Research Paper

Place-keeping in action: Evaluating the capacity of green space partnerships in England

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Nine UK case studies involving two local authorities and seven Friends Groups.
- Community involvement is not static but evolves due to partnership capacity.
- Partnership capacity involves six interrelated factors within a local context.
- Community involvement is dependent on the support of a network of stakeholders.
- Most communities are unable to manage green spaces as local authorities do.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Residents and communities have long been interested in managing their local green spaces. As local authority budgets become increasingly restricted, communities are under pressure to take an active role in green space management in partnerships with the public, and where applicable, private sector. Support for such partnerships has been made manifest at the highest level of government through the UK's 2011 Localism Act. However, there is little research exploring the validity of expectations that community groups can take on such responsibility. This paper addresses this gap in knowledge by assessing to what extent groups have the capacity within cross-sector partnerships for sustained green space 'place-keeping', or long-term responsive management. This paper reports on data collected about nine cross-sector partnerships in Sheffield, Hackney, and Stockton-on-Tees. Taking a qualitative research approach, this paper applies a framework for partnership capacity based on interrelated factors, including capital, commitment, skill base, motivation, communication and political influence. The findings show that partnership capacity goes beyond these themes; it can be influenced by the political and historical legacy of a given place and the specific nature and context of place-keeping tasks. While findings show that partnerships work positively in practice, there are a number of barriers to community groups managing green spaces independently of local authorities, occurring at different scales including individual, group, partnership and the wider context. Without sustained resources and ongoing public sector support, the effectiveness of place-keeping partnerships is called into question.

1. Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, community involvement in green space provision, design, management and decision-making has risen up the political agenda. This is illustrated in the ongoing shift from (local) government green space management to a governance structure involving local non-governmental stakeholders (after Geddes, 2006). This is underpinned by the dominant neoliberal approach taken by many governments and described as 'governance-beyond-the-state' (Swyngedouw, 2005), where non-state actors play an increasingly significant role in decision-making processes. This approach has been embraced by UK government. The then Labour government called for 'ownership and control' by communities to 'own and run services...by serving on local boards and committees, or through social enterprises and cooperatives' (DCLG, 2008, p. 118). Echoing this, 3 principles guided the Conservatives' *Big Society* manifesto (2010): individual and

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community empowerment through a decentralised redistribution of power; the encouragement of greater social responsibility; and, the creation of an enabling and accountable state. This marked a shift from top-down micro-management to a flexible and locally responsive approach, made manifest through the introduction of the 2011 Localism Act. Through Area Panels and Community Assemblies (the lowest rungs of government), the Act provided significant community rights regarding government expenditure on local service provision and delivery, including budget allocations for parks. However, since 2011 the responsibilities associated with these rights have become unclear as (top-down) central government-led local authority budget cuts continue, including the abolition of Area Panels, Community Assemblies and ongoing reductions in park staff numbers.

The responsibility for parks, which were often land bequeathed to a town/city from original landowners and/or philanthropists, and other green spaces mostly lies with local authorities in England (Conway, 1991). As a non-statutory service, funding for parks and green spaces has long been adversely hit by budget cuts, and increasingly maintenance services are contracted out to non-public sector organisations in efforts to reduce costs. Alongside this fragility of funding is a historically strong and active involvement of communities and non-state actors in green space management (Jones, 2002). With political will driving forward distinctly local agendas, but without accompanying funding, the need to understand how public-community green space partnerships function in practice is timely and relevant. In this way, this paper takes a practice-oriented approach to understanding green space partnerships 'in action' in three parts of England. Generally speaking, green space practices tend to be state-dominated as the local authority has responsibility as landowner and/or manager with funding primarily from local and national taxation. Decisions about how general revenue budgets are allocated are taken by local councillors (CABE Space, 2006). The paper aims to understand better the *capacity* of cross-sector partnerships within this wider policy context by applying a conceptual framework of partnership capacity in relation to long-term and sustained green space management, or 'place-keeping' which builds on existing empirical research (Dempsey, Smith, & Burton, 2014). The paper will apply this practical framework to a number of existing cross-sector partnerships in nine green spaces to examine the nature and extent of their capacity for place-keeping. This will involve a qualitative exploration of the extent to which stakeholders within partnerships can withstand and undertake specific responsibilities and the ensuing challenges (after Macmillan & Townsend, 2006). The paper provides a timely examination of place-keeping in practice which can help professionals and academics understand the challenges faced by partnerships on the ground.

This paper builds on work conducted by the EU-funded project MP4: Making Places Profitable, Public and Private Open Spaces (2008–2013) which explored examples of place-keeping in northern Europe (Dempsey et al., 2014). The project aimed to establish and examine the overlapping dimensions of place-keeping, which are partnership, governance, funding, evaluation, policy, and design/maintenance. It became clear that more investigation was needed of these dimensions in specific political, social, economic and environmental settings, which was outside the scope of MP4. This paper is therefore a pilot study focusing on partnerships in a small number of sites in England.

2. Exploring partnership capacity

Partnership in place-keeping describes an association of two or more partners with shared responsibility for the long-term management of a place (Barnes et al., 2008; Burton & Mathers, 2014).

Partnerships may be informal, based on a mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities, or formal, based on written agreements and contracts. According to Burton and Mathers (2014), partnership is a contested term as in practice partnerships may not demonstrate genuine working together, but be 'little more than rhetoric' (Carnwell & Carson, 2008, p. 4). *Partnership* is related to the concept of *governance* which supposes that government does not work in isolation but through relations with civil society and non-governmental sectors, including the community. Governance in place-keeping describes these interactions, defining their roles and responsibilities in relation to the management of a place (Smith et al., 2014). It has already been highlighted that political interventions (such as the Localism Bill) directly relate partnership capacity together with voluntarism as a mechanism for effective partnerships. This has led to a marked and active engagement with the voluntary sector. According to Milligan and Conradson (2006, p. 2), this is increasingly viewed by the state as 'an attractive intermediate organisational form in relation to the somewhat tired state-market dichotomy'. The growing interest in volunteering has been underpinned by 'the debates around active citizenship, governance and neocommunitarianism' (Osborne, 2010, p. 3). Of particular interest in this paper is how citizenship can be oriented around place, and how and why such citizenship develops more strongly in some places than others, contributing to potential differences in capacity. It has been claimed that voluntary organisations and community groups often cannot function wholly independently of the local state (Milligan & Conradson, 2006). It is also argued that 'community participation in public service provision is not necessarily an emancipatory claiming of rights by citizens' but is rather a process passing on 'state responsibilities to civil society' (Rosol, 2012, p. 240). In this way, it is important to be mindful of the political context within which place-keeping is occurring.

The formation of a community group may be influenced by the extent of deprivation in a given neighbourhood. Chanan argues that 'disadvantage impedes participation' indicating that those living in deprived areas begin at a weaker position in comparison to residents in other areas (2003, p. 6). This may manifest itself as imbalances where certain (e.g. middle-class) groups can better act on their needs and communicate their demands (Rosol, 2012), perhaps with easier access to funding and (political) support. Stipulations in urban regeneration (or *place-making*; Dempsey & Burton, 2012) programmes in deprived areas, often require engagement and participation of residents in decision-making processes, to help strengthen social capital (Carpenter, 2006). In her examination of community gardens in Berlin, Rosol claims that "the starting point of the new interest in volunteering is the lack of funding for the parks maintenance" (Rosol, 2010, p. 557) illustrating how a lack of funding and attempts to mobilise communities can go hand in hand. Community engagement requirements in deprived areas (where social capital may be weak) are often managed as part of structured intervention from local authority-led partnerships (Chanan, 2003) – e.g. England's New Deal for Communities programme at the turn of the millennium. This highlights specific contextual characteristics for this paper in relation to spatial and inequitable disparities in funding, supporting governance structures and policy implementation (after Rosol, 2012). So for example, while an individual's propensity to volunteer can underpin the extent of wider community participation, the nature of the latter will also depend on the wider socio-economic and socio-demographic context. Insofar as is possible, we will explore the extent to which context has a bearing on partnership capacity in place-keeping in practice. For the purposes of this research, we define *partnership capacity* as the degree to which cross-sector partnerships are able to develop and deliver its aims and to withstand and respond to internal and external changes affecting place-keeping in practice. While the focus