Working in neighbourhoods in Bradford

An interim summary of findings from the JRF Bradford programme: *Working in neighbourhoods* project

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April 2011

This report describes progress, gaps and future opportunities in neighbourhood working in Bradford. Devolved decision-making and neighbourhood working have evolved over 20 years. Neighbourhood working is a way to deal with diversity between places, and take account of local priorities. This report examines how current policy on localism and the Big Society presents opportunities and risks for neighbourhood working. It looks at debates about how to create more empowering relationships between citizens and public sector organisations.

The report:

- assesses the contributions that neighbourhood working has made to more active citizenship and the improvement of public services and neighbourhoods;

- identifies gaps and tensions in neighbourhood working, and explores broader issues of transformation in relationships between the public sector and citizens;

- looks at the roles neighbourhood working plays in developing devolution of decisions to neighbourhoods;

- discusses how localism and the Big Society policies offer opportunities and risks for neighbourhood working.

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Devolved decision-making and neighbourhood working has been evolving in Bradford and nationally over at least 20 years. It is one way of dealing with diversity between places, and takes account of neighbourhood need and priorities. Bradford is still grappling with how to devolve further, and maximise the opportunities in devolution while minimising the risks.

Bradford's neighbourhood working has been restructured to create a more viable vehicle for delivering on local plans, through ward-focused officers and multi-agency teams. Although more finessing is needed, these structures are already delivering locality planning, opportunities for community decision-making and self-help, improved services, and some active citizenship. This fits well with the current localism and decentralisation agenda.

Citizens can and do participate in a wide range of active citizenship and activities. Aspects of the Big Society already exist in Bradford, although more in some places than others, and more on some civic activities than others. Where neighbourhood working works with what already exists, using creative approaches to engagement, it can encourage more citizens to play an active role. There is some way yet to go in local government to develop the understanding and innovations in approach needed.

Existing differences between neighbourhoods in levels of community activity and capacity suggest that some communities need more from the state than others. Many Big Society and active citizenship activities are organised by Bradfordians without state support. Big Society is not necessarily small government, but a different role for government.

What is needed in Bradford, but extremely hard to achieve, is a more transparent debate over who gets what, and what citizens accept as being fair between places with different needs. Elected members find it challenging to manage debates in their wards on these complex and often controversial questions. Neighbourhood working needs a strong strategic centre to broker between neighbourhoods in the interests of the whole local authority area.

Small-scale, informal activities are the most attractive to the majority; only a minority of citizens and neighbourhoods have the desire or capacity to take on major roles in the large-scale delivery of services.

However, where there are voluntary and community organisations willing to take on these roles, there is still a lingering reluctance from some, but not all, in the public sector to hand over control. This reluctance is sometimes not helped by the lack of a hard evidence base for the voluntary sector's argument about its own effectiveness, and perceptions of lack of inclusiveness in some community centres.

In Bradford, as in local government more widely, there is acknowledgement of the need for fundamental transformation of the relationship between the state and citizen. Thoroughgoing cultural change is needed in public sector organisations to make sure that public services help citizens to do and engage more, rather than feel disempowered.

Current national policy offers many positive opportunities to continue devolving down to neighbourhoods and promoting active citizenship. But the possible outcomes are unclear at the moment. Nationally there are concerns about inequalities between neighbourhoods, and that public spending reductions may undermine the delivery capacity that makes neighbourhood working effective. Bradford Metropolitan District Council has reinforced its commitment to neighbourhood working in its budget decisions.

Introduction and background to the *Working in neighbourhoods* project

In 2004, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) made a ten-year commitment to working with the city and people of Bradford, as part of its longstanding commitment to addressing poverty and disadvantage. In 2010–11, JRF is running a project on *Working in neighbourhoods* (WIN), which brings together an action learning network (ALN) of residents, volunteers, elected members, officers and professionals. The ALN meets every six to eight weeks, and focuses on how to adapt and improve practice in neighbourhood working across the district, as well as share learning and celebrate success. There are also opportunities to learn from practice in other parts of the UK and explore their application in Bradford. This interim report is based on:

- a desk review of relevant documentation, e.g. Bradford's Sustainable Community Strategy;

- 45 interviews with key Bradford stakeholders not directly participating in the ALN (36 interviews while developing the brief for the project, and nine interviews at the mid-point for the project);

- discussion and feedback from six ALN sessions between March and November 2010;

- visits to three of Bradford's five neighbourhood working areas between July and November 2010. The visits involved interviews with council officers, community and voluntary organisations, and elected members; tours in the neighbourhoods; observations of meetings.

1 Neighbourhood working in Bradford

Bradford Metropolitan District Council (MDC) is a local authority with a large, young and rapidly growing population of around 500,000 people. It is an extremely diverse area with a thriving urban centre in the city of Bradford, but including many rural villages. Two-thirds of the area is classified as rural and one-third as urban, although the majority of people live in the urban centres. It is also ethnically diverse, with a minority ethnic population of 26 per cent in 2007, and diverse in other ways. It contains areas of affluence; for example the rural villages around Ilkley are in the 15 per cent least deprived wards in the country, but 40 per cent of the district's population are in the 20 per cent most deprived areas in the country. The gap between the most and the least deprived areas in Bradford is the largest in the country (Bradford MDC, 2010).

There are also significant differences between neighbourhoods in their levels of community strength, capacity and engagement. There are many measures of the strengths and capacities of a neighbourhood or community, for example some neighbourhoods which experience severe socio-economic problems nevertheless generate a powerful sense of loyalty in their residents, 'pulling together' to tackle problems. Nationally in 2008–09, in the 60 per cent most deprived areas, there were still between half and two-thirds who felt that people in their neighbourhood would pull together to improve it, against an average of 67 per cent for all areas (Lloyd, 2010). The Bradford district has a history of vibrant associational community activity. More affluent neighbourhoods are more likely to be more ethnically and culturally homogeneous, and more rural. In these places, there are higher levels of community capacity, thriving community and democratic activity, mutual aid and strong within-group ties, and fewer community divisions or tensions.

These strengths are generated in a more 'organic' way than in the less affluent neighbourhoods. Less affluent neighbourhoods are more likely to be more ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, and more urban. In these places, there are examples of community self-help, such as community associations, community centres, churches and sports bodies. There are examples of mutual aid, and informal social networks, such as faith communities, with a good level of provision of community facilities in many deprived neighbourhoods, and some involvement in decision-making. Groups in those areas have a track record of lobbying. However, overall in less affluent areas there are lower levels of community activity and community capacity, and more community divisions or tensions. Active citizenship is more reliant on support from paid professionals to initiate, facilitate and sustain activities.

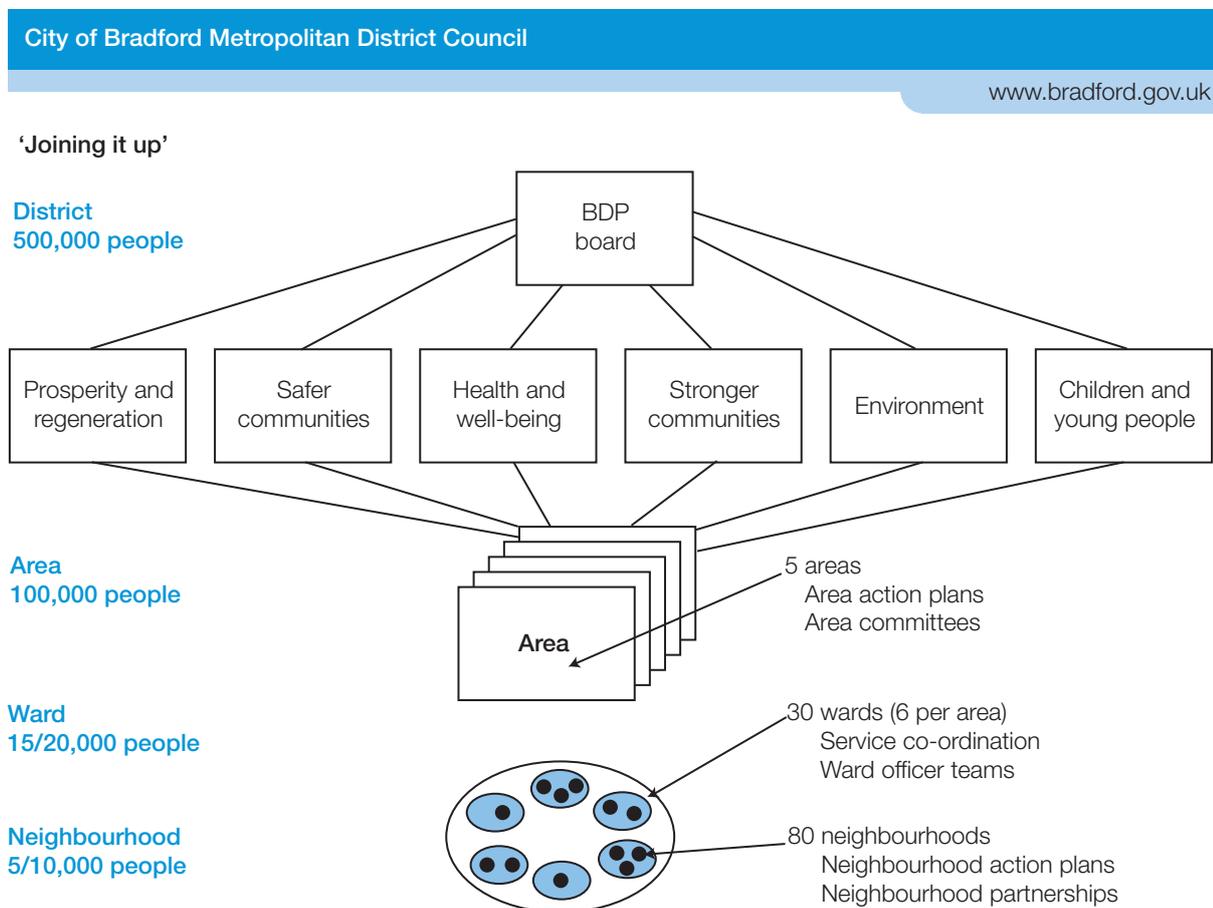## Context for neighbourhood working

The diversity in the district is one reason why the local authority decided to devolve budgets for some services to area level, and have area and ward co-ordination. Bradford MDC has a long history of working in neighbourhoods, for example introducing area panels and neighbourhood forums in the early 1990s. The council's structures have evolved over the last 20 years. There have been area initiatives in some deprived neighbourhoods, including the community-led company Bradford Trident in West Bowling between 1999 and 2010, under the New Deal for Communities, and neighbourhood management through the Streets Ahead initiative in five areas between 2006 and 2010. Urban village action planning operated between 2004 and 2005 in some of the more affluent neighbourhoods without neighbourhood renewal funding. Previous structures for neighbourhood working also included Neighbourhood Action Plan (NAP) groups, which were made up of active residents and service providers. The NAP groups

focused on environmental and community safety issues and were funded by Bradford Vision (the arms-length local strategic partnership of the time) to develop NAPs. There has also been a history of community development work in the district. There have been several iterations, with provision originally being provided in-house by a community development section within the council. This was subsequently commissioned out to the voluntary and community sectors via community centres, although a variety of officers in neighbourhood services also do community development work in their roles.

Current neighbourhood working arrangements

A review of neighbourhood working by the council in October 2007 found that all neighbourhoods had some form of neighbourhood planning and ways for people to get engaged. But it also found that there needed to be stronger co-ordination and capacity to focus at a neighbourhood level, and better links between neighbourhood plans, area plans and strategic plans, as well as more effective service delivery and implementation of plans to produce outcomes for residents. In 2008, the structures for neighbourhood working were adapted to achieve those aims through a stronger focus on co-ordinated work at a ward level. In addition to the existing neighbourhood forums, area committees (formed from adapted area panels in 2001) and area co-ordinators, the council refocused the area community engagement officers to become ward co-ordinators, and introduced new multi-agency ward officer teams (WOTs) for all wards. The current Bradford MDC structures for neighbourhood working are shown in Figure 1 below and explained in Table 1 on page 9. The Bradford District Partnership (the local strategic partnership) plays an overarching role, and neighbourhood and area planning takes place within the context of Bradford's *Big Plan* (the Sustainable Community Strategy).

Figure 1: Bradford MDC neighbourhood working structure

This study is focused on Bradford MDC's neighbourhood services department, although other council departments also play a role in neighbourhood working and have neighbourhood-based officers, such as parental involvement area officers employed through children's services. Other public services also have their own structures for neighbourhood working, for example neighbourhood policing, housing and estate management by social housing providers, the Primary Care Trust's community development team. Some of these services are working with neighbourhood services, for example through the WOTs. Community and voluntary organisations also play a key role in neighbourhood working, and are involved in the JRF *Working in neighbourhoods* action learning network. In addition to neighbourhood services' structures shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, the council also supports voluntary organisations and community centres through grants, commissioned pieces of work, and joint strategic planning.

Table 1: Bradford MDC structures for neighbourhood working explained

Five area committees	The five area committees each cover six wards and a population of about 100,000. Area committees are led by elected members, with nine councillors (out of the 18 for the area) on each committee. They meet monthly, and have devolved budgets for a number of powers and functions (for example, highways, community clean-ups, parks and landscaping, seed money for community groups). The devolved budgets have been around £525,000 a year for each committee. Area committees are responsible for producing area action plans, covering the major themes in Bradford's Big Plan. The committees are supported by Bradford's neighbourhood services section through the area co-ordinators and their staff. Area committees also oversee the work of neighbourhood forums and other partnerships at neighbourhood level.
Five area offices	The neighbourhood services teams for each of the five constituency areas are made up of an area co-ordinator, ward co-ordinators, area development officers and neighbourhood wardens. Besides servicing and reporting to the area committee, the team works at ward and neighbourhood level throughout the area, via the bodies and structures listed below, and on a day-to-day basis with residents, community and voluntary organisations, elected members, local businesses and other stakeholders. Each area co-coordinator also has thematic responsibility for one of the Big Plan themes (children and young people, improving the environment, health and well-being for all, prosperity and regeneration, safer communities, strong and cohesive communities).
Ward officer teams (WOTs)	There is a WOT for every ward in the district, covering around 15–20,000 people each. WOTs (also called ward partnership teams where elected members are involved) are multi-agency teams of service providers, focused on tackling 'crime and grime' issues through locally tailored service delivery. The teams meet formally every six weeks. They are co-ordinated by the ward co-ordinators, and can include a range of services, e.g. police, housing associations, fire and rescue service, environmental services, traffic and highways, youth service, youth offending team, anti-social behaviour officers, drug and alcohol workers, schools, park rangers, public health officers.

Table 1 (continued)

80 neighbourhood action plan areas	These local plans – covering all areas across the district – are intended for implementation but are also presented to the area committees and fed into their action plans. Neighbourhoods have a population of about 5,000. Neighbourhood action plan areas include the formal structures of neighbourhood forums and neighbourhood partnerships. Neighbourhood forums are public meetings open to all residents, and other attendees include service agencies, local businesses, elected members, local community and voluntary organisations, and schools. Each forum covers around a third of a ward, although size varies across the district. They are typically held twice a year. They are serviced and chaired by neighbourhood services, and councillors attend. The purposes of forums include raising local issues, consultation, participatory decision-making and information sharing. Issues raised can be taken up directly with service agencies. The forums feed back into the area committees. The format for neighbourhood partnerships are more varied between neighbourhoods, but are co-ordinated by neighbourhood services, and feed in to neighbourhood action planning. They include invited representatives of local bodies.
Parish and town councils	Parish and town councils are the first tier of local government, and are made up of elected councillors, supported by parish or town clerks. Parish and town councils can raise money through local taxes called a precept. They deliver a range of services at community level and their role is to represent the local community, provide services to meet local needs and improve quality of life and community well-being. The majority of parish and town councillors are not elected on a party political basis. In Bradford, particularly in rural areas, parish and town councils play a key role in delivering the neighbourhood forums and local action planning.

2 Is neighbourhood working achieving its aims?

There seems to be a clear and agreed vision for neighbourhood working that is shared among neighbourhood services staff and across sectors. The broad consensus is that it has twin aims. The first aim is to improve services and neighbourhoods in order to produce better outcomes for residents on their priorities. Service and neighbourhood improvement in the revised structures takes place through strengthened multi-agency and partnership working, for example in the WOTs and neighbourhood partnerships. If focused correctly on the area and NAPs, this work should also then contribute to meeting district-level *Big Plan* outcomes, as the local plans are themselves linked to the *Big Plan*.

The second aim of neighbourhood working is to encourage a bundle of attitudes and behaviours around active citizenship. This has been an aim of neighbourhood working for a long period, and was explicit as a reason for the restructuring in 2008:

> *Why devolve? Recognising diversity and empowering citizens: the importance of the neighbourhood as a focus for building communities and political engagement; tackling the 'democratic deficit'. Residents become not just once-a-year electors (at best), or consumers, but active citizens.*
>
> Flecknoe, 2008

Service and neighbourhood improvement

On the first aim of service and neighbourhood improvement, there has been good progress. Previous research in Bradford in 2006 (White, *et al.*, 2006) suggested that there was a gap in the ability of previous neighbourhood structures to deliver improvements. This was because, on the one hand, before the restructuring in 2008, the area committee and co-ordinators covered too wide and mixed an area to have capacity to fully deal with issues raised. On the other hand, there was an argument that Bradford Vision's neighbourhood action planning group process was not sufficiently integrated into local authority structures, was focused on too small an area to create significant change, and had led in some cases to duplication, and to 'wish lists', but without the capacity to deliver on the wishes (White, *et al.*, 2006).

After the restructuring, through the creation of the new ward co-ordination posts, and the multi-agency partnerships in the ward officer teams, there is now a more viable vehicle for delivering on local plans. One achievement has been to set the WOTs up relatively quickly, and get participation from a wide range of relevant partners at the appropriate operational level. Attendance at the regular WOT meetings is high. The WOT meetings are tightly focused and deal with operational details, which enables them to resolve problems. They are largely reactive, and focus on 'clean, safe, green' issues including crime, anti-social behaviour, and environmental problems. This study found that the teams had gelled together well, and have extremely good arrangements for data sharing which are unusual compared with many other public sector partnerships. The WOTs are able to use shared intelligence to better target the work of each service, as well as undertake joint work, for example, community clean-ups, and action on criminal activity. There has also been some work by some neighbourhood partnerships to tackle wider issues, for example on raising aspirations of residents and helping people into employment.

Gaps still remain, and there was ongoing review and improvement by the council during the period of the research which is starting to address these gaps. Some officers question whether WOTs could be made more flexible, for example whether having multi-agency 'task and finish' groups, constructed as and when needed and involving only those services needed for a specific issue for a specific period of time, would be better value than the current system of having meetings at fixed time points involving the same people each time. The WOTs are intended to focus on 'crime and grime' issues, and have done so, but there are other issues in neighbourhoods such as poor health and unemployment, that have had less attention in WOTs, although some work has taken place in some areas. This is also reflected in gaps in attendance by some services, such as those that are universal and do not have a strong neighbourhood focus. This is are partly addressed by links to those services outside of WOT meetings. Some respondents in the research want to see WOTs taking a more proactive and preventative approach. Some more intractable neighbourhood problems are taking longer to resolve, for example abandoned, derelict privately-owned properties especially where these are used for illegal activities such as cannabis factories. Where issues need to be dealt with at a more senior level, there are sometimes difficulties in 'escalating' them. It is not clear what contribution the neighbourhood partnerships made in all cases, and whether they operate at too small a scale to have sufficient impact on neighbourhoods. There are some tensions between the council and voluntary organisations over who co-ordinates the partnerships.

Active citizenship

One of the initial debates in the action learning network was about how far to focus on citizens' engagement in *structures* for neighbourhood working, or whether to look at how people actively engage in neighbourhoods more broadly. The key issue is that structures such as neighbourhood forums, or even parish and town councils, are only part of a much larger number of ways that people are engaged in their neighbourhoods. The idea is that the neighbourhood workers develop and support all forms of engagement in a way that suits that area.

Achievements include participation in neighbourhood forums of around 10,700 people in 2009–10. In some places neighbourhood forums are adapted to make best use of existing local resources, for example using well-attended parish council meetings to run forums. Some community engagement and community development work, for example door-knocking exercises, fun days and social events, are very successful in persuading people to participate. Area committees support local clubs, associations, community projects and groups through small grants. Ward co-ordinators and area development officers also work closely with community groups, and help set up new groups. Neighbourhood wardens are working with school children as 'eco warriors', doing neighbourhood clean-ups. There is some very successful joint work with voluntary organisations to set up social groups for older people, showcasing how people can be active, happy and give back to the community in later life. In some places there is joint work with parish councils to develop and implement neighbourhood plans. Informal relationships between council officers, elected members and neighbourhood-based organisations develops neighbourhood plans, engages the wider community and creates practical projects to improve neighbourhoods. Some community and voluntary organisations providing facilities and activities in neighbourhoods are working together with ward teams to develop new projects, for example a community farm and a community orchard. Community centres provide support for residents, families and younger and older people, and these are seen by ward teams as critical facilities for the neighbourhood, even where there is no direct help from neighbourhood services staff or ward officer teams.

However, there are many aspects that need further development. Participants in this study did not have a sophisticated enough understanding of the full range of reasons for the diversity in community capacity and levels of community activity described earlier in the report: for example between and within urban and rural places, ethnically mixed and more homogeneous areas, and more and less affluent households and neighbourhoods. This means that it is harder to remedy gaps because the causes

are not clear to people doing work in neighbourhoods. For example, there is awareness that lower levels of formal education and income are barriers to participation, but confusion about why some low-income households do participate, and what might raise participation rates despite socio-economic barriers. A sophisticated international evidence base does exist on these topics, but people are not familiar with this body of work.

Attendance at neighbourhood forums varies dramatically, with some forums attracting 50 to 100 people, while others are more sparsely attended. Practitioners, including paid workers and community organisers, experience low attendance at meetings and events in the most deprived areas, and many attempts to engage citizens with services have not worked. Official structures focus on involving people in decisions, but have unfulfilled potential to generate more community self-help. Paid community workers tend to work with existing groups. They do not always have the capacity in all the areas to help set up new groups. There is also more unmet potential for neighbourhood working to facilitate a much wider range of citizen activity, for example informal helping between neighbours.

A history of 'patchwork' funding streams within the district has resulted in inconsistent allocation of resources between neighbourhoods, leading to duplication of provision in some places, and gaps in others. For example, some neighbourhoods have two very similar community organisations on the same street, and some places have several community centres which are under-used, whereas other areas that would like a community base do not have an appropriate facility.

Despite some positive relationships between the public and voluntary and community sectors, relationships overall are patchy. Joint work and trust is undermined by a number of things, four of which are described below.

Firstly, some community centres are perceived by stakeholders to be dominated by 'cliques', not fully open to all groups in the neighbourhood. There is other evidence to suggest that this perception is shared by people in the wider community (ICPS, undated; Pearce and Milne, 2010). This is a highly contested perception, and the circumstances vary widely between centres and neighbourhoods. Community volunteers in the action learning network demonstrated their efforts to invite and be open to the wider community. However, this is not necessarily the case in all areas.

The study collected evidence that some community centres focus the majority of their efforts on use of the building, and do not have the capacity to do extensive community outreach work. Respondents in the research from both sides argue that the focus on activities in centres is driven by centres' management committees, who understandably want to ensure the viability of their facilities and cover core running costs by ensuring high levels of usage.

Secondly, some in the neighbourhood services would prefer to shift the balance between commissioned community development work and in-house provision even further towards in-house provision. Public sector workers argued this would be more effective in reaching a wide community audience than community development work commissioned from voluntary and community organisations. However, there are also signs to suggest that the preference by some in the public sector for in-house provision over commissioned work is caused by a reluctance to transfer control, rather than weaknesses in alternative forms of provision. Respondents from the voluntary sector felt that their sector was able to deal with specific client groups more effectively than the public sector because of its flexibility, understanding of needs, and community base. The relative effectiveness of the public and voluntary sectors is an unresolved debate.

Thirdly, regardless of whether there are grounds for the suspicion from public sector stakeholders about quality and effectiveness of some organisations, the voluntary and community sectors did not always present themselves in the best way. For example, they are not always coherent on what they offer to the public sector, or what added value they provide, and the sectors lack an adequate, robust and well evidenced case for their work.

Fourthly, there is a perception by community volunteers that their efforts are not recognised, despite schemes to celebrate and reward volunteers, and that the public sector did not always listen, or

respond to their concerns and priorities. One result of this is that some people who continue to be active in the community are wary of the public sector and reluctant to acknowledge any weaknesses in their own organisations or sector, which then further exacerbates poor relationships. Stakeholders also suggested that citizens are less likely to become and stay involved if they do not feel that their efforts are valued.

3 Other key issues in Bradford's neighbourhood working

Local elected members' roles in neighbourhood working

In common with local government across England, Bradford's elected members have a varied set of backgrounds and bring different skills and expertise to the role. Inevitably, this means that some councillors are more active in their wards and in neighbourhood working than others. A summary of elected members' roles in neighbourhood working, based on feedback from elected members and council officers in the research, is shown in Table 2. Members perform these roles through their casework with individual residents, through surgeries, involvement on area committees, attendance at neighbourhood forums, membership of neighbourhood organisations, for example school governing bodies, and membership of other bodies, for example district-wide bodies like the Bradford District Partnership and partner bodies.

Action planning and area needs

Members are very knowledgeable about their local areas, and there is usually at least one ward member who attends (or in the case of same party wards, was delegated to attend) neighbourhood partnership and neighbourhood forum meetings. In some places, members are involved in local consultations, and have integrated parish plans and neighbourhood action plans. Members sign off area action plans via area committees. In some constituency areas this is a genuine review process, while in others there are suggestions that this is rubber stamping. There are varying levels of involvement in developing local plans. However, some areas have gaps in the relationships between the tiers of local government. Overall, there are questions over how far all ward members have strategic oversight of their area's priorities and how these fit within district-wide priorities.

Table 2: Summary of elected members' roles in neighbourhood working

Action planning and area needs	– understand local community needs and feed into action plans – have a strategic overview to set area and ward priorities – sign off on NAPs and area action plans
Action taking	– councillors are active citizens in their own right – facilitators of action by services and citizens – taking action directly to solve problems where appropriate – unblockers of blockages in the system – advocates for local community in the authority
Arbitrating interests	– brokers and mediators of conflicts of interest – able to challenge (unreasonable) expectations – make, debate and explain tough choices

Action taking

As an authority Bradford exhibited positive and close relationships between members and officers, in contrast to more arms-length relationships in some other authorities. Elected members are actively involved in communities, for example attending local meetings, sitting on school governing bodies and belonging to village societies. Members allocated funding for community projects from area committees. There is appropriate delegation to officers through ward officer teams.

However, not all members are equally active in their communities, and some activity is concentrated around election time. Where members attend meetings, forums and partnerships, it is not always clear what specific contribution their presence makes. Some members themselves are not clear what their precise role is, other than being there. It is not clear how far the area committees monitor delivery of area action plans, or could influence where there are delivery gaps.

The criteria that had been used to award funding, for example to community projects, is seen by some stakeholders as open to question. For example, it was asked whether some projects had been awarded to curry favour with voters. Some elected members see funding as their main route to directly supporting communities, but have few alternatives if or when these resources, such as area initiatives money, are no longer there. Some councillors have found it hard to help citizens to resolve neighbourhood issues because of a lack of response to their queries from other departments in the council, or gaps in tracking work.

Arbitrating interests

Members' roles in arbitrating between competing or conflicting interests in a ward or area are underdeveloped in some places. Elected members are largely aware of, and able to articulate, the issues and some are able to challenge, mediate and broker between interests. However, in several wards, members are unsure how to resolve conflicts other than to reject all parties' claims. For some this is also driven by electoral considerations. Despite many vocal and articulate councillors, some are cautious about taking a community leadership role where there are controversial community tensions, particularly if these centre on conflicts over ethnicity, nationality, faith, or culture. Elected members found it challenging to manage debates in their wards on these complex and often controversial questions.

Role of neighbourhood working in brokering difference

As can be seen from the diversity of the district, there are significant differences between and within areas, wards and neighbourhoods in terms of their 'feel', populations, histories and needs and wants. This is a key underlying issue for neighbourhood working, recognised by participants in this study and sensitively articulated. Three key debates in the action learning network have been about the additional needs in some south Asian communities, the need for more inter-generation work, and how neighbourhood working might be applied differently in more and less affluent areas, or places with higher and lower levels of need for service input.

Many respondents, including politicians, officers and resident volunteers, want to see more flexibility to adapt levels and types of provision and neighbourhood working between areas, based on need. However, stakeholders in the research in Bradford said they experienced or perceived strong pressures on public sector and political leaders to ensure that provision is, and is seen to be, equitable. This is particularly important given a background in Bradford of competition between neighbourhoods and uneven allocation of resources historically. However, at the time of this study there was only just starting to be an open and transparent political debate on these issues, although since then progress has been made on initial decisions to devolve more decisions and budgets to areas.

How does neighbourhood working fit into the broader change agenda for local government?

The twin aims of neighbourhood working – service and neighbourhood improvement and active citizenship – are seen by participants in this study to be mutually complementary, in theory and in some areas of practice. There is corporate and political leadership on the active citizenship aim, and generally a desire to create a more empowering public sector. Where the local authority's agenda focuses on community needs, these aims are echoed by partners and other sectors.

However, some feel that the experience in Bradford of improved service provision has in some cases increased rather than reduced citizen demands and expectations of services. For example, new neighbourhood clean-ups are organised by the wardens with other partners, including street cleansing, schools and community groups, and the police. This is an additional service for neighbourhoods with high levels of fly-tipping and environmental hazards. Services went round street by street:

- clearing up litter, rubbish and dumped items;

- knocking on doors to give people contact details for any future bulky refuse;

- spotting, reporting and tackling abandoned cars, fire risks, trees in need of attention, broken streetlights, illegal business practices, abandoned properties, graffiti, etc.

There was an expectation that this would lead to less dumping, abandoning of cars, setting of fires, littering, and fly-tipping, as well as more reporting by citizens, and fewer problems with illegal activities. In some areas, the neighbourhoods have stayed tidy after the clean-ups. However, in some places dumped furniture, mattresses, old kitchen fittings and so on were back on the streets only hours after the clean-ups finished. Participants in the action learning network relayed anecdotes that illustrated their frustrations with this, for example overhearing parents telling their children not to pick up litter as 'that was the council's job'.

Better services, and increased service levels in particular, are seen as a barrier to people having a greater sense of agency over their own lives. Increased public provision is seen as displacing citizens' own efforts, substituting for, not adding to, them. For example, after the wardens started clearing dumped items, some felt that citizens started to expect that their bulky rubbish would be removed automatically without them ringing the council to have it collected, as should be the case. Workers gave examples of people putting bulky rubbish in the street without ringing for collection, and expecting wardens to organise the collection on their behalf.

There is also a broader sense that welfare provision, such as social housing, subsidies for housing, and income benefits, had made its recipients feel 'dependent' rather than empowered. Citizens' pride is seen as being undermined by having had things 'given to' them or provided by the state. Regardless of this broader debate, there is evidence that there is an understanding by residents of a division of labour between them and the public sector where, on some issues, people expect that 'the council will sort it out'.

A key conclusion practitioners and senior managers have drawn is that mutually reinforcing outcomes depend on the model of service provision used. Some are disempowering while others can help facilitate community action and self-help. Changing the model of service provision from a 'dependency' inducing one to a more facilitative approach is a significant challenge and opportunity for Bradford. Bradford MDC sees itself as at the early stages of redefining the issue, before moving on to reconfiguring delivery models.

The council and its partners feel that a change in the behaviour of its citizens requires cultural change in their organisations. They are wrestling with what a new empowering model of service provision

could look like. Some initial productive work has already been achieved in relatively small ways, for example changes to the way that neighbourhood forums work, and work by neighbourhood wardens to generate community-led environmental clean-ups. Officers could articulate the need for more active citizenship and their potential role in creating these changes, but there is a need for this to be more deeply embedded in practice. This includes restyling service providers' responses to individual citizens, as well as encouraging more collective organising and community group responses.

There is evidence that these challenges to shift organisational cultures and 'the way we do things' are not unique to Bradford's public sector. For example, across the north west, one of the priorities for local authorities in the last few years has been to fundamentally re-shape service delivery so that it enhanced citizens' own efforts rather than crowd out or limit them. Bradford MDC is in a relatively good position to face these challenges in its attitude towards innovation and risk. Unlike other local authorities that are more risk averse, Bradford MDC has been open to experimentation and innovation, both in the WIN project and other pieces of work, although the authority acknowledges it has not always thought through its previous innovations before moving on to the next piece of work.

4 How does neighbourhood working fit with localism and the Big Society?

Central government sees localism as the overall ethos, with decentralisation as the means to achieve it, and the Big Society as the intended outcome. The Localism Bill (DCLG, 2011) and Decentralisation Guide (DCLG, 2010) are aimed at devolving power from central to local government, and to citizens. The general concept of active citizenship predates the Big Society, and in Bradford there has been cross-party support for active citizenship for several years, with a published Active Citizenship Framework from 2009. These policies take place in the context of public spending reductions, which affect neighbourhood working in many local authorities. There is no central government protection for locally funded programmes.

In common with the wider public (Ipsos MORI, 2010), participants in the JRF action learning network were not clear what the concepts of the Big Society or localism meant, or what the potential implications are for them. Levels of understanding of, and indeed interest in, specific legislative proposals in the Localism Bill among the action learning network are low. There is a desire among practitioners engaged in neighbourhood working to promote devolved decision-making, stronger accountability, shared responsibility with citizens, improved democratic accountability, and to generate and strengthen civic activity. But desire does not imply a smooth progression towards achieving these goals. Five key questions and barriers are identified below.

Firstly, participants in the action learning network questioned the overall feasibility of transferring power to communities. Participants recognised the possibility that a small number of well-organised community initiatives could seize the opportunities within localism and the Big Society to transform their neighbourhoods. However, people are concerned about the risks that greater devolution, for example through neighbourhood plans, could lead to 'NIMBYism' and further exclusionary pressures in more affluent, organised and resourced communities. Moreover, there are doubts that many communities had the capacity or will to take up civic and voluntary opportunities, especially in the context of public spending reductions. Or, if and when they did, whether there would be sufficient accountability of residents to the wider community, to services, and to local politicians, and whether resident-led initiatives would be effective at delivering quality facilities, services and activities.

These are crucial and longstanding debates. There is evidence that only a minority of citizens are willing to take on much higher levels of responsibility for services. There are many capacity gaps. However, underlying this debate is arguably a deeper lack of *belief* in the possibility of citizen-led action, and a lack of trust of the public sector in citizens and the community and voluntary sectors. This study found competition and mistrust between parts of the public sector and parts of the voluntary and community sectors. There are also shades, in Bradford as elsewhere, of a reluctance by elements in local government to hand away too much control. This is also a serious challenge to the aim of re-shaping public services and local government to forge a more equal relationship with citizens, and co-produce outcomes by working jointly together.

Secondly, some local government organisations are making cuts without having a chance to think through how they might fit with any future restructuring in line with a different relationship between state and citizen. Nationally 'slash and burn' spending cuts are in many places running ahead of work on transforming public services and the future shape of local government. It may well be the case in local authorities across the country that some adaptive capacity, and critical experience of making things happen at a

local level, will be lost through cuts. The picture is somewhat different in Bradford, also facing severe financial pressures. There is recognition by Bradford MDC at both a corporate level and in neighbourhood services that decentralisation needs neighbourhood-focused teams to generate, oversee, co-ordinate and deliver activity if it is to be successful. Bradford's elected members have made a strategic decision to protect frontline neighbourhood staff despite the loss of central government funding for some posts. Neighbourhood services are attempting at the same time to re-shape the service from an enforcement focus to a more empowering one facilitating behaviour change in citizens. So, in Bradford, there are signs that fundamental re-thinking of the nature and purpose of public services can happen concurrent with reductions in public spending.

Thirdly, the majority of community activity is small-scale informal activity. Some estimates suggest that three-quarters of all activity in the community sector is by small unincorporated groups. Community self-help has significant potential to contribute to localism and the Big Society, and is a big source of community activity in Bradford. However, the focus in central government policy is on the larger organisations with capacity to take over services and assets, or more well-organised groups who can operate at a bigger level, for example in the 'right to challenge' as set out in the Localism Bill.

Fourthly, elected members themselves express frustration when they feel unable to influence services or create improvements in neighbourhoods on behalf of residents. In turn, they are seen as unresponsive to citizens. It is not clear what changes current policy will be able to make in the responsiveness of systems necessary to gain increased transparency and accountability to citizens. There are institutional blocks on generating greater involvement, but these are often very hard to shift. Barriers include the role of 'small p' and 'big P' politics; the desire to retain public sector control, sometimes regardless of effectiveness; and the desire to have strong democratic accountability by elected representatives, but which, in practice, can mean wariness about joint decision-making that does not have councillors in the lead role.

Fifthly, there are widespread concerns among commentators about the implications of policy for social justice and equity between neighbourhoods and groups. In Bradford, as nationally, the existing position is one of uneven distribution of community strengths and capacity. Spatial patterns of disadvantage are persistent, structurally underpinned, and become more marked when inequality increases and during downturns. Therefore, current economic circumstances create a challenge for implementing Big Society and localism in poor areas. Some poor areas are vulnerable to rapid decline which is likely to inhibit community involvement by undermining some of the conditions for involvement. There is some evidence (John, *et al.*, forthcoming) that civic activity can be increased if the right techniques are used, without overcoming resources barriers or offering additional support. However, there are questions over what support communities might need to ensure that differential capacity does not widen inequalities on a range of outcomes.

5 Conclusions

Devolved decision-making and neighbourhood working has been evolving in local authorities around the country and in Bradford for more than 20 years. Devolution offers a way for governance and delivery structures to deal with local complexity and diversity between places, and be based on neighbourhood need and priorities. Bradford now has in place a set of structures and processes that deliver neighbourhood and locality planning, opportunities for community decision-making and self-help. Neighbourhood working in Bradford, overseen by elected members, is producing improved and tailored services for neighbourhood improvement. It is working towards encouraging more active citizenship. This fits well with the current localism and decentralisation agenda. The district is still grappling with how to devolve further, and maximise the opportunities in devolution while minimising the risks.

This study shows that 'communities' can and do participate in a wide range of active citizenship and Big Society-type activities. Some parts of what is now called Big Society already exist in Bradford, although in some places more than others, and more on some civic activities than others. Where neighbourhood working works with what already exists organically in communities, sees engagement in its fullest sense, and uses creativity, then it can encourage more citizens to play an active role. There is some way yet to go in local government to develop the understanding and innovations in approach needed. But, as elsewhere, more affluent neighbourhoods have higher levels of capacity and activity with less external input. More deprived neighbourhoods need more significant input and support, which is currently being provided partly by neighbourhood working. All neighbourhoods need some way to make sure that powerful communities do not unwittingly exclude under-represented groups, or act against the greater good. This is a particularly challenging economic time which is likely to have most severe impacts on the poorest areas. Those areas may need transitional support, but beyond that this study suggests that some communities will continue to need more from the state than others. Big Society is not necessarily small government, but a different role for government.

Previous regimes have contributed to competition over resources between neighbourhoods. What is needed in Bradford, but extremely hard to achieve, is a more transparent debate over who gets what, and what citizens accept as being fair between places with different needs. Elected members found it challenging to manage debates in their wards on these complex, controversial, and potentially vote-losing debates. Differences between neighbourhoods, and arguments over resources, suggest that neighbourhood working also needs a strong strategic centre to co-ordinate and broker in the interests of the whole authority area.

Big Society is a term which refers to a wide range of civic activities from the small to large, but some of the emphasis in the legislation has been on citizen organisations taking over the running of public services. However, what is clear is that small-scale, informal activities are the most attractive to the majority; only a minority of citizens and neighbourhoods have the desire or capacity to take on major roles in the large-scale delivery of services. A number of voluntary and community organisations will relish the opportunity to take over services they consider to be poorly managed. But, where there are voluntary and community organisations willing to take on these roles, there is still a lingering reluctance from some, but not all, in the public sector to hand over control. This reluctance is sometimes not helped by the lack of a hard evidence base for the voluntary sector's argument about its own effectiveness, and perceptions of lack of inclusiveness in some community centres.

The way that public services are delivered does not always enhance citizens' ability to do more. Indeed, sometimes it can be disempowering for people. In Bradford, as in local government more widely, there is acknowledgement of the need for fundamental transformation of the relationship between the state and citizen. Thoroughgoing cultural change is needed in public sector organisations to make sure that public services help citizens to do and engage more, rather than feel disempowered (Durose, *et al.*, 2009).

Current national policy offers many positive opportunities to continue devolving down to neighbourhoods and promoting active citizenship. This seems like the right direction to be travelling in. But the possible outcomes are unclear at the moment. Will the outcomes be fair if policy replicates or increases the existing gaps in community activity and capacity between better-off and less well-off areas? Will public spending reductions undermine vital organisational and delivery structures for making neighbourhood working effective? Will policy go with the grain of the bigness of society that already exists? Will public sector organisations be able to genuinely share or hand over control to communities and work in a different way? The JRF *Working in neighbourhoods* project hopes to be able to continue contributing to these questions. The project is due to complete in July 2011 and report in Autumn 2011.

Conclusions

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