'localism' and the varied practices of community activism

Programmes to support local initiative and participation must recognise the social, economic and environmental particulars of individual localities—and this calls for experimentation and learning from local experience and a wider re-think of the relationship between government and civil society, says **Patsy Healey**

Jim Bird

Wooler in rural North Northumberland—a small town with an activist tradition

So once again politicians of many shades are calling for more 'localism' and community involvement in public policy, as Sue Brownill helpfully summarises in a recent article in this journal.[1] As she explains, this revival expresses a long-standing ambition to draw 'people' and 'communities' directly into shaping how government policies are designed and delivered. One factor behind the revival is a search not just for more relevant and responsive ways to meet people's concerns, but for ways to repair the serious lack of trust between citizens and formal government.

The community energy that has produced Wooler's capacity for self-government is both specific to its circumstances and vulnerable to external events and influence

Sue Brownill urges those trying to mould English legislation not just to keep an attentive eye on the 'practical and democratic details' which might expand the possibility for deeper citizen engagement in what is done in their name, but also to ensure that the values of equity and social justice are not lost as initiatives are rolled out. The legislation she has in mind is that which affects the shaping of place futures. This includes the planning system, but many other sectors of formal government are involved too. More broadly, such an agenda is also about how government relates to the people of the political community it claims to represent.

In what follows, I reflect on what such practical and democratic details might involve, drawing on my experience of a decade and more of deep immersion in community development activism in the locality where I live.

Many in our 'community' have been busy over the years in various projects which seek to shape our collective future. My locality is in deeply rural North Northumberland, with an activist tradition which has been nationally recognised in comments such as those of Peter Hetherington in this journal:

'*Straddling the winding A697 into Scotland from England, the small border town of Wooler could easily have followed countless other places in a familiar spiral of decline—seemingly left behind, ignored by decision-makers and starved of essential services as big cities powered ahead, leaving others struggling to survive. [Instead Wooler has] defied the odds through local endeavour.*'[2]

Our locality might seem to have acquired a self-governing capacity, much emphasised in earlier 'localist' programmes.[3] And indeed such programmes have provided some of the resources for our various initiatives. These in turn have generated considerable public value.[4] But these achievements, and the community energy which has produced them, are both unique to our particular circumstances and a fragile accomplishment, vulnerable to external circumstances and internal tensions. In this, we are like many other localities where groups of people come together to enhance local life experience. It is this diversity and fragility which needs to be understood when designing and delivering government programmes to support local initiative. Such programmes need to recognise the situated specificity of the social, economic, environmental and political dynamics of local life.

My experience has made me very aware of the fine-grained complexity of our particular social dynamics.[5] Many people often talk of 'our community' and of its qualities; the many ways we 'work together' to do things which others appreciate. Yet we live in an area in the throes of a major social and economic transition. Once an economy dominated by large lowland farms and upland hill sheep farms, tourism opportunities are now more dominant, supplemented by many more people working from home online in various ways. Once people imagined that they knew who was who and what everyone did; now there are multiple groups and networks doing many different things, often unaware of, or bumping uncomfortably against, each other. Some people

end up very isolated, maybe from choice, but often through lack of any social network connecting them to others.

So as a collection of people, we should perhaps be understood not as 'a community' but as an amorphous mosaic of overlapping groupings. Despite this multiplicity, most people have a very strong attachment to the 'place' of the area, whether 'born and bred' or newly arrived. This place attachment too carries different meanings and, so far, there is no accepted common platform where these different meanings and feelings can be identified, debated, and presented to others.

Although there are parish councils in the area, and a well regarded local development trust, there are other arenas in which people organise new initiatives and discuss future possibilities, some long established and some very recently formed and transitory. Maintaining connections between these diverse arenas is always hard work. People outside the groupings which cluster around an arena often wonder what it does and how to reach it. Thus the agency of community is distributed within multiple networks and arenas where 'community voices' are articulated and many different ideas are put forward on what should be done and whose concerns should be prioritised. For agencies seeking to 'engage communities' in their work, finding 'the community' to work with in situations such as ours is not straightforward.

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From the reverse perspective, community activists find the array of formal government agencies and procedures confusing and sometimes conflicting. It is very difficult for people to track down how one bit of England's over-centralised, fragmented and continually changing government system relates to another, and where decision-making about key services, regulatory requirements and resource flows actually lies. Only some people in our locality are skilled in navigating through such difficulties and barriers to access support. It also requires insight and knowledge to prevent a government requirement distorting what a community group seeks to achieve. In this situation, it is all too easy for some people's activities and voices to drown out those less vocal

or less able to articulate their concerns. As a result, 'self-organising' in local communities does not necessarily lead to inclusive and 'socially just' outcomes, let alone environmentally sustainable ones.

Our experience echoes many similar experiences in both urban and rural areas. People are often prepared to work together as groups of neighbours to 'do' and 'make' material and social opportunities to enrich local life. This energy is not just about picking up the pieces of apparently neglectful formal government, taking on responsibilities that it once undertook. It instead arises from the responsive creativity of people who know their locality intimately. It is such experiences that fuel the continual search for better ways in which citizen's views and activities can reach and interact with formal government and public policy — a search which has led both to repeated calls for more opportunities for 'public participation' practices and to the wider 'localist' agenda.

So far, government responses to these calls have achieved only marginal changes to how local activists relate to formal government. Government projects, and those of other charitable entities, drop into the flow of local life, create a burst of energy and interest, and ebb away again, often leaving little long-term impact. This is partly because, in recent years, such projects have been overshadowed by the steady decay and technological transformation of so many public services on which people used to rely.

As many now argue, the relationship between government and citizens is not likely to improve without more fundamental changes. It is not just a matter of adding more resources; it is also a matter of, first, our constitutional settlement, particularly to give more tax-raising and regulatory power to sub-national levels of government and to enable citizens' voices to be heard more strongly in the design and delivery of government actions at all levels — the 'double-devolution' agenda. This necessary first step needs to be combined with a re-orientation of cultures of practice in government agencies, to put working with local communities at the heart of their activities, rather than compliance with nationally set performance criteria. Our experience in North Northumberland suggests that such a practice culture needs to embed within it at least the following:

- a respectful appreciation of people's attachment to their place of living, and the variety of ways in which this is experienced and expressed;
- a willingness to accept that groups of people in a locality have significant potential to shape local futures, but that these capacities evolve in locally specific ways;
- a locally specific grasp of the amount and variety of the 'self-organising' that goes on between neighbours, much of which is 'below the radar' of formal organisation;

Meg Vickers

A business pod at the Cheviot Centre, a key community centre in the Wooler area

- a recognition that this variety may generate several arenas and several voices 'speaking for' those who live in a particular locality;
- programmes which allow for the flexibility to experiment and innovate, respecting the spirit of formal rules and requirements while sometimes finding creative work-arounds;
- an awareness that such 'self-organising' can generate significant value in terms of social support and environmental care, enhancing shared place qualities; and
- an appreciation that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to how this happens—every locale is unique in its history, geography, capacities, and future possibilities.

Promoting such a culture has implications for the design and management of public administration. In effect, it calls for a re-think of the relationship between government and civil society. This should emphasise supportive partnership, close to what is often called the grass-roots of daily life experience. For groups of people in a locality cannot take on making a contribution to future-shaping without significant inputs from formal government. What makes a big difference is that these inputs are made available in stable, understandable and accessible ways.

Achieving stability means replacing continual piecemeal reform, re-organisation and re-naming of agencies with slower and more sensitive ways of making changes to government structures and

practices. Making government understandable means that politicians and officials need to be able to explain the purpose of a policy and its mode of delivery in clear and simple ways when challenged. Being accessible means not just meeting freedom of information requirements, providing reams of website pages, and making sure that people can access a building—it means being out and about on the streets, meeting people, learning what goes on, and becoming a recognisable and friendly 'go-to' face. Digitalisation can achieve a lot, but online always needs to be combined with offline.[6]

This means that those in government should give much more priority to the 'street-level' staff— those who are out and about 'getting to know' and becoming a known person.[7] It takes time, and local involvement, to gain a sense of the multiplicity of views, of who speaks for whom and how people's thoughts about their place and shared futures change through time. Staff with a community development orientation can notice potential troubles before they become serious personal difficulties or angry encounters. They can keep an eye open for people whose voices and concerns may be silenced by more assertive neighbours.

Such a re-orientation also means that the knowledge accumulated by such street-level staff should be valued as a critical ingredient of the overall knowledge which informs public policy-making, filtering into the technical knowledge provided by professions and the political ambitions of those who seek to shape policy agendas. As

Hilary Cottam argues,[8] investing in such frontline staff may in the end save resources through interventions which avoid problems escalating into acute crises. It also suggests that, in re-thinking our constitutional settlement, it is not enough to give more power and resources to existing local governments, which are themselves much larger units than they once were. In England, local authorities need to give more attention to neighbourhood-level arenas, as some already do and as calls for more 'neighbourhood planning' emphasise. In rural areas, this implies re-thinking the pattern of parish councils, some of which have no organisational presence at all.[9] Perhaps something at the scale of the Scottish Community Councils would be worth thinking about.

This still leaves open the difficult question which Sue Brownill raises about how to address issues of spatial justice and equity, to which should be added the multiple agendas wrapped up in concerns about environmental sustainability and climate change. There will always be tensions about which values should take precedence in any specific situation, and between the experience of a neighbourhood or small locality and the wider geography of which it is a part. Within a locality, people are not likely to agree on what should be given priority either.

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If there is an ambition in reforming government agencies and practices to create a more sensitive and supportive way of combining formal government with citizen activism, then it is important to be clear where conflicts over values are resolved, and how these resolutions are expressed through flows of government resources and through regulatory practices. No locality can cut itself off from responsibilities to others elsewhere. When translated into government programmes, the values of equity, social justice and environmental sustainability — so important for how our wider regional, national and international worlds go forward into the future — cannot avoid resulting in limitations imposed through regulations, incentives and taxation measures which constrain what people locally can do. If these are just experienced as a remote statement that 'government says no', with no explanation as to why, then little will change in citizens' trust in government.

The continual revival of 'localism' as a political agenda is not so much about encouraging government agencies to reach 'down' and 'out' into localities in more collaborative ways. Rather, it is one strand in a search for ways to re-invent what democracy means in a country such as England. This is perhaps why achieving 'localist' agendas is so hard and seems never to happen. What is important is to continue to experiment, learn from all kinds of experiences of local initiative and how they interface, or not, with formal government practices, and use this knowledge when designing changes, not just to the planning system, but to the organisation and practice of how we do government in this country.

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Notes

1   S Brownill: 'Localism is dead — long live localism'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2021, Vol. 90, Nov/Dec., 364–67

2   P Hetherington: 'Inclusive England — regions for all'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2019, Vol. 88, Jun., 217–19

3   For a general review of conceptions of 'localism', see S Davoudi and A Madanipour (Eds): *Reconsidering Localism*. Routledge, 2015

4   I define public value as what a 'public', a community of citizens in some form, has come to 'care about' collectively and seeks to produce and sustain as benefits, qualities, and resources available to them — see Chapter 8 of my new book, *Caring for Place: Community Development in Rural England* (Routledge, 2022)

5   This experience forms the basis of my book cited in note 4

6   This is becoming increasingly clear in research on the relationship between community activism and digitalisation — see, for example, recent research by Newcastle University's Open Lab, *Making Community: Lessons Learned from Researching Digital Technologies* (2022); and Alexander Wilson and Mark Tewdwr-Jones' new book, *Digital Participatory Planning: Citizen Engagement, Democracy and Design* (Routledge, 2022)

7   In some situations, politicians play this role very effectively, but often they do not

8   H Cottam: *Radical Help: How We Can Remake the Relationships between Us and Revolutionise the Welfare State*. Virago, 2018

9   Parishes in Northumberland can have fewer than 100 people, and some have no parish council. Many residents are unaware of which parish they are actually in