

The future for Adur communities – some urgent challenges

It's the place, stupid.....Adrian Barritt makes the case for the Right to Belong and the irreplaceable role of local action by local people in Adur - the sandwich between Brighton and Worthing with a filling which makes it a great place on the W.Sussex coast. Adrian exposes the platitudes about "civil society" and "local engagement" explaining that "the latent pull is towards bigger organisations, short-term initiatives, and intense competition for funding. And it's not just government: many big national, regional and some local charities are into the game. Now, there's nothing wrong with national, regional and specialist charities so long as they stick to their knitting. But do they hell? If their endgame were poker, I'd feel us locals had a chance! But it's chase the contracts, mouth the words, move on fast and stuff the place.

A sense of place, to me, has been important all my life, shining as it does through so much art, literature and poetry. So it has been encouraging to discover that one of today's buzz-words is "place shaping". It was coined or picked up by the 2007 Lyons enquiry into local government. Sir Michael defined it as "the creative use of powers and influence to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens". The more detailed definition included "building and shaping local identity" and "maintaining the cohesiveness of the community and supporting debate within it, ensuring smaller voices are heard".

It is good to know that this concept of "place-shaping" will inform a new "Sustainable Community Strategy", looking ahead at Adur's journey into the future, and means of travel. The Lyons Report stresses the importance of focussing on outcomes that are of greatest importance to local people - not rocket science, is it? So a vibrant and locally-rooted pattern of community life and action in Adur can embody both Lyon's destination and journey. It's hard to disagree with, but that characterises most good ideas which are never acted upon.

So how are we placed, here in Adur? I wouldn't go so far as Marcellus, "Something is rotten in the state ...", but the time is overdue for a big conversation about the future for Adur's voluntary organisations, community associations and the whole patchwork of life that can make our small towns vibrant and interesting places. Actually, we're Sompting, Lancing, Shoreham-by-Sea, Southwick, Fishersgate, Kingston Buci and Coombes, with bits within and between – but that's another story. We're a long, narrow, strung-out kind of place, without one focus, and parcelled up by roads, railways, and the natural dividers of South Downs and Sea. Some would say, a sandwich between Brighton and Worthing - but the filling makes us a great place – a part of Sussex, with our own history and individuality. Adur has its own river, harbour, airport, countryside, sea and beaches. Experiencing fresh air and space, the outdoor life, is apparently now defined as "Ecotherapy", so Adur's got to be a winner!

There are people who feel it's backward-looking, narrow, Little Englishish, not cost-effective or even xenophobic to point to our rootedness in places. I heard it described at one "infrastructure development" meeting I attended as "playing the local card", as if it were all one big machiavellian game. I believe it's for real: to belong somewhere (and to be aware of this) is likely to strengthen people's respect for community distinctiveness everywhere. We all have a right to belong, and the structure of our local government reflects this, as do our networks of small businesses and voluntary associations. Of course, communities of interest are important. That's another debate. But apart from a handful of rootless global jetsetters, what counts is outside the front door, and for many, within

walking or public transport reach. Virtual belonging may not help much when the crunch comes.

So what's up, Doc? In short, government's money is not where its mouth is, the EU is adding to the problem, and doesn't the banking crisis just say it all? Locally, the joining up of local authority service delivery systems across Adur and Worthing issues a challenge to civil society – where is our place? Where do we belong? The recession is being used as a lever to rationalise pre-existing pressures towards incorporation of much of the voluntary sector into bigger, more anonymous structures and funding straitjackets. Small may be beautiful, but big is necessary (cue, sad sigh!). Whilst we hear routine platitudes about the importance of “civil society” and “local engagement”, the latent pull is towards bigger organisations, short-term initiatives, and intense competition for funding. And it's not just government: many big national, regional and some local charities are into the game. Now, there's nothing wrong with national, regional and specialist charities so long as they stick to their knitting. But do they hell? If their endgame were poker, I'd feel us locals had a chance! But it's chase the contracts, mouth the words, move on fast and stuff the place. And I've not even hinted at the private sector, “Anywhere Community Enterprises Ltd”, pitching for public money to involve volunteers to deliver on service contracts. “Follow the money” is always a helpful adage – but you've got to be slick and quick to spot this game, you can't watch the body language, and calculating the odds makes poker a breeze.

Local voluntary groups, by contrast, are often rooted in time, culture, sense of locality and what I call “folk history”. This means that they know their places, have long memories and the capacity to learn from experience. That may sound folksy and slow-moving, a vanishing world, like (sadly) many local pubs. But there's another angle: such groups are close to local needs, and can work to meet these opportunistically and over time: if one resource dries up, we can work together to open up others, ducking and diving but knowing what our long-term goals are. The same people are around for decades, because most are not on career paths. So specialist knowledge (about the group's concerns) and local knowledge (about the place) are integrated. Sounds different, does it not, to the government style: chuck money at a perceived political problem, make people fight each other against long odds to win a small share of a small pot, pull out after a couple of years (leaving it to the local authorities to maybe pick up the tab from within the Council Tax revenue, which they are unable proportionately to increase)? Hmm... there must be a better way.

There is, and I'm optimistic about its chances in my locality. My organisation's message to the local public sector is – think holistically, think creatively, work with local people. Look for opportunities within UK and EU law to achieve this. Plan broadly for added value, and expect to find a varied local picture, different ways of getting where we want. And don't keep pigeon holing everything – use more verbs and fewer nouns, so we talk about processes. The nonsense-on-stilts obsession with performance measurement, the rigmarole of “outputs” and “outcomes” needs to be balanced by much more sensitive – and yes, political – awareness of the processes that are taking place in our communities. We need to tolerate diversity, and only impose uniformity when there is no other way.

I failed recently to win two grants. The first was because AVA is technically a Council for Voluntary Service (although that's only one part of our role). Duh. The second – get this – was to provide support to offenders experiencing mental ill health. It so happens that we prefer mixed groups, and to offer services to the local community, so we don't label

anyone, trying to place those experiencing exclusion within generic groups. Sorry AVA, responded my user-friendly funder (as they go), if you want our support they need to be diagnosed, labelled, badged, treated and churned out as output statistics. Double-duh.

Seriously, the biggest barrier to a good Adur Volunteer Centre is the monopolistic ownership of the brand by Volunteering England, and the mind-numbing, energy-sapping bureaucracy (sorry, quality control) of accreditation “There is no wealth”, wrote Ruskin, “but life”. Volunteering and voluntary action are freely chosen parts of the lives of people active in local communities. Volunteering England – get a life! And I’m not even going to delve into the crass roll-out of the government’s recent volunteer brokerage scheme, but take a look in the current Third Sector magazine, or send me a Tweet and I’ll point to the twittering. Yes – it matters.

So do let-downs, and PR efforts to draw the public and voluntary groups into morale-sapping might-have-beens, such as (so it appears from this week’s press) the grandiose Shoreham Harbour Initiative. And where did Shoreham Renaissance, our local rebirth of learning, go? I make these points in neither a malicious nor personal way, recognising that the policy road is fraught with potholes. But reader, you must surely acknowledge that it doesn’t help, does it? There’s got to be a better way.

How about the often deliberate confusion around use of terms like “public service delivery”, “not-for-profit”, “social enterprise”, “voluntary action”, “community development” and “voluntary sector capacity building”? The “voluntary sector” is only one part of the local community. Voluntary action in civil society is about more than service delivery. The provision of an externally managed and controlled “local service” in someone else’s locality usually does little for local community development or for development of the voluntary sector. Neither does it normally do much for the local economy: at worst, it siphons out both cash and community engagement. A social enterprise can mean something or (almost) nothing, in so far as it relates to the local community. Follow the money.

So these are some reasons why in Adur Voluntary Action, we try to start with real people and communities, and end up there too. We spend our money locally, recycling it whenever possible into other voluntary groups and local businesses, by purchasing their services, or giving support in kind. Our priorities are for community (not “VCS”) development, and for voluntary action and volunteering (not “public service provision”). Yes, we recognise that everything overlaps, but this is our baseline, here is our starting point. You can’t split up communities, individuals, families, voluntary groups, self help groups, local small businesses, service providers: they’re all there in the whole, and require holistic investment. Folks, it’s all connected. You can’t mess with just one bit without affecting the whole. The more locally we look, the more this stares us in the face. Focus closely and honestly enough, and we stare back at ourselves.

Let’s end by returning to my optimism about the future. Here in Adur and Worthing, the local authorities are talking about community development and how we can work together to make a reality of it. That’s great, there’s a lot of good will, and we’re getting skilled outside help from Community Development (SE) and Planning Aid. We’re working together on the Sustainable Community Strategy, and Adur in Partnership is reviewing its operations. Health Promotion is getting a higher profile from the Primary Care Trust, and there are honest efforts to draw communities into the dialogue. The discussion channels are open

with the local and health authorities about how voluntary action can best be supported, not by blueprint but by negotiation. The voluntary sector itself is talking across the County, Trustees meeting (often for almost the first time) and sharing thoughts. It's hard learning, we've lost some, and everyone's short of resources. But there's a chance to build a new model that breaks the moulds, saying (and doing) something important for West Sussex, and the vibrancy of our local communities. A chance really to invest in our places – because no-one else can be guaranteed to do so, and because the present system is just as likely to disinvest.

But we need to wise up, peer around the blinkers, and move fast to counter the rapid siphoning away of the life blood of local voluntary action. It's the place, stupid.

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