



**Regional Forum
Briefing Paper No. 2**

“Little Britain, Large Communities”

What makes community happen?

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Introduction

The idea of a Britain whose cities, towns and villages are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future, is at once simple and incredibly complex. Achieving sustainable communities means places that meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, places that are built with sensitivity to their environment and contribute to a high quality of life, places that are safe and inclusive, places that are well planned, built and run, and places that offer equality of opportunity for all.

But the key ingredient to places must be people: the lifeblood of communities, and without whom even the most well designed and executed towns will not thrive. So, whilst the policies and initiatives are intending and helping to build up communities across our region, are we making sure that we retain the elements that make good communities in the first place?

Responding to this question, the Regional Forum brought together speakers and delegates to take part in debate and look at how the voluntary and community sector (VCS) can further contribute to the sustainable communities agenda.

Keynote Speaker

Geoff Mulgan, Director of the Young Foundation

Between 1997 and 2004 Geoff had various roles in the UK Government including Director of the Government's Strategy Unit and Head of Policy in the Prime Minister's office. He was closely involved in the design and rollout of a series of new organisations and programmes in social policy, welfare, health, education and technology.

Communities are all about different voices coming together as a whole. Much work has gone into developing communities but mistakes have been made. Geoff started working in regeneration 20 years ago and has realised that some approaches adopted then were not right for the situation.

An ambiguity of sustainable communities is that people are mobile so things change. It tends to be the more affluent people in a community, whose situation will change as those who are economically poor are less mobile and unable to take advantage of opportunities.

The capitalist ethos can cause problems in community development as a large injection of money to solve regeneration issues can result in creating small bureaucratic groups, trying to take control and effectively overriding the community.

1. How can communities thrive?

Research has looked at some smaller northern European countries, Canada and Switzerland, where communities are developing well. All these countries are highly connected to trade, information and communications systems. They have high levels of trust, effective public agencies and large capacity in the areas of skills and learning, and organisation.

2. Prosperity and Economy

Communities thrive when they have something to trade/sell. If a community loses the capacity to trade, then it declines – communities cannot be self-sustaining, they need to trade and have a connection both within and outside of the community. You need a strong economic base to get people to move into communities. The selling does not have to solely be goods, it could be labour or room space.

A lack of social skills is still the biggest cause of unemployment and truancy, not literacy, numeracy and IT. Employers are saying that there are still high levels of communication skills, teamworking and problem solving skills lacking amongst people and these core skills are still ignored in schools and education policy.

3. Double Devolution

National government has consistently designed programmes to bypass the involvement of local government. Local government therefore has no power to effect change or develop trust within local communities. Our system of local government is too large with each local authority serving too many people and being too far removed from the people. Double Devolution has to really work to be effective. We need to consider who is involved and who is useful.

4. Civil Society

What is the future of civil society? For example, young people now have a much stronger relationship to consumerism rather than civil society. With this trend developing, which areas of civil society are still strong and what can be developed to strengthen society in other areas?

Suggestions for strengthening civil society include:

- Asset transfer – how to transfer capital/assets into communities.
- Health – more self-help groups are coming into being – not all traditional medicine based treatments – is it possible to give money to these self-help groups?
- Community development by individuals – can communities define their own priorities by, for example, saying one person is willing to pay for an improvement if others will also contribute.

5. Cohesion

How do people live together? One train of thought states that there is an inverse correlation with societies where diversity is increased, then welfare provision is decreased and there is less sense of community. However, this theory overlooks the presence of a strong centre left leadership, which leads to a strong welfare state and community.

The political arena influences people's perceptions of where division or unity are present. Centralisation of government and political parties is a problem. Political parties are becoming removed from the people – need to rebuild these links. Political parties were originally good training and development arenas for people, particularly in the areas of leadership, political education and civil action. The political regime

needs to be re-integrated into community regeneration. We need more people coming into politics to change society.

Geoff believes that in 2036 , we will judge our lifestyles not by prosperity but by health. What does it mean to be a healthy person, family or community?

Getting on their Soap Box

Key issues on what makes up and breaks down communities are **social capital**, **active citizens** and **sustainable development**. Below are some bitesize insights into these three themes from people with a definite view.

a. **Social Capital – Professor Jenny Pearce, Director of the International Centre for Peace Studies at the University of Bradford**

Social capital is a concept, which helps us to think about the relationships between individuals and communities. Social relationships can bring about individual and group well-being and can generate great ideas.

1. Is social capital an individual or a community based concept? Is about individual satisfaction of need or the universal well-being of humankind?
2. **Inequality**
It is the root of much conflict in society. Inequality undermines trust and can damage health.
3. **Power**
In all communities, power relations are important. There is a need to establish who is speaking for whom and in what context. Power is not solely about domination, it needs to be a force to help people to do things.
4. **Gender**
It is often women who stimulate trust and mutuality but men who hold power over situations. It is an anomaly that women are great grassroots activists but very few rise to the higher influential positions in organisations.

b. **Active Citizens – Judy Robinson, Director of the Regional Forum**

Active citizens is what the VCS is all about. Active citizens can influence decision making processes and lives, make things better and renew engagement between citizens and the power structures.

Four key messages:

1. **To Policymakers** – build engagement into all policies as a matter of course and resource it and give it guidance. Don't abandon it when it suits and be honest from the outset about its purpose, value and influence.
2. **To the VCS** – a challenge to link the enthusiasm in local projects with the complex formal structures. Need to ensure a genuine diversity of voices can

be heard. Look at creative ways of communicating and deploying budgets within communities. Need accountable engagement for representatives.

3. **To the Region** – just because the Elected Regional Assembly vote was lost in the North East, power has not disappeared from the regions.
4. **To Everyone** – There is still significant apathy amongst people in relation to active citizenship. 40% of the electorate did not vote in the last General Election. Will double devolution bring back the local connection to power or is this local connection lost?

c. Sustainable Communities – Karen Houghton, Director of Karen Houghton in Partnership

Sustainable communities are about learning to understand each other. Most people want to know their neighbours, to be happy and to have access to education and jobs.

Two key issues arise in relation to this understanding:

1. **Language**
Issues relating to culture, housing and environment are complex and as such the related language can be confusing. There is a need to simplify the language to increase understanding and to improve communication about sustainable communities.
2. **Community**
What is an individual's community? We need to understand what people identify as their community and locality. Communities are too often imposed on people whereas in reality people have a different understanding of communities based on interest, culture, locality etc.

Closing Remarks

What about the future? – Julian Dobson, Editor, New Start Magazine

The whole issue of community is about who we are and what we want to become. We need to encourage environments where mistakes can be made and we actively learn from these mistakes.

There are both tensions and challenges in building communities. There are the old economic challenges but also new tensions such as personal issues associated with lifestyle changes and personal well-being. Perhaps we need to judge policies on what value they add – such as do they increase well-being?

We need to have brave debates that will find ways of working out what makes sustainable communities. Devolution will bring conflict. It will be difficult to get the balance right as communities need more of certain types of power to support themselves.

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