

**PARTNERSHIPS, NEW LABOUR
AND THE GOVERNANCE OF
WELFARE**

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Partnerships for local governance: citizens, communities and accountability

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Introduction

'New Labour', as part of its democratic renewal and modernisation agendas, has championed new and different forms of decision making in public services. In local government this change can be construed as a shift in emphasis away from representative democracy towards partnership and participatory decision making. New Labour has encouraged the active involvement of citizens in their communities. For their part, local authorities are developing new approaches and structures to facilitate such engagement.

Local government, as in other areas of public policy, is also undergoing a new phase of reshaping and redefinition. There has been a shift in emphasis from hierarchies, to markets and now to partnership. This current emphasis on local authority partnerships has a number of strands - with other parts of the public sector, with the private and voluntary sectors, and with citizens and communities. This chapter is concerned with partnerships between local authorities and their citizens and communities.

The chapter explores New Labour's democratic renewal agenda and its application to local government, before moving on to consider partnership and participation. It then examines examples of partnership being developed by a local authority, Birmingham City Council, particularly emphasising governance partnerships at the ward level. In analysing Birmingham's approach, the way in which this authority is utilising its version of partnership is questioned. In particular, it identifies and analyses concerns that relate to the representativeness, social inclusion, accountability and utility of these governance partnerships. The chapter's conclusions seek to draw out implications for the wider local government community.

Democratic renewal

Recent years have seen a loss of confidence in democratic structures and ideals. "Even the most democratic countries are not democratic enough" (Giddens, 2001, p 6). As Giddens (1998, p 2) had stated earlier, "Political ideas today seem to have lost their capacity to inspire and political leaders their ability to lead". In particular, representative democracy is seen as insufficiently responsive and representative. Criticism has pointed to, among other things, low electoral turnout, particularly at local elections (Blair, 1998, p 14). Much of local government is viewed as unresponsive and living in the past, with a feeling that many 'rotten boroughs' in which 'one-party states' operate still persist. The quality of local services is often seen as leaving something to be desired and a further sign of the democratic state's malaise. Lying behind this is the perceived loss of confidence in democratic structures and ideals in recent years. Giddens (1999, p 72) states that "in the mature democracies ... there is widespread disillusionment with democratic processes".

In his introduction to Labour's 1997 manifesto Tony Blair declared, "The vision is one of national renewal, a country with drive, purpose and energy" (Labour Party, 1997, p 2). Democratic renewal has therefore been a central plank of the government's agenda of reforms to the structures of government and public services. New Labour wanted:

... to make Britain's democracy work better: to bring politics closer to the people, to strengthen the rights of every citizen, and to make government more open, responsive and accountable. [We want] to build a more dynamic Britain by modernising the constitution so that people have greater control over their own lives. (The Government's Annual Report, 1998, p 84)

Labour's manifesto for the 2001 general election reaffirmed this agenda:

Our purpose is simple: to create a Britain that is democratic, decentralised and diverse, with decisions always taken as close to the people as is consistent with efficiency and equity. (Labour Party, 2001, p 31)

The Third Way and local government

Specifically in relation to local government, the Prime Minister has made it clear that:

We need a new – a different – local government to continue the task of modernising Britain. A new role for the new millennium. A role that challenges the sense of inevitable decline that has hung over local government for the past 20 years and provides local people and their representatives with new opportunities.

At the heart of local government's new role is leadership – leadership that gives vision, *partnership* and quality of life to cities, towns and villages all over Britain... *It is in partnership with others ... that local government's future lies.* (Blair, 1998, p 13; emphasis added)

Some may question whether leadership and partnership are compatible concepts. The government's argument was later developed in the local government White Paper *Modern local government: In touch with the people*, which stated that:

Too often within a council the members and officers take the paternalistic view that it is for them to decide what services are to be provided, on the basis of what suits the council as a service provider. The interests of the public come a poor second best.... Too often local people are indifferent about local democracy, paralleling, and probably reflecting, this culture of inwardness. (DETR, 1998, paras 1.10 and 1.11)

New Labour's strategy has therefore been "to build councils which are in touch with their local people and get the best for them" (DETR, 1998, p 6). Partnerships are seen to be key to achieving this, reflecting a shift of emphasis from the more inward-looking focus of the past. The government is providing "a new framework which will give councils the opportunities to modernise and the incentives to do so" (DETR, 1998, p 6).

Participatory local governance

This chapter examines the example of one local authority's citizen partnership initiatives. It could be argued that we are witnessing a shift from politics and governance legitimised through representative democratic structures to local governance that is now increasingly seeking to be legitimised via participatory democratic techniques (Davis and Daly, 1998, 1999; Cowen and Daly, 1999; Daly and Cowen, 2000).

This shift can be explained by Gyford et al's (1989) model of the 'three pulls' on representative democracy, in which market democracy, delegate democracy and participative democracy are regarded as competing democratic forms. Gyford et al's analysis reflects a period when policy and politics were in the midst of attacks by 'New Right' Conservative administrations on representative democracy, and assertions about the supremacy of 'market democracy' in particular (Waldegrave, 1993), as illustrated by the privatisation of public services, the introduction of quasi-markets and the introduction of service charters (Prior et al, 1993; Hill, 1994; Barnes, 1997; Rouse and Smith, 1999).

New Labour's Third Way is neither a straightforward continuation of 'New Right' market democracy approaches nor a return to 'Old Labour' reliance on local representative structures. Rather, for New Labour, "what counts is what works" (Labour Party, 1997, p 4). Although Powell (1999) argues that "the elusive nature of the Third Way makes it difficult to be sure about where Labour's social policy resides on [the political] spectrum", in terms of democratic

approaches we believe that the direction is clear. In local government, authorities are being required to pay greater attention to the needs and wishes of their communities. This will lead to greater opportunities for public participation, for example, through greater use of citizens' panels, citizens' juries, user groups, housing tenants' management boards, information and communications technology (ICT), and so forth (Rouse and Smith, 1999, p 249). However, as Leach and Wingfield (1999, p 47) have said, with reference to Arnstein (1971), "there is some ambiguity about how far up the ladder of citizen participation the government is advocating local authorities should go".

These ambiguities notwithstanding, the government has set local authorities the challenge of 're-engaging' with the communities they serve and embracing the 'community governance' agenda. In the event that councils are "unwilling or unable to work to the modern agenda, then the government will have to look to other partners to take on [their] role" (Blair, 1998, p 22). Therefore, local government must 'modernise' or perish.

Partnership and participation

Partnership has been part and parcel of local government for many years. In the past this usually operated around service delivery issues, but recently partnership for governance has also become an important priority. There are many imperatives for this, including the fragmentation of service delivery among a variety of agencies during the Conservative years; the perceived poor performance of many local authority services; and the lack of citizen engagement referred to above.

The Best Value duties now placed on local authorities and a range of other local government-related bodies (1999 Local Government Act) bring together a number of these strands (Martin et al, 1999, 2001). Given the government's desire to ensure that "above all ... local people and local communities are put first" (Blair, 1999), it seems reasonable to expect that "Best Value may give a new impetus to types of partnership which involve the direct participation of local communities" (Geddes, 1998, p 18).

The growth of these new governance partnerships may have significant implications for accountability and social inclusion. First, there is a potential slippery slope from collaboration to cosiness to collusion to corruption (at least in the sense of corruption of purpose). It is important therefore not to lose sight of the question, 'whose interests are being served by a particular partnership?'. Second, partnerships are as likely to be exclusive as inclusive, and indeed some may be specifically designed to be so.

Partnerships in Birmingham

The focus of this next section is an analysis of Birmingham City Council's attempts to develop partnerships for governance rather than partnerships for service delivery. The City Council is placing much emphasis on "a new partnership approach to the governance of the city" (BCC, 2001a, p 8), which

goes further than current government requirements. In choosing to focus on Birmingham, our intention is to focus on one authority's approach to partnership with its citizens; analyse the nature of its approach; and draw out issues that are of significance to the wider world of local government and public policy more generally.

Partnership working in local government has expanded massively and rapidly in the years since 1997. Therefore, getting to grips with partnership issues is a major challenge for all in local government and indeed other parts of the public sector (Audit Commission, 1998). In presenting this example, we recognise the limitations of the case study approach. Nor are we intending simply to criticise the authority. Innovation requires experimentation. The point here is to illustrate the practical implications of some of the issues stemming from an increased emphasis on partnership approaches.

Birmingham has been the focus of a number of historical, political and academic studies over the years (Tiptaft, 1945; Briggs, 1963; Newton, 1976; Hattersley, 2001), although none has directly addressed the issues that are the concern of this chapter. The city has been Labour-controlled since 1984. It has a diverse, multi-ethnic population of around one million, around 30% of whom are from minority ethnic groups (BCC, 2001b, para 31). It has 39 wards, each with three councillors, and therefore a total council membership of 117.

The authority has invested a great deal of energy and resources since the mid-1980s in redefining the city. Birmingham traditionally relied heavily on manufacturing industries, but since the recession of the 1980s the council has concentrated on attracting inward investment to promote a more diversified city economy. It sees this as the way "to provide the range of job opportunities needed within Birmingham" (BCC, 2000a, p 11). As a consequence, a number of service industries have relocated to the city. At the same time, the City Council has been successful in capturing European funding, which has been used to fund various large civic enterprises, including a convention centre, exhibition centre and indoor sports arena. The city has, therefore, had some success in reinventing itself, so that it no longer sees itself solely as a manufacturing heartland but increasingly as an international business and conference city with a wide range of employment sectors.

Much of this renaissance has involved partnership working and the authority is continuing to use partnership as a means of 'adding value' to the lives of the city's citizens. The council's cabinet has stated that:

Progress can only be made through a modern Council, in touch with the way people live their lives today, more suited to *building partnerships* with local communities, businesses and other agencies, and more capable of joined-up working across boundaries. (BCC, 2000a, p 2; emphasis added)

The council envisages two key strands to its partnership working: partnership with communities for local governance; and partnership with providers to deliver the best possible services:

A successful city relies on strong community networks.... The essence of partnership government is the joining together in mutually supportive networks of ... various resources and interests, based on a commitment to a common interest in making Birmingham a more successful city for all. (BCC, 2001a, p 8)

This is very much in line with the government's Third Way thinking, emphasising citizen engagement and delivering the best possible services.

City-wide partnerships

The 'overall vision for Birmingham' is 'held in custodianship' by the 'City Pride Partnership' made up of public, private and voluntary sector agencies. This was set up in the mid-1990s. This partnership is neither a partnership for governance nor a partnership for service delivery. Rather, the City Pride Partnership produces 'a set of strategic objectives' to underpin the vision for Birmingham and uses 'a set of quality of life indicators to assess how the agreed vision for Birmingham is being realised':

In doing this, all partners, including the City Council, will be held to account for their actions. (BCC, 2000a, p 13)

The mechanisms for delivering this accountability are not entirely clear. There also exist a number of other mechanisms concerned with developing a vision for the city. These include the so-called Highbury events, whereby "key players from the world of business, commerce, politics, the arts and the public sector" (*The Birmingham Voice*, 17 January 2001) from Birmingham and beyond receive personal invitations to the city. At the most recent event, in February 2001, the 100 or so participants were asked "to plan the transformation of the city over the next decade" (*The Birmingham Voice*, 17 January 2001). This is notwithstanding that the City Council had in 1999 established a 'Futures Panel', many of whose members could be described as belonging to the 'local elite', which set out "to create a vision for the future of the city and then work to make it happen" (*The Birmingham Voice*, 24 May 2000). The council's majority political group also, of course, regularly discusses its own priorities for the city. Neither the relationship between these varying mechanisms nor the criteria by which their success is to be measured are always clear.

The council is currently considering what arrangements it needs to put in place at the strategic level in order to respond to the 2000 Local Government Act, in particular the requirement for a Community Plan for promoting the economic, social and environmental well being of the city, its citizens and its communities. Alongside this, the council is considering how to respond to the government's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, through which the city is to receive £49.5m over the period 2001/02 to 2003/04. As set out in *A new partnership for governance* (BCC, 2001a), which was published for consultation during the summer 2001, the City Council is proposing to set up

a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) at the city-wide level, in order to oversee the delivery of Community Planning and the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy.

Partnerships with local agencies

The council has also been nurturing partnerships with other local agencies in all sectors (public, private and voluntary). The council itself is central to a number of partnerships in health and social care, in housing, in transportation and in education, lifelong learning and work. In health and social care, for example, the City Council is working with the health authority, Primary Care Groups and agencies in the voluntary sector to:

... develop programmes which help the people of Birmingham to lead healthier lives, thereby reducing health inequalities across the city. (BCC, 2000a, p 8)

In social care, the council intends "to secure partnerships to deliver the integrated services people need ... [working] closer with partners in the voluntary, community and private sectors, in a respectful and equal way, to provide social care and support" (BCC, 2000a, p 8).

In relation to housing provision, the council is exploring a controversial transfer of its own stock, as well as enhancing partnership with the private sector. Lack of finance for essential maintenance and development of the housing stock is a key motivating factor.

Partnerships with citizens and communities

Birmingham has decentralised its service provision and devolved its political decision making in an incremental manner. Decentralisation of services from the mid-1980s involved the establishment of a number of neighbourhood offices, later developing into a city-wide network. These offices provide a range of local services (housing management and benefits advice in the main). However, there was no accompanying devolution of political decision-making and lines of control remained centralised.

Area sub-committees, based on the city's then 12 parliamentary constituencies, were established by the late 1980s, with a membership comprised of the councillors for the wards within the constituency and the local MP. The powers of the area sub-committees were insubstantial and did not include the control of the already established neighbourhood offices. In 1991 the 12 area sub-committees were replaced by ward sub-committees in each of the 39 wards. At the same time the council agreed that it would encourage the setting up of 'neighbourhood forums' where requested by the public. These forums would encourage the public to take an interest in the issues affecting the areas where they lived. In practice, promoting the development of neighbourhood forums, which are seen by the authority as a mechanism for local consultation, has

received little priority. Although there are now between 50 and 60 forums across the city, their coverage is patchy.

In October 1997 the authority launched the Local Involvement, Local Action (LILA) initiative, where for the first time some political decision making was devolved to the ward councillors through the ward sub-committees.

We established Local Involvement, Local Action to give a new perspective to the partnership between the Council and the citizens, enabling residents to become involved in proposing local projects, influencing the spend of local budgets and identifying longer term needs and priorities through Ward Development Plans. (BCC, 2000a, p 15)

Ward committees and ward advisory boards

The 39 ward sub-committees are now known as 'ward committees', and are still made up of the three councillors for the ward. Until recently the ward committees were largely consultative forums, which met in public in their ward areas, typically debating a range of issues concerned with the quality of the local environment (for example, planning applications, traffic issues and local leisure facilities). However, in more recent times, firstly under the 'Meeting Needs Across the City' initiative and subsequently under LILA, they have been given limited budgets to spend locally.

More recently, Ward Advisory Boards (WABs), consisting of the ward councillors and local community organisations, have been established in line with a local political manifesto commitment "to give much more opportunity and responsibility to local residents and local communities" and a promise to "create a new vision of popular, open and democratic local government in the city" (Labour Party, 1999, p 6). As well as working with the ward councillors on the production of Ward Development Plans, the WABs also have a role in expressing views and providing recommendations on local spending priorities and services.

The model constitution for WABs outlines a 'core membership' of the three ward councillors, the local Member of Parliament, two representatives from each neighbourhood forum within the ward, one representative from each Residents Association and one representative from each Housing Liaison Board (these boards exist to represent the views of the council's housing tenants).

Ward committees (that is, the three ward councillors) can also invite representation from other interest groups (BCC, 2000b); therefore, these are far from a partnership of equals.

Each WAB has helped to guide and determine the production of a Ward Development Plan. The 'plans' vary widely in size (from four pages to 40) and arguably in comprehensiveness, in some instances possibly representing little more than unprioritised local 'wish lists'. Nevertheless, the council's cabinet has indicated its intention to "make sure that Ward Development Plans have increasing influence over Council services" (BCC, 2000a, p 15).

From WABs to WaSPs

The City Council is currently proposing to develop further the arrangements at ward level for local involvement and decision making. This is a response in part to the government's agenda for LSPs to implement community planning and the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. It is also partly a response to the City Council's recognition of a number of shortcomings in its existing arrangements for local involvement and decision making (BCC, 2000c, 2001a). The City Council's Green Paper '*A new partnership for governance*' suggests bringing together the role of the existing ward committees and WABs into new Ward Strategic Partnerships (WaSPs), and giving them a much greater range of responsibilities. The composition and role of the WaSPs, as set out below, would be different from the WABs in that, among other changes, they would be:

... bringing third-party organisations into these governance arrangements consistently across the city.... Those participating in [the WaSPs] would be equal members of the partnership, with something to contribute to the improvement of the local area and something to gain from working alongside others. (BCC, 2001a, p 32)

It is expected that each WaSP would include the three ward councillors, the local MP (who de facto would be a member of three or four WaSPs), two representatives from each of the neighbourhood forums in the ward (where they exist) and representatives from any parish council in the ward (currently there is only one parish council within the city of Birmingham). It is also suggested that there could be possible representation of the police, Primary Care Groups, Probation Service, Fire Service, schools in the ward, any higher and further education establishment, the 'Working Age Agency', the Learning and Skills Council, representatives from key local authority services, one or two local business people, representatives of other local voluntary and community organisations, representatives of young people, minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities and older people (BCC, 2001a, pp 32-3).

The WaSPs, which would become 'accountable bodies' under the 2000 Local Government Act, would not only be responsible for the Ward Development Plan, but in addition could become responsible for approving all expenditure delegated to the ward, including appointments to local bodies; consideration of all local planning applications; appointments of school governors; managing certain funding streams such as regeneration funds or the Neighbourhood Renewal fund; coordinating grant aid to the voluntary and community sectors; managing, in consultation with other wards, certain local council services such as street lighting, reactive road maintenance, street cleansing, refuse collection and holiday play schemes; and determining service delivery arrangements for those services controlled at ward level, including management of local tenants' halls and community centres, local regeneration and neighbourhood offices (BCC, 2001a, pp 33-4).

Learning the lessons

Partnership for governance is not unproblematic. The City Council has itself recognised that its initiatives have a number of shortcomings (BCC, 2001a, p 13). The main areas of concern arising from the ward-based devolved structures (and which are also likely to be pertinent to other local authorities wishing to create governance partnerships) are in relation to representativeness, social inclusion, manageability and utility, and accountability.

In terms of *representativeness*, research has identified concerns from community activists, councillors and council officers. One community activist commented:

"... it's a trick isn't it and it's well used in the city... In the end, when you do a bit of analysis, they don't represent anyone at all, they're representing themselves ... and they put their own case forward rather than the collective case. And I get very annoyed at that ... the danger always is that the local elite, the man with the loudest voice, will get what he wants and not what the community want."

Another complained that "Everyone seems to be on first name terms with everyone". A majority party inner city councillor noted that "As far as I can see from [my ward] it seems to be the same people who are always having the voice on other forums. So we really need to open the whole process out so it includes everybody". Similarly, the Labour Party nationally has recognised that "There can be a danger that [community empowerment] initiatives ... end up involving the same people in different guises" (Labour Party, 2000, p 14). Thus while the avowed intention is that the ward-based structures should be fully inclusive, the recurring reality is that this is not achieved.

A majority party councillor representing an outer-city ward commented:

"You see, what bothers me about this devolution of decision-making is that I've got 20,000 electors in my ward and the biggest meeting I've ever had is 100. So even if those people had all put their hands up for something, you can't ever say that that is [the view of] my constituents, my ward."

These issues extend into questions of *social inclusion*. When one inspects WABs city wide, one observes that the pattern and structure of WAB membership vary significantly from one ward to another. Although a systematic promotion of different partnership arrangements to reflect the diversity of the city's wards would be logical, it appears that the different arrangements tend, in practice, to be due to pragmatic, rather than more considered, reasons.

Both the City Council's Equalities Scrutiny Committee report on the *Involvement of under-represented groups in the LILA initiative* (BCC, 2000b) and *Challenges for the future*, the report of the Birmingham Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Commission (BCC, 2001b), have raised concerns about the exclusion of certain voices:

... two wards do not have advisory boards [at all].... Only 12 wards had representation from older people's organisations ... 22 of the 39 wards ... had no members from black and minority ethnic groups ... 30 ... of Ward Advisory Boards had no disabled member ... 23 ... had no youth representation. (BCC, 2000b, p 70)

LILA's focus on wards as the basic building block of community fails to value the richness of the minority ethnic communities that are based on communities of interest and not just communities of place. (BCC, 2001b, para 8.7)

The current membership proposals for the WaSPs (BCC, 2001a, pp 32-3) do not address these criticisms, although the City Council is taking steps to address these issues.

As Geddes has said (1998, p 18), and acknowledged by the City Council itself (BCC, 2001a, p 7), communities need to be thought of in terms "of place, of interest and of identity". Arguably, the membership structures of the WABs or WaSPs do not adequately take account of this. Taking account of the various types of communities will be important for any local authority seeking to establish effective partnerships (see also Chapter Nine).

Turning to the *manageability and utility* of devolved structures, the 2000 Local Government Act requires councils to adopt new political management arrangements in place of committee structures. The preceding local government White Paper commented that: "Traditional committee structures ... lead to inefficient and opaque decision making.... Equally there is little clear political leadership.... People often do not know who is really taking the decisions" (DETR, 1998, paras 3.4-3.7).

The government view is that separating out the executive role will lead to greater efficiency (quicker, more responsive and more accurate decisions); greater transparency (it will be clear who is responsible for decisions); and greater accountability (enabling the measurement of actions against policies) (DETR, 1998, para 3.14). The government has been rather more flexible about desired area and neighbourhood structures, expecting "a wide variety of different arrangements" to be put in place (DETR, 1999, para 3.26).

It is difficult to see, however, how Birmingham's devolved structures properly meet any of the above 'tests'. In the present ward committee/WAB structure, although formal accountability is arguably clear, the role of the WAB can, in practice, lead to some confusion. Transparency is far from complete – WABs still seem to operate 'behind closed doors'. Efficiency is a more difficult concept, but, if measured as suggested above, there is little evidence that ward committees/WABs lead to quicker decision making. They may well be more responsive to certain local individuals and interest groups, though whether this leads to more accurate decisions may well be open to question. If one applies the wider, but nevertheless still appropriate, 'principles of public life' (selflessness – decisions taken solely in terms of the public interest; integrity; objectivity; accountability; openness; honesty and leadership – promoting the principles by leadership and

example), which were set out by Lord Nolan (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995, p 14), it is difficult to discern any improvement.

If the proposals to replace ward committees and WABs with WaSPs go ahead, it is hard to see how any of these matters will improve. On the basis of the outline membership proposals, the Moseley WaSP, for example, could have around 30 members. This does not have the appearance of a small, streamlined body of the kind that the government seems to believe is necessary for efficient decision making. Members would come with diverse mandates. Just four would be subject to direct, universal, public election. The others would, at best, be 'delegates' from various organisations in the ward but, at worst, may not even be that. This could place local councillors and MPs in the invidious position of being the only members who can be held to account by the wider public, yet very much in the minority on the WaSP. There would be some questionable potential conflicts of interest. For example, schools would be represented on the WaSP, while the WaSP would make appointments to school governing bodies. Indeed, the WaSPs risk being dominated by special interests, leading to a whole range of potential questions about their ability to comply with, and be seen to comply with, Nolan's eminently reasonable 'principles of public life'.

We have noted elsewhere that public service *accountability* presents particular problems. In our view, there are two distinctive elements of accountability, namely: a means for the giving of an account; and a means of holding to account (Stewart and Davis, 1994, p 32). The first of these is, in principle, unproblematic. There is no real reason why Birmingham's devolved partnership or political management structures, current or proposed, cannot find effective means to report regularly on their decisions and activities to the public and others. Indeed, in some cases appropriate mechanisms may already exist.

However, as is so often the case with non-elected bodies, it is the second element (a means of holding to account) that presents difficulties. In practice, there is a lack of effective sanctions that can be utilised by the wider public in the event of dissatisfaction with the decisions and actions of individual partnership participants. Unless they are councillors or MPs, the wider public certainly cannot remove them. Yet the wider public is still expected to pay, through central and local taxation, for the public services about which decisions may be being made. 'No taxation without representation' was a rallying cry of the American Revolution. It is still an appropriate maxim today.

It would not be completely honest to argue that effective accountability for the decisions of devolved structures (such as the ward committees or WaSPs) can be assured through the centralised structures of the authority, such as its cabinet and full council. It is neither reasonable nor realistic to expect the city's leading councillors to have adequate knowledge and control of every activity and decision in every locality. If devolved structures are to be properly accountable, there need to be adequate mechanisms in place at that level.

Those with decision-making responsibilities must have a clear and universal mandate. While this is the principle behind Birmingham's current devolved arrangements of ward committees and WABs, in practice roles are blurred. The

ward councillors sit on both the decision-making body (the ward committee) and the body that advises them (the WAB) – they thus advise themselves. This blurring is then compounded by the way in which ward councillors are able to determine WAB membership. Furthermore, the process of discussion and recommendation emerging from the WABs may lead to the local councillors, in their ward committee role, having little alternative but to endorse WAB recommendations, thereby making it far from clear where the 'real' decision has been made.

Alternative arrangements would be to subject the decisions of these devolved partnership bodies to direct democracy, such as referenda, or to exempt from relevant taxation those who are not given adequate means of representation. Neither of these options is unproblematic.

Conclusions

These observations should not be interpreted as indicating that partnerships are of no value or are too problematic to be worthwhile. Neither are there grounds for complacency about the current state of our representative democracy – although it should be recognised that this is by no means simply a problem of this age. The Labour Party nationally states that it "is committed to an open, responsive democracy held to account by the people" (Labour Party, 2000, p 24). With this in mind, the initiatives that are being developed to promote greater partnership and participation in Birmingham and elsewhere are to be welcomed. However, in many instances, much remains to be done to ensure greater inclusion, increased representativeness and clearer lines of accountability. A greater clarity over the purpose of such initiatives would help in achieving these aims.

There is frequently confusion about the relationship between partnership for governance and representative democracy. Both have strengths, both have weaknesses. The imperative is to achieve an effective, workable balance that harnesses interest and energies. What is required, therefore, is a renewed democracy, in which citizens are able to participate as partners *and* be properly represented.

This implies arrangements that are truly representative and that take care to ensure that they do not just involve 'the usual suspects'. Such arrangements should also be fully inclusive. The comprehensibility and manageability of many developing partnership arrangements is complicated beyond belief. These partnerships should be kept simple and straightforward. So far as accountability is concerned, the mixing of mandates is arguably highly problematic. Councillors are being placed in an invidious position and there should be a clear separation between decision-making and advisory roles. Those making decisions must be able to be *held to account* by universal suffrage.

Learning from the lessons outlined above suggests a number of key issues for those wishing to construct effective local governance partnerships:

- partnerships should be based on a thorough, considered, strategic approach with clear aims, rather than on ad hoc and incremental initiatives (Hudson and Hardy refer to this as 'clarity of purpose' in Chapter Four);
- partnerships should be genuine pluralities, reaching out beyond the 'usual suspects' and the 'local elite';
- partnerships should recognise diversity and be inclusive of different types of community, including communities of interest and identity as well as place (a point also noted by Craig and Taylor in Chapter Nine);
- those who participate in partnerships as representatives of communities, of whatever type, should be able to demonstrate their legitimacy;
- the structures and workings of partnerships should be open and transparent;
- partnerships should be 'fit for purpose', with considerations about size of membership, the frequency and timing of meetings, the remit and the 'shelf life' of the partnership fully thought through;
- partnerships should have adequate mechanisms for regularly evaluating their effectiveness and progress in achieving their intended purpose;
- partnerships should observe and honour the Nolan Committee's 'principles of public life';
- partnership and participation should inform conventional representative democratic structures and should only replace them if they can be fully accountable in respect of both of the two elements of accountability, namely the giving of an account and a means of being held to account; and should ensure real and effective means for the operation of both kinds of accountability. Otherwise there is a danger, as Davies points out in Chapter Eleven, of partnerships delivering negative outcomes to communities.

Through such means, clear and effective partnership arrangements can make an important contribution to the goal of democratic renewal.

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Partnerships with the voluntary sector: can Compacts work?

Pete Alcock and Duncan Scott

Partnership working between the state and the voluntary and community sectors is an important, if sometimes less widely publicised, element of Labour's new agenda for the development and delivery of social policy; it has recently taken on a more formal guise through the introduction of Compact agreements between the sectors. However, translating the formal commitments within Compacts into practical partnership working is likely to require greater levels of understanding and commitment than has generally been the case in previous relations between the state and the voluntary and community sectors. It is also important to recognise the differences between the voluntary and community sectors themselves (see also Chapter Nine). This chapter describes the endeavours by the New Labour governments to formalise partnerships between statutory and voluntary sector organisations through the new mechanism of 'Compacts'; and explores the potential for partnership working through an analysis of the experiences of a small number of voluntary organisations. Attention thus focuses on these rather than on community action, but even here the clear message is that diverse needs and circumstances will not easily be captured within single regulatory frameworks.

The developing government agenda

The government has established a clear agenda for 'modernising' public services, particularly in the welfare field. This modernisation agenda is very much at the centre of the government's much trumpeted 'Third Way' for welfare reform, which involves, inter alia, a renewed commitment to 'partnership' between different providers in the welfare economy. It is now widely recognised, of course, that, despite the 'welfare state' reforms of the mid-20th century, which established the major public services for health, housing, education, income support and social care in the UK, there has always been a mix of providers – public, private and voluntary – supplying welfare services to citizens. This variation is usually referred to as the 'mixed economy of welfare' (see Chapter One).

However, a mixed economy of welfare is not the same thing as collaboration or partnership working. The latter terms imply joint involvement in service development and delivery, not just the use of providers from different sectors.