

Double Devolution

The recent New Start conference on effective research in regeneration reawakened what for me has been a longstanding question:

- ◆ Can we make 'research' an active agent for regeneration and community empowerment?

The 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' local government white paper sets us a framework for organising our thinking about research and its role in regeneration, in particular section 2: '*Responsive services and empowered communities*'. This proposes a new Best Value duty on Councils to inform, consult, involve and devolve, and the second part of the 'double devolution' deal first offered by David Milliband:

- ◆ Neighbourhood management
- ◆ Community Call for Action (CCfA) and local petitions
- ◆ Community management of assets / services
- ◆ Neighbourhood Charters / Neighbourhood Councils

So what challenges does this new framework pose to those wishing to use research as a 'delivery tool' for regeneration and empowerment?

First of all, if we want better information, we need to find out why the public services find it so hard to communicate with the general public. There are a number of factors. First, **language** – we either need a translation service or to re-learn how 'normal people' speak. Where does it start to go wrong? As young people enter a working life in the public services, somewhere along the line so many lose the ability to think and talk like the rest of the community. How do we put it right? This needs research! Another issue is **culture** – do we really think like the customer or still like the provider. The thinking is in the language, for example the notorious term 'hard to reach'. For many local people, the person most 'hard to reach' is an officer who will listen to your problem and get it sorted! We also talk about 'access to services' again as providers – often how to access and use our system rather than re-thinking the system so it is intrinsically more accessible. This gets reflected in much of the 'information' the public services issue. Is it essentially propaganda? Is the **purpose** at heart just 'here's how you can /should use our product'? How far should information go beyond this? Who is brave enough to disseminate information showing their service is failing? In summary, language, culture and purpose will need to change radically.

To help create 'Responsive Services' a much greater emphasis will be needed on consult and involve. There is a key design issue here, to move from services designed for the producer to ones for the user / consumer. For example:

- ◆ Help people define what they want (citizen goals)
- ◆ Help them design how it will feel (service delivery spec)
- ◆ 'Personalisation' of delivery
- ◆ Helping people have more control in commissioning

The white paper asks for the provision of prompt information on the quality and performance of local services. However,

- ◆ What information is meaningful to people?
- ◆ What information allows people to scrutinise value and performance?
- ◆ What information leads / empowers people to influence the service?

Research answers are needed to help deliver on this aim.

Turning to the main pillars of the white paper's devolution framework, again a stronger and more focussed role for research emerges.

a) Devolve – neighbourhood management. Here a community role is needed in:

- ◆ Identifying needs and local priorities, community audit
- ◆ Developing Neighbourhood Action Plans
- ◆ Prioritising what gets done (Delivery Plans)
- ◆ Commissioning services
- ◆ Evaluating service effectiveness, scrutiny of local performance
- ◆ Measuring accountability and governance

b) Devolve – Community Call for Action. Councillors can ‘serve’ this notice on service providers where problems and issues remain unresolved, but so long as they don’t engage in ‘vexatious’ misuse of the power. But this too raises some key research questions:

- ◆ What are the key unresolved issues for residents?
- ◆ Why are they perceived to be important? Unresolved?
- ◆ Where has the established system fallen down?
- ◆ What can / should the intervention of Councillors achieve?
- ◆ What do people feel is reasonably termed ‘vexatious’? Anything that is not in line with what the services will deliver anyway? Anything that implies changing pre-determined priorities and spending allocations?

c) Devolve – community ownership and management. The political consensus favours this road but we currently know too little about:

- ◆ What people want to own and manage? What do they want the public services to own and manage?
- ◆ Preserve unviable facilities scheduled for closure? [set up to fail]
- ◆ Reach higher service standards
- ◆ Local pride of ownership
- ◆ What skills / competences / commitments are needed / there now?

d) Devolve – Charters and Neighbourhood Councils. Here again local community research has a major role to play:

- ◆ Aspirational planning – what is the uniting bond of the local ‘mission’
- ◆ What is the governance aspiration (resident ‘power’ enmeshed in constitution)
- ◆ How would people exercise their power – engagement, elective accountability, influence?

Summing up, we need to ask ourselves some probing questions on what is meant by ‘Effective’ Research in Regeneration:

- ◆ A device for achieving clearer, evidence based community / neighbourhood focus?
- ◆ Helping achieve better performance on ‘inform, consult, involve, devolve’?
- ◆ A means of achieving more responsive services?
- ◆ A proactive device for positively realigning local power relations?
- ◆ ‘Knowledge is power’ - research as an instrument of change? Are we up for this?

This article is a shortened version of Dr Pocock’s workshop paper, a powerpoint version of which can be found on the ‘knowledge hub’ page of the website www.m-e-l.co.uk