Crunch time for community engagement?

The 'Communities in Control' White Paper forms part of a long chain of 'think tank' research papers, policy reviews and legislation that have emerged under New Labour. Many of the White Paper's proposals have been enshrined in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) that comes into force this year. Of immediate note is the requirement to fulfil a new Duty to Involve for all best value authorities in England (excluding police) as from 1st April. A further duty to promote democracy is included in legislation likely to receive Royal Assent this autumn.

Finding the time to absorb and, more importantly, *to act on* some of the key recommendations within this veritable tsunami of reports, guidance and legislation is a daunting task, even more so when there are clear tensions at the heart of these various policy initiatives. The increasing focus on *personal choice* (as individual consumers) can be contrasted with the need to find *collective solutions* (as citizens) to community-wide concerns, often within the constraints of centrally prescribed funding regimes and targets. Managing these tensions can leave local policy makers and politicians accused of failing to meet enhanced expectations in the design and delivery of 'community friendly' public services.

Alongside these attempts to engage and empower local people in service delivery has taken place radical reform of governance arrangements. The Local Government Act 2000 swept away the old committee structures and introduced new powers for councillors in promoting the economic, social and environmental well being of their communities. This led to the creation of Executive Committees in many authorities with 'back bench' councillors having an "enhanced representational role".

A huge array of partnership arrangements for 'joined up' service delivery now exists. The non-Executive Councillor now has few places to exercise any real authority. He (it usually is a he) is left feeling undervalued and resentful about being there simply to make up the numbers. An ODPM evaluation (2004) of the impact of these arrangements reveals the consequences :

"to say that non-executive councillors often feel their role has changed and that they are excluded from the decision making or policy processes of the council, is in part to restate one of the purposes of the Act in a negative way. The aim was to enhance the role of the political leadership and as such to limit the day-to-day decision making influence of non-executive councillors."

But decision-making does not have to be a zero sum game! Most day-to day decisions are of no strategic relevance and, however trivial they may be seen corporately, are seen as hugely important when viewed from a local community's perspective. It is the perceived persistent unwillingness or inability to address such daily concerns, or worse still, the apparent indifference to their consequences, that lies at the heart of the resentment and distrust of local government.

Councillor Margaret Clare – the Chair of Great Lever Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder in Bolton - gets the point:
" There's sometimes a fear that giving power to the community will mean councillors will lose it. I totally disagree. I'm on equal terms with the community at board level and by adopting an inclusive approach you can definitely achieve more"

The new Duty to Involve will make little impact on community empowerment if those local councillors at its centre are themselves disempowered and have no incentive to make the changes

that they see are required locally. The report of the Councillors' Commission (Representing the Future Dec 2007) makes the point with admirable clarity:

> *"Unless the perception that councillors lack power changes, nothing else will."*

And a participant at a recent Community Development Foundation empowerment conference reinforces the point: "there are hundreds of duties. Why bother with this one?"

In her speech at the recent SOLACE conference in Belfast Hazel Blears commented that: *"This is the time for local government to assert itself; to become the leader in focusing public, third sector and private sector efforts to develop overall well-being in localities".*

In doing so she echoes the views expressed by the Councillors Commission itself: "*councils had become dependent on central government ... for guidance, encouragement and permission to innovate. Local government...needed to gain ... a sense of powerfulness, with confidence and capability driven from within the local government community itself"*.

Dealing with the consequences of the credit crunch will undeniably be of huge importance to local government for some considerable time. All the more reason to pursue the 'common sense' approach that SOLACE Enterprises has adopted in its approach to the engagement agenda. Instead of getting drawn into devising the 'perfect structure' for community engagement it is far more important to invest in changing cultures of participation.

So, don't get overwhelmed by the tidal wave of guidance and legislation. Instead, assert your right to devise local solutions from within and, above all, do all that you can to incentivise involvement in local decision-making.