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VOiCE Case Studies

Communities Influencing Anti-Poverty Policies in Scotland

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Communities influencing anti-poverty policies in Scotland

Summary

The Poverty Alliance in Scotland is conducting a four year project across Scotland entitled EPIC – Evidence, Participation and Change. The project is funded by the BIG lottery fund and is designed to bring those experiencing the effects of poverty together to influence anti-poverty policies and strategies in Scotland at both local and national levels.

The EPIC project team are using VOiCE in a series of measures to identify and map key project participants and groups from across Scotland, investigate potential barriers to engagement and plan and record effective action to engage participants from across all backgrounds. Now at the end of year one, the VOiCE tool is being used as a method to review progress and assess direction in community engagement for the next phase of the project.

About EPIC

EPIC has been designed to ensure that people from a diverse range of backgrounds from across Scotland can make their voices heard by Scottish Government and other national and local agencies with the purpose of developing a sound basis for action to tackle poverty in Scotland supported by anti-poverty policies and initiatives which address real issues and real experiences.

The project aims to involve 320 community organisations from areas with a high concentration of poverty and deprivation in dialogue on what living in poverty and on low income means, what the effects are and what can be done to meet the needs of those living in disadvantage. EPIC also aims to create opportunities for meaningful participation to enhance the ways in which evidence about the impact of anti-poverty strategies is gathered, analysed and disseminated. The project is supporting people experiencing poverty to gather their own evidence of the effects of poverty through participatory approaches to research where local people investigate, analyse and respond to the problems they face.

Why is community engagement a key feature of the EPIC project?

Two main factors influenced the development of the EPIC project; the need for evidence based responses to social problems and the emergence of ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’ as important principles in policy development.

In the initial project design, the Poverty Alliance highlighted that ‘for many people living in poverty there is a sense of disconnectedness from the policy makers and policies that have an impact on their lives. There are few avenues available to help them engage with decision makers and few resources to help them do so’.

EPIC’s core purpose is to support individuals and community groups to influence anti-poverty policy according to their own experiences and to come together with local and national agencies and policy makers to engage in dialogue on the development of the Scottish Government anti-poverty strategy and the policies which underpin it.

Why did EPIC use VOiCE ?

EPIC was established in February 2009. There are three members of the EPIC project team; a Policy and Parliamentary Officer, a Community Research Officer and an Administrative Assistant. The team had existing knowledge of community engagement practice and principles but identified early in phase one of the project the need for a resource to enable them to record detail and store evidence of their community engagement activity as the project progressed.

The first stage of the project required the EPIC project team to;

- analyse who the key stakeholders in the project would be
- ensure that there would be wide and varied representation from the target areas
- identify any potential barriers to engagement and what actions would be needed to address those barriers
- identify the most appropriate methods for community and stakeholder engagement

What were the benefits of using VOiCE?

VOiCE provided the project team with a set of critical questions which enabled them to begin conducting their stakeholder analysis in a rigorous and systematic way. The project design had produced a broad analysis of the target areas but by using VOiCE the team was able to use this tool as one method for recording reflections of the EPIC team on key stakeholders.

By following the key process steps in VOiCE the project team were then prompted to analyse the barriers that potential project participants might face, which in turn influenced the selection of the methods of engagement to be used. The software provided one method to capture in recording barriers in terms of engagement and to draw on the knowledge base of the EPiC team. One issue which was identified was the range of differing perceptions of what poverty actually means – would some of the intended project participants identify themselves as living in poverty?

As a result of the identification of barriers, methods of engagement were then assessed for appropriateness for the target groups and the time available in relation to project milestones.

What key lessons did the EPIC team learn about using VOiCE most effectively?

- >> **Preparation:** The EPIC team sourced VOiCE through a web search and spent time to independently familiarise themselves with all sections of the tool before agreeing to use it as their main recording database. All team members committed equally to using the tool and populate it with data on a regular basis. Although team members are experienced in community engagement work they identified that specialist advice in the most effective use of the VOiCE software would have saved time in the start up phase of the project.
- >> **VOiCE as a learning tool:** Although the initial motivation for using VOiCE was that it supplied a recording facility, the EPIC team began to use the key steps and handy hints information as a reflective learning approach within each piece of engagement they conducted. VOiCE is now used by the EPIC team as a learning, action and reflection tool for community engagement processes.
- >> **Sorting information:** The EPIC team originally recorded the whole project as one VOiCE record. As the project developed it became apparent that each element of the project was different in terms of characteristics, scale and pace and therefore using one record for all engagements became a complex task. The EPIC team concluded that, in order to use VOiCE to best effect, each discrete strand of the project should have its own record on the database under the umbrella of the EPIC project.
- >> **Shared access:** Once it was established that all team members would use the VOiCE tool. VOiCE was installed on the organisation main server so that access could be shared and all project team members and other Poverty Alliance staff could view and update the same records. This avoided different sets of information being held by different people and was an important approach in avoiding confusion and duplication of effort.

How will VOiCE be used in the future?

Throughout the first year of the project the EPIC team used VOiCE to log records associated with the engagement element of the project and are now embarking on a review of year one. The review stage of VOiCE will provide the EPIC team with a set of critical questions which will enable them to assess whether any elements of the engagement can be improved in year two.

As a result of the EPIC team using VOiCE, the Poverty Alliance is now using the tool to inform its organisational community engagement strategy as part of Poverty Alliance fieldwork development.