Voluntary sector involvement in devolution

15:00-17:00 Monday 20 March, Committee Room 21

Ruth Breidenbach-Roe, Policy Officer at Locality

- Locality run a network of community organisations across England, that act as a catalyst of social action and volunteering, building the capacity of local organisations to be involved in their local areas.
- Locality are interested in how devolution can work for society, and how the sector can be involved. There is a substantial risk that important opportunities are being missed.
- Since the referendum there has been a lot of talk about left behind communities where there are structural inequalities and disenfranchisement. If devolution is contained to sub-regional governance and marginal shifts in responsibility and imposing elections on people that have already chosen not to, this won’t be enough dispersal of power. There is a need to involve local people in the decisions made about their local area – the current lack of discussion with local organisations is worrying.
- Fixing inequality requires economic growth to prioritise social justice and create economies that work for the people that live in them, with communities in partnership with dealmakers.
- There is frustration that voluntary sector representation is reduced to one seat on one governance board. Can it be used to make the local public pound work better for the local area?
- The principle of localism needs to be brought back into the debate – this must be the aim of what devolution is all about. The 5 principles of devolution should be embedded into deals to make them work, and central government should use its power to back communities.
- It isn’t enough to just discuss the big areas and mayoralities. We need to look at how we can grow communities, to look at community ownership and delivery, and how we can give people a stake in the priorities of their local area. Councils must be committed to coproduction, and empowered to carry it out.

Jane Hartley, Chief Executive of Voluntary Organisations’ Network North East (VONNE)

- Across the North there are huge variances in the progress of devolution and engagement with the voluntary sector. Manchester and Liverpool are progressing well, and have engaged the sector well, but it has taken a long time. In the North East (NE) it is just the start of the journey.
- The Northern Powerhouse Partnership has a business orientated board, with no voluntary organisations around the table. Local voluntary sector representatives found that whilst, there is acknowledgement of the work the sector does for communities, there are no plans for wider engagement with the sector.
- The sector needs to be recognised within the Northern Powerhouse action plan. Their reporting has been very North West (NW) focussed, meaning the NE gets forgotten. Devolution is often framed on economic issues, with the voluntary sector reduced to skills and employability functions, forgetting the role the sector plays in increasing engagement.
- The NE has lots of issues - higher unemployment and lower skills than average, with high dependency on public funding, which has been cut, and a strong vote to leave the EU. There are two combined authorities –Tees Valley and the NE – the NE deal recently collapsed. There is a possible North of Tyne deal, but there has been no voluntary sector involvement in that.
- Devolution progressing well in Tees Valley, and the voluntary sector is more engaged, but it is very much economy focused, health and care aren’t devolved, despite this being an area with high rate of health and social care issues.

Rebecca Clarkson, Director of City and Hackney Together, Hackney CVS (HCVS)

- HCVS work for a fairer borough - Hackney is changing, there is lots of new wealth that isn’t being used to help communities with special needs. Hackney will soon be devolved, and HCVS set up City and Hackney to bring the sector together to bid and deliver health and social care contracts.
- One City and Hackney project is looking at tackling overuse of A&E and GP services, originally targeting older people. The project has now developed to any adult with complex problems. It is run in consortia with small organisations and massive hospitals. HCVS lead a group of providers who offer a range of social and care services, offering a local package of care which is reducing GP and A&E attendance. 2300 people
The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Charities and Volunteering

have been referred, many who have trouble accessing services and suffer from social isolation. The approach has meant people’s other issues have been uncovered, and the model allows those problems to be tackled.

- This model of working has meant organisations have learned a lot, which they will take into the devolution environment. The organisations would like to be able to expand this working model, placing Navigators into GP surgeries, helping people access services straight away.
- Coproduction is very important. It is vital the sector makes sure it is in the right place, on the right boards and in the right work streams. The sector needs to be part of the discussion, not on the sides waiting.

Sarah Allan, Engagement Lead at Involve

- Involve specialise in engaging the public in decision making, focusing on the key challenges facing the UK and looking at how participation can help solve them. There is increasing concern about turnout, public trust and cynicism – engagement is a means to tackle this.
- There has been very little public engagement in devolution to date. If devolution is to transform lives then we need public engagement, not just in the design of content and the structure of deals themselves, but also engagement after deals happen and are ongoing.
- High quality public engagement will be virtually impossible for the public sector without involvement of the voluntary sector. They already have trusted networks and relationships, and may already have ongoing interactions with people.
- The wider public also need to be engaged, as decision makers can’t easily judge how well the voluntary sectors views actually represent communities. Not all voluntary organisations are close to service users in all areas, some are more representative than others.
- Coventry is a good example: they ran a ‘people’s jury’, asking people how they saw their identity in relation to Coventry, and what they saw as the risks and possibilities of a deal vs no deal. In Oldham, young people used their experience to decide the top 5 mental health challenges in the area, and worked with decision makers to work out recommendations based on their findings.
- It is possible to do great local engagement about devolution deals, but central government’s timetable has made it impossible. People need to be prepared for deal making and policy making steps to take more time, to allow for participation. All parties need to want participation, and to value it – it can’t be dropped as soon as it becomes difficult.
- Need to model best practice ourselves- hold a community day when feeding in, and invite decision makers along to see how it can work.

Q&A

Susan Elan Jones MP asked how we make partnerships work in very rural settings? JH said NE is very rural and a complete disconnect with the idea of city regions. Local CVSs do exist in most areas, providing a connection to local authorities, but they are being shut. These communities are the most disconnected from devolution. Transport is a key function in many deals, but the NE has a lot of challenges with public transport.

Baroness Barker asked about how these projects show evidence of impact? RC and JH said collecting evidence for new projects can take 3-5 years. In the meantime case studies and small scale difference can be used. both There is evidence behind the common sense case for social proscribing from Leeds and Rotherham. SA highlighted that evidence is costly, and funding isn’t normally there. The Research Council should fund it.

Baroness Barker asked how leadership and accountability balance against public input. SA said that there are many models for production that retain leadership and accountability, but also give people first-hand experience of being listened, which is important when belief in the social contract is low.

Lord Hodgson asked whether there is misunderstanding about the compromise required for localism to work. RB said that local areas don’t need to be able to determine exactly what happens, but need the powers to allow them to do what a local area wants. The Treasury already has requirements for deals that they back, could evidence of local consultation or forward planning become requirements? SA said that if a decision being taken locally doesn’t change much if culture and opportunity for local involvement hasn’t changed.
Localism gives the opportunity to do things differently, and can give experience of local compromise, giving people more understanding of the task commissioners face.

Baroness Morgan asked whether the Tees Valley deal could incorporate health. JH said there had been a reluctance to do too much at once, and a desire to start with the local economy, and later look at health and wellbeing. Baroness Pitkeathley said that we need to make sure the sector is integral to service delivery, for the health of the area and economy, so it isn’t excluded later when devolving.

John Slater, LVSC, asked how the sector can challenge devolution programmes that are just central government decisions being localised, not actual devolution. RB and SA said that we need coproduction, not tick box consultation after the fact – we shouldn’t be offered deals that are a complete package. There are nine questions you need to ask to get engagement right. JH said it is important to create as many opportunities as possible, you can’t disengage even if you are invited to the table later than you might wish.

Karl Wilding, NCVO, asked whether the sector has lost the skills to influence and campaign? JH agreed that the sector has lost skills, partially because there is no funding for policy or campaigning work. Local organisations are not able to operate on the scale of large devolved contracts, so there is more need for regional organisations, but many have shut. It is increasingly hard to share learning.

Susan Elan Jones MP asked how coproduction works for large areas? The compact made local authorities fell they had to work with charities, which made a difference. SA said coproduction can work on different scales – local service and local coproduction, regional service and regional coproduction. Match the work with the scale. John Slater and RC said we need to change commissioning culture so that coproduction and involvement of service users from the start is an assumption.

Stephen Mallinson, Local Giving, raised concern for micro-organisations, run by volunteers, who can’t commit to the scale of devolution. RC said this is the importance of consortia working, allowing small organisations who have the trust of community, to share some of the work, even if they don’t have all policies in place. Resources are needed to build capacity on small organisation and help get procedures into place. JH said the resources for volunteering and infrastructure where pulled, just as we acknowledge its importance.

Paul Winyard, NCVO, asked if central government should do more to promote voluntary sector involvement in devolution deals? SA and JH said it was important involvement was meaningful, perhaps a team is needed to go out and plug skills gaps. Central government pressure in favour of coproduction would be a good thing. Caroline Howe, Lloyds Bank Foundation said requiring commissioners to take account of social value within the new kitemark would be a good way to see change.

Heather McLoughlin, CFG, asked how do we make sure the sector isn’t left behind in areas that aren’t bidding for a devolution deal? RB and JH said localism and combined authorities exist regardless of devolution, so we can still look at opportunities for local production and better involvement in those areas.