

Introduction

The relationship between local government and public participation is described as problematic by authors in recent studies (McKenna, 2011:1182). Even though participatory experiments have been taking place within local government since the 1960s, stakeholder participation continues to be discussed as 'emergent' (Newman and Clarke, 2009:3) or 'innovative' (Landscape and Recreation Division, 2006:17) by academics and government organisations. Despite the apparently long experience of participation in public bodies, participatory exercises are still viewed as developmental in nature and there is an incomplete body of theories to explain the processes (McKenna, 2011:1182). Authors have observed that there may be benefits to the public as a result of the processes, through reductions in bureaucratic demonstrations of power (Newman and Clarke, 2009:7). However research also indicates that ultimately decision-making has not been significantly affected as a consequence of public participation (McKenna, 2011:1182).

Much of the academic research has focused on the nature of communication in stakeholder groups (Santos and Chess, 2003:270), and the initial organisation of the process (McKenna, 2011:1183). There is a body of research into the practical issues arising through participation (Hoppe, 2011:163) but there is also concern that authors focus upon process and do not sufficiently consider the outcomes of stakeholder participatory exercises (McKenna, 2011:1183). Partly due to the lack of systematic evaluation, it is noted that government officials have difficulty in establishing what constitutes 'good' public participation (Santos and Chess, 2003:269). Consequently, a focus of this paper is the connection between the achievement of outcomes and the variety of expectations and perceptions of participation processes.

Research has shown that stakeholders anticipate that participation will be empowering and meaningful, but they are frequently disappointed and frustrated (Murray et al, 2009:555). The notion of power-sharing is not necessarily an aim

of policy- and decision-makers who support public participation, even though the stakeholders may expect it (Hoppe, 2011:166). This discrepancy between expectations is also reflected in interpretations of terminology. For example Santos and Chess (2003:269) have noted uncertainty surrounding definitions of success amongst stakeholders in their research. Indeed, in some instances the objective of participatory exercises has been that local government bodies should simply obtain data (Murray et al, 2009:555) in the manner of customer feedback, and this is seen to have contributed to stakeholders' dissatisfaction with participation (McKenna, 2011:1192). Equally there are instances of participatory groups being set up by local government merely to conform to legal requirements (Murray et al, 2009:555). This does not provide the level of empowerment that is implied in participants' expectations of the process (Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005:2139-40). The concept of empowerment is a recurring issue in the literature, as is the variety of forms that power takes, and this is considered to be central to developing insights into the complexity of the changing public sector (Newman and Clarke, 2009:23). Accordingly this paper discusses analysis of power alongside the achievement of outcomes and perceptions of improved participation processes.

The purpose behind setting up participation processes is relevant to discussion of the expectations of all those involved. Hoppe (2011:180) considers that instituting participation exercises but failing to formalise the connection between participation and normal decision-making implies the process is not being taken seriously by the organisers. Research carried out by Murray et al (2009:566) indicated that participants perceived they were only 'rubber stamping' decisions that had already been made. Participants were concerned that their time had been wasted and that the process had been approached with entirely different expectations by the organisers and the participants (Murray et al, 2009:567). Several authors have argued that participatory exercises may be the method by which controversial policy is apparently legitimised, thus managing conflict in a manner that implies openness (McKenna, 2011:1193; Murray et al, 2009:559).

Furthermore, Hoppe (2011:164) notes that the tendency to use participation in order to reduce antagonism towards implementing unpopular policies is a factor that contributes to the lack of beneficial outcomes.

However there is also a discrepancy in the extent to which aspects of participation are deemed relevant to evaluation. Santos and Chess (2003:277-278) examined theoretical approaches to evaluation of public participation and found that process and implementation were the focus, even though participants were more concerned with outcomes. Several years later McKenna (2011:1183) observed that 'very few studies have considered outcomes rather than process' and considers this imbalance in research focus is a cause for concern, due to the body of evidence indicating 'outcome failure' (2011:1183) in participatory initiatives. But Hoppe (2011:163) has found that this failure is increasingly the subject of research. The repeated finding that participants are disappointed with the process has been partly attributed to an imbalance in power distribution, by respondents in the study by Murray et al (2009:567). The notion of empowerment has been discussed as if it is a simple concept, easily transferred between bodies and individuals (Newman and Clarke, 2009:23). This aspect of participation is acknowledged to be particularly relevant to discussion of 'meaningful participation', which assumes genuine involvement of stakeholders by government, since this has been described as 'perhaps the most common level of empowerment in the developed world' (Timothy, 2007:203).

The study carried out in this paper responds to calls for research to be carried out specifically into the role of power in participation (Santos and Chess, 2003:278), in order to develop understanding of how empowerment occurs in public participatory groups. This research is set within the context of Local Access Forums (LAFs) formed in response to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW 2000). The analytical framework that is applied to the data has been developed from Lukes' three-dimensional view of power (2005), as it

acknowledges the multidimensional nature of power in stakeholder participation (Hall, 2012:10).

Stakeholder participation through Local Access Forums

In England for most of the twentieth century there has been recurrent conflict between land owners, and users who demanded greater rights of access to the countryside (Page and Shoard, 2000). However continued lobbying from recreational users of the countryside culminated in legislative intervention. CROW 2000 was passed into law in November 2000 and within this law was included the public right of increased access to 'open' countryside. Responses to the announcement of CROW 2000 were polarised and debate was emotionally charged (Hansard, cols 28-32, 1999; Page and Shoard, 2000) but a potentially pacifying feature of this legislation was to be the creation of stakeholder participatory groups to be known as Local Access Forums (LAFs). A prospect offered by participation in LAFs was that of including landowners in the decision-making process since it was to be their property that the public would be able to access under the law. This use of participation resonates with the point made by Murray et al (2009:559) in which they state this may be used as a legitimising process for implementing controversial policy.

CROW 2000 required local (access) authorities and national parks to form LAFs that would advise them upon the implementation of the law. Guidance for LAFs was limited at this stage but a number of constraints upon them were evident. They were to achieve 'balanced' membership of each LAF (without detailed explanation of how this was to be achieved) and aim for consensual decision-making (Hansard, col 25, 1999). The guidance required each member to be appointed for a period of one to three years arranged to ensure the expiry of their terms of appointment would be staggered. Membership should comprise between 10 and 22 persons representative of users, owners and other 'relevant' interests (Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000). Also the guidance stated that the Chair and Vice Chair persons should be selected by members and

should represent different interests to each other. At least two meetings were to be held each year and they should be open to the public (Defra, 2002). A further constraint became apparent as questions from LAFs about funding drew the response from national government that no additional funds were available for improvements to access.

Government-commissioned surveys across all LAFs and participants were carried out by the Countryside and Community Research Unit (Short et al, 2005) in order to report on the progress of LAFs in their first two years, as there was no automatic reporting mechanism in place. The methodology for this report involved 'a desk study of the material available on each LAF, a questionnaire survey of LAF members and secretaries and the officers of the appointing authorities (AAs) and case study interviews in 16 varying situations.' (Short et al, 2005:i). The findings indicated a number of issues that concerned members and access authorities organising LAFs. Issues highlighted included:

- The uncertainty felt by LAFs regarding the role they should play;
- The tendency for some access authorities to undertake the bare minimum required to comply with the law;
- The shortage of staff and finance to support the work of LAFs;
- The belief amongst many respondents that access authorities do not act on the advice of LAFs;
- The lack of attention given to the selection of Chair persons – particularly since their leadership is essential for a 'successful' LAF (Short et al, 2005:33-50).

Following on from this report the government issued revised guidance to the LAFs in 2007 – four years after the initial formation of the forums. However the revised guidance remained vague in its requirements from the LAF membership. The lack of specificity in the initial guidance meant that access authorities were able to interpret and implement the law with a certain amount of flexibility. In some cases this was interpreted as an opportunity to perform the 'bare minimum'

by the access authority. In this paper two LAFs are discussed, in order to contrast the different approaches that have been taken by the access authorities and the members when implementing CROW 2000, specifically addressing the issues highlighted here. Both local (access) authorities were politically in accord with national government and apparently supportive of the legislation. Nonetheless there are practical issues associated with interpretation and implementation of new legislation. As noted by Newman and Clarke, actors at local levels must find ways of implementing policies imposed by central government so that they are suitable for the specific context (2009:20).

Expectations

Interpretation of terminology has been acknowledged as an area where expectations diverge in participatory exercises. Nonetheless, terms such as 'good' and 'success' are used in discussion without definitions being provided. For example the research carried out by the Countryside and Community Research Unit makes the following statement:

Good leadership from the Chair is essential for a *successful* LAF. However, whilst all LAFs recognised this most selected the Chair from the existing members and then 'hoped for the best'. *Good* practice did occur, such as the development of an approach where a Chair would have served as Vice-Chair for a year before taking over the role, thus having had some preparation. In one LAF the Chair and secretary met before the meeting to discuss the agenda, this preparation was thought crucial to the effectiveness of the meetings. A *good* Chair inculcates a positive attitude amongst members. This must go hand in hand with at least the perception that the LAF has influence and is valued. Being proactive also enhances a sense of *empowerment*, which can be reinforced whenever it clocks up *successes*. (Short et al, 2005:43).

A cause for concern is that if participants and administrators differ in their definitions of success and their identification of 'good' practice in participatory groups (Santos and Chess, 2003:269), then there is potential for a further mismatch if the report has yet another definition for these terms. The

interpretations of terminology are problematic if they rest upon the motivations and purpose of those engaging with participation. In addition the Review of Local Access Forums (Short et al, 2005) found that the enthusiasm and willingness of members to take part would be likely to decline unless they believe their efforts achieve positive results. Similarly it has been indicated elsewhere that the disappointment of participants is likely to lead to their withdrawal from future participation (Barreteau et al, 2010).

Analytical Framework relating to Power

Power is often identified as a resource for participatory processes, and also is directly related to discussion surrounding the empowerment of participants in stakeholder groups. However literature frequently fails to examine its other features more closely and when considering existing research into participative ventures, it has been noted that some authors have used the term 'power' without being clear whether they perceive it as a construct of 'influence, authority, persuasion, dissuasion, inducement, coercion, compulsion, force ...' (Dahl, 1986:40). The assumption is made that readers will understand the meaning(s) imputed to the word. However in order to develop an in-depth understanding of how power affects stakeholder groups, the alternative forms that power takes have been considered. Power is described as particularly relevant where there are efforts to influence policy-making (Hall, 2003:101) although sources of power are diverse and may exist even among apparently marginalised stakeholders (Coles and Scherle, 2007:223). For example, the use of persuasion, ingratiation, emotion and intimidation have all been typified as tactics aimed at achieving specific outcomes and indicative of alternative sources of power (Coles and Scherle, 2007:222). However empirical research into power is particularly complex given this variety of sources, and it may not be possible to establish causal links between all the possible tactics and the outcomes (Dahl, 1986:37-58).

Silva (2007:174) considers the lack of suitable frameworks for the analysis of power and compares phenomenology, critical theory and structuration theory. They are all found to have limitations as they 'do not contain a concrete theory that analytically conceptualizes power in terms of its components and that directs researchers to the concrete pieces of data they need' (Silva, 2007:174). Similar issues arise when attempting to incorporate Foucauldian concepts into studies of power in collaborative exercises. Foucault stated that the power relations are involved and complex; also that there are no tools to assist with the analysis of power relations but we must rely on 'ways' of thinking (Foucault, 1982:327). Generally analysis of power necessarily concentrates on limited aspects of stakeholder groups and cannot examine **all** aspects in one study.

A key factor in policy and decision-making processes is the identification of topics to be considered – as in agenda-setting for example. This is also associated with naming problems (Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005; Hardy and Phillips, 1998), and is perceived to be power related. Furthermore Shepsle and Weingast (1981:510) refer to the possibility of unrestricted manipulation of outcomes by the individual in charge of setting the agenda. Such a situation permits control of the topics under discussion and also may limit the extent to which they are discussed in meetings. Hardy and Phillips considered 'formal authority, the control of critical resources and discursive legitimacy' to be aspects of power (1998:219) relevant to interorganisational study. All of these aspects may be visible and formally bestowed and consequently observable. For example, legitimate authority is conferred upon those who are authorised to organise a participatory group and visible in their capacity to structure the membership and its meetings.

Bachrach and Baratz introduced concepts such as non decision-making and restricting decision-making to 'relatively "safe" issues' (1962:394) - which directly relates to 'the ability to "set the agenda"' (Heyward, 2007:48). Notably Lukes (2005:29) brought together aspects such as 'Agenda-Setting' and 'Non Decisions' in the three-dimensional view of power. However there is an inherent

difficulty in studying the concept of issues 'organized into politics while others are organized out' (Schattschneider cited in Bachrach and Baratz, 1962:396) as it involves speculation regarding intent, rather than measurable data.

Following Foucault's suggestion that analysis begins with the 'forms of resistance' against power (1982:329), the analytical framework considers the removal of power from stakeholder groups to be observable. As with the concepts discussed by Bachrach and Baratz the difficulty of researching Lukes' three-dimensional view of power is that it also requires study of 'what does not happen' (Hall, 2003:106). However it is possible to reverse the lens on the subject and study non empowerment as 'what does happen'. This offers commonality between aspects of 'non' power that is not available to the study of power. Lukes considered the use of the Latin words 'Potentia' and 'Potestas' by Spinoza when distinguishing between 'power to' and 'power over' as separate variations of the concept of power (Lukes, 2005:73). Since 'Potentia' is translated as having the power 'to exist and act' (Lukes, 2005:73) it appears that 'power to' has greater relevance to the concept of empowerment applicable to stakeholder groups than 'power over'. Accordingly, the removal of 'Potentia' is referred to as 'Depotentia' (Hall, 2012:5). Use of the term 'Depotentia' does not call for analysis of motive or intent and consequently this simplifies examination of the concept.

The analytical framework (Table 1) allows tabular examination of the themes that emerge from the data. For example participants' involvement in agenda-setting can be identified. If they have little or no involvement in setting the agenda it can be ascertained whether they have made that choice themselves (Internally perpetuated), or whether they have been excluded by external organisers (Externally imposed). This is an aspect of Depotentia that can be reversed and provide insights into the expectations of the organisers and participants:

Table 1: Analytical Framework

SOURCES OF DEPOTENTIA	EXTERNALLY IMPOSED	INTERNALLY PERPETUATED
DECISION MAKING, NON DECISIONS AND OUTCOMES		
AGENDA-SETTING		
CONFLICT		
STRUCTURE		

(adapted from Hall, 2012)

Methodology

The two cases presented in this paper are of LAFs created to advise county councils. They formed part of a broader project in which four cases were studied over a two year period between July 2004 and July 2006. Of the 79 LAFs that had been formed, the four case studies were chosen for their variation in geographical location and their relative prioritisation of rural access. Two of the cases advised English national park authorities and two cases advised county councils. Consequently this facilitated comparisons of their experience of the implementation of CROW 2000 within similar organisational structures. Prior to the creation of LAFs, Access Liaison Groups (ALGs) had been providing advice regarding access to the countryside to local councils in England as informal arrangements without statutory validation. These groups had existed from the mid 1980s with encouragement and advice from the Countryside Commission (Parker, 2004:13). In some cases the members of LAFs had previously served on ALGs and these stakeholders are typically enthusiastic and knowledgeable with regard to rural access. However previous research indicated that the existence of ALGs had not led to wider participation (Ravenscroft et al, 2002:730) but had appeared to marginalise some interest groups (Parker and Ravenscroft, 2001:385). The ethnomethodological approach applied to this project focused upon exploring ‘research participants’ own situated experiences’ (Symon and

Cassell, 1998:2) in order to understand the implementation of the legislation and the process from the perspective of participants. The study of LAFs as stakeholder groups was facilitated as, by law, meetings are open to the public. It was anticipated that attending and observing meetings would lead to conversations that would enable identification of key actors who would later be asked to take part in semi structured interviews.

Experiences of LAFs

Overview of the Case Studies

Five meetings were observed in each of two county council LAFs over a period of two years, and in the first Case Study (Northshire) in-depth interviews were carried out with four members and a County Council access officer. Additionally, informal conversations took place with a second Council access officer, two further members of the forum and two members of the public at forum meetings. In August 2006 there were 18 members of this forum in total. In the second Case Study (Southshire) in-depth interviews were carried out with nine members and two County Council access officers. In addition conversations took place with three members of the public at forum meetings. This forum had 22 members in total in August 2006.

County councils receive the majority of their finance through national government and locally imposed taxes. There is a broad remit for the use of the income, as councils are responsible for a number of services to the community. These include provision for the police force, education, leisure and highways maintenance. Consequently councillors are required to prioritise specific aspects of service provision annually. This will usually accord with the priorities that match their political affiliations.

The Northshire Case Study relates to a forum that advises the county council in an area where countryside access is not specifically directed at provision for inbound tourism but upon leisure facilities for local communities. The funding

arrangements for Rights of Way maintenance and improvement may mean the access officers experience competition from their colleagues. In this instance the funding for Rights of Way is within the budget of the Environment Department of the county council and the LAF is organised by the Countryside Access Team. Throughout the period of observation, meetings were held at various council offices around the county and always took place in the evenings, beginning at 7pm. During this period the LAF held four meetings each year which were open to the public. The access officer responsible for administering the forum at the end of the period was the assistant to the officer responsible at the start of the study. Both of the administrators commented on the lack of guidance from Defra and the consequent amount of time spent on detail by the members. They also expressed disappointment at the lack of involvement in the wider work of the forum by members.

The members who spoke most often in the Northshire forum were the Chair and those involved in farming or land management, although the county council employees dominated information dissemination. Several members spoke only rarely and one of those was interviewed. Members expressed frustration with the lack of decision-making by the forum, and poor attendance at meetings was attributed to this by some interviewees. This opinion was reflected by the county council employees. This was the most difficult of the LAFs in which to arrange interviews – there were no refusals but it was difficult to bring appointments to fruition. Many members turned up either on time or late for meetings so there were limited opportunities for casual conversations.

The district affected by Southshire LAF is a county that offers recreational access to the countryside and also to the coast. A primary resource for access to the countryside in England is the Rights of Way network. Since this network is maintained by the Highways Department in this environment, the officers responsible for Rights of Way experience competition from their colleagues in the Highways Department as they try to gain a significant portion of funding for their

projects. Part of the task undertaken by LAFs is the formation of a plan identifying improvements to Rights of Way recognising current needs of recreational users of the countryside.

Prior to this research being carried out, this LAF had already experienced low attendance at meetings to the extent that it could not achieve a quorum and so was unable to function. A new access officer had been employed with the specific intention of revitalising the forum. The meeting at which he was introduced to the members was also the first meeting to be observed for this study in July 2004. Over the period of data collection he repeatedly stated that he required feedback from the forum but it was notable that it took two years before the members participated in an energetic way. For the greater part of the data collection period, decision-making in this forum focused on administrative matters. Uncertainty over the role of the LAF led this forum to ask the Countryside Agency for advice on what was expected from LAFs, in November 2004.

The LAF held five meetings each year that were open to the public. Meetings began at 4pm and were held in various venues around the county. One access officer was responsible for the LAF and he attended all meetings – usually accompanied by his direct superior. Both of these access officers appeared to have had a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve from CROW 2000 and the LAF. Their enthusiasm for CROW 2000 was clear and their vision of increasing the funding available for maintenance and joining up the network was a priority in their implementation of the legislation. In effect the access officers provided the guidance for the LAF's role that was not present in the legislation. In the early meetings it was noticeable that the access officers were doing most of the talking and delivering information to the members. Important issues to them appeared to be assessment of the driving forces behind the legislation and then including their personal aims within that agenda. Despite misgivings regarding the

opportunities missed by the legislation, the officers' overall opinions favoured the improvement of access for the public.

Comparison of cases

Disengagement

Both LAFs experienced difficulty in getting the members to engage with the process. This was in evidence during meetings, and observation notes made at the time showed that in Northshire up to 40% of members in attendance sometimes did not speak at all during meetings. The lack of engagement indicated by the low attendance rates throughout the whole period of observation (with only 10 or 11 members at four of the meetings and 12 at the fifth) was attributed to the lack of obvious outcomes by interviewees:

'Currently no one on the LAF seems prepared to challenge them (*county council*) and say why are you not doing this? This may be why attendance is dropping off because people wonder what they are achieving.'

'We don't get any more done through being on the forum than we would anyway.... Because the power of the LAF is not clearly established I think the County Council are worried. Because they were always autonomous.'

It appears that despite an explicit desire for the members to become more involved, the access officers implicitly discouraged active participation. Some members of the forum appeared to be aware that there were externally imposed limitations upon their active involvement in the process and this was referred to in interviews:

'We are there as token gesture rather than of real use. I am prepared to give it a little longer to see...'

In Southshire the work of the forum was viewed as slow starting by members. During the period of data collection members were usually diffident in their behaviour at meetings, whereas in interview they were forthcoming. This lack of engagement with the issues was apparent during the first eighteen months of data collection. A number of members did not speak at all during the meetings of that period and there were frequent references to maintenance of strict time-keeping in meetings. The meeting held in November 2004 was only just quorate but during the evening two of the members did not speak at all, effectively reducing even further the number of people in the participation process. The observation notes from September 2004 indicate another example of this disinterest:

Southshire Observation notes meeting September 2004

Agenda Item 8b. Another member spoke for the first time - about farming (3 people still have not spoken at all 5.40pm. - Thirteen members present in total. Meeting began 4pm.)

Agenda Item 8c Chair: 'must move on, time is pressing'

However in the observation notes of the same meeting an access officer had explicitly requested active participation from members:

Agenda Item 8a. Access Officer A says he needs full and frank viewpoints of forum – he wants them to challenge him in what he does.

Nonetheless at this stage members did *not* challenge the access officers and this may have reflected either support of their actions or lack of engagement with the process.

In Northshire reluctance to speak was also indicated in notes made during observations of meetings. In the meeting of October 2004 four people out of 11 members did not speak all evening and in the meeting of April 2005 at 8.40 pm five members of 11 present had not spoken.

Further evidence of members' reluctance to engage with the process was indicated by their unwillingness to fill the roles of Chair and Vice Chair in Northshire, when this was raised for discussion in April 2006. Members were requested to stand for the positions but there were no volunteers despite the urgency attached to the replacement of the Chair person.

Northshire Observation notes meeting April 2006

Agenda Item 8. Chair and Vice would like people to take over as Chair and Vice. Chair asked for volunteers and got none. He said he is going to step down 'willy nilly' so a letter will go out to everyone as he has done 3 years and is happy to stay on LAF but not as Chair. He feels it is up and running and though not well oiled, it is greased in the right places. Chair said: 'Someone will HAVE TO stand up and take over as it is not fair on...(voice fades)'. 'It is intended to be a 3 year term and I intend to make it so'. SILENCE

This issue had not been resolved by the end of the meeting.

Funding

In Southshire the problem relating to funding of improvements to Rights of Way was raised at the meeting held in June 2005 and a member noted that it was 'leading people astray asking them what they want, knowing there is no money!'. This constraint affected the outcomes of decision-making. Consequently the element of competition with the Highways Department to get more funding was one of the most constantly revisited aspects in meetings. The access officers explicitly recommended that the forum should try to gain increased funding for

Rights of Way. This perspective was expressed in the meeting held in September 2004, as the following excerpt shows:

Southshire Observation notes meeting September 2004

Access officer B: Funding goes to highways mainly and ROWs (Rights of Way) need to get in there as they are part of the highways network and should have funds for basic maintenance as it **should be the same in principle**. The LAF needs to persuade government that their ROWs should be eligible for some of that funding.

It appears that the external constraint placed upon the forum through restricted financial resources was contested by the access officers who were not members of the forum. Although they were receiving advice from the LAF rather than forming part of it, they allied themselves with the aims of the forum members and rather than undertaking the 'bare minimum' required by the legislation the access officers actively engaged with the LAF.

In Northshire the financial constraints were not specifically addressed by members during interviews or meetings. However in an interview the access officer commented:

'I am disappointed at how much money has been taken from other areas for this. Rural transport partnerships have lost a lot of funding. ... We have to bid annually for money from the Local Transport Plan. LTP2 (*the second version of the Local Transport Plan*) has things like quality of life as a shared objective. That means that Rights Of Way may get opportunities but there is no actual core funding! I **am** disappointed about the lack of funding.'

In both cases most membership interviewees had joined to see access improved, either from the viewpoint of their own interest group or in general and safety

terms. Landowners tended to join to 'ensure that the farm and landowning community had a spokesman', according to interviewees.

Interaction

The majority of members did not meet outside of meetings, but in Southshire the number of meetings was increased by the access officer – partly to reduce delays between receipt and reply to consultation documents from national government. Those members that met outside were people who had jobs that brought them into contact. In Northshire meetings were held quarterly although this was not always considered to be sufficient, as stated by one of the members during interview:

'We only have 4 meetings each year. The landowners think that is enough but others think we need more – because we are trying to discuss a lot in a two hour meeting.'

Throughout the period of data collection Southshire took part in regular field trips. This activity appears to require co-operation between the external and internal participants in the process. In this case there were members who were able to provide venues for meetings and field trips. This resulted in members participating in the process of organising meetings and also providing themselves with opportunities for increasing interaction. Meetings always began at 4pm and were often held at different locations that allowed for a two hour field trip for the membership prior to the meeting. Three of the five meetings observed were held in field trip locations. The time spent on these field trips assisted members to become more familiar with each other and this enabled them to become aware of the suitability of potential Chair and Vice Chair persons.

Northshire forum did not take part in field trips. In an interview one of the access officers suggested that the reason was that members:

‘... delayed thinking about where to go on site meetings.’

The observation notes of the meeting held in July 2005 illustrate the members’ reaction to the possibility of a field trip:

Northshire Observation notes meeting July 2005

8pm The access officer is talking about setting up a day / site visit for members. He asked for suggestions? There was silence.

In addition to the lack of site visits there was a tendency for members to arrive at meetings either just before or just after they began. This contributed to the lack of interaction, and was mentioned by interviewees as follows:

‘The problem is that everyone goes their own way after the meetings.’

‘I think members just do not speak to each other.’

At the final meeting observed in Southshire forum, there had been a change of Chairperson. The style of discussion in this meeting was relaxed and finally vociferous in relation to joining up a bridleway that had been dissected by a new road, to ensure safe crossing of the new dual carriageway. The road improvements that had been planned required horse riders to make a long detour to the nearest roundabout in order to continue their ride from one side of the road to the other. This issue was not just championed by the horse riding member, it was strongly supported as a matter of importance by the general membership. Authors have noted that there is potential for conflict between different user groups, and also within groups using the countryside for recreation. For example Church and Ravenscroft (2007) have discussed the disputes between anglers and canoeists on England’s waterways. However they have also drawn attention to negotiated agreements between landowners and specific canoeists that lead

to other canoeists being excluded - even though they fall within the same user group (Church and Ravenscroft, 2007:189).

In order to achieve 'balanced' membership, LAFs usually have a single representative from many interest areas. In this LAF (Southshire) the interests of Motor Vehicle users, Disabled users, Horse riders, 'Access for All', Business and Cycling each had only one member to represent them. This can lead to such interests being overwhelmed if the majority of members oppose their access for recreation. For example in this LAF there were several opponents to motorised recreation in the countryside, but generally the members had a broad view of access to the countryside as a resource that they wished to use and improve. They also saw it as a resource that they might lose in the future if it were not tended.

Their support of the access officer and his enthusiasm was universal. But he spent a great deal of time in the early stages, encouraging them to actively engage in the process: 'We **must** make a robust Rights Of Way Improvement Plan: it is vitally important and you must hammer me if I have got it wrong' (LAF Meeting in June 2005). None of the interviewees expressed disenchantment with the process or the management of the forum.

In Northshire there was a lack of continuity in the access officers responsible for organising the meetings. In addition, the responsible officers did not always attend the meetings. This may have delayed the development of familiarity between attendees that was observed in Southshire. The observation notes recorded the apparent disruption in responsibility as follows:

Northshire Observation notes meeting April 2005

Arrived 6.50pm....

No sign of S – who is the secretary now?

N apparently, but had conversation with his Assistant Access Officer.

Present: 3 forum admin staff and 2 other CC officers and 12 members. (ie 5 from the county council out of total 17 attendees).

Southshire LAF meetings spent a high proportion of time on information delivery by access officers. However this LAF exposed the fact that the access officer attended all meetings documented for this case study whereas Northshire LAF did not have this level of continuity.

Agenda-setting

In 2008, a follow up interview took place with the access officer in the Southshire forum. The purpose was to discover if the findings reflected the continuing experience of participants in the process. The external influences upon the members were clarified by this interviewee. He indicated that the forum members had been 'empowered' to the extent that they could promote the requirements of the county council. In other words 'empowerment' was *bestowed* upon the LAF members by the county council. Access officers had been proactive in anticipating the topics that would be raised by national government as well as leaving matters out of agendas if they were considered to be irrelevant to the county. The minutes of that period indicated that members had continued to engage with the process, in contrast to the earlier meetings in which a lack of engagement was observed.

In this follow-up interview it was stated that the forum was portrayed as influential to third parties by the access officers. This was achieved through promptly meeting requests by the members and obtaining assistance from whichever sources that they selected. The interviewee was asked whether a decision of the forum had ever been ignored and the response was that it was 'not the county council's right to overturn a LAF's decision **when** they did make one.'

However in Northshire the interviewees stated they did not see outcomes that adhered to the decision-making that had taken place:

‘Things have gone ahead despite what was said at meetings.’

The assumption of responsibility for agenda setting was explicitly discussed in interviews, and one member stated:

‘I have never put anything on the agenda and I thought I could not. I can only put stuff in AOB (Any Other Business).’

This view was reinforced by an access officer who stated:

‘The County Council sets the agenda and presents the meetings. The major concern is that the amount of time the appointing authority puts in may not equate to the benefit they get from it. I think the County Council should be throwing things into the pot but the members should decide what to talk about.’

This aspect of the process was highlighted when the widening of a trunk road was discussed, as specific difficulties were illustrated during meetings. When the topic was originally raised for discussion, the member central to the argument suggested that old sections of the road that would not be re-used in the new dual carriageway could be usefully adapted for Rights of Way.

Observation notes 26 April 2005

A member says he is disappointed that this has not been brought to LAF attention before and he only found out about it because it affects his farm. It has been going on for 2 years and he thinks the council should have brought this up as it is central to what the group should be doing....and thinks LAF should force the pace.

However it appeared that this involvement was not welcomed by all the access officers, as one of the officers commented in interview afterwards that:

‘The forum did not get anything altered through their intervention, they only got the presentation (*part of the open consultation process*) last week – so they only got the opportunity to respond to consultation.’

Examination of the available minutes of 2012 LAF meetings in Northshire indicates that in some respects little has changed. Requests for information made in February were still unanswered in September and most of the information was presented by the access officer. Similarly there were no volunteers to stand as Chair of the LAF. However, site visits had taken place and approximately 30% of the membership (and the access officer) was unchanged from 2006, providing greater continuity than observed previously.

From the perspective of the county council in Southshire their explicit target was to use the forum to develop the Rights of Way Improvement Plan into a tool that would help the council to raise additional funding. Ultimately it is estimated by the access officer in Southshire that this approach led to the Rights of Way funding having trebled in this county. A further point is that in this forum the annual changeover of one third of members (to comply with ‘staggered’ terms of membership) was found to adversely affect the development of the forum so the access officer removed that requirement.

Neither the members nor the access officers in Northshire took advantage of the opportunity to interpret the legislation freely. The access officer was aware of the lack of direction in the forum and in the meeting of April 2005 he referred to his ‘concern about the LAF and where it is going’. Although members formed a sub group to consider this, one year later the members appeared to be satisfied with the LAF and its approach:

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Agenda Item 5: Report of LAF role sub-Group after DEFRA Training and meeting thought this LAF doing well compared with many

others around the country others feel LAFs have no teeth and are therefore no use.

However in Southshire this flexibility in interpretation was taken as an opportunity to enhance the provision of rural access and improve its competitive position amongst facilities supported by the local authority.

Discussion

Revisiting the framework in Table 1 that was used to analyse these cases, facilitates discussion of sources of Depotentia and examination of where they have been reversed.

Table 2: Completed Analytical Framework

SOURCES OF DEPOTENTIA	EXTERNALLY IMPOSED	INTERNALLY PERPETUATED
DECISION MAKING, NON DECISIONS AND OUTCOMES	ADVICE NOT ALWAYS TAKEN LACK OF FUNDING	DISENGAGEMENT
AGENDA-SETTING	MAINLY CONTROLLED EXTERNALLY	REACTIVE
CONFLICT		COMPETITION BETWEEN INTERESTS AND NON-INTERACTION
STRUCTURE	BALANCE OF INTERESTS	

(adapted from Hall, 2012)

The sources of Depotentia highlighted in both cases have partly been a result of external imposition. Decision-making, non decisions and outcomes were affected through the LAF's advice not always being taken in Northshire. However the approach taken in Southshire indicates that this can be reversed by the access officers. Similarly lack of funding was addressed in Southshire by the access officers' alliance with the LAF in order to maximise the council's ability to obtain additional funding. The Agenda-setting was mainly controlled externally in both LAFs and the Northshire case study indicated that members felt excluded from this part of the process. However in Southshire the task of Agenda-setting

was embedded within the time-frame of issues expected to arise at ministerial level. This assisted members by reducing the time taken up unnecessarily on peripheral issues. Finally among the external sources of Depotentiality, it is notable that the balance of interests in Southshire membership adhered to the expectations of the legislation. However the relationships forged between LAF members on field trips assisted them in supporting each others' interests. Also there was continuity in attendance of the access officer, unlike the Northshire LAF. This suggests that the level of familiarity amongst members and the access officer in Southshire may have been increased through the informal parts of the field trips.

There were sources of Depotentiality that were Internally perpetuated in both these case studies. The effect of members' disengagement upon Decision-making was apparent in both cases and partly evidenced by lack of participation in meetings. After eighteen months of persistent effort by the access officer, Southshire LAF reversed this source of Depotentiality and members had become fully engaged with the process, whereas Northshire members had not. In both LAFs the members were reactive rather than proactive with regard to Agenda-setting. This is reflected in the research of Santos and Chess (2003:277) who also found that participants did not recognise the importance of issues such as Agenda-setting. Although a member in Northshire had attempted to take a more active role in Agenda-setting he had been discouraged by council officers and one year later the LAF indicated it was satisfied with its passive role. However in Southshire members' engagement with the issues had been welcomed by the access officer and the benefits of members' enthusiasm were found to assist the council in achieving its aims. In Southshire the LAF increased interaction between the members through co-operating in the organisation of field trips. Members spent time together outside of the 'bare minimum' required for meetings and this reveals that not only the access authorities but also the participants themselves must be willing to do more than the 'bare minimum' required by law.

Conclusion

Using this analytical framework to examine the data from these case studies has clarified how expectations and perceptions of the process can be identified and used to benefit both the organisers and members of stakeholder groups. It is possible to reverse instances of Depotentia, as has been indicated in Southshire. Consequently this framework has provided the means of identifying where efforts can be effectively directed to provide satisfactory outcomes for all parties. As noted by Murray et al (2009) there are different perceptions and expectations among participants and organisers in stakeholder groups. Ensuring that the level of disappointment in participants (Barreteau et al, 2010) is minimised, helps to ensure their willingness to engage in future stakeholder processes.

These findings have implications for the formation of stakeholder groups in governance. When forecasting how groups will function the organisers should assume that individuals may be in competition with each other even if their interest area designation appears to coincide. Furthermore in the Northshire Case Study there was evidence of competition between the county council and the LAF membership. The political 'will' of the organisers is central to the groups' achievement of satisfactory outcomes for participants. The competitive urge between the organisers and the members may not be explicitly stated but may be indicated in less obvious ways, such as:

- the lack of continuity in attendance by the responsible organiser
- failure to carry through decisions of the group

Although LAFs were originally intended to aim for consensual decision-making, the competitive urge will still undermine the group's capacity to function if the organisers fail to engage with the process and provide explicit and implicit support.

The insights offered by the experiences of these cases provide examples of the opportunities for organisers to improve the efficacy of participatory groups, within a broader range of settings. Since stakeholder participation is perceived to be beneficial to the achievement of sustainable outcomes in governance, the approach of organisers continues to be fundamental to the achievement of those outcomes. It is apparent that where guidance regarding the role of the group is vague, there exists the opportunity to interpret the objectives in a manner that provides certainty for the membership. Through engaging with (and undertaking leadership of) the group the organisers are then ultimately in a position to improve the performance of their own organisation, as the group becomes increasingly confident. Rather than presenting barriers to that confidence, the organisers benefit from the additional support that the group provides for them. However if organisers are willing to provide leadership in this way, they must possess a clear vision of their objectives in order to encourage the group to engage with them.

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