

An Evaluation of Neighbourhood Working in Derby

6. Strengthening Neighbourhood Working in Derby: an Agenda for Change

The four rationales we have employed in this study are a useful way of simplifying the complexity of the arguments which have been used to promote neighbourhood working in working and the wide range of strengths and weaknesses which came out of our interviews with participants. We have used that framework in the paragraphs above to separate out and present the tensions and issues emerging from the fieldwork in a structured and digestible fashion.

In practice of course, councillors, managers, residents and partners often use more than one rationale, “picking and mixing” across the ideas available and shaping that mix to address a contemporary problem in the specific context of the city. In addition even in principle the rationales themselves are not mutually exclusive in the sense of having no interconnections with one another. Common values, such as a concern for equity, are apparent across some of the rationales and in this subsection we briefly highlight two particular issues which work in this way.

Firstly our cross cutting analysis of all the interviews showed a cluster of concerns which stretched across elected members, neighbourhood teams, Council employees and residents which can be summarised in the question how committed are the CSP and the Council to continuing down the path of neighbourhood working. This was evident across three of the rationale in particular:

- The civic – how committed to community engagement?
- The political – how committed to local accountability of elected members and service managers?
- And the economic – how committed to resourcing neighbourhood working to do its job?

The second theme which cut across these rationales related to Derby's history of community development and its focus particularly on regenerating the poorer areas of the city. The question which arises here may be summarised as what contribution is neighbourhood working making to the relieving of poverty and inequality in the city? In short we can say that the way in which the rationales are being applied at this time suggests that there is a danger of this focus and area of expertise being lost in a one size fits all approach which is applied to every neighbourhood in the city.

Our analysis highlighted a range of concerns in relation to the civic, political and economic rationales which stretched across an equally wide range of stakeholders, not only residents and their representatives, but also many within the council, CSP and neighbourhood structure itself. For the most part however these criticisms were “balanced” in their presentation and therefore it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that an atmosphere of constructive criticism permeates across these groups and this in turn points to a strong motivation towards securing improvement. This optimistic interpretation is supported by the finding that the public service partners who are

already engaged in neighbourhood working are in the main enthusiastically supportive of the project and therefore highly likely to assist in any plans to drive forward the progress which is already in evidence.

From the preceding analysis, it is apparent that although considerable progress has been made in relation to neighbourhood working in Derby, there are several issues which concern some or many of the partners (including residents) involved. In this final section, ten such areas of concern are identified and discussed. In many cases they reflect a choice to go in one direction or another, in others a choice of priorities, and in others a problem to which there is no apparent solution. The list can perhaps be seen as an agenda for change facing Neighbourhood Working in Derby. Our final report will seek to provide help in responding positively to this agenda, drawing on further work (including workshops) which will take place between now and July.

These issues are:

1. Clarity about priorities of neighbourhood working

As noted in Section 2, there are four distinctive rationales for (or objectives of) neighbourhood working which can be identified – civic, social, political and economic – which are closely linked to the concepts of empowerment, partnership, government and management respectively. In Section 5 it was argued that neighbourhood working in Derby had contributed to each of these four objectives, but not in a particularly coherent way. In particular, there is little sense of priorities amongst the four objectives. There would be value in those responsible for the scheme trying to explicitly address this issue. In the context of limited resources, it is unlikely that all four objectives can be achieved to a satisfactory degree. There is likely to benefit in focusing on one or two of these objectives as the main driving force(s) behind the scheme. If everything is a priority, nothing is.

2. Community development as a necessary pre-condition for effective neighbourhood working

There is a sense in which the hope of encouraging a much wider interest and involvement in neighbourhood governance (the political/government rationale) is unlikely to be achievable without considerable prior investment in community development (the citizen/empowerment rationale). In a few areas (for example, Arboretum) there is a community development worker; in others the role is played 'unofficially' by a youth worker or community activist. In the absence of this kind of input it will be difficult to overcome the degree of apathy which is perceived in several areas. There are different mechanisms for stimulating the growth of social capital which need to be explored, particularly in those areas where it is demonstrably lacking.

3. A short-term or long-term perspective?

This is choice of priority, or balance facing neighbourhood working in Derby. Much of the energy of NF meetings in particular, in many areas, goes into a discussion of specific operational issues (for example, graffiti, litter, parking). Sometimes these issues imply an area-wide problem, often not. All neighbourhoods recognise the case for developing priorities for action (i.e. some form of strategic vision) or specific policies to deal with high profile local issues. But there are differences in the priority given to short-term versus longer-term issues amongst the different areas. In some it is argued that there is value in an emphasis on the latter to sustain local interest and

involvement. In others, there is a view that there must be a move away from short-termism to a more strategic approach. The appropriate balance may vary from area to area. But it does need to be addressed.

4. Should neighbourhood definitions reflect community identity or administrative convenience?

It was pointed out in Section 2 that participation is more likely if there is a neighbourhood structure reflecting areas with which people actually identify, and that typically, these are smaller (5-10,000 population) than are wards in Derby. The reality is that whilst some wards/neighbourhoods are likely to reflect felt identities (e.g. Mickleover, Spondon), others clearly do not (Darley, Derwent, Arboretum). This disparity has been recognised through the establishment of multiple NFs in certain wards (Normanton, Mackworth, Arboretum). This mismatch between current structures and perceived neighbourhood identities needs to be addressed, not necessarily by a reorganisation, but through an attempt to identify and stimulate input from neighbourhoods which reflect community identities.

5. The problem of un-representativeness

There was widespread reference to this problem. The typical attendance at NF meetings was frequently seen (with some justification) as unrepresentative – skewed in favour of older articulate often middle-class residents with only limited representation for the young and ethnic minorities. The composition of NBs was typically seen in the same way – who do the six resident members (if indeed the six places have actually been filled) represent? Why are some voluntary/community groups represented and not others? No-one is claiming that it is possible to achieve a perfect match between NB composition and the local population profile, nor that traditional forms of representative democracy should be given greater emphasis in the absence of a more representative form of participative democracy. However it is clear that in most areas, new channels and mechanisms need to be developed to ensure the involvement of a **more** representative profile of the population, including (as one respondent put it) more ‘ordinary people’.

6. Responding to diversity

The current approach to neighbourhood working in Derby has sought to introduce the same structures and processes for each neighbourhood, and each neighbourhood receives the same allocation of resources. Yet neighbourhoods vary greatly in terms of their social composition, level of deprivation and profile of problems. Some, for example Mickleover, are relatively stable middle-class dominated suburbs with a relatively modest agenda of problem issues (typically dominated by traffic/highways issues). Others, for example, Arboretum are areas with transient population, high levels of deprivation, and a wide array of economic social and environmental problems (for example, the dangers of violent extremism, lack of social cohesion, street drinking). At the very least there is a case for (re)considering whether that ‘one size fits all’ approach is appropriate to such diverse circumstances. Other neighbourhood schemes give greater priority to the more deprived areas, including a disproportionate share of resources.

7. Developing a ‘critical mass’ of local support

One of the key assumptions behind the Derby neighbourhood scheme is that it will work more effectively if strong local leadership is demonstrated, most appropriately by one or more of the ward councillors involved. Some respondents however, felt it

was more important to develop a form of leadership which was responsive to the needs of the local community (a 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' perspective). An alternative approach to current assumptions about leadership (whilst not dismissing its contribution) would be to highlight the importance of the development of a **critical mass of support** in a neighbourhood – a network of individuals committed to developing 'momentum of neighbourhood working'. The network would be likely to include the neighbourhood manager, one or more councillors, plus (depending on the circumstances) representatives of influential community groups, committed local residents, and locally-based council officers.

8. Drawing in a wider range of partners and services

There is a further important aspect to 'capacity building'. To prosper, the neighbourhood scheme requires a stronger 'buy-in' from a wider range of council departments and partners whose responsibilities impact upon the quality of life in neighbourhoods. For this to happen, the profile of neighbourhood working needs to be increased at the centre, particularly within Derby City Council. The fact that the lead responsibility is situated within the CSP has many advantages but has resulted in a skewing of the agendas of neighbourhood working towards the priorities and traditional concerns of those organisations most active in the CSP.

9. Strengthening learning capacity within and between neighbourhoods

There are mechanisms for learning in existence – the periodic meetings of neighbourhood managers for example – but there is scope for strengthening the learning capacity within neighbourhood working in Derby in various ways. Training and development events at which experience can be shared more systematically, amongst a wider group of participants would be one beneficial development. The challenges of operating at neighbourhood level – particularly of chairing different NF meetings – are not always fully recognised, particularly for newly-elected councillors. A training initiative would be helpful here. Finally there is scope for drawing in more fully experience from other neighbourhood schemes.

10. Recognising the fragility of neighbourhood working in Derby and the need to protect and sustain it

The aims of the neighbourhood working in Derby are to be commended. Considerable progress has been made, and expectations of further development are high. It is an exciting project. However it is also a fragile project – vulnerable to the political volatility of Derby, the impact of the recession on resource availability within the City and the unevenness of support for it amongst the organisations involved. For the City and the CSP to withdraw from the scheme – or even to dilute or marginalise it – would have profound negative consequences for the relationships which are being developed at local level between the various partners and local residents, and the expectations that these will develop further. Neighbourhood working is not yet fully embedded in the culture of the key organisations involved. Its difficulties are to a large extent a reflection of the problems which are always involved in introducing a new policy initiative into an established set of working relationships. A clear statement of continuing commitment – and in due course a development strategy for neighbourhood working in Derby – would be a beneficial boost to the scheme.