

Improving Community Participation

A Guide to improve community participation for multi-agency forums working with asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers in the East of England

Produced by MENTER's Partnership Development Project

July 2008



Aim

This document has been developed as a guide to help improve community participation in multi-agency forums (MAFs) and help member organisations fulfill their statutory duty to promote race equality (Race Relations Amendment Act 2000).

Acknowledgements

This guide has been produced by MENTER's (East of England Black & Minority Ethnic Network) Partnership Development Project in collaboration with the Refugee Council and the Voluntary Sector Refugee Network for the East of England (VSRN-EE). However, since this is just a mere guide, we believe that at best it is a suggestive rather than an authoritative document. We expect to be receiving continuous feedbacks from network members with a view to further develop and improve the guide in the future.

Introduction

Multi-agency forums (MAFs) have been established across the region to assist with the integration of asylum seekers, refugees and more recently migrant workers. MAFs are essentially a round table of organisations involving stakeholders from statutory, voluntary and community organisations providing services or with an interest in issues affecting these groups. The MAF members meet with the understanding that they are working in partnership in relation to their work around issues affecting refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers. However, to date most MAFs have little or no participation from the communities they are trying to assist. This guide will be sharing knowledge and experience as a means to increase community participation in the local MAF activities. It starts with general background information about the benefits of community participation and the difficulties associated with it, and then it will share examples of some of the community participation models in practice in different areas of the Eastern Region of England.

Audience

This guide is intended for individual MAF member organisations which make up the MAF membership. It is hoped that it will enhance community participation within individual organisational settings particularly in how they deliver services. We equally hope it will be of value to community members who are looking to have greater influence on policies and practices that affect their day to day lives.

What is Community Participation?

'Community Participation is about enabling people to become active partners in the regeneration of communities by contributing and sharing in the decisions that affect their lives. Participation should enable people to have a degree of power and control in the processes with which they are involved.'

(Strategic Framework for Community Development – *Standing Council for Community Development, 2001*)

It is worth noting that there have been huge amounts of work on developing user-led services in recent years with increased awareness that it is intrinsically valuable for people to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. There are however different levels of participation. An approach that involves people only on a superficial level as receivers of information or passive recipients of a service is not true participation. This point should be an important element when considering community participation. Simply seeking to widen your audience does not enable people to become active partners in their community, or active within your organisation. *Wilcox (1994)* has developed five levels or strands of participation that offer increasing degrees of control to a community, starting with the least.

Information - The least you can do is tell people what is planned.

Consultation - You offer a number of options and listen to the feedback you get.

Deciding together - You encourage others to provide some additional ideas and options, and join in deciding the best way forward.

Acting together - Not only do different interests decide together what is best, but they form a partnership to carry it out.

Supporting independent community initiatives - You help others do what they want – perhaps within a framework of grants, advice and support provided by the resource holder.’

(Guide to Effective Participation, David Wilcox, 1994)

What are the benefits of community participation?

Improving community participation in multi-agency forums should help:

- Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrant Workers to become active members of their community and to have a stronger voice;
- Create genuine opportunities for them to influence policy and provision of services;
- Local Service providers in addressing changing needs;
- Policy and Decision-makers generating well-informed decisions;
- Make better use of existing skills, knowledge and resources in the community at all stages – planning, delivery and evaluation.

“All too often external experts seem to have more influence over change in communities and the development of policies and priorities. The result is a development process that is unsustainable, unfair, of little relevance to those directly affected and which fails to make the best use of available resources, experience and skills.”

A Strategic Framework for Community Development, Community Development Exchange

The Strategic Framework defined community participation as a means “to enabling people to become active partners in the regeneration of communities by contributing and sharing in the decisions that affect their lives. Participation should enable people to have a degree of power and control in the processes with which they are involved.” We are aware that because of the complex nature of community participation, it may not be a simple term to define. The Scottish Borders Council in a document on community engagement noted that regardless of definitions in reality, community engagement is a two way communication process between organisations and the community.¹

The Strategic Framework for community development (2001) identified a framework developed by the Scottish Community Development Centre for evaluating community development which lists the processes involved and achievable outcomes. Though the Scottish Framework is mainly focused on community development, in effect the processes identified have been some of the most effective action oriented means to engaging community members which generally result in effective community participation. It classified the benefit as twofold: community empowerment and quality of life. However we believe the outcomes identified are the real benefits of community participation.

<u>Community empowerment²</u>	
Process	Outcome
Personal empowerment	A learning community
Positive action	A fair and just community
Community organising and volunteer support	An active and organised community
Participation and involvement	An influential community
<u>Quality of life</u>	
Process	Outcome
Community economic development	A shared wealth
Social and service development	A caring community
Community environmental action	A safe and healthy community
Community arts and cultural development	A creative community
Governance and development	A citizens' community

In view of the above we believe community participation fits well within the purpose of MAFs in the region and should therefore be adopted. For example engagement with the community in Peterborough has led to additional community development support by New Link for aspiring new community organisations which has resulted in a more active and organised community.

¹ Community Engagement: Our Scottish Borders. Available online at <http://www.scotborders.gov.uk/pdf/17544.pdf>

² **Source:** Achieving Better Community Development

MAFs and the challenges for Community Participation

At present it appears that most MAFs aim to keep local community organisations informed through their mailing lists or through existing support services. At the same time there seems to be endless amounts of consultations with voluntary run community groups being asked to respond on each and every issue and initiative. At the opposite end of the spectrum there seems, at national level, to be an ever-decreasing resources invested in supporting community empowerment and development. Though community cohesion is being promoted through Local Area Agreements (LAA), and within the remits of the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) how this will translate to increasing community participation, though promising, we believe is yet to be established.

Some of the specific challenges we have identified and noted as inhibiting community participation include the following:

- Lack of will from community organisations to participate.³
- Time and capacity of organisations and individuals.⁴
- Most MAFs lack the capacity and resources to invest in developing the community sector.
- Community organisations vary and are very different in size, stage of organisational development, resources, number of volunteers available at any time, motivation and scale of involvement with the wider community. Some are focused on their own membership whilst others seek to be more engaged with activities in the wider community.
- Not all issues affect all the communities to the same extent and there is a need for more energy and focus to be put where the needs are greatest
- The culture of participation is very different among the different communities and there may be unfamiliarity with system and conduct of meetings
- MAF meetings are often quite formal, both in high level language, venue and inflexibility in time
- The inability and lack of confidence to speak English can be a major obstacle and it is often difficult, due to costs, to get translators. At the same time the language used, particularly acronyms can be inaccessible.
- Most community organisations are led by a small number of individuals and their circumstances are often not accommodated when planning MAF meetings and events
- Participation can become a tick box exercise. People attend but are often not involved, this should not really count as participation
- No clear link between participation and results.

³ Because asylum seeker dispersal to the Eastern Region is relatively low in many places the communities are very small and as such do not warrant a specific-community group. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at present there are very few migrant worker community organisations as they are all too busy working.

⁴ Many of the community groups are relatively new and do not yet have the capacity to engage widely.

This latter point seems to be at the heart of the problem where community organisations for several reasons have lost faith in the process. Communities are being asked the same questions over and over (consultation fatigue), whereas they rarely get feedback and are becoming increasingly cynical about being consulted. The cliché of ‘Whatever we say or suggest, will not make any difference’ is real for most community members when it comes to making actual decisions about how the resources will be distributed. Some often tend to believe that regardless of their involvement, how the final decisions are made is not going to bring anything to their benefit.

Evaluating existing levels of participation

Before starting anything, you may find it useful to try and draw up some sort of baseline assessment in terms of your existing level of community participation and then assess this on an ongoing basis to see if and how things are improving. This can be done with a simple self assessment based on a set of questions:

Do you have Community Organisations (COs) on your mailing lists?

Never Rarely Occasionally Regularly Always

Do you have representatives from COs regularly attending your MAF/community meetings?

Never Rarely Occasionally Regularly Always

Are COs consulted when planning MAF led initiatives

Never Rarely Occasionally Regularly Always

Are COs involved in the delivery of MAF led initiatives

Never Rarely Occasionally Regularly Always

Different ways in which MAFs can engage with asylum seeker, refugee and migrant worker communities

Different models of community participation and engagement have been used across the Eastern Region involving different approaches which we can narrow down to four areas associated with Wilcox’s idea.

1. Improving communication between MAFs and community members through meeting structure/attendance planning
2. Consulting on specific themes
3. Improving individual MAF members engaging with communities
4. Investing in community development

In the next sections we will share examples of some case studies of community participations models that are in practice in the Eastern Region based on the four areas identified by Wilcox. Each model, in our view, could be adapted to improve participation of a wider range of community members. We are aware that the case studies mentioned below have not been independently evaluated, but we appreciate that each model appears to have strong local support and involvement.

It should be noted that most of the MAFs or their individual organisation members have already developed action plans which emphasize the need to effectively engage with communities. However they may find it necessary to set targets for participation and monitor progress against these on a regular basis. Where there is direct participation lacking at MAF meetings, other systems of engagements should be explored, as illustrated in our case studies below.

In a research document produced for the Home Office by Mistry (2007), two major methods of engaging communities were identified which somehow mirror the examples we share below. The inward-facing approach is a strategy to encourage local people to attend meetings, such as themed meetings, and using that opportunity to involve them in identifying solutions. The outward-facing on the other hand involves engaging community members outside the formal meeting settings, for instance at Church Hall or community events.

In considering any model of community consultation, the following suggestions may help to make MAFs more inviting and accessible:

- If the timing of the meetings is highlighted as a problem, organise occasional meetings after work hours or on Saturdays. Ask the target group for a preferred time and place to meet
- Don't assume specialist knowledge by using acronyms, spell things out in full
- Look to using alternative venues for some meetings, especially in public accessible spaces such as libraries
- Offer to support community representatives with transport costs, crèche and interpreters/translation, check with your local council for small funding pots
- Encourage a mentoring/shadowing system between community organisations members and MAF members
- Encouraging communities to take on specific tasks which they may be able to do more effectively than other members, e.g. to survey community needs
- Make meetings more friendly and welcoming by experimenting through small discussion groups or coffee breaks for networking

It should be noted that not much will be achieved in engaging with community members without investing time and sometimes funding. Therefore if MAFs want to develop a community participation model it will be necessary to identify an organisation or an individual with the remit to dedicate some time and resources. But the MAF will need to give full support to this effort to enable the process. Though this may seem to pose a problem, in fact most local councils and individual organisations like the police do have small budgets for community engagement and development purposes. With proper

coordination of efforts such funds could be properly invested towards effective community participation initiatives.

Improving attendance/communication with MAFs

Most of the MAFs in the eastern region already have highlighted the need to engage more effectively with communities in their action plans. However they may find it useful to identify the necessary actions to take this forward, set targets for participation and monitor progress against these on a regular basis.

Where there is not direct participation at MAFs other systems for two-way communication can be explored such as Asylum Voice.

Case Study: Asylum Voice, Norwich

Asylum Voice is a second tier community meeting group initiated by the Norwich MAF to specifically focus on helping identify the basic integration needs of asylum seekers and refugees. It started off as an unfunded project meeting once a month to bring together the client groups with an opportunity for them to express their views and concerns which are then feedback to the main forum for action.

Actions:

Meets monthly, which allows people to attend meetings as and when they can. No issue is too trivial for discussion. The meetings encourage through informal translation both English and non-English speakers take part. The centre has toys and books to entertain young children so parents can attend. The coordinator of Asylum Voice attends the regular MAF meeting to ensure that key issues from the community are raised on the agenda of the main forum and vice versa.

Local MPs, Immigration Staff, service providers and other key stakeholder organisations are occasionally invited to attend themed Asylum Voice meetings to hear from individuals directly and to offer a platform for questioning. Most attendees like this idea of hearing directly from the decision makers.

Impacts & Outcomes:

- Has been an effective mechanism to keep the client group informed of what the MAF was doing and reporting back issues affecting the community to the main forum. Asylum Voice enabled concerns raised by refugees about move on housing support within Norwich to be taken up by the MAF with the local housing team. This is now leading to better understanding and service provision.

For more information:

Contact: Pa Musa Jobarteh
Tel: 07738 944 608
Email: pmjobarteh@redcross.org.uk

Consulting on specific themes

A number of the MAFs have established processes to consult on specific themes, most notably the Let's Talk events in Suffolk.

Case Study: Let's Talk Events, Suffolk

Let's Talk events in Suffolk are themed road show communication events around key issues such as housing, health or community safety and are usually targeted at specific nationality groups. They were initiated in response to ongoing requests from community members about ongoing issues of concern. The themes explored so far were actually raised in response to questions from the communities at earlier events.

Action:

The Suffolk Constabulary as a MAF member organisation leads on the road shows by coordinating the events on behalf of the MAF. The role of representation from statutory bodies and other agencies is limited to a minimum to ensure a relaxed and informal feel, and to ensure that the communities feel that it was their event. The key is to be creative in how they choose to engage with communities. The events are hosted at the premises of the Ipswich CSV (community voluntary sector) which has a good working relationship with the community members.⁵

Impacts & Outcomes:

- The events make space for the theme issues to be discussed thoroughly with an opportunity for community members to come together to collaboratively suggest and develop appropriate solutions to problems. Been a successful local tool in answering questions from community members by practitioners in the field. The events have been good at improving interaction between diverse community groups. These events have now opened up new and direct lines of communication between individuals and relevant agency representatives, which was previously lacking.

For more information:

Contact: Peter Haystead
Tel: 07764 259689 / 01473 613990
Email: Peter.Haystead@suffolk.pnn.police.uk

⁵ The venue of CSV Media was the preferred choice because is centrally located and is regularly visited by refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers for training, music and to have access to internet services.

Engaging with individual MAF members

In order for an organisation to ensure that it is effectively meeting the needs of its users and providing an efficient and cost effective service it has to communicate with all its users, including those that may be hard to reach. This means that it has to explore and find different ways to engage and encourage participation by all its users.

There is always the need to reevaluate how participation is achieved by service providers. It is nearly always an expectation for those on the outside to come and join the party, yet in reality there is a need to reach out. For instance many organisations are now in the process of adopting new ways of engaging with communities, such as through existing forums, developing partnerships with community organisations and community leaders and also by employing, either permanently or temporarily members of different communities. The police for example are now employing more community officers, from new arrival communities that bring understanding, cultural awareness and language skills into the forces. In addition, they also get involved in supporting community activities, such as multi-national football competitions during refugee week and regularly go as invited speakers to community events.

These types of engagement, however, tend to happen in isolation of the wider MAF membership, as they are generally specific to meeting the needs of the organisation that employs them. If their achievements are shared more widely this could have ongoing benefits across the forum of agencies, some of which may not be able to undertake these initiatives.

Case Study: Zimbabweans in Luton: The Pachedu-Zenzele Health and Social Care Intervention Model

The main aim of this project was to address the health inequalities in Luton by developing evidence-based culturally sensitive health and social care strategies that meet the needs of people from sub-Saharan Africa.

Action:

The key focus of the Pachedu-Zenzele interventions involved engaging local Zimbabweans in developing designing and implementing the interventions. The words Pachedu-Zenzele translates to 'amongst ourselves – let's do it' thus capturing the spirit of communal involvement in health promotion and research. Key to the interventions include 'following the Zimbabwean population, in their everyday settings. This involved

home visits, street interventions, manning a stall in the town centre, interventions in clubs and pubs, visiting hairdressers and work places.

Impacts & Outcomes:

Key findings indicated that health promotion initiatives that were available to the general population were not effectively reaching this population. More understanding of cultural realities and therefore perceptions that were held by individuals and communities.

Recommendations for improved health promotion activities with Strategic recommendations for improving access to this community were developed.

For more information:

Contact: Public Health Team, Luton PCT, 94 Ikerman Street, Luton, LU1 1JD

Tel: **01582 657595**

Investing in community development

Investing in Communities is a concept associated with programmes driven by local need with local input. It entails engaging with communities to identify their need and helping them develop solutions. For asylum seekers and refugees, this may include mentoring programs and personal development training needs. Therefore, the model requires constant contact with community members, to help identify the barriers to reaching their potentials, seeking their views and delivering results based on team work, as illustrated in our example below.

Case Study: Umbrella Community Group Forum, Peterborough

The Community Group Forum was established as part of the New Link Centre's community development work, which supported the establishment and development of new community groups in response to a changing population. It was to encourage the interaction and support between new arrival community groups and provide a portal for statutory bodies to provide information to them and access information from them.

Actions:

Try to engage and build contacts with new arrival communities through the New Link Community Development project. Identifying the needs of the community groups involved in the forum within the first few meetings. Follow up information sessions were held with the concerned statutory bodies such as the Police, Peterborough City Council's (PCC) Housing and independent Housing Associations, and PCC's Legal and Democratic Services. Full forum meetings are held once a month and key people from each community group are invited to attend, but the meetings are open to all community members.

Impact s & outcomes:

- The forum sessions provided a two way information sharing mechanism between community members and statutory organisations, allowing individual voices within the community to be heard. A monthly newsletter is produced and widely distributed. Various training sessions and workshops have been organised by the forum to address the needs raised by the community groups. The forum has built confidence in its members and it is now seen as an influential body in representing the views of community members while it continues to widen its networking and learning opportunities for members.

For more information:

Contact: Kat Blaszkiewicz, New Link

Tel: 01733 742 807

Email: Kat.Blaszkiewicz@peterborough.gov.uk

Web: <http://www.peterborough.gov.uk/page-9982>

How to identify and contact local Community Organisations

The first challenge is to identify community groups in your area, and the following is just a general guide:

- The Basis Project at Refugee Council is currently working with a wide range of refugee community organizations (RCO-s) across the eastern region.
Website: www.thebasisproject.org.uk, tel: 01473 297 912
email: shpetim.alimeta@refugeecouncil.org.uk
- MENTER's Partnership development Project database of local projects
http://www.partnershipdevelopmentproject.org.uk/html/projects_database.html
- The Voluntary Sector Refugee Network for the East of England (VSRN-EE) has a list of refugee community organisations in the Eastern region. web: <http://www.vsrn-ee.org.uk> tel: 01473 406432 email: office@vsrn-ee.org.uk,
- Use contacts and data bases developed by other organisations and forums such as Refugee Council, diversity officers within the County Council etc.
- MENTER keeps a database of BME groups across the eastern region 01223355034 www.mentor.org.uk
- There may be specialist agencies or projects working within local communities, and you may also check with local community development workers
- Your local Racial Equality Councils or Community Voluntary Services (CVS) should be a good starting point. They usually have a register of local community groups.

When it comes to making contact don't just rely on email invitations as the only form of communication. If you really want to make contact with someone, it may be worth

following up in different ways and focusing more energy on those who might need greater encouragement.

Conclusion

Capacity:

Though community participation can appear to be very challenging to implement it is nonetheless achievable. MAFs need to hear and understand what the community members need, and consider the community's ideas on how to resolve the problems. Though there are limited resources available to MAFs in developing the communities to enable them to do this effectively, this may be an obstacle which MAF should aim to overcome with creativity.

Community participation in multi-agency forums should be a basic requirement for all MAF, because community participation promotes community cohesion and it can help member organisations fulfill their statutory duty to promote race equality. Community members should be empowered not just through training, but by ensuring equal access to services and by their direct involvement in activities and decisions leading to issues affecting them.

MAFs need to promote community member participation as a valued contribution such that the diverse community members will appreciate that they have a say in issues affecting their lives.

Representation

However, there is a need to be realistic about some of the problems associated with trying to engage community members. In the Eastern Region there are several community groups on the database of organisations, but many of them are in the early stages of development. The few successful ones appear too busy with their day-to-day activities and are therefore hardly involved with the local MAFs. It may also be that they are not sure of the benefits of attending these meetings as they don't see any impact on resolving their needs and for them it then becomes a waste of their time. Such problems are coupled with the fact that most MAF members attend meetings to represent their organisation for the sake of their job. It should equally be understood that community members may not be able to attend such meeting especially if they have to take time off work.

It is often argued that individuals from a community attending regular MAF meetings are not really a true representative of the community voice as they tend to be speaking from a personal rather than an organisational perspective. Regardless of this argument, any form of representation is better than none. Although this can be true it may well help to inform MAFs about the kind of issues affecting people in the wider community, and the single community activist could be the link to the wider community. Such arguments could also steer MAF discussions around the need to get other community members on board. On a more general note, most people are now overwhelmed by too many

meetings and there is nothing worse than sitting through a two hour meeting which has no relevance to you. Therefore it may be appropriate to invite some community groups, and organisations to MAF meetings and events only when it relates to an issue affecting them.

Cultural

Cultural differences could also lead to a reduced value in the benefits of attending MAF meetings for some immigrant communities. Many new arrivals are more used to a traditional style of putting questions directly to someone who might be able to make a difference such as a politician. Within the MAF structures, there is often the tendency that decision maker have to be consulted at a later time on matters discussed at the meetings. Some migrant communities are not familiar with the fact that in the UK, it is often that issues are discussed, evidence gathered before any action is recommended to take the matter forward. If MAFs and their member organizations want to demonstrate that they are serious about better community participation, more effort needs to be made not only to engage but to inform communities about the purpose of these forums and the value they could get out of them in terms of influencing change.

Way forward:

We believe that MAFs could be an effective way to increase community participation as their structures could enable them feed in problems affecting communities. Community members need to be aware that MAFs can help in finding out what is happening locally. They are also a place to meet organisations working in the community, and they can contribute to discussions to influence change. MAFs could further developed by building stronger links with their Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) and Local Area Agreements (LAAs) which are the new driving forces in influencing planning and spending in local areas.

It is obvious that community participation is not something that can be achieved overnight and as such there is a need for an incremental approach, such as making small steps each year trying. Nearly everyone who has email is feeling increasingly overloaded by the number of emails we receive. At the same time there is an ever increasing amount of reports, conferences, consultations, and events around refugee, asylum and migrant worker issues. Although it is nice to keep people informed we need to be aware that most community organizations are led by a small number of individuals on a voluntary basis and they do not want to be overwhelmed with huge numbers of email with extensive attachments which may scare off groups that have been brave enough to join your mailing lists.

We understand and appreciate that each community can be different, but following the model of the case studies discussed in this guide, we believe MAFs need only be creative enough to come up with their own version of how to engage with its diverse community members.

Finally, here is a suggested list of things to bear in mind to improve community participation:

- Ensure understanding of all sides
- Evaluate existing levels of participation
- Review attendance/communication with members
- Explore different ways MAFs can consult locally
- Assess the development needs of community groups
- Encourage community development support work
- Declare ownership by identifying a dedicated MAF member or organisation to lead on community participation

Reference

1. A Strategic Framework for Community Development.
Available online at <http://www.cdx.org.uk/files/u1/sframepdf.pdf>
2. MENTER (2005) Better Building Partnerships. Available online at http://www.partnershipdevelopmentproject.org.uk/building_better_partnership_booklet.pdf
3. Mistry, D. (2007). Community Engagement: practical lessons from a pilot. A Home Office Development and Practice report available from online at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/dpr48.pdf>
4. Wilcox, D. (1994) The Guide to Effective Participation (a summary of the guide is available online courtesy of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/H4.asp>