

Lay report

A case study of community participation within Easterhouse

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in collaboration with Thriving Places



Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a research project conducted in 2017 as part of a MSC in Public Policy and Management at the University of Glasgow. The research was undertaken in collaboration with Glasgow Community Planning Partnership and the Easterhouse Thriving Places project. Thriving Places uses an asset-based approach to community development, facilitating local people to use existing skills and knowledge to achieve positive change within the local area. A fundamental principal of this approach is to encourage community participation, where local people are involved in identifying local issues and priorities, influencing decisions on service delivery. To this end this research explored the experiences of community participation within Easterhouse. The research objectives were:

1. To explore what participating in the 'community' means for people in Easterhouse
2. To evaluate the perceived benefits, if any, associated with different forms of community participation
3. To analyse the barriers and facilitators to community participation

Literature review

This research categorised community participation into three types: influencing local decision making, volunteering or involvement in community groups and informal social connections. The first category was the primary interest of this research, although there are overlaps and relationships between all three types of participation. A review of the existing literature on factors that influence community participation provided three possible barriers to be considered:

Decline in the traditional concept of community - people are less connected to each other in the local area than they have been previously. In society, there is a more individualistic outlook and therefore individuals are less likely to wish to be involved in community participation.

Apathy towards governance - people have no interest in political activity and are therefore indifferent towards local decision making. This barrier is refuted with evidence in the literature. Alternative explanations given were: topics for discussion being irrelevant to the individual; the community participation activities offered not appealing to potential participants and a negative perception of being involved in politics.

Participant disillusionment - the belief that community participation does not offer real influence in decision making and therefore is not a worthwhile process.

Methodology

Over a period of two months the researcher participated in several community groups: including a knitting group, volunteer group and several workshops held by Thriving Places in The Shandwick, a local shopping centre. During this time, two focus groups were conducted, one with six and the other with four participants, all members of community groups. Six interviews were conducted with community workers. The knowledge gained from the literature review and informally participating in community groups was used to tailor the topic guide for the focus groups and interviews. Focus groups were conducted first to allow discussion on the topics and to highlight specific areas of interest which could then be focused on in more depth within the individual interviews. In addition to taking field notes, the interviews and focus groups were also audio-recorded. The material was analysed to highlight themes of interest. The study was approved by the University of Glasgow ethics committee before any data was collected or any participants were recruited.

Key Findings

Perceptions of community participation in Easterhouse

The findings from the primary research showed there is a strong sense of community within Easterhouse, with a real sense of individuals caring about each other and the area itself. However, it was highlighted that there are sub groups within the area which have a negative impact, with several participants making reference to local gang activity. Participants suggested urban regeneration had resulted in fewer communal areas and less opportunities to interact with neighbours. It was also suggested by several participants that neighbours have opportunities to interact through their children playing together, however it was felt that happens less due to a reduced number of children and safety concerns. A few participants suggested individuals are more focussed on their own gains rather than those of a collective and may only participate if personally invested in the outcome. However, this was disputed by one participant who felt that there was more of a collective outlook and care for others in Easterhouse, than in more affluent areas.

Perceived benefits of community participation

Benefits of community participation included: giving people a sense of purpose; increasing skills and confidence; reducing social isolation; breaking down social barriers between sub-groups within the area and overcoming fear of those in positions of authority. Furthermore, many participants felt that having local people involved in the discussion and implementation of new policy would result in more sustainable change.

Barriers to Participation

Lack of time to participate due to other commitments was the most frequently mentioned barrier to all forms of community participation. Other commitments included work, household chores and looking after dependents. Lack of mobility i.e. not having access to a car or not being able to afford public transport was highlighted as an issue. Also, a lack of awareness of the community participation opportunities available. In relation to local decision making, disillusionment in the process was the barrier which evoked strong feelings, as evidenced by body language and tone of voice. Previous negative experiences of community participation, where opinions were ignored or no action was taken had left many individuals feeling frustrated and sceptical of whether any influence is possible. A lack of self-confidence was also highlighted as a barrier, where individuals believe they are not educated enough to voice an opinion. This may have been an outcome of previous experiences in which people felt discouraged from expressing their views. Finally, not wishing to be associated with, or having a fear of individuals in a position of authority, was highlighted as a further issue.

Facilitators of Participation

The key facilitators of community participation highlighted were: existing social networks, working with youth, a local representative, and an informal process. In line with the literature on social capital, existing relationships with groups of people increased self-confidence. This led to greater willingness to participate in influencing local decision making. Being part of existing social networks increased an individual's awareness of opportunities for community participation.

Community projects targeting the younger generation was mentioned by three participants as a way of influencing their views on the value of community participation, building self-

confidence and trust in official processes. This was suggested to increase the likelihood of participation in the community in the future.

It was stated by a several participants that a local representative increased the credibility of the process and the likelihood that participants would get involved. In addition, an informal process, with a relaxed approach, made participants more comfortable voicing an opinion, in contrast to a more formal participation process which was viewed as uninviting and intimidating.

Conclusion

In order to encourage community participation, first there needs to be a sense of community. Participants in this research suggested there was a strong sense of community in Easterhouse. Influence on local decision making was viewed positively as it increased an individual's confidence and knowledge whilst also increasing the likelihood of sustainable positive change. Community participation through informal social connections and community groups was suggested to increase well-being, through reduced loneliness and providing a sense of belonging.

The literature review presented three potential barriers: decline in traditional community, political apathy and disillusionment. The findings suggest there are less opportunities for locals to interact which has reduced the sense of community in Easterhouse. The barrier of disinterest in local policy making was not supported. Lack of time, lack of awareness of the event and lack of self-confidence were alternative barriers suggested. Disillusionment in the community participation process was strongly supported, as participants frustrated with negative past experiences were less likely to participate in future consultation events.

Facilitators of participation in local decision making included existing social networks, working with youth, a local representative and an informal process.

Implications

The findings of this research suggest there is potential to increase community participation to influence local decision making in Easterhouse. The following recommendations should be taken into consideration.

- Individuals should be given opportunities to provide feedback in less time intensive formats
- A safe and welcoming place should be provided to encourage individuals who may be wary or nervous of those in perceived positions of authority
- Co-ordinators involved in community participation process should emphasize that every individual's opinion counts
- Examples should be provided of when consultation has been successful to increase the credibility of the process
- Realistic expectations should be set for what could be achieved, to avoid disillusionment.
- Regular informal community events in easily accessible locations may enable more people to participate and build informal social connections which can lead to other forms of community participation
- The setup of varied community groups should be encouraged which attract a mixed demographic with the aim of increasing the size and diversity of social networks within the area.
- Awareness of community participation opportunities could be raised through posters, flyers, social media, and capitalizing on existing social networks.

Future research

- Future research could extend this study by increasing the sample size and interviewing residents who have not been directly involved in community participation activities to understand the barriers from their perspective.
- Examining whether perceptions of community participation and the barriers vary between groups within Easterhouse such as young mothers, teenagers, the elderly.

