

Sheffield, UK

A citizen's perspective

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Summary

A multi-cultural inner city community in Sheffield recently took part in a UK government strategy called the New Deal for Communities programme aimed at neighbourhood renewal and tackling social exclusion. This case study explores participation from the perspective and experience of a citizen and community activist. It examines the implications for citizens and communities of working in partnership with local government to improve services and transform a very deprived neighbourhood. Rose Ardron is a local activist and community representative in Sheffield.

Background

Burngreave, a multi-cultural inner city community in Sheffield, faces many challenges around poor public services, quality of life and access to opportunities. Rose Ardron is one of a number of activists in the area who have worked over the years to strengthen the community and attract resources and improvements to the area. Largely because of their work, the city council and central governments chose Burngreave to be one of 39 areas across the country to take part in the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme.

The NDC programme is part of the government's strategy for neighbourhood renewal and tackling social exclusion. It is designed to be community led. The aim is to bring together local people, community and voluntary sector organisations, public agencies, local authorities and business in a local partnership that will tackle deprivation, achieve long lasting improvements, strengthen citizen engagement in the design and delivery of public services and develop a model for neighbourhood governance. It reflects the government's agenda to improve services by empowering communities and encouraging citizens to participate in planning and decision making with service providers at a local level.

The NDC areas were selected on the basis of the extent of the deprivation experienced. Each area was allocated approximately £50 million over a ten year period. The intention was to achieve a transformation in housing and the physical environment, crime, health, education and worklessness in these neighbourhoods. The lessons learned from this approach informed the development of neighbourhood partnership working across the country. The programme was designed around a partnership approach with communities located at the heart, working closely with service providers in order to stimulate the reshaping and improving of public services. The NDC programme was launched in September 1998 and is now moving towards the end of the ten year funding period.



NDC takes information out to the community – the official launch of the mobile communications bus.

What happened and why was it significant?

I became involved in NDC by standing for election as a community representative on the Partnership Board, a decision-making body involving people with an interest in the area who approve activities and projects carried out by NDC. I served on the Board for six years and was Chair for four years. I saw the NDC programme as more than a grant giving regime – it was an opportunity for the community to work in partnership with the local authority and to have a direct influence over local services. I believed that the ‘community led’ ethos of the NDC would provide opportunities for genuine grassroots involvement and the emergence of a more politicised and empowered community better able to engage meaningfully with local government and other agencies.

I got involved with the NDC in Burngreave because I thought it was an opportunity to make a difference to the area. The government gave our local communities the opportunity to take part, shape and lead the programme. They handed us some power to use public resources in the way we thought would best benefit our community. This did actually give us a little bit of leverage, not major resources compared to what public services were spending in the area, but enough to make agencies want to come and talk to us and listen to our ideas. It gave us the power to make it worth sitting round the table and engaging in discussions. For me the ultimate prize was not so much how the resources were allocated but whether we could make a difference to how those agencies worked.

For the project to be worthwhile it also needed to last beyond the life of the New Deal programme and spread and contribute to the way things happened in the whole City. I hoped that the community led ethos of New Deal for Communities would give us an opportunity to learn new ways of engaging people and new ways of empowering people to take part in the decisions that affect their lives and that we could continue to use these skills in the future.

My personal dilemma was whether to stand for election to the Partnership

Board. This would mean taking some of the responsibility for trying to make things happen through the NDC programme and I would also be accountable for any shortcomings. It would mean dealing with the complexities and the flaws of a government initiative rather than voicing an opinion from the sidelines. My natural instinct as a local activist would be to stay on the outside of such an initiative and to critique, scrutinise and point out what was not working. But this time I decided to try to do things differently, to get my ‘hands dirty’, and see whether we, the community, could actually make a difference.

We are now entering Year 8 of a 10 year programme in Burngreave and a lot has changed since the beginning of the programme. You can see a physical difference when you go through the local area; the streets are cleaner, the residential areas have had a ‘face-lift’, green spaces and playgrounds have been improved, two major buildings at the heart of the community have been refurbished – one as a community learning centre and the other as a base for agencies such as the police. Local residents now have better access to services like education, training, employment and business support. Previously they had to travel into the City centre to find the appropriate agency and then negotiate their way through the system. For many people that journey was too far, but now these services are all within easy reach. Working together under one roof has also meant better connections between agencies and there are outreach and advocacy projects in place to support and encourage people to come forward and use the services.

This project has made a difference partly by improving the general look of the area – 65% of local residents now think that NDC has improved the area as a place to live – and has also brought more services into the area. Now data for the area is more in line with the rest of the City, e.g. local unemployment has reduced by 15.2% and the gap with the city has narrowed from 17.3% to 5.9%.

So we can demonstrate that the NDC programme has brought improvements to the area, but what does this mean in terms of the experience of participating

as a community at the heart of this ambitious government experiment?

What were the challenges?

1. Getting involved in decision-making means talking solutions not problems.

Becoming involved in a collective effort means being responsible for the things that do not work as well as the things that do. It is easier to stand outside and pinpoint short comings than to work together to try and find solutions. We often forget to recognise where progress has been made.

2. Regeneration is very complex, long term and difficult.

No one person has the right answer or solution so learning happens along the way through mistakes we make. We had to learn to deal with complexities together and this takes time.

3. Bringing out issues of power exposes flaws in both representation and participation.

Big questions arise about who is representing whom and who is accountable to whom and for what. The tendency is to say either that participation is best or representation is best, but the trick is to put the two together to get the best out of each and come to a win/win solution.

4. Sharing rather than holding onto power.

The role of locally elected councillors has been changing significantly over recent years. Local government in the UK has adopted a cabinet structure, which means that if councillors do not hold a cabinet portfolio it is difficult for them to make discernible changes. If they cannot show any impact on policy, citizen participation also declines as there is little point in voting for someone who cannot deliver. Councillors can feel very defensive in the face of calls for widening participation. In overcoming this problem it is vital to remind ourselves that power is not a cake that you divide up and then compete for the biggest slice. Power is something where the more you share it, the bigger it grows. I think it is worth reminding ourselves of this all the time.

5. Making projects long-term and sustainable.

We need to move away from trying participatory initiatives sporadically and only in special time-bound government programmes like NDC. Instead we should make it part of 'the way we do business around here'. Without this the gains we have made in Burngreave may start to melt away when the NDC programme comes to an end.

6. Citizen participation in decision-making requires effective institutional change.

It is not just about how we participate as residents and citizens. It is also about how others respond to us and their ability to respond. The institutions also need to change to be more receptive to greater citizen participation and less centralised in their decision making.

7. Citizen participation in an imposed and unfamiliar environment.

When we take part in partnerships and government initiatives, local people, residents and volunteers are being invited into settings outside of their own environments. We are being invited to behave and act in ways that may not be natural to us, for example, in formal meetings with a Chair. For many people this is not a useful or familiar way of working and they may find it difficult to express their passion and commitment in these settings.

One of the most difficult aspects of the Chair's role was facilitating other people's behaviour to encourage them to adapt to this model.

What were the lessons?

1. Non-participation means lost opportunities to hold government accountable.

This is why participating in the NDC project was so important – it was about exercising our right as citizens, to act as a check on government and to scrutinise local services.

2. Local citizens should take advantage of government initiatives and policies.

We should do this to the best of our ability and in whatever way it presents itself. This also means pushing the boundaries further to see if we can widen participation to include ways of bringing more people in and make it more meaningful to everyone.

3. It is necessary to expose power and build new and different relationships.

This initiative is not just about how we participate but also how others respond to our participation. It means bringing the issue of power out into the open and building new relationships between local people, elected representatives

and service providers. Finding the way forward to more local and inclusive decision making requires political will and leadership.

4. Community Empowerment is of value in its own right .

We should never forget the value of community action and the importance of creating our own spaces and setting our own agendas. We need people on the outside as well as the inside, people to force issues on to the agenda and people on the inside to negotiate them through.

5. The partnership model of participation has drawbacks.

Those who step forward are doing so at the invitation of the establishment, with an agenda and an organisational culture that has been set by the public sector. It is a 'managerial' model and we risk becoming unpaid managers on behalf of the state. We still work in very formal and traditional ways, for example in the way meetings are structured. We try and manage people into these and judge them as to how they perform in a setting not of their own making and then we wonder why more people do not get involved. We need to think about our model of participation and how it could be changed, as well as new innovative participatory models that could be used for greater engagement.