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Dilemmas Of Community Planning: Lessons From Scotland

Stephen Sinclair

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Abstract

Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) are a central feature of a programme of local government modernisation and public service reform in Scotland. CPPs are intended to ensure that local authorities, other local public agencies, the voluntary, community and private sectors develop a shared vision for ~~their~~ area and work in partnership to implement this. CPPs therefore have much in common with similar initiatives in other parts of the UK, such as communities strategies, Local Strategic Partnerships, and ~~proposals~~ contained in the 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill in England. This article discusses how the development of CPPs relates to devolution in Scotland. It identifies systemic dilemmas, if not contradictions, encountered in implementing community planning in Scotland. Tensions exist reconciling partnership working with local authority leadership; between community planning as an additional or core duty of public agencies; between community engagement and the practical demands of policy-making; and between central government direction and local partnership autonomy.

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Keywords

community planning, local governance, partnerships, devolution

Introduction

The term ‘community planning’ has various meanings. Its most general sense refers to methods of public engagement and participation in local planning, particularly public involvement in local environment planning (DCLG, nd). A more specific meaning refers to the development of joint strategies and partnership working between local agencies (IdeA, nd). In Scotland, more emphasis has been attached to this second meaning: community planning (CP) north of the border refers to a statutory Community Planning Partnership (CPP), comprising the local authority, the other local public service providers, and representatives from the voluntary, community and private sectors. The Community Planning Working Group (CPWG) established by the pre-devolution Scottish Office and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) in 1997, proposed three aims for CP: to improve local services through co-ordinated working between local public service providers; to establish a process through which public agencies and the voluntary, community and private sectors could agree a strategic vision for their area and the measures to implement this; and to create a means through which the views of communities could be identified and delivered in policy (Scottish Office, 1998: para 7). The statutory guidance issued by the post-devolution Scottish Executive set out two further principles for CP: that CPPs should become the overarching partnership coordinating other initiatives within a locality, and CPPs would become a principal connection between national and local priorities and policies (Scottish Executive, 2004a).

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CP in Scotland represents an important experiment in organisational integration and community involvement, but it is far from a unique development in the UK. Multi-

agency local partnerships are a common feature in the changing landscape of local governance in each of the four UK nations. For example, the Local Government Act, 2000 required local authorities in England to produce a community strategy, similar to the community plans required of Scottish CPPs, and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) have become an important mechanism for the coordination of local services (Bound and Skidmore, 2005). In Wales, Community Strategy Partnerships and the Community First programme resemble other aspects of CPPs, such as partnership working and community engagement (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006); and in November 2005 it was announced that Local Strategy Partnerships in Northern Ireland were to be developed into CPPs along Scottish lines (Blake Stevenson and Stratagem, 2005). ‘Community planning contains the seeds of a fundamental change in the ways of working at a local level’ (IdeA, nd). CP in Scotland has developed in parallel to and shares many features with similar local governance reforms elsewhere in the UK, and the Scottish experience is relevant both to these and comparable developments outside the UK (McKinlay, 2006). These parallel reforms include developing joint local decision- and policy-making processes, delivering ‘seamless’ and customer-centred public services; debates over new localism and ‘double devolution’; the duties of local authority councillors, the role of the voluntary, community and private sectors in local governance, and other measures contained in the Local Government and Public Involvement Bill in England.

However, the institutional and political culture in Scotland provides a distinctive background to this shared agenda. This article discusses the development of CP in Scotland and outlines some of the challenges encountered in implementing this new local governance partnership. This experience is related to the broader context of

devolution introduced in Scotland in 1999. The paper considers whether devolution has led to a divergence from parallel local governance reforms elsewhere in the UK, and given CP ‘a distinctive Scottish flavour’ as a result (Lloyd *et al*, 2001, p. 19). The discussion draws upon analysis of the numerous policy proposals, thinkpieces, commentaries and evaluations which have accompanied the development of CP in Scotland (e.g. Scottish Office, 1998; Stevenson, 2002; Audit Scotland, 2006). This is supplemented with findings from a pilot research study of the experience of partnership working in one case study CPP in Scotland. This project involved semi-structured interviews with the main CPP participants and other local voluntary, community and private sector stakeholders.

The Development Of Community Planning in Scotland

The statutory requirement to establish CPPs in all 32 local authority areas in Scotland was the most significant local governance reform introduced by the Scottish Executive in the second session of the Scottish Parliament, 2003-07. The Local Government in Scotland (LGiS) Act, 2003 made the creation and maintenance of CPPs a local authority responsibility, and participation in Partnerships a duty of the other main local public agencies: Health, Police and Fire service joint boards, Scottish / Highland and Island Enterprise, and regional transport partnerships. It also imposed a duty upon Scottish Executive Ministers to ‘promote and encourage’ CP (Carley, 2005, p. 59).

To understand the evolution of CP in Scotland it is important to be aware of the context in which it developed. Firstly, CP should be seen in relation to a wider programme of local government modernisation and public service reform undertaken by the previous Scottish Executive (i.e. the Labour - Liberal Democrat coalition in office until the May 2007 Scottish Parliamentary elections). The Scottish Executive's 'vision of public service reform', *Transforming Public Services* (2006a) related CP to a range of measures, including efficiency savings - developing upon the UK government's Gershon review of public sector efficiency and service reform (2004) and the Executive's own version of this, *Building A Better Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2004b) - 'streamlining bureaucracy', rationalising government funding streams, encouraging the sharing of back office services within the public sector and shared service delivery mechanisms, rolling out the Best Value process across the public sector, and mainstreaming community engagement into local policy making.

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Secondly, CP should be seen in relation to the institutional and cultural context of Scottish politics. The re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 (after it was prorogued in 1707 following the Treaty of Union with England) is only one aspect of this context. The Scottish Parliament and Executive were not reintroduced in 1999 upon a 'blank slate' but added to existing systems of institutional and administrative devolution; most notably distinctive legal, education and local government systems which had sustained separate identities and policies from Whitehall (McConnell, 2005; Keating, 2005). Therefore, if there is any distinctive 'tartan tone' to CP or local governance reform in Scotland this should not be attributed solely to devolution.

Certain other features of Scottish politics also influenced the development of local governance reform and CP. Among these is the small scale of the political community and the 'village-life' quality which results from the shared experiences, close proximity, and inter-penetrating networks which characterise Scotland (Jeffrey, 2006, p.61). For example, 36% of the 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) elected in 2003 had previously been local authority councillors, which creates a familiarity between the levels of government and intensity of association not possible in England with almost 400 local authorities and over 650 Westminster MPs (McAteer and Bennett, 2005, p. 297). One outcome of this has been a more consultative and cooperative policy style, in which relations between central and local government are more negotiated than confrontational (Keating, 2003). Some commentators argue that such consensualism engenders conservatism in policy and inhibits radical change (Gallagher, 2007). According to this perspective, what has been distinctive about policy in Scotland, including local governance reform, is neither its substance nor outcomes but the form in which it is developed and introduced. Although some significant policy reforms have been introduced in Scotland since devolution (most notably in relation to student university fees, and funding long-term care for elderly people), these have been neither as frequent nor different as some anticipated (Mooney and Scott, 2006). Indeed, some of the most notable departures in Scottish policy from those in England since devolution have resulted from the Scottish Executive's reluctance to replicate innovations introduced by Whitehall - a tendency Scotland has shared with the Welsh Assembly Government - rather than through pioneering its own new policies (Adams and Schmuecker, 2006). One effect of these conditions in relation to local governance reform is that the Scottish Executive has developed a more inclusive performance regime in partnership

with public service agencies. The Scottish Executive did not adopt the level of regulation and scrutiny favoured, until recently, in England. For example, there have been no Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPAs) nor league tables for local authorities, and fewer performance indicators. There has been less emphasis on setting targets, and continuing reliance upon local government as a provider of services. The central element of monitoring local government performance in Scotland are triennial Best Value Audits undertaken by Audit Scotland, which have the ostensible purpose of assisting rather than ranking performance, although some local authorities have found themselves 'named and shamed' for poor performance by the Auditors (Audit Scotland, 2007).

Reflecting this culture of cooperation, the Scottish Executive was deliberately non-prescriptive and did not specify in detail how CPPs should operate, arguing that 'what is appropriate will depend on local circumstances' (Scottish Executive, 2006b). Inevitably this has led to variation in their format and operation, so that it is necessary to be cautious in generalising about their overall performance and impact. Nevertheless, while acknowledging this, it is possible to identify a number of recurring issues from the various analyses of CP which have been undertaken.

Dilemmas Of Community Planning

There has been debate in England over the extent to which the succession of reforms referred to as the local government modernisation agenda amount to a coherent set of policies (Downe and Martin, 2006). Although fewer and less frequent, a similar

question can be asked about parallel local governance reforms in Scotland. CP in Scotland itself entails systemic dilemmas, if not contradictions, as Offe (1984) uses these terms. Contradictions are fundamental structural incompatibilities within a system of government and arise when actions to remedy problems undermine the very basis of that system. Contradictions are irresolvable and lead to crises in which the reproduction of the entire structure is imperilled. Less severely, a dilemma describes a situation involving a choice between alternative courses of action that are mutually exclusive or equally unfavourable. Whereas a contradiction cannot be resolved, a dilemma can be 'solved or managed by a circumspect balancing of the two components' but only at the expense of sub-optimal performance of either or both options (Offe, 1982, p. 11).

Such dilemmas and tensions exist between the different aims set for CP and aspirations attached to CPPs in Scotland. While these dilemmas do not threaten the survival of CP, they compromise its performance by requiring Partnerships to juggle conflicting duties which cannot be reconciled. Of course, all complex organisations involve coping with multiple responsibilities and inevitably entail trade-offs between competing goals. What makes CP especially interesting is that it involves multi-agency partnerships comprising organisations with different remits, responsibilities and resources attempting to co-ordinate sometimes competing duties and tasks, so that dilemmas and trade-offs are more conspicuous. For example, an evaluation of the initial five CP pathfinders launched in 1998 concluded that they had some significant successes, given the short period they had operated (Rogers, *et al*, 2000). However, this evaluation also identified tensions in the operation of CPPs. These included that between agreeing a shared strategic vision, establishing the processes to implement

this, and translating these processes into joint actions and outcomes. A second tension involved reconciling the respective requirements of partnership working, community involvement and the local authority's community leadership role. These inherent tensions remain unresolved.

A review of initial CP progress reports concluded that among the key issues for the successful future development of CP were:

- i. unequivocal Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament support for CP
- ii. the need to rationalise existing local partnerships and revise national policies responsible for these
- iii. establishing a clearer role for voluntary, private and community sectors representatives
- iv. developing joint resourcing of key CP activities (COSLA, 2000).

Although subsequent analyses indicate that progress has been made on some of these matters, nevertheless several remain relevant and unresolved (Carley, 2004; Scottish Parliament Audit Committee, 2007). Their persistence reflects four dilemmas at the heart of CP as this operates in Scotland, each of which is discussed in turn; i.e. tensions between:

- partnership working and local authority leadership
- CP as a central or an additional duty for public agencies
- community engagement and the practical demands of policy-making
- central government control and local autonomy

Partnership v Leadership

The requirement for local public service providers to work in partnership has been a consistent feature of policy throughout the UK since the late 1980s (Rummery, 2006). However, partnerships between agencies are likely to entail some unease and potential friction; it can take many months or years of sustained relationship building to establish the trust and mutual recognition required to operate effective multi-member co-ordination (DETR, 1999; Taylor, 2006).

The proliferation of local policy and delivery partnerships required in recent years has also created problems of co-ordination and over-extension. Consequently, one of the initial aims of CP was ‘to help rationalise a cluttered landscape’ of local partnerships (Community Planning Implementation Group, 2004. p. 7). The previous Scottish Executive (1999-2007) suggested that its ultimate aspiration in this rationalisation process was the development of shared ‘back office’ services between public agencies, and integrated systems of service delivery (Scottish Executive, 2006c; Scottish Executive, 2006a). However, despite such high level commitment, three of the issues identified in 2000 by COSLA (i.e. ii, iii and iv above) which remain unresolved in many CPPs reflect the continuing practical difficulties of partnership working.

There is a persistent dilemma in Scottish CPPs between, on the one hand, equal participation in policy-making and, on the other, the community leadership role

assumed by local authorities (Rogers *et al*, 2000; Lloyd *et al*, 2001). Leadership of CP was assigned to local authorities from the outset: the remit of the CPWG required it to have regard to councils' status as the local focus of democratic leadership, and the subsequent legislation and associated guidance confirmed this role (Scottish Office, 1998. para 2). It is significant that the LGiS Act states that while local authorities have a duty to initiate, maintain and facilitate CP, other public agencies only have a duty to *participate*, which inevitably results in local authorities taking responsibility for leading Partnerships (Phillips, 2006, p. 15). Councils' leadership position is further reinforced by their ability to devote greater resources, staff and expertise to CP than other partners (SCVO, 2003). For example, two thirds of the 32 CPPs in Scotland are funded solely by local authorities, and they also chair the main executive boards of all CPPs and two thirds of the of lower level 'theme' boards within Partnerships (Audit Scotland, 2006, para , 92, 64). While this dominance of local authorities within CPPs has not lead to many occasions of outright conflict (Stevenson, 2002, para 3.9), nevertheless, a Partnership maintained and serviced by a single member 'can affect the dynamic of decision-making' and may be perceived 'as diminishing the status of the community planning partnership as providing a balanced environment for decision-making' (Phillips, 2006, p. 8).

The degree of local authority dominance of the CP process varies according to local circumstances, e.g. the history and degree of experience of local partnership working, levels of trust between agencies, and the outlook of local council leaders, both elected and official. An evaluation of the progress of CP commissioned by Communities Scotland, the national regeneration and housing agency, concluded that councils at the 'leading edge of modernisation', which value partnership working and citizen

participation, were more ready to share decision-making and avoid dominating CPPs (Carley, 2004). However, by definition, this leading edge includes only a small number of authorities and Partnerships.

This dilemma reflects the wider question of legitimacy in local policy making, and who can claim to represent local interests. Local elected councillors, the voluntary sector, and community representatives may argue their respective cases for a legitimate mandate, and there are indications that some local councillors regard CP as dissipating their authority (Abram and Cowell, 2004, p. 225; Community Planning Network, 2005). This tension has arisen in other UK local governance reforms: the interim evaluation of the Communities First programme in Wales found that many elected councillors were uncomfortable with what they regarded as a shift towards participatory rather than traditional representative democracy (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006, para 1.2.45). Similar concerns about the mandate, role and responsibilities of voluntary and community sector representatives in local partnerships have also been noted in England (IdeA, 2006, p. 16). While some councillors may feel that their power is eroded by partnership decision-making, the expected trade-off is that CP opens up other local public agencies to greater democratic scrutiny and enhances the accountability of partners to each other. However, even this 'democratisation' of local policy-making is double-edged, as it places elected members in the ambiguous position of simultaneously shaping, scrutinising, and also becoming partly accountable for the policies of CP partners.

CP therefore challenges previous lines of accountability, and this generates further tensions. There is a disjuncture within CPPs between legal, budgetary, and political

responsibilities for policy and the level of shared decision-making. CPPs are not themselves legal entities, but Partnerships have increasingly assumed responsibility or significant influence over policy and expenditure decisions for which individual partner organisations are separately legally and politically accountable (Phillips, 2006). In such circumstances, organisations may take defensive action and retreat into ‘organised tribalism’, where they become reluctant to share decision-making, and prioritise those duties which are subject to scrutiny and performance monitoring at the expense of working in partnership (Dalley, 1989). One possible response to this dilemma would be for CPPs to become ‘incorporated’ as independent legal bodies, as provided for by the LGiS Act. However, so far none has shown any enthusiasm for this option (Audit Scotland, 2006, para 37).

The previous Scottish Executive stated its hope that CP will contribute to a more streamlined and less bureaucratic public sector (Scottish Executive, 2004b), but there is no evidence that requiring organisations to work together in itself produces this outcome. If anything, the opposite appears more equally: consensus policy-making requires increased consultation, co-ordination and negotiation between participants, and the decision-making process can become more complex and slower as a result (Scottish Parliament Audit Committee, 2007, para 39). Analyses of LSPs in England have shown that ‘There is an ongoing tension between inclusiveness and effectiveness’ in policy-making (Russell, 2005 p. 51). Indeed, the complexity of joint governance relationships in partnerships can actually obscure the transparency of decision processes and reduce accountability (IdeA, 2006, p. 17). It is telling that Audit Scotland’s review found that CP had not reduced nor simplified the number of

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local partnerships in Scotland, and in fact the ‘risk of increased bureaucracy and duplication of effort’ was growing in some areas (2006, para 85).

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Integration v Supplementation

The Community Planning Implementation Group (CPIG) noted in its final report that the long-term success of CP requires that organisations adopt partnership working as an integral element of their everyday operation rather than something extra they must do (2004, p. iii). It is questionable how far this change of outlook has occurred: while CPPs have developed high-level strategic relationships they remain less integrated at the managerial and operational levels. For example, the shared vision each CPP must develop has not been incorporated into the strategies of each partner organisation (Spicker, nd). There is also relatively little evidence of Partnerships pooling budgets, sharing staff, standardising their reporting systems, joint procurement or common commissioning arrangements (Audit Scotland, 2006: para 35ff). There is also little evidence of any distinctive outcomes or added value from CP in terms of service users’ experiences; most analyses completed to date have focused mainly on the implementation processes involved in CP rather than its outputs or impacts (Audit Scotland, 2006: para 120).

These failures in part reflect the operational circumstances of certain CPP members. Particular problems occur in the majority of CPPs where organisational members do not share common geographic boundaries. In such cases individual organisations must try to reflect and reconcile the potentially conflicting circumstances and priorities of

several different local community plans and strategies. For example, Strathclyde Passenger Transport and Strathclyde Police are both members of over a dozen different CPPs, so that senior management face difficulties in even ensuring there are sufficient staff to attend all the relevant CP meetings (including theme boards and local level CP within Partnerships) let alone co-ordinate the range of policy interests these generate (Scottish Parliament Audit Committee, 2007: para 58). Experience of partnership working in other policy areas and UK regions suggests that 'co-terminosity is the single most critical success' factor (Goveas, 2006).

The Scottish Executive has recognised that many CP members faced an inherent tension between prioritising local partnership working and continuing obligations to implement national policy directives and the agendas of their respective sponsoring government department (2007, p. 18). This dilemma is reinforced by funding systems and lines of accountability which direct organisations' attention and interests upwards to central government rather than towards local concerns. National priorities do not necessarily correspond with local conditions nor interests, which inevitably become compromised when any trade-off is required. In addition, relatively few CPPs have their own dedicated staff (Eglinton, 2002). Those staff which CPPs do have may only work part-time on CP, and remain accountable to their principal employer, i.e. in most cases the local authority. Previous experience of cross-cutting and partnership working has shown that staff performance appraisal and career development systems which do not emphasize nor reward joined-up working are unlikely to have much impact on how organisations operate (DETR, 1999).

Engagement v Capacity

The need for greater community involvement and participation in local policy making was identified as a priority in the CP Pathfinder report, and the subsequent statutory CP guidance stated that ‘effective and genuine engagement of communities is at the heart of’ the process (Rogers, *et al.* 2000; Scottish Executive, 2004c, p. 7). Optimistic interpretations of CP have argued that it offers an opportunity to significantly extend local participatory democracy by involving citizens at the beginning of decision making, developing genuine participation processes in place of traditional consultation, and employing innovative methods to involve local people in shaping policy (Carley, 2004). Advice and assistance has been provided to CPPs to facilitate this: the Scottish Centre for Regeneration (nd) has developed a ‘How To’ guide for community engagement in CPPs, a Community Empowerment Fund (subsequently the Community Voices Programme) was established to support community representatives participating in CPPs, and Communities Scotland developed *National Standards for Community Engagement* to assist Partnerships.

Despite these measures, many CPPs and local authorities have found effective community engagement ‘a challenging part of the process’ where considerable progress is still required (Community Planning Implementation Group, 2004, p.5; Scottish Centre for Regeneration, 2005). Both the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and the Poverty Alliance argue that relatively few community groups are familiar with CP or aware of their opportunities to influence local policy (Poverty Alliance, 2005, p. 2; SCVO, 2003). A significant barrier to effective participation faced by voluntary and community sector (VCS) representatives is the

alien culture and uncongenial style in which many public sector organisations continue to operate. Again, this is an experience shared by local partnerships throughout the UK: analyses of LSPs concluded that genuine community engagement requires partners to alter their normal 'rules of engagement' and amend policy making processes which are off-putting to those unfamiliar with them (Taylor, 2006, p.270). Like its Scottish counterpart, the Anti-Poverty Network Cymru (2006) found that local people were deterred from involvement in the Communities First programme by the failure to adapt organisational cultures and practices to something they felt comfortable with, and also more practical impediments, such as the opportunity costs of attending meetings and lack of childcare provision for VCS representatives (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006).

Frustrations have been voiced by some public officials in CPPs and other partnerships that VCS representatives do not 'speak with one voice', retain an oppositional outsider identity, and are reluctant to accept shared responsibility for collective decisions (IdeA, 2006, p. 16). In response to this, and in the interests of quick and 'efficient' decision-making, some CPPs are accused of minimising the effective influence of VCS representatives by involving them only after agendas have been set and imposing timetables which limit meaningful VCS impact (SURF, 2004, p. 2).

One implication of the experience of CPPs and other local partnerships is that it may be necessary to reconsider what can be realistically expected from VCS representatives (Foley and Martin, 2000). Some official agencies may be expecting VCS participants to perform a role that they are neither able nor willing to undertake. Although public officials' interest in streamlined and professional decision making is

understandable, it is unrealistic to expect VCS representatives always to speak decisively on behalf a diverse sector or to reconcile what may be conflicting ideas about 'community' interests. Officials engaged in CP must also accept that a legitimate role for VCS representatives is to challenge public sector organisations and hold them accountable to broader interests, and not regard this as irresponsibly 'rocking the boat' (Taylor, 2007, p. 270). In addition, VCS participants in local partnerships often need practical support and investment in their capacity to participate (Ross and Osborne, 1999, p. 58). It is not only public officials who may be overstretched by the growth in local partnerships: involvement in CP places an additional burden on what are often untrained local volunteers (Sharp *et al*, 2004). VCS organisations involved in local partnerships also have to develop new consultation and accountability mechanisms within their sector to fulfil this role. This may require a level of capacity within the sector which many VCS organisations do not currently possess (IdeA, 2005). More fundamentally, it requires the VCS to consider what they regard as their relationship to public agencies and to each other, and confront their own dilemma of reconciling the opportunity for greater influence against their anxiety of losing autonomy and being incorporated into a role many have traditionally avoided (Craig *et al*, 2004).

Central Control v Local Autonomy

The operational problems experienced by CPPs in part reflect long-standing tensions in relations between central and local government. Like LSPs in England (Darlow *et al*, 2007), Scottish CPPs have criticised central government for a persistent 'silo

mentality' in which government departments continue to treat CP organisations as separate entities rather than recognise their partnership obligations; for example, through issuing conflicting instructions to different local public agencies, or placing restrictions on the use of funding (Scottish Parliament Audit Committee, 2007, paras 8, 15, 18). The degree of freedom and de-centralisation versus regulation and centralisation which central government accords local government and other public service providers expresses the level of trust and confidence between them (Centre for Scottish Public Policy, 2005). New Labour's position on this spectrum is ambiguous and 'highlights a deep-seated tension between national prescription and local flexibility' (Foley and Martin, 2000. p.487). The result is an uneasy circumscribed and conditional autonomy for local policy makers, where central government expresses the desire to increase local decision-making while simultaneously imposing a performance and inspection regime which restricts local freedom of action (Johnson and Osborne, 2003). This is also exemplified by central government in England devolving control of certain services to the local level but restricting local authorities' influence over these, as for example through trust schools and foundation hospitals. This dualism is also an implicit attraction in the current enthusiasm for 'double devolution' and 'new localism' to levels of governance below local authority control (Hilder, 2006). Neither of these tendencies have been pursued as vigorously in Scotland, but local government and public agencies have not completely escaped New Labour's 'control freakery and faith in managerialism to improve the delivery of public services', as shown by the slower development of general outcome agreements for local services in comparison to England, despite strong lobbying from local authorities (Kelly, 2007, p. 328; COSLA, nd; SOLACE, nd).

A growing body of evidence from both formal evaluations and the practical experience of those working in local partnerships and delivering services demonstrates that the public sector performance culture extended by the Labour government has created its own inefficiencies and dysfunctions (Bound and Skidmore, 2005). In partial acknowledgement of this, a common theme in more recent policy statements from governments in all UK nations is recognition that more efficient outcomes may be achieved through less central control, and that future performance improvement initiatives should devolve more decision-making to local providers (e.g. Welsh Assembly Government, 2006, para 1.3.3). For example, the previous Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in England stated that central government ‘must have the courage at the centre to let go. The challenges we face are too complex, the needs often too local, for all solutions to be imposed from the centre’ (DCLG, 2006, p. 4). Proposals for ‘lighter touch’ Comprehensive Area Assessments in place of CPAs, and fewer Best Value Performance Indicators are expressions of this incipient development. In Scotland, the dysfunctions and perverse outcomes of a restrictive performance culture have been recognised by the Scottish Executive in the establishment of an Independent Review of Scrutiny to examine reporting requirements and ‘ensure all scrutiny is streamlined and proportionate’ (Scottish Executive, nd).

The evaluation of the local government modernisation agenda in England concluded that in order to further improve performance among local authorities, central government had to allow them greater freedom for innovation (Martin and Bovaird, 2005). This lesson applies equally to the relationship between the Scottish Executive and CPPs. The dilemmas faced by CPPs will not be resolved by directives from

central government, as they are in part a manifestation of the limits of central control, as currently exercised. Rather, the optimal accommodation of the competing demands CPPs juggle is more likely to be accomplished through practical experience and 'learning-by-doing' (Carley, 2005, p. 55). According to Communities Scotland, 'Scottish local authorities and their partners have become a national learning network on better governance and participation'; and, as there is no single best method of implementation, CP should be 'a process of experimentation.' (Carley, 2004, p.v, 26). The eventual outcome from this might be a mosaic of different partnerships, ranging from consultative co-ordination to full incorporation, depending on local circumstances. The Scottish Executive intimated a potential movement in this direction in its response to the Scottish Parliament's inquiry into CP (Scottish Executive, 2007, p. 4).

However, the practical and political limit to greater 'earned autonomy' for local authorities and partnerships is how far central government is prepared to allow autonomy and innovation to run the risk of failure. As Foley and Martin (2000, p. 487) point out:

the encouragement of innovation and experimentation may well be set on a collision course with the strong centralising instinct that lies at the heart of New Labour. Certainly increased local discretion is not easily reconciled with 'zero tolerance of failure'.

Oversight and intervention to address inadequate performance or service standards is a legitimate responsibility of central government, and in fact a statutory duty in some cases. Consequently, responding to some of the practical difficulties encountered in

local partnership working by granting greater local autonomy itself raises dilemmas and tensions. The boundaries of responsibility and relationships of authority between central and local government remain fluid and 'in a constant state of flux' between opposing demands for central control versus local autonomy (Kelly, 2007, p. 325). CP in Scotland may have developed a different means to strike a balance between these tensions, but neither devolution nor the distinctive circumstances and political culture in Scotland have been able to resolve this dilemma.

Conclusions

Four years after the legislation introducing statutory CP in Scottish local government was passed, and 10 years since the formation of the CP Working Group, a succession of analyses have concluded that it remains difficult to attribute any discernible impacts to CP: it remains a process and method of working rather than a tangible set of outcomes (Audit Scotland, 2006).

These processes and experiences are broadly similar to those encountered in local governance reform and partnership development elsewhere in the UK. This is not surprising as CP reflects both circumstances and ideologies of reform which cross the borders of the different UK nations. Not least among these shared circumstances and pressures to convergence has been that the same political party was in office in each administration, albeit in coalition in Scotland until 2007. Consequently, CPPs in Scotland have been confronted with the same 'fundamental tensions' and 'paradoxical processes' of partnership working to those faced in developing community strategies

and LSPs in England (Darlow, *et al*, 2007', p. 127; Johnson and Osborne, 2003, p. 153).

CP is a multi-purpose policy, central to the Scottish Executive's reform of local government, its local service delivery improvement measures, attempts to reduce the local 'democratic deficit' through increased community participation, and its neighbourhood regeneration and social inclusion strategies (Poverty Alliance, 2005, p. 8). In fact, rather too much may be riding on CP, and its future success will be influenced as much by developments across this wider reform agenda as by any factors intrinsic to CP itself. Cowell (2004, p. 503) suggests that 'it remains to be seen that aligning national and local priorities, closer intersectoral collaboration and greater public involvement are comfortable bedfellows'. It appears that they are not, and that CPPs face dilemmas between these competing duties. These are dealt with by prioritising one element over its rival or by operating both at a sub-optimal level. Consequently, either inefficiencies or disappointed expectations are inevitable in CP, as currently constituted.

While CP and local governance reform in Scotland have been developed and implemented in a spirit of cooperation between central and local government, this has not itself resolved these dilemmas. Devolution also did not itself significantly shape the development and experience of CP in Scotland; the main differences, such as they are, have been largely attributable to the distinctive culture and institutional context which existed prior to 1999.

The future of CP and local governance reform in Scotland will be determined fundamentally by the consequences of the Scottish elections in May 2007, which resulted in the election for the first time in history of the Scottish National Party (SNP) to government, albeit as a minority administration. The freedom of action of the new Scottish Government as it insists on being called (rather than Executive), is significantly limited by its minority status. It appears likely to maintain CP rather than undertake large scale reorganisation; not least because the implications of both the 2003 LGiS Act and 2004 Local Governance in Scotland Act (which introduced the Single Transferable Vote system for local elections and increased the number of coalition authorities) are still being dealt with.

The importance of the Scottish central government’s position and of Scottish-UK inter-governmental relations to the future of local governance reform demonstrates the extent to which local institutions and policies are shaped by national elections and politics. In this sense, ‘community’ planning is as much a product of central as of local government, and the dilemmas faced by CPPs in Scotland and similar reforms throughout the UK are symptoms of this core condition.



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