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Working Paper 136

Blending, braiding, balancing:

Strategies for managing the interplay between formal
and informal ways of working with communities

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Abstract

The study investigated the different functions performed by formality and informality in community and organisational settings. The report explores the tensions and dilemmas arising from their interplay and identifies various strategies and practices for combining and balancing formal structures and procedures with informal processes.

This working paper challenges the view that 'formal' is the optimal or default mode for third sector organising, arguing that informal interactions are crucial for encouraging inclusive participation, networking and flexible organisation development. A 'praxis' is identified, bringing together the skills, knowledge and values that characterise the role of skilled facilitators and community development workers. 'Light touch' approaches to funding, governance and community engagement are recommended, along with suggestions for policy.

Keywords

Informal Formal Community Governance Participation Collaboration

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I am grateful to colleagues and friends who have contributed to my thinking and to the findings through informal conversations and interviews, as well as workshops and a focus group. A full list of contributors can be found in the appendix.

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Preface - Some personal observations

Over many years as a community worker, volunteer and political activist, I have been aware of the ways in which formal and informal ways of operating become entwined within organisations and events, serving different functions at different stages of development and complementing each other, often within the same setting. I was heavily involved in the evolution of a small community association that started life meeting in people's front rooms, with the purpose of setting up a community centre in an inner-city area of Bristol. At that stage it had no constitution, funding or formal structure but a vision and collective commitment. Its journey over the next three or more decades has seen its transformation from a small informal, but determined group of residents to a large charity, legally incorporated as a company limited by guarantee with an annual turnover of many thousands of pounds. I played a major role in this early transition: initially as a local resident and committee member, but later as a paid development worker, ensuring that the formal aspects of the organisation's development were properly carried out, while also weaving together informal activities around and through the core. At the time I had not questioned the need for formal structures and procedures to establish the Community Association as a legitimate and powerful body in the neighbourhood, but I did note the value of informal processes occurring in and around the community centre with local people dropping in to pass the time of day. Many of the issues and ideas shared through these casual conversations later became collective initiatives or campaigns. The connections that already existed across the area or were formed through these activities created the emotional and political foundation for the Centre's continuing success: a bedrock of local links that continue to provide mutual support and loyalty.

These experiences informed my subsequent doctoral research on networking (Gilchrist, 2001). I sought to reveal the value of informal interactions and understand how networking (as an everyday process and significant aspect of professional practice) contributes to a sense of community and collective capacity, making things happen – serendipitously and strategically. I concluded that “[t]he capacity of a community to respond creatively to change and ambiguity is to be found in its web of connections and relationships, rather than in the heads of individuals or the formal structure of voluntary bodies” (Gilchrist, 2009, p 171). In other words, there is value to be found in informal activities, creating social capital, resilience and shared wisdom.

Alongside this paid community development work, I was active politically in several social movements, usually through my membership of trade unions or a staunchly hierarchical

political party. I could appreciate how the discipline of formal rules and centrally agreed policies underpins collective organising but also recognised how social activities and informal networks hold people together and motivate members. I realised that many highly effective actions are co-ordinated through more fluid models of self-organisation, such as the peace camps at Greenham Common or gatherings of the more recent Occupy movement. This has become even more evident in the past decade.



Figure 1 - Anti-fracking demonstration - Preston June 2015

A recent anti-fracking demonstration lacked apparent formal direction but I noticed how many activists were wearing bright yellow items of clothing, presumably an informal dress code that signified vigour, exuberance and unity, while an attempt to set a Mexican wave going along the picket round the town hall, only took off when someone with a megaphone arrived, providing a semi-formal authority to the proceedings as well as amplifying the chants. This was a timely reminder of the valuable interplay between formal and informal, and the use of collective strategies that combine the two.

During the course of this study, I valued the many informal conversations with friends and colleague; in particular one revealing verbal fantasy in which we imagined our walking club being taken over by fanatics for formality. As well as being amusing (high viz jackets for the leaders, risk assessments for every route, evaluation forms at the end of outings, etc.) it led me to realise just how successful a self-organised group of volunteers can be that operates with a minimal set of policies and procedures, while promoting informal processes and values of companionship and common sense.

Chapter One: Introduction and rationale

A combination of formal, semi-formal and informal modes lies at the core of successful collective action and cross-sectoral collaboration. The research presented here champions the informal aspects of community life and citizen participation, arguing that effective community involvement in local planning, service delivery and partnership working requires a greater appreciation of how informality improves the overall experience and contributes to the outcomes.

Moreover it identifies a 'knack' or 'praxis' for balancing, braiding and blending the formal and informal so as to encourage maximum community participation and influence, while at the same time maintaining progress and measuring impact. The initial motivation was primarily to provide evidence of the value, indeed necessity, of informal activities for working with communities, but as the research unfolded this has been challenged. As one of the workshop participants said: "*it cuts both ways.*"

Tensions and encounters

There are advantages and disadvantages to both informal and formal ways of working, depending on the circumstances, phase of development and the people involved. Rather than formal and informal being regarded as two ends of a continuum or opposite sides of the same coin, their interplay is much more complicated and the focus of a skilled and, often sophisticated set of choices, comprising a 'praxis' that has not previously been examined.

The Chinese symbol for 'political order' is said to combine the characters for river and dyke, suggestive of a proper balance of natural and constructed mechanisms for directing (or diverting) flow (Jha, 2015). Formal and informal modes of operation co-exist and can seem to merge, just like water molecules form ice, liquid and steam; the specific appearance being determined by both external conditions (mainly pressure, temperature) and internal composition (levels of contamination). The nature of community activity is similarly shaped by internal and external factors, so maybe there are a range of ideal states for configuring formal and informal processes in order to make the most of most people's voluntary commitment and effort? How can formal structures and procedures facilitate collective action that is empowering, effective and fair? And how can informal processes be encouraged to help communities to mobilise, learn from experience and mitigate risks? In short, what are the appropriate ways of selecting and melding elements of both these approaches to achieve communities' own aspirations as well as broader policy objectives?

The interplay between formal and informal approaches generates tensions and anomalies; some reflecting power differentials, others due to cultural differences. These often result in friction and frustration appearing during processes of formalisation or when institutions attempt to engage with communities through co-production or consultation strategies and to work with third sector organisations in partnership arrangements.

Policy context

In recent decades policy has become increasingly oriented towards communities for both ideological and economic reasons (Taylor, 2011). Governments of all political persuasions have sought to increase community engagement through programmes to enhance participative democracy and active citizenship or volunteering. This has been evident in the successive rhetoric of ‘double devolution’, ‘communities in control’, ‘localism’ and ‘doing things differently’. Most of the associated programmes, such as Together We Can, Our Place budgeting, City Deals, local integrated services and various area-based ‘zones’ initiatives, have emphasised the importance of subsidiarity, joined up working and variations on the theme of community empowerment.¹

Under New Labour there was considerable investment in what was termed capacity-building but this usually took the form of organisational development, assisting community and voluntary groups to become more ‘business-like’ so that responsibilities and contracts could be transferred away from statutory agencies into the hands of private companies or what became known as the third sector (Alcock, 2010). This was accompanied by a regime of increasing regulation and close monitoring of funding. The result was a gradual formalisation of what had hitherto been a relatively independent realm of community and voluntary action, what Billis (2010) has termed ‘hybridisation’. The ‘community corner’, characterised as largely informal in Evers and Laville’s (2004, p17) model of the welfare mix, is neglected in policy, and often in practice (Scott, 2010) until its rediscovery through the promotion of the asset-based approach to community development, possibly driven by austerity commitments to reducing public expenditure.

Community connections

Diverse communities and ritual occasions provide specific cues and customs but broadly speaking community life can be characterised as relatively informal, with interactions shaped by personal choice and circumstances. ‘Community’ is a notoriously slippery term but nevertheless conveys an important set of values and public goods, such as co-operation,

¹ See <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/attempts-join-public-services-timeline>

kindness, solidarity and inclusion, that are sometimes bundled up in the concept of social or community capital (Knapp, 2014). Self-organised activities that come under the rubric of ‘community action’ encompass self-help, mutual aid, campaigning, philanthropic volunteering and neighbouring. Community spaces and places provide opportunities for casual interaction, access to informal support and advice, care and the networking that supports collective organising. Our sense of community deals in practical, and mainly positive, common concerns and mutual commitment, all of which are mediated through informal interactions. In contrast, we associate formalities with work settings, significant rites of passage, encounters with statutory institutions and possibly in situations where conflicts or dilemmas need to be resolved.

Sites of interplay

My original intention in undertaking this study was to explore what is happening when formal and informal modes encounter one another and to reveal the functions of informality in these situations. Throughout my experience as an activist, community development practitioner, volunteer and manager, I have witnessed and participated in these tensions at the nexus between communities and institutions or what I have called ‘sites of interplay’. By this I mean situations where informal processes operate within, around or alongside formal protocols and structures. These states of affair are common in the community sector: community members organising themselves for collective action, or seeking to engage with statutory agencies or private institutions, for example, to influence decisions, gain resources or simply to get recognition. The initial phase of the research identified three main ways in which formal and informal approaches intersect and interact as set out in the figure below.

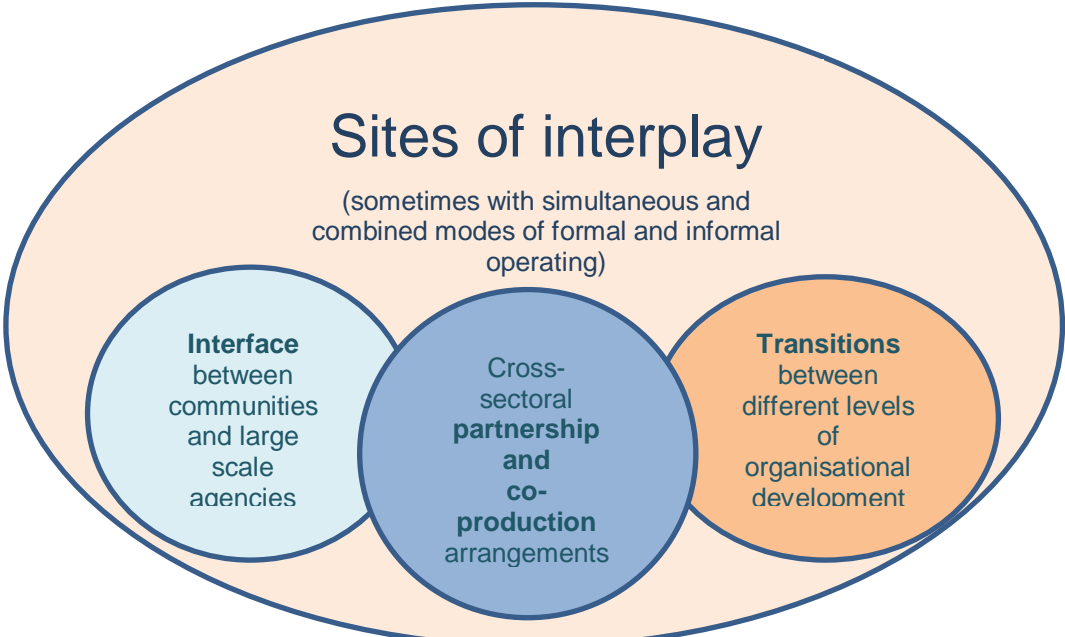


Figure 2 - Different kinds of interplay between formal practices and informal processes

The first category, the interface between the informality of communities and the usual formality of large organisations, will be familiar to anyone involved in community engagement or public consultation exercises. These might be regular forums, such as Neighbourhood Panels or Health Watch, or they could be one-off events, for example, a 'town hall meeting' about a proposed development. These vary in tone and format: some councils adopting a very formal mode, with officers in suits and elected members at the top table trying to follow a set agenda. Members of the public and community representatives (often seated in rows as if they were an 'audience') are expected to confine their contributions to matters already tabled, to defer to professional expertise and municipal authority and to behave with suitable decorum. At the other extreme of community engagement, events are often noticeably less formal, using fun days, picnics, roundtable discussions and games, with casually dressed facilitators to encourage maximum participation.

The second type of interplay can be found in arrangements for multi-agency collaborative working and co-production. These coalitions, which may involve community groups and individual members of the community, often arise from informal conversations and through a network of long-standing relationships that connect the various groups and organisations involved. As responsibilities grow, the drive for accountable decision-making and effective delivery necessitate formal mechanisms, such as financial accounts, contracts (e.g. Service Level Agreements) and Management Boards. These may require a degree of formality that user representatives or community members find confusing, alienating and wasteful of their voluntary time and energy.

The same can be experienced during the transition identified in the third column whereby loose networks become semi-formal groups, with a shared focus, and then find they need or want to develop more formal structures and mechanisms. This can occur for a variety of reasons: expansion in membership, increased liabilities and associated risks, the need for public accountability or simply due to assumptions about what is the 'proper' way to do things as the organisation matures. Sometimes the trigger for formalisation is an internal choice by the members, such as introducing clarity around roles and responsibilities so that they can be better shared. This might be externally imposed by funders, who may require at the very least a constitution and a bank account, or it could be internally agreed to ensure transparent and shared accountability.

Of course, each of these situations may involve the commonplace occurrence whereby informal behaviours are intertwined with formal procedures, possibly to subvert them or to render them more palatable and user-friendly. Thus, an organisation may have in place designated officer roles and standing orders for the conduct of meetings, but in practice, it

allows informal banter and gossip alongside getting through the ‘business’ on the agenda. Similarly, conference timetables often incorporate formal and informal sessions with keynote speeches leavened by networking time and café style discussion groups. Sometimes attempts to combine informal and formal modes can jar and make people uneasy as conventions are disturbed or inadvertently ‘broken’. Most people in the course of everyday life are able to understand how to adopt and interpret formal and informal modes appropriately, but need to have sound cultural or contextual knowledge to do this. As we will see later, this is not uniformly available or acknowledged.

Research rationale and conceptual framework

Formal procedures and structures are commonly regarded by policymakers and public officials as the optimal or default mode. This research questions that view, arguing that informal processes are crucial and beneficial for inclusive community participation at grassroots level and that policy can change to become more labile, adapting practice to varying circumstances. In doing so, the study draws on direct experience and also recent literature on complex organisations, modern management practices and community development.

Recent management studies acknowledge the complexity of modern organisational arrangements, urging a more flexible approach based on networks and enhanced individual autonomy (Sull and Eisenhardt, 2015; Pflaeging, 2014; Laboux, 2014). Seddon in particular criticises the formal management models adopted by many public service bodies, referring to the “vast pyramid ... of people engaged in regulating, specifying, inspecting, instructing and coercing others ... to comply with their edicts” (2008, p193). Later he argues that this ‘regime’ is both ineffective and wasteful of time and effort, estimating that around one fifth of the costs of government contracts are devoted to the administration required for accountability and compliance (Seddon, 2014).

For the purposes of this study, I have adopted a relatively straightforward, real world, approach to the concepts of formal and informal. In the various literatures on everyday life (e.g. Vaneigen, 2006), group and organisation theory (e.g. McMorland and Erakovic, 2013), community studies and voluntary action (e.g. Rochester, 2013), these terms are usually portrayed as the end points of a continuum or as a dichotomy such that something is either formal *or* informal, and by implication cannot be both at the same time. I follow Msztal’s analysis (2000), arguing for a more nuanced, dialectical approach that recognises that life, and indeed organisations and behaviour, are more complicated than that binary division. Elements of formal and informal often intertwined within the same event or embedded in an

organisation's structure or modus operandi (Guha-Khasnobis et al, 2006). Below I set out my understanding of these key concepts.

Definitions of terms and understandings

Community life is primarily conducted through informal interactions and exchanges although some aspects are shaped (and supported) by social conventions and customs that have a formal, or ritualistic function, such as those associated with rites of passage.

Informal tends to carry connotations of casual, unofficial behaviour, determined by individual choices rather than public codification. Informal interactions happen 'off-stage' or through spontaneous encounters. Conversations tend to be unscripted and unrecorded, allowing more candid exchanges and for people to be their 'authentic selves' rather than acting in a professional or organisational role. Informal events are usually playful and relaxed, where emotions, humour and intuition are permitted, enabling people to be more creative, honest and unguarded in their interactions. Myszal (2000, p53) observed that informal modes are framed by notions of civility, sociability and intimacy. She argues that these are necessary bulwarks against the apparent rise of impersonal and bureaucratic processes that came increasingly to characterise 20th century society. Over the past few decades we have become accustomed to greater informality in how we communicate, organise and behave. Rather than informality being associated with either 'stropy' or 'sloppy', it is increasingly acceptable as a normal aspect of work and social life.

Much of what holds communities together and enables them to mobilise collectively can be characterised as informal, reliant on local conventions, everyday habits and face-to-face relationships. It is only when collective goals are pursued that mechanisms for organising associative collaboration become necessary or desirable, with elements of formality being introduced or imposed. Indeed, the experience of 'community' emanates from ordinary and routine interactions and relationships between people who have an interest or identity in common, and who may feel a sense of belonging or shared fate. In recent years social media, likewise usually informal, have been shown to provide important communication channels and forums that maintain and mobilise these inter-personal networks (Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Whittaker and Gillespie, 2013)).

Formality, on the other hand, is governed by rules and regulations, by codes of practice and symbolic assertions of status and authority. In contemporary society and spheres of government, formal suggests 'serious' and is considered to confer legitimacy on proceedings through a curious combination of ritual, regulation and rationality. It is seen as 'normal' and neat: limiting ambiguities, restricting discretion and imposing clear expectations regarding standards and duties. This is the model favoured by most major funding programmes and

new public management with its emphasis on outputs, targets and performance monitoring frameworks, though it is being discredited in some quarters and abandoned altogether in others.

As this report will show, neither approach is without problems, both perceived and actual. A range of practical strategies and policies are identified that acknowledge their different functions in different situations and adapt them appropriately. These include 'light touch' approaches to funding, integrating convivial activities within formal settings and adopting more flexible models for community engagement and organisation development. I will argue that they offer viable and reasonable ways to increase citizen participation, ensure effective accountability for public spending and manage risk proportionately.

However, informal processes are not a universal panacea and need to be handled appropriately. They can be messy and are susceptible to the influence of subjective or group interests. Personal prejudices may go unremarked and unchallenged, while decisions may be contaminated by emotions and allegiance that should have no bearing on the matter. Too much informality allows relationships (loyalties as well as rivalries) to become overly significant, crowding out scientific evidence and more objective considerations. Casual interactions and anecdotal conversations may shape what happens on the ground and under cover, leading to malpractices and coercion by dominant factions.

Conversely, formality can be experienced as oppressive, constraining natural exuberance and initiative through rules and regulations that are designed and enforced by people in specific roles within an organisational structure, usually designated by job titles and appropriate forms of address. Compliance with these requirements may embody a legitimate desire for fairness, conformity to agreed standards and forms of democratic decision-making, but they may also divert energy and attention from the core purpose.

However, there is a tendency for compliance with, or adoption of formal, protocols to take precedence over informal processes, and to indicate that 'things are being taken seriously'. In many situations, they are therefore privileged with being given more time, resources, attention and respect, often to the detriment of informal modes of activity and communication.

Methodology

The themes for this study grew from my own observations and reflections, along with informal discussions with practitioners experiencing similar tensions between formal and informal ways of working. I adopted a 'grounded theory' approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), allowing ideas to develop throughout the investigation rather than attempting to devise

and test an explicit hypothesis. I carried out a literature review and explored the issues in-depth with a range of experienced practitioners, politicians and policymakers; many already known to me, others suggested by my informants as the enquiry unfolded.

Evidence was gathered from direct experience, practitioner workshops, interviews, and a focus group discussion acting as a sounding board, along with an extensive review of academic and ‘grey’² literature, including policy papers, practical guidance and evaluation reports of various funding programmes (e.g. Pearmain et al, 2011; LGA, 2013; Cohen et al, 2013; James et al, 2014; Cameron et al, 2015a and b; Imagine, 2015). Community development values of equality, empowerment and experiential learning framed the inquiry, driving the analysis as well as policy and practice recommendations.

I aimed to listen to the views and experience of people from different backgrounds and in different roles, using ‘snowballing’ techniques to develop a purposive sample for semi-structured interviews with 29 people in all. The following categories were represented, though it is important to acknowledge that all of the individuals hold, or have held, positions that cross into other role classifications; indeed this is the reason some of them were approached because they would be able to contribute from several different perspectives and understood the dilemmas associated with ‘wearing more than one hat’.

Community activist/leader/organiser	4	Academics and voluntary sector researchers	4
Local councillor	1	Voluntary sector senior managers/policy officers	5
Local authority officers/advisors	3	Funders	2
Independent researchers/practitioners	5	Current or former civil servants	5

Table 1 – categories of interviewees

There were two interviewees from minority ethnic backgrounds. Thirteen were women and sixteen were men. The interviews were recorded and took place in a variety of settings, many quite informal such as people’s homes, gardens or local cafes.

In addition, I was able to use my own role as a Big Local ‘rep’³ to post an invitation on the Big Local online forum and bring together thirteen of my colleagues at two workshops in London and Birmingham and an ad hoc discussion group at a reps day.

² Interestingly, the term ‘grey’ literature is used to describe more informal sources of evidence, indicating that it may not be as robust as that acquired through more formal or scientific methods

³ The reps provide light touch, long arm support to areas receiving Big Local funding



Figure 3 - Birmingham workshop - April 2015

These workshops occurred early on the research journey and involved practitioners who had already expressed an interest in these issues. They brought with them many examples from Big Local areas, welcoming an opportunity to reflect on these experiences and to report on how they had dealt with the issues arising.

Once the workshops and interviews were completed, I prepared a short report summarising my thinking thus far and drawing some broad conclusions, along with some tentative implications for policy and practice. These were presented at a 'sounding board' session, with a focus group made up of funders, civil servants, voluntary sector leaders, programme managers, researchers, practitioners and an activist (see list of acknowledgements). The resultant discussion identified new insights and recommendations, as well as confirming that the line of enquiry was proving useful.



Figure 4 - Sounding board discussion July 2015

Analysis

As the research progressed I became more aware of practices around managing the formal-informal interplay, and noticed situations where these appeared to be in tension or jostling happily along together.

In summary, the evidence for this report was itself garnered through a combination of formal and informal means – some organised and facilitated, others purely serendipitous and personal. It was interesting to observe my decisions about when I needed to be formal, and when I could afford to be more relaxed and flexible, depending usually on the setting or, frequently, how well I knew my informants from previous encounters.

The views that emerged from the various workshops and interviews revealed the complicated and equivocal nature of formal and informal modes of operating. Many of the contributors found themselves reflecting on this aspect of their experience and practice for the first time, while others have undertaken substantial research in the areas of volunteering and third sector organisations without explicitly recognising the continuous *interplay* between, and *intertwining* of, formal and informal approaches.

Chapter Two: Living democracy: participation, engagement, relationships and interactions

This chapter explores the interface between informal community activities and formal institutions, such as local authorities or funding bodies. It highlights the importance of relationships and interactions in encouraging participation generally, and in community engagement strategies.

FINDINGS

Several of the contributors had been involved in managing or evaluating funding programmes which overtly value informal processes and to avoid formal procedures as far as possible. These included the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Neighbourhoods Programme, the Community Development Foundation's Grassroots Grants, Nesta's various challenge funds, the Community Organisers Programme and Big Local, funded by the BIG Lottery and administered by Local Trust. Some acknowledged the irony of using top-down, nationally driven programmes to foster informal grassroots activity and felt themselves to be managing some of the tensions generated by this paradox, for example around timescales, project management and responsibility for spending public money to meet the funders' desired objectives. They all emphasised the importance of trust and networking, using light touch facilitation, brokering and guidance (for example through learning advisors), rather than heavy-handed governance or reporting requirements.

Engaging communities

Experience from these programmes is mixed but indicates that informality is usually good for promoting participation, inclusion and innovation, but it does have drawbacks, especially when dealing with formal bodies and top-down styles of leadership. Informal processes commonly used in community engagement, such as front-room meetings and family fun events, attract high levels of involvement but are sometimes seen as lacking legitimacy because those who participate are not 'representative' of, nor democratically accountable to, the whole population.

"Sometimes informality is being used to increase engagement but it's not very meaningful"
(MW)

This is a perennial dilemma for anyone working in or with communities. It is important that politicians and officials alike understand the arguments on both sides and have the capacity and willingness to 'juggle' formal and informal methods of decision-making.

Several contributors noted a growing pressure for community activity to be 'harnessed' to deliver policy objectives on localism and community rights, or to maintain services in the face of austerity cuts. One interviewee described this 'formalising of informality' as "*chilling*" (KH), arguing that much greater awareness is needed regarding how introducing formality can stifle 'natural' mutual help processes, eroding the social commitment generated by acts of kindness, courtesy, care and compassion, which perhaps comprise the essence of what we think of as 'community spirit'.

Informality can be facilitated and incorporated into strategies that encourage active citizenship and social action. In addition to various innovative forms of public engagement, people described creative and playful activities that disrupted some of the previous conventions for public consultation and opened up discussion to new ideas and new participants.

"Those [local authorities] that are doing well create spaces and opportunities for those more informal, solution-focused kind of discussions" (HW).

"Things like arts and creative interventions can be amazing. It allows people to be liberated from a certain kind of identity ... [there is] potentially massive scope for changing the rules and inspiring people" (MS).

Informal activities do not necessarily have to be visible or collective. One former senior civil servant described how he "*supplement[ed] the formal channels of reporting with informal meetings ... to gauge what local people really think and ... [hear] what new ideas they may want to put forward. As the senior decision-maker ... [it] was undoubtedly a great help for me to use these informal approaches alongside the more formal processes*" (HT).

Trust and interaction

Informality is more likely to generate trust and rapport because such interactions seem less restrained by roles or rules. Describing community meetings involving relatively inexperienced residents, one activist/leader noted: "*If they're relaxed they just witter away and out of that wittering comes wisdom ... If you're informal, people come out with things you never even dreamed of ... You need to have trust to get at the truth*" (CF).

In these circumstances people are making choices about how they present themselves to others and how they react because their behaviour is less governed by codes and conventions. However, it would be misleading to suggest that informal processes are entirely

free-form or anarchic. They are often carefully crafted to establish common ground, generate rapport and encourage reciprocity (MA).

Without formal mechanisms to mediate and hold individuals to account, the quality of interpersonal relations and interactions is crucial. Time, space and support are therefore needed for contacts to develop into connections and then deepen into genuine relationships. Many of the interviewees and practitioners referred to empathic attitudes, 'people' skills and participative techniques used to encourage people to mingle and get to know one another.

On the one hand, informality allows flexibility and experimentation, but on the other, communities sometimes crave the apparent stability offered by formal structures, describing it as a defence against disorder and especially useful for resolving conflicts, managing differences. In addition, formal mechanisms offer the kind of transparent accountability that communities hanker after when handling public money or seeking representation.

These veiled rules of association and interaction, sometimes regarded as 'common sense' or assumed as 'how we do things round here', may hide insidious boundaries exerted through informal conventions or symbols (Cohen, 1985). These may exclude people who are not (yet) in the know or who cannot conform, for example, because they cannot join in the post-meeting gathering in the local pub (for reasons of cash flow, access, childcare or religion). Similarly, informal behaviours can give an impression that everyone (else) belongs to a close-knit group of friends, who are well acquainted and can afford to tease, banter and gossip amongst themselves without realising that this may make others (such as newcomers or those from a different background) feel uncomfortable or disenfranchised. A highly involved tenant leader felt that too much informality can be detrimental, with strong individuals dominating proceedings and no mechanisms for changing or challenging this dynamic.

"The disadvantage of informal is that sometimes you get over-run by the loudest voice ... the reason you go through the Chair is that everybody else gets a chance" (CF).

She felt that formality enabled everyone to have a chance: to speak up in meetings and to take on tasks or a role. In this respect, she argued, formality created capacity and also stability.

Honest relationships

Several interviewees stressed the importance of authenticity and trust as a foundation for connecting with communities and mobilising people for collective action. A repeated

recommendation to (and by) policymakers was for discussions to have integrity and candour, with many recommending that public servants could be ‘more human’ in their dealings with communities and learn to appreciate (and tolerate) the inherent messiness of community meetings.

“Public facing figures should focus much more on the relationships they form than on the systems they represent ... They need first to be a human being ... to break down the barriers, the assumptions, the expectations ... That takes time and a commitment to be vulnerable” (MP).

Civil servants and local authority officers need to become more at ease in informal settings and more knowledgeable about the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and what it is like working precariously or collectively.

“It would be wonderful to have an honest exchange: for civil servants to say what their fears are right up front; get them to show a human face ... [Public officials] internalise the limitations and self-censorship that is there [in their jobs]. We need to know that and we need to learn from it” (MS).

Informal settings and styles encourage disclosure, people interacting and having conversations that reflect genuine experiences and personal interests. This is crucial particularly in cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary situations in order to promote connections across professional and social boundaries. The informal transfer of ideas and information improves decision-making because policies are grounded in a wider range of realities and are therefore more likely to work in practice. But such an approach can jeopardise professional boundaries and requires careful attention to issues around confidentiality and discretion based on a social or moral obligation towards the others involved.

“You really get to know people’s life stories ... they present a completely different side that somehow you can never ignore from then on ... [So] I’m being open, so my personality, for good or ill, is right on the line” (MA).

Improving access and participation

This also applies to improving access to advice and services. An informal approach, such as a ‘drop-in’ or using community link workers, can make it easier to approach services because there is less stigma attached and a more ‘peer-type’ relationship between the providers and users.

Many felt that meetings should be enjoyable, fun even, and where possible there should be opportunities for informal chat and humour to be woven into formal procedures. Experienced practitioners emphasised the value of working informally with individuals outside of meetings and away from the group, especially those who appear more reticent or daunted in formal situations.

Box A. 'Aunty Pam's is a support and advice service for mothers-to-be, set up by public health in Dewsbury and Huddersfield to provide 'professional and friendly' information and guidance about sexual health, contraception, pregnancy, birth and motherhood. It uses an approach that works with community strengths to support people's overall well-being by involving peer volunteers to listen and advise women on all aspects of becoming a mother. This informal drop-in style for services was developed because women who had concerns about their pregnancy reported that they did not feel comfortable going to a formal appointment with their GP. (Richardson and Thurgood, 2014).

Many workshop games and ice-breakers can be great levelling exercises. Playing around together can have a political purpose in community settings because it breaks down barriers and attracts a wider range of involvement in activities.

The Hastings Pier and White Rock Trust had "*a theory of change [that recognises] why you have to stay informal, why you have to have fun – the political purpose of fun. We're not informal because we can't be bothered to be formal. That's the really crucial thing. We're informal because that's how you build political power – by having large numbers [of people involved] ... sociability is the first step around solidarity ... People won't associate unless they're enjoying themselves*" (JS).

Box B. Alejandra Ibañez, a community organiser in a multi-ethnic area of Chicago has found that she can reach the most marginalised women, including immigrants without citizenship, by attending peñas, informal cultural gatherings to tap into their shared experiences, build on their sense of community and as occasions to mobilise political awareness and action (in Durose et al, 2013).

One practitioner/activist described how a new community trust has set a tone from the outset that values openness and informality, with "*porous*" meetings and outreach work into the community to encourage maximum participation. She talked about the need to "*valorise*" informal activities and relationships by having formal reports about these built into the agenda, making informality both valuable and visible (JS).

Managing tensions

There were several examples of formal mechanisms resorted to for managing difficulties in groups and to settle conflicts in ways that enabled people to resolve their differences and stay involved. Social action is usually driven by people's passions or strong political motivations to change things that they consider unjust. So allowing informal comments and interjections within formal proceedings can sometimes enable people to express feelings. The Chair of a Police Community Consultative Group was described as very good at running meetings in the wake of the Brixton riots so that they provided "*a good safety net for the community to vent their feelings*" (JW).

Policy-makers and practitioners alike recognised that formality is likely to deflect or absorb community energy and emotions making it much more difficult to mobilise people through collective, voluntary effort. There was an implicit consensus amongst the contributors, especially in the workshops, that an evolving mix is best, responsive to changing circumstances and organisational aims. This may involve iterative processes of action and reaction, with organisational cultures learning from experience and oscillating between formal and informal modes according to the different preferences of members or external pressures from funders.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The empowerment of people outside of the formal decision-making elites and structures requires that "traditional technocratic ways" are supplemented, perhaps even replaced, by more inclusive forms of involvement (Durose et al, 2013; Durose and Richardson, 2015). This means, if possible, avoiding holding public or panel meetings in intimidating surroundings, such as the Council chamber, or using oppressive styles of address or room layout. A review of the early years of Health and Well-being Boards found that the most effective boards were those that were run relatively informally, with space woven into the formal structure of meetings to carry out developmental activities and build relationships. This created a more solutions-oriented atmosphere and enabled people from different sectors to work well together and for new community activists to be involved beyond the usual cohort of interested members of the public and user representatives (Shared Intelligence, 2015). There are indications that there is greater willingness amongst professionals and policymakers to make more deliberate use of informal aspects of community life as evidenced in the latest guidelines on community engagement and health (NICE, 2016, p10).

Mobilising groups for concerted action seems to require more formal tactics to make sure voices and pressure are focused on the point of change, and in this respect it is noteworthy that the informal approaches adopted by the early community organisers is being replaced by the more formal mechanisms of ACORN branches and a national federation. Different settings and cultures presume certain styles or standards so behaviours that violate these covert expectations are often explicitly reprimanded or eliminated through peer pressure. In semi-formal situations, such as online forums or community meetings, the host or moderator, may take this role whether or not they have the formal authority to do so.

Transactions and exchanges

The 'give and take' of informal sharing or swapping is a familiar aspect of neighbourliness and community action, through networks of trust and solidarity, but these tend to be subconsciously monitored for fairness and to maintain a sense of reciprocity. Occasionally more formal arrangements are put in place to manage the exchange, especially when this is between community groups and public bodies. The ratio between trust and legal agreements varies depending on the longevity of relationships and levels of mutual knowledge (DP). With or without formal contracts there is scope for things to go wrong, for example, occasional or endemic corruption, social investments not being repaid or unforeseen disagreements arising between partners. Experience among funders and practitioners alike suggests that community members tend to be very trustworthy and prudent when it comes to holding and spending public funds or shared money, but sometimes value the protection that formal structures can offer.

Contracts may be needed (binding the respective parties to itemised costs, outputs, targets and timescales) and the accompanying transaction costs include the time and bureaucratic efforts devoted to negotiation, monitoring and reporting. In her interview, a community activist with years of experience in tenants participation, referred to the concept of a 'living contract' which she thought operated to uphold standards and get things done (CF), while at the same time making sure tenants' voices were listened to. Her experience as a tenants' representative showed that too much formality could be intimidating for volunteers and people become more relaxed and willing to contribute with quite simple alterations such as changing the room layout. Others too observed how this can change the power dynamics and improved the atmosphere of meetings. This induces conviviality and levelling that in turn establish the foundations for the kind of active engagement, sustained generosity and dedication to community or place that current policies entail.

Spaces and places

Public places such as pedestrianised town precincts or semi-rural spaces (woods and parkland) are mostly neutral with relaxed atmospheres where people are free to roam and loiter. They form part of what Allen et al (2015) say are needed to “cultivate the landscape of kindness” (p37). Events and organisations that foster informal interactions through an atmosphere of welcome and belonging, such as community festivals or clubs, village or school fetes, or local women’s institutes, also nurture networks of almost casual care that characterise supportive communities.

Informal conversations away from or on the edges of formal spaces allow unplanned encounters and relationships to develop, while unstructured, agenda-free ‘third’ places such as pubs, cafes and communal gatherings, provide excellent opportunities for people to explore their differences and similarities, breaking down barriers and identifying possible collaborators (Oldenburg, 1991). It is the informal aspects of these occasions that encourage people to ‘be themselves’ and not to ‘stand on ceremony’, though of course they have their own, often hidden, mores. The idea of picnics (literally and metaphorically) captures this approach – operating as they do between order and ambiguity with important lessons for community participation (Harris, 2011). Food has long been recognised as a facilitator of interaction. Incredible Edible use an approach which can be summed up as “Keep boring meetings short. Keep eating often” (Warhurst and Dobson, 2014, p268). Food not only attracts people to events but it creates a friendly atmosphere, a way of weaving some informality into otherwise formal proceedings.

Box C. Food is a dependable way of creating informal occasions, both in the preparation and the meal together. In Tipton, the Bangladeshi Women’s Association opened up their community kitchen to organise a regular shared cooking and eating group, dubbed “Come Dine With Neighbours.” The activity brought people from seven different ethnic communities together and provided opportunities for the women to learn about each other’s culinary traditions and to develop friendships.

The project is described as a “fun and meaningful way to bring women from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds together, using the universal language of food” (From the evaluation of the RSA’s Connecting Communities programme, Parsfield et al, 2015).

In a similar vein, a monthly Sunday lunch is provided at a local Church in Walthamstow with the aim of overcoming social isolation and loneliness. “Plates Are Us”, run mainly by young Muslim volunteers and supported by the Near Neighbours fund, has been very successful, attracting a range of diners including homeless people and gradually breaking down barriers and stereotypes between different ethnic groups as well (Lynn, 2013).

Food and fun build relationships, and therefore trust. It is a way of mobilising people who do not want to be organised as such.

Integrating approaches

However, where informal activities are used to increase participation and influence, they should be complementary to formal business, not separate. Those who are shy or dissenting may find their 'voice' in the informal spaces and then choose to articulate their views in the more formal settings. Informal activities also provide a gentle route into 'learning the ropes' for involvement in formal meetings and taking on organisational roles. Barnes et al (2008) describe how parents attending children's centres gradually become more confident to speak up at management meetings having acquired these skills through informal discussions initially.

Good relations and trust are also important within organisations, especially small bodies operating through informal processes rather than formal procedures (Rochester, 1999). This can bring dangers of group bias or individual burn-out. Such organisations may become cliquey, with opaque decision-making that is reluctant or unable to adapt to changing conditions or internal growth. This cosiness can lead to eventual stagnation or even the demise of the group through failure to resolve disagreements or recruit new energies. Clubs often operate satisfactorily using very few formal protocols, relying on good will, shared interests and familiarity to keep going. Recruitment is through word of mouth or personal invitation, while they are founded in the satisfaction that comes from hobbies shared with like-minded enthusiasts.

On the other hand, many examples were offered of formal structures supporting informal volunteering and inclusive participation. For instance, sports clubs generally operate according to their national governing bodies, with rules, aims and membership criteria for ensuring fair competition and reputation management but within their activities there is plenty of room for informal contributions (NO).

However, these clubs are generally not what we mean by community groups, as this latter term implies a more open membership, oriented towards some kind of shared or even public benefit. The affective aspects of these small groups are crucial, with basic human needs being met through companionship, compassion and mutual assistance, an aspect of 'below the radar' activity that is often overlooked (Soteri-Proctor, 2011).

Mutual commitment

A review by Midlothian Voluntary Action (2014) found that hobbies and pastimes encourage care and social interaction across generations: describing the support provided by some members of a local brass band to an elderly player, the report referred to this as “evol[ing naturally – there was no formal assessment of his needs, the young people just helped him out” (p20). The report recommends that such groups could be aided to provide this informal social care through micro-grants requiring very little paper work. It urges practitioners to become proactive in exploring what’s available because most of these clubs, societies and associations are not hooked into mainstream services so no information is collected about their activities.

They generally operate according to informal social controls “via a set of commonly agreed norms and rules” that uphold standards of behaviour (Richardson, 2008, p241) and so it may be necessary to suggest buddying arrangements with members and newcomers to reduce the impression of ‘clique-iness’. Anderson (2013) suggests that in community engagement exercises or partnership forums, grassroots representatives are somehow permitted to introduce emotional perspectives into formal arenas and this allows them a different kind of influence over policy-making. The authenticity of their contribution is enhanced if community members feel that these are trustworthy spaces and that they are dealing with people who can be trusted.

Collective action

A propensity to take part in community action is driven as much by intangible factors such as local loyalties and affinities, as by the exigencies and opportunities found in individual circumstances or policy directives. There is broad agreement that it is the quality of relationships and interactions that characterise people’s understanding and sense of community and their willingness to act together, sometimes termed ‘collective efficacy’ (Hillery, 1955; Crow and Allan, 1994; Sampson et al, 2002; Sampson, 2007). Networks are essential for making things happen and the nature of connections can enhance or detract from community capacity to co-produce a whole range of public goods as well deliver specific policy objectives (Halpern, 2009; Gilchrist, 2009). This is especially true when mobilising community assets to deal with complex issues that have appeared intractable to outside interventions, such as improving public health, social care and community safety (e.g. McKnight and Block, 2012).

This web of inter-connections has been described as ‘social’ or ‘community capital’ (Putnam, 2001; Halpern, 2005; Knapp et al, 2013). The RSA’s action research project, Connected

Communities, operationalises the latter concept to test interventions designed to ‘understand, involve and connect’ local networks to deliver dividends at individual and community–level, identifying four ways of generating or unleashing the social value of relations: namely improved well-being, active citizenship, collective empowerment and economic benefits (Parsfield et al, 2015). For communities, and perhaps for society as a whole, interventions targeted at well-connected individuals produce network effects that ripple out to enhance hope, health and happiness, spreading positive mood, determination and confidence among those connected (Hatfield, 1994; Christakis and Fowler, 2010). This emotional contagion may contribute to the subjective and relational aspects of collective efficacy, community cohesion and social identity, indeed to an overall sense of belonging.

One-size fits all’ models that feature in bureaucratic processes, such as proforma reporting mechanisms, are clumsy and often exclusive. A range of opportunities are needed to suit diverse motives, capacities and interests. This should include regular and accessible opportunities for informal interactions. By focusing on what matters to community members or listening to beneficiaries’ perspectives, formal procedures can be tailored accordingly and more meaningful participation is likely to follow.

Exchanges and sharing

Informal inter-personal networks provide a foundation for all kinds of exchanges, many based on mutuality and trust (sometimes described as comprising the ‘informal economy’). They offer a vital safety net for coping with poverty, occasionally as a springboard to self-help and entrepreneurship (Burns and Taylor, 1998; Williams, 2004; Batty and Cole, 2010; Kyprianou, 2015). “People who can draw on extended families and wider networks of friends are more likely to be resilient to shocks that might push others further into difficulty” (Bacon, 2013, p10). This informal reciprocity allows people to trade in favours of help, support, and practical assistance through swops and shares, without formal contracts or payments. This informal everyday help contributes to making lives ‘liveable’ in ordinary, often intangible ways (Anderson et al, 2015).

At a very local level, these ideas are translated into small scale initiatives such as street associations, whose strapline is ‘friendship, fun, belonging, a helping hand’. They have been formed to encourage neighbourliness and informal practical help (McCabe and Burnage, 2015). As one member of a group in Harbourne put it “If an old lady’s curtains fallen down, you don’t need a government initiative, you need a neighbour with a drill”. Groups have arranged parties for their children, bonfire nights and barbeques – all ways of getting residents together without the intrusion of formal organisations.

Several semi-formalised models for saving and lending exist in different communities, such as the 'pardner' clubs or 'hawala' systems used to share and transfer money without recourse to formal contracts or banking systems. Both have deep roots in former slave communities and were used by early immigrants to the UK from the Caribbean and south east Asia respectively. These are based on friendship, kin, caste, village and trading networks and although only loosely regulated, they rely on informal peer pressure and the honour system for enforcement. Such schemes provide good examples of the tensions between formal and informal modes in that access to credit is dependent on being a trusted member of the group, as determined by the 'banker', a respected figure in the community, usually a woman, or a small committee.

More formal arrangements have evolved, increasingly web-based, to facilitate such peer-to-peer exchanges, including Timebanks, Tool Shares, Freegle and LETS and apps designed to encourage 'urban commoning' or collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Although formal registration and auditing of exchanges is to be found in these schemes, nevertheless trust is an important component and all make claims to be enhancing a sense of community.

Misztal called for new forms of solidarity based on 'an optimal balance between the informality and formality of transactional practices' resting on three pillars of civility, sociability and intimacy (2000, p53). Community-level ways of getting things done primarily incorporate elements of sociability: the human inclination to seek companionship, to help one another and to co-operate. Methods of working with communities must value and enhance trust, mutuality and friendship (Wheatley and Frieze, 2011). Key components are therefore opportunities to promote meaningful conversations that enable participants to share emotions and experiences, and to develop joint ownership of goals and commitment to pursuing common purpose.

Chapter Three: Organisation development: governance, accountability

As indicated earlier, community groups often start out very informally, through self-organising networks, task-focused collectives, grassroots activities or campaigning. As they grow or become more ambitious they find themselves transitioning into more formal organisations acquiring assets, a higher profile or external responsibilities, for example to funders or legal frameworks relating to employment, public accountability or safeguarding.

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I examine why and how organisation development occurs, with a particular focus on this drift or shift from informal governance to formal procedures for decision-making and reporting.

Pressures to formalise

The development of organisational structures and protocols is often driven by increased membership, growing ambition, financial responsibilities and widening remit. But informality should not be reduced or discarded too quickly. It works when the action needs to be nimble, allowing expedient short cuts to be taken, a potential that increasingly is realised through social media. Initially such activities and conversations may seem ephemeral, but can have repercussions in the longer term, such as the setting up of a campaign group or establishing a regular community festival – “let’s do this again next year and invite the whole neighbourhood!” At that point, perhaps to ensure some continuity, things may become slightly less informal – with regular, but relaxed planning meetings held in someone’s living room, perhaps the group choosing a name and opening a bank account.

As more people get involved, maybe the meetings transfer to the community centre and tasks are divided into designated roles overseen by some kind of steering committee. Over the years, if the initiative is successful and chooses to grow, a fully-fledged organisation evolves that can apply for funding, employ staff and possibly acquire its own assets. This is a familiar arc and one that often seems to have its own momentum, but may need community development support.

“It’s when you’ve got that need for resources that you tend to see the group move towards formality” (KD).

In one of the workshops, this point of transition was thought to be triggered by the question ‘Who needs to be in control now?’ This occurs because the group is seeking public sector

assets (such as grants, land or buildings) and questions around indemnity arise, often due to the official requirements of funders, banks or insurers.

Benefits of formal mechanisms

Formal models may have strategic advantages; they assist in getting things done, following up tasks, recording decisions and maintaining accountability. Constitutions and standing orders establish the aims and objectives, as well as the powers and rules that members need to follow. Formal management structures enable an organisation to exist independently of its individual members, in terms of clarifying roles, liability, accountability and internal democracy. Partnership arrangements or alliances usually develop some kind of memorandum of understanding that codifies the responsibilities and aspirations of different parties, so that collaboration is possible in ways that transcend the motives of the specific people involved at any moment in time.

During this phase, tensions may emerge due to differing expectations of how the organisation or coalition should operate. An individual activist or facilitator can usefully take the lead informally, sometimes as an outsider or paid worker, by holding together a group through its common commitment and managing the group dynamics when things get difficult. They may have a designated, quasi neutral, role requiring them to be “*savvy, sensitive and sympathetic*” (PD) and deploy a set of skills for operating informally until the group is ready to formalise itself. In the initial stages of development, that person acts as a vehicle for handling risks, disagreements and uncertainties until formal procedures are in place that may help to manage the behaviour of ‘wreckers’ and ‘mavericks’ who may be causing mischief and schisms, sometimes unintentionally.

“If a [designated] relatively neutral person is there to hold the business and commitment of a group, it doesn’t necessarily have to formalise... the worker is holding the group dynamics” (MT).

With or without a paid worker, formal terms of reference offer a distinct advantage when disputes arise or in making sure that tasks are fairly allocated and followed through. Transparent, accurate record-keeping and formal reporting mechanisms ensure that an organisation maintains its impetus in the medium term. Vision statements and standing orders may enable the group to maintain its focus, refresh the team of officers and volunteers, supervise staff and address conflicts of interest without too much disruption or rancour. However, within community settings, where animosities are often personal rather

than ideological, recourse to formal procedures or documentation may prove counter-productive, entrenching people in rival positions or alienating them altogether.

Moving between informal and formal

It should not be assumed that the development of the group is inevitably moves from informality to formality. There is often dissent within groups about how, why or indeed whether to proceed down this route, resulting in friction and fall out with some members of the group leaving (or being ejected). Different beliefs about what is 'correct procedure' can undermine the commitment of individuals and distort its functioning so it is important that careful consideration is given at these points of transition as to the gains and losses will be brought about through formalisation.

"It's not like there is a journey from informality to formality – it's not a one). way street. We need to capture the complexity of all that goes on in communities. It's not as simple as [formality] is better" (AC).

"There is a tendency, and government is inevitably guilty of this, [to] look at small organisations and think it looks really chaotic and actually it's not ... [informality] might seem messy compared to what you are used to ... but it works and groups don't always need to grow" (NO).

The view that formality represents a more advanced stage of development for organisations should be challenged, or at the very least questioned. Informality offers a different, but valid, way of organising that reflects and values relationships and emotions. In the main, interviewees thought that formal structures and procedures should be adopted when suitable or necessary in order to achieve agreed aims and maintain probity rather than as the default position. The findings indicated that formality should not be foisted on groups without their understanding or approval. It is sensible to let organisations evolve organically according to changing needs and functions rather than imposing an 'off-the-shelf' format.

"Government should recognise that there are certain bits of society that it should not try to directly influence and that's fine ... [but] there should be formality where it's appropriate and where people want it" (NO).

"What's bad is when the needs of the bureaucracy are driving formality" (AC).

Formal procedures are deemed necessary for 'properly incorporated' or mature organisations; indeed these are often required by potential funders or partners. They are

certainly useful but can inadvertently exclude those who find constitutional niceties boring or baffling. Formal procedures may help an organisation to achieve its purposes but should be kept under review and allow room for discretion. It was suggested that informality “*allows things to morph and change and shift and become more appropriate to the context and the people involved*” (MP). This means that there are few models that necessarily fit the circumstances and aims of the group, and organisation development should be seen as a process of evolution rather than controlled engineering or construction.

Several of the study’s informants were familiar with recent or current large funding programmes and reported that community groups, such as Big Local Partnerships, Community First panels and the host organisations for community organisers, seemed to choose excessively high levels of formality, drawing up constitutions, electing officers and establishing structures despite being explicitly discouraged from doing so by the funders. Commenting on this, one funding manager (JH) supposed that this may be to do with issues of custodianship and continuity, a means of securing collective ownership and common purpose, but others involved in such projects have found them to be disempowering and frustrating.

An example⁴ was shared by a practitioner supporting a Big Local area that wanted to develop environmental projects in relation to the canals. A member of the core group requested ‘permission’ to widen the relevant sub-group to so that more members of the community could be involved. In reality, no such permission was needed as no local terms of reference existed and the ethos of the programme was very much about maximising community engagement. Yet, a phantom structure and rules seemed to lurk in participants’ heads because that is what they were used to.

Some groups “*become more formal than they ever need to be and that’s about replicating; wanting to emulate people they’ve seen playing these roles. [They believe] that to be seen as proper by the local authority, you have to work in that [formal] way*” (MW).

Downsides of formality

However, communities are sometimes hesitant to grow or move into more formal modes of organising so expansion or formalisation should not be seen as the only measure of progress or success. The transition can provoke anxiety or resistance for some group members, while others see it as a reason to become overly formal, introducing unwelcome and unnecessary

⁴ Based on email sent by Lorna Prescott, Dudley CVS.

rules and regulations that become burdensome and oppressive rather than supporting development and organic change.

“We end up placing bureaucracies on people and it scares them off” (AD).

This degree of formality can generate stress, either from the frustration of having to work towards outcomes imposed by funders or by working to external timetables. But lack of formality also creates worries when people feel they are operating without clear guidelines.

Occasionally formal requirements are assumed to operate or even invented to meet real or imagined grabs for power. This implicit narrative is often rooted in past experience as well as current expectations, but can be challenged through informal discussions and demonstrating that things can indeed be done differently.

Growth itself can also lead to formalisation, through the introduction of hierarchical management arrangements and role definitions, including for volunteers (NO). Consequently, the design and implementation of what one interviewee described as *“inert”* bureaucratic processes (JS) absorbs time and effort that was previously available for informal, more convivial activities. It was said that this can lead to a sense of sadness or resentment.

Managing growth

Scale is a significant factor in the transition from informal to formal, linked to micro and macro forms of collective action. *“You use formality for scaling up”* (KH). One interviewee, a community organiser (MP), suggested that there is an implicit association between smallness and informality. This echoes an observation I have often made that networks of up to about 40 interacting nodes (individuals, families, organisations, etc.) can be self-organising without introducing formal protocols but above that number mechanisms are needed for co-ordinating activities. This may be due to issues around shared communication and decision-making, or perhaps the size of the array of inter-connecting relations that can simultaneously be managed.

Box D. Incredible Edible in Todmorden began life with no formal processes but a vision for communities to grow food on unused and available common land, including verges and pocket parks. The organisers did not ask permission; they just got on with planting and harvesting and the movement expanded rapidly. As the founder explains it, their aim was to *“create a movement of small actions that can over time become a larger movement of small actions and can ... link with other people who have movements that complement it”* (PW)

Their success has attracted worldwide interest and they are inundated with visits and copy-cat initiatives springing up in other areas. The group want to encourage this whilst retaining their roots in the neighbourhoods and upholding the core values of 'community, learning and business'. In order to do this, a network was set up to share learning and to protect the 'brand' of organic and mildly anarchic micro-projects. This network has a paid co-ordinator and hosts an annual gathering of activists and volunteers. It encourages the use of 'open source' resources through online communication and continues to provide leadership and inspiration, while maintaining a largely informal mode of loose organising. The network is now entering a new phase, becoming a movement of members to be known as Incredible Edible Ltd, with special projects that stretch the model and is looking to link with all bodies in the north of England that are using food for focus for effecting change.

See Warhurst and Dobson (2014) for the whole story.

Sometimes the desire to formalise comes from within because that's what people are used to or because they want a fairer and more transparent distribution of power and accountability. Formality is seen as a way of legitimising decision-making with procedures used to prepare the ground including setting agendas, defining who can vote and whether the forum for making decisions is properly convened and accountable. These rules are usually set out in constitutions or standing orders, and the extent to which they are followed can be a source of controversy. Some people, especially those accustomed to formal proceedings, assume that such structures are necessary, normal and non-negotiable.

"At the moment, everyone jumps to formality: how it has been done before" (AC).

Others see formal procedures as alien and distracting so they attempt to subvert or circumvent them through informal channels and behaviour, arguing: *"You won't get anywhere unless you recognise the power of the informal to achieve change"* (NC).

A common development that accompanies growth or longevity is for an organisation to evolve a highly formalised core, such as an executive committee with officer roles or a co-ordinating group, surrounded by an informal periphery of sub-groups and networks of supporters which are much more fluid and porous, allowing people to dip in and out as they choose.

As one interviewee later observed, these arrangements can be uneven with *"lots of informal processes in small active groups but when they start to grow, this can present at least two*

issues: (a) a reluctance to acknowledge that informal processes don't work in the same way at scale and so tend to privilege those who have been most involved ... On the other hand (b) there is an [unwillingness] to dismantle important informal approaches which have worked in the past.”⁵

Maintaining a balance

An intermediate position was suggested by one interviewee, arguing that building power and formalising are parallel processes in that collective decision-making must be both “adequate, accountable and acceptable to the wider group” in order to engage with formal powerholders and earn their respect (JS).

Much of the conversation in the workshops and interviews explored the tensions and challenges of policy and organisation development. A key message from practitioners was that it is vital to stay focused on what a group wants to achieve. Different forms of governance might be appropriate at different stages of a group’s evolution and it is important to be flexible rather than get stuck with one format (MT).

“For some groups ... that informal nature is the very reason they exist, and if formal structure is imposed from the outside, if you change it so much, then it doesn’t match people’s motivations anymore” (NO).

Box E. A long-standing and effective community group had already incorporated themselves as a neighbourhood organisation but was pushed by the Council into becoming a social enterprise. They subsequently received regeneration funding to refurbish some empty shops and employ staff. However, they found themselves spending lots of time on the associated formal policies and procedures. This diverted time and energy from what they really wanted, which was to have a community centre. They never got their community centre. (MW)

Pressure to incorporate formality into an organisation should be accompanied by questions around anticipated benefits and what might be lost along the way. Workshop participants argued that *“formality should be proportionate and appropriate to the demands of the situation.”*

The informal and formal parts of the organisation need to complement each other, by supporting existing members and drawing in new participants, especially those inclined more to action than talking. This combined approach allows different functions to be performed by

⁵ Email sent by Mike Aiken after interviews completed.

different aspects, ideally enabling the organisation to work towards collective goals, refresh its leadership and be accountable to the wider community through the capillary relationships that reach out from the periphery and into the core. This creates what one interviewee described as “*a bank of goodwill to do things differently*” (PW).

External pressures, internal expectations and organisational cycles may shift the balance between formality and informality, but if a balanced equilibrium can be maintained then the group will survive and adapt to changing circumstances. This can be described this as ‘order out of chaos’ (MT), with informal interactions shaping the formal structures through feedback enabling the evolution of policies and procedures in response to various requirements and aspirations.

One programme manager with wide experience of supporting communities to develop formal organisations was aware that in many instances inappropriate requirements were being imposed due to assumptions about risk or what constituted ‘best practice’. He referred to “*an unwritten rule in my head that if ever something is insisted upon, then there needs to be justification why and not just because it’s [deemed] good practice*” (NB). He described how ‘sub-cultural’ expectations were ‘seeping’ from the public sector across into the practices of voluntary organisations, particularly in relation to risk management. He contended that being recognised as ‘fit-for-purpose’ in managing statutory contracts or administering public funds should not necessarily require extensive formalisation of policies and procedures.

Accountability

The issue of accountability generated much discussion in the interviews and workshops, particularly in relation to monitoring progress and measuring impact. It was recognised that accounting for public money spent in and by communities is necessary and desirable, but that this should not be too cumbersome for small groups of volunteers.

Box F. It’s up to You is a funding scheme run by Kirklees Council that has become super-informal. It is available to individuals and groups to develop an idea that has community benefit, without the need to fill in forms either for applications or evaluations. Grants are allocated according to community budgeting processes and the projects choose for themselves how they will provide evidence of impact. Despite the misgivings of some, all the money can be properly accounted for and members of the community have been highly creative in telling the stories of their success. Perhaps most importantly, the open and flexible approach has brought ‘first timers’ out of the woodwork, willing to try out fresh ideas and to do things differently. (AD and CG)

Much of the discussion referred to difficulties around evaluating whether the resources invested (financial as well as human) yielded the most worthwhile outcomes. Formal models for assessing performance do not reliably capture the most significant or valuable aspects of the investment and can get in the way of actually delivering the service. It was reported at the focus group that a community group in south London decided to give back a grant to the authority because they felt the formal monitoring requirements, described as 'box ticking', were diverting them from achieving their vision (EC).

Evaluating progress

In contrast, formal measuring tools developed by nef and others, such as social cost-benefit analysis (SCBA) or social return on investment (SROI) were criticised as being both too arbitrary for officials to find useful and too difficult for community projects to use. But formal structures and reporting mechanisms are sometimes seen as useful means for untangling the web of accountability crossing multiple levels and directions. These may be increasingly necessary in times of devolution and cross-sectoral partnership working, but they tend to be *"too rigid and over prescriptive"* (HT). A former civil servant, he went on to complain that *"people in the Treasury and local government finance departments by and large do not understand community-focused performance review, and tend to insist on rigid data collection that relegate the importance of informal engagement."* Furthermore, he argued that *"the inability of many community groups to back their feelings with quantifiable information makes it difficult to make a case on their behalf that their funded project is delivering well or warrants extra support."* There are clearly issues here about both culture and capacity.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Organisations do not have to be formal in order to be effective. Formality is often associated with organisational growth but it should not be assumed that groups always want to expand; lack of growth does not equate with failure; neither does a desire to stay as informal as possible. There is no right or inevitable trajectory from informal to formal and every step towards, or indeed away from formal, needs to be considered in the light of advantages and drawbacks. The key here is to be aware of the different functions played by formality and informality in different situations and to understand how these can be combined or balanced to achieve the desired goals.

Formal functions

However, ownership of shared community resources and ambitions mean that formal structures and protocols may prove useful in maintaining that vision while transferring control and responsibility over the years. Studies of small community organisations have found that although power struggles do happen generally transitions in leadership are smooth, and

there is a sound commitment to cultivating successors from the membership pool (Ockenden and Hutin, 2008). Antagonisms between trustees, members, paid staff and volunteers are common and formal protocols, such as constitutions and clear job descriptions can help to demarcate roles and resolve differences. In some fortunate circumstances these may evolve naturally over time but there is a tendency for groups to embark on a conveyor belt of formalisation that guides a familiar transition from a fledgling informal collective through to becoming a 'properly' constituted and governed organisation (see, for example, McMorland and Erakovic, 2013).

An important function of infrastructure organisations, such as councils for voluntary service or national charities, is to advise groups on the formalities of organisation development and to provide training in governance skills that will help them to formalise and allow further growth. Much of the guidance available makes assumptions about the direction of this journey and what are seen as inevitable transition points or requirements. See, for example, Good Governance – a code for the voluntary and community sector (2010)⁶ or the checklist in the Community Development Foundation's (CDF) Starting Up for Success guide (Allen and May, 2007). Community members themselves may go along with this, believing it to be the 'proper' way of doing things and it is certainly a step towards accessing funds and status. Many funders and government programmes require groups to become incorporated in order to be eligible for grants or to bid for contracts, but for some groups this is a step too far or too soon.

It is commonly assumed that 'good governance' is achieved after progression through these stages but I would contend that important aspects of community activism and voluntary effort may be lost along the way, notably the enthusiasm, 'experi-mentality' and sheer doggedness that residents and service users bring to the development and delivery of local initiatives. Nonetheless, when this informal commitment disperses, then formal procedures may well assist in ensuring that the group ends on a good note or that an organisation is properly closed with all the loose ends tied off.

Legal Liabilities

There is often pressure for an organisation to limit the indemnity of its individual members through incorporation as a legal entity of some kind. This is entirely understandable and there are several options, each with attendant requirements around registration, record-keeping and rules. Relatively new forms of incorporation have been introduced in recent

⁶ <http://www.governancecode.org/full-code-of-governance/>

years to reduce the bureaucratic burden on community organisations, notably Community Interest Companies and Community Benefit societies, known as BenComs.⁷

Over the past few decades government policy has been to develop a 'mixed economy of welfare' and to address supposed democratic deficits by involving communities and third sector agencies in service delivery and planning. Inevitably this has raised thorny issues around representation and responsibility that needed to be addressed and gradually pressure grew for these bodies to become more formal and externally regulated (Milbourne, 2013). The ChangeUp programme from the 1990s had begun this tendency aiming to render voluntary organisations more 'business-like', a view echoed by the National Audit Office evaluation (Hoadly et al, 2009).

The current 'community rights' agenda appears to be accelerating the process, requiring organisations to replicate the systems of private businesses in order to compete with the private sector to run local services and facilities (NB). In the report, 'Saving money by doing the right thing', Locality argue that excessive formalisation wastes money and time and that community members should be involved in designing monitoring and governance systems that suit them rather than expecting them to conform to standard models of incorporation (Seddon, 2014).

This was recognised in the evaluation of the 'governance hub', one of six strands of the ChangeUp strategy (Kumar and Nunan, 2002). The report argued that a more nuanced approach was needed both in terms of 'governance' and of 'small community groups and voluntary organisations'. This is gradually being recognised in changes to the government's commissioning procedures (Cabinet Office, 2016). The blanket imposition of formal governance requirements was seen as unduly heavy, restrictive and inappropriate for some community groups and voluntary organisations, with consideration given to development of a light governance structure, one that enables rather than stifles. Some enlightened funders and councils recognise this and there are signs that government too, is attempting to do things differently, with the suggestion floated that a new form of indemnity should be developed for non-incorporated groups (Cabinet Office, 2011).

However, the benefits gained from current protocols and structures such as legitimacy and access to funding should not be lost altogether. Governance needs to be facilitative rather than constraining.

⁷ <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/new-law-cooperatives-community-benefit-societies/governance/article/1299944>

Light touch approaches

A report by Lewisham Council (2012) warns against attempts to get community and voluntary sector organisations to become too business-like and bureaucratic as this will simply curb “the enthusiasm and passion that made people want to get involved in the first place” (p2). Many organisations, perhaps especially those established by Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, face similar challenges because they are reluctant to charge for services, preferring light touch funding and flexible contracts rather than becoming embroiled in bureaucratically managed schemes. For similar reasons, many small and ‘below the radar’ groups choose not to scale up, providing instead local, niche services that can result in their isolation from the mainstream sector and failure to tackle the bigger issues around discrimination (Donahue, 2011). There is evidence that this particularly affects groups already on the edge of society, such as Traveller communities or refugees (Ryder, 2011; Piacentini, 2012).

Proportionate and appropriate

A study of self-help groups carried out by the now defunct Community Development Foundation found that overly formal structures and procedures can smother or divert the very passion and energy that the institutions are trying to galvanise (Archer and Vanderhoven, 2010). The report recommended that intermediary roles are needed to combine the zeal and commitment of informal community initiatives and those public services with expertise and resources. Government and local authorities could do more to create the conditions in which self-help can flourish but must not seek to control it. More recent research by CDF (2014) showed that ‘tailor-made’ projects run by community groups provide excellent value for money in terms of health, well-being, community safety, improving the physical environment and contributing to the local economy. Key to their success are trust, flexibility, responsiveness, connected-ness and reach. In other words it is the informal way in which they operate that enables them to harness local expertise and energy, and by and large avoid duplication.

Nevertheless, at times of difficulty it can prove expedient to have in place terms of reference (such as a constitution or code of conduct) that have been agreed collectively and can be referred to, to resolve conflicts relatively amicably and without prolonging disputes or interpersonal acrimony. Formal procedures can allow a group to make a clear decision and move on rather than implode in a welter of allegations and personal acrimony. Too much informality, including not taking notes of decisions made, can sometimes keep a group spinning in circles, going over old ground and re-inventing the wheel for its own governance so that it struggles to make meaningful progress and retain interest.

Formal statements that enshrine a group's vision or establish the focus of its activities can assist that forward motion and prevent an organisation from becoming derailed. But it can also lead to the moribund 'founder syndrome' when all attempts to change falter in a stagnating swamp of claims that 'this is what we were set up to do' and 'we've always done it this way'. Paradoxically, this occurs when the formal protocols are insufficient to challenge the informal cosiness enjoyed by a clique of founding members or a self-perpetuating faction. Instead formal procedures of open elections, induction exercises and transparently accountable decision-making processes can be used to bring in new members and shine fresh light on old assumptions. Once allowed through the door, as it were, people develop confidence over time and acquire skills to operate in the formal settings.

Chapter Four : Power and politics: democracy, leadership and partnership

This chapter focuses on how resources are allocated and co-ordinated through collaboration between different sectors, and how different models of decision making enable joint working to be both democratic and effective. Co-production and leadership are core themes in examining the interplay between formal and informal modes of participation.

FINDINGS

The introduction of formality at the interface between communities and institutions was described by one interviewee as a form of 'colonisation' imposing foreign customs in settings that are unsuitable or resistant.

The interface between councils and communities

Elected members of parliament and councillors play vital boundary-spanning roles and are often adept at integrating the formalities of their political role in the chamber, with informal encounters at their surgeries or constituency events. They are able to use these opportunities, along with their case work, to gain insights and bring in a range of perspectives to the policy-making arenas. Some councillors and staff may need support to become confident in this interface role, especially in consultative or joint decision-making forums, such as Neighbourhood Panels. These provide spaces for the development of local solutions to local problems, often through involving communities in formal co-production and commissioning models but also by enhancing informal co-operation and dialogue. For this to work well, good quality relationships and access to informed debate (on all sides) are needed. One interviewee noted that *"when you have a formal procedure you get a different type of relationship with communities – it becomes more transactional than creative"* (CG).

She went on to say that Councils need to be more emotionally intelligent – more flexible and modern – in order to develop a new, less paternalistic relationship with local people, recognising that community members who engage with local authorities are not necessarily representative (and should not be expected to be), but are driven by a range of interests, motivations and passions. Nonetheless, tensions are frequently reported, sometimes due to misunderstandings around the respective roles of elected member versus community representative, with each vying for leadership status vis-à-vis the 'silent majority' (HW). In order to avoid the improper use of power and influence, Councils have constitutions, codes of conduct and procedures for declaring a personal interest or stake, and contractual procedures to ensure *"appropriate governance"* (HW) in order to uphold important principles of accountability and transparency. Notions of representation and leadership can be

achieved formally (through mechanisms such as nominations and elections) or these can emerge through informal networking and responsive action, sometimes involving the self-appointment of a local figurehead or clique of supporters. At the same time informal networking can undermine the whole edifice through the use of 'soft power' to preserve power differentials and obscure sources of control that are difficult to challenge.

Lack of trust can be deeply undermining of both participative and representative democracy and a combination of formal structures and informal relationships probably offers the best possible balance. Where elected members adopt a paternalistic style, closing down informal channels of discussion and asserting their sole right to represent, they claim to be exercising community leadership through having a democratic mandate. This fails to acknowledge the value of participatory forms of democracy.

In contrast, the councillor interviewed for this study recommended spending time alongside community activities but working hard to persuade the formal political system work to address issues raised by residents. He suggested that for a local campaign (for example around traffic schemes) to gain leverage it needs to take on at least the semblance of a formally organised group, with a name and spokesperson. He argued that 'loose' collectives carry no voice in the debate, with even a small degree of formalisation adding weight to the argument. He thought that campaigns work best when they are driven by a recognisably constituted organisation, such as a Community Association that can advocate on behalf of a wider constituency and "*lessen antagonisms and suspicions*" (IG).

Box G. Widcombe Association was formed to restore the high street of a neighbourhood in Bath to former life, after a misguided traffic rearrangement nearly 40 years previously. It has also developed other community activities such as 'village' events and clubs. They have used their status as an acknowledged representative body to collaborate with the Council on designing a new traffic scheme and road layout to address long-standing issues in the area caused by through traffic and commuter parking. The working party has acted as a channel for ideas and information to flow between the planners and local residents, and provides feedback on concerns and developments as they occur. Most of their ideas have been successfully implemented. (IG)

The councillor is able to play the role of 'go-between', attending meetings and using informal processes to funnel through ideas in advance of the formal decision-making procedures. Formal organisations positioned at the interface between Councils and communities, clearly carry more clout and are therefore assumed by many to be the preferred model for

community networks. There is an assumption that *“to be professional, to do things professionally, you have to be formal”* (MW).

Power and influence

The link between power, status and formality was highlighted by most of the participants in the study.

“Informality isn’t valued because the [bureaucrats and policymakers] are setting the agenda. [The formal side] is where the power and the influence and the money is” (AA).

Formal structures are usually seen as essential for effective management and efficient working, but they can be disempowering because they restrict room for discretion. Governance documents enable organisations to run according to agreed rules and with clear roles delineating formal lines of influence and accountability. In theory this transparency enables collective democracy and the achievement of shared goals.

“Formal is very important in terms of things like fairness and consistency ... having structures which help you to remember [what was agreed]. It’s a way of managing society in a way that doesn’t simply give the strongest or loudest the final say ... Ensuring that everyone’s voices can be heard and that we don’t end up resorting to violence” (PD).

However, formality can be intimidating, cumbersome and tedious, especially for those who are relatively powerless or who are unaccustomed to formal situations and styles.

“The people who have the power and the money are all very formal and there is an expectation that we will jump through their hoops” (DL).

Some contributors thought that government attempts to empower communities through a series of programmes and policies such as the active citizenship (ALAC) pilot, the Duty to Involve, Community Rights and Localism usually failed to inspire or empower ‘ordinary’ people because they resulted in overly formal mechanisms such as community empowerment networks or neighbourhood forums that were often run along formal lines. Consequently, these did little to address power differentials and simply perpetuated traditional divisions between ‘them’ (the power holders in authority) and ‘us’ (residents and service users). The bureaucratic cultures responsible for devising engagement strategies created a kind of *“ambiguous power that is polyvalent and cellular and difficult to challenge or channel”* (MS). This was said to generate conflict rather than a critical, but constructive dialogue that would have allowed community views and experiences to be properly debated

and influential. But sometimes, he argued, you need elements of formality to manage animosities between rivals or different interests. The appearance of conflict can sometimes be the trigger for introducing or reverting to formal rules of engagement or codes of conduct.

Collaboration

Trust and understanding allow co-operative relationships to form between partners and, as we saw in chapter two, depend heavily on the nature of connections and exchanges. Many of the contributors thought that more time and funding is needed to support informal networking and that this should be regarded as a vital foundation for voluntary action and partnership working, enabling people from different sectors and communities to “*be alongside*” one another (MA) and to develop mutual respect.

A focus group member described how it was the good relationship between the CEO of the local CVS and the leader of the Council that enabled things to run smoothly between the statutory and voluntary sectors, rather than relying on a Compact or Memorandum of Understanding, but he also acknowledged that this strategy can collapse if one of the parties leaves, and in any case it does not lend itself to transparency or open accountability (NC).

Government policy in the past three decades has sought to increase and improve partnership working across the sectors and to involve the public (however vaguely defined) more widely in local decision-making and delivery strategies. Many of the interviewees had direct experience of designing and implementing these policies through programmes such as Communities First, ‘Our Place’, neighbourhood planning, the reinvigoration of parish and town councils and setting up business improvement districts, to name just a few recent initiatives. Inevitably, these brought out tensions between representative and participative democracy that were reflected in different forms of collaboration, some more informal than others. Practitioners felt that there needs to be more awareness of the distinction and the overlap between these different forms of democracy, and how they might integrate both formal and informal processes.

Box H. The devolved Welsh government have uniquely legislated for a Third Sector Scheme that brings together elected politicians, officials and voluntary sector leaders. The current (2014) Scheme, like its predecessor, provides for a Third Sector Partnership Council (TSPC) which is chaired by the relevant Minister and brings together representatives from across the sector, including the main national infrastructure body (WCVA). Over the years since it was established, the twice yearly meetings have become more informal and partners value the rich mix of conversations and formal decision-making which enables them to influence policy. (PD)

A first step for those involved in cross-sectoral discussions and working parties is to put aside their formal roles and enter the middle space relatively unencumbered by their designated chains of accountability.

“Everybody who joined that working party ... agreed to take off their ‘hats’ and just to be people with views and experience to share on conditions of confidentiality, I guess, not being held to account ... and that’s why the informal can be so much more productive than the formal because everybody in the formal situation is looking over their shoulder” (CW).

This is not easy for some, especially if they have been mandated or are acting within particular policy frameworks. However, it was said by one interviewee with experience in this regard, that civil servants should be more confident in stepping outside of their comfort zones and allowing outside stakeholders, including members of the public, to influence decisions and shape initiatives. This would be eased if public officials stay longer in the same position, in order to develop relationships with the relevant players and to develop their expertise in specific areas of policy, for example by ensuring that lessons from formally documented evaluations are carried forward rather than simply stored in an electronic filing cabinet. The same retired civil servant observed that *“the longer you’ve been a civil servant, the less you think about achieving the objective and the more you think about covering your back!” (CW).* In his constructively critical farewell speech he cites a former colleague, speaking of “‘know nothing executives’ – people whose only concern is to serve their hierarchical masters (sic), not to seek to develop sound policies that work.”⁸

“Councils themselves need the maximum flexibility to be able to determine their own solutions locally that make sense in the place, so having top-down initiatives is rarely helpful” (HW).

Doing things differently

Rigidly designed national programmes are therefore not ideal, but as we shall see later, there is a case for performance frameworks that promote best practice and avoid the postcode lottery of service standards. Doing things differently at neighbourhood level requires a willingness to adopt more flexible approaches to community empowerment and participative democracy. Top-down initiatives are regarded as unhelpfully prescriptive and councils can be encouraged to learn from the best practice through peer networks such as the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network.

⁸ From untitled speech delivered by Charles Woodd at his retirement party in 2010.

More attention must be paid to ensuring that procurement and commissioning procedures make sense and are proportionate to the value of the contract. One contributor suggested that overly prescriptive commissioning procedures comprise a way of “*pre-managing risk*” by outsourcing it to the intended ‘suppliers market’ (AS). More thought is needed on whether the pre-qualifying requirements are really necessary and setting realistic timescales, especially for smaller groups to make arrangements for putting together consortia for joint bids (Seabrooke, unpublished paper, 2011).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Policymakers and politicians need to be able to ‘mix and match’ formal and informal methods for engaging with communities to shape and deliver services. They need to present a human face while also acting as ‘agents of the state’, interpreting the rules with discretion and a sense of wider purpose.

Representation in practice

Over-enthusiasm for informal encounters runs the risk of derailing the results of formal deliberations through a determined nudge from a member of the public encountered at a community event, or at the whim of an elected member (PD). There are also issues regarding transparency, inappropriate influence and public accountability that need guaranteeing through codes of practice, standing orders and public ethics, such as those enshrined in the seven Nolan principles of public life (Nolan, 1995).

The risks of corruption and nepotism, as has surfaced in at least one London borough recently, can be dealt with by reference to council constitutions and individual declarations of interest. However, too much council paraphernalia may undermine engagement processes, such as neighbourhood panels, leaving councillors aloof and paternalistic because meetings are unwieldy and boring. This is not how democracy or evidenced-based policy-making should work.

Councillors are often said to be community leaders by virtue of their election, mostly on a party political mandate. This role is supposed to be facing both ways - into the council chamber and outwards to the residents of their constituencies. They must act as brokers and mediators, sometimes arbitrating between, and sometimes advocating for, local interests (Richardson, 2012). In order to fulfil these sometimes contradictory expectations, effective councillors locate themselves at the interface between politics and the public. Their surgeries and participation in community initiatives are good examples of how informal styles of interaction are needed to carry out a formal role effectively. At the same time, if they are to

have any impact within formal decision-making structures then they need to be able to operate appropriately and, importantly, ensure that their constituents can do so as well.

Democratic legitimacy needs consideration when thinking about issues of power and current systems of representative government. Elected members can find themselves managing the tensions of, on the one hand, championing the informal but vociferous arguments of community pressure groups while simultaneously attempting to defend formal lines of accountability (Klijn and Skelcher, 2007).

Councillors are necessarily boundary-spanners, and need to be able to act within formal parameters to fulfil their legal and democratic functions but should also be able to operate with some discretion and informality, so that there is room for persuasion from the people they represent.

Facets of power

The interplay between formal and informal is particularly relevant to theories of power that draw attention to hidden aspects, such as Lukes' 3rd face (2005) or Gaventa's power cube with its visible, hidden and invisible sides (2006). Other models envisage power as flowing through circuits (Clegg, 1989) or networks (Gilchrist, 2009) rather than exerted through formal structures and procedures. Foucault and other postmodernists join Gramsci (1992) in examining the nature of dominant discourses, arguing that the prevailing ideologies that permeate society and mould 'common sense' are mediated through cultural as well as political ideas, permeating 'capillaries' of influence and dictating the parameters within which options are considered.

This has profound implications for how communities are supported and challenged to question, learn and articulate their own thinking and interests (Ledwith, 2011). It is well known that informal, behind the scenes, conversations influence formal decisions, through lobbying and schmoozing, even when no actual bribery or corruption occurs. Institutional processes of democracy are not necessarily the only valid means of participation and as Barnes et al (2008) noted "Governance consists of both formal structures and informal processes" (p170).

Alternative politics

Authority and power are usually associated with formal structures and styles. Indeed the adoption of formal constitutions and positions are often accompanied by grabs for power and legitimacy. They tend to favour those who already occupy or are accustomed to formal roles,

and there have been numerous attempts over the years to dismantle or discredit formal systems in order to empower those who are excluded or marginalised by these. Some such attempts are based on alternative ways of 'doing politics' through a broad discursive system for 'everyday talk' and more formalised deliberative democracy (see Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). These 'empowered spaces' (Burrell, 2015) include people's assemblies (Feldman, 2009), citizens' conventions and minipublics and are designed to develop 'strategies that innovatively disrupt entrenched forms of bureaucratic governmental institutions'.⁹ There are also a plethora of online platforms for debate such as OpenDemocracy and Netivist that aim to galvanise individual action as well as mass mobilisations, petitions, etc.

These forms of collective organising are rooted in versions of participative democracy that eschew bureaucracy and are 'unencumbered by the nature of habit, law, custom or prejudice' (Graeber in Guardian interview – 21.3.2015). Some look to the fluid, network models of social movements (Tarrow, 2011; Castells, 2012) or anarchism (Graeber, 2013) while others are inventing new democratic practices to encompass the 'unruly politics of social life' (Macfadyen, 2014). Cornwall's (2008) distinction between 'invited' and 'claimed' spaces is an important contribution to debates about community engagement strategies and has provoked thinking about hybrid forms of governance spaces nestling in the interstices of power that link governmental and civil society space (Gaventa, 2004; Billis, 2010; Howard and Taylor, 2010).

Fluid Leadership

Hierarchical models of decision-making and accountability, exercised through bureaucracy and/or representative forms of democracy, seem dependent on conventional notions of 'top-down' leadership. However, in this age of active citizenship and community empowerment, governance models are developing that embrace notions of collective, distributed and emergent leadership (Wheatley, 2006; Skinner and Farrar, 2009; Casey, 2012; Kenny et al, 2015). For communities, leadership appears in many different ways, and is not always expressed overtly or through obvious or traditional roles. Community leadership may evolve through the strength of inter-personal relationships and the nature of regular interactions across networks at a micro-level, creating an informal power base and networks of influence (Onyx and Leonard, 2011). In this regard, leadership development has been described as 'rhizomic', emerging from hidden roots to create equilibrium at system level (Kenny et al, 2015, chapter 10).

⁹ See <http://newcommunityparadigms.pbworks.com>

Community leaders can also be ex-officio figureheads, such as chairs of relevant committees, business leaders, those holding religious posts or school heads. They are often well-connected and hold significant resources. This model tends to be rather 'macho'; favouring men, to the disadvantage of very capable and active women, an issue which I will return to later in the report. Someone who occupies a leadership position in formal or traditional hierarchies may seem an obvious choice, but they are not necessarily the person who represents local views or is able to mobilise activists and volunteers. Community members occupying positions of power sometimes exert gate-keeping functions that are difficult to challenge or circumvent, especially if these are held informally (Bailey, 2014). Effective leadership at community level is often multi-focal, tactical and wily based in informal democratic practices that tend to favour women (e.g. Williams, 2015). The entrenched power of formal authority figures may be contested openly or through informal breaches of protocol whereby the status, reputation or democratic legitimacy of elected or appointed leaders is undermined or questioned (BRAP, 2015).

Flexible Networking

Through informal behaviours, the accustomed deference to elders, representatives or expert authority is withheld or their privileged status is ignored. Instead of focusing on trying to engage those in formal authority, it is useful to bear in mind what have become known as the Curitiba principles of urban planning (Rabinovitch and Hoehn, 1995). These recognise that practical solutions can be developed in incremental ways that are fast, simple and cheap rather than trying to adopt a top-down, centralised and static plan. Visions can be achieved by working flexibly and primarily with the willing and able, while staying outcome focused. The Todmorden Incredible Edible project flourishes because it has prioritised doing things that are immediately liberating, not oppressive or frustrating.

Misztal (2000, p125) talks of the 'dialectic' nature of the relationship between formal and informal, and the need to achieve an optimal balance, referring to "highly adaptive informal networks [that] move diagonally and elliptically, skipping entire functions to get things done" (Krackhart and Hanson, 1993, p104). Collaborative behaviour, whether in formal organisations or through informal collective action, is driven most effectively by common purpose rather than rules and commands. And yet such arrangements can be highly charged with a range of competing interests, raising strong emotions that need expressing (or at least acknowledging) through informal outlets if they are not to spill over into the formal discussions (Cairns, 2015). The sum of individual, freely given, contributions can produce something of great worth as demonstrated, for example, by crowd-sourcing or Wikipedia's commitment to the social production of knowledge (Benkler, 2006). It is now well recognised

that networks grow even within strongly hierarchical structures and that they can prove extremely effective (Nohria and Eccles, 1992). One study of organisations has found that the high performers were notable not for their individual expertise but for their extensive and diverse personal networks and channelling resources and influence, thereby generating 'hidden power' for those well-connected people (Cross and Parker, 2004). It is through such informal interactions that these mutual loyalties and reciprocal exchanges develop. This can benefit some while disadvantaging others who have equal merit and potential. Evidence from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) poverty and ethnicity research programme indicates that the operation of informal networks can undermine formal equal opportunities policies and trap people in low wage jobs or in marginalised positions (McCabe et al, 2013; Hudson et al, 2013).

'Buffering' bodies

Where partners are working together across sectors, there needs to be some clarity around roles, remit, expectations and limitations. These can be established in a formal memorandum of agreement (or such like) but it is imperative that everyone 'owns' these arrangements and that community partnerships themselves are as informal as feasible. This may involve some compromises and creative juxtapositions so that those who are not accustomed to formalities are comfortable to participate in discussions, while the regulatory processes, legal responsibilities and compliance mechanisms (e.g. regarding finance or employment) are 'bracketed off' to sub-committees or accountable bodies.

Funding programmes designed to support community planning and social action (notably Community First, the Community Organisers Programme or Our Place) were all outsourced, via competitive tendering, to national organisations or consortia. These arrangements set in place 'buffers' between government and communities, providing a 'safe pair of hands' with the status of trusted and respected bodies that can absorb potential mishaps, often themselves imposing formal targets and criteria. Similar measures are used at local levels, with the Community Organisers Programme's host organisations and local councils acting as 'stewards of community risk' (Carr-West, 2011). Locally trusted organisations (LTOS) in the Big Local programme and 'community holding groups' set up by some community organisers perform this function, as do many infrastructure bodies.

Voluntary sector organisations can play a useful role as intermediaries, enabling the unstructured, unorganised, and unincorporated sections of communities to contribute to partnerships and benefit from funding. There are signs that things are shifting and new ways being found to support smaller groups through the formation of larger consortia, facilitated or

fronted by stable voluntary organisations or by setting up funding mechanisms such as community-run 'kitties' .

It has been said that politics is the 'art of getting things done' by bringing together ideas, funding and expertise to achieve jointly agreed goals. The current government's ideological commitment to neoliberalism implies only limited interventions and policy directives as manifest in recent trends towards cross-sectoral partnership working and outsourcing. In theory this should, "shield delivery from political micro-management and bureaucratic oppression"¹⁰ and requires a greater willingness to relax control of both resources and responsibilities. As the next chapter explores, this strategy carries some inherent risk but may only succeed if communities and civil society projects are enabled to devise their own forms of governance and to engage with the various forms of democracy using methods that are participative and inclusive.

¹⁰ Woodd, C. See footnote 4.

Chapter Five: Risks and standards: quality and equalities in practice

Formality is often seen as ‘standard’ and it can also be the means for upholding standards and managing risk. Issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion are also relevant to ethical standards because this theme is not only about doing things optimally and making best use of resources and talents but also about equity and fairness.

FINDINGS

Power and privilege operate through informal processes of personal preference, local customs and organisational cultures. As Pam Warhurst of Incredible Edible asserts, “*it is vital to go with the grain of the community.*”

Perpetuating disadvantage

However, as we saw in the previous chapter, formality is also perceived as maintaining or demonstrating powerful positions and is sometimes experienced as intimidating by people who are socially disadvantaged and politically marginalised.

“There is a key driver of levels of deprivation in communities that have historically faced a lot of discrimination: an imbalance of power. I think naturally they veer towards the informal ... because of some of those issues ... for people who have not historically been at the table” (KD).

Formal procedures offer transparent ways of ensuring parity and fairness in the allocation of resources, for example around grants or pay levels linked to nationally negotiated grades. To some extent bureaucratic standards ensure consistency but remove the scope for local discretion which could allow the most powerful to negotiate high remuneration or to take advantages of local opportunities. “*You can use formal processes to disguise inequality and unfairness*” (KH).

Power, its use and abuse, has been a critical theme in this study, with formal procedures sometimes preserving elite positions, yet also being used to challenge such privilege through, for example, equal opportunities policies, mechanisms for succession (open elections and finite terms of office) or shared accountability. Unrestrained informal processes tend to reflect social biases or personal prejudices and can be discriminatory, as is evident in the ‘canteen cultures’ of many large institutions (Macpherson, 1999).

Inclusion

Dimensions of inequality intersect with the formal-informal matrix in multi-faceted ways. At the practitioner workshops it was suggested that already disadvantaged social groups, such

as women or young people, may be further marginalised by formal styles of leadership because they feel alienated and prefer to operate through more informal processes that seem more inclusive and 'level' (see also Jupp, 2007).

"Informality can support inclusivity because you don't have to be a fixed member of a group to go along; it's open to everyone; everybody can have their say. You don't have to have a role. But that can also be excluding to people because you haven't got any rules so people can shape it how they want to" (MW).

Box 1. The residents of one Big Local area have avoided establishing themselves as a formal organisation because their experience has led them to see these as corrupt and oppressive, especially for members of the local Black and minority ethnic communities. Instead they have adopted a loosely coordinated structure of working groups around the priority themes and these have enabled people interested in those topics to get on with actually delivering projects, rather than simply talking about issues. Awards to individuals have required only very informal applications and so have been taken up by people who might not have got through formal procedures.

However, because of past histories of shady dealings in the area regarding the allocation of funding, they have developed formal procedures to vet the organisations that are to receive grants or contracts to deliver services. This has allowed them to address levels of distrust amongst community groups by using local knowledge to work out who is reliable and who is under threat. This has enabled the funding to be invested where it is most needed and most effective. (SP)

There may well be cultural preferences regarding formal and informal, linked to different ethnic communities and traditions. However, there appears to be no straight forward picture linking ethnicity to either, and it is likely that generational and gender factors may intersect with class and cultural factors. At the focus group it was said that some members of BME communities favour formal structures, such as those that govern temples or mosques, and that they find informality and loose structures quite difficult.

"Some of the traditional groups that I've worked with in the past actually like things highly formalised because that's what they are used to ... the formal structures are very male dominated ... and women are often excluded ... It's an inherited tradition that they perpetuate" (VG).

This complexity needs to be addressed all round so that formal institutions become more sensitive to the diverse traditions and perceptions of different communities, while society at

large learns to be more adept at choosing and using appropriate levels of formality. In Islington, the Council has enabled young people to influence decision-making by gathering their ideas informally and then including their views about services into formal commissioning documents. The LGA is encouraging other authorities to adopt a less formal approach to commissioning from communities, drawing on promising and idiosyncratic practices from several of its member Councils.

Levelling tactics

Some of the practitioners hinted that class was a factor, with formal styles favouring upper and middle class people who were deemed to be more comfortable with formal dress codes, the use of jargon or titles of address (councillor, professor, etc.) It was argued that disrupting these implicit codes challenged the power of elites or officials and created a more level playing field. An obvious example relates to the layout of furniture for a meeting.

“You can transform the milieu, the culture, the environment to an extent and I suppose there an awful lot of power in [doing] that” (MS).

The common practice of moving chairs into a circle and removing the ‘top table’ of officers usually offers a simple way of facilitating more informal discussion and encouraging face-to-face interaction.

In order to combat the relative disadvantage of informal community groups in accessing resources and influence, instances were given of formalised organisations (such as a voluntary sector forum) providing the credibility and legal status needed to apply for funding or to be awarded a seat round the strategic partnership table.

Larger, well-established organisations are sometimes called upon to contain or manage the risks. In Birmingham for example, BRAP (a constituted and well-regarded equalities body) played a coordinating role bringing together a loose alliance of smaller BME groups to assist them in bidding for contracts. Smaller groups are *“doing some great work ... but haven’t got the constitution, the indemnity insurance or particular protocols or whatever to attract funding from larger public sector organisations so at times we’ve needed to play a bit of a go-between, as an accountable body ... [But] we needed to work quite informally to get this consortium together” (AA).*

One interviewee (JS) indicated that organisations sometimes choose to formalise in order to gain credibility, traction and respect in the formal world. But formalising can also create barriers that exclude some people from participating or feeling ownership.

Promoting fairness

One interviewee explained that Black and minority ethnic groups face unwarranted prejudice in terms of nepotism and corruption and so are forced to jump through more bureaucratic hoops, with higher thresholds for performance management thus generating more formal processes for compliance and scrutiny. This view was echoed by one of the focus group members, saying that *“bigger, more formal BME organisations are needed, with many smaller groups requesting help to formalise their procedures”* (JC). Until such groups are able to develop a track record of managing funds and delivering successful projects, they cannot get beyond informality and are stuck in a whirlpool of distrust and limited resources.

“The biggest issue is this structural racism. In the minds of the commissioners BME groups don’t do certain things and in terms of coming to the party, they have to club together to get the ticket” (AA).

Inequality in expectations and opportunities can be addressed with a mix of legislation and policy, combined with changes in people’s attitudes and relations.

“It’s not a policy fix. It’s a thinking fix ... It’s about a willingness of people to let go of territories, move out of their comfort zone ... It’s about the ability to see creativity in unusual places ... to see beyond the paper, to judge value” (AA).

Policies are not a substitute for actual practice and behaviour but they can shape how people think and act, often providing useful points of reference for how things ‘should’ be. Formal protocols tend to be seen as necessary for ensuring fairness, mitigating risk and providing quality assurance but they have perhaps gone too far in *“creat[ing] very sophisticated models for people to cover their backs, to distance themselves from blame”* (AA).

Upholding Standards

Some contributors, especially those working in the voluntary sector, thought that funders (statutory and philanthropic) were becoming more controlling of the aims and activities of those organisations they assisted or commissioned. It was reported that the associated performance assessments, with their formal targets and services standards, tend to squeeze out the personal aspects of people’s care and commitment, resulting in less role satisfaction for staff and volunteers, including trustees.

Rigid models of service delivery or collective organising (comprising, for example, checks, registers and competency criteria) may deter potential contributors arriving through informal channels, such as being invited to ‘have a go’ or ‘come along’ without having to conform to official requirements or meet strict conditions.

Nonetheless, formality appeared to offer communities some security, a way of spreading the liability and risk associated with the allocation of public money by insisting on transparent and consensual decision-making. Structure and clear roles can be experienced as supportive, enabling people to perform well and to be rewarded accordingly, whether as staff or volunteers. Career progression ladders and job evaluations may encourage individuals to develop their repertoire and to become more ambitious in fulfilling their potential for growth and advancement. At an organisational level, performance management frameworks can prove useful for evaluating progress towards specific goals but they have also been found to distort work priorities and de-motivate staff.

Box J. There is a quiet but visible tradition of Good Neighbour schemes in England, mainly in rural or semi-rural areas, sponsored by various national organisations including Age UK, ACRE and the Royal Voluntary Service. They operate naturally in the space between the informality of co-residents' relations, and the accountable formality of health and care services. Because of the requirements of safeguarding, insurance, and handling donations, volunteers running the schemes are inevitably involved to some extent in formal processes. Most schemes are constituted, but otherwise determinedly resist measures that are seen to reduce their informal ways of operating. However, the tradition could be shaken up as managers of formal services experience severe reductions in funding, and in some cases look to Good Neighbour schemes to take on more – and more formal – tasks. (KH)

Further, inspections and quality assurance systems can distort performance in order to get ratings and reach benchmarks.

“Comprehensive performance assessments were the holy grail for all directors and chief executives so getting your ratings was the drumbeat for everyone ... [it became] the most important thing when the inspections took place, everything in the service was subordinate” (KO).

Community Perspectives

This is likely to apply even more so to community activists who may be motivated by passion, politics and philanthropy rather than material incentives. It is important to focus on the overall purpose of a policy or programme, not just specific outcomes or outputs, and to consider 'value' or 'benefit' from users' perspectives. Nesta's Neighbourhood Challenge programme used an alternative approach with communities choosing from a menu of 'change statements' those that reflected their own goals and reported progress against these, as they perceived them. These included, for example:

- People feel more connected to other people in their community.

- New group/organisation activities have been developed to meet local priorities.
- There are more opportunities for formal and informal learning that help people to make change in their community.¹¹

Risk management

While formal checklists and record-keeping can increase awareness (and be used to apportion blame if necessary), there are other means to uphold and improve standards including general alertness to hazards, rough benchmarks and informal feedback. Indeed it could be argued that an over-reliance on formalities such as DBS¹² checks can lead to complacency and reduced vigilance. One interviewee described how an unwarranted faith in formal accounting procedures can create a false sense of security about how funding is being spent, especially if few people are in a position to scrutinise or understand the figures (JH).

There was broad agreement that organisational rules and structures are used to mitigate risk and allocate responsibility. Some areas of public life were deemed more resistant to allowing informal community-oriented approaches to impinge on their services, notably the criminal justice system (JC) and the health sector (VG). They may need more encouragement to embrace these ways of working though their reluctance may be partly explained by the greater likelihood of death or serious harm if things go wrong in these services. In making the case for more informality, it will be necessary to reassure authorities that both quality and equalities issues will be addressed, especially in relation to risk and standards.

“In terms of trying to make the case [for more informality] the biggest barrier for formal organisations around this is risk ... how much are they prepared to take things on trust, forego their usual standardisation and quality assurance” (ND).

Funding and franchising

In recent years funders appear to acknowledge that more flexibility is needed in managing points at the interface. The ‘funding plus’ models developed initially by CDF, JRF and Nesta adopt a lighter touch with open dialogue and continuous engagement between grant makers and recipients. The Big Local and Community Organising Programmes have extended this ‘looseness’ to a ‘trust’ model of funding in which the default position is to trust communities to ‘do the right thing’. Formal requirement and restrictions have been minimised but this is accompanied by high expectations. The programmes encourage innovation and transformation (i.e. risky stuff), but also need to practise due diligence regarding the use of

¹¹ These were initially developed by Icarus, the programme’s learning partners. See Casey, 2012.

¹² Checks provided by the Disclosure Barring Service to indicate whether an applicant has previous relevant convictions.

public funds. This balance is manifest in latitude around timescales and how progress is measured. The Big Local programme endeavours to be as flexible as possible in enabling communities to review progress and develop a model of governance that is optimal for their area with regulations kept to an absolute minimum. It also allows almost unlimited time – communities proceed at a pace that suits their circumstances and capacity.

The disadvantage of this open-ended approach is high levels of uncertainty and a tendency to be overly cautious. To counter this possibility, successful community enterprises, such as the Trussell Trust or Incredible Edible, have developed guidelines that define their 'brand' and enable variations on the model to be set up wherever there is enthusiasm or a need. Incredible Edible has enjoyed widespread appreciation and emulation, but now feels the need to establish a 'kitemark', a registered trade mark, that can only be used by projects that adhere to its core ethos. They encourage people to use it but ask that people also conform to the principles of the 'three spinning plates' – community, learning and business.

This type of franchising, which may include suggested templates for structures and procedures, is useful in that it saves time and to an extent preserves core values, going some way to ensuring that quality or ethical standards are met.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Standards and ethics are important but how can they be implemented and upheld organically rather than imposed through bureaucratic means? Services or conditions that are below par can put people at risk through the provision of poor advice, lax safety measures, breaches of confidentiality or corruption. Limited vigilance and lack of sanctions create situations that are open to potential harm and hazards; so mechanisms are needed that can alert people to poor standards or malpractices and apply whatever means are needed to avoid these happening to vulnerable people.

However, if formal procedures are too complicated to understand or too onerous to comply with, they are likely to be subverted or ignored, and not only at community level. There are numerous examples in the worlds of private companies, global associations and governments of protocols and professional codes that have failed to prevent fraud, distortions, lies, fake documentation or simple neglect of the formal procedures.

Poor services or advice can harm or disadvantage those whose rights may be jeopardised or lives endangered. Compromises are needed between informal models and formal regulations so that communities are empowered to develop their own approaches without too much detriment to users and each other.

Challenging bureaucracies

Seddon (2014) argues that remote, bureaucratic organisations are “sub-optimal” ways of delivering locally appropriate and culturally sensitive services because they have distanced themselves from their prime goals of meeting customer or user aspirations (p46). Moreover, this reliance on outputs and outcomes is problematic since the supposed objectives are not always clearly defined especially when communities are involved in steering the outcomes.

Raelin (2011) talks of post-bureaucratic methods of management that prefer a more ‘emancipatory discourse’ to empower practitioners in the workplace. This model suggests a new role for managers, so that they become leaders by facilitating informal critical conversations. With the growing emphasis on user and community influences over the design and delivery of services and activities, significant facilitation and leadership skills are needed.

Local authorities and governments are themselves complicated organisations, operating within a context of constant change. They can be considered as complex systems of interacting stakeholders, including service users, elected members, staff and electors. Pflaeging (2014) argues that in these situations of inter-dependency, shared responsibility and social pressure, there is a crucial role for lateral communication and interactions. What he calls ‘connected leadership’ is deemed to work better than top-down bureaucratic management. Civil servants, public sector leaders and policymakers need to be more receptive to ideas that come from below or from outside their circle of decision-makers. One of the community practitioners in the study referred tellingly to the ‘permafrost’ of middle management, while Stewart (2015) writes a trenchant criticism of the centralised attitudes in the Metropolitan Police which forced him to resign as a serving police officer having become thoroughly disillusioned with the “arse-covering” (his words) mentality he encountered in what he termed “excessive hierarchy” and paperwork. Warmington et al (2014) encountered similar views in their study of care work.

Ensuring quality

As indicated above, formal protocols appear to offer certain guarantees of quality or attainment. Quality marks and performance management systems abound for the voluntary and community sector: some provide externally moderated ‘assessment frameworks’, others, such as PQASSO¹³, use self-administered health checks. The latter are generally cheaper and more informal, but may be of dubious validity. More formal, and possibly therefore more robust, schemes are available for assessing how well organisations are delivering, using a variety of targets, success criteria and performance indicators.

¹³ <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/practical-support/pqasso/pqasso-quality-mark>

However, the prevalence of externally set targets and performance indicators has been shown to erode the morale of staff and volunteers alike (Seddon, 2008). It undermines their intrinsic motivation, and paradoxically, can reduce, rather than drive up, standards. As the Berwick report into patient safety noted, “under such conditions, organisations can hit the target but miss the point” (2013, p7).

There are less formal methods to encourage high expectations, such as peer comparison and the use of informal feedback. Mutually agreed yardsticks or values statements can offer suitable shared guidance about expectations and sanctions, for example in the form of community charters, volunteer pledges or neighbourhood agreements. Responsibility for monitoring these is shared between those delivering the service and the intended beneficiaries.

Government, along with most organisations, invests in order to achieve change and ideally this commitment would include a sense of how progress would be measured, but this is not always the case. Formal models, such as NEF’s Social Return on Investment (SROI) and cost benefit analysis (Vardakoulias, 2013) are criticised for using rather arbitrary figures and neglecting to include community or user contributions that have intangible benefits (Bovaird, 2013). Moreover their implementation is complicated and costly, so (ironically) may not offer good value for money. Nevertheless ‘payment by results’ regimes have become popular means for awarding contracts recently, generating perverse incentives and unintended consequences. The National Audit Office report on the government’s use of outcome-based payment schemes noted that many charities and small groups found this difficult and were reluctant to engage in commissioning processes because of actual and anticipated cash flow problems (Morse, 2015).

Regulations and expectations

Formal rules and systems are introduced to provide frameworks for mitigating risk, ensuring equity, avoiding harm and upholding standards. Bureaucratic reporting mechanisms and checks offer ways for apportioning and deflecting blame. They may help to prevent harm but also have the potential to avert scandal when things do go wrong. Over many decades there has been an accretion of ‘red tape’ affecting communities and the third sector, regulating and restricting community initiative and enterprise, especially in handling public funds or dealing with the public. This has been accompanied by pressure from funders and infrastructure bodies for community groups to incorporate and register as a charity (or community benefit organisation) thus placing them within a regulatory framework that theoretically lends status and respectability.

But regulations and checks are not guarantees of validity and reliability when it comes to either probity or safety. They can provide a spurious sense of security, seeming to remove personal responsibility from the individuals concerned to some impersonal, but not fool-proof system. Accidents still happen, people cheat, loopholes are discovered and financial accounts are falsified or contain errors. Child abuse continues to occur despite the growth of ‘safeguarding’ procedures and DBS checks, perhaps because these cause people to be less alert to fraud or predatory behaviour, believing that the system will pick up on any transgression.

Misconceptions about the protective value of ‘paper work’ need challenging, along with the myths concerning what paper work is required for different kinds of community action (Allen et al, 2014). Risks do indeed need to be identified, assessed and dealt with but not to the detriment of innovation and willingness to volunteer (Gaskin, 2006). Practical toolkits from JRF and Volunteering England offer alternative and more realistic approaches to formal risk registers and expensive insurance.¹⁴ They emphasise the benefits of risk taking especially in the voluntary and community sectors that delights in ‘disruptive innovation’ and creativity. The Big Local programme similarly prides itself on its attitude to ‘rewarded risks’, seeing these as opportunities to be embraced rather than avoided or controlled (Local Trust, 2015; Framjee, 2008, 2012).

Informal mechanisms

Community groups are often “characterised as disorganised, ineffective, lacking transparency in decision-making and insufficiently concerned with quality standards and equal opportunities” (Richardson, 2008, p131). And yet this caricature belies often remarkable feats of organising, enterprise and achievement (MacGillivray et al, 2001). We need to have a more rounded view of actual probabilities of risk and a better understanding of how groups deal with these in everyday life.

Community members or representatives are usually well aware that they are acting on behalf of others and in positions of trust, operating with high degrees of informal scrutiny and mutual criticism. They therefore tend to be cautious, honest and thrifty, especially when it comes to managing public funds or money raised through local effort (Taylor et al, 2007; IVAR 2015a). More explicit, but relatively informal, strategies have also been introduced. For example, Streets Alive advocate community disclaimers when organising street parties. These are signed by the event organisers to accept responsibility for any mishaps and effectively

¹⁴ See <http://www.candoguide.org.uk/pdf/NALP%20Can%20Do%20booklet%2009279FINAL.pdf> and http://www.ivr.org.uk/images/stories/Institute-of-Volunteering-Research/Migrated-Resources/Documents/R/Risk_toolkit.pdf

transfer risk from the council to the organising group. It is often a matter of clarifying mutual expectations and ‘terms of use’, which then form the basis for mutual interaction, exchanges and learning.

At grassroots level, buddying between old hands and newcomers can help people to acquire the ‘nous’ that will ensure that they are prepared, aware and alert for eventualities. If communities are discouraged from experimenting with small-scale and incremental change they may be deterred from challenging the status quo, or simply from grasping the chance to get on and change things.

Reducing ‘red tape’ – pros and cons

Local authorities, conversely, are biased towards risk aversion because they are closely scrutinised, responsible for public money and tend to anticipate the worst case scenarios (Richardson, 2012). The government report ‘Unshackling good neighbours: recommendations for civil society’ (Cabinet Office, 2011) identified a number of restraints to volunteering and community action including fear of litigation, insurance costs and ‘over-zealous’ attention to risk. It asserted that skills gaps in community sector leadership and governance could lead to errors and misjudgements but overall recommended the application of common sense and a test of reasonableness. Significantly, the report suggested that the law should be changed to limit the liability of trustees in unincorporated organisations and, for itself, the government spelt out its principles of regulation:

- only regulate “if it can be demonstrated that satisfactory outcomes cannot be achieved by alternative, self-regulatory or non-regulatory approaches, and
- “where analysis of the costs and benefits demonstrates that the regulatory approach is superior by a clear margin, and
- “where the regulation and the enforcement framework can be implemented in a fashion which is demonstrably proportionate, accountable, consistent, transparent and targeted” (Cabinet Office, 2011, appendix F).

In other words, government has recognised that a robust and compelling case is needed before regulation rather than a knee jerk reaction to negative things happening.

However, there is a danger that reducing regulation (for example in relation to health and safety or equality considerations) merely transfers responsibility from an organisation to the individual, placing the onus on already disempowered workers or volunteers to understand and appropriately combat discrimination, create opportunities and mitigate risks. Excessive de-regulation may lead to indirect harm that may be borne by other parts of the organisation or by people outside it, for example, those costs associated with high staff turnover, court

cases, industrial injuries and so on. The government's preferred solutions of voluntary, unenforceable guidance may exacerbate this, with collective decision-making being circumvented or neglected until recriminations come to rest with community activists and leaders. This perception may have led to a decline in combined levels of formal and informal volunteering with fewer people taking part in social action activities (Sloccock, 2015).

Diversity and difference

Questions about the relevance of formal and informal aspects of engaging with communities or collective organising must take into account the diversity of different people and different communities. "Responding effectively to change will need new connections to be made with new communities and creativity in bringing people together around common issues: creating space for informal encounters and conversations, and using the enormous potential of social media and the internet, especially to reach younger people" (Taylor and Wilson, 2015). Preferences and practices vary across communities and are also changing over time, so as we shall see in Chapter Eight on skills and strategies for practice, it is crucial to understand and respond sensitively to these differences rather than insisting on a particular approach or organisational model.

Box K. RotherFed is a community development organisation in Rotherham working "with and through grass roots community groups that are committed to bringing communities together, giving all communities a voice and creating local solutions to local issues". It realised that the population of the town was changing and that requiring members to be part of existing organisations was excluding some communities who organised more informally. Accordingly the Federation changed its rules to allow individual membership, thus encouraging those involved in smaller informal groups, such as among Roma residents, to become active in the organisation.

Source: MW and <http://www.rotherfed.org.uk/>

Women and BME people are disproportionately represented in informal sectors, such as below the radar (MacGillivray et al, 2001; Ahmed, 2012). It is said that women may prefer informality and feel disadvantaged by formal structures (Dominelli, 2006; Van der Plaats and Barratt, 2006; Rai, 2008; Robson and Spence, 2011). Women are often active at grassroots but become less visible at intermediate levels and even scarcer at higher, more formal echelons of the voluntary sector. One explanation may be found in the ways women, BME and young people access the social and cultural capital stored in their networks (McCabe et al, 2013). Young people operate informally to create their own social milieu, sometimes in semi-formal gangs but more often in peer friendship networks. They also maintain informal links to the broader comparative stability of community (Bauman, 2001; Measor, 2006).

Cultural differences may also play a part with different understandings of the 'correct' way of doing things. It is said that gangs composed of young people from different ethnic background organise at varying levels of formality. Gypsy, Traveller and Roma (GTR) communities have long experienced disadvantage as a result of widespread prejudice and their more informal, clan-based, ways of organising (Cemlyn et al, 2009; Ryder et al, 2011). In reaction to these, the communities established a sympathetic funding body, the Travellers Aid Foundation, and a broad federation of GTR organisations which have acted as intermediaries and were able for a while to challenge the assumptions and expectations of mainstream funders and policy makers (Ryder et al, 2014). Due to both transient lifestyles and discrimination, GTR communities are poorly organised in terms of engaging with third sector infrastructure and suffer from a clash of cultures with bureaucrats charged with enforcing local policies. So discussions between GTR communities and officials tend to take place informally and prior to formal consultations (Ryder et al, 2011, p 40-41).

Inequalities and exclusion

Those that are already experience discrimination and oppression may be further marginalised through the unquestioned use of formal structures and procedures to distribute resources and influence over decision-making. But it is equally plausible that unscrutinised informal processes simply reflect prevailing structural inequalities, including in relation to class and the other 'protected characteristics' such as ethnicity and age, as defined in the Equality Act. These feed in to the more formal echelons of community and voluntary activity and so it is unsurprising to hear of concerns about the apparent under-participation of disadvantaged groups in civic engagement, social action (above grass roots levels) and volunteering (e.g. Williams, 2011).

Reliance on the informal can exacerbate exclusion. Formal meetings are usually held in accessible venues, with assistance for those with communication or sensory impairments (signers, etc.) but the informal pre- or post-conversations tend not to be inclusive and so Disabled people miss out on these all-important discussions. They therefore continue to face challenges around being accepted and finding accessible ways to participate in community activities and networks. Bigby et al (2008) found that the social networks of people with learning difficulties who had moved into the 'community' are, 5 years later, still predominantly confined to family members and friends from within the system, relationships that pre-dated the move to so-called independent living. Clearly informal community processes have not enabled them to integrate in ways that might reasonably have been anticipated.

Until understanding and rejection of such stigma, prejudice and preconceptions about people's abilities, expected roles or cultures are universally embedded into people's thinking, formal equal opportunities policies will at least require people to consider issues around access and diversity even if the solutions are not always entirely effective.

Rural dimensions

In rural areas, there is widely believed to be even greater reliance on self-help and mutual support, with informal networks threading across the landscape linking families and shaped by communal traditions and seasonal economies. There have always been disparities in wealth and ambition within small and dispersed communities (Opare, 2007), generating subtle patterns of exclusion and inequality for incoming settlers and migrant workers. Black and minority groups in rural areas are especially isolated and dependent on informal networks to maintain a sense of community, build capacity, influence policies and obtain help, but they are often marginalised from conventional VCS activities (Ware, 2015). Language barriers, lack of critical mass and limited access to infrastructure support has meant that few formal BME organisations exist serving rural areas and the communities experience both racial discrimination and segregation in relation to mainstream opportunities and services. This, combined with transport difficulties and employment schedules, makes informal interactions more needed, and yet more challenging.

The chair of ACRE (the federation of rural community councils) highlighted the levels of detachment and distrust that many rural communities extend towards formal centralised government bureaucracies, believing that these prefer to scale-up or transfer solutions developed in urban settings, and can not accommodate local differences. She drew attention to an oft repeated maxim that 'it is amazing what you can achieve if you do not care who gets the credit', observing 'therein lies the politician's problem. Those in charge usually prefer the default position of formal control'.¹⁵

¹⁵ Contributed by Sue Shaw, Chair of ACRE

Chapter Six: Shared thinking: Communication, knowledge and learning

This chapter is mainly concerned with how information is processed, stored and shared at the interface between communities and institutions. Whose knowledge is valued and how it is applied? How do people communicate with one another in order to influence decisions and get things done? And how do we learn from one another as well as through reflection on our own experiences?

FINDINGS

In these respects, formal is generally regarded as superior: providing more robust and valid evidence or expertise. Informal allows some 'fuzzy thinking', a blurring of the lines between acknowledged 'fact' and less scientifically grounded opinions, anecdote or generalised 'common sense'. This ontological range is reflected in different modes of communication that in turn denote different levels of authority.

Modes of communication

Distinct types of communication perform various functions, including putting people at ease, asserting status or simply conveying precise information. The tone or register of a conversation or message can make a big difference to how readily people respond or contribute their own ideas. The non-verbal aspects of communication are also significant, such as body language and presentation style.

As one interviewee explained: *"People do not want to hear that some remote agencies are dealing with all the important issues without any reference back to them, and nor do they want to sit through some formal meeting where the suits talk at them. Informal chats bridge these communication gaps"* (HT).

A range of different modes are needed, ideally with some available simultaneously so that most people have some choice as to how they communicate and how they access information. Social media *"don't have the same expectations of formality"* (MP) and are used to great effect to generate discussion and feedback, resulting eventually for some in a deeper level of engagement. One community organiser described how he co-ordinates a local 'Twitter Hour' bringing together a weekly online informal discussion of local issues. These have been complemented by monthly MeetUps where members of the local community come together in face-to-face social gatherings, that are *"hosted but there's no structure to it"* (MP).

An over-reliance on formal 'official-ese' can be off-putting for those not familiar with jargon or acronyms. Translation into local parlance is needed or as one tenants leader (CF) put it: *"you*

need to bring your words down” as she challenged an officer to use plain and simple language.

Safe spaces

Informal, off the record, conversations can make it easier to address difficult issues or to handle sensitive topics, but semi-formal methods for discussion can also help by elevating a personal difficulty into a shared problem so that a collective solution can be developed.

Box L. A boy with the Duchenne form of muscular dystrophy was becoming marginalised in a community-run playgroup because of his mobility challenges and the social attitudes of the parents and other children. This tendency for him to be excluded from group activities would be exacerbated by a planned camp when he reached the age of 12 and the anticipated difficulties were being discussed informally behind the scenes through ill-informed whispering. One of the parents decided to tackle the problem so that a proper solution could be developed for including the young man in the camping trip, either through paying for a support worker or identifying (and training) a dedicated volunteer.

Her strategy was to use informal conversations at the school gate to identify potential allies and to share knowledge about the condition, and then to call a ‘kitchen-table’ meeting to talk through options and avert the pending crisis of exclusion. Thus she was able to move the challenge into the open and develop a sense of collective and positive responsibility that was respectful of the parent-led nature of the group as well as being inclusive for all the children.

Informal settings (often ‘off stage’ so away from the public gaze) enable people to make mistakes, learn from them and move on. Similarly, informal dialogue is more likely to allow criticism and disagreements to surface so that the hegemony of ‘received wisdom’ can be challenged and (occasionally) people change their minds.

One of the interviewees (KO) felt that policy was sometimes developed and asserted against an “*uneasy silence*” because the informal ‘safe spaces’ for discussing contentious issues such as homophobia were being narrowed by what is sometimes termed ‘political correctness’. He argued that, as a consequence, policy was less informed (and therefore more difficult to implement) by the range of views in communities that were not being engaged in open debate.

“What happens at the formal level and what happens informally are two different things” (KO).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Accountability involves sharing evidence and explaining the rationale for particular choices, so communication and learning are both relevant to this theme. It is often said that knowledge and power are related and so it is no surprise that the research threw up many issues about the democratisation of knowledge and learning (in terms of ownership and access) and levels of validation for different forms of evidence.

One of the problems fostered by the partnership and capacity-building programmes that were trialled under New Labour (ChangeUp and Improving Reach) was an over-reliance on formal skills and know-how, derived from a deficit model which underestimated community capabilities and ingenuity. The rare attempts to foster community development/engagement across the whole of government, such as the Firm Foundations initiative and the Together We Can programme, were well-intended but short-lived and chronically under-funded.

Valuing community intelligence

Informal settings provide valuable opportunities for learning through discussion, skill-sharing and mentoring but these are seldom validated. Knowledge is prized differently depending on how it is produced and presented. The expertise of community members gained from experience or passed down through hearsay and tradition is habitually disregarded by professionals whose training and organisational culture leads them to require more formal verification. The radical educator, Ivan Illich describes this as an “illusion that the knowledge of the individual citizen is of less value than the ‘knowledge’ of science. The former is the opinion of individuals. It is merely subjective and is excluded from policies” (1975, p100)¹⁶.

The use of informal processes to share knowledge and generate ideas enables participants to be more intuitive, to use their ‘gut instincts’ when making judgements and to tolerate a higher level of ‘fuzziness’ or uncertainty in choosing whose beliefs to trust and how to go forward.

There has long been a debate about types of intelligence and expertise, particularly in relation to the relative validity of local or tacit knowledge – what communities know about their area, its history, local issues, strengths, priorities and so on. Much of this embedded knowledge is generated informally through experience and oral traditions, told through stories, anecdotes and gossip. It forms part of the communities’ assets but it can also be outdated or biased, distorted by dominant factions and reflecting entrenched dogma rather than objective reality and fresh thinking. Nonetheless, it may gradually morph into accepted

¹⁶ Cited in Harris (2006).

fact, especially if recorded or otherwise codified in ways that make the evidence appear formal, even though it actually remains quite flimsy when subject to closer examination. .

Gathering information

For community planning purposes, the informal, anecdotal and ‘folk’ aspects of community knowledge need to be complemented by more robust, formal evidence, obtained through systematic research using statistics, surveys and even experimental methods. Community profiling or audits (Packham, 2000; Hawtin and Percy-Smith, 2007) offer approaches that involve community members in researching the facts and figures for their own communities, and participatory action research has long been used in developing countries and is gaining a foothold in the UK (Chambers, 1994; Burns, 2007; Mayo et al, 2013). However, when working with communities there is a risk of privileging or formalising this kind of knowledge too early (Shum, 1997), thereby appearing to diminish the validity of other, more experiential, ways of knowing that enable people to conform or to challenge received wisdom.

Intuition can be a vital source of immediate insights, while ‘common sense’ is often culturally transmitted through local institutions and across generations. Together they provide an informal guide to ‘how things are done round here’ and ‘what is going on at the moment’.

Informal and experiential learning

Equally, local assumptions can constrain the transference of ‘good practice’ across space and time, or limit the assimilation of novel or controversial ideas. New ideas are often spread through informal inter-personal contacts and networks of ‘near-peers’ (Kolb and Fry, 1976) and these inter-personal conversations are an important component of knowledge transfer and management. A recent investigation into the evaluation practices of UK trusts and foundations discovered that there was little systematic knowledge management or use of data for formal learning in these organisations, but that lessons were identified and disseminated “broadly through open dialogue within the team and exchange of ideas at management level” (IVAR, 2015b, p54).

My investigation has adopted a model of learning rooted in Dewey’s (1966) approach that values experiential learning and peer-to-peer education (Hager and Halliday, 2007; Richardson, 2008). Informal dialogue and reflection are celebrated as a valuable aspect of adult experiential learning and community development (Cairns, 2000; Westoby and Shevellar, 2012; Beck and Purcell, 2010; Ledwith, 2015). Shared learning creates a strong foundation for joint working and this can be achieved through semi-formal means, such as mentoring, role models, coaching, practising or simply ‘having a go’.

'Life swaps', whereby individuals work-shadow counterparts in other sectors and are immersed for a day in a different cultural or work environment have proved effective in increasing understanding for other people's jobs or way of life and breaking down prejudices (NCVO, 2015). An evaluation of the NCVO's 'Volunteering for Stronger Communities' programme found that volunteers enjoyed 'learning through the backdoor' in community-based settings and supported by mentors (Bashir et al, 2013) and furthermore they welcomed opportunities to have this accredited. Similarly, a review of various funding programmes for the BIG Lottery found that informal 'drop-in' environments with self-paced progression were especially conducive to learning for disaffected young people who shunned classroom type settings (Bailey et al, 2007). Informal education finds echoes in the debates that value play and open child-led learning rather than curriculum-based models with its attendant tests and certificates.

Peer exchanges

Informal learning does not necessarily have to mean that it is un-facilitated or lacks structure. The 'communities of practice' approach actively promotes learning across work roles and status differentials (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Boud and Middleton, 2003). More formalised strategies for shared learning include action learning sets and peer challenges (as used by the LGA for its networking programmes for Guide Neighbourhoods or Catalyst Councils). Exchange visits involve mutual learning through observation, questioning, listening, discussion and then taking ideas back for piloting or implementation. Away days and workshops perform a similar function for teams, whether work-based, volunteers, or a mixture of the two. Accordingly, several nationally funded programmes, including Big Local and the Community Organising Programme, offer co-ordinated support and training for organisers and participants that combine peer-to-peer networking and accredited courses. The participants appear to enjoy and gain more from the informal exchanges but they also value the chance to have their experiential learning formally accredited. Many programmes incorporate networking events as opportunities for participants to learn from one another and to reflect on their own experiences, including Take Part for 'active learning for active citizenship' (Mayo and Rooke, 2006; Packham, 2008), Big Local (Rocket Science UK, 2016) and the Community Organising Programme (Imagine, 2014).

Such approaches see learning through informal education as liberating and empowering. They are familiar methods for community-led development in the global south, and make particular use of informal settings to stage 'learningful conversations' and encourage 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972). The Barefoot Guide suggests that "in informal culture and systems, information can move around in all sorts of ways, unrestricted by rules and hierarchies. This enables a great deal of learning to take place" (Hope and Timmel, 2013,

p17). Much depends on opportunities and motivation but trans-national exchanges are also useful, enabling cross-fertilisation of ideas through comparison and challenge.

Accreditation

However, people often want their informal or experiential learning to receive some kind of formal validation. Certified courses are therefore attractive for those who have previously been disadvantaged in formal education because these may be the first qualifications they receive. Accreditation models offer frameworks for doing this, identifying knowledge acquired, skills demonstrated and providing an overall picture of competence. A degree of formalisation is inevitable if such qualifications are to be seen as a form of currency, indicating levels of worth that are transferrable across different circumstances and roles. The Community Organising Programme is at heart about training and the organisers undergo quite intensive training that is awarded credits through the Open College Network system. In order to 'graduate' they have to demonstrate competence through a fairly formal assessment procedure and it is notable that those from disadvantaged backgrounds find this hard (Taylor and Wilson, 2016).

Language and tone

Communication is a vital component of learning, whether formal, semi-formal or informal. The effective generation and transfer of ideas and knowledge are wholly dependent on the quality and appropriateness of different forms of communication and how tone, vocabulary and accent are used to convey emotion, authority, social identity and so on. Language itself has various registers and vocabularies that 'encode and enact' different levels of formality, privilege and power relations (Williams, 2015).

Informal language might be couched in dialect or its close cousins, jargon and slang. It indicates a shared identity, possibly a sense of belonging that is not conveyed through a formal style of communication, which may be intimidating or impenetrable for some. Although informal conversations can be equally oblique in using street argot and abbreviations, they provide important feedback loops, sometimes carrying constructive criticisms and useful information about what's happening behind the scenes in colloquial ways. Unguarded or off-the-cuff remarks are often more honest, and may subvert the official narratives or policy positions. Similarly, some of the secret or 'samizdat' communications of yesteryear now often take place openly, though sometimes anonymously, through online community spaces. As well as articulating political or seditious views, these can provide vital rallying points for local critiques and mobilisations.

Chapter Seven: Time and temporalities

The passage of time is experienced differently according to a range of factors and pressures. This chapter explores how time itself can be considered from formal and informal perspectives, and how timing and timelines affect community participation and organisation development.

It is conjectured that different people and cultures have different attitudes to time, and different experiences of the flow of time. Neither punctuality nor patience is a universal value. It is said that ‘time flies’, but its flow through communities often seems variable, affected by local conditions and personal situations or lifestyles. Where there are high levels of diversity – time flows are rarely aligned between the different ‘players’, resulting in hidden tensions, impatience, token gestures, fragile decisions and fraught meetings. Calendar and clock time is used to co-ordinate the contributions of various stakeholders but this public, regulated time may not be a universal reflection of how community members perceive the way time flows through their lives, with its unpredictable eddies, pools and torrents.

FINDINGS

The dimension of time featured strongly in the interviews and workshops but was often nuanced: *“It’s about the right level of formality at the right time”* (MP).

Phases of development

Typical of the range of views was the observation by one focus group member that *“formality and informality have different advantages and disadvantages at different points, for example with informal spaces encouraging innovation and involvement early on, but potentially leading to issues around exclusion at later stages”* (DL) It is often the formal features of organisations that provide the stability which sustains collective visions and voluntary action over the long term. They form the basis for continuity, sustainability and legacy but there is a tendency for groups to formalise prematurely, often using ‘off the shelf’ constitutions with designated officer posts, membership rules and restrictions on what may be discussed at meetings.

For some participants, having written statements and records provides *“a source of authority that they can draw on in the future ... [these] allow the group to operate on a common understanding of what they are and what they’ve achieved ... it’s something which they benefit from but that comes later in the process of the group’s formation. At the very early stage having minutes and formal business doesn’t feel appropriate”* (MP). Too much formality, too soon can lead to some members drifting away, feeling that their contributions no longer matter.

Distraction and delay

Formality consumes time, both for volunteers involved in maintaining their organisation's structures and rules, and for the staff of funding bodies that have to administer contracts, monitor progress and evaluate impact. Delays in implementation are often the unintended consequences of over-regulation with these formal requirements obstructing progress and diverting energy from community activists and officials alike. This detracts from the motivating passion that drives many community initiatives, causing disillusionment and mutual suspicion between those in charge of enforcing the small print and those who want to achieve their vision.

“Once you go down the path of constituting [a group], a lot of the energy gets lost instantly because most people are not interested in that, they’re interested in having a street party [or whatever]... the space for that initiative has been removed” (JH).

Interviewees noted that residents and activists often complain about formal procedures absorbing disproportionate amounts of time: attending meetings, dealing with committee business, completing applications or detailed proformas. For many volunteers and community members this diverts energy from their main concerns, with bureaucratic provisos regarded as ‘hoops to jump through’ that impede action without apparent justification. Informal processes can appear to speed things up, circumventing formalities and allowing expedient or immediate responses to urgent matters.

But informal processes can themselves be distracting, with a danger that agendas are disregarded and meetings become engulfed in banter or gossip. Time for social interaction can be woven sensitively and creatively into or alongside formal proceedings so that people find enjoyment as well as purpose from involvement in community activities. The ‘leading lights’ of community organisations are often very busy people and they want to see that their efforts and time are well-used. The same applies to those who represent their communities on area forums or such like. For empowerment to be more than a bit of policy rhetoric, it is imperative that the time that people spend engaging with public institutions or running local services is valued and effective.

Expediency

Informality was seen to encourage spontaneity with the taking of short cuts enabling communities to organise collective responses to crises or sustain inter-personal networks over the long-term. Different attitudes to time were cited as causing some communities to lose out, compared to those who were more accustomed to keeping to formal timetables. The role of charismatic leaders was seen as helping to “*circumnavigate the formal*

processes" (AA), slicing through the red tape, to make things happen, sometimes by cutting corners and using impromptu methods to advocate their cause.

However, this is not always possible and expectations on all sides must be realistic. The artificial timelines commonly found in funding programmes and project management schemes sometimes bear little relevance to a pace suitable for communities involved in setting priorities and planning activities. Targets, outputs and milestones may or may not be achieved within certain timescales and are not always the most useful ways of measuring progress.

One of the interviewees spoke of *"the three great virtues of the grassroots: thrift, impatience and sociability"*, each of which values informality (JS). In particular, she praised the 'meanwhile' approach because it is *"fanatically informal"*, enabling people to *"just get on with it – get the brooms out, get the paintbrushes, lift the rotten carpets ... and be impatient"* to get things done. 'Pop-ups' are likewise a way of using informal arrangements to make things happen while longer term, more formal, procedures take their course. The recent interest in 'pop-up' or 'meanwhile' projects, originally a government initiative to regenerate high streets, represents an interesting new development that tries to do things as informally as possible. This approach is about identifying temporary uses of facilities, such as vacant shops or empty workspaces that can be used for community initiatives, such as a drop-in resource centre or to host youth activities. These short-term projects have proved viable and popular ways of demonstrating need, 'rehearsing' potential solutions and piloting innovative ways of working with local people (Hill et al, 2013). They allow momentum to be maintained and keep things 'ticking over, until more permanent arrangements for premises or funding can be made.¹⁷

Dealing with complexity

This haphazard way of taking advantage of opportunities sometimes requires courage and a 'leap of faith'. Given the complex environment in which communities operate, change is rarely linear or even predictable. The eventualities of everyday life generate co-operation, conflict and connection, creating unforeseen opportunities but also obstacles that can derail even the best of intentions.

"Community is messy and things go wrong there because you're dealing with human beings in all sorts of situations ... and people change, sometimes rapidly and sometimes they don't change, and that's a problem too ... People's lives are complicated" (KH).

¹⁷ Further information on the Meanwhile Foundation from <http://www.meanwhile.org.uk/>

Nevertheless, some formal structures and strategic planning helps communities achieve their goals as long as it allows reaction and adaptation to ever-changing circumstances. However, over-dependence on formal procedures makes it difficult for an organisation to adapt to change, especially if its operating environment becomes turbulent and unpredictable. Inhibiting the informal processes that allow feedback and experimentation may reduce organisational learning and restrict the latitude for evolution or re-orientation.

On the surface, Prince Two offers a formal model for “managing projects in a controlled environment” with timed phases for review and adjustment. As one practitioner/consultant who liked this approach, noted, *“It’s crazy because environments aren’t controllable”*. However, as she said earlier in her interview *“systematic is not the opposite of informal”* (JS).

Long-term sustainability

Increasingly, funding programmes and service commissioners are looking for long-term outcomes. People themselves are concerned to ensure that their efforts are sustainable and that there is some kind of legacy. In this respect, ensuring continuity and impact, the formal aspects of organisations are often vital – the vision statement, the constitution that enables, indeed usually insists on, a succession strategy, and the record keeping. Also important are mechanisms for dealing with disagreements which might otherwise drastically disrupt a group from achieving its aims or maintaining good internal and external relationships.

Such formalities can be particularly helpful if an organisation takes on ownership or management of physical assets, such as a community building or renewable energy scheme. The formal structures and procedures provide a framework for collective decision-making, focus everyone’s efforts on achieving the agreed goals and enshrine the shared values so that they live on independently of the specific individuals involved. This can address ‘founder syndrome’ but paradoxically, having formal protocols in place, should not detract from investing in the informal processes necessary to build relationships and trust, both within a current group, but also across the generations of people taking on stewardship of these shared assets.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Programme managers often start with a ‘timeframe’ for their work with communities, setting out a linear sequence of stages or tasks, sometimes called a plan, pathway or timeline. They rarely consider how this model implies a power relationship and may restrict the choices and contributions that communities are able to make.

Allowing time

Those with most power or the holders of resources are often in a position, like the conductor of an orchestra, to dictate the tempo; setting priorities, performance criteria, against which progress will be evaluated. All across the country communities are being set up to fail because they are not being allowed the time to develop at a more 'natural' pace that enables them to develop inclusive ways of working, resolve conflicts, overcome bureaucratic obstacles, deal with the unexpected and rise to challenges. The relaxation of timescales adopted by some funders such as BIG Lottery, notably through Local Trust's 15 year Big Local programme has allowed communities to proceed at their own pace and this is to be welcomed. A prudent blending of formal and informal activities can provide the necessary framework for an organisation to grow and to attract new members but this cannot be rushed or too closely controlled.

Nonetheless, there can come a point, often linked to scale and ambition, where it becomes apparent that "goodwill [is] not enough for the long haul" (Howard and Taylor, 2010, p184). Informal processes are still vital to keep the energy flowing and informal recruitment by word of mouth encourages new people to come forward; but some elements of formality help a group to become stable, with a sense of continuity over time. For example, a requirement that elected officers have to retire on a regular basis usually ensures a smooth succession and brings 'fresh blood' into the organisation, but this is dependent on there being new people willing to take on these responsibilities.

There has been much talk of capacity building and 'strengthening communities' but this takes time, a long time in many cases. Government programmes, driven by the political cycle of elections and public spending reviews, usually allow insufficient time for deep and sustained community engagement, let alone empowerment. Communities find they are expected to hurtle through formal requirements towards targets that may prove outdated or irrelevant to local needs and aspirations. Measures of progress are sometimes taken too early and too frequently before projects have reached their maturity, and grant aid often comes to an end just as things are beginning to take off. As the learning advisors for the relatively short-lived Community Organisers Programmes noted: there is a "*danger ... that if you prod the chrysalis too much, you kill the butterfly*" (Imagine, 2014). There is little time for hesitation, reflection or experimentation and so these programmes often appear inconclusive or failures. This undermines the sustainability of such interventions and causes widespread disenchantment at the lack of any discernible legacy, as well as being a poor use of public money.

Handling uncertainty

Many community groups do not experience life as a linear, uniformly paced journey with easily defined milestones. Communities are themselves complicated and dynamic, connected through a kaleidoscopic pattern of diverse interactions and personal relations. In turn, they exist among overlapping systems, comprising links to other communities, voluntary organisations, public services, government bureaucracies, the business world, within the independent realm of associations and movements that constitute civil society. It is not surprising that discovering how things change is far from an exact science. In complex systems and unpredictable circumstances change is usually non-linear, sometimes making great leaps forward but often becoming mired in uncertainty and recriminations. Despite the best efforts of project managers or even some community support officers, these developments tend not to take a planned course, though they may move in a preconceived direction towards set outcomes. Local coincidences, eventualities and serendipity can lengthen or shorten the time that things take, and precipitate a change of direction entirely. This flexibility may not be a bad thing as new opportunities arise or priorities change.

Adaptable timescales

A further complication arises due to the various temporalities (sense of time flowing) that are operating for different players, what Bastian refers to as “multiple rhythms of time use” (2014, p6). The passage of time is an under-appreciated aspect of community processes but time provides key markers of progress and of development, as well as creating pressures and expectations. Practitioners and activists often face notional deadlines for submitting proposals, reports and accounts which allow little scope for communities to proceed at a pace that feels right for them, and this can result in many a missed opportunity.

Time can be regarded as a finite resource that needs to be stretched or apportioned. This way of thinking inevitably shapes objectives and may limit the range of people who can be involved in designing and delivering the ‘projects’, excluding those who would ‘take more time’ to engage and become properly empowered. Even the word ‘project’ conveys a sense of a time-limited intervention, rather than the nurturing of unfolding processes, with aims that may emerge only through iterations of parallel conversations and experimentation as more people come ‘on board’ or new ideas and resources appear.

The value of time

Time can be seen as a ‘container’ of activities, an incubator that enables things to unfurl or grow, protected from outside forces. We use the phrase ‘give it time’, in the expectation that immediate difficulties will resolve or diminish simply as a result of time passing. Yet community development is not a straightforward linear process; change can happen in leaps

and bounds through sudden shifts in consciousness or an influx of resources. Serendipitous encounters can lead to rapid alterations of course, with new connections being made, catalysing conversations and the revelation of possibilities which did not seem to exist before.

There are no clear chains of cause and effect, so it would be foolhardy to predict specific changes over time. Instead rough forecasts can be made, acknowledging that many dimensions of life are interacting on different levels and over different timescales. Working with communities involves spotting trends, seizing moments, meeting the occasional deadline, dealing with the past, shaping and creating present opportunities, but nearly always keeping some forward momentum. For communities and the people who work with them, time is simultaneously a pressure, a measure and a resource. Indeed, the unpaid time of community volunteers is often explicitly counted as 'matched contribution' alongside funding (adapted from Gilchrist and Bastian, 2014).

Chapter Eight: A skilled and strategic praxis: mixing and matching formal and informal approaches

As the previous chapters have illustrated, a strong undercurrent of examples and observations emerged in this enquiry to reveal a 'praxis' for managing the interplay between formal and informal modes of operating. By praxis I mean a set of skills, attitudes, emotional intelligence and knowledge that enable people to make judgements about how to behave, what to expect in different situations and what kinds of interventions are likely to work.

In this chapter I identify some of the techniques and understanding that ensure that a proportionate and appropriate combination of informal processes and formal procedures are used to achieve the outcomes desired by communities, policymakers and funders. This involves a whole array of factors and levels from individual capabilities and temperaments, through cultural traditions, organisational requirements and policy or legal imperatives.

FINDINGS

It seems that some people are either more naturally fitted to informal modes or they are more adept at managing the interplay between formal and informal. This can equally apply to those individuals who make the well-trodden journey from community activism or volunteering, perhaps through positions of leadership and representation, to becoming community workers, project managers or trustees. As they move from informal activities, some people are likely to become more comfortable with formality while others may continue to resist it.

"I prefer the informal – that's where I come from, but I have learnt to do the formal" (CF).

Individual preferences

Most of the contributors to this study have chosen to occupy boundary-spanning roles (indeed they were selected on this basis). They well understood the importance of combining informal and formal, or being able to mediate between the two modes. They felt that versatility was needed rather than simply a propensity to casual or maverick behaviour.

Some people seem to prefer to operate informally wherever possible, while others opt for formal approaches – it suits their temperament or maybe reflects social traditions. How formal and informal modes are braided or balanced sometimes reflects individual predilections, while recognising that there are occasions when they must put aside their preferred *modus operandi* and conduct themselves more formally in order to influence decisions and be taken seriously.

"There's this question of how individual temperaments respond to more formal or less formal contexts ... we know that some people prefer and need discipline ... you can get a clash

between someone who does informality and someone who doesn't" (KH). It was suggested that this difference might relate to expectations of trust and being comfortable with uncertainty.

"A lot of my experience of informality has been tempered by the appearance of formality that I've been trying to avoid so often; it's been a matter of trying to bounce away from something formal and structured and heavily bureaucratic ... that's been my mind-set" (MP).

Appreciating informality

Job role will also be a factor and associated with this, different organisational cultures. The view that there is a hierarchy of esteem or continuum from informal (bad) to formal (good) needs to change.

"There's formal and there's informal. They are not superior-inferior; just different" (JH).

Formality is often taken for granted, as inevitable and therefore 'invisible' to those that inhabit that sphere. *"Most people in positions of influence and power haven't really thought about how formal processes impact on different people who aren't used to them. The formality gets dumped on them and deepens their disempowerment, makes it more profound"* (KH).

Clarity is needed around the purpose of formality – the different functions performed by structures, rules and procedures – and consideration should be given to whether or not these can be implemented through more informal means that are more inclusive and less consuming of people's time and effort.

"If we could break down the purpose of formality and just have the bare minimum, we could get away from this false sense of security that's build around a lot of these formal structures" (JH).

Or as another interviewee put it: *"People's conception of formality is that it ensures a degree of professionalism"* (MP) but this assumes a particular concept of what it means to act 'professionally', i.e. to be slightly aloof and impartial.

A different mind-set is needed enabling astute choices to be made as to how formal and informal modes are blended or balanced against each other.

"Informal is only chaotic if it's badly managed and managing the informal takes a lot more skill ... all those formal structures are done in order to make meetings easier to manage. Informal is not chaotic; it's a methodology" (ND).

Skills and strategies

“At the moment everyone jumps to formality: how it has been done before. [We should be] using formality when it’s appropriate not just as a default ... formality should be more of a back stop” (AC).

For this to happen, there needs to be greater recognition of the skills and aptitudes required for working through informal activities and spaces. In particular, we need *“to start to define and articulate the skills and roles around informal practices” (KD).*

“Just because something is informal, doesn’t mean you can make it up as you go along. Listening skills, abilities to facilitate conversations, understanding how to get clarification without coming across as rigid and demanding, are all things that could do with more training for those going out to meet people. Community outreach and youth workers have better experience than most, and policymakers and practitioners can learn much from them” (HT).

The skilled nature of ‘light touch’ interventions is currently undervalued with most participatory processes requiring deft judgements about how to select or intertwine formal and informal approaches. This praxis may be a ‘knack’ acquired over a lifetime’s experience or it may be a deliberate strategy implemented through a combination of personal style, conscious decisions, group exercises and behaviours.

“There’s the actual structures and there’s the style with which the structures are delivered” (KH). Handling the interplay between formal and informal uses *“good facilitation skills and bringing people together in a space where they all feel comfortable” (MW).* In these situations, structured activities may help to more rapidly encourage interactions and, crucially, to build relationships. The facilitation and brokering practices that are used to manage the interplay between formal and informal could be better recognised generally, with training provided for people (from whatever background) who are involved in community engagement or working in this field.

At the focus group the people working from the ‘inside out’ were seen as crucial:

“You have to nurture those people ... because that’s a tough role to play from inside the formal structure – they’ve been called ‘tempered radicals’, trying to change things from the inside” (ND).

Managers could support the existing general commitment by encouraging individuals to become involved in community activities, perhaps through volunteering or trustee positions. Unfortunately, reductions in government spending have put pressure on officials’ time and made it more difficult for civil servants and local authority staff to be ‘out and about’. One

interviewee working in national government suggested that *“the trick is not to get caught up in all that sort of [bureaucratic tasks], without getting caught out”* (PD), implying that just enough attention must be paid to performing necessary formal business, while leaving time for important, but often invisible, aspects of talking with people in the third sector and building up good relations.

Authentic intermediaries

This was a common theme, with many contributors recommending that civil servants and public officials could usefully become ‘more human’ and adopt a more facilitative approach as this would encourage a collaborative model of co-production and partnership. But *“a lot of civil servants don’t have the confidence to use their position [within government] to call a meeting, to engage. They just don’t dare because they feel there is a line that they have to take ... It is risky to go into a meeting and allow people to think [that they can influence things]”* (CW). A colleague echoed this: *“You need to talk with people in communities as fellow citizens to build relationships to make projects work What is important is that people come to see you as someone they want to share information with”* (HT). This suggests a degree of open-ness and flexibility that many workers in local and central government may find difficult due to the demands of political accountability and regulation.

The use of intermediaries who understand how the third sector operates, especially at community level has proved helpful in the past, using independent consultants or community-facing membership organisations, to act as brokers or hosts to negotiate objectives and establish a suitable atmosphere so that discussions can be both candid and constructive . This approach may require championing and modelling from the top, with leaders and policymakers setting a different tone for government policy and funding programmes, permitting, indeed encouraging, processes to be carried out more informally. Several of the interviewees advocated more emotional maturity and intelligence on the part of formal institutions that may need to learn to be more agile, to *“do things differently”* and become less risk averse (PM).

Tools and techniques

In the research, a range of group exercises were mentioned that can be deployed to create informal problem-solving space within formal settings, often by breaking large gatherings into smaller sets that invite participants to open their minds, engage with one another, explore diverse views and to find common ideas. These include brain storming, buzz groups, world café, ‘speed dialogue’, ‘constructive conversations’ and those participatory methods encompassed by the ‘Art of Hosting’ model. Such tools and techniques are useful but not vital.

A judicious braiding of informal processes with formal procedures may create the optimal conditions for shared learning, collective discussion, agreeing goals, making and measuring progress, involving people, keeping going, being fair and so on. This practical wisdom is demonstrated by experienced chairs, facilitators and community workers. It has implications for policymakers in that it serves key underpinning values frequently associated with government's community-oriented policies – namely citizen participation, social inclusion and integration.

Various initiatives, such as the Big Lunch or street parties, were cited as offering simple models for facilitating informality through formal, but flexible, frameworks that make things easy to organise without imposing pre-ordained outcomes.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate a complicated maze of benefits and drawbacks. Astute choices are needed as to how formal and informal modes are blended or balanced against each other.

Over decades informality within the realm of social and personal interactions has been increasing while the reach of formal regulations and guidance governing organisations and transactional relations, has, until recently, been expanding. This inevitably creates friction at the points where formal requirements encounter informal activities.

Being pragmatic and realistic

It is assumed in official and professional spheres that formalities offer a superior way of operating, useful for ironing out the kinks and risks inherent in community and volunteering activities. Formality is deemed to convey status and that things are being taken seriously. There are however many contradictions and tensions between the application of official policies and strategies and what actually happens in everyday life or how ideas get interpreted or implemented at community level. These are not always explicit or acknowledged. Although formal rules may appear to hold sway, they may not be consistently enforced in practice, while on the ground they are ignored or bent. For example, public spaces may be patrolled and controlled by notices (no ball games, keep to the left, and so on), and yet these explicit directives are often subverted within community settings by informal tactics of resistance and transgression (Purcell, 2012). These surreptitious acts are usually subtle and spontaneous so may be difficult to observe or challenge, but they are sometimes crucial ways of surviving a precarious existence in an oppressive system or maintaining some semblance of independence.

Contemporary everyday life, with its ambivalent expectations and shifting circumstances (Miształ, 2000) is the site for most forms of local community action and therefore the target of

community development and neighbourhood improvement programmes (Day, 2006; Somerville, 2011). Everyday settings, habits and connections shape people's priorities and how they interact with one another. Informal community relations and customs form the backdrop (and behind the scenes action) to government interventions and local strategies for community engagement. They therefore affect how and when people choose to participate or contribute (Jupp, 2013).

Managing disagreement and dilemmas

Dissent and doubt are often expressed informally, perhaps through disruption or in 'off stage' discussions. Tensions and disagreements may surface informally with disputes manifest in 'backbiting', oblique insults and grabs for control. This can make life very uncomfortable for community members, with festering rivalries and personality clashes. Sometimes, formal conflict resolution may offer the best mechanism for moving forward and enabling a disadvantaged interest group to be heard. This can be undermining of the official democratic or mediation processes but it also provides ways of identifying allies and marshalling arguments in preparation for more formal debate. Thus, loosely co-ordinated networks of direct action (such as deployed by modern social movements) have become important campaigning vehicles for discussion and mobilisations, made more accessible and perhaps more powerful through social media technologies (Tarrow, 2011, Castells, 2012). An element of formality can amplify and channel quiet or unorganised voices without being too cumbersome. This might be illustrated by the use of chants on demonstrations, led by whoever happens to have the loud hailer, ensuring that there is an appearance of unison, albeit stripped down to simplistic slogans and demands.

Normally, in the absence of formal roles and policies, different viewpoints and loyalties generate personal and professional dilemmas (Hoggett et al, 2008) and as Howard and Taylor note (2010, p194) "all ambiguity ... creates tensions. What is interesting is that some of these tensions turn into conflict and others into opportunities. Our research suggests that it is the skills and experience of particular individuals which make some organisations better equipped to navigate these tensions."

Almost without exception, groups and collectivities experience differences of opinion and power struggles. Tuckman's (1965) model of group development posits a series of stages in which progression from 'forming' to 'performing' requires an inevitable 'storming' phase during which conflicts are played out and mostly resolved. Although the linear nature of Tuckman's model is contested, networks or co-operatives that lack formal mechanisms or external support, find that disputes and clashes can undermine a group before it has a chance to reach full maturity (e.g. Landry et al, 1985). This has been dubbed the 'tyranny of

structurelessness' (Freeman, 1973) and it is therefore advisable to have some minimal ways of dealing with discord sooner rather than later, ideally before sharp conflicts arise.

Experience from the Big Local programme indicated that having recourse to previously agreed 'standing orders' has helped participants cope in tricky situations and to move the group of residents forward towards becoming partnerships without collapsing in rancour and suspicion. Formal procedures have provided sufficient scaffolding for the initial groups to assert their collective aims, resolve conflicts and reassure potential stakeholders about their local credibility and public accountability. As time goes by, it enables organisations to build capacity, undertake repairs and generally withstand assault by creating stable and safe conditions for partnership members and stakeholders to grow confidence in their own skills and develop robust networks.

One important aspect of the informal-formal balance concerns the management of uncertainty and complexity in situations where broad consensus is desirable but not easily achieved. This is often the case in organising collective action in diverse communities or for community engagement and cross-sectoral partnership arrangements. Decision-making is often about negotiating disagreement and dilemmas when the optimal route forward is unclear or there are ethical dimensions attached to the different options, for example with potential for discrimination or missed opportunities. Conflicts of interest are unsettling and usually bring power dynamics into play. Skilful and strategic use of informal processes and formal procedures underpins effective working with communities, especially those who are disadvantaged by institutional structures and inequalities. Informal interventions afford useful tactics to steady the group dynamics, let off steam and draw out quieter or dissenting views.

A systems approach

A better understanding is needed of how communities operate as multi-faceted and dynamic systems, with myriad inter-personal and inter-organisational connections, loyalties and rivalries, underlain by an ever-shifting pattern of individual emotions and motivations (Milofsky, 2006, 2008; Gilchrist, 2009). Network mapping techniques (such as Kumu¹⁸) may be a more appropriate way of tracing the links and relationships between people, interest groups and voluntary organisations, rather than 'organigrams' that focus on formal structures, roles and lines of accountability.

In particular, it is important to be aware of the gate-keeping functions played by some community-members, often in positions of self-appointed leadership, who occupy both informal and formal positions of power (Bailey, 2014). Their role is crucial in engaging with

¹⁸ See <https://kumu.io/markets/network-mapping>

communities but it may also need to be challenged if others are being blocked from influencing decisions or taking on responsibilities. Outsiders can play a useful role in bridging and brokering across sectoral boundaries, weaving connections between informal networks and formal organisations (Krebs and Holley, 2006; Morgan-Trimmer, 2014). As a former senior civil servant in community-facing divisions of Whitehall has highlighted, facilitation and negotiation skills are at a premium (CW).

Being at ease

Those working with communities and civil society organisations need to be both bold and discerning about when formality helps and when it hinders. Secondments into and outside of the civil service enable officers to become more tolerant and adept in handling relationships with the community sector, enabling more successful transitions and exchanges.

The Civil Service Competency Framework (2012-2017) currently makes no mention of working with communities though it does refer to people engagement skills in “managing and engaging with people in a straightforward, truthful, and candid way” and “creating an inclusive environment, welcoming challenge however uncomfortable” (p4). Public officials and civil servants might benefit from experiencing the positive aspects of informal meetings and ‘grassroots’ forms of organising so that they understand that this approach can be effective and legitimate. They might acquire the skills, knowledge and self-awareness needed to operate comfortably within the apparent ‘messiness’ of informality. Work shadowing outwith government would deepen this understanding of what life is like in the third sector – its dynamism and precarious environment, especially for smaller community groups. Presentations from those working or volunteering in these settings could be built in to induction programmes or modules designed within public administration courses for continuing professional development such as those offered by the Civil Service College.

Spanning boundaries

Intermediary voluntary organisations often act as “*docking mechanisms*” (MT) whereby ‘ordinary people’ (volunteers, activists, community members) can find out about issues and opportunities that may affect them and become engaged in consultations, training and campaigning. Infrastructure bodies can help smaller or younger organisations with advice, support and access to resources, and also offer a route into being represented on partnership forums.

Making the links between these very informal frontline micro-organisations and more formal infrastructure organisations that could potentially offer ‘on tap’ advice and support requires sensitivity and the skills of buddying and friendly mentoring (Taylor and Wilson, 2015). Intermediary organisations might provide opportunities for peer-learning and forum-like

spaces that are facilitated to enable optimal sharing. Individuals may play a similar role – helping marginal or new groups to navigate the landscapes of partnership and community engagement.

People who take on boundary-spanning roles exhibit particular competences in networking, negotiating and diplomacy, operating at the interface between citizen and state services as ‘special agents’ (Williams, 2013) or navigators, bringing outreach, advice and advocacy services to communities (Turning Point, 2010). This requires a range of abilities, not least an understanding of how formal and informal modes complement each other and knowing how to operate in both genres.

I have spread my dreams under your feet;

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W. B. Yeats (from *He wishes for the cloths of heaven*)

It has been fascinating to consider these different dimensions of community action and engagement through the lens of informality in order to elucidate benefits and limitations compared with formal aspects. It is notable how rarely the term 'informality' appears in the index of books on community, society or community work, and yet there is wide agreement that it is a vital ingredient in the everyday life of communities. Informality deserves further consideration in the development of policy and practice that seeks to improve or exploit the ideas and motivations to be found in the third sector.

This study has proceeded on the basis of the core values usually associated with community development and participatory democracy, namely empowerment, inclusion and shared learning. The initial motivation was to demonstrate the significance of informality in situations where formal structures and procedures seemed to be deflecting citizens' energies and enthusiasm for collective action, reducing participation and suppressing innovation. Over the course of the investigation this focus has shifted from a relatively straightforward message that **'informality is good and needs to be better understood and supported'** to a much more complicated appreciation that **there are advantages and disadvantages for communities in both formal and informal aspects of voluntary and collective action.** The pattern of advantages and disadvantages associated with informal and formal modes is complicated and affected by various factors. Furthermore, effective practice for **working with, in and for communities uses skills, strategies and shrewd judgements in blending, braiding and balancing formal matters with informal processes.**

A complicated picture

Ultimately this study has been concerned to improve understanding and practice in how communities are supported and enabled to take action and to influence the decisions that affect them. It is difficult to draw straightforward conclusions about the relative merits and drawbacks of formal and informal processes when working with communities but a major conclusion is that **informal and formal modes of operating should be acknowledged as different but equal**, having parity in terms of how they are valued by those working with communities.

The interviews, workshops and literature review provide evidence and examples of how formal measures can be both restrictive but beneficial, depending on circumstances. Informality is likewise associated with both advantages and disadvantages that are perceived differently by different players and this may be affected by a variety of factors, including relative status, cultural expectations and traditions, as well as individual characteristics and preferences. What has become clear during the course of this short study is that for civil society to operate well and for communities to be properly supported and engaged in delivering current policy objectives, neither informal and formal modes are dispensable.

The recommendations fall into two main arenas: policy and practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The clear message from the preceding discussion is that policies and policy-making procedures should respect, value and cherish informal processes and styles rather than regard community ways of organising and debating as inherently 'messy' or 'subjective'. It is therefore important to nurture and attend to what's happening informally – the emerging ideas, emotions expressed and networks of relationships. In every context it should be possible to **allocate resources, time and space for informality**.

Policymakers need to move away from a default position of 'formal as normal'. The list of requirements for funding programmes or engagement strategies needs to be fully thought through and justified before being implemented or sanctioned rather than simply described as 'good practice'. In many situations, formality can be used with a very light touch or at arms-length as to provide 'just enough' skeleton to support growth and change. It should be proportionate and not burdensome. George Edwards Deming, the engineer and management consultant, who pioneered continuous improvement systems, famously suggested in relation to quality assurance, that "a regulation is justifiable if it offers more advantage than the economic waste that it entails" (1982, p298). He also advocated breaking down barriers between departments and levels in a hierarchy, so that there can be organisational learning from mistakes. The emphasis in his model of Total Quality Management is on cost effectiveness so that money and time saved from formal procedures can be used to make things happen.

Government should not gratuitously interfere with the inherent informality and independence of the third sector and communities in particular. Instead, policies should foster an environment that allows informal groups and initiatives to flourish without being hampered by unnecessary regulations and requirements. If communities are indeed going to be at the heart of a more compassionate and cohesive society, then a whole eco-system of informal groups, organisations and activities must be sustained and encouraged to evolve.

Ideally, a **combination of ‘facilitated informality and flexible formality’ is needed**. Consequently, policies must be more elastic in how regulations are devised and applied in different situations with some slack to encourage community participation and experimentation.

There are different ways for developing the various organisational aspects of effective collective action: notably decision-making and accountability. A light touch approach that offers support and guidance, without trammelling initiative through rules and regulations, is able to manage crucial dimensions of organisation governance and community participation. Wherever feasible community members should be involved in designing a system of checks and balances that will work from their perspectives and support appropriate decision-making. This will allow communities to apply their local knowledge, articulate different views and priorities and mitigate risk appropriately while remaining friendly, accessible and largely informal.

Policymakers and officials can usefully jettison the assumption that community organisations and inter-face bodies should aspire to formal modes. Organisations do not always need to grow or to formalise, and it is helpful to think of collectivities as functioning and evolving within an inter-connected eco-system of groups, organisations and institutions, each with its own ‘niche’ and shaped by forces of natural selection (Conn, 2011). Instead of a ‘ladder mentality’ with community organisations moving ever upwards until they fall off, it is more realistic to see a spectrum of different activities, all equal, all different (MacGillivray et al, 2001, p28). Some outsiders may see this as ‘jungle-like’ but an expert organisational ecologist will see through the apparent chaos and recognise the transitions and borders, and the ‘space of possibilities’.

“There’s nothing wrong with ambiguity. What’s bad is confusion. They are not the same thing” (CR).

Formality should act as a ‘handrail’ or ‘safety brake’ to reach for when things falter and before they go wrong. Organisations that do have all the formal policies and procedures in place can act as a ‘safe pair of hands’, performing the regulatory, due diligence and risk management functions so that communities do not have to, concentrating instead on the expressive, emotional aspects of everyday life that keep people involved and well-motivated. ‘Buffering’ or ‘hosting’ bodies may be used by funders and programme managers to balance the demands for public accountability and transparency.

Where communities decide that they want their own organisation, its development should proceed on the basis of dialogue among the various stakeholders and informed choices

about the level of formality to be introduced at a pace that is appropriate for those involved. The circumstances might favour the setting up of umbrella bodies (for example, a forum for rural BME communities) or facilitating a temporary consortium to enable small groups to overcome the mind-sets of officials and gain a place at the big table.

Dealing with informal, multiple community organisations may be difficult and time-consuming but these are the essence of community life, promoting well-being and social action. Professionals working with communities need to learn how to relate to them and work with them using formal and informal methods.

Embracing these levels of fluidity and complexity may mean that managers and local authority officials need to adjust their attitudes and expand their repertoire of skills and styles. This could involve challenging policies and received wisdom about how communities should organise themselves; and being prepared to give up control. There is room for compromise and rewarded risks when it comes to dealing with communities; notwithstanding the expectation that government and council officials are custodians of public money and therefore accountable for ensuring value for money and standards. Yet changes in policy guidance and the prevailing political culture could permit public leaders, commissioning bodies and funders to be less cautious, more prepared to let go of the reins and trust communities more. Regulation should be proportionate to the potential risks and requirements for accountability and could consist of loose frameworks that allow high degrees of flexibility and local room to manoeuvre, using, for example, broad outcomes and shared expectations, rather than tight targets and rules.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The research has demonstrated that working with communities involves judgements and choices as well as skills and techniques. There are a number of areas where these interventions can occur. Managing group dynamics in meetings requires a particularly skilful practice from the Chair or facilitator. There is a need to get through the business in hand and for people to enjoy the experience sufficiently to feel that their attendance has been worthwhile. If possible a happy medium must be found or as one of the interviewees, a tenant activist who played a major role in customer services for her Housing Association, observed “You have to want to go to meetings. You don’t want to be bored” (CF).

For most people, effective meetings encourage sustainable and inclusive participation through a compromise between expressive (emotional, social) and instrumental aspects (tasks, decisions). Informal processes around or within meetings can make a big difference to how people interact and how ready they are to contribute ideas or to take on

responsibilities. Changing the layout of furniture so that people can make eye contact with one another encourages more relaxed interactions perhaps because people are able to communicate through body language as well as formal interjections regarding items on the agenda.

Another option for including new or less confident people is to hold open, informal pre-meetings that are an opportunity to go through the agenda, clarify any upcoming issues, raise questions, rehearse arguments and share any background information that might be relevant for the formal decision-making. This can be very reassuring for individuals and build the capacity of the whole group.

Within the body of formally organised meetings, conferences and workshops there are plenty of techniques for introducing informality, challenging excessive formality and encouraging playful interaction. Thus 'ice-breaker' exercises can be used to get people talking to one another very quickly, building trust and initial connections within a group. Lateral thinking and sharing 'zany', unorthodox ideas is stimulated through cultural animation approaches, playful activities or numerous other engagement exercises to be found in manuals such as the Barefoot Guides (Hope and Timmel, 2013) or on websites such as Involve.¹⁹

Art of Hosting offer a set of practices and principles that are designed to manage 'divergence, emergence and convergence' of ideas in large groups. They do this through a series of restorative and strategic conversations using a variety of methods such as world café, open spaces technology, circle-calling, story-telling and harvesting in order to co-create an alternative future. A key founding concept is the idea of facilitated 'chaordism', holding conversations in the 'zone' between chaos and order which enables self-organisation through connectivity and co-production. The Art of Hosting method melds elements of formal structure and informal process to "bring kitchen table and street corner democracy into being" (Block, 2007, p11). The approach emphasises the idea of community as fundamentally about sociability so that it uses facilitation practices for hosting honest and meaningful conversations.

There are interesting implications for funders arising from this study that are already being implemented for some programmes. A recent report for the Baring Foundation suggests that funders consider small grants to informal groups with an understanding that these are 'at risk' of not delivering the intended outcomes but will encourage experimentation. In order that these are used to best effect, they should be accompanied by buddying arrangements to encourage learning (Taylor and Wilson, 2015).

¹⁹ See <http://www.involve.org.uk> for further resources

Another strategy, already adopted by Big Local and the Community Organisers Programme, is to use more stable and sensitive local organisations to take a supportive administrative role and liaise with smaller, fragile groups. The independent Travellers Aid Trust is an example of this model of allocating grant aid to marginalised groups but is sadly now defunct.

Many community groups begin their life as ideas gestated through informal conversations around kitchen tables, in the cafe or outside the school gates in what are essentially private gatherings. The people involved may firm up their development through living room meetings but there will come a time when the group want to become more open but without becoming overly formalised and before they seek funding. Community-based or incubator spaces, with temporary and flexible leases, may be needed to provide room for meetings, administrative or even social activities that enable the group to grow, widening the membership to be more inclusive and perhaps attracting outside resources, while remaining relatively informal.

This study has discovered many semi-formal strategies for encouraging informality and generating opportunities to build authentic relationships that form the bedrock for co-operation and collective action. For example, allocating a 'participation percentage' to funds would encourage projects to devote a proportion of grants to informal activities and proactive measures that will engage people and build networks as preparation for and an adjunct to delivering formal programme outcomes. This investment should be seen as a legitimate use of public money because it builds a firm foundation for future growth. Others have advocated strategies for embedding serendipity into semi-randomised interactions so that unexpected encounters and juxtapositions can generate novel connections or fresh ideas (Olma, 2009).

Further research is needed in these areas to understand what works in different circumstances and what levels of formality are tolerated by different people and their different motivations. A robust evidence base could include case studies of where informality has driven the success of a project. It would be illuminating to discover more about what is happening at the sites of transition and co-production and at the interface between different sectors. There is further light to be thrown on the ways in which formal and informal approaches support or constrain collective action. A particular focus on the effectiveness of informal arrangements for organising social action may reveal the delicate practice and judgements made by those who are facilitating these experiences so that we can learn more about what works, and why. The evaluations carried out by learning advisors for funding programmes draw out useful lessons and identify positive, if sometimes intangible, outcomes, even though they do not purport to provide rigorous assessments of impact.

Good ideas are often generated and spread informally but can become diluted in the process, losing the key principles or features that have made the model so inspiring. Formal

affiliations and franchises allow successful models to be scaled out without compromising the original standards, capturing the essential idea but enabling it to be adapted to local circumstances (Bunt and Harris, 2012).

Informality is able to stimulate experimentation because the lack of regulation and standards allows people to try things out and to learn. Sanctions for failure are limited or non-existent, encouraging innovation and cross-fertilisation of ideas. Casual, free-flowing conversations can result in new insights, discoveries or inventions. Informal spaces without rules and surveillance enable free exchanges and open discussion, sometimes challenging orthodoxy and formal conventions. Such conversations often occur 'off-stage': on journeys, at social occasions or during breaks in the formal proceedings. Or they can be deliberately encouraged alongside semi-structured activities commonly used in youth work or craft-based groups such as 'stitch and bitch' or projects carried out by Men in Sheds.

However, for these to be consolidated or more systematically investigated, formal procedures (for example of scientific methods of testing hypotheses and running pilots) are needed. As Nesta found in its Big Green Challenge project, this can lead to clashes of culture between community enterprises and private or public sector bodies (Cox et al, 2010) and larger agencies should be sufficiently flexible in harnessing local expertise rather than trying to control or own it. Hence the call for 'scaling-out' strategies, rather than 'scaling-up', with the aim of nurturing a proliferation of good ideas rather than growth (O'Donovan and Rubbra, 2012; Durose et al, 2013).

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

This research has explored the interplay between formal and informal aspects of collective organising, identifying advantages and disadvantages for both, and attempting to tease out the various functions that each performs in different situations or stages of development and delivery. The main conclusion I draw is that achieving the right combination of formal and informal requires the deft application of skills, perceptions and deep-rooted knowledge. Values and judgements are also needed about what is ethical and what is effective regarding the involvement of community participants in designing strategies for addressing shared concerns, which may or may not coincide with the objectives of funders or policy objectives.

Essentially this study has been concerned to inform and influence policies relating to social action and organisational governance. It has considered how to optimise the combined use of formal and informal approaches to ensure that people are not unnecessarily excluded and are able to deal with tensions and conflicts, while achieving both community aspirations and government thinking. This requires developing and maintaining a shared vision of citizen

empowerment and inclusive network dynamics, including group members, potential beneficiaries or stakeholders and any partners involved.

Crucially, the route followed by communities in setting up and sustaining different forms of collaboration with local allies and other partners should be determined by participants and beneficiaries themselves. Formalities are important but they should grow organically, evolve or be engineered in accordance with participants' wishes. Careful support and facilitation may be needed to determine how these can most appropriately be met without overwhelming the informal aspects of community life. The value of informal processes is evident in successful community empowerment programmes and this can be built into all aspects of engagement, development and delivery.

Considerations for practice

This report ends with a number of recommendations that acknowledge that informality performs valuable functions and should be cherished rather than swept aside or constrained. They are summarised in this appendix and put forward to counter the presumption that formal is somehow normal and proper, or the 'mature' way of doing things.

In the current political and economic climate, there may be less time, funding and energy available to carry these out at all times or in every situation, but they can be borne in mind when planning or responding to opportunities for community engagement, public participation and partnership working.

The following suggestions are offered as take-home messages for anyone working with or in communities. It makes sense to keep these under review at all times. They will help both policymakers and practitioners to be flexible: adapting, adjusting and recovering situations to ensure the optimal combination of formal requirements and informal processes.

MAINTAIN 'HUMAN' TO 'HUMAN' CONNECTIONS AND COMMUNICATION

The quality of relationships and interactions is key to how communities operate and to a great extent this also applies to organisations of all kinds. An informal atmosphere or approach makes it easier for some people to participate and informal modes of communication allow people to speak more openly and confidently. This is because formal modes of communication can appear opaque or inaccessible to some community members, while proscriptive roles can stifle emotional engagement and creativity.

It is therefore useful to build in opportunities for people to get to know one another. This could involve 'ice-breakers' at the beginning of sessions, clear introductions, use of name-labels, and sharing (culturally appropriate) food together at some stage. Keep jargon and acronyms to a minimum and/or provide clear explanations, such as a 'jargon buster' sheet. If a microphone is needed, use a roving one that people can use without necessarily having to stand up or come to the front. Keep people informed using a variety of communication channels, including social media.

MINIMISE FORMALITY

There is still room for greater awareness of how formality constrains or inhibits participation and it is important to find ways to avoid or minimise this. Those working with communities should use formal procedures only when absolutely necessary and where these contribute to the stability and sustainability of an organisation or can be justified in terms of risk

management, legal compliance or democratic validity. Reviewing the formal aspects of an organisation, such as mission statements or terms of reference and formal protocols, should become a regular habit to assess whether these are still serving the function they were intended to do, and whether they need revising or even removing.

Formal 'rules' and 'roles' should not be regarded as the ideal or default setting for all organisations. They should be introduced only as necessary and after full discussion so that everyone is clear about their usefulness. Formal procedures should be kept to a minimum and kept under review to ensure that they work and are fully understood by all concerned. Nevertheless notes or some kind of record of decisions offer a way of keeping track of developments and learning from past experiences so that the group is not continually 're-inventing the wheel' or losing sight of its core purpose.

GRADUAL EVOLUTION

Formalities should be allowed to evolve organically and incrementally as circumstances or aims change rather than imposed by external requirements. People who are used to operating in formal settings tend to try and formalise automatically or too swiftly, because they believe that establishing formal structures and policies should happen as soon as a group grows to a certain size and status. Others prefer to keep things informal and friendly, with a loose open structure that allows for flexibility and inclusivity.

These two approaches can come into opposition as a community group develops into an organisation, resulting in disaffection and frustration all round. As this study has witnessed, key transitions are triggered by acquiring a bank account, applications for funding, employment of staff or the desire to take on 'representative' or leadership roles within the wider community.

Organisational development should happen naturally and gradually, introducing procedures and policies as they become necessary to handle growing responsibility or membership. This process can be re-considered, halted or reversed at any time as circumstances change or new expectations are placed on the organisation. Standing orders or constitutional frameworks should be reviewed regularly to make sure that they are still needed and fit for purpose.

PREPARE FOR EMPOWERMENT

Status and power are often indicated by formal modes of address (and sometimes 'dress codes'). Official procedures can be off-putting to those that do not understand what is going on. Standing orders are not always necessary to ensure that organisations and meetings are well run. Formalities should not be insisted upon, but if they are deemed obligatory, then

make sure that everyone is aware of how to use them and what they signify. To this end, informal gatherings or pre-meetings can prove useful for some participants: a chance to go through the agenda, explain what decisions are to be taken and provide any background information. They are an opportunity for people to ask questions, think about what's involved and discuss options.

UNDERSTAND LOCAL CULTURES AND PLACES

The history and landscape of communities matter, and much of this knowledge is stored in people's heads and shared through informal conversations. The iconography of landmark buildings and places carries different meanings for different sections of the community and is an essential part of local cultural traditions and practices. Introducing informal activities into what are seen as formal settings can be a good way of breaking down barriers and re-claiming imposing buildings. 'Messy church' or festival events held in civic halls are examples of this.

CREATE COMFORTABLE SPACES

People are more inclined to contribute if they feel comfortable and can see each other's faces. Some members of the public can feel intimidated in formal settings, especially if these are dominated by official symbols and protocols. Chairs set out in a circle or horseshoe shape ensure that everyone is on the same level and can make eye contact easily, while avoiding the appearance of a 'top table'. Café style layout with everyone round small tables increases opportunities for small-group work and encourages discussion by 'levelling' people's status. Use venues that are familiar or neutral for community members.

MAKE/TAKE TIME

Formality can provide a degree of continuity and stability that is not dependent on the current activities or individuals involved. But it takes a while for people to understand most aspects of formal structures and procedures and some may resist them. Groups and networks usually evolve their own way of operating where 'form follows function'. This can take a while to emerge and may involve some friction. Working groups and teams need time to 'gel' but this can be accelerated if people are given time to get to know one another as individuals and to identify what they have in common, such as a shared goal. Progression to becoming formal organisations should not be assumed and in any case does not always follow a linear path.

ATTEND TO LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION AND POWER DYNAMICS

The creation of 'officer' roles can inadvertently or deliberately excludes some people from decision-making, especially if this group forms an inner-circle or executive committee. Many people find the formal parts of meetings boring and are deterred from taking on responsibilities because they fear 'getting things wrong' if guidance is too bureaucratic or

rigid. However, too much informality can feel 'cliquey' so some formal processes can help to include newcomers or people from different cultures.

Meetings involving community members should be as open and as informal as possible though some structure helps by ensuring that introductions are made, roles explained and that people are able to ask questions, challenge statements or make exploratory suggestions.

INTEGRATE FORMAL BUSINESS WITH INFORMAL PROCESSES

It improves the enjoyment of formal meetings if there is some scope for informal banter and humour, sometimes during the course of business or in the breaks. Good chairing and facilitation will aim for a balance between getting through the agenda so that everyone feels able to contribute, and ensuring that people feel able to make a joke and catch up on personal news.

Volunteers and activists do not necessarily want to be bothered with formal bureaucratic procedures. They usually want to get on with doing things and helping out rather than undertaking strategic and accountable responsibilities.

The chair should have a relaxed style of facilitation while also keeping an eye on the agenda, timings and the democratic niceties of accountable decision-making. Use creative and participatory methods of enabling people (perhaps working in pairs or small groups) to share ideas and reflect on their experiences. These might include use of simple art and craft activities, drama or role play, brain-storming and buzz groups.

In some circumstances, administration, contractual and accountability functions could be outsourced to trusted intermediary organisations that have a track record of managing funds and reporting/evaluation frameworks.

RISKS ARE OFTEN REWARDED BY POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Risks can often be managed using careful judgements and common sense. The likelihood of a threat or peril actually occurring is often over-estimated, especially if the consequences are harmful or potentially embarrassing. Innovation and progress may depend on taking 'rewarded risks', i.e. seizing unexpected opportunities and experimenting with new ways of doing things.

Be aware of potential hazards but not consumed by them. Instead adopt a collective and measured approach to probable risks, taking advice from experts where necessary, and stay alert to possible early indicators of things going wrong. Disclaimers can be issued if event

organisers are worried about being held legally responsible for accidents, stating, for example, that people take part at their own risk and should be aware of potential dangers.

It is worth considering the new forms of indemnity that are being developed, which will apply even where an organisation is not legally incorporated.

MAINTAIN STANDARDS

Quality can be assured through informal processes of listening and responding to feedback, taking shared responsibility and asserting a culture of 'continuous improvement'. Constant focus on targets and performance criteria can distort services and production with its focus on outputs and 'deliverables'.

A pledge or charter, signed by the respective parties, can be a simple document setting out agreed expectations and what will happen if these are not met. Peer-to-peer networking that encourages comparison and mutual support provides useful ways of bringing people up to scratch and sharing good practices or novel ideas. Ideally these kinds of interactions should be supportive rather than competitive.

BE PREPARED FOR TROUBLE AND STRIFE

To avoid the destructive influence of negative attitudes and behaviour, it is sometimes advisable to develop a simple code of conduct and agreed 'zero-tolerance' statement setting out what will happen if prejudicial or offensive language and conduct are used. It is useful to have clarity around decision-making protocols, such as when meetings count as legitimate, who is entitled to take part in discussions or vote, and clear expectations (and notes) about how decisions will be implemented. Having procedures in place to deal with disputes and unacceptable behaviour, along with appeals procedures where appropriate, may be an advantage in preventing unpleasant situations from escalating.

Discrimination can go unchallenged, allowing disadvantages to creep in and for inequalities to be exacerbated or perpetuated by informal biases. Informal communication can result in collusion or complacency, allowing fraudulent transactions and 'muddy' decision-making. This can lead to disputed accountability with conflicts and disagreements appearing as 'personality clashes' or factional rivalries. Unless mechanisms are in place to deal with these tensions they may fester resulting in the group malfunctioning.

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Marilyn Taylor (MT) – Visiting research fellow at the Institute for Voluntary Action Research, visiting professor at Birkbeck, University of London

Henry Tam (HT) - educator, writer, and former senior civil servant

Pam Warhurst (PW) – Founder, Incredible Edible

Heather Wills (HW) - Principal advisor - SE region, Local Government Association

Mandy Wilson (MW) – community facilitator and research consultant

Charles Woodd (CW) - Former Voluntary and Community Sector manager and civil servant

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WORKSHOPS AND DISCUSSIONS WITHIN THE NETWORK OF BIG LOCAL REPS

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About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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