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Beyond Referendums and ‘Austerity’: Public Participation Policy

Enactment in ‘new’ UK Governance Spaces

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Biographical Notes

Martin E Purcell is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Huddersfield, UK, where he has been the Youth & Community Work Course Leader for the past three of his five years in post. Prior to this, Martin taught at Universities in Manchester and Leeds, UK, and worked for ten years as a Senior Research Fellow at the Policy Research Institute, based at Leeds Beckett University, UK. Martin completed his PhD – on which this paper is based – in 2012, and continues to conduct research into the translation of professional values into practice.

Abstract

This article generates new insights into what contributes to the effective enactment of public participation policy. It critiques the implementation of recent public participation policy in the UK, focusing on new local governance spaces created in England by Labour governments (1997-2010), and arrangements subsequently enacted under the Coalition and Conservative governments (2010-2015). It reports on a study conducted in 22 local authority areas in one English region, exploring public participation practices in Local Strategic Partnerships, and again seven years after the policy was rescinded.

Power and agency feature in the analysis, which demonstrates how the intended impacts of public participation policy is diluted by complex context-specific organizational, cultural and professional factors. The article presents evidence of citizens' continuing enthusiasm to shape and influence policy, through formal structures and non-traditional processes, and argues that public participation policy during 'austerity' should accommodate the potential for progressive outcomes to emerge from both approaches.

Key Words

Policy enactment, public participation, community development, local governance.

Word Count: 6,976

Introduction

The effectiveness of public policy enactment has been the subject of considerable enquiry, much of which has sought to determine the cause(s) of the ‘implementation gap’ between the design and achievement of policy goals (e.g. Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier, 1999; Hill & Hupe, 2006; Siddiki *et al.*, 2015; Andersen & Jakobsen, 2017).

Problems with policy implementation appear to arise from the interplay between several discrete challenges, including the increased complexity in society, public leadership problems and constraints affecting those charged with enacting policy at a local level (Ansell *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the ‘implementation gap’ can be attributed to failures in policy design, enactment by public officials or/and resistance from within target communities, meaning that the locus of responsibility for a policy’s success or failure may be difficult to pinpoint, unless it is subject to rigorous evaluation (Sanderson, 2009).

Emphasising the “transforming and relational nature” of the policy implementation process, Sausman *et al.* (2016: 556) assert that it is neither rational nor linear in nature, and emphasise the centrality of local actors in the process. They highlight the practices and cultures of implementing organisations as factors inhibiting the effective enactment of policy, placing local actors as central to the successful implementation of policy (*ibid*).

Drawing from research spanning over ten years, this study identifies critical factors that shape the translation into practice of UK public participation policy goals, as articulated by different levels of government and policy-makers, implemented by managers and practitioners with different professional backgrounds, and impacting to varying degrees on citizenry. The findings presented here build on research into policy enactment and public participation in a range of contexts (e.g. Clark, 2018; May & Jochim, 2013; Howlett & Walker, 2012) to

identify how actors in public participation policy exercise agency in practice, and to inform recommendations for future policy-makers and practitioners.

Why Explore Public Participation Policy Now?

Debate about the extent to which UK citizens should exercise influence over decisions affecting their lives has heightened recently (e.g. Bang & Norris, 2018; Hansard Society, 2018), as referendums on Scottish independence and membership of the European Union (EU) have generated unprecedented levels of public participation (84.6% and 72.2% respectively) in formal decision-making processes (Electoral Commission, 2016). These instances seem to have ‘bucked a trend’, arising at a time when public participation policy has sought to foster political renewal in the UK and other liberal democracies (primarily EU member states, north American and Australasian countries) because of falling participation rates in elections (Solijonov, 2016; OECD, 2001). Policy in these countries has been informed by theories and models that provide a better understanding of the impact and effectiveness of different approaches (e.g. Fung, 2015; IAPP, 2007; OECD, 2001). However, having evolved to reflect the social, economic and political priorities of the day as mediated by the make-up of different national governments, its implementation has been moderated by these other policy priorities (Purcell, 2015). The forms of practice that have emerged in response to these policies in the UK over the past two decades have brought into stark relief the challenges faced by public servants responsible for translating participation policy into practice, often confounding these models in the process, whether as a deliberately disempowering pastiche (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) or in spite of policy-makers’ intent to support authentic community development (Taylor, 2007).

Recent trends in public participation exhibit a problematic dichotomy, with participation in different forms of activity reflecting contradictory motivations. For instance, high levels of

participation in the EU referendum (the results of which have been mirrored in polls in the US and other EU countries) have been characterized as embracing reactionary, ‘populist’ policies, as citizens resist the over-powering nature of neo-liberal influences on their lives (Bang & Norris, 2018). Simultaneously, progressive global street-based and online movements (Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Avaaz, etc.) have emerged, also aiming to challenge the neo-liberal hegemony, channeling the anxieties of the elements of the populations of countries in the global North, and generating widespread support in the liberal media (Chomsky, 2012). While providing a useful context within which the focus of this study is framed, it is not intended here to enter into detailed consideration of these trends in representative forms of democracy. Suffice to say, this has necessitated a fresh analysis of the motivations for participation, and the modalities of policy enactment, reflecting our enhanced understanding of the impact of post-modern society (Zizek, 2014; Bang, 2009).

Considering public participation policy relating to the establishment of new local governance spaces in England (Local Strategic Partnerships, LSPs), and subsequent public participation initiatives shaped alongside the ‘austerity’ agenda (Cairney, 2012), this study critiques the effectiveness of policy enactment in this area of UK government policy. Drawing on the findings of research conducted into public participation in LSPs in one English region, the paper contributes to the wider debate on the translation of policy into practice by reviewing elements of public participation and policy enactment theories and critiquing public participation policies of successive governments from 1997-2017. It highlights the critical factors impacting on the effectiveness of the translation of the stated policy goals into practice, and generates proposals for future UK public participation policy and practice.

Theoretical Context

This brief overview of the theoretical traditions highlights key aspects of each one as they relate to the analysis of the data. By framing these two theoretical traditions in this way, this study generates new insights into what aspects contribute to the effective enactment of public participation policy.

Public Participation

Public participation is the process by which individuals and groups affected by any proposed intervention are involved in the formulation, creation, transmission and implementation of policy relating to that intervention (IAPP, 2007; IAIA, 2006). Definitions of citizen participation focus on the exercise of power by “different social actors in the spaces created for the interaction between citizens and authorities” (Gaventa & Valderama, 1999: 7), and the ways disadvantaged and excluded groups and individuals determine how strategic goals are set, resources allocated, programmes implemented, and benefits distributed (Arnstein, 1969).

Policy has emerged in response to three main drivers: concern about the decline in participation in traditional decision-making processes (the ‘democratic deficit’); the perceived decline in trust of political institutions; and the decrease in membership of political parties and trades unions (Prendergast, 2008; Power Inquiry, 2006). Meanwhile, social and technological developments – particularly in forms and patterns of communication – have left politicians feeling threatened, challenging them to promote participation, albeit while wanting to modify and limit its sphere of influence (Gaventa, 2013).

However, the emergence of ‘new’ forms of public participation (e.g. ephemeral street-based activity, single-issue citizen activism and web-based organizing, including the use of e-petitions) suggests that this interpretation is open to challenge (Bang & Marsh, 2018). Rather than causing alienation, the decline in formal public participation could be seen as a

consequence of unequal power relations and limitations to individual agency in people's lives (*ibid*). The parallel processes of globalisation and individualization and the increased complexity of governance arrangements have conspired to exclude the weakest and most vulnerable groups and individuals from formal decision-making processes, concentrating power in the hands of politicians, bureaucrats and corporatist interests (Bang, 2009). As a result, these novel forms of public participation have emerged, providing participants with opportunities that better reflect their identities and political interests.

The fact that the terms used to discuss public participation (e.g. Who are 'the public'? What is 'community'? What constitutes 'participation'?) are increasingly contested makes it difficult to take a fixed stance when exploring policy and practice in this area (Crow & Mah, 2011). For instance, reflecting post-modern interpretations of societal developments, these forms of public participation incorporate loose and transient activist networks and coalitions, with more fluid boundaries, focused increasingly on achieving social change through direct action and community-building (Norris, 2007). Here, individuals engage in issues that affect them directly, and see tangible impacts of their participation, unlike more passive forms of participation, such as voting. These forms of 'micro-political' participation allow individuals to engage with specific policies impacting on their own lives and interests, rather than remote policy-making processes (Pattie *et al.*, 2004). While a significant proportion of the population participates in some form of civic activism (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014), self-actualisation is identified increasingly as a motivation for participation in these less formal processes; young people in particular appear to be motivated more by individual purpose than obligations to government (Andersson, 2017).

Policy Enactment

Policy enactment theory acknowledges the criticality of different local actors, and identifies the dual processes of policy *interpretation* and *translation*, as enacted by these actors in a range of roles within a given context (Ball *et al.*, 2012). Here, *interpretation* is the process whereby an individual reads a policy text to derive sense or meaning from it; *translation* – in which individuals working together in a given context engage in dialogue and planning to inform the way in which they enact policy – follows. This heuristic allows for conclusions to be shaped by a sophisticated understanding of the complex context(s) within which any policy is enacted, generating:

“... a grounded account of the diverse variables and factors (the *what*), as well as the dynamics of context (the *how*) that shape policy enactments and thus to relate together and theorise interpretative, material and contextual dimensions of the policy process” (*ibid*: 20).

In exploring how public participation policy is implemented, due weight is given here to consideration of subjective “interpretational dynamics”, focussing on four “contextual dimensions”: *situated contexts*, *professional cultures*, *material contexts* and *external contexts* (*op cit*: 21). Applying this heuristic required the study reported here to identify and critique how policy intersects with various sites of delivery, acknowledging that the fluid, shifting and multi-layered context is a “conditioning feature” of enactment (Singh *et al.*, 2014: 6-7).

Additionally, this study’s analysis reflects Newman’s (2013) assertion that policy enactment is influenced by human agency, highlighting the importance of relationships as policy is enacted at a local level. Her work acknowledges, too, that policy draws on pre-existing “pre-figurative practices and emergent capacities”, suggesting that actors might “work across

governmental and alternative projects to mobilise capacities and resources that might mitigate the effects of ‘austerity’” (*op cit*: 526-7).

Policy Context

The democratic principles underpinning the UK’s social and political tradition reflect the core values of liberal democracy: the right to self-government and the protection of individual liberties (Rosema *et al.*, 2011). The principle of self-government allows people affected by the decisions of public agencies to influence those decisions through their elected representatives or direct referendums; while their liberties are preserved by limiting the power of those public agencies (through the separation of powers, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights). Hence, liberal democracy can be seen as having a commitment to egalitarian and majoritarian dimensions (Pauwelyn *et al.*, 2012), the application of which ensures the legitimacy of public decision-making through the attainment of accountability in political terms (holding decision-makers to account) and legally (preventing abuse of power by decision-makers) (Bonzon, 2014).

UK Public Participation Policy

UK Public participation policy has evolved under governments of all political hues since the 1960s. The focus of policy evolved rapidly from early benevolent attempts to establish consultative mechanisms – involving citizens in generating information to inform policy and service design – to an ideologically-driven focus on reducing individuals’ reliance on the state as a provider of services. By the time of the election of a New Labour government in 1997, citizens were characterized as “atomised individuals, privately consuming their services, empowered by the existence of competition and, ostensibly, the growth of choice” (Fenwick & MacMillan, 2010: 2). Policy portrayed public participation as a means of empowering service users, although the real intent was to limit public expenditure, with

voluntarism replacing state provision (Alcock, 1996).

New Labour's public participation policy permeated much of their reformist agenda affecting all aspects of social policy (Chanan, 2003). As illustrated in figure 1, public participation in new local governance spaces was part of the New Labour project, making clearer the vertical connections between central and local government and the communities and citizens they served; and strengthening the horizontal connections between service providers and citizens and communities at a local level. These structural changes and policies sought to:

- Join up and enhance service delivery (drawing on citizens' local expertise to generate better policy solutions, increase efficiency and generate improved outcomes)
- Foster democratic renewal (resulting in increased participation in elections and strengthened ties between individuals, institutions and their communities)
- Strengthen communities (by helping people to overcome alienation, respecting individual rights and developing social capital)

Figure 1 here

Public participation policy under New Labour evolved from promoting community engagement (in initiatives designed to achieve universally endorsed outcomes) and community empowerment to citizen governance (Fenwick & MacMillan, 2010). Public participation was used increasingly as an instrumental tool, reflecting a shift in discourse

around ‘community’ from “stakeholders” and “empowered public” to “consuming public” and “responsible public” (Barnes *et al.*, 2007; Clarke *et al.*, 2007).

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010-15) promoted public participation to create a ‘*Big Society*’, where social issues would be addressed by social action, instead of state intervention, and voluntarism, philanthropy and social action would foster community empowerment (Cabinet Office, 2010). The Localism Act 2011 outlined ‘essential actions’ to transfer power from the state to local communities (DCLG, 2011), including empowered communities, increased public scrutiny and strengthened accountability to local people, although it was unclear what these institutions were. The only specific public participation policy implemented in the 2015-17 Conservative government was the ‘in-out’ referendum on the UK’s continued membership of the EU.

Local Strategic Partnerships, the ‘Big Society’ and ‘Austerity’

New Labour introduced LSPs at a local authority level in England to bring together public, private and community sector stakeholders to achieve through enhanced partnership working better services and enhanced outcomes for local people (DETR, 2001). Similar structures were introduced in Scotland (Social Inclusion Partnerships; later, Community Planning Partnerships) and Wales (voluntary Local Service Boards). These are not included in the current study, as they had a different focus and evolved under policies reflecting the unique character of those countries’ devolved administrations (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2002; 2005; Welsh Assembly Government, 2006).

Early guidance set LSPs the explicit of increasing opportunities for “local people [to] influence decision-making and take action to improve their neighbourhoods” (DETR, 2001: 1). LSPs were required to produce Community Strategies, addressing the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their areas (DETR, 2000a), and to embed the aspirations of

local people in these, locating public participation at the heart of strategic decision-making and partnership working, thereby promoting equity and inclusion (DETR, 2000b). They were encouraged to adopt creative, flexible approaches to facilitating public participation, and to focus on engaging traditionally excluded and alienated groups, to improve service delivery, strengthen social inclusion and develop empowered communities (ODPM, 2002).

Subsequent policy introduced a duty on public agencies to involve the local community in the exercise of LSPs' functions, and to adopt a set of principles informing their public participation processes, to ensure greater accountability, equality and openness in their work (DCLG, 2007).

After the Coalition government downgraded their role, the number of LSPs reduced drastically as local authorities no longer felt compelled to maintain these structures. The post-2015 Conservative government's commitment to localism continued instead through the devolution of powers to regions, city-regions and in some cases to cities (DCLG, 2016).

State-sponsored public participation was limited to voluntary sector representation on Local Economic Partnerships, elections for directly accountable Mayors, and through engagement with 'Community Organisers': 5,000 of whom were to be recruited in the most disadvantaged communities in the country. However, their impact was limited, due to a lack of clarity about their role and a lack of resources (Cameron *et al.*, 2015). As with New Labour, critique of the Coalition's public participation policy focuses on concerns that there was a disjuncture between the values articulated by policy proponents, and those translated into reality.

Notions of 'fairness' replaced 'social justice' in the rhetoric, but implementation of the *Big Society* agenda and parallel policies (primarily inspired by the 'austerity' agenda) resulted in people already excluded from society being further disadvantaged (Powell, 2013).

Instituted after the 2008 global financial crisis, 'austerity' policies of governments around the world incorporated significant public sector budget cuts to reduce fiscal deficits and

sovereign debt (Stanley, 2016). In the UK, ‘austerity’ policy initiatives have included wholesale welfare reform, reductions in public sector employment and the divestment of services to the private and third sectors (*ibid*). Conceived as an intensification of neo-liberal policy at the heart of current economic and social policy globally, ‘austerity’ has impacted in the UK on the most socially and economically vulnerable sections of society (i.e. those whose collective voice and agency are most limited) (Hayes, 2017).

The ‘anti-welfare’ rhetoric central to the ‘austerity’ agenda has created rivalry – as opposed to building solidarity – between the least wealthy in society (Hoggett *et al.*, 2013: 567).

Linked to this, ‘austerity’ has been interpreted by some (e.g. Hamnett, 2014) as a convenient excuse for shrinking welfare provision and replacing state provision with volunteer-run services, resulting in despair, diminished expectations and the illusion of empowerment among the most marginalized in society. The impact of ‘austerity’ on public participation in decision-making has generated a “heavily circumscribed” form of agency, in which citizens are empowered to “cope with neoliberalism rather than challenge it ... to do what is right, rather than what one wants” (Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley, 2014: 19).

Study Design

This study was undertaken in two phases: phase 1 focused on public participation in LSPs during the period 2008-11; phase 2 revisited these areas in 2016-17 to identify how practice had evolved in light of the changes in policy detailed above.

Phase 1: The lead professional responsible for public participation in each of the 22 LSPs in one English region completed a survey at the outset, and subsequently participated in an interview. These sought to identify the key factors affecting implementation of public participation policy relating to LSPs in each locality. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using a broad set of themes: some of these were identified prior to the

interviews, drawing primarily on the public participation theories outlined above; other themes emerged from the data, reflecting the constructivist paradigm underpinning the study (Lauckner *et al.*, 2012).

One LSP was selected as a case-study, allowing for further detailed interviews with key stakeholders involved in the enactment of public participation policy relating to LSP governance. Over fifty interviews – with public officials, elected members and community activists – were conducted, generating deeper understandings of the contextual and cultural factors influencing the efficacy of enacting this particular policy in one local authority area.

Phase 2: sought to review the impact of residual structures and policies on practice in twelve of the local authority areas, where discussions were held with original participants who were still employed (mainly by local authorities) in similar roles to those they held during the first phase. Interviews were conducted with five of these practitioners, to determine their perceptions about the changes in emphasis in recent public participation policies, and to explore how these have been enacted locally. As before, interview data were transcribed and coded to allow analysis of trends in policy and practice.

Findings

The analysis presented here seeks to identify how actors in public participation policy exercise agency in practice, especially when negotiating multiple and often contradictory policy drivers / discourses. Acknowledging the potential for researcher prejudices to influence the interpretation of data, the study sought:

“stories of hope and resistance ... resourcefulness, courage and willingness to ... engage with a different set of ideas about what (public participation) could be about” (Singh *et al.*, 2014: 10).

Public Participation in LSPs

From the reflections on public participation theory presented above, it appears that enactment of policy intended to promote and facilitate public participation in local decision-making requires a degree of professional understanding on the part of local policy lead practitioners; something which this study found to be often lacking. Whereas one might have expected to find qualified and experienced community development professionals charged with overseeing the implementation of this policy at local authority level, instead responsibility was passed to a range of officers from seemingly random backgrounds. Many respondents demonstrated little or no understanding of the nuances of engaging people in the complex world of local politics and democracy, inhibiting their ability to support people wanting to participate in local decision-making. One LSP Manager with no previous experience of working with the public described a typically flawed approach to promoting public participation:

“We set up two public meetings where representatives of the local community were to be elected onto the LSP Board, and advertised them in the local paper. Nobody turned up”.

The study found considerable evidence of local communities being invited to participate in developing high-level strategies, with all 22 LSPs having conducted some form of consultation process on the production of a Community Strategy. Participation rates were not encouraging, with almost all respondents indicating levels between five and fifteen *per cent*; as one respondent observed:

“Consultation brochures were posted to every household in the district, and residents were invited to attend Local Area Committee meetings (all of which had the Community Strategy as an agenda item). We only had formal responses from

just over one hundred people, and less than fifty attended any of the meetings.

We simply couldn't make the issue seem important or relevant enough for people to want to contribute their ideas.”

Consequently, the Community Strategies that emerged in many of these locales were nothing more than a selection of pre-existing policies, re-presented in one document under an 'agreed' shared vision for the area.

Only one LSP generated participation rates in the production of the Community Strategy that were in line with local voting rates. Here, local authority Community Workers conducted an extensive Appreciative Inquiry (AI), using a wide range of creative approaches to generate enthusiasm for the process. Rather than adopting a deficit model – as was the case in most other LSPs – this approach sought to highlight assets valued by the community and other stakeholder that could be built upon. The LSP established working groups made up of people who had participated in some of the earlier events to try to generate a set of shared priorities. When it was evident that these were replicating existing strategies, the LSP Board identified four straightforward priorities to work on, based on the concerns expressed by participants: basic skills; community transport; obesity; and public engagement. This latter priority reflected the fact that people had enjoyed participating in the AI process, and wanted to continue to be involved in dialogue with local agencies about their communities and services. The LSP published a series of booklets and postcards, celebrating the area and the public's contribution to the AI process. The LSP Manager shared the contribution of one of their residents to the evaluation of the AI process, who described it as being:

“... very open and inclusive. It actually did involve people. They felt engaged, and not just consulted. People actually enjoyed it”; for himself, he said that the process was “liberating”.

All 22 LSPs established complex structures to facilitate the participation in decision-making of community sector representatives. However, officials who participated in the study were unable to identify examples of ways in which these structures and processes had changed any decisions. Several reported local people's concerns that their input had little or no impact on the key decisions affecting their communities, feeling that much of their effort was wasted. Several reported that community representatives on LSP structures had withdrawn from the process altogether; one participant complaining that their presence was "merely tolerated" another feeling their participation was "tokenistic at best"; and – in many cases – stating that they felt their participation had been an opportunity for them to be manipulated by partners.

Details on one consultation process where the case-study LSP induced the public to contribute to plans to overhaul public transport provision in the district illustrate these concerns. In this case, the LSP Manager heralded the process as a success, described how they had engaged "more than the 'usual suspects' ... people from all walks of life, many with some expertise in relevant areas". However, when interviewed about this, those same people dismissed the whole process as meaningless, one claiming that:

“Not one single word of the original proposals was changed as a result of our input, even though we had commissioned our own expert research into the ideas we submitted ... the whole consultation exercise was a 'whitewash' ...”.

The LSP Chair subsequently asserted that the people who participated in these consultations had no mandate, and that they represented “vested interests” that he felt it was his duty to “challenge and over-rule”.

This example illustrates a fundamental limitation in the approach of all 22 LSPs to promoting and facilitating public participation: the unwillingness of key stakeholders to cede power over decisions or resources to local communities. In particular, local authority personnel (both

officers and elected members) demonstrated reluctance to facilitate community empowerment. Many officers working with the case-study LSP claimed they had a duty to act objectively and draw on their professional expertise to plan and manage services *on behalf of* their citizens. The LSP Manager asserted that:

“Local people prefer bureaucrats to make these decisions on their behalf”.

Likewise, many Councillors decried the process of promoting public participation as ‘anti-democratic’; one typically asserted that “I know my community better than anyone”, claiming it was his responsibility to counter the influence of “self-selecting individuals with vested interests or ‘axes to grind’”.

Where practitioners with a community development background were involved in working with LSPs, it was usually in relation to the development of the Community Strategy. Their perspectives reinforce the view that the process was used as a means of retrenching power in the hands of the existing power-brokers, as this quote indicates:

“I was originally very excited by the requirement for us to devise a Community Strategy, as I interpreted it an opportunity to embrace the power and energy of local communities in shaping Council policy. How naïve I was ... the reality proved to be more about containing local people’s enthusiasm and ‘managing their expectations’ (how I hate that term!)”

Only one LSP in this region had a ‘community engagement’ strategy. Even there, with two glossy publications outlining the strategy, it was unclear about its status or the likelihood of its implementation by the key local stakeholder bodies. One LSP Manager claimed that devising additional stand-alone strategies went “against one of our underpinning principles: minimising bureaucracy” and that their Board was committed to “limiting the LSP’s area of responsibility to producing a Community Strategy”.

Most LSP Managers and Co-ordinators acknowledged the challenges in managing competing personal, political and professional values, especially in identifying and approaching their community, something which impacted on their own sense of agency. In particular, there appears to have been considerable difficulty in balancing the ‘rights versus responsibilities’ dichotomy inherent in government policy: several respondents admitted to being confused by conflicting priorities in guidance which gave emphasis to promoting participation as a means to facilitate citizens’ responsibility to contribute to society.

Similarly, while most LSPs’ policies placed emphasis on community empowerment, their practice was not designed to bring about this result. This may be because reference to community empowerment featured to such an extent in policy and guidance that practitioners (especially those without a community development background) adopted the term, without necessarily fully appreciating its meaning or the implications of working with communities in an ‘empowering’ manner. The Manager of the LSP in one of the largest local authority areas said:

“I don’t know how we’re supposed to be able to empower a quarter of a million people! We’ve made a commitment to do this in our strategy, but I don’t think there’s really enough understanding of what it means at Board level ... if there was I’m not sure they’d really be able to let it happen ... giving up control of their budgets to unaccountable people”.

Public Participation post LSPs

There is some evidence, from the more recent conversations with practitioners, that new spaces have been opened up in which some have been able to act ‘in and against the system’, challenging ‘austerity-driven’ cuts in services. Here, they have supported new forms of local action. For example, when responding to pressure from local people who were organizing a

campaign against proposals for ‘fracking’ in the district, one officer described how the previous AI-inspired work:

“... gave us a footing and a language to help us communicate with local people”.

Similarly, another former LSP-based practitioner has – in their new community sector support role – supported local groups that have come together to:

“... challenge the [local NHS commissioners’] recent decision to close what local people consider to be essential services, after a ‘sham’ public consultation exercise”.

Another practitioner described the very recent formation of a local campaign to challenge proposals to construct and operate a waste-to-power incinerator, highlighting the fact that participation for these people was not necessarily about simply ensuring that their views prevailed. Instead, as the following quote suggests, they appeared to be more concerned about having their concerns heard and treated seriously:

“This group goes some way beyond the traditional ‘NIMBYs’. They’re looking to find research into both sides of the argument, so that they can come to an informed position on the merits of the Council’s current proposals. Although their instinctive position is to resist the scheme, they seem to be interested in engaging in a more meaningful form of activism than might have been the case for a similar group of local people in this area ten years ago”.

One former LSP Co-ordinator currently works for the local authority, re-designing local services, often working with local activists to co-produce new forms of delivery that fit within the ‘austerity’ agenda, supporting services and service users to transform the design of

systems of delivery. While this is intended to secure enhanced outcomes and budget savings, this practitioner nevertheless sees her work as:

“... an opportunity to ensure local people secure power over resources intended to address their priorities”.

However, in other settings, the impact of ‘austerity’ – and maybe the wider political context – has created an environment in which local actors have become more defensive, making it difficult for practitioners to promote work in support of more inclusive forms of activism. For instance, one practitioner had hoped to engage local people in a campaign to safeguard services for refugees, but was disappointed to find that people saw it as:

“... a choice between us and them. Sadly, I was unable to persuade the groups I was supporting that the refugees’ struggle was the same as their own”.

Practitioners talked about the public’s continuing sense of disaffection with formal political processes and powerlessness over decision-making (even the anti-fracking protestors – who had persuaded the local authority to deny the fracking company a license – saw this decision subsequently overturned by the Secretary of State, despite their campaign achieving a national profile). Nevertheless, many practitioners challenged the view that people in their localities may have become disconnected from the policy process. Rather, they described forms of activism that reflect the passions and interests of groups of like-minded people, many of whom had remained engaged since the days when the LSP was operational, and acknowledged the importance of local people having access to flexible and supportive practitioners playing an intermediary role to facilitate their continued engagement.

These more creative approaches – driven by necessity as resources dwindle – demonstrate that practitioners can operationalise forms of practice that facilitate the development of

community-based power, mobilising community capacity in response to locally-identified priorities.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Is there a Future for Public Participation?

This work offers insights from analysis of practice in LSPs (and subsequently) that can be applied in the wider context of implementing public participation policy in the UK and further afield. While the study identified considerable barriers to the enactment of this national policy agenda, the findings suggest that there may be reasons to be optimistic about the public's appetite to participate in different forms of political processes, in spite of evidence that could be used to reach a more pessimistic interpretation. Indeed, if attention focussed only on the failures of practice to translate the rhetoric surrounding this policy into reality over the past twenty years, then it would be easy to conclude that its enactment had failed, in at least these key areas:

- Politicians' rhetoric misappropriated progressive terms and values (particularly empowerment). The ultimate iteration of public participation policy (i.e. what followed LSPs) laid bare *conservative* governments' desire to see voluntarism replacing state provision, even though the language used was taken directly from the *radical* tradition of community organizing (Alinsky, 1971).
- Mistrust of the policy was rife, particularly among elected representatives, suspicious of governments' intention to circumvent representative democratic structures and of the motives of citizens who engaged in the process.
- The opinions and local expertise of engaged citizens were too often overlooked by more powerful local actors, including Councillors and public officials.

- Policy and practice was ill-prepared to respond to and embrace alternative forms of self-initiated or community-led participation.
- The approach to public participation critiqued in this study relied on flawed assumptions about compliant citizens and their willingness to engage with initiatives arising from these policies.

However, the study did not suggest that these shortcomings in the enactment of public participation policy have resulted in wholesale despair; rather, that – although citizens’ agency may yet be limited – many still want to influence and shape policy. Indeed, while this study focuses on ‘induced’ participation, the impact of new forms of social action in the late ‘post-modern’ era (as *per* Jensen & Bang, 2013) cannot be overlooked. Stories about public participation captured in the latter part of the study often ran counter to the dominant public policy discourse, and offer encouragement about the commitment of large numbers of citizens to progressive forms of public participation in decision-making. There is little evidence from this study that participation in state-sponsored processes ever reached – or could reach – significant levels, or that the ‘new’ governance spaces explored here succeeded in engaging traditionally marginalized or alienated groups of people. Nevertheless, large numbers of people were found to be active in addressing issues that concern them, bringing their situated expertise to bear in whatever ways they can to shape the future of their communities and services.

Policy Enactment Theory

Policy enactment theory proved useful in aiding the interpretation of findings relating to public participation policy. The range of approaches to implementing LSP and related public participation policy reflects the *situated contexts* of the different locales within which the policy was being implemented. For instance, the initial study highlighted the importance of

differences in local political alignments in helping to shape how policy was likely to be interpreted by LSPs. Likewise, structural variations – reflecting local political commitment to limiting public expenditure or to addressing citizen’s priorities – impacted on the extent to which implementation programmes were likely to be devised. The complexity of local relationships between different vested interests (including public sector agencies and their accountability to different government departments) was found to have a significant impact on enactment of policy in these localities. Other factors impacting on public participation across LSPs included geography, pre-existing community relations and the capacity of the community sector.

This study has demonstrated the significance of the *professional cultures* of those charged with implementing public participation policy at a local level. In many LSPs, this responsibility rested with practitioners who had little or no prior experience or understanding of the concept. Even where the local practitioners were suitably qualified / experienced, their best endeavours at securing the involvement of local people in decision-making were often undermined by more powerful vested interests within local decision-making structures.

In the case of public participation, *material contexts* present a significant challenge to the success or otherwise of policy enactment. For example, even where resources were made available for programmes designed to support policy implementation (such as Community Organisers), these were constrained by the inadequacy of those resources and the imposition of other constraints (such as time and scope of engagement). Perhaps more pertinently, the complexity of post-modern life suggests there are other questions that need to be answered before seeking to introduce or evaluate public participation policy:

Firstly, the study raises questions about the extent to which people want to participate (or *not*) in decision-making, when it could be argued that they have other more pressing priorities and may see decision-making as the role of politicians and civil servants.

Specifically, it suggests that the fluidity of post-modernity – in terms of employment, residence and social relationships – may have contributed to a more divided and self-focussed citizenry, less inclined to participate in forms of collective action. This study supports the view that British citizens’ trust in the political class has diminished, both locally (as evidenced in the LSP study) and in light of the EU referendum, where ‘Brexit’ was argued partly as a means of reclaiming power from remote bureaucrats; as reflected in the most recent audit of political engagement, which found falling and low levels (34%) of satisfaction with the political system, seen as serving vested interests (Hansard Society, 2018). It also suggests that, while ‘austerity’ has limited the ability of the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in society to participate (given their need to become more self-reliant and to work harder and for longer hours), opposition to the ‘austerity’ agenda has motivated others to participate in political and other forms of actions.

Secondly, the study amplifies questions about assumptions on the capacity of the citizenry to make ‘rational’ decisions when engaging in participatory processes. For instance, both elected members and public officials questioned the ability of members of the public to access and make sense of all the information needed to shape complex decisions. The result of the EU referendum – in which electorate supported nationalistic and conservative agendas potentially running counter to their own economic interests – could be seen as an indication of citizens’ acquiescence to the post-modern malaise, choosing ignorance (‘epistemic closure’) and perceived self-interest over more progressive, humanistic considerations (Bartlett, 2016). An alternative perspective places responsibility for people voting counter-rationally in the hands of the vested interests likely to benefit from these decisions, and who are in control of media: the

truly powerful elite who propagate forms of ‘post-factual’ information to ensure people cannot make informed decisions (Bybee, 1999).

Some of these discussions already allude to *external contexts*, particularly features of the impact of post-modernity upon individuals’ decision-making processes. It is clear that a range of factors affected the efficacy of enacting this policy, including: political integrity; individuals’ limited sense of power and agency, born of uncertainty about their livelihood and security; fluidity of community identity and communal relations; questions about what it means to be ‘rational’; and the influence exerted by remote and increasingly concentrated *loci* of power (e.g. EU) on participatory structures and processes (*and* individual’s decisions).

Recommendations

Much of the foregoing focusses on the limitations of individual citizens to engage meaningfully in state-sponsored participation initiatives. The study confirms that the rationale behind New Labour’s commitment to public participation policy (as summarised in figure 1) remain pertinent twenty years later, and the need for such policy may be greater than ever given the rise in populist movements. This analysis should help policy-makers to better understand what is needed to shape public participation policy in future. Specifically, they need to articulate more clearly their intent in relation to public participation, distinguishing more clearly between participatory and representative forms of democracy. At the same time, as alternative forms of participation are emerging, it may be more appropriate for government to attempt to embrace these, as opposed to trying to induce its own form of constrained processes on a resistant citizenry.

Future public participation policy should be generated by government working with public officials and citizens, making it likely to be more acceptable and implementable when it comes to enactment. Policy should acknowledge the genuine concerns of marginalized and

vulnerable groups who feel their voices have been silenced, in order to channel their frustration at traditional politics and democratic processes – as evidenced by the extent to which these groups supported reactionary populist agendas in the EU referendum – more constructively. Ideally, this would be part of a constitutional settlement, locating participatory democracy alongside representative structures, to ensure that changes in government cannot undermine participative processes, and that human rights are protected against populist and discriminatory trends. This settlement could include a clear framework within which citizens would be encouraged to frame their decisions, and guiding public officials' roles in supporting their participation; thereby ensuring public participation promotes progressive, humanist policies (i.e. avoiding oppressive decision-making based on misinformation and populist movements). Such an approach would need to incorporate a commitment on the part of the powerful elite to provide citizens participating in decision-making with accurate information and support in its interpretation, so they can make informed decisions.

Ultimately, this would require the development and implementation of new forms of policy-making, reflecting these new realities, embracing emergent forms of participation and channeling modern forms of political action to help shape dynamic responses to public concerns and embrace new ideas. It would also require government to accept different conceptualisations of 'community' (leaving behind rigid adherence to geographical boundaries) and of different forms of 'participation'. At the same time, street-based activists need to reach agreement about the use of more impactful tactics, so that they can bring meaningful influence on policy-makers and counter the post-truth narrative that features increasingly in the populist media, as opposed to winning their arguments in the liberal media. This highlights the need for an intermediary / advocacy role for public officials between policy-makers and the new generation of post-modern activists.

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Figure 1: New Labour's Purpose in Promoting Public Participation

