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# Local Political Parties and Local Activists

**POWER**  
An independent inquiry  
into Britain's democracy

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## Introduction

In early 2005, The Power Inquiry and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned Opinion Leader Research to carry out research exploring views and perceptions of activism. This report looks at the major themes and findings from the research.

The wider objectives of the research were to:

- *Investigate* why people who are active in their communities increasingly reject political parties as an appropriate focus for their energies
- *Generate* ideas into how political parties can re-engage individuals who are currently active in non-party related 'political' activity and/or non-political community group
- *Consider* whether and how political parties can work to reverse a historical trend which has seen non-party related 'political activity' bypass parties as a focus for activism and support.

All quotes in this report are verbatim statements made by participants in the research sessions.

## **Approach and methodology**

Our research revolved around a series of parallel workshops with social influencers.

### **Parallel workshops**

Parallel workshops are an innovative way of bringing together different audiences for meaningful debate and knowledge sharing. A large part of a workshop is spent discussing the same agenda in separate groups, before different sides are brought together to share their similarities and differences.

Throughout the workshop there are opportunities for participants to discuss ways forward and to develop new ideas and thinking.

### **Social influencers**

Opinion Leader Research has developed proprietary thinking on how influence works in contemporary society.

As part of this, we have identified 'social influencers' as the people who shape and mould the views of others in society. Being a 'social influencer' is about having a psychological mindset, rather than coming from a specific demographic group.

Social influencers gain their influence through being members of various social networks (formal and informal), and communicating stances and information through those networks. As a result, they tend to be articulate, engaged and informed.

### **Methodology**

We conducted three one-day parallel workshops with social influencers. We recruited 24 participants to take part in each session, with participants split into three equal segments:

- 'Social influencers' who are active in party politics
- 'Social influencers' who are involved in non-party related 'political' activity (i.e. issue-based campaigns, pressure groups)
- 'Social influencers' who are involved in community activity (i.e. PTA, School Governors, Rotary Club, charity work)

We ensured a diversity and range of backgrounds were represented in each workshop, in terms of the parties and organisations that people were involved with. We also ensured a mix of ages and socio-economic groups, in addition to ensuring a balance between men and women.

The parallel workshops were conducted in Glasgow, Birmingham and Somerset. The fieldwork took place from 3 June - 15 June, with an additional session in Glasgow conducted on 13 July with party political and issue-based activists only.

The session in Birmingham involved only Black and minority ethnic participants.

## **Summary**

Our research shows that political parties face a series of serious challenges.

### **Lack of influence**

Activists of all kinds feel that party political activists lack power and influence. Party political activists acknowledge that their power to shape what their parties do and say is limited. They also bemoan the fact that they have to justify policies that they have had no say over, or to which they are actually opposed.

Issue-based and community activists feel that political parties are too 'top-down', and that local parties lack the power to influence policies. This dissatisfaction with local parties fits within a broader narrative of disillusionment with the political process. Indeed, issue-based and community activists hold deeply negative views towards political parties.

### **Recruiting members**

Party political members admit that political parties face problems when it comes to recruiting members. They believe that people have less time to get involved in community activity.

However, they do acknowledge their belief that people are disillusioned with, and disengaged from, conventional party politics; in particular young people. In contrast, some feel that issue-based campaigns are more appealing to people as they allow for more immediate results, on-off involvement, and are more glamorous and trendy.

Moreover, party political activists acknowledge that their current efforts to recruit members are limited.

### **Morale**

Party political activists are more negative about their involvement than issue-based and community activists.

Activists of all kinds (party political, issue-based and community) feel that activism represents hard work, and takes up a lot of spare time. Many feel that they are often unfairly labelled or stereotyped as "do gooders" or "extremists".

However, party political activists are much more negative than their counterparts. Indeed, they often struggle to cite positives about being a member. When discussing why they are active, they lack the emotional fervour of both issue-based and community activists. Above all else, they complain of lacking power and influence.

### **Thinking about the ideal**

When asked what an ideal party should be about, political party activists feel that they should have direct influence. They want greater influence on their leaders and the policies they adopt.

Non-party activists struggle with the concept of an ideal party, and believe change must be made to the wider political process first. However, discussion on what an ideal party should be

about does reveal some interesting themes. Non-party activists believe the ideal party should be open to change, influence and ideas. An ideal party would continually engage with people, and not just during the short span of an election campaign.

### **Working together**

Activists struggle with the concept of how local parties could work more closely with issue-based and community groups. However, some issue-based activists can see advantages from working together with local parties, in terms of more direct access to power.

Ideas on how local parties could connect better with organisations revolve around improved communications; more visibility from political parties; forums that bring together different kinds of activist; and more personal connections between different kinds of activist.

## Exploring motivations

At the start of the workshops, we explored the reasons why activists got involved in their various forms of activism.

This section outlines the findings from those sessions. Firstly, we look at the common themes emerging from all three groups, and then look at themes that emerge from the specific groups.

### **'Natural Joiners'**

Reflecting the social influencer mindset, participants are 'natural' joiners'. They have high levels of community participation and social capital. For example, party political activists tend also to be involved in other forms of activity (such as issue-based campaigns and community work).

The three groups are united by a desire to make a positive difference to society. This expresses itself in a number of different ways. The party political and issue based activists both place emphasis on 'speaking out' on issues. Moreover, this act of "speaking out" is perceived to be a way of having some influence over the direction of society.

As this suggests, activists in all three groups discuss the importance of giving a "voice" to the groups they belong to or identify themselves with. In some instances, particularly in relation to the issue-based and community group activists, these are groups they perceive to be disadvantaged or under represented.

For members of all three groups, making a difference to society is linked to the desire for a collective experience. This is very much about getting together with like-minded people and enhancing one's quality of life.

### **Motivations: political party activists**

When asked why they joined political parties, party activists' main motivation was to change society, and to have influence over future policy.

When thinking about why they joined initially, a number of key themes emerge:

- Political party activists frequently cite the chiming of their values with a particular political party as a reason for becoming a member of that party.

"My main motivation for joining was basically that their values coincided with what I believe" (Political party, Glasgow)

"I have been a lifelong Labour supporter. Overall, they have been the party that reflected my own socialist views" (Political party, Somerset)

"I joined because I think I know where I stand with the Conservatives they stand for capitalism, they're not hypocritical, they don't pretend to do this, that or the other. You know exactly where you stand." (Political Party. Somerset)

- For some, a specific issue led them to join a certain party. For instance, anger over the war in Iraq or university tuition fees led them to join the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats. This motivation is more pronounced amongst younger participants.

"I wanted to make a stand against Labour over certain policies of theirs that I don't agree with...like Iraq and top-up fees" (Political party, Birmingham)

"I've just recently finished college and I strongly oppose tuition fees. A lot of the politics the party [The Conservatives] has I feel I can relate to and when it comes to things like fees and being a student." (Political Party, Glasgow)

For political party activists, family background and heritage are also considered to play a prominent role in motivating people to become involved.

"I joined because of my father's influence and have been involved with my party since I were very young. But my lads just don't care about politics. It's not seen to be important" (Political party, Glasgow session 2)

"Family connections are an important aspect I think. My family have always been members of my particular party so it would have been quite odd not to carry that on" (Political party, Somerset)

"My Dad was a political man just like my grandfather... political engagement runs through my family" (Political party, Glasgow)

Importantly, political party activists primarily join political parties because of 'national' reasons, rather than a desire to change the local community. This is largely because of their desire for greater power and influence in society, and the perceived ability to shape and determine national policy and debate.

Some political party participants also speak of joining a party in order to give a specific group a wider 'voice'. In Glasgow, left-wing activists – for example, Labour and SSP members - got involved in party politics so as to give the working class a more powerful voice. In Birmingham, a key initial motivation was to ensure ethnic voices are given a political outlet. While in Somerset, Conservative Party activists think that by being members of a political party they can ensure that "the countryside is heard".

"There are a lot of people whose opinions are never heard. To give expression to those opinions is why I have joined a political party" (Political party, Glasgow)

"This political system was constituted in order to recognise only certain groups of people. My motivation in getting involved in politics nearly 30 years ago now was to try and give those disposed by the system some outlet to be heard" (Political party, Birmingham)

"I got involved because I wanted to try and make sure the concerns of the countryside like fox hunting were given a national voice" (Political party, Somerset)

BME activists also talk of how party membership is partly about being a fully integrated member of UK society. Many see party membership as a form of active citizenship.

“Being part of a political party is a way of saying that you want to contribute and be part of that society as much as possible” (Political party, Birmingham)

“Joining a political party is partly about wanting to be recognised as a legitimate citizen of this country, not someone who is excluded from it” (Political party, Birmingham)

### **Motivations: issue-based activists**

Issue-based activists become involved to actively change things and to speak up. The primary motivation behind activists joining their campaign groups comes from a desire to “speak up” on a cause that they feel passionate about.

A number of issue-based activists say that they want to speak up for the ‘powerless’ and ‘voiceless’, and against forms of social and political injustice. As a result of the geographic and thematic diversity of groups represented in our workshops, these “voiceless” groups range from the more local (prostitutes in Birmingham) to the most global (the least economically developed African nations).

Motivation to join an issue-based campaign group is often related to an aspect of their own identity they consider to be of importance. Consequently, activists will talk of speaking out on a issue that directly impacts on their own experiences. While the emphasis for some in Birmingham is the need to tackle various forms of racism, the focus in Somerset centres on countryside issues, and their perceived lack of recognition from central government of those issues.

“Its passion for my cause which gets me involved...to help in some way” (Issue-based, Glasgow)

“We joined because we wanted to try and change things” (Issue-based, Somerset)

“One of the things that motivate us is improving people’s quality of life and standard of living” (Issue-based, Birmingham)

“I think local action groups are the most effective way of changing things. We help empower disadvantaged people and challenge a lot of injustice” (Issue-based, Glasgow)

“Returning dignity and respect to people and easing their burdens is one of our motivations” (Issue-based, Birmingham)

“My motivation for joining was to try and make sure that the kinds of discrimination I have experienced are not experienced by others like me” Issue-based, Birmingham)

### **Motivations: community activists**

Similar to issue-based activists, our research shows that the motivations determining people’s involvement in community activism are generally of an altruistic nature. As such, community

activists speak of getting involved in community based projects because they want to make a difference to their area.

Like issue-based activists, they have a passion for their causes and get involved with the hope that they will be able to make a positive contribution to their communities. Part of their motivation derives from a desire to “belong” and to be part of something durable.

Personal benefits are often cited as motivations. Examples of these are that of “meeting like-minded people” and of “feeling good about helping other people”. In Somerset, community activists place greater importance on establishing and expanding their social life by being a community group member. They are far more likely to cite social life aspects as a motivation behind joining community groups than activists in either Glasgow or Birmingham.

“I wanted to be part of something, something that aims to improve things around you”  
(Community group, Somerset)

“All of us joined our different groups because we are all dedicated and passionate about improving things around us” (Community group, Birmingham)

“People are becoming really atomised. Community activity is one way of challenging this phenomenon” (Community group, Glasgow)

“They [community groups] allow a person to belong to something that has meaning and that lasts. No one wants to be on their own” (Community group, Somerset)

“We are in our organisation because we get satisfaction. But the pleasure we get is because we help others” (Community group, Birmingham)

“My community group brings people together and is a brilliant way of meeting up with friends and new people” (Community group, Somerset)

## Experiences

As the workshops progressed, we explored what the three groups thought of themselves. We looked at what they thought the 'positives' and 'negatives' were of their forms of activism.

### **Experiences: party political activists**

#### *Positives*

Party political activists consistently struggle to spontaneously cite positive aspects of being a member of a political party. Indeed, questioning on the possible positive aspects is frequently met with either laughter or silence.

Initially, political party activists say that they have the power to influence the direction of their party, and as result, the direction of politics as a whole. The premise being that by being part of a political party they are in possession of greater power and influence than those who are not party members. However, on further reflection, this is almost always acknowledged not be the case. (see 'Negatives' immediately below.)

Party political activists do talk about the benefit of coming together with like-minded people. The benefits of this tend to be thought of in terms of campaigning, but also in terms of bonding with others through social events. This social life aspect is most pronounced in Somerset.

"Political parties are the most effective channel for trying to make things happen"  
(Political party, Glasgow)

"Political parties set the policies and dictate how the country is run. Being in a political party means you are closer to that power." (Political party, Somerset)

"Most people join a political party because they want to have influence over the things that dictate their lives. Rightly or wrongly, the hope is that you might be able to gain some power to do so" (Political party, Somerset)

"You have greater access to influential people by being in a political party. More than if you are outside of it" (Political party, Glasgow)

"Some would argue that being a political representative gives you greater social capital" (Political party, Birmingham)

"There is a social (life) element as well as a political one that is positive about being a political party member" (Political party, Somerset)

"Being a member actually enables you to meet up with other people who think similar to yourself...generally; fellow party members are friends who you have known for years anyway" (Political party, Somerset)

In addition, political party activists in both Birmingham and Glasgow identify access as a key benefit to being a member of a political party. Access to information on local developments and decisions, and for members of the BME group, information on national policies are often considered to be positive features. Furthermore, political party activists think that there are

clear benefits of having access to key decision-makers (councillors and MPs), in terms of patronage and access to privileged information. However, access in terms of political patronage is only considered to be the case for those who are members of the party currently "in power".

"Being in a party I have far greater access to new information on what's going on policy wise than I did before being a member" (Political party, Glasgow)

"The reality is if you are in a political party you have far more knowledge of what's going on than if you aren't" (Political party, Somerset)

"One of the definite benefits is that you can stress your points of view to the influential decision-makers like your local MP" (Political party, Glasgow)

In the BME workshop in Birmingham, party activists specifically mention access to training and resources for personal development as an important and key benefit from their membership. For example, some BME activists see parties as offering an attractive 'career ladder'.

"Training that you might be able to acquire from a political party are transferable, it's not only training which better prepares you to becoming a local councillor or a member of parliament, hopefully, but also it enhances your career development because some of the training you receive are transferable skills." (Political party, Birmingham)

"You can build a successful career out of politics and aspects of training you wouldn't usually receive. You can build a career out of it" (Political party, Birmingham)

"It's providing the opportunity to be a future politician, you get the councillor training, that will help you provide the opportunity to become a councillor, if you do a very good job it opens the door for you to become a, to get the ammunition to become a MP."

### *Negatives*

When looking at negatives, party political activists primarily complain of a lack of influence both nationally and locally. Despite earlier claims, they feel they cannot shape policy as much as they would like. They feel that they are often treated as "cannon fodder" by party leaders.

"How much power we have locally is negligible, and I don't think we have any say over national policy at all" (Political party, Glasgow)

"No, I don't feel that local parties have power. I know from experience" (Political party, Somerset)

"I joined the political party to be an influencer but I am not naive enough to think that by being part of the political process, even running as a candidate in the local election, that I have any real power" (Political party, Birmingham)

"Local party members are just cannon fodder used for immediate effect" (Political party, Glasgow)

This sense of impotence is worsened by the fact that they are blamed by others for decisions they have had no say over. The policy decisions most often mentioned are that of Iraq and top up fees.

"I had no say over going into Iraq. But still I get the backlash from it" (Political party, Birmingham)

"I've still not got away from the poll tax palaver. In fact, even now, every time my party changes leader or something people seem to think it's my fault...that I could have stopped it" (Political party, Somerset)

"One of the bad things about politics are the policies your party promotes which you don't agree with; Iraq, for example. This can lead to abuse in the streets even from your family members" (Political party, Birmingham)

"Being a member of a political party you can't say anything negative about that party, even when you disagree with things they are doing. Otherwise people will look down on you" (Political party, Birmingham)

Lastly, party activists see their party membership as having a negative impact on their own personal time and space. In particular, political party activists bemoan the level of hard work and "slog" involved, which can affect the amount of time they spend with partners/families.

"No one appreciates how much effort and work goes into what we do, which is often at the expense of my time with my family" (Political party, Somerset)

Hard work, it's long, it takes a lot of your time. You out all hours, you've meetings every other night. You don't have another life. You generally don't have many other people that you know outside your own circle of your own political pals." (Political party, Glasgow)

## **Experiences: issue-based activists**

### ***Positives***

Issue-based activists find it easy to identify positive aspects to being a member of their type of organisation. They strongly believe that issue-based campaign groups are "making a difference" to both society and issues such as global poverty and the environment.

Primarily, issue-based activists thrive on the desire to raise the awareness of important issues and consider themselves to be very good at doing this. Raising awareness is seen to be a pre-requisite for any successful campaign, hence the importance they place on increasing public knowledge.

Issue-based activists feel that because of the very specific and focused nature of their concerns, they are effective at instigating change. Amongst those issue-based activists involved in local campaigns, there is a feeling that they deliver results that improve people's lives.

"If a campaign gains enough momentum, we can have big influence over government policy as well as local activity" (Issue-based, Birmingham)

"I joined because I want to give people more power in their everyday lives" (Issue-based, Glasgow)

"We make a real difference, producing real results that impact on people's lives. The same can't be said of political parties" (Issue-based, Birmingham)

### *Negatives*

While they are very positive about the value of their form of activism, issue-based activists do voice frustrations with their organisations. However, these frustrations are considered by the activists to be of minimal importance in comparison to the positives.

Issue-based activists consistently talk of the frustrations of trying to raise the awareness of their issues and campaigns. Amongst activists who are involved in issues such as Third World poverty, the perception that the work is depressingly never-ending is often cited.

In addition, they also refer to the personal sacrifices that are made in order to be "fully involved" in their causes. The most prominent examples being the necessary investment of time and emotion.

"It can be really frustrating at times. You work hard to get people interested in what are vitally important issues. So when people aren't interested in can be quite hard to get your head around it" (Issue-based, Glasgow session 2)

"Campaigning on something like poverty can be hard because the chances of it going away are minimal...there is not really an end point" (Issue-based, Glasgow)

"The work can be really time consuming, a lot of hard work and completely draining" (Issue-based group, Birmingham)

Activists argue that being a member of an issue-based campaign group can lead to being wrongly stereotyped by others. This often takes the form of a stereotypical image of an activist engaging in extremist behaviour (e.g. "rioting", "violence", "vandalism" etc).

Issue-based campaigners also feel that there are difficulties in increasing their membership and, to a lesser extent, maintaining their existing levels of membership.

"One of the toughest things is getting more people involved" (Issue-based, Somerset)

"Our committee's very small, I'm still always trying to get local people to give their time to the committee. I'm finding that really difficult." (Issue-based, Somerset)

Sometimes you're penalised. Some people, like for example, the other day were arrested for demonstrating." (Issue-based, Glasgow)

Furthermore, those activists who dedicate their time to more 'local' issues feel frustrated at the lack of recognition their causes receive. This is sometimes because they feel attention is more directed at global issues such as the Make Poverty History campaign.

"I think it's such a, we are a very giving nation, our country, and the trouble sometimes I think we've given too much in some ways and not enough for our own needs, our local bypasses and things like that, that are, in our schools, in our hospitals. We have a lot in our own country that needs addressing." (Issue-based, Somerset)

"It is really frustrating when your voice doesn't get heard. You can push and push, but sometimes it's really difficult to make a breakthrough" (Issue-based group, Glasgow)

## Experiences: community activists

### *Positives*

Community activists are very positive about their own organisations and see them as embodying a range of positive attributes.

Activists involved in community-based organisations feel that they continually make a direct difference to individual lives and communities. Indeed, community activists think that they exert influence in their communities, by identifying and helping people in need.

"We are making a difference to individual's lives, which also improves things on a collective level" (Community group, Glasgow)

"We try to identify differences and empower people" (Community group, Birmingham)

"The reason I joined my organisation was, cos I felt there was no scope for youngsters in my community, they were either just hanging about corners or getting themselves into trouble." (Community group, Glasgow)

One of the positive aspects of community groups referred to by activists is the visible impact of their successful campaigns. Being able to see the impact of their work is said to increase their morale and dedication. Discussed in relation to political parties, community groups are seen as providing a collective voice without being oppressive.

"Being able to see that what you are doing is working is all the incentive you need to keep going" (Community group, Glasgow)

"With community organisations you can see the result of your work, but with a political party you can't really see the result of your vote" (Community group, Glasgow)

"With community groups, you get the benefits of a collective spirit without being rigidly controlled" (Community group, Glasgow)

In Somerset, the community activists place far more emphasis on social life aspects than in either Glasgow or Birmingham.

"The social life aspect of being in a community organisation is brilliant and that's what I get out of it" (Community group, Somerset)

"It's a way of life...it's about protecting traditions" (Community group, Somerset)

"We've got small villages around here and it's the social side as well. Everybody moves into a small village to be almost together." (Community group, Somerset)

### *Negatives*

Mirroring issue-based activists, community activists are considerably less critical of their own organisations when compared to the political party groups. However, a number of community activists complain about the lack of appreciation they receive from other members of their communities, but also the Government.

"If the Government actually cared about what we are doing they would do so much more to make sure we have the resources to help people" (Community group, Glasgow)

"We do suffer from a lack of recognition. Sometimes I don't feel people appreciate what we do at all" (Community group, Birmingham)

"Some people will never, ever do anything, but expect to come to the events and then it's always the same people who moan about it." (Community group, Somerset)

They complain about the difficulty of getting others involved and, the lack of financial support they often suffer from. Other community activists also feel they come up against excessive bureaucracy when trying to get funding or approval for projects.

"It's always the same people doing everything" (Community group, Somerset)

"As a community group you might want to grow. But when this happens you get bogged down with red tape and bureaucratic constraints" (Community group, Birmingham)

Aside from the Somerset group, community activists also feel that their form of activism is often very demanding and stressful. Not only does it take up a lot of time, it is also emotionally demanding. Additionally, the community activists in Somerset also complain of being stereotyped by others in the community.

"It's really rewarding but it can be emotionally draining and stressful" (Community group, Glasgow)

"The only problem I have with our type of organisation is the image we have. Which is being labelled as old farts and do-gooders...it's just so different to what we are" (Community group, Somerset)

## Thinking about local parties

Moving on in the workshops, we looked at views towards political parties. We asked the issue-based, community and party political activists what they thought of local political parties.

### **Overwhelming negativity**

Fundamentally, non-party political activists are highly negative towards political parties. Non-political party activists strongly dislike what they consider to be the 'top down' nature of traditional party politics. Connected to this, non-political party activists consider local parties to be impotent and lacking in power, with party leaders seen as imposing their views from above. This lack of power and influence is considered by non-political party activists to be also true at the local level. Indeed, they question whether local parties positively enhance the lives of people living in their area.

"The main parties are controlled from the top down, and they don't actually listen to either their party members or the general public" (Community group, Glasgow)

"At the end of the day local party reps are puppets on a string. They just listen to the big lads down south and they dance to their tune" (Issue-based group, Glasgow)

"If you want something done locally you should not turn to a political party. Community groups are far more effective" (Community group, Birmingham)

"We have important issues, they have their ivory towers and there's a big gap in between. That's why they can't help us" (Issue-based, Somerset)

"It's hard to get things done working in the party political framework. You can't campaign perpetually like you can in my situation" (Issue-based, Birmingham)

The negativity directed at political parties needs to be understood in relation to a broader mistrust and disconnect with politics in general. Non-political party activists make frequent references to "broken promises", spin or lies, and contentious issues such as the war in Iraq.

"Basically we pick up the broken pieces left by the Government. Helping those who need the most help but are not listened to" (Birmingham, Community group)

"The people of this country rejected the idea of going into Iraq, but they didn't listen. How can you trust a group of people who are like that?" (Community group, Birmingham)

"There is no transparency in what they do. It's always like they've got something to hide" (Issue-based, Somerset)

## Views of issue-based activists

A great deal of the criticism issue-based activists aim at local political parties focuses on what they consider to be their lack of influence.

We have found that issue-based activists consider local parties to be overly constrained by their party leadership and national party agendas. This, argue issue-based activists, culminates in severe restrictions placed on their ability to campaign.

“Power is all centralised in Westminster” (Issue-based, Somerset)

“In a political party you are severely restricted by who and how much you can lobby. They can’t challenge the sources that feed them (Issue-based, Birmingham)

“Political party will allow you to campaign but as long as your campaign tallies in the general view of the party. So once your campaign is going in an opposite direction they won’t let you do that. You’ll be stopped from doing it” (Issue-based, Birmingham)

“I think political parties have become completely monolithic. You can’t trust any of them; they’re more obsessed with gaining personal power than anything else” (Issue-based group, Glasgow)

## Views of community activists

Community group members feel completely alienated from party politics in general. Many consider politicians to be “untrustworthy”, and parties are also accused of offering up the same policies as each other. Many community activists think that all the political parties fail to deliver pragmatic and realistic solutions, particularly in terms of local issues.

“We are very sceptical about political parties in general. They are all the same. None of them really listen. We’re just completely disillusioned with political parties” (Community group, Glasgow)

“They draw up their policies without any consultation...they say jump and they expect us to say “how high?” ” (Community group, Glasgow)

“If you want things done locally you don’t turn to a political party. They have high ideals but no solid solutions to the problems we face” (Community group, Birmingham)

Importantly, many believe that local parties have no power or influence in their local communities. This is partly because community activists consider local parties to be so “useless” that they feel no need to engage with them. Furthermore, political parties and politicians (which are considered the same thing) are accused of being out of touch with the needs, wants and concerns of the general public.

“I doubt my local MPs have any power, so why would I want to know them?” (Community group, Somerset)

"Politicians make decisions that affect our lives but don't know anything about them. They don't listen...they never have, they never will" (Community group, Somerset)

"Politicians are like another breed of person. I don't think they are community minded at all" (Community group, Somerset)

"Westminster and politics is a million miles away from here. They don't know anything about us" (Community group, Somerset)

The most striking and powerful critique of political parties comes from the BME community activists in Birmingham, who feel that political parties stunt rather than promote change, and produce rather than tackle social injustices.

"I think that the political machine just defends the status quo and nothing much changes as a result of the system...it stunts all change" (Community group, Birmingham)

"It seems like the system is put in place to make sure that nothing changes" (Community group, Glasgow)

"The system creates injustice rather than attack it" (Community group, Birmingham)

## Why has party membership declined?

As part of the discussion with party political activists, we explored their views on why they think political party membership is in decline.

### **The problem**

Political party activists readily admit that political parties are struggling to increase or even maintain their levels of membership. Furthermore, they openly acknowledge that the climate for doing so is particularly inauspicious.

Political party activists identify a number of reasons for the declining levels of political party membership. Initially, political party activists have a tendency to primarily blame the decline of party membership on people themselves, accusing them of being lazy and self-obsessed.

“There have been big changes in society, people just don’t have the time anymore to get involved” (Political party, Somerset)

“People have become so complacent and lazy. They need a shock-wave to get them moving into action. Only when there is a real national crisis will people become interested” (Political party, Somerset)

“The way that kids are brought up now and as you say you were brought up in a very political background but a lot of the families now that are coming in don’t really bother about it. It’s not an issue. It’s not like they sit around the table and talk, a big discussion in the house than maybe when you were brought up. So a lot of the young ones, they don’t really, they don’t associate with politics. It doesn’t bother them. Do you know? Just the fact that they’ve got their pocket money, they’re out, they’re away to the dancing, they’re happy. Nothing like that matters. They’ve not got that belief.” (Political Party, Glasgow)

However, political party activists do also acknowledge that people are genuinely disillusioned and/or disengaged with politics. Chiming with the views of the non-political party activists, political party activists also feel that the decline of party membership is partly due to the fact that politics is now seen as remote from people’s lives.

“We work at increasing membership but I won’t pretend that we’re making many inroads. People nowadays, especially the young, are completely disconnected from politics” (Political party, Somerset)

“Why would someone join something they thought actively sidelined and disadvantaged them?” (Political party, Birmingham)

“The big monolithic and bureaucratic political parties that exist and control the country at the moment are all the things you throw at them. No wonder us small parties find it hard to get people on board” (Political party, Glasgow)

## Efforts to recruit

Moreover, party political activists admit that their efforts at recruiting new members have been somewhat limited.

In Glasgow, political party activists are candid about the fact that recruiting new members is not a priority. The one exception to this is the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) members, who consider recruitment to be “an essential part of what they do.”

In the Birmingham and Somerset groups, a few of the political party activists talk of trying to actively recruit new members through a variety of means such as running membership stalls. However, they also say that these have a limited impact and do not appear to attract people.

In addition, some political party activists have experimented with social events, but find that the ‘party political’ labelling of an event is a turn-off for people, and are not seen as being successful at attracting new members.

“It might sound bad but increasing our membership is not top of our agenda at the moment” (Political party, Glasgow)

“Recruiting new people is central to what we should be doing. It’s not a question of whether or not we are successful” (Political party, Glasgow)

“Yeah we do set up stalls in looking to get new people on board but it’s hard work to get anyone who wants to talk to you” (Political party, Birmingham)

“We’ve tried holding social gatherings for people to come along but they’re not interested are they?” (Political party, Somerset)

## Views of others

As a key part of the workshops, we explored what the different groups of activists thought of each other.

### Views of political party activists towards issue-based campaigns

#### *Positives*

When discussing issue-based activists and their campaigns, political party activists easily identify positive aspects. Indeed, many party activists either are or have been involved with issue-based campaigns.

Political party activists speak positively about the ability of issue-based groups to focus all their efforts on one issue, as opposed to a range of issues. For political party activists, this focus comes from the perception that there is a start and a finish to issue-based campaigns. This is also thought to enable issue-based activists to have a more flexible commitment to their organisations, in contrast to the on-going commitment required of political party activists.

“Because they only have one thing to deal with at a time they can dedicate all their energy into that one thing...I wish!” (Political party, Somerset)

“Single issue groups just don't have the barriers to campaigning that political parties have. They don't have to follow the party line and can therefore get results quickly” (Political party, Birmingham)

“One good thing about single issue groups is that they have targets they can see and aim for” (Political party, Somerset)

This perceived flexibility of commitment is thought by political party activists to allow for a more ‘dip in, dip out’ approach to political involvement. As a result, there is a strong perception that issue-based activism does not have nor need the same commitment levels as party politics.

“They will probably disagree but they have the luxury of starting and stopping campaigning when they want” (Political party, Glasgow)

“Compared to being a member of a political party they don't require the same kind of commitment from their people” (Political party, Somerset)

Revealingly, however, this perception is not shared by the issue-based activists themselves. Indeed, they strongly dislike volunteers who only get involved intermittently or do so for the ‘wrong’ reasons. ‘Wrong’ reasons are perceived to include doing something because it is trendy, or for the benefit of a person's CV.

However, political party activists also perceive a number of other advantages to issue-based campaign groups. Political party activists acknowledge that issue-based campaigns are often successful at achieving their objectives, frequently producing results more quickly than political parties. Added to this, they also think that issue-based campaigns are very effective at raising the profile of important issues from the more locally focused to the most international.

Interestingly, in Somerset there is discussion on how issue-based campaigns can sometimes achieve more than political parties. This view revolved around the Countryside Alliance's role in the hunting debate, where Conservative activists felt the Alliance was a more effective campaigning vehicle than the Conservative Party; due to the fact that the Tories were in opposition.

Party political activists also feel that issue-based groups are often more adept at capturing the imagination of the public, in part because of celebrity endorsement of certain campaigns.

"Single issue groups capture the public's imagination by placing great emphasis on some important issues" (Political party, Birmingham)

"They produce quick results. You only have to look at the Fairtrade campaign to see that" (Political party, Glasgow)

"It would seem that in some situations they are more successful at achieving things than us" (Political party, Somerset)

"They get a lot of positive media support because of their association with celebrities like Chris Martin. They can become huge overnight" (Political party, Glasgow)

### *Negatives*

While political party activists have positive perceptions of issue-based activists and the causes they support, they also cite negatives towards issue-based campaigns.

The primary complaint is that they are too limited in scope, in contrast to the wide-ranging focus of a political party. In tandem with this, they lack the ability to make policy and pass laws. There is also a feeling that they can be too narrow and extreme at times, or that campaigns peter out after a while.

Challenging the perception of being too narrow in focus, issue-based activists who are involved in 'global' issues argue that their seemingly disparate issues are interconnected. We also found that some of the party political activists believe parties and issue-based campaigns are not mutually exclusive and are in fact interdependent. This is not surprising since party activists are often simultaneously involved in forms of issue-based activism.

"They can only raise the issue, its political parties that implement them. They can throw things, cause vandalism. But until the political party decides, nothing will change" (Political party, Birmingham)

"It's political parties who decide what our national laws are and not single issue groups" (Political party, Glasgow)

"On the downside, some single issue groups can appear really extreme in their behaviour, look at the animal rights lot" (Political party, Somerset)

"Single issue groups are not really separable from political parties. They work together already to some extent and some MPs support and champion certain single issue campaigns anyway" (Political party, Glasgow)

## Views of community activists towards issue-based campaigns

### *Positives*

Community activists see many affinities with issue-based campaigns, and as a result, they view issue-based campaigns in a very positive light.

They are viewed as passionate about their causes, and are praised for how they focus on a specific issue. Moreover, they are perceived to be successful at instigating change. As part of this, major campaigns such as Make Poverty History are seen as effective at gaining support.

“They are really passionate and into what they are doing... We can relate to them very easily” (Community group, Glasgow)

“They [issue-based campaign groups] aren’t bad at all. It looks like they are successful at achieving what they want” (Community group, Somerset)

“It’s important that you have interest groups, local and otherwise, to challenge the status quo or to try and change things that you don’t like about it” (Community group, Birmingham)

### *Negatives*

In contrast, community activists only identify a handful of negatives to do with issue-based campaigns. In comparison to discussion around positives, criticism is much more muted.

With regard to negatives, some community activists feel that the passion of issue-based activists can lead to extremist behaviour. Other community activists argue that they are too limited in their focus and lack the wider focus of their activism.

In Somerset, community activists offer a slightly different perspective, arguing that some issue-based activists concentrate too much on international issues.

“There isn’t much you can criticise about them...except perhaps their perceived extremism” (Community group, Somerset)

“Whereas community groups address a number of issues, pressure groups only deal with one thing at a time” (Community group, Birmingham)

“Single-issue groups are restricted in that they only focus on one particular issue” (Community group, Glasgow)

“They concentrate a lot on international problems like world trade. Which is good. But I think they perhaps concentrate too much on those things” (Community group, Somerset)

## Views of political party and issue-based activists towards community activism

Political party and issue-based activists are very positive towards community groups and offer very few critical comments of them. Underpinning this perception is the fact that many political party and issue-based activists are also members of community groups, and are actively involved in community campaigns. Community activists are seen as making significant contributions to their local communities, improving their quality of life and bringing about change.

"They are doing a good job... but then most of us are already involved in community activity (Political party, Somerset)

"A community group that is well informed and has developed expertise over a number of years can be very effective" (Political party, Birmingham)

"Community groups are a good source of consultation. If you've got access to real issues that matter to the people living in that community, who's part of that community and have got a stakehold in what happens in the area....that is power" (Political party, Birmingham)

However, both political party and issue-based activists feel that community groups inevitably lack national scale and influence. They are also seen to lack financial stability.

"They do a good job but some of them but they will always lack any real influence because they are very small" (Issue-based, Glasgow)

"Community groups are too dependent on external forces...Financial restrictions" (Political party, Glasgow)

## Ideal Party

During the workshops, we asked participants to develop an outline on what 'the ideal party' would be about, in terms of how it would be run and how it would treat its members.

In their separate groups participants developed an outline. At a later point during the workshops,, we mixed the groups of activists together, and asked them to compare their ideas.

### **Political party activists**

When they think about the 'ideal party', party political activists primarily talk about having more direct influence. They want greater influence on their leaders and the policies that they adopt.

"Ideally, members would have more influence over national policy" (Political party, Glasgow)

"An ideal party is a decentralised party. One that gave a meaningful amount of influence to all members" (Political party, Somerset)

"Having a real influence about the affairs [of the party]." (Political party, Glasgow)

Openness is also key, in terms of being more open to change on policy and allowing people to progress through the party ranks. In particular, BME participants speak very strongly about an ideal party being one that is free of prejudice.

"An ideal party would be an open one that selected people on merit and not tradition or status or money. It will never exist" (Political party, Birmingham)

"Any ideal party would have to be representative of lots of different people. Not people who are just compliant and will do what they are told or people that are marginalised" (Political party, Birmingham)

### **Issue-based activists**

Issue-based activists struggle with the concept, and feel that an 'ideal party' is unrealistic without changes to the wider political process.

"I think it's a waste of time even thinking about it. It's never going to happen. Things need to radically change first" (Issue-based, Birmingham)

"There has to be a mechanism to hold them [politicians] accountable. Without this things can't move forward" (Issue-based, Glasgow)

"We have very little respect for politicians because they've gone down the same road, and the media have driven them down, and they're all into image and votes and look at me, I'm wonderful, I'm going to achieve this. Actually, they're achieving nothing." (Issue-based, Somerset)

Importantly, issue-based activists not only think an 'ideal party' to be unachievable, they also consider it to be undesirable. They argue that they do not need political parties to affect change because they can bring about change on their own. Issue-based campaigners feel that parties are restricting rather than enabling.

"We don't need parties. They can't lobby or campaign nearly as freely as us"  
(Issue-based, Birmingham)

"Political parties are practically a waste of time. It's not a question of wanting...we don't need them" (Issue-based, Glasgow session 2)

"The ideal party would not work because those in power would not allow it to happen. Full stop. So why think about it?" (Issue-based, Birmingham)

However, discussion does reveal a series of interesting themes. Issue-based activists feel that an 'ideal party' would place great importance on local issues and concerns. This could only be achieved though listening to people on an ongoing basis, and not just during election campaigns.

"It [the 'ideal party'] has to be connected to local issues...they need to know what's going on and care about it" (Issue-based, Birmingham)

"Understanding people's needs, desires, and not just when they want something" (Issue-based, Birmingham)

Issue-based activists place a lot of importance on the values an 'ideal party' would embody; in particular, honesty and trustworthiness are frequently cited.

"An ideal party would be an honest and open party" (Issue-based, Somerset)

"There needs to be a building of trust. You can't conceive of this ideal party without it"  
Issue-based, Somerset)

"You want the people and the whole thing to be open and honest" (Issue-based, Glasgow)

"We think that political parties would be more attractive if you could actually trust them... if they were honest" (Issue-based group, Somerset)

### Community activists

Mirroring the reaction of issue-based activists, community groups similarly found it very difficult to conceptualise what an 'ideal party' would be about. They do not think it is a realistic idea, and some feel that there is no need for political parties.

"There needs to be an entire transformation in the political system before this idea can be considered without it just being words" (Community group, Birmingham)

"The ideal party doesn't attract me. It would never ever happen, so why think about it?"  
(Community group, Glasgow)

"I don't know why I would join a political party. They don't represent us. They don't speak to us" (Community group, Somerset)

However, discussion does reveal a number of interesting themes. Community activists say an 'ideal party' would have members who displayed integrity at all times. Indeed, a lot of emphasis is placed generally by community activists on the character traits 'ideal party' members should have.

For community activists, an 'ideal party' would be "thoroughly democratic", where the word "democratic" is perceived to be about openness. As such, it is strongly felt that an ideal party would be open to influence, different ideas and change where necessary. Indeed, an ideal party needs to continually listen and engage with the local community, and be interested in local matters.

"An ideal party would have to have a constant flow of exchanges between different people and groups of people" (Community group, Glasgow)

"Any ideal party would be concerned with local issues not just national things that don't feel very tangible" (Community group, Somerset)

"If the relationship could work, then they [political parties] would have very strong knowledge of what's going on...what we are doing" (Community group, Birmingham)

However, even if it existed, issue-based and community activists say they would be still unlikely to join the 'ideal party'. Antipathy towards party politics is too entrenched for activists to even begin to consider seriously the idea of joining a political party.

## Working together

Towards the end of the workshops, the composition of the groups was changed, in order to ensure that issue-based and community activists joined the party political group, and that party political activists joined both the issue-based and community groups. In their new groups, participants worked on developing ideas and thinking on how local parties could work together more closely with issue-based and community groups, and vice versa.

Our research shows that all activists from the three different groups struggle with the concept of how local parties could work more closely with the other groups. However, some issue-based activists can see advantages from working together with local parties. The belief is that they may have more direct access to power by connecting with a political party in some form.

### **The big barrier**

Non-political party activists struggle to find ways that they could work together at all with political parties.

Primarily, disengagement and disillusionment with politics means activists are reluctant to imagine working together with local parties.

“By joining up with a political party you have already become part of the problem”  
(Community group, Birmingham)

“I don’t know about working together at all. The only person who went down to Westminster with a great idea was Guy Fawkes” (Plenary, Glasgow)

Activists believe that local parties lack power or influence to change things, especially on the local level.

“My local MP has no power, not even locally” (Community group, Somerset)

“If new policies are being planned the notion is that because you’re part of a political party you’ll have had knowledge in advance and better able to shape and formulate those policies appropriately to the needs of the community that you’re from, that is the notion. But come on, is that a joke?” (Plenary, Birmingham)

Finally, political parties are seen to lack transparency, and are not open to being influenced by people’s views and opinions

“The only relationship we can have with political parties is that of trying to make them accountable for their actions” (Issue-based, Birmingham)

“Before we can work together the whole political system needs to change. Anyway, we don’t need them to achieve what we want to achieve” (Plenary, Glasgow)

“A lot of people feel that the current system is so inadequate and not open to change that we wonder if things will ever change in the way political parties relate to the different groups” (Community group, Glasgow)

"There is a huge divide between us and politicians and I think politics more generally. And some of that comes from how poorly we communicate with one another"  
(Issue-based, Somerset)

### **Specific obstacles**

Beyond this wider sense of disengagement from the political process, activists raise a set of specific obstacles to working together.

In terms of the community activists, they tend to be very sceptical towards politics and parties. They worry about being unfairly labelled or compromised by being linked or associated with party politics.

"We couldn't even think about working with a political party. That would be like the kiss of death to our organisation" (Community group, Somerset)

"All political parties have to convince the electorate that they're honest, absolutely above board, will listen to its members, and give them a chance to speak" (Community group, Glasgow)

"Working with political parties will inhibit what we can actually achieve" (Community group, Glasgow)

Interestingly, party political activists in Somerset raise concerns too about the idea of working together. They feel that they cannot identify too much with issue-based campaigns, as they might embarrass local councillors/MPs.

### **The benefits**

However, some issue-based and community activists can see potential benefits from working together more closely.

This primarily revolves around access to power and resources for both issue-based and community activists. Issue-based and community groups acknowledge that getting support of political parties can potentially help raise their profile and speed up change.

"By working with a political party it may well increase our ability to be successful because they might pull some strings for us" (Community group, Glasgow)

"Perhaps we can reduce conflicts by working through and negotiating things"  
(Community group, Birmingham)

"We could use them to our own advantage...things might get done quicker"  
(Issue-based, Somerset)

Party political activists in Birmingham and Glasgow can also see they would benefit from closer links with other groups.

"I think the good thing about community groups is their networking. Political parties don't have the access to certain groups or communities. So if we joined in partnership with them they might have greater access" (Political party, Birmingham)

"Astute parties, or party members, should know that single issue groups can be an excellent vehicle for getting what they want done without actually doing a lot" (Political party, Birmingham)

## Solutions

While critical of the idea of working more closely together, the three groups of activists also provided us with a number of ways in which political parties could connect more with other activist groups. Ideas revolved around:

- Improved communications and more visibility from political parties
- Forums that bring together different kinds of activists
- More personal connections between different kinds of activists

## Solutions: communication and visibility

Activists feel strongly that communication needs to be improved between different groups.

For example, In Somerset, some community and issue-based activists speak of how they do not know people in local parties, and would not know where to find information on local parties. Many feel they have no channels by which to communicate with parties.

"The political process needs to be clear if people are to access it" (Issue-based, Somerset)

"Local parties must develop good communication channels to and from the community and national government. Having a realistic approach to the issues for real solutions" (Community group, Birmingham)

"Without adequate practical ways of communicating, for example open public debates, this situation will not improve" (Political party, Glasgow)

"Everyone on all sides needs to listen to one another, and most importantly, respect each others concerns and problems. This can only start with better communication" (Community group, Birmingham)

For these groups of activists, improved communication is related to the improved visibility of political parties, particularly at a local level. In all the workshops, there is discussion on how the local parties should be more visible. There is discussion around how politicians and parties should have to spend more time on outreach activities, with some in Somerset suggesting the idea of having a 'second MP' who focuses all their attention at the constituency level, attending activist meetings and listening to different points of view.

“Communication between the groups is all one-way. There needs to be a non-hierarchical relationship between the groups for communication to improve” (Community group, Birmingham)

“Why don't the political representatives come to our activist meetings and actually listen to what we have to say as opposed to always trying to dominate discussion and patronise us” (Community group, Glasgow)

“Local parties need to have far more visibility and presence at a grass roots level. Who are they? Where are they? How do we find them? Are we interested? Do they care?” (Issue-based, Somerset)

“You find that when there is going to be an election they [local MPs] are in your face, any other time you can't see them, you can't even contact them. That is irritating and it increases my lack of interest” (Community group, Glasgow)

“Politicians should actually come along to our meetings and see what we have to say” (Issue-based, Somerset)

### **Solutions: forums**

In all the workshops, activists suggest that forums are an attractive way of bringing together local parties and other activists. Forums are seen as a way to allow for interaction and the sharing of ideas, and would provide an ongoing channel for communication and feedback.

“There should be a two-way feedback system from your community groups to your local parties and local party to its community group. Each just telling the other what's going on, what the priorities are, what the needs are and what's happening” (Community group, Birmingham)

“People need to be consulted very early on from the very beginning. Forums are an example of how a sharing of ideas would be possible” (Issue-based, Somerset)

“There needs to be some way of bringing the different groups together to discuss things, like public meetings or forums” (Political party, Somerset)

Importantly, issue-based activists place great emphasis on the need for the forums to be meaningful in terms of their outputs, arguing that local parties need to provide continual feedback. Without this, activists feel that forums could be meaningless talking shops.

“Forums are a good idea for exchanging ideas. But they would need to be more than just another talking shop. Otherwise they make the idea of forums a waste of time” (Community group, Glasgow)

“The hierarchy between the groups with the political at the top and the rest of us at the bottom needs to change. Everyone needs to have their voice heard and perhaps having something like Forums would help” (Issue-based, Birmingham)

## Solutions: personal connections

Aside from institutional changes, activists speak of the importance of different activists making connections. More personal connections between activists are seen as leading to greater trust and understanding between different groups, and providing easy channels for communication.

“We need to build from the personal relationships that already exist between people who are members of more than one of the groups. That’s where we should start” (Political party, Somerset)

“It is really important that strong links are developed between the groups. One way of doing this is to develop personal links” (Community group, Glasgow)

“By having personal connections where people join and get to know people from different types of organisation trust might be increased” (Issue-based, Somerset)

## Wider change

Above all else, activists of all kinds talk about making changes to the wider political system and process in the UK. Ideas on change revolve around three areas:

- Citizenship education

Activists feel that there needs to be a greater focus on citizenship education at schools. This is felt to be important in terms of educating future generations about how the political process works, and the role of parties within the wider system.

“Political life should be about promoting citizenship rather than emphasizing differences. But the question is who the government defines as a citizen” (Political party, Birmingham)

“I think people don’t understand how local government works, the different layers. You’ve got the parish council, the district council, county council. The normal punter, and I may be just talking about me, but I don’t understand where the power lies.” (Community group, Somerset)

- Changes to the voting system to make it fairer

Activists discussed replacing our first past the post system with proportional representation. This is seen as leading to fairer democratic system, and is perceived to help ensure that all voices are heard.

[DISCUSSING PR] “People need to get educated about different types of political system...perhaps then the current system will be overthrown” (Issue-based, Glasgow)

“We need some kind of system of proportional representation to sort out some of the problems we have voiced today” (Political party, Somerset)

"You really need a proportionalised system with a real decentralisation of power, where people at local areas can really make changes that will affect people's lives" (Issue-based, Glasgow)

- More direct democracy

The workshops also reveal a great desire for power to be devolved down to local communities, and for people to feel more of a sense of direct power. There is less willingness to defer to others, and a greater appetite for more control over the communities in which they live.

"I want a few things. Direct Democracy, direct action and accountability to the members... the right to sack them" (Issue-based, Glasgow)

"Realistically, I think probably the only way that equality, fairness and justice in our society can be protected is by having an advisory committee with people who are morally committed to advise those people in power" (Political party, Birmingham)

"They are power mad. But we should have the power. The right to deselect representatives who have disgraced themselves or just not been doing their job properly" (Community group, Glasgow)

"Folk are not damned fools and I don't think our youngsters are more politically apathetic than when I were young... politics needs to change" (Issue-based group, Glasgow)

## Looking forward

The research reveals major challenges for political parties

- Activists face morale issues in terms of their lack of influence over policy and the direction of their political parties
- Recruitment of new members is difficult, and does not represent a major priority for activists
- Though there is tendency to primarily blame the lack of new members on people's laziness and self-interest, there is an acceptance and acknowledgement that people are turned off by politics

Compounding this, issue-based and community activists are deeply hostile towards political parties. They struggle with the concept of an 'ideal party' and the idea of working together with local parties. This fits within a wider narrative of disengagement and disillusionment with conventional Westminster politics.

However, the research does reveal a series of future opportunities

- Fostering better links and communications between local parties, issue-based campaigns and community groups
- Facilitating ongoing forums that bring together different groups and local parties to discuss issue and debates
- Encouraging activists to foster their own personal connections with each other

Yet, the research does reveal that there needs to be wider changes to the political process in the UK, beyond merely thinking about the role of political parties. Disengagement and cynicism towards political parties is only part of a much greater problem.

## **Appendix: additional commentary**

In order to further illustrate some of the specific findings from each of the workshops, we have included additional comment on each session.

### **Somerset**

The social life side of activism is especially pronounced in the Somerset workshop. In particular, party political activists are more focussed on the social elements of membership than their counterparts in Birmingham and Glasgow. For community activists, the social life aspect is also particularly important.

Emerging from the workshop is the strong sense that activism for many is about protecting and securing countryside traditions and heritage. Primarily, this revolves around discussion of issues such as fox hunting, and the emergence of the Countryside Alliance. However, it also encompasses campaigns against proposed developments such as new bypasses.

Reflecting the area in which the workshop was conducted, the party political activists tended to be on the right of the political spectrum. Many Conservative activists had also become involved in the Countryside Alliance in recent years. Interestingly, these activists felt that as the Tories had been in opposition for an extended period, the Alliance offered a more direct and meaningful way to influence power.

Somerset activists struggle with the concept of working together more, with party political activists raising qualms about associating too much with local campaigns. Significantly, Somerset participants place a lot of importance on the role of personal connections in fostering better links.

### **Glasgow**

When thinking about motivations, party political activists in Glasgow place the most emphasis on family and community background; in contrast to their peers in Somerset and Birmingham. Issue-based campaigners in Glasgow have the most globalist perspective of all the sessions; with a number of participants being involved in campaigns on global poverty, fair trade and causes such as Palestine.

Reflecting the area, party political activists tended to be on the left of the political spectrum, with participants coming from Labour and SSP backgrounds. In particular, Labour Party activists in both Glasgow workshops feel they lack influence, and some were disillusioned over decisions that were taken over Iraq and university tuition fees. As part of this theme, issue-based and community activists feel parties are controlled too much from London/the top, and there is a lack of power on the ground.

In common with the other workshops, there is a consensus in Glasgow that there should be forums that bring together different forms of activists. Party political activists could see how they could benefit from closer links with issue-based groups,

## **Birmingham: BME**

Activists of all types in Birmingham are united by a desire to speak up for their minority ethnic group or community, and importantly, to give voice to their issues and concerns.

Party political activists in Birmingham treat their involvement with a great degree of seriousness. Activism is seen as an integral part of citizenship, and a way to progress in UK society. It offers access to training and resources. For younger activists, political activism is seen as leading to a potential professional career. Lack of influence is also an important issue, with some Labour activists feeling particularly compromised over the decision to go to war in Iraq.

Issue-based and community based campaigners are passionate about their desire to change the status quo. However, there is a marked reaction in Birmingham against the idea of working together more with political parties. In a more pronounced way than the other workshops, non-party activists feel the current political system is corrupt and designed to sideline certain groups of people.

Indeed, when thinking about the ideal party, the theme of being free from prejudice emerges strongly from all groups of activist. Beyond this though, there is a strong sense that politics represents a 'machine' that does not fully meet the wider needs and interests of BME groups.