

Improving Efficiency at the Interface

How meetings between Local Government officers and external partners have been at the heart of partner engagement, have contributed to failures, and might be improved.

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1. Introduction

I have been a Local Government Officer and have experience of working with a number of Local Authorities, including Bristol City Council, Luton Borough Council, Bedfordshire County Council, and Northamptonshire County and Northampton Borough Councils, plus various Regional Development Agencies and Government Offices. In my time with these authorities and others, I became increasingly frustrated with the way in which policies were developed and implemented. In particular, I had concerns with regard to how collective decision-making was handled and “collective time” was squandered in meetings and the way in which this impacted upon any attempts to build partnerships with external players. Most notably, from my point of view, relations with “target” communities and with the private sector suffered - the former often having expectations raised and then dashed; the latter often developing a lack of respect for publicly funded bodies and the people who work within them.

In the course of my work and studies, I became aware of a wider acknowledgement of these problems and a wider interest in getting to grips with them. However, there is a distinct paucity of material relating to what I have defined below as “the interface” and how malfunctions at this interface pivotally negate much good thinking and effort.

For the purposes of this paper, I have adopted a number of definitions. To wit:

Partnership Building / Community Engagement

Although these are relatively self-defining terms, it is worth noting the following contextual definitions. For government, community engagement means “changing the way we work to give citizens and communities a bigger say” (DFCLG White Paper, 2006). A good partnership is defined as one in which “all partners understand and agree the purpose and outcome of the partnership (shared vision), why it was developed and what it hopes to achieve, building a common purpose, and shared commitment” (Audit Commission, 1998).

In common practice, based on my own experience within the public sector, Community Engagement (CE) is usually taken to mean dealing with often disadvantaged citizens within a Local Authority’s geographical remit, whereas Partnership is usually taken to mean co-working with other formally constituted and trading organisations in the private and public sectors. “Partners” are usually perceived as being equals with recognised resources and skills to bring to the partnership table – very often with a view to devising or implementing some form of intervention to “assist” or “support” community. For the purposes of this paper,

CE is taken to be a sub-set of Partnership Building (PB). That is to say, CE represents an area of PB where particular attention must be paid to use of terminology, proactive support for participants, positive discrimination in reaching the “hard to reach”, and flexibility in terms of interpretations of rules and common practices. I have adopted the term “partner engagement” to refer to trying to develop working relations with all three sectors – community, private sector, and public sector.

the “interface”

Actual meetings and face to face encounters between LA Officers and external partners, be they from professional organisations or from disjointed, ad hoc community groups.

a “meeting”

A meeting is differentiated from a “conversation” - the former having a (spoken or unspoken) agenda and a lead facilitator or chair; the latter being a relatively unstructured exchange in which tangents are entertained indefinitely.

“collective time”

Time “spent” in meetings. Collective time awareness assures that participants are attuned to the fact that there are always time/resource implications whenever a group of publicly funded officers get together for anything more than a conversation.

In the context of Local Government therefore, there tends to be three kinds of Partnership and three types of “interface” - community, private sector, public sector. These are discussed in more detail below.

2. Critique of Partnership

What went wrong?

Local government prior to the 1980's was seen to be paternalistic with very limited sense of obligation to the body public on anything but their own terms. Career officers “knew best” (Lowndes, 2001) and their career trajectories were based upon this. In the 80's and 90's there was a drift towards a notion of “modernisation” – as evidenced by such initiatives as the Citizen's Charter and the NHS Patient's Charter. The drift became more coordinated and pronounced with the advent of the Labour government in 1997. This more formal and determined approach defined two main elements:

1. the stimulation and encouragement of participation of public sector and community stakeholders
2. greater collaboration with the private sector

Cutting across these elements are features such as “community engagement” and “partnership working”.

All the above clearly represents an attempt at a seismic shift away from the perceived paternalism of old school local government towards a scenario where citizens and enterprise are working with local government on an equal footing to define problems, propose solutions, and roll out and monitor strategies that arise therefrom. Despite all of this, a largely negative view of local government still prevails. In 2001 Lowndes (Lowndes, 2001) reported that focus groups were expressing the view that “their local council thought it 'knew best' and was ultimately unresponsive to public concerns.” And as late as 2006, Mori was reporting that people don't trust their local councils and feel that councils make no or, at best, “phoney” attempts to communicate or consult (DFCLG report, 2006).

The introduction of this paper mentions how relations with “target” communities and with the private sector suffered. Incidences of the former having expectations raised and then dashed were rife throughout my experience of New Deal. For example, a straightforward community commitment to purchasing a dis-used factory in its heart was side-tracked and thwarted in a

number of interesting and creative ways by both the LA and the Regional Development Agency.

CE initiatives also suffered from suggestions of “tokenism” (Willis, 2008) which continues to suggest a level of cynicism in the minds of the body public. And frequently the few community activists who persevere through these constraints find themselves neutralised by the “usual suspects” tag which brands “the individuals who (depending on your point of view) either clog up much public participation and prevent the voices of the real community from being heard, or else are the best hope we practitioners have of engaging the public in meaningful dialogue about policy issues “ (May, 2006).

The earliest example of the latter developing a lack of respect for publicly funded bodies and the people who work within them in my experience stems from the earliest days of the old Training & Enterprise Councils (TECs). Many meetings were laced with comments from local entrepreneurs along the lines of “how many of you people does it take to make a decision?”, “how long does it take for you people to make a decision”, “what precisely are you trying to say”, and, of course, “it's not clear what's in it for us”.

The private sector has itself grappled with the problems of coherent partnership working through such studies as “A Complete Waste of Time” (Koh, 2005) and “Time Well Spent?” (McGlory, 2000) which wonder whether meetings are any use at all. But these internal difficulties seem to pale in contrast with their experience of the public sector as illustrated above.

The third kind of partner for LAs is other publicly funded bodies. Here at least there is common ground for understanding how difficult it can be to deliver on the ground the occasionally rarefied strategy or policy developed in a “top down” environment. They are equally aware of the particular pitfalls associated with trying to do this in the context of apparently consulting end users when key decisions have already been taken – the “tokenism” problem mentioned above.

The Bristol experience of partnership working at the strategic level was that its Local Strategic Partnership – which included representatives of all 3 sectors - floundered between achieving fairly high degrees of shared partnership decision making and having those decisions undermined and delayed by subsequent Local Authority (as the Accountable Body) vacillation. To be fair, having the Accountable Body and the lead partner as one and the same entity may not be a recipe for unmitigated success.

3. Implications - Medium term, long term

To some extent, the modernising agenda pre-supposes that local elected government doesn't work. Would we need to be troubling ourselves with community engagement if the democratic processes were as engaging as their founders anticipated and as latter day politicians and civil servants assume? Would we be developing channels for hearing the voice of the electorate in parallel to the electoral processes themselves if these electoral processes were doing their job? Isn't an election a consultation? If it's too clumsy to be the kind of detailed consultation we are seeking, is it better to pursue parallel channels or to address the problems inherent in the election/consultation itself?

This begins to touch upon the theories and debates associated with “deliberative democracy” first coined by Joseph M. Bessette in 1980 (Bessette, 1980). Deliberative democracy was meant to be a kind of halfway house between direct and representative democracy – encouraging citizen “deliberation” to add value to or even replace whatever the other forms of democracy might have produced.

But is a “back to basics” approach what's needed? Should we acknowledge that a democracy is only as good as its education system and revamp familiarisation and training across the board? Should we be looking at what the key elements of local democracy are and how they might be improved upon? Should we be looking internally, externally, or both?

This paper shares the same assumption as the modernisation agenda, ie. that local government is working to an acceptable degree, but that solutions should be found which both improve functionality within and engagement capacity without. However, the failings outlined in Section 2 have implications.

In the medium term, the failure of partnership engagement will lead to further disaffected communities and a return to greater distancing between the public and private sectors. The catch-all response to this failure will inevitably be a reversion to formal democracy. That is to say, having experimented with other forms of responding to its public, Local Government will be forced to opt for a fuller reliance on its elected representatives to articulate to officers all the concerns and problems of the voters and all the potential solutions on offer from the community and private sectors. This in turn will bring us back to where we were pre-modernisation.

In the longer term, it is conceivable that central government, still having concerns about value for money, responsiveness, and voter confidence will revert to a much wider application of outsourcing. This is already on the table in the sense that where LAs or parts of LAs are seen to be failing, private administrators have been brought in. Indeed, in the Bristol example there was even talk of placing the entire LA function in the hands of Capita. The general consensus among LG officers and many theoreticians is that this would be a far from constructive outcome, and yet it hangs there in Damoclesian fashion as a worst case scenario.

4. Analysis.

Where did it go wrong?

This paper posits the experiential theory that, apart from other failings, the nub of the problem, ultimately and inevitably, resides at the interface – meetings between LA officers and existing and potential partners – and that, in part, this failure is an extension of a relatively undisciplined Local Government internal meeting culture. Are such meetings handled properly? Are they adequately prepared for? Is there a system in place for monitoring and assessing such meetings?

The three modes of partner engagement – community, private sector, public sector - may differ in terms of what media are used to initiate contact or encourage involvement, but they all ultimately rely on a smoothly functioning interface with the Local Authority. For example, flyers pushed through neighbourhood doors are unlikely, in terms of pitch and content, to be of interest to local enterprise. Likewise, brochures explaining added value through partnerships with enterprise are unlikely to be of interest to the average domestic citizen. However, both, if successful, inevitably lead, at some point, to face to face contact with officers from the authority - the interface.

The common interface for all three is the “meeting”. The outcomes of engagement initiatives will inevitably lead to face to face meetings as mentioned above. If meetings are unproductive, the initiatives which prompted them, no matter how well publicised and presented, will fail. However, differing practices and informal rules of engagement apply to each and local government officers need to be clear about the “rules of engagement”; to be certain that the people they are encountering have a common understanding of the basics of what's required to engage successfully. (Ideally, this clarity will be based upon improved understanding of similar “rules of engagement” applied internally as well – see Recommendations below).

In terms of community engagement, one of the most often cited discouragements from the community perspective is that “while we (community representatives) are here voluntarily, you (the local government officers) are paid to be here”. This is based on clear and consistent first and second hand experience. A programme of subsidies or attendance allowances and crèche facilities, as proposed by Lowndes (Lowndes, 2002), could be a useful way of improving levels of participation. Under New Deal in particular there were

instances of these which produced results but which tended to be applied sporadically and inconsistently. In Bristol cash “backfill” payments are being trialed as a means of getting third sector representation on Locality Governance panels but it is too early to assess impact.

“Top down tokenism” (Waring, 2008) is also cited as a serious problem area. In the Luton New Deal experience, although Boards were elected and sub-committees and working groups were formed, neighbourhood Board members were regularly confused and frustrated by LA and RDA staff pursuing different, often unspoken, objectives.

Community engagement programmes require regular and ongoing outreach training in the workings of local government – what the departments are; the difference between district, county, and unitary authorities; which activities (eg police) come under what controls; how elections are managed; how elected members are supported. If these were to include basic training in how and why different levels of meeting are conducted in the way they are, then levels of frustration and misunderstanding would drop significantly.

In terms of engaging with the private sector, LAs with which I have worked tend to get a period of grace as entrepreneurs and captains of industry settle in to the new culture. The honeymoon only lasts a few meetings however, as questions of efficiency and constructive use of time begin to emerge. The private sector will often reflect a variation of the community view that “you (LA officers) are paid to be here; I’m not” along the lines of “you (LA officers) are paid to be here; so am I but it’s showing up on our books as added overhead with no scope for profit generation”. As their patience wears thin, they begin to talk more and more about “the bottom line” for each intervention under discussion. Gradually, they even begin to wonder about the bottom line for the authority itself. They too, after all, are rate payers and begin to express concerns with how their money is being spent.

Engaging with other public bodies such as Local Government Offices and Regional Development Agencies tends to be less problematic insofar as they too are familiar with the problems of translating policy into practice where policies are sometimes still in draft form. They too understand the importance of letting deadlines drift as outcomes of activities and decisions taken elsewhere are awaited.

Different sensitivities therefore need to be deployed at the interface depending on which of the three sectors an LA is dealing with. In dealing with community, an LA needs to understand the extent to which even basic concepts like Minutes and Agendas may not be understood. In dealing with the private sector, meeting preparation, punctuality, and efficiency are paramount. In dealing with other public bodies, it is important to set high standards towards which both parties can aspire.

Could an authority better embed these approaches by engaging in root assessment of the interface between local government and communities and other partners? What actually goes on at face to face meetings - internally and externally? Are poorly managed internal meetings part of the problem? How could they be improved? Although there are many studies examining the failings of specific initiatives by pointing to the failure to engage with partners, there appear to be none which go into detailed analysis of the “interface” itself. DJ Leach (Leach, 2009) has done interesting work on the effect various characteristics of meetings have on subjectively perceived quality. Taking into account such variables as agenda use, punctuality, chairing, and quality of facilities, researchers were able to show impact on attendees' impressions of the quality and effectiveness of specific meetings. However, positive attendee impressions cannot always indicate meeting effectiveness. A positive experience does not always equate with a positive outcome.

Sue Balloch and Marilyn Taylor (Balloch, S & Taylor M, 2001) also looked at these problems but did not venture into the assessment of meeting quality or productiveness. In fact, in conversation and correspondence, Taylor acknowledges the lack of research in this area and the need for assessment processes. However, she and Danny Burns (Burns & Taylor, 2000) in a Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded publication presented “impact assessments” for the assessment of community participation, and later, with others (Burns, Heywood, Taylor, Wilde

& Wilson, 2004) produced a set of “audit tools”, again for the purpose of developing community participation. This comes close to the sort of assessment of meetings looked for in this paper, but it is neither empirical enough nor suited to meetings of other kinds.

In the absence of clear empirical precedents, I re-visited work I had done previously (Strube, 1996 - see Appendix 1) when I undertook a “democracy audit” at (among others) the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales. The methodology for observing meetings and trawling through Minutes of meetings was developed in association with the Open University. The study involved observed meetings, subjective interviews, and going through company documentation such as Memoranda & Articles of Association, published accounts, minutes of meetings, annual reports, etc. The “decision tracking” chart (see Appendix 2) represents an attempt to develop a “coefficient of decision-making”. Starting from one year previously, decisions were identified and categorised as Routine, Major policy, Minor policy, Supplementary, and Carried Forward. Meetings were then graded according numbers of decisions taken in each category per unit of member time and a ratio calculated. The ratios for each category could be considered against each other category and/or against the total number of decisions taken per meeting – contributing to categorical and overall “coefficients of decision-making”. Patterns began to emerge where, for instance, a high incidence of Carried Forward decisions would indicate an absence of direction or key personnel. Decisions were also “tracked” through the Minutes to the point of being either actioned or dropped off the agenda. The limited number of studies (there were 3 in all) also meant that the coefficients were meaningless because they needed a backlog of similar studies to produce a database and establish norms and comparators. Nor was the scope of the study able to encompass the assessment of outcomes of actions taken, but this is clearly the next logical step.

Anxious to find an arena for further study within the timeframe of this course, I endeavoured to enlist fellow course members in a short trial of meetings, observation, and assessment in association with the online strategy game of Travian (see Appendix 3) which allows for fairly precise measuring of inputs and outcomes. A simple game which utilises concise numerical data, it allows for ease of tracking decisions and outcomes. I failed to enlist support from fellow students but resorted, less robustly and much more informally, to friends. A group of 5 users generated a total of 4 meetings. Although not as formally observed as the audit meetings mentioned above, I sat in and did not speak. A number of features emerged. Absence of an agenda for the first one led to such confusion that use of agendas became essential. For example, there was often confusion about when players were discussing a tactic or strategy within the game and when they were discussing aspects of how the game itself was managed and run. This sort of inconsistent understanding of frame of reference is something I have encountered a lot at LA meetings. As the meetings continued, focus improved and numbers of decisions per meeting increased. The trial was too short and too informal to track the outcomes of decisions taken, but it was clear that this would be possible given more time and participants. Empirical charting of results could demonstrate meeting efficiency and perhaps establish further data for the “coefficient of decision making” database, but the sample set was too small and the time allocation too short to be entered into for the purposes of this paper. Suffice to say there is potential here for examining and understanding the dynamics of collective decision-making in a substantially measurable way.

5. Recommendations

5.1. medium term

Experience and the studies mentioned above demonstrate that for all the good intentions behind the modernising agenda, examples of hard delivery in terms of enhanced community engagement and/or partnership working are thin on the ground. Somewhere between the strategic intentions and the delivery agents the objectives get distorted and devalued outcomes derive. For example, due to varying pressures from varying sources, it may

become more important to have good attendance figures at community engagement events than to assure that good quality engagement is actually taking place.

However, a number of short term “quick wins” suggest themselves.

- A) A mainstream programme of subsidies or attendance allowances and crèche facilities could be a useful way of improving levels of participation (Lowndes, 2002).
- B) to include regular and ongoing outreach training, perhaps accredited, in:
 - the workings of local government – what the departments are; the difference between district, county, and unitary authorities; which activities (eg police) come under what controls; how elections are managed; how elected members are supported.
 - “What is a Minute?” - basic training in the ways of formal meetings
 - how and why different levels of meeting are conducted in the way they are, the degrees of “formality” required in which circumstances.
- C) In Bristol, as in many other authorities, a Business Transformation programme was underway. An aspect of this is getting front line staff to better understand the people they deal with as “customers”. This also applies to a central call centre into which all council telephone enquiries are funnelled. Bristol has also spent money on independent consultants to come in and train “Change Coaches” to assist selected staff in supporting fellow staff members who are required to adapt to a new ordering and payment system. It would be a relatively simple matter to have some of the principles of these processes applied to interface training. Encourage staff to think of external meeting attendees as customers who, in a sense, are “always right” and from whom feedback is always welcome. Encourage staff to consider ways of making meetings more efficient and consistent.
- D) ITC presents opportunities. Bristol experimented with Extended School Community interactive web sites which included discussion forums, “wikis”, and even a facility for text messaging the web sites from mobile phones. Bristol has also adopted a form of “Moodle” which allows citizens to open an account to share documents and links with the authority and with whoever else they choose. These seemed successful enough in terms of community engagement but are in need of thorough independent evaluation. ITC also provides a variety of “group support systems” (Fjermestad & Hiltz, 2001) which can assist the process of collective decision-making and, at some point, evaluation. There is also enormous scope for collaboration via online sources such as Google and Sharepoint.

5.2. longer term

In the longer term, a much more rigorous analysis of what takes place at the interface would be useful. What, quantifiably, happens at the various face to face meetings. An analysis of the productivity of meetings would require a programme of systematic observation, subjective interviews, and desk research to assess actual outcomes. As mentioned above, there are few examples of this in publication, but, also as mentioned, I have direct experience of this myself (Strube, 1996 - see Appendix 1) when I undertook a “democracy audit” at a number of firms. In theory, enough applications of this methodology could generate a database of norms against which individual meetings or organisations under scrutiny might be compared. A programme such as this across two or three authorities might lead to the sorts of constructive business transformation many LAs – particularly Bristol - have been pursuing for years.

Where LAs are reluctant to commit to a programme of observed meetings in work settings, a mass trial of an online strategy game like Travian could yield less directly useful but nevertheless interesting and measurable insights. The other advantage is that more than one authority could be involved in a single programme; each supplying a group of volunteer participants willing to discuss their tactics in an observed setting and to critically review their collective decision-making. The fact that they are engaged outside their core work might even serve to eliminate any anxieties or sense of threat.

As an adjunct to this, it would be worth considering work from a number of non-mainstream sources. Progressing from Richard Dawkins' work in "The Selfish Gene", Blackmore (Blackmore, 2000) further extrapolated the concept of the "meme". Although Dawkins was preoccupied by genetics, an entire school of thought – memetics – began to emerge; Blackmore being one of the foremost exponents. In simple terms, memetics attributes to proliferating communicable thought many of the principles and characteristics of genetics. In this way, one might trace "strains" of thought as they pass through organisms (such as meetings) and both alter and contribute to alterations. Marilyn Taylor, in conversation, theorised that some sort equivalent to genetic dying would be needed to achieve this. Whatever the problems associated with tracking, it is clear that knowing how ideas, decisions, and actions flow through an organisation would be hugely beneficial in terms of improving that flow.

Also, Ken Wilbur (Wilbur, 1996/2000) refined the notion of "holons" (initially proposed by Arthur Koestler in his book *The Ghost in the Machine* (Koestler, 1967)) - the universally applicable principles of systems and sub-systems. Not only are atoms sub-systems of molecules which are sub-systems of cells, but so too are social organisations "nested" systems and sub-systems which have many of the same observable characteristics (see Appendix 4). It may be worth noting that the "nested" nature of holons, where one holon can be considered as part of another, has similarities to the term "panarchy" (originally coined by economist Paul Emile de Puydt in 1860) as used by Adaptive Management theorists L Gunderson and CS Holling (Gunderson & Holling, 2001). The term was adopted "to describe evolving hierarchical systems with multiple interrelated elements". Panarchy is "the structure by which systems, including those of nature, are interlinked in continual adaptive cycles of growth, accumulation, restructuring, and renewal."

Plausibly, a "unified theory" embracing the tracking of decisions, actions, and memes and the way they pass through nested hierarchies could lead to the development of a method for observing, quantifying, and improving meetings both internally and at the interface; thereby enhancing internal communications, community engagement, and partnership working. Could the flow of actions and memes be observed, quantified, and assessed as per the Decision Tracking at Appendix 2?

Something along the lines of the above might move an aspiring "learning organisation" (Senge, 1990) towards establishing and embedding a culture of productive meeting awareness - whereby participants are conscious of the need for outcomes - and "collective time" consciousness. This in turn would have a beneficial impact on driving the quality of engaging with communities and partners up the Arnstein ladder (Arnstein, 1969).

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7. Appendices.

- CAT Democracy Audit - Appendix 1
- Decision Tracking Sheet - Appendix 2
- Summary of Travian – Appendix 3
- K Wilber's Twenty Tenets - Appendix 4

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