

North West Futures

Workshop B Neighbourhood Governance and community engagement: making it work?

Facilitator: Professor Gerry Stoker, Co-Director IPEG, University of Manchester

Speakers: Anna Randle, Head of Policy, New Local Government Network

Andy Zuntz: Executive Director, Rochdale Borough Council

(Notes for both the speakers' presentations were included in the conference information pack)

Summarised notes on audience contributions and responses from panel:

Where possible these have been attributed to the speaker but this has not been possible throughout

Audience member:

Responding to comments made by Andy Zuntz about how structures for community participation can be used by extremists to achieve a platform for the expression of their views. For example, a BNP member being elected onto the board of Heywood New Deal for Communities.

- Although there was not widespread public awareness about the election of this individual, many community groups, churches, groups from the Asian communities, trade unions did come together to campaign against the election of a BNP member onto this board. Eventually the campaign was effective and this individual stepped down.
- It is often the low level visible initiatives that have most impact and create most interest and awareness amongst the wider community. For example, Street Care Team in Heywood. 'Quick wins' particularly on issues about the physical environment, so relieving traffic congestion, street cleaning etc can be very valuable

Audience member:

- Capacity building is inherently a difficult and long term strategy.
- However, community development is necessary and often more important than physical improvements

Mr. Jim Carr, Chief Executive, Preston City Council

Responding to comments made by Anna Randle about no 'one size fits all' model for community engagement and neighbourhood governance rather we should strive towards 'different arrangements, for different areas and different aims'

- Such a multiplicity of structures may be difficult for the wider public to understand and access and in fact may prove confusing
- A clear structure and line of accountability has to be maintained
- Structures need integrity
- There needs to be a compromise between creating responsive structures and creating structures that makes sense across the borough
- So governance structures need to be joined up

Andy responded, accepting the need for transparent governance structures. However, local government often seems to unintentionally deceive people about this, there is a need to establish clear links and 'joined up' governance across local authorities. However, this is often an evolutionary process; it is not something that can happen overnight. It is not rational and is often difficult to establish.

Anna responded by asserting the opportunity to tailor structures to needs and not to simply impose a model of governance on an area where it may be inappropriate. It is however important to maintain a 'line of sight' and for structures to be clear.

Amanda Bickerton, Community Development Worker, Salford CVS

Responding to comments made by Anna Randle about ODPM's view of elected councillors as 'neighbourhood champions'

- Many people have disengaged with party politics, but continue to engage in local issues and concerns
- Yet, councillors are still elected primarily on a party political basis
- How far is the role of party politics in local government and now therefore in an era of participative governance sustainable?
- Do councillors have the necessary skill base or willingness to take on this role?

Anna responded that the role of councillors is and will continue to be central to this agenda and is not an attempt by the government to bypass councillors.

Audience member:

- In moving towards neighbourhood governance structures, we first need to clarify what we mean by neighbourhoods?
- Many people living in a given area have very different constructions about their neighbourhood and its role and function
- 'Neighbourhood' seems to pre-suppose social cohesiveness but, we need to recognise that currently people have very real fears about engaging with different groups in their neighbourhoods- so bonding but often not bridging social capital
- Do people want mixed communities or neighbourhoods? Mixed in many senses of the word: ethnicity, religion, age, housing tenure
- How can greater social cohesiveness be achieved?
- Is there a role here for local government in encouraging the sharing and exchange of resources?

Anna responded by asserting that neighbourhood governance structures can often be facilitators of social cohesion and we can and should think positively about the opportunities that such low level working can bring.

Mr. Ben McCall, Social Enterprise Network:

- How do we achieve participative governance?
- Participative governance involves compromise and reconciling often conflicting viewpoints
- There is a need a mediator, someone to play a brokerage role in this?
- Should this be the role for local councillors? Balancing community, local government and key stakeholder views
- Councillors need an appropriate skill base to take on this role

Cllr. Brian Millard, Leader of Council. Stockport Council

- On the question of the emergence of community leaders, it is often difficult to persuade people to come forward for election, for example on parish councils.
- People are often willing to become involved on a single issue basis but not on a sustained basis, is this problematic for a more participative governance agenda?
- It seems that councillors have an important role to play in this agenda, the brokerage role mentioned earlier, balancing community and political aims, local versus strategic agendas
- However, interest in single issue politics does not seem to translate, as it once did, into sustained interest in politics
- Mechanisms are needed to encourage people to stand as councillors
- However, people often do not seem conventional political involvement as a means of achieving their aims.

Sue Thornton, Township Governance, Rochdale MBC

- The discussion so far has not touched on the intensive time commitments that this sort of community development and participative work requires
- A sustainable base for community involvement is inherently a long term, intensive and often difficult commitment to manage

Donna Bradshaw, CPPM

- In working towards community cohesion and participative governance it is important not to lose sight of the levels and forms of accountability; evaluation; commissioning of public services
- It seems that we will need some sort of coordination to balance local and strategic priorities

Andy responded by accepting that accountability and evaluation are difficult to manage. Rochdale employs a consultation and endorsement process to give some democratic weight to decision making. Evaluation needs to be an ongoing process, it should not be retrospective but should run in parallel.

Ms. Christine Leeson, Communications and Informations Manager, Probation Boards Association

- It is important in these processes of regeneration and renewal and we attempt to manage the expectations of all those involved
- Often expectations are conflicting and contradictory and are not fully explored at the start of the process. As such, the wider aim is undermined and the opportunity to move forward is lost

Gerry Stoker, IPEG

- Politics is the process by which we determine resource distribution
- It should be recognised that this is a difficult and often disappointing process
- But it is better than other options (autocracy, technocracy, violence etc)
- By devolving to local levels, people can be given the opportunity to become involved in politics and this will hopefully manage expectations about what politics can offer and how difficult it can be

Audience member:

- Can anyone put forward any benchmarks for measuring community involvement and its effectiveness or impact?

Audience member:

- The government seem to be pushing a mayoral agenda, does this not conflict with ideas of devolved and decentralised decision making and more participative governance?

Audience member:

- Funding is often an important facilitator of partnership working and of community engagement.
- Money can often bring people in where it would be very difficult to achieve similar levels of participation without it
- People need to be heard as well as listened to (responded to), more effective mechanisms and reasons for people to be involved need to be developed

Amanda Bickerton, Community Development Worker, Salford CVS

- To return again to the party political question, it is not that people have lost interest in political issues but people certainly have lost interest in political parties
- Councillors are however, still tied up in with the party system

- Maybe we need to forge a 'new politics'?

Gerry Stoker, IPEG

- Are we trying to simply enhance and encourage more engagement or is this part of a far more substantive shift in the nature of our democracy?
- With the question of councillors, there of course comes the question of quality
- Unfortunately, the poorest wards and poorest people often have the poorest councillors
- Issues of skills, interest and capacity building need to be addressed

Audience member:

- A central theme of this discussion seems to be representative vs. participative forms of democracy
- We need to go beyond consultation and towards empowerment

Mr. Ben McCall, Social Enterprise Network:

- It should be recognised that there are far more radical measures and tools that could be employed to look at these questions, for example the participatory budgeting, Porto Allegre, Brazil

Anna Randle, NLGN

- By encouraging people to be involved in participative structures, people will become more interested in being involved in representative structures. That link is not yet there, but it is an optimistic hope
- We do not have to conceive of representative and participative as an either/or question

Andy Zuntz, Rochdale MBC

- Community participation should not be an add on or a specialism but it should be mainstreamed into every activity of local government as part of the culture and the way of working