Pathways
through
participation

Informing and influencing policy

01 Introduction

This paper focuses on the implications of the findings from the Pathways through Participation project for national policy agendas that relate to citizen engagement[1]. It is primarily aimed at policy-makers at national, regional and local levels with an interest in encouraging and supporting citizen engagement, as well as policy teams in voluntary and community organisations.

Since coming to power in 2010, the Coalition Government has stepped up the drive that started with the former New Labour Government to devolve power and decision making to a more local level and encourage people to do more in their communities. The Government agenda of the Big Society formed a key element of the Conservative Party's 2010 election campaign. Some of the main themes that underpin this agenda are:

• Supporting voluntary action and encouraging philanthropy and giving

• Devolving power to communities and local government

• A greater role in public services for voluntary and community organisations and other civil society organisations.

Over the last year there have been some significant policy developments for the implementation of the three aims outlined above. These include the Giving White Paper and the Localism Bill and a range of initiatives to reform public services. The findings from the Pathways through Participation research shed light on some of the important themes that emerge from these policy documents, and contribute to current thinking about how current policy agendas might be taken forward.

02 The research

The Pathways through Participation project is a joint research project led by NCVO in partnership with the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and Involve, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. It explores how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives. Through the improved understanding of the reasons for, and the contexts of participation, the project also aims to influence policy and practice, and encourage the development of opportunities for participation that are better suited to people's needs and aspirations. It focuses on the following questions:

1. How and why does participation begin and continue?

2. Can trends and patterns of participation be identified over time?

3. What connections, if any, are there between different forms and episodes of participation and what triggers movement between them?

Participation means many different things to different people. This project takes a broad approach to understanding participation that includes a range of social, public and individual activities such as being involved in: a formal voluntary organisation; informal or grassroots community groups; lobbying and campaigning; formal public consultations; demonstrations; boycotting products; purchasing fair-trade goods; helping out neighbours and giving to

charity. The research methodology places the individual at the centre of the research and looked at participation in three fieldwork areas (Enfield, Leeds and Suffolk). The researchers conducted over 100 in-depth interviews, exploring participation over people's lifetime and within the communities they belong to. This approach allowed people to tell their story of participation in their own words[2].

03 Evidence from Pathways through Participation on key policy drivers

The Pathways through Participation research findings are relevant to two significant current policy drivers: giving (of time and money) and the decentralisation of power, which includes measures around diversifying the provision of public services.

Giving: time and money
A number of measures have been announced by the Coalition Government that aim to bring about a step change in the giving of both time and money. Specific programmes have been launched to encourage this including the pilots of the National Citizens Service programme and the Community Organisers programme.

The Giving White Paper[3] was published in May 2011. It sets out the Government's strategy to increase the numbers and rates of giving both time (i.e. volunteering and social action) and money (i.e. charitable giving and philanthropy). The White Paper outlines early details of a range of specific initiatives around reciprocal models of volunteering (e.g. time banking) and micro-volunteering (giving short bits of time every so often), some new investments (e.g. match funding, Social Investment Fund), tax incentives to encourage charitable giving and announces a Giving Summit to be held in autumn 2011[4].

The Pathways through Participation project gathered a wealth of evidence on what motivates and prevents people's involvement in their communities, and on people's decisions about, and methods of, donating money to particular causes or movements.

Key findings about giving
The project found that people start participating in an activity such as volunteering for a combination of factors that are illustrated in the Figure 1.

Personal motivations such as helping others, developing relationships, self development and exercising values and beliefs shaped people's participation.

Triggers such as an emotional reaction like wanting to save a service from closure, a personal life event such as moving area or having children, and external influences such as natural disasters were important too. Personal motivations and triggers were tempered by people's access to resources – practical resources like time and money, learnt resources such as skills and experience and felt resources like confidence and a sense of efficacy. Having the opportunities to participate – the institutions, organisations, venues and groups – that enable people to come together, were also key to people's participation. All the above factors interplay and can be mutually reinforcing. We found that among many of the younger interviewees, structured school-based citizenship or community service programmes and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award were common points of entry to participation.

Relationships and social networks were key drivers of participation, with people's parents, siblings, partners, friends and wider networks of colleagues and other participants playing an important shaping role on their propensity to participate and the nature of their participation. Being asked by someone in their social network was often a reason for people to begin participation – an example of a trigger to participate.

Figure 1:
The participation equation – why participation starts, continues or stops
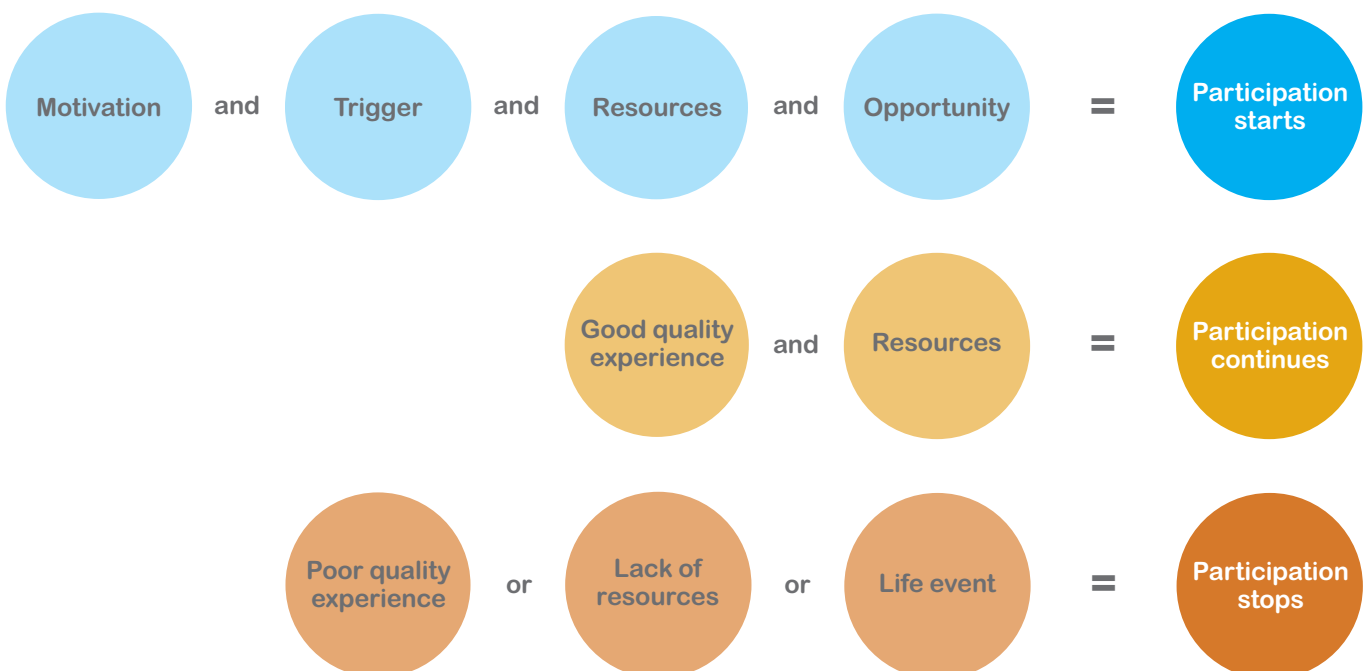
We found that people need to have a good experience of participation in order for it to continue, and that their involvement must feel purposeful. We also found that all participants want to do something that is worthwhile on their own terms, and every participatory act has, and is intended to have, consequences. At the very least, participation makes a difference to the individual participant; at most, it also helps change the world around them; and sometimes it does both.

The research suggests that people's attitude to government initiatives to encourage them to participate was generally negative, and that over and above any other factor, people choose to get involve in their communities because they want to.

In terms of charitable giving, few people that we interviewed articulated carefully considered reasons for why they do or don't support particular organisations through their own donations or by fundraising to others. Their giving comprised a combination of small regular donations, 'as and when' asked or when there happens to be a donation box at the till and there is some spare change, and when motivated by an emotional response (disaster) or a critical moment occurs in their own lives (such as death or illness in the family).

engagement – one that is formalised – which may not appeal to all. Important lessons from the Pathways through Participation project about what makes a good quality participation experience (and therefore more likely to positively affect sustained participation), about people wanting their contribution to be purposeful, useful and impactful need to be remembered, and having opportunities to continue participation after the end of the programme need to be embedded in its structure.

- If Government wants to encourage giving, it needs to better make the case for why people might want to. The White Paper does not put enough emphasis on the link between giving, need and personal motivations, and misses out on the range of benefits – and positive impacts – that can be realised at both an individual and wider societal level from participation[5].

- The White Paper offers three proposals for tackling barriers: new opportunities to give as part of everyday life; better information on opportunities to give, and removing/reducing bureaucratic obstacles to giving. Giving time flexibly appears to be the main way in which the practical barriers of not having enough time to volunteer, or money to do so is addressed. While micro-volunteering initiatives may work for people who are already interested in volunteering, they are unlikely to tackle the hardcore of people who are too busy juggling full time work and/or caring responsibilities[6]. Better information on the huge diversity of existing opportunities to give may help in this.

- Our research did not find that people cited bureaucratic obstacles to volunteering or donating money as major barriers – a deficit in any of the three types of resources identified above was the underlying explanatory factor in most cases. For instance, the practical barrier of not having spare income was the reason for several interviewees for not giving or not giving more.

Decentralisation of power

According to Government the decentralisation of power to the local level away from Whitehall involves moving power to local government, in the form of financial autonomy and a 'general power of competence'. It also involves a range of measures intended to devolve power, services and facilities to community groups and to individual citizens including changes to planning laws and community rights to buy assets and challenge the running of public services.

The key policy document that enshrines these themes is the **Localism Bill**. The Government published the Localism Bill on 13 December 2010, with an 'essential guide to decentralisation'[7]. It is expected to receive Royal Assent (become law) in November 2011. The essential guide sets out six steps the Government will take to achieve decentralisation (with the Localism Bill providing the legal basis for this):

1. Lift the burden of bureaucracy

2. Empower communities to do things their way

3. Increase local control of public finance

4. Diversify the supply of public services

5. Open up government to public scrutiny

6. Strengthen accountability to local people

There are strong relationships between the localism agenda and Localism Bill and the recently published Open Public Services White Paper in relation to the fourth stage, 'diversify the supply of public services'[8] and several specific proposals within the Localism Bill that evidence from the Pathways through Participation project can help to illuminate. The community right to buy gives communities the power to prevent local assets (buildings and land) that belong to both public and private organisations from being closed down by bidding to take them over[9]. The community right to challenge gives communities a right of challenge to run local authority services. This means that local communities may be able to get more involved in the delivery of public services and shape them in a way that is hoped to better meet local preferences and needs[10]. Under changes to

2 See Section 1.4 of the full Pathways through Participation report for more on research approach and methodology.
3 HM Government (2011) Giving White Paper. Norwich: The Stationery Office.
4 For a full analysis of the Giving White Paper, see http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/NCVO_Policy_Analysis_OPSWP_for_web_final.pdf
5 and 6 See http://www.guardian.co.uk/voluntary-sector-network/2011/jun/08/government-white-paper-on-giving
7 HM Government (2010) Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: an essential guide. Norwich: The Stationery Office.
8 For a full analysis of the Open Public services White Paper, see: http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/NCVO_Policy_Analysis_OPSWP_for_web_final.pdf
9 HM Government (2010) Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: an essential guide. Norwich: The Stationery Office.

neighbourhood planning, the Localism Bill proposes major reforms to the planning system to give local people new rights to shape the development of the communities in which they live. This gives people the right to produce their own neighbourhood plans and proceed with development without the need for a planning application, and limits the powers of planning inspectors to re-write local plans.

Key findings about the decentralisation of power

The project gathered much evidence on the value, meaning and importance of **local services**. We encountered stories of local schools, a hospital, village hall and public swimming pool being mooted for closure and local residents taking action in the form of protests and lobbying to try to prevent this change from happening, sometimes with success. We also gathered evidence on the role that volunteers play in public services, with stories from volunteers in hospitals (e.g. running the hospital radio) and schools (e.g. being on the PTA).

The important facilitative or enabling function of **sites** of participation was evident with multi-purpose hubs like community centres providing spaces for groups to meet, fostering interaction between groups, supporting neighbourhood-level social networks, and linking different groups, organisations and activities. These sites came across as being particularly valuable resources for participants, and need support to function effectively.

We encountered one example in an area bordering one of our fieldwork areas where the local council planned to sell a redundant school building to a developer, to be converted into flats. In opposition, local residents formed a trust, which successfully bought the building to convert it into a social enterprise, including a community centre, incubator for small businesses, café and arts centre. This was, however, the exception rather than the rule: there was minimal evidence amongst the people we spoke to of a desire to take over local services and run community assets.

The research found that people take on many different **roles** in their participation activities, and that some people take on a higher level of responsibility than others. Sometimes people felt cajoled into taking on more responsibility and committing more time, and became stressed or burnt out. Others talked about not wanting to *'sit at the front and drive the bus'* – they preferred behind the scenes roles that did not involve leadership and management.

The emergence of a **local issue** that someone considers to be a priority can trigger them to start to participate. In general, our interviewees seemed more ready to become involved in local level public participation in order to preserve features of their locality rather than to change them, for example resisting knocking down buildings and tree felling. Amongst people who didn't consider themselves as particularly active participants or interested in public participation, a local planning issue was often the trigger for their involvement in the public realm. Whilst we spoke to several people who had a professional background in town planning and who knew the system and how to work it, for the most part, people learnt how to navigate the system when there was a local issue that was important enough to them .

Implications
- People need to have the resources – felt, learnt and practical – to be able to take on management and technical roles that owning community assets and designing and co-producing community services would require. The example given of the school being bought by a community trust depended upon residents in the area having developed a certain level of social capital and resources at their disposal to enable this to happen.

- Some areas that have weak levels of social capital may see public and private assets and services disappearing and not have the collective resources amongst the local population to challenge this[12]. There is the danger of widening gaps between better resourced and other areas.

- Whilst we encountered many examples of active community leaders and lynchpins, these people are often already over-committed. There is a limit to how much people can, and are willing, to take on. Over-stretching and over-relying on the already committed 'civic core'[13] that provide the majority of voluntary efforts raises a number of issues around sustainability, diversity and equality.

- Expecting people to take on roles and levels of responsibility that they aren't comfortable or familiar with can be counter-productive. A range of opportunities for involvement – from envelope stuffing to public speaking - need to be provided and promoted to appeal across people's personal preferences and to suit their other commitments and lifestyles.

- People need to be able to navigate the system as and when they need it – staying involved in public participation wasn't so common in our research because people usually get involved for a particular purpose to serve an end.

04 Further information

Detailed findings, the full report and other briefing papers are available on the Pathways through Participation website.

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project visit the website http://pathwaysthrough participation.org.uk/

Find out more about:

NCVO:
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR):
www.ivr.org.uk

Involve:
www.involve.org.uk

10 HM Government (2010) Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: an essential guide. Norwich: The Stationery Office.
11 For more information on how people get involved in public participation and engage with the mechanisms of democracy, see briefing paper on local engagement - http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/resources/briefing-papers
12 Clifford, D. (2011) Voluntary sector organisations working at the neighbourhood level: patterns by local area deprivation, Third Sector Research Centre Working Paper 65.
13 Mohan, J. (2011) Mapping the Big Society: perspective from the Third Sector Research Centre, Third Sector Research Centre Working Paper 62