



centre for 
human ecology

Get your voice heard!

A pilot project in Leith and North Edinburgh to enhance the participation of black and ethnic minority people in the Local Community Planning Partnership and other local democratic processes

اجعل صوتك مسموعاً *Wasaa optain sh' Bary* 

आपकी आवाज सुनाएँ *आपনার বাতাস অন্যদের আশ্রয়* 使別人聽到你的聲音

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The Centre for Human Ecology has been working for many years with individuals and organisations within the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community in Scotland, building capacity, encouraging individual empowerment and promoting engagement at community level.

In September 2005, in partnership with local BME organisations and the Equalities Unit of the City of Edinburgh Council, we launched the 'Get Your Voice Heard' pilot project to encourage the participation of BME individuals in the local community planning process in Leith and North Edinburgh.

The aim of the project was to create a model of engagement for local decision making processes that would:

- a. build understanding and skills amongst decision-makers as to how to engage effectively with local BME communities and
- b. build the capacity of BME individuals to address some of the barriers they encounter when trying to impact change in their lives and communities.

Twelve BME residents of Leith and North Edinburgh took part in the project, alongside nine officers from the NHS, the Police and various Council departments. In the course of ten training sessions over 18 months, we collectively learned about the structures and remit of local community planning partnerships (LCCPs), we inquired as to where and how we could most effectively get our voices heard, and engaged with community councils (CCs) when we realised that they were one of the best avenues, through which ordinary citizens might influence decisions on service delivery at local level.

Our collaborative action inquiry also led some of the BME participants to get involved in various projects and to unfold leadership skills and confidence when engaging with local communities and decision-makers.

Our recommendations focus on the processes and resources needed to promote and sustain the engagement of BME individuals in local decision making processes. We also suggest that embedding the action learning approach within community planning mechanisms might be a way of simultaneously addressing 'democratic deficit', inequalities, 'silo' professionalism, and other challenges to effective community planning.





02 Recommendations



Our collaborative action inquiry process and our reporting seminar have resulted in twelve key recommendations, which we would like to promote to others.

Recommendations for community planning partners/agencies and the Scottish Executive:

1. continue to prioritise, resource and develop similar 'collaborative action inquiry' capacity building/leadership development programmes;
2. launch a new programme in the short term, using innovative practical mechanisms to encourage BME participation in local Community Councils;
3. in the medium term, embed the 'whole system' action-inquiry approach within and across community planning mechanisms as a way of simultaneously addressing 'democratic deficit', inequalities, 'silo' professionalism, and other challenges to effective community planning;
4. in the long term, use an 'action inquiry' process to create the conditions whereby local people can make full use of the powers available to them through local community planning;
5. include local equalities data in the neighbourhood partnership profiles that will inform neighbourhood partnership action plans;
6. ensure that both qualitative and quantitative data are included;
7. ensure equalities groups receive information on the new structures, how to influence them and who to contact (the neighbourhood manager).

"From an officer's perspective, in order to improve services it is important that all voices are heard. I appreciate that it would not be practical for all staff involved in equalities and service delivery to go on a course that was a similar length to the GYM project but I would recommend, however, that if a course or consulting mechanism could be created that allowed officers to mix and speak to people from different backgrounds then I think this would be beneficial for all."



Recommendations for local BME individuals and organisations:

The GYVH project was a bespoke 'collaborative action inquiry' process which may hold some promise for engaging with the opportunities presented by community planning. However, there remain many challenges for local BME people as they try to get their voice heard. We recommend:

- 8.** celebrate the vibrancy that already exists in the many BME communities in Edinburgh (and Scotland) as one way of claiming the political space that is every citizen's right in Scotland's emerging democracy;
- 9.** make use of allies in the Council, Police and Health services who are open to learning how to engage better with local people, including BME residents;
- 10.** support your friends, volunteers and staff in their efforts to get involved in local CCs;
- 11.** support your friends, volunteers, staff to see the process of getting involved as being like 'action research' or 'collaborative action inquiry';
- 12.** lobby your Council or other funders for resources to help support this process.





Supporting quotes from GYVH participants:

"I think decision makers need to be aware that Edinburgh's BME residents (and many other groups) may not always be aware of, or readily able to access, current local community representative processes. As a consequence, conventional public consultation which uses those processes is often not eliciting a range of views which [more fully] represent the city's population. I think the BME voluntary and community sectors should be able to engage with the public sector through the mainstream processes, such as community councils, but we need to acknowledge how difficult this can be."

"Resources need to be found to ensure that the BME participants can be supported to become advocates for change and engage within their own communities. In particular, it's vital to find ways by which emergent BME leaders can be supported if they decide to get involved with their community councils and other local decision making bodies."

"I realised that a key outcome of Get Your Voice Heard was that it showed it is possible for many diverse people to engage effectively together, with a positive attitude, in a democratic process of action and reflection on a topic that really matters. It is amazing to think that some of us said they felt they had not been taken seriously in years."

"GYVH should be continued."

"From an officer's perspective, in order to improve services it is important that all voices are heard. I appreciate that it would not be practical for all staff involved in equalities and service delivery to go on a course that was a similar length to the GYVH project but I would recommend, however, that if a course or consulting mechanism could be created that allowed officers to mix and speak to people from different backgrounds then I think this would be beneficial for all."

"When I joined this project, I was inspired to discover that the group wasn't made up of the 'usual suspects'. Making sure that a wide variety of people is included in any consultative or research project is vital for the renewal of democracy and the engagement of BME people in public life."





"In 2001, following the Centre for Human Ecology's work on 'Who's A Real Scot', we were invited to join EMPOWER Scotland, an ethnic minority-led, and partly European funded, network of organisations. Under our EMPOWER remit, we worked closely with local ethnic minority organisations and delivered capacity building training programmes to empower individuals and encourage them to engage with their community. We also did work with people interested in delivering participatory training events in their organisation and offered training in facilitation skills.

When we came to reflect on this work, we felt compelled to look at how CHE could join forces with relevant others, albeit modestly, to find solutions to one of the biggest challenges facing the ethnic minority sector and society as a whole: the lack of participation and representation of ethnic minority people at various levels of the democratic process, and the impact of this on opportunities and quality of life.

In the last few years, reports have highlighted the dangers of this 'democratic deficit' and have pointed to the difficulty in achieving healthy and vibrant communities without the active participation of all sectors of society. Ethnic minority people have repeatedly been marginalised from decision-making processes. According to various key indicators of well-being, they also belong to the most disadvantaged groups¹. It is in this context that the Scottish Parliament passed the Local Government Act of 2003 which introduced the concept of community planning and made it a legal requirement for local authorities and all partner agencies to engage communities in the planning and delivery of local services.

The community planning legislation provides a new context for engaging effectively with ethnic minority communities, one strengthened by legal incentive. However, for reasons outlined in reputable studies², the participation of ethnic minority people in decision-making processes poses particular challenges and calls for appropriate resources and innovative approaches to engagement.

Before this project started, we reflected on how we could build on this political energy to work more effectively and strategically with BME communities and how our passion for, and experience of, participatory practice might have something creative to offer to the community planning process.

In autumn 2005, in partnership with the City of Edinburgh Council's Equalities Unit, we launched the 'Get Your Voice Heard' (GYVH) pilot project in Leith and North Edinburgh.

¹ See 'Regeneration in Scotland: People and Place (Motion S2M-4024)' - Commission for Racial Equality, 06 March 2006 - www.cre.gov.uk

² See 'Extending Democracy, Participation, Consultation and Representation of Ethnic Minority People in Public Life - A report on the Bristol Experience', Dr Hassan Boussetta, University of Bristol, April 2001. <http://international.metropolis.net/events/rotterdam/papers/14-Boussetta.pdf>



When we launched GYVH, the community planning process in Edinburgh had already been established at city-wide level through the Edinburgh Partnership and its various Strategic Partnerships. Communities of interest, including BME communities, had been given a voice on the partnership board.

At local level, however, proposals to introduce locally-based community planning partnerships around the city were still being developed. In dialogue with senior officers at the City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) Equalities Unit, we decided that developing a model of engagement, showing how ethnic minority people might become involved in the local community planning process would be a valuable and innovative contribution.

Project aims

At the start of the project, we had two key aims focused around 'content' and 'process':

- 'content' aim was to offer training relating to the community planning process (to include such issues as structures, boundaries, power and accountability);
- the 'process' aim was to catalyse a year-long collaborative action inquiry between all participants into how local BME people could 'get their voice heard' through the local community planning process in Leith and North Edinburgh.

We expected these aims to evolve as participants' priorities shaped the programme design and delivery.

Project principles

The following principles were to guide the project:

- a. Design the whole programme as an action inquiry learning journey, embedding values of respect, equality, democracy, social justice and sustainability within all elements of design and delivery.
- b. Balance work at local level where residents are directly affected by local service delivery with work at a strategic, city-wide level where significant decisions are taken;

"Given my inexperience in working and interacting with people from BME communities, my role with the department's Social Inclusion Group and active input in preparing and implementing strategies and action plans, I felt it would be appropriate to put my name forward for the Get Your Voice Heard project. It sounded like an excellent opportunity to meet individuals, hear their stories and learn about their experiences."



- c. Respond to explicit invitations from local BME residents and organisations to engage with their priority themes;
- d. Work within geographical boundaries that, as far as possible, reflect the emerging community planning boundaries where a relatively high population of BME residents were under-represented in local decision-making processes;
- e. Do our best to ensure that the project would impact positively on people's lives as they participated.

Following advice and invitations from the CEC Equalities Unit and local residents and organisations, we began our work in the Leith and North Edinburgh area. The steps we took to establish the project are presented in detail below, as this might provide useful information should this project be replicated or adapted in other contexts.

Designing an invitation to attract participants who were personally excited by the aims of the project

We wished to bring together local BME people, living or working in the area, and professionals working for the community planning main partner agencies (e.g. the Council, the Police and the NHS) which make the decisions regarding the delivery of local services and which could potentially liaise with the city-wide Partnership Board. Previous experience had taught us how important it was that the participants should positively 'opt in' to the process, demonstrating an understanding of the commitment we were asking for, as well as bringing personal passion and professional focus (where appropriate) to the project.

Schedule and methodology

After three months of sharing these intentions through conversations across our existing networks (and, in turn, with people to whom they suggested we should speak), we devised a programme that would run over a period of one year, meeting once a month on average. We consulted widely on the relative advantages and disadvantages of different timetables, and this helped us to make difficult, but necessary, choices.

For example, we decided that we wanted to make it possible for young mothers to be part of the project. There were many excellent reasons for this decision. We had noted a tendency for



young mothers to be excluded from programmes because of their commitments, yet they are often a group of people who can be most passionate about local and global futures for their children. So, factoring in mothers' child-care needs, as well as professionals' diaries, we settled on a 10am-2.30pm scheduled meeting, to include a healthy, shared lunch, to be held on a week-day, once a month, over the course of a year. However, this decision excluded some people, such as youngsters of school age. We were aware that the Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership has an on-going remit to work specifically with young people, and decided to point people to alternative sources of support should we be unable to accommodate them.

We scheduled the whole year's diary in advance, and published this with an application form that made it clear we expected participants to attend the majority of sessions, explaining that the depth and effectiveness of our 'learning journey' held more promise through a continuity of development of trust and a culture of inquiry between all participants.

Pace

We were also careful to be realistic about the pace at which participants might be expected to engage in the intended action-reflection cycles between sessions. We settled on meeting monthly, as a commitment which professionals as well as local people would be most able to fulfil. Within this framework, we intended to negotiate an appropriate pace of reflection, input and action learning according to the participants' capacities, needs and energy.

Recruiting 'emerging leaders'

We undertook a careful recruitment process to ensure diversity, commitment and leadership potential from all participants - professionals and locals alike. We decided we could take a maximum of 25 participants, and that our ideal would be fifteen BME residents and ten professionals. As a principle of the programme, we had already decided (and made explicit) an attempt to address some of the power imbalances between participants, and one of the more obvious ways to do this was to ensure a majority of participants had direct experience of a lack of 'voice', as BME people. Where possible, we also attempted to balance gender, ethnic group, age of participants and (for professionals) strategic or local focus in their work. The group that eventually self-selected did represent a healthy balance in most of these respects.

"No public sector experience. No political aspirations. No friends in high places. You are the perfect candidate for the public board post. [This] advert appeared before the New Parliament was opened. This made me think that I would like to get involved in public service and see how I could change my area or if I could help in some small way. I was turned down on more than 4 separate occasions. Then, some years later, I was asked if I would like to get involved with the Get Your Voice Heard Project."



(i) Local BME people

Our discussions over three months with many BME organisations working in the Leith and North Edinburgh area culminated in CHE running a 'taster' session in September 2005. Our aim was to listen to the views of key active people and to ensure, as far as possible, that our work was both accountable to local people and organisations and that it could contribute to positive change.

We were also depending on 'word of mouth' networks to encourage local people to apply, as we wanted to encourage those who wouldn't normally consider putting themselves forward for a programme like this. We did not decide to exclude the 'usual suspects', but we did emphasise our intention of working with emerging, as well as established, local 'activists' or residents.

Our application form was also intended to help people self-select onto the programme. Following the September meeting, which involved participatory exercises similar to those we intended to offer on the course, our allies in local organisations agreed to help us distribute the application form and to actively encourage their volunteers/staff and members to apply. The application form outlined the following basis for engagement:

- You will care about the place you live and about your community;
- You will be prepared to imagine that it's possible to make a difference and to apply your unique experience, skills and ideas to make it happen;
- You are open to learning new ways of working, thinking positively and listening to other people's perspectives and priorities;
- As far as your know, you expect to be able to meet every few weeks from 10.00am - 2.30pm for about a year (a crèche will be provided).

Eighteen BME residents were involved with the programme in some way. Of these, ten folk remained very actively involved throughout. They came from the African, Pakistani, Sikh, Indian and Latin American communities.

(ii) Professionals

Meanwhile, Nick Croft, Senior Officer at the CEC Equalities Unit, contacted officers who had responsibility for, and personal commitment to, the community planning process in the area and

"I decided it was going to be a good chance for me to join this one year long project, knowing that it was going to be worthwhile a chance for me to learn, to improve on my networking skills and my participation in various community groups."



were working with the council, police or health services. A memo from Communities Scotland had highlighted the need for community planning agencies to engage actively with ethnic minority communities and the project had therefore received a written endorsement from the Leader of the CEC, which helped considerably in mobilising interest in the programme.

In a similar way to that in which local BME organisations agreed to help us 'find' local folk, Nick hosted a meeting with officers from the Police, Health Service and CEC so they could find out more about what was involved and 'check us out'. This 'taster' approach was important in the early stages of building trust, a culture of respect and the involvement of all participants.

Of our original ten professional participants, seven were able to remain fully engaged throughout. They came from CEC departments (Local Planning and Regeneration Unit, City Development, Sports and Leisure, and Children and Families); the Police (officers from Drylaw and Leith Police stations); and the group included one participant from the National Health Service.

Participant expectations

The diversity of hopes and expectations for the project is reflected in the following quotes:

"Given my inexperience in working and interacting with people from BME communities, my role with the department's Social Inclusion Group and active input in preparing and implementing strategies and action plans, I felt it would be appropriate to put my name forward for the Get Your Voice Heard project. It sounded like an excellent opportunity to meet individuals, hear their stories and learn about their experiences."

"I was keen to improve my understanding of the community planning process, share my knowledge and experience of working in local government, and take the opportunity to network and establish new contacts."

"I was initially concerned the remit [seemed to] attempt to influence policy and strategy of the Scottish Executive and CEC. I thereafter realised that we had set our sights slightly lower and were talking about influencing at a local level and working our way up. I felt that this was wholly appropriate and a more manageable and sustainable forum."

"I wanted to join the group so that I could meet members of the BME community who I would not normally get an opportunity to meet. I was also intrigued by the possibility of working with members of the BME community and officers from other departments in the Council on a 'level playing field'".

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05

On 10th November 2005, twelve BME residents and nine officers from various services of the CEC, the Police and the NHS gathered for the first session of the Get Your Voice Heard project.

Over many years, CHE engagement with communities has been rooted in the practice of action research and popular education, following in the tradition of Paulo Freire. We believe that the way we work with people and communities needs to reflect the goal we are working towards - we should aim to 'walk the talk', and be accountable to this intention throughout. We wanted to try to model some good practice in participation, and in so doing help our participants develop both their skills in participatory practice, and a sense of how participatory democracy may be possible at a local level.

Action research can be defined as research with people and for people as distinct from on people. Participants in the inquiry process are fully part of the decision making process and choose how and what they want to research. Popular education emphasises that people learn best when what they learn is rooted in their life experience and is clearly relevant to what is happening in their lives and in the community as a whole.

With a focus on the local community planning process and on the multicultural community in Leith and North Edinburgh, we devised the following principles to inform our work:

- Give space for participants to get to know each other and build a 'learning community';
- Provide enough structure at the start of the process so that participants feel a sense of safety whilst the group is still forming and clear aims are emerging;
- After a few sessions, involve participants in decisions as to what the following session should focus on and where the process should be taking us;
- Draw as much as possible on the richness, diversity and expertise of the group to reach our collective learning objectives;
- Value people's time, experience and commitment. For example, we decided to offer an honorarium to those participants who took part in the project on a voluntary basis, noting that the professionals were attending on paid time and that we had a desire to strive toward power-equalising structures where possible;
- Keep the wider network of stakeholders informed as to how the project unfolds. This is part of the accountability process and ensured that the project stayed connected to the wider context in which it was taking place.

The sessions took place between November 2005 and October 2006. From March 2006, sessions were planned and delivered with participants' involvement. We produced an interim report in April 2006 to inform the wider stakeholder community and organised a seminar on 13th December 2006 to give feedback on the outcomes of the project. Participants were fully involved in organising and running this event. The feedback was rooted in the story that each of them wrote at the end of the project about their involvement with 'Get Your Voice Heard'. They said what they had expected and learnt from it, and where they were hoping to go from now. Quotes in this report are extracted from these stories.

"Because we received an honorarium for attending the meetings, I felt that my time and experience were valued. I strongly recommend that other organisations look very seriously into the issue of compensating community representatives for their time and commitment."



A. From community planning to community councils and local democracy: the challenge is to 'get our voices heard'

"Despite its complexity, understanding community planning processes might be interesting but it doesn't necessarily solve problems..."

This quote illustrates the basic challenges that the group came to recognise as we explored the concept of community planning. We decided that we needed to make sense of this new approach to decision making and service delivery at local level. However, the CEC timescale for presenting clear guidance on the future for Local Community Planning Partnerships' structures and remit kept slipping - and we guessed that Council politics and interests were making competing cases for the future power distribution settlement.

From our third session, we re-shaped the premise that had catalysed the project - that we would be able to help shape these structures. Instead, we focused on identifying our own priorities, and sought opportunities to engage with the new structures when those arose. We were helped to this clarity of purpose by revisiting our collective expectations that our work together should attempt to make positive changes in people's lives. For more information on how the sessions were facilitated and on the exercises we used in the group, please refer to the our website: www.che.ac.uk.

In brief, this is how the overall process unfolded: in the first three sessions we learnt about the broader framework of community planning (including the proposed area boundaries, the constitution of the partnership board, the representation of the local community and voluntary organisations, the powers and remit of the LCPP etc) but quickly moved onto inquiring as to where we should best invest our time and energy to make sure that our voices would be heard. In particular, we created space to share our mixed experiences of previous consultation and local engagement processes, as well as our doubts and hopes for this newly established community planning structure. The following two key questions emerged in the process:

Question 1 - How can community planning processes practically address inequalities in listening to people's voices?

Question 2 - How can we design our voice so it can be heard? And how can we design structures so that they can hear/listen?

The following quotes reflect some of the insights that participants gained on all these issues:

"The 3rd session stood out for me as it got clearer that this project was definitely for us, the people from the BME group, to get our voices heard by decision makers and also to see how the BME community should participate and engage in their local communities."

"The course started off exploring participants' knowledge and understanding of community planning. This is a subject I would never, in the past, have had an interest in and which was quite different from my area of expertise, medicine and health in general... The fascinating thing is, as I gained more understanding of community planning, my interest in the subject increased and I found I was enjoying the process more and more. I think most of it had to do with the methodology used (participatory inquiry) which appeared fairly un-orthodox initially but was quite fun and turned out to be a very good way to learn."



“At least I gained the understanding that community planning is a complex process which operates at different levels and responds to changes in current policy. The main question now is how far local members of the community are informed and are involved with developing services that affect them.”

The next step in our inquiry focused on learning more about, and engaging with, community councils (CCs), particularly when we learnt that their power was being reinforced within the overall consultation and planning framework. It appeared that they would have a seat on LCPP boards, specifically to voice and represent community concerns. It therefore dawned on the group that engaging with CCs could be one of the most effective and democratic ways for ordinary citizens to have their voices heard and engage with the local community planning process.

In this context, Eileen Hewitt, Community Council Liaison Officer with the CEC, came to one of the Get Your Voice Heard project meetings to give an input on the history, governance, constitution, powers and electoral processes of CCs. She also highlighted their duties regarding racial equality and described the steps involved in setting up a new community council. It was argued that although many have developed their own culture and were not representative of the whole community, CCs have got the potential and legal backup to become campaigning organisations and capacity builders. Through work with other organisations they could also increase their power to influence issues of concern for the community. Eileen's input was highly valued by the group, as illustrated by the following quote:

“I would like to highlight the input from the Edinburgh Council's Officer regarding Community Councils as being the meeting I found most beneficial. I recognised that this would be an ideal vehicle for BME members to have a real influence at local level. [I realised] they would not only be influencing a community reaction in relation to BME issues but would also get involved with generic community issues.”

But the input and discussion that followed also highlighted that most CCs remain completely unrepresentative of the BME community and there is still much work to do to ensure better representation of BME communities in local democratic processes.

The group invited Ijaz Nazir, recently elected onto the Craigmillar Community Council and now one of the few BME Community Councillors in Edinburgh, to come and speak to them. He shared his story and told how he was invited to stand for election to his community council. His commitment to the whole community of Craigmillar and the generosity of heart expressed in his story had a tremendous impact on the group:

“At least I gained the understanding that community planning is a complex process which operates at different levels and responds to changes in current policy. The main question now is how far local members of the community are informed and are involved with developing services that affect them.”



"I missed the session with the Community Councillor from Craigmillar, but the following session stood out in that the members of the group who were there seemed very positive about it and something had shifted subtly in the dynamic within the group - it was almost as if a light had been switched on."

As a result of this inquiry, two members of the group decided to engage with separate Community Councils to inquire whether they could attend meetings as non-elected members with the aim of eventually standing for election.

Supporting their new commitment became a focus for the group. Right from the start, we recognised the resistance that they might encounter from some of their CC members and took time in one of the sessions to plan the steps they would need to take before and during the meetings to prepare for questions that would inevitably come their way. One of the two people was accompanied to her first Community Council meeting by a police officer who was participating in the course and whose remit covered that Community Council area.

The experiences shared at the following session varied greatly. One person was made to feel very welcome by the members of her Community Council. They talked of getting more people from the BME community involved and invited her to join as a nominated member until she could stand as a full member at the next election. The other one, on the contrary, was made to feel uncomfortable, was submitted to a barrage of questions and saw her motives being listened to with suspicion. Her experience certainly reflects the major obstacles still encountered by many members of the community when they try to participate in local decision making. We all learned a great deal from this real engagement with democracy:

"At our September session, A and C reported their experiences [of] attending community council meetings, and we heard first hand about the delights as well as difficulties of engaging with 'stuck' local community councils... it seemed like this was really action research in practice - that these folk had been incredibly brave to try something out, and that we had collectively helped to make this possible."

Clearly time and resources need to be invested in Community Councils to allow and encourage them to become more representative of the whole community. Support and leadership capacity also needs to be provided to individuals from marginalised (including BME) communities who wish to become members of their Community Council. Ijaz's example demonstrates that one's legitimacy as community representative goes beyond issues of race or origins. However, breaking down barriers to participation evidently requires more than a sole person's will and commitment.

"I have been inspired to hear the story of a community councillor, Ijaz, who shared his time, integrity and passion with us for a morning and left me deeply appreciative of his long-term commitment to his community, and asking myself deep questions about my role in my own place."



B. Wider issues relating to local democracy and participation in Leith and North Edinburgh

One of the issues we took time to explore during this project was concerned with planning, with a specific focus on the Leith Docks and Waterfront development project. We recognised that although town planning doesn't come directly under the remit of LCCPs, decisions made by planners and other stakeholders about major developments have considerable impact on local communities. Town planning is therefore an integral part of local democracy and BME communities tend, once again, to be excluded from decision-making processes.

The input that one of the participants, a senior planner with CEC, delivered to the group about the Leith Waterfront development raised important insights with regard to the consultation methods used in such projects, the lack of BME voice in these consultations, and the need for the whole community to engage with local democracy.

"I must mention that the presentation about the Leith docks development project, reclaiming land from the sea, was very interesting. Being a land animal, the sea has always been a mystery and I cannot get my mind around the mechanisms involved in planning such a venture and the impact on the environment. I think it is such an ingenious project and I wonder what understanding, if any, local people have about it to enable them to effectively influence decisions...."

"When I heard the input on the Leith Docks development plans, I was astonished to discover that none of the many BME organisations in the area responded to the consultation document. In fact, very few voluntary organisations were mentioned. This, to me, raised serious issues on the effectiveness of consultative processes and as to whether local democracy exists at all."

"That day, I learnt how conventional mail shots, adverts and a few presentations on public consultation can fail to engage people."

Our reflection on local democracy also took us to explore the themes and issues that people feel strongly about in their lives and neighbourhoods. Interestingly, as one participant said, "the issues prioritised were mostly general concerns and interests of city residents, rather than particularly "BME issues"."

Compared to more privileged citizens, many BME people have little capacity and power to act on the issues that affect them. Obstacles to participation and engagement are considerable, as highlighted in this quote: "At a local level, getting your voice heard about the issues that affect you and your family is obviously difficult if you have no idea about where to go, who to approach and how to participate in decisions. Now that I have a better appreciation of these difficulties, I realise we should be more careful not to make assumptions about what people know and don't know about local service delivery."

"[One] element of the project which stood out for me was the report describing two group members' different experiences of attending community council meetings in North Edinburgh and Leith. That report suggested that there are currently failings as well as successes in achieving truly representative community councils."



Lastly, one of the major obstacles to participation lies in whether elected representatives are in tune with people's concerns and use their power appropriately to influence positive change. The following quote from one of the CEC officers leaves us in no doubt that the responsibility to achieve a better democracy lies not only in the hands of local people, but also amongst elected members:

"During the session when North Edinburgh and Leith residents were asked to prioritise themes and issues that affect them and [that they] want to talk about, what stood out for me was that the subjects they put forward were very different from what is generally discussed at the main Council forums (i.e. Local Development Committees) where local people can bring up issues affecting them in the area. Culture, tackling inequalities and housing were three of the main subject areas that were prioritised by the group that day."

C. Further insights, skills gained and participants' reflections on the process itself

"We've been looking to develop new ways of thinking, problem solving and engaging in the community."

This quote reflects the richness and depth that such an approach to learning unfolded in the group.

On the one hand, BME participants gained new understanding of their area, renewed their commitment and enthusiasm to engage in their community and strengthened their personal voice and confidence. Belonging to this group also gave them the prospect that change can indeed happen:

"During the session when North Edinburgh and Leith residents were asked to prioritise themes and issues that affect them and [that they] want to talk about, what stood out for me was that the subjects they put forward were very different from what is generally discussed at the main Council forums (i.e. Local Development Committees) where local people can bring up issues affecting them in the area. Culture, tackling inequalities and housing were three of the main subject areas that were prioritised by the group that day."

"During the process I gained a good understanding of myself - what I was really about and how I work best. I rediscovered my need to express opinion on issues of interest and I understood why some of the work I have done in the past was so uninteresting and mundane. In this realization, my task of achieving my most important objective (finding meaningful employment), has become even harder because such jobs are few and very competitive - but is it possible to find a way out?"

"I have gained so much knowledge; have a good network of friends and contacts. Relatively, I can say with this experience I am now in a better position and confident in taking up any community involvement challenges that come my way. I will be sharing and using the skills I have gained in developing ideas on how my community can be empowered in getting our [individual and group] voices heard."



"I am enjoying life in [a] way I haven't done for years. I feel such a great sense of well-being and want the feeling to continue. So in a lot of ways, my life has improved."

"The meetings themselves did not only provide a melding of ideas for individuals and their respective interests. It also provided the opportunity to give ideas on how I wanted to shape the community that I lived in."

"I have thought about why participating in this programme was so enjoyable to me. And I think it was about having the platform to express my opinions and understanding about issues and to have people listen without judgment. This is something that has never happened before during my stay in Scotland. "

"I am not used to frequent meetings because my profession is that of musician and I am also working part time as a cleaner. Sometimes I felt a bit tired and some issues interested me less than others; but these moments are a good opportunity to practice patience."

"I have learned much more deeply how it feels to be a resident in North Edinburgh, and [also about] the particular challenge that racism continues to exert for mental health and community well-being."

"It has been a very good learning experience and I have realised that North Edinburgh is an extremely important area from a business and cultural point of view."

"This project has also provided us with the space to network with professionals and community leaders. This group has been very strong and I am convinced it can bring changes in relation to lobbying and decision-making. I believe we could not have achieved this without any one member of the group."

"It has to be said at this moment that the commitment shown by the local authorities - Edinburgh council, the police, the planning officer, health officials, officials from the council - was immense as they were present at all the meetings that I attended. Their participation in the meetings was vital because these are the people who are core to the planning and development of any community."

On the other hand, officers from the CEC, Police and NHS gained new insights on issues faced by the BME community and the challenges presented by multiculturalism. They expressed renewed commitment for their work and for working towards greater diversity in decision-making processes. Also, they didn't shy away from self-criticism:

"I might lose momentum in what I am doing; a prospect I do not want to envisage."





"I have an improved understanding of the different communities, identities, backgrounds and cultures that exist in Edinburgh and a better appreciation of how they came to live in Scotland and of their experiences since moving here."

"I also learned to love the stories some of the older members of the group shared; stories about far-off times and places that, however, bring richness and life to my sense of the bubbling community that North Edinburgh already is, and point to what incredible potential there remains to unleash."

"When I hear or read about news in the media about ethnicity, religion and cultural identity, I feel I have a new perspective on these issues and a more informed understanding of what is being reported."

"At our September session, A and C reported their experiences [of] attending community council meetings, and we heard first hand about the delights as well as difficulties of engaging with 'stuck' local community councils... it seemed like this was really action research in practice - that these folk had been incredibly brave to try something out, and that we had collectively helped to make this possible.

"I hope that in the near future, planners like myself will be able to carry out an ongoing dialogue about the development of the city with truly representative community groups, leading to a better understanding of all citizens' needs and aspirations, and consequently a better city."

"I learned that despite regarding myself as a staunch anti-racist and humanist, I still hold some residual internalised stereotyping of people. I hadn't realised just how few BME people I actually know. I have gained some great contacts, and perhaps even friends."

"I am a lot more "conscious" about how I go about my connection with individuals I work with - I have been re-awakened where I didn't realise I had been sleepwalking."

The process itself, through its mixture of inputs and facilitated group discussions and decisions, seems to have worked well for most of the participants:

"During the meetings of Get Your Voice Heard we had many debates and it was very healthy to put out our feelings and try to get to a common point with others with a different opinion."

"I feel that the facilitators let us talk and be ourselves during the sessions. With their guidance, I have become more confident, and feel I now could and would stand up and voice my ideas and opinions more readily than before."

"I have learned that there are officers in other departments of the Council who are as committed to genuine community engagement and tackling the issues of engaging the BME community as I am. In Community Learning and Development, there is an assumption that we are the only ones who struggle with these issues, or who have a commitment to improving the experience of "engagement" for communities. It was a pleasant surprise to discover kindred spirits in the (to my mind) most unlikely of places!"



"I was particularly impressed with the manner in which the meetings were structured and coordinated. Issues and themes were allowed to develop and I think that was wholly down to the flexible presentation/facilitation style which invited feedback and group discussion."

"[During] session five, the group challenged a plan that the facilitators had made, and then collectively took greater control of the learning process.... I sensed that a much greater sense of ownership of the programme was distributed amongst us all from that point forward."

"I believe that stimulating debate is important to build more critical and conscious citizens. In that way, the project was successful."

"There are many social problems in our society and they are more evident where people live. To create a way of bringing people together in an open and respectful manner is the only way to solve most of our problems."

We recognised, however, that the process could have been more effective, had we been in a position at the start to take on board the following concerns and suggestions:

"Looking back, it's a shame that we did not have 'youth' attendances/participation during the meetings."

"Several important communities weren't represented in this project like, for example, the Chinese and Eastern European communities. How could we make sure that a project like this is truly representative of the diversity of the BME community?"

"It would have been great to have two or three people from the same community so that we could support each other in spreading what we've learnt and in engaging with real issues. If two or three of us are present at meetings, it also helps us be more accountable to the rest of our community."

Finally, it's fair to acknowledge that, although we had extensive discussions on how to engage more effectively with local democratic structures, the question raised by one of the participants below remained unanswered:

"Tackling institutional racism is a major challenge. It doesn't feel to me that we've talked enough about it. Is getting involved in local decision making processes really going to make a difference? I wonder."

"I have learned a lot about what an appropriate pace for a project like this is; that it is possible to meet every month for a few hours and to maintain momentum, given a good [project] design, a developing trust and friendship between participants, some keen time-keeping and a wise choice of facilitation exercises."





D. Emerging leadership

One of the most successful outcomes of this piece of collaborative action research can be seen in the emergent leadership that many members of the group displayed when engaging with various projects in the course of this 18-month long process. The following quotes highlight the variety of new engagements:

“My involvement with this project took me to Dundee for the Scottish Urban Regeneration Forum where I was privileged to hear great speeches from various people with a great vision on how to improve their communities. This also increased my knowledge of community engagement in other cities across Scotland and [let me see how individuals] taking part in their local community [life] changed their way of living. “

“During the summer festivals I got the opportunity to get involved in various activities starting with the survey that a small group of us designed and tested at the Mela in August. This showed how getting together makes people come up with a lot of good ideas. I noticed how multicultural Edinburgh had become...thus with the survey, I increased my networking skills and it helped me realise how I can raise awareness of issues affecting my community.”

“With this journey I had the opportunity of attending one of my local community council meetings...the experience highlighted the fact that the BME people in my area were not represented at all, although we make up a big percentage [of the population] in the area. This gave me the urge to start a campaign on getting involved.”

“Since doing this project I have joined the Leith Open Doors shadowing scheme and got to work with my local MSP. I have found it most exciting, and have met many people I might never have met.”

“I became a member of Community Voices Network (CVN) as a representative from the African community in Edinburgh. CVN arranged for my sponsorship to attend a two-day community regeneration convention at Warwick University in the summer this year.”

“I have attended a community council meeting in my area and aspire to become a nominated community councillor.”

“I have joined the Leith Opening Doors project, a project that aims to engage with BME communities to encourage more participation in local and national politics through a politician shadowing scheme. This has given me the opportunity to articulate issues that affect me, and people like me, to people who are at the heart of decision making. Through this, the Africa Centre has, for the very first time, been visited by a Scottish government minister and Labour MSP. I think this is a good thing, as the profile of the Centre has been raised in the right quarters [with the aim of] securing long term funding.”

E. Wider stakeholder engagement in GYVH

In December 2006, we collectively hosted a networking 'stakeholder' event, building on our networks and existing efforts to keep in contact with a wider circle of colleagues, residents and officers working at strategic planning level in agencies (this intention had already resulted in our circulating an interim report in April 2006). The aim of the seminar was to share the outcomes of the project with the wider network of stakeholders and to reflect on whether and how such a project could be replicated and adapted in other contexts and with other minority groups. Participants included elected members and officers from various departments of CEC, and several people working in the mainstream and BME voluntary sectors across Scotland.

GYVH participants co-designed and facilitated the seminar, learning facilitation, communication and event design, gaining strategic planning skills in the process. To prepare for the event, each participant wrote a story of their experience of the journey, including initial expectations, highlights and what they thought was missing. They also made recommendations for community members, professional workers, and agencies on how to take the 'GYVH' agenda forward.



The Centre for Human Ecology: who are we and why are we doing this work?

The Centre for Human Ecology (CHE) is a small, Scotland-based charity carrying out action, research and education for personal development, environmental sustainability and social justice.

Human ecology is concerned with what makes healthy communities. It's about people and their environment. That means valuing the contribution, background and unique talent of each individual. This is why human ecology is, amongst many other things, concerned with the well-being and participation of ethnic minority people in society. At the CHE, we don't only study and carry out research, we also engage with communities to encourage individuals and organisations to work together to transform their reality. Our approach can be summed up in the following way:

Head: understanding, reasoning, imagining solutions

Heart: relating to and dialoguing with people, building relationships

Hand: testing out our ideas by engaging with real people in real places.

In 1999, whilst working on a study called 'People & Parliament', we heard about the experience of racism shared by many ethnic minority people. As a result of their experience, they found it difficult to feel a sense of belonging in Scotland or to fully participate in the democratic changes that took place around the coming of the new Parliament. We consequently published the 'Who's A Real Scot?' report in which we explored these issues more deeply. Whilst the report strongly acknowledges the impact of racism on people's capacity to be active citizens, it also suggests creative ways forward. In particular, it highlights that hospitality and fostership are core Scottish values and multiple identities are part of Scottish identity³.

To summarise: at CHE, we engage with real people in real places where and when invited to do so. Our work with BME communities is only one facet of our work. Some of us at CHE are also working with people who want to bring about change in rural communities, focusing on community-owned assets and individual empowerment. Others deliver environmental education projects with schools or professionals in various fields, whilst some of us are ecologically oriented and work on conservation projects such as forest planting, restoring or protecting wildlife habitats or locally grown food initiatives. And we are also working actively with issues of ethics and social/ecological responsibility in business.

Accredited courses

We think it's important that people gain visibility and 'voice' through their engagement with us. Accredited learning helps this process, and is a common element of our programmes. In partnership with the University of Strathclyde, we offer a Master's degree in Human Ecology and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses. People who come and learn with us are concerned about the big issues in the world (environmental destruction, poverty and human suffering, war and violence) and want to play an active part in healing their communities whilst engaging with change at personal, local and institutional levels.

If you'd like to know more about the CHE and our courses, please visit our website at www.che.ac.uk

³ See 'Who's A Real Scot? - the report of the 'Embracing Multicultural Scotland' project. Centre for Human Ecology, April 2000: www.che.ac.uk/publications/EMSReport/reportcontents.html

Timeframe and Session outlines

Session 1 - 10th November 2005

“Introducing & clarifying the aims of GYVH”

Session 2 - 8th December 2005

“Getting to know one another, Listening, What do we know about Community Planning?”

Session 3 - 19th January 2006

“Mapping our involvement with the community of Leith and North Edinburgh”

Session 4 - 16th February 2006

“What are the issues we feel strongly about in our lives and in the community?”

Session 5 - 9th March 2006

“Refocusing our inquiry around 2 key questions”

Session 6 - 11th May 2006

Update on the Local CP structures and Input on Planning and Consultation processes

Session 7 - 15th June 2006

Guest speaker: Community Councillor Ijaz Nazir from Craigmillar

Session 8 - 13th July 2006

Guest speaker: Eileen Hewitt, Community Councils Liaison Officer, Edinburgh Council

Session 9 - 14th September 2006

Debrief of engagement of 2 participants with their local community council and action planning for months ahead

Session 10 - 12th October 2006

Evaluation of GYVH and planning for mainstreaming seminar & report

Preparatory sessions for the mainstreaming seminar: November 9th and 23rd 2006

Mainstreaming Seminar: 13th December 2006





Session content: examples of specific exercises used in the process

Feedback from our final stakeholder event on 13th December 2006 suggested that it would be helpful to show some specific exercises that helped participants on our programme. We have, therefore, selected some 'snapshots' to illustrate our way of working. These have been extracted from reports written after every session by Gina Headden, GYVH project administrator.

Snapshots of sessions 1- 4

Set of exercises #1 - Creating the 'container'

At the beginning of the process, we spent time ensuring everyone was clear that our intention was for the agenda to be negotiated together: the group as a whole would decide what the issues were and how they might be addressed. We also agreed 'ground rules' that we continued to develop through the sessions, building our awareness of the power of conscious dialogue together.

Set of exercises #2 - Noticing diversity, building trust and listening skills

Early exercises focussed on trust-building and listening skills, as well as attempting to help us clarify our understanding of 'community planning' and other concepts while increasing our awareness of action research. e.g.

Unfolding feelings about living/working in North Edinburgh/Leith:

"We split up into pairs and were asked to chat about three things each of us liked about living and/or working in North Edinburgh/Leith. We each shared our thoughts with three different partners. We then repeated the exercise but this time were asked to discuss three things that we didn't like or that made us feel angry and frustrated about living and/or working in North Edinburgh/Leith.

We came together once more as a group and listed the points that had arisen from the conversations:

- There was a feeling that the differences between ethnic communities needs to be appreciated and the level of the support that they do or do not get within those different communities needs to be acknowledged.
- Also, if people reach out to include the different ethnic minority groups and the groups don't take up this offer, the reasons for this need to be investigated.
- We need to create new ways of engaging, creating a voice, getting our voices heard.
- How can we best become effective engaging communities?"

Listening exercise:

The importance of listening and communicating with respect was emphasised prior to the exercise. The exercise itself involved all of us sitting in pairs, back to back, and taking turns to listen to each other tell a simple story. While one person was talking, the other was to remain silent and listen carefully whilst facing away from the speaker. We then debriefed on how it had felt to listen to the other's story and to tell ours. We also brainstormed on: 'What makes "good" listening?'

Set of exercises #3: Introducing action research

Our learning of action research principles and practice happened throughout the process as we engaged in a collaborative action inquiry on how to get our voices heard. However, the specific exercises outlined below helped participants to air their feelings and understanding about conventional research approaches such as consultations, or needs assessments, undertaken by 'experts'.

Research simulation exercise:

A brief exercise that illustrated how we can feel cheated when research is done on us and we are not involved in a meaningful way. It showed that it is important to fully understand what we are being asked to get involved in, and that we need to be aware of factors that affect our input to a project. In particular, it can be useful to ask ourselves the following questions when we get involved in a project that aims to improve the quality of life of the community: Who decides what questions need to be asked? Whose agenda is it? What are our expectations? How do we know that we represent the wider community not just ourselves? Is what we are doing relevant to others in North Edinburgh and Leith?

Set of exercises #4: Introducing community planning

During the first two-to-three sessions, we spent time gathering information about the community planning process and used different exercises to elicit how much participants already knew about it:

“Road signs” exercise:

We were each given a sheet that had a number of road signs on it and were asked which road sign we were attracted to when hearing the words 'Local community planning'. It became clear that some participants, in particular the professionals, had already heard about the community planning process and had engaged with it at various levels. Residents of Leith and North Edinburgh were much more unsure as to what it was all about.

'Line up' exercise:

We positioned ourselves along a line to show how long we had been aware of the community planning process. The group roughly divided in two equal groups: about half the people felt they'd been hearing about 'community planning' for years. The other half had only recently heard about it. We then stepped to the right or left of the line to show how well we felt we understood what was involved in the community planning processes. It became apparent that some people knew a lot more than others and also that few, if any, of us knew everything that there is to know about the process. We concluded that lots is to be gained by working together but also that we shouldn't take for granted that people know what community planning involves. Some questions were raised including: 'Who's in charge of it all?' 'Who has the solutions?' 'Where/What/How will this be funded?'

Mapping our reality exercise:

This mapping exercise encouraged a 'participants'-eye view' of patterns of relationships and engagement with local services and places in North Edinburgh and Leith. Participants resident in the area were asked to write up labels detailing all the places that are a significant part of their lives in that area. We collectively agreed a colour coding scheme to include:

- Schools/libraries/education/colleges
- GPs/Health centres/well-being centres (mental and physical)
- Shopping
- Entertainment: events, parks, walks, cinemas and sports
- Transport and communication
- Worship and religion
- Police
- Community and voluntary organisations
- Job centres

Another listing was made for participants who work in the area. This included the following categories:

- Where are you based? (by geography and theme)
- Which area do you work in?
- What are your organisation's strategic priorities for the area?
- Where do you fit in with this?
- What's your job role?
- What's your level of responsibility?
- Which bit of the job do you most enjoy?
- Which projects in the area are you particularly working with?

We then stuck our labels onto a map of North Edinburgh and Leith while saying a little about the specific places we were mentioning. Those who work in the area told us a bit about their jobs etc as per the list above. We spent time analysing what was, and what wasn't, represented on the map, realising the limits of our 'representation', as well as helpfully seeing commonalities in our world-views. We reflected on the power of maps and map-makers. We asked: 'What's one thing we/I could do to build on the map and our work so far?'

From the fifth session onwards, participants were fully involved in the inquiry process. We shifted from facilitated exercises as described above to small group and whole group discussions, as well as inputs based on what participants had decided to focus on. Once the trust had been established within the group, and learning objectives had become clearer, the project could develop into a more organic process.

Thanks to:

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Our designers, **Waterbomb**.

Further information:

If you'd like more information on this process, please refer to the Centre for Human Ecology's website: www.che.ac.uk or contact the GYVH facilitators:

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Three participants have also agreed to answer questions about the process if required:

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