



Empowerment skills for all

Analysing gaps and constructing a learning framework
A summary of the full report

From the Academy, the external skills arm of the Homes and Communities Agency



Homes &
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ACADEMY

The HCA Academy is the skills arm of the Homes and Communities Agency, the national housing and regeneration body.

We support the HCA's partners to deliver better places by providing access to practical training and resources. Our work strengthens the HCA's ambitions to create thriving places and affordable homes. Our current focus is on giving people the tools and know-how to deal with the recession and develop new models for delivery.

For 2009-2011, our three priorities are:

- Creating a central learning and knowledge hub
- Supporting and improving places
- Leading the skills agenda

The study summarised in this report was carried out by Gabriel Chanan and Colin Miller in partnership with and on behalf of the HCA Academy.

Contents

Spreading empowerment	4
Definition and scope	5
A map of empowerment skills	6
Policy context	7
Empowerment in practice	8
Empowerment within existing training	9
Occupational differences and agency cultures	11
Upgrading community development	12
The challenge of co-ordination	13
Conclusions	14

Spreading Empowerment

A democratic society is based on empowering its members. All parts of society need to feel that they have some control over the dangers of impoverishment, crime, terror, climate change, overly bureaucratic control and poor quality services. Since public, private and voluntary services have a major role in local life, they need to play their part in empowering people. In addition, special efforts are needed in disadvantaged areas.

The HCA Academy has the national remit to develop and improve skills that are needed in common across all occupations which help to sustain communities. Community engagement has been identified as such a skill, which the Academy takes as an umbrella term to cover community engagement, development and empowerment, whilst acknowledging important differences between these. The report focuses on the Academy's programme on empowerment and clarifies the relationship between engagement, empowerment and development.

The empowerment White Paper of 2008 ('Communities in Control', CLG) also affirmed the Government's intention to work with the Academy to promote empowerment skills.

The Academy programme seeks to establish who has empowerment skills, who needs them and how they can be spread throughout the relevant occupations. The aim is to *achieve a significant increase in the empowerment of local populations attributable to the spread and improvement of empowerment skills among a variety of occupations.*

This aim poses a number of dilemmas. How do we recognise empowerment? How should it be defined? Is it different from community engagement? How can it be measured? If it is a skill that all front-line workers need, can it be disseminated to all occupations in the same way, or does each occupation need its own methods? Where are the skills now and who will teach them to new staff? How are the various inputs to empowerment intended to join up when they impact on the same communities? This report starts to provide answers to these questions.

Definition and scope

Community **engagement** is used when a public body, be it a local authority, health agency, school, police or any other, reaches out to involve people in its service, either through representation, volunteering or cooperation.

A government definition of community **empowerment** puts the emphasis on people's ability to influence public bodies:

the giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them.

A Scottish definition puts the emphasis on what communities do for themselves:

a process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them.

Community empowerment is brought about by a mixture of 'bottom up' processes of community action and 'top down' factors which assist communities to become more empowered. An example would be the ability of local public agencies to respond to community initiatives or to involve residents in dialogue and collaboration, generally called community engagement.

The foremost occupation dealing with empowerment is community **development**. This emphasises support for bottom-up activity within communities. The new (2009) version of the National Occupational Standards for community development includes more strategic elements than before, linking the strengthening of communities with guidance to public bodies.

A fundamental difference of perspective remains between community engagement and development: community engagement starts with the agenda of a public service and seeks residents' involvement, while community development starts with people's concerns, especially those of people in disadvantaged situations, and works to enable them to improve their own conditions together, by their own activities and by influencing public agencies.

A map of empowerment skills

In Figure 1 the skills to maximise empowerment through the combined contributions of all relevant workers in a locality are set out as a framework of twelve factors. These form a basis for dialogue with different occupations, public services and all levels of government, and for devising and disseminating new training materials.

The four central boxes indicate the community development basis. More detail on community development is available in the National Occupational Standards for community development (CD NOS), which have been revised during the same period.

Elements in the empowerment framework that are not in the CD NOS include: proactive customer relations; facilitating community influence on local public services; facilitating joint working between communities and public agencies; advising local third sector organisations on empowerment; advising varied front-line workers on empowerment; and coordinating empowerment across a locality.

Figure 1: A map of empowerment skills

E. PROACTIVE CUSTOMER RELATIONS/ GUIDING INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT	G. MANAGING CD/ EMPOWERMENT WORKERS OR TEAMS	I. HELPING PUBLIC AGENCIES OR SERVICES ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS	K. HELPING SENIOR MANAGERS DEVELOP RESPONSIVE INVOLVEMENT WITH COMMUNITIES TO IMPROVE SERVICES AND INCREASE EMPOWERMENT
A. GENERIC BASIS: VALUES AND PRINCIPLES, UNDERSTANDING HOW COMMUNITIES WORK, AND OVERVIEW OF EMPOWERMENT AIMS AND FUNCTIONS	B. HELPING PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER ON COMMON ISSUES, AND HELPING C – GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS	C. HELPING NETWORKING AND COOPERATION BETWEEN COMMUNITY GROUPS	D. FACILITATING COMMUNITY INFLUENCE ON LOCAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND SERVICES
F. ADVISING LOCAL THIRD SECTOR ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS ON EMPOWERMENT	H. ADVISING VARIED FRONT-LINE WORKERS ON EMPOWERMENT	J. FACILITATING THE INPUT OF COMMUNITY GROUPS TO JOINT WORKING WITH PUBLIC AGENCIES	L. COORDINATING EMPOWERMENT ACROSS A LOCALITY

The main report, available separately, includes a version of this map populated with detailed areas of skills and knowledge.

Policy context

While community empowerment is relatively new as an explicit government policy, it is the successor to a long line of community involvement policies. If empowerment was just the icing on the cake of a prosperous society, it might have seemed less important after the extraordinary economic events of 2008-09. However, it is even more crucial to holding society together and protecting democracy and living conditions at a time of uncertainty and social turmoil.

The empowerment policy laid down in 2007-08 forms part of a cluster of policies known as Public Service Agreement 21 that together aim to produce 'cohesive, empowered and active communities'. PSAs are agreements between the Treasury and other government departments about what they will deliver.

There are close connections between community empowerment, cohesion and active citizenship, and this study relates to the HCA Academy's parallel work on community cohesion, and the Office of the Third Sector's concerns with creating 'an environment for a thriving third sector'.

Government measures empowerment by the fourth indicator in the local government performance framework (NI 4). This ascertains whether, in a large-scale local statistical survey, people say they feel they can influence decisions affecting their locality.

The average figure nationally, published in the spring of 2009, was 29% of people saying yes to this question. Closely associated indicators point to cohesion, civic participation, volunteering, sense of belonging to neighbourhood and having a thriving third sector. Numerous local case studies show that these additional aspects are included in what most people understand to be the scope of empowerment activity.

Empowerment in practice

The main government programme to boost empowerment focuses on a range of special initiatives such as transfer of underused buildings and land to community organisations, participatory budgeting, electronic participation, wider use of petitions, neighbourhood charters, getting more people to take up citizen governance roles, and commitments to quicker redress for poor quality service. However, situations requiring empowerment skills also arise from everyday activities in communities.

When individuals seek influence over a service it is often not through local committees or special initiatives but through the workers they deal with at the point of delivery of a service e.g. teachers, doctors, nurses, care-workers, social workers, police and others. Levels of empowerment are therefore likely to be strongly affected by the engagement and involvement policies and practices of the main public services e.g. health, education, policing, environment, regeneration, transport, housing and so on.

For example, a report from CLG, *Powering up Communities* by the National Community Forum (2008), gives testimonies of residents about seeking help from local services in overcoming a problem. Half are about problems of individuals, such as understanding the benefits system or obtaining accommodation for a person with disabilities, and half are about collective situations such as saving local amenities, improving green spaces or monitoring the quality of public housing and community buildings.

The workers approached included: housing allocation officer; benefits officer; parish councillor; youth worker; tenant participation officer; planner/environment officer; police; PCT officials; officer dealing with council tax; officer dealing with refuse bins; neighbourhood manager; teacher; community warden; social services officer; occupational therapist; planning and highways officer.

How do front-line staff react to being approached about a community problem? Some welcome user involvement and see themselves as part of the local community or as advocating for it within their agencies. Others stress the boundaries of their professional responsibility. Their ability to undertake engagement or empowerment also depends on senior management support, and on being given time, remit and training to engage with residents.

Empowerment cannot be achieved solely by training front-line staff – it must also pervade the culture of the agencies they work for. While all public services have policies for public engagement and are required to involve their users, it is not clear that these practices sufficiently link up with the government's community empowerment policy.

Empowerment within existing training

The report sought to establish to what extent community empowerment is already part of the ethos and training in different occupations, building on previous research conducted by the HCA Academy that showed that elements of community development (CD) practice can be found in a number of other occupations.

Over 70% of a sample of 404 respondents from seven broad occupational streams that contribute to sustainable communities reckoned that their work incorporated a significant element of community development.

Two thirds of respondents expected the need for CD within their jobs to increase in the future though only 8% of the sample were community development workers by name. Empowerment and CD was less familiar and less practised among built environment occupations than among social occupations.

This report went on to look at how far empowerment skills enter into the training of some of the individual occupations that regularly interact with local communities. The following occupations were chosen due to their explicit commitment to community empowerment in some form but are not exclusive:

Housing. Qualifications and accreditation in the management of housing are largely controlled by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH). Housing is an area in which there is a longstanding concern with resident involvement.

In some localities the housing sector is leading the way on partnership working and empowerment initiatives. In much of the training in this area there is a commitment to including empowerment and community development issues.

Planning. For the planning profession the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) plays the key role in assuring professional standards, practice and training in England and Wales. Planners have worked with local communities for many years, particularly through the voluntary organisation Planning Aid, and in the last few years a systematic approach has been laid down through Local Development Frameworks. However, there is some lag in implementation.

There are also particular obstacles in this area: local environments often face competing demands from a variety of interests, and since the Barker review of housing supply in 2004, there has been increased pressure on certain locations to accept substantial new housing settlements, to which local communities are often resistant.

Policing. The responsibility for police probationer training lies with individual forces, guided by a Home Office framework. The 2004 White Paper, Building Communities, Beating Crime identified neighbourhood policing as a key element in police reform, saying that police must become more responsive, 'citizen focused' and locally accountable. The training and delivery of police services has an increasingly strong emphasis on neighbourhood and community policing.

In 2008 the Flanagan report added further emphasis, and identified neighbourhood management as playing a central role in helping the police develop their neighbourhood role, acting as a vehicle to encourage more effective joint working and problem solving with other services and the community.

Police Community Support Officers. The first PCSOs were deployed in Westminster in 2002. There are now 16,000 across England and Wales. Their role is to reduce crime, the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour by being highly visible within the community, dealing with minor offences and supporting front-line policing. However, most of their training relates to technical matters such as arrest powers, questioning people, health and safety, evidence gathering, statement taking and crime scene management. They have considerable potential but very limited training in the skills and knowledge required to work effectively with local communities and community groups.

Neighbourhood Wardens are another occupation created in the same period but these workers are employed by local authorities. Not being tied to the policing agenda they have a freer range to take up whatever issues arise in the community. Wardens only exist in a limited number of local authorities but there is a national network and there are currently moves to develop the role further in a community empowerment direction.

Neighbourhood Managers, another recently created occupation, focus on joining up practitioners seconded from different local services and departments to create a neighbourhood-based team with a strong relationship with local residents. The government's NM pathfinder programme is nearing completion but the model has spread among local authorities and there are now about 300 schemes operating.

Community empowerment does not seem to figure prominently in training for this young occupation but its ethos and structure position it exceptionally well for this function, and its exponents argue that it should be seen as a universal model, not an experimental initiative.

Occupational differences and agency cultures

The six examples of different occupations show considerable contrasts, but even among this group of the more community-focused occupations, training and learning in understanding how communities work and how to further empower them is by no means fully developed. Overall, there was limited training specifically about empowerment, and even less about how to join up with the empowerment role of other occupations. It is likely that most other occupations are considerably less empowerment-ready than these.

All occupations would benefit by a better awareness of the overall aims and techniques of empowerment, common principles and objectives and where their particular role can contribute best. One way of establishing this common awareness might be the production of generic courses or modules that could be common material for all professions, and also for civil servants and councillors.

Beyond that, different professions have different contributions to make to empowerment. This suggests that a second stage of activity should be dialogue with professional institutes and training providers in a range of professions encouraging the development of the empowerment component in those professions. In addition to those occupations already mentioned, health, education and employment should also be considered.

From these pilot investigations, as well as background literature and informal inquiries, it seems clear that there is a different level of 'empowerment-readiness' in different occupations. Relevant professions tend to fall into groups presenting different types of challenge, for example:

- those with a 'natural' empowerment function and history of empowerment activity, such as housing, neighbourhood management, community wardens and community development
- those without a strong historic or 'natural' empowerment function but with a strong formal requirement or recent history of special innovations of varying success, such as planning, regeneration, policing and health

- those without a strong history of empowerment and no obvious empowerment role but possibly with empowerment potential, such as the built environment sector
- those rightly or wrongly associated with controlling and therefore disempowering functions, such as benefits staff, prison staff, social workers

It seems likely that all professions could benefit from the development of a core set of basic community empowerment and engagement knowledge and skills but given different starting points and professional cultures, more specific needs and potential may need to be tailored to each occupation.

Even workers whose roles entail a degree of control or perceived threat towards people, such as social workers, landlords and benefits workers, can to some degree be more empowering, or at least less disempowering, by being more empathetic, by seeing guidance and support as replacing control wherever possible and by proactively looking for ways to link individually raised issues with collective outcomes.

This implicitly raises the question of what cultural changes in organisations are needed in order to enable front-line workers to acquire and use more focused empowerment skills. In drawing up involvement action plans, agencies need to consider changes in staff ethos and methods, that might involve some retraining, and specific additional responsibilities. Agencies should also analyse which aspects of their responsibilities are genuinely open to modification by community influence, and whether some of their objectives require the appointment of expert community development staff.

Empowerment skills should include creative thinking among high level and middle managers, to widen scope for positive cooperation with communities at the front-line.

Upgrading community development

The most concentrated source of empowerment skills is the community development (CD) occupation, which is found in local authorities, some housing associations and Primary Care Trusts and scattered through a variety of voluntary and community organisations.

Community development works directly with community groups, organisations and networks. These have a vital role in overcoming isolation, crystallising shared issues and formulating cooperative action. This is the fundamental link between empowerment and a thriving third sector.

As well as being a key source of techniques, CD is important because it is a living occupation with several thousand specialist workers. It also has national, regional and in some places local structures and networks of communication.

There is a need to harness community development knowledge and skills from across the relevant occupations as a basis for an empowerment skills offer for those professions that are less empowerment ready.

However, CD as it currently stands does not cover all the empowerment skills identified here, or has the capacity or remit to coordinate empowerment by different occupations across a locality. Furthermore, room for manoeuvre among CD workers, especially those in the third sector, is often limited by poor and insecure employment conditions.

Most comments from people who reviewed a draft of this report tended to confirm the view that while community development is central to empowerment, it does not in practice cover the whole of it. Existing CD training is not necessarily well framed to engage other occupations, and CD workers are not often well positioned to spread their skills to other occupations. However there is movement towards including more strategic factors, for example in the new National Occupational Standards, and some local authorities do have sophisticated CD strategies and teams.

The transmission of CD skills to other occupations entails investment in CD expertise and changes in CD itself. Its existing ethos and learning materials are largely moulded to running small scale projects and to one-off interventions in larger systems. The principles and experience need refashioning for universal and mainstream roles and the strategic levels such as coordination of CD across localities.

Other key sources of empowerment skills that need to be drawn on are neighbourhood managers, tenant participation officers and community workers in specialist fields such as health and education. There are also important sources of empowerment skills that have developed under other headings.

One of these is community-led planning (CLP), which began in 2000 as Parish Planning but is now also being advanced into urban areas. CLP brings together components of community engagement, empowerment and development which elsewhere are often isolated or spasmodic. It concentrates on achieving a *cumulative* growth of local improvement and empowerment which is definitively owned by local residents.

Government has been perceived as hinting that the spreading of empowerment skills to all front-line workers could make the specialist CD occupation redundant, but the report's findings suggest that this would be illusory and wasteful. The CD profession needs to be upgraded to play a leading role and to instil these skills among other workers.

The challenge of coordination

To achieve a lasting impact, empowerment activities by different occupations need to be linked up across a neighbourhood, parish or locality. This means that all occupations need to be aware of how their contribution to empowerment fits in with others and that some occupations will need the additional skill of how to coordinate different contributions. This cannot be done solely by front-line workers. It requires co-operation and common vision at a higher level. This illustrates the need for culture change within agencies to support empowerment activity at the front-line.

Examples of effective coordination can be found in a number of areas but are far from being the norm. At local authority level the Local Strategic Partnership or one of its subgroups is likely to be the most appropriate vehicle. But coordination of practical action is most crucial at the neighbourhood, ward or village level which is the natural scale for interaction between people on a daily face-to-face basis, and where there is most direct interaction between public services and local communities.

Here there is often a glaring gap. A new and universal framework is needed; integrating experience from in-depth community development projects, parish and community led planning, neighbourhood management and neighbourhood renewal, including the New Deal for Communities. These are not mutually exclusive but they have emerged from different traditions and programmes, and tend to be found in different places. Each has particular strengths, and a new model should draw on them all.

Consultation responses on a draft version of this report had much to say about coordination. Most agreed that it was badly needed: *'Co-ordination would produce better results'; 'it needs a coordinated strategy so we all work to core principles'; 'there is strong benefit to having a core group of occupational community empowerment skills which different occupations can sign up to and accredit staff against'.*

Better coordination was also seen as likely to produce a more effective relationship with the community: *'Coordination is needed to orchestrate local initiatives and to show public agencies and communities that they have shared goals... brokering these relationships forms an important step in the drive to pool resources within a squeezed fiscal environment'.*

There were however some accompanying warnings: *'We need to be sure we don't set up a bureaucratic beast'; 'not sure... are relevant empowerment skills similar enough across a range of professions and roles?'; 'coordination of different empowerment activities is important but should not distract CD workers from their core role, which is spending time with a community and helping it to solve its problems'.*

Conclusions

Society relies increasingly on the empowerment of local and other communities to build social capital, influence the improvement of public services and help strengthen democracy by reinvigorated forms of participation. Community empowerment is dedicated to these aims. This requires the **spreading of certain skills throughout all occupations** that interact with local and other communities, and the report summarised here underpins the Academy's programme in this field.

The report concludes that effective empowerment practice must be based on a **clear skills and knowledge base** that is common to all who are engaged in empowering local and other communities. There is a need for **generic courses or modules** that could be common material for all occupations. Beyond that, different professions have different contributions to make to empowerment and are in different states of readiness, so a further stage of activity should be dialogue with training providers in individual occupations to stimulate and guide development of the empowerment component. Lasting change requires not just the training of workers but **cultural change** in agencies.

This report proposes that a series of actions are taken to spread community empowerment skills and calls on government and all relevant agencies to commit themselves to help implement this agenda in the interests of more effective achievement of their own specialisms as well as the joint strengthening of communities. This programme is likely to include these five components:

- agreement with the Department for Communities and Local Government on joint work to spread community empowerment skills through all relevant professions. CLG could use its good offices with other programmes and Departments to create receptivity to the spread of empowerment skills in other policy areas, while the HCA Academy works to the same end through professional institutes
- dialogue with key professional institutes and training providers in a balanced range of occupations, both those most 'empowerment ready', some of which have been described in this report, and those less ready, about establishing or strengthening the role of community empowerment within their professions. Training and learning providers will be encouraged to develop material to boost the empowerment skills of front-line workers and the empowerment ethos and systems thinking of the local delivery agencies, while the Academy proposes to commission a generic course to be a foundation-stone for all these
- round-table seminars with representatives from varied occupations to compare actual and potential contributions to empowerment, clarify benefits for the contributors as well as for communities, and guide the design and dissemination of generic or specific learning materials
- contributing information, ideas and proposals to the HCA Academy's *Better Skills for Better Places* – a national skills action plan that will accelerate the development of a flexible, knowledgeable and highly skilled workforce
- dialogue with community development bodies and those experienced in neighbourhood management and community led planning on strengthening the capacity of these occupations to guide empowerment learning in other occupations and play a local coordinating role; simultaneously CLG could consider supporting the development of more comprehensive and strategic forms of community development practice

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