

On the Block



Fear and Loathing in
our Local Authorities:
Reflections from
behind the keyboard.
Anonymous.

On the Block is an occasional column which allows authors to express themselves in unconventional or provocative ways. In this issue we publish a piece by an anonymous author whose experience of working in a local authority leads to questions about the constraints of practice within the current context.

I was halfway through our reflective practice session when the fear kicked in. The sense of loathing around how bureaucratic our approach to community engagement had become was nothing new. It is usually accompanied by a healthy bout of self-loathing, as I reflect on my contribution to these processes. However, this was different, I felt a twinge of fear as we discussed the constraints of practice within the local authority context and more importantly, how they could be resisted. The idea of getting together over lunch to collectively reflect on the way we practice came out of a workforce development meeting. It is thrown out there on a regular basis, old heads and new are aware of the values and principles of our profession. We are also aware that knowing the path and walking the path are two different things. However, this time was different, we had finally acted. The numbers were down from that initial group who had been excited by the idea of meeting to reflect critically on what we do. The trickle of emails sending apologies had a consistent theme. “I’ve been asked to pick up a piece of work”.

“I’m covering for Tina”. “I’m just not going to make it, but really want to come to the next one”. Nevertheless, there was enough of us huddled into that windowless room to make it worthwhile. We had chosen Keith Paterson’s paper on community engagement as a starting point (Paterson, K, 2010). Punchy and just as relevant today as it was when it was written over a decade ago, “it proposes a number of frameworks to assist workers to locate their own practice and to promote debate on the issues it raises” (Paterson, K, 2010, Page 76). A helpful tool for practitioners at the best of times, but given the current financial context within local authorities, this feels like the worst of times. As such, it remains as relevant as ever, stimulating critical thought amongst those tasked with engaging communities. Asking the question, whose interests does it serve? In doing so Paterson makes a meaningful contribution to the debate within community work about the role of practitioners in relation to community action, particularly where the policies and practices of employers are to be challenged.

As we reach ten years of community empowerment under the 2015 act, the picture has changed after a decade of austerity. Government bodies within community planning partnerships will be asking themselves searching questions about their capacity to develop and support the next iteration of local outcome improvement plans. Or at least we hope they will. Local authorities may be keen to drive forward asset transfers for a range of different reasons, not all aligned to community empowerment. I recently heard a rebuttal of the idea that community engagement couldn’t be done on the cheap. It sent a shiver down my spine. We know what’s coming. We know that overstretched, undervalued community development workers will be sent out to deliver community engagement in a manner unrecognisable to the values and principles of our profession. It sometimes feels like there is no alternative, the machine is too powerful. Resistance is futile. However, sat around that table there was a spark of optimism as practitioners remembered long forgotten ideas, such as being in and against the state, and

strategic non-participation. So where did the fear come from? Has merely discussing alternative ideas become a subversive act within local government. Was I doing something wrong? Was I putting my job and by extension my family at risk? Traditionally, employment within local authorities has offered practitioners a level of job security not often available in the third sector. This undoubtedly has implications for the actions and identity of practitioners, as they endeavour to speak truth to power and resist hollowed out bureaucratic approaches to their work. Times are changing in local authorities and short-term funding matched by short-term thinking is often the order of day. People are understandably fearful of what is to come. However, perhaps that fear has some utility. I remember my first placement tutor telling me that she was ever fearful of the hand on her shoulder. Waiting to be taken to task for facilitating resistance to the corporate line. So perhaps the twinge of fear is a sign that I am on the right track. To be taken as encouragement to press on, rather than to disappear into the night.

References

The Glasgow Papers, Community engagement: for whom?, Paterson, K, 2010