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**Nick Bailey¹
Madeleine Pill²**

¹ School of Architecture and The Built Environment, University of Westminster

² Cardiff School of Planning and Geography, Cardiff University

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Can the state empower communities through localism? An evaluation of recent approaches to neighbourhood governance in England

Nick Bailey

School of Architecture and The Built Environment, University of Westminster,
35 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5LS, England; e-mail: baileyn@westminster.ac.uk

Madeleine Pill

Cardiff School of Planning and Geography, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building,
King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WA, Wales; e-mail: pillmc@cardiff.ac.uk

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Abstract. ‘Empowerment’ is a term much used by policy makers with an interest in improving service delivery and promoting different forms of neighbourhood governance. But the term is ambiguous and has no generally accepted definition. Indeed, there is a growing paradox between the rhetoric of community empowerment and an apparent shift towards increased centralisation of power away from the neighbourhood in developed economies. In this paper we explore the literature relating to empowerment and identify two broad conceptions which reflect different emphases on neoliberalism. We go on to discuss two models illustrating different levels of state intervention at the neighbourhood level and set out evidence from two neighbourhood councils in Milton Keynes in central England. In conclusion, it is argued that those initiatives which are top-down, state-led policy initiatives tend to result in the least empowerment (as defined by government), whereas the bottom-up, self-help projects, which may be partly state enabled, at least provide an opportunity to create the spaces where there is some potential for varying degrees of transformation. Further empirical research is needed to test how far localist responses can challenge constraints on empowerment imposed by neoliberalism.

Keywords: empowerment, localism, governance, neighbourhoods

1 Introduction

Community empowerment has many, often conflicting, meanings and has in recent years been promoted by a variety of governments in the UK, USA, and other developed economies in pursuit of very different ideological priorities (Yetano et al, 2010). Definitions vary, but most suggest (to varying degrees) a transfer of power over decision making or the allocation of resources from the centre to the periphery. While often associated with neoliberalism (Brown, 2005; Mowbray, 2010), empowerment is frequently part of a broader strategy to engage local communities at the neighbourhood level under rhetorical banners such as devolution, decentralisation, and localism. However, as many argue, rather than empowering communities, these strategies often have the effect of reinforcing the power base of the controlling institutions with only marginal gains at the local level. As Miraftab (2004) notes, “once the subversive, emancipatory tools of activists, [community participation, empowerment, and social capital] have now become the tools of trade for governments as well as for international financial establishments such as the World Bank” (page 239). In the UK a consensus has emerged over the past decade that community participation and empowerment are essential elements of public policy, but the nature of the discourse frequently shifts under governments of different political parties (Atkinson, 1999). Critics have

highlighted the apparent paradox between the increasing rhetoric of community engagement compared with the growing centralisation of power and control by central government (Bailey, 2010; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Brown, 2005; Guarneros-Meza and Geddes, 2010).

In this paper we set out to explore this paradox and what appears to be a growing dissonance in the UK between government policy statements, on the one hand, and the realities of the 'New Localism' and a 'revival of the local' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), on the other. We begin in section 2 by discussing the nature of the highly contested term, empowerment, in the context of localism. In doing so we identify some of the opportunities opened up, as well as the barriers which prevent the rhetoric becoming a reality. We then propose two models of localism that have been attempted in the past decade in the UK, based on different levels of state intervention at the neighbourhood level. In section 3 we discuss two case studies of the role and extent of empowerment of neighbourhood councils in the city of Milton Keynes, which has had full coverage of civil parish councils (CPCs) since 1997. In section 4 conclusions are drawn about how far the state can empower communities or merely reinforce existing power relationships, and the case for identifying key dimensions of empowerment is made. We also draw on a series of recent research projects on governance and neighbourhood management in English cities (Bailey, 2012; Bailey and Pill, 2011).

2 Manifestations of empowerment

The problematic nature of empowerment relates to the many definitions available and different methods of measuring it. One fundamental division is between whether the term is best used to define a process or an outcome and, as Laverack and Wallerstein (2001) note, "whether it exists as an inter-personal phenomenon, a broad socio-political context or an interaction of change at multiple levels" (page 179). They go on to affirm that:

"Community empowerment is most consistently viewed in the literature as a process in the form of a dynamic continuum, involving: (i) personal empowerment; (ii) the development of small mutual groups; (iii) community organisations; (iv) partnerships; and (v) social and political action. The potential of community empowerment is gradually maximised as people progress from individual to collective action along this continuum" (page 182).

The assumption of the inevitable progression of empowerment towards higher level goals can also be questioned in that sociopolitical barriers can frequently limit if not reverse this progression. Thus attempts to measure progression come up against difficulties of when to measure and over what time period.

There appears to be a growing convergence between governments of developed and less-developed economies which are promoting a discourse of empowerment at the local level. Commentators point to an international trend towards the greater involvement of citizens backed up by legislation and incentives to devise appropriate mechanisms in order to reduce the 'legitimacy gap' in policy making (Yetano et al, 2010, page 785).

Those attempting to identify the outcomes of empowerment also have to account for the parallel growth of neoliberalism, particularly where services are privatised. For instance, Mirafab (2004) discusses this in relation to a case study in Cape Town, South Africa, and concludes that "the grassroots movements and their empowering outcomes emerge despite the 'empowerment' of the neo-liberal programs" (page 254). Evidence from other countries, such as Brazil and the Philippines, suggests that some positive outcomes can be achieved (see Gaventa, 2004a, pages 19–21; Houtzager et al, 2003). Many other commentators point to the importance of neoliberalism as the overriding political rationality. Brown (2005) argues that neoliberalism:

"puts market rationality at the fore" but it "is not only—and isn't even foremost—centred on the economy; it consists instead of the expansion and dissemination of market values to political and social spheres and to a variety of institutions" (page 51).

Griggs and Roberts (2012, page 199) also point towards neoliberalism being closely linked to a ‘rescaling’ and ‘rolling back’ of the state. Thus, as Jessop (2002) argues, “neo-communitarian” strategies “to encourage neighbourhood solutions” are envisaged “even in the most neo-liberal cases” (page 464).

Given the rise of neoliberalism and associated processes such as globalisation, governments are coming under increasing pressure to respond to:

“allegedly uncontrollable *supralocal* transformations, such as globalisation, the financialisation of capital, the erosion of the nation state, and the intensification of interspatial competition” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, page 341, original emphasis).

The response is to focus on the ‘local’ where the contradictions between needs and resources become most apparent and where new institutional and governance arrangements can be tested. As Eisenschitz and Gough (1993, page 11) argue, localities are frequently represented as the only sites in which “the apparent opposites of enterprise and community, of efficiency and welfare, of economic means and local ends” can be rationalised. As a result, the ‘local’ has been the site for a series of experiments involving innovative approaches to the local economy, service delivery, and governance (Bailey and Pill, 2011).

Empowerment has for many decades been part of the political discourse associated with urban regeneration and the improved delivery of public services, particularly in the USA and UK. Bacqué and Biewener (2013) trace the discussion of empowerment in the USA back to the civil rights movement and the Great Society programme of the 1960s as well as the women’s movement a decade later. In 1977 an influential paper by Berger and Neuhaus (1977) stressed the importance of ‘mediating structures’ such as neighbourhoods, churches, and voluntary associations. The authors argued these structures could provide support at the local level without encouraging dependency on diminishing public resources. Thus empowerment gradually acquired a stronger economic focus since dependency on the state was often linked to high levels of unemployment. In 1993 President Bill Clinton passed legislation to establish empowerment zones in US cities although the previous Bush administration had established an Economic Empowerment Task Force in 1990 (Bacqué and Biewener, 2013, page 2202). In the UK, as in the USA, empowerment could be applied from both the Right and Left of the political spectrum. An important theme in much of the discourse was that increased community participation might bring further benefits in reducing the ‘democratic deficit’ represented by low turnouts at general and local elections. An early attempt at community empowerment was the establishment of twelve Community Development Projects set up by the Home Office in 1969 in areas of chronic deprivation, but subsequently abandoned in 1972. Nevertheless, varying definitions of empowerment appeared in British urban policy from this period onwards. Both Clinton in the USA and Blair in the UK promoted different interpretations of the ‘Third Way’ (Giddens, 1999); and, as state spending and economic growth have been in decline since 2008, new interpretations have arisen such as the ‘Big Society’ and localism. Indeed, it has also been suggested that in the UK there is now a ‘postpolitical consensus’ (Dias, 2013) about the need for varying degrees of community engagement, although those minorities which do engage are often cast as ‘the usual suspects’ or ‘peripheral insiders’ (Jones, 2003, page 582).

2.1 Restricted empowerment

Both MirafTAB, and Bacqué and Biewener draw similar conclusions about the nature of empowerment. When viewed through the prism of neoliberalism, they argue, it tends to become a limited form of power sharing around some local public goods and services, rather than a transfer of power. Moreover, the debate around these services is very often taken out of the mainstream whereby larger decisions remain under the control of high-level institutions.

As Bacqué and Biewener (2013) conclude:

“Management of poor areas has been delegated in part to community organisations, which has allowed for some degree of ‘social peace’; yet this ad hoc type of power sharing remains outside the traditional political system and, as such, does not offer any means of transforming that system or of addressing problems at the broader scale at which they arise. Instead, it can lead to a fragmentation of power which only profits the most powerful” (page 2210).

In a review of neighbourhood governance in Baltimore and Bristol, Davies and Pill (2012) also put forward the proposition that “centralisation and economies of scale are certainly one plausible response to austerity, perhaps signalling a return to hollowed-out ‘big government’” (page 2215). Direct state intervention, they argue, will either be replaced by “‘softer’ social control strategies ... or a more coercive and overtly disciplinary posture, or is substituted by other agents of empowerment and/or control” (page 2215).

2.2 Empowerment as an open-ended process

It is also possible to take a more positive view than the critics of empowerment discussed above, who tend to accentuate the importance of neoliberalism in shaping strategies and interventions. A second group of advocates of empowerment see it as an open-ended process rather than an outcome of good governance. Lavarack and Wallerstein (2001, page 182), for example, see it as a gradual progression from individual to collective action.

The close association between community participation and empowerment has also been criticised as narrow and reductionist; in Cooke and Khotari’s (2001) view, the ‘new tyranny’ arises where participation becomes the prerequisite for many kinds of community development strategy. Rather than being about participation in predetermined, ‘preneutralised’ arenas, empowerment should be, as Gaventa (2004b) argues, about the interaction “between citizens and all forms of wider powers that influence their lives” (page 26). This leads, at one end of the spectrum, to the preconditions for democratic arenas to express needs and the capacity to mobilise around local issues, and, at the other, to making services more receptive to local needs (Painter et al, 2011, page 31).

If empowerment is an open-ended process where new opportunities can arise—or be grasped—the potential for ‘participatory governance’ necessitates exploring the power relations within new forms of participation.

“Power analysis is thus critical to understanding the extent to which new spaces for participatory governance can be used for transformative engagement, or whether they are more likely to be instruments for reinforcing domination and control” (Gaventa, 2004b, page 34).

Gaventa advocates a more nuanced approach that asks how governance spaces are created, in whose interests, and with what terms of engagement (see Bailey, 2010, page 321). He identifies closed spaces, invited spaces, and claimed and created spaces reflecting the different ‘terms of engagement’ as determined through the interaction of power holders and those seeking power (Gaventa, 2004b, page 35). Newman and Clarke (2009) extend this taxonomy by identifying ‘ambiguous spaces’ occupied by different interest groups with different agendas: “the transformative potential of public participation is conditioned and shaped through the interaction of different political orientations and practices in different contexts” (page 139).

The uneven distribution of power between state agencies, the private sector, and local communities is also relevant to the debate about social capital. Simplistic definitions of ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ social capital by Putnam (2000) and others in the past led to strategies of ‘capacity building’ and ‘growing’ social capital without regard to the nature of the target ‘community’. Moreover, oppositional social movements were often excluded

from the debate about social capital (see, for example, Mayer, 2003). The more affluent, better organised communities may draw on both types of social capital, as well as ‘linking’ social capital, and can thus exert pressure on democratic institutions in order to secure better quality services or to oppose unwanted developments in their area. Business may also draw on social capital in promoting increased commercial activity in an area through the formation of a Business Improvement District (BID) (Ward, 2006), where, as in the USA, additional resources can be secured through a local property tax. Areas without the skills or motivation to organise may lack the capability to utilise the social capital available.

In concluding this section, it is possible to throw some light on the paradox of community empowerment by accepting that neoliberalism has a far-reaching influence on the economy, society, and thus the way governments operate by developing ‘technologies of citizenship’ which use empowerment as a strategy for regulating the citizens whose problems are being addressed (Cruikshank, 1999, page 2). Yet, as Gaventa and others point out, much depends on local circumstances and the rules of engagement as to the nature of the ‘governance space’ created; transformation can also arise over time from created or ambiguous spaces at the local level. Thus if empowerment is best defined as a process involving various stages of development, and if neoliberalism impacts on different communities in different ways, it is possible that strategies to reduce the role of the state and to initiate a stronger role for civil society may create new tensions and greater variance in process and outcomes (Dias, 2013).

3 The rise of localism

As has been noted above, the recent focus on the ‘local’ has much to do with the need to resolve contradictions between policy areas and to integrate the operations of different sectors and agencies arising from supralocal forces such as globalisation (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1993). In the USA and Britain there is a long history of time-limited, area-based projects set up to address issues of deprivation and economic underperformance with varying degrees of community empowerment. In Britain ‘new localism’ began to be applied to the reforms of the Labour government after 1997 and combined aspects of the modernisation of services, a focus on improved delivery of services at the local level, and engaging all stakeholders (including residents) in ‘partnership’ arrangements.

However, the Labour governments of the period 1997–2010 designated local government as the main vehicle for delivering this agenda. Three key policy statements signalled the direction policy was to take (CLG, 2006; 2008; DETR, 1998a). The first set out an approach to modernising local government and promoting democratic renewal at the local level (DETR, 1998a). The second endorsed the role of local government in developing strategies of ‘community leadership’ and ‘place shaping’ and strongly advocated reinvigorating the role of active CPCs (CLG, 2006, pages 42–43). *Communities in Control* (CLG, 2008) advocated more detailed arrangements for empowering citizens and groups. This white paper acknowledged that the current trend towards political disengagement could be put down to a “sense of powerlessness on the part of most citizens that their voices are not being heard” (page 21). Empowerment in this context was defined as:

“passing more and more political power to more and more people, using every practical means available, from the most modern social networking websites, to the most ancient methods of petitioning, public debates and citizens’ juries” (page 21).

The solutions included two additional responsibilities for local authorities. The first was a ‘duty to promote democracy’ through improved communications and the engagement of specific groups. The second, a ‘duty to involve’, was imposed on local authorities and fourteen other agencies delivering local services. The outcome was a series of modest measures to promote local democracy without fundamentally changing the uneven balance of power between government and local communities. In this case, ‘empowerment’ was largely a function of

local government: “We will empower local councils to present themselves as democratic centres, with a new culture which sees democratic politics as respected, recognised and valued” (page 24).

In practice, there was considerable variation over time in the approach, objectives, mix of central and local funding, and extent of engagement of local residents and their representatives. Two of the high-profile programmes of this period were well funded and heavily directed by central government: the New Deal for Communities (NDC) and Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, which were managed by similar forms of neighbourhood governance. Both emerged from a previous initiative, the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), and both had well-resourced evaluation projects working in parallel (CLG, 2010; Lawless, 2011; SQW Consulting, 2008). While these projects were running, there were also many other experiments in localism set up with varying degrees of funding, central policy direction, and engagement of different stakeholders (Bailey, 2012). The Coalition government elected in 2010 passed the Localism Act (2011), which introduced new powers to enable neighbourhood development planning by CPCs or, as an alternative, by the establishment of neighbourhood forums (CLG, 2011).

There is not space to fully describe each of these programmes, but two contrasting models of local intervention involving neighbourhood governance can be identified based on the extent of state involvement at either central or local levels. The state-led model broadly characterises the period of central government direction in England between 1993 and 2010 whereas the state-enabling and self-help model is associated with the Coalition government from 2010. The key characteristics of each type are set out in table 1, and each one is briefly described below.

3.1 State-led empowerment

The first model is the state-led, area-based initiative (ABI). This was the approach first devised by a Conservative government in the early 1990s and then extended by the Labour government after 1997. In 1993 the government announced that it intended to merge approximately twenty separate funding streams into a single budget. Most of this was already committed, but about £100 million was to be made available through competitive bidding to local authorities and other lead agencies for the following financial year. In the six rounds of SRB approximately 60% of SRB funding was spent on environmental and housing improvements while community development activities were allocated only 5.5% of the total (Rhodes et al, 2005, page 1934).

A later development of the ABI was the NDC programme which was launched in 1998 and arose out of a strategy to reduce social exclusion and a commitment to “help turn around the poorest neighbourhoods” (DETR, 1998b, page 1). As a result, over £2 billion was allocated to thirty-nine designated areas in England’s major cities over a decade. The approach adopted with NDC had significant differences to previous initiatives. This time there was no competitive bidding, and local authorities with the highest levels of deprivation were invited to identify relatively small areas with a population of about 10 000. Community involvement was a major priority, and this included both consultation around annual action plans and encouragement for residents to sit on the management board. In many cases residents were in the majority and had a major influence on local priorities and spending patterns.

A third example is the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder partnerships. In 2001 the government funded thirty-five partnerships in two rounds for seven years, each at a total cost of approximately £100 million. The areas selected were both urban and rural with populations of about 10 000 each and were chosen from proposals submitted by local authorities. Each area was awarded £3.5 million over seven years to cover core management and running costs and to leverage projects. The priorities here were to increase and improve the quality of local

Table 1. Two models of local intervention at the neighbourhood level.

	State led	State enabling/self-help
Approach	area-based initiatives, generic approach to improved service delivery, community capacity building	localism, community development, building social capital, limited service delivery, expressing local opinion to higher tier organisations (eg, planning); dependence on local communities to promote voluntarism and self-help, commitment to consultation, and sometimes empowerment to strengthen civil society
Legislation	reliance on existing powers	enabling legislation to create civil parish councils, forums, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), and powers to require payment of precepts but heavy dependence on volunteerism
Process	target-driven, multilevel governance, performance management, partnership working	creating 'spaces' for engagement and coproduction of services; use of 'network power' to influence service providers
Funding	funding from central government with leverage of additional capital and revenue sources	self-funded from precepts, members, or private sector, including charitable donations
Locations	areas of deprivation selected by central government	dependent on local initiation and self-selection but with local authority approval; areas with communities with a history of mobilisation and with appropriate skills and resources likely to be most active
Lead organisation	special-purpose agencies	local communities, coalitions, local business organisations
Governance spaces	closed spaces, boards, and officers largely selected by central and local government	invited and claimed spaces created by lead organisations and local elections of representatives; many spaces remain 'ambiguous'
Extent of empowerment	residents represented on the management boards with influence on priorities and service delivery for the duration of funding	some influence over local services; dependent on mobilisation of local opinion; limited but some influence on local services; acquisition of assets and local service provision encouraged
Typical examples	New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders	civil parish councils, neighbourhood forums, BIDs, community enterprise, community development trusts, and community forums

services based on extensive consultation and community engagement. Although much was achieved by these partnerships (Pill and Bailey, 2010), they were quickly closed down by the incoming government in 2010.

In all, the state-led approach was heavily influenced and funded by central government, although delivery was managed at the local level. Central government set the priorities and level and period of funding and provided detailed guidance on the management of different elements of the project. Performance management systems were introduced including reporting procedures to the Government Offices for the Regions and a requirement to adopt a set of national indicators in order to monitor performance. Community empowerment was on the agenda so long as it accorded with the philosophy and rhetoric of government policy at the time. The NDC national evaluation found that project outcomes tended to result in

improvements to the physical environment with only limited impact on indicators such as household income, health, educational attainment, and community cohesion. Despite large amounts of funding, Imrie and Raco (2003) conclude that “the practices of urban governance remain highly centralised and output-focused. Communities are often ‘shoe-horned’ on to local policy initiatives according to central government guidelines” (page 27). Moreover, the proportion of residents becoming actively engaged in the NDC programme reached only 17% by 2008, and there was no evidence for ‘transformational change’. Although local communities played a much bigger role than in previous initiatives, this did not result in “community empowerment” (Lawless, 2011, pages 527–28), and “regeneration activity had relatively little to do with change” (Lawless and Beatty, 2013, page 955). Moreover,

“NDC evidence points to the limited ability of neighbourhood-level initiatives to address many of the problems affecting these localities, and the limited scale of direct resident involvement in regeneration activities” (Lawless and Pearson, 2012, page 523).

3.2 State-enabled and self-help empowerment

The second model in table 1 covers a wide range of examples where permissive legislation is available to establish local decision-making bodies covering a defined area. Many of these organisations arise out of the ‘duty to promote democracy’ which was included in the Local Government and Public Health Act (2007). The legislation includes guidance on membership and how to run ballots and elections. No direct funding is provided, but powers may also be included to raise funding from local taxation, such as a levy on the rates. Thus much depends on civil society to form associations, mobilise residents, and engage with a range of local stakeholders and service providers.

CPCs have existed at least since 1894 and have a variety of powers to own and manage assets, provide services such as bus shelters and signposts, and be consulted by higher level local authorities. In 1997 legislation permitted communities in England outside Greater London to petition local authorities to set up elected civil parish or town councils. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) extended these powers to the London boroughs for the first time and required them to carry out a ‘community governance review’ before creating new CPCs. Reviews may also be triggered by a petition of local government electors for an area seeking to set up a parish council. CPCs have powers to levy a precept on the (local) council tax, and this generates an annual income to provide a range of services prescribed in various acts while additional powers can be transferred by the relevant local authority. Some employ a full or part-time parish clerk to manage meetings and day-to-day business. They also represent local opinion by making representations and responding to policy initiatives of higher level authorities. In addition, many prepare village appraisals, housing needs studies, and village plans in order to encapsulate the needs of their communities and to feed into the statutory planning process (Owen and Moseley, 2003). Under the Localism Act (2011), they can now prepare neighbourhood development plans.

An example of a well-established system of CPCs can be found in the former New Town (now the City) of Milton Keynes where forty-five CPCs have covered both urban and rural parts of the borough council area since 1997. *The Parishes’ Protocol* (MKBC, 2010) sets out the powers and responsibilities of both the CPCs and the borough council. This includes a commitment on both sides to provide information, to allow adequate time for consultation, and to refer comments and suggestions back to the main council through their ward councillors. As a last resort, a call-in procedure operates where a CPC can request that an executive decision is reviewed before final confirmation. Two particular innovations include a Parishes’ Forum where CPC chairs meet annually to discuss topics of current concern and an annual funding round where CPCs can bid for special needs and projects. If a CPC produces a community,

village, or town plan, this can be incorporated into the statutory planning framework for the borough council as a whole.

A good example of a CPC in Milton Keynes is the Woughton neighbourhood, which has a population of about 12 000. It covers seven housing estates and two industrial areas. It was one of the first areas of the new town to be constructed in the 1970s, has a high proportion of social housing and houses in multiple occupation, and is one of the most deprived wards in the city. Life expectancy is on average at least ten years shorter in Woughton than the city's average for men and women. In 2012 three more affluent neighbourhoods in Woughton Parish Council (WPC) broke away and formed their own parish council with the borough council's approval. As a result, four members of staff were made redundant and the precept on the remaining residents was increased.

WPC employs a manager, six other full-time staff, and about fourteen part-time employees. There are twenty-one council members elected for a four-year term. WPC manages four meeting places which can be booked by local groups and one drop-in centre which provides advice and IT support. Many other projects and groups receive funding, including schools and nurseries, allotments and gardening projects, a carnival, a talent show, and other activities for families and pensioners. WPC officers are encouraged to promote community development by becoming the 'eyes and ears' of the community and by encouraging greater involvement.

Extended interviews with the Chair and staff of WPC confirmed the strengths and weaknesses of the system. A major issue is the precept on council tax which adversely affects an area of low housing valuations like Woughton. Because the needs are great, it has to raise the precept, but this can disadvantage tenants already having great difficulties in paying rent and household bills. One of the reasons for the more affluent areas breaking away was because they did not want to cross-subsidise the more deprived estates. Moreover, the City Council cannot cross-subsidise the precept from other sources; only funding raised from property in the area can be spent by WPC in that area. At the same time, the City Council is looking at ways of transferring assets and liabilities, such as community facilities or undeveloped land, to the CPC but it has no resources with which to bring these into beneficial use. In practice, therefore, Woughton is spending an annual precept of about £500 000 in order to ameliorate the negative aspects of the area through community development.

The Chair of WPC saw their role as protecting a vulnerable population from cuts in services and a reduced quality of life, rather than expanding and taking on new commitments:

"We've got to stay in being and active and viable to protect them [the residents]. There have been no great tensions of any significance, crime levels are not out of control, anti-social behaviour is not massive. One of the things the parish councils may be doing is keeping a lid on the situation. If we weren't here, what chance have these people got?" (interview with Chair of WPC, August 2012).

As the former leader of the Milton Keynes City Council and a long-term resident, the WPC Chair was very well connected with members and officers of the council and could take up issues of local concern on an informal basis. But he clearly saw his role as defending existing service levels rather than expanding provision. The Community Council Manager is also aware of the stigma arising from level of deprivation:

"It's a disadvantage because people don't like to come to the area. People are reluctant to come here and will ask if it's safe to park their cars outside. But it's an advantage because we can say we are the most deprived so you need to support us either financially or in terms of resources. So it sometimes operates in our favour" (interview with WPC Manager, August 2012).

The Manager also saw her role and that of her staff as being the eyes and ears of the community and to bring the community together through a series of events in a climate of financial stringency:

“We operate lots of events and we work with groups to organise events. We make sure our staff are well informed about anything that’s going on within the parish and further afield if we can. And we make sure that they have the ability to talk to residents to keep them informed and advise them when there’s a meeting on which may be beneficial to them. We operate everything from a carnival and local fun days right the way through to an annual meeting that we have to have. So a lot of our work is around making sure that our officers and members are well informed so they can offer advice and support to residents” (interview with WPC Manager, August 2012).

In practice, the role of the community council is heavily proscribed by both the level of funding and powers transferred from the City Council. The diminished geographical area covered by WPC meant that the additional tax on the remaining residents had increased and service levels had declined through redundancies and cuts in mainstream budgets. The high levels of deprivation in Woughton meant that skill levels and motivation were relatively low and residents proved hard to mobilise because many wanted to move out of the area. The strategy of WPC is thus to promote community activity and social capital, target limited resources on community development, and exploit ‘network power’ (Booher and Innes, 2002).

As of 2012, local communities can now establish neighbourhood forums if at least twenty-one residents make a request to the local authority. The local authority is required to publicise and consult about any applications it receives. If approved, these forums are required to have open meetings. They have no statutory powers but can prepare neighbourhood development plans (CLG, 2012). To date, over 200 neighbourhood planning frontrunners have been approved by the Department of Communities and Local Government and receive limited funding to support the plan preparation process. There are no other sources of statutory funding, and forums therefore depend heavily on volunteers and applications to other agencies. While these plans can galvanise local communities, critics point out that preparing a neighbourhood plan is a complex process which adds another tier to the planning process while also making it difficult for the local authority to achieve strategic objectives, such as meeting local authority house-building targets and locating unattractive installations such as wind farms or incinerators. Moreover, in current circumstances local authorities do not have the staff to devote to advising on the preparation a further tier of plans.

Some neighbourhood plans are strongly orientated towards business development. A second example from Milton Keynes is the Central Milton Keynes Alliance (CMKA). This is a neighbourhood ‘frontrunner’, which was approved by the Milton Keynes Council in July 2012 and received central government funding to assist in preparing a ‘business neighbourhood plan’ covering 60 ha of largely retail and commercial uses in the central area. The CMKA Steering Group is technically a committee of the CPC for the central area, called the Milton Keynes Town Council. The Steering Group is made up of a board of sixteen people; eight represent public bodies such as the Central Milton Keynes Town Council, the cabinet member for economic development and enterprise for Milton Keynes City Council, and a number of ward councillors. The remaining eight members represent a variety of business organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the managing director of a major retail store in the city centre, and a planning consultant based in the city. There is an additional member representing Community Action: Milton Keynes. The Alliance Steering Group prepared a

draft business neighbourhood plan for consultation in 2012, and the main priorities are to:

- expand and diversify the retail offer of central Milton Keynes;
- build many more offices to create new jobs;
- reserve key sites for major opportunities, such as the proposed expansion of the university;
- complete almost 5000 new dwellings;
- enrich its social, sporting, and cultural life with new facilities.

The plan sets out the approach to planning in the city centre:

“To achieve growth within the existing grid layout and development plots, the Plan supports building at higher densities than those assumed when CMK was originally planned. With buildings up to generally eight stories high, the planned growth can be accommodated without changing the spacious tree-lined street scene” (CMKA, 2012, page 1).

By early 2013, an extensive consultation exercise had been completed with over eighty responses to the draft being submitted. A wide range of issues were raised, and in particular the Milton Keynes Council 2012 were concerned that:

“the plan is written as if it was a stand-alone document; its linkages to higher documents such as the NPPF [National Planning Policy Framework], adopted MK [Milton Keynes] Local Plan and emerging MKC [MK Council] Core Strategy which provided the context and parameters for the CMKAP [CMKA Plan] are poorly developed.”

The MKC was also concerned that the evidence base for the economic strategy in the plan was inadequate. A number of revisions have been included in a revised draft submitted for examination in May 2013 (CMKA, 2013).

The CMKA represents a partnership between the Milton Keynes Town Council covering the central area and the City Council, as well as leading business representatives. The plan is designed to promote more retail and commercial development while also adding additional housing and retaining the best of the qualities of the original new town concept. The composition and focus of the alliance, together with the professional input into drawing up the plan, suggests it will have a considerable impact on policy making in the city centre. However, before the plan becomes statutory, it must be approved by two separate ballots of those residents and businesses located in the designated area.

Since 2010, state-enabled localism has been promoted heavily by the Coalition government:

“[our] plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives” (Conservative Party, 2010).

The various forms of local governance arrangements outlined above have statutory backing and in two cases are linked to revenue-raising powers through the council tax and business rate. In some cases powers are specified in the legislation, but in general there is considerable dependence on the ability to ensure an active membership and where necessary to mobilise local interests. Parish councils have considerable influence at the very local level, but recent research suggests their views, particularly on planning issues, rarely impinge on higher level authorities (Gallent and Robinson, 2012; Gallent et al, 2008). In a tiered structure with many stakeholders, communications between parish councils and the local authority can be problematic, and in the Kent case studies investigated by these authors the parish councils experienced difficulties in influencing decision making at a higher level.

The election of the Coalition government in 2010 introduced a period of financial austerity and severe cuts in public expenditure. In the early months the discourse of the ‘Big Society’ was portrayed as “[the Coalition government’s] alternative to Labour’s big government approach” (Conservative Party, 2010, page 1) and that the “agenda is designed to empower communities to come together to address local issues” (page 1). It was even argued

that “we want every adult in the country to be an active member of an active neighbourhood group” (page 1). The reduction of funding available to local government and the third sector soon indicated that much of this discourse was not well understood or achievable, and the Big Society was gradually replaced by a new emphasis on ‘localism’.

The two examples from Milton Keynes illustrate the different approaches which are being adopted in areas of deprivation and commercial vitality. Both communities have been mobilised by the City Council’s decision to designate parish councils and the national legislation enabling neighbourhood forums to be designated and neighbourhood plans to be prepared. The membership of these organisations, the skills and expertise they can draw on, and the extent to which they can mobilise local interests and influence decisions by higher tier agencies will largely determine outcomes in the longer term. The two Milton Keynes case studies are instructive. Neither have large amounts of resources at their disposal, but Woughton is heavily constrained by its ability to generate income from the precept whereas the CMKA also has limited resources but considerable political capital through its influential membership and ability to exert influence over developers and local decision makers. Both tend to use the concept of ‘community’ to include an elected group of residents in the case of Woughton and largely existing councillors and business representatives for the CMKA in order to demonstrate representation and democratic accountability.

4 Conclusions

This paper has established that empowerment is a flexible, ambiguous, and ill-defined concept which forms an increasingly important part of the discourse (or rhetoric) of government. Two different conceptions of empowerment are discussed: the first emphasises the influence of neoliberalism and the extent to which this both emphasises the ‘local’ but also often marginalises the debate and ensures that power is retained by higher level agencies. The second view emphasises the open-ended nature of empowerment as a process where new forms of citizen involvement can open up new ‘spaces’ with ‘transformational potential’. This is similar to Featherstone et al’s (2012), concept of ‘progressive localism’, in contrast to the neoliberal ‘austerity localism’ (page 177):

“We use the term progressive [localism] to emphasise that these struggles are not merely defensive. Rather they are expansive in their geographical reach and productive of new relations between place and social groups. Such struggles can, moreover, reconfigure existing communities around emergent agendas for social justice, participation and tolerance” (page 179).

While both conceptions see empowerment as a process rather than a set of outcomes, it tends to be discussed in terms of organisations set up, new policies developed, or influence applied, at fixed points in time.

Neoliberalism, through the parallel process of globalisation, embraces both developed and developing economies, and it has promoted a variety of ideologically driven ‘reforms’ at the local level, as well as new forms of resistance (see, for example, Hall et al, 2013; Peck et al, 2013).

Of the two approaches to empowerment, the first is typified by top-down projects which have clear objectives, are well funded, but are time limited so are difficult to integrate into mainstream service delivery. These create short-term opportunities for community empowerment in relatively ‘closed spaces’. The second approach depends on enabling legislation which in some cases provides a funding stream but with little control over objectives and with some influence over policy, rather than substantial powers. Here communities are expected to operate on voluntaristic principles and may be given ‘voice’ but relatively little empowerment. These organisations may be able to construct created or at least ‘ambiguous’ spaces but are heavily constrained by the external political and economic context.

They also operate within an increasingly neoliberal environment where the state is reducing funding levels and withdrawing from some types of service provision. The most recent examples, such as neighbourhood forums, are state enabled through the Localism Act, but in most cases have no direct sources of funding. A conclusion to the paradox raised at the beginning of this paper is that, in general terms, those initiatives which are top-down, state-led policy initiatives tend to result in the least empowerment, whereas the more bottom-up, self-help, state-enabled projects at least provide an opportunity to create the spaces where there is some potential for varying degrees of transformation. However, the more prosperous areas with skilled residents and business involvement are more likely to take advantage of these opportunities compared with deprived areas. Thus rather than challenging the broader processes of neoliberalism and globalisation, they may achieve very limited local outcomes within heavily constrained parameters as is evident in the two Milton Keynes case studies.

What are the key dimensions which determine the extent of empowerment in each case? The first relates to the context in which the project operates and the extent to which external economic, political, and social factors impinge on the area and the potential for mobilisation. The second is the extent of the transfer of powers from the state to a neighbourhood or community. This could be through primary legislation or a policy statement. The third depends on the level of resources available and whether they are provided by right or have to be borrowed, generated through commercial activity, or bid for. The fourth and most important is the constitution of the organisation, the extent of community engagement, and its ability to create a representative and credible 'voice' for the local population which can be sustained over time through network power. These created spaces have the potential to articulate local needs, make maximum use of all channels of communication, and develop 'linking' social capital with higher tier agencies. A wide range of factors come into play which determine whether the 'created space' can grow, extend democratic practices, and become 'transformative', or whether it becomes co-opted and marginalised by more powerful agencies. Only empirical evidence from working examples over time will establish the relative importance of these processes in more detail.

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