

Sound and Fury or Signifying Nothing? Understanding the voice and engagement role of multi-purpose community anchor organisations in the UK

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Abstract

There is a policy drive in the UK for third sector organisations (TSOs) to act as delivery agents for contracted-out state services and to become financially more sustainable (DCLG, 2007; OTS, 2006) in an emerging market environment (Clarke & Newman, 1997). At the same time there are plans for more local citizen engagement and devolved municipal powers (DCLG 2006) alongside a continued emphasis on cross-sector partnership working (Taylor et al, 2002). Taken together these policy trends are creating new patterns of governance which have a direct effect on the relationship between the local state and TSOs (Klijn and Skelcher, 2007). Elsewhere in Europe, welfare states have also been undergoing structural changes, with similar shifts in the configuration of relations (Bode 2007; Laville et al, 2006).

Against this background, the role of TSOs in providing a voice for citizen engagement has attracted increasing interest. Local multi-purpose community organisations, increasingly referred to as 'community anchors' in the UK (Thake 2001), have particularly been seen as having the potential for providing a 'voice' to empower hard to reach groups and support 'community empowerment' and 'neighbourhood governance' (DCLG 2006, 2007). It has been argued that having more 'voice' means local people will have opportunities to express their views (Kennedy 2007), gain better representation and services (Thake 2006), and have the chance to affect policy decisions (Gaventa 2004).

However, the governance arrangements and policy environment in the UK are making the voice and engagement roles (also described as the 'advocacy' function) of community organisations increasingly complex (Craig et al, 2004). Community anchors engage in multiple issues and consequently relate to many statutory organisations and partnerships at neighbourhood, city and regional levels. They may also be both advocating *and* delivering contractual services to the same statutory organisation. The advocacy role has been regarded as a core function of community organisations (Smith 1997) but is particularly challenging in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Barriers faced by organisations in this context include difficulties participating in decision-making processes (Elstub, 2006), power imbalances (Taylor et al, 2002), and the centralised nature of UK policy development (Taylor and Warburton, 2003). In addition there is no consensus on terms in the field (Schmid & Bar 2006) with 'advocacy', 'voice', 'engagement' and 'campaigning' used in contrasting, overlapping and interchangeable ways in the UK.

How then do community anchors make sense of the challenges they are facing and the roles they are performing in the arena of voice and engagement? How do they undertake these roles and how are they funded? This paper will explore these questions by drawing on an exploratory action research study (Cairns et al, 2006) which included 20 case studies (Yin 1994) of community anchor organisations. Forty-five interviews were undertaken with those in management, governance or administrative roles in these organisations; the perspectives of local government officers were also included. This study was supported by a questionnaire survey of 40 other community anchors.

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The findings suggest that 'voice and engagement' was rarely funded as an activity in its own right. It was not generally seen as a discrete activity; rather it was spread across multiple roles and integrated into core work including service delivery. Whilst in areas with high clusters of community organisations or a history of partnership working the role appeared to be better understood, in many organisations there was a lack of understanding of the concept and application of advocacy. The study also suggested a range of organisational difficulties in carrying out advocacy work within the current public policy and funding environment; many of these were associated with issues of management and governance.

The paper explores the implications of the findings for both community anchors and public policy makers, drawing a link to tensions in the new 'public governance' agenda (Stone and Ostrower, 2007). It contributes to the conceptual distinctions made elsewhere on the subject of voice and engagement (Boris & Mosher-Williams 1998). Consideration is given to how far community anchors are being pulled from 'community development' roles (Taylor, 2006) and the impact this has on their ability to fulfill their missions and to meet contemporary policy expectations about their 'voice' role.