

Glasgow Centre for Population Health

Response to the National Standards for Community Engagement Consultation issued by the Scottish Community Development Centre and What Works Scotland

Introduction

The Glasgow Centre for Population Health (GCPH) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the review of the National Community Engagement Standards. The GCPH supports appropriate use of community engagement through its work to generate insights and evidence, support new approaches, and inform and influence action to improve health and tackle inequality. The GCPH also has a keen interest in understanding how community engagement is used by others in their endeavours to work with communities to bring about beneficial change.

Key messages

The context in which the standards are used is critical to their success. We would particularly highlight the need to use the reviewed standards in ways that ensure communities know what to expect from community engagements and can use them to help safeguard their rights and responsibilities. It is also crucial that communities have the opportunity to exercise legitimate power in shaping decisions about matters affecting them.

The spirit in which the standards are used and the values with which people collaborate is equally important. The 2012 GCPH response to the consultation on the proposed Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill recognised the considerable potential of the standards but highlighted the potential limitations of imposing a predefined framework on such a localised and context-dependent issue¹.

Alongside the suitability and practicability of the standards must be a commitment to meaningful engagement and a reciprocal dialogue with communities which enables an authentic representation of community interest within decision-making. This requires strong leadership, cultural change and sustained commitment. It also demands an empathy with, and appreciation of, community context, needs, assets and aspirations, and with a willingness to co-produce engagements with communities where appropriate. The GCPH recognises through its evidence that in addition to the standards, communities must have legitimate power to participate in decisions affecting them. This means a wider look at how political and administrative structures facilitate community participation in decisions that affect them. We would welcome further dialogue prompted by the revision of the standards about how to strengthen local democratic processes and promote devolved decision-making in broader terms.

Accompanying the standards, greater clarity is needed about who they are designed for, how they are intended to be used, how they may be applied and what sort of impact might be achieved. The GCPH notes that SCDC have developed training courses designed to address this and recommends that such training is widely accessible in which community engagement processes in general are also explained. For example, training could facilitate participants to approach engagements in an asset-based way by thinking about what they can do, rather than what they cannot. The GCPH has found that groups who work in this way find that participants can develop a greater sense of power, control and ability following their involvement, which would be an enabling set of dynamics for community engagements in general.

Use of case studies may also be a helpful way to show how the standards can be used. It may also be helpful for visual supplements, such as cartoons, infographics or film, to accompany the standards because they could also illustrate examples of their use while also making them more widely accessible.

It would also be helpful to provide clearer guidance about where the standards sit in relation to other guidance and legislation particularly for public sector organisations (for example, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and NHS guidance on major service change).

The GCPH has found emerging consideration that creativity, compassion and collaboration can lie at the heart of successful engagements. The GCPH would welcome discussion on how creative approaches can be used with the standards during engagements to achieve more meaningful and productive engagement.

Themes from GCPH and public health evidence

Before the National Community Engagement Standards were published, a joint discussion paper by the Scottish Council Foundation and NHS Health Scotland reflected on how communities could be engaged differently in order to achieve better health and wellbeing outcomes². While this paper focused on public health efforts and not specifically on community engagement, it offers relevant insights to the review of the standards. For instance, the paper acknowledged that Scotland's population persistently experiences worse health than their European counterparts³ and the discussion proposed that conventional methods of public health might not solve this problem. Emerging from this paper was a sense that while toolkits, guides, standards and indicators can be useful tools, it was proposed that creativity, compassion and collaboration also should lie at the heart of any engagement that sought to work with communities to improve health and wellbeing. Furthermore, evidence was presented that suggested that, imperative to any successful engagement was an environment in which individual and community confidence in one's own worth and abilities was encouraged or enabled to flourish⁴. The point here for the review of the National Standards for Community Engagement is that, from a

public health perspective, the standards are a highly important part of achieving beneficial change but that the spirit, methods and values with which community engagements are undertaken locally are also important.

Working with people, recognising their strengths and valuing the positive aspects of their life can also be seen as asset-based approaches. Asset-based approaches can enable strengths, capacities and abilities to be identified and developed for positive change while also facilitating collaboration⁵. Such findings suggest that community engagements would benefit from using these kind of approaches and are consistent with strands of the National Standards for Community Engagement which encourage participants to build on confidence and capacity to get involved in decisions affecting them.

The importance of collaboration, and the methods used to facilitate this, also emerged when the GCPH reflected on its experiences of community engagement in *Community Engagement: The Centre's Experiences and Outcomes*⁶. In this paper it was emphasised that, while the publication of the National Standards for Community Engagement was a positive and helpful development, significant work remained to ensure effective dialogue and working relationships between organisations and communities. Key issues that the GCPH raised in this paper included:

- Community participation involves a way of working that differs from the way in which things may have traditionally been done. The different cultural contexts of communities and organisations can mean they do not interface easily.
- For some organisations, community engagement can be a box-ticking exercise or a process located at the bottom layer of an organisational chart with internal institutional priorities really guiding the development of policies and resultant strategies.
- For communities, an absence of capacity in a form recognisable to organisations, a lack of belief in community autonomy and an atmosphere of distrust as a legacy of previous disappointments can also present a barrier.
- The use of inappropriate methods that do not bridge the differences between organisational cultures and community experience can also undermine attempts at community participation. There may also be a lack of an adequate understanding of the personal motivations that lead to individuals and communities taking part in community participation processes.

Alongside these points, the GCPH recognised that its engagement could also be affected by the history of research itself, particularly in terms of the relationship between researchers and those they research. In particular, although research could act as a useful conduit between community and policy, the overall research process tended to result in highly professionalised rather than lay forms of knowledge which could have limited relevance to those who have been researched. Communities thus risked being alienated from the very knowledge they had helped to create. In addition, as research was more frequently 'done to' communities, with little ongoing

involvement, communities have become increasingly fatigued by providing their views yet seeing little change.

Where are we now?

The GCPH's recent report, in partnership with What Works Scotland, into participatory budgeting in Scotland found that since the introduction of the National Standards for Community Engagement there was still a mismatch between the standards and overall practices on the ground⁷. An example of this was successive evaluations of Community Planning Partnerships in Scotland which found a lack of community engagement⁸. Supporting this finding was GoWell's briefing paper on community empowerment, which highlighted a disconnect between policies and strategies and the very communities they were designed to benefit⁹. Meanwhile, responses to the review of the National Standards for Community Engagement¹⁰ have featured positive accounts in which communities have used the standards to achieve better outcomes and this offers encouragement for their continued use.

The participatory budgeting report went on to highlight that drivers for effective community engagement should not solely rest on the use of standards. On a wider level, for instance, Scotland is still more politically and administratively centralised than its European counterparts¹¹. The ramifications of a centralised structure for decision-making is that individuals and communities have less opportunity to participate in local democracy and in decisions that affect them. Evidence to support this claim can be found in a recent survey¹² for the COSLA Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy, which indicated that:

- only 35% of Scottish citizens feel part of how decisions affecting their community are made
- 77% would get more involved in their community if it was easier to participate in decisions that affect it
- 82% would like more say in how local services are provided in their area.

More positively however, the GCPH report also highlighted the role of the 2014 Scottish Independence referendum in potentially reinvigorating 'participatory democracy' and 'democratic renewal'. While the report saw the record levels of voter turnout and unprecedented national engagement as a timely opportunity to engage communities in decisions affecting them through participatory budgeting, this historic mobilisation of political engagement arguably has important impetus for all kinds of community engagement.

In summary, the GCPH welcomes the review of the standards and is keen to continue dialogue and what is required to ensure they can be used to best effect in engagements with communities to achieve beneficial change.

References

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