THE YOUNG FOUNDATION

Why do some people get involved?

How to encourage local activism and help communities to self-organise

Why do some people get involved in their communities?

Who participates and how?

Most UK residents feel they "belonged strongly" to their neighbourhood and were "satisfied with their local area as a place to live" according to the latest Citizenship survey[1] published in January 2010, however, only just over a third felt that they were able to "influence decisions in their local area."
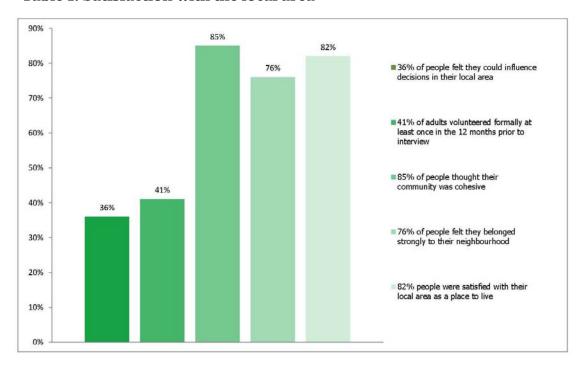
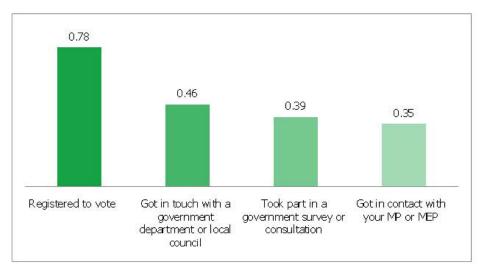### Table 1. Satisfaction with the local area

Source: Citizenship Survey: April – September 2009, published 28 Jan 2010

An Ofcom study[2] of political engagement of online users shows that although the majority registered to vote, less than half had ever contacted their local council, taken part in a government survey or had been in touch with their MP.

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[1] **Citizenship Survey: April – September 2009**, published 28 Jan 2010. The latest statistics report on the first two quarters of the 2009-10 survey, covering April to September 2009 and update those statistics released on 29 October 2009.

[2] **Participation stats from: Digital Citizens and Community Participation.** An analysis of how citizens participate online and connect with MPs and Parliament, Andy Williamson. 2010 Hansard Society. N:\Common Area\Local Innovation Team\Neighbourhoods\Neighbourhood Futures\Seminar papers\Research material_comm engagement\Digital Citizens and Democratic Participation1.pdf

Table 2. Political Engagement

Source: Digital Citizens and Community Participation, Ofcom, 2010

There is significant evidence to show that social factors affect levels of citizen involvement. A recent paper by the Democratic Audit states there are, "marked biases in which segments of society participate and which do not that reflect the inequalities in resources and power."[3] Table 3 shows that higher levels of participation are more common with higher earners.

Table 3. Variations in political participation

No. of political actions	0 (%)	1-4 (%)	5+ (%)
All	15	52	33
Class			
Professional & managerial	8	45	47
Intermediate	14	51	36
Manual	18	58	24
Household income			
Under 10,000	19	56	25
50,000 and over	3	43	54
Time in education			
15 years and under	19	57	24
*16-18	15	52	33
19 years and over	7	43	50
Ethnicity			
White European	15	52	34
Black/Asian/ Caribbean/other	18	56	26

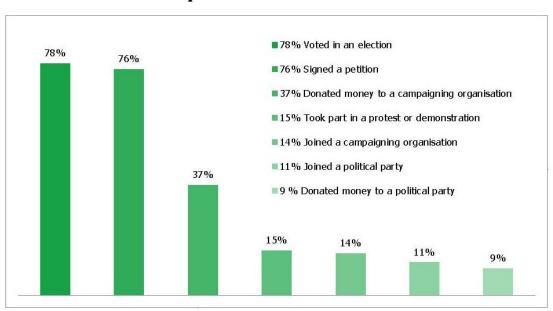Source: adapted from Pattie et al, op cit, Table 3.4, 2000:86

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[3] A literature review by Democratic Audit: In Power and Participation in Modern Britain by Beetham, D. et all, (2008) From: www.democraticaudit.org/download/PP_lowres.pdf

Table 4. Belonging to community organisations

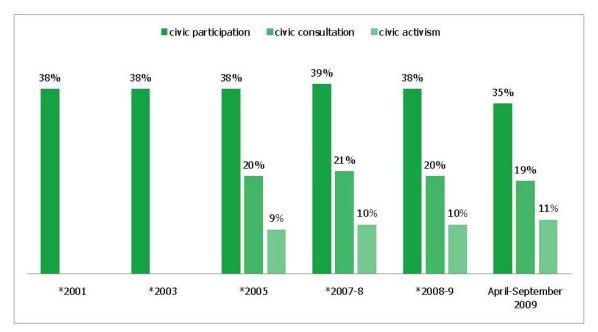| Group	Percent belonging to community organisations		
No of organisations	0	1	2+
All	76%	18%	6%
Gender			
Men	76%	18%	6%
Women	76%	18%	5%
Ethnic group			
White	76%	19%	6%
Other	84%	14%	2%
Social Class			
Professional/employer	68%	20%	12%
Intermediate non-manual	69%	25%	7%
Supervisory/skilled manual	81%	16%	3%
Unskilled manual	84%	12%	4%

Source: Adapted from Johnston and Jowell, the 18th BSA Report, Table 8.12, Sage/NCSR, 2001:191

Table 5. Political Participation

- 78% Voted in an election
- 76% Signed a petition
- 37% Donated money to a campaigning organisation
- 15% Took part in a protest or demonstration
- 14% Joined a campaigning organisation
- 11% Joined a political party
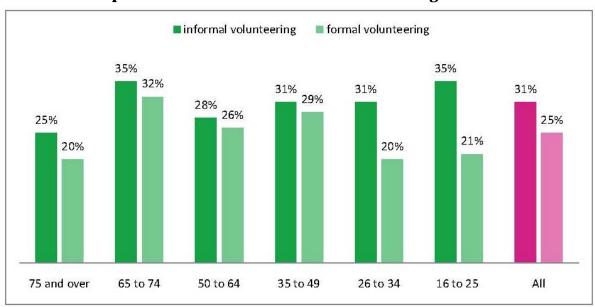- 9 % Donated money to a political party

Source: Citizenship Survey: April – September 2009, published 28 Jan 2010

Table 6. Participation at least once in the last year

Source: Citizenship Survey: April – September 2009, published 28 Jan 2010

Table 7. Participation in formal and informal volunteering at least once a month

Source: Citizenship Survey: April – September 2009, published 28 Jan 2010

Conditions to support participation

"Local people often know what the solutions to problems in their area are - but too often we don't include them in the process. If we want the highest quality services that really meet people's needs then we need to find better ways of hearing what they have to say and put communities in control of the services that affect their lives."

Hazel Blears[4]

Why do people participate?

A recent literature review by Involve called Understanding Participation[5] demonstrates that people's reasons for being 'active' citizens will vary greatly depending on their social, environmental and personal circumstances.

The main reasons outlined in Understanding Participation[6] for people getting involved are:

- "a personal interest" or common interests
- An aspiration to change things
- Faith
- Exposure and access to community and voluntary sectors
- An opportunity to voice opinions

The three main psychological motivations for civic activism and participation, outlined by Klandermans (2004)[7] a social psychologist, are:

- **Instrumentality:** a desire to change circumstances
- **Identity:** to belong to a group
- **Meaning:** to give meaning to one's life

Recent literature suggests that having a voice in the community and a feeling a sense of empowerment gives citizens a stronger commitment to their local area. As a consequence they will be more likely to be a part of local activities. In addition, "when an active interest is shown in their opinion...and feel their engagement was influential and acted upon" a citizen will be more motivated to be involved and stay involved politically. [8]

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[4] http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/864083
[5] Involve: Understanding Participation: A Literature Review, Dec 2009
http://www.involve.org.uk/assets/Uploads/Pathways-literature-review-final-version.pdf
This literature review forms part of a major national research project called 'Pathways through Participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?' led by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) in partnership with the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and Involve.
[6] Involve (2009) *Understanding participation: A literature review*, 4.3.1
http://www.involve.org.uk/assets/Uploads/Pathways-literature-review-final-version.pdf
[7] **Klandermans, B.** (2004) 'The Demand and Supply of Participation: Social- Psychological Correlates of Participation in Social Movements' in D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, and H. Kriesi (eds) The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements, London: Blackwell Publishing.
[8] Involve: Understanding Participation: A Literature Review, Dec 2009, 4.3.1 p.28
http://www.involve.org.uk/assets/Uploads/Pathways-literature-review-final-version.pdf

Social networks are also an important factor in triggering the involvement of citizens. Some other key triggers include 'being asked', 'word of mouth' and the influence of community motivators or 'moving spirits'.[9]

Volunteering

Looking at what motivates people to be involved in certain activities can give an indication of why some people participate more than others do.

Four explanations as to why people volunteer[10]:

• **Socio-economic factors:** people with higher education and income volunteer more than those with fewer resources.

• **Opportunity or access:** this is connected to people's social networks; people who volunteer often do so because they have been asked.

• **Historical and cultural factors at the wider societal level:** for example, the bias in the UK for volunteering to take place within the realm of social welfare and the way in which people from certain cultures or religions are routinely involved in activities which might be seen as volunteering (e.g. Chinese and African-Caribbean communities caring for members of their family and neighbours).

• **Individual motivation:** some people have personalities which are more helpful and generous than others.

The key drivers for volunteering which were outlined by the cabinet Office's Helping Out survey[11] were:

• "to improve things and help people" (53%)
• time available
• to gain life experience
• a personal attachment to the organisation
• in order to widen social networks (a common reason for younger people)

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[9] Involve: Understanding Participation: A Literature Review, Dec 2009, 4.3

http://www.involve.org.uk/assets/Uploads/Pathways-literature-review-final-version.pdf

[10] Involve: Understanding Participation: A Literature Review, Dec 2009, 4.3.1 p.29

http://www.involve.org.uk/assets/Uploads/Pathways-literature-review-final-version.pdf
[11] Helping Out Survey:
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/research_and_statistics/third_sector_research/helping_out.aspx

Reviewing the barriers to participation

Understanding Participation[12] outlines the key reasons that inhibit and even prevent people from taking part in community action. These are:

1. **Institutional barriers:** complex institutional structures and beaurocracy tend to be a deterrent for involvement
2. **Lack of resources:** educational, financial, lack of time
3. **Psychological barriers:** lack of confidence to participate, lack of knowledge, lack of trust, perceptions of typical participant, a lack of faith in the engagement process at local decision-making level
4. **Discrimination and prejudice:** stigma within the community

Factors that positively influence sustained participation levels include:
- A settled personal life
- Higher levels of education
- Previous experience of participation
- Friendships and networks created through previous participation

The research and literature into public participation shows that citizen involvement in local action is dependent on a variety of factors such as who the participants are, the type of participation available and their motivations for participating.

Conditions to encourage local involvement – opening up information

In the Citizen Empowerment report issued by the Cabinet office in 2009[13], there is a call for a more, "personalised and responsive" service with "a deepening of user involvement through new forms of individual and community control." The report calls for the information held by services to be more available for re-use by citizens and civic organisations. Which will include, "the provision of frequent, comparative and tailored performance data about services at a local level".

The report states that although mechanisms to implement this will vary, the ambition will be the same: "enabling more personalised services by giving citizens the information and power to shape services around their needs and aspirations, rather than by assuming that someone in the Government knows best."

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[12] Involve: Understanding Participation: A Literature Review, Dec 2009, 4.4
http://www.involve.org.uk/assets/Uploads/Pathways-literature-review-final-version.pdf
[13] Citizen Empowerment, Cabinet Office, December 2009
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/publications/excellence_and_fairness/report/html/citizen_empowerment.aspx

Using the internet to get involved:

This year the Paper Digital Citizens and Community Participation[14] was released which examines how citizens participate online and connect with MPs and Parliament.

The study found that **70%** of respondents felt that the internet "makes it easier for them to participate" in civic and political actions with only 6% in disagreement.

49% of the participants said that they would "generally prefer to use the internet to participate in civic and political activities", whilst **17%** disagreed.

At a local level, local authorities are increasingly using social media to engage with citizens: 42% have Twitter accounts.[15] Many also have Facebook accounts – Coventry City Council's Facebook page has over 10,000 members.

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[14] **Digital Citizens and Community Participation,** An analysis of how citizens participate online and connect with MPs and Parliament, Andy Williamson. 2010 Hansard Society.
N:\Common Area\Local Innovation Team\Neighbourhoods\Neighbourhood Futures\Seminar papers\Research material_comm engagement\Digital Citizens and Democratic Participation1.pdf
[15] See http://www.publictechnology.net/content/21390

About this paper

This paper was produced as part of the Neighbourhood Futures programme, a partnership with six local authorities exploring the impact of the economic downturn on community empowerment and neighbourhood engagement. The programme ran between 2009 and 2010 involving the London Borough of Camden, the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk, London Borough of Hackney, London Borough of Lewisham, Knowsley Council and Suffolk County Council.

About the Young Foundation

The Young Foundation brings together insight, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs. We have a 55 year track record of success with ventures such as the Open University, Which?, the School for Social Entrepreneurs and Healthline (the precursor of NHS Direct). We work across the UK and internationally – carrying out research, influencing policy, creating new organisations and supporting others to do the same, often with imaginative uses of new technology. We now have over 60 staff, working on over 40 ventures at any one time, with staff in New York and Paris as well as London and Birmingham in the UK.

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