

Creating greater value: participation in Milton Keynes



A review of citizen involvement in an English town

Kevin Harris and Bev Carter

A report by Local Level for **citizens:mk**, 2009

citizens:mk



Local-Level.org.uk

'We need to create greater value from the connections popular participation creates between public services, civil society and our structures of democratic representation.'

Skidmore and Craig, 2005

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Introduction

This is the report of a research project about social and civic participation in Milton Keynes. Local Level were asked by **citizens:mk** to take a snapshot of participation activity in the town, and to reflect on what was learned, with particular consideration given to social exclusion and perceived *barriers* to involvement. For a description of what we mean by 'participation' please see section 2 below. The work was carried out by Bev Carter and Kevin Harris between April and June 2009.

What was the project about?

We worked with a range of groups and residents to explore what 'participation' means in contemporary Milton Keynes. We were asking: to what extent do people get involved in groups, campaigns and activities, what motivates them and what are the disincentives?

Since it is not possible in a project of this kind to be comprehensive in coverage, or to speak to more than a small proportion of those who might have views to offer, we chose to work with a selection of local groups, interviewed some key individuals and carried out a small questionnaire survey.

As outsiders with experience of participation, empowerment and community development in a range of localities, our approach has been to provide 'interpretive expertise'. By this we mean that we have listened to as many people as we could in the time available, using workshop techniques to bring participation issues to the surface and explore them; and then tried to apply our experience from elsewhere in interpreting what we have learned.

As a consequence, this report certainly should not be regarded as a definitive statement on participation in Milton Keynes, but as a snapshot with some issues highlighted for their potential significance. This report is part of the process of 'playing back' what we think we have found. We invite residents of Milton Keynes to consider how the issues reflect their experience, and to discuss collaborative ways forward with **citizens:mk**.



citizens:mk is an alliance of active citizens and community leaders convened to organise for positive change in Milton Keynes. Members of the alliance include faith groups, schools, students, union branches, older people's groups, ethnic and resident groups. Members of **citizens:mk** will share a commitment to action, working together for the common good. **Citizens:mk** will be conducting community leadership and citizenship training for our membership.

For more information please visit www.citizensmk.org.uk.

2. Participation and society

For this project we adopted a broad understanding of participation. This is based on the need perceived by **citizens:mk** and many others (including government) to increase the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes. In what follows we first offer a brief review of the policy significance; we then go on to summarise the breadth encompassed by the notion of 'participation'; and explain why we place some stress on 'social participation'.

Why does participation matter?

Our society is sometimes described as a 'post-welfare' society. This means that we are moving away from a time when the citizen could simply depend on the state to maintain extensive welfare services in return for a passive contribution in the form of taxes.

Sometimes this policy agenda is referred to as 'responsibilisation' – the process of encouraging citizens *to take greater responsibility for the decision-making processes that affect them*. This relates to the idea of *empowerment* – giving people more power to influence what happens to them and around them.

This agenda is important for a number of reasons. If authorities take decisions with the demonstrable support of the people affected by those decisions, then what happens is more likely to be acceptable to everyone and the benefits more sustainable.

Participation has been shown to contribute to good mental health, just as feeling *disempowered* in your day-to-day life can have negative effects and contribute to depression. Participating in social and civic

What does the national picture look like?

Headline figures from the most recent *Citizenship survey* (April 2007 - March 2008) show that just 38% of respondents felt able to influence decisions in their local area whilst only 39% of people were involved in some kind of civic participation such as attending a public meeting, signing a local petition or contacting a local councillor.³

The 2009 *Hansard audit of political engagement* suggests that people's level of satisfaction with the system of government and their belief in the efficacy of political action is 'in slow but steady decline'.⁴

A 2008 report on empowerment for the government, by Ipsos-MORI, noted:

'The evidence suggests a spectrum of interest, with only a very small minority at one end who want to be actively involved, a larger minority at the other end who have no interest at all, with most in the middle.'⁵

In 2007 the Henley Centre devised a 'segmentation' of public attitudes to engagement, suggesting that -

36% of us are '**community bystanders**' (least likely to be

¹ Wilson *et al.* (2009).

² Harris (2008).

³ CLG (2008).

⁴ Hansard Society (2009), p49.

⁵ Duffy *et al.* (2008).

activities with other people can bring the benefits of mutuality - shared experience, information, skills, useful contacts and so on.

Recent international research has shown that levels of local social support (such as through family, school, neighbourhood, religion, and extra-curricular activities) are strongly correlated with the development of altruistic (or 'pro-social') behaviour.¹ People behave pro-socially towards one another where they perceive social support to be accessible around them.

Further, the notion of an 'enfolding community',² rather than just a single source of support, is significant. The researchers note that altruistic behaviour appears to require social support from multiple sources.

They also found that the most pro-social participants in their study live in high quality but relatively low-income neighbourhoods - areas that are looked-after but where residents have needs that can be met collectively.

Low levels of participation across society could give rise to divisions as our population continues to become more diverse. Lack of involvement in civic affairs will also weaken democratic representation, providing opportunities for extremist groups and thereby creating instability:

'Unless we become a nation of engaged citizens, our democracy is not secure.'⁷

Finally, participation can be seen as a human right that campaigners of the past have struggled to claim, sometimes dying in the process. It would be irresponsible to allow its practise to fall into disuse through lethargy. Adopting and re-asserting that right is not just legitimate but is a responsible form of behaviour which enables many other things to happen. Ruth Lister puts it like this:

'The right of participation is a crucial human and citizenship right because it underpins the effective realisation of other rights... To act as a citizen requires a sense of agency, the belief that one can act and effect change; acting as a citizen, especially collectively in solidarity with others, in turn fosters that sense of agency.'⁸

participating even at a passive level)

33% are '**passive participators**' (passive participation in 'easy' activities such as socialising with neighbours and attending school events)

16% are '**community conscious**' (Likely to organise local community activities and take part in voluntary or charity work)

8% are '**politically engaged**' (more likely to attend community and planning or consultation meetings); and

7% are '**active protestors**' (most likely to write to a newspaper or MP and canvas for a political party).⁶

⁶ Harrison, M. and M. Singer (2007).

⁷ Lord Chancellor cited in Citizenship Advisory Group (1998), p8.

⁸ Lister (2007), p440.

What do we mean by 'participation'?

Participation, engagement, involvement and empowerment have been the subjects of a great deal of research, debate and policy. A broad range of 'pro-social' behaviour is implied by these terms. They may cover, for instance, the following:

- Individual activity in the collective interest, or asserting one's right to have a say – such as writing a letter to a newspaper, voting, making ethical consumer choices, recycling waste etc.
- Inter-personal (one-to-one) activity and informal volunteering – such as being a carer, or looking after someone else's children for a few hours after school – and formal volunteering (for example helping out at a day centre on a regular basis).
- Looking out for neighbours – perhaps checking on an elderly neighbour when they may be housebound during bad weather.
- Taking part in group activities such as scouts or guides, a local drama club, music, sport or faith group activities.
- Information sharing – passing on 'gossip' about local issues, maintaining social networks, contributing to local online discussions.
- Organisational roles, for example being responsible for some aspect of a festival or sporting event, or running a pub quiz.
- Community and civic decision making – being a school governor, serving on a community forum, residents' group, primary care trust, parish council and so on.
- Citizen opinion – attending public meetings, signing a petition, responding to consultations, providing feedback to service providers, writing to local newspaper.
- Political activity – taking part in a demonstration, membership of a political party, distributing information for a political party, and so on.
- Making use of civic and social amenities, for example libraries, parks, community centres, public transport.

A broad categorisation, ranging from the more informal to the more structured forms of participation with much overlap between them, might look like this:

personal or friendship activities - community - civic – political.

Of course, it is possible to behave *anti*-socially while using public transport, for instance; just as it is possible to behave maliciously while sharing local information, or while being a carer. The point here is not to claim that all such behaviour is necessarily participative or pro-social, but to clarify the range of activities that can and do make a contribution to collective quality of life.

This idea of 'collective quality of life' is what many people mean when they refer to a 'sense of community' or 'community spirit'. It acknowledges an essential degree of human mutuality; and that the interests of all

members of society – even those who do not participate - can be served by collective behaviour. And it is surely what motivated one of our questionnaire respondents, when asked to tell us what local issues concerned them most, to write:

'Need for deeper understanding of other faiths, culture, interests, feelings.'

Where do you start?

If we were to try to measure levels of participation in Milton Keynes using something like the categories listed above, we would expect to find that participation in *social* activities was far more prevalent than participation in *civic* or *political* activities,⁹ in terms of numbers involved or hours committed. An important Australian study¹⁰ found very low levels of civic and political participation as distinguished from social participation. This applied to individual behaviour but even more so to *collective* forms of civic participation (less than 6% of the sample).

A definition of civic participation is provided in the 2008 *Place survey*¹¹ (this was devised for statistical purposes):

'being involved in any of the following in the preceding 12 months:
being a local councillor (for the local authority, town or parish);
being a member of a group making local decisions relating to any of the following: local health or education services;
regeneration of the local area; to tackle local crime problems; a tenants group; services for young people; any other group making decisions on services in the local community.'

This is understandable when we reflect that civic and political participation often requires particular knowledge and skills at or near the point of entry. You need some understanding of politics and public affairs before you start:

'if you don't know the rules of the game and the players and you don't care about the outcome you're unlikely to try playing yourself.'¹²

This point reminds us of the gaping lack of practical political education in contemporary society. As one commentator puts it,

'Our system of government is based on democratic decision-making, yet there is very little education or training to help people learn how to take part... If you want to improve society through politics, it can be very hard to learn the ropes.'¹³

Furthermore, common sense - and research - suggests that as far as *local* civic and political action is concerned, a healthy level of *social* participation

⁹ Such as serving on a resident action group, or membership of a trade union or political party.

¹⁰ Baum *et al.* (2000), p423.

¹¹ CLG (2009).

¹² Putnam (2000), p35.

¹³ Alexander (2007), p28-29.

is needed as a basis. It can also help if there is some form of adversity facing local people. A summary of European-wide studies concluded that:

'Participation with the aim of improving the neighborhood seems to be fostered most by a lively social environment and having a problem to tackle.'¹⁴

Similarly, detailed research in three cities in the USA found that

'the more individuals and blocks get involved in helping their neighbors, informally or through religious or other service organizations, the more they also get involved in grassroots community action.'¹⁵

Three points follow from this. First, more people are likely to engage in a discussion *about* participation if it is clearly understood to include some kind of informal social engagement. The study by Baum and colleagues asked about visiting or being visited by family or friends at least once a month and recorded, unsurprisingly, over 80% for each category.¹⁶ This suggests that most people will readily think about and begin talking about participation if we start with the idea of getting together with family, friends or neighbours.

Secondly, it is not unrealistic to discuss forms of participation in terms of a range which is progressive - from the most informal (*eg* dinner-time conversations in the household; 'what would you like to do at the weekend?') to the most structured and institutionalised (*eg* parliament). This is not to suggest that there is a natural and acceptable separation of the 'community' from the political sphere: we comment on the need for stronger connections between the two in section 11 below. Nor is it to imply that people necessarily have to progress up a hierarchy one step at a time. But it does give us a useful framework for thinking about participation as a process that is pertinent to us all.

Thirdly, distinguishing between informal engagement and participation through organisations does not imply that one is more important than the other, nor are they mutually exclusive. Healthy, self-supporting societies will invest in both. Informal engagement tends to generate companionship, emotional support, interaction with peers, in-group trust, sharing of opinion and sense of belonging. On the other hand, time spent developing civic skills through involvement in organisations is more demanding but fosters responsibility for tasks, experience in relating to authorities, teamwork, leadership and pride in community. It's also the case that not all time spent in organisational activities is formal – plenty of social interaction takes place as well.¹⁷

On this theoretical basis we developed two simple workshop devices, described in section 3 below: the 'democracy wall' and the 'participation spectrum'. The first gave us opportunities to talk about participants' personal experiences of democracy in their lives; the second helped people to place their experience or understanding of participation in relation to the wider society.

¹⁴ Dekker and Van Kempen (2008), p81.

¹⁵ Perkins *et al.* (1996), p106.

¹⁶ Baum *et al.* (2000).

¹⁷ Green and Brock (2005).

How does Milton Keynes compare nationally?

In June 2009 the Department for Communities and Local Government published results from the 2008 *Place survey*. The survey collects information on 18 national indicators (NIs) for local government, used to measure local government performance in England,¹⁸ and the results show that in many respects Milton Keynes compares well with the rest of the country. The key questions and figures for the present study are reproduced here.

Question	MK	England
Generally speaking would you like to be more involved in the decisions that affect your local area?	29%	27%
% very or fairly satisfied with how council runs things	49%	45%
% who agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together (NI 1)	76%	76%
% who feel they belong to their immediate neighbourhood (NI 2)	52%	59%
% who have been involved in decisions that affect the local area in the past 12 months (NI 3)	13%	14%
% who agree that they can influence decisions in their local area (NI 4)	33%	29%
% who are satisfied with their local area as a place to live (NI 5)	83%	80%
% who have given unpaid help at least once per month over the last 12 months (NI 6)	23%	23%

As from February 2009, the Local Area Agreement (LAA) for Milton Keynes has a target for NI 1 ('people who agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together') of 79% by 2010-2011.¹⁹ Notably perhaps, NI 2, 3 and 4 (which are concerned with belonging, involvement and influence) are not included by the LAA for performance targets. However, indicators for participation in sport (children, young people and adults) and engagement in the arts, have been chosen.

¹⁸ A summary of the headline results is available here:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/placesurvey2008>.

The tables are here:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/xls/1262515.xls>.

See also CLG (2009).

¹⁹ See *Milton Keynes LAA proposed targets*, February 2009,

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/9656869>.

3. Methodologies

Listen, interpret, play back

As outsiders, we were invited in to Milton Keynes, to coax stories from participants and to help with the interpretation of these stories.

Our first task in this project was to encourage people to speak about their perceptions and experiences of participation. To that end, our approach needed to be flexible and creative, and could not claim detached objectivity. Clearly a rigid methodology could be counter-productive: strictly adhering to a predefined set of questions might work for one group of people, but be very off-putting for another. In order to stimulate conversation, we had to demonstrate familiarity with the themes, if not the context.

Some of the people we spoke to had considered and ready-formulated views on the issues, whereas others (such as the younger of two groups of school students) had spent little if any time discussing them. In addition, members of several groups (Bangladeshi, Malaysian and Somali residents) felt less confident with the English language and it was essential to take sensitive account of this. Furthermore, it was important to ensure a participative style which stimulated debate, and for all voices to be heard when possible.

We ran eight workshops with a variety of groups, including older people, young people excluded from school, women's groups and minority ethnic groups. We attended a children's nursery and spoke to some of the mothers, all of them Asian: because of the context and time of day it was not possible for this to become a workshop, instead it evolved into a series of interviews involving between one and three people at a time. During the project we also interviewed five individuals separately, and distributed a simple two-page questionnaire, receiving 158 responses.

The questionnaire was distributed through contacts, given to workshop participants, and in some cases completed with a participant as the basis for a short one-to-one discussion. The questionnaire is provided as Appendix A.

In the workshops we used two main devices, described below.

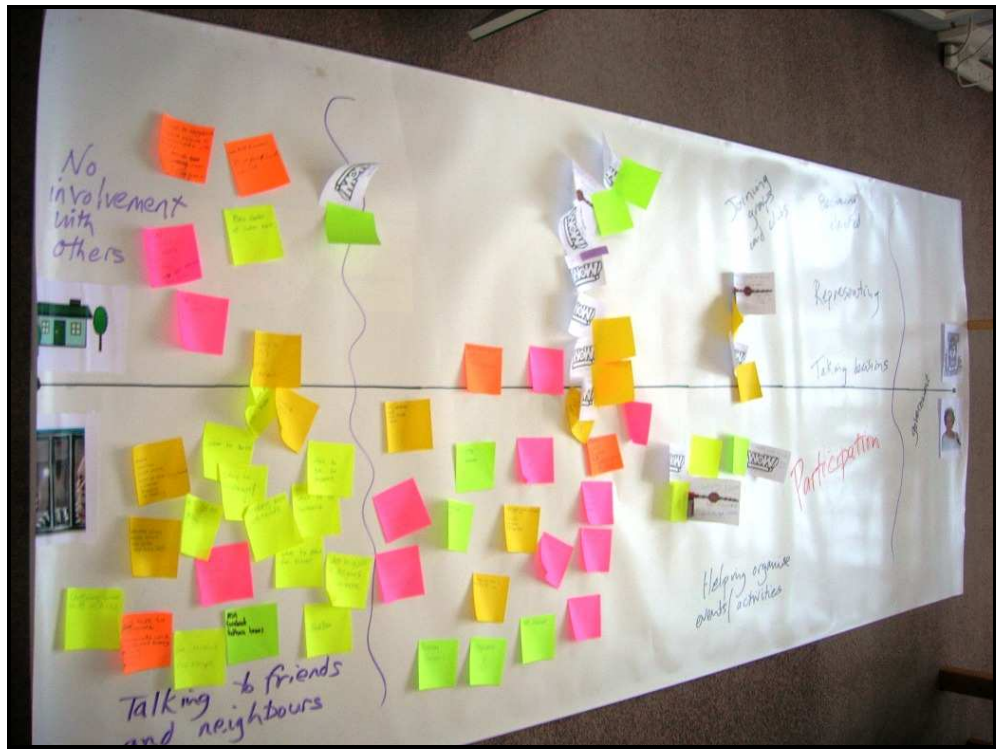
Exploring democracy

In most of the workshops we began by inviting people to consider their earliest, or most distinctive, experience of democracy. The purpose here was to stimulate a few shared stories which got people thinking about democracy in their everyday lives. The examples that arose illustrated how democracy means far more than the mechanics of voting, because it accumulates to form a confidence-giving bedrock of trust for everyday interaction.



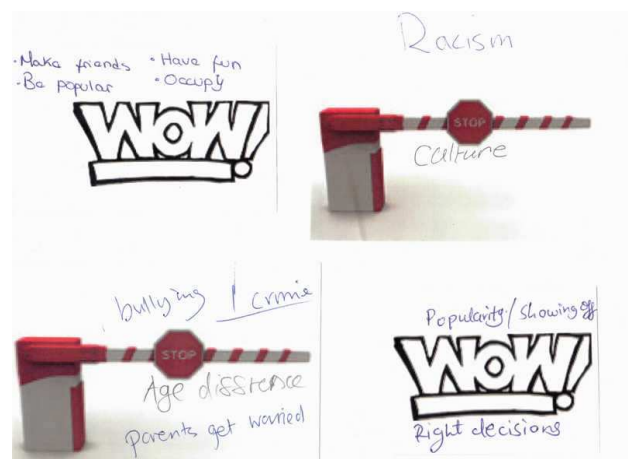
The spectrum of participation

In order to encourage participants to reflect on their experience or understanding of participation in relation to the wider society, we discussed the contrast between a person who has little contact with others around them, and someone whose participation in public life makes them highly visible. Usually this range was represented by a recluse (depicted in a house with the curtains drawn) at one end and the prime minister at the other end. For some groups, particularly the school students, we spent some time exploring this range, because it provided a context in which different kinds of participation could be viewed and discussed.



For example, young people were able to reflect on their relations with their neighbours and others in their area, and show how these related to other kinds of participative action such as being in a sports club. Older people who were active on committees or area forums could place this more formal civic involvement further along the spectrum.

In the case of the school groups we also used 'Barrier' cards and 'Benefit' cards, once we had all been discussing the topic for a while. The participants annotated these and added them to the spectrum sheet, recording what they felt to be barriers and benefits of participation.



Maps

At various times we produced a map of Milton Keynes, to stimulate thinking about local issues.

The young people used post-its on the map to locate their experience of social participation. The group of Bangladeshi young mothers pointed out where they lived, so that we were able to invent scenarios - the local park becoming unsafe to use or a planned motorway extension running through their back gardens. This stimulated discussion about how they and their neighbours would respond collectively to a threat.



Play back

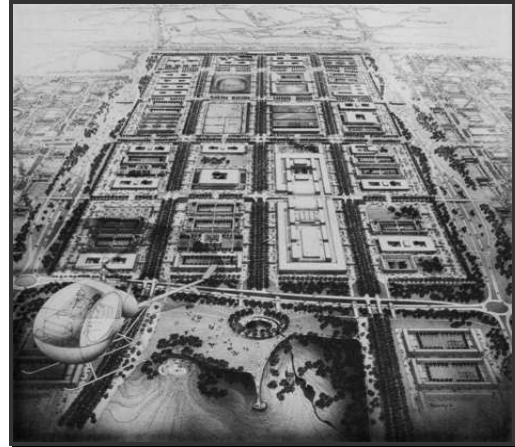
Finally, having assessed the material that we had accumulated and come up with some tentative messages, we facilitated a meeting organised by **citizens:MK**. About 30 people attended. The purposes of the meeting were (a) for us to 'play back' our interpretation of what we had heard, giving participants an opportunity to reflect on the issues collectively before they became cemented into a report; and (b) to begin the process whereby **citizens:MK** assumes ownership of the messages.

4. Place and belonging

It would not have been realistic to bring any town planning expertise into this project. But because the spatial design of Milton Keynes is distinctive and has been much-studied, it may be helpful to offer some reflections here on the possibility that the town's built form has an effect on participation.

Milton Keynes was designed as a new town in the 1960s linking and overlaying several existing towns and villages, and using a grid pattern with approximately 1 kilometre intervals.

This maximum distance to main roads, walkable for most people, reflects the planners' aspiration to promote bus use as well as car use. It also offers a theoretical human scale for community settlement – the 1km grid squares were intended as semi-autonomous communities with their own local facilities, arguably obviating the need for a traditional retail and residential town centre. Central Milton Keynes is a business, retail and administrative district.



In 2007 the population of the borough of Milton Keynes was 228,450, having grown from approximately 60,000 in 1967. The projected population by 2011 is 237,650.

The road network is augmented with a network of 'redways' – cycle and pedestrian paths which pass under or over most of the roads, effecting a distinct separation of motorist from other people moving about the town. From the comments we received, written and spoken, there was no clear consensus either on the quality of the bus service or the perceived safety of the redways. We heard more negative comments than positive ones, about both: for example

"Red ways" security - makes places separate.

It's noteworthy that in the government's recent *Place survey*²⁰, satisfaction with local bus services in Milton Keynes was a mere 31%, compared with 55% for England as a whole.

Critically, the spatial design of Milton Keynes was related to modernist theories of planning which assumed that by the second half of the twentieth century, the idea of neighbourhood was dead. The influential theorist Melvin Webber wrote of the primacy of 'community without propinquity' and described what he envisaged as the 'non-place urban realm'.²¹ Forty-five years later, in spite of a revolution in telecommunications affecting the constitution of social networks for

²⁰ CLG (2009).

²¹ Webber (1964). According to *Wikipedia* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melvin_Webber) the chief architect of Milton Keynes described Webber as 'the father of the city.'

almost all of us, people feel that 'non-places' have not been successful in sustaining social life. Place still matters, and the prescribed 'non-place' planning has been called into question. One of our workshop participants claimed:

'You had neighbours who you wouldn't mix with if you were dying. It was theory-led, they had this theory that everyone had to mix together and it wasn't going to work.'

One review of the community mobilisers service (a community development programme working with children, young people and families across Milton Keynes) puts this reflection into a policy context:

'Historically it is now appreciated that much of the social development work of the MK Development Corporation was compromised because workers were withdrawn from high need estates when physical rather than social development was complete.'²²

Against that, it's important to point out that several people told us that they moved to Milton Keynes because they were attracted by the clean environment and sense of order. Furthermore, there was no over-crowding, at least in the town's early years. There may be a trade-off between an ordered environment and low sociability, which is attractive to some people.

Most visitors to Milton Keynes are likely to be struck by the relative freedom of movement for cars on the roads, compared with other English towns and cities; the relative sameness of the ordered, manicured landscape as perceived from those roads – and hence the poor legibility of the environment; and perhaps the lack of a sense of centre. In what follows we reflect on two themes for the present study: the effects on collective behaviour of an environment designed primarily for travel by car; and the sense of place and belonging.

Has interaction been designed-out?

The spatial design of Milton Keynes is suited to structured, organised interactions – attendance at appointments across town for example. Moving about the town is relatively easy and timing predictable. The layout seems to be much less-suited to *unstructured encounters*, like street-corner serendipity.

This has great significance for two reasons. First, because it is easy for the volume of local encounters to drop below a certain level, after which neighbourhood life is hard to sustain. This in turn bodes ill for social and civic participation over the long term. Secondly, when our social networks depend strongly on structured arrangements, we tend to meet with people who are like us, rather than with people from different backgrounds. Around any town with a diverse population, higher levels of serendipitous encounters will tend to promote cohesion and integration: but in Milton Keynes it seems possible that a healthy level of such encounters has been designed-out. This may (partly) explain why, for example, several

²² Milton Keynes Children's Service (undated).

representatives of minority ethnic groups told us of racist remarks directed at them from people in buses and passing cars. We discuss integration further in section 5 below.

The spatial design of the town could also have had a critical and divisive effect on the sociability of young people. In this environment, those whose parents proactively encourage them to participate in social activities will find themselves driven by car, out of their own neighbourhood, a great deal of the time. They are sometimes referred to as the 'backseat generation'. For those that remain, the informal social and cultural environment is correspondingly impoverished. US research on 'over-scheduling' and participation concludes:

'Of greater concern than the over-scheduling of youth in organized activities is the fact that many youth do not participate at all. The well-being of youth who do not participate in organized activities is reliably less positive compared to youth who do participate.'²³

The planned layout of Milton Keynes was always likely to affect young people's 'home range'. If we define this in terms of the distance from home that a child of a given age is permitted to be out on their own, or seeks to be of their own accord, we would expect it to be lower in Milton Keynes than it might be in other large towns or inner city areas.

This matters because if children are not consistently occupying the public realm, they are less likely to learn the norms that serve to moderate interaction with other social groups. This in turn will constrain their readiness to participate in activities beyond their own known circle.

'Children's experiences in and of public space may be viewed as a reflection of the level of trust developed in a locality and the degree to which common norms, values and reciprocity have been established.'²⁴

We discuss the involvement of young people in section 8 below.

Sense of belonging: the importance of the local

In one of our workshop exercises a participant wrote:

'Some estates - empty for work - lonely for those left'

There is a perception that suburban estates leave people vulnerable to isolation, unless that is either the individual's preference or they 'make an effort'. In a seminal study of suburban Australia, Lyn Richards records 'the clear implication that civic effort is rewarded by belonging.'²⁵ Richards found that her respondents sought a 'sense of community' much less than they desired families and homes, leaving neighbouring as a 'residual relationship' and raising the possibility that those attracted to suburban estates are fundamentally less inclined to social and civic participation.

The statistics do not contradict this: the proportion of Milton Keynes residents who feel that they belong to their immediate neighbourhood (52 per cent) is well below the national average (59 per cent). We were told

²³ Mahoney et al (2006), p1.

²⁴ Weller and Bruegel (2009), p631.

²⁵ Richards (1990), p57.

that in the early years people were moving to the town often not from choice, but because their companies were moving there and they were following their jobs. Often this meant a detachment from the extended family and subsequently a sense of resentment about flawed theories:

'they tried to force people into getting on together and of course it didn't work.'

To the extent that sense of attachment is a function of spatial design, it may be important to distinguish between the layout of the town as a whole and the character of individual neighbourhoods. In all our discussions across the town we were puzzled by this key missing element: *the sense of the local*. A detailed study of participation in the USA found that residents of 'well-defined and bounded' communities were much more likely to be involved in local affairs.²⁶ What people seem to be lacking is not association with Milton Keynes, but association with a defined, distinctive neighbourhood which offers them something to be proud of, to develop and defend. As we discuss in section 9 below, one valuable and inexpensive way of nurturing this may be through neighbourhood online networks.

At the same time, we should caution against placing too much emphasis on the notion of belonging. Research suggests that the sense of attachment to place is not strongly correlated with neighbourhood ties, readiness to take action against anti-social behaviour, or low levels of crime.²⁷ People might express a low level of attachment to their neighbourhood but still practice neighbourly behaviour. Conversely, where we find high levels of attachment to a locality it's quite possible that there is not much social participation going on.

In its most positive form, sense of belonging may be regarded as a collective sense of positive identification with place, which combines shared memories of the past with visions of the future, and acknowledges the problems of an area. Susan Saegert describes this attitude among older black women running co-ops in apartment buildings in Harlem as

'woven together by durable, multifaceted social ties and activities centered in the neighborhood'.

Saegert says that those who began to organise collectively against this adversity, or were involved by others,

'used their attachment to guide their actions and engage others in their efforts. Thus place attachment became a component of place making that reinforced further attachment.'

By contrast, those residents who were not linked to others in this way, tended to harbour a nostalgic sense of attachment to their neighbourhood and this merged with a sense of futility in their own lives.²⁸

This brief review suggests that there *is* a connection between the spatial design of Milton Keynes and residents' expressed sense of belonging. This emerged in people's views on participation, as a sensed lack of localness and of physical detachment between neighbourhoods.

²⁶ Verba and Nie (1974).

²⁷ See Harris (2006), p68 for a summary.

²⁸ Saegert (1989), p308-309.

5. Integration

Why integration matters

We live in an increasingly diverse society, within which social groups (such as ethnic groups) naturally tend to cluster for mutual support and to take advantage of their common culture. However, if these groups do not integrate *at some level*, in order to share the tasks of maintaining the ecology of democracy, then however high the levels of participation are *within* groups, the quality of social life generally will be vulnerable.

Milton Keynes is home to representatives of numerous ethnic cultures. Since 1999 the number of dialects and languages spoken in the city has risen from 35 to 66, with more than 30 first languages spoken. With regard to participation, there is no reason why this diversity in itself should be problematic. European-wide research claims that:

'the percentage of ethnic minorities in a neighborhood does not influence the participation rate...

'contrary to the assumptions of many policymakers, concentrations of ethnic minorities do not necessarily have a negative effect on participation.'²⁹

However it is not clear from this research to what extent the participation is taking place *within* defined groups, or to what extent representatives of minority groups are involved in wider cross-cultural initiatives. Our discussions about participation in Milton Keynes raised questions about the promotion of integration for participation, which we explore in this section of the report.

Recently reported research into the integration of refugee groups in the West Midlands found that connections between people from different backgrounds did occur, but 'at an informal, individual and superficial level without leading to meaningful relationships across difference or attitude changes':

'Bonded cultural groups did provide the base and support for wider contacts to be made... but only at an information not collaboration level.'³⁰

This finding may be a useful reality check for us. In section 9 below we offer examples of internal informal support within the Bengali and Somali communities, to illustrate cultural differences in participation.

In this project we were only able to speak to a small proportion of people from minority ethnic groups, but in various ways we were given the messages that integration is felt to be problematic, racism is re-emerging, and lack of confidence with the English language is an obstacle to integration.

²⁹ Dekker and Van Kempen (2008), p76, 79.

³⁰ Daley (2009), p163.

'If you try to communicate they want a fight'

Several participants emphasised that there is much that is positive about inter-ethnic relations in Milton Keynes. One interviewee said:

'I've lived in Milton Keynes my whole life and never seen a racial incident. Milton Keynes embraces different cultures'.

Another respondent wrote:

'There's a good community feel, very multicultural'. (Questionnaire response)

And in a workshop group one participant, reflecting the issue of in-group and between-group involvement, wrote:

'BME communities do a lot of volunteering in their own communities - but find it difficult to break into other forums.'

This concern to diversify participation was echoed in another workshop exercise:

'We need to involve "unlikely people."'

So at one level we might say there is a degree of reassurance and commitment, as far as integration for participation is concerned.

By way of contrast, we heard numerous stories of racist behaviour which risk blowing a cold draught of futility over efforts at multicultural participation. Several participants in the school workshops referred to racist neighbours or encounters. One of the Somali women had lived in the Coffee Hall area before moving to Conniburrow, and described experiences of racial harassment there. She knew that Conniburrow was more culturally diverse and that Somali people lived there:

'In Coffee Hall there were problems with disruptive teenagers getting into drugs. I had eggs thrown at my windows and doors, they stoned my brother's car and if you try to communicate they want a fight'.

We also discussed playground interaction among parents. One woman said:

'I want to interact and be friendly to white British people but there's been many times when I have approached mums in the school playground, said hello and they have turned their back on me. After a while you give up.'

In a more sinister development, a teacher described how Ghanaian girls practise clear self-segregation along ethnic lines within school, 'sometimes in a quite aggressive manner'. It's a potent example because language has nothing to do with it: apparently they all speak English. What are the issues of community identity that drive such defiance against available cultural diversity? Potentially it could stifle people's willingness to take participative opportunities except in the most closed and secure situations.

Integration by participation

Lack of language skills and confidence (discussed in section 9 below) are clearly constraints on cross-cultural participation. It's possible that some groups feel they are required to conform more fully to the norms of British society, before they become active participants in integrated social arenas.

Recent research among British Arab activists shows that some immigrants are ready to participate actively in their society of settlement, while rejecting the idea that

'integration requires cultural conformity or exclusive loyalty to Britain'.³¹

For these activists, integration is seen in terms of 'a dialogue between distinctive but equal groups sharing a given place' - a useful platform for participation on issues of mutual interest with other groups.

This seems a promising direction for policy and practice, suggesting the need to explore more purposefully the conditions in which minority groups will engage on 'extra-community' issues. The terms of this engagement are not always easily defined. As Anne Phillips points out:

'When oppressed groups are called upon to put their own partial interests aside - to address the shared concerns of all humanity, to think beyond their own interests and needs - this injunction can lock them into the very structures they are trying to dislodge.'³²

A recent study of Somali refugees and asylum seekers in Denmark and the UK (Sheffield) clarifies the fundamental importance of a sense of stability and security in order to understand what integration means to immigrant groups:

'For the Sheffield Somalis integration is about a commitment to the place-based community where they live; it does not require them to adopt the cultural membership of Britishness, nor does it require them to deny their transnational affiliations.'

'It is the very possibility of achieving integration by participating in the places where they live without having to deny their transnational affiliations as Somali and as Muslim which gives migrant groups... the security to feel they belong.'³³

Support for integration

It's also possible that some of the dominant voluntary agencies are not helping to promote integration, even among the willing. One minority ethnic respondent, who chose to volunteer when she suffered a physical disability, wrote to us about her experience of voluntary agencies:

'It did not take me long to find out that they wanted me on the committee but would not trust me with any interesting work. As I

³¹ Nagel and Staeheli (2008), p415.

³² Phillips (1995), p147.

³³ Valentine *et al* (2009), p246, 247.

had to give up work I tried hard to get into various voluntary organisations offering my services for free just for the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile. To cut a long story short, I have always had to prove myself, sell my services hard and push myself into some roles none would like. This pushing oneself hard, selling one's skills and experience for an outcome of insults is not everyone's cup of tea.

'Charities begging for volunteers do not seem to realise that members of BME communities do not necessarily want to work with BME members. I have been told several times that they could not give me any volunteering roles because they did not have any BME demand, until I proved Caucasians were just as happy with my work.

'Agencies using volunteers as well as employers seem to think all similar looking people are the same. So, they club together all Africans, brown skinned people etc, no matter where they are from, thinking they would be happy working together. As one African friend of mine put it, these people calling themselves clever do not realise that someone from Somalia can be as different from someone from Nigeria as an Italian from an Englishman.'

It's apparent from experience and research that neither integration nor participation will happen by themselves. A key message that we heard is that groups' efforts to integrate are inadequately supported by public and voluntary agencies:

'I love Milton Keynes and it's nice, but there are no solicitors that speak Somali, no universities, and no help with integration'.

The extension of this message is that integration as a community development process takes time, and there are other forces working in the opposite direction. The study of refugee integration, quoted above, suggests that:

'positive cohesion across difference does not necessarily happen at a local level without practical community intervention and can be a difficult and long-term process.'³⁴

³⁴ Daley (2009), p166.

6. Key trusted individuals

In this section we will draw attention to three categories of trusted individuals whose roles seem to have been influential in promoting participative behaviour in Milton Keynes.

The first category comprises workers within the care system. In one of the workshops we ran with young mothers, most participants had a story to tell about a professional from a support agency – midwife, community health worker, crèche worker and so on – who had made a suggestion which they had acted on. These were contacts associated with early parenthood: having a baby or a toddler narrows the distance between citizen and institutions, and numerous rewarding connections can result. It might have been the suggestion of an agency to visit, a contact to call, a volunteering opportunity to follow up.

The participants felt that even as young mothers with fairly structured days and limited energy, they owed their status as active citizens to the directions of these trustworthy workers within the care system. It's worth pointing out that the role of these professionals is very much oriented towards the individual – usually the child – and their broader contribution to collective involvement is seldom recognised. It raises the question as to how systematically other professionals involved in intervention (not just in health and care, but others such as community police support or housing officers for example) might recommend available options to individuals with whom they have contact.

The second category is recognised leaders with distinct constituencies. Participants in the Bangladeshi group we worked with had a very clear sense of the importance of leadership. We asked participants what they would do in the case where their local park became unsafe or dangerous. We also asked what they knew of practice in the areas of Bangladesh from which their families came. In both cases the response was leader-oriented: speak to the community leader(s), the leaders call a meeting, residents would go and listen and might offer views. The process was reassuring to people and they were clearly comfortable with such a hierarchy.

The third category comprises what we call 'connected citizens'. These people often hold or have held some official status such as teacher, faith leader, police or council officer, and use the range of connections they have established and their reputation for pro-social behaviour to contribute to the connectedness of others. They are commonly involved in identifying other pivotal people who can get things done, or helping to recruit participants for some cause or other. This category is well-represented within **citizens:mk**.

In the present study we were struck by the relative significance of this range of trustworthy individuals. When we spoke to people about how they had got involved in a given initiative, reference was frequently made back to someone who had suggested a fruitful connection to talk to, a course to sign up for or an agency to visit. Some inter-related questions arise:

- Is there a risk of burn-out from over-demand on such individuals, and if so what can be done about it?
- How to increase the supply of such people? Where are the gaps? For example, are there enough active people who have skills in languages other than English, helping to direct people to participatory opportunities?
- What are the optimum conditions for them to pass on the baton to others? (For example, does perceived bureaucracy deter likely substitutes?)
- Can communications technology be exploited to increase their effectiveness?
- How can they best be supported by community workers and the local authority so that they are comfortable and effective in their role, are given appropriate recognition and can access training and guidance?
- What relationship do these people have to other decision making structures and are they known by officers and councillors? Do they feel they are recognised and appreciated for the work they do?

7. People who experience exclusion

The more unequal a society is, the poorer the quality of social relations will be. Evidence about trust, community life and violence shows that inequality leads to divisions, which in turn weaken and erode social structures.³⁵

This social truth applies to participation. If there are clear inequalities among the social groups that contribute or do not contribute to decision-making processes (reflecting patterns of exclusion and resulting in participation elites, for instance), sooner or later that becomes problematic. It is problematic not just for the individuals and groups concerned but for society as a whole and for the body politic.

As mentioned in section 2 above, Milton Keynes scores higher than average for the country on the national indicator for empowerment and participation (known as 'NI 4').³⁶ Nonetheless two-thirds of the town's adult population do not claim to be able to influence decisions affecting their local area. When efforts are made to try and increase the proportion of those who feel empowered, do they include efforts to engage with people who experience exclusion?

If we were simply trying to come up with an acceptable proportion of people who can influence processes – say 50% – we would be inclined to target people who might be indifferent but are relatively empowered, and seek to engage and persuade them so that they *do* feel they can influence things.

However, if policy is seeking to strengthen democracy by equalising empowerment, it has to address the sense of detachment and disengagement from processes that characterises the lives of the most excluded people.

So while **citizens:mk** has to remain realistic in its objectives, it is not only responsible but also wholly appropriate to explore levels of, and barriers to, participation, among people who experience the most complex exclusion.

We sought to take this into account in the present study. Unfortunately a workshop with women who experience exclusion, organised for us by Women and Work³⁷, had to be abandoned because there were no participants, which illustrates precisely the issues we need to explore. Our reflections here are mainly based on comments made by several interviewees, including a representative of Women and Work, and from a workshop with young people excluded from school, organised for us by Countec.³⁸

³⁵ Wilkinson and Pickett (2009).

³⁶ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/xls/1262515.xls>.

³⁷ <http://www.womenandwork.co.uk/>.

³⁸ <http://www.countec.org/index.asp>.

The experience of exclusion

The need to connect with those who experience exclusion was reflected in numerous comments we received. For example:

'There are many lonely people in MK, all sorts of ages/backgrounds. They shut themselves away in their houses and don't know/want to mix. How do we help them?' (Questionnaire response)

'Health of disenfranchised and those most isolated.' (Questionnaire response)

'Lack of social capital, no community sense, nothing to bind them together.' (Workshop)

'People are quite cut-off. I meet people who are isolated who don't get into the statistics of the health service.' (Workshop)

In addition, our discussions clarified the need to understand social exclusion as typically a complex mix of problems, often involving poverty, poor health, drug abuse, inadequate housing and relationship difficulties. These can be thoroughly debilitating. The following remark exemplifies the barriers to participation for someone experiencing complex personal difficulties:

'At the moment I've got a lot of issues in my mind. I don't feel like doing anything. I'm depressed.' (Questionnaire response)

Other contributions point to a sense of neutered disempowerment, and what one interviewee described as the negative mindset of the experience of disadvantage. Many people have a range of ongoing problems but just need a lot of encouragement from outreach workers. Another category 'knows what they want and they want it now, and may well be critical if you can't solve their problems for them immediately'. Their orientation is to receive from a service, rather than two-way engagement out of mutual interest. And there are those whose lives are simply too unstructured or unstable to be able to focus on the occasional fleeting opportunity. Some appear to hope that their lives will be changed by agency intervention, but these are people who are very hard to motivate even in their own interests.

We had a conversation with one young person, excluded from school, about what she might get from society and what she might give in return. She told us she wouldn't work. These were the reasons she gave, in quick succession:

'Just lazy'.

'There's no jobs, there's a recession.'

'It would reduce my benefits'.

'I have no skills'.

This young woman sees no future and says so.

Participation and inclusion

There is clear support in research for policies that target exclusion in order to promote participation. For instance, an extensive study of an Australian health service participation programme argues that 'allowing the voice of the marginalised to be heard is a more valuable objective than accurately representing all views.' The researchers say that:

'An important evaluation criterion for mechanisms of participation should be the extent to which they give voice to the concerns of the marginalised.'³⁹

'Reducing inequities itself, is likely to be one of the most effective means of encouraging broader civic participation.'⁴⁰

The key difficulty appears to be around the practicalities of engaging with people who are genuinely 'hard-to-reach'.⁴¹ The nature of complex exclusion means that for many people, patient, skilled outreach work is needed to persuade them to turn up for something: there is no substitute for this work. It takes 'a lot of time, a lot of energy' (interviewee) to engage them, and it requires sensitive expertise from specialist agencies.

Meaningful participation can result, if there is sufficient range of opportunities – and successful reconnections of excluded people do happen, time and again. What then is the role for an agency like **citizens:mk**? What matters is that there is a receptive, welcoming, local and varied range of participation opportunities – a healthy ecology of involvement - which can be tapped into whenever someone is in a position to do so. The role for **citizens:mk** could therefore be to stimulate and manage this ecology.

A key part of that role may be to explore more purposefully the potential of new technologies to help people build social capital and establish connections with others. Research on the uptake of computers and online networks among people who experience exclusion has shown increases in confidence and self-esteem, linked to increased connection to friends, family and new weak ties.⁴² There are good grounds for seeing this as a necessary first step to participative uses of online, and face-to-face engagement.

³⁹ Baum *et al.* (1997), p133.

⁴⁰ Baum *et al.* (2000), p421.

⁴¹ While wishing to avoid misuse of the term, we argue that there are people who can be described as 'hard to reach'. There are people who are isolated, not known even to their neighbours or to agencies, often suffering from illness or problems with their mental health, perhaps moving accommodation frequently or occasionally living homeless. There are people who live secretly in conditions of brutal oppression and violence. They are hard to reach, and that is why society organises services designed to help them.

⁴² UK Online (2008).

8. Young people

Why young people's levels of participation are of concern

In section 4 above, we suggested that the spatial design of Milton Keynes presented particular challenges for the introduction of young people to a participative society. We have set aside a whole section of our report to consider the issues relating to young people, for three reasons.

First, we received a high proportion of comments from and/or about young people.

Secondly, levels of civic participation across the population are felt to be critically low, and they won't be revived sustainably without understanding the factors that might engage young people. The longer the decline continues, the more destructive it will be. It's true that this is not exclusively a 'youth problem', seen in terms of low voter turnout, declining party membership and diminished interest in public affairs:

'Yet it is widely interpreted as a youth problem because an inter-cohort shift is occurring with each new generation revealing a dwindling enthusiasm. This "downward spiral" means even if the next cohort of electors (and those who follow) acquire an unparalleled passion for voting the decline would continue for decades.'⁴³

Thirdly, the proportion of the Milton Keynes population aged under 25 is increasing. The borough's population age profile is younger than that for England as a whole, with some 34 per cent of the population being under 25 at the 2001 census. Significantly, for the school age population a *14 per cent increase* is projected between 2006 and 2016. For young adults, 17 to 24 years old, an increase of 2 per cent is projected for the same period.⁴⁴ That is a lot of young people, and it's important to try to understand how to make the social context as receptive as possible for their participation, because it will be needed.

Material collected

We ran two workshops with school groups and one with a group of young people excluded from school. Most of these participants completed our questionnaire. We also interviewed several people who work with young people, and connected with a number of young mothers and parents of teenagers throughout the project. Much of the material collected in this way was inevitably generalised, but we were struck by the level of urgent concern that people raised about this age group. What follows therefore is largely interpretative rather than systematic, reflecting on the expressed concerns through our participative experience.

⁴³ Jeffs (2005).

⁴⁴ Milton Keynes Council (2009); and Milton Keynes Council (2001).

Everyday democracy: 'wen they asked my opinion'

We began by trying to appreciate how young people experience democracy in their everyday lives. We asked them for their memories of democratic involvement in decisions, stressing that this could be in the home, extended family, classroom, playground, out with friends or in the workplace.

A selection of the comments is offered in the box on the right. There was less diversity in the suggestions than we would have expected – a lot were about school council elections or family decisions such as choice of holiday destination. But some of the comments were striking.

Democracy wall: sample contributions

when we have friends fighting and you don't know who to choose
picking people for school council
choosing football teams
choosing what colour to paint my room
choosing to live with my mum or dad
decision of yr.10 courses
choose what to cook for whole family
I was involved to move to Milton Keynes from Luton
what to name dog?
when I had make a decision where I had pick school

For example, one wrote:

'at work wen they asked my opinion on the display.'

This simple remark exemplifies the crucial micro-world of participative experience. This young person was presumably working part-time in a shop, to gain experience and pick up a little pocket-money, and someone took the time to include them in a decision. The young person remembered it. Such an apparently trivial experience can be of profound significance to someone who otherwise might feel detached from the processes that go on around them.

We can't say if the kinds of democratic experience that we heard about are particularly different to those of previous generations: we suspect they don't differ very much. What we sensed was that many young people get occasional trips to democracy-land, but they don't inhabit a democratic culture on an everyday basis: perhaps it's treated as a nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there.

This interpretation is supported by a number of the other remarks they offered about democracy and participation:

'We haven't got democracy'

'You'll say something about it, but nothing will ever be done'

'You'll get arrested'

'We got our way on our uniform'

'You're never going to please everybody'

'People are more likely to listen to a group'.

These remarks characterised the challenge to understanding participative democracy: *have we got something we can use? But it's too awkward - does it have any effect or benefit? And what's in it for me? Well, we asked*

for some conditions regarding school uniform and they were met. Yes, if we can act collectively perhaps there's something in it...

Our tentative conclusion from this exploration of democratic experience with young people is that there is no real problem with their ability to understand the nuances of democracy and the importance of participation. But it needs to be reinforced consistently through opportunity and a thoroughly inclusive environment by the adults surrounding them. This is a cultural challenge across society.

Young people's understanding of a participative society

So what do young people understand by participation in the society they find around them?



When we invited the participants to tell us who they engaged with socially, how and where, we heard a great deal about consumer leisure opportunities and very little about clubs or organisations. Youth clubs (one mention) are apparently un-cool and there was only sparse reference to football clubs, dance groups, faith groups (several) and air cadets. Understandably there was frequent reference to the Xscape centre, which offers a cinema, rock climbing, shopping, restaurants, bowling and various other entertainments.

Three related points arise. First, it seemed that there was quite a lot of motivation if there were something happening across the city, but only lethargy for pitiful or non-existent local offerings. Social participation for most young people in Milton Keynes means going to the city centre and consuming. What is the meaning of social participation if it is experienced primarily from a consumer standpoint?

'For teenagers I don't think there is much, unless you play football. Unless you've got money. There's all sorts of wonderful things if you've got money.' (Workshop)

Secondly, we were given a strong sense of resistance to *organisation*. We got the impression – which resonated in discussions with others – that most have little experience of organising together (for example, a football team or a band), being organised, self-organisation, or organisations. This plays out as detachment from structured processes. We are aware of recent research into young people's sense of citizenship in the Netherlands which apparently echoes this impression.⁴⁵

Young people today inhabit a culture that celebrates individual choice, but their own experience may not reflect this at all accurately. A recent study of young people's intended civic and political participation identified a strong correlation between students' levels of personal efficacy and their

⁴⁵ Van der Sanden, J. 'Giving young people a voice: citizenship in the everyday lives of young people in vocational education'. Paper to 11th UK Joint Social Work Education Conference, Hatfield, July 2009, <http://www.jswec.co.uk/programme.asp>.

perception of the benefits of participation. The researchers conclude that those students who feel personally empowered are more likely to realise the benefits of participation:

'It may therefore be that a degree of efficacy and familiarity with participatory activities is a pre-requisite for students to engage in the assessment of the costs and benefits of participation.'⁴⁶

It's important here to appreciate the extent to which young people, even those in relative poverty, are able to resist being programmed. This is reflected in the way they communicate and consume media content. A recent marketing review of how to engage with teenagers points out that:

- They will never watch TV on someone else's schedule. The idea of being constrained to watch a certain program at a set time will make no sense to them.
- They won't own a landline phone, and probably never will. They will not own a watch either.
- Teens trust their peers - even unknown peers - more than they trust experts.
- The social community and communication with 'friends' is a primary activity. However, no loyalty to a particular social network.⁴⁷

Thirdly, the abandonment of the local and the gravitational pull of the centre may have other social effects. In a low density area which is designed for and dominated by the car, those without the use of a car will have even less autonomy. Young people in Milton Keynes are structurally disadvantaged in this respect from the outset. Those in families who can afford it may simply join the legions of 'backseat' children, driven by car to and from organised activities and seldom exposed to serendipitous and diverse encounters. Those whose families cannot afford it, or who are not subject to much attention from their families, get left behind in a socially-impooverished neighbourhood with very little going on.⁴⁸

Opportunities: 'You'd hope they'd be angry'

These points suggest that there are patterns of collective behaviour – through organised groups or creative opportunities - that are not available to many young people for them to experience, either to accept or to reject. Those from faith communities are more likely to have these models. White working class families will often have come to Milton Keynes without extended family, and in one observer's words many young people 'don't experience their family as a unit much anyway, because of shift work' (teacher). This matters because, as one recent study of neighbourhood social capital notes:

⁴⁶ Lopes *et al* (2009), p14.

⁴⁷ Fletcher, J. (2009).

⁴⁸ A similar distinction between 'cosmopolitan' and 'parochial' groups of young people was put forward in a study of an east London housing estate by Cattell and Herring (2002).

'where parents have fewer local connections, children tend to have less opportunity to develop autonomous local relationships.'⁴⁹

We note also that it's easy for these young people to avoid intergenerational interaction, and there are disadvantages to this – for instance in terms of weak ties and bridging capital. When the time comes to be interacting with adults, there is a risk that too many young people struggle to communicate, or opt out.

'Their ways of getting power or influencing their own lives are limited, partly by poverty and partly by opportunity.'

(Teacher)

Crucially, many young people in our workshops seemed not to connect with creative collective experiences, such as those offered by clubs. Within the present project it has not been possible to research this systematically, but it seems an important area of concern recognised in the work of the community mobilisers, mentioned in section 4 above. An evaluation published in January 2009 claimed that work with young people had resulted in the following outcomes among several:

- Feeling safe as a means to becoming more involved and familiar with their neighbourhood and local community
- Having fun through regular, reliable activities/clubs and planned one-off events.⁵⁰

It seems to make sense to invest effort in activities, clubs and events *at a local level*, as the Mobilisers programme does. In this respect, we were interested in how the citizenship curriculum appears to proceed smoothly within school, but it does not appear *to link young people to participative experiences* which they can invest in and from which they can take value.

Local social networks are important to young people and we were warned that some may be struggling to establish or maintain a place in friendship groups. It seems likely that for many, local social networks don't overlap with or get reinforced by those of adults around them. One report on the community mobilisers programme provides a challenge to parents in this respect:

'It was striking... that the children we talked with consistently "blamed" parents for children's non-participation. Asked why some children did not know and engage with the Mobiliser, children typically replied that "they aren't allowed", "parents haven't got the time" or "their mam won't let them"'.⁵¹

What has built up in this project is voiced disquiet over the ways in which the balance of young people's freedoms and restrictions somehow directs many of them away from participative opportunities. Creative and supportive local environments, so important for young people, have been allowed to atrophy. As one teacher put it:

'You'd think they'd be angry. You'd hope they'd be angry.'

⁴⁹ Weller and Bruegel (2009), p638.

⁵⁰ Milton Keynes Council (2009), p9.

⁵¹ Laerke (2007).

Social attitudes towards young people

Finally in this section we report on the perception that social attitudes towards young people might serve to consolidate other constraints on participation. Younger participants articulated this themselves: as one said,

'We are seen as stupid, knife-wielding yobs.'

Other correspondents in the project expressed concern about provision for young people and the ways in which they are vilified collectively. One participant in the older person's group said:

'Where we're failing, for youngsters, there's nothing casual for them to do, where they can go. *We're* established, we've been here a long time, we can organise things. These youngsters, they need something casual.'

Some of the Somali parents we spoke to were visibly agitated about anti-social behaviour among their young people; but they also lamented the lack of support from agencies in helping to address these problems, and were concerned about dismissive attitudes within these agencies towards Somali youngsters. Such views were reinforced by the frequency with which concepts like 'respect' and 'self-esteem' recurred in the workshops with school groups. For teenagers, personal identity is still very much under construction and vulnerable to dismissive attitudes: without a respectful surrounding culture that promotes self-worth at this age, as a society we risk turning a substantial proportion of people away from participative careers.

Without doubt, the media-fanned culture of blaming young people for occupying public space is damaging and limits their readiness to become participative citizens. As Weller and Bruegel put it,

'policies that either neglect the needs of the young or criminalise their activities in public space do little to promote children's engagement in their local neighbourhoods.'⁵²

A recent examination of the impact of the government's *Respect agenda* on young people points out how hard it is to assume a role as an active citizen when the state does not reflect a sense of respect and worth to young people:

'Without a validated, dignified and respected sense of self, the steps to a full and active citizenship are limited and restricted...'

'Feeling disrespected by the state, living in insecure and often dangerous environments, without the voice, power or belief that change could be enacted, many young people subvert their citizenship, creating an alternative framework of respect for themselves.'⁵³

⁵² Weller and Bruegel (2009), p641.

⁵³ Gaskell (2008), p225, 235.

9. Understanding the barriers to participation

Introduction

People who are active citizens have 'participatory careers', and their levels of involvement vary over time.

Some might be motivated to be highly active on a single issue at some point in their lives – for instance if they have a disabled child and decide to campaign around the child's needs, or if their neighbourhood is threatened by development – after which they may withdraw again or become more passive supporters of other initiatives.

Often people's participation is purely supportive and is based around existing friendships, which may wane or be subject to significant life changes such as moving to another part of the country. Sometimes 'occasional participators' will step up to become more active, but often they will drop out.

There can be many reasons why some people get involved in social and civic issues, and others do not.

Lack of time, poor health, or no knowledge of opportunities, tend to be among the most common explanations for non-involvement.

What matters for the present study is to understand why it might be that some people who would be ready to participate, are somehow held back.



What would be needed to increase the numbers of active citizens in Milton Keynes, encouraging those who are peripherally involved to be more active; and for those who are not but could be, to give it a try?

In seeking answers to these questions we've been struck by how much attention is paid to the barriers to participation and how little is paid to the benefits.

For example, we know that many people who experience depression are reluctant to get involved in local activities; but participation offers demonstrable mental health benefits.⁵⁴ We go on to discuss perceived benefits in section 10 below.

⁵⁴ For example, the study by Baum and colleagues (2007) found that 'the more that people were connected and involved with others through regular social contact or through involvement in social and civic activities, the better their mental health.'

People's backgrounds matter: cultural capital and 'agency'

One group of young mothers we spoke to showed clear understandings of the cultural capital that might be needed for, and gained from, participation. 'Cultural capital' is the value attached to knowledge and understanding that a person acquires through their background, experience and connections. It accumulates especially through education and is closely associated with social class.

Continuing education may be one important area where institutions can make a contribution. A recent review of research shows a correlation between adult education and participation:

'people who take courses are... more likely to join voluntary organisations and clubs of all kinds, as well as taking a greater interest in public issues - and are more likely to believe that they themselves can influence public decisions.'⁵⁵

In one of our discussions a young woman, referring to the time she spends volunteering at a local crèche, said simply:

'You can put this on your CV'.

She was aware that her participation has a value that society recognises and, crucially, she was motivated to volunteer because the currency of this cultural capital was familiar to her.

All of these mothers recognised the importance of 'knowing where to go' before they could take advantage of opportunities to participate, and pointed out the significance of the increased confidence they gained as a consequence. Another young woman was now employed part-time in a third sector agency, having volunteered there previously.

These women were mostly white English and were comfortable negotiating the prevailing culture that includes available care services, courses, and participative opportunities. In contrast, we spoke to a young Bangladeshi woman who described her upbringing in Milton Keynes:

'We didn't do any after-school clubs because Bengali parents don't want their children going out in the evening. We'd visit with neighbours, but did not do organised activities.'

She went on to explain how they were gradually becoming 'westernised', but -

'We don't really use outside help for anything. When we have religious events everybody prepares food in their home. We wouldn't hire a hall.'

Similarly it is important to recognise differences in Somali culture, which also reflect a readiness to be autonomous where necessary. In Somali culture it is customary, if someone is unwell and has been taken to hospital, for members of the community to try and make the time to go and visit them, even if they don't know the person. One woman said that

⁵⁵ Field (2009).

when she was in hospital several people came to send their best wishes, and brought food for her, and she had never met them before. 'Word gets out through people's connections to one another,' she said.

In both these cultural groups, bonding social capital is clearly and necessarily strong. But, at least within the Bengali community, there was a degree of cultural resistance to certain channels of integration in the wider community: bridging and linking capital are weak.

Before people can take advantage of opportunities to participate, various other things have to be in place. Inhabiting a democratic culture, and recognising that, is a start. It is an acknowledgment that you have 'agency' within that culture, which means that you can act independently and intentionally. Sometimes one might have the potential to influence things, but be demotivated through scepticism. One of our survey respondents wrote:

'I feel my participation would not change anything. It is so corrupt.'

Middle class educated people who have plenty of cultural capital tend to assume that agency is universal in contemporary society, but this is a fallacy: it has to be nurtured continually. When we discussed early experiences of democracy with a group of Bengali women, one of them said simply:

'I did whatever I was told. When I got married it was the first time I exerted and expressed my opinion'.

For some people, feeling empowered to influence what happens to them, and recognising an opportunity to do so when it comes along, can go together.

When discussing participation with local people we have found it helpful sometimes to explore with them the relation of individual to the state, in a kind of dialogue.

The state says: 'I provide you with security and stability through armed forces; I provide a structured economy so that the things you need are accessible and employment opportunities are available; I ensure that utilities like water and power continue to function; I provide roads and transport so that you can move about if you need to; I regulate all sorts of things that could be destructive or dangerous to you; I organise housing, health, education and policing, leisure centres and libraries, and many other things to help make your life easier. **What do you offer in return?**'

For some people, the answer 'I pay my taxes' is felt to be sufficient. This could be characterised as the response of 'the welfare generation', many of whom will not have visualised an alternative model in their relationship with the services they receive.

This dialogue approach stimulates some interesting reflections. It highlights the extent to which the transformation to a more participative society requires more than a little local agitation: it requires profound cultural change.

There are nuances of course. A Bengali woman said firmly: 'we pay our taxes, we work hard and contribute to the generation of wealth. We always vote in elections. And it's not just the Bangladeshi community that is not participating'.

Opportunities and information

What does our research tell us about the need for information and opportunities to participate? In our survey we offered the following statement:

'I'd like to contribute, but I wouldn't know how to start.'

More than half (51%) of respondents agreed that this applied to them at least some of the time. This is significant, because it comes from a sample which was biased towards people who participate or are at least ready to discuss it. It seems to us that this finding can be explained largely by lack of cultural familiarity with participative opportunities, and inadequate information.

Various participants recognised that apparent shortage of opportunities to participate was a constraint. One young woman offered this comment:

'If there was a youth centre, I would volunteer. At that age you need someone to guide you along.'

By contrast, a woman from the Somali group said:

'We don't know that there is an opportunity to be involved because nobody tells us.'

Survey respondents wrote:

'Not knowing where to start.'

'I have never been invited to one before but I would love to be involved.'

'I want to help but I don't know how.'

'Lack of awareness regarding existing issues.'

'The reasons why I have not got involved in local issues is because I have not lived here long and I am fairly new and don't hear about what is happening in the community.'

Social and civic participation does not necessarily depend on available opportunities of course – sometimes people create their own involvement. When groups came up with a local issue in discussion, we asked how they would deal with it. Among the group of older people, there was clear familiarity with bureaucratic systems and hierarchies for dealing with things. One participant said he would not expect to get involved on an issue 'until the consultation stage'. In the Somali and Bengali groups it was far more likely that the issue would be discussed within the local ethnic community, a meeting being called by 'community leaders' who would formulate a representative response.

A group of mothers were discussing the provision of services for young people and the perceived need for them to have something to do. These were young women who for the most part had successfully negotiated various support systems on behalf of their children, but one said simply:

'I wouldn't know who to talk to about it.'

This comment seemed to resonate with the group and illustrates how, even for those familiar with some parts of 'the system', other parts can seem excluding, without clues as to how they might be breached. This highlights the role of key trusted individuals (section 6 above).

Motivation, confidence, and commitment

Assuming that an individual has a sense of agency, is informed about opportunities to participate and is culturally comfortable with those opportunities, they may still be constrained by a lack of **motivation** or **confidence**.

In our questionnaire we offered the sample statement:

'I'm not interested, I don't see the point'.

Some 18 per cent of respondents said this applied to them, with a further 12 per cent claiming that it did 'sometimes'. In other words, nearly one third of our sample – which as we have noted was biased towards participation – had felt at least some of the time 'not interested' in participation.

People who are more self-confident are likely to be more readily motivated or to motivate themselves. For those who lack confidence, it's important to recognise how much effort it can take simply to approach a participative occasion. Explaining why they might not always get involved, one survey respondent wrote:

'Getting through the door. Once there feel OK.'

This raises the question of whether occasions where people are invited to join in are sufficiently welcoming, a point that we consider below. We should also note that it is not easy to be a confident active citizen if you are not reasonably fluent in the English language. This issue is also discussed below.

We cannot understand contemporary attitudes to participation without considering flexibility of **commitment**. People have become highly sensitised to exploitation: the line between being prepared to contribute and the threat of becoming over-committed is sometimes fine. Many people fear that if they agree to helping out, they'll soon get drawn reluctantly into roles that are time- and energy-consuming. Some 44 per cent of our survey respondents said they had felt this way at least some of the time. In a workshop exercise one noted:

'The 5% "active" end up doing all the organisation and newcomers worried that they will be "sucked in".'

One of the participants in our workshop with older people offered advice in this respect: 'get involved in an organisation that has as part of its policy that it won't trap people in their commitments'.

Beyond the fear of commitment comes a sense of futility when faced with a loaded system:

'The same problems and subjects seem to be aired so many times that you feel you are going round in circles getting nowhere.'

Participants often reminded us that **perseverance** was needed if you want to make a difference:

'The MP and councillors, you *can* talk to them. You *can* influence what is going on at local level. You've got to keep going. You have to keep at it all the time.'

Time and convenience

For most people, readiness to commit to some form of participation is related to having available time. Lack of time is probably the most commonly recorded explanation for non-participation. In the 2007 *Helping out* survey (which covers England), of those who had not volunteered during the previous year but who were willing to help, 82 per cent cited 'not enough spare time' as a factor. For those who were not regular volunteers, 31 per cent said 'more spare time' was the thing which would make it easier to get involved.⁵⁶

In our survey, 56 per cent of respondents said it applied to them at least sometimes.

'I have a lot of commitments i.e. family, work etc that I feel if I get more involved then my children might miss out.'

'Because I am working full time and studying a part time course which means there is no time to get involved in local issues.'

'Commitments – too much on.'

This does not necessarily make it easy to identify some kinds of people more likely to participate than others: different forms of participation will attract different kinds of people at different life stages. For example, in recent research on housing estates across Europe, Dekker and Van Kempen found that:

'People with more time (unemployed) or a higher stake in the neighborhood (households with children, homeowners), tend to be more active in improving their neighborhood'.⁵⁷

However, a seminal study of civic activism in the USA suggests that:

'the amount of free time a person has seems to have little or no effect on whether he or she becomes civically active or not'.⁵⁸

These contrasting interpretations may come down to understandings of different kinds of participation, but they do remind us that there are no simple formulae to explain what really matters. After all, there are many stories of highly active citizens who have extremely busy personal lives. Perceived lack of time is perhaps the most important *secondary* factor in explaining non-participation: we think it probably reinforces lack of motivation, confidence, or opportunity, to justify quite a lot of non-participation. Because motivation, confidence and opportunity are seldom

⁵⁶ Locke (2007).

⁵⁷ Dekker and Van Kempen (2008), p81.

⁵⁸ Verba *et al* (1995).

discussed as if they were significant, 'lack of time' comes to dominate as an explanation.

We should note also the way in which **online technologies** might alleviate the scheduling demands for some forms of participation. Not everyone can get to meetings across town at specific times, but in causes where asynchronous communication is appropriate, many more people might contribute online in the evening or at some other time to suit them. This option does not apply just to campaigns: we are beginning to see evidence that local online networks can stimulate digital conversations, information sharing, and discussion of all sorts of local concerns.⁵⁹ In Milton Keynes the council could make a significant contribution by enabling the development of loosely-linked independent neighbourhood networks across the town.

Perceptions of available time are influenced by the sense of **convenience**, which also affects motivation and commitment. If opportunities to participate are awkward – for example, 'Dark evenings and far distance' as one respondent put it – then people may well feel discouraged. And if an individual's motivation is already low, something as slight as a bad experience with the bus service can put an end to a participative career.

Certainly the key factor in convenience seems to be **transport**. During our research we were often told of difficulties with the bus service (although it was also praised), and we have already noted the effect of the low-density car-oriented design of Milton Keynes. One respondent summarised what this means for participation:

'Time really is the main problem – exacerbated by local transport (buses) which is my only means of getting around.'

Lack of positive experiences

We have alluded to the impact of negative experiences of participation. It's apparent that some people have been put off and will be reluctant to try again. In our questionnaire we offered this sample statement:

'I went along to a meeting but didn't feel welcome so I didn't go back again.'

Responses show that some 16 per cent of people felt that this applied to them. That figure may seem low, but among the problems we are discussing it ought to be one of the most soluble. Here are some of the comments our respondents made:

'I wasn't welcome at a meeting but I still went back again.'

'Sometimes my face doesn't fit – Newport Pagnell is very old and has longstanding families.'

'I would like to be involved but I feel I am not welcome.'

'I commit to the group but you don't get any gratitude or enough back. Even left to clean up at events. Feel unappreciated.'

⁵⁹ See for example Haringay Online, <http://www.haringayonline.com/>.

From our work on other projects we know that such experiences are not rare. It seems important that a participative culture is developed across the country which emphasises attention to the detail of inclusive, welcoming and rewarding experiences.

Language

Low confidence in speaking English was an important factor for many participants in our research. Several workshops were conducted with interpreters. Restricted ability in the dominant language is obviously constraining, not just in terms of communicating with other groups and agencies, but also in terms of confidence.

'Not enough English and lack of confidence, not good in English.'
(Questionnaire response, eight similar responses)

'Some people don't have experience of speaking English so they keep all their problems inside, they are the ones that get left behind'. (Workshop)

In section 5 above we discussed aspects of integration and noted that lack of English speaking skills was a constraint to cross-cultural participation. What struck us in several conversations with people who were learning English as another language, was their readiness *to explore participative activities as part of that learning process*. We have found the same potential in our work elsewhere – for instance in the organisation of a recent community picnic in north London, partly coordinated by members of an ESOL⁶⁰ class. Programmes need to be developed to establish and evaluate more cross-cultural community activities as part of collective language learning efforts: participation is always a learning experience and that learning should include language.

Local facilities and services

It's common sense to observe that the availability of local places to meet and run participative activities would be a pre-requisite for local citizen involvement. Responses to our survey suggested that some people are dissatisfied with the level of facilities and available services around them. One wrote for instance:

'Do not have a local centre where I can go for help.'

Child care, schools, housing, advice services, even jobs – an important arena for basic social connection - were all mentioned, along with 'unsafe playgroup' and 'unsafe park'.

But the relationship between the availability of opportunities for social engagement, and levels of social interaction, is not straightforward. Research in South Australia found that in four postcode areas studied, the area with the greatest number of community groups and organisations, with a comparatively high number of sporting clubs and social clubs, had the *lowest level of participation* in groups. The researchers note:

⁶⁰ English for speakers of other languages.

'It seems that provision of groups and organisations within an area is not sufficient to facilitate participation without consideration of the kinds of individual or compositional reasons for not participating... such as the cost of involvement or lack of time.'⁶¹

We can conclude that personal and neighbourhood factors can combine in complex ways to create, or militate against, levels of participation and readiness to take up opportunities. In addition, as recent European research⁶² has shown, policies and democratic traditions at the national level also have an impact: in the UK, recent political emphasis placed on empowerment can be regarded as promoting a positive climate for participation.

Bureaucracy and trust

We heard unequivocal criticism of the bureaucracy associated with both civic and social participation. Principally, as might be expected, this applied to what is regarded as excessive regulation through CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checks, but it also applies to the documentation of issues in the context of consultation and citizen involvement in decision-making.

'There's far more stuff you have to read. The risk analyses and so on, the CRB checks. Society can be so litigious, that keeps people back a bit. People are generally wary of this compensation culture.'
(Workshop comment)

Necessary or not, bureaucracy appears to be a significant disincentive to participation. A national survey review reported by the Institute for Volunteering Research found that almost half (49 per cent) of those questioned who did not volunteer said they were put off by bureaucracy, with only slightly fewer (47 per cent) saying they were worried about risk and liability.⁶³

One of the participants in our workshop with older people told us:

'I'm trying to get volunteers for my group. People think there is a shadow of suspicion on them before they start, this is putting people off. People who are socially active, they are not really put off; but those who are not socially active, they find it very intimidating.'
(Workshop)

This raised the question of whether bureaucracy was felt to be contributing to a reduction in the pool of available participators: the group felt that it does, that it is anti-participatory.

'With CRB, people feel that they're signing up to a commitment. As a volunteer you may just want to do it when you want to.'

Strikingly, concerns about levels of suspicion and the 'litigious society' also flowed into areas of informal social participation:

'I am wary of popping into a neighbour, because I want to know what my liability would be.'

⁶¹ Baum *et al* (2007), p114-115.

⁶² Dekker and Van Kempen (2008).

⁶³ Locke (2007).

'When a new neighbour comes into the neighbourhood, I won't go into the house, I'd stay in the garden.'

These remarks suggest that the risk aversion associated with CRB checks represents a deeper problem of a dearth of generalised trust. Bureaucracy tends to operate on an assumption that trust does not apply or is inappropriate, and consequently erodes it. This issue of low levels of trust constitutes a profound cultural barrier to participation.

Combinations of barriers

While it helps to distinguish the barriers to participation in order to try to understand their impacts, it's important to avoid over-simplifying their effects. Most of the barriers we have discussed operate in combination and in different ways at different life stages. One respondent felt that

'The key things are knowing how to drive and being able to speak English.'

For others it might be, say, literacy and self-confidence; or over-commitment and health. This conclusion requires particular attention to be paid to people who experience exclusion as a complex of problems - bad housing, low incomes, language difficulties, having a limiting long-term illness, difficult relationships and so on. In such circumstances, finding and taking advantage of opportunities to participate can take an extraordinary effort and/or some chance combination. We have discussed this in part in section 7 above.

It also suggests that two broad requirements need to be in place if levels of participation are to be improved across the board. First, efforts to reduce inequities and levels of social exclusion need to be redoubled. Secondly, cultural transformation is needed, to the point where everyday life is loaded with welcoming participatory options and it is seen as eccentric *not* to get involved, rather than, as now, *unusual* to be involved.

Additionally, there are always grounds for describing and discussing the *benefits* of participation, and we turn our attention to this in the next section.

10. Benefits of participation

Asked to describe early recollections of democratic experience, one of the participants in our workshop with older people spoke of striving to be a class representative when at school in India – ‘because it showed you were popular’.

Even those who are experienced volunteers or who participate routinely in civic issues tend not to dwell on, or become effusive about the benefits of participation. It was almost with reluctance that workshop participants came up with suggestions such as:

‘Make you feel good, satisfied’

‘Gain or exchange of knowledge and information.’

Perhaps assumptions of modest altruism tend to hold sway. By contrast, we were struck by the suggestions put forward by one of the school groups, after we had spent a little time discussing what their parents (or others they knew of) got involved in. Some of the suggestions they made are in the box on the right.

Benefits identified by school students

Power
Diserplin
Fun!
Chill out
Entertainment!!
Help people
Make friends
Have fun
Be popular
Occupy
Get more respect
Express talent
Fun, make friends
Fresh air
Change of mood
Achievements
New things
You will have good friends when your older, so you can still do things together instead of being on your own
Feeling happy
Helping people
Make friends
Keeping fit
Popularity / showing off
Right decisions

Research into attitudes to volunteering among groups deemed at risk of social exclusion also shows awareness of the benefits:

‘Volunteers with no qualifications or a LLI [*limiting long term illness*] were more likely to recognise the personal benefits of volunteering than those not at risk of exclusion. Members of at risk groups were more likely to cite personal achievement, gaining new skills and enhanced employability as a benefit. Volunteering may be perceived as a more accessible way of gaining skills and experience, which is particularly important for entry into the labour market for these groups.’⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Teasdale (2008).

This resonates with our discussion with the group of white young mothers, several of whom had identified voluntary activity as a way to gain skills and valuable experience.

Since participation is largely about collective engagement and endeavour, it may be worth stressing the social benefits (as exemplified by some of the young people's suggestions above). One study suggests that the degree of personal insight gained from volunteering is directly related to the experience of working in a group:

'Individual experience is part of a collective experience.'⁶⁵

This is the essence of the participative movement to which **citizens:mk** belongs. The challenge is to promote the context of collective experience in an age of individualism.

The formal voluntary sector has led the way in publicising the benefits of participation, with numerous positive and colourful campaigns. It is in the interests of **citizens:mk** to take advantage of opportunities to promote appreciation of the range of benefits that participants describe. People involved in social or civic participation might help themselves and their causes by being ready to recommend the legitimate personal satisfaction and other benefits that accrue.

⁶⁵ Brockerhoff and Wadham-Smith (2008), p84.

11. Political connections

This project has taken place at a politically turbulent time, when a highly-publicised string of allegations about expenses claims made by members of parliament brought public trust in government and politicians to arguably the lowest point in English democratic history. The expenses disclosures only added to what was already a serious decline in expressed levels of trust in politicians, membership of political parties, and voter turnout over several years.

This context is significant for two reasons. It may make it harder to explore issues of governance and participation, because people feel less obliged to defend their own detachment from political activity. Political activity can too easily be portrayed as self-interested, corrupt and failing to bring about change. The balance shifts from feeling 'perhaps I should get involved,' to a straightforward dismissal of the entire field of collective political endeavour, which is the harder to challenge. By way of example, in the previous section we quoted the sense of futility expressed by one of our respondents who felt that their participation would not change anything, because 'it is so corrupt'.

Against this however, the new context may create a more fertile ground for new ideas of local democratic involvement to develop. In any ecology, if the dominant organisms begin to weaken, opportunities arise for smaller species to grow and spread out. What might be needed for local initiatives like **citizens:mk** to take advantage of this changing, and perhaps promising, new environment?

One view is that local participation may no longer justify any effort, because it is no longer relevant. Some commentators for example argue:

'It could be that today's young people have developed values and priorities appropriate and relevant to the global society into which we are moving, rather than to the communities we remember.'⁶⁶

But the demise of traditional close-knit neighbourhoods does not invalidate local connections, and nor does globalisation. There are other models of local. Throughout this project, the importance of local connections for everyday life was constantly reasserted in numerous ways. We have sought to represent what we heard in a broad context which shows how those connections might feed into civic and political participation, given the right conditions.

Local social participation seems to us to be a far more sensible point at which to begin refreshing democracy than any righteous preaching about the party system and the importance of voting. A recent online discussion asking 'Who says teens don't do politics?' stimulated the following comment:

'I wish instead of so much effort being put into the mechanics of democracy and party politics more effort would be put towards supporting young people to be active and positive contributors to their local communities. I was talking to a lad earlier in the week

⁶⁶ Pirie and Worcester (2000), p9.

about his GCSE's and asked him how he'd found citizenship lessons - the only thing he could think of was "I learned how voting is different in Poland".⁶⁷

It is the detachment of formal politics from everyday life that is problematic, not the detachment of ordinary people from politics. We will return to this theme with a particular example below: first we consider an area where civic participation meets the political system – consultation.

Consultation

People feel strongly about consultation because it's one of the more visible ways in which citizen concerns bump up against the system of governance – more visible perhaps and in some ways more personal than voting. In Milton Keynes we heard a good deal of scepticism about spurious consultation exercises:

'The involvement they are inviting is totally on *their* terms. So where is the participation?'

'They determine the consultation.'

'They just hand out questionnaires, and that's a consultation.'

And people require confirmation of the validity of their involvement:

'From experience, when communities feel what they have to say is not actioned, minuted or acknowledged, then their participation stops. They say "what is the point?" Are decision makers really interested in getting them involved?'

There was also clear determination to play a part in improving things – perhaps a role in which **citizens:mk** could take a lead:

'You've got to educate the people who are doing the consultation. It's the way they consult. They have all these brochures and they think that's consultation.'

'Ask us, and we'll *tell* you how to consult us.'

These remarks suggest that people feel the onus is on officials and politicians to make an effort to understand participation and its processes.

From mutual support to political connection

A group of Somali men provided an illustration of the kind of tantalising gap that can exist between social and political participation. They spoke about the number of requests for support that they field from other Somalis in their area. Broadly, these are requests for support, from people who are accustomed to an oral culture and a very different language, in the face of bureaucratic requirements - to do with school conditions, housing needs, how to complete a form, what is needed to get to see a doctor?

⁶⁷ *Children and young people now*, 18 May 2009, <http://community.cypnow.co.uk/forums/p/1142/2924.aspx>.

Often these calls lead to the activist having to accompany the individual on a visit to an office and interpret, and can be very time-consuming.

We explored this in some detail and asked all the participants for a considered assessment of the number of such calls and visits in a typical day. Several estimated that they had about eight or ten such calls *each day*. Two people said about ten (often rising to fourteen or higher). One said about eight, others less.

The total among these nine people (one of them a recent arrival to this country so less involved) was 39, and this group was not claiming full coverage. Even allowing for weekends off, this represents almost *200 enquiries per week* in a small minority community. This voluntary role is compensating heavily for a shortfall in formal social provision.

It seems obvious that there is a need to take a political approach to addressing this shortfall. So we asked what contact the participants had with their local councillors. The answer was none.

In our view, this kind of gap is one which civil society, representatives and agencies ought to be capable of bridging fairly easily. Officials and elected members on the one hand, and the community sector on the other, should not be working in parallel furrows but in practical collaboration, sharing information, expertise, and energy to find mutual solutions. It is not good enough to be in a situation with what Daley describes as:

`a general lack of meaningful and ongoing relationships between individuals and groups from different backgrounds and links with political structures'.⁶⁸

If **citizens:mk** achieves nothing else, it should work to bridge this damaging gap.

⁶⁸ Daley (2009), p167.

12. Conclusions and recommendations

At the national level, democracy has been thoroughly diagnosed and is widely believed to be in poor health. In this project we took the view that there is a profound and essential connection between the sense of disillusion at the national level, and the experience of democracy at the most local level. If people do not feel that they inhabit a participative society in their day to day lives, no amount of tinkering with the party political process, encouraging petitions or simplifying voting will refresh democracy.

Citizens:mk wishes to understand more closely how to increase levels of social and civic participation across Milton Keynes. Acknowledging that these levels are hard to measure, we have seen that the forces that limit people's involvement are various, and their interplay is complex. Some people have plenty of time but lack connections, information or confidence; others may have a thorough understanding of the issues but not of the processes. Yet others may have been motivated by concern but were made unwelcome as soon as they stepped forward. The peculiar history and geography of Milton Keynes may make this situation more complex in some respects. The striking topography does not appear to favour local social connections for the accumulation of trust and involvement.

Distinctive neighbourhoods

We reflected on the sense that people seem to be lacking association with a defined, distinctive neighbourhood which offers them something to be proud of, to defend and develop. Addressing this slightly unfocused issue may be beyond the role of **citizens:mk**, but the organisation might seek opportunities to introduce the participation implications into planning and regeneration discussions and consultations. (Section 4)

Integration and inclusion

The sense of detachment of young people and, to a lesser extent, of Bangladeshis and Somalis, helps us appreciate that cohesion and stability among existing groups has to precede participative integration into broader civic structures. If young people feel despised and unwanted, or Somalis feel unsupported and victimised, those claims have to be addressed before we can raise expectations about integrated participation. **Citizens:mk** are therefore right to place an emphasis on social inclusion in their work and should continue to do so. (Sections 5 and 7)

Networks and key trusted individuals

In our final remarks below we comment on the essential significance of people's connections to others as the basis for meaningful participation. As an example, our review noted the contributions of key trusted individuals who had played a decisive part in influencing others to participate. There is much to be said for building on this: **citizens:mk** could explore ways of raising awareness among professionals involved in

intervention, so that in turn more of them can recommend potentially rewarding participation options to individuals they encounter. (Section 6)

Young people

Our report has placed emphasis on the views of young people and how they relate to participation. Unsurprisingly we found some disillusion, but more importantly we may have identified factors that **citizens:mk** and other agencies need to take into account. These include a possibly significant shift in the areas where young people can or cannot exercise *autonomy*; and an apparent general decline in their experience of *organisation*. We think that most young people have no difficulty understanding the nuances of democracy and the value of participation. The problem is more about *policy-makers appreciating the importance of social participation in everyday life at local level*, and recognising the validity of young people's quite different perspectives on that basis. Participation principles are not reinforced consistently in the adult world. To make those principles meaningful to more young people requires that they become consistently visible through opportunity and a thoroughly inclusive environment. This is a huge cultural challenge across society, one which **citizens:mk** needs to be articulating and for which it needs to be finding collaborators. (Section 8)

Participative community activities as part of learning English

We have been struck by the potential contribution to community action of groups learning English as a second language. We suspect that a great deal more could be done formally to establish and fund initiatives that combine English language courses with support for participative activity as part of the learning process. (Section 9)

Neighbourhood online networks

We are aware of and have noted the potential of local online networks to contribute to social and civic participation. Although these networks did not feature in this review, information and communication issues recurred repeatedly and we believe the potential should be taken seriously and explored urgently. In Milton Keynes the council could make a significant contribution by enabling the development of loosely-linked independent neighbourhood networks across the town. (Section 9)

Community development

We have suggested that a key ingredient is community development, to help people develop their own causes, skills and confidence. It is to be hoped that **citizens:mk** can work closely with the Community Mobilisers scheme and perhaps even help extend it across the broader population. (Section 9)

Political education

Many people would be interested in civic participation but do not know where to start. We have noted that there is very little education or training to help people learn how to take part. We explored some of the ways in which this creates difficulties, whether or not there is social

participation to build on. **Citizens:mk** should develop and press the arguments for more practical political education, so that people can discover and exploit opportunities to contribute. (Sections 2 and 11)

Concluding remarks

Paul Skidmore and John Craig point out that popular participation creates connections between public services, civil society and the structures of democratic representation, and they argue that we need to create greater value from these connections.⁶⁹ It seems to us that that is a valid way of expressing precisely what **citizens:mk** has been established to do.

But our review has shown that there is more to this. Popular participation does not just *create* connections, it also *depends on* connections - between citizens, agencies and representatives. A healthy variety of connections is of massive, barely-noticed social significance. The kinds of diverse links we heard about or witnessed in our short review - between homeless Somali woman and housing officer, between young mother and health visitor, between Bengali woman and English tutor, between excluded young people organising a charity event, between young mums discussing volunteering opportunities - these are the essence of being social. Without these we cannot develop a participative politics that resolves social problems by involving all kinds of people collectively in addressing them.

⁶⁹ Skidmore and Craig (2005), p25.

Don't feel as if you're involved? Tell us about it.



The **Milton Keynes Citizens Launch Group** (citizens:mk) is trying to understand the difficulties that stop people getting involved in local issues. Please help us by answering the following few questions. This questionnaire is *anonymous* – please just let us know your thoughts.

Do you belong to a local group, club or society (such as a faith group, drama society, music group, sports team, scouts or guides)?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Do you actively participate in local cultural or sporting events (such as pub quizzes, charity fund-raising events, or street parties)?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Do you serve on a local committee (such as school governors, mother-and-toddler group, tenants association, neighbourhood watch, or some other community group)? If yes, please tell us which group(s)	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Do you volunteer ? For example, do you help out at community or faith group events, or help give older people a day out?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Have you ever responded to a public consultation about a local issue, for example attending an information event where you have been asked for your views about a local issue?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Have you ever written to your local newspaper, to your MP, to a councillor or to the council about a local issue ?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Do you vote in local elections ?	Always <input type="checkbox"/>	Some-times <input type="checkbox"/>	Never <input type="checkbox"/>

Please tell us what **local issues you are most concerned about:**

Do any of these statements apply to you?	Yes	No	Some-times
'I'd like to contribute, but I wouldn't know how to start'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
'My health isn't good enough'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
'I'm afraid of getting over-committed'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
'I don't feel I have the skills or experience to get involved'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
'I don't really have the time'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
'I'm not interested, I don't see the point'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
'I went along to a meeting but didn't feel welcome so I didn't go back again'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are there **other reasons** why you might not have got involved in local issues? Please tell us here, and add any other comments you may have:

.....

Please return this completed form to your local contact or to:
citizens:mk, Foundation House, The Square, Wolverton MK12 5HX.
 If you would like **citizens:mk** to get in touch with you, so you can find out more about participation in Milton Keynes, please provide contact details (name, tel no, email) here:

THANK YOU

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