

Empowered Communities in the 2020s: Feedback on the first 50 responses to the opening survey

28 April 2017

As part of the scoping stage for Empowered Communities in the 2020s, we invited people interested in contributing to the research to complete a short survey asking how they would like to be involved; what they felt was most important to help communities become more empowered and vibrant; and for examples of where we might look for empowered communities. This short report summarises responses received from 20 March – 11 April 2017. In addition to using this data to help develop the research, we are also able to see where to target to get further survey responses that will achieve a good geographic spread of voices and perspectives. The survey will be open until the end of June 2017.

Top 5 themes related to empowered communities

People were asked about the most important thing/s that they thought would help communities to become more empowered and vibrant in the future. The top 5 themes were:

1. Devolution, power, agency to make decisions locally
2. Active participation in policy decision-making
3. Resources for work with communities
4. Support including education, training, capacity building, peer support
5. Self-efficacy or confidence and self-belief

Interests

People were asked to provide a few words about why they were interested in the future of communities and community development. Some of the key interests that emerged included:

Active, vibrant communities are the bedrock of social success in difficult times

Respondents wanted to see strong communities that are equipped to deal with today's challenges including austerity, reduction in public services, growing inequality and poverty, social isolation and loss of amenities.

- *'Active, vibrant communities have highest economic and health outcome. They have high levels of community safety. They are the bedrock of all social success.'*
- *'We need radical change in the way public services are delivered/produced and a revival of local democracy; competent community development enabling communities to organise in ways that they determine, set their own priorities and engage effectively with decision makers is essential for this.'*
- *'Because societies and economies are rapidly changing, politics is failing to respond effectively, and inequality and poverty are growing. Strong, connected communities have never been more important.'*

- *'Communities are under more threat than ever: broken up by so called regeneration, weak representation from councillors outside cabinet system, rising costs, increasing difficult access to services, social isolation, loss of amenities and poor health.'*
- *'Because government cuts mean that if communities don't do stuff for themselves no one else will.'*

Bringing people together takes skill

Respondents said it was important to maximise resources, share skills and knowledge and learn from and build on the existing community development knowledge base.

- *'Our society needs to become more equal, we need to make better use of resources and share skills and experience.'*
- *'Particularly through the Big Local / Local Trust project I've become concerned about how existing wisdom in community development doesn't seem to be being used to its best to support effective development in areas with very low existing capacity.'*
- *'It is only by working together in communities that we are going to be able to address the many issues facing us at the moment and bringing people together takes skill.'*
- *'I am also committed to ensuring that communities have the practical assistance needed, in the form of paid workers, base resources and access to training and funding.'*
- *'I have been a community development worker all my working life and believe passionately that belonging to, and solidarity in, geographical communities can be positively transformative to both individuals and society. I believe that professional community development input can be (should be) a major contribution to these processes.'*
- *'...essential to grow sustainable and socially just communities. I would like to see a digital participatory project to share through creative commons all the material produced in the past 40 years for all communities to share.'*

Time for a grown up conversation about what's needed for a more equitable distribution of power and resources

Respondents wanted to see action towards a more fair and just society and a more equal distribution of resources.

- *'I believe we are at the heart of a transformation of how the state interacts with communities and individuals. If we are to support this change process and ensure that we have a grown up conversation about the way we distribute our resources and share fairly then we need to be engaging in that now.'*
- *'Our society needs to become more equal, we need to make better use of resources'*
- *'Poverty alleviation. Social cohesion. Good relationships essential for progress and for wellbeing'*
- *'To ensure that communities are properly supported and enabled to address issues affecting their lives and to challenge power imbalances and all forms of discrimination.'*
- *'Too many communities are being left behind. Too little is being done to include residents and too much is still being done to marginalised communities by others. I see practice on a daily basis that buries the most marginalised residents and communities beneath structures, created by 'professionals' who claim to be acting inclusively but simply cannot face the fact that they are part of a system that cannot deal with genuine resident-led power.'*

Participation: a tool for democracy or the status quo?

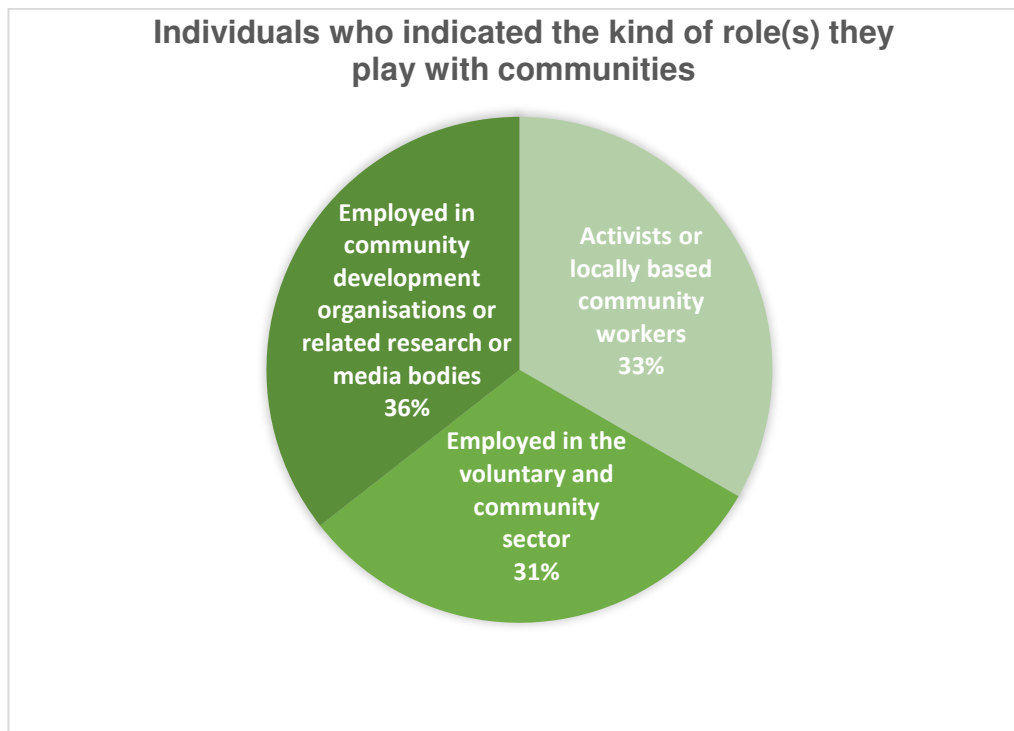
Respondents wanted to see new opportunities for meaningful participation in local decision making; supporting communities to engage effectively with decisions that affect their lives.

- *‘...the empowerment of local communities to enable them to be equal partners in decisions that affect them is of particular interest to us’*
- *‘It’s a crucial time for communities living in deprived areas. There is a lot of rhetoric on empowerment and participation, amid continuous cuts to public resources. Over the past 40 years there’s been broad institutionalisation of participatory practices and a growing emphasis on community control. Yet over the same period we’ve witnessed a rapid expansion in socio-economic inequality and political polarisation. Do we need to revisit our approach? Is participation becoming a new tool to reinforce the status quo in both discourse and practice?’*
- *‘... enabling communities to organise in ways that they determine, set their own priorities and engage effectively with decision makers is essential for this.’*
- *‘Because local communities can often do a better job than local authorities with less!’*
- *‘Communities are the building block of Democracy. Sadly, the elite /councillors are controlling and little or no mentoring or chances for the young.’*

About respondents

Total number of respondents (20/03/17 – 11/04/17): 50

Most respondents occupied more than one role in their work or involvement with communities. We have loosely categorised them as shown in the figure below.



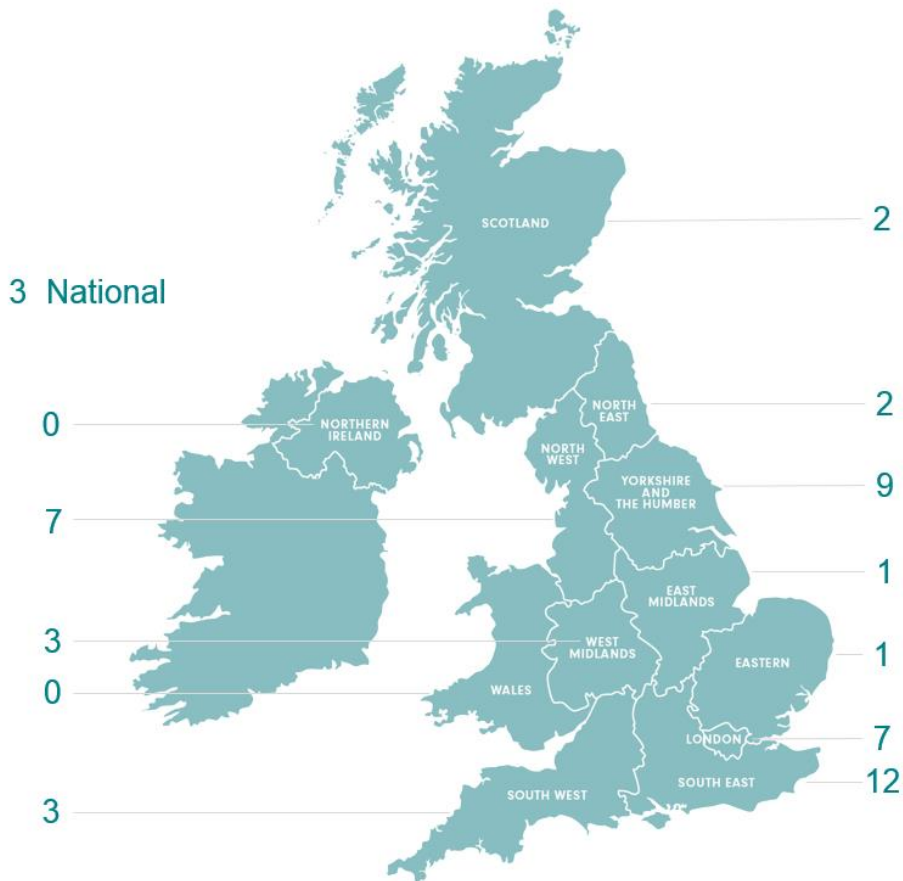
Engaging with Empowered Communities research

People were asked if/how they would like to contribute to the research. All 50 respondents said they would like to contribute in one or more of the following 3 ways:

- 45** people said they would complete surveys on research findings as they emerge
- 32** said they would host or connect us to an event in their area
- 22** people said they would join a Twitter conversation

Location

We asked people what region they lived or worked in.



We want to hear from everyone, particularly from people living and working in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. The survey will be open until the end of June 2017, to have your say, sign up to email updates on the project and find out about other opportunities to contribute visit www.localtrust.org.uk. To contact the research team email enquiries@ivar.org.uk using "EC2020s" in the subject of your email.