

LOCAL RURAL COMMUNITIES – POTENTIAL CHAMPIONS OF THEIR OWN DESTINIES?

A note of a Workshop convened by the Arkleton Trust, October 2002

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Introduction

This note is an attempt to summarise many of the points emerging in a workshop convened by the Arkleton Trust in association with the Countryside Agency and the University of Gloucestershire and held at the Mill and Old Swan, Minster Lovell, Oxfordshire on 10th –12th October 2002. It has been written by Malcolm Moseley, one of the organisers of the event and a trustee of Arkleton, with assistance from Stephen Owen and Ros Boase.

The Workshop's aim was to explore how far it is desirable and feasible for local communities (broadly at the village, parish or small town level) to plan and manage the social, economic and physical change affecting them, and to 'make things happen' at that very local level. A sub-title might have been; 'how far is real subsidiarity desirable and feasible'? The focus was very much on rural England though valuable reference was also made to the situation in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Belgium.

Participants to the workshop, listed in the Appendix, were drawn widely from people in the statutory and voluntary sectors with relevant interests or experience. All participated in a private capacity and no remarks have been attributed to individuals.

Invitations to the workshop included the following ‘preamble.’ *‘We all know that there is an enormous amount of valuable voluntary / community endeavour in rural Britain – but much of it is narrowly focused on particular projects and is undertaken by small groups of activists with a concern for specific issues. In addition, many parish and town councils do valuable work in protecting and championing the interests of their local constituencies. But what we are concerned with here is the capacity and readiness of local communities to take a ‘holistic view’ and to become major players in local governance in their own right. A related issue concerns the legitimacy of such action and the proper roles of informal and formal (parish and town council) activity.*

Various recent developments have brought these issues into focus. They include the 2000 Rural White Paper (in particular its chapters dealing with market towns and village communities) and subsequent initiatives taken by the Countryside Agency and others designed to promote the contribution to ‘regeneration’ made by various small town and village organisations. At the same time, all principal local authorities are now required to prepare holistic ‘Community Strategies’ and many are grappling with how to involve local communities in that process. And as important as preparing plans and strategies is the challenge of implementation – by means both of very local ‘bottom-up’ initiatives and by influencing other agencies and decision makers.

In considering all this, we must beware of focusing excessively on rural England. There may well be lessons to be drawn from our cities, from elsewhere in the UK and from the continent – and we hope to draw on some such perspectives’.

The format of the workshop

Though the emphasis was on small group discussion and open debate there were a number of short presentations which valuably described specific initiatives and local experience. They were as follows:

- Nick Holliday and Crispin Moor – “The Rural White Paper, the Vital Villages and Market Towns initiatives as spurs to local development; attempts to strengthen England’s Parish and Town Councils.”
- Catherine Le Roy – “Rural communes in Wallonia, Belgium – planning and implementing ‘local development strategies’ “
- • Niall Fitzduff – “Local community development and planning in Northern Ireland”
- Madeline Barden - “Village Action Plans – the Lincolnshire Experience 1993 to 2000”
- Rob Murray – “Experience in Dorset – Community Involvement in the Bridport Market Town Action Plan and the Chideock Parish Plan”

Those presentations are not summarised here; anyone particularly interested should contact the presenters for further information, (email addresses are to be found in the appendix) though formal papers, as such, were not produced.

The “small group discussions” and final plenary session focused on the following questions. *“Should local rural communities be able to plan their own future and make it happen? If so how far and how? What constrains them? Can those constraints be relaxed?”* Those questions provide the basis for the rather selective and inevitably personal resume which follows.

1. Should local communities be able to plan their own future and ‘make it happen?’

The workshop never sought to define ‘local communities’ as such though there was a broadly accepted sense that we were talking about people living in villages, parishes and small towns, at the most local level of (potential) governance, below that of the principal local authorities, namely the districts, counties and unitary authorities. That said, there was a general acceptance that in principle the answer to that question is ‘yes’ – to the extent that decisions taken at that level would have only minor consequences beyond the immediate locality.

Four justifications for this view were mentioned:

- local people have local knowledge that can improve decisions affecting them,
- decisions taken at the local level are more likely to be adhered to,
- action at that level is likely to make use of otherwise untapped human resources,
- capacity-building – the ‘development of human and social capital’ is likely to come about as a by-product.

There was also the view that it is happening anyway to a greater or lesser extent. The opportunities are there but their take-up varies and this can in practice bring undue advantage to the more sophisticated communities. Thus the view was expressed that much of the intervention to encourage greater planning and action at the local level should be aimed at spreading more evenly this growing phenomenon of very local community planning and action. There was also some discussion of the kind of action that was most pertinent in this context – planning a future strategy, influencing other agencies, or delivering discrete projects or programmes? Clearly there is great variation amongst local communities regarding which of these they feel comfortable with – and great variation in the preferences and competence of individual people within those communities.

2. How and how far might local communities best play an enhanced role?

In addressing this issue, there was general support for the concept of ‘holistic community planning exercises’ – indeed a broad measure of support for the kinds of approach being fostered by the current Parish Plan and Market Town Action Plan exercises in England and the broadly similar approach facilitated by the Fondation de Wallonie in the rural communes of Belgium, as described by Catherine le Roy.

There was much discussion of whether the **parish and town councils** should be the primary vehicle for these local planning processes and subsequent action. Arguments in favour included their legitimacy as (usually) elected bodies, the fact that government can normally only give substantial resources to legal entities and their being inherently better placed than ad hoc bodies to champion community well-being in the round.

But doubts were expressed about the competence and commitment of many of them, and about their readiness to accept some measure of overall responsibility for the development of their parish and the well-being of their parishioners. In addition, many good people, it was said, simply do not want to be involved in their parish council.

They 'don't want to be in the frontline' and to give up their time for what are often very modest outputs of real social value. There was also the argument that many parishes may be too small to take on new responsibilities - when compared with the larger Belgian communes that have been created by amalgamations or else with the French communes that thrive only by working in partnership with their neighbours.

Nevertheless, many participants argued that the parish and town councils should be the 'preferred but not the exclusive' vehicle in this respect. As local authorities, they have the basic legitimacy that ad hoc community groups lack and the view was expressed that the government's job is to 'back them or scrap them', and to work to improve their representativeness and competence 'using both sticks and carrots'. If a 'critical mass' is needed to ensure the adequacy of skills available etc, then some clustering of adjacent parishes might be worth considering.

Other participants preferred to extol the benefits and achievements of formal and informal local community groups and argued that this was 'participative rather than representative democracy at work' – even if such groups can often in practice be more 'top-down within the community' than genuinely 'bottom-up'. England has a rich endowment of such groups and an instance in County Durham was cited where an active local community association serving a particular parish has declined to press for the creation of a parish council wishing instead to retain the capacity to involve the whole local community in its activities if people so wished. The challenge may well be to find better ways of incorporating such community groups more successfully into local systems of governance – as well as the parish and town council. There was also brief mention of 'development trusts' as alternative (or complementary) vehicles for bottom-up local development.

Related to all this was the frequent assertion that 'capacity building takes time and therefore community development takes time'. If more responsibility is to be devolved to the local community level, this will necessarily be an incremental process rather than a 'big bang'. There will need to be early and visible 'wins' and the continuing build-up of momentum. Also, experience shows that some communities will embrace new powers and make use of new resources while others will not – at least not in the short or medium term.

Communities vary in their capacity – their collective skills, resources and enthusiasm. Some will prefer to articulate their concerns and wishes but without engaging in practical action or 'delivery'. In others there is more of a 'do it yourself' culture already.

Uniform progress cannot be expected, but while 'the pace is not critical the direction is'. Nor is uniform geographical coverage of competence and standards realistic except, conceivably, in the very long term. Part of the challenge for government is dealing with this lack of uniformity without decreeing that the convoy 'must travel at the speed of its slowest member'.

Another theme developed during the day concerned the common tendency to proceed in an ad hoc manner. As yet the protagonists of local community development and action have made only limited progress in getting one-off projects to be framed within some sort of 'local strategic plan'. Similarly, regarding the need for very local and 'higher up' planning to mesh together, many people working at the very local level fail to see how their plans may best fit in with 'the bigger picture' developed by the principal local authorities and other agencies operating across extensive areas. There is a danger that the various levels of planning simply fail to mesh. There is also a danger that the proliferation of plans and strategies is a recipe for confusion.

3. What constrains them and how far might these constraints be alleviated?

The afternoon workshops and plenary discussion focused on identifying the constraints impeding the greater devolution of responsibility and power to the very local level – and possible ways of addressing them. The following is a summary of some of the main points emerging

- 1 Local action can have **significant wider consequences** so clearly ‘self-rule for all’ is not a realistic option. The challenge is to fashion systems of governance that best permit the coming together of ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’. Where local communities can plan and take action with only minor ‘wider ripples’ there is little problem, but on most important issues this will not be the case. In such instances there is a need for ‘charters, contracts and partnerships’ bringing the different agencies together such that the local communities may seek to influence decisions affecting the wider area. But several people noted that such machinery can be very demanding of staff time and other resources.
- 2 There is often **a reluctance to devolve** by the principal local authorities and statutory agencies – for a variety of reasons including a lack of trust and confidence in parish and town councils and informal community organisations and a concern that at that level the ‘articulate minority’ often has excessive influence. Another factor is the unevenness or ‘patchiness’ of competence and interest at the local scale with government departments and local authorities ‘finding it difficult to deal with non-conformity’. There is also sometimes a feeling by professionals that ‘community action’ is a threat to their role and some have been heard to sigh ‘here’s another local plan or shopping list for us to deal with!’ In response to these difficulties, ‘contracts, charters and protocols’ between the different actors have sometimes proved useful, spelling out mutual expectations along the lines of ‘if you do that, we’ll do this’. The general feeling was that local communities need some sort of framework or guidance on what other agencies are expecting of them and what help they might reasonably receive.
- 3 Related to this is another constraint - the **need for facilitators or mentors** to help local people and groups realise their full potential. In particular skilled and reliable help with such exercises as ‘plan making’ and the implementation of plans is often crucial and currently insufficient. Rural Community Councils do a good deal in this regard at present but the feeling was that this is often not enough. One suggestion was that parish clerks (and certain councillors) could themselves be ‘community facilitators’ if properly trained and resourced, as could salaried ‘village agents’ working with just a small number of parishes on an almost daily basis. Others suggested that the business sector might be willing and able to offer appropriate support in some cases. But generally it was felt that central and local government should do more to ensure that such help is made available. There was also mention of helping to convene ‘brokerage tables’ to facilitate the implementation process.
- 4 Some participants suggested that many of the people who currently get involved in parish and town councils lack the vision or breadth of perspective to help local communities to be pro-active and holistic in considering their needs and in determining appropriate action. Related to this is **a need to build up local leadership** – to ‘nurture leaders and champions’ - and there was favourable reference to a ‘Community Champions Fund’ initiative and to the work of commune mayors on the continent.

- 5 This relates of course to a more general **need for 'capacity building'** and there was general agreement that the capacity of 'both sides' needs building up. Thus just as local councils and community leaders frequently need advice and training in the best ways to relate to, and to influence, agencies 'higher up,' so do many principal local authorities and Regional Development Agencies need training in the best ways to relate to local councils and community groups. (One participant suggested a need for the main stakeholders in local development to be 'community-proofed' – i.e. appraised for their sensitivity to the concerns and culture of local community groups).
- 6 Another constraint cited was **'red tape and bureaucracy.'** There is a general need for grant giving agencies to simplify their procedures. A particular concern is that the filling in by local groups of complex application forms for what are often quite small sums of money is a disincentive to local action. Local groups want to 'get on with things' and the suggestion was that they are often unnecessarily constrained by over-complex grant schemes. 'The best way to learn is to do, but have we made doing things too difficult?'
- 7 Thus many agencies, it was felt, need to develop more of a **culture of 'letting go.'** Likewise they should resist a tendency to 'hijack' the activities of local groups – for example the temptation for some principal local authorities to encourage village appraisals and similar ventures essentially as inputs to their own 'Community Strategies.'
- 8 The issue of **'early discouragement'** cropped up several times. People, it was said, 'get fed up waiting for things to happen' and in response many participants stressed the need for some 'quick wins' so that local communities could be reassured that it was worthwhile undertaking surveys, filling in forms, attending meetings etc. 'People need a taste of success'. A slightly different point is that people can be galvanised if they can see and experience successes achieved by other communities with similar needs; 'if they can do it so can we!' is often a fine motivator of action. And related to this is the 'difficulty of maintaining momentum' when there is a high level of dependence on the volunteer and, more pointedly, on just a small band of volunteers in any one community.
- 9 Finally there was some discussion of an alleged **shortage of funding** at the very local level – funding both to do the fact-finding and planning work and for the implementation of projects emerging from that local appraisal and planning. In fact many participants felt that this shortage was more apparent than real. Several schemes now exist to part fund both the planning and local action and local councils are of course able to raise their own funds via the local precept. Moreover it was stressed that much can be achieved with little or no funding – particularly through systematically and skilfully influencing the 'actors with the money'.

A conclusion

It seems fair to conclude that the workshop participants generally expressed a good deal of sympathy and support for the idea of more fully engaging rural England's formal and informal very local institutions and groups in the governance of their communities. There was also broad agreement that such engagement must include an emphasis on holistic local planning and management, not just on energetic *ad hocery*, and also on carefully orchestrated linkage between the different levels of governance. 'Top-down needs more effectively to dovetail with bottom-up' was the broad message emerging. And though the feeling was that this is beginning at last to happen, there was also agreement that much more needs to be done to address the specific issues and difficulties outlined above.