

The Duty to Involve – another confidence trick?

The ‘Duty to Involve’ or the ‘Duty to be Involved’: who is involving who and why would you care?

The Duty to Involve is now with us – how does it feel to be ‘involved’? Have citizens up and down the country been writing to their local press in an upsurge of local debate and entitlement? Have you noticed the queues outside the town halls, waiting to attend the latest sub, sub group of the Local Area Agreement (LAA) strand on stronger, safer, sedated communities? Seen those petitions flying about with thousands of signatures boosting levels of scrutiny to a new high? Perhaps not, but has anyone seen those enforcers from the Audit Commission starting to flex? The new regime that was supposed to make the difference is nowhere to be seen and those who have experienced similar posturing over the years know only too well that one set of bureaucrats overseeing another set of bureaucrats is going to achieve, well a bureaucratic outcome – pretty much status quo, same as it ever was.

So let’s do a quick audit for ourselves. The Duty to Involve:

- Means what for community groups? (Not much)
- Can work how? (Doubtful)
- Can be held to account how? (With difficulty)
- Claims to avoid jargon (yeah right)

There are going to be a lot of earnest people from the voluntary and community sector, sponsored by the local state, running around telling people that it is an opportunity to influence services, local decision making, place making, etc. You can always rely on these people to put the ball in the back of their own net on such occasions – instead of exercising critical judgement, we will have a surge of self hatred ostensibly based on the inability of the sector to be sufficiently corporate and engaged in a superior top down agenda.

What we need to do is insist on the right to engage on our own terms as a sector. Rather than being involved in someone else’s pre set agenda, to reflect and act on our own agenda, and not have a minority of our sector, typically sub contractors who are voluntary in name only, being led by the nose into the town hall for crumbs of recognition in what passes for partnership working these days.

As individuals the rules of engagement are simple – trust your instinct, use what is useful, reclaim the spaces that exist for community working if remotely possible and ignore the rest. Strangely enough if the sector was more upfront about what was a genuine opportunity for joint working it might make it work better for all partners.

Another way of approaching the ‘Duty to be Involved’ now that we have established some tactical approaches (resistance is always fertile) – is to audit reasons to be sceptical and

reasons to be cheerful. Echoing the fact that activists always need a pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of will, I maintain that there are some useful openings for independent action. So read on, and be surprised.

Reasons to be sceptical 1-5

- It's somebody else's agenda – feels like 'they have to involve us in order to be involved'
- Doesn't recognise a community development approach / self organising
- Councils can choose which approach they use – they will use what is easiest
- We've been here before – plenty of wriggle room to weasel out of failures to engage
- Inequalities within the Third Sector – i.e. the gaps in the voluntary and community sector between the richest and most powerful and the majority of poorer and smaller groups have grown massively over the last ten years. The duty to involve will reflect this inequality by ensuring only the trusted gatekeepers get to take part.

Reasons to be cheerful 1-5

- Council's are encouraged to be creative – show 'em how
- We can learn to use this as a tool to lobby (selectively)
- We can occupy the rhetoric and open the space up
- We should argue for resources and infrastructure to do it properly – remember Empowerment Networks (CEN's)?
- We should argue that the sector needs to move from 'capacity building' itself to deliver services to deeper democratic values – the community sector is the democratic mainstream

The alternative to cheerful, selective opening up of spaces is to ignore it completely. – which will almost certainly be what most groups will do most of the time and usually will be entirely legitimate. The debate we may want to have in our sector at some stage is whether non engagement is always a principled stance? Clearly a minority of the sector will always engage in the name of the whole sector however flimsy the rationale and outcome – but is the majority of the sector content for this to continue just so long as it doesn't have to be bothered to think about it, or turn up to pointless meetings? My argument is that we have to force this issue out into the open in order to create a more honest and equal sector; for others this is a pipe dream and the default position to any outside agendas is to say bugger off and leave us alone. There is a choice to be made.

In the meantime talking tactics – my alternative audit report suggests the following:

- Critically chatting – we need to talk more
- We need to reclaim the agenda – the agenda is whatever you want it to be (swimming pools, street markets etc)
- No one can empower anyone – let's use our own words and stories to talk about power

- Moving from local authorities as a failed and toxic brand to real local power; the duty to involve is all about the council as friend and benign ruler – but we want community infrastructure not community makeover – let’s argue for long term resources

Having spoken to many in the sector about the duty to involve, it is amazing, if not exactly surprising, just how turned off we are about this agenda. Given that it is supposed to be about civic renewal it takes real talent to create such low expectations across the board. But looking at all the things that excite me about the sector – its independence and the raw drive to get on and do things, I think regardless of the government dictats that sweep through communities, the opportunity is always there to reaffirm and act on our own values. No one’s going to go to jail for not being involved (I’m tempted to say ‘yet’) but, given the desperation of the state to claim it has a positive relevance in people’s lives, means the opportunity for independent action should not go begging. That is action that comes from outside of the state and which is not manipulated and mediated into glossy partnership brochures of how to do it guides, but actually trusts people to lead their own lives and make decisions on their own terms. Truth be told there is a real fear of ‘community’ and a hatred of democracy that underpins bogus consultation leading governments to reinvent the obvious – and fail, fail and fail again.

My final alternative suggestions, based on exhaustive audit, are for more:

- Collective action (sharing and caring within the sector, formerly known as solidarity)
- Forums, grants, workers (we need to re-build levels of accountability and resources within our sector)
- When challenging and campaigning we should be bolder – go to the top, avoid the time wasting role played by council officers acting as shock absorbers, not enablers
- Community groups – the silent majority, the vocal authority; if 90% of the sector is a small unfunded group they and not the monied subcontractors should be in the driving seat
- Clarity: Yes; No; I need more time – partnership meetings were described to me as ‘muppet shows’ by a resident who disdained getting ‘involved’ in her local New Deal for Communities (NDC) board. The sector has to have the guts to actually say what it means and avoid signing up to what it doesn’t agree with. It simply isn’t that hard to say either yes or no to key decisions.

Another kind of involvement is possible – we want and need our sector back!

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