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Emergent Community Governance;

A model of socially sustainable transformation in New Wortley

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Abstract

Following the 2009 Community Plan's (Graham et al, 2015) lack of impact in Leeds' most deprived area New Wortley, community leaders rethought their approach to achieving change. The Community Plan had been guided by a physical masterplan, a conventional approach that could not deliver the necessary social transformation. A new method subsequently developed, termed here as *emergent community governance*.

A bottom up process evolved through a ground swell of mutual action. Empowerment of a diverse collective formed a series of relationships informing a cohesive, fluid and inclusive *community strategy*, embedding a feeling of *mutuality* throughout the community stakeholders. The paper reflects on a transformation within this community as a result of shifting *change processes*.

Project Office, Leeds Beckett University's (LBU) '*design and research collaboration of staff and students*' (Warren & Stott, 2014) is embedded in the collective, using skills across a range of disciplines to design the physical environment in tune with the community's strategy. Part of the refocusing is the construction of New Wortley Community Centre, a 7-year co-design live project completed May 2016.

As John Thackara (cited in Hyde, R. 2012) asserts '*Critic and environmentalist similarly calls for designers to evolve from being the individual authors of objects or buildings, to being the facilitators of change among large groups of people*', thus this paper demonstrates how developing mutual relationships amongst the community and the so called 'professional team' can have a significant impact on the creation of socially and economically sustainable environments.

The evidence in support of this model is multifaceted; £759,497 BIG Lottery funding to construct the building, Our Place grants to support the new strategy through an Our Place plan, an NHS pilot scheme to create a Health & Wellbeing Centre with Project Office as co-design coordinator.

This paper demonstrates that there is a shift from masterplan led models to models such as *emergent community governance* as an appropriate means to deliver desired transformations in deprived communities.

Introduction

The New Wortley community has been on a remarkable journey since the completion of the New Wortley Community Plan in 2009. LBU's School of Architecture and Project Office have been working alongside them as a technical stakeholder from late 2009, supporting a marginalised but proud and vocal community.

The New Wortley Community Plan

In 2009 New Wortley residents, supported by Planning Aid (RTPI, n.d.a) and local stakeholders produced the New Wortley Community Plan. Despite not having statutory force, Community Plans (ODPM, 2004) are valuable because they enable the public to produce development plans for their neighbourhood. It is recognised that *masterplanning*, on its own, is not sufficient as a viable means of regeneration. The New Wortley Community Plan, therefore, tried to tackle issues of social isolation, drug misuse, health and wellbeing by prescribing a cocktail of community classes and services, better outreach, improved health facilities and new community support workers.

However, problems arose because Community Planning is associated with legislative planning, and necessitates the co-stewardship of a planning or design professional working alongside the community. This meant that with its focus on planning design, issues as important as 'social isolation' could not possibly be adequately captured. The problem with well-intentioned community master planning is that its professionals retain the upper hand resultant of their technical expertise.



Figure 1. LBU architecture students first site visit 2009

They lead the process and decisively are leading it well before the real issues and their solutions can be articulated and embedded by the community. The non-planning issues that were actually covered in the Community Plan played a subordinate role, appearing in the document as a wish list. The connection between the drawn masterplan information and the overall wider vision was disconnected. The plan also lacked a coherent implementation strategy.

New Wortley's Community Plan was initiated by the community as a tactical

opposition to the demolition proposals in Leeds City Council's (LCC) Leeds West Gateway Framework (Leeds City Council, 2010). Its triumph was to thwart an ill-considered top down imposition on their community. Maureen Ingham chair of New Wortley Residents' Action Group explained to the writers, *'without the Community Plan we would not have the community as it is today. The plan by Leeds City Council was to demolish the whole area including the four tower blocks and gentrify the area, meaning the replaced houses would have been beyond original residents' reach in price.'*

Beyond this successful activist act none of the planned spatial changes to the area were implemented. This was because of the lack of financial means to support its delivery, a lack of faith in the system and also recognition from community stakeholders that the masterplan was not as important for the transformation of the area as the non-spatial programme, which subsequently became the focus of their effort.

Leeds Beckett University's involvement

In 2009 LBU's School of Architecture began working with New Wortley Community Association (NWCA). The architectural brief was to design a new community centre next to the existing one, doubling its size. Curiously, this was not a project that was included in the Community Plan, yet the quantity of new services, classes and activities deemed necessary to help transform the area meant that a new building was essential to accommodate them.

Maureen Ingham explained, *'to deliver community facilities in the plan it was agreed with myself and Cllr Alison Lowe that LCC would fund a business development manager to turn the centre around and deliver the part of the plan relating to the community centre itself. Bill Graham was selected to fill the post and worked with myself initially on delivering and shaping the future of the centre.'*

Architecture lecturers Simon Warren and Craig Stott developed a close working relationship with NWCA and its users as initial design work by architecture students began. Big Lottery funding applications followed, co-written by Warren, Stott and NWCA. This participation helped the authors understand the journey the community had been on and how they were beginning to refocus.

The physical master plan was shelved with a new process evolving from the bottom-up. It was a ground swell of mutual action, starting with the community association, of a diverse collective who formed a series of relationships. From this, over time, emerged a cohesive, fluid and inclusive *community vision and strategy*. The community was beginning to *do it for themselves*. They recognised that to move forward, control over their issues had to be diverted from top down (although these could be well meaning) external providers to the community itself. This led the writers to think that something significant was beginning to happen.

The authors instigated the community centre design as both a practice-based and practice-led research *architectural live project*, including participation in community consultations, public meetings, board meetings and many unstructured conversations with individuals living in New Wortley as part of the co-design approach. In 2012 the theory of *emergent community governance* was posited and the research additionally became focused on this. This has led to a combination of ethnographic research and participatory action research being undertaken for this paper. It is noted that these methods naturally overlap because of our embedded role.

Maureen Ingham, chair of New Wortley Residents' Action Group in 2009 and currently a NWCA board member was interviewed to assist our understanding of continuity throughout the period of covered by this paper. Bill Graham, NWCA's Community Project Manager and similar Yorkshire and Humber Our Place project leaders answered questions by email, as a comparative research exercise to validate the concept of emergent community governance.

Localism Act 2011 and Our Place

Coinciding with the community's new direction, the Localism Act was introduced in 2011 (DCLG, 2011). It implemented a key objective of the Coalition Government to 'decentralise' decision-making and empower local communities. Four key measures are described:

- *new freedoms and flexibilities for local government*
- *new rights and powers for communities and individuals*
- *reform to make the planning system more democratic and more effective*
- *reform to ensure that decisions about housing are taken locally*

The two parts of the Localism Act of use to NWCA's work are:

1. Community Rights

The five Community Rights are, Community Right to Bid, Community Right to Build, Community Right to Challenge, Community Right to Reclaim Land and Neighbourhood Planning. Community Rights can be beneficial, for example, Community Right to Bid has been successfully demonstrated at Bramley Baths (Poulter, 2013).

Neighbourhood Planning is currently under consideration (see Graham's comments below) as a community masterplanning tool by NWCA. Considering the criticism of this methodology, it is now a wait to see whether it can be used successfully alongside their excellent Our Place work. However, the writers think that NWCA is correct to proceed to a spatial design method *only* after the development of community governance and its consequential *real change* impact.

2. Our Place

'Our Place aims to give people more power over local services and budgets in their neighbourhoods' (Locality, n.d.a). *'In December 2013, DCLG commissioned Locality*

and partners to deliver *Our Place 2014/15* which currently supports 118 areas to develop an operational plan by March 2015' (Locality, n.d.b).

'Our Place puts communities at the heart of service delivery in their area and involves local partners within a neighbourhood coming together with local people to identify the issues that matter most to them' (My Community, n.d.a).

NWCA recognised that the *Our Place* programme was a better way to deliver change in comparison to planning led regeneration of their Community Plan. In September 2014 NWCA became part of the network of 118 areas to develop an operational plan.

The first output funded by *Our Place* was the New Wortley Conversations Report (Newton, 2015). Its purpose was to:

- *find out what local people think and feel about the community*
- *what could be done to improve the area*
- *to help build a partnership with service providers*

The report's approach is based upon the idea that people are *'experts in their own situation'*, stating *'their knowledge and experience should be respected, and that they should be fully involved in decisions or developments that affect them. Primarily we consulted people 'on their own territory', i.e. by going to places we know they will be (on the street, cafes, community centres, events, etc.)'* (Newton, 2015). LBU students helped with public consultation events held at the existing community centre.



Figure 2. Summer BBQ at New Wortley Community Centre

The results described the positives, the major social issues facing the area and ideas for improvement. It led to the setting up of a successful network of local partners; the main contributors alongside NWCA were Barca Leeds, Leeds West GPs, Castleton Primary School, Leeds City Council, Rachel Reeves MP and the Police.

The Localism Act is working well at New Wortley but the writers' anxieties remain about the motives of the Government. Rt. Hon. Greg Clark MP, Minister of State for Decentralisation introduces the Localism Act stating, *'For too long, central government has hoarded and concentrated power. Trying to improve people's lives by imposing decisions, setting targets and demanding inspections from Whitehall simply doesn't work. It creates bureaucracy. It leaves no room for adaptation to reflect local circumstances or innovation to deliver services more effectively and at lower cost. And it leaves people feeling 'done to' and imposed upon - the very opposite of the sense of participation and involvement on which a healthy democracy thrives'* (DCLG, 2011b).

The words are credible but was the real motive the Conservative's ideological position to reduce the state? Local authorities through widespread *austerity* cuts have been radically scaled back. Or, was Localism more influenced by its Liberal Democrat co-authors and therefore more about genuine participation of society in its affairs? The Liberal Democrat Co-Chairs of the Parliamentary Policy Committee on Communities and Local Government advised, *'The Bill is now much improved from when it started, and will really change the way we do local government in this country, with new tools to increase participation, and give councils a greater ability to make the decisions that are right for their local area. It has greatly benefitted from having a strong Liberal Democrat influence throughout its passage through the House, and will be a better Act in practice than it would have been without our influence'* (Brooke, A. Lord Tope, 2011).

The writers believe that well resourced local authority governance has an essential part to play supporting communities to flourish and to safeguard the poor and vulnerable in our society. Erosion of local authorities under the guise of reducing debt, in a time of so-called *austerity*, will not adequately compensate disadvantaged communities by some positive outcomes of Localism. That is not to say that local authorities do not need to change, they have to make some big strides and devolve to and trust communities much more - less top down, more bottom up. As witnessed in the EU Referendum there has been a popular backlash to political orthodoxy across most of the UK. We think that emergent community governance has surfaced as a direct consequence of a condition of political neglect in disadvantaged communities prevalent over many years.

Emergent Community Governance

The authors believe there is a new generation of activist regeneration underway. The chosen expression for this is *emergent community governance*.

If Localism is seized by communities as a means of community activism, so it is not

just about having influence but about affecting governance then how far could social, environmental and economic transformation go?

This theory has developed through collaboration with New Wortley and its community association, having seen the community grow in its ambition, begin to flex its muscles, be listened to and become confident. Their legitimised voice has become a potent instrument for change and our provocation is that could lead to a more radical '*strong governance*' (My Community, n.d.b) contrary to that the authoring politicians of the Localism Act might have intended.

The Oxford Dictionaries definition of emergent is '*in the process of coming into being or becoming prominent*' (n.d.) and through its activism and reflection the community has discovered its method and realised its position. The belief is that *governance* simply came about through necessity, and once articulated, began to grow and be shaped.

This model is at an early stage, but is it ready to be called *governance*? Governance is defined here as '*the processes of interaction and decision-making among the actors involved in a collective problem that lead to the creation, reinforcement, or reproduction of social norms and institutions*' (Hufty, 2011). Certainly, there are '*actors*' - the community and its technical collaborators and there are '*processes of interaction and decision-making, involved in the collective problem*' - the transformational vision defined most eloquently in the New Wortley Conversations report and the New Wortley Our Place plan. The community's network of mutual action is operational and evolving, but it needs longer to reach maturity. Only then could it confidently be known as *governance* and be able to substantiate that it '*lead to the creation, reinforcement, or reproduction of social norms and institutions*'.

New Wortley's Emergent Community Governance in Context

It is important to compare the New Wortley experience with other Our Place projects to test whether *emergent community governance* is showing signs of life elsewhere. Within the Yorkshire and Humber region there are 15 projects that have been supported. Although Our Place has a clear methodology, there is no blue print, just a framework of objectives that steer participants towards a successful outcome.

Seven of the fifteen projects (which includes NWCA) have very similar objectives and means of achieving them. They identify health and wellbeing, employment, skills, environment and safety issues as common problems. Each has developed a mutual network of stakeholders that is charged with governance of the vision. Could they be exhibiting *emergent community governance* as have been defined at New Wortley? Key people at the seven comparable projects were sent the following two questions by email to help inform the theory. Three responses were received. The answers were edited to key points, and referenced as follows:

- LD. Linda Dellow, Chief Officer, Centre4, Grimsby.
- BG. Bill Graham, Community Project Manager, New Wortley Community Association, Leeds.

- TD. Tony Dylak, Chief Operating Officer, Royds Community Association, Bradford

Question 1. Can Localism (specifically Community Rights and Our Place) be used to deliver a new kind of governance, radically changing how decisions are made and by whom within communities? Or is Localism simply a pragmatic way for supporting community projects?

LD. *'Localism as a concept has merit but in practice little has changed in terms of what power is deferred and the methods of transfer tend to enable larger organisations to benefit rather than community groups. This kind of governance is unachievable at a time of rapid service transformation as people try to ensure their 'sustainability' in a rapidly changing voluntary and community sector (VCS) and public sector. Organisations with 'power' are risk averse in this environment and political pressures mean that anyone without a 'track record' gets little opportunity to take or receive power.'* Dellow goes on to state that Centre4 is, *'using our local network and relationships with key individuals to get things done. We act more as innovators, influencers and honest brokers rather than power mongers / managers.'*

BG. *'Communities across the UK, in disadvantaged areas are notoriously difficult to engage with, there are a lot of reasons for that, but many of these communities will have been promised 'change' at some point and either been let down or it wasn't the change they were looking for. Again areas that are high in deprivation tend to have been for a long time. Doesn't really matter what political party or philosophy is in charge at the time, the impact on people's day-to-day lives is minimal. Localism gives us a chance to ensure local problems are dealt with locally.'*

TD. *'Party politics are proven to be untrustworthy. The new kind of governance takes party politics out. The new governance is by people not interested in party politics, for example – a local mum campaigning for a playground is a 'politician'. Local people know what the answers are. There are opportunities for local people to be political without being party political.'*

Question 2. Is there a bigger vision emerging or at play in your area?

LD. *'Multiple ones, which is part of the problem. Devolution, Brexit, and other changes at regional, national and international level are all impacting on the vision for the area and how it can be achieved.'*

BG. *'Yes there is a bigger vision, the idea of a community led body taking more control of the environment and the housing locally – whether through transferring management of the estate and buildings to the community, and or looking at the association (NWCA) becoming the developer at the heart of the future plans for the area. We have looked at a neighbourhood plan (which would require the formal voted support of the local people) whereby we shape and control the future of the area, taking our own destiny onto our hands. Going forward the plan is getting the work we do to be recognised and commissioned, so we are not so reliant of grant*

funding. The association can be the means whereby local people can get involved, by volunteering, training or even working – as we have demonstrated. Money being brought into the area should have a direct result in terms of creating jobs and opportunities for local people – this in itself is a very direct way to lift people out of despair and give them hope.'

TD. 'Public bodies have lost the ability to adapt, the analogy is that they are oil tankers slow to change direction; we are a speed boat and can change direction really quickly. There are lay members in 1000+ organisations nationally doing things like us, allowing ordinary people getting into how their community works; it works best where local authorities are not involved, free of restrictions. Once people get it they never go back, it's the right way to work, we get more done.'

As stated in Dellow's answers, some organisations will use Localism as a practical tool to carry out their projects. This is to be expected and a larger sample of respondents would be needed to explore this. Significantly both Graham and Dylak display an urgent tone caused by a persistent political condition that has led to the disenfranchisement of their communities. Their communities, on the whole, have developed a total distrust of party politics (both local and national). These two communities have responded out of necessity through the only option remaining - *self-governance*. Localism, at this moment, is a significant opportunity in the pursuit of self-governance, defined here as *emergent community governance* in the example of New Wortley. Both Graham and Dylak have stated that their communities are not restricted to Localism, it's just one method, it is important to consider any opportunity available.



Figure 3. New Wortley Community Association workers and volunteers

So far.....

The community network has brought in over £3 Million of investment to date, and now that the new community centre is open there is twice the space for the

community to use. A Power to Change grant has secured modest capital to start the conversion of the existing community centre into a Health and Wellbeing centre, for which Project Office is the architect. These two facilities will host many of the services, groups and support initiatives raised in the New Wortley Conversation report and the Our Place plan around health, wellbeing, isolation, skills development and employment. Our Place funded posts, mostly taken up by local people, support these.



Figure 4. Landscape volunteers working outside the new community centre 2016

What next?

In conclusion there are two areas of further work and research of relevance to the writers.

1. Technical Stakeholder

PO will continue to be involved as a technical stakeholder embedded within the New Wortley network. One of the seven key ideas from the New Wortley Conversation Report is for '*Improvements to the environment*' and this will be PO's next major commission. LBU's landscape design students have developed an urban realm strategy, co-designed with the community which will lead onto detailed design work and implementation, subject to fundraising.

Design work has started on the reconfiguration of the existing community centre's entrance as it is transformed into the Health and Wellbeing Centre. A bike library for the repair and hire of bikes will be situated in a converted shipping container next to the community centre.

All of this work will form a physical urban strategy, six years after the masterplan of

the 2009 Community Plan was abandoned. The conclusion is that, only now, after years of consultation, collaboration, capacity building and mutual network building all distilled into its governance model is the community's vision ready to be defined as a physical plan.

2. Research

Localism is the opportunity that some marginalised communities are using right now to confront issues of exclusion. We have articulated this moment as *emergent community governance*, a radical idea of communities taking control of their situation. Localism is just one tool, what are and will be the other ways that this takes hold? To track and evaluate this further, New Wortley and similar communities will continue to be the area of study.

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