

Working outside the box

An approach to delivering rural services in an age of austerity

An open minds meeting

On 7th June in Bishop's Castle in Shropshire, a small group of experienced and open-minded people who want to make things happen in public, business, voluntary and social enterprise sectors got together. The aim was to explore effective ways of cross-sector working and 'co-production'. None of us came to lobby, make a pitch, or impose our point of view.

The group included senior Shropshire Council¹ managers and strategists, a Council cabinet member, and seven social and business entrepreneurs with a very wide range of experience. We met to bring our knowledge and experience together to discuss creative ways of delivering quality public services in the new context - planning for the future, rather than the past.

The meeting was hosted by Enterprise South West Shropshire² (ESWS) and facilitated by Helen Fairweather of Marches Community Enterprise³ and Resources for Change⁴.

The discussion was very open, energetic, engaged and wide-ranging!

We discussed our different experience (local, national & international), roles and skills (grass-roots, managerial and strategic), and shared enthusiasm for thriving rural communities.

We used the example of Bishop's Castle, an unusually well-connected and energetic community to explore the variety of players in all sectors: education, health, social enterprises (eg Household Energy Service, ESWS, Community Land Trust), business group, faith groups, tourism company, town council, social landlords, farming, arts & leisure (eg SPARC), police, and others.

What we learnt together

We recognised that every community is different, even ones geographically close, shaped by the energy of the individuals and groups driving activities and change in that community.

It seemed to us that representative democracy, at the core of a council's mandate and responsibility (and a key strength), can block its route to participative and inclusive democracy, as well as to effective on-the-ground action via the entrepreneurs and activists in each community.

¹ Shropshire is a unitary authority.

² www.bishopscastle.co.uk/enterprisehouse.htm

³ www.marches-community-enterprise.co.uk

⁴ www.r4c.org.uk

It was clear that we are a long way off a co-production approach. The main challenges & areas for development are at two levels:

At council level

- Connecting formal structures to community energy - the real do-ers on the ground, especially those who don't identify with traditional voluntary sector structures. Typically, councils have a clear communication route mainly to Town and Parish Councils.
- Mapping social capacity
- Identifying service areas/budget sections which could be delivered differently
- Clarifying accountability
- Transparency of procurement procedures

At community/entrepreneur level

- Building collaborations across sectors and levels (grass-roots/strategic)
- Building capacity and understanding at community level of its own potential to deliver
- Risk management

So what happens next?

The group members are keen to investigate routes towards new kinds of rural service delivery. We know we're not on our own on this. We would like to harness the energy in Shropshire to create one or two pilot projects, exploring a model which confronts the challenges to co-production outlined above.

Helen Fairweather, June 2011

How it came about:

My involvement with the Fiery Spirits <http://fieryspirits.com/> Community of Practice and the Carnegie UK annual convention in October 2010 opened my eyes to what is (and isn't) happening in the redesign of public services, and the theory and practice of co-production. In the following months I facilitated a social enterprise peer mentor group for BRAP www.brap.org.uk. The energetic participants wanted to develop effective collaboration and engage with the council's procurement process, to deliver better services in communities. Marches Community Enterprise www.marches-community-enterprise.co.uk offered a platform to help move these plans forward, and Resources for Change www.r4c.org.uk offered organising time. A serendipitous meeting with a senior councillor and officer gained their interest, and intensive diary co-ordination led to this small assembly of thinkers and doers.

Background

My thinking was informed by:

A Shareholder's Guide to Rural Services

http://issuu.com/fieryspirits/docs/a_shareholders_guide_to_rural_services/1

The Challenge of Co-Production

http://www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/The_Challenge_of_Co-production.pdf