

**CREATING AN
“INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ENGAGEMENT”:
FROM WHY TO HOW**

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

This paper was written mainly as a personal contribution to the debate about participation and democracy, or at least some aspects of it. It is based on many years of practical participation experience, on messages and lessons from training courses and on a (limited) study of the most recent literature. Being a participation champion, the paper has of course also evolved with input from many colleagues and is better for it – for which many thanks. Despite the use of the word ‘we’ throughout the paper, the end result is the author’s responsibility alone.

*This is not a paper about consultation and participation as a whole. It identifies what the author, and colleagues, believe to be a major omission in the planning and management of effective participatory processes. It elaborates that omission – **the need for what is called an “Infrastructure for Engagement”**, describes **what is currently happening to deliver aspects of the infrastructure** (as yet only minimal) and then **highlights some ways forward** to ensure a coherent and integrated approach. It ends with an **outline of an initiative** that could help to prove the point and demonstrate how to proceed.*

The reader will notice that many of the examples come from the world of planning and development (including regeneration) and sustainability. This is not an apology. As Gabriel Chanan¹ noted in work for the ODPM, the UK’s approach to Local Agenda 21 offers a striking example to all of how to promote and use participative principles, and recent changes in the planning system are drawing to the surface some exciting and challenging issues about participation, especially in relation to the often overlooked private sector. This does however reflect the author’s personal experience; any further work on the ideas in this paper would demand a more reasonably balanced policy area coverage.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In today’s world one almost gets the feeling that, if anything at all moves, someone, somewhere will demand to be consulted on it. And, shortly after, government will come out with guidelines requiring that consultation and offering practical guidelines for so doing. ‘Consultation’, ‘involvement’, ‘participation’, ‘engagement’ are everywhere. One evening recently one of these terms apparently came up on the national television news, one hour later in Coronation Street!

1.2 Not surprisingly, many commentators are now worrying about overload, about people being consulted to death or, more usually, they use the term ‘consultation fatigue’. People in central and local government, and even some in the private sector, are beginning to be frightened by the many implications of consulting everybody on everything. This is all rather worrying for participation advocates because we see, every day, yet more guidelines, programmes, exhortation to do even more ‘out there’ without any consideration of how that might happen without actually worsening ‘fatigue’ problems and generating cynicism about the whole principle of participation.

1.3 This paper is about a seriously, almost totally, overlooked aspect of building a participative culture. What is more, it is about an aspect which, if properly addressed, could go some way to lessening the problems of overload. Taking this to its extreme, and in the hope of encouraging people to read on, **it is tempting to suggest a complete moratorium on new guidelines, new requirements, new programmes, new reports on methods until this lack of what we call an ‘infrastructure for engagement’ is properly addressed!**

2. WHAT MISSING ASPECT?

2.1 The term 'capacity building' is now relatively familiar. However, the 'coin' of capacity building has two sides and one of those sides has been developed well while the other is as yet barely recognised, let alone developed. The argument for an infrastructure for engagement highlights this 'second side'.

2.2 The familiar side of the coin is the burgeoning network of projects, initiatives, programmes and ad hoc events through which people, most often from disadvantaged communities, are supported to take more control of their own lives and enrich them. Within this, there is a heavy emphasis on building (some call it 'releasing') capacity to enable people to engage as full partners in participatory decision-making processes. (There are also important ideas in here about the development of social capital but we will leave them out of the discussion at this stage.)

*"This means investing in successful efforts to build the skills, abilities, knowledge and confidence of people and community groups to enable them to take effective action and play leading roles in the development of their communities."*²

2.3 This is a direct consequence of the other burgeoning territory of legislation, guidelines, requirements and exhortation, mainly from central government, to ensure wider and better involvement of citizens in almost every area of policy, practice and service delivery that affects their lives. Success in realising the ambition for more and better participation, especially of those historically most distanced from decision-making, is heavily dependent on there being skilled, articulate and confident participants. And, as such skill and self-confidence usually rests with those further up the socio-economic ladder, so we return full circle to the need to build capacity for those further down the ladder in particular.

2.4 The sheer diversity of initiatives etc. emerging recently from government, either about the need for better participation or the need to build capacity to deliver it successfully, is captured in Figure 1 (overleaf). This shows a page from a Home Office publication about capacity building with communities entitled 'Firm Foundations'³; (which introduces the 'coin' analogy). It illustrates – as book icons - a medley of other related reports, from a medley of government departments. **Such lists could no doubt be added to again and again if a serious attempt were made to identify all relevant recent reports and programmes.** (This exercise took place at a recent workshop and generated another 16 titles in as many minutes.)

2.5 With obvious provisos about whether all in this medley is genuinely 'joined-up' or consistent in its principles and approaches (we return to that issue later), what is underway is patently a good thing for those who believe in a shift towards a more participative democracy. But there is one other crucial proviso and that takes us back to the other side of the capacity building coin, best illustrated with a real life example.

2.6 In one neighbourhood renewal area in England, a lot of valuable community capacity building had been taking place in order to enable people to take up the many opportunities for participation. The first opportunity one group of 'trainees' had in which to use their new skills and confidence was the first stage of participation on a project about some empty, unused, local open space. Sadly, that event was run as a traditional Public Meeting with the usual horrific panoply of top table, talking heads, shouts and anger and blame from the floor, shows of hands etc. Not surprisingly, the new trainees emerged from that experience totally disillusioned. They had expected to be given opportunities to share, discuss, listen, develop ideas and work as equals with, not against, professionals.

Figure 1



2.7 This exposes, rather bluntly, the other side of the coin. The shift to create more opportunities for participation is welcomed. Building the capacity of people to participate is also welcomed. However, **unless someone is also taking a similarly responsible and skilled approach to providing meaningful and effective opportunities for engagement, people will continue to walk away totally disillusioned.** What is more, the challenge of providing proper opportunities and skilled delivery is just as much in need of government exhortation, coherent programmes, high level backing and appropriate resourcing as is capacity building for participants. Creating and delivering proper opportunities is not just a matter of developing a few clever tricks for running meetings or devising questionnaires!

2.8 Action needs to be taken to focus on enabling key people, who can and should be from any group or sector, to have the skills and ability – and institutional backing - to develop appropriate participation processes and deliver them down to the last detail of group facilitation (or whatever). To achieve this, many different sorts of action are needed, at many different levels. The result would be an ‘infrastructure for engagement’ to allow newly skilled people (and those already skilled and committed) to maximise the value of what is, for many, a significant contribution of their unpaid time. **Without this ‘other side of the coin’ the enormous personal and financial commitment to capacity building will be entirely wasted and the advance towards a more participative democracy will be damaged, maybe fatally.**

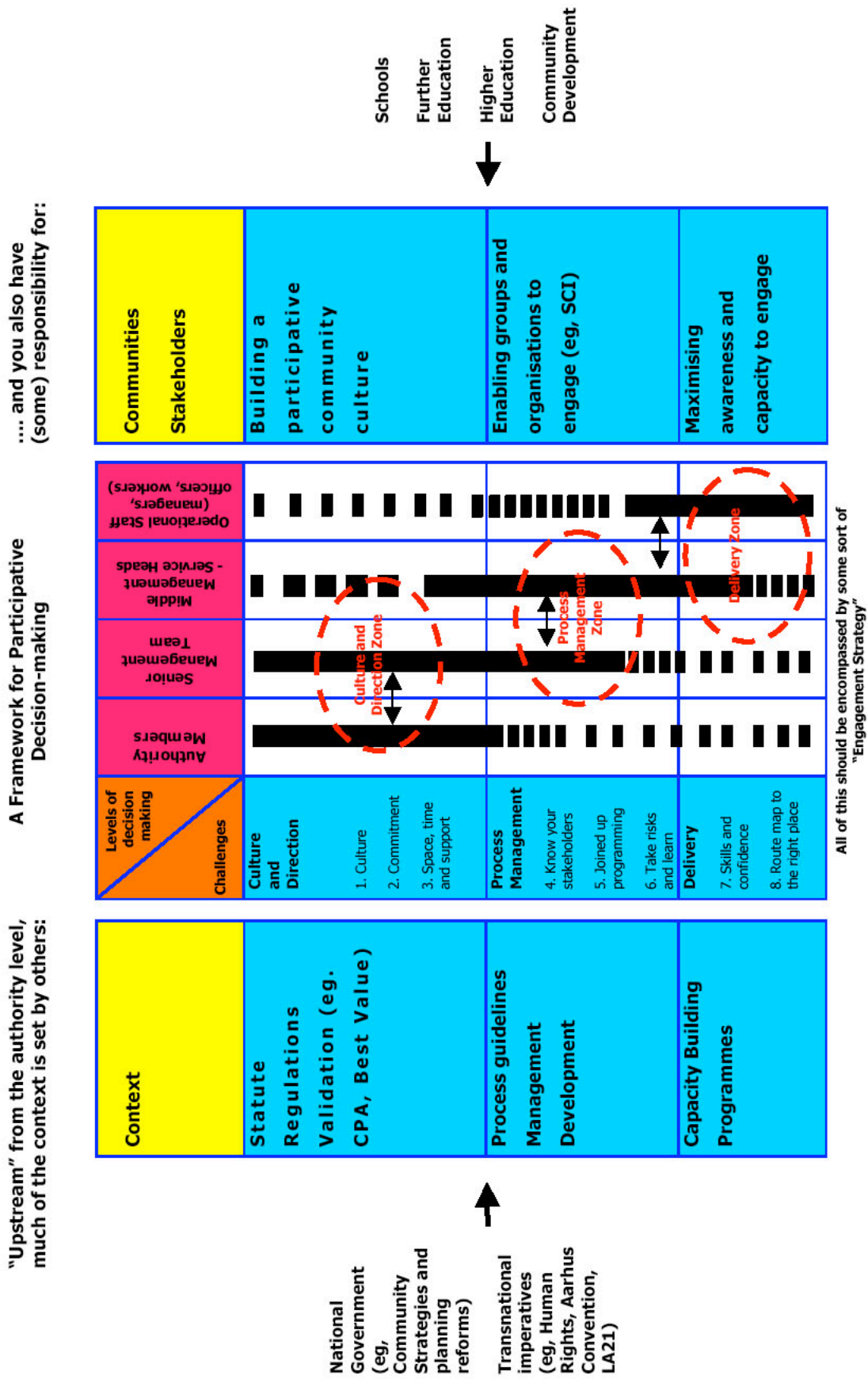
“... opportunities for people to be involved are as important as their capacity to take part. Public servants and other major service-providing organisations need to be equipped to engage better with citizens and communities.”⁴

3. WHAT IS THE ‘INFRASTRUCTURE’?

3.1 As suggested earlier, there has as yet been so little exploration of the other side of the coin that we are in ‘poorly mapped territory’. At the same time, once one starts to suggest frameworks for an infrastructure, it is surprising and encouraging to see that quite a few positive components of possible frameworks already exist, if operating in a small way and often so isolated from each other such that the whole is patently less than the sum of the parts.

3.2 Over recent months, triggered by a number of pressures, events, articles, personal frustrations etc., a ‘work in progress’ diagram has emerged that begins to illustrate a possible format and hint at actions to fill the framework. This framework is shown in Figure 2 (overleaf). Its central part is about action at local government level – though that could also be Primary Care Trust or Police Authority level, perhaps even Neighbourhood Renewal Area level. This format was chosen because, in terms of number or initiatives and immediate impact on people’s lives, it is at this level that the burgeoning commitment to more and more consultation becomes most real. Interestingly, we could add that it could be - in fact **it ought to be** – operated at the Local Strategic Partnership level, which ostensibly brings all sectors together. Given current experience with LSPs and their approach to participation, we will leave that idea hanging for now!

Figure 2



3.3 Local Government Level

3.3.1 We suggest starting by looking at the central part of the diagram which refers mainly to a local authority; its members, officers, policies and practices.

- The first row (**Culture and Direction**) suggests a need for overall, corporate commitment and backing, including financial, to effective engagement if proper opportunities are to be built in coherently, consistently and genuinely to everything that a local authority* does – to its whole 'culture'. (* Substitute PCT or whatever fits your situation better.)
- The second row (**Process Management**) suggests that this corporate commitment to engagement needs to express itself through appropriate planning, programming and project management that sets up and supports a range of participative activity in a way that can deliver effective overall processes.
- The third row (**Delivery**) is about the day-to-day work and skills that go into the final design, implementation and facilitation of engagement activity.
- The columns relate to the range of players from executive members (left) through to 'field workers' (right) who share responsibility for enabling effective engagement.
- The solid vertical bars show the main areas of responsibility for each of these groups. When bars become broken that indicates that they must also show support for action throughout.

3.3.2 Truly successful engagement and (to quote 'Firm Foundations') a '*much more comprehensive and coherent menu of learning opportunities for community engagement*'⁵ is only really likely to happen when (as it were) **all boxes are filled and the responsibilities of all the main lines are taken up by those to whom they relate.**

- Action only in the bottom right hand box will have limited overall or cumulative value; it could be called the "better techniques blind alley". We find it staggering that so much effort is still put into this box on the diagram, by government, agencies, professional associations and – more staggering still – many participation practitioners.
- Action only in the top left could be called "gestures bereft of action"; it is the area of empty commitments and policy for the sake of it.
- Not surprisingly, experience from many other areas of practice in all sectors shows that it is too often at the middle management level that the real change of attitude is needed. Middle management, at worst, can block the route from top level commitment down to action and prevent bottom level action from ever being coherent enough to be genuinely seen as policy implementation. A colleague describes such bad middle managers as "better blockers".

*"The prospects for mobilising social capital also depended upon mundane matters that were in the hands of managers rather than politicians."*⁶

3.3.3 One natural but far too rare demonstration of thinking and action across the whole framework would be (as per the small note at the bottom) through the development and adoption of a genuinely effective, overall, local authority (dare we suggest LSP) '**Engagement Strategy**'.

*"There may be value in authorities regularly reviewing and setting out their strategy for consultation and public participation."*⁷

3.3.4 Such things were highlighted early in the current government's 'Modernising Local Government'⁸ campaign but were barely ever mentioned again and have been slowly forgotten. In most cases that we know of, however, the authorities producing such strategies have not genuinely or corporately taken on board the challenge implicit in their strategy or have placed its implementation in the hands of officers far too junior to ensure that it happens on a

coherent as well as day-to-day basis. This is a classic example of top level commitment and bottom level enthusiasm being deadened by middle management.

“Consultation Strategies must be supported by appropriate implementation structures and processes. These may vary between authorities, but are necessary to ensure that the initiation of consultations is co-ordinated; to ensure that the results of consultations are shared corporately; to integrate databases of potential consultees; and to build the core skills of the authority in the tools and techniques of consultation.”⁹

3.4 Central Government Level

3.4.1 If the diagram included only local government or similar levels, it would imply that they operate in a vacuum. Most operate within frameworks or dictat, formal or informal guidance passed down to them from central government. At the next level up there are also demands and pressures from international level as with Human Rights (the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is especially important on participation issues¹⁰) and from others such as the EU - notably the recently adopted Aarhus Convention¹¹ with its requirements (if rather modest) for participation in all public sector practice.

3.4.2 As of now, the diagram does not focus heavily on such levels. They are brought into the equation through the column to the left entitled ‘**Context**’. One might expect governmental action to impact solely or mainly in the upper row of the diagram, through regulation and policy. It also impacts, however, at the middle level through detailed guidance (eg. as with the recent town and country planning reforms) and practical, centrally funded initiatives, at the lower level (eg. the ODPM Community Participation programmes¹²).

3.4.3 The current diagram does not as yet do justice to this level and it would need developing before the framework could move further ahead. In many ways the central part of the diagram could – in fact should – be applied to central government as well as local. The same issues apply about levels and about roles, and there is real concern at more local levels that **there is nobody, and no mechanism, at central government level to bring to their work on participation the same coherence and consistency that we are arguing to be necessary at local level.**

3.5 ‘Community and Stakeholders’ Level

3.5.1 The column to the right completes the suite by pointing out that action within or by organisations is never enough. Creating and promoting a culture of participation is valuable but, to really make progress, it needs to meet a capable and committed voluntary, community and even private sector coming towards it. In fact the ultimate aim is that participation should cease to be something initiated by ‘them’ in which ‘we’ are graciously invited to play a role. As will come clear later, participative processes could and should be initiated by ‘anybody’. To that extent the divide in the diagram between community and local authority is potentially damaging – though it serves to make key points at this stage.

3.5.2 This point is reinforced by our inclusion of community, voluntary and private sectors within our rather inadequate label. The first two sectors are always central to any debate on participation, and are of course the main focus for the majority of capacity building work. Inclusion of the private sector is, however, particularly important. Recent years have seen growth in the levels of initiatives such as environmental reporting by business and work on ‘corporate social responsibility’, often being taken forward through what is termed ‘stakeholder dialogue’. In the world of planning and development there are now some private developers who operate far more thorough and challenging approaches to participation in project management than most in the public sector. Even more interestingly, the idea of

positively encouraging, even requiring, private developers to take a lead in participation work is actually embedded in the recent planning reforms; (even if so well embedded that many have not yet found it!)¹³.

3.5.3 We include within this column background activity to prepare people for participation and engagement, notably initiatives such as ‘citizenship’ in schools, some aspects of youth work and of course community capacity building. We also include here other aspects of real relevance to the establishment of an infrastructure of skilled people – the initial training of key professionals (planners, transport engineers, community workers etc.). In terms of the government’s push towards ‘sustainable communities’ it is useful to look at the Egan report that highlighted the key skills needed in the future for all relevant professionals. That list included, for example, ‘stakeholder management’ and ‘inclusive visioning’.

3.6 Culture

3.6.1 But now a caution. Analytical frameworks can be powerful tools but they can be dangerous if treated too mechanistically or functionally. Progress towards more, better, coherent participation is far more than just a matter of ‘filling the boxes’. It is about a key change in overall culture (for all, not just local government). To borrow a key phrase from the women’s movement, **it is about a shift from participation as something we do to participative as something we are**. For participative working to become ordinary, mainstream, the way we do things, a cultural shift is needed. It should be the failure to be participative that stands out, not the so-called ‘novelty’ of participation.

“The key point is that the Council in have encouraged, through their control over the institutions of local government, a climate of official consultation and innovation in participation methods.”¹⁴

3.7 (Before moving on, a brain-teaser! The media now play an extremely significant role in mediating between people and government and ought to be actively brought in to help in moving participative work forwards, not least because they too often move it back into conflict. But where would they fit on the diagram?)

4. CURRENT COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK

4.1 The above section outlines an emerging framework and suggests that **successful progress comes when there is some action by all at all levels and in all sectors and when this all hangs together purposefully**. Only when that is genuinely in place will the challenge to develop participation in so many areas of policy and practice, and the growing pattern of building the capacity of people to participate, be fully realised. Only with the full infrastructure in place will the full potential of participative democracy be released.

4.2 This then leads to the next question. What is the current picture in terms of actions to ‘colour in’ the framework? We have hinted that there may be nowhere where the full picture is in place but have also stated that there are already some building blocks beginning to emerge.

4.3 One of the few initiatives underway set up explicitly to begin to build an infrastructure for engagement (though never with that grandiose title) is ‘Local Facilitator Networks’ as now promoted by InterAct Networks¹⁵; (of which this author is a Director). The principle of InterAct Networks is that in any area (or large organisation) there should be a group of people – a Local Facilitators Network - with skills in participative process design and facilitation (to complement their day jobs), ideally drawn from many groups and all sectors. Network members can be called upon by anybody in that area to act independently to plan and

deliver engagement processes. Complementing the external focus on delivery, network members are able to share and exchange experience in an action-learning mode and thereby build and develop their own capacity to deliver.

4.4 As of now, there are around more than a dozen Local Facilitator Networks in existence in the UK. The positive feedback has been that the individuals in networks have helped to enable a remarkable number of more effective engagement processes and events. The cautionary feedback relates directly to the basic argument about the lack of an infrastructure for engagement. It has been about the frustration felt by many network members that they are **still not being appropriately empowered by their middle and senior managers to use properly the skills they have learned and developed** - whether deliberately or by default is unclear. Though never expressing it in this way, practitioners have highlighted the lack of an 'infrastructure'.

4.5 This led to an opportunity to run a workshop to check with network members and others what might be done to make progress on the cautionary and negative aspects. It was the preparation for the workshop that generated the first version of the framework introduced earlier. Around half of the 30 or so people who attended the workshop (in April 2005) were from existing or prospective facilitator networks. The others included community development workers, trainers, consultants, staff from government departments (eg. Home Office), government agencies (eg. Environment Agency) and activists from the engagement territory.

4.6 Everybody at the workshop had been sent the framework in advance and the first key task of the day was to 'colour it in'. Participants were asked to draw on their experience to suggest what is currently happening that is good and positive in each of the boxes in the framework (for their area, authority or agency) and also what is not happening or is negative. The outcomes can be seen on Figures 3 and 4 (overleaf). The framework proved itself generally (as it has done in practice since then¹⁶) and the key points it generated were:

- Figure 3 shows, for each box, whether there were more negative or more positive comments from people. Blue boxes show a majority of negative comments, red boxes a majority of positive comments (and unmarked boxes show a more equal response).
- Overall, the boxes suggest a strong positive picture in the bottom right of the central diagram (the action end) and a negative picture towards the top left (the overall authority or agency end). This is as anticipated from the informal feedback described above,
- The positive aspects at organisation level were complemented and supported by the red box in the 'Communities and Stakeholders' column (to the right). This is probably what one might have expected. A more positive response in the top two boxes might have been expected, but the comment was that communities still feel as though they are only genuinely engaged ad hoc, at the discretion of those in (for example) a PCT's or an agency's policy making or projects.
- Perhaps more surprising are the red boxes to the left in the 'Context' column. These suggest that participants felt that government and others 'up there' are giving out a wide range of positive messages from in-principle encouragement to practical help. (This does not deny earlier comments, reinforced at the workshop, that there is still much to for central government to put its own internal 'house in order'.)
- Slightly more elusively, there is a suggestion in all the feedback that best practice, where it exists, would show good correlation between community and authority views in terms of Process and Delivery, but that there would still be a significant mismatch between them in terms of Culture (aspirations, expectations etc.).

Figure 3

Context		Levels Challenges	Members	Seniors	Middle Managers	Coalface Staff	Communities Stakeholders	
Statute Regulations Validation		Culture And Direction					Building a participative community culture	
Guidelines Management development		Process Management					Enabling groups, organisations and individuals to participate	
Capacity Building		Delivery					Maximising awareness and capacity to engage	

Figure 4

Context	Levels Challenges	Members	Seniors	Middle Managers	Coalface Staff	Communities Stakeholders
Statute Regulations Validation	Culture And Direction	Members	Seniors	Middle Managers	Coalface Staff	Communities Stakeholders
Guidelines Management development	Process Management	Members	Seniors	Middle Managers	Coalface Staff	Communities Stakeholders
Capacity Building	Delivery	Members	Seniors	Middle Managers	Coalface Staff	Communities Stakeholders

4.7 The red boxes in the context/government column suggest a key question that simply must be asked: if what is coming ‘down’ is so good and wide, why are there so many blue boxes elsewhere? Some of the answers to this question are hinted at in Figure 4 (previous page) which adds to the basic framework a short summary of negative (blue) and positive (red) points made at the workshop. This and the full results (not included here) show clearly that **there are a few places (organisations etc.) – but only a few – where a ‘critical mass’ of skill, experience and commitment is beginning to build up.**

4.8 This particular piece of managed feedback is inevitably partial and still rather anecdotal. What other initiatives or programmes are underway to colour in at least parts of the framework? From feedback at the workshop and from suggestions made by several colleagues, we can move around the framework and start some ‘painting by numbers’ colouring in, covering mainly the more positive picture, Though some parts of that picture start to look better, it is important to remember that there is probably no place in the country where all of the following activities are underway; (an issue to which we return in the final section).

4.9 We will start with the ‘**Communities and Stakeholders**’ column.

- Within the schools sector there are certainly some good examples of children and young people being helped, mainly through ‘citizenship’ programmes but also Schools Councils, to develop at least the initial skills necessary for managing debate and shared decision-making. In some cases this has involved engaging young people directly with real life neighbourhood changes and also involved preparing them with practical skills in event management and facilitation¹⁷.
- “Greater consultation with the public about decisions being taken by the authority is likely to foster a greater feeling of responsible citizenship. The reverse is also true – a wider acceptance of the need to be active as a citizen is likely to mean greater interest in local government.”¹⁸*
- There are even more good examples emerging now from various forms of youth work in which young people are trained as advisers or mediators on a self-help or peer mentoring/review basis around issues such and personal and sexual health, drug abuse and broader aspects of socialisation. This is not quite training for engagement processes but many such projects come close to that and the link (eg. from mediation skills to facilitation skills) could easily be made.
 - Occasional examples exist of what was referred to earlier – training professionals with the key skills as suggested in the Egan report¹⁹. The Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment has related components in its requirements for Associate membership, backed up by courses in universities. Occasional day courses and short programmes have been run for trainee planners and for sustainable development professionals. By and large, however, the picture in relation to initial training and continuing professional development for the key professions is very worrying; almost all students emerge with no relevant skills or background at all.
- “It also means expanding learning and development within public services, so that professionals, practitioners and policy-makers are better equipped to engage with citizens and communities. The development of a much more comprehensive and coherent menu of learning opportunities for community engagement, both for citizens and communities, and for professionals, practitioners and policy-makers.”²⁰*
- Moving on to the more obvious community level, we find some positive examples again. Though several different terms are used (community enabler, community facilitator etc.) there are a number of programmes underway, especially in social regeneration areas, to build up formal or informal groups of people with the skills to help their own communities

to engage properly in local decision-making. In fact, to close the circle, one of the InterAct Networks groups is based on a Community Empowerment Network in a neighbourhood renewal area and members of another Network (Burnley) are proactively outreaching to specific groups on specific community issues. (To add a note of caution, it is however our experience that these are often solely locally focussed and do not work on broader topics with far more mixed and challenging issues and stakeholders, such as district-wide transport strategies.)

- We also understand that the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit at ODPM has commissioned a team to develop a 'toolkit' to advance community facilitation at neighbourhood level. Interestingly, this is a joint initiative with the Home Office.

4.10 Moving now to consider the left hand side of the framework we can comment on the '**Context**' column and the role of government and government agencies in particular.

- The good news – the reason for the red boxes and comments in Figures 3 and 4 – comes in two parts. The first has already been mentioned. It is the lorryfull of regulations, guidelines, encouragement etc. from central government to everybody to do lots more participation (or consultation or involvement according to which report you read). Secondly, the equally large lorryfull of reports, programmes and projects on community capacity building (which maybe fits better under the 'Communities' column).
- Some agencies (eg. the Environment Agency) are grappling with putting some sort of system in place and several larger scale, longer term projects touch on the fringes of 'infrastructure' (eg. the Countryside Agency's Vital Villages programme or English Nature's coastal management plan work).
- A further example comes again from planning. Guidance on the recent reforms suggests that planners should take on the role of 'capacity builders' to help people understand planning better and to then become active in its increasing medley of involvement activities. Unfortunately this is treated as a bad joke by most planners who, though often recognising how important such a task is, feel themselves totally unresourced and unskilled to do such work. To counter-balance this, the ODPM funds the England-wide Planning Aid system, established specifically to bring planners and public together.
- In terms of the more internal management issues for central government, there are beginning to be some positive signs of fashionable if crucial 'joined-up thinking' as in the toolkit example just mentioned. ODPM are also planning to adapt some of its planning system work directly into the next wave of work on Community Strategies, specifically to ensure greater consistency.

4.11 Returning to the central part of the framework, we can look first at the (mostly) positive areas – the red boxes in diagram 3.

- Some local authorities (we happen to know of Bristol City Council) offer training opportunities to their staff on aspects of consultation and participation work, though rarely for middle or senior managers. There are also many other small and large groups, even individual trainers, out there undertaking training in facilitation, consensus building, participation and so forth (notably the well established programme at The Environment Council).

*"While experience and confidence is growing, expertise in for example, facilitation skills, planning and running workshops, questionnaire design and analysis etc., is still spread very thinly in many authorities. Too often the task of organising a survey or facilitating a workshop is delegated to officers with little or no experience, and the skills and experience which do exist within Councils are not used, or developed consistently."*²¹

- InterAct Networks may be a step ahead in terms of trying to move beyond mere training into ways of ensuring continued development and coherent application of learned skills,

but there are other examples of proto-networks set up to help people to share skills and experience. (There again, in some of our own contacts with local authority professionals, we did not find a single one who even knew that a facilitators network or suchlike existed in their area!)

4.12 Finally, and very briefly, the remaining blue boxes in the top left of the central part of the diagram – the levels of middle managers, senior managers and decision-makers.

- With a couple of ad hoc exceptions, we know of nothing, and certainly nothing as coherent as a programme, of training or management development for any of these groups about the need for an overall approach, the need for senior level understanding and commitment and the development of general managerial and project management skills to put proper engagement coherently into place.
- As we have struggled towards defining what we now term ‘an infrastructure for engagement’ we ourselves have tried out some ideas. We have run a couple of successful day workshops for members of a Local Strategic Partnership or a Senior Management Team in a local authority. We have also recently run training for middle level planners that focuses on their role as project managers and overall process designers to set up and deliver the new standards for community involvement in planning.

4.13 In summary then, the overall picture at the moment looks bleak. **It is ad hoc and fragmentary, with initiatives only partially underway to ‘fill some boxes’ and, for those such as middle managers and elected representatives, almost nothing happening at all.** (This may of course reflect our own lack of knowledge and the list of initiatives clearly needs elaborating far more carefully. However, it remains our view that the overall pattern would still look as summarised in this paragraph.)

4.14 Is it any surprise therefore to see an authority or agency launching yet another consultation run by inadequately skilled people, with minimal (maybe no) support from middle managers and decision-makers, with a resulting lack of appropriate resources, and probably starting at the same time as another 10, 20, 30 consultations by others in the same organisation? And then is it any surprise when the participants are confused, exhausted and probably angry?

4.15 Putting more and yet more input into just the few bottom right hand boxes of the central part of the framework is doomed to failure. **Without building understanding, commitment and genuine support at other levels, without creating a genuinely coherent infrastructure to enable engagement, throwing more resources, more training and more guidelines on ‘how to do engagement’ aimed at just one small part of the framework will be counter-productive.**

5. FLIPPING THE COIN AGAIN

5.1 Although this paper concentrates mainly on the as yet poorly developed enabling infrastructure side of the capacity building coin, what has been elaborated above has some implications for the more familiar aspects of capacity building. These warrant a mention because of the challenges they raise.

5.2 As stated at the outset, the majority of capacity building activity has been focused on people from disadvantaged communities. At one level this is absolutely correct and long may it carry on. However, if one takes on board the full implications of what we have been developing then alarm bells start to ring about the assumptive world of capacity building for engagement.

5.3 There is a danger (and yet again the current framework almost reinforces this) of accepting the notion that participation is inherently a top-down approach; that it is and always will be those at the 'top' (elected representatives, senior professionals etc.) who determine the need and opportunity for participation, while those at the 'bottom' will always be 'just' the participants, allowed in on the gracious whim of those in charge. And, inevitably, it will be those in between - the middle managers - who design, manage and deliver the participative processes and activities.

5.4 However, by creating an infrastructure to enable engagement that operates at all levels, it becomes not just possible but essential to see that **initiation, design and control can rest anywhere in the system**. And that is just as likely to be with a local community (eg. on neighbourhood management issues) as a local authority. It then becomes obvious that traditional decision-makers and their professional deliverers may well be in just as much need for capacity building to engage as anybody in a so-called disadvantaged community – they need to learn (maybe that should be 'relearn') how to be good participants.

5.5 We, and no doubt many others, have witnessed at first hand the damaging and disabling way in which some elected representatives, senior officers, professionals, developers, captains of industry etc. behave when placed in the role of participant rather than 'top bod'. The point that they may need as much and maybe more, certainly tougher, capacity building than many in the community would be warmly applauded, (if generating incomprehension from many of them).

5.6 If for example, the government's 'Neighbourhoods Matter'²² agenda is to make real progress, then more and more initiatives are going to be initiated and led at very different levels and locations from the traditional top table. If that is the case, then the whole idea of capacity building for engagement is going to have to be rethought and fundamentally retargeted. In particular, in the future, many initiatives will emerge from and be led by groups who will then occupy the top box in the 'Communities and Stakeholders' column, and others (eg. councillors) will participate in their projects! The previously mentioned Burnley Facilitators Network has recently managed this role, the result being important amendments to what had otherwise been a mainly top-down initiative.

5.7 Some aspects of the infrastructure for this exist at present through self-help groups, social enterprises and various forms of neighbourhood council (perhaps including the better Town and Parish councils) but their role as drivers of broader decision-making remains uncertain. To some extent good Community Empowerment Networks, Councils of Voluntary Service and Rural Community Councils already operate as intermediaries between public

*"Experience so far suggests that, if engagement is to be widespread and not dependent on the few who are already committed, it is important to allow adequate time and resources to build a strong and sustainable foundation both at CEN and LSP level."*²³

and community sectors, hence often at a more strategic level. That leads inevitably to another mention of LSPs. They ought to be addressing this issue but, as before, we will not linger on that notion! (Following this line of argument would lead inevitably to changes in the core diagram, perhaps to locate CENs, CVSs and RCCs as 'bridging' groups between the two columns?)

5.8 Rather interestingly, this brings us right back to the theory and practice of consensus building or deliberative decision-making. This is because such approaches are based on three fundamental principles (plus others less relevant here):

- That any process or event must bring all parties face to face to work fully together.
- That all are equal when 'in the room'.

- That it should not matter who initiates, designs and runs the process; (the principle of 'independence').

5.9 On that basis, over any given period, anybody could be a participant at one time and an enabler at another. Given that many will be participants but never enablers (thank goodness!) the models for capacity building need to adjust, without losing the redistributive focus of recent years, to become more widely targeted, inclusive and challenging.

5.10 And all this starts to expose another worrying part of the assumptive world of participation. We see it almost daily; the way people make assumptions about 'community involvement' as if it is some form of fundamental redistributive mechanism to give more 'power to the people' (but only if they are, or think they are, currently left out or not listened to). We urgently need to lift engagement and participation out of the 'community' – especially 'disadvantaged community' – trap.

5.11 **Creating equity in processes, avoiding domination by the powerful and educated middle classes and so forth are all crucial issues, but simply adopting the outdated, win/lose Arnstein²⁴ model of shifting power from one end of the 'ladder of participation' to the other is no way to make progress.** And there is of course the point that, once one puts aside the redistributive assumption, there are many people in all communities – not just what are now derisively called 'the usual suspects' – who can bring remarkable, skill, knowledge, experience and commitment to participative processes.

6. BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE: NEXT STEPS

6.1 Everything so far in this paper has been descriptive, analytical and aspirational. However, the paper's title starts with an action word - 'creating'. This leads inexorably along even less well-trodden paths because it forces us to ask 'how' (who, when, with whom etc.) we are going to make progress towards filling in the framework and building a coherent infrastructure for engagement, nationally and locally. And here things become far more speculative – but then triggering development of an action plan was a key aim in writing this paper.

6.2 Before offering ideas, however, there is an important proviso. We should not assume that the tools, techniques, proven practice and experience on creating an appropriate infrastructure are all there just waiting to be brought together and implemented – ie. that all the 'ingredients' are ready on the shelf, as it were. There is, as suggested, quite a bit of experience, but we should certainly not assume that it is solely a matter of setting up programmes. There is undoubtedly much still to be done to develop approaches that can, for example, work successfully with elected members or Asian women's networks, with property developers or senior staff of NGOs; ie, the 'recipe' for an infrastructure is likely to need some new or amended 'ingredients'. However, with that proviso firmly in mind, what might be some key building blocks of progress?

6.3 Central Government

6.3.1 Earlier results (Figures 4 and 5) suggested that people are generally positive about the type of messages emerging from central government; (and certainly about their quantity!). They are also positive about the capacity building programmes emerging. However, if the key points of this paper are to be believed, there is at present a worrying gap, a lack of attention to and programmes on an 'infrastructure for engagement'. That gap urgently needs to be plugged, the system 'rebalanced', if the real value of all the other good work is to be realised.

6.3.2 Things need to flow from central government that make it clear that high level organisational understanding and support are also crucial if those further down are to genuinely advance participatory practice. They also need to make clear that action on one side of our metaphorical coin (capacity building) should not, even must not, happen without some sort of complementary attention to the other side of the coin (infrastructure). Capacity building projects alone should probably not happen any more; they should all contain some complementary element of infrastructure development. (And we could add another specific suggestions – please, no more studies or reports listing principles and methods of good engagement!)

6.3.3 In addition, the reams and reams of good words to encourage participatory practice should be backed up with some form of enforcement - ideally in an encouraging rather than deadening mode. Performance criteria on this aspect could be included in service reviews for example²⁵. The beginnings of this are there already with Comprehensive Performance Assessment but, as yet, the actual criteria and tests do not meet what is implied in this paper. There may also be lessons to learn here from the introduction in planning of 'Statements of Community Involvement'. They were set up to enable Inspectors to test the effectiveness of consultation work and potentially refuse support for plans and projects that do not show wide-ranging community commitment.

6.3.4 If those two points take care of the top two boxes of the 'Context' part of the framework, then they also need supporting – via the bottom box - with initiatives and programmes to encourage action on the ground.

6.3.5 In general however, there is an urgent need for those in central government to 'get their act together' and start to be far more consistent and coherent – across all departments - about all aspects of engagement, to provide some sort of structure ('Policy Unit'?) which can deliver continued progress and to make sure that engagement is not treated the way it always has been to date, as something that just gets tagged on the end of all the (nevertheless highly valid) content material. Aspects of process might better be thought of – and promoted as – the central and indispensable 'oil' that enables all the other elements to function properly^{26,27}.

"Government needs to redefine, rationalise and consolidate its current approaches to community engagement and active citizenship. These are uncoordinated and fragmented across many different department programmes, and encourage confusion, apathy and fatigue in relation to citizen involvement and consultation. The Government has to be honest and clear about the amount of power or influence being given to role of the 'active citizen' in participative and representative democracy."²⁸

6.4 Local Public Sector

6.4.1 At the more local level there is an urgent need for training and management development for elected representatives and senior officers, preferably via LSPs. Most importantly, something similar is needed for those at middle management level because it is here that the main problems always seem to occur with any innovation. This should definitely be part of the programme of work for the Academy for Sustainable Communities and the Regional Centres of Excellence. At the

"Both local residents and other representatives can benefit from training and support in learning to deal with difficult conditions such as situations with tensions and lack of consensus between various members of the partnership structure."²⁹

same time, it can be too easy to load blame on those at middle management level because they are so heavily pressured from all possible directions, their career structures rarely if ever credit any work on engagement and they are subject to what seems to be an ever-increasing load of dubiously relevant performance criteria, some of which positively work

against good engagement, (eg. by enforcing inappropriate timescales).

6.4.2 There are also key gaps to fill with the other, wider partners of participatory practice – especially those who have always assumed that they are leaders and initiators not participants. That means management development for those in Regional Development Agencies, the Police service, PCTs, government agencies and all the professions that serve the public sector.

6.4.3 ‘Training’ is however just one strand and it has limitations. Demonstration projects, good case studies and some regional/local champions all have a role to play in advancing practice. There is potential too, if handled carefully, in high profile standard-based initiatives such as Charter Marks and the recent shift in approaches to poor performing authorities to enable them to work closely with and learn from better performing ones.

6.4.4 At the local level, public sector bodies can also do far more to maximise the potential of initiatives such as referenda or Citizens’ Panels, and very practically help to provide physical locations where people can come together to share ideas in a managed environment – ‘discussion cafes’ to talk to each other as opposed to internet cafes where most ‘chat’ is remote!

6.4.5 Though all the above may be needed, it is all very practical and does not yet tackle the key issue of bringing the varying cultures and expectations into line. The above list also implies that change can come from actions within existing structures, when those such as Lowndes et al³⁰ argue that only by institutional change can government really begin to fully access, mobilise and develop all aspects of social capital.

6.5 Communities and Stakeholders

6.5.1 Moving across to this final column, the first place to start is undoubtedly in the schools sector. Too much citizenship work has got a bad name, but the creativity and excitement created by integrating citizenship activity in schools with real life community engagement activity is potentially extraordinary. It possibly even ought to be a basic criterion that nobody should leave school without experiencing being a participant but also, more relevantly here, without having an opportunity to learn about and practice involvement skills such as facilitation.

6.5.2 Moving on again, it really is frightening that most professionals whose later working life brings them into situations where engagement work is needed are so totally unprepared for this in their initial training (and only minimally supported thereafter). Again the Academy for Sustainable Communities (for one) could play a major role in ensuring that all next wave professional training, as recommended by Egan³¹, includes the practical development of skills such as group management and facilitation. And that’s just the bottom line; it probably ought to go further than that in initial professional training and certainly be backed up by coherent CPD programmes. This would have the added benefit of developing a resource of skilled people not just in the public sector but also in the private sector (able to work with companies, developers etc.) and also the community sector.

6.5.3 Now to where it all really matters (some might say ‘matters most’), the specific community level. There is already, as suggested, some good progress here and more apparently on its way. However, from what we have seen, there is a danger here of social entrapment; that people at community level will be increasingly skilled and active at managing and mediating decision-making at community level but will not be also be building capacity and opportunity for people to engage at a broader level. One way or another, the good work that is now beginning to happen on engagement in major, large scale issues such

as ‘new communities’ needs to be brought alongside the equally good work on local sites and often almost parochial (if still highly challenging) social issues.

6.6 An Integrated Approach?

6.6.1 The emphasis in this paper has been on rebalancing; on asserting the need to address both sides of the engagement coin if real progress is to be made. But we should not go too far in that direction either. Success with the government’s agenda for a society more and more fully engaged in decision-making needs action on both sides of the coin in an integrated and highly creative way that uses skill and experience from many groups and individuals.

“One section, for example, was linking training for the long term unemployed with public participation by training them to be ‘consultation representatives’ who undertook door to door canvassing on behalf of the authority in the three most deprived wards of the town.”³²

6.6.2 We have in fact been developing a possible model for that recently through a proposal for a project that pulls all strands together. In principle, the approach is alarmingly simple. We have all, as described in this paper, been trying out ideas and initiatives in a scatter-gun way; a project in that place, a programme with that community, an initiative through that profession or agency. Inevitably, the value built, the social capital created, the capacity developed on project A rarely if ever transfers to project B, or what is gained for community X is rarely made available to community Y. Too often, positive gains seep away through lack of consolidation or useful transfer.

6.6.3 We therefore asked ourselves a simple question. What would happen, what type and degree of added value could be secured, if all (whatever that means) initiatives could be focused, in a well managed way, onto a few geographical areas and communities? How could creating the infrastructure be linked in to building capacity, how could work with developers and councillors be linked to work with residents and community facilitators – to mutual benefit? In other words, by working in depth in just a few places, to what extent and in what ways (and with what lessons for others) could developing the full infrastructure create a situation in which the ‘whole’ becomes greater than ‘the sum of the parts’?

(Watch this space for progress with this project; it has already generated high level government interest and some local authorities are keen to be involved.)

7. A FINAL REFLECTION

7.1 All of the above leads to the very final point. Even if all of the suggested actions were implemented, if that were all done in the absence of some sort of overall framework and set of consistent principles, without a coherent and cumulative programme, then we would be back again to square one. As with the suggested ‘integrated approach’, concepts and frameworks, and then programmes and the related monitoring, need to be looked at and developed quite broadly for all the different elements to genuinely add up to something.

7.2 We need a genuine, coherent, widely supported ‘infrastructure for engagement’ and, without entwining the whole thing in bureaucracy, some sort of organisational structure to manage and develop it.

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