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**Nick Bailey**

School of Architecture and the Built Environment

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**TRANSFORMATION OR BUREAUCRATISATION? THE  
CHANGING ROLE OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION  
IN LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS IN ENGLAND.**

**Nick Bailey**  
**School of Architecture and the Built Environment**  
**University of Westminster**  
**London NW1 5LS, UK**  
**[baileyn@wmin.ac.uk](mailto:baileyn@wmin.ac.uk)**  
**Tel: +44(0)20 7911 5000**  
**Fax: +44(0)20 7911 5171**

## **ABSTRACT**

The debate about the need to build social capital and to engage local communities in public policy has become a central issue in many advanced liberal societies and developing countries. In many countries new forms of governance have emerged out of a growing realisation that representative democracy by itself is no longer sufficient. One of the most significant public policy trends in the United Kingdom has been the involvement of community organizations and their members in the delivery of national policy, mediated through local systems of governance and management. One such policy area is urban regeneration. Central government now requires local authorities in England to set up Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) to bring together stakeholders who can prepare Community Strategies and deliver social and economic programmes which target areas of deprivation. This paper reviews the key institutional processes which must be addressed, such as representation, accountability and transformation. It then investigates three very different examples of LSPs based on interviews with key representatives. The paper concludes that political commitments to community engagement in civil society are always mediated through existing institutional arrangements. Thus attempts to change deep-seated political structures and power relationships require a commitment to increase representation as well as to transform the practices and repertoires of deliberation and action.

### **Reinventing Democracy and the Search for new Governance Models**

The shift from urban government to governance, including the increasing role ascribed to community involvement, has been one of the most important trends in British government policy. Political rhetoric has reached increasingly strident tones in devising new strategies and innovative projects that place local communities at the heart of the decision-making process. There are many reasons for this trend, not least the increasingly crowded policy arena where agencies no longer operate in top-down hierarchies but in inter-organisational networks (Rhodes, 1997, p.53). The decline in voter turnout at local and national elections has also raised a larger debate about the trend from representative to participatory democracy. Britain is by no means unique in this respect and similar debates are occurring in Europe about the use of different community participation methods (Henderson, 2003) and in the USA concerning the growth of community development corporations (Vidal and Keating, 2004). The contribution of community participation to the debate about social capital (Johnson and Percy-Smith, 2003) is now a world-wide phenomenon (Woolcock, 2001).

An important aspect of this debate concerns the ways in which local communities might be given greater influence in decision-making at the local

level, particularly as integral elements of urban regeneration initiatives. At present it remains unclear whether enhanced levels of participatory democracy create social capital and feed back into greater involvement in the formal democratic process. While the government's commitment to modernisation strongly favours community involvement, a number of critics have begun to question whether the vision of participatory democracy, as currently expressed in government guidance, can realistically be delivered (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Jones, 2003).

Over at least a decade central government in Britain has issued guidance which has sought to make community and voluntary sector representation a condition of funding. City Challenge, the Single Regeneration Budget and New Deal for Communities are all initiatives where national guidance has required substantial community involvement in management boards and delivery vehicles (Bailey *et al.*, 1995). The most recent initiative, Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), is promoted by at least two major Government policy statements (DETR, 2000a; SEU, 2001). LSPs have been given a strategic role in preparing Community Strategies, action plans designed to enhance the quality of life of local communities (DETR, 2000b). Those LSPs covering the 88 most deprived local authority areas in England are also allocated additional resources from the

Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) and Community Empowerment Fund (CEF). Other local authorities are encouraged to set up LSPs, although no additional funding is provided (Bailey, 2003).

The governance model that is adopted by LSPs is similar to earlier initiatives in that representatives of key public, private and community stakeholders are to form partnerships in order to carry out a combination of strategic, representative and implementation roles. Most LSPs have now been in existence for at least three years and the extent of the tasks they are required to perform are only just becoming apparent. Many have struggled to attract representatives from all sectors and accusations that they can become a “talking shop or cosy club” (University of Warwick *et al.*, 2004) have been common amongst regeneration professionals and community activists. In most cases processes and procedures have taken longer than expected to be established and many have found it particularly difficult to recruit representatives from employers and local businesses. Whilst LSPs in many areas may form a useful forum for thinking about strategic issues, and how they might be tackled through Community Strategies, evidence is harder to find that they are “adding value to the regeneration process” (see for example, House of Commons, 2003, p.26).

From the perspective of local residents, LSPs provide an important opportunity to gain representation in a new decision-making arena. This potentially increases the network capacity for engagement by creating a new ‘political opportunity structure’ (Stoker, 2000). In comparison with previous initiatives, LSPs represent an opportunity to be at the centre of debate about strategy and the delivery of services across the whole local authority area. Yet emerging evidence suggests that substantial uncertainties have arisen about the meaning of ‘representation’ of often very diverse communities and that unbalanced power relations within partnerships often mean that community representatives lack the personal skills, technical knowledge or sectoral power to influence those representing agencies with large budgets. Moreover, as the LSPs develop bureaucratic modes of working borrowed from local authorities and the public sector it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge working practices and lines of least resistance which could ‘transform’ the audit culture common in the public sector. The danger is that LSPs operate as a partnership and build consensus but that established orthodoxies and long-held assumptions remain unchallenged. In essence, they can become parallel forums for debate which lack the power to require the local authority and other mainstream agencies to co-ordinate their services in new and more locally-sensitive ways.

This paper sets out to explore these issues by focusing on the role of community and voluntary sector representatives on LSPs. It begins by examining the original intentions underlying the discourse of community involvement expressed in the guidance on LSPs and then reviews some of the more recent literature which investigates some of the complexities of their task. It then examines some of the practical issues of being a member of an LSP based on a number of interviews with community and voluntary sector representatives on three LSPs. This section discusses the representatives' views of what it is like to be a member of an LSP, how they represent local interests and the extent to which they report back to member organisations, and how far they feel able to influence decision-making and strategy. The paper concludes by arguing that LSPs should develop mechanisms to counter the tendency for community and voluntary sector representatives to feel excluded by developing sensitive management systems and non-bureaucratic procedures, and by providing a 'voice' for local diversity.

### **National Policy Guidance**

The Labour Government first elected in 1997 has accentuated the rhetoric of community involvement, but as Chanan (2003, p.16) notes, "community involvement objectives tend to get swallowed up into the objectives of other



fields or disappear from view as programmes unfold”. The Urban White Paper lists six justifications for community involvement, including:

Involvement is people’s right: People have a right to determine their future and be involved in deciding how their town or city develops....It is not enough to consult people...they must be fully engaged in the process from the start and...everybody must be included’ (DETR, 2000a, p. 32)

The launch of Local Strategic Partnerships also included a strong commitment to community involvement and was introduced by a government minister stating:

Partnerships will not succeed unless they provide real opportunities for people to express their views, influence decisions and play an active part in shaping the future of their communities. Special efforts must be made to involve groups that might otherwise be hard to reach, including faith, black and minority ethnic communities. (DETR, 2001, p.5)

The guidance stresses the importance of drawing on wider community networks and articulates a number of ways in which local communities can become involved, in addition to being members of the LSP itself. They are encouraged to express local views and priorities, encourage openness and accountability, and to build capacity and assist in the engagement of hard to reach groups. LSP boundaries are normally the same as those of the local authority and they have no additional statutory powers.

The composition and balance between different sectors is largely left to the local authority and other partners to determine according to local circumstances. However, in order to ensure they are fully representative of all interests a system of accreditation by the Government Office of the Regions (GORs) has been instituted on an annual basis (NRU, 2001). In all, LSP members are required to “take a strategic view; speak with authority; reflect the priorities and goals of their organisation/constituency; and exert influence within their organisations in order to shape decisions....” (DETR, 2001, p.12)

Thus the tasks facing LSPs in assembling members and in developing rules of engagement are considerable. They are required to have a membership which is balanced and representative of a broad range of interests (including hard-to-

reach minorities); to provide vision and strategic leadership while also being transparent and accountable; to both generate and implement a joined-up strategy towards achieving both government 'floor targets' and meeting local priorities; and to engage with a complex web of regional and national agencies with funding and monitoring powers. This would be a challenge for any organisation; it would be particularly difficult for one that is managed by a board membership coming from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds with very different social and cultural values.

In order to do this, it has been suggested that there are four modes of operation which should be considered as 'ideal types'. These have been put forward by an action learning set of 11 LSPs brought together by the Office of Public Management, as part of the national evaluation strategy under the direction of the University of Warwick (2004, p.1):

**Advisory:** the LSP acts as a consultation and discussion forum and often forms the basis for consensus building, but has no independent power to act. It draws its accountability and legitimacy entirely from member organisations, particularly the local authority;

**Commissioning:** the LSP has its own staff and authority, is able to implement decisions and commission projects, and therefore has to create its own form of accountability and legitimacy;

**Laboratory:** the prime focus is on generating new ideas and new ways of designing local services, drawing on the combined thinking of senior managers and community leaders;

**Community empowerment:** attention is focused on creating strong networks within the community rather than on the key public agencies.

The next section goes on to review recent theoretical and practical research which addresses these issues. In particular, it explores what is known about the process of transformation whereby community involvement goes beyond bureaucratic processes of representation in order to achieve cohesive and inclusive forms of governance. As Taylor argues:

The challenge for community empowerment approaches to social exclusion will be their ability to work creatively with the diversity within communities, to bring positive energy out of conflict or mistrust and to build multiple links between run-down and stigmatised

neighbourhoods and those who have left them behind. (Taylor, 2003, p.228).

## **Transformation or bureaucratisation?**

### **Institutional Pressures**

This section explores in more detail the extent to which the institutional context in which regeneration partnerships operate creates barriers and constraints to the full and effective involvement of community representatives, which is often assumed in the government literature. Organisational norms, culturally embedded working practices and technical jargon, designed to achieve speedy decision-making, often discourage and alienate members without experience of 'co-governance'. How far and in which ways are community representatives able to transform the debate within partnerships in order to establish local priorities and to improve service delivery, particularly where they are in the minority? Are community representatives able to overcome the uncertainties of representation in order to assert possibly conflicting sets of values between different parts of the community?

It has already been noted that government guidance asserts the priority to be given to community involvement. The Urban White Paper (DETR, 2000)

identified six principles of involvement. These include assertions that it “overcomes alienation and exclusion”, “makes community stronger in itself” and “maximises the effectiveness of services and resources”. This presupposes that organisations such as LSPs are able to adapt to local circumstances and to different locally determined priorities. Organisational theorists such as DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that most organisations tend towards institutional isomorphism – “highly structured organisational fields provide a context in which individual efforts to deal rationally with uncertainty and constraint often lead, in the aggregate, to homogeneity in structure, culture and output” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p.147). They identify isomorphism as a “constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions”.

Of the three types of isomorphism, coercive isomorphism is the most relevant here. Coercive isomorphism arises from formal and informal pressures imposed by other organisations on which they are dependent and from broader social and cultural expectations. Examples of internal and external pressures include legal and technical requirements of the state, budgetary cycles, annual reports and monitoring procedures. Milofsky (1988) reports how neighbourhood organisations, which are committed to participatory democracy, are forced to

develop organisational hierarchies in order to gain the support from more hierarchically organised funding bodies. The outcome is that, through a variety of cultural and institutional pressures such as state guidance and professionalisation of staff, organisations operate in the same field tend to converge and adopt dominant working practices such as bureaucratisation.

O'Malley (2004) explores many of these themes through an investigation of two regeneration projects. One is well established in an inner city location with a large ethnic minority population with representatives with considerable experience of bureaucratic procedures. The other is based on a peripheral housing estate with a limited history of community involvement. In exploring institutional theories of representation, consensus-based decision-making and bureaucratic forms of organisation, O'Malley concludes that "bureaucratic procedures are increasingly becoming norms of working for community groups because of the needs of funding bodies" (O'Malley, 2004, p.855).

Given the emphasis on consensus-building in the two partnerships under study, O'Malley found that even representatives from clearly identified minorities tended to adopt majority views, rather than asserting minority interests. However, where disagreements occurred, community groups tended to ignore

the regeneration programme and promoted alternative projects more in line with their perceptions of local needs.

Thus the conclusions emerging from this study of community representation suggest that while every attempt is made to recruit diverse interests onto consensus-based partnerships, these groups often experience cultural pressures to adopt consensual, bureaucratically defined strategies. These pressures tend to dilute the ability of representatives to promote clearly defined sectional interests. Those groups and individuals with experience of working with hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations, such as local authorities and funding bodies, will be more adept at working with partnership organisations. Whilst not always resisting these institutional pressures overtly, many representatives also promote alternative approaches through their own organisations.

### **Transformation**

In promoting the concept of effective partnership organisations, government guidance has tended to dwell almost entirely on the need for community organisations to be fully represented, in order to reflect the diversity of localities undergoing regeneration. As has been noted above, the institutional context which then arises often promotes hierarchical and bureaucratic



structures which accentuate consensus, making it difficult for minority groups to articulate differences. The search for consensus can often mean that dominant power relations are able to suppress minority views, particularly where these interests may lack the tactical skills to fully articulate their opinions. This often leads the community sector to be portrayed as 'weak' (Taylor, 1995).

Thus as well as representing their communities, representatives need to be able to exert real influence on the deliberations of the partnership. The concept of transformation was first identified by Mackintosh (1992) in outlining three 'models' of partnership: synergy, transformation and budget enlargement. She argues that in the second model "partnership becomes a mutual struggle for transformation" and "each partner in a joint venture is not merely trying to work with the other and find common ground for mutual benefit. Each is also trying to move the objectives and culture of the other more towards their own ideas" (Mackintosh, 1992, p.216). The three models of partnership are clearly overlapping and not mutually exclusive with successful organisations demonstrating aspects of all three. It clearly suggests that partnerships are dynamic organisations with complex interactions taking place within and between sectoral interests. In successful partnerships all stakeholders should be

able to demonstrate situations where they have influenced the debate and transformed final outcomes through force of argument and the effective use of evidence.

Coaffee and Healey (2003) have pursued this theme in a recent investigation of the ability of area committees to act as a ‘voice of place’ and to transform the wider context of urban governance in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne. They review the role of area committees within the context of institutional theory and set out a series of four criteria for assessing the extent of transformation. These suggest that networks and coalitions need to establish connections between residents in many situations and mainstream decision-making arenas; that selection processes need to be inclusive in order to enable multiple ‘voices’ to be heard; that discourses need to be diverse and multi-channelled; and that practices need to be accessible, diverse, facilitative, transparent and sincere. Thus, for transformation to occur, the entire system of communication needs to be reconfigured; it is not simply a case of increasing representation.

**[insert Table 1]**

In reviewing the role of the area committees in Newcastle Coaffee and Healey identify a number of tensions between the commitment to devolving decision-

making and equal, and opposite trends towards centralisation, notably the new 'cabinet' system of governance in the City Council. They suggest that traditional ways of managing Council business continue while 'arenas of hope' have been opened up for erstwhile excluded groups. They conclude that the commitment to area committees demonstrates some potential to "shift the City Council's own practices and to open up policy discourses to the voices of residents in a richer way than in the past" (2003, p.1995):

But whether this merely generates another layer of perturbation in an already complex governance culture or actually shifts that culture...remains an open question. The key issue for their future transformative power lies in the extent and manner in which residents are linked to governance processes.' (2003, p.1995)

Transformation can therefore be seen as an important process of change working both within partnership structures and as a dynamic of change in a larger system of governance. In both cases it raises important questions about how change permeates large and powerful organisations such as local authorities, how the 'mobilisation of bias' takes place and how far embedded centres of power prove resistant to change. Coaffee and Healey suggest a mixed

picture of ‘qualified transformation’ in Newcastle whereby the Council has initiated a system of devolved decision-making and consultation through area committees but where “old traditions of clientelism live on as expectations, part of the accepted repertoire of how to do government, in the minds of both citizens and councillors. A kind of new corporatism struggles with this old culture” (Coaffee & Healey, 2003, p.1996).

A similar analysis can be applied to LSPs whereby a new opportunity structure promoting community involvement is located within a broader framework of governance. Johnson and Osborne (2003) review the potential for LSPs in achieving the dual aims of the co-ordination of service delivery and power-sharing or co-governance. They conclude that the prospects for achieving co-ordination are much greater because of the emphasis placed on monitoring the delivery of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and the requirement to contribute to government targets, such as Public Service Agreements and floor targets. The objective of co-governance is largely taken for granted and only monitored through the relatively weak system of accreditation – the need to convince the Government Offices for the Regions that the LSP is broadly representative and operates in an ‘inclusive’ manner. In order to counter this, Chanan argues that a baseline study and performance indicators need to be developed to monitor the

extent of community involvement (Chanan, 2003, p.84)

### **Local Strategic Partnerships in Practice**

This section reviews the experience of representatives of the voluntary and community sectors who have a direct involvement with LSPs. A series of structured interviews were carried out with seven people in relation to three different areas. Two of these are London boroughs in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and Community Empowerment Fund. The third is an LSP in a county town in England with a population of approximately 110,000. This authority receives no additional NRF or CEF funding. The interviews were designed to throw light on the following questions:

**Institutional context:** How do the LSPs relate to broader systems of governance, such as the local authority and the main spending departments? What is the management style of the Chair and what role do officers play? Is the LSP inclusive and does it include representatives of hard-to-reach groups?

**Policy context:** How are the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and Community Strategy developed and what role do they play in the deliberations of the LSP? How effective are these strategies in co-ordinating council and other services?

**Accountability and reporting back:** How are the voluntary and community sector representatives selected? Do they operate as a caucus and report back to their member organisations? Does access to the Community Empowerment Fund enable the voluntary and community sector to be effectively represented?

**Overall impact:** What impact has the LSP had so far on the system of governance? How has it impacted on the culture of organisations such as the local authority? Are there examples of how community representatives have been able to transform policies or debates? Is the LSP operating at the right level and what are the prospects for the future in the longer term?

#### **1. Institutional Context**

LSPs have only been in existence for about three years and many have taken some time to become established. Important issues to be resolved in the early stages are the membership, terms of reference and their relationship to service deliverers, such as the local authority. In London borough A, a member of a faith group was elected to be the Chair, with a representative from a disability group as the vice-chair, and there was considerable debate about the role and purpose of the LSP. A feeling of 'radicalism' emerged in that issues were debated from first principles. However, in May 2002 local elections led to a change in the majority party and the Chair was replaced by the Leader of the

Council. The new administration adopted a more traditional approach to the LSP and other service providers strongly supported the Council taking a leading role.

“The service providers got together and said we must have a service provider as Chair. They put in the Leader of the Council as Chair.”

(Interviewee, council A)

In London borough B the Leader of the Council became the Chair of the LSP from the beginning and officers in the Regeneration section of the Chief Executive’s office were actively engaged in providing briefing papers for the LSP and in preparing the Community Strategy. This was a mainly technical document which set out 96 measurable targets to be delivered across the borough. In this borough a Network of Networks was set up in order to bring together around 1300 community and voluntary organisations. This Network elects four representatives to sit on the LSP by postal ballot. It is entirely the responsibility of the Network to elect its own representatives; there are no places reserved for traditionally hard-to-reach groups such as black and ethnic minority (BME) groups. In borough A, places are reserved for the multi-faith group and for people with disabilities. A Network steering group meets

regularly with LSP representatives and in the past council officers and other members of the LSP have attended to discuss their perspectives on particular issues.

In both boroughs interviewees suggested that the LSPs adopted the management style of the local authority. In borough B, a very business-like approach was adopted from the beginning under the direction of the Chair, who is Leader of the Council. The LSP is run very much like a council committee with minutes, reports from officers and presentations by experts on issues deemed to be relevant to the meeting. One interviewee reported that the Chair runs the LSP like a “lean, mean, strategic machine”.

“How it’s set up, it has no powers whatsoever and she [the Chair] doesn’t want it to have any powers. I think it’s just there because it has to be there because they have NRF and that’s the whole ethos of it in this borough. The Chair sees it as a necessary evil. The other members see it in exactly the same way...As soon as the NRF is gone, it (the LSP) will disappear.” (Interviewee, borough B)



In borough A, the LSP was launched in an atmosphere of exploration and debate in a context where it was accepted that the Council was often considered “weak, disorganised and under-funded”. One community representative described the early days thus:

“A lot of that [consultation] was done in the early days. We didn’t get bogged down in detail. It was well facilitated. We had a pragmatic approach and when it was not perfect six months later we reviewed it and it gets a bit better”. (Interviewee, borough A)

The establishment of a culture of learning was important to many interviewees. Some felt that there should be opportunities in LSP meetings to hear about what each partner was doing so that experiences could be shared. In borough B the LSP had agreed that representatives should investigate what was happening in some of the ten neighbourhood partnerships in the borough and then report back to the full meeting. This was never followed through fully so that knowledge about issues, problems and possible solutions was not shared. As a result, the voluntary and community sector representatives tend to be labeled as ‘the bad guys’ because they are the ones who always ask questions.

In the county town, the LSP is chaired by the cabinet member for community services and has two deputy chairs, one of whom represents the voluntary sector. A Community Strategy was produced in three months by officers after extensive consultation exercise and a major conference. However, local elections in 2002 led to the Council having no overall control and interviewees felt that this had weakened the effectiveness of the LSP. Moreover, funding to the voluntary and community sectors has been under review and further cuts in budgets are anticipated. As one interviewee noted:

“There is a handful of officers genuinely committed to developing the voluntary and community sectors. There is also an overwhelming number who are critical about the level of support and see their departmental budgets squeezed as a result...Council officers tend to dominate, in particular the Community Services Manager”.

Another interviewee felt that the approach of having regular open meetings about single issues was a good one: “when the discussions take place, all partners can make an input. The administration is committed to being inclusive”.

## **2. Policy Context**

In borough A the LSP decided to prepare the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy first and then to produce the Community Strategy in the longer term. The latter is only now in draft form (May 2004). In contrast in borough B, both strategies were prepared in the first year, largely by Council officers. In this borough thematic groups from the LSP were designated to identify priorities for allocating NRF around issues such as capacity building, community safety and health.

Interviewees in the two London boroughs were sceptical about the impact of NRF funding in reducing deprivation and in targeting issues strategically. In both cases they felt that money had tended to go to local authority, and in some cases health service, 'pet projects' which could not be funded in other ways, and that 'local politics' played a major role in how the resources were allocated. In borough A, an interviewee walked out of a meeting where the Chief Executive of the local authority and a senior police officer were arguing over who would provide funding of a few thousand pounds for a particular project. In both boroughs it was felt that NRF funding was the main driver behind the LSP but that if other local services were inadequate, it would never have a

significant impact.

In the county town it was generally felt that the Community Strategy clearly articulated local needs and priorities and that it was influencing both the local authority and other agencies. It would also feed into (and might have influenced) new policy initiatives such as the designation of neighbourhood partnerships, a neighbourhood pathfinder initiative funded by central government, and a proposed Urban Regeneration Company covering the town centre.

### **3. Accountability and Reporting Back**

By accessing the Community Empowerment Fund, borough B has devised an effective system for supporting the voluntary and community sector. The Network is made up of about 1300 organisations which elect by postal ballot four representatives onto the LSP every two years. Shadow members can also attend meetings and training events. A Network Co-coordinator works full-time in supporting the Network. The intention is that before each LSP meeting the four representatives discuss tactics with the steering group. This does not always work because the agenda papers often arrive too late to arrange a meeting. In this situation the Network Coordinator provides a briefing note to the representatives before the meeting.

In borough A there is a less structured approach. One interviewee said that he felt that the LSP should represent all organisations in the borough and was not strongly in favour of designated members. In practice, substitutes often go to meetings when a member was unable to attend. However, in this borough there are 15 out of 28 members from the voluntary and community sectors compared with four out of 15 in borough B (ALG, 2003).

There is little evidence that any of the voluntary or community representatives reported back in any structured way. In borough B, the Network Coordinator performs an important function in preparing a monthly newsletter and in placing documents on a website. For many interviewees the main mechanism for reporting back was through personal networks and informal contacts. Interviewees said there just was not the time for a more formal and structured approach. In some cases this was because formalised systems of reporting back had broken down; in others representatives were already overloaded with other responsibilities.

The effectiveness of the voluntary and community sector was most severely restricted in the county town. The town's Council for Voluntary Service (CVS)

receives a small budget from the LSP to support the representation of the sector but according to interviewees this was not working satisfactorily. One interviewee summarised the problem:

“My initial understanding of why I was elected, what my role would be, who I would be accountable to and the process by which I would consult, were not realised. It’s a huge problem for me as an individual trying to keep abreast of bucketfuls of policy and also playing the politics of it, without a mechanism to consult. It’s probably impossible at this stage to get people to catch up.”

The interviewee explained that for about three months a structured approach worked whereby sector representatives met before LSP meetings to discuss their tactics and then filled in a feedback form afterwards, which was then widely circulated.

“The single reason why the system collapsed is because we haven’t got an effective voluntary sector umbrella body. The CVS has not been able to deliver the support to representatives it promised. It’s been challenged with its own budgetary concerns”.

Another representative felt equally let down: “Because we are not able to have wider community discussions, we’re forced to just bring to the meetings our own perceptions.” He argued that all agencies with large budgets should contribute to a fund which would be used for systematic consultation of all interested parties, particularly the voluntary and community sectors. He also stressed the importance of enabling community representatives to be engaged, by, for example, paying expenses associated with attending meetings. Paid employees of voluntary and community organisations often found it easier to attend consultative events and their views did not always coincide with those of ‘grassroots’ volunteers.

As with the London boroughs, individual contacts and personal networks became the most important reference group, rather than a more structured discussion with the sector as a whole.

#### **4. Overall Impact**

Most of the interviewees found it difficult to point to significant achievements of their LSP although there may be benefits arising in the longer term. In borough A interviewees argued that the attitudes of senior officers were beginning to change and that they were increasingly willing to listen to

grassroots' opinions. This cultural change was beginning to filter down to middle managers as well. However, additional funding to the LSP was not going to resolve weaknesses in the current level of services and a long history of perceived disorganisation and under-funding in the local authority. In borough A the Council was also carrying out a review of community assets with a view to selling off surplus land and buildings. This was adversely affecting trust between the local authority and local communities.

In borough B there was respect for the professionalism of officers who were willing to listen as well as to match the often conflicting requirements of central government and the various stakeholders on the LSP. However, one interviewee was critical of the Chair (the Leader of the Council) who she considered was defending the centralist approach of the council in that she, the Chair, was unwilling to accept that further devolution of decision-making to the neighbourhood level. Another interviewee felt that the LSP's main role was in allocating the NRF and that its rationale would disappear if this funding is terminated.

There was little or no evidence from any of the LSPs that the voluntary and community sector representatives had been able to significantly influence the



policy or actions of their LSPs. In general representatives had found it difficult to attend meetings regularly and to absorb large amounts of information. In at least two cases the Council was able to set the agenda and produce supporting information through an alliance between the Chair and council officers. Other stakeholders were attending meetings in order to protect their 'patch' and there was limited evidence that they were able or willing to make significant changes to the way their organisations operated; national and London-wide priorities were more important.

An interviewee in borough B argued that the focus on the borough-wide level was in itself a weakness. Many services, such as school catchment areas, crossed borough boundaries and this distorted data on educational attainment and deprivation. He felt that there should be more attention paid to the five local communities based on town centres in the borough, together with a sub-regional focus linking two or more boroughs.

In the market town interviewees were divided about the impact of the voluntary and community sector on the LSP. One felt that it had had some influence on establishing priorities, such as identifying target groups like young people and the targeting of the most deprived wards. It had also had an influence on the

content of the Community Strategy and had assisted in engaging new partners, such as the Primary Care Trust. In looking to the future, another interviewee argued that the county level (which also has an LSP) was the more important forum because local services are provided by both the town council and the county council.

### **Conclusions**

LSPs represent a new and relatively untried attempt to increase local leadership and influence over urban governance. Major tasks include the need to coordinate local services and target areas of deprivation, to establish strong but accountable systems of local leadership, and to engage local communities in decision-making processes. Yet inconsistencies and conflicts of interest abound. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the paradox that central government is operating in a top-down manner by defining the ‘rules of engagement’ and by providing the resources in the form of NRF and CEF to promote greater autonomy at the local level. Moreover, as is reported here, a two-strand system of LSPs has been established with only 88 of the most deprived areas receiving additional resources. Localities which do not fall into this category are required to institute significant changes in governance without any additional funding.

The research reported here focuses on the role and impact on the voluntary and community sectors. It has been noted how the modernisation project of the current Labour Government strongly promotes the engagement of local communities in urban governance. The rationale for this is practical; to ensure policies and programmes are supported, relevant to local needs, and sustainable in the longer term. There is also an implicit, and as yet unproven, assumption that effective community involvement will underpin civic leadership and revive local democracy.

Yet evidence has been presented which indicates that these change strategies need to alter deep-seated cultural assumptions and must challenge traditional power relations. To be effective, LSPs will need to evolve more transparent and inclusive ways of working and very different organisational cultures and management styles. They are also being superimposed on complex, and often fragmented networks of policy-making carried out by organisations which have little experience of working in collaboration with others delivering parallel services. Moreover, local communities have traditionally been relatively powerless and are more often recipients of services proscribed by others, rather than controllers of their own destinies. Thus to be truly effective LSPs must not

only become inclusive and collaborative forums of debate but must also promote change in the way all services are delivered by big spending agencies. These are powerful organisations, such as local authorities, health services and the police, which have until now operated with relative autonomy.

LSPs are also not starting as autonomous projects. They are deeply embedded in local contexts and political cultures which, as has been shown, directly impact on their effectiveness. A high degree of trust between key stakeholders is essential for effective partnership working. Local authority politics can have a direct impact on the leadership provided by the local authority and electoral change can remove key participants and undermine commitments and strategies. This was the case in two out of the three case studies reported here. Likewise, local authority leadership will tend to impose a 'bureaucratic' culture on proceedings, relying heavily on professional jargon, committee papers and policy documents. This is accentuated with the emphasis on floor targets, indicators and management systems imposed by central government. Thus a system of relative autonomy is being sought through the adoption of top-down management processes, supervised by the Government Offices for the Regions.

Evidence from the research literature and the interviews carried out with voluntary and community sector members of three LSPs indicates that the challenge is considerable. Since the voluntary and community sector in most localities is under-funded, over-stretched and dependent on public funding and goodwill, it often lacks the capacity to deliver effective support to its community representatives. It can also feel compromised if most of its funding also comes from the local authority. Volunteers are usually forthcoming but systems are in most cases inadequate to ensure that they are fully briefed, have agreed a strategy between themselves and are able to be accountable to their wider constituency in a structured way. At present the voluntary and community sector is represented at the LSP table but their contribution is not always recognised or valued and they often experience detachment from what is often a complex, diverse and sometimes fragmented constituency. Unlike paid professionals, they often have to bear all the social and financial costs of attending meetings and these are at times not of their choosing such as in the evening and at weekends.

So is there a future for LSPs? DiMaggio and Powell (1983) point to the danger of coercive isomorphism whereby organisations respond to external pressures by tending towards convergence as a result of cultural and institutional

pressures. This could occur if central government seeks to impose greater uniformity as a condition of funding. If LSPs are to be truly representative of local contexts and to reflect the interests of their local communities it is essential that they develop working practices, as well as systems of representation, support and accountability, which enable them to address issues of difference. In particular, differences of culture and uneven power relations need to be addressed by developing new and innovative organisational cultures. 'Representative symmetry', where everyone has the same representative legitimacy may not be possible and necessarily desirable but as the evaluation report notes:

Successful LSPs find ways to listen to very different perspectives and work in ways that draw on the strengths of different sorts of people, rather than trying to 'iron out' difference through bland or bureaucratic processes.' (University of Warwick *et al.*, 2004, p.24).

England is undergoing a period of rapid change in the way it is governed and in the delivery of services. The evidence reviewed here has demonstrated how one such experiment has been developed as a mechanism for engaging local stakeholders, and in particular, to promote community involvement. As has

been reported, the dynamics of government in England has facilitated a degree of community representation but with limited progress in the transformation of the discourse to genuinely reflect local perspectives. An important conclusion to be drawn from this study is that political commitments to community engagement in civil society are always mediated through existing institutional arrangements. Thus attempts to change deep-seated political structures and power relationships require a commitment to increase representation as well as to transform the practices and repertoires of deliberation and action.

**Table 1. Governance Processes: Assessment Criteria**

Dimensions	Criteria
Networks and coalitions	Connections made to residents in many situations Connections made to significant 'mainstream' arenas and networks.
Stakeholder selection processes	Inclusive selection of who gets involved in area committees Multiple 'voices' for place accessed
Discourses: framing issues, Problems, solutions, interests etc	Strong daily life emphasis Diverse experiences of place emphasised Distributive issues/conflicts over priorities recognised Knowledge resources enriched in range and type
Practices: routines and repertoires for acting	These are: accessible, diverse, facilitative, transparent, sincere.

Source: Coaffee and Healey. 2003



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