

Whose terms? Observations on ‘development management’ in an English city

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Contradictions

Are we witnessing in English cities the emergence of development management that makes for — because it is premised on — ‘empowerment and participation’? More critically, even if this is what we are indeed witnessing, dare we hope that this will help shift the patterns of domination and deprivation that define those cities?

The answer, to both those questions, has to be: Yes, and No. I make that answer with reference to only one English city — Sheffield — though I have no reason to believe that, in this context, it differs significantly from any other such city. In Sheffield, certainly, it is the contradictory nature of how development is being managed that is its most striking feature: on the one hand, the explicit opening up of the process to a much wider set of players than traditionally has been the case; on the other hand, the continuing domination of a traditional top-down management style. We have the explicit espousal of equality as a central value in the council’s vision for the city, and yet we see the continuing co-existence of wealth alongside poverty, of private affluence alongside public squalor, and of acceptance of this state of affairs.

I will look at the first of these contradictions, not least because I believe the introduction of new players, with different and differing values, may be precisely the stimulus required for a move against the inequality that is my main concern. The two stories I will tell revolve around the same two questions: *on* whose terms — a question of power — do those new players come to share in the management of development? and *in* whose terms — a question of language and culture — is their involvement framed?

User 'involvement'

The concept of 'user involvement' has been gaining currency in the increasingly linked fields of social and health care in the UK. The idea is a disarmingly obvious, and obviously virtuous, one: users of care services should be involved in the design, planning, delivery, and evaluation of the services they receive, not least as a vital means of improving the quality of those services.

In Sheffield, this idea's time seemed to have come in March 1996, when £240,000 was allocated by the local and health authorities to a three-year project to establish a *Sheffield Users Network* (SUN) that would promote 'the involvement of service users in decision making about care services'. The project would encourage the creation of groups of users around issues of particular importance to them, and would allow the statutory services to have better access to a broad and representative range of their views. The Network would promote a more coherent and powerful contribution on the part of users. The development of services would take on a different, more open character, would no longer be the exclusive preserve of statutory agencies. In September 1996, a Management Committee for the project was created and the process of recruiting workers began.

Eight months later, the SUN project was closed down, its Management Committee accepting a 'suggestion' from the lead officer in the Council that it 'consider the option of winding up in its current form'.

A complex of factors lay behind the closure: gender, 'race', ethnicity, class, culture; all of these caught up in relationships of cooperation and (increasingly) conflict between different groups of users, between users and professionals, and between different professionals. This is a complex that is difficult if not impossible to disentangle, and not immediately relevant to my interests here. Rather, I want to look at the statutory agencies' handling of the collapse, for this points to how fraught and fragile is the process of shifting the terms on which professionals and users meet, of shifting the balance of power between them.

The city council and health authority, through the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) (which links the two public bodies for planning purposes), immediately commissioned a review into user-involvement in community care in Sheffield. This review was to explore the setting up and closing down of the SUN and 'make proposals for the development of user involvement in health and social care services planning, management and review'. Fieldwork took place between June and November 1997. A final,

66-page report — it starts with a ‘HEALTH WARNING: This is a long report’ — was presented to, and agreed by, the JCC in February 1998. Its recommendations as regards future funding for ‘user involvement’ (re-designating the SUN money) are now being implemented.

A number of aspects of the review suggest an attempt to take some of the risk — for existing management — out of extending user involvement. Three are of particular interest. The first has to do with the way in which the report’s account of the rise and fall of SUN softened history, in particular by understating the element of conflict. Inter-personal politics, underpinned by, but not accounted for simply in terms of, ideological difference, had figured strongly. Yet the anger, venom, and bitterness that had characterised some exchanges between various interested parties were not reflected in the account.

This did more than simply reduce the dramatic intensity of the report. In playing down the conflict, the authors lost an opportunity to explore a wider political dimension. For all that they found particular, immediate form in the SUN development, the key conflicts were part of a much longer, local and national, history: years certainly, decades arguably. This relates to the post-war conflict between statutory agencies and black communities over equity and appropriateness in the provision of statutory services. There is also the no less long-standing conflict between statutory agencies and users of services over how needs are defined and, more pointedly, over who defines them. SUN turned into an arena in which both these conflicts were played out. This political dimension is not written into the account. In consequence, the conclusions drawn from the review focus more on the details of project management than on the dynamics of political process. A political problem becomes a technical one.

The second aspect is, again, about what is missing from the review. If the report de-contextualised SUN in this historical sense, it also de-contextualised it in an institutional sense. The authors had received evidence from the Disability Consultative Committee, a committee of disabled people set up to advise Council Departments on how they can effectively consult with disabled people. This they had not incorporated within their report, because the evidence referred to ‘the wider organisational and cultural context of disability’, which, they argued, did not come within their terms of reference. The Committee subsequently went on to make a number of critical comments on the draft report. It did not, they said, explain the social and political context of user involvement; it did not set out models of user involvement; it ignored

understandings of user involvement which extend beyond the provision of welfare services, particularly those organised around challenges to disparities in power and status; and it ignored the vastly unequal power relations between users and service providers.

In referring to this in their final report, the authors acknowledged, 'that there are many shortcomings to the review', but went on to say that, 'despite all the acknowledged shortcomings of the report, we think that the evidence for our recommendations has been clearly presented by users and others involved, and we have no hesitation in presenting them to the Joint Consultative Committee'.

The third aspect relates to the recommendations themselves. I have already referred to conclusions which were more about project management than about political process. The recommendations that followed from these conclusions were essentially to do with tighter controls over the commissioning, management, and monitoring of user involvement projects. The review went further, and specified those areas where future investment in user involvement should be made. The most notable feature of these recommendations was the shift away from any large-scale, broad-based user-involvement movement and (back) towards smaller-scale projects organised around particular welfare categories — frail, elderly people with learning disabilities; people with physical disabilities — or around the needs of people in black and minority ethnic communities. As the Disability Consultative Committee observed, such 'recommendations may further compound the fragmentation of user groups and increase the domination by the statutory bodies'.

Re-generation partnerships

Just as it has become common practice for public officials to seek user involvement in the development of services, so it has become common practice for those officials to encourage people in the voluntary and community sectors to play a role in the city's social and economic re-generation. In this case, the process is presented in terms of 'partnership'.

'Partnerships' are being developed in a number of contexts. For some years now, there has been a statutory obligation upon local authorities to devolve a substantial amount of the provision of community care services to voluntary (and private) sector agencies. In Sheffield this has taken formal shape in the setting up of 'partnership contracts' between Social Services (as purchasers) and some 30–40 voluntary organisations (as providers).

With respect to urban economic and social re-generation, voluntary and community organisations are now being invited to join already existing ‘partnerships’ involving public, quasi-public, and private organisations. The major national and European funding regimes upon which re-generation projects draw increasingly require evidence of community involvement in projects before they will accept and approve bids for funding. And Sheffield City Council, recognising the need for allies in order to realise its vision for the city, has recently begun to promote an ethos of working ‘in partnership with the community’ — this after years in which the culture of the (locally) ruling Labour party was such as to encourage patron-client relationships between Council and community.

In all these contexts, there are ever-increasing opportunities for people in the voluntary and community sectors to take up more explicit roles in the management of re-generation in the city, and for the interests of their organisations to be recognised in planning processes. Indeed, it is commonly affirmed that no strategic working group, no project planning group, no development forum, should be without voluntary or community sector representation

For all this apparent openness to new players, it is clear that in many respects the change taking place is a matter more of an old order incorporating newcomers than of a new order being brought into being with, and through, the arrival of newcomers. In particular:

- New management bodies have been, are being, created, with a wider range of interests represented. However, these bodies function very much in the style of local authority committees, leaving newcomers either to learn this style, take on what may feel like an alien culture, or be left on the margins. And these bodies, for all that they have in their very composition the means of recognising and responding to the complex and conflictual reality of the city, come to be preoccupied with the management and allocation of their own resources.
- New strategies are formulated, with more of an inter-agency, interdisciplinary, approach. However, they are very much the same ‘strategies as blueprints’ that have hitherto been produced by single agencies: these strategies are documents that pretend to map out the future, the future to which all interests will be expected to sign up. These are strategies, also, formulated by (and for) the few: short (externally set, the argument goes) time-scales prevent wide consultation; while length and language exclude scrutiny by the many.

- Accountability is newly stressed. However this is accountability of the many to the few, and of the people to the plan. This is accountability to strategies, expressed through the monitoring form, which specifies targets and milestones in boxes that necessarily distort and demean the work being reported. Quality is subordinated to quantity. And the longer the term under scrutiny, the more the 'evidence' becomes science-fiction.
- All is expressed in the language of new, wider and better, 'partnership'. However, this partnership is the partnership of centralised, pre-determined coordination, rather than of local emergent cooperation. This is partnership whose main object is efficiency. This is partnership which far from acknowledging diversity — the diversity which is at the heart of city life — submerges, seeks to subvert, it in common purpose. This common purpose, established by the few, is required of the many.

In all these ways, the potential added value of bringing new, diverse interests into play in the regeneration of the city is lost. Instead of reality — including the reality of inequality — being more faithfully reflected in the process of management, newcomers, particularly those from local communities, are expected to abandon their understanding of, and attachment to, local reality, and enter into the imaginary cityscapes of the city strategists.

What I have here set out in abstract terms can be illustrated from everyday experience. By way of example, at the time of writing (July 1998) our locality — along with two others — is being presented with a 'Development Framework' that is intended to set out a programme of 'sustainable development' stretching over the next 5–10 years. The Framework emerged from a study commissioned by the local Single Regeneration Budget Partnership Team, and undertaken by a private consortium involving no local people. The extract below presents the suggested 'Delivery Mechanism'.

The Development Framework is designed to provide the context for concerted regeneration of the SRB area to the south of the city centre. It aims to bring together a set of strategic objectives and translate them into a range of integrated actions that will deliver sustainable regeneration over a 5–10 year period.

The development framework and action plan relies [sic] on the effort of a variety of agencies, landowners, residents, businesses and funding bodies to enable it to move forward. Shared objectives translate into shared responsibility and a requirement for everybody to work together to achieve a set of shared goals. We would therefore

recommend that a new umbrella organisation led by the City Council be established to oversee the delivery of the framework and action plan. It is particularly important to engage the local community and business community in the delivery of the plan — they are integral to the successful delivery of regeneration within the area.

Clearly there are already a number of different partnerships/forums established in the area — and others are proposed. Without wishing to disrupt established working groups there is a requirement for an organisation acting as a driving force that can oversee integrated regeneration throughout the area. In our suggested organisation framework the City Council could fulfil this role.

There is also a requirement for dedicated groups to drive forward projects/strategies under the umbrella. This will enable teams/groups to remain focused on effective delivery and implementation. Our recommendation is that the existing and emerging forums, partnerships and development trusts, should become individual bodies geared towards the implementation of this framework and action plan.

Three points are remarkable, two evident from the extract, one not. The first is the acknowledgement of the importance of the local community. The second has to do with how local forums and so on — each an (imperfect) representative of a particular local community — are treated within this ‘delivery mechanism’ for the Development Framework. They are required to become agencies ‘geared towards the implementation of this framework and action plan’. There is no sense of the legitimacy or significance of local interests that might lie outside the Framework, no recognition that the value of local bodies might lie as much as anything in expressing those divergent and other interests, or indeed that there is a city outside the Framework.

The third — all of a piece with the second — has to do with how local forums were treated within the study process. For at least two (covering two of the three localities involved) there was no consultation before, during, or (until demanded) after the undertaking of the study and writing of the report. And the onwards transmission of the Framework to the Regional Office of Government — to become, no doubt, another accepted representation of the imaginary city of Sheffield and its imaginary future at that ‘higher’ level of development management — was a reality local forums had to catch up with after the event.

Unfinished stories

In each of the two stories told above, there is a sense of new possibilities being opened up — and then being closed down: users of services having incipient freedom to manoeuvre severely curtailed; people in local community organisations, reflecting local interests, finding those interests count for little in the face of dominant re-generation management processes.

There is much in this to induce pessimism. The opening up of development management to a wider range of players does not seem to have changed the terms on which and in which development in Sheffield is taking place. On this view, little hope can be held out that development is likely to shift patterns of inequality.

It is, thus, more than usually important to say that in neither of the above cases has the full story as yet unfolded.