



URBAN POLLINATORS

LOOKING UP - JUNE 2011

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS FROM JULIAN DOBSON

THIS MONTH: REALLY LOCAL LOCALISM

UNPICKING THE 'INCOHERENT'

THINKING BIG BY THINKING SMALL

RESOLVING THE LOCALISTS' DILEMMA?

WELCOME

Urban Pollinators is a consultancy and practical think tank founded by Julian Dobson, commentator on regeneration, placemaking and community issues. This newsletter is part of a series of regular commentaries on topical subjects. We hope you find it useful and informative; please pass it on to anyone you think will be interested.

This month our focus is on 'really local localism', drawing on the series of seminars on community asset ownership hosted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation over the last year.

A REALLY LOCAL LOCALISM

You could notch it up as one of the quiddities of contemporary policymaking: a Conservative government minister asking the leader of a community network to persuade well-heeled landowners to drop their opposition to a new law.

Yet this is what happened a couple of months back, and the results are instructive. Steve Wyler, chief executive of Locality, was asked by Greg Clark, minister responsible for the Localism Bill, to have a quiet word with the Country Land and Business Association (CLA). The CLA, in Wyler's words, were 'horrified' that the bill contains a community right to buy – an opportunity for local people to take over unused or neglected public assets¹.

The right, as Wyler points out, is far from revolutionary. It 'merely provides a window of a few months to help communities prepare a bid if land or buildings of community value come up for sale.' Yet for the 35,000 landowners who still own more than half the land in England and Wales, it sounded like the beginnings of Bolshevism.

Locality, in its previous guise as the Development Trusts Association, has been campaigning for many years for legislation to enable community organisations to develop local assets and hold and manage them for local benefit. The idea gained political acceptance under the last government, with the publication of the Quirk Review in 2007,² and has been a strong strand in the coalition government's thinking about localism and the idea of a 'big society'.

For the country landowners, the idea of a community right to buy raises the spectre of land nationalisation or Henry George's campaign for land value taxation³, wresting away the inherited rights of property owners who regard themselves as the stewards and custodians of their way of life. They are having no truck with a community right to buy or the idea that local people might somehow put the land to better, more productive or more equitable use.

¹ You can read more at the Locality website: <http://locality.org.uk/comment/speaking-truth-power/>

² Department of Communities and Local Government (2007). *Making Assets Work: The Quirk Review*. [online] <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/makingassetswork>

³ See the Henry George Foundation website: <http://www.henrygeorgefoundation.org/>

Unpicking the ‘incoherent’

What’s significant about this little exchange is not so much its result as the fact that it took place at all. Policy on neighbourhood renewal and community empowerment – to borrow the jargon of New Labour – has become a bit like walking through sand dunes: the landscape is constantly changing, but almost impossible to map. Think of that meeting between Wyler and the landowners as an encounter in the desert. It could mean nothing, or the initial exchange could spark others, eventually becoming a trading post.

The House of Commons communities and local government select committee recently described the government’s localism agenda as ‘incoherent’⁴. But if it is, it isn’t for lack of thought. There are, if anything, too many competing thoughts informed by too little understanding of their practical consequences.

Over the last year I’ve followed the debate on community asset ownership closely, acting as a rapporteur on a series of events staged by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁵. In five separate discussions – with a final one on 30 June – experts, academics and community activists wrestled with the dilemmas posed by a policy context that praises community ownership to the skies, despite practical hurdles that can often appear insurmountable.

The events unpicked community assets from a variety of angles. We looked at the history of ideas behind current thinking and the deep roots of mutual aid and cooperative principles. We examined the experience of Scotland, where legislation providing a right to buy has been in place for several years. We zoomed in on community energy programmes and local growing schemes, and zoomed out to consider the role of community infrastructure in large-scale housing developments. Most recently, we focused on the hard financial lessons many community organisations have had to learn in managing and developing assets.

Thinking big by thinking small

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation events highlighted the tension at the heart of localism. If you want to capture the essence of localism, it is that you can think big by thinking small: instead of huge masterplans and national programmes, you work with the grain of local communities, acting on a scale that makes sense to them and building up from there.

This idea, at its heart, is far from incoherent. It makes absolute sense to work at a human scale, engaging people in the issues that matter to them in the places where they matter. It is the essence of good placemaking, as preached and practiced by Jane Jacobs in New York and Toronto and Nabeel Hamdi in the shanty towns of Sri Lanka and South Africa. It underpins the neighbourhood-based work of the UK’s development trusts, from the Arts Factory in South Wales to the villages of Northumberland and the arches under the Westway flyover in central London – and it contrasts with many painful experiences associated with the huge and unwieldy housing market renewal programme.

The driving force behind good, effective localism and community asset development is not policy and legislation, although that can and should help. It is relationships. A community-based organisation succeeds because it taps into a sense of local identity and coalesces action around shared concerns. From there, it can revive and

⁴ Press release and report of the communities and local government committee on localism available at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/news/localism-report-pn/>

⁵ See <http://www.jrf.org.uk/events/community-assets-seminar-series> for details, reports and background papers.

sustain the local economy, providing opportunities to trade and exchange. That, in turn, helps to build local resilience: the ability to cope with shocks and unexpected events, to adapt, survive and thrive.

These relationships work where there is trust. The idea of ‘deep value’, promoted by Community Links in East London, builds on this theme⁶: respectful, sustained relationships between those who use local services and those who provide them can make all the difference between a young person overcoming the challenges of disadvantage, abuse or low self-esteem or entering a labyrinth of officialdom in which they are treated as a problem to be solved or an output to be delivered.

From warm words to hard grind

The Joseph Rowntree events have provided numerous examples of successful localism where trusting relationships have been developed, from the island of Eigg with its self-generated energy and agreement to limit energy use, to the shared vision developed in Hebden Bridge to save, take over and revitalise the Victorian town hall.

But there is a downside to working at a human scale, and one that has been glossed over as ministers try to sell their localist vision. You don’t create trusting relationships by issuing press releases trumpeting that government is ‘putting local people in the driving seat’; still less by casting local government in the role of the big bad wolf, as some ministers like to do. Trust takes time to build, and trust on its own is only part of the story.

So it’s no surprise that the JRF events have also revealed stories of difficulty and struggle. The community right to buy in Scotland, it turns out, has still only been used on a handful of occasions. Even relatively mature organisations, such as Caterham Barracks Community Trust, are finding it hard to service their debts; and it is getting trickier to secure finance. As Tony Curtis from The Social Business warned at the most recent seminar, lenders are becoming more wary and more demanding.

All of this provides an important counterweight to the success stories. What the successes do have in common is that they have taken time; they have demanded enormous effort and determination; and they are not easy to sustain. Community ownership, it would seem, is not so much a magic bullet as a hard grind.

Clearly the backing of government is helpful, and legislation sends an important signal about political priorities. But a consistent message from the seminar series was that practical support is more valuable: loan finance, technical and professional help for community groups, sufficient time to organise and prepare, and assistance when needed from local government and statutory bodies. In such circumstances it’s no surprise that there’s a growing demand for a ‘right to try’⁷ or a ‘right to use’⁸ as well as a right to buy – people need time to make this approach to localism work, and space to experiment, make mistakes and learn from them without the burden of ownership and debt finance.

⁶ See <http://www.community-links.org/our-national-work/deep-value/>

⁷ See Res Publica’s report, *The Right to Retail*: <http://www.respublica.org.uk/articles/right-retail>

⁸ See our response to the RICS Land and Society Commission: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/50937830/A-response-to-the-RICS-Land-and-Society-Commission>

The dilemma of inequality

The ultimate dilemma for localism, though, is the challenge of inequality. The communities and local government committee refers to this as a 'postcode lottery' – a hackneyed expression that nonetheless reveals the tension between allowing people to develop local, human-scale solutions to their problems and acknowledging the deep-rooted sense that it is unfair for some communities to enjoy opportunities and advantages that others don't.

The issue of inequality goes deeper than the concept of a postcode lottery. As the Joseph Rowntree events consistently revealed, inequality is not a lottery. The places that have always been disadvantaged, with some notable exceptions, remain disadvantaged. The local economy is weaker, people with resources are less likely to stay, problems of poverty are more intense.

This stacks the odds against developing community assets. There are likely to be fewer activists with sufficient time, resources and professional connections to make things happen; the land and buildings are more likely to be run-down and in need of extra work; funding from local government or charitable sources may be harder to come by; and the opportunities and markets for developing revenue-generating activities tend to be tougher.

As a participant in one of the events commented, how could the community groups she worked with be expected to run and manage buildings when they needed help just to minute their meetings? For many small organisations or groups, that journey to asset ownership looks unimaginably hard.

What's more, all this is happening at a time of unprecedented spending reductions. As Ben Cairns, director of the Institute for Voluntary Action Research, put it: 'There are huge tensions between the vision of entrepreneurialism and empowerment and systematic cuts which will engender a sense of fatigue and disillusion locally.'

Partnering: a human response to the inequality dilemma

The dilemma, then, is how to develop a localism that works on a human scale and delivers genuine ownership to local people without exacerbating divisions and inequality.

It is a tough call, but not impossible. Some things can be done by national and local government – creating a right to try as well as a right to buy; opening up democratic processes (there's a completely different discussion of localism to be had on this point); providing more practical financial and professional support to enable community organisations to compete on a fair footing; and, as Steve Wyler argued at the first JRF event, instituting a 'right to know' what assets are likely to become available. Stephen Thake, the foundation's adviser on community assets, went further, suggesting we need a national 'bill of rights' for community organisations to protect them from being gobbled up by the private sector or squeezed out by the public sector.

Such measures can be helpful, but often work through a process of challenge and contest rather than trust and cooperation. And if the best localism is based on trust and relationships, we need to find methods that build and reinforce these links.

Community organisations have traditionally shared their expertise and made their case to government and other players through membership based 'umbrella' bodies, often funded by the state. While these have come under pressure through funding cuts and can be compromised because of their client relationship with government, they have generally worked well in supporting and giving a voice to community and voluntary groups – particularly to those that are larger and more mature, and therefore more able to take part in national debates and policy development.

But new and emerging groups need a helping hand where they are as well as at a national level. It is the old-fashioned work of community development, listening, brokering, helping people to express their hopes and crystallise how they will achieve them. It is about having someone you know and can turn to and who will support you because they care, not just because it's their job.

Such work has traditionally been funded by local authorities and specialist organisations. In a localist, relationship-based world it needs to become personal, sustained, and free of political faddism.

Just as rock climbers work in pairs, with one holding and belaying the rope while the other climbs, so community organisations need pairing arrangements where they receive long term mentoring and support – and, in turn, they need to use the skills they gain to mentor and support others on the start of their journey. It is mutual aid with a twist: instead of simply coming together to support each other, organisations and groups should commit to partnering with others in more disadvantaged areas who can benefit from their skills and experience. Everyone helps someone who has a greater need or further to travel. Instead of aggregating assistance, it is distributed and networked. It is really local, not just in a geographic but in a psychological sense. It is about feeling and being connected.

Such mentoring has been tested before – the national network of guide neighbourhoods had such an approach⁹. The Church of England has for many years twinned wealthy suburban parishes with struggling inner city ones. This idea of partnering needs to become part of our psyche: each group or organisation should set aside a proportion of its time and resources to help others. Some already do. This will help to build a culture of sharing skills and experience, reaching out to and learning from others, creating personal and helpful relationships, strengthening networks and addressing the inequalities that inevitably lead localism to be dismissed as a postcode lottery.

IN OTHER NEWS...

- The recent appointment of TV presenter Mary Portas to head a review of Britain's high streets has caused a stir. But we've been [thinking about the future of town centres](#) for quite a while. We're working with Hometown Plus to research the possibility of a national network of local loyalty schemes. [Read more here](#), and watch out for updates in future newsletters. We're also working with a partnership of forward thinkers to feed into the Mary Portas review, drawing on the best ideas about reimagining town centres.
- What is JFDI urbanism? How might it make a difference where you live? This is the question we posed at the first of the [Orangery Academy](#) events in Wakefield, where we joined former RIBA president George Ferguson to consider new directions in placemaking. It was a lively start to what promises to be an exciting series of events. You can read some of our thoughts on the subject [here](#). We hope to return to this theme in future newsletters.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We always welcome your comments and feedback. You can [contact us via our website](#) to have your say, update your details or suggest ideas for future newsletters and articles. You can also view details of recent projects [here](#), or read what people are saying about us [here](#).

⁹ The guide neighbourhoods network is still going: see <http://www.guideneighbourhoods.net/>

And if you'd like us to work with you, help you with writing, research, facilitation or training, or speak at an event you're organising, please [contact us](#) or speak to Julian Dobson on 07545 874556.