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NEIGHBOURHOOD WORKING IN POLICING

Neil Chappell

I began my PhD, title 'Doing Community Safety through 'locality working': A Case Study of the new localism in practice' in January 2011 and am currently in the early stages of creating a literature review. The intent of the research I am conducting is to examine how neighbourhood working in Plymouth is done with particular regard to the three themes of community safety, participatory democracy and networked governance. Neighbourhood working originates from practices of locality work and multi-agency working initiatives which were formally established under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. The emphasis on networks of control, of social inclusion and exclusion, and the desire to bring voluntary sector organisations into the fold of a community safety paradigm reflects noted trends of late modernity in the increasingly networked governance of the social (Garland, 2001; Foucault, 1977).

Additionally, this move toward decentralised governance on a local level – with more active engagement by the public in the management of their affairs in the form of neighbourhood meetings – reflects an attempt to recast the relationship between citizens and the state. This change is referred to as participatory democracy and is intended to address the deficit of social capital which is also felt to be symptomatic of late modernity (Putnam, 2000; Halpern, 2005) where, increasingly, dislocation in patterns of work and home life leave many erstwhile communities to consist of little more than what Jock Young described as 'lightly engaged strangers'. However, there is also the potential for conflict between participatory democracy and more established forms of accountability, either by older representative democracy or via bureaucratic audit and process. These potential tensions and how they are resolved

will produce substantial changes in the operation of local services, including policing, which this research will examine and document.

Whilst the intention of this project is to document the latest changes in neighbourhood working in Plymouth, it is important to recognise that these ways of 'doing localism' exist, sometimes uneasily, alongside previous working arrangements and codes of practice. The new participatory democracy sits alongside traditional working practices such as police operational independence, the differing ethos and guiding principles and practices of partnership agencies, and, crucially, the older concept of representative democracy as realised through local councillors and political wards. What this means is that such tensions and issues that do arise will be relayed both horizontally, across the partnership agencies involved, and vertically, as the 'new' participatory democracy impacts upon older more established hierarchies of control and accountability (Stoker and Wilson, 2004). Additionally, these changes in the methods of local governance will inevitably interact with the informal networks of social control and the creation of social capital in civic society.

In considering the implications of neighbourhood policing for civic society, it is necessary to discuss these with regard to two particular conceptions of policing. First, there is the Aldersonian conception of the role of the police as community leaders, acting as both the servants of the public and the guarantors of safety but also seeking to reinvigorate informal networks of social policing and self-governance within the community (Savage: 2007). Against this must be weighed the potential for the new networks of neighbourhood governance to be utilised by the public in a consumerist fashion. Whilst it is important to note that the intent of neighbourhood working may not be to articulate or enhance this relationship between local service providers and the public, it is necessary to place neighbourhood working alongside trends in service provision which have accentuated the drive toward consumer focus. For example, the Police Reform Act 2002 and the Police and Crime Act 2009 contained many elements ostensibly geared toward consumer focus, including improved rates of detection, response times and the policing pledge (Savage, 2007).

The danger of such consumer-focus in neighbourhood working is the potential for existing inequalities to be reinforced by such a move (Andrews and Turner, 2006). Put another way, the existing capability for those with privileged knowledge of the systems of governance and the resources – the self-styled 'sharp elbowed middle class' – are at a distinct advantage in navigating the system to achieve optimal

outcomes from local services. Moreover, such a move toward a consumerist view of local service provision and the networks of governance which go with it does not empower individuals or communities to participate more actively in how their community is run. In choosing between potential preferences by the consumer, there is a danger that this is artificially identified with a true accountability from the police, council, and others engaged in neighbourhood working and community governance (Andrews and Turner, 2006; Halpern, 2005).

The potential danger at the other end of the spectrum lies in a lack of community participation in the existing structures of neighbourhood working, governance and accountability. In these circumstances, the position of those tasked with making neighbourhood working a success – the police, the council, and the councillors – effectively occupies a position sitting above a complacent or apathetic civil society and is tasked with neighbourhood management. The issue here is that whilst all these services have a function to serve and manage the communities of Plymouth, they are also, as public servants, capable of shaping the expectations citizens can have of local services and public life (Lipsky: 1980). The danger therefore is that meetings which exist to govern communities above civil society may grow complacent in their duties to that society or fail to locate and engage with those groups out there who might be difficult to reach or have specific needs. Additionally, if community engagement with neighbourhood working is lacking, then one of the core concepts of community safety and crime reduction is undermined: that is, the potential for social crime prevention with the inclusion of the community and the ability to both gather intelligence and establish the criminogenic needs for that area (Gilling, 2007; Hughes, 2007).

With this in mind, the research will examine a cross-section of some of the 40 neighbourhoods in Plymouth with the objective of examining a sample of those neighbourhoods. This sample will not be representative in nature but will instead seek to examine the differences between neighbourhoods with differing characteristics and fundamentally dissimilar criminogenic needs. The intent behind this approach is to examine how the policy of neighbourhood working reacts to such differences in environments and is interpreted on the ground by differing teams of management. Additionally, it will examine how civil society in these neighbourhoods strengthens or undermines the new form of governance represented by neighbourhood working. To date, I have attended four neighbourhood working

meetings in various locations across the city as a preliminary step to establish which areas I shall look at in greater detail. This will inform which neighbourhoods are suitable for case study and help identify key stakeholders for interview.

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