

Culture or Compliance: Monitoring the use of the National Standards for Community Engagement

In December 2006 and January 2007, 'Culture or Compliance' was adopted as a key theme of four regional conferences reviewing progress in implementing the National Standards for Community Engagement. This advice note is based on the keynote presentation and discussion that arose from it.

Community engagement - A self evident virtue?

Paul Burton reviewing the public policy and community engagement has commented:

'There are very few who write about or comment on regeneration, however it is defined who do not claim that public involvement is an important if not essential component of effective and successful regeneration.'¹

It is as if community engagement has come to be seen as a self evident virtue for public agencies, particularly in the context of regeneration. There are many illustrations of what these virtues are perceived to be. Two examples capture the essence of this. Maguire and Truscot in a report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation² identify:

- increased influence for communities
- improved information for service providers
- 'joined up' thinking across services
- more flexible use of resources.

The Scottish Executive Civic Participation Policy Unit³, describing civic participation as 'an essential tool of modern government' highlight:

- making better policy,
- building ownership and consensus around policy outcomes,
- accounting for actions taken
- promoting participation.

Community Engagement – a flawed practice?

Despite the positive perception of the value of community engagement and the promises of public policy, practice has often disappointed. In his article Burton goes on to comment:

'The conclusion of many studies is that public involvement did not work very well in practice: it was embarked upon too late; insufficient resources were provided to make it effective; the local environment was not very conducive; and key decisions continued to be taken by people not living in the areas affected'.

¹ Paul Burton (2003) 'Community involvement in neighbourhood regeneration: stairway to heaven or road to nowhere' Centre for Neighbourhood Research Bristol

² Kath Maguire and Frances Truscott (2006) 'Active governance: The value added by community involvement in governance through local strategic partnerships', Joseph Rowntree Foundation

³ Final report by the Policy Unit (2000) 'Civic Participation – a Policy Unit Project' Scottish Executive

It was to help to bridge the gap between the large hopes and small realities of community engagement that the Minister for Communities commissioned the development of the National Standards for Community Engagement. The standards

- Seek to support improvements in the quality, process and impact of engagement.
- Are designed, and have been demonstrated in practice to provide, a clear framework for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating community engagement.
- Provide a guide to best practice but they are a means to an end not an end in themselves. Meeting the standards is not the purpose of practice but a necessary step in delivering outcomes that impact on the quality of the lives of disadvantaged communities.

The role of the National Standards – culture or compliance

A key issue that has emerged in applying the standards is how best to establish commitment to their use. Whether there should be penalties for public agencies and partnerships that fail to meet the standards or whether this would be counterproductive in producing tokenistic adherence, but not real commitment, has been hotly debated.

The issue was raised in the development phase for the standards but the predominant view then was that the standards should be seen as a tool to support development of a public service ethos that embraces the value of community and service user involvement. In other words the key challenge was to establish a culture of practice in which involvement was normal. Yet, despite good examples of practice, for many people, progress does not seem to be fast or consistent enough from area to area or service to service. The debate about the need for means to ensure compliance with the standards has re-emerged. Carrot or stick – which will be more effective?

For most people involved in their development, the standards were best seen as a voluntary code of conduct that all parties would mutually agreed to abide by. The act of adopting them would require reflection on the agreement that was being entered into that would build recognition of the complexity but necessity of achieving good community engagement. In many settings this has been the case but two years into implementation of the standards, commentators also point to the wholesale adoption of the standards, for example, by community planning partnerships in community engagement strategies, whose promise is not met in the realities of their practice.

Meanwhile the increasing endorsement of the standards in policy has further highlighted the issues of culture or compliance. The following section reviews the way that they have been treated and the degree to which compliance is beginning to emerge.

The Standards in a range of policy contexts

The Standards in Community Learning and Development

How Good is Our Community Learning and Development (2), the HMIE self evaluation and inspection framework for community learning and development identifies 'engaging with communities and other stakeholders to identify and plan to meet their needs' and 'developing skills and confidence for community engagement' as key processes. It seeks evidence of impact on communities in terms of 'active and influential roles in local and wider decision making' and refers particularly to community planning. Among the illustrations of good quality performance is that community groups are: 'able to engage as equal partners with public agencies in relevant consultation and planning arrangements'. In relation to quality indicators of the exercise of power and influence by community groups the framework refers directly to: 'community engagement in community planning in line with community engagement standards'. As an illustration of good practice in this area HGIOCLD suggests: 'Community groups and organisations have a good knowledge and awareness of methods of community engagement and work towards the Standards for Community Engagement'

In effect these requirements have introduced an element of compliance in that good practice will in part be judged in formal inspections against its impact in assisting community groups to engage in a manner that reflects the standards

The Standards and the Health Sector

The Scottish Health Council Work Plan for 2006-07 states:

'Assessing the performance of NHS Boards and Special Health Boards, ... in terms of the quality and extent of their Patient Focus and Public Involvement activities, (is) fundamental to the work of the Scottish Health Council. We will achieve this by reviewing the self-assessments NHS Boards provide of their achievements on Patient Focus and Public Involvement against established Performance Assessment quality indicators. We shall also review NHS Boards' activities using national guidance and standards, such as the draft *Informing, Engaging Consulting* guidance and the *National Standards for Community Engagement* developed by Communities Scotland.'

As in the case of community learning development the Standards are emerging as a formal tool for quality assessment - elements of compliance are in place

The Standards and Regeneration

Regeneration Outcome Agreement Guidance (2004) from Communities Scotland says:

'Effective and genuine community engagement is at the heart of community planning and there must be evidence of this in the ROA. We are looking for CPPs to excel at engaging effectively with the disadvantaged communities they serve..'

Annual Reports on the ROA are required to describe progress in community engagement and the National Standards are being used as a template. Once again an element of compliance has emerged.

The Standards and Planning

The Scottish Executive Community Engagement 'Planning with People': Consultation Draft' (2006) notes that:

'A great deal of practical guidance on how to achieve effective community engagement already exists, including the *National Standards for Community Engagement* and the *RTPI Guidelines on Effective Community Involvement and Consultation*. In this PAN the National Standards for Community Engagement produced by Communities Scotland have been applied to the planning system in the form of guiding principles. The standards are ideally suited for use by planning authorities for development plan preparation, by applicants in pre-application consultations with communities and by communities engaging in general on planning issues.'

In this case there is no compliance requirement but a clear and authoritative indication of the value that is attached to achieving the standards.

The Standards and Community Planning and Auditing

Audit Scotland published Community Planning an Initial Review in June 2006 and concluded that :

'Community engagement is progressing but it needs to be more sustained and systematic. The Introduction of the National Standards for Community Engagement provides an opportunity for CPPs to improve consistency and effectiveness of community engagement'.

It goes on to suggest that CPPs should champion the National Standards and holds out the possibility of fuller study in future

Many CPPs have directly adopted the standards in their community engagement strategies and the endorsement by Audit Scotland, whilst not indicating direct compliance requirements, nonetheless raises the stakes in terms of performance by partnerships that is congruent with them.

The Standards and Social Care

The Care Commission is currently piloting a new quality assurance framework for inspections of care providers that measures involvement of carers and users as a key aspect of all quality areas. The National Standards for Community Engagement are being used by inspectors as a tool to guide quality assessments in diverse social and health care settings, including residential, domiciliary and day care services for children, adults and older people. Whilst this does not constitute a requirement for compliance the principles of the standards are being given prominence in this context.

Observations and implications

The evidence of policy development indicates that, without requirement for compliance, the National Standards for Community Engagement have been taken seriously and are influencing the direction of practice across the public sector and beyond. The 176 participants in the review events, who were mainly agency staff with strategic and operational responsibilities for promoting community engagement,

were divided in their views of the progress of their own organisations in developing the competence of their staff (Appendix table 1). However their general view was that the quality of community engagement itself was improving (Appendix table 2) and on balance they were optimistic about the specific potential of community engagement in the context of community planning (Appendix table 3).

Yet despite this broadly positive view that progress is being made there appears to have been a shift in view about the value of compliance as a means of driving progress. Over half felt that compliance was a necessary feature of development (Appendix table 4). This does not of course mean that compliance is a substitute for establishing a culture in which the values of community engagement are embedded but it does suggest that opinion is shifting about the need to drive the pace of change by demanding better performance.

With this in mind the increasing degree of compliance within policies will be broadly welcomed yet there remain anxieties about the risks of a compliance approach. Some potential risks that have been identified are:

- Measuring standards targets rather than engagement processes and outcomes
- Ticking boxes rather than reflecting, critically reviewing, learning and developing
- Non participatory performance monitoring by agencies external to the process of engagement – you participate we judge performance
- Judgmental not developmental monitoring and evaluation
- Confusing compliance with improvement

The ultimate challenge must still be the achievement of a participatory culture of governance. Commitment to user and community empowerment has to be more than adherence to externally determined requirements but setting and monitoring clearly stated expectations may help.

Appendix

Table 1

Has the organisation you work for made progress in developing the capacity of its staff to use the Standards?

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| Lots of progress | 8% |
| Some progress | 46% |
| Little progress | 25% |
| No progress | 11% |
| Don't know | 9% |

Table 2

The quality of community engagement is getting better.

| | |
|----------|-----|
| Agree | 81% |
| Disagree | 19% |

Can community engagement in community planning really bring about long term change that benefits the community?

| | |
|---------------|-----|
| Certainly | 24% |
| Probably | 33% |
| Possibly | 42% |
| Not likely to | 1% |
| Don't know | 1% |

Table 3

Can community engagement in community planning really bring about long term change that benefits the community?

| | |
|---------------|-----|
| Certainly | 24% |
| Probably | 33% |
| Possibly | 42% |
| Not likely to | 1% |
| Don't know | 1% |

Table 4

Do you agree with compliance against the National Standards for Community Engagement?

| | |
|----------|-----|
| Yes | 55% |
| No | 29% |
| Possibly | 16% |