles result in action to bring about change. Some examples of their achievements include improved retail facilities for African Americans, greater openness in the community planning process and the establishment of new voluntary organisations or the strengthening of existing ones (see Study Circle Resource Center 2001, Roberts and Kay Incorporated 2000).

Various developing countries, including Ghana, Mali and Senegal

Community driven development

3.7 An approach to social change that prioritises bottom up action, placing a premium on people's lived experience, and their knowledge of their own circumstances. The approach gives local community groups and institutions direct control over investment decisions, project planning, delivery and monitoring. The approach strongly emphasises participatory approaches and accountability of decisions made. Achieving inclusion and representative decision-making can be challenges for this way of working.

3.8 The approach has been used most often in areas experiencing conflict or rural poverty. Research has generally found that community driven projects successfully develop social services and physical infrastructure. They are also considered useful to build social cohesion and social capital and connect the state with citizens. Evaluation has found community driven development to be most successful when it builds on initiatives originating within a community (WBOED 2005).

Canada

Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, British Columbia

3.9 The Citizens' Assembly was established by the government of British Columbia in January 2004 to review the current system of voting in the province. It is a rare example of a randomly-chosen citizens' forum that has been given significant political power in the decision-making process.

3.10 The Assembly was composed of 160 randomly-selected members (plus an independent chair to facilitate meetings) – one man and one woman from the 79 provincial electoral districts plus two Aboriginal members. During 2004, the Assembly met regularly to learn about different electoral systems and discuss their relative merits. Members received an honorarium of \$150 per meeting day and childcare and other special needs were catered for.

3.11 Widespread support for the Assembly suggests that citizens are willing and able to deliberate and decide on significant areas of public policy. (see www.citizenassembly.bc.ca).

Brazil

Municipal Health Councils

3.12 Brazil has undertaken a number of democratic experiments which have been used as an inspiration for international practitioners and activities around the world, including the UK. The most famous democratic innovation is participatory budgeting, but in recent years the Municipal Health Council in Cabo has also gained a reputation as one of the most vigorous and innovative participation spaces. It is a place of high inequality and complex health problems, and the council has been attributed with contributing to the dramatic reductions in infant mortality by over three quarters in a ten year period.

3.13 Responding to pressure from citizens in 1998 a health council was set up reflecting the design-wishes of the citizen reformers with 50 per cent of seats allocated to service users. These were partly allocated to ensure that minority and identity movements were represented and partly elected. Any council member was also eligible to be elected as chair. The council is a mechanism for citizen oversight of the work of the health secretariats and an arena for debating health resource allocations and priorities, structured by the principle of inclusive and participatory consensus building. The council also had allocated municipal funding to enable travel to engage with local populations, to draw on technical expertise, access training and secretarial support, carry out local inspections and feedback sessions, and engage with wider debates.

3.14 There are some criticisms that funding mechanisms and structures have not gone far enough in ensuring independence and outreach. However, the approach is considered a catalyst for democratisation, providing opportunities for excluded groups to interact with those who govern them, and providing a space for members to build technical, political and deliberative skills which they have used in other areas of their lives.

3.15 This brief review of international activity highlights some useful examples that decision makers might want to consider when planning good conversations. In particular, some of these examples move beyond engagement and consultation, actually putting decision making power into the hands of citizens. For further information about different techniques the Power Inquiry 2005 is a useful source.

4. Looking ahead: what are the prospects for good conversations?

4.1 As time goes by more and more techniques for good conversation are experimented with, both in the UK and abroad, and we know more about the circumstances in which different approaches are likely to work. While it is clear that good conversations do not offer a silver bullet and the evidence base remains rather patchy, they can bring a number of positive benefits:

- Good conversations can increase peoples' sense of efficacy, making them feel more able to influence decisions. This has positive externalities, making people more likely to be positive about their area as a place to live and increasing cohesion, social capital and trust
- Good conversations can result in more effective public services, with outcomes better suited to citizens' and communities' needs
- Good conversations can bring about cashable savings, and they can also inform effective 'invest to save' strategies. Pursuing 'invest to save' in public services has much potential, but it also creates significant challenges to the current ways of working in the public sector, with a more integrated cross-public services approach needed alongside a broader interpretation of 'value for money'

4.2 Despite this positive evidence, there is concern about the prospects for good conversations given the public spending context. While the local authority 'duty to involve' and the 'Big Society' agenda should protect some activities linked to good conversations, the non-statutory nature of most community engagement and empowerment work raises concerns about the sustainability of some of this activity. It is imperative that cuts are made with long term improvement in mind, not just quick cashable savings. To really reap the benefits of good conversations, local authorities and their partners must be convinced of their value.

4.3 The Coalition Agreement commits the government to greater localism, pledging to:

"...end the era of top down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals" (HM Government 2010 p11)

This agenda offers many opportunities, but it is not without costs. In some areas there is a gap between the policy expectation and the capacity of communities to respond (Cox and Schmuecker 2010). But community capacity building, engagement and feedback are resource intensive activities. Moving beyond this to empower communities is more difficult still, but offers potential for real, long-term, mutually beneficial and equal relationships and conversations between communities and the public sector.

4.4 The current agenda of localism, and alongside it the Big Society, create an opportunity for local authorities and their partners to build on the positive outcomes of initiatives like Total Place, to redesign service delivery and their relationships with citizens and communities based on the foundation of good conversations.

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