Outcomes and Cuts:
The current state of official community engagement strategy and community work

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Introduction

Whilst community engagement has been well defined, in theory at least, by a range of policies, national standards, etc, community engagement in practice is more problematic, particularly when framed within the political and economic context of cuts to public services. In this article I want to argue that the current cuts agenda, coupled with a decade of managerialism in the public sector has exposed deep contradictions at the heart of policy. Examining the implications for community work I want to explore three themes: firstly, to look at what community engagement means in the context of cuts to public services; secondly, provide an analysis of managerialism and community engagement; and thirdly, to examine how a narrow interpretation of community engagement facilitates the process of cuts and the neo-liberal project of rolling back the state.

Community engagement: the policy context

What I call official community engagement is informed by a series of policies and national standards. These include the Local Government Act (2003) which places upon local authorities a statutory duty to ensure that local people and communities are 'genuinely engaged in decisions about the way services are designed and delivered'. The main outcome of this act is established structures for community planning. According to the guidance on community planning issued to Councils, 'consultation alone is not sufficient to ensure effective community engagement…community engagement in this context must involve consultation, co-operation and participation', adding that 'the overall aim of community engagement is to *improve the planning and delivery of services by making them more responsive to the needs and aspirations of communities*' (my italics). In terms of community work, the former Scottish Executive, now the Scottish Government, has issued a raft of policies, standards and resources highlighting the importance of community engagement, e.g. National Standards for Community Engagement, Working and Learning Together (WALT), and Quality Standards for Community Learning and Development. Paterson (2010) argues that '*the sheer volume of standards, guidance and resources produced by the*

Government highlights the importance of community engagement in community planning.' (my italics).

Meanwhile, the recent Christie (2011) *Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services* notes that effective community engagement should involve local authorities *planning services around the needs and aspirations of local communities* (my italics). From a cursory reading of policy and reports it would seem that the planning of services to meet the needs and aspirations of communities is at the heart of local government. However, to what extent is this possible given the political and economic context of severe cuts taking place in public services?

Cuts in Public Services

Only twice before has there been two years of consecutive cuts to public services. In regards to Scotland, the Con-Dems have cut the block grant to the Scottish Parliament by 11.3% between now and 2015 and consequently Scottish Government is planning £3.5 billion worth of cuts in the next five years. According to the Christie Commission it will be 2025-26 before the Scottish budget returns to its 2009-10 real term spending levels.

Local councils have been instructed to make severe cuts in services and the pain they are being asked to inflict on communities is extensive: youth clubs, nurseries, community centres, libraries, resource centres, day centres for disabled people and their families, services for people with mental health issues, children's homes, (the list could go on), are closing or are being instructed to close. The Tories argue there is no alternative and claim 'we are all in this together'. This is a somewhat spurious claim. The campaign group, UKUncut, has done pioneering work in highlighting how Britain's super-rich use legal loopholes to avoid paying the tax they should. Then there are the private companies, most of them based abroad, that manage PPP schools and hospitals that get their cheques every month from cash-strapped councils who are forced to pay back many times more than what they originally borrowed. Meanwhile in what David Cameron calls the age of austerity the wealth of Britain's billionaires has increased by 18% in the past year alone (see *Sunday Times* Rich List, 2011).

Of course not everyone accepts the Tory argument that there is no alternative. Across the country activists have formed anti-cuts groups and people have rallied together to protest against the closure of specific services. Last year thousands of people, including many public sector workers, took to the streets of Edinburgh united behind the slogan 'There is a Better Way'. In addition to this, some trade unions, including UNISON have called upon local authorities to implement what the union calls 'needs budgets'.

Implications for Community Engagement

Given the severity of the cuts, what then is the implication for official community engagement strategies? It would appear that Councils are being asked to do two contradictory things simultaneously: on the one hand manage and facilitate the process of cuts and at the same time plan services around the needs and aspirations of local communities. Is this an act of the impossible? Communities rallying against the closure of a community centre or library or resource centre for disabled people may well regard official community engagement rhetoric as politically naïve at best, corporate PR at worst.

Difficult questions remain unanswered. For example, can activists work within the parameters of community planning partnerships to change policy? Can community planning structures be used to prevent the closure of a much needed facility? If the answers to these questions are no, and I suspect they might be, then the Council's claim to plan services around the needs and aspirations of communities is somewhat disingenuous. So too is claiming to work in partnership with communities.

If we accept this analysis, what does it mean for participation? There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that many community representatives are voting with their feet. This leaves official community engagement to a professional group of workers working with the 'usual suspects' or what a Joseph Rowntree Report into participation calls the 'consultative elite', that layer of individuals who often claim to represent the 'community' but in reality do no such thing (for more detailed information see Joseph Rowntree Report, *Community Participation: Who benefits*?).

Of course participation in official community engagement and community planning will inevitably involve community groups and voluntary sector organisations. However, groups find it increasingly difficult to be politically critical of Councils because partnership working is often a pre-requisite for funding. Professor Gary Craig, who has written extensively on the subject, argues that 'once inside partnerships it would seem that local authorities impose their own agendas on communities often using funding requests as levers of compliance'. The micro management of community groups through performance management has subverted the democratic process. Local government it seems can hold community groups to account yet it seldom happens the other way round.

These are difficult times for community work practitioners. Many are torn right down the middle between a loyalty to working class communities and a sense of injustice at

the cuts they face, whilst balancing these feelings against a need to be compliant with Council policy out of fear of losing employment. The difficult times are further compounded by the rise of a rampant culture of managerialism in the public sector that I now want to explore.

Community Engagement, Community Work and Managerialism

Two decades of what academics call New Public Managerialism has profoundly altered the nature of community work practice resulting in a bureaucratisation of the community work process. Consequently, community workers now spend a great deal of their time working to a performance management agenda that is littered with terms such as outputs, outcomes, fit for purpose, best value, etc. Instead of doing real community work time is increasingly spent in meetings or on administration. Shaw (2010) notes that the real 'hands on' community work is increasingly left to casualised low-paid sessional workers or external consultants, arguing that the effects on the profession are profound:

> Many practitioners are beginning to understand that not only have they been compromised by their role as agents of modernisation, but their own sense of professional identity and social purpose is simultaneously being dismantled.

Meanwhile, performance management reduces community engagement to a set of administrative procedures, boxes to be ticked and 'outcomes' to be met. This of course ignores the real world of community politics where the concerns of local people are not always the same as the concerns of local authorities and community planning partners. Moreover, it is based on an idealised, one might say a-political, bureaucratic view of the world, which naively assumes that consensus can always be achieved through managerial procedures.

I want to end this section by arguing that managerialism is an alien discourse, certainly alien to working-class communities where its technocratic language means little; but also increasingly alien to the many public sector professionals, managers included, who work within its discursive boundaries. I suspect that it could be the case that the obsession with performance management is one of the biggest factors contributing towards declining morale amongst those inspired to work in the 'ethical professions', professions such as social work or community education.

Does official community engagement facilitate cuts?

In the third and final part of this article I want to argue that official community engagement is being used by some to facilitate cuts in local services. Local authorities have organised consultation events for the community to 'have a say' in what to cut. One community work commentator has called this 'devolving the axe'. Communities are told that their expectations must be 'realistic' about what they can expect from the state (which usually means to accept cuts in services).

In addition, the transfer of public assets from local authority control to the voluntary sector is one of the main vehicles used by Councils in facilitating the Tory cuts agenda. Community engagement methods are being used as a strategy to deliver communities to policy. Communities are told by Council officers and local politicians that the best way - or only way - forward is to provide public services via Development Trusts or Social Enterprises.

This approach is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, it facilitates the process of cutting public spending. Secondly, and this is the crucial point, it leads to inequality in terms of access to public services. Provision of services becomes sporadic and dependent on whether enough 'active citizens' can rally together to provide or manage a service. Research by John Mohen from Third Sector Research Centre, highlights that 31% of the population provide 87% of volunteering hours; on average these tend to be middle class people who live in middle class areas. Furthermore, the research revealed that voluntary work is less likely in poorer or deprived neighbourhoods, the very areas hit hardest by the cuts. The warning from this is that we need to be realistic about the extent to which people in poorer communities will volunteer the time required to set up Trusts or other organisations that provide public goods and services. The current emphasis on contracting out public services to the voluntary sector erodes the social democratic ideal of equal access to public services funded out of general taxation. Shaw (2011) suggests that this will result not in a Big Society but rather a 'small minded society', a 'fragmented society of neighbourhoods'.

I want to end this section in arguing that the role of the voluntary sector in grassroots political campaigning has been much diminished in recent years. Many organisations are encouraged to act like entrepreneurial businesses competing with one another in the public services delivery market, to provide services on the cheap. What has happened is nothing short of a cultural takeover of the sector by business values and practices.

Conclusion

This article has focused on three areas: the impact of public sector cuts on official community engagement, managerialism and community work, and the ways in which official community engagement strategies are used to facilitate the process of spending cuts. These are challenging times for the community work profession. I have argued that the managerialist agenda deskills and de-professionalises staff with too much time being spent resentfully on administration. This has a negative impact on workforce morale. And it could be about to get a lot worse. Community work will not escape the Scottish Government's £3.5 billion worth of spending cuts. Across the country many community facilities are closing, whilst some workers get transferred into the voluntary sector or arms-length executive organisations. This will undoubtedly lead to a fragmentation of the service. Meanwhile, as more players get involved in the burgeoning community engagement industry, community workers may struggle to demonstrate their own professional uniqueness. There has always been a view that community education is more of an approach to working than a professional service. Are these the dying days of a profession? I hope not. We should remember that community education arose out of the social democratic ideal that working class people, young and old, should have access to educational opportunities, often systematically denied to them; that are provided out of general taxation by the local authority. We should remember these are ideals worth fighting for.

References

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