

# Under the axis of influence

**Worried it was not making a difference, one Dudley women's group used a new tool called the Axis of Influence to find out the truth. The Axis became the driver for huge changes in its way of working. ROBERT BULLARD explains**

In 2007, inspired by International Women's Day, Sue Solly joined her local Women's forum. But after attending a few of the group's meetings her initial enthusiasm began to fade. 'The forum felt a bit lost,' says Solly, a retired health and safety advisor from Dudley. 'There was no clear idea of what we wanted to do – if anything.'

But in Solly's case her mood changed after the forum was introduced to the Axis of Influence – a recently developed tool that helps organisations measure the influence they are having, and how they might increase their impact.

'The Axis made the forum ask what we wanted to do,' explains Solly. 'Did we want to be a place for people to chat, a network, or something more pro-active?' The forum opted for the latter, she says, and as something to focus on, they decided to scrutinise the strategic plan for Dudley's town centre.

'One of the things we noticed in the plan was a lack of toilets,' says Solly. 'So we made representations – and they took our views on board.' Energised by their success, the Axis then encouraged the forum to develop a clear and bolder aim: 'to get a member of the forum onto each of the strategic plan's sub-groups'.

## A clear direction

The forum's transformation inside 18 months – from a group that was drifting to one with clear direction – has 'all been down to the Axis,' says Solly, who now hopes to take the Axis to another groups that she attends.

The idea for the Axis of Influence came out of a request from the regional government office for the West Midlands. In 2005, GO-WM asked Dudley's community empowerment network, Dosti (literally 'friendship' in Punjabi, Bengali and Urdu), what influence it was having on local decision-making.

'I realised we did not even have a consistent way of measuring influence,' says Lorna Prescott, Dosti's senior development officer. 'So I commissioned research to identify what



influence means and then to develop a framework for assessing organisations' influence.' It was Prescott who introduced Solly to the Axis.

'Lorna was fundamental to the Axis's development,' says Sal Hampson, from the consultancy group Changes, which developed the idea. 'She gave us a very flexible contract – where producing something at the end was more important than regular reports – and she gave us enough time to make the Axis's development worthwhile.'

The tool has two axes on which organisations plot their position. The vertical represents an organisation's capacity to influence, numbered from one (want to influence) to 10 (influence). The horizontal represents their degree of influence ('no influence' to 'a lot of influence'). To help organisations identify their position on the vertical, there are a series of indicators (taken from the five dimensions of community empowerment), representing the degree to which an organisation is confident, inclusive, organised, co-operative and influential.

'People can get the hang of the Axis in 10 minutes or so,' says Hampson. Feedback from users supports this – but also that it can take a few hours to understand all of the finer details, and some people may find it easier to work with than others.

'It is not everyone's cup of tea,' warns Solly. 'Some people prefer formal committee work; the Axis requires people to think more

loosely and strategically.' But, as someone who likes to try and see the big picture, she found the Axis easy to use and is convinced of its benefits.

## Flexible development

In addition to the Women's Forum, Dudley's Action for Disabled People and Carers also testifies that the Axis helped them reformulate their vision, and galvanise them into wanting to achieve more. As well as being an evaluation tool as originally envisaged, therefore, the Axis is proving to be a development tool as well, providing organisations with practical ideas about how to have more influence.

'People can feel really energised by the Axis,' confirms Alison Navarro, who used the approach with a Children's and Young Person's Hub (a network of 20 voluntary organisations) in Cumbria, after Community Development Exchange had it adapted for national usage.

'We are really delighted with the Axis,' says Beth Longstaff, research and policy officer at Community Development Exchange, for whom the approach has three advantages beyond its practical applicability. It takes a multi-dimensional view of empowerment, with people working collectively rather than individually; it does not assume that having an influence is easy; and it allows differences in view and discussion between the people using it.

'The Axis has been invaluable to our local networks,' says Prescott. 'It is like a map. It provides signposts and directions on where we need to go. I have never seen anything like it that helps people in such a coherent way.'

## Further info

Changes consultancy specialises in community development, active citizenship and community engagement. The Axis and a resource pack are available on their website. For more information call 01743 350198 or visit [www.changesuk.net](http://www.changesuk.net)