

Changing Cultures and Building Shared Ownership

Christina Ashworth

If we have learned anything from the last 20 years of urban regeneration it is that, to be sustainable, regeneration needs to be based on genuine partnerships – where partners learn how to trust each other, gain mutual respect and share the responsibility for bringing about change.

Our problem, though, is that we also live in a cynical age. If you use words such as *mutual trust*, *shared vision*, or *ownership* people's eyes tend to glaze over. They are words that have come to sound as trite as the phrase *motherhood and apple pie*. Partly, no doubt, because we have misused such words to describe partnership arrangements that could, at worst, be characterised as the temporary suppression of mutual suspicion in the interests of mutual need – much as we have used the term empowerment to describe processes in which power stayed where it has always been.

I am, however, proud to work for an organisation that has tried, through action, to make those words meaningful, and to create not simply a regeneration organisation but a participatory democracy, i.e. a structure and a decision making process in which residents work on the basis of equality alongside members of the voluntary, business and public sectors. Acting together, they have developed and implemented solutions to the problems and challenges faced by the local community. It is a participatory structure, in which emphasis is placed on the obligation of each participant to value the contributions of others, and where participants are encouraged to respect skills, knowledge and experience – whether professional skills or based on the knowledge that comes from living

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locally. Decisions and responsibility are shared across sectoral, departmental, cultural, educational, religious and gender divides. We believe this is a process that has as much to contribute to social inclusion and community regeneration as the services that it funds – for what is *community* but the relationships we have with each other and the ties that bind us?

“Changing cultures and building shared ownership” sounds deceptively easy. Whilst it is always tempting to use these opportunities to present a polished view of reality, to promote hard won compromises as if they were planned from the outset and to gloss over mistakes, I am going to try and tell it like it is. My aim is to share our hard won lessons: what we did and the rationale behind it; what happened when theory met with reality, and the learning that the Partnership Council has gained from its experience so far.

Getting started

I want to begin where I began on 1 April 1996. In retrospect, perhaps, the fact that it was April Fools' day was no coincidence! It was my first day in my job as the Partnership Council Co-ordinator and I met with the Steering Group. The task they set me was to create a Partnership Council that brought residents together with members of the voluntary, public and business sectors to be responsible for a European Programme worth £5.4 million. The Partners were to be local people who had direct experience of living or working in the community. What was in the programme had already been broadly defined by Nottingham City Council in their bid. No match funding had been secured. As a result of disagreements between Central Government and the Commission, we were already three years into the programme. All the funding had to be committed by December 1999 and all that was in place was a Steering Group whose membership reflected the make-up of the proposed Partnership Council.

I began by meeting the local partners. The resident community was, to put it mildly, hardly beating a path to our door: although a feasibility study had, on paper, established local support for the idea of a Partnership Council, door knocking locally resulted for the most part in reactions that ranged from indifference to outright hostility.

People simply did not believe that they would be given any real say over how the money was spent. A significant minority had been involved in regeneration initiatives in the past which, like many regeneration programmes of that era, focused almost exclusively on economic and structural regeneration. And whilst no doubt well intentioned, such programmes were top down, frequently bypassed local accountability and trampled over local sensibilities. Initiatives that talked of empowerment while not delivering had left many people feeling manipulated or ignored, and the legacy was the reinforcement of local mistrust to the degree that even the most well-planned interventions were routinely greeted with suspicion.

Tensions

Even if we could get the community involved – which community? Fundamental changes in the socio-economic climate in the last two decades have left many people feeling anxious and abandoned by a world that seems to have rushed off elsewhere. In such circumstances people tend to seek smaller and more restricted definitions of identity and community, leading to an increasing sense of tension and a community that is constantly being divided in terms of class, race, gender, geography, education, income, religion, or age. Insecurity leads to individuals and families that come and go. This high social turnover has had a destabilizing effect as people have less opportunity to get to know one other and social networks are weaker. There was, therefore, not one but many local communities.

What of the other local partners? The Business Sector was also struggling to cope with a much harsher economic environment and an increasingly global market. Greater local mobility meant that the extensive retail sector was experiencing record levels of business failure. Most local Businesses had also become cynical about the various schemes run locally to offer support. Their perception, confirmed by an early survey, was that services were run for the benefit of the service deliverer rather than for them and that the services that were offered bore little relationship to the realities they faced. Publicity material received from Business Support Agencies was often being ‘filed’ in the nearest bin, and those businesses that

did seek support were quickly bewildered by the complexity of service delivery and the lack of co-ordination between services.

The Voluntary Sector had also increasingly fragmented in order to compete for resources. In many service areas, it had lost its ability to work with other local organisations. This lack of co-ordination meant that, as a sector, its ability to respond effectively to local needs and advocate on behalf of the community had substantially diminished. The social fragmentation of the resident community had become reflected in the organisations that developed to serve it. As those organisations pitted against each other to fight for limited funding, the differences between local communities were constantly highlighted and local divisions reinforced. In many challenging and innovative areas, many voluntary organisations were struggling to respond to both the demands of funding regimes and the increasingly more complex needs of their clients.

The expectations, hopes and demands of all of these groups came together at the door of the Public Sector – a sector that had been coping with almost constant change for two decades. Many felt disillusioned and dispirited. Constant public criticism, often led by central Government, had resulted in a lowering of esteem and to a loss of respect and support from the wider public. Front line staff endured criticism, yet often felt powerless to bring about change. Those responsible for local services appeared to be distant from the realities of local people, who only met them at adversarial public meetings. In such a climate it was perhaps understandable that professionals were rarely seen as potential allies and therefore were not treated with respect, or their efforts valued.

In the face of these tensions it almost seems an act of insanity to try and create a structure that relies on collaboration and consensus, and a decision making process that could not work unless people from all these sectors came together. But we took this risk because we believed that if we presided over yet another regeneration programme that did not respect and incorporate the views of local people, then no matter what services it funded it could, and would, only make matters worse. We would rather fail than add to mistrust and fragmentation. The task was there-

fore: to use the opportunity provided by the programme to reward consensus rather than competition, and actively to take steps to repair the social fabric of our community and link it with the rest of the city. The fact that we placed as much emphasis on building structures and processes that enabled people genuinely to share power and responsibility reflects a conviction that active involvement was not an optional extra, an ideological fad, but a fundamental prerequisite for change.

Structures

Consequently, we set about creating a Partnership Council made up of representatives from each of the Sectors. The Forums were created so that these representatives could be nominated by, and accountable to, local groups – to ensure representativeness and avoid accusations of hidden agendas and vested self-interest. The structure of the Partnership Council is made up of Seven Forums whose members are those who live and work locally, including three residents' Forums that reflect the boundaries of the local communities that make up the Partnership Council area. The other Forums are the Voluntary Sector, The Public Sector and The Business Sector, and membership of these is drawn from those who work locally. The Local Area Committee of Nottingham City Council acts as the Seventh Forum, nominating three local Ward Councillors to the Board.

The residents' Forums were set up by 21 volunteers who spent 4 weeks knocking on nearly every door in the area, as well as visiting pubs, community organisations, churches and anywhere else where people gathered. We told them that there was a chance for them to take part in deciding how £10.8 million would be spent locally. As a result of all this, only 160 local people attended nine public meetings that were held across the area. At these meetings we told the truth – that we only had half the funding, that the agenda was already partly set by the successful bid, that we had restrictions and there were things that we could and could not fund. "Telling it as it is" seems to have worked and, by 1997, over 500 residents had been involved in some way in the process.

Once the Forums had been established they were set the task of identifying five priority actions for each measure in the programme and nominating three representatives to carry this mandate to the Partnership Council Board, made up of 21 representatives – each accountable to the Forum that nominated them. No group has enough representatives on the Board to outvote the others, and the constitution is written in a way that makes consensus and collaboration the only way to get decisions through. Training and independent facilitation took members through team building exercises in which they set ground rules, expressed hopes and fears and began building the trust that would be essential to the process. They also discussed an "ethos document" that laid out the principles on which the Partnership Council was to be based. They also decided that rather than elect a Chair they would employ a facilitator for all the meetings so that the ground rules could be enforced by an independent person with no vested interests.

Changing cultures

However, this was all theory and, for the first couple of meetings, representatives did tend to sit in clumps of 'them' and 'us', with the voluntary sector representatives somewhere in the middle. Contributions seemed to be interpreted on the basis of who had expressed it rather than what they had said. The first meeting that felt like a partnership came on the day we put the Action Plan together. Representatives brought the contributions of their Forums, and much to their surprise found huge areas of common ground. Business Reps were surprised by the degree to which resident Forums members had anticipated their agenda. In turn, Residents were surprised by the degree to which Voluntary Sector and Public Sector Workers shared not only their perception of the problems, but their solutions. There were points of difference but, in these, Residents' representatives were supported by other Board Members and the resulting Action Plan represented a genuine common agenda.

By April 1997 we had an Action Plan that represented a consensus of over 800 people who lived and worked locally. What now? We could, of course, have created a bidding process, selection

criteria and assessment boards and put the whole lot out to bid. What then? The only people who could apply would be those in organisations with the capacity to write bids, an understanding of the bidding process and the ability to secure match funding. In addition, those organisations would interpret the Action Plan in their own way, without further consultation. Even worse, perhaps all the tenuous relationships that we had built by bringing different public agencies together, getting the voluntary sector together, building links between local business, and engaging them all with residents would be shattered. Once more, all those agencies would pitch into battle to secure resources. We had started a process that sought to reward collaboration and consensus building. We had demonstrated the need for local people to be involved in forming the agenda – so we had to find a way of following these principles through.

The solution was the creation of the Working Groups. The Action Plan was split into seven themes, with each theme having a working Group whose task was to translate the Action Points into costed tender, or service specifications. These Working Groups were, in essence, mini Partnership Council Boards in which local residents worked with public, business and voluntary sector workers to draw up Service Level Agreements and tender specifications, negotiate contracts, agree outcomes and outputs and make tender assessments. All Working Group members were given training both in team working and in terms of their roles and responsibilities. The Working Groups were set the task of doing all of these parts as well as attracting match funding and committing all the funding by December 1999.

So what happened when the theory met reality? In terms of our achievements the Partnership Board has been meeting once a month since 1997 and has only voted once. The Working Groups committed all their funding by 1999, and over 1000 people have been involved in this process. Innovative projects such as a Mediation Service for Neighbourhood Disputes, A New Deal plus programme, a social capital fund and a Restorative Justice Programme have all been funded. Over £1 million has been made available to local organisations in grant funds supporting everything from business loans to youth grants.

Perhaps more importantly, hundreds of people have worked together across sectoral and other divides. Public sector workers have begun to see projects less in terms of outputs and more in terms of impact. Some of the fears and prejudice, both within and between sectors, have diminished.

This is important. Social exclusion is partly based in a belief that others are unlike you. That the Public sector is full of people who are indifferent, that business sees profit as everything, that the Voluntary sector is full of do-gooders, and that residents have no contribution to make to either the design or delivery of complex services. These prejudices, like all prejudices, have elements of truth in them, but, again, like all prejudices, the over-generalisation is a distortion of the truth. These perceptions matter because they affect the way in which people look at opportunities or services. Any relationship, including the one between service users and service deliverers, requires a degree of trust, which cannot be formed until we accept the commonality between us. For residents, these perceptions also matter because they limit access to service provision and limit aspiration. It is little wonder that having been influenced by such prejudices, local children on the Children's Forum expressed no wish to be teachers, policemen or businessmen or women. Public sector workers, who understand the community only in terms of deprivation statistics or from public meetings where only the angry speak, cannot be too harshly judged for reaching ill-founded views of local people. Motivation comes from meaning and, for many, a personal contact with the local community can transform their attitudes.

However, that is the good news and the reality is that we have a long way to go. The Partnership Council has not won unanimous plaudits in any sector. Many local people see partnership working, bridge building and collaboration as nothing short of collusion. There are many local people who still feel that the business sector is the enemy and the public and voluntary sectors as not much better. The Working Groups were also extremely difficult to manage and support. Residents struggle to make sense of outputs, business plans and match funding. The first Voluntary Sector meeting resulted in fights in the street outside. The Training

Working Group left residents bemused as local college representatives eyed each other speculatively across the table. We quickly realised that local public, voluntary and business sector working groups required as much capacity building as their resident counterparts.

The Partnership Council's refusal to adopt just one agenda angered those who see the only solution as one in which local people are in control of, and employed by, their own services. Many want the Partnership Council to lobby and adopt a far more adversarial approach to bringing about change. However the Partnership Council Board argues that this is not its primary role. Residents need opportunities to influence much broader agenda than they can control. We also need to build alliances with those people who have the skills, knowledge and experience to assist the local community to bring about change. The fact is that if local people had access to all the resources required to change things, we would not require regeneration initiatives. The essence of social capital is that everyone does not need to know everything, but that we are all connected to networks through which we can gain access to the knowledge, skills or resources required. As well as giving access to knowledge and resources, these links also mean that new aspirational routes can be formed. We have to accept that many more local people need to look for opportunities outside their own communities and traditions.

What did we learn from this?

Four main points.

- First, that we needed to focus on the process as carefully as we focused on its outputs. Partnership is hard work, and partnership is even more demanding. To reinforce it requires structures that reward genuine collaboration across difference. Rewards may be access to funding, opportunities to develop skills or to have fun. Social events and the opportunity to meet other participants informally have been an important element of our process.
- Secondly, that it was important to take the risk to be honest: honest about what could be changed and what could not – limits on the ability of public sector to act, how much things cost, how

long thing take, what is fundable and not fundable, about outputs, and time-scales. Social inclusion is also about giving people insight into the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Sharing difficult choices and becoming more aware of the limitations on everyone's ability to act increases respect and it is important to share both responsibility as well as power.

- We needed to be explicit about the principles underlining the process. Partners need to respect the contribution that all the sectors make, and we explicitly encouraged participants to do this. Public, Voluntary and Business reps tended to use statistical evidence, and residents personal experience. Each was valid. Residents bring the 'get real' factor, they are the experiential experts. We need the strengths of all these approaches to develop solutions that work. The contribution each participant brings is different, but equal.
- We need to capacity build *all* participants. We cannot make assumptions about skill levels and assume that the only people that need to learn are residents. Public sector workers have a great deal to learn and many hold prejudices that need to be challenged. There is a tendency to see members of the community through the narrowed lens of their problems, rather than as whole people, and public sector workers often struggle to explain the intended impact of the services for which they seek support. Participants from all sectors have different levels of knowledge, power and interpersonal skill.

Even if all these things and more are done, it will still be difficult.

- There is a lack of capacity across the sectors for this kind of work. The public sector is not used to explaining itself, or its rationale to local people. Public sector structures and decision-making processes do not easily lend themselves to local partnership working. Service provision is fragmented across departmental and organisational barriers, which people are not used to thinking or acting across.
- There are also constant tensions. Between inclusivity and action. Between qualitative and quantitative analysis. Between the local agenda and wider city, conurbation or regional priorities.

Between democratic process and the realities of project planning and accountability.

These challenges cannot be avoided because they are the inevitable consequences of the changes in culture and decision-making that we must bring about if we want to create more effective and accountable services.

In its 1997 Action Plan, the Partnership Council said “Our aims and objectives are deeper and longer term than those encapsulated by any single, short term funding programme. It is to move beyond a blame culture to one of empowerment

and a sense of shared responsibility for bringing about change”. This destination still feels along way off. However, in 1999, evaluators concluded that: “without doubt the Partnership Council has built capacity amongst the local residents and community groups. It was refreshing to find people who were so enthused about the entire initiative not simply because it was trying to change the environment in which they live but also because of their own involvement and contribution to the process”. We therefore can claim to have made some progress along the road.

Maintaining the momentum through community activism in Kings Cross

Michael Parkes

KXRLG (Kings Cross Railway Lands Group) was born in 1987, in the white heat of local outrage to the then British Rail’s first proposals for a Channel Tunnel Terminal under Kings Cross – a 50 acre hole in the ground! The intervening 15 years has witnessed the abject failure of national and local Planning and Development processes to deliver, and the concomitant blight of a hard-pressed inner city community which, but for this blight, could have been a model of community-led (or at least balanced) regeneration many years ago.

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Initial concerns about railway works widened when the Foster-designed ‘Office City’ proposals emerged six months later for 7.5 million square feet of office space (including two 44-story tower blocks) on the associated 155 acre Railway Lands. These proposals were felt to be necessary to attract the necessary private sector interest in the whole Channel Tunnel Rail Terminal (CTRT) project. However, local people could not see how they would, in any way, benefit them. The project seemed to be the worst form of business-led approach so typical of the 1980s, rather than a holistic process in which the benefits of regeneration were harnessed to meet the economic and transport needs of both the City of London *and* local communities. Successful campaigning leading to changed government policies, coupled with the early 1990s recession in the property market, meant that the proposals never got beyond the planning stage.

How did our community-led organisation keep the needs and interests of local people on the agenda for so long, in such difficult circumstances? What are the lessons for more traditional capacity building approaches from community activism like ours? As at February 2000, the group still has a mailing list of 180 individuals and 90 group members. Half the individuals and one third of the groups have re-paid their subscriptions. We are not in the first flush of youth – indeed we are exhausted – but we are still here and, whatever happens to funding and accommodation, we will carry on! There are a number of reasons for our longevity.