

Community Planning in Scotland: Dilemmas of reconciling policy and practice in community development work

Kaela Scott

**Local Community Planning Officer
(writing in a personal capacity)**

The drive to encourage the direct involvement of communities in their own governance, increasingly evident in political discourses from the turn of the century, was given a statutory basis in Scotland by *The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003* which formally introduced Community Planning to the policy lexicon. Defined by the Scottish Government as ‘a process which helps public agencies to work together with the community to plan and deliver better services which make a real difference to people's lives’ (Scottish Government 2010), Community Planning has now become firmly embedded as a mechanism for harnessing the participation of communities to the government's strategic priorities. By elevating the community (at least nominally) to the centre of the policy making process the Community Planning agenda has also created a new context for work within the Community Learning and Development (CLD) sector, one that confronts conventional understandings of the purpose and parameters of professional community development work.

For many community development workers, particularly those working within a local government context, there is a growing expectation that supporting and resourcing engagement activities linked to Community Planning will become a central part of their remit. While on one hand this can be seen as recognition of the expertise within the sector in relation to empowering communities to act in their own interests, it has also revealed underlying tensions as workers attempt to reconcile their professional values¹ with some of the ways the objectives of Community Planning are being translated into practice.

Community development practice has traditionally drawn its professional legitimacy from its ‘strategic position as a mediator in the relationship between the state and its citizens, through various forms of participation and community engagement’ (Shaw 2011, p.ii128). It is also, traditionally, a politically motivated *vocation* which, working from a distinctive epistemological and methodological position grounded in social principles of self-determination and inclusion, advocates for a more

¹ A wide range of commentators, both academic and practice based, have articulated their own versions of these values and principles, placing emphasis on different facets depending on their own political or philosophical positions. For the purposes of this paper however the statement of values provided by the CLD Standards Council (2009) will be taken to represent the professional consensus. Here the values of CLD are summarised as self-determination, inclusion, empowerment, collaborative working and the promotion of learning as a lifelong activity.

democratically just society (Tett 2010, p.107). Operating in the meso sphere of civic interactions, between the macro world of institutional structures and the micro world of individual actions and personal concerns, community development work has essentially been purposed on transforming *community* from a simple description into a term denoting agency. Thus a defining feature of the work has been directly supporting and resourcing community groups, in ways that build their capacity to understand and theorise their own situations, and which empower them to take collective action with political intent (often in direct opposition to the state). Now that the prevailing policy direction appears to not only welcome but actively seek out opportunities for engagement and partnership with communities, concerns are emerging that the distinctiveness of the profession risks becoming compromised through being mainstreamed within official structures.

Offering both limits and possibilities this situation prompts the question of whether, in an environment where the CLD sector has been both strengthened by being identified as a major contributor to the government's strategic priorities and constrained by this very same recognition, it is possible to find a mode of practice that can accommodate the tensions between the demands of policy, the values underpinning the profession, and the interests of communities themselves.

Community Planning – the policy context for CLD

Defined as 'a framework for making public services responsive to, and organised around, the needs of communities' Community Planning was founded on the principle of 'making sure people and communities are genuinely engaged in the decisions made on public services which affect them; allied to a commitment from organisations to work together, not apart, in providing better public services' (Scottish Executive 2004, p.1).

Emphasising that the success of Community Planning depends on the participation of a wide range of public, voluntary, community and private sector bodies, the *Local Government in Scotland Act* placed a duty on local authorities to initiate Community Planning in their area and a reciprocal duty on all other public service bodies to participate in the process of planning and providing their services through consultation and co-operation (Scottish Parliament 2003, p.12). The Act also gave local authorities specific responsibility for facilitating community participation; with related guidance making it clear that seeking the 'views of communities' is not sufficient but rather the purpose of engagement must be to secure communities' 'active involvement as partners in Community Planning' (Scottish Executive 2004, p.7).

By focusing on the active participation of community in the planning and delivery of services Community Planning policies embodied a new way of demarcating a sector for government which, by shifting focus away from society as a whole, operationalised community not only as a *territory* for government but also as a *means*

of governance (Rose 1996, p.335). This way of conceptualising community rests on a particularly neo-communitarian appreciation of community as both the site and source of moral values and mutual obligations wherein a civic duty to participate in one's own governance could be mobilised 'through the instrumentalisation of personal allegiances and active responsibilities: *government through community*' (Rose 1996, p.332).

Upon coming to power in 2007 the SNP (Scottish National Party) embraced Community Planning and made it its own. From the outset the SNP committed its government to an outcome based approach to public service provision in pursuit of a single overarching purpose: to create 'a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth' (Scottish Government 2007, p.1). This stance was also firmly underpinned by a normative understanding of citizenship that emphasised a clear reciprocal relationship between rights and civic obligations and served to naturalise their position that Scotland's 'future prosperity... depends on everyone playing their part' (Scottish Government 2007, p.1). Communities, as a meso-space between the state and individuals, were positioned as the site in which this participation could be played out.

By focusing on outcomes, i.e. the difference made rather than processes or outputs deployed, the SNP's discourse of government clearly aligns itself with the potential promise of Community Planning; to deliver greater flexibility and autonomy to structures outside the centralised state by leaving the details of service delivery 'to those who can best understand and tailor their resources and activities in line with local priorities' (Scottish Government 2007a, p.45). In practice however the SNP retained the functions of meta-governance tightly within their own state apparatus, creating a strong strategic framework in which any operational freedom devolved to other agencies is disciplined firstly by national priorities and targets and secondly by national systems of monitoring and reporting. This 'tight-loose-tight' approach to governing (Somerville 2005, p.137) is exemplified by the *Concordat between the Scottish Government and Local Government* (Scottish Government & COSLA 2007) which has framed the development of Community Planning under their administration; charging public services in each local authority area to develop a Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) which, while informed by an assessment of local priorities and needs, would be aligned with and accountable to national outcomes and indicators.

Within this broad political agenda a particular role for the CLD sector is explicitly prescribed in relation to furthering the goals of Community Planning. Guidance to the Act identifies the CLD sector as being able to 'play a central role in supporting the engagement of communities' (Scottish Executive 2004, p.10) and supplementary guidance invites Community Planning partners to harness this expertise 'to extend skills in community learning and development more widely across a broad range of public services and disciplines' (Scottish Executive 2004a, n.p). The precise nature of what is expected from the sector is best articulated in *Working and Learning Together*

to *Build Stronger Communities (WALT)*. Here CLD is charged with ensuring both that ‘the quality of community engagement offered by all CPPs is ‘fit for purpose’ and that ‘individuals and communities... gain the confidence and skills to participate’ (Scottish Executive 2004b p.13).

CLD therefore is positioned both as a subject and agent of policy; defined as a resource and tasked with specific purposes which, as further developed in *Building on WALT*, are to provide through community capacity building ‘opportunities that develop more empowered communities... build their collective ability and support them to become more confident and self-reliant’ (Scottish Government & COSLA 2008, p.1). Faced then with the dual obligation of supporting both sides of the engagement process - enabling Community Planning partners to consult with communities in an effective manner while simultaneously enabling communities to develop the skills and capacities that will allow them to engage as ‘full partners’ (Scottish Executive 2004b p.13) - it is not surprising that ambiguities and tensions emerge when it comes to translating policy into community development practice.

As stated earlier, community development work is consciously partisan, and thus, for practitioners who position themselves as being “on the side of the community”, allowing policy imperatives to be the only thing setting the parameters of practice would be untenable. It would be equally damaging, however, to reduce the defining features of community development practice to a set of values disconnected from their social and political context. Instead, going back to an understanding of community development work that sees its role as mediating between *policy* and *politics*², professional practice must be able to engage with and integrate both, relying on the values underpinning the profession to ensure the integrity of the work at a given time and place. From this position then, practitioners should be well placed to exploit the opportunities that come from *engaging with communities* being located at the forefront of the Government’s agenda for a successful Scotland to the benefit of the communities they work with. It is to some of the challenges of doing this in practice that I now turn.

A role to support Effective Participation

The goal of achieving broad public participation in Community Planning is premised on the idea that everyone would want to participate in governance if given the chance. There is however little evidence in Britain that such participation, beyond the level of voting, is perceived as a duty of citizenship. This challenges the feasibility of the partnership envisioned in policy between the state and its citizenry and means that, in pursuing this outcome, the Government risks its ambitions foundering if community members do not step up to the responsibilities they have been given.

² Where policy is understood to mean the ‘superimposed demands of the state (from above) ... [and] politics, the needs, aspirations and demands of communities (from below)’ (Tett et al 2007, p.43)

WALT asks the CLD sector to support the aspirations of Community Planning by developing people's confidence and ability to participate, however the policy guidance also recognises that representing the community too often falls on the same individuals - the ubiquitous *usual suspects*. Blame for failing to reach beyond this small group is usually attributed to 'the failure of the usual suspects to recognise that exercising community leadership does not mean sitting on every committee; the failure of particular decision makers to look beyond the usual suspects and reach out to new constituencies; the failure of people in those constituencies to stand up and be counted' (Skidmore et al, 2006, p.35) and agencies are urged to try harder to reach *the-hard-to-reach*.

In the current climate, where more and more forums for participation seem to be opening up all the time, the solution for practitioners charged with building the capacity of communities to participate cannot simply be to continually *build* more participants. While Community Planning rests on principles of direct community participation it does not necessarily follow that all citizens need to be equally involved, in everything, for engagement to be meaningful or legitimate. Instead it may be more productive to focus on ensuring that everyone with an interest in the outcomes of a decision has the *opportunity* to participate in a way that is relevant to them. In practice this requires a twofold approach.

Firstly, it means building up the capacity of those active in civil society so that individuals willing to take on a representative role have the skills, resources and networks of support within their communities that will enable them to do so in an effective way. Simultaneously, while acknowledging people's right to choose non-participation, community workers must endeavour to ensure that individuals are not prevented from participating on the basis of disadvantage or exclusion. As Sen (1984) maintains, it is important not just that opportunities for participation are nominally open to under-represented groups, but that individuals within these groups have the *functioning capability* to participate (i.e. that the choice to actually *do* and *be* involved is in the set of functioning vectors within their reach) rather than simply relying on their behaviour as indicating a decision not to participate.

Secondly, it involves approaching the goal of increased public participation in a way that strikes a balance between depth and inclusion that is right for the specific task at hand. Central to this is acknowledging that, not only will different people want to participate in different ways and to different degrees, depending on their own circumstances and the relevance of a particular issue to their life at a given time, but that this is legitimate. In this case then the priority becomes less about persuading everyone to participate in formal structures of community governance than it is on valuing the wide range of informal spaces in which people's civic engagement occurs and ensuring that this counts. Fundamental to making this work will be developing systems that recognise and consolidate channels of information exchange and accountability between smaller numbers of formal participants and the wider community. For, as Skidmore et al conclude, the existence of a 'community elite' who

take on a representative role 'is not evidence that policies to promote community participation have failed. The existence of a community elite disconnected from local civic culture is' (2006, p.49).

A role to support Effective Engagement

Within the discourse of Community Planning the main purpose of engagement with the public is identified as being 'to improve the planning and delivery of services by making them more responsive to the needs and aspirations of communities' (Scottish Executive 2004, p.7). This focus on service improvement has led, in practice, to an emphasis on community participation within 'invited spaces', with 'spaces' here understood to refer to 'opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests.' (Gaventa 2006, p.26) Invited spaces therefore are those into which people (as users, citizens, beneficiaries or representatives of community groups) are invited to participate by various types of authorities, and can be contrasted with demanded spaces which emerge from processes of popular mobilisation – a division commonly referred to as *top-down* versus *bottom-up*.

Although Community Planning engagement is premised on making services more responsive to communities, the fact that there is a politically mandated duty on public services to engage with communities (Scottish Parliament 2003) means that it is these *top-down* spaces that community workers are increasingly being called upon to support, resource and recruit for. This emphasis on participation within invited spaces is one of the factors that make involvement in Community Planning controversial for many community workers. While the rhetoric of invited forums may be about providing what the community wants there is concern that, in originating from an agenda framed by predetermined national outcomes and performance indicators, community participants in these spaces may have little opportunity to contribute to theorising the problems or the desired solutions. Further, just as community wants may be curtailed to fit a predetermined agenda, there is a risk that invited spaces for engagement between communities and public sector agencies may actually serve to diminish the public space available for communities to set their own agendas by delegitimising other forms of *bottom-up*, non-sanctioned mobilisation. Even more worrying, however, is the possibility that this can occur within a context that simultaneously represents these spaces as being directed at community self-determination.

Creating spaces for engagement between communities and service providers is, as Cornwall reminds us, a 'political process rather than a technique' (2008 p.281). As such, spaces for participation are never neutral, but embody rationales relating to *why* as well as *how*, and necessarily begin as 'structured and owned by those who provide them, no matter how participatory they may seek to be' (Cornwall 2008, p.275). Although a framework of invited space may initially limit the parameters of debate

and deliberation, the very fact of opening a space for dialogue creates opportunities for participants (and those working alongside them) to stretch these boundaries, making connections between common experiences and understandings in ways that can shift the agenda towards a community's own concerns and interests. It is also important to note that participation in invited spaces can give participants a taste for more genuine forms of democratic control. It is surely then the responsibility of practitioners to find and embrace these gaps and unintended developments in ways that support communities to use 'the power gained in one space, through new skills, capacity and experiences' to not only enter and affect other spaces but also to claim 'the right to define and to shape that space' (Gaventa 2006, p.27).

While the rhetoric of public involvement in decision making is now commonplace, the decision making authority of spaces for engagement often remains undefined at best. In practice much of the engagement that takes place within invited spaces is designed to supplement structures of representative democracy and inform the later deliberation of public service decision makers. This is made more problematic by the substantial reservations that many public service staff and elected members seem to hold about the extent to which consultation and public deliberation can (or should) be an integral part of decision making. Orr and McAtee's 2004 report showed that over 50% of elected members interviewed across Scotland agreed that 'councillors should use their judgement to make decisions rather than being bound by the conclusions of public participation exercises' (p.138) and I suggest that, if interviewed again today, the results would be much the same. In this context then, a community's time and effort can be directed towards formulating recommendations that agencies are under no obligation to implement.

Although it would be easy to maintain therefore that it is of no benefit to anyone if communities are invited to participate in forums where there is no real power to implement decisions, this stance must be balanced in practice by a recognition that such state instigated forums do represent real and current opportunities for communities to influence local outcomes. Thus, instead of rejecting these forums outright, it is surely the responsibility of community development workers to ensure that there is transparency regarding the role of such groups and that the limits of their authority are clearly defined. Further, there is a parallel role to instil in decision makers an awareness of the value of participatory engagement, assuring that community voices are *heard* in decision making, rather than simply collected as a tokenistic fulfilment of obligation.

To truly have an impact on improving the effectiveness of engagement processes then practitioners must also be prepared to share their expertise, so that those organisations seeking to engage with communities have access to a broad repertoire of techniques and, more importantly, the skill to use them appropriately and meaningfully. Building this capacity, however, will involve not just promoting good practice (i.e. practice that creates genuine opportunities for participation in meaningful deliberations which have the real possibility of creating change) but also

highlighting and challenging manipulative or tokenistic forms of engagement when they do occur; working not only ‘in and against the state’ but also (and critically) *for the state*’ (Shaw & Martin 2000, p.409) by helping to construct an authentic settlement between policy agendas and the aspirations of communities.

Today, as the expectation that the CLD sector will support community engagement in Community Planning processes continues to grow, it seems more important than ever for community development workers to maintain a politically aware intermediary function if they are to find a way of balancing the expectations of policy, their own professional values and a desire to secure the best possible outcomes for the communities they are working with. The Government’s sustained interest in co-operating with communities in order to improve services has, whatever its current limitations, increased access for communities to influence decisions and shape services in ways that are more responsive to their needs and aspirations. However, if the CLD sector is to take seriously the role it has been given to ensure that community engagement undertaken within Community Planning frameworks is truly ‘fit for purpose’, then this will require it to do more than develop communities’ capacity to maximise the opportunities presented by these spaces for participation. Additionally, it will involve using the expertise present within the sector to develop the capability of those seeking to engage with communities in ways that enable them not only to *do* things differently but also, and more fundamentally, to *see* things differently.

This, it seems, is one of the biggest challenges for reconciling community development practice with the aspirations of Community Planning policy, as getting established decision makers to *see* differently the potential contribution of communities to decision making is something that cannot be legislated for. Until it is achieved, however, effective community capacity building for engagement may be as much about supporting communities to make discriminating decisions about how and when to participate as it is about supporting their participation per se, and any ambition that communities will participate as ‘full partners’ in the Community Planning process will remain a distant goal.

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