



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary notes from the meeting held on 11 October 2016

Present:

Cllr Andrew Palfreeman

Cllr Fazila Fadia

In Attendance:

Carl Whistlecraft, Spencer Wilson, Jenny Bryce Chan and Diane Sims

Witness:

Cormac Russell is Managing Director of Nurture Development, the leading Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) organisation in Europe, and faculty member of the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University, Illinois. He works with local communities, NGOs and governments on asset-based community development and other strengths-based approaches, in four continents. Cormac served on the UK Government's Expert Reference Group on Community Organising and Communities First during its term in 2011-12. His book "Asset Based Community Development (ABCD): Looking Back to Look Forward" was published in 2015.

Summary of Discussion

Background

Cormac explained that he started working with Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) 23 years ago, working in an excess of 30 countries around the world, getting a varying view of what people understand about the relationship between citizens and government. He explained that his main passion is working at a grass roots level, trying to figure out how democracy grows from inside in a way that is citizen-led rather than a top down.

Cormac advised that he had been working in Huddersfield for the last 2 years in communities like Birkby and Clayton West as facilitator, distant but learning with the Local Authority about what it takes to get people involved in the conversation and understanding how best to get people involved as primary inventors rather than passive observers. Cormac explained that his has involved working in 12 areas, 16 neighbourhoods, in the last 7 years holding a "democratic enquiry" about what it takes for people to lead their own change in an inclusive way at a neighbourhood level.

Councillors and Involving Local Communities

Cormac explained that over the last 2 years there has been an immense desire for local people to get actively involved. Although there is an assumption that people are apathetic and don't want to get engaged the experience of working in Birkby and Clayton West has shown that more people would get involved if obstacles were removed. This could be achieved with skilled practice and good community building, not a top down approach, and treating people like citizens rather than service users.

The only 2 deficits discovered in Huddersfield are people don't know how powerful or what assets they have at a local level and these assets are not connected up. When there are skilled people who know how to identify connect and mobilise, these assets can address what is wrong. They need support and facilitation to be at the heart of the conversation rather than just as service users.

Cormac explained that are certain practices and attitudes of bureaucracies can get in the way of people being able to contribute to the wellbeing of their communities. The critical democratic question is *"what can you contribute to the wellbeing of your community and how can you support you"*.

Cormac explained that current issues are partly explained by organisations such as councils organising their systems into silos. "Silos are where smart people go to do dumb things." Neighbourhoods are where lots of good things happen and the best change happens where local authorities have a stewarding role to look after the village or community. This involves going where the energy is. People are busy but are keen to do bite size chunks of engagement it is therefore important to removing the barriers to making this happen.

Cormac explained that in order for councillors to facilitate communication it was necessary to change the questions being asked. Councillors should not be the expected to come up with all of the answers. He suggested that they should be asking people what matters to them as their job is not to be the inventors of a better tomorrow but to facilitate and to enable citizens to be producers and not just consumers. The elected members who are making a difference are the ones having a different conversation, one that does not treat citizens like clients. The elected members that are getting in the way are the 'leave that with me elected members' I'll look after that – another vote in the bank."

Cormac advised that working harder will not necessarily get you better outcomes. Before engagement can begin communities have to be built. The Commission noted that a lot of people don't want to volunteer or go to meetings, although there is increasingly a "narrow door of democracy" which says "you can participate if you come to a meeting or volunteer". Most people engage because they care about something. People not are attracted to the proposition of committees with a pre-set agenda a predefined thing.

Cormac posed the question of "how do we listen to people about what they care about and help them engage around the things they want to do at the level they want to do it". To be effective this involves getting close to peoples doorsteps as most people engage about things that are close to home. Elected members have an

opportunity to do that because of the ongoing relationships that already exist. It is about finding a way of engaging with people not just every 5 years, but having a continual conversation.

He advised the commission that sometimes a lot of terminology is used such as “how do we get people to the table” as if the table is over there that the citizens have to come to. Some of the important conversations that should be happening is “how do we get invited to their kitchen table”, and enable them to come to each other’s table. That is a different engagement question altogether. Cormac suggested that local authorities and institutions should be asking “what is your opinion about what we should do to you, for you and with you”. Democracy is then about listening carefully and engaging with citizens as people with “gifts to give” with assets to share and not just passive consumers.

Cormac explained that representative democracy, on the surface, suggests that people don’t want to participate, believing that democracy is a transaction and politics can get outsourced to councillors. Part of the role of a powerful elected councillor is to say to people eyeball to eyeball “I’m confronting you with your own freedoms, you live in a democracy”. If people want a good life and a healthy community there are limits to what councillors / local government can do. The idea that local government can unilaterally keep people safe and make them well is nonsense. A good life cannot be had by an outside agency doing things to and for people. The relationships of the past have not been the right relationships, however having a different conversation it is going to be challenging.

In terms of democratic legitimacy Cormac explained that public service is held as a sacred trust and legitimacy is not just defined by how people participate in the process of voting but also how they engage in civic life. Legitimacy is tacit and there are different ways when shifting from representative democracy to participatory democracy in making the invisible legitimacy more visible for people to see to see their power and their role. People aren’t seeing the link between civic action and public service. The role of the councillor is to fill that gap.

Cormac went onto explain that funding structures tend to pit community against community. In light of this it is therefore important to shift the narrative to the “abundance mind set”, which starts with the question “what is going well rather than what is wrong”. Cormac explained that when you start with a needs analysis rather than an assets inventory you pit people against each other for scarce resources. It is therefore important to have to start with an asset inventory as “people can’t know what they need until they know what they have.”

Changing Roles and Attitudes

The Commission was advised that the role of a democratic steward is to ensure that people have the best life they can possibly have. This does not mean organising local government into a business and servicing people. It is better for people to be interdependent in community life and have services when they need them rather than to be completely dependent on services and have no community. The balance is wrong.

Cormac explained that systems have been consuming people's needs for a long time and gave an example of a man he recently met who was on his 22nd detox programme, going through recovery. He advised that he had met people who have been in and out of systems like a revolving door. He explained that he had spoken to agencies who are busy recruiting people for their service but no clear strategy about how they are supporting people to get out of those services and back into independent life. Part of the democratic process is to challenge that and stop people building up massive amounts of dependency.

Communities and Local Democracy

In terms of public understanding of the council and the role of councillors Cormac explained that there is a profound difference between those aged 50⁺ and the under 35's. People aged 35 or less have had a different experience growing up than people 50⁺. They would have experienced the demise of street play and experienced childcare delivered by professionals rather than by local people.

In this context Cormac explained that looking backwards is important as it helps explain the ties that "bind people to civic impulse". Part of this should involve getting back to working at a neighbourhood level and restoring the neighbourhood connections as this is the "nursery of democracy."

Cormac expressed his concern as to the future of democracy for people who want to progress to be contributors as there are many of the young people who have experience a sanitised version of democracy. For example, with reference to Kirklees, the composition of residents association or neighbourhood watch or committees rarely includes instances where young people have a genuine voice. Cormac explained that there are many spaces where young people can have the opportunities to be involved across the age range of such groups. It's inaccurate to say that people don't care, but they are no longer relating to a partisan left / right divide. In this context it is important to start with small steps and become more proactive in encouraging dialogue and engagement across the generations.

Regional Devolution

The Commission explored the opportunities and implications of regional devolution in the context of Cormac's work. Cormac explained that, as a general principle, the notion of subsidiarity has inconsistencies and actual practice / evidence has not kept with to this principle. The real issue is that practice generally indicates that devolution involves the relocation of responsibility (sometimes money) but rarely the devolution of power. Current approaches to regional devolution have strongly focussed on the economic drivers rather than the needs of citizens and how they are represented. "Devolution is a pig and a chicken organising a feast. The chicken says I'll donate the eggs if you donate the pork". We can't get devolution unless the power grows grass roots up and gets relocated.

Cormac explained that real power is often at grass roots level when people become more connected, when they consider what is it they want to do and what help they expect from outside agencies. To an extent if populations of 3000 / 5000 people are in conversations with each other and are able to say “this is our vision for the future”, “this is what we need from the outside” - this would be immensely powerful. In this context it is therefore important to work from the “bottom up” whereby central and local government are listening to people and is willing to get out of the way rather than stifle communities doing things for themselves. This is a much better way of relocating power. Cormac supported this point with the example of work that has taken place in Seattle which has seen local government seek to organise itself in the same way that people organise their lives. This reduces the need for devolution and it is this that is missing in a many representative structures. Such approaches will mean more people want to be involved although it is important to start with very small steps which build on the neighbourhood fabric - kids being able to play safely, stop siloing people, get people talking across generations.

Elections and the Electoral Cycle

The Commission explored the merits, or otherwise, of moving to a cycle of elections every four years. Cormac explained that there are benefits in moving to such a cycle, not least because it allows time for relationships to be developed between councillors and communities. It allows councillors to facilitate neighbourhood planning at a grass roots level which means that citizens will “start picking out who is doing what, who is playing politics and who is really behind the neighbourhood plan.” People would be voting for what it is they prioritise rather than who they have an affinity for. Cormac acknowledged that this is very important for an elected councillor who will be judged as advocates of their neighbourhood plan rather than as part of a “beauty contest”.

Within this context the Commission looked at the wider issue of party politics. Cormac observed party politics is important although recognised that it was in danger of losing its legitimacy. Party politics is important although Cormac would like to see a pluralist society where parties can begin to not just represent the various concerns of their constituency but have the ability to be “peace makers.” Cormac recognised that party politics plays out less at a local level as there is more collaboration at a neighbourhood level. .