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Lest we forget: democracy, neighbourhoods and government

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Contents

- 4** Foreword: Lest we forget: the power of community spirit
by Clive Grace and Lucy de Groot
- 8** Introduction: Reclaiming the neighbourhood
by John Benington
- 19** Rules of engagement for the community worker
by Sue Goss
- 22** A bit more agitation and a bit less management
by Sean Baine
- 24** A trained, professional workforce is key
by Marjorie Mayo
- 26** A heritage of elitism and exclusion
by Herman Ouseley
- 30** 'Think global act local' is the way forward
by Balraj Sandhu
- 34** How housing led the way in building better dialogue
by Bob Brett
- 36** Shaping the future with a nod to the past and present
by David McNulty
- 39** The root of the matter is all about a sense of place
by Jane Roberts
- 41** What, exactly, constitutes a neighbourhood these days?
by John Foster
- 43** Wards in action, a work in continual progress
by Richard Leese
- 46** How we can learn from the Scottish experience
by David Donnison
- 50** Local solutions to local problems will drive change
by Joe Montgomery
- 54** Size matters in the challenges ahead
by Vivien Lowndes and Helen Sullivan
- 58** Democracy, neighbourhoods and government
by Lucy de Groot and Jane Foot

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Lest we forget: the power of community spirit

by Clive Grace and Lucy de Groot



The idea of community in local governance is both ubiquitous and ambiguous.

Communities are essential and universal, both in physical and transient settlements. They are a source of mutual support and defence, a place for families to flourish and a way to make social life more rich and interesting, and more efficient. They are a basis for growing economies and sharing the resulting benefits (albeit invariably unequally), a foundation for culture and art, and the development and differentiation of ideas. Communities may not be a sufficient condition for all these benefits to flow, but they appear to be a necessary one. We know that there are downsides to strongly bonded communities in the way that they can exclude as well as include, and the way in which they may silence dissenting voices and claims on resources. A community spirit has enduring values and is at the core of human history.

For governments and their policies it is the ambiguity of community that raises most concerns. Communities are an uncertain and sometimes unsettling ingredient in the policy mix. The rhetoric of community is often present. It is generally expressed as a celebration of the alleged virtues of "neighbourhoods" in the form of small, discrete, and usually homogenous territorial units in which people live better lives than might otherwise be credited. Governments in the last 100 years or so have repeatedly "re-discovered" the power and importance

of the community and neighbourhood idiom. But they often seem uncomfortable with the implications, and they are frequently inept in knowing what to do with it. Most frequently they lionize communities on the surface, but cannot deal with the real challenges of community. Underneath, governments and their civil servants tend to display a mixture of incomprehension, indifference, defensiveness and resistance.

It is tempting to think that the source of this contradiction is that people and their communities are "bottom-up", and governments and their policies "top-down", and that never (or only uncomfortably) should the twain meet. But this would ignore the role of government and policy in creating and shaping territorial communities, and the part they have tried to play persistently (if periodically) in making communities "better". Indeed, successive governments have had no choice but to do so - the dysfunctional parts of communities soak up a hugely disproportionate share of public resources, from welfare payments to policing, and from economic output foregone to environmental decay. And when the community divide in physical and economic terms is reinforced through ethnicity or faith, then the wider risks become profound.

Role of local government

Local government is - or should be - the principal (two-way) transmission body between the needs and aspirations of community and the realities of national policy-making and delivery, and local government is enthusiastic about the recent (re)turn to the neighbourhood idiom. A core

local government task is to sustain and promote local democracy as the basis for governance, community and belonging. The new emphasis on localism and the devolution of decision-making and accountability, the need to empower and engage citizens and communities and on services that offer choice to local areas, are all fundamental to the future of local government. For their part, the LGA and IDeA have shown commitment in their publications *Closer to People and Places* and *Closer to People*, which urge councils to look critically at their existing neighbourhood, locality and community-based activities, deepen and widen those initiatives, and ask themselves how neighbourhood-based working can help them deliver their priorities.

But there is trepidation too, which arises from the complexities that place and identity present in defining neighbourhoods and communities, and from the depth of the challenge that this agenda poses to the way that much of local government has been working under the centralising yoke. Moreover, there is as yet insufficient evidence that central government is able to speak with wisdom and consistency in the idiom of community, and get beyond the rhetoric and into the reality.

Yet collectively we come to this agenda with a richness of wisdom and experience to draw upon. The SFI and the IDeA are publishing this pamphlet so that we can learn from the long – and cyclical – history of working locally. The policy-making community is impoverished by its relative lack of attention to history and experience, and by its short-termism, political motivation, and tendency to assume a “blank sheet”. And by the re-formulations in which yesterday’s regeneration becomes today’s neighbourhood working, and community action becomes capacity building and empowerment – closing off, in the process, otherwise accessible experience and learning about what works and what does not. We aim to reconnect what is already known and understood with what now needs to be done, and also to underline the fact that there is no need to reinvent this particular wheel. To do so will waste what is already

available and will lead to more wasted effort.

The new local government white paper will take the agenda forward in policy terms. We want this pamphlet to inform and enrich the way in which that happens, and to open up channels through which past experience and understanding can be better harnessed to the contemporary agenda. It was conceived by Lucy de Groot and John Benington, and has been ably orchestrated by Jane Foot. The editors have drawn together an extraordinary range of voices, speaking with authority, engagement and passion.

Voices of experience

This pamphlet’s contributors were not chosen to give a detailed assessment of the initiatives of the past 30-plus years, and we certainly did not want to fall into nostalgia or romanticism about a golden past. They all have personal experience of working at a neighbourhood level and they are now in a position to influence implementation. Some comment from inside local authorities looking outwards, as politicians, activists, workers and managers; others have a vantage point within communities and neighbourhoods; some take a policy perspective; and some focus on organisational issues. All reflect critically on their own experience and the lessons for current policy.

John Benington starts off with a revealing review of government policy towards neighbourhoods. He charts the twists and turns, and the fluctuating popularity of the community idiom in policy and delivery. He also highlights the way in which the relationship between the state, market and civil society has been redrawn, shifting the centre of gravity towards civil society and with significant implications for local government leadership and skills. Sue Goss then makes a strong statement for passion and “reflexive practice”, and more radical change built on genuine engagement, before Sean Baine and Marjorie Mayo, respectively, pose tough questions about communities and agitation, and about the gender issues which run through the community and neighbourhood agenda. In different ways, Herman Ouseley and Balraj Sandhu

Foreword

then extend the analysis to BME communities, but both connect that to more general themes in community development and activism.

There is then a group of voices which focus on the "territorial" imperative of neighbourhoods and communities. Bob Brett looks at community engagement and neighbourhood accountability in the context of housing management, while David McNulty and Jane Roberts, respectively, describe important local initiatives in Trafford and Camden which have expressed in a practical and determined way a commitment by their authorities to give effect to genuine community engagement. John Foster recounts the Wakefield approach (with reference to the implications of the Congress of Berlin for community identity!), and poses the tension between electoral wards and "real" neighbourhoods as a focus for belonging and action. This offers an interesting contrast with the approach and experience of Richard Leese in Manchester, where wards were treated as approximations for neighbourhoods in order to take the benefit of the alignment which could then be created with units of political organisation.

We then have two pieces which speak from very different perspectives about governments and their policies towards communities. David Donnison celebrates the way in which the Scottish Parliament has built on and amplified the strong communitarian tradition in Scotland, while Joe Montgomery sets out the UK government's position - one which has been informed by his own experience at the front line. His own sense of engagement and understanding come through in a very powerful way.

It falls to Vivien Lowndes and Helen Sullivan to draw out some general themes, and to highlight the tensions and contradictions of localist approaches and solutions. They explore the various available rationales for localist policies - civic, social, political, and economic - and develop these into a framework of ideal types, each with their own characteristic objectives, democratic device, citizen and leadership roles, and institutional forms. Then come the challenges and trade-offs - between

the extent of participation and the scope of control; between accessibility and competence; between cohesion and pluralism; and between local choice and equity. Their work reminds us of the need to locate experience and practice in wider theory and conceptual analysis, and charts what that might look like.

Finally, Lucy de Groot and Jane Foot tackle head on the question of what neighbourhoods are good for. They conclude that a sense of place is both fluid and complex, and that the timescales in which the strengths of neighbourhoods and communities can both be built, and further built upon, are likely to be much greater than governments are generally willing to devote to the project. The fruits will not fully be realized, they suggest, outside of a transformed settlement between local and central government.

Between them, the voices assembled here provide a rich and diverse source of experience and perspective to inform the "new" neighbourhood idiom. They help to illustrate that change happens best when institutions, people, and their communities reflect on and learn from their environment, from others, and from their history. The collective memory and individual voices of successes and failures can be a powerful resource as we shape the agenda for neighbourhoods, communities, and democracy in the 21st century.

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Reclaiming the neighbourhood

by John Benington



Neighbourhoods are now – yet again! The UK government's strategy for public service reform is at a significant turning point in its history. There is a (belated) recognition by ministers and the Cabinet Office of the limitations of top-down pressures, national targets, and centralised regulation, and a search instead for "self-sustaining systems of improvement", based on increased choice for individual service users, and increased voice for neighbourhoods and local communities (see *The UK Government's Approach to Public Service Reform*, Cabinet Office, 2006)

The return to neighbourhoods and localities is expressed most clearly in the Department for Communities and Local Government's strategy for double devolution, first to local authorities and then to neighbourhoods – and indeed in the re-labelling of the department in these terms. The acronym DECLOG that local authorities and the third sector are now using for the latest incarnation of this frequently re-labelled department (DOE, DETR, DTLR, ODPM) suggests a friendly welcome for these signals of decentralisation, with some scepticism about the accumulated debris that will have to be cleared away to get the channels flowing freely to and from the neighbourhood frontline.

All this seems like *déjà vu* for those who were involved at the grass roots, in the Home Office's Community Development Projects of the 1970s, or in any of the subsequent UK and EU programmes during the 1980s and 1990s, which attempted to engage with neighbourhood communities to promote social, economic or

political development. There is a real risk that government will develop its new neighbourhood strategy without looking at the evidence or learning the lessons gained from its own previous programmes over the past 30 years.

As before, the neighbourhood strategy is a very mixed bag – some aspects are about tackling complex problems (for example crime and community cohesion) which cut across the responsibility of different departments; some are about decentralisation of services to the frontline; some are about greater accountability of key statutory services to people and local communities; some are about devolution of decision-making to more local democratic forums; and some are about an enhanced role for local councillors.

Some elements of the strategy explore the prospect of a shift of power and resources from the state towards neighbourhood organisations, and scope for local innovation. Other elements suggest a co-option of civil society and informal communities (of interest and of place) into the work of government and service delivery, which could further reduce their power and autonomy.

A plethora of pilot programmes – but what changes on the ground ?

The residents of disadvantaged areas could be forgiven for scepticism about yet another government policy on neighbourhoods. Many of them have been on the receiving end of a succession of pilot programmes and special projects over their lifetimes, and question what if anything has changed as a result.

At least eight different national pilot

programmes to tackle neighbourhood disadvantage have been launched in the UK over the past 30 years, including educational priority areas (EPA) in the late 1960s, the community development projects in the 1970s, Peter Walker's six towns studies, Keith Joseph's cycle of deprivation studies, city challenge, the single regeneration budget and so on.

In addition to these UK programmes, the USA has had its own war on poverty and model cities programmes. The European Union has run three cross-national programmes to combat poverty and social exclusion, and the Irish government ran a whole series of programmes and agencies to combat poverty.

New Labour has now added its own profusion of pilot programmes - education action zones, health action zones, employment zones, best value pilot projects, pathfinder estates, new deal for regeneration, new deal for communities - to this apparently endless flow of area regeneration acronyms and initiatives. (Newham, one of London's poorest Boroughs, once had a full pack of all the available zones, pathfinders and pilots, as well as leading partnership arrangements for the new deal for the unemployed, the single regeneration budget five, and objective two European regional development funding).

This brief introduction aims to set the debate about neighbourhoods and government in its current policy context; to discuss the lessons from the history and evaluation of previous neighbourhood-based programmes; and to look at some of the possible questions and implications for government and the public, private, voluntary and informal sectors of greater engagement with neighbourhoods and local communities.

The evolution of government policy for neighbourhoods

The UK government's renewed interest in engagement with neighbourhoods and local communities has evolved gradually since it was elected in 1997, but is now at the heart of its strategy for public service reform. The initial focus was on selective intervention in deprived

neighbourhoods to tackle social exclusion. The current proposals envisage a broader-based reorientation of mainline central and local government policies and services towards the neighbourhood level.

Neighbourhoods are now seen by government and all political parties as central to four inter-related goals:

- Deepening both representative and participative democracy, strengthening elected councils and councillors, stimulating more active citizenship, and reinforcing the legitimacy of elected government through public involvement in policy-making and delivery (at a time when low turnouts in elections have weakened the formal mandate for politicians)
- Improving the responsiveness, accountability and value for money of public services to front-line users and to local communities (at a time when the rate of growth in public expenditure is reducing) and including the possibility of "co-production" of some services between the public, private, voluntary and informal community sectors
- Tackling disadvantage, crime and neighbourhood renewal in the most deprived localities, where many social problems are concentrated
- Developing "social capital", community cohesion and a sense of civic responsibility and belonging, at a time when the risks of fragmentation and conflict between diverse cultures, races and faith communities are being felt more strongly

However, this all-encompassing strategy for neighbourhoods has emerged incrementally, starting with a focus on poverty and deprivation and now extending to neighbourhood democracy and management of services, and to the reforming of government and public services more fundamentally. David Miliband has spoken of it as nothing less than a redrawing of the contract between the citizen, the community and the state. Similarly, Ruth Kelly has spoken of the importance of "getting the balance right between the state and citizens" (Speech to the Development Trusts Association Conference, September 19 2006).

The initial focus on deprived neighbourhoods

The government's early interest in neighbourhoods was linked to poverty and disadvantage. The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was set up in 1997 to "develop integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates, including crime, drugs, unemployment, community breakdown, and bad schools".

This led rapidly in 1998 to the publication of A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, the setting up of 17 "pathfinder" districts to take part in an £800 million, three-year new deal for communities, and the setting up of 18 "policy action teams". One of the policy action teams extended the focus from disadvantaged people to neighbourhood renewal, and concluded that "neighbourhood management [w]as the key vehicle at local level that could provide the focus for neighbourhood renewal ... Its role should be to help deprived communities and local services improve local outcomes, by improving and joining up local services and making them more responsive to local needs".

By April 2000 the government had launched a 15- to 20-year national strategy for neighbourhood renewal targeted at the 88 most deprived neighbourhoods in England, and supported by the setting up of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and the Tackling Disadvantage Group within the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM).

This has been accompanied by a plethora of pilot projects and initiatives – 35 neighbourhood management pathfinder areas; a network of over 150 other neighbourhood management initiatives (NMIs); 39 new deal for community programmes (NDCs); 88 community empowerment networks (CENs); over 250 tenant management organisations (TMOs); and so on.

Meanwhile, the power of "well being" given to local councils by the Local Government Act 2000, and the creation of local strategic partnerships to manage neighbourhood renewal funding and to create a more strategic framework for the whole locality, has allowed neighbourhood level work to be integrated and in some areas mainstreamed. Local councils could now take up the community leadership role.

Neighbourhood engagement has also been an important feature of theme-based strategies coming from a range of government departments, for example crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs), better government for older people, and Sure Start for children. The shared assumption has been that these issues are best understood and addressed at the frontline, where services interact closely with users and local communities and where "joined-up" responses can be developed between networks of public, private, voluntary and informal community organisations, and cross-disciplinary teams of professionals.

From disadvantage to decentralisation, delivery and democracy

The current stage in the government's strategy sees neighbourhoods not just as a focus for tackling disadvantage, crime and other social problems, but as an important part of the overall interface between local and central government and the public. The strategy is directed at all neighbourhoods (prosperous as well as poor; rural as well as urban), and will cover government policy for education, health, crime, housing and local government. The government's line of reasoning for this is clearly summarised in Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter (ODPM/Home Office, 2005): "An important part of responding to the twin interconnected challenges – securing sustainable improvements in our public services and re-engaging our citizens with the institutions of government – is to promote and develop activities at a neighbourhood level, harnessing people's interest in those local issues that affect their daily lives. Such activities can:

- Make a real difference to the quality and responsiveness of services that are delivered to or affect those neighbourhoods
- Increase the involvement of the community in the making of decisions on the provision of those services and on the life of the neighbourhood(s)
- Provide opportunities for public service providers and voluntary and community groups

to work together to deliver outcomes for the locality

- Build social capital, reducing isolation while building community capacity and cohesion

An additional justification is given by the National Audit Office in terms of value for money, relevance and fitness for purpose of public services: "Community participation is vital in ensuring value for money in public services. Services designed and delivered without community input risk wasting public money because they will be unused or underused if they are not what people need" (Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal, National Audit Office, 2004)

The centrality of neighbourhoods and local communities to the government's overall reform strategy is reaffirmed in the most recent statement of the UK Government's Approach to Public Service Reform (Cabinet Office, 2006), which combines four main elements:

- Pressure from government (top-down performance management)
- Increased competition and contestability in the provision of services
- Increased pressure from citizens and service users (choice and voice)
- Strengthening the capability and capacity of civil and public servants, and central and local government

"In combination these four elements are intended to create a self-improving system within which incentives for continuous improvement and innovation are embedded".

Self-sustaining systems of improvement?

A key feature of this new model, and of many of the conference speeches, is the need to reduce reliance on top-down interventions by government, through the imposition of centralised targets, external inspection, and detailed regulation (what I have called the "carrot and semtex" strategy; and the "name and shame game") - and to seek instead to establish "self-sustaining systems of improvement".

More devolved and transparent "self-

sustaining systems of improvement" is emerging as one of the government's new mantras for public service reform, touched on in an increasing number of ministerial speeches. Inevitably perhaps, there is less clarity or agreement about what "self-sustaining improvement" might mean, or how it might be achieved, in practice.

For some, self-sustaining improvement seems to imply more marketisation of public services and strengthening of individual choice. For others, self-sustaining improvement implies more democratisation and devolution, and strengthening of communal voice. The government's strategy is to try to strengthen both (choice and voice) for citizens and local communities. (I would argue that cultivating "loyalty" - the third of Hirschman's trio of exit, voice and loyalty - is as important as choice and voice, especially at neighbourhood level).

Gordon Brown and David Miliband have both extended the notion of voice beyond the delivery of services and into the democratic process, outlining the need for a "double devolution," first to local government to enable them to become "place-makers" and then to neighbourhoods, "so that communities not just individuals can exercise choice and voice".

Gordon Brown also outlined some practical proposals for strengthening communal voice, through proposals for "a community call for action" not only by councillors but also "by citizens able to trigger action to change their services, putting local people far more in the driving seat, not only by holding public service providers accountable, but by taking power themselves ... complementing this community call for action, by neighbourhood advocates and managers that can act as advocates and brokers for local people".

David Cameron and the Conservative party are also strengthening their commitment to local solutions as one of their four core values for public service improvement: "We believe that all policy ideas designed to improve public services should be measured against their ability to make the system more responsive to service users ... the tradition of the individual and the

Introduction

local community is still strong in our national consciousness and there is a strong move today to find ways of restoring that sense of local decision making and local ownership of the services on which we depend for so much of our daily lives ... local ownership of the management process and the ability to develop local solutions are essential prerequisites of success" (The Well-Being of the Nation, Interim Report of the Conservative Party Public Service Improvement Policy Group, 2006).

These commitments to devolution and decentralisation to users, neighbourhoods and local communities are already beginning to be reflected in practice - for example in the provisions for patient and public involvement in the NHS; in the Police & Justice Bill 2006 with its proposals for a "community call for action" by citizens and local communities in relation to community safety (and its possible extension to other services such as street cleaning) and in the appointment of Ed Miliband as minister for the third sector. Neighbourhood engagement and community leadership has also been included within the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of local authorities since 2005.

There are, of course, many tensions and contradictions embedded within these proposals, and it remains to be seen how government will react when devolution to citizens and neighbourhood communities results in more vocal challenges to its policies and priorities.

The danger of by-passing elected local authorities

One of the most crucial questions running through all these debates is the role of elected local authorities and councillors in relation to neighbourhood participation. Although the policy documents are all reassuring on this issue, there is fear in many quarters that the government intends to go over the heads of local authorities and other public bodies, and develop a more direct relationship with neighbourhoods and with a network of stand-alone agencies, such as trust schools, trust hospitals, independent treatment centres, neighbourhood police units

and so on. The real test of these issues will be in the detailed wording of the forthcoming white paper on local government.

Learning from previous neighbourhood programmes

What can we learn from the experience of the previous waves of neighbourhood-oriented programmes which took place in the USA in the 1960s, in the UK from the 1970s onwards, and in the European Union from the 1980s?

The US war on poverty was kick-started by the Ford Foundation in the early 1960s through a series of innovative community action programmes, designed to influence city government through neighbourhood participation and dialogue with the poor, and the experimental demonstration of the possibilities of reform. This "grey areas program" in five cities (Oakland, New Haven, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington DC) and various communities in North Carolina, was directed at neighbourhoods of emerging poverty, where timely interventions were hoped to reverse the trend. The programme developed a repertoire of interventions based on community participation, inter-agency co-ordination, and systematic evaluation.

In practice, this produced great tensions between, on the one hand, local people and organisations who when consulted voiced their needs and raised their expectations, and on the other hand, the public authorities who responded with better co-ordination of some services, but could not deliver additional resources or increased investment in services to those neighbourhoods. The processes of city decision-making were altered by greater citizen participation, but only very limited material improvement was achieved in those aspects of neighbourhood life which the people saw as top priority - housing, education, skills, incomes.

The US programmes were fully monitored and evaluated and their knowledge and experience was shared with UK policy-makers, civil servants and academics, most famously at a high level Anglo-American seminar called by prime minister Harold Wilson at Ditchley Park, Oxford in 1969,

before the launch of the UK's own more modest "war on poverty".

Despite warnings from US experience, engagement with neighbourhoods and with local community organisations, and co-ordination of frontline services, quickly became a central feature of the UK programmes launched by both Labour and Conservative governments throughout the 1970s and 1980. These all followed a remarkably similar trajectory to the government's neighbourhood programmes this decade – starting with a remedial focus on small areas of poverty and disadvantage, and gradually moving on to a more strategic and comprehensive concern with neighbourhood development and citizen participation.

One of the first catalysts for the previous initiatives had been Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech in 1968 when he raised the spectre of racial ghettos and social and political disruption in inner-city areas. Shortly after this the government announced the setting up of a special urban aid programme targeted at "areas of serious social deprivation in a small number of our cities and towns – often scattered in relatively small pockets". The programme, administered by the Home Office, provided both capital and revenue grants for local projects such as nursery centres, play centres, family advice and community law centres, as well as support for autonomous community organisations like women's aid centres, summer play schemes, adventure playgrounds and so on.

At about the same time, following the Plowden Report, the Department of Education and Science, launched the EPA, with five pilot projects set up in educationally disadvantaged areas in England and Scotland, and research and evaluation led by Professor AH Halsey at Nuffield College Oxford. The EPA programme ran from 1968 to 1971, developed and tested many small-scale innovations in educational practice, and produced a five-volume evaluation report, but there was little or no follow up action by the government to mainstream the lessons from the programme nationally.

In 1969, the Home Office announced

another neighbourhood-based action-research programme: the national Community Development Projects (CDP).

The CDP programme had very high-level ministerial support and was co-ordinated by a central team at the Home Office and carried out in partnership with 12 local authorities who co-financed and administered the local projects through a project committee. A project director and action team was appointed in each locality, backed up by a research team based at a local university. At a later stage the CDP programme was also supported by a national information and intelligence unit to draw together and disseminate the findings from the action-research.

Gilding the Ghetto ?

Like their American predecessors, however, the CDP projects quickly experienced the contradictions embedded in this formula. Residents were glad to be consulted and invited to participate, but argued that while better co-ordination of existing services was necessary and beneficial, it was not sufficient to address their key concerns about inadequate housing, deteriorating environment, poor schools, job loss, redundant skills, chronic unemployment, low incomes and so on.

Neither the sources nor the solutions to these problems could be found at the neighbourhood level alone. The needs and problems identified by residents and community organisations required major investment by government from mainstream spending programmes. Furthermore, key issues like job opportunities and local economic development were not under government control at all, but dependent on decisions by private, often trans-national, corporations.

The CDP projects researched and documented these issues in a series of local and national inter-project reports, which had a significant impact on practitioner thinking and debate for over a decade. However, the analysis proved too controversial for government and the programme terminated without any lasting influence on mainstream policy towards neighbourhoods.

Introduction

The Conservative government, elected in 1970, maintained the commitment to action-research studies of urban and neighbourhood problems. The Home Office set up an Urban Deprivation Unit (UDU) to co-ordinate the action-research programmes and, in 1974, just before the election, which brought Labour back into power, the UDU proposed a series of comprehensive community programmes. These linked local authorities, government agencies and local community organisations together in systematic joint planning and action to tackle urban deprivation, as an integral part of the local authority's corporate planning, budgeting and decision-making cycle.

The Home Office argument in 1975 is clear and still very relevant 30 years later: "There is no short cut to dealing with urban deprivation ... what is required is to direct the major programmes and policies of government to those most in need. Decisions about the allocation of scarce resources must obviously be settled through the political process, but new administrative arrangements can help to ensure that political commitments are translated into effective action".

So neighbourhoods are a good arena for identifying and illuminating the problems facing citizens and local communities, but their resolution required intervention of a more strategic and structural kind. The next section discusses this in more detail.

30 years of pilot programmes: implications for current government policy

What can the government learn from the past 30 or more years of neighbourhood-based programmes? Although the focus in the 1970s and 1980s was on disadvantaged neighbourhoods, much can be learned about engagement with local communities in general. Most of the pilot programmes generated some tangible short-run improvements in the physical and social infrastructure of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Benefits included practical measures:

- To bring about small but tangible

improvements in the cost and quality of living for the poor - including welfare rights and income support, credit unions, and the socialisation of some costs like community transport

- To develop opportunities for skill training and re-training, job placements and work experience for the unemployed
- To increase the relevance, accessibility, co-ordination and accountability of government services at neighbourhood level, and their integration with voluntary and community networks
- To improve the physical condition of housing and of the local environment, through repair and refurbishment of existing facilities, and some new building and provision of community facilities
- To mobilise and empower local residents to represent their interests more effectively; to claim and gain access to services to which they are entitled; and to strengthen their own networks of co-operation, action, and mutual help within the community

Design limitations

However, most of the programmes suffered from the following limitations:

- They were too brief to achieve significant impacts. Pilots usually lasted around three to five years - long enough to identify problems, and to introduce a number of short-term measures, but too short to implement medium- or longer-term strategies and programmes for intervention, or to sustain community development
- Their focus on the local and neighbourhood levels assisted the process of problem identification and analysis at the micro-level, but it has been harder to analyse root causes or to develop strategic or preventative action at national government levels
- The detailed focus on small neighbourhood areas was a good starting point for evidence-based policy-making. However, a small area focus of this kind can run the risk of diverting attention away from the wider political and economic forces which shape local communities
- Many of the programmes were designed

and launched by central government without sufficient consultation with local authorities or local communities, so they have remained in a kind of no-man's land, disconnected from the realities of local politics and resource allocation, and also marginal to mainstream decision-making in central government

- Most of the pilot programmes were monitored and evaluated by independent researchers, but the findings were rarely fed back into the next stage of the decision-making process, or had any major influence on up-stream thinking and policy-making by governments.

Government now has the opportunity to analyse and learn from the evaluation studies it has commissioned over the past 30 years, and to practice the evidence-based policy-making it has long recommended to others

- There needs to be a clear acceptance of responsibility that government is part of the problem as well as part of the solution. The language of one of the early Social Exclusion Unit reports is blunt and honest: "Past government policies have often contributed to the problem ... Too much has been spent on picking up the pieces, rather than building successful communities or preventing problems from arising in the first place ... Problems have fallen through the cracks between Whitehall departments, or between central and local government. And at the neighbourhood level, there has been no one in charge of pulling together all the things that need to go right at the same time"

This candour is refreshing, but it leaves the government with a clear self-imposed challenge to do (and be seen to do) much better than previous programmes.

Questions for strategy and practice

Experience of neighbourhood level programmes over the past 30 years thus raises a series of questions about both the overall strategy and its translation into operational practice. These need to be addressed if the new orientation to local government and local communities is to be effective, and to avoid reinventing the wheel:

- To what extent can the needs of

neighbourhoods be isolated from the wider context of city-wide, region-wide, national and global issues? How can neighbourhood strategies be developed which take account of these wider forces of "glocal-isation"?

- Is there a risk of neighbourhoods being held responsible for addressing problems whose causes and solutions lie in wider political economic and social forces well outside those neighbourhoods (for example poverty, unemployment)? How can neighbourhood strategies avoid parochialism, and respond to the localised impact of wider changes in the context?

- How can policies and programmes focused through the lens of neighbourhood locality avoid the risk of privileging the voices of stronger better organised groups and "community leaders", and also give attention to less articulate minorities and isolated individuals?

- Can decentralisation of (often under-resourced and poor quality) services to neighbourhoods become a substitute for redistribution of resources between rich and poor areas?

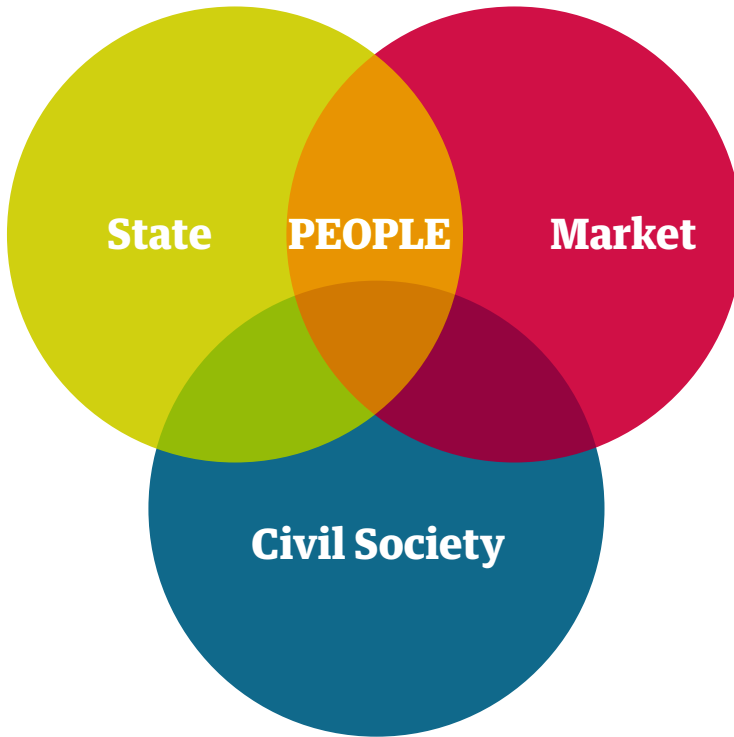
- How can governments respond when local groups say that what they really need is not more participation or personal services, but better jobs, incomes, housing etc

- How can the danger be avoided of local government being by-passed as central government engages more directly with neighbourhoods and other devolved bodies?

- What are the opportunities within this strategy for a real deepening of democracy, and empowerment of ordinary people?

- How can the resources already devolved or decentralised to the local level (for example through schools, primary care trusts, basic command units of the police) be harnessed behind integrated strategies for neighbourhoods and local communities - this would mean displacing the vertical silos through which so much central government policy and resources is currently channelled, with horizontally - and spatially-integrated programmes focused around the needs of neighbourhoods and communities of interest and of place

- How can better integrated policies and



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programmes be developed for communities of interest which thrive at the neighbourhood community level, but which are not exclusively place-based and may cut across several localities (for example young people, older people)

- How can questions of equalities, fair access and cohesion be given proper prominence within strengthened commitments and powers for local communities?

A shift in the centre of gravity of governance towards civil society

Since 1997, the government has strengthened relationships between the state, the market

and the user/consumer. However, the government's new strategy for engagement with neighbourhoods and local communities means that there is now an equally important need to explore and redraw the relationships between the state, civil society, and the citizen.

Civil society is currently much less well understood than the private market or the state, partly because up until the 1990's there had been less recent theorisation and research on civil society, and partly because in the post-war period the political parties have focused many of their ideological and positional differences around the relative roles of the state and the

market (the left calling for public regulation of the private economy, and the right calling for privatisation or marketisation of the public sector). In this bi-polar contest between state and market, the third sphere- civil society- has largely been neglected.

However, since the late 1980s, the powerful influence of civil society organisations has been demonstrated by the popular mass movements for democratisation of the state in Eastern Europe, South Africa and Latin America and this has stimulated fresh interest in civil society among both theorists and policy makers.

A working definition of civil society is "a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication." (Cohen JL and Arato A 1992).

This places civil society at the heart of debates about deliberative democracy and the promotion of opportunities and forums for active participation within the public sphere. A potential tension for the Government, in its commitment to engage more directly with civil society, lies in the possibility that more active participation by individual citizens, groups and voluntary associations will result in more vocal challenges to government policies and programmes

In addition to the increased potential for civil society organisations "to interrogate the state," the notion of citizen-centred public services also implies (as one prominent permanent secretary noted astutely) a fundamental shift in the centre of gravity of governance away from the state and towards civil society, and a significant loss of control by public policymakers and managers.

The government's traditional sources of leverage through the use of legislation and taxation remain in the hands of the state. However, the policy initiative (the definition of goals and priorities, the generation of policy ideas and options, the assessment of alternatives, the design of programmes, the forms of organisation and implementation) will increasingly have to be shared with informal networks of users,

neighbourhood associations, community groups, and minority ethnic organisations as well as with more formal partners from the public, private, and voluntary sectors.

This more active engagement with civil society, in which much public service will be "co-produced" with a range of formal and informal partners rather than by the state alone, implies a need for governments to discover new ways of indirect leadership of, and influence on, the thinking and activity of networks of other organisations and actors, in addition to direct use of "state assets" and "state authority" to achieve its ends (See Mark Moore Creating Public Value, Harvard University Press, 1995).

One of the biggest challenges for the government is therefore how to "lead" devolved and self-sustaining systems of improvement not only in partnership with other levels of government (regional, local, parish, neighbourhood), and organisations from other sectors (public, private and voluntary), but also with active involvement from informal associations, community groups and individual citizens.

The role of government

The role of government in this kind of situation is not simply to act as referee between competing interest groups, but to work proactively to try to develop some kind of shared vision or common purpose out of the diversity of perspectives, and to negotiate and mobilise coalitions of interest to achieve those communal aims.

Considerable political insight, professional skill, social understanding, moral judgement and practical wisdom are required to achieve this kind of participative democratic process and citizen-centred public service. The new capabilities required by public and civil servants working within civil society include skills in active listening, capacity building, community development, and constructive negotiation.

Public policymakers and managers will thus often have to work across the boundaries between state, market and civil society in order to improve public service and create public value.

Introduction

Table 2: Boundaries

Sphere	Primary form of regulation	Primary form of co-ordination
State	Voice	Command and control hierarchies
Market	Exit	Competitive markets
Civil Society	Loyalty	Collaborative networks

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However, it is important to recognise that the three spheres (state, market and civil society) are very different from each other in terms of their forms of regulation and coordination (see diagram on page 16), and that engaging with civil society in particular poses very new challenges for government. This shift towards new patterns of polycentric networked governance means that national government may not always necessarily be central government; the centre for many purposes and processes may lie within civil society.

Conclusion

These are the kinds of questions we address in this SFI pamphlet, and which we hope the government will grapple with as it develops its strategy for greater devolution to local government and to local neighbourhood communities. National government needs to learn from the evidence and experience which has already been gained from previous programmes of community development and neighbourhood engagement, and current experience by those local authorities which have been at the forefront of innovation in terms of neighbourhood democracy and management.

Professor John Bennington has worked at Warwick University since 1988 where he founded the Institute of Governance and Public Management (IGPM). He lived and worked in Moss Side, Manchester, in the 1960s (with the Moss Side People's Association and the Hideaway Youth Project); in Hillfields, Coventry in the 1970s (as director of the Home Office Community Development Project); and in Sheffield in the 1980s (as the Council's director of economic and employment development)

Rules of engagement for the community worker

by Sue Goss



In the late 1970s I was a community worker in Deptford Housing Aid Centre. I found myself part of a little network of community organisations staffed by young(ish) people turned off by the stuffy worlds of the civil service and local government – idealistically committed to working “for the people” in a loose way – trying to get officials and politicians to listen more, and dictate less. The work was practical and down to earth: stopping unscrupulous landlords from evicting tenants illegally; helping women escape from violent husbands; ensuring homeless families had a roof over their heads; helping people on a local estate set up a tenants’ association, campaigning for repairs.

Much of what passed as radical then has now become accepted as common sense, but the distance between government and the people seems as great as ever. What can we draw from that experience that might be helpful in planning neighbourhood-based initiatives today?

Reflecting

One of the main differences between then and now was the passion with which neighbourhood and community workers in the 1970s examined the motives and unintended consequences behind local and national government interventions. What were we “for”, whose side were we really on? Were community workers supposed to keep local communities quiet, to support self-help, or to build the confidence and skills needed for successful protest?

Accepting complexity

In the 1970s and 1980s, old certainties and allegiances were breaking down – as was the passive acceptance that the council knew best. Tenants’ associations were spreading, locally and nationally, and single issue campaigns began to emerge. Politics began to encompass new movements – feminism, anti-racism and the gay movement. The personal became the political. Communities were being torn apart, and the tensions and contradictions emerged in a troubled politics. There was no longer one community but many.

Community activists became involved in all these issues, and were sometimes as bad as traditional politicians in trying to impose both analysis and solutions – working-class Londoners were often bemused by the antics of college-educated “activists”. Despite the fashionably leftist political theories that were used both by academics and activists to describe community politics, the struggles were not simply between “communities and bureaucrats” or “workers and the state”. Communities were far from united. Some of the campaigns were waged by traditional working-class activists against those seen as outsiders – gypsies, squatters, immigrants or single parents.

We discovered that “the people” can be intolerant, narrow-minded and prejudiced, especially when they are feeling defensive. Loud-mouthed self-appointed representatives can destroy any real sense of community. And while councils in those days often seemed to be part of the problem – since white, male, middle-aged councillors in the 1970s had no experience from

Rules of engagement for the community worker

which to understand or tolerate the new politics of community action – that experience has led me to a respect for the role of democratically-elected local authorities in creating the right conditions for community engagement: creating spaces in which all voices can be heard and difficult community tensions negotiated. The emerging “place-shaping” role has to recognise and balance different legitimacies, and design good ways of engaging all the communities within a locality – creating conditions in which active citizenship is not burdensome.

Being there for the long haul

Engagement also has to be seen over the long term. Community energy goes in cycles, depending on the importance of what’s at stake and the energy of individuals. Community empowerment takes decades not years. Governance models, which assume that poor people will spend their lives in boring meetings or dealing with endless bureaucratic red tape with little to show for it began to seem as exploitative as those which ignore them. Even in the current vogue for “community engagement” – the terms of the debate are all too often set by politicians, officials and professionals. The relationship between the state and civil society is not simply about Westminster and Whitehall – it is created every day between the social worker and the single parent, between the health visitor and the pensioner, between the police and young people.

Reciprocity

The challenge for those of us working in local neighbourhoods was to transform the relationship between ourselves and local people into one of mutual respect – negotiating solutions which recognised the experience and knowledge of each service user – so that professional knowledge could be used to support users, individually and collectively, in finding appropriate solutions to their problems. Drawing on the expertise on “both sides” we could learn from each other, explore together, negotiate. It was easier to begin in the voluntary sector, where the tradition of experimentation

was greater, but slowly, practice began to change inside local government. The idea of the reflexive practitioner offered a way forward when first the planners, then the social workers (and later even teachers and doctors) found their professional infallibility challenged. As the idea that service users might have something to contribute gained ground, we experimented with consultation techniques, which neither imposed professional or political solutions, nor simply set up opposition between “community” and “bureaucrats” because of some pre-conceived sense of struggle. We learned to compromise, to negotiate, to listen.

The experiments in the 1980s that followed laid the foundations for a different sort of engagement between local government and their communities: one based on dialogue, which accepted diversity and the complexity of very mixed communities; recognised the interlocking causes of multiple deprivation; negotiated with communities as co-producers of solutions to social problems; and welcomed the voluntary and third sectors, and the contribution of the private sector within managed markets.

Recognising conflicting interests

We learnt also, however, to be sceptical about the possibility of always finding a consensus, since interests are often in conflict. Divided communities may live alongside each other while disagreeing. Market solutions have created a sense of choice and flexibility for the better off sections of the working population, but they have tended to fail those with the least purchasing power. Some problems can’t be solved within neighbourhood boundaries – poor communities fight each other precisely when they do not have the power to change the terms of their own poverty.

Authoritarian models versus pluralist models

The tension that emerged in the late 1970s between old authoritarian models of state decision-making and more pluralist, libertarian, community-based politics are still being played out now on both the left and the right, for

example between the centralising tendencies in New Labour and the pressures for devolution, and between the more libertarian style of Cameron, and the more authoritarian traditional conservatism. Thirty years on, services are more customer responsive, and politicians, managers and staff increasingly recognise the importance of community voices. Neighbourhoods are back on the agenda. But we are still a long way from the partnership between service users and providers we used to once envisage. While there are many more "reflexive practitioners" there are still closed ears and closed doors. In the 21st century, there is a need for more radical change than governments, local or national, have yet conceded.

Sue Goss is principal, National and Local Services, OPM. She has worked with local, regional and central government, specialising in leadership, governance and strategy development. She teaches at the Leadership Academy for executive councillors, and has worked in several authorities on top team development and on leadership skills for councillors

A bit more agitation and a bit less management

by Sean Baine



The 1970s

In the early 1970s I was involved in national Conferences of Neighbourhood Agitators. Core groups came from London, Birmingham and Edinburgh while 'Agitators' Notes' went out to groups across the country. According to the key statement from the conference "we, as groups involved in neighbourhood organising, are opposed to the capitalist system and the inevitable exploitation this brings. The contradictions we seek to bring to the surface are vital, complementary ones, in housing, education, health and social security, play and leisure, and the position of women, all geared to the physical and cultural reproduction of the work force".

The early 1970s were typified by fights against Rachman landlords, the squatting movement, Claimants' Unions and the first play schemes. Poverty was being rediscovered (it had, of course, never really gone away) and inspiration was being gained from experiences in America including those of Alinsky in Chicago. They were heady and exciting times.

As with many activists job moves were often into local government's - I went to work in Haringey supporting a wide range of community groups and new initiatives. One of these initiatives was the government Area Management Scheme - the Green Lanes area became one of four national pilots. Another set of government demonstration projects were the Community Development Projects. These developed much innovative action at both neighbourhood and local authority level, but did

not last long once the projects and their workers developed a critical stance towards government, most famously in their publication *Gilding the Ghetto*, which stated that "neither the poverty initiatives, nor the government's more general policies towards the poor could be said to have had much impact on the problems facing the people who live in the older urban areas". It went on to conclude that "it is not surprising that in the final analysis the 'deprivation initiatives' were not about eradicating poverty at all, but about managing poor people".

The 1980s

The middle and late 1980s saw local government reacting to the Thatcher government, most famously over rate capping. Funding for many community initiatives disappeared. However, there was also within local government a renewed emphasis on neighbourhoods - and often from those 1970s activists who were now councillors in local government. In 1987 I became neighbourhood chief executive in Labour-controlled Stepney in Tower Hamlets developing sensitive local delivery of services while working with a range of neighbourhood groups. But the programme was a flawed one, as the controlling Liberals attempted to decentralise everything, often inappropriately. When the Liberals took over Stepney neighbourhood in May 1990 I was soon sent on my way. When the Labour party came back into power in 1994 they abolished the neighbourhood system - as also happened in Islington and other areas. Yet again neighbourhoods took a back seat.

The 1990s

After dismissal from Tower Hamlets I took the well-trodden consultancy route. One piece of work was to evaluate the New Life for Paddington Single Regeneration Budget Programme (NLP). This had emerged out of radical activity in North Paddington in the 1980s. North Paddington was part of the City of Westminster, run from 1983 by Shirley Porter. Local activists had resisted her policies of bringing more middle-class residents into the area in order to secure Conservative electoral votes. The most famous victory was by Walterton and Elgin Community Homes (WECH), which secured a large area of North Paddington for resident controlled social housing.

New Life for Paddington (NLP) was a community initiated and controlled SRB programme which brought into the area over £13 million of government money. There was a variety of programmes and projects and a rapprochement was achieved with the city council, but this only happened because of a strong and independent community presence and a council willing to engage with local initiatives.

The 2000s

Out of the NLP activity emerged four neighbourhood councils, each with their own neighbourhood manager. One is a government Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder while in the others neighbourhood plans are being developed by local people in conjunction with partner agencies. This is no top-down structure agreed by the local authority – rather it is an organic growth led by local people and supported by Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) money and the statutory authorities.

Reflections

My experiences have been a mixture of direct working with communities in neighbourhoods and working for local government. From working with communities I have learned that structures are never set and are continually evolving and that sensitivities are required in order to respect and work with local people. From working in

local government I have learnt that, while many of the agendas are the same as for local people, there is also the necessity of learning how to manipulate and move a large organisation, often with the parameters of its work set by central government. However, while being restrained by central government, it is also true that local government controls considerable resources that are important for neighbourhoods. While city wide, regional, national and international settings are also important neighbourhoods are still where people live and spend large amounts of their time and therefore will often be the natural location for community activity. This activity needs to be positively supported and government structures bent and structured to recognise its reality.

While it is no longer fashionable to relate local government and neighbourhood activity to the functioning of a capitalist economy many of the issues that we were agitating about in the 1970s are still relevant today – and the private market still plays a large part in determining local outcomes, for example around property prices and employment. The idea of agitation is essentially bound up with ideas of local autonomy for people who live in neighbourhoods and it is their lives that should remain central to any concepts of local control. Local government needs to respect this local autonomy and there should always be a healthy suspicion of government top-down schemes that predefine neighbourhoods and localities and try to get local people, networks and institutions to fit into their structures.

If asked, I would always argue for a bit more agitation and a bit less management.

Sean Baine has been a neighbourhood agitator, a local government officer in Haringey, Hackney and Tower Hamlets in London and a voluntary sector worker for local and London-wide organisations. Currently he is a consultant working on a variety of issues including evaluations of neighbourhood initiatives, writing neighbourhood plans, the Government Change-Up agenda and business planning for voluntary and community organisations

A trained, professional workforce is key

by Marjorie Mayo

Neighbourhoods have been rediscovered as the focus for public service reform, reviving concerns about a series of related and long-standing dilemmas. To what extent are neighbourhood-based initiatives decentralising responsibilities without resources, for example, failing to address the wider causes of spatial disadvantage, undermining the scope for redistribution within and most importantly between richer and poorer localities? And what about the possibility that these initiatives offer spaces for populist or overtly racist politics – the outcome of one particularly notorious decentralisation experiment?

While there are parallels, with lessons to be drawn from the CDP (DEFINE) onwards, there are significant differences too. Community development was rediscovered in the late 1960s, along with area-based approaches to poverty, as cracks in the post-war welfare state became increasingly apparent. The current revival is taking place within a fundamentally different framework, a policy context dominated by neo-liberalism, more or less aggressively pursued for two or more decades in Britain and globally. The welfare state has been subjected to radical restructuring, and as a result the boundaries between the state, civil society and the market have been and continue to be redrawn.

Community development

Community development has traditionally been a highly contested field: working on the frontline poses a series of continuing dilemmas for staff operating 'in and against' the (local) state, as we expressed this in the 1970s. But the current

policy context is arguably more challenging than ever, with more and more tightly defined targets leaving fewer and fewer spaces for more transformative approaches. Effective implementation of neighbourhood working requires skilled and experienced staff – both in local government and in community-based organisations. To operate effectively, frontline professionals need more than sophisticated tool-kits of technical skills – they also need the support and personal skills to work with the contradictions, dilemmas and pressures of the frontline.

Neighbourhood workers

So what has actually been happening to the neighbourhood workers? Community development jobs seem to have expanded in the past, only to contract as community development fell out of fashion in the Thatcher years. Without firm figures, past patterns are somewhat hazy, but the picture clarifies in more recent times. Since 1997, with the election of Labour governments, jobs have expanded rapidly, including jobs involving frontline work with communities from a range of related professional backgrounds – local economic development and health promotion, for example, along with community safety. By the turn of the century, there were at least three times more workers employed than there had been in the early 1980s.

While numbers have increased, however, the quality of jobs on offer has not been keeping pace. Community work has become increasingly casualised: for example at least 50% of new

recruits have contracts of three years or less. The nature of the work is changing too, as more and more jobs involve employment on short-term government initiatives. Compounding these problems, recent interviews with frontline staff identified major gaps in staff support structures (there were examples of professionals paying for non-managerial supervision out of their own pocket, so keenly did they feel the need for safe spaces for critical reflection as they negotiated the minefields of their daily rounds, on the frontline).

Problematic roles

How can the next generation of workers develop the personal resources as well as the knowledge and skills to cope with these increasingly problematic roles, taking account of the additional challenges of the new public management, such as balancing outputs and process outcomes and meeting top-down targets, while remaining sensitive to needs and priorities from the bottom-up? If decentralisation is to promote further democratisation and empowerment, rather than the reverse, then these policies need to be implemented by professionals with vision, adequately trained and supported, securely employed with fair pay and conditions.

One particularly disturbing feature relates to the issue of gender. Women community workers are especially vulnerable to casualisation, being disproportionately represented in the lowest paid jobs. And women are particularly likely to give their time as unpaid activists, while still less likely to be represented in more prominent positions within the community sector.

Gender issues

Gender issues gained prominence in the 1970s both in community working and in international development. But gender seems virtually invisible today, sliding off contemporary agendas for regeneration in Britain. If devolution is to tackle equalities as well as democratisation and empowerment, within neighbourhoods, then gender has to be brought back onto the agenda, along with race and ethnicity, not to mention

social class, the difference that Law and Mooney in the August 2006 issue of *Critical Social Policy* describe as the "difference of not daring to be named".

Marjorie Mayo is professor of community development, Goldsmiths, University of London. She was previously employed in the Central Research Team of the Community Development Project, among other experiences of working on area-based initiatives

A heritage of elitism and exclusion

by Herman Ouseley



Nowadays we are better informed, more aware, prepared to complain and challenge decisions and not slow to seek redress where our interests are adversely affected. Not so 40 years ago. We would be taken for granted by public officials, who believed that they knew what was best for local communities. Black and minority ethnic (BME) residents experienced considerable racial discrimination and exclusion from services, jobs, decision-making processes and power structures. It was only in 1965 that the colour bar in Britain was outlawed. Up until then it was commonplace to see public statements that: "Blacks, coloureds, and Irish need not apply" for vacant jobs or rooms to let. Not surprisingly, local authorities were also heavily involved in discriminatory policies and practices.

Emergence of localism

As a consequence of this authoritarian "the council knows best" behaviour, in the 1960s and 1970s we witnessed the emergence of community activists defending their interests often through their positions on voluntary and community organisations and also in tenants' and residents' associations.

My experience of observing the struggle between localism and central interventionist approaches in the provision of public services shows that local activists emerge and thrive as a consequence of the failings of providers and decision-makers. Some of the activists go on to become decision-makers themselves and do a

good job for local people. Others join the system as bureaucrats or decision-makers that reinforce the status quo by holding on to power for themselves. The remainder stick with the streets, the estates and the neighbourhoods, true to their principles of serving their community's needs, frustrated with the centralised decision-making processes, getting older and tired with the political leadership.

Those early experiences reflect the reality of local government in parts of south London from the mid 1960s, through four decades of considerable changes, both in the ups and downs of political control and the expressions of community activism.

Local activism

Early on, these experiences centred on the struggle of poor people living in overcrowded and unsatisfactory housing conditions, up against unsympathetic local planning authorities. People found it very difficult to improve their basic amenities without considerable expense and effort. Town planners, architects and developers were in collusion to smash what they considered to be slum housing, destroying communities with widespread compulsory purchase orders, and building to the sky to solve the housing crisis. Most affected local people felt impotent in opposing such powerful forces. Power was in the hands of a few people, doing all the deals and able to deflect dissension with ease. Such dismissiveness and centralisation led to the emergence of local activism and new leaders. This new community leadership operated outside the formal democratic processes, but was fully

engaged with local people. It also led to the emergence of new kinds of councillors, who drew strength from community mobilisation and whose role in the council was to champion the concerns and aspirations of local people notwithstanding the ruling political party's agenda. This led to the clipping of the wings of some of the powerful bureaucrats of that time.

Consultation became the new panacea for engaging with local people and bringing them more into the decision-making process. However, it added to local peoples' existing stress in having to study weighty and complex documents, attend many meetings and engage in the intrigues of local government administration. In reality, this consultation enabled those who were most articulate to cut deals with power brokers, while protecting the status quo. This problem is as real today.

Partnerships and self-help

Perhaps one of the most significant developments to emerge during the 1980s, and still the most effective means of achieving community involvement and participation, has been the development of partnerships covering diverse interests including private sector companies, community and voluntary organisations and public bodies, including local councils. The partnerships of the early 1980s led to the emergence of new forms of community leadership which challenged the established order. It was no surprise to see the emergence of BME self-help groups, voluntary organisations and community groups serving their own particular needs, hopes and aspirations.

The new emergent community groups were anxious to collaborate with each other to help them gain maximum attention from the town hall decision-makers and avoid divisive responses. They formed into federations and associations; such arrangements had carefully put together constitutional arrangements, so they were as representative and as democratic as practicable, and so that as many people and their groups and organisations as possible could participate in these federal bodies. Inevitably, some of the

office bearers, depending on their personalities and connections, themselves became detached and more involved in the wheeler-dealing of the town hall, creating its own elite to deal with the main power-wielding elite.

These federations incorporated both BME and white-led community and voluntary organisations, and they operated collectively and cohesively in campaigning for resources and better service provision. However, the BME representatives, who were not as well connected to the power structures of the institutions were always at a disadvantage. Those who were most successful in the partnership arrangements were the local "power barons" who were to be found in tenants' and residents' associations, leading self-help groups and even in some of the emergent community and neighbourhood councils, set up by the local councils.

Devolving responsibility; retaining power

Promises were often made to devolve power, decision-making and resources to local people, only to raise their hopes, aspirations and confidence and then to leave them disillusioned. One such example can be gleaned from the mid-1980s. There was the emergence of a new programme known as the "Community Involvement and Participation Scheme" in Lambeth, which was supposed to offer hope to the disenfranchised, the deprived and the disaffected and included all the components and principles found in today's social and community cohesion programmes. It was a bold and sincerely expressed attempt to reach people of all backgrounds, particularly those that there were usually excluded and secure their participation in decisions on those matters which fundamentally affected their quality of life and that of their neighbours. This process was to be effected through the local teams of youth and community workers, housing and other outreach staff working at neighbourhood levels. It was well intentioned and captured the attention and interest of local people. However, it failed because the results could not match aspirations. Having raised the awareness of

A heritage of elitism and exclusion

local residents about their needs, entitlements and rights, it was not possible to deliver those expectations through the decision-making processes. Frustration developed all round. The outreach teams and the people with whom they were in touch became disillusioned. There was a realisation that local people wanted to share the power and make decisions, which was unpalatable to those who controlled the power and resources.

This confirmed that whatever the intentions to devolve, decentralise and to localise, and no matter how sincere, it is rare that those with power ever give it away to people on the ground. Why should it be different now? This is a problem for all of us who have been in positions of power. The multi-agency partnerships and the better awareness of people at local community levels show that there can be better outcomes for locally deprived communities and neighbourhoods if there is early engagement with them, and they are encouraged to participate on their terms and not that set by the institutions and decision-makers. Local people will only be an effective part of the solution when decision-makers realise that it is they who are part of the problem and the solutions are often within the competence of the local people. If only ...

Herman Ouseley worked in local government for 30 years, including two chief executive positions, and also recently served a three-year stint as president of the LGA. He was chair of the CRE for seven years, is presently a people management consultant and is actively involved in numerous voluntary and community organisations

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'Think global act local' is the way forward

by Balraj Sandhu



I came to England in 1967. I remember that there were some pubs in Gravesend that had signs on the door saying "no wogs and no dogs" and those without such signs often maintained an unofficial colour bar. There was no recourse to legal address and the early Sikh community was close-knit and self-supporting. As I reflect on these issues 30 years after the 1976 Race Relations Act, I am reminded that we all still have a lot to learn about the effects of alienation and discrimination in our neighbourhoods. Government was slow to react to the needs of new settlers and the effects on established communities which often perpetuated traditional stereotypes and new myths. Some would argue that it is still the case.

Changing world

Today we grapple with the same issues, but in a much changed world. Technological advances make the world a much smaller place where global events can profoundly influence the dynamics in local communities and neighbourhoods. Perhaps "think global act local" – a term commonly associated with the need to protect the environment- now applies just as much to the neighbourhood agenda in diverse communities, particularly in large inner city areas. World events effect and shape our communities in a way that was not possible before the advent of 24-hour multi-media broadcasting. Everything is so immediate now. This has made a fundamental difference to what defines our communities. Whereas before, you

could clearly identify communities by geography, now they are much more fragmented. The effect of this is that across all communities society is much more atomised. When it was much harder to keep informed about events back home, the neighbourhood was key to our sense of community. Now communities of interest can often identify with each other more strongly than before.

Changing communities

It's now much more difficult for us all to keep up with the fast pace of change and this is equally true for government. Communities found it a lot easier to identify around common themes and powerfully voice their issues. Today, neighbourhoods are changing more quickly than service providers can keep up with. The larger the organisations, the more difficult it proves to move away from the bureaucracy and structures that create their silo cultures and services. Public service provision is therefore largely in the mass production model of "we decide and deliver what's best for you". The recent drives on transformation or "customer centric" approaches is a welcome step in the right direction. However, the customer focus is often determined by staff and it fails to address sufficiently what people want - something that tangibly improves their quality of life. Transformation clearly isn't possible unless government, and particularly local government, has a clear understanding of what it means to be customer centric. On the present evidence, there is along way to go. Many still see this as cheaper service provision and low customer satisfaction.

This isn't always easy as it is about changing attitudes and being able to "let go". And how do you take greater account of the diverging priorities, interests and needs of diverse communities?

Raised expectations

Real devolution means giving local people resources and the ability to act. Citizens no longer distinguish between public and private sector service delivery in the same way as before; they expect higher standards of service from everyone. People expect much better, bespoke and immediate services that respond to their needs and which will enhance their quality of life, not what government says is right for them. At the same time, the desire for individual solutions to problems does need to be balanced against how you tackle social exclusion and how local solutions are equitable. It's a fact that society is now more diverse, but is it more cohesive?

Previously within strong communities like my own in Gravesend, community leaders and elected members worked better together to meet local needs and aspirations. Today, it often appears that there is reluctance to take responsibility, with a fault-line between elected and participative democracy. If we are creating polarised communities, somebody has to take responsibility. I think local leaders should be the ones to do so. Strong communities where strong levels of social capital persist can be an anathema when they stifle interactions with others.

Strong leadership

New neighbourhood powers to trigger community action such as in policing brings into sharp relief the conflict between participative democracy and elective democracy – isn't demanding action on behalf of communities the purpose of local councillors? We need to think very carefully about the added value of prescribing powers to local people when there is little evidence that this will lead to better services. From my experience, before we devolve further, we need to address some fundamental weaknesses in leadership.

The quality of our elected members has to demonstrate rapid improvement; councillors' effectiveness could be boosted by giving them a clear job specification and establishing a common yardstick for measuring and selecting candidates across all parties. Councillors should be able to take a whole view of neighbourhood issues and how that feeds into those affecting the locality as a whole. And all political parties should emphasise softer skills, such as interpersonal and communication skills and the ability to listen and respond to their constituents.

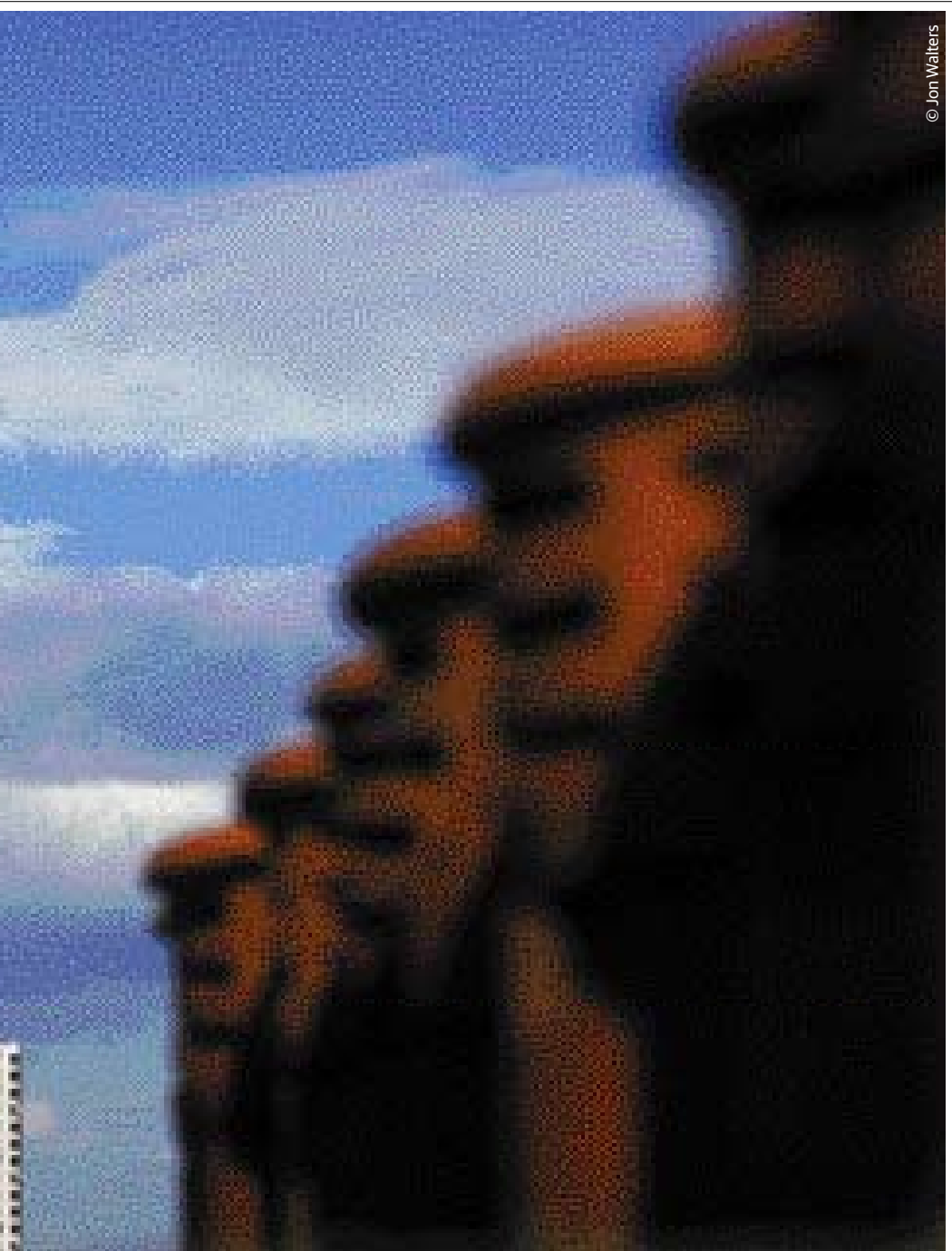
We need to consider community capacity issues in local neighbourhoods too, and recent policy initiatives demonstrate that this is now firmly on the agenda. What is trickier is an equitable way of funding and building such capacity in a sustainable manner.

Conclusion

New localism is about devolving more power to our communities and neighbourhoods, giving them ownership, control, power. But we do not necessarily have to make statutory powers to devolve. We need stronger and more competent leadership at community, officer and member level. The best neighbourhoods are places where people just want to get along, live and work together, not always being told how to do it all the time.

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How housing led the way in building better dialogue

by Bob Brett



The history of housing management has a lot to offer on the successes of devolving power and engaging users.

Tenants' organisations have been at the forefront of community activism since the 1970s, demanding more control and better services. Community and local initiatives have contributed to the move away from monolithic housing departments and given tenants more control over their homes and estates. Often, small and locally-based housing associations have taken over as social landlords. But pressures to reduce costs are resulting in a round of mergers and acquisitions, which threaten to undo much of this localisation, and undermine tenants' ability to hold housing associations to account.

Housing estates are an important part of the physical and social landscape in any locality. Any consideration of local neighbourhood and community engagement must start from the fact that social housing estates are often sites of concentrated social deprivation. They are commonly places where poverty, crime, ill-health and educational standards are uniformly worse than the average, and this has been increasingly the case over the past 30 years.

In this context effective housing management is not simply a matter of collecting rent and re-letting properties, it is the much wider task of community management. Managing anti-social behaviour, for example, which is often related to drug or alcohol addiction or mental health problems, is a major task for housing managers, which can only be effectively carried

out in partnership with the council and other responsible agencies, and, crucially, in effective partnership with the local community.

Engagement can lead to improvement

There is already a wealth of evidence of the importance of partnership working and community engagement in successful improvement projects, for example housing action trusts, tenants' management organisations and arm's-length management organisations (ALMOs), and new deal for communities and neighbourhood management projects. The most successful projects have over time, developed individuals and groups able to play an important role in improving services to their community.

Managing schemes

As the social composition of social housing has narrowed, so the task of managing it has become more complex and demanding, requiring a broad range of social and professional skills and expertise. This is especially true of housing associations (HA) who are taking over ex-local authority stock in need of major investment, often already carrying a weight of social problems. Managing schemes that contain traditional social renters from the local authority waiting list, private renters, key workers, shared owners and outright owner-occupiers is a demanding and complex task.

Housing management needs to be local: locally engaged, locally knowledgeable, locally responsive. If residents are to be effectively engaged in ways that can lead to effective oversight of service quality and service

improvement, then the area covered by the HA must be such that residents feel some reasonably communal relationship with each other, and that the HA managers and staff are, in some real sense, local. Engagement of deprived communities is dependant on management structures and a geographical presence that can make this abstract ambition viable in practice. What is true for housing management is also true for other locally-based services and neighbourhood management.

Reducing regulation

Empowerment of residents is key to the government's commitments to reduce regulation. At the conference of the National Housing Federation in 2005, David Miliband advocated greater resident involvement in the management of social housing, and argued that effective resident involvement and participation could reduce the need for inspection and regulation. Miliband's argument was that resident involvement would serve as an internal mechanism for ensuring that housing authorities delivered high quality services, providing a self sustaining mechanism for improvement and thus reducing the need for external regulation.

This emphasis on resident involvement was taken up by Sir Les Elton's 2006 Review of Regulatory and Compliance Requirements for RSLs, which recommended that the Housing Corporation should put greater emphasis on "neighbourhoods as an important lever for encouraging genuine accountability". And the Housing Corporation's chief executive, Jon Rouse, has recently said that it is not acceptable for any association not to take resident involvement seriously.

Rhetoric of community engagement

Unfortunately, despite the rhetoric of community engagement or neighbourhood accountability, the practice of the Housing Corporation appears to be going in precisely the opposite direction. Under pressure of costs, it now seems to be a specific object of policy to concentrate the development and ownership of the social housing stock in fewer and fewer, very large

housing associations, with the effect that there is likely to be less and less effective engagement with local communities. There are currently some 30 associations with over 10,000 homes. It is predicted that within five years, at the present rate of merger, the 10 largest associations will have over 50,000 homes each and the 50 largest associations will own 80% of the stock. So strategic headquarters could soon be 100 miles or more from the stock, and local services up to 50 miles away.

The housing management record of housing associations is (with some honourable exceptions) mediocre compared to Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs). This is because they have geographically concentrated stock and are subject to direct pressure by residents and councillors on their boards. The management success of ALMOs is a direct endorsement of the view expressed by David Miliband: community engagement and resident involvement can lead to self-sustaining improvement and help to reduce the regulatory burden.

So residents and housing professionals are experiencing a resurgence of centralisation as a response to demands for cost efficiency. This potentially jeopardises the quality of the service as well as our ability to work with colleagues to join up local services, empower residents, and integrate housing management into locality-based neighbourhood arrangements and partnership working.

Bob Brett is a housing manager who has been involved in virtually every neighbourhood initiative of the past 20 years

Shaping the future with a nod to the past and present

by David McNulty



Places are identified by the stories we tell about them. In my work with neighbourhoods I have always started by trying to understand the realities of people's day-to-day experiences and the sense they make of them. We have then worked to develop shared stories about how these experiences are linked to structures of power. Finally, we have looked at how these shared stories about our past and present enable us to try to shape our future.

We have to recognise the limits of a council's place-shaping powers, not least when the national place-shaping strategy seems to be simply to make us as attractive as possible to global investors. Markets will crucially shape places. We have to be honest in helping people to understand these changes. We have to enable them to acquire and develop the skills they will need to be effective in a globally competitive environment. And we have to encourage them to participate in trying to influence locally-shaped futures.

Trafford's approach to neighbourhoods evolved from our desire to align people's mental maps and shared experiences, and from a concern that reported levels of resident satisfaction and sense of well-being were lower than would be expected from our performance measurements.

We started from an appreciation that people have a range of identities but they do live in a definable place and therefore an opportunity exists to grow a sense of a community of place, and that places have elected representatives

with responsibility for the well-being of the people and place they represent. We work with councillors to enhance their role as community leaders (incidentally ensuring that non-executive councillors have a more important and fulfilling role than scrutiny often allows).

Our approach

We began with councillors taking us around their wards to identify the issues as they saw them. We distinguished between straightforward problems or service failure and other strategic issues that we could immediately respond to. We triangulated this with ward data, feedback from community groups and our call centre and complaints logging. From this we drafted ward profiles, which tried to summarise in a maximum of four pages a picture of the ward, including explicitly listing social capital, and the key issues facing people there. The four-page limit was heavily criticised by those who felt only a PhD thesis would suffice, but we wanted something easily readable and engaging. We took these drafts on roadshows in every ward and asked people, "does this sound like where you live?" After we'd revised the drafts from this feedback, we had working documents for each ward. This took a year. Now it's time to go around the wards again with the councillors so this is established as an iterative improvement process.

Strategic dimensions

On the roadshows we took our community strategy with us (also four sides), so that conversations could locate the ward profile within a wider borough and regional context.

There are crucial place-shaping actions for some wards that we cannot deliver without changes in regional planning guidance and sub regional transport powers.

We have developed a tour of the borough so that all councillors can experience and connect the local to the strategic. We have worked with councillors to develop what we see as the four key dimensions of their community leadership role:

- Responding to the issues raised by their constituents, mobilising and encouraging a co-ordinated response from services
- Articulating and advocating, being a voice for the place they represent
- Initiating actions that will improve their place
- Challenging the place they represent, for example having the courage and credibility (by doing the other dimensions well) to ask people in their ward to think again when the immediate or popular response might not be best

We have restructured our services so that those linked to the doorstep issues that are most often raised with councillors are aligned in one directorate. Within this, we are investing strongly in co-production measures and “friends’ groups” to enable the necessary shared responsibility for the changes that are identified in the profiles.

Neighbourhood forums

We appreciate that wards are constructs and very few people’s mental map of a neighbourhood corresponds to ward boundaries. Wards can contain several distinct neighbourhoods and some understood places contain several wards. We have tried to deal with this through a flexible neighbourhood forum structure. We have nine forums. One is based on a neighbourhood renewal area. Two comprise adjoining parish/town councils. Six are based on recognisable places within the remaining parts of Trafford. The varying sizes reflect a physical and democratic reality. Serendipitously, there are nine sergeants in the police division for our borough, so the neighbourhood forums can align with the structure of our most important partner.

The forums are deliberately not constituted as council committees to avoid the bureaucracy that would go with that. They do not have budgets to avoid diverting focus onto how to spend small sums rather than shaping services, decisions and neighbourhoods. Forum sessions have three elements:

- An open, drop-in period where people can discuss problems and issues with staff from across the range of services and use an opinion meter
- Discussion of a strategic issue from the profile
- Monitoring of actions

There is clear evidence that the forums are working. We are getting far more people involved. The self-appointed “voice gatekeepers” are having to acknowledge different voices and concerns. There is a sense of improvement and momentum in the wards and real co-production on park improvements, public realm enhancements, litter reduction, recycling and school improvements.

As the corporate management team we are monitoring our contribution with a detailed discussion about each ward and forum every quarter. And we are building the ward profile and neighbourhood issues into our service improvement framework.

Real choices

Our approach enables a genuine conversation about choice. We began by aligning the immediately local and the strategically local through the key social contract between councils and constituents – community leadership and the resources to guarantee security and well-being. Through the forums we tackle together the immediate visible reasons why people might feel uneasy while also responding to longer-term structured causes of future unease. A developmental approach to involvement is also more likely to make people happy.

We still have significant challenges. How do we co-ordinate better across boundaries? How do we keep growing participation so that this doesn’t ossify and get captured by new

Shaping the future with a nod to the past and present

vested interests? At borough level, we have mechanisms that are engaging with youth and the equalities agenda, how do we reflect that on a neighbourhood basis?

We have an opportunity to resolve challenges positively because we are developing a shared story about the present and desired future, and about the constraints and difficulties facing us. We have the basis for monitoring progress and holding to account at a neighbourhood level the council and others. We have a transparent and challengeable approach to community leadership. We are certain of where and when we want this to happen and increasingly we are confident of how.

David McNulty developed an approach to widening participation and lifelong learning at Blackburn with Darwen that won international recognition. That story is told in his book, Dreams, Dialogues and Desires. He is chief executive of Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council

The root of the matter is all about a sense of place

by Jane Roberts



"Are you local?" I asked a young lad who I happened to meet in Maitland Park in my former ward in the London Borough of Camden. "Oh no", he said, "I'm from Queen's Crescent" – about

300 yards away.

In the face of the inevitable complexity that comes with any consideration of neighbourhoods, how can local government best understand and build on this powerful sense of rootedness? Indeed, why should local government grapple with these issues at all?

It is the core business of all local authorities to understand the different localities that fall within their administrative boundary so as to ensure that the highest possible quality of services are delivered and to facilitate a sense of belonging – a sense of place. Although we all have multiple overlapping identities, place still plays a significant part in our identity, albeit to varying degrees for different people and at different times of our lives. In addressing these issues, local government can enhance both individual and collective agency – the notion of having some meaningful control over the lives that we lead. And we know that the notion of efficacy or agency is crucially important for our well-being. Isn't that what local government explicitly is charged with doing: "promoting the economic, environmental and social well-being" of its constituents?

Let me outline the approach to neighbourhoods that was being taken by the Labour administration in Camden borough council until earlier this year.

Camden is an inner London borough, the 15th

most deprived borough in the UK but with areas of extreme wealth as well as extreme poverty – often living cheek by jowl with one another.

There is a 10-year difference in life expectancy between Holborn and Covent Garden ward in the south and Belsize ward, only a couple of miles to the north. Camden's population is relatively mobile, with an active private rented sector, and highly diverse: just under 30% BME (black and minority ethnic) communities, 23,000 refugees from all over the world, and 120 languages spoken in its schools. Administrative boundaries criss-cross not just within the council but throughout public sector agencies in the borough. There is a very contested political culture in Camden with an active and engaged electorate (and press). How to go forward in the light of this complexity, to progress on our overarching objectives to deliver the highest possible quality services, to tackle inequality and to promote social cohesion?

Areas of most deprivation

In essence, our approach as far as structures was concerned, was both to let a thousand flowers bloom across the borough as a whole but also to focus strategically on the areas of most deprivation where we would target efforts to build local capacity. We did not seek, at least at that stage, to devolve decision-making of the executive to, for example, area committees, but instead to have a more fluid and dynamic approach that built on all that was best about the engagement of Camden's residents but avoided some of the pitfalls that we had experienced with area committees of yesteryear.

The root of the matter is all about a sense of place

Our approach determinedly recognised that matters other than that of structure were important to local governance. The way in which local authorities interact with the electorate, how responsive and transparent they are, plays a crucial part in making sense of how change comes about at a local level and hence promotes agency. The quality of the interaction between a council and its citizens is key: the genuine offer of information, explanation and dialogue; the openness to different voices and views; and the responsiveness and reciprocity of the interaction.

Network of community centres

In the borough as a whole, Camden funded the voluntary sector – over £15m spent on voluntary sector grants, because voluntary sector activity fosters community engagement and participation. The council had set up some years previously a network of community centres, which acted as a base for activities involving people of different ages and backgrounds. And there were a huge number – over 80 – of consultative fora in the borough: friends' groups of libraries, of parks, conservation area committees, tenant and residents' associations and so on. When we examined the make-up of these groups, however, all were very unrepresentative of the borough's population in terms of age, class and ethnicity.

Uneven spread of capacity

In the light of the very uneven spread of capacity between different communities in the borough, we decided to explore what needed to be done in the areas of most deprivation to build capacity and involvement in decision-making. We commissioned Ove Arup in the late 1990s to undertake extensive work that identified 10 areas in the borough where measures of deprivation were highest, the so-called "neighbourhood renewal areas (NRAs). These 10 areas were very different – indeed that is the joy of locality – and we set about working with local people and ward councillors in each area to build up local partnerships using about £1 million over the years for a community development approach. This was in addition to the much larger amounts

of money that were available in some (but by no means all) areas that had been successful in bidding for single regeneration budget funding, for example.

Progress varied in the different partnership areas but there has been generally an enhanced sense of locality in all of them, and the borough as a whole, as well as greater levels of participation in many. How can I be so confident? Well, Camden commissioned a survey of levels of social capital in the borough first in 2002. No other local authority to our knowledge had embarked on this course. When repeated in 2005, the survey showed startlingly positive results: a growing sense of collective efficacy, a belief that local neighbourhoods were improving and significantly higher levels of trust in public service providers, such as the police and the council.

That 10% increase in trust in the council revealed by our survey was, alas, not sufficient to enable Labour to withstand the political tsunami that overtook us in Camden in the local elections of May 2006 ...

Jane Roberts was a member of the council of the London Borough of Camden for 16 years and leader of the council from 2000 to 2005. Her professional background is in medicine – she specialised in child and adolescent psychiatry. She is presently undertaking working with the IDEa, LGLC and Warwick University

What, exactly, constitutes a neighbourhood these days?

by John Foster



In 1884 the major European powers met at the Congress of Berlin to divide up spheres of influence across Africa. Politicians and civil servants who had never set foot on that continent drew lines on maps, covering the Nile to the Cape. In many ways, the often tragic history of Africa since then has been a direct result of those decisions. The current situation in Darfur being only the most recent example.

While they may not have such catastrophic implications, wrong decisions in relation to the current neighbourhoods agenda risk repeating those mistakes. Public servants like neatness and order, with services and customers packaged to maximise administrative efficiencies and convenience. Whether the lines on maps are drawn in Brussels, Whitehall or the town hall, the urge is always there to promote representational equity and balance through geography. Equal sizes, equal populations, and equal slices of the public services cake.

Neighbourhoods not wards

Neighbourhoods are not electoral wards. Wards are creations of the Boundary Commission to ensure electoral equality and prevent gerrymandering. Neighbourhoods, on the other hand, are primarily social and geographical constructs of their residents. A neighbourhood can be defined and bounded by the simple act of asking people: "Where do you live?"

The answer gives us definitions of a neighbourhood's spatial geography and its community. A key lesson from the history of

community development is that neighbourhoods with strong bonds of social cohesion and high levels of social capital are far easier to empower. I feel a strong sense of *déjà vu* about this. Those of us who worked on the Home Office community development programme in the late 1960s and early 1970s were faced with the challenges of working in communities where these attributes were lacking. It says much about recent urban policy that we still struggle with these issues.

Of course neighbourhoods are all different and have different degrees of what Phil Woolas, in a speech to the LGA in June 2005, called "21st-century social realities". These realities are likely to produce citizen-defined neighbourhoods that are of different sizes, with different populations, needs and expectations. They also exhibit different levels of social capital and community cohesion and require different approaches to the production and consumption of public services.

A sense of place

There needs to be a shared understanding across the public services landscape of what constitutes a neighbourhood. The identification of 'place' needs to be citizen led. In Wakefield, which has a population of over 300,000, we have 21 wards, 18 parish and town councils, four local partnership areas and three neighbourhood management pilot communities. Our major public sector partners all have their own managerially determined boundaries. This produces a complex web of overlap and duplication that means nothing to citizens and inhibits joined-up service provision.

What, exactly, constitutes a neighbourhood these days?

Local determination

A key stage of our developing approach to neighbourhoods is to work with citizens to identify their perception of their locality and its boundaries. Working with people in a way that makes sense to them is a cornerstone of a successful local democracy. The neighbourhoods' agenda will produce outcomes both faster and more efficiently if it builds on existing communities, rather than attempting to define new ones. The place-shaping role will be at the heart of successful community development.

Wakefield has developed the concept of total family support, based on the idea that in order to resolve the difficulties faced by individuals, we must address the challenges faced by other family members. The life chances of a young child, for example, cannot be maximised without addressing the problems of parents and siblings and the hinterland within which they exist. For young children that is a neighbourhood.

To make better sense of this we have established three management pilots in deprived neighbourhoods. These are citizen-defined but coincide with groups of super output areas. Our approach is called "families and neighbourhoods", a citizen focus that reflects how people actually live their lives. Each pilot is developing its own model of governance and in each case the roles and relationships of councillors and citizens are subtly different.

Recognising how people live

If the neighbourhoods agenda is to be successful, we local leaders will have to organise ourselves and our services around these 21st-century social realities, and be ready to support and promote democracy within a framework of equality and open, knowledge-rich communities. We will also need to be aware of the fluidity of neighbourhoods and their potential for rapid change. One planning decision can alter the size and composition of a neighbourhood within a matter of months. The neighbourhoods' agenda is likely to move us into an age of fluidity.

Our ultimate, and universally-shared goal is sustainable communities – communities who

look after themselves more, so that we can do less, or focus on other things. This is clearly the case in relation to street cleansing, for example, and helps us to refute a traditional welfare economics critique. Sustainable communities are, on this definition, inherently more efficient, but an absolute precondition for this is a collective recognition by citizens of what their community actually is and their place in it.

Another precondition for sustainability is cohesion – the great challenge of our age. The most cohesive communities are, regrettably, the least diverse – they are bonded internally. What we need is to create bridges between communities, of interest as well as place.

That is easier said than done, but the key to it is engagement that shares knowledge rather than deprives people of it. Robert Sampson (*New Economy, Vol. 11, 2004, pp. 106–113*) suggests that through a better sharing of knowledge and information, communities can come together and take ownership of their common challenges. It may not yet be the holy grail of sustainability, but it could be the path towards it.

Unlike the colonialists of 1884 we will have come not to conquer, but to empower, and not to ride roughshod over communities – but to learn from them and build on their traditions and strengths for the benefit of all.

John Foster is chief executive of the City of Wakefield Metropolitan District Council. He was previously chief executive of Middlesbrough Council and North Tyneside Council. He is a trustee of the New Local Government Network

Wards in action, a work in continual progress

by Richard Leese



When I was first elected to Manchester City Council in 1984, I became part of a 'new' (not New) Labour administration, which had as a key policy plank the concept of neighbourhood services – services organised in a joined-up way to meet the differing needs of recognisable neighbourhoods. We had a powerfully-led neighbourhood services committee, a neighbourhood services unit, we produced a neighbourhood map of the city, and started the process of building a mini-town hall for each of the identified neighbourhoods. Only four were ever built and the initiative ground to a halt.

Why did the initiative fail? Government's clampdown on capital expenditure meant the roll out of purpose-built mini-town halls became unaffordable. We had identified so many neighbourhoods that we did not have the capacity to deal with all of them on an individual basis but, most importantly, we failed to re-engineer council service delivery to make it joined-up and localised.

Return

Fifteen years later we returned to the basic premise of neighbourhood services, but from a number of different perspectives. The first was our overall approach to regeneration. Historically that approach had been paternalistic and patronising – one of "we know best". It was an approach that didn't work, and we learnt that for even the weakest communities, renewal had to come from within and we had to support the strongest and healthiest parts of those

communities as the basis on which regeneration could be built.

As well as an attitude change, there was a structural change to our approach to regeneration. The writing was already on the wall for area-based programmes and we adopted a whole-city policy for regeneration. This was underpinned by six strategic regeneration frameworks, which together encompassed all of the city. This is enormously time intensive, indeed six years on we are still completing the sixth regeneration framework, but the effort has been worth it.

Pilots

The second perspective came from our being a best-value pilot authority. For our best-value pilot we selected three wards in the city. One, by our standards, was relatively affluent. Another, by anyone's standards, was suffering severe deprivation, and a third was somewhere in between. These wards gave us a mix of housing types and tenures and a fair reflection of the population diversity of the city.

Essentially the pilots sought to build a profile of the ward through a range of research and survey techniques, to engage local residents in identifying their main concerns, and using that to inform how council services were delivered. For each of the three wards a volunteer council officer, each from a different departmental background, took on the role of ward co-ordinator and the leadership of the pilot at local level, with a capacity to develop and deliver new and different ways of delivering services tailored to each area.

Exploring community engagement was a key element of the pilot and showed enormous differences between the three areas. For example, while the residents of the more affluent area wanted good and timely information about what the council was doing, they had no desire to participate in determining how the council was run. In contrast, a significant number of residents in the most deprived ward (although still a minority) wanted to get involved.

A third perspective came from a 1999 review of the council's constitution carried out in anticipation of the legislative requirement for some form of executive/scrutiny split. A key concern of that review was the role of the ward councillor and the tools available to them to influence what the council did, and how well it did it, in the areas they represented. The review led to the ward co-ordination approach developed in our best value pilot being rolled out across the city.

Roll out

There were a number of elements to the roll out. First we adopted city council wards as an approximation of "neighbourhoods". Around this time, we repeated a process of neighbourhood mapping based on recognisable neighbourhoods, along the lines tried in the eighties but for just the two wards in the city covered by New Deal for Communities. The work here, though invaluable, is still unfinished because of the sheer number of neighbourhoods involved and demonstrates clearly that we simply do not have the resources to replicate it in every part of the city.

Second, there was a ward co-ordinator assisted by a ward support officer identified for each ward in the city. Ward support officers were full time but supporting more than one ward. Ward co-ordinators were senior staff often, but not always, from regeneration teams, who were expected to carry out ward co-ordination alongside their other duties. We were determined not to isolate ward co-ordination from mainstream service delivery.

Third, we established ward service co-ordination groups, bringing together ward

councillors, officers responsible for managing services delivered to ward, and usually community representatives, to do what the label says, co-ordinate council services delivered to the ward. Some wards with enormous numbers of community groups found other ways to involve residents rather than attending the ward service co-ordination meetings. Twice a year, a ward newsletter was delivered to every household in the ward giving information and inviting feedback.

Partnership

When we formally established our local strategic partnership, Ward Service Co-ordination was identified as the main link between the local and the city-wide levels of activity – in effect the ward LSP.

Three years on, with the support of colleagues from other public sector agencies, particularly the police and health, we carried out a major review of ward co-ordination, which led to a confirmation and strengthening of its fundamental role in the way we do business in Manchester.

The review led to each ward, within the context of a strategic regeneration framework, developing its own three-year, rolling ward plan. This was a plan about the ward as a whole, not just about council services delivered to it. The plan aims to identify key priorities for the neighbourhood wherever responsibility lay. Each ward plan was backed up with a delivery plan which for most ward co-ordination groups set the agenda for their quarterly meetings. I say "most" because there is sufficient devolution to allow each group to determine how it wants to work.

Tools

Each ward plan was required to be informed by a community engagement strategy. However, given the difference between wards identified in the best value pilot, as with other working methods we did not prescribe from the centre how community engagement should be carried out but, rather, we provided a tool-box of techniques to be used on a pick-and-mix basis.

It had to be done, but how was determined at the ward level. The content of ward newsletters has become less bureaucratic in tone and more relevant to everyday life but now aim to report on progress with the ward plan. In addition, ward service co-ordination groups will now have other service providers (including the voluntary sector) present and contributing.

Neighbourhood delivery poses the question as to how you can have local flexibility within a council-wide policy and budget framework and maintain democratic accountability.

Ward co-ordination in Manchester is far from perfect, but shows that that question can be answered and in a way that does help make the city a better place. It is now an entrenched part of life in Manchester and one that we fully intend to develop further.

Sir Richard Leese has been leader of Manchester City Council since 1996. He is president of Eurocities and is heavily involved in regeneration activity including being on the board of the East Manchester Urban Regeneration Company. He is chair of Manchester Airport Group's Shareholders' Committee

How we can learn from the Scottish experience

by David Donnison



Contributing from north of the border to a pamphlet that will be written and read mainly by the English, I have to start by reminding them that Scotland is a different country. The Scots still believe in government. People working for the central and local authorities and in the public service professions form a larger part of the labour force than they do south of the border. More Scots live in social rented housing and more send their children to state schools. The public services in Scotland contract out less of their work and rely less on private finance.

The Scots' greater trust in the state

There are good reasons for the Scots' greater trust in the state. One is that, in a smaller society, people know their colleagues and their politicians better. Peer-group pressures do not always guarantee good practice, but they work better here than in a society that is 10 times bigger, and the cruder disciplines of the market seem less useful. In a smaller country with a proportionately bigger state, do mobilised communities and loyalties rooted in neighbourhood play a weaker part in governance? That may be too complex a question to answer with certainty. But although parts of Glasgow and Dundee used to look and feel like cities of the former Soviet Union, many would argue that community-based patterns of governance have always been livelier in Scotland than in England.

Long before large-scale transfers of public housing to private landlords began, community-

based housing associations, largely managed by their residents, were set up all over Glasgow with strong support from the city council. Community councils have gained considerable influence in many parts of Scotland. Planning aid, set up by volunteers in the planning profession to help local communities grapple with the planning system, got off to an impressive start. Other community-based enterprises that owe nothing to the state also thrive. The proportion of people who play a musical instrument, often in ceilidh bands and less formal sessions in pubs and kitchens, is greater in Scotland's central belt than anywhere else in Britain.

Scotland's new parliament built on this tradition. From the start it encouraged petitions from any group wanting to talk to politicians. It set up a petitions committee to respond to them, which forwards the more significant appeals to relevant specialist committees, and the petitioners are invited to come and participate in that committee's discussion.

Communities have to get their act together

A Land Act has given local communities a right to register an interest in the land on which they live, or in just one building standing there. The owners then have to offer the community a first opportunity to buy the property if they ever decide to sell it. Communities seeking to use these rights have to get their act together, raise the money they need, and therefore prepare agreed business plans that show how they would use the property and meet the costs of developing and maintaining it. Growing numbers of communities are achieving that.

A Mental Health Act was passed, which is helping to move large numbers of hospital patients into the community, and transfer decisions about compulsory medication and confinement from the courts to specialist tribunals. To make these provisions work fairly for people with mental illness or learning disorders the act requires health and social work authorities to ensure that their patients and clients have the help of independent advocates who can enable them to say whatever they want to those on whom they depend (parents, employers and landlords as well as doctors, nurses and social workers). The nationwide network of agencies which has grown up to provide this free service relies heavily on recruiting, training and supporting volunteer advocates. In many places this has been a community-based enterprise, involving groups of volunteers and groups of patients, bringing spokesmen of both into the boards directing the agencies, and collectively seeking improvements to the services involved.

It was a historical accident that this service began by helping people with mental disorders. It cannot be confined to them. Already it is being extended in different ways in different places – to help frail and elderly people, homeless people, parents whose children have special educational needs, and others.

There are many examples of such community-based initiatives in Scotland, such as collective mediation between disorderly youngsters and local residents disturbed by their behaviour. There is also the campaign to eliminate religious bigotry and violence that Scotland's first minister and his executive are mounting with the help of football clubs, youth groups and others; and the "Bridges Project" which has mobilised employers to help refugees and asylum seekers find appropriate jobs.

Qualifications must be added to this optimistic story. As in all voluntary movements, the character and vigour of these initiatives vary greatly from place to place. They tend to work better in the remoter villages and small towns than in Scotland's biggest cities. Political control of those cities usually rests with the Labour

party, and Scottish socialism tends to rely on the state and be suspicious of voluntary agencies.

Highlanders have an even longer tradition of hostility towards authority of every kind, including the state. They have always had to work with their neighbours to cope with their own problems. That may explain why the directory of Scottish voluntary advocacy services lists more agencies (in relation to population) in the Highlands than anywhere else; why the powers offered by the Land Act have been mainly used in remote places; and why the National Lottery, which at first sent outreach workers to every part of Scotland to help people apply for its grants, soon withdrew them from the remoter communities because they found them so much better equipped for the task than the people in poorer city neighbourhoods.

Seven lessons from Scotland

Does the Scottish experience provide lessons that will help people throughout Britain? I will confine myself to seven.

First, community action, which is to make an impact on public policy, requires an intelligent and consistent response from the state. With no friends in the corridors of power it withers, or turns to other issues that evoke a warmer welcome. So community action, like voluntary service generally, thrives best where the state has invested most resources and thought hardest about its own priorities and strategies. It is not an alternative or a rival to the state. It is an essential collaborator.

Second, now that central government is belatedly rediscovering the importance of action taken at neighbourhood level, some people at the centre will see this as an opportunity to speak over the heads of civic leaders in local government and to erode their powers even further. They must be resisted. It is a more responsive, more community-based form of civic leadership that we need, embedding local government more deeply among the people it serves, not some alternative, competing layer of micro-politics.

Third, demands for public services are limitless.

How we can learn from the Scottish experience

There is no way in which the state, central or local, can meet all of them by hiring paid staff to do the job. Increasingly becoming an enabler rather than a direct provider, government will have to develop other strategies - many of them relying on volunteers. Our experience, in the difficult and fairly unglamorous work of advocacy for people with learning difficulties or mental illness, is that excellent volunteers come forward, and they bring us capacities that the paid professional may lack. They are less likely to become acculturated into accepting unattractive bureaucratic practices, more willing to challenge them: to assert that "it doesn't have to be like that".

A new profession is emerging

Officials in the services funding this work are sometimes uneasy about the numbers of volunteers involved and press the agencies on their payroll to become "more professional". We have to tell them that a new profession is emerging whose skills include a capacity to work with local communities and their volunteers, which means listening and responding to them as well as offering leadership and training. Some people, feeling this argument is getting a bit out of hand, will remind me that I would not want my cancer treated by briefly trained, unpaid, part-timers. This is, of course, true. But I would hope to find doctors who listen, who respond to my circumstances, needs and wishes, who help me decide on treatment rather than just prescribing for me, and who put me in touch with other patients who can support and advise me.

Fourth, every public service is learning - some faster than others - that it needs the help of its local communities to achieve its objectives. The police were among the first in this field. There are fire services that spend more on teaching people how to prevent fires than on putting them out. (The fact that arson in schools has in many places increased suggests, not that this is a mistaken strategy, but that they may be talking to the wrong members of the community. It also poses challenging questions about the reluctance of many schools to engage with the communities in which they stand.) Environmental

cleansing services might do better to spend more on persuading people not to drop litter than they spend on picking it up. It is the services that are, in the old-fashioned sense, most "professional" which have often been slowest to learn these lessons.

Fifth, when vulnerable people seek improvements in services to meet their own needs they are not just acting as selfish pressure groups. They bring insights to the table which ultimately help all of us. A group of people in Dumbarton who have learning difficulties were recently invited to help in training bus crews. They said: "remember that some of your passengers cannot run along the street to catch the bus; some may have difficulty mounting the step to board your bus; some will have difficulty handling money; some need time to sit down before you let in the clutch; and some may not know where to get off unless you shout the names of your stops". Which of us will not be grateful for bus crews trained in this way?

Sixth, I believe that it is very important to keep community-based initiatives flexible, innovative, experimental, and open to new ideas and new people. It is their sense that they are given considerable responsibility to work with colleagues, paid and unpaid, on the frontiers of practice in their field that attracts and retains such good people.

Seventh, the "academy", meaning research and higher education in general, has so far made little contribution to these developments. (None at all to advocacy for people with mental disorders.) In time, the universities must help, if only because exposure to such ideas will help them. They are a striking example of a service committed to expansion targets which cannot possibly be met by simply multiplying present teaching and staffing arrangements many times over. Moreover, no one can properly teach political science, medicine, law, social work and other subjects which deal with an evolving society unless they are aware of the developments discussed in this pamphlet.

But the universities' involvement must be cautious, modest and shrewd. If we end up with

a new profession of highly-trained, community-based, public service workers that can only be entered by people who belong to the right professional institute and have the right letters after their names - we shall have failed! And if students graduating from medical schools, law schools, planning schools and other parts of the university go forth to practice their professions without a thought for the communities in which they work, we shall have failed twice over!

Daniel Barenboim, speaking of music in this year's Reith lectures, offered us a philosophy that every profession should learn from. "Music", he said (I noted it, but do not have short-hand), "is something we try to do professionally. But it's not a profession. It's a way of life. There is no special niche, excluding all others, for what we do. It encompasses musical traditions of every kind, and welcomes everyone to share in it". Much the same could be said about healing, teaching, social work, law and other "ways of life".

Thanks to Geoff Fagan for help with an early draft of this article

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Local solutions to local problems will drive change

by Joe Montgomery



Localism has become the new orthodoxy amongst the main political parties, professionals and analysts. Government at all levels wants to devolve power to communities; and local people

consistently say that they are hungry for greater influence and control over decisions and services. Turning these ambitions into a new reality on the ground will take commitment and dedication, but we must seize the opportunity.

The government is committed to empowering local people to make the services they receive more responsive to local needs and to have influence over what happens in their community. To achieve this government will devolve power to local authorities and give citizens and communities the information and the tools they need to make a difference in their neighbourhoods.

In this article, I want to set out why neighbourhoods matter, to people and to government; the challenges faced by communities across the country; and the solutions that the government wants to encourage, working in partnership with local authorities and their citizens to devolve to the town hall and the wider communities.

Why neighbourhoods matter

In communities across the country – big and small, urban and rural – citizens are taking action to come up with local solutions to local problems. I'm privileged to have the chance to visit many such neighbourhoods and talk to people about what we can do to build on their successes.

Neighbourhoods matter because people have a strong interest in the issues that surround them and affect their day-to-day lives – the state of the streets and roads; the safety of the local parks and spaces in which children play; and the quality of local homes and shops. Home Office research found that 71% of people feel a very, or fairly strong, sense of belonging to their neighbourhood.

People know what the local problems are and usually have a good idea about what can be done to solve them. It's at neighbourhood level that people can get together and reach across different groupings to come up with solutions to local problems. They're prepared to put in the extra effort to get something done about the issues that are literally on their doorstep. In this way, neighbourhoods can act as nurseries of democracy, nurturing more active forms of participation in civic life and community cohesion.

But not everything can be solved at the neighbourhood level. Many issues require strategic action at the local authority, sub-regional or regional level. But it's at the neighbourhood level where many local services either meet or fail to meet people's expectations; it is in neighbourhoods where communities either come together or grow apart.

Challenges

The challenge we face is two-fold. First, we have to accelerate the improvements we have already started to generate in local public services. Despite great advances in recent years, public services are still not responsive enough in many areas, particularly for the most deprived people and places.

Second, we have to re-engage citizens with the institutions of government. Over the years, turnout in elections has declined and trust in both the professions and many institutions has been eroded, but people still have an appetite for getting involved in the issues that matter to them. A recent LGIU poll found that 73% of people were in favour of giving neighbourhoods more control over local services. A similar survey found that 55% of respondents would definitely be interested in being more involved in the decisions their councils make, with another 16% willing to get involved on the right issue.

To maintain improvements and re-engage people, we have to deliver real change in neighbourhoods. Our approach has been rooted in an appreciation of the importance of neighbourhoods and a desire to give people the tools to take action for themselves.

Since 1997, the government has invested unprecedented amounts of money in public services and in new initiatives to make a lasting difference in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods. The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal set out a new approach to tackling deprivation; working with and through local people rather than dictating what should be done. The New Deal for Communities (NDC) and the neighbourhood management programmes have made this agenda a reality on the ground – with impressive results on the quality of local services, the quality of life locally, and people's belief in their ability to make a difference. In neighbourhood management areas, the percentage of people who were satisfied with their area as a place went up from 71% in 2003 to 75% this year, although similar neighbourhoods that didn't have neighbourhood management saw this figure fall by 1%. The proportion of people who think they can influence decisions by local agencies also rose from 23% to 26%, the same as the national average. In NDC areas there was an 18% increase in those thinking the project had improved the area a great deal or a fair amount, from 33% to 51% over a similar period.

The debate about the importance of neighbourhoods is not new and, over time,

urban policy in particular has been increasingly focused on the neighbourhood level. The work of the Priority Estates Project on local housing management and tenant control, for example, was an early example of the model of community-centred renewal that we have promoted through the National Strategy. Consequently, as some of the contributors to this pamphlet have highlighted, governments talking about delegating power to neighbourhoods can provoke a sense of *déjà vu*.

Past governments have thought about ways to make sure services and decision-makers are responsive to local needs and local people, but stopped short of giving lay people, and 'ordinary' residents, real stewardship of major regeneration programmes. The NDC and neighbourhood management programmes mark a real shift from this approach and are starting to deliver positive results.

Much of this work is being 'mainstreamed' precisely because they have been able to harness the energy of local people in the co-production and co-governance of services. The success of the NDC programme in getting local communities on board to develop and deliver plans of action, which reflect local need – as reflected by a National Audit Office study of the programme in 2004 – has inspired local authorities and other projects to try out similar innovative approaches that go beyond traditional methods of consultation.

Strong local governance must be about more than electoral turnout rates – it has to be about citizens having a voice and being able to have their demands heard and acted on. Of course, the answer will not always be the one they want; but at least they will be confident people have listened and considered.

The solution

In a recent speech, Ruth Kelly spoke of the government's determination to become "instinctive localisers". To take this forward, the local government white paper sets out radical but practical steps to drive forward the next stage of devolution from the town hall and beyond to communities.

Local solutions to local problems will drive change

As more power and decisions are devolved to local government, local authorities will be able to do more to respond to their communities' demands. This will not be a "one size fits all" solution to devolution; the intention is to enable and create opportunities for people to take action – not mandate them.

Clearly, we have to be realistic about the time pressures that people are under in today's busy society. The Demos pamphlet on Everyday Democracy reminds us that people are too stretched to engage through conventional routes and that organisations need to adapt to more responsive ways of working.

We want to ensure that local services are responsive to people's needs with simple routes of redress or reform if they are failing. The white paper makes available new, flexible tools to councillors and communities to deliver real change in their neighbourhoods.

Decent information

People need decent information so that they can measure the success of local services and find out quickly what they can do to get a problem fixed. Where services are not working, we want to put in place clear mechanisms for redress – a community call for action, which will enable people to raise a local issue and get it addressed.

In some cases, people will want to go further and take action for themselves by, for example, taking on responsibility for the day-to-day management of their estate or taking over the running of a community hall. We will also make it easier for people to take up these opportunities.

It won't be easy. Neighbourhood devolution can sound warm and fuzzy, but it is in fact a challenging agenda, which raises complex issues. Concerns for equity, minimum service and efficiency standards and probity must of course be addressed in full.

We need to make sure that the wishes of the majority, or the most vocal, in an area do not drown out the needs and desires of other groups, by giving communities the tools to mediate and resolve differences. We have had to intervene before now where tendentious groups have, in

effect, 'captured' local initiatives in a way that goes against a natural sense of fairness.

There is also a need to ensure that the crucial role of councillors in acting as a leader of – and advocate for – their local communities is strengthened. Devolving beyond the town hall does not mean cutting local councillors out of the picture. Neighbourhoods, especially the poorest ones, need more advocacy and representation, not less.

We are at a tipping point in the debate. For the first time, central government, local authorities and communities agree on the need for greater devolution to neighbourhoods. Working together, we can take advantage of this unique opportunity.

But the challenge is growing as we speak. Earlier this year, research from Norwich Union claimed that 55% of us don't know our neighbours. Neighbourliness and cohesion need to be actively fostered rather than nostalgically lamented – they support the ordinary human values that make tolerance and extremism less likely to take hold. Our task is not to promote localism for its own sake, but to help local people to create the tolerance and sense of belonging that are the stuff from which sustainable communities are made.

Joe Montgomery became director general of the Places and Communities Group in October 2005, having joined DETR as director general of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit in March 2001. He was previously executive director for regeneration at Lewisham Council. He has extensive experience of grant-making and urban renewal from his work as assistant secretary to the Cadbury Trust; as leader of the government's Inner City Task Force (in Deptford); and as chief executive of one of the 'pathfinder' City Challenge urban regeneration companies

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Size matters in the challenges ahead

by Vivien Lowndes and Helen Sullivan



Attention to neighbourhoods may be relatively new, but the debate

about devolution and the contribution of small units to good governance has a long history. Conventionally, small-scale governance is associated with participation and responsiveness, while large-scale governance is linked with efficiency and equity. There is assumed to be a trade-off between democracy and delivery. But how relevant are these arguments in an era of multi-level, multi-factor and e-enabled governance? Do small units become more or less viable and/or attractive in this context?

In the spirit of "lest we forget", we look at what can be learned from the classic debates on devolution, and at the challenges which emerge in the context of the "new governance".

The case for neighbourhood governance

The civic rationale identifies opportunities for direct citizen participation and community involvement, and distils the insights of classical political theorists such as Mill, Rousseau and Tocqueville.[i] Neighbourhood units are more accessible and as they contain fewer citizens making direct participation is more feasible. Communication is also easier and citizens have incentives to engage because it is at the neighbourhood level that they consume many of the most important public services, and experience the issues most likely to mobilise them. Controversially, perhaps, neighbourhoods

are also more likely to encapsulate homogenous communities and to be characterised by shared values, beliefs and goals. Community cohesion is more likely to emerge as a result of voluntary compliance to informal norms, reducing the costs associated with official enforcement.

The social rationale points to the possibility of a citizen-centred approach to governance, building on the work of Fabians such as GDH Cole and contemporary commentators like John Stewart and Dick Atkinson.[ii] At the neighbourhood level, it is possible to see governance from the standpoint of the citizen – rather than the politician or the professional – and to design services and decision-making accordingly. Neighbourhood governance offers the best prospect for "joining-up" local action to provide a more integrated approach to citizen well-being. The neighbourhood is an important arena for innovation in the design of public services (for example around "life episodes" rather than professional demarcations) and of collaborative decision-making (through multi-agency and community-led partnerships). Neighbourhood arrangements have special value in addressing "wicked" policy challenges (such as urban regeneration), where there are particular benefits from a holistic and inclusive approach.

The political rationale focuses on improvements in the accessibility, responsiveness and accountability of decision-making, drawing on arguments made by Plato and continuously updated ever since (notably by American political scientist, Robert Dahl).[iii] Citizens are able to access neighbourhood governance more easily. Having first-hand experience and knowledge

of the issues at stake, citizens are able to make informed inputs into policy-making. Leaders at neighbourhood level are more likely to be responsive to citizen views, and to have direct experience of key issues. Leaders are more likely to be known to citizens and they have more opportunities to communicate. Citizens are better able to hold leaders and service-deliverers to account because their deliberations and actions are more visible, as are the consequences of their decision-making.

The economic rationale stresses efficiency and effectiveness gains in local service delivery. Neighbourhood units are better able to identify and limit waste in organisational processes; they are also better placed to identify diverse citizen needs and provide appropriate services. Neighbourhood governance can exploit economies of scope – the benefits of “bundling” services (including creative synergies and shared backroom functions) – in a world in which traditional economies of scale may be reducing in significance (with the advent of e-government and a mixed economy of provision). Small units of governance are potentially more efficient than larger ones (according to the famous Tiebout hypothesis) because of the increased transparency of the tax/service deal and the greater possibilities for exit (due to a larger number of jurisdictions). [iv]

Neighbourhood government is, in short, more susceptible to market-style forms of “bottom-up accountability”.

Organising neighbourhood governance

Different aspects of government policy resonate with each of the four rationales: civil renewal (civic); neighbourhood renewal (social); local government modernisation (political); and neighbourhood management (economic). “New localism” or “double devolution” draws on elements of all four rationales and gets close to specifying a comprehensive case for neighbourhood governance. We still don’t know how much of this agenda will be practiced (particularly given New Labour’s centralising pedigree), but it is important to consider the institutional forms that could bring transition.

Table 1 presents four ideal types of neighbourhood governance. Ideal types are based on, but are not the same as, real-life structures and processes; they accentuate certain features in seeking to bring conceptual order to messy realities. Ideal types help us to understand the link between purpose and institutional design. The point is to clarify the scope for, and dimensions of, choice in governance arrangements – even if combinations or hybrids are more common (and appropriate) on the ground, in the context of pragmatic and political considerations.

Table 1: Forms of neighbourhood governance: four ideal types

	Neighbourhood empowerment	Neighbourhood partnership	Neighbourhood government	Neighbourhood management
Primary rationale	Civic	Social	Political	Economic
Key objectives	Active citizens and cohesive communities	Citizen well-being and regeneration	Responsive and accountable decision-making	More effective local service delivery
Democratic device	Participatory democracy	Stakeholder democracy	Representative democracy	Market democracy
Citizen role	Citizen: voice	Partner: loyalty	Elector: vote	Consumer: choice
Leadership role	Animateur, enabler	Broker, chair	Councillor, mini-mayor	Entrepreneur, director
Institutional forms	Forums, co-production	Service board, mini-LSP	Town councils, area committees	Contracts charters

What are the challenges?

The civic rationale pointed out that citizens are, in principle, more easily able to participate in neighbourhood-level governance. But citizens' scope of control – the services, issues and resources that they are able to influence – is likely to be less than for “higher” levels of governance. Could this lead to citizen dissatisfaction, and further alienation, in the context of raised expectations? Indeed, we already know that citizens are more likely to vote in national than local elections, recognising that this is where the big decisions are made. Does neighbourhood governance imply a trade-off between the extent of participation and the scope of control?

The smaller a unit of governance, the smaller the pool of citizens from which representatives and leaders can be recruited. The range of skills and experience is likely to be less, which may impact on the capacity of citizens to mobilise campaigns and to hold representatives to account. Indeed, critics of the government's current devolution agenda question whether there is any appetite among citizens for more participation at the neighbourhood level, arguing that only “Trots” or busybodies will come forward. The recruitment of representatives may also be harder because party systems are less well developed, there are fewer and less diverse community organisations, and there is little media coverage of local politics. In comparison with larger units, is neighbourhood governance likely to attract leaders (and representatives) of lower calibre given the small pool from which they're drawn? Does neighbourhood governance imply a trade-off between accessibility and competence?

The relationship between neighbourhoods, citizen homogeneity and community cohesion presents significant governance challenges, particularly in a society in which diversity is increasing and may be positively valued (for both economic and socio-cultural reasons). The idea of neighbourhood governance rests heavily on the notion of shared values and identities. However, the smaller and more homogenous the unit of governance, the easier it is for elites to dominate,

and the harder it is for diverging views to be expressed and accommodated. When conflict does break out at the neighbourhood level, it can be particularly acrimonious.

Of course, no community is ever entirely homogenous, but those who identify themselves as “different” (or are identified as such by others) may be especially isolated within a neighbourhood setting. As the size of governance units decreases, so too does the population of community associations and interest groups, contributing to a lack of diversity within political debate. Larger units provide more opportunities for minorities to express and protect their interests and identities, and politicians have greater incentives to understand and respond to these. Experiments in the 1980s with neighbourhood decentralisation in multi-ethnic areas provided evidence of the marginalisation of minorities, most notably in the London borough of Tower Hamlets.[v] Given patterns of residential segregation in our towns and cities, we need to be aware that neighbourhood governance could become the institutional expression of “parallel lives,” lived by different ethnic communities. Does neighbourhood governance imply a trade-off between cohesion and pluralism?

Devolution to neighbourhoods implies increased differentiation in public service delivery across areas. This brings with it two potential challenges:

- First, neighbourhood governance could compound what the political scientist LJ Sharpe calls the “geography of inequity”, and militate against the redistribution of resources between areas.[vi] If neighbourhoods are to draw more on their own resources – in terms of human, social and economic capital – what is the fate of communities that lack resources?

- Second, neighbourhood governance is associated with more diversity in service provision, potentially affecting both the range and quality of local services. Are we prepared to tolerate greater variation in standards – from parks to child protection?

The situation is, of course, further complicated

if neighbourhoods gain revenue-raising powers: residents (or some sections of the community) may not want to pay for certain existing services, or prefer a reduction in service levels with associated savings. If neighbourhood governance provides the services that local residents want, does it matter that this package might be different from that available to the next-door community? Does neighbourhood governance imply a trade-off between local choice and equity?

Conclusion

Institutional designers no longer face a trade-off between democracy and delivery. Conceptions and practices of citizenship have changed in the context of the "new governance", as have the technical limits to delivery. Non-local identities and causes, coupled with new media and technologies, facilitate citizen participation across large jurisdictions. At the same time, small units can be efficient and effective commissions of services in an environment of e-procurement and multi-level, multi-sector partnerships.

In developing neighbourhood models, we face instead a series of questions about the underlying purposes and priorities of community governance. There is a need to establish clearly the rationale, or mix of rationales, for any scheme of neighbourhood governance. Clarifying the link between purpose and institutional design is vital in confronting the challenges faced by neighbourhood governance – in relation to capacity, competence, diversity and equity. The trade-offs we have discussed can be managed – or minimised – if we are clear about purpose and also prepared to combine creatively, different elements of the institutional designs presented in **table 1**.

So, despite the new governance environment, the old advice is the best. As Robert Dahl tells us, there is no optimal size for units of governance: different problems require political units of different sizes. [vii] The task for institutional designers is to establish the strengths and limitations of different units and to specify the ways in which they can be best combined to prevent governance failure. Neighbourhoods can't do everything. We need to concentrate on

what they are best placed to do and on how to manage the inevitable trade-offs they throw up. We can go as low as we like – but we need to know why we are going there, and what the costs as well as the benefits might be.

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An extended version of the argument presented here will appear in the journal, Public Administration, in 2007

Democracy, neighbourhoods and government

by Lucy de Groot and Jane Foot



A great deal of "new" public policy has been tried before somewhere. John

Benington's (page 8) introduction to this pamphlet reminds us of the experiences of neighbourhood working over the past 30 years, and the lessons for current policy and operational practice. Many of our contributors have reflected on their personal experiences of neighbourhood working and the lessons they have taken from it as politicians and practitioners, some have described how they are approaching neighbourhoods in the light of their own experiences as activists in the past. Grounding us in the historic debates on devolution, Vivien Lowndes and Helen Sullivan (page 54) offer a framework to help with the challenges. This pamphlet offers a rich body of wisdom to draw on.

Devolution to neighbourhoods and communities is a hugely significant element in the renewal of local government and local democracy. It emphasises the council's role as the democratic leader in our localities and communities. But it also challenges us to embed democratic processes in the way we do things and to promote a "culture of democracy" and mutual respect. As David Donnison (page 46) says, neighbourhood engagement has to become a "way of life".

We need clear thinking about the relations between government, central and local, democracy and neighbourhoods. We need to

be realistic as we identify "places" to take on the devolved powers and resources that we are not crystallising difference and competition for resources. Neighbourhoods are about more than making choices about services - they are about tackling the wicked and intractable problems that affect well-being. And our commitment should be that devolution is about revitalising democracy and local government, not circumventing it.

The interaction between government and neighbourhoods

While the advocates of devolution point to England's unique history of centralisation, there have also been many smaller area-based initiatives and programmes running in parallel (John Benington, Sean Baine and others have mentioned many). Parishes, town councils, area forums and area committees have come and (sometimes) gone. Many councils have encouraged people to participate directly in decision-making. But they have fallen short of neighbourhood empowerment, and not necessarily contributed to the vitality of local democracy.

One symptom of centralisation has been the extent of central control and regulation, which the government's public services reforms have exacerbated. Local or neighbourhood projects have for the most part been based on a national "analysis" of the problems and solutions, funded by and accountable to ministers. Double devolution represents a recognition that central command and control cannot effectively tackle local issues, even through arm's-length projects located in neighbourhoods. It moves the "centre

of gravity" to the local level, as John Benington has suggested.

Without a constitutional settlement between national and local government, central government has tended to encroach on local choice and demonstrated a lack of respect for local democracy. The Lyons Inquiry into "the role, functions and finance" of local government has argued for a rebalancing of this relationship and much greater freedom for local choice and variation. With local government given greater freedom of decision-making, there is more reason for local communities to engage in governance and debate.

But instead of seeing different outcomes from local decision-making as a strength, we have seen, according to Sir Michael Lyons, a "preoccupation with postcode lotteries". There is a danger that the same will be true when neighbourhoods opt for different ways of doing things. A strong and confident council – and councillors, too, as Balraj Sandhu (page 30) reminds us here can stand up for difference, can moderate conflict and uphold important values. Vivien Lowndes and Helen Sullivan talk about the "geography of inequity". Jane Roberts (page 39) writes here about the uneven spread of capacity between different communities. Equally, as Sue Goss (page 19) and Balraj Sandhu say, we should not romanticise community politics and neighbourhood representation.

What are neighbourhoods good for?

Comparing the different manifestations of community empowerment over the past 30 years in John Benington's introduction, we were struck by the different conceptual frameworks for neighbourhood working.

The Community Development Project (CDP) and similar initiatives in the 1970s were located specifically in poor and deprived areas, working with grassroots organisations to demand resources (for example, play schemes and child care). Self-help community projects filled in the gaps of state provision, or were set up in opposition to the paternalism of local services. Women's aid, tenants co-ops and food co-ops

modelled different ways of doing things, but they also wanted influence over housing and jobs that could not be resolved locally.

By the late 1970s and the 1980s, the initiative was coming from within councils. Monolithic and paternalistic services were decentralised to foster a more customer responsive and accessible approach. Tower Hamlets, Walsall and Islington in particular pioneered this "customer care" ethic. They were ambitious: the whole borough was included, and all services – especially the personal services such as housing and social services – were decentralised. Councils were investing in outreach and community development to improve accessibility. As Sean Baine (page 22) tells us in this pamphlet, in Tower Hamlets each area's mini town hall was controlled by the majority councillors in the neighbourhood, irrespective of the party in control of the borough.

New economic opportunities

By the 1990s, consumers, competition and markets were dominant and producers were the main focus of reform. The role of consumer was privileged over citizen or community member. Service users were encouraged to be more active consumers, assertive in their demands for better services. Individuals would benefit from new economic opportunities, and move out of poverty and often out of the area, undermining sustainable community regeneration.

Public policy is now focused on the "wicked issues" of crime, health, worklessness, educational achievement, public behaviour and, most topically, social cohesion. These are issues that not only need other public agencies to be partners, but also – as David Donnison (page 46) points out – "the state needs communities" to engage as partners and citizens.

Neighbourhood governance contains the notions of co-production and social capital. Without the active involvement of families and neighbourhoods, and a positive value put on sustaining networks and neighbourliness, we cannot achieve outcomes such as better health or a greater sense of security. Participative

processes do more than consult – they stimulate dialogue about priorities and help communities to establish links across community boundaries. Devolution is not only about new forms of management and decision-making, or greater choice of services – however welcome those changes are. Neighbourhood governance is crucially about enabling citizens and communities to engage alongside councils to improve well-being for all.

Counter pressures against localism

As in the past, there are also strong counter pressures against localism, diversity and variation. Government's thinking about efficiency prioritises the standardisation of services, bulk purchase, economies of scale and technology-driven solutions. The current approach to public service reform talks about users and customers but seldom about communities or neighbourhoods. Housing, as Bob Brett (page 34) tells us, having been ahead of the wave, with the break up of monolithic municipal housing and tenant management, is now under pressure from government to consolidate into larger and more distant organisations. Housing associations are losing their ability to engage with tenants and partners, one of the original rationale's for the break up of municipal landlords. The irony being, as Brett describes, that the job of community management requires a very local scale.

While each cycle of decentralisation and local working leaves its mark, there is a remarkable correlation between the places where the CDPs were located 30 years ago and the NRU areas. Has the investment in regenerating these areas not worked because power was not devolved sufficiently, or because devolution does not deal with systemic economic and social issues?

A sense of place is complex and fluid

Lyons promotes the strategic role for local government as "place-shaper", which he says includes "building and shaping local identity". The LGA has also focused on the leadership of places and communities as central to the modern

role of local government.

Joe Montgomery (page 50) outlines for us what the government wants to achieve with its latest policies. This is complex territory.

Neighbourhoods policy is tending to develop separately from the place-shaping role. But several of the essays published in this pamphlet raise the problematic nature of defining "the place where they live" as the basis for engagement and dialogue, as well as potentially differential services. As John Foster (page 41) describes it, neighbourhoods are not about drawing lines on maps as an administrative exercise. Different spatial levels are appropriate for different decisions and issues.

As Herman Ouseley (page 26) and Sean Baine (page 22) point out, the activism of the 1970s was rooted in struggles about place and the physical infrastructure – who would get housed and where? Place shaping, whether in those areas facing housing market renewal challenges or growth pressures, will involve balancing competing interests all with a sense of entitlement and belonging. As Sue Goss (page 19) says – there is no longer one community but many, and inequalities are increasingly conspicuous.

Sense of place and belonging is complex: people may not feel they have a stake in where they live, and communities of interest or identity will be much more important than geography for them (see Balraj Sandhu's essay, page 30). The pace of population movements, national and international is now a key feature in both rural and urban areas. Communities are in flux in terms of identity and place of origin, but also because of social changes resulting from the housing market, age and class. So are places: as John Foster (page 41) says "one planning decision can alter the size and composition of a neighbourhood within months". Some areas – particularly London and some other cities – have traditionally been places in which people are in transit; low-cost housing and a buoyant economy offers an entry point from which people quickly move on. Some new places, for example East Anglia, Lincolnshire and the south-west, are

experiencing migration of seasonal agricultural workers or wealthy second homers with only limited stake in the community. Other places, such as Liverpool or some remoter rural areas, struggle to hang on to their young people. The rate and scale of this population churn is a major feature of local life. What do place-based governance and choice arrangements mean in this context?

The interaction between community cohesion and devolution to geographical neighbourhoods remains a major concern. If geographical segregation and separate lives become "fixed" by neighbourhood structures and decision-making, this can lead to conflict over resources and to the invisibility of minority groups within an otherwise homogenous population. Stronger communities may not welcome outsiders. Communities without a strong identity may not have the critical mass to argue for resources. Unpopular groups can get left out altogether. There are tensions here for many councils. Do they maintain a strong centre that can uphold core values and promote cohesion between places and communities? Or should they "let go" and allow the variations of place-based allocation of resources and power. At the very least, the ways in which we devolve resources and powers should not sharpen the differences between groups, but nor should they get in the way of communities taking ownership of the choices and solutions.

So what does this pamphlet tell us ?

One key lesson is that this all takes time. We need to plan for a realistic timescale for the change in communities and voluntary sector groups, in councillors' representation role and in organisational practice. Sue Goss talks about this change taking "decades not years". John Foster, David McNulty, Jane Roberts and Sir Richard Leese are all talking about a long-standing investment of time and energy. Changing attitudes is critical here – far more than structures, and skills, which can be learned. Without it we will not see the creativity and reflexive practice that will lead to the kind of

transformation of organisations and decision-makers, which is necessary.

Even more than before, the challenge of building voice and choice from the bottom up is critical to the sustainability of neighbourhood working. If people do not believe it is worthwhile getting involved, they won't. In John Foster's words, the "self-appointed voice gatekeepers" will dominate. The success of tenant management organisations shows that self-confident and well-supported residents can manage their homes and environments.

Neighbourhood working and the participation of residents and communities are not an alternative to elected councillors taking decisions. Participative and representative democracy are interdependent and in Jane Roberts' words: councils need to take "a fluid and dynamic approach". Devolution should, and could, result in an enhanced role for councillors. Councillors know they need good relationships with community groups if they are to be effective in the council. Neighbourhood working will require them to develop new groups, challenge different interests, and support open debate and negotiation. The demands and expectations on local councillors are changing and this is as much an issue for the political parties as it is for local government.

In turn, community and neighbourhood organisations and forums need elected councils who have the credibility and legitimacy to take the difficult decisions: balancing different needs, protecting core values of equality, speaking up for unpopular groups, and developing long-term strategies that can make the most of the public resources. These are all roles for a legitimate representative democracy.

Local councils must expand democratic processes to take account of the new circumstances, nationally, locally and globally. They have to be willing to give away powers and challenge those that won't, while retaining responsibility for the overall well-being of the locality. This is the life-blood of vibrant local government, and makes the case for a transformed settlement between central and local government.

Democracy, neighbourhoods and government

Jane Foot was a community worker for many years, and is now an independent policy advisor and researcher. Recently she has been advising the IDeA on neighbourhoods and devolution. She has worked with many local authorities, specialising in strategic policy development, associated with their community leadership and engagement role

Lucy de Groot has been executive director of the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) for the past three years and before that was chief executive of Bristol City Council and director of public services at the Treasury. She spent 10 years in her early career in the voluntary and community sector, including four years in the 1970s working for the tenants of Holloway Tenants Co-operative in the "neighbourhood" of north Islington

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This year the IDeA commissioned independent research into neighbourhood working that showed that there were clear benefits from:

- involving local people at a neighbourhood level in the selection of service providers
- service providers engaging with each other at a neighbourhood level
- delivering some services in a neighbourhood or in a more localised way.

The IDeA works for local government improvement so councils can serve people and places better. To find out more about our work on neighbourhoods, devolution and communities, including several innovative council case studies, visit the IDeA Knowledge website.

www.idea.gov.uk