

The Impact of Organizational, Policy and Programme Changes on the Effectiveness of Market Town Partnerships.

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Abstract

Market town partnerships represent 'localism' in action.

This paper argues that the ability of partnerships to help solve locally identified problems of rurality, and to contribute to policy development, has been compromised by changes in organizational and governance structures, programmes, and policy priorities.

It is suggested that stable, long-term support for market town partnerships is necessary if they are to continue to address well-known, persistent problems of rurality in ways that reflect local needs. If government commitment to localism is to be more than rhetoric, however, policy makers must recognize the need for structural stability, a consistent approach, and programmes appropriate for partnerships, the members of which are often lay volunteers.

Keywords

Community-led development, 'localism', Market Towns, partnership working, organizational change, rural policy.

1. Introduction

Community self-help is an activity done by the community, not for or to them, but it needs support from outside if it is to flourish. (Boateng 2001 p116)

Community-led development takes time and effort, and requires a degree of local autonomy. Devolution is difficult and expensive, and ensuring wide participation in community work is difficult and complicated (Pearce and Mawson 2003 p57, Williams 2003 p81, AMT 2004, Carnegie 2007, Clark, Southern and Beer 2007). It is not surprising, therefore, that, in the words of one experienced local community activist, "*Regeneration takes a generation.*" (Garrity 2001). Consequently, programmes of support need to be simple to understand, responsive and sensitive to local circumstances, and sufficiently stable to enable long-term progress to be made.

Change, however, not stability, is the norm. For example, the rate at which government organizations and structures have been reviewed and changed in recent years adds further complications to what has long been recognized as a complicated way of working (Jackson and Stainsby 2000, Gershon 2004, Lyons 2004, Defra 2005, DCLG 2006, HMT 2007). Recent

years have also seen changes in programmes, structures and governance mechanisms. It is argued that these changes, which broadly coincided with a period of increased interest in the functions of market towns, and the creation - and end - of the Market Towns Initiative (MTI), a national support programme designed to encourage community-led development in England's market (country) towns (DETR-MAFF 2000 pp73-88), have been unhelpful to Market Town Partnerships (MTPs). It is also argued that these changes resulted in a lost opportunity to learn, in a practical way, about long-standing problems of rurality - such as access to transport, employment, and services - via a nationally-coordinated longitudinal study. The lack of such a study has long been noted (Dickenson 1942 p181, Mills 1988 p2, Shucksmith, Roberts, Scott, Chapman, and Conway 1996 p67, Morris 2003 p103).

2. Changes in Governance, Organizations, Programmes and Policy Priorities

It is important to recognize the distinction between **government** and **governance**. A dictionary definition of government is, "... *the system or form by which a community etc., is ruled ...*", whereas governance is, "... *the action, manner, or system of governing ...*" (Collins 1979 p631). Where the former is about structure, the latter is about action - i.e. how things get done. *Government* suggests Westminster politicians, civil and public servants, the two or three tiers of local, democratically elected politicians and their officers, and the various semi-public bodies outside, but dependent upon, government (i.e. Non Departmental Public Bodies). Implicit in the concept of *governance*, a word often attached to corporate, clinical, and global, as well as national and local, is a sharing of power and influence amongst a variety of public, private and voluntary organizations, whose representatives might be elected, or appointed, to their positions.

Governance mechanisms are intended to improve policy development and implementation. The related literature is eclectic and embryonic (Flinders 2000 pp51-52). Although the influence of governance is apparent at all government levels, there are contradictions between the need for consensus and joint working, and prescription and control by the centre (p70). Much of central government's power is concentrated in the hands of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Musson, Tickell and John 2006 p1395), and there is a tendency to maintain primacy via monitoring, financial and target-setting controls (p1408). This tendency, coupled with the complicated nature of governance (Morris and Nichols 2007 p30, North, Syrett and Etherington 2007 p41), means that the effectiveness and appropriateness of governance as a mechanism for implementing policy is a subject of debate (Winter 2006, North *et.al.* 2007 p93).

There are, therefore, contradictions between Government's instinct to control and government politicians' stated intentions to devolve. These contradictions and associated tensions affect community groups and the tiers of local government. Any devolution that has taken place has tended to be from the centre to the regions, with powers and responsibilities shared between local authorities and regional, semi-autonomous organizations. Therefore, although, "*Community-based partnerships that engage local people ... remain strongly in vogue ... the perception remains that a 'democratic deficit' persists at local level*", a consequence perhaps of the, "... 150 Acts of Parliament

diminishing the powers of local authorities.” enacted between 1979 and the mid-1990s (Tomorrow Project 2006).

In October, 2007, following a period during which ‘localism’ (a word generally meaning the devolution of power from central to local authorities) became the approach favoured by all three main British political parties (Cameron 2007, DCLG 2005, Hughes 2007), Hazel Blears, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, announced a plan to give more powers to local government, saying, “*I do not underestimate the challenges that devolution will bring but local leaders have a chance to show that local solutions can be best and I am confident that they will rise to that challenge.*” (Blears 2007). A newspaper article from the same month reported, however, that a locally-led scheme to build affordable homes, a school, workspace, and a community hall, which was submitted for planning approval in 2003, and supported by Parish, District and County Councils, and the Rural Affairs Minister (who, “... *pushed through a £137,000 grant to develop proposals further.*”) had failed to win support from Ms Blears’s department on the grounds that the scheme could result in an over-supply of affordable housing (Hetherington 2007). In short, central government had supported, delayed, and then apparently second-guessed and blocked a locally-led project, for some four years.

In this case, at least, it is difficult to believe that the concept of ‘localism’ had been understood, let alone accepted and adopted as an approach to policy development and implementation. Revealingly, a UK Government review of regional economic development measures, refers to a, “... *substantial devolution of responsibilities ... for sub-national levels of government.*” (writer’s emphasis), but makes no obvious reference to any significant increase in powers (HMT 2007 p104). Although the lack of local authority powers is acknowledged (p73), there is little to suggest that significant additional freedoms and powers - e.g. to raise money and spend it in locally-determined ways - will result from this review.

There is, therefore, a difference between intention and rhetoric, and the reality faced by local people when they choose to work together for the common good, using processes and money controlled by others. It is this complicated and time consuming reality that faces local people involved in community-led MTPs. These difficulties are further complicated by the fact that working in partnership is not easy (IDeA 2007), as the following graphical, if somewhat cynical, definitions of partnership working suggest: “... *an equal suppression of loathing in the pursuit of money.*” (IDeA 2007); “*Linking up with other institutions so as to spread the blame.*” (Hoggart 2007).

3. Implications for Market Town Partnerships

The impact of governance mechanisms on MTPs is difficult to assess. The Market Towns Initiative (MTI) aimed to give local people, “... *a say in the future of their market towns...*” (CA 2005 p2), but was relatively short-lived as a nationally-coordinated programme. The first MTI partnerships were established in 2001, and the programme effectively ended in 2005. Although the programme was evaluated in 2005 (Moseley, Owen, Clark and Kambites 2005) there has been no attempt since, methodically, to acquire nationally, analyse and disseminate, the experiences of the partnerships. This is partly because of organizational and policy priority changes (Haskins 2003, Defra 2005).

The impact of these changes on MTPs, each with an average of 25 members, the majority of whom are, in one way or another, volunteers (Entec 2005 p12), is at best confusing, at worst damaging, disillusioning, and demoralising. Although regional support for MTPs continues (e.g. via the Market and Coastal Towns Association in the South West - <http://www.mcti.org.uk/> - and Renaissance Market Towns in Yorkshire and Humber - <http://www.rmtportal.com/>), these activities do not seem to be coordinated or regularly and rigorously monitored and evaluated nationally.

The rate and nature of the changes referred to above are not new. There have been periodic bursts of interest in the roles of market towns (Heamon 1950, Bracey 1954, 1962, Courtney, Dawson and Errington 1998, Medcalf 2000, Morris 2003, Nichols 2005, AMT 2007), and numerous regeneration policies since the 1960s - an Audit Commission report lists 39 major Acts, policies and initiatives (Audit Commission 2004 pp59-62). There have also been calls, since at least 1987, for rural strategies to integrate economic, social, environmental, and recreational objectives and policies (RTPI 2000 p31). Policies have increasingly been designed to develop the capacity of the people who are affected by, and involved in, the regeneration of an area, but they have been poorly integrated into the 'mainstream', fragmented, badly coordinated, and complicated in terms of process and administration (Wilks-Heeg 2000 pp17-20, HMT 2007 p75).

Governance mechanisms within government's hierarchical structure, and semi-independent departments, make it difficult to achieve effective integration into 'mainstream' policy of programmes with wide-ranging community-based interests and ambitions, such as the MTI (North *et.al.* 2007 p56). This, in turn, limits partnerships' influence and control over programmes and associated processes (Caffyn 2004), and confuses and frustrates the - often lay - people involved (Pearce and Ayres 2004 p3, Orr 2007).

The MTI, with its emphasis on, "*... Market Towns as a focus for growth, ... and ... as service centres and hubs for the surrounding hinterland ...*" (DETR-MAFF 2000 p73), and support for, "*Business, local authority, voluntary group, residents and other partners coming together as a steering group ...*" (p78), illustrated the importance and relevance of community leadership to the development of community governance (Sullivan 2004 p191). If leadership is to come from within a community, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the community should have a measure of control over the direction in which it is being led. The question is, how much control? Ultimately, the debate about local governance and community-led work is likely to centre on influence, power, control, and money (Hetherington 2007a).

On the one hand, if communities are to take, implement, and be responsible for decisions, and, implicit in this, to make and, importantly, to learn from their mistakes, they need appropriate powers, and money. On the other hand, organizations responsible for developing public sector programmes, and for ensuring that money is spent correctly (i.e. in accordance with public sector rules and programme guidelines) are limited in their freedom to take risks and devolve power by the controls imposed on them by sponsors within the vertical governance chain. Similarly, limits will also be imposed on all involved in partnerships by the constraints governing each partner's and individual's freedom to act.

Within this tangled and changing web of reality lie dilemmas and dangers, for government, and for governance, in terms of development and good practice. There are, of course, practical difficulties associated with governance (e.g. numbers of organizations, potentially conflicting or poorly matching individual or organizational priorities and objectives, and concerns about democratic accountability). Also, in the writer's experience, local politics can be difficult and divisive, pitting neighbour against neighbour, friend against friend. Yet, if control is to be given to MTPs, external paymasters and those with statutory responsibilities for wider geographical and policy areas must be prepared, and able, to devolve both power and responsibility. Although this has risks for higher tiers of government, there is historical support for the view that these could be outweighed by locally-led, locally sensitive and appropriate innovations that could usefully inform policy development elsewhere (Szreter 2002). In reality, in order to allay fears regarding accountability (Defra 2007) any such devolution is likely to be to the lowest tier of local government (i.e. a statutorily accountable democratic body such as a Town Council). In any event it is difficult to see how communities can *lead*, and be responsible for their actions, unless they have some measure of control and autonomy. It is as if Government wants local people to become leaders, but does not want, or know how, to accept the risks and loss of power and control that comes from true devolution.

4. Conclusions

Tensions between tiers of government and, indeed, people and organizations, will always occur. Nevertheless, if central government is serious about 'localism', locally-led partnerships will have to be given the power, responsibility, money and stability needed to enable them to do the work that they have been encouraged - often by central government - to do. Complicated governance and organizational structures, together with frequent policy and organizational changes, are likely to weaken, not strengthen, local partnerships. This, in turn, could reinforce the dependence of partnerships on relatively remote regional organizations, which could be said to be little more than regional versions of central(izing) government.

From the point of view of MTPs, there are tensions between **Government** and **governance**. The former is a financially and legislatively constrained, often relatively remote, controller of policy and programmes, whereas the latter is an enabling mechanism, the effectiveness of which depends on partnerships of committed people having the power and authority - and time and skills - needed to implement *their* locally developed plans. Clearly, there must be checks and balances to ensure probity, but without local freedom and stable long-term support, partnerships can become demoralised and ineffective. The realization dawns that their influence is limited, their freedom to act restricted, and that progress is, despite the rhetoric, ultimately in the hands of others. If this is to change, politicians must get off the fence. It is time for clarity, a willingness to take risks, and decisiveness.

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