

COMMUNITY PLANNING: RIGHT SENTIMENTS, WRONG APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Executive is determined to reform the way local government works. Government is keen to ensure that local councils and the statutory public bodies they work with better co-ordinate their activities. This is popularly articulated by Government through its use of the term 'promoting joined-up government' (Lloyd 1997). Ensuring better co-ordination, and thus achieving greater financial efficiency, is, however, only one dimension of this policy ambition. Government is also keen to ensure that local government engages with the 'community' itself in developing the policies which will affect them. This element of policy is seen to be one part of a wider drive to secure the democratic renewal of Scotland. To achieve both these ends, Government has promoted and encouraged the development of a new planning tool for local government, namely Community Planning.

Community planning is described by its proponents as providing 'a framework for closer and more constructive working which will engage and provide a better service to communities' (MacDonald and Geddes 1998, p.3). Scottish local authorities, in parallel with similar moves in England and Wales, are to be encouraged to both provide for, and promote, the economic, social and environmental well-being of the communities they serve (Community Planning Working Group 1998). The overall planning of these broad community well-being strategies, within individual local authority areas, is to be the responsibility of Community Plans. As such these plans

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appear to be designed to act as a bridge or interface between the 'bottom-up' community responses to tackling community well-being issues, and the 'top-down' broad policy agenda set by Government.

Local government has, since its inception, been expected to play a key role in enhancing local economic prospects and has long had planning powers to protect and enhance the quality of the local environment. Further, local government has also always perceived a role for itself in addressing issues of poverty, now subsumed under the heading of social exclusion. So while Community Planning does not, in itself, represent anything new in terms of the tasks to be tackled, it does represent a more explicit acknowledgement that a range of actors, and not just local government itself, is now expected to co-ordinate their skills and expertise to addressing these issues.

At present there is no statutory basis for this approach. Both in Scotland and in England and Wales there is a desire to avoid being prescriptive about the approach adopted (Community Planning Working Group 1998; Local Government Association 1998). This appears to be contradicted, however, by the stated expectation that, in the short term, 'the Scottish Parliament should legislate to provide a statutory basis for community planning' (Community Planning Working Group 1998). A similar ambition is recorded in the context of England and Wales (Local Government Association 1998, para 55).

In light of its potential significance for local government and its future mode of operation, an analysis was undertaken of several pilot community plans in order to see how well they addressed the two broad policy objectives set for them. The first aspect examined was how well Community Plans promote partnership working with other bodies, whether in the public, private or voluntary sectors. The second was to look at what these documents reveal about the changing status of local government. Does Community Planning help address the perceived democratic deficit in local government, and does it act to enhance local government as the legitimate voice for the local community?

To set the context for this evaluation it is first necessary to define the terminology used to describe this policy initiative. Setting down the various definitions associated with the terms planning and community is critical because one's understanding determines expectations. It is also worth spending time outlining the broader policy context from which this local government initiative has emerged and within which it is designed to operate. Through detailing the range of changes which local government has experienced over the last two decades an insight will be gained into the thinking which underpins the development of Community Planning.

DEFINING PLANNING AND COMMUNITY

The selection of the term Community Planning is peculiar given that both words reflect multiple meanings, which are also highly contested. In a sense the juxtaposition of these words is contradictory, with the term 'planning' implying the imposition of ideas from above, while 'community' conveys a grass roots, or 'bottom up' approach to policy making. By outlining the range of meanings associated with both terms it will quickly become evident that their selection to describe this policy development runs the risk of throwing up a range of misunderstandings and false expectations.

The traditional view of planning comes from the immediate post-war era where town planning, as it was termed, was considered to be 'the art and the science of ordering the land-uses and siting of the buildings and communications routes so as to secure the maximum level of economy, convenience and beauty' (Keeble 1969). Post-war Master Planning represented an ideal, and this was best articulated through the utopian planning associated with the construction of New Towns (Robertson 1998). The prime focus for these planning exercises was economic and environmental, although there was also a strong social engineering dimension given the desire to create new communities through the creation of New Towns. 'Environmental determinism' and the creation of 'community spirit' were considered to be closely intertwined (Bell and Newby 1978)

Modern planning pundits would now argue that planning should not necessarily be defined as a subject, concerned with a range of identifiable physical land-use topics or design policies, but rather it should be seen as a process, or method. Planners within a local government context, over the last 25 years, have primarily become strategic managers who, through their professional training, were able to take the broader vision, seeing the various connections between a diverse range of issues and topics (Greed 1993). It is no surprise then that planners now play key roles in the corporate management of local government, and hold similar positions within the panoply of Government agencies that have appeared over the last 30 years.

Planning has also always had a social dimension. As Broady (1968) so succinctly put it 'planning is about people'. However it would also be true to say that the planners have traditionally had a very limited view of social issues, and generally do not think in terms of the social implications of their actions (Pahl 1977; Greed 1993). Most land-use activities generate social consequences which require proper consideration. It is also the case that in satisfying the needs of one group within society the preferred solution may well be at the expense of other groups. The development of suburbs, for

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example, generated the need for improved access to these peripheral residential locations. For those who happened to reside along the chosen routeways the creation of the required trunk routes produced many negative consequences.

More recently, that is over the last 25 years, the social aspects of planning have taken on developing anti-poverty strategies, with Strathclyde Regional Council's **Social Strategy for the Eighties** being a well known example (SRC 1983). In this case planners were instrumental in developing a corporate anti-poverty strategy that would influence the Council's service delivery operations. This was, however, an unmitigated failure given that individual departments opted to ignore the negative consequences of their decisions (Smart 1991).

Planning - whether dealing with land-use issues, or as a management tool for local government - is clearly an overtly political activity, operating within a highly politicised environment. How one chooses to define planning - whether part physical land-use, part social engineering, part managerial - influences what you expect to come from that activity. The term planning has a variety of meanings and expectations. Clearly, given the loaded and imprecise meaning of the phrase it should only be used to describe an activity when it is accompanied by clear descriptions and qualifications.

Community is also an equally, if not a more overtly, contested and multi-dimensional descriptor. Community is viewed within sociology as having three distinct realms, community as locality, community as sentiment and community as a relationship or network (Lee and Newby 1983). The last reflects the social linkages that exist when a group of people share similar beliefs, or engage in similar activities. The most obvious may be religious orders or particular sectional interests, such as those articulated by the so-called 'scientific community'. Such communities of interest can be extremely powerful social entities through their cultivation of political or professional power structures.

Community as a locality represents a more common conception of the term. In this sense community equates with a spatial unit, a neighbourhood or district. The use of the term community to describe an administrative unit is also universal, although the scale of unit can vary markedly. Yet these definitions do not imply anything about the social relationships that exist within a spatial defined community. A particular community may not display either solidarity or communion, which is likely to be more evident under the network conception. Any conception of a single unitary community is, as a consequence, grossly misleading as there is a variety of interests present

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within any spatially defined community which do not add up to a clearly demarcated whole. Classic sociological illustrations of this are provided by Frankenberg (1957) and Littlejohn (1964) amongst others. That said, there is a role for location within a conception of community (Day and Murdoch 1993).

The notion of community also encapsulates sentiment, in which nostalgia features strongly. Both 'community sentiment' and 'a sense of community' are strongly evocative terms, which tend to hark back to a 'golden age' which may or may not have existed. This is especially strongly felt in so-called working class communities whose perceived solidarity came from a shared experience of poverty (Young and Willmot 1971). It is, however, important to separate feeling and sentiment in that they are separate entities. Community feeling is after all not necessarily based on sentiment.

More recently this aspect of community has taken on another dimension, namely that of prescription. Currently there is a great deal of discussion of re-inventing community as a prescription to regenerate social structures that are thought to have been lost. Here sentiment does play a part. The so-called communitarian agenda (Etzioni 1998), which has amassed a strong political following in the USA, has also had an influence on recent New Labour thinking. The White Paper entitled **Modern Local Government**, for example, discusses a variety of mechanisms that could be employed by local government to reinvent itself as 'community leader', providing the community with a voice on social and environmental issues affecting their localities (DETR 1998a). Local government is now expected to take on the roles of enabler, advocate, guardian and steward of their particular local community (LGA 1999).

Community is, therefore, another strongly contested term which covers a number of distinct and separate meanings. Again when the term is used it is important to define exactly what meaning is being employed. Where the two terms 'community' and 'planning' are used in conjunction the potential to misunderstand or misrepresent is greatly enhanced.

Before moving on to discuss the changing nature of local government, and how Community Planning ties into these changes, it is worth noting that Community Planning has a previous heritage. Public participation has not been a particularly obvious strength of British local government (Cullingworth and Nadin 1994). Yet how best to engage with the public had become a critical concern of the planning profession in the late 1960s when, as a result of substantial redevelopment activity throughout Britain, there was a great deal of soul searching as to whose interests the planning system

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sought to serve. Exactly who the planners planned for was another challenging question. The best articulation of these concerns is provided by the Skeffington Report (1969) which was established 'to consult and report on the best methods ... of securing the participation of the public at the formative stage in the making of development plans for their area'. Although its recommendations were rather obvious - encouraging planners to provide better information and publicity about the planning process, and supporting the adoption of a very timid form of local participation - the report did stimulate a great deal of discussion and debate. Developing participation strategies was conceived as one means of ensuring disenfranchised communities were able to play a part in deciding upon the future of their area. For example, one consequence of this debate was the creation of Glasgow's community-based housing association movement which has been instrumental in renewing many older tenemental neighbourhoods (Robertson 1997).

What Skeffington also touched on, but failed to develop, was the idea that 'public participation would be little more than an artificial abstraction if it becomes identified solely with planning procedures, rather than with the broader interests of people'. This clearly had major implications for the management of all local government services at the time, but notions of public participation in education, cleansing, housing and social work were then non-existent, and even today could not be described as well developed. Just as critically, Skeffington touched on the political implications of these changes, noting that participation implies a transfer of some power from local councillors to groups of electors. There has always been a conflict between concepts of popular participation and those of traditional representative democracy. This is as true today as it was in the late 1960s. Overall, the Skeffington report attempted to promote participation as a means of providing a small degree of consumer control over professional and bureaucratic power. It did, however, fail to appreciate just how resistant local government bureaucracy and political power would be to supporting this development. Whether Community Planning draws from this history and its valuable lessons will be examined in the review of published plans later in this article.

COMMUNITY PLANNING: THE POLICY CONTEXT

The introduction of Community Planning comes at a time of deep anxiety on the part of local government. To a degree the development of Community Planning reflects that insecurity, in that it attempts to address the operational and strategic changes that have affected local government over the last two decades (Stewart and Leach 1994; LGMB 1993). Further, local government

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has also had to contend with a democratic legitimacy problem, in that the electoral appeal of local government has declined markedly as reflected in the extremely low turn-outs at elections.

Operational change

The nature of local government's relationship with central government has dramatically changed over this period. As local government power has weakened, the power of central government has increased (Stewart 1989; Stoker 1996). One illustration of this has been the rapid growth of specialist agencies, directly accountable to central government, which have taken over responsibility for tasks previously the sole remit of local government (Stoker 1994). This, in turn, added to the fraught relations which have existed for the last twenty years between central and local government (Stoker 1994). There has also been a corresponding growth in both private and voluntary organisations who, from originally filling the gaps in local authority service provision, have increasingly gone on to take over mainstream services (LeGrand 1991; Midwinter 1995). Many of these new voluntary bodies have developed direct regulatory and funding arrangements with central government, rather than local authorities, through the same specialist agencies. Scottish Homes and the voluntary housing movement provides one illustration.

Local government has also had to contend with significant changes in its financing. When once it could rely on almost half of its annual income coming from the rates, giving it some degree of independence from central government, Scottish local government now finds itself accounting for just 15 per cent of its income from domestic Council Tax sources (Midwinter 1995). At the same time central government has been reducing the overall level of resources going to local government, with ever increasing funding going to its agencies (Midwinter, Keating and Mitchell 1991).

As a consequence of these financial and operational changes, local government's mode of operation has dramatically altered. From essentially adopting a social democratic model of welfare, whereby local government directly provided the vast majority of social welfare services, it has evolved, albeit slowly and reluctantly, into a service purchaser (LeGrand 1991). New Public Management is the term used to describe this separation between the purchaser and provider of services (SOLACE 1994; Midwinter and McGarvey 1995). When the late Nicholas Ridley stated that local government should only 'be required' to meet a few times a year to open the tenders, his comments met with derision. Now they no longer appear outrageous, for what

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had originally been seen as a radical part of the Conservative Government's ideological agenda has now become mainstream.

Strategic change

The operational changes noted above now ensure that local government, rather than being the sole strategic decision maker for public service delivery within their particular locality, with a broad-ranging departmental structure to implement the agreed strategy, is now more likely to rely on a broad range of distinct Government agencies and voluntary bodies to achieve these ends. Each of these bodies themselves will have their own priorities and objectives, detailed in either strategic statements or business plans. The difficulty for local government is that it needs to ensure these various plans and associated resources are properly utilised to meet its own strategic objectives. It is this task which has ensured the greatly increased use of what is termed 'partnership working' (Hastings 1996).

Local government's ability to plan strategically has also been severely hampered by the ill-conceived, and overtly politically motivated, re-organisation of Scottish local government by the previous Conservative administration (SLAMC 1994). This saw Regional and District Councils replaced by single-tier authorities of markedly varying sizes, in terms both of territory and population (Jackson and Lewis 1996). Now Clackmannan, Scotland's smallest authority, has the same range of powers as the substantially larger Highland or Borders Councils. The previous arrangement had come into being twenty years previously, when the regional tier of government was introduced following the recommendations of the Wheatley Commission (Royal Commission on Local Government in Scotland 1969). In order to deliver certain services such as education, water and sewerage, social work and strategic land-use planning a certain scale of operation was felt to be necessary. The creation of regional-scale local government also represented the last piece of the strategic planning jigsaw which had its roots in the regional plans of the late 1940s and early 1950s (Robertson 1998). The abolition of regional government effectively destroyed strategic and service planning at the regional scale, and with it the post-war corporate consensus which had long been at the core of Scottish local government.

One illustration of this complexity is revealed by the new arrangements for strategic land-use planning. Strategic plans are now administered through a range of different arrangements. In Borders and Highlands, for example, the new single tier authorities take responsibility. In the more populous areas such as metropolitan Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen joint committees made up of individual councillors, representing their individual authorities,

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have these responsibilities. The support arrangements also differ markedly with, for example, the Glasgow and Clyde Valley Structure Plan team having a permanent staff of 15, in contrast to Edinburgh and Lothian where there are no permanent staff.

The effectiveness of these new strategic land-use planning arrangements is also questionable. Local planning decisions throughout central Scotland would indicate that the power of the previous Structure Plans to restrict housing development on the urban periphery has been seriously undermined. Critically, the previous Regional Council's ability to call in local planning decisions that appeared to be at variance with the Structure Plan has been lost. For example, both Lanarkshire authorities have for several years been allowing substantial levels of new housing development in locations close to Glasgow. Previously the Regional Council would call in such approvals, but now that is not possible. Objections by Glasgow that these decisions breach the agreed Structure Plan can easily be overruled as Glasgow represents but one of the eight member authorities. It is also unrealistic to expect the employees of the Structure Plan team to challenge the local planning decisions of the individual authorities who, in effect, employ them. A similar pattern is also evident in relation to retail activity. Recent and planned developments in Glasgow would also undermine the previous Regional Council's desire to focus retail development on Glasgow's city centre. Concern about such development has also been voiced by East Dunbartonshire and East Renfrewshire. Edinburgh and Midlothian also exhibit similar problems. All of this implies a serious weakening of strategic land-use planning. Further, it also illustrates the limited control the Scottish Executive can exercise over such matters, given current administrative arrangements.

Scottish local government also awaits, with some trepidation, the full consequences that will fall from the creation of the Scottish Parliament. Given the Parliament's powers to determine the role, function and funding of local government there is currently much speculation as to what the likely repercussions will be. There is a great worry, in many parts of Scotland, that the vacuum created by the loss of the strategic scale of service planning may be filled by the Scottish Executive, thus further diluting local government's role and function (McFadden 1997). Already there has been talk of the Scottish Executive taking over responsibility for Fire and Police services - although the proposals for the Police seem to have been rejected for the time being - and similar arrangements have been mooted for education.

There is also clear evidence that the Scottish Executive will require to squeeze local government if it is to achieve any of its own ambitions, given

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that over forty per cent of the Scottish Executive's budget of £16 billion is taken up by local government expenditure (Scottish Executive 1999). Expected adjustments to the Barnett Formula will also add considerably to this pressure (Kay 1999). With the Scottish Parliament expected to undergo a six per cent cut in resources, in real terms, over its first three years of existence (McAteer 1998), it is local government which can expect to receive the most marked cutbacks. Government expenditure limits have ensured that actual growth is limited to 2.5 per cent. Further, a one per cent rise in local authority expenditure, above that agreed with the Scottish Executive, would require a seven per cent rise in Council Tax given that 85 per cent of total Council spending lies with central government.

Community voice

Local government, desperate to redefine its role and purpose, has embraced the notion that it represents the sole legitimate 'voice' for the community (Sinclair 1997; Easton 1999). However, with local government elections producing such low turnouts, the legitimacy of this statement can only go so far. Perhaps the MacIntosh Commission, set up to examine local government's relationship to the Parliament, by recommending that proportional representation be introduced for local government elections will, in part, overcome part of the problem (MacIntosh Commission 1999).

That said, there is still clearly a need to develop other means of engaging with the 'community' on specific service-delivery and planning issues. It is generally accepted that there is a need to enhance public participation and involvement in the work of local government, but how this is to be achieved is subject to much debate (Labour Party 1995; DETR 1998b). New Labour 'think tanks' such as Demos and the IPPR have been attempting to address the perceived democratic legitimacy problem. Hence, current discussions about the role and function of citizens panels, advisory referendums, focus groups and users surveys are common both in Scotland and south of the border. Techniques of information gathering, learning and exchange are seen to be critical to enhancing this public participation agenda (DETR 1998b). Such desire to facilitate participation and user involvement is certainly not new, as was noted earlier (Skeffington 1969; Beresford and Croft 1993). Yet it is not at all clear that this previous experience has helped shape these new participatory tools. A critical omission, as in the case of Skeffington, is the lack of recognition that differential power relations exist within any participatory context. This is a theme which will be returned to later.

It is little surprise then that the joint CoSLA/Scottish Office Working Group on Community Planning (Community Planning Working Group 1998), the

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recent Government publication **Local Democracy and Community Leadership** (DETR 1998b) and the Local Government Association publication **Community Leadership and Planning** (Local Government Association 1998) collectively reveal deep unease about the future role and function of local government. Little wonder they also express a strong desire to ensure local government develops new means to engage more fully with the public it seeks to serve.

Given the changes outlined in the mode of local government there is clearly a need to try to tie together, at the local scale, the mass of strategic and operational planning generated by the various partner bodies operating within their administrative boundaries. There is clearly a need for 'joined-up' local government, and Community Plans are viewed as one means of achieving this end. It is also the case that such co-ordination may result in a rationalisation of service provision. Given the financial pressure on local government and the Scottish Executive such co-ordination holds certain financial attractions. It is also the case that with local government leading on the Community Plan process it can try to ensure that the various partner agencies better support the local authorities' agenda for economic, social and environmental well-being. This ambition perhaps goes some way in explaining the stress which has been laid on the need for Community Plans to replicate the Regional Report structure which was used to set the priorities for the incoming regional tier of local government in 1975 (see Sinclair 1997; Lloyd and Illsley 1999). Regional Reports were to lead to corporate planning, and some commentators appear to view Community Plans in a similar light, being management tools to enable effective 'partnership' working. Where exactly the users of these services, and the public in general, fit in to this planning process is not clear. While the promotional literature expresses concern about encouraging public participation in developing Community Plans, guidance on the methods employed to achieve it is somewhat muted.

AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY PLANS

Community Planning seeks to address two issues. First, it attempts to put local government back in the driving seat in terms of the strategic planning of services within their local area. Local government, in partnership with the range of Government agencies operating within their locality, is expected to develop a common strategic vision through jointly producing a Community Plan. Each party should then agree the action needed to pursue that vision over a five to ten year period. Second, the Community Plan is expected to provide the means to open a dialogue between local government, its partners and the 'community'. What is not clear is whether such dialogue should help shape the plan or provide comment on it once it has been presented. Given it

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is felt that the process of producing the plan is as important as the eventual product, active involvement at an early stage with service-users, citizens and the community would appear to be preferable (Community Planning Working Group 1998). This, after all, is considered to be one of the new means to enhance local democracy.

The Community Plans examined were four out of the five pathfinders, those that acted as pilots for this initiative, namely **Vision of Edinburgh: Towards a City Plan for the Next Five Years** (City of Edinburgh Council 1998), **Stronger Together: A Community Plan for South Lanarkshire** (South Lanarkshire Council 1998), **Our Community Plan for Highland: The Natural Place to be** (Highland Council 1999) and **Working Together: A Community Plan for the District of Stirling** (Stirling Council 1999). In addition **Creating Tomorrow's Glasgow: The Glasgow Alliance Strategy** (Glasgow Alliance 1999) was included for, although not technically a Community Plan, in that the local authority was not the initiator of the process, the participants, structure and approach mirror the other Community Plans almost exactly.

Given that these documents were working to a prescribed format it is little surprise they display such similarity. Each sets down its own 'vision', and then proceeds to put forward an agreed 'strategy' to ensure this 'vision' is realised. The elements that make up the agreed strategy are then outlined under certain key headings, with individual partner responsibilities for implementation listed. Further, key 'measures or milestones' on which to assess progress on individual strategy components are also provided. In addition each plan was to cover a five to ten year time period, be annually reviewed, be 30-40 pages in length and be jointly published (Community Planning Working Group 1998).

The vision statements are predictable, uninspiring and limited. Stirling wishes to ensure that their citizens enjoy a good quality of life, South Lanarkshire aims to improve the quality of life for all, while Highland opts for a prosperous and dynamic future for the Highlands. This is taken a bit further by Edinburgh which visualises a capital city of international standing, where institutions work together for the benefit of all, every citizen is able to participate and enrich the life of their community and the city as a whole, and which has harnessed the benefits of the information age. Glasgow adopts a more pragmatic vision wishing to see a competitive city attracting and retaining jobs, people and opportunities.

In relation to the stated strategies advocated to achieve such visions each document makes mention of enhancing 'employment' and 'prosperity',

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addressing 'social inclusion' and ensuring future developments are 'environmentally sustainable'. That said, the emphasis on sustainability was less strongly expressed in the Glasgow and South Lanarkshire documents. Glasgow did talk about sustainability being a guiding principle, but saw this as an economic development rather than an environmental issue. Also it was not made explicit how sustainability would influence the working of all partners. In keeping with the Community Plans' service-sector focus, mention was also made of 'education' or 'information and learning', 'health' or creating a 'caring community'. The focus here was on educational policies and those covered by community care. While Glasgow and Edinburgh majored on education, and information technology, the others did not accord it such high status. 'Community well-being', or 'community safety', the synonym for crime, also featured but was not as prominent in either the Glasgow or Stirling plans.

There were differences. Edinburgh included a specific mention of accommodating economic growth from major development projects, as well as meeting the challenges of being a dynamic European capital city. Glasgow not surprisingly opted to make 'Housing, Neighbourhood and Environment' a priority, given the appalling condition of so much of the city's housing fabric. Stirling uniquely gave a key focus to improving services and enhancing local democracy. Highland and South Lanarkshire displayed no uniqueness in relation to their strategic ambitions.

These variations, and similarities, are very much a function of the interests and priorities represented in the groups which produced the plans. The key partners were usually the local authority, the local enterprise company, the health board, Scottish Homes and the Police. Perhaps the lack of priority given to 'safe communities' by Glasgow may reflect the fact that the Police were not represented. That said, Glasgow had consulted them, along with Strathclyde European Partnership, the Employment Service and Strathclyde Passenger Transport Authority. Those that had Scottish Natural Heritage and/or tourist board representation (namely, all except Glasgow and South Lanarkshire) placed a stronger emphasis upon environmental sustainability. Edinburgh involved the greatest number of partners, which included the tourist board, water company, Chamber of Commerce, Napier University, and **The Scotsman** newspaper, yet no community or voluntary sector representatives. South Lanarkshire involved the least, sticking solely to the core group.

Stirling, no doubt in part because the Council had already invested time in establishing a community forum, was the only plan which ranked local participation issues as a key strategic aim. Both Highland, through a brief discussion of local decision making, and South Lanarkshire, via noting the

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techniques it had employed to achieve user feedback on services, acknowledged the importance of public consultation in relation to their plans. Neither, however, chose to develop this into a strategic ambition. South Lanarkshire considered this approach to be appropriate because their consultation exercises had revealed a broad consensus on the plan's key elements. Likewise, while Glasgow stated that 'empowerment' was another of the plan's guiding principles, it failed to explain how this would become 'second nature' to the way the partners 'go about their business'. Glasgow did, however, state a desire to engage with both community and private sector forums at a later stage. Edinburgh also favoured future public consultation, rather than active participation in the plan's development.

The omission of a community voice in the critical developmental stage of Community Planning would appear to cut against the notion of the process being as important as the product. It also raises a set of interesting questions as to whether local authorities can legitimately be considered the voice of their communities. More often than not, it was paid officials, and not elected councillors, who sat on the Community Plan groups. Further, given the long-standing criticism that quangos are democratically unaccountable, it is not at all clear how their local operations could hope to articulate a service-user, let alone a community, perspective.

Having set down each component of the strategy, the plans then detail the individual projects that comprise each of these elements. The approach adopted is very standardised, with each initiative being briefly described, the partner responsible for its implementation noted, and where possible information on targets, timescales and budgets provided. Although Glasgow's approach furnishes the reader with more detail in this regard, this is not really saying much. If anything, these sections represent the weakest part of the plans and undermine their credibility as strategic documents. This listing of projects, rather than appearing to fall directly from the strategy are, in effect, what the strategy has been constructed from. What is presented, therefore, appears uncannily like a 'cut and paste' word-processing exercise, utilising the operational or business plans of the partner bodies.

The illusion that a strategic approach has been pursued is further exposed by comparing the context statements provided in these plans - which varied in length from two to seven pages - with those provided in previous local authority strategic planning exercises, whether for land-use or service-delivery purposes. Community Plans fail to provide the critical overarching analysis of the economic, social and environmental issues which any strategic planning exercise demands. For a strategy to be effective it requires to

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recognise the causal processes which underlie these issues, and not simply focus on symptoms.

Further, as they currently stand, Community Plans are entirely dependent upon the investment and planning decisions already taken by their partner organisations. Exactly how these decisions were reached, and what strategic objectives they are seeking to address is not at all clear. What is patently evident is that their priorities were not determined through their participation in the community planning exercise. What is also clear is that these bodies require to meet the priorities set for them by Government, and these may not always act in the best interests of specific localities. For instance, Glasgow's problems have as much to do with the current failings of public intervention as they do with the operation of the market (Robertson 1998), and yet this fails to get a mention in their plan.

Perhaps where this failure of strategic thinking becomes most apparent is in relation to the resources earmarked to achieve these planned visions. It would appear that each plan has been drawn up on the basis that no new cash will be made available. Hence, the resources mentioned merely reflect previous commitments made by partner agencies. Such a focus is wrong in principle, and runs counter to the purpose of strategic planning. Evaluating the benefits and disadvantages which result from a range of options should be a critical component in this type of exercise. To restrict the options by accepting no new finance will become available effectively undermines a good part of this exercise. It could reasonably be argued that an intrinsic part of any strategic planning exercise should be to make a case for specific new investment. By pursuing this restrictive interpretation of resource requirements major local opportunities will be missed. Nowhere is this more obvious than in relation to major infrastructure projects, and transport planning in particular, which - with the exception of Edinburgh - is poorly handled. Without addressing these critical strategic failings Community Planning runs the risk of being viewed merely as a public relations exercise.

Further, if this is solely about rebuilding some form of corporate management of available resources, within defined local authority administrative areas, then it appears to have learned none of the previous lessons about how corporate planning failed (Smart 1991). The broad strategic ambitions Strathclyde set in place under the banner of **Social Strategy for the Eighties** were effectively undermined by certain powerful departmental interests which refused to skew their budgets in favour of these ambitions. In the new world in which local government finds itself, its ability to skew the budgets of other bodies does not even appear to have been attempted.

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If the strategic planning provenance of this exercise has been found wanting then the same goes for their community credentials. In the first place, these documents operate at an administrative scale which fails to appreciate, let alone acknowledge, the mosaic of local communities that operate within local authority boundaries. This was most evident in the urban authorities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, and interestingly South Lanarkshire. At the same time, while both Highland and Stirling acknowledge their diversity of communities, they still opt for a spatial rather than interest-based conception of these communities, again viewing them wrongly as a collective whole. In that sense Community Plans merely reflect the long-standing local government view of community being solely the geographic area they administer, rather than the complexity of community interests.

It is also worth noting that while the 'community' is viewed as one of the partners, it does not appear to be one which is to be trusted with a seat at the table. As was noted earlier, with the notable exception of Stirling, 'community' representatives were not present. Further, although each reiterated the need to engage and consult with the community, the actual details of how this was to be achieved were left sketchy, as Glasgow and Edinburgh illustrate. Where such consultation had taken place, as in the case of South Lanarkshire, this exercise merely acted to confirm the approach already being pursued by the plan.

Yet what incentive is there for any part of the community to participate in this exercise anyway? Were their views being sought as citizens, or as consumers of the many services being planned? Was there genuine interest in what the public had to say, or was this primarily a means of legitimising their actions by illustrating a degree of public accountability in the process? Accountability, as presently constituted by Community Plans, does not move outwith the traditional modes of representative democracy, through both central and local government. If, as outlined in the introduction, one of the wider ambitions for Community Planning was to provide some means of addressing the perceived democratic deficit of local government, then on this evidence this has not been achieved. If anything the Community Plan provides a clear illustration of just how far the powers of the local authority have diminished, and just how critical central government, through its quangos, is in determining key policy areas at the local level. The lack of local accountability is illustrated by these documents, rather than enhanced by them. Both local government, and the agencies of central government, have a poor record when it comes to engaging with the public they seek to serve. In this sense little appears to have changed since Skeffington attempted to introduce a limited form of public participation into the formative stages of the planning process. As Skeffington also noted, any move in this direction

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had to be accompanied by a willingness for those with power to give some of it up. The problem here is that power has moved away from local to central government, with no attempt being made to also ensure some power moved in the opposite direction. What is more worrying is that there does not appear to be any clear linkages from these documents back to the decision-making mechanisms either in local government or the partner bodies themselves. This could represent a further dilution of democratic accountability.

On the evidence provided by these plans it could be argued that the community they seek to influence is solely a very narrow community of interest, namely the public partners who collectively contribute to the creation of these documents in the first place. This is further reinforced by the language they employ, given it is both exclusive and professionally orientated. Overall, these documents are very much 'top-down' offerings, rather than 'bottom-up' statements of intent. Great stress is laid on central government objectives, with no real attempt made to generate issues from the local communities themselves. Again such an approach jars with commonly held assumptions about local involvement, community participation or empowerment. The reality appears to be that the 'community' is solely being asked to confirm an agenda already set for it by ever distant bureaucracies. They are being denied the opportunity to help shape that agenda.

REFORMING THE SYSTEM

In concluding this review of Community Planning four suggestions are made which would address the criticisms raised. These collectively advocate a radical overhaul of a planning system to ensure it is both strategic and locally accountable. In order to achieve this, strategic planning requires to blend a land-use and service-delivery focus. Such a move also would reflect the broadening of planning to include resource planning and spatial managerialism as well as traditional land-use planning. At the same time, there is a need to create a distinctive 'community' or neighbourhood dimension within this more pluralist view of planning. By adopting this approach an interface would be created between the broad ambitions of strategic planning and the practical implementation issues that require to be resolved at the neighbourhood scale.

Specialist interest groups, or communities of interest, would contribute to the broader strategic aspects of planning, while, through the creation of neighbourhood plans, local residents could provide structured feedback on the range of public services provided within their locality. The creation of such feedback mechanisms would ensure a symbiotic relationship was

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established between the strategic and neighbourhood plans, each helping to contribute to the development of each other.

Strategic planning

As noted above, there needs to be a re-appraisal of strategic planning so that the land-use considerations of the current Structure Plan are blended with the partnership co-ordination ambitions of the Community Plan. Critically, there also needs to be a proper appraisal, based on considered analysis, as to what are the key issues the plan seeks to address. Only then can proper costed and argued strategies be put in place to address these issues, within an agreed timescale. It is these strategies that would provide the template for drawing up multi-sectoral agreements across the range of administrative and service functions. Promoting and safeguarding these overarching objectives would be a key part of the relationship between the strategic and neighbourhood plans.

Throughout Europe strategic planning is organised at the metropolitan or regional scale. Functional boundaries are clearly more appropriate to this scale of planning. While this would not pose problems for Government agencies, it would for local government as the existing arrangements for Structure Planning, within certain local authority areas, clearly illustrates. Perhaps the desire to reform the planning system will be a precursor to creating a more appropriate local government administrative structure.

It is also essential that this reformed planning system is both accountable and transparent. To ensure this happens there needs to be a clearly defined and transparent interface between the overarching strategic plan and their implementation through the neighbourhood plan. To help foster this relationship there will be a need to develop a clear understanding of the function, status and hierarchy of different neighbourhoods. Jointly developing this appreciation would provide the key interface between the neighbourhood and strategic scales of planning. Such an appreciation would be critical given that one key task of the new strategic plan could be to mediate between neighbourhood plans. That said, the neighbourhood plans would also be expected to monitor, review and challenge the strategic ambitions set by the strategic plan.

Neighbourhood planning

The neighbourhood plan would be a responsive, accountable and dynamic form of local planning. Its prime aim would be to give voice and power to a broad range of self-defining local communities. It would also ensure that the subtlety of place, which has never been a consideration of the Local Plan system, comes to the fore. As with the new strategic plan arrangements

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neighbourhood plans would combine local land-use planning considerations with local service-delivery and area-management arrangements. Such bodies would play the key role in setting and evaluating services-level agreements with those public bodies, whether local or national, which provide services in their locality. This would provide the much sought after customer feedback in relation to these services.

Ensuring a consumer voice should not, however, be the sole objective of this change. Clearly, within a democratic society, which has shown a commitment to devolve power, there is a need to further pursue this agenda. Establishing a neighbourhood plan system would represent a continuation of subsidiarity, in that decisions affecting a particular neighbourhood would be made at the most appropriate level. Further, such a change, by giving voice and power to the broad range of local communities may help reinvigorate local government, by encouraging it to re-examine its current decision making and service delivery structures.

As noted earlier, through creating a clearer appreciation of the roles and functions of different neighbourhoods, these areas would be better placed to participate in drawing up the broad strategic ambitions. They too would have a better appreciation of how certain strategic ambitions might impact on their particular neighbourhood, or on a particular group of people. The proposals made here would allow local citizens to properly engage with the broad range of public bodies, through agreed participatory mechanisms, thus providing another check on the strategic plan system.

Empowerment through planning

Community Plans clearly illustrated the distinct power advantage held by those organisations represented within its covers. It was also clear the Community Plans' audience was Government, and not the communities the plan sought to serve. This is all the more disappointing given that a key ambition set for Community Planning was to help counter the democratic deficit of local government. Again this is illustrative of the centralising tendency which has afflicted local government for the last two decades.

These suggested reforms attempt to redress this balance. It should always be remembered that local government and Government agencies derive their power and resources from the wider community. Should the ordinary citizen not then be given the means to engage with these bodies to ensure these powers and resources are being used to best effect? Achieving accountability has never been solely the task of elected members. Given the development of greater pluralism in the way we organise and deliver public services should

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we not also endeavour to create greater pluralism in our notions of democracy?

To redress the balance, those holding power via the traditional electoral process need to give up some power to ensure a degree of community empowerment. For empowerment to be more than a just a printed aspiration, both political and financial power must be given up by those who currently exercise it. One criticism of this approach is that it will strengthen NIMBYISM, and undoubtedly that is a risk. Yet, is it not better to debate issues openly, rather than having a view imposed by a small but powerful set of vested interests? There is after all a need to be honest about the power relations that currently exist within the planning system.

Structural reform

Finally, perhaps there is a more critical consideration which underlies all of this reform discussion. Prior to putting in place any new planning system, should the Parliament not take a hard look at how the Scottish Executive currently organises its public administration functions? 'Partnership', rather than being viewed as a solution to the difficulties of co-ordinating public policy, may merely illustrate the severity of this problem. Are not the Scottish Executive, its agencies, and local government hidebound by inappropriate functional arrangements which are at least 50 years out of date? Are there not lessons to be learned from initiatives such as the English Single Regeneration Budget or the Dutch Regeneration Fund? Instead of trying to encourage existing agencies to skew their budgets to fit a strategy not of their own creation or choosing, should they not be encouraged to compete for the available resources by illustrating how their approach would contribute to the strategic ambitions set for the project by the affected community? Arguably, only by re-constructing the underlying organisational framework will we be able to challenge the poverty and inequality which continue to scar so many communities.

Community planning, therefore, comes at a time of transition and trepidation for local government. The old mode of local government operation has effectively been abolished, but exactly the shape of its replacement is still in a state of flux. Community Planning, as currently practised, vividly illustrates these tensions, conflicts and contradictions. It fails to provide either a strategic approach to co-ordinating public investment within local authority areas, or the means to improve local authority accountability. This critique and suggested reforms will, it is to be hoped, open up a debate as to how best to achieve these and other ambitions. However, in order to achieve these

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proposed reforms, a more fundamental review of Scottish local governance would have to occur.

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