

Community engagement

Wednesday 23rd June 2010
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The state of communities to day

- Issues for communities
- Issues about communities
 - – social evils – key findings of the Rowntree Report (2008) *individualism, consumerism and greed, and a decline of community.*
 - - social cohesion – primarily concerned about increasing **social segregation and impact on community relations**... particularly in relation to Muslim communities



- Who belongs to a local community based group of any kind – sporting, church-related, mother and toddler, book group, women's group?
- Who does a regular outing with one or more friends – to the pub, the cinema, each others' houses?
- What is the difference between these two activities?

Robert Putnam

- Argues that **social capital** fosters community, 'civic virtue' and makes public spaces cleaner, friendlier, safer
- It enhances economic development, better health and education outcomes
- The absence of social capital leads to a higher crime rate – people don't take part in community organisations, don't supervise children, and aren't linked through networks of friends.
- There's an assumption that civic society organisations are 'a good' but they can also be negative – national front, al-qaeda, organised football hooliganism

Taking part...

- Taking part is good...
 - **"Participation and active involvement in the determination of one's own destiny is the essence of human dignity" Mary Robinson**
- It helps individuals to avoid isolation in circumstances which might otherwise make them vulnerable to it
- Policy-makers and decision-makers need people to take part – it should result in better outcomes for all
- It's a 'right' and a 'responsibility' – when we discuss issues around active citizenship, this is one aspect that we are talking about

The Participation and Practice of Rights project



- Use a 'human rights based approach' (HRBA) to lobby for change and seek to influence policy and practice
 - The HRBA turns 'needs' into 'rights'
 - The HRBA promotes accountability
 - The HRBA empowers people
 - Participation is central to a HRBA
 - The HRBA focuses on the inclusion and involvement of particularly vulnerable groups

‘Card before you leave’

- The scheme ensures that all those who present to Emergency Departments with thoughts of self harm/suicide will be offered either an urgent appointment immediately or an appointment the following day by mental health services and that patients in need do not have to wait. (www.pprproject.org/index.php)
- Lobbying – this is an excellent example of how an organisation lobbying can contribute something ‘really obvious’
 - Lobbying appeals to campaigners, but it’s important to realise that not everyone is a campaigner
 - There is also a danger that the ‘loud voices’ overshadow wider interests of the community
 - BUT not all lobbyists are equal – some groups can exert much more influence because of who they know, what resources they have, how confident and articulate they are

Citizen's Jury

- A number of years ago a Citizen's Jury was run in the eastern health and social services area
- A citizens jury is one form of consultation – a representative sample is chosen as the 'jury'; they spend a significant amount of time listening to 'expert witnesses', debating the information and are able to ask questions
- At the end of the process they can make recommendations
 - This process does not suit all circumstances
 - Only a small number of people get involved
 - But it is a 'rich' and 'deep' process

Citizen's Jury cont.

- It can be very expensive – usually takes place over 3 days, venue, catering, accommodation and experts all have to be paid for
- Is not really suitable for small-scale decisions but for larger 'big picture' issues – overall planning, overall priorities etc
- Advantages too – considered opinion rather than 'snapshot' opinion of an opinion poll or day consultation event
- Involves 'Joe and Joanne Public'
- At the end of the Eastern Board process a conference was held to feedback on the process, it included feedback from two members of the jury

- ... A few observations

- A relevant government minister was present – he arrived in time to speak during the time slot allocated, and left immediately – which meant he didn't hear from anyone else in the room
- A local councillor challenged the process, saying they represented the community and they should be consulted rather than spending all that money...
- A local community network worker also spoke, saying they were 'the community, organised' and if they were consulted, the community was consulted
- BUT the two Jury members stood in contrast, they were a random selection, off the street and whose views were not necessarily covered by either of the previous speakers both of whom claimed to speak for them

Community engagement – why?

- Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act requires it (equality to be pro-actively pursued).
- It can help to build trust and improve the reputation of public services
- Effectively communicating with the public can improve relationships between communities and between communities and public services
- Consulting a wider range of people is more likely to produce better policy – how representative of the wider community is a ‘policy community’?



THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PYRAMID

Dangers...

- It can easily be turned into a box-ticking exercise
- One outcome of Section 75 – an avalanche of paper
- You can raise false expectations – for example, if people have taken part in a consultation process they expect to see their views reflected in the final result. If they don't, they will believe that they have not been heard – it will be more difficult to get them to participate the next time – how do you manage expectations?
- There is nothing so disempowering as 'tell me what you think?'

Engagement...

- Suggests a two-way movement – what does this mean for communication?
- Communities of practice – have their own language and language codes – most of the rest of us are ‘outsiders’
- There is a need to recognise the imperative of communicating – to portray what you have to say in a way that is understood by ‘outsiders’ and the equal need to listen to what they have to say
- People are the experts of their own lives

Who engages?

- A range of professionals are required to engage with a wide range of people in communities with varying degrees of skills and knowledge
 - How do you encourage them to take part?
 - How do you ensure they don't feel 'stupid'?
 - How do you ensure their participation is worthwhile and not just a 'token'?
 - How do you ensure they have realistic expectations?
 - How do you make sure they stay involved?

- ‘the people you most want to hear from are least likely to be in the room’
 - How do you support the involvement of people who don't believe they have anything to say or that anyone will listen?
 - How will you balance the interests of the ‘loud voices’ with the quiet or silent?
 - Why are the ‘hard-to-reach’ hard to reach?

The role of education



- Tony Blair once said 'Education is our best economic policy'.
- I would argue that education is also one of our most important public health policies.
- Education links to empowerment, a sense of efficacy, better job and income prospects, better health outcomes and a longer, happier life.
- Education is also the product of a person's social and economic background more than any other factor. If people are labelled 'failure' we can't act surprised when they are placed on the negative trajectory of disadvantage

Community education

- A comparison with community education...
- The guiding principle of community education is that 'you go to where people are at'.
- In this sense community educators start where people want, are able or willing to start – if it's an informal workshop, a topical issue or preparation to take part in something else – such as a local consultation process
- 'really useful knowledge' – what will people be able to use there and then, as opposed to many school experiences when it wasn't at all obvious what you might do with the knowledge (other than try to pass an exam in it!)

Highlander Folk High School USA

*When you
start – who
knows where
you will end
up?*

*Education =
Change*



Sept. 1957—*Martin Luther King, Pete Seeger, Charis Horton, Rosa Parks, and Ralph Abernathy at Highlander.*

increasing community engagement

