Designing citizen-centred governance

The expansion in opportunities for citizen participation and of partnerships as a means of making policy and delivering services has created a wide range of different ways in which public services are governed. This can result in confusion about who is responsible for what and how people can get involved in decision making. This study investigated different models of citizen-centred governance and the principles on which this is based.

Key points

- Towns and cities are now governed by a patchwork of special-purpose governance structures operating alongside local authorities, NHS bodies and other government agencies. The picture is complex and changing.

- Citizens and service users in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are doubly disadvantaged. They have to negotiate the complexities of public service delivery to meet their immediate needs, and also respond to the many consultation and engagement initiatives.

- The governance of disadvantaged neighbourhoods is in a state of flux. Not only do residents have to overcome the economic, social and political barriers of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but their opportunities for involvement in shaping public services are constantly being changed.

- Clarity about the purpose of engaging people in governance arrangements is lacking. This can lead to confusion and disillusionment.

- Governance designs can emphasise local representation, where people speak on behalf of others, or can be based on local knowledge, where people's insights into local needs can contribute to the quality of service delivery.

- New forms of governance can offer greater flexibility and less formality, thus encouraging participation by citizens and service users. However, there is an absence of effective democratic oversight of the design of new structures or their operation.

- The researchers conclude that more debate is needed on the principles and purposes underlying citizens' involvement in governance, with bottom-up involvement in determining appropriate designs. More effective links are required between new governance bodies and decision-making authorities, with sufficient stability to enable learning as well as experimentation.

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Background

The fundamental challenge for the governance of communities is how to create flexible, effective organisations for delivering public services, while at the same time promoting the values of local democracy. Getting this right leads to 'citizen-centred governance'.

Policy initiatives in recent years have created many special-purpose bodies to plan, manage and deliver public policy programmes. These have often been area-based initiatives focused on disadvantaged areas, emphasising partnership with communities, service users and not-for-profit, statutory and business organisations. Some of these new governance structures, such as NHS Foundation Trusts and New Deal for Community partnerships, hold public elections for governor and board positions.

Alongside these developments, local authorities have created area and neighbourhood structures through which to engage people and deliver services. Local Area Agreements are intended to integrate and improve public service performance across the various governance structures operating in local authority areas. The involvement of patients and members of the public is also official policy within the NHS.

As a result, citizens and service users in disadvantaged areas receive considerable demands to become involved in the governance of their communities. They face a double disadvantage, as they have to negotiate the complexities of public service delivery to meet their immediate needs and also respond to the many consultation and engagement initiatives set up by the various institutions of community governance.

This study examined the relationship between new governance structures and the engagement of citizens, service users and the voluntary and community sectors, with the aim of identifying lessons for policy and practice. Important lessons can be learnt from the experiences of service users' involvement in decision-making about health and social care, and from experience outside the statutory sector.

Mapping the complex governance landscape

As well as new opportunities, these policy initiatives have produced a patchwork of governance structures in each local authority area. Partnerships and other bodies providing public services are characterised by informal constitutions and problems of legitimacy, and weaknesses in accountability. This makes the process of public participation more complex, demanding and frustrating for those who give up their time to contribute, especially for people living in disadvantaged areas.

For example, this study's mapping of governance initiatives in Birmingham revealed that a typical inner city neighbourhood would have neighbourhood renewal, regeneration, Children's Fund and Sure Start projects, together with district and ward committees of the city council, a district strategic partnership (involving public, private and voluntary/community sector stakeholders), community networks and neighbourhood forums. This was in addition to mainstream statutory agencies (city council, Primary Care Trust, police and others). Citizens and service users were involved in these new governance arrangements, as well as being eligible for election to school governing bodies and as NHS Foundation Trust governors.

Across this city and elsewhere governance structures have adopted different and overlapping geographical remits. New governance bodies can also have different constitutions. Most are 'unincorporated associations', which means that they do not have a legal identity and are only able to spend money and enter into contracts through an 'accountable body' – i.e. an established public or not-for-profit organisation. This gives flexibility in terms of how the governance body operates, but means that formal accountability remains elsewhere.

This complex governance landscape has changed frequently in response to policy shifts, local decisions and political factors. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods in particular are affected as a result of the stream of initiatives started by central and local government and other public service providers. As noted earlier, this creates a double disadvantage for people whose lives already involve daily struggle with poor economic, physical and social conditions.

Principles for designing citizen-centred governance

There is still considerable uncertainty about the roles of citizens and service users in these new structures of governance. Those designing and managing new governance arrangements must be clear whether citizens and service users are being involved as community representatives or as individual experts. This reflects two design principles:

- *Local knowledge* is about the expertise that citizens and service users have to contribute to the formulation of policy and the design and delivery of services. Traditionally, expertise was regarded as something restricted to professionals. Now, however, it is recognised that citizens and service

users have their own equally important local knowledge to contribute.

- **Local representation** emphasises how participatory forms of governance can contribute to making public decisions more democratic. Engagement in governance is about 'representing' the views of particular local constituencies in the decision-making process. This gives greater legitimacy to decisions.

These two principles have different implications for governance design. Local representation requires attention to the legitimacy of participants as representatives of those for whom they speak. There is also an expectation that they are accountable to their constituents. In contrast, local knowledge emphasises the importance of creating spaces that enable new understanding to be generated through open, informal deliberation.

Case studies of citizen-centred governance

The researchers analysed case studies using the distinction between these two principles in order to understand approaches to citizen participation.

The *local knowledge* principle was strongly reflected in case studies of a Sure Start initiative and a community-led housing association. The Sure Start initiative's governance had undergone changes, but participants sought to retain a way of working that enabled parents who were inexperienced in formal meetings to contribute their local knowledge to developing the programme. This included very simple methods such as sitting on comfortable chairs rather than formally around a table.

The community-led housing association had its origins in action by residents protesting about poor housing quality and local services on a council estate. From the start residents were involved in determining how the governance systems should work. While *local representation* was reflected in formal board structures, *local knowledge* informed the design of participation structures around the board. These enabled residents to debate the future development of the area and meant that they were able to exert some influence over housing and neighbourhood policies.

The *local representation* principle informed the design of NHS Foundation Trusts. Foundation Trust governors are directly elected by their constituents, including patients and the public. In the research case study there was considerable interest in these positions, with 27 candidates standing for the two patient-governor seats and a level of turnout among voters commensurate with local elections in the area.

However, these governors only have an advisory role and are not part of the Trust's board. Also, although the governors are there as representatives, there are no channels through which they can communicate with their constituents.

Local Strategic Partnerships primarily reflect the principle of *local representation*. However, in this case public representation on the board is expected to come through umbrella voluntary and community organisations. But the expectation that such organisations will 'represent' the wider community presents difficulties because of the diverse nature of the sector, informal and under-resourced co-ordination, and the desire of individual organisations to be seen as independent. More direct involvement by local people is possible via an annual stakeholder conference and thematic partnerships. These forums also have some characteristics of the spaces for deliberation which are necessary to enable access to local knowledge.

Learning from diversity

The study's analysis of 'state of knowledge' papers by experts on ten different public service initiatives highlighted the diversity of methods through which people engage in governance, and the importance of understanding why they get involved and what impact this has on them. In particular, the analysis found a link between improving services and the motivation to become engaged. But this usually requires achieving changes in ways of working, policies and service delivery within partner agencies.

People come to take part in very different ways. They may be elected, appointed, invited or encouraged via community development activities. These various methods suggest very different expectations about whether citizens might act as representatives of any particular constituency. There is also considerable variation in the extent to which precise roles or responsibilities are defined for either citizen or agency participants in these new governance processes.

Direct reference to the importance of local knowledge is rare, although it is implicit in much of the work to engage with groups who might be expected to contribute a rather different perspective from that of public officials.

The way forward

The research pointed to four dilemmas that need to be resolved if citizen-centred governance is to make a greater impact on neighbourhoods and services. There is no easy quick fix. These dilemmas need to be managed in the light of circumstances and attitudes in each neighbourhood. However, there are ways in which policy and practice could help to resolve the dilemmas:

- **New opportunities, but greater confusion**. New forms of governance have created different ways for citizens and service users to become involved and shape services, but at the same time there is more complexity and confusion about who does what. The ideas of local representation and local knowledge provide a useful way of distinguishing different purposes for citizens' participation in local governance. Those involved in designing governance arrangements need to be clear about the meanings and implications of these two design principles.
- **More flexibility, but less transparency**. The old bureaucratic ways of providing public services are being changed and made more responsive to local needs, but this has reduced the transparency of decision-making and accountability.
- **Making a difference, but depending on others**. Citizen-centred governance makes a positive difference to individuals and communities, but requires the engagement of mainstream agencies to be sustainable.
- **Experimenting with governance, but maintaining oversight**. Widespread experimentation with governance designs has a value in developing good practice, but there is also a need for oversight to enable lessons to be learnt and the overall governance of the community to be effective.

The researchers suggest the following recommendations:

1. Provision of guidance to enable greater clarity about the differences between 'local knowledge' and 'local representation' and their implications for governance design.
2. Clarification of the role of agency 'representatives' within partnerships.
3. Designing governance structures from the bottom up in order to create a design that reflects an appropriate balance between flexibility and transparency.
4. More effective links between new governance entities and agencies holding decision-making powers.
5. Both experimentation and stability to enable effective working relationships and learning.
6. Consideration by local authorities of establishing a governance register of all bodies undertaking public functions or roles in their area, to ensure learning and transparency.

About the project

This study undertook new research as well as building on existing knowledge. The researchers commissioned 'state of knowledge' papers from national evaluation teams and other experts in the field. These papers covered: Sure Start (Jane Tunstill and Debra Allnock); the Children's Fund (Hanne Beirens and Nick Peim); school governing bodies (Stewart Ranson); New Deal for Communities (Paul Lawless); neighbourhood management initiatives (Geoff White); Local Strategic Partnerships (Mike Geddes); registered social landlords (David Mullins and Mike Smith); patient and public involvement forums and NHS Foundation Trusts (Shirley McIver).

The study undertook new research in:

- a Sure Start children's centre;
- a community-based housing association;
- a Local Strategic Partnership;
- an NHS Foundation Trust in the West Midlands.

The researchers also conducted further interviews in a number of governance structures they had first investigated in two Economic and Social Research Council projects in 2000-2003. This enabled them to offer a longitudinal perspective on the way in which governance processes have developed.

For further information

The full report, **Designing citizen-centred governance** by Marian Barnes, Chris Skelcher, Hanne Beirens, Robert Dalziel, Stephen Jeffares and Lynne Wilson, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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