Devolving governance

Area committees and neighbourhood management

Report of a seminar held in March 2004
The Mansion House, Doncaster

Report compiled by M.D. Wilkinson

JOSEPH ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION

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Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Website: www.jrf.org.uk

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Executive summary

In recent years issues around new localism and the devolution of power to a lower level have taken on new impetus in government circles. This is an area of policy which has huge potential significance for the revival of flagging interest in, and commitment to, local governance. However, it is clear that significant tensions often emerge in the process of decentralisation, and in recognition of this it is essential that key stakeholders continue to broaden their experience of what does and does not work. This JRF seminar brought together councillors, officers and academics to progress debate on devolving governance.

Discussions in the workshops and plenary sessions revealed a wide range of benefits accruing from decentralised arrangements. Some authorities were experiencing vigorous democratic renewal and community engagement in civic and civil society which had, in some cases, led to a significant growth in involvement in decision-making at all levels and increases in turnouts at elections. Participants told of improved service delivery, of genuine involvement of citizens in localised project development, and of a more positive environment facilitating amicable and consensual relationships. Elected members, particularly non-executive councillors, had by and large enjoyed their enhanced community leadership role.

There remained, nonetheless, significant challenges to be met and obstacles to be tackled. A host of factors impact on local authorities' ability to make decentralised arrangements work. Local governance has become much more complicated in recent years, with areas of responsibility often opaque within partnership structures. Some authorities, mindful of their need to meet the rigours of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, were understandably reluctant to risk devolving services and budgets where this might detract temporarily from the smooth running of operations, or might prove more costly in the short term.

Some councils lacked the political will or a 'champion' to drive the process forward. In the absence of a strong political steer, service directorates were reluctant to deviate from centrally established objectives. Area teams were sometimes understaffed and under-resourced, while demands upon them had increased exponentially. Area arrangements were failing to link into strategic decision-making processes and could be 'hijacked' by the 'loudest shouters'. Community activists all too often felt that the council had become better at undertaking consultation but no better at responding to the views

expressed. Initial enthusiasm could therefore rapidly turn to disillusionment and cynicism.

The way forward

There was broad agreement that there is no 'correct' model for decentralisation. While participants felt that local authorities must be prepared to be adventurous, there was recognition that some areas of service provision did not lend themselves easily to decentralisation. Equally, devolved budgets are not essential. New ways of developing neighbourhood control over services could well prove more effective than decentralised budgets.

Decentralised arrangements work best where:

- community leadership has flourished
- there exists a public mandate for the process
- there is clarity and wide agreement on purpose
- area committees have clearly defined decision-making powers, and their relationships to decision- and policy-making structures within the council are transparent.

They require solid political backing and preferably cross-party support, which sends a strong message that the process will not be de-railed by a change in political control. There is a clear need for strong leadership in driving the process forward and changing organisational culture, to counter entrenched departmentalism and scepticism.

At the same time, councillors must be reassured that decentralised arrangements are not taking democratic accountability away from them and can enhance their role. Clarity in the ward councillor's community leadership role is essential. There is an urgent need for more training and support for the community leadership role of the frontline, ward councillor. The focus within the modernisation agenda has been on the executive with the representative role not being properly supported. Yet all the evidence shows that successful outcomes in neighbourhoods depend on good relationships between any community structure or local partnership and the ward councillor.

A series of recommendations, emanating from presentations and discussions at the seminar and the range of research materials made available by those present, has been drawn together in this report with recommendations for both central and local government. There were particular concerns that government was considering options which would actively marginalise the role of councillors in neighbourhood

governance, the intention being that community activism should supersede their representative role. This, it was felt, would be a grave mistake. Councillors provide a direct link between the local and the strategic and they provide a key community leadership role, as democratically elected honest brokers between a range of often competing and sectional interests.

Instead, it was felt that government should be encouraging and facilitating a productive relationship between representative and participatory decision-making: experimenting with new ways to support positive working between councillors and community activists, to help councillors buttress their political legitimacy and local residents achieve their aspirations.

Substantial capacity building with local communities is an essential prerequisite for them to engage meaningfully. It is essential to ensure that participatory models address the need for *systematic, long-term participation* (even over generations), in which there are reciprocal rights and responsibilities on both citizens and local government. A key component is the need to foster *efficient participation,* whereby stakeholders get maximum benefit from minimum resource and time input.

Government policy initiatives have, to date, emphasised partnership – horizontal integration. There is now a new challenge to address vertical integration, between neighbourhood and district, city and sub-region. Governance systems are needed which interlock in meaningful ways without duplicating representative roles or participatory structures: this is real subsidiarity.

1   Introduction

In recent years issues around new localism and the devolution of power to a lower level have taken on new impetus in government circles.

A research study by INLOGOV in 2001 found that:

> Decentralisation strategies can help involve a wider range of citizens in local government by focusing on issues that are important to neighbourhoods and communities. This develops both local government's representational role and residents' participation in local government, helping these two roles to work in tandem.
>
> (JRF, 2001a)

There are nonetheless tensions inherent in the move towards greater community participation in council decisions and spending. It challenges the traditional role of elected members, it brings other, less clearly accountable actors into the arenas of decision and it places new demands upon community representatives.

This is clearly a problematic area of policy, but one which has huge potential significance for the revival of flagging interest in and commitment to local governance. While there are no easy answers to the tensions which emerge in this process of decentralisation, it is essential that key players continue to broaden their experience of what does and what does not work. The seminar brought together councillors, officers and academics to take the discussion further. This paper pulls together insights from the proceedings, it also draws from a range of research materials made available by those present.[1]

Presentations included: *Devolved approaches to local governance: the EU-funded Demos project in seven* countries,[2] by Professor Michael Carley, School of the Built Environment, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh and *Area management in practice: pitfalls and* possibilities,[3] by Dr Mick Wilkinson, Centre for Social Inclusion and Social Justice, University of Hull.

Representatives of Bradford MBC, Doncaster MBC and Kingston upon Hull CC gave presentations based on their own experience around the theme of 'lessons from the frontline'. These were followed by workshops for elected members, for senior/strategic level officers, and for frontline staff to discuss the pressures and opportunities which exist in relation to area governance.

The Mayor of Doncaster MBC provided concluding remarks: "This discussion day has underlined the importance of sharing ideas and experiences as well as learning from each other in developing area committees and managing better neighbourhoods."

2 Background

Area-based structures

By June 2002, 51 per cent of English local authorities with a leader-cabinet system had formal area committees. More have supported area and neighbourhood advisory/consultative forums. Almost every local authority has at least one kind of decentralised governance structure and many have a multiplicity of such structures.

Local authorities are developing decentralised local governance arrangements for a number of reasons, not least in response to central government guidance and directives. Since the election of the first New Labour government in 1997, partnership working has become the organisational strategy most strongly espoused by government for a wide range of policy initiatives including regeneration, public health, childcare, education and anti-poverty policy; and the language of local governance is now influenced strongly by the concept (Scottish Office, 1996; DETR, 1997). The delivery of effective, efficient and equitable services in any area, and the development of a healthy local democracy, is seen increasingly to depend on strong and appropriately defined relationships between different combinations of local actors (Rao, 2000; Glendinning *et al.*, 2002).

Until relatively recently, the major explicit government arena for partnership working was in the widening context of urban regeneration (Skelcher *et al.*, 1996; Carley *et al.,* 2000). This broadening approach, including support for local partnership activity and community development, reflected a changing policy approach that has focused attention on issues of social exclusion and social integration rather than solely on physical and economic development (SEU, 1998). The parallel focus on 'joined-up action' as a key policy response to social exclusion, means a greater emphasis on working across the boundaries of local government's own departments, as well as with other local agencies. Attention has also shifted back towards the greater involvement of local communities (through their representative organisations), not merely as recipients of central or local government action, but also as key partners in the development of strategic responses to poverty and exclusion in their own right. Partnership working, it has been argued, through the 'interconnectedness' of service providers, also provides a better chance of success in delivering services which are both relevant and of high quality (NAO, 2001).

In recent years a whole host of initiatives, many of them area-based (LGA, 1999), such as New Start, Health Action Zones and Better

Government for Older People, all emphasised the need for inter-agency partnerships as a basis for tackling important local social and economic issues. A report from the Performance and Innovation Unit (2000) listed 32 government-inspired area-based initiatives, since when further major initiatives, such as the Children's Fund, have emerged.

Policy drivers

The duty of 'best value' requires that authorities commission local services according to quality, value for money and local need (DETR, 1998a) this also implies a strong role for partnership working (DETR,1999a; DETR, 1999b). Indeed, a common thread that runs throughout the Best Value concept is the need for meaningful consultation with local people regarding the design and shaping of local services, whether or not they are consumers of council services. The concurrent government demand for developing local democracy is also predicated on a broad partnership agenda (DETR, 1998b, 1998c). The implicit policy target for many partnerships, in theory at least, is for partners not only to maintain a role in project implementation, but also to influence policy development and direction.

Recent policy initiatives formalise those arrangements. As a fundamental requirement of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, the 88 Neighbourhood Renewal Fund areas in England have to formally establish a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), while the Local Government Act, 2000, required all local authorities in England and Wales to produce a Community Strategy which will promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas. In so doing, most have already established LSPs or are in the process of doing so.

The Local Government Act in Scotland, 2003, required local authorities to initiate and facilitate the Community Planning process and to set up an authority-wide Community Planning Partnership (CCP), together with many local Community Planning Partnerships (LCPPs). It also placed a duty on several other public and key local bodies, the NHS, the police, etc. to participate in the process.

Currently the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder programme is operating in 20 local authorities. The stated aim of Neighbourhood Management is: 'To help deprived communities and local service providers work together at neighbourhood level to improve and join up local services' and 'to help make those services be more responsive to local needs and ensure they deliver priority outcomes'.

The role of councillors

For their part, local authorities have come to recognise that in a broad range of policy initiatives the quality of governance, and participation in governance processes are key determinants of success. The role of councillors is increasingly in question as a result of a number of central government initiatives, including the local government modernisation programme, the development of cabinet government, the emergence of directly-elected mayors, and the development of regional bodies. There is a broad acceptance that councillors' developing role in community governance and community leadership will founder without effective partnership working. Councils are also motivated by a desire to restore the link with the general public, to restore faith in local political processes, to counter apathy and distrust, low turnouts at local elections, and a perceived lack of civic engagement in general. At the same time, although most councillors are happy to take on the role of 'community leader', many feel inadequately resourced or prepared to manage its demands (LGA, 2001; Wilkinson and Craig, 2002).

It is clear that important questions need to be explored in relation to the role of different partners in the local governance arena and the tensions emanating from these interactions. There has been precious little guidance for local authority members and officers faced with working within an arena where various partnership representatives call on widely differing forms of legitimacy. These gaps in our knowledge form the background to, and the focus for, the Doncaster seminar.

3 Diversity of approach

Decentralisation varies from authority to authority, generally occurring at three levels:

1. **Constituency level (usually 50,000–100,000).** For example, Birmingham is creating eleven districts in a city of 1.1 million people. The international Demos project operates at this level. Antwerp has a city council for the city as a whole supplemented by district councils elected separately, while Utrecht has district committees with a parallel citizens' committee.[4]

2. **Multi-ward or area level (usually 20,000–40,000).** Coventry and Rochdale have established area committees at this level.

3. **Neighbourhood level (usually 1,000–10,000)/natural neighbourhoods.** This is the level at which the government's neighbourhood pathfinder scheme operates. In Aberdeen there are 40 neighbourhoods of approximately 5,000 people, where boundaries are based not on wards, but on citizen agreement as to natural boundaries – generally based on historical connections, geography and key amenities such as schools.

4   Key relationships

A common approach has been a mixture of **area-based formal committees** of the council, and **neighbourhood fora**, which feed directly into them, both being supported by local area teams of council officers. Alongside these, some councils have initiated **thematic forums** around the priorities in the Community Plan, and/or **service orientated forums**, around cleansing, transport, etc. many of which complement the work of the area committees, or as in the case of Brent, **identifiable interest group forums** such as youth affairs, pensioners, public sector housing, disability and mental health, black and minority ethnic groups.

A number of councils have created **a strategic link between the area fora and the corporate centre**. In Brent, area committees forward strategic issues or entrenched problems directly to scrutiny and overview committees. In Barnsley the area forum's dedicated senior officer informally brings to the Executive's attention any particular sticking points in the locality and formally feeds into the Executive the results of mass communication exercises undertaken by local forums. Kirklees has established a committee of all Area Chairs plus executive members who have an area responsibility, together with communications and the Chair of Scrutiny. Cabinet members go out to discuss themes across all areas. In Trafford, Area Board Chairs meet Executive members with responsibility for the LSP and community issues, and together they make recommendations directly to the Executive.

Some authorities have engaged in **root and branch democratic reform**. In Aberdeen a task force of local citizens was established to review the council's relationships with its citizens. This resulted in a long-term Strengthening Local Democracy Strategy, covering every aspect of local governance over ten years. Cross-party support ensured that a change in local control did not derail the process.

Several **area committees have forged formal links with service departments** in order to influence mainstream provision. In Warwickshire all service departments undertake an annual needs analysis of each area and then identify the particular actions being undertaken to address those needs. They present workshops locally to outline their planned responses. The area committees monitor progress against targets in those area plans and against 70+ **area-based 'quality of life' headline indicators**. In Trafford area officers meet monthly with a network of middle managers in service departments to share ideas on service delivery.

Some areas Local Area Teams have engaged in **area profiling**, undertaking surveys of local opinion and drawing up **area plans.** In Manchester, each ward has developed a local plan through their local forums which has been fed up into the strategic/community plan for the service directorates to implement. In Doncaster, a community audit was followed by each of 20 neighbourhood management areas establishing a neighbourhood management partnership, and forging a management plan with local people through a '**Planning for Real**' process. This will impact directly on service delivery and on the strategic planning process by linking into Doncaster's Strategic Partnership. In Scotland the Community Planning Process is now in full swing. Aberdeen held a city-wide consultation on council services and a constitutional convention. Community planning was then developed with strategic partners.

Budgets and services

There has been some reluctance among elected members and senior officers to devolve mainstream budgets but some authorities are now testing the waters. South Somerset DC has been particularly successful in **decentralising budget allocation** and monitoring responsibilities in housing, planning, technical services and environmental health. Many, however, have experimented with innovative strategies to bring local influence to bear on service delivery.

Doncaster has restructured several services into one directorate called Neighbourhood Services, with a flagship component, the Community First programme. Delivery teams of multi-agency local service staff are working with neighbourhood wardens, in each neighbourhood management area, to deliver local targets. These are supplemented by local thematic initiatives such as a community recycling partnership, in which the public directly influences the shape and delivery of services. The council has instituted a **citizens' panel** with its own committee, some of whom sit on the area committee alongside the service providers. Members of the citizens' panel are encouraged to go along to conferences and strategy meetings alongside or even instead of officers/members. The council is currently developing **one-stop shops** in all areas and is moving towards local commissioning and eventual budget holding. Community Health Services has subsequently reorganised its own services to closely fit the 20 neighbourhood management areas and the police authority is looking to do the same. Aberdeen has seen a radical decentralisation of virtually all council services, including social services and education, to three area offices (70,000 population per office) and the three area corporate directors have equal standing to four other corporate directors in relation to council-wide planning and oversight. Most council officers are attached

to an area office and have formed Neighbourhood Officers' Groups. Police and Health are also subsequently reorganising around those area boundaries.

Bristol City Council has 'Project Pathfinder', the first public, private and community partnership in the country to produce an integrated and neighbourhood managed solution to waste collection, street cleansing, grounds maintenance and recycling. Barnsley has incrementally moved to delivering an increasing number of services – the Youth Service, Housing Estate Managers, and Neighbourhood Pride (a multi-skilled workforce, locally based, undertaking grass cutting, sweeping, cleaning, caretaking, etc.) – on an area forum basis. Neighbourhood Pride has won national innovation awards. They have also introduced 'blitzing an area' where various services come together over a few days to give a particular area a spring clean. In Warwickshire area committees have a range of executive powers over such matters as public and community transport, traffic management, and community development grants.

Some councils, Hull and Warwickshire included, have established relatively small-scale (generally under £100,000 per area) local project budgets to be allocated by area committees. These have proved popular with councillors and community representatives alike. In Barnsley, Area Forums have £25,000 each to spend on Highways for schemes they can't get into the main programme and £40,000–£60,000 to spend on community projects. In Doncaster each Neighbourhood Management Partnership has a 'quick win' budget to facilitate speedy improvements as the community planning process takes shape.

Several authorities use innovative participatory models to engage traditionally hard-to-reach groups. Coventry, for instance, had undertaken targeted work with African-Caribbean communities, lone parents and disabled people. Kirklees co-opt 'hard-to-reach' or minority groups onto area committees through invitation or open application. They also pay annual bursaries to encourage young people to attend area committees! At East Hampshire DC, councillors and officers deliver a five-week course on citizenship in all of the district's secondary schools and colleges. Birmingham has developed a Best Value Review methodology which specifically asks how the views of socially excluded groups have been represented in the review process. In Sunderland a group of young people from the 'at risk' register were involved in reviewing the authority's services for young people. The process directly influenced the development of the authority's Youth Strategy.

The international Demos team has produced a 50-page study on inspirational examples of local governance innovation.[5]

5 Lessons from the frontline

Discussions in the workshops and plenary sessions covered a wide range of benefits and challenges arising from devolution to neighbourhoods. The main points are detailed below.

The benefits of decentralised arrangements are:

- civic renewal
- improved service delivery/relationships
- local project development, and
- community leadership.

Civic renewal

Some authorities were experiencing vigorous democratic renewal and community engagement in civic and civil society which had, in some cases, led to a significant growth in involvement in decision-making at all levels and increases in turnouts at elections. Participants told of very healthy turnouts in local forums – at times into the hundreds when contentious proposals were on the agenda. Neighbourhood and area fora were addressing a wide range of issues, covering micro, localised, individual, immediate concerns and macro, strategic, authority-wide, medium to long-term concerns. Communities had responded enthusiastically to decentralised decision-making arrangements and localised service delivery.

Improved service delivery/relationships

Local service providers had been able to respond positively to many of the issues raised in area and neighbourhood fora, where previously they would not, or could not. Services were improving. Members of the public liked one-stop shops and appreciated the work of local area teams. As citizens became increasingly involved in thematic reviews and the community planning process, more amicable and consensual relationships were replacing a historic 'culture of objection'.

Local project development

The provision of funding for localised project development had been particularly popular among elected members, officers and members of the public alike. They were an effective means both of engaging local people directly in decision-making and of circumventing the often tortuous wait for initiatives to filter into corporate priorities at the centre.

Community leadership

It was also clear that elected members, particularly non-executive ones, had by and large enjoyed their enhanced community leadership role. It had got them out of the town hall and back to the interface with those they represent. While party political differences remained, there had been much cross-party consensus between area chairs, with 'peace breaking out' particularly in the face of perceived common enemies/concerns.

There are, however, some difficulties and obstacles to be tackled and these were identified as follows:

- fragmentation of local governance
- costs
- insufficient commitment
- corporate barriers
- lack of capacity/misuse of instruments
- political footballs
- public disillusionment.

Fragmentation of local governance

Local authorities had been bombarded with a plethora of new initiatives from the government and developing decentralised services, or linking area working with other aspects of the modernisation agenda, were low on the list of priorities. A host of other factors, impacted on councils' ability to make decentralised arrangements work, including:

- the fragmentation of council services (e.g. large-scale voluntary transfer of housing, more independence for schools, long-term outsourcing)
- the impact of organisations such as Urban Development Corporations
- the neighbourhood renewal agenda, where regeneration projects, outside of municipal control, didn't necessarily fit the broader needs of the community.

Local governance had become much more complicated in recent years, with areas of responsibility often opaque within partnership structures. Effective local governance requires transparency and accountability and it was felt that often the most powerful agencies exhibited neither. There were particular concerns around the democratic status of LSPs, which could be dominated by unelected economic interests, and of how and

where LSP activities meshed with decentralised arrangements and the community planning process.

Costs

In recent years councils have come under increasing pressure to prove their efficiency under Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). CPA does not address devolution arrangements within its methodology. Some authorities were understandably reluctant to risk devolving services and budgets where this might detract temporarily from the smooth running of operations, or might prove more costly in the short term.

Insufficient commitment

Some authorities lacked the political will or a 'champion' to drive the process forward. Some councillors were reluctant to let go of the reins. New political structures had not facilitated devolution of decision-making in any substantive sense. Legally councillors are responsible for all the key decisions taken by area committees and while local forums were used to airing grievances, in some localities there was no meaningful link into the area committees. In several authorities area committees had been 'totally ignored' by portfolio holders and non-executive councillors had lost their link to service departments. Area committees had therefore become little more than area surgeries, duplicating existing roles.

Corporate barriers

In the absence of a strong political steer, some service directorates refused to deviate from centrally established objectives. Some refused to work with area coordination teams and failed to turn out to local forums. Insufficient information was filtering down to the localities to enable local area teams or local people to engage in meaningful monitoring of services and budgets. That was in part due to historic demarcation lines between departments – people spoke of departmental bunkers or silos.

Lack of capacity/misuse of instruments

Area teams were sometimes understaffed and under-resourced, while demands upon them had increased exponentially. Area-based officers sometimes questioned the commitment of elected members and senior officers to the process and voiced frustration that the potential of decentralisation was being lost. Members used them for surgery issues and the public presented wish lists rather than suggestions based on the strategic needs of their area. There was a particular problem of the 'loudest shouters', who could at times get their way in meetings through persistence or strength of presence rather than community support or

weight of argument – something some chairs were finding difficult to resist. Officers spoke of 'self-appointed' community activists, of the 'local mafia' and 'grants gangsters' who 'crawled out of the woodwork' whenever significant amounts of 'funny money' were available.

Political footballs

Officers could also find themselves in very difficult positions. The effectiveness of area directors could be influenced by the political persuasion of their area chairs. Where overall control had changed or an area chair had changed hands politically there were instances of area officers being criticised for having too close a working relationship with area chairs of the outgoing ruling group.

Public disillusionment

It had proved difficult for some members of the public to accept that area committees were formal council meetings in which their own role was somewhat limited in comparison to that of elected members. This had made relationships difficult, particularly as both members and officers were at times ill-prepared and felt exposed in local public meetings. Community activists all too often felt that the council had become better at undertaking consultation but no better at responding to the views expressed. Initial enthusiasm could therefore rapidly turn to disillusionment and cynicism.

6   The way forward

There is a general acceptance among policy makers that the public have little respect for local political processes or for local authorities. All too often, moribund systems and procedures have led to officers and members delivering poor services. A clear need has arisen both to re-engage citizens with political processes, and to encourage their direct input into decisions about service provision. There are also a plethora of policy areas and initiatives, from regional planning and economic development to poverty alleviation and social inclusion, which benefit from strong neighbourhood structures. It would therefore appear that area governance and neighbourhood management are set to become permanent features on the local government landscape.

An integrated working model for decentralisation should therefore include:

- flexibility
- localised models
- clarity of structure and purpose, and
- participation.

Flexibility

As previously outlined, decentralised arrangements have costs and they do not necessarily lead to better services. While participants felt that local authorities must be prepared to be adventurous, there was recognition that some areas of service provision did not easily lend themselves to decentralisation. Equally, devolved budgets are not essential. Neighbourhood budgets can be a distraction to a mainstream culture change. New ways of developing neighbourhood control over services could well prove more effective than decentralised budgets, e.g. decentralised contracts, multi-agency delivery teams, involvement in the annual budget decision-making process, decentralised staff dedicated to neighbourhood working, area-based performance management. Devolution of the community planning and priority setting process can have more impact than the devolution of services.

Some authorities had devolved too much too soon only to see systems failing and then having to 'unpack the mess'. Some preferred a phased or incremental approach, which places less emphasis on devolving budgets and staff and more focus on influencing policy and service provision via partnership working and citizen involvement. Others suggested that key funding streams – regeneration, education, etc. could become a community grant to be managed by community planning

partnerships. One suggestion, (not necessarily welcomed by all participants in the seminar) was that the LSP could manage and oversee an overarching budget to deliver all services through one structure, and that it might ultimately become the second chamber of council!

Equally, neighbourhood management does not necessarily promote neighbourhood governance or greater civic engagement. There are examples of efficiently delivered multi-agency services based on passive forms of consultation (user surveys, etc.) and very limited community engagement in the community strategy. There is evidence that 'larger areas also afford more opportunity to participate in and influence public affairs than smaller units, because of the proportionately greater number of voluntary organisations, citizens' associations, community groups and organised political parties to assist the articulation of political demands' (Smith, 1985).

Localised models

There was broad agreement that there is no 'correct' model for decentralisation. Each local authority area will evolve its own instruments and processes over time, as participating parties press their own agendas and as learning takes place. Experience suggests that localised services are a good starting point for decentralisation, with political devolution following, as and when it appears useful. It is often easier to decentralise services than it is to decentralise politics. In any case, many citizens simply want high quality services and a means to participate on issues of the moment directly affecting them, rather than making a regular input into local government structures. Similarly, people may be willing to engage in defining the service outcomes they want for their area, but few will want to be involved in monitoring these outcomes routinely unless they receive some incentive for doing so.

Clarity of structure and purpose

Decentralised arrangements work best where community leadership has flourished, where area committees have clearly defined, decision-making powers, and where their relationships to decision and policy-making structures within the Council, to the Council, to the Executive, and to the Scrutiny committees are transparent. Structures also need to have been created to enable the community voice to feed directly into the Council's performance management framework.

The form of neighbourhood governance should be fit for purpose. If the key purpose is to broaden community involvement in community planning, the form could be planning-for-real exercises and members of the LSP coming to meet those who are not usually heard (e.g. at a Sure

Start project or youth club). A formal committee structure is unlikely to be effective for this purpose.

Participation

There are many and various techniques for encouraging participation, however, it is also essential to ensure that participatory models address the need for **systematic, long-term participation** (even over generations), in which there are reciprocal rights and responsibilities on both citizens and local government. These should extend to its institutional partners, and include the responsibility to respond to the contributions generated by such techniques. As in Scotland, in the community planning process, this may ultimately require the establishment of statutory duties at the local level.

A key component is the need to foster **efficient participation**, whereby stakeholders get maximum benefit from minimum resource and time input. Not all communications need be face-to-face – interactive neighbourhood websites, internet-based 'citizens panels' for policy review, video participation for hard-to-reach groups and digital imaging by citizens' groups to monitor their neighbourhood are all viable alternatives.

7 Lessons for local government

Decentralised arrangements and local community planning work best where there exists a public mandate for the process. It is important from the outset to consult widely with service providers at all levels, trade unions, with communities and their community leaders, if schemes are to obtain a wide ownership.

They work best when there is clarity and wide agreement on purpose. Are they aimed primarily at service coordination, as in neighbourhood management? Is the question primarily to coordinate and improve service delivery across public agencies? If so, for which services? Or is the purpose to engage citizens in local governance? Is it about forward planning by citizens, councillors and officers, as in neighbourhood action planning, which can also then link to statutory planning? Or is it about formal decision-making and/or locality budgeting in a local partnership which may also link to a council area sub-committee? Or is it about some combination of all these?

Whatever the purpose, there is no magic bullet for improving citizen participation in local governance. What is important is the learning both from the everyday success and failure of ongoing participation in partnership and from processes taking place in other local authorities, which can then be used to improve the next phase of innovation. Councils need to establish what works. They need to initiate systematic, long-term programmes where initiatives are tried out and evaluated. Unsuccessful ones will be dropped but steady gains and moves to improve the process will result.

The inter-relationship between structures is critical to achieve positive outcomes in terms of:

- how neighbourhood, district, city and sub-region interface and integrate
- how neighbourhood management impacts on main council departments and other public agencies
- how the ward councillor influences the decision-making process of the executive
- how neighbourhood planning influences the community strategy
- how the ward councillor relates to the neighbourhood structure
- how community development at the neighbourhood relates to the engagement of interest groups at the authority-wide level.

Decentralised arrangements require solid political backing and preferably cross-party support, which send a clear message that the process will not be de-railed by a change in political control. Managers' commitment depends upon political commitment. There is a clear need for strong leadership in driving the process forward and changing organisational culture, to counter entrenched departmentalism and scepticism. At the same time, councillors must be reassured that decentralised arrangements are not taking democratic accountability away from them and can enhance their role. Clarity in the ward councillor's community leadership role and support for this role are essential.

Neighbourhood management requires enhanced councillor and officer skills: communication, negotiation, brokerage, advice, community development and partnership working. It also requires an effective geographical information system, so that participants can share data effectively between themselves.

Substantial capacity building with local communities is an essential prerequisite for them to engage meaningfully. It is not a genuine partnership unless local people feel they can challenge officers and members. Integral to that process should be the development of a range of mechanisms to encourage the participation of marginalised groups. Devising a successful programme of inclusion requires close working with representatives of these groups to experiment with various methods of participation, ensuring that their views have influence and the impact is reported back.

Citizens clearly like a neighbourhood presence and a single portal into local government to resolve neighbourhood issues. So neighbourhood offices and one-stop shops, involving adequately resourced contact officers with specific but broad responsibilities who able to respond in a flexible manner, are key. The single portal can be extended to include other partners such as the police, health or transport. People also respond positively to tangible outcomes, early in the process of decentralisation.

8   Recommendations for local government

It was felt that the following recommendations would support an integrated approach to decentralisation by developing local government's representational role and resident's participation:

(a)   Experiment with governance systems which work at both city-wide and local levels and interlock effectively without duplicating representative or participatory functions.

(b)   Ensure that area fora have clearly defined decision-making powers which relate transparently and procedurally to the corporate centre, to the Executive, the council and scrutiny and overview committees, so that they inform the strategic direction of the authority.

(c)   Create formal links between area fora and service departments so that they influence mainstream service provision and ensure that the community voice feeds directly into the council's performance management framework.

(d)   Utilise a broad range of mechanisms to encourage participation – thematic groups, interest groups, service groups, etc. while linking them into area structures and the key democratic role of elected members.

(e)   Use innovative participatory models to engage traditionally hard-to-reach groups, wherever possible, designed in partnership with representatives of those groups.

(f)   Maintain and promote the key democratic locus of elected members, reward learning and innovation among members and officers and provide strategic support, training and development for councillors and officers at all levels, in accessible formats with flexible timescales.

(g)   Take a strategic approach to information flows between all participants. Written communication and language at meetings should be accessible to all.

(h)   Set aside a budget for 'quick wins' and aim to reduce the time-lag (or budget cycle) between neighbourhood participation and real changes in services provision/resource allocation.

A further recommendation was that local government umbrella and partnership organisations should develop mechanisms that enable local authorities and councillors to share their skills and experience in decentralised arrangements and processes.

9   Recommendations for central government

There were concerns that government was considering options that would actively marginalize the role of councillors in neighbourhood governance, the intention being that community activism should supersede that representative role. This, it was felt, would be a grave mistake. Councillors provide a direct link between the local and the strategic and they provide a key community leadership role, as democratically elected honest brokers between a range of often competing and sectional interests.

Instead, it was felt that government should be encouraging and facilitating a productive relationship between representative and participatory decision-making: experimenting with new ways to support positive working between councillors and community activists, to help councillors buttress their political legitimacy and local residents achieve their aspirations. There is an urgent need for more training and support for the community leadership role of the frontline, ward councillor. The focus within the modernisation agenda has been on the executive with the representative role not being properly supported. Yet all the evidence shows that successful outcomes in neighbourhoods depend on good relationships between any community structure or local partnership and the ward councillor (Wilkinson and Craig, 2002).

Central government should therefore:

(a)   Acknowledge and robustly support the key role of elected members in decentralised arrangements, as an integral part of the council's duty to ensure publicly accountable, equitable and quality-consistent services as well as a strategic overview of local provision.

(b)   Facilitate a national support programme for local councillors in developing skills in the analysis of strategic and local issues.

(c)   Give a clear lead on what is expected of decentralised structures. Are they primarily about service delivery, or civil renewal or both?

(d)   Be consistent in devolution policies. Should large unitary councils, (if regional government is agreed in the northern referenda), re-establish two tier working as Birmingham is doing? Should towns re-establish parishes, or is devolution of principal authorities the main aim?

(e) Consider placing a legal obligation on councils to develop a strategy on civic renewal with a responsibility to undertake specific measures to encourage the inclusion of 'hard-to-reach' groups, as part of their community strategy.

(f) Collate available research around decentralisation (academic, research foundations, evidence from the neighbourhood pathfinders and initiatives such as new Deal for Communities, etc.) to inform practice on the best ways of shaping local services.

(g) Consider working with a group of pathfinder authorities to evaluate the impact of decentralisation.

(h) Acknowledge that no one size fits all, that each community should set its own instruments and mechanisms for decentralisation, and accordingly, not impose directly elected neighbourhood boards on local government. A mandatory structure is unlikely to achieve any of the current objectives on service delivery or civil renewal, and would serve only to institutionalise another tier of governance.

(i) Acknowledge the costs accruing from decentralisation processes and resource local authorities accordingly.

(j) Clarify how and where LSPs are expected to fit with community planning and the decentralisation process.

10 Conclusions

Government policy initiatives have, to date, emphasised partnerships – horizontal integration. However, the new challenge to address is vertical integration between neighbourhood and district, city and sub-region. Governance systems are needed which interlock in meaningful ways without duplicating representative roles or participatory structures, i.e. real subsidiarity.

Productive relationships are vital to avoid disillusionment and scepticism. The contributions of elected members, as well as community representatives, are required for successful neighbourhood decision-making. One cannot be substituted for the other. With proper training and support these two groups of 'active citizens' can ensure that local voices are a force for change.

Notes

1   Of particular value was a paper by Ines Newman, LGIU, *Local government decentralisation,* to the government inter-departmental meeting on neighbourhood governance, March 2004.

2   Focusing on active citizenship in urban areas, drawing on lessons from Scotland and Europe.

3   Drawing on a recent study of decentralised arrangements in several localities in England. See Wilkinson, M. and Craig, G. (2004) *A local voice? For tenants and residents,* Working Papers in Social Sciences and Policy, No.13, University of Hull. Also, Wilkinson, M. and Craig, G. (2002) *New roles for old: Local authority members and partnership working,* JRF/YPS, York.

4   Information on the project can be found at: www.demosproject.org.

5   Carley, M. (2002) *Good practice in local governance: Brief case studies.* This can be downloaded for free from www.demosproject.org. See also: Carley, M. *et al.* (2004) *Citizens, innovation and local governance: A 21st century approach,* which covers in depth points raised by Professor Carley at the Mansion House seminar.

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Participants

Speakers
Cllr G McLister, Doncaster MBC

Michael Carley, Heriot-Watt University

Mick Wilkinson, University of Hull

Mayor Martin Winter, Doncaster MBC

Sue Blizzard, Kingston upon Hull City Council

Fred Scoley, Doncaster MBC

Janice Thornton, City of Bradford MDC

Joint Chairs
Debby Ounsted, Trustee JRF

Richard Best, Director JRF

Organisations
Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

City of Bradford MDC

Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council

Kingston upon Hull City Council

Kirklees Metropolitan Council

Local Government Association

Local Government Information Unit

North Yorkshire County Council

Sheffield City Council

Trafford Borough Council

York City County