

## in it together: definitions

As Community Engagement Working Group members we spent some time exploring together what we each understand by the word '**community**' and the terms:

- Community engagement
- Community involvement
- Community participation
- Community empowerment
- Community development

We discovered that frequently we did not understand the same thing!

This got even more confusing when we asked friends, family and colleagues what they thought of when they heard some of these words. Dosti also asked for ideas on their website discussion forum. This is what working group members found out:

**Community** – people thought of: a group of people with something in common, friends and family, a village, my street, a social network, a sense of place ...

Some people referred to the biological definition of a community as a group of interacting organisms sharing an environment, and went on to suggest that a community is a group of people who act in the interests of their collective good, rather than to serve individual interests.

Working group members noted that for people living in Dudley Borough, the term community is strongly linked to geography or place. This did not appear to be so strong for people outside Dudley, who tended to think in terms of family and friends.



One common view of 'community' was summed up succinctly by the following response:

*"The term tends to be used by politicians as some kind of utopian vision of residents in a geographical locality who work together for the 'common good'. In reality geographical boundaries rarely define 'a community of interest'"*

Another interesting reaction to the word 'community' was:

*"'Community' anything is tarnished. 'Nice' places don't have Community Centres or Community Schools or Community Colleges or Community Groups. Use of the word 'community' has become a not very subtle cipher for failing or problem areas which in turn really translates into socially, financially or educationally excluded areas."*

**Community engagement** – people thought of: community interaction, contributing to a community e.g. litter pick, how people can come together to change things, a term you hear bandied about, it's jargon and is quite meaningless.

**Community empowerment** – people thought this meant: being able to take part in a real way, influence through relationships by using skills and knowledge of the community, having control over your life and future, liberation, encouraging people to do things they previously thought they couldn't, bureaucracy, groups of people waving their hands and placards about!

Cumbria County Council's **Framework for Community Engagement** suggests that:

*Unfortunately when the term 'community' is used in the context of public services, a variety of meanings may be inferred ...*

*The main reason for the varied use of the term 'community' is partly to do with the fact that communities are quite complex. For example, an individual living in a community is a resident of the geographic population but may also operate in a myriad of other communities both at work and also through recreation, health or education. For each individual these will also vary over time and personal circumstances.*

*It should therefore be understood that real day-to-day experiences of community are as dynamic as they are diverse. Furthermore these experiences will usually be quite different even amongst close neighbours and family groups.*

*Effective community engagement must understand these subtleties if it is to relate to the real lives that people actually lead.*

We propose that the Dudley Community Partnership uses the definitions and an explanation of terms presented in the introduction of **in it together**, and encourages ongoing discussion and reflection on what we mean by 'community' when we talk about engaging.