

We Never said it was Easy....Lessons Learnt from Collaborative Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an on-going research project in the South of England that seeks to explore the nature of community involvement from the perspective of local residents. The research is the product of a partnership between local residents, a capacity building charity, a regeneration programme and two universities and the paper has been co-written by two of the partners, one from a university, the other a manager within the regeneration programme. It provides an innovative approach to the analysis of findings from a defined ‘deprived’ neighbourhood, located on the fringe of the “chic, cool city” of Brighton and Hove. Local people form the majority of the steering group which guides the research.

The aims of the work are:

- to provide a voice for residents involved in participating in different ways in their local community;
- to give students (UK and international) the opportunity for practical experience in their course; and
- to draw some lessons of relevance to future policy making.

We will argue that the issues faced in developing and implementing this research mirror, to a great extent, many of the challenges and opportunities related to community participation in local governance. We will use the story of this project, thus far, to reflect on this experience, the related theoretical frameworks and potential practical lessons for both local and national policy.

Themes emerging include: the recognised and sub-conscious influence of neighbourhood and organisational cultures; the conflict of externally set time-frames and financial accountability with citizens’ capacity to participate at a pace suitable to them; the strengths and weaknesses inherent in personal relationships as they develop in partnerships; what can realistically be achieved, and what can potentially be challenged – and by whom? Cutting across all these themes are profound questions around diversity, inclusiveness and equality which call into question who participates, and how ‘representative’ individuals can be of their wider community – and indeed whether there is a responsibility to be ‘representative’ at all.

Coupled with the emerging evidence from the research itself, we will explore the above themes and unpick how such evidence and experience can be meaningfully used to engage with local policy makers and inform future ways of working, especially in the light of the recent Local Government White Paper. It will be argued that the project highlights opportunities to make better use of existing structures (in organisations and communities) and to challenge assumptions, bureaucracy and traditional approaches.

Key Words: citizen involvement, participation, governance