

**‘The grit in the oyster’: community development workers in a  
modernising local authority**

**Sarah Banks and Andrew Orton**

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**Correspondence to:**

**Sarah Banks: [s.j.banks@durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.j.banks@durham.ac.uk)**

## **‘The grit in the oyster’: community development workers in a modernising local authority**

### **Abstract**

This article offers a brief overview of the challenges facing *UK local authorities*, including the need to enhance *public participation* in decision-making and service delivery, improve service performance and increase partnership working. It explores the potential contribution of *community development work* to meeting these challenges, drawing on a case study of one local authority, *Durham County Council*. The essential *tensions and conflicts* in the role of community development workers in a local authority are highlighted, showing how the *modernisation* process introduced by the New Labour government is adding further layers of complexity and ambiguity.

### **Introduction**

The uneasy relationship between community development work and the local state is a recurrent theme in the literature (see Craig et al., 1982; Craig, 1989; Taylor, 1995; Shaw and Martin, 2000), particularly following the experience of the UK Community Development Project in the 1970s (Green, 1992). The position of the worker employed by a local authority, yet whose role is to support community groups to challenge aspects of that authority’s policy and practice, was characterised as ‘in and against the state’ (London to Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980). Thomas (1983) in his classic study of the making of community work in the UK, saw the Community Development Project as a watershed, after which community work lost credibility. It had presented itself as political, offering a Marxist analysis of social problems and a conflict-based approach to tackling them. Although many local authorities continued to employ community development workers during the 1980’s and 1990’s, seeing their role in promoting community self-help and enabling participation in service delivery (AMA, 1993; Broady and Hedley 1989), their deployment has been patchy - often in relation to short-term projects in the regeneration field (see Glen et al., 2004). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, as local authorities themselves have been diagnosed as verging on the moribund, there seems to be a new role emerging for community development work as part of New Labour’s project to modernise local government.

### **Changing local government: participation, performance and partnership**

During the latter decades of the twentieth century, UK local government faced a crisis of public confidence in accountability of systems, calibre of councillors and officers and ability to deliver high quality services. This crisis had been developing since the 1960s, as the local state was increasingly viewed as excessively bureaucratic, distant and parentalist. In response, various New Right reforms were introduced during the 1980's and 1990's, including internal markets, privatisation and systems for consumer feedback, as part of a broader 'new public management' programme (Clarke et al. 2000). Arguably, these reforms further weakened local authorities by reducing their control over delivery, whilst also presenting challenges to the roles of elected councillors (Hansen, 2001; Wilson and Craig, 2002). With the election of New Labour in 1997, 'modernisation' of local government was seen as a priority, within a broader project of modernising public services (DETR, 1998a & b). In one sense, this modernisation project can be viewed as an extension of the new public management, with a continuing focus on organisational efficiency, performance and enhanced accountability. On this reading, modernisation is a programme designed to update public services to meet the expectations of the modern consumer (Newman, 2000, p. 46). However, modernisation can also be understood as a 'discourse that seeks to harness the language and techniques of management reform to a new political agenda' (Clarke et al., 2000, p. 17). According to Newman (2000, p. 47), this political agenda is characterised by an uneasy mix of broad social goals (such as tackling social exclusion) with the economic goal of curtailing public spending. It is about transforming the relationship between the state, market and civil society as part of New Labour's 'Third Way' (see Giddens 1998). As such, it creates inherent tensions and contradictions between the old and new agendas, and between fundamentally different models of the relationship between the state and the individual, depending on whether the individual is seen as citizen or consumer.

This analysis enables three problematic trends to be identified which have been central to informing New Labour's modernisation process:

**1) *The 'democratic deficit'*.** The percentage of the population voting at elections has steadily declined, with this trend often blamed on a perceived lack of control by residents over the issues that matter to them (Pratchett, 2000). Research by Lowndes et al. (2001, p. 452) using focus groups found that there was a 'near-universal feeling ... that their local council thought it "knew best" and was ultimately unresponsive to public concerns'. Policy initiatives to modernise local government structures have made significant changes to councillors' roles (see DETR, 1998a & b; Rao, 2000), including the creation of a cabinet structure (small executive committee) in many authorities, alongside devolving aspects of planning and decision making to a more local level,

using structures such as area committees or forums (see Sullivan, et al., 2001; Taylor and Gaster, 2001).

- 2) ***The 'crisis of implementation'***. Local authorities are finding it increasingly difficult to meet ever-rising demands for high quality yet cost-effective services (Pollitt, 2000). The new public management techniques developed in response to these demands (seen through programmes such as 'Best Value') have led to further policy and practice changes, building on consumerist market principles (Clarke et al., 2000). There has been a near-universal adoption of individualistic mechanisms such as complaints and suggestions schemes, performance management and target setting, as well as widespread use of mechanisms such as public meetings and area forums as a way for local authorities to consult with people from local areas (ODPM, 2002). This has resulted in an inevitable tension between the centralising logic of managerialism and the decentralising strategy of governance (Shaw, 2004, p. 24).
  
- 3) ***The recognition of 'wicked issues'***. The increasing awareness of the complexity of social issues, especially the inter-related ('wicked') nature of issues such as poverty, social exclusion and crime, has led to a pronounced policy emphasis on partnership working between agencies and sectors at all levels (Audit Commission, 2001; Glendinning et al., 2002). These partnership approaches endeavour to address previous criticisms of agencies for dealing with individual aspects of issues in isolation, with limited effectiveness (Audit Commission, 2001). An example of such partnership working is the development of Local Strategic Partnerships as a mechanism for co-ordinating the work of different 'stakeholders', including voluntary and community groups, in many local areas (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2003; Russell, 2001).

### **Policy into practice**

Responses to these trends have been categorised as part of a 'modernising agenda' to increase the responsiveness and effectiveness of decision-making structures. However, in practice, these responses have often comprised largely uncoordinated initiatives and experiments, addressing each of the identified problems in isolation. For example, amended constitutions were introduced to improve political governance arrangements; new public management techniques aimed to improve the economy and delivery of services; and detailed guidance was issued to public agencies on improving partnership working. At a local level, these policy developments are provoking diverse manifestations, with differing degrees of overlap and integration. Despite numerous legislative and guidance measures to promote the benefits of greater connectivity between local services and their

users (Audit Commission, 2003), the current arrangements appear to remain ineffective in terms of service delivery. Indeed, the Audit Commission (2004, p. 2) recently concluded that:

the complex interaction of national programmes, initiatives and targets, and complicated partnership arrangements confuse lines of responsibility and accountability and hamper successful delivery at local level.

This was characterised as a ‘humpty dumpty effect’, with central government agendas fracturing into departmental silos in the process of implementation, and local leaders trying to put them together again. Many local public services remain insufficiently responsive to public concerns. Research suggests that only a few local authorities are engaging in participative strategies (to involve residents in decision-making), rather than just undertaking consultations (collecting opinions) or professional assessments of need (Pratchett, 2000). Indeed, a recent survey of local authorities (ODPM, 2002) found that only a third of respondents felt that public participation had a significant impact on final decision-making. Arguably, addressing this requires securing commitment across local authorities at *all* levels, permeating and penetrating into their very fabric and culture (Audit Commission, 2003).

### **Community development in a modernising local authority: a case study**

It was in the context of these challenges that Durham County Council established a Community Development Team (originally called Community Support Team) in 2000. The Council, located in the north east of England, covers a population of approximately 493,000 and is part of a two-tier structure of local government, together with seven district councils. The introduction of the Community Development Team was presented as part of the modernising local government agenda, stimulated by the New Labour programme to increase confidence in local authorities, making them more transparent, open and trustworthy, and able to play a key role in tackling social exclusion and developing community strategies. The Council had already adopted a Community Development Policy and Strategy in 1999, designed to ‘improve the level of involvement and participation of local people [in the council]’ and to strengthen the council’s community leadership role (Durham County Council, 1999). It was based on four strategic objectives: improving community governance; tackling social exclusion; improving partnerships; building community capacity. The implementation of the strategy was seen as the responsibility of the ‘whole council’ and was premised on an ‘inter-departmental’ approach.

Two new initiatives were introduced alongside the Community Development Policy and Strategy: the Community Development Team, comprising a manager and 10 officers; and Member Area Panels (initially 15, later 16, then seven groupings of councillors based in local areas). The Member Area Panels were designed to promote councillors' involvement in local community activity, facilitate partnership working and inform the council of key local issues. Two of the key roles of the Community Development Officers were to service these Member Area Panels and support councillors in their community leadership role. An early publicity leaflet also described the Team as supporting local groups and partnerships, and acting as a link to help the Council and communities work better together. Whilst initially established in the Social Services Department, the Team moved in 2002 to a newly-formed Chief Executive's Office, giving it a clear corporate role at the heart of the Council.

### **The research**

The next part of the article draws on a three-year formative evaluation of the Community Development Team between July 2001-June 2004. This aimed to assess the contribution of the Team towards achieving the strategic objectives of the Council's Community Development Policy and Strategy; their impact on corporate and inter-departmental working; and their role in increasing the Council's responsiveness to community needs. Data were collected from: quarterly monitoring returns submitted by Community Development Officers; other relevant reports and documentation; observations of Member Area Panel meetings; focus group discussions and individual interviews with all the Community Development Officers, other council officers, councillors and a limited number of members of community groups and staff from other agencies. 46 interviews were conducted at the start of the three-year period and 34 towards the end, with the aim of gaining perceptions of the achievements of the team, challenges faced and examples of good and problematic practice. Three case studies of specific pieces of work were also undertaken. In this article, we will focus specifically on the tensions manifested in the role of the Community Development Officers as indicative of a set of new challenges facing community development workers who have a corporate role in local authorities.

### **The challenges**

The Community Development Team was explicitly established 'to implement the County Council's policy and strategy for community development'. Yet as already noted, this strategy was a 'whole council' project. If the local authority as a whole was to deliver on the themes of the strategy, then its internal structure would have to mirror some of the policies it was trying to implement. Its own

departments needed to work in partnership; the capacity of councillors and officers to engage with local people and community groups needed to be developed; its systems for public and community involvement and participation in planning and service delivery would need changing. The Community Development Team was caught up in this broad and difficult agenda for change. In addition to the traditional role of community development workers as community advocates, builders of local capacity and the link between those in power and local people, their role also involved contributing to making a large, traditional County Council fit to listen to and engage with local communities.

Analysis of the data collected for the evaluation indicated a number of areas of tension, which we discuss below.

**1. *Traditional tensions of the community development role in local authorities.*** As noted earlier, the role of community development workers employed in local government has always had potential for conflicts and dilemmas. We offer just two examples below.

- *Complex accountabilities* - Community development workers have a role both in advocating to the local authority on behalf of the community and to the community on behalf of the local authority, resulting in complex lines of accountability to communities and their employer. An example of these conflicting roles arose as a result of two Community Development Workers supporting a local residents' group in campaigning to retain the school swimming baths in a particular area, following a strategic decision to close a number of baths across the Council area.
- *The issue of visibility* - Community development workers traditionally play a role as behind the scenes facilitators and enablers. Yet if they are to demonstrate what they do, they also need to be visible and to claim some of the credit for successes. One of the case studies involved a Community Development Officer working to set up a community partnership. When the secretary left at a crucial stage, the Community Development Officer briefly took on the role herself, stressing it was a temporary measure. As one of the partnership members commented: 'she kept her distance and stressed that the group must make its own decisions'. This intervention was crucial in establishing the partnership and ensuring its survival, yet few people outside the partnership were aware of it. In interviews, several senior officers and county councillors made the criticism: 'I don't know what the Community Development Officers do', suggesting that their role was either unclear, or irrelevant. Similarly, several requests were made for an analysis of the 'value for money' of the Community Development Team.

**2. *New tensions between the national and local state in 'modernising' local government.***

The constant emergence of prescriptive policy initiatives from central government creates tensions that impact on all local government officers, particularly community development workers.

- *Working to both local and national priorities.* This is recognised as a central tension in the modernising agenda, which demands flexibility, responsiveness, creativity and locally-tailored solutions, whilst also requiring that local government and its partners work to a clear framework of nationally set targets, accountability and audit requirements (Newman, 2000). The performance and audit regimes and the cultures they engender can tie local groups into externally imposed structures and mechanisms designed to meet the agendas of powerful outside agencies (see Hodgson, 2004 on ‘manufactured civil society’). The requirement to set up Local Strategic Partnerships in nationally determined Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, which are monitored and endorsed by the regional central government offices is a case in point. Community Development Officers were centrally involved in supporting and developing community partnerships in some areas and then ensuring their representation on the district-level Local Strategic Partnerships. One of the evaluation case studies was of a proactive piece of work that involved bringing together disparate partners and establishing a community partnership in a neglected area. In this case, the workers were characterised by a senior councillor as ‘pouring oil on troubled waters’ to smooth the relationships between district and county councillors, voluntary and community sector members in order to negotiate appropriate local arrangements. Yet it was the central government requirement for Local Strategic Partnerships that provided the framework, ‘directing’ local residents into a community partnership as a means to having a say in broader decision-making processes through the Local Strategic Partnership.

**3. *The dynamic tension between work with external groups and organisations and internal Council development work.*** There is a constant pull between capacity building with community organisations versus policy development and work towards culture change within the Council.

- *Locally-based community development work versus strategic, policy level work.* The need and demand for work at neighbourhood level and within communities of identity and interest is very great. County Durham is a large geographical area with persisting economic, environmental and social problems as part of its ex-industrial (mining) legacy. Many wards feature highly in the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Although voluntary organisations and district councils employ community development workers and some of our interviewees suggested dangers of overlap, in practice there is potentially a greater demand for community development work than existing



workers can meet. County councillors are also keen to make a difference at local level, and the Community Development Officers could easily use all their time on local work supporting councillors and groups. A worker might be undertaking development work with a youth club in response to a request from a councillor, whilst at the same time playing a key role in revising the County Council's Community Development Policy and Strategy. Whilst this creates a dynamic tension, with the experience of local work lending insights and credibility to the strategic and policy-related work, it also creates problems in prioritising and balancing time.

- *Improving representative democracy (through supporting councillors) whilst developing participatory democracy (through engaging local people and groups in decision-making processes).* One of the Community Development Officers' functions was to support councillors in their community leadership role. In early interviews, several interviewees (Community Development Officers, councillors, officers and workers in outside organisations) expressed concern that Community Development Officers could become assistants to councillors ('members' gophers', in the words of one interviewee). On the other hand, in undertaking their broader-based community development work, and responding directly to the demands of local residents, some thought that they might usurp the councillor's role. In the context of changing expectations of councillors' roles as part of revised governance arrangements, the work of the Community Development Officers could seem threatening, particularly where councillors were less skilled at managing processes of listening to local people, engaging them with local decision-making and handling inevitable diversity and conflict within communities. Furthermore, it could seem to other Council officers that the Community Development Officers were 'politically naïve' or deliberately stirring up opposition to Council policies (as in the case of the Community Development Officers who supported local residents to express their views over the proposed school swimming baths closures).

### **The essentially contested role of the local authority community development worker**

The community development role has always been one of ambiguity and contradiction, but the modernisation process adds further layers of complexity. Alongside the usual problems of measurability, visibility, conflicting loyalties and accountabilities, there is an increased fluidity, changeability and dynamism in the work. Our analysis of Community Development Officers' monitoring returns identified that they were constantly shifting between types of work, which variously covered the four themes of the Community Development Policy and Strategy at both local and strategic levels, as listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Types of work undertaken by Community Development Officers**

Types of work	Relevance to themes of Community Development Policy and Strategy	Level of work
1. Supporting/developing existing community groups.	Building community capacity; tackling social exclusion.	Local
2. Initiating/supporting/developing new groups.	Building community capacity; tackling social exclusion.	Local
3. Initiating/supporting/developing Local Strategic Partnerships.	Improving community governance; improving partnerships.	Local/Strategic
4. Representing Durham County Council on relevant bodies/groups.	Improving partnerships.	Strategic
5. Participating in Member Area Panels.	Improving community governance.	Local/Strategic
6. Supporting members in their community leadership role.	Improving community governance.	Local/Strategic
7. Internal development work.	Improving community governance.	Strategic
8. Responding to one-off queries, attending specific events or researching particular issues.	Any.	Local/Strategic

Given the diversity of work undertaken, it is not surprising that many of the people interviewed were unclear about the role of the Community Development Officers, whose original title of ‘Community Support Officers’ and emphasis on councillor support added to the confusion. A community worker from an outside organisation commented: ‘It seems they have appointed community development workers to these posts, but they are not allowed to practise community work’. These comments reflect the tensions between the relatively narrow role of supporting councillors, Member Area Panels and promoting the County Council agenda to the outside world, with more proactive and open-ended community capacity building and development work. Even in the later interviews, some senior councillors and officers were still describing the work of Community Development Team as ‘woolly’, ‘unclear’ and the product of ‘muddled thinking’.

During this three-year study, the Community Development Team has been engaged in a constant process of rewriting and refining its role – partly to narrow down its enormous brief, yet also in an attempt to gain an elusive clarity. However, these attempts to capture the ‘essence’ of the job may have failed not because of lack of clarity, but because the role of the community development

worker is an essentially contested one. A range of work can come under the heading of ‘community development’, as Table 1 indicates. Different workers at different times may undertake all or some of these types of work in varying combinations. What characterises an activity as ‘community development’ rather than, say, social work or leisure, is not the description of the type of work, but the value base from which it is undertaken.

Organisations that promote community development place great emphasis on values - usually understood as general ethical principles about how the work should be undertaken. The precise configuration of values listed varies between different organisations, but generally these include variations on: social justice, equality and participation/empowerment (see Paulo, 2003; Standing Conference for Community Development, 2001). This focus on values is problematic for many of the so-called ‘stakeholders’ in community development processes. First, some participants (ranging from local residents to local authority officers and members) may not appreciate that the defining feature of community development work is the value base that underpins it, seeking instead to define specific tasks and/or measurable outputs that fit more comfortably with the prevalent new public management culture. Second, each of these values is in itself contestable and contested (Banks, 2003; 2004). Is social justice, for example, about redistributing goods and power in society in terms of need, fair shares for all or desert? Third, all ‘stakeholders’ do not have equal power in the community development process (see Taylor, 2003, pp. 86-139). This refers not just to the lack of power of local residents over decision-making, but also the power to set the agenda – to define the terms of the debate and the interpretation of the values and principles on which the work is based (power that is often less visible and unacknowledged).

The Community Development Team delivered a series of six one-day ‘taster’ training events attended by 27 councillors and 36 council officers based on the Achieving Better Community Development (ABCD) model (see Barr and Hashigan, 2000). This is based on a set of values (‘community empowerment dimensions’) comprising: participation and influence; positive action; community organisation; and personal empowerment. Whilst many participants gained greater awareness of the nature and purpose of community development, and felt better able to use the vocabulary to describe their activities, the abstract nature of the model was problematic for some. As one senior officer said: ‘I don’t know if I’m too keen on models. It can make things remote and unrealistic’. This exemplifies the constant challenge to communicate the nature of community development work in concrete terms, without fixing what is a flexible and continually changing role. It also highlights the difficulties in developing a critical dialogue about the nature of power

and participation in the context of a fundamentally unequal society, despite such a dialogue arguably being crucial to evolving fuller forms of participatory and democratic governance.

## **Concluding comments**

What lessons can we learn from this case study about the role of community development in local authorities in the current climate of change?

- 1) ***Changing the organisational culture and institutional arrangements.*** In many local authorities, organisational cultures and institutional design (especially the responsiveness of decision-making machinery) needs to change. This will involve working with councillors and officers to develop a commitment to listening to and involving local people, as well as a repertoire of skills and approaches to do this effectively. Such approaches require an inter-departmental approach within the council and a partnership approach outside. Whilst it may not necessarily be community development workers who take on this challenging role, there are clear benefits where such challenges are taken seriously. For example, recent research by Lowndes et al. (2002) and Lowndes and Wilson (2001) suggests that the institutional design of local governance is an important factor in mobilising local 'social capital' (formal and informal networks of sociability) in pursuit of public participation in decision-making. Our study of Durham County Council shows that community development workers can be effective facilitators of this process. Furthermore, the focus of community development work on *community* participation may be more likely to succeed in meeting the aims of democratic renewal than approaches based on individualistic forms of public participation, due to their explicit linking of local involvement with strategic decision-making.
- 2) ***Developing more sophisticated consultation and participation.*** Councillors and officers in local authorities need to know when it is appropriate to engage with local people; the difference between individual and community consultation and participation; and to develop appropriate strategies for achieving these. Community development workers can offer a valuable contribution towards developing consultation and participation strategies for local authorities, providing they also ensure that other officers and councillors gain the skills to implement them.
- 3) ***Balancing a corporate role at a strategic level with local level work.*** Community development workers who have a central location in a large local authority (such as Durham County Council's Chief Executive's office) have the opportunity to play a corporate role at a strategic

level, and therefore need to take care not to become too engrossed in grassroots neighbourhood work. It may be more appropriate for workers employed by voluntary organisations and district councils to undertake much of this work. Nevertheless, it is important to engage selectively at a local level in order to work effectively at the interface between the strategic and the local.

4) *Recognising and holding tensions and ambiguities*. The work of community development workers as networkers, catalysts and connectors (Gilchrist, 2004), constantly moving between roles and types of work, may not be well understood by councillors, officers or even local residents. There is a need for workers to accept the tensions and ambiguity in their roles, whilst developing a reflexivity that subjects their own knowledge and value claims to critical analysis (Taylor and White, 2000, p. 35). This is something with which community development workers are familiar, as the traditional tensions and dilemmas in the role provoke critical analysis (see Banks, 2003; Filkin and Naish, 1982; Kenny, 2002; Mendes, 2002). The ‘modernising’ agenda, which requires measurable outputs and outcomes according to pre-determined criteria, whilst also calling for flexibility, innovation and locally tailored solutions, arguably stimulates an even greater need for critical reflexivity. A senior councillor (cabinet member) described the role of the Community Development Team as follows:

I think they have been put in a difficult position, recruited to a role the County Council was not ready for, facing enormous expectations from members and meeting resistance from some parts of the Council, encountering differing attitudes amongst officers.

This same councillor spoke of the Community Development Team as ‘provoking some inevitable tension as a catalyst for change’. Whilst this ‘discomfort’ was perceived as negative by some, for others it was an inevitable consequence of change. A senior officer described the Community Development Team as the ‘grit in the oyster’. This metaphor goes beyond others in common use for community development work in local authorities such as ‘oiling the wheels of participation’ (Booth, 1997). It captures both the discomfort and the invisibility, whilst indicating potential for the grit to turn into a pearl.

Some of the most effective work undertaken by the Community Development Team in Durham County Council happened at the interface between the local and strategic, between the internal and external work and between the different themes of the Community Development Policy and Strategy (community governance, capacity building and so on). To narrow down and limit the role

of the Team would arguably have reduced its effectiveness. This leaves the workers and the local authority to handle the essential ambiguity of the community development role, making it harder to measure precise outputs and outcomes and to argue ‘value for money’ in the new managerialist culture. Yet holding the tensions in the role as a creative space in an otherwise over-regimented bureaucratic setting is essential for this Team (and others like them) if they are to take forward the democratic renewal part of the modernising local government agenda, whilst at the same time subjecting this New Labour political project to critique and being a source of critical reflexivity within the local authority itself. This is a difficult task to achieve; as Barnett (2003, p. 60) argues, the ability of local government to be on the side of civil society can be achieved only fleetingly, as can the generation of the capacity for its own self-critique. Nevertheless, the process of struggle is important and community development workers can clearly play a key role, enabling local people to engage critically and constructively based on their own analyses of the tensions and dilemmas resulting from participation in policy-making and service delivery, whilst also engaging councillors in developing a living local democracy.

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