Neighbourhood Governance: Contested Rationales within a Multi-Level Setting – A Study of Manchester

Catherine Durose & Vivien Lowndes
De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

Abstract
‘Neighbourhood’ is a long standing concept in local governance which was re-energised as part of the post-1997 New Labour policy paradigm. This paper builds on the work of Lowndes and Sullivan which identified four distinct rationales for neighbourhood working – civic, social, political and economic. The utility of the framework is explored through primary research in Manchester, UK. The research shows that different rationales are held by actors at different locations within the complex system of multi-level governance within which neighbourhood policy is made and implemented. Neighbourhood approaches to urban regeneration exist within a congested governance environment. In Manchester, regeneration has been strongly driven by the self-styled ‘Team Manchester’ who have provided an urban entrepreneurial vision for change in the city. Significantly, however, interventions at the neighbourhood level have shown potential for creating opportunities for citizen and community dissent and empowerment not subsumed with the narrative of the entrepreneurial city. Lowndes and Sullivan’s framework provides important analytical building blocks and illuminating tools for understanding neighbourhood approaches. This research points to the merit of a dynamic approach recognising competing perspectives and contested agendas.

Key Words: Neighbourhood, local governance, urban entrepreneurialism, community dissent, Manchester

Introduction
‘Neighbourhood’ is a long standing concept in UK public policy with numerous initiatives in the field of local government, social services and housing since the 1970s (Burns et al., 1994; Lowndes & Stoker, 1992a,b; Smith 1985). But, from 1997, the ‘neighbourhood’ has re-emerged under...
New Labour as a focal point for cross-sectoral policy interventions, which have been strongly steered (and also funded) by central government often ‘over the heads’ of elected local authorities. In policy areas like urban regeneration, social exclusion, community safety, public health, education, childcare and local business development, small scale ‘area based initiatives’ have proliferated. In the context of the UK’s ‘super-sized’ local government, the neighbourhood has been seen as the appropriate scale for tackling intransigent policy problems within an increasingly dispersed model of ‘local governance’. Over time, other aspects of the New Labour agenda, notably around citizenship and community leadership, have also come to be associated with neighbourhood working. As a policy approach, neighbourhood working in the UK takes place within a complex multi-level and multi-agency system in which elected local authorities are required to work in partnership with a range of public, private and community based agencies (Smith et al., 2007; Stoker & Wilson, 2004).

In a previous article, Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) sought to clarify the different rationales for neighbourhood working in what is undoubtedly a congested and confused policy space. Lowndes and Sullivan identify four potential rationales – civic, social, political and economic – and consider their relevance within contemporary UK policy debates. This article considers the utility of the framework for empirical research through a locality-specific study of the neighbourhood approach taken in Manchester, UK.

The article presents a multi-level analysis which considers the differential take up of the rationales within the city. The paper argues that national policy makers and neighbourhood based actors have been effectively allied around neighbourhood based working as a means of empowering citizens, particularly those in deprived neighbourhoods. Actors at the city level, however, have focused on a more diffuse concept of ‘place’, which aims to reflect wider market dynamics and facilitate ‘entrepreneurial’ urban strategies. Here, neighbourhood working is linked to service improvement and regarded primarily in instrumental terms.

The article starts by considering the broad characteristics of a ‘neighbourhood’ approach. Next the four rationales for neighbourhood working identified by Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) are explained and related to UK urban regeneration policy post 1997. The significance of Manchester as a case study is then discussed. Then evidence from the Manchester case study is presented in relation to the rationales. The research reveals that different rationales are employed at different levels (neighbourhood, city and national government). The article concludes by reflecting further on the usefulness of the rationales as set out.

What is a ‘Neighbourhood Approach’?

Interventions at the neighbourhood level are underpinned by the belief that neighbourhoods are ‘viable, recognisable units of identity and action, and are
therefore the appropriate locus for the planning and delivering of a range of services and activities’ (Chaskin, 1998: 11). The neighbourhoods’ agenda is also based on the premise that people are most likely to engage with services and policy making at a very local level; this is particularly resonant in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where people’s choices are more likely to be dictated by their immediate surroundings (Taylor & Wilson, 2006: 5; Smith et al., 2007). However, the use of the concept of ‘neighbourhood’ in policy has been mired by ongoing definitional difficulties.

As Kearns and Parkinson (2001: 2103) note, ‘there is no single generalisable interpretation of the neighbourhood’. As Taylor and Wilson (2006: 5) highlight, ‘there is often a discrepancy between top down “administrative” definitions that rely on ward boundaries or other boundaries used for the collection of statistical information and those that residents themselves apply’. For residents, perceptions of what constitutes the ‘neighbourhood’ will usually be based on ‘the location of family and social networks, amenities such as shops and schools and physical boundaries such as roads and railways’ (Taylor & Wilson, 2006: 5). However, ‘different residents and organisations will not always agree on the actual boundaries’ (Power, 2004: 2). The definition of a neighbourhood is inevitably subjective, dynamic and multi-faceted.

Whilst it is widely agreed that neighbourhoods are ‘socially constructed’, ‘neighbourhood’ is also a distinct spatial entity and on this basis can be differentiated from the more fluid concept of ‘community’ (Davies & Herbert, 1993: 1). This geographical dimension of ‘neighbourhood’ is central to understanding its prominence under New Labour.

Deciding upon a definition of ‘neighbourhoods’ may prove to be like counting angels on the head of a pin. Rather than seeking to define what a neighbourhood is, it is more useful to consider what the advantages might be of downscaling from a local (or municipal) government level to the sub-local arena. Consequently, following Lowndes and Sullivan (2008: 62), we understand a ‘neighbourhood approach’ in the following way:

a set of arrangements for collective decision making and/or public service delivery at the sub-local level. This implies the transfer of political and/or managerial authority from ‘higher’ to ‘lower’ level actors, although who gains power and over what depends upon the purpose and design of devolution ... ‘sub-local’ is a relative concept, referring to an area smaller than the local authority boundary, though such areas may contain 1,000 residents or 10,000.

Rationales for Neighbourhood Working

Lowndes and Sullivan (2008: 57–59) identify four rationales for why ‘neighbourhood’ may be considered as a useful scale and space for
intervention and policy action. These rationales are theoretically grounded but also reflect the use of ‘neighbourhood’ in policy terms under New Labour. The rationales are summarised in Table 1.

The **civic rationale** associates neighbourhood working with greater opportunities for direct citizen participation and community engagement and empowerment (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008: 57). ‘Neighbourhoods’ are often the sites where the issues that matter most to people’s lives are in sharpest relief (Durose & Richardson, 2009). Neighbourhoods are areas where citizens identify with and feel a sense of belonging (CLG, 2007, cited in Durose & Richardson, 2009: 31). The spatial aspect to the definition of a ‘neighbourhood’ provides a focus for the distribution of information and opportunities for direct participation.

The **social rationale** views the neighbourhood as a focal point for a more citizen-centred approach to governance (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008: 58). Neighbourhood arrangements have the potential added-value of providing an opportunity for developing more holistic and inclusive approaches to governance and service delivery allowing so-called ‘wicked’ policy challenges, like social exclusion, to be tackled. The neighbourhood provides a site for innovation in developing ‘joined up’ local action from a range of stakeholders and agencies to provide more integrated service provision, pooling resources, risks and rewards with the aim of achieving ‘collaborative advantage’ (Huxham, 1996). This rationale also sees the potential of neighbourhood working as a locale for ‘co-production’ and work with citizens to design and develop services that are more tailored to their needs.

The **political rationale** gives emphasis to the potential for improvement in accessibility, accountability and responsiveness in decision making by working at a neighbourhood level (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008: 58). Citizens are more likely to know, have access to and hold accountable elected decision makers at the neighbourhood level. In addition, citizens are more likely to have an informed perspective on issues at the neighbourhood level based on their own experiences and as such can participate in decision making.

### Table 1. Rationales for neighbourhood working

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Civic</th>
<th>Social</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on efficiency and effectiveness gains in local service delivery</td>
<td>Improvements in the accessibility, accountability and responsiveness in decision making</td>
<td>Opportunities for direct citizen participation and community involvement</td>
<td>Holistic and citizen-centred approach to develop joined-up local services</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal</td>
<td>Local government modernisation</td>
<td>Civil renewal</td>
<td>‘New localism’</td>
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<td>‘Double devolution’</td>
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*Source: Adapted from Lowndes and Sullivan (2008).*
The economic rationale emphasises the potential effectiveness and efficiency gains possible through neighbourhood working. Neighbourhoods are sites where diverse citizen needs can be more easily identified and so appropriate personalised services can be provided. There are potential cost savings which arise from exploiting synergies between related services and reducing waste and duplication (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008: 59).

New Labour’s use of ‘neighbourhood’ in policy has drawn on all four of these rationales in different policy agenda (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008). Durose et al. (2009) map the use of ‘neighbourhood’ as a concept in the New Labour project. In the last decade, ‘neighbourhood’ has been filled with so many different policy agendas and objectives so as to potentially lose its spatial and experiential distinctiveness. For instance, under New Labour, ‘neighbourhood’ became, in effect, a ‘code-word’ for central government policy makers seeking to tackle poverty and inequality without having to explicitly articulate these objectives (Cochrane, 2009). This has led to confusion regarding the specific contribution that neighbourhood-based approaches can offer in addressing social exclusion, and an unhelpful elision between the general concept of ‘neighbourhood’ and the particular experience of areas of multiple disadvantage. Moreover, since 2006, the prominence of ‘neighbourhood’ in UK central government policy appears to be waning, which distracts attention from ongoing, and innovative, local initiatives (Durose et al., 2009).

In their survey of neighbourhood working, Durose and Richardson (2009) find that some rationales have greater resonance than others at the local level. Specifically, they acknowledge the progress of local government in pursuing the ‘social’, ‘political’ and particularly the ‘economic’ rationale for neighbourhood working; but they note the ambiguous stance of most local authorities towards the ‘civic’ rationale. In addition, the ‘social’ rationale in practice is often subsumed by the ‘economic’ rationale where concerns about efficiency dominate re-design of services. Furthermore, the ‘civic’ and ‘political’ rationales can be seen as potentially in tension with one another, the former emphasising participatory forms of democracy, while the latter stresses the ongoing role of traditional representative modes.

Our starting point is that the rationales provide a useful heuristic device for exploring the experience of neighbourhood working. The framework facilitates a mapping of the different perspectives that can be brought to bear on the same initiative within a multi-level setting, and the tensions – and spaces for innovation – that this can create. These issues are explored through case study research on neighbourhood regeneration in Manchester. Next we review the policy context for our case study.

Neighbourhoods in UK Urban Regeneration Policy

Although not a new policy tool, the neighbourhood approach was a notable part of New Labour’s post 1997 urban policy agenda. Indeed, it was a key
part of the branding of the new government. As noted earlier, New Labour’s policies around ‘neighbourhood’ have drawn on all four of the rationales outlined.

Early in the New Labour administration, a number of practitioner-informed Policy Action Teams (PATS) were established focused on key policy challenges. From one of these PATS the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was established. The SEU emphasised a spatial understanding of social exclusion and deprivation. The SEU established the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR; SEU, 2000, 2001) which identified priorities for action in relation to health, crime, employment, education and housing, targeting the 88 most deprived neighbourhoods in England, with the aim of narrowing the gap between deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. The aim was for the government, local authorities and other service providers ‘to reallocate resources in their mainstream programmes to tackle deprivation better’ (SEU 2001).

Implementation of the NSNR was coordinated by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) and worked through a series of other neighbourhood based regeneration programmes. The flagship programme was the New Deal for Communities (NDC), NDC funding was for 10 years, a significant expansion from previous regeneration programmes and an acknowledgement of the entrenched problems in many deprived areas.

The government’s initial focus on tackling social exclusion has elements of the ‘social’ and ‘economic’ rationales. Other parallel agendas of ‘double devolution’ and local government modernisation give prominence to the ‘political’ rationale for neighbourhood working. Latterly, policies stemming from Blunkett’s interest in ‘civil renewal’ gave support for neighbourhood based volunteering and community development initiatives reflecting the ‘civic’ rationale (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008: 61).

In some localities, neighbourhood approaches also built upon local authorities’ own traditions of sub-local working (Burns et al., 1994; Lowndes & Stoker, 1992a,b). However, all these developments have taken place in the context of an increasingly centralised, target-based regime of local government funding (Stoker & Wilson, 2004). Ironically, a greater role for neighbourhoods has not been associated with any devolution of power from central to local government (as has been the case elsewhere in Europe – see Denters & Rose, 2005). Indeed, the promotion of neighbourhood working may even be considered as part of a central government strategy to exercise further control over policy interventions and outcomes at the local level.

Regeneration in Manchester: A Case Study

Lowndes and Sullivan’s work (2008) is one of several attempts to understand neighbourhood approaches (see also Durose et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2007). This article aims to assess the utility of this framework through
a case study of neighbourhood regeneration in Manchester, and the experience of two specific neighbourhoods.

Manchester is a particularly interesting and a useful case study for several reasons. The approaches to urban regeneration taken in Manchester have been extensively researched (Peck & Tickell, 1995; Quilley, 1999; Ward, 2003). As such a particular narrative on regeneration has become associated with Manchester. This narrative or, as Quilley (1999) terms it, ‘the Manchester script’ emphasises the ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ (Cochrane et al., 1996; Harvey, 1989; Ward, 2003) of Manchester City Council. ‘Urban entrepreneurialism’ refers to cities behaving like businesses, developing ‘entrepreneurial measures narrated in entrepreneurial terms’ (Jessop, 1994: 37).

Manchester has been seen to have driven forward a supply-side strategy based upon property-led regeneration and place-marketing aiming at developing an ‘urban idyll’ (Hoskin & Tallon, 2004), which emphasises attracting a new (middle class, young, professional) population and ‘de-risking’ some parts of the city for private investors (Beal, 2009). This strong narrative and vision for Manchester is seen to be articulated by those Peck and Tickell (1995) call the ‘Manchester Men’ or the self-styled ‘Team Manchester’. The ‘Manchester Men’ are a small group or cadre of six to 10 senior city leaders and public servants who have occupied prominent positions in the city for the last 15 to 20 years, working with business leaders to develop and implement a shared vision of the entrepreneurial direction of the city.

The narrative of Manchester as an entrepreneurial city has shaped the city-level approach to neighbourhood based working and regeneration. Manchester’s neighbourhood approach is perceived as an opportunity to further city-regional ambitions and economic reach. Neighbourhoods in Manchester are seen to have a catchment area (in terms of markets for labour, property, investment, leisure and retail for example) across the whole of the city-region. Neighbourhood working and regeneration in Manchester aims to shape places that people might want to live in, visit and invest. Within the discourse of urban entrepreneurialism, ‘neighbourhood’ becomes simply an arena within which individuals make choices (to take up residence or move out, to invest or develop). It does not feature as an actor in its own right, in the sense of expressing a set of collective interests or identities, or providing a basis for political or civic agency. However, it is not clear from earlier research how pervasive the narrative of urban entrepreneurialism is and how far it is shared, owned and articulated beyond the ‘Manchester Men’.

The strong, locally formulated and driven agenda in Manchester presents an interesting challenge to the empirical relevance of the rationales for neighbourhood working that we have discussed so far. In a sense, neighbourhood approaches have to compete with other approaches to regeneration championed in the local authority. The city-level priorities
have meant that some of the potential objectives and underpinning rationales for neighbourhood working have slipped out of focus at the city level and the rationales are perhaps not able to give purchase on the full story. However, the Manchester case study suggests that the rationales are potentially useful in illuminating the inter-relationships between different levels of governance – central, local and neighbourhood – with broader implications for our understanding of the dynamics of contemporary multi-level governance.

Since the early 1990s, Manchester City Council and its partners – notably drawn from the private sector – have worked with central government on a string of nationally funded and directed programmes for integrated area based regeneration. Whilst, substantive regeneration has taken place – also catalysed by events including the 1996 IRA bomb of the city centre and 2000 Commonwealth Games – Manchester continues to be ranked highly in terms of deprivation. The two case study neighbourhoods considered – Hulme and Beswick – both have long standing trajectories of regeneration.

Hulme is an inner city and multi-ethnic neighbourhood, close to the central business district of Manchester. Hulme has a long and contested history of regeneration in the form of interventions led by both the city council and central government dating from the 1960s. The area became one of the first areas in the UK for the implementation of an integrated multi-sectoral strategy for regeneration, in the form of the City Challenge initiative which ran from 1992 to 1997. During this period, Hulme underwent substantial physical and demographic change. In the decade following the City Challenge initiative, Hulme has continued to receive particular attention from Manchester City Council in an attempt to consolidate and extend the changes. The extent and impact of community participation in Hulme has been of particular interest to national and international commentators (Pares, 2009).

The second case study neighbourhood, Beswick, is a predominantly white working class area; although so called ‘new communities’ of economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are growing in the area. Beswick’s regeneration has a shorter timeline than Hulme. As Ward (2003: 5) notes, ‘strategies to tackle [deprivation in] other areas, such as Hulme and Moss Side have taken precedence, with the effect the longer the needs of East Manchester residents were left unattended’. Beswick, and the neighbouring wards in East and North Manchester, were the subject of numerous unsuccessful applications for regeneration funding in the early 1990s.

Eventual success came with a bid to the NDC programme, which was focused on a far smaller area for regeneration than previous bids. NDC was a funding stream determined on the basis of the extent of deprivation, previous regeneration funding and the development of a local multi-sectoral partnership. Manchester was one of the Pathfinder areas, securing funding of over £50 million over 10 years. Beswick and Clayton are the only area within the local authority to receive this funding. NDC programmes give
great emphasis and indeed resources to developing community involvement ownership of the regeneration process.

Beswick is also a central part of the larger Urban Regeneration Company (URC), ‘New East Manchester’, which brings together a range of government and European funding streams – including the NDC project – and partners in the private and community sectors. The regeneration of the neighbourhood has been ongoing since the start of the NDC initiative in 1999; through the URC strategies are now in place until 2018. The NDC project in Beswick has received national acclaim, along with critical scrutiny for its community engagement strategies there is also current concern for their sustainability. The NDC funding came to an end in 2008 when the initiative was merged with the wider URC, which is more focused on physical and economic regeneration.

Alongside these special time-limited programmes, Manchester City Council has also developed strategic regeneration frameworks – to replicate that provided by the Urban Regeneration Company in East Manchester – in the North, West, South and South Central districts of the city. Ward coordination is another means of advancing a sub-area focus in the city.

Ward coordination is led by senior council officers, together with locally elected councillors, and is directed primarily at developing partnership working with public sector agencies. The espoused aim of ward coordination is to deliver improvement in service delivery through collaboration between different service providers at the ward level (the electoral district). Manchester City Council posits elected councillors as the key conduits between communities and decision makers and makes little additional provision for community engagement.

Research Methods

The central research question concerns the utility of Lowndes and Sullivan’s framework for understanding the dynamics of neighbourhood working within a specific locality. Linked questions consider how the rationales are played out at different governance levels in Manchester, and whether the rationales are subsumed within the dominant narrative of the ‘Manchester script’.

An initial review of existing academic research, grey literature and material produced by Manchester City Council and its partners informed the research. The research was mainly constituted by a series of individual semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2009.

The sample was based on selecting respondents both ‘serially’ in terms of their position and ‘contingently’ reflecting their reputation (Erlandson et al., 1993: 92). Individuals were identified from mentions in the preliminary document based research and/or because they were considered to occupy positions of important relevance to regeneration strategy and neighbourhood working at the city level and reflected positions within the case study
neighbourhoods. The sample was ‘snowballed’ as participants were asked to identify other potential interviewees which provides a contingent if arguably exclusionary sample (Munro, 2007).

The research involved 25 semi-structured interviews with individuals at Manchester City Council, including both executive elected members, members of the senior management team and other officers; and at Manchester Partnership (the local strategic partnership), including public, community and voluntary sector partners. In two specific neighbourhoods, Beswick and Hulme, elected ward councillors, ward managers, community development workers and regeneration team members were interviewed. In addition several community group meetings were attended and observed.

Interviewees were asked about their background and role as related to neighbourhood working and regeneration; their perspective on the neighbourhood approach taken in Manchester and the motivations for the city working in a neighbourhood way. Actors working at the neighbourhood level were asked about difficulties and opportunities in their neighbourhood and the impact of earlier regeneration interventions. They were also asked about the current initiatives, including key actors and relationships and areas of strength and weakness. All actors were asked about their perspective on the city-level agenda and on the level of priority given to neighbourhood working, and the profile within this of particular localities.

Documentary, interview and observational data were analysed using the rationales for neighbourhood working as a coding frame. This article considers the rationales employed in Manchester for neighbourhood working. It looks at the patterns of take-up of the rationales, which rationales are the most significant, and for which actors. It also reflects on how useful the framework is in identifying the basis for neighbourhood working.

How is the ‘Neighbourhood Approach’ Played Out in Manchester?

The research revealed that different actors at different levels tell different stories about the objectives and practice of working at a neighbourhood level. For many councillors – both executive and ward – and officers, taking a neighbourhood approach presents a challenge to their traditional roles. Many have not previously taken a locality or community-centred approach to their work. The government has urged councillors to take up new roles at the neighbourhood level as ‘community champions’ (ODPM/Home Office, 2005) following the reforms legislation in 2001 to establish a separate Executive Leader and Cabinet.

Officers at the city level outside of self-styled ‘Team Manchester’ who were interviewed as part of the research showed an interest in neighbour- hood working and of the four rationales were most attached to the ‘economic’ rationale, that is, the benefits accruing from economies of scope:
the bundling of a range of different services to maximise synergies and reduce duplication.

City-level actors – including Executive councillors and officers – repeated a story of how the ward coordination system was initiated following pilots of ‘Best Value’ initiatives. Given achievements in the pilot Best Value areas, the city council decided to roll out the system across the city. The aim was to achieve efficiency gains by delivering services in neighbourhoods.

These efficiency gains are seen to be achieved by developing a cross-service approach to delivering services at the neighbourhood level. This rhetoric reflects the ‘social’ rationale for neighbourhood working. However, whilst the language of partnership is employed as an underpinning to neighbourhood working, it seems that the nature of partnership working in practice is more aligned to the aims of the entrepreneurial city. At the city level, there has been a focus on building relationships with the private sector. Manchester City Council is regarded as having particularly strong relationships with the private sector, with a senior city council officer arguing that council–business links were ‘the best in the UK, probably the best in Europe’.

The city council’s relationship with other public sector agencies had been ‘more uneven’ according to one senior officer. Yet ‘social’ objectives for neighbourhood working can only be achieved by working in partnership with these other public sector agencies. In addition, many partners at the city level reflected that relationships between the city council and the voluntary and community sectors were also difficult. The sector was criticised by officers for its ‘moribund complacency’ and ‘overly bureaucratic structure’, which one senior officer described as ‘nearly as bureaucratic as many people think the council is’. Many officers within the council were cautious about the contribution that the voluntary sector could make in terms of developing more responsive, citizen-centred services, one commented ‘the voluntary and community sector should not become a go-between for the council and the community; that makes the council more remote’. Another senior officer commented, ‘groups that purport to be umbrella groups are often no nearer to the community than we are’.

The views of officers working at the city level were reflected in the perspectives offered by Executive councillors. Both officers and councillors themselves gave great emphasis to the representative mandate of councillors and showed a sustained belief in councillors acting as the central conduit of communication between the community and the council. Both groups seem reluctant to the idea that this mandate may be enhanced through more participative means and neighbourhood working. As one city council officer put it, elected members feel ‘they have to control that process [of representation] and are blinkered about the possibilities of a positive contribution’.

In fact, there was evidence of a deep-seated cynicism regarding citizen participation. There is, however, at least a rhetorical commitment for
Manchester City Council to engage with communities. One voluntary sector worker commented that the city council ‘don’t know how to do it well’ and argued that the council was not ‘pro-active’ in terms of community engagement, and was prone to ‘navel gazing’. When talking to Executive councillors and senior officers there seemed to be little activity in terms of the broad range of participation strategies that have been associated with leading UK local authorities since the mid-1990s (Lowndes et al., 2001). Executive councillors and officers referred to ward coordination as a mechanism for ‘seeking validation’ for council policies and services from local communities. Initiatives labelled as ‘community engagement’ were often little more than dissemination of information or consultation on already specified options, for example, through citizen panel surveys, newsletters and public meetings. One senior officer went further, arguing that such consultation was only appropriate in particular areas, he stated that ‘residents don’t want to get involved [so] in areas that are sustainable and not deprived, why consult?’

As such, whilst opinions are strong on the nature of politics and democracy in Manchester amongst Executive councillors and officers, these perspectives do not underpin a ‘political’ rationale for neighbourhood working, which emphasises the potential benefits to local representation from increased accessibility and accountability or indeed a ‘civic’ rationale which stresses the potential for direct citizen participation and engagement.

The views of many officers, particularly senior, and councillors, notably within the Executive, do not reflect rationales for neighbourhood working beyond the ‘economic’, where the emphasis is on the possibility for efficiency gains. The ‘social’ rationale is subsumed within the ‘economic’ rationale and the wider entrepreneurial aims of the city. The potential for buttressing the representative mandate through participative means is widely dismissed, as such ‘political’ and ‘civic’ motivations for neighbourhood working are notably absent.

In contrast to the Executive councillors and officers working at the city-level, many of the officers based directly in the neighbourhoods have a long-standing background in area-based regeneration. Many community workers based in Hulme and Beswick have established links to the area or a background in community development. The city-level perspective, outlined above, is significantly challenged by actors at the neighbourhood level, notably officers working in our case study neighbourhoods which are both deprived and have been the target for long standing regeneration interventions. Many neighbourhood actors – including a councillor outside of the ruling majority – were critical of the approaches taken by leading central actors.

Actors at the neighbourhood level were familiar with the ‘economic’ rationale for neighbourhood working but did not give it primacy. Instead, the ‘economic’ rationale was widely seen in instrumental terms, as a means of building a case for more localised working. As one officer in Beswick
noted, devolving services to the neighbourhood level is critical to building community ownership of services and tackling the feelings of disempowerment experienced by residents in areas like Beswick and Hulme.

At the neighbourhood level, strong support was given to the ‘social’ rationale for neighbourhood working and the opportunities presented for developing more ‘citizen-centred’ services. However, whilst there is clear support for the social rationale as an objective, it was not clear that it was being delivered. For example, many officers and community workers argued that, in Beswick, some public agencies have not taken the holistic approach advocated by New Deal for Communities, instead taking a ‘stigmatising’ approach to working with people in poorer areas. This failure to ‘mainstream’ a holistic approach to delivering neighbourhood services is seen to have hampered the impact of the regeneration. There is no doubt that the general situation has improved as a result of the regeneration initiatives, but there is concern that this has not impacted significantly ‘hard to reach’ individuals and families. This perceived failure led to repeated advocacy of the need for multi-agency, holistic, resource-intensive and early interventions.

The opportunity for developing a ‘citizen-centred’ approach through neighbourhood working seems to be reflected in the perspectives of the community themselves. As two officers in Hulme commented, there are many isolated ‘territorial pockets’ in which people have a ‘very blinkered view on life, don’t even see themselves as near to or connected to the city centre ... they want facilities on their doorstep’. A neighbourhood focus allowed an understanding of citizen viewpoints – for instance, that a green space on the housing estate across the road was not seen as within ‘their’ territory.

Many neighbourhood actors, both officers and community workers, voiced criticism of the practice of councillors, particularly their willingness and skills to work in the communities they have been elected to represent. Many officers working at the neighbourhood levels, along with (unsurprisingly) community workers, were strong advocates for developing direct citizen engagement in local decision making and community empowerment and reflecting the ‘civic’ rationale for neighbourhood working.

The two case study neighbourhoods of Beswick and Hulme were both subject to additional regeneration interventions from the city council, these areas were seen to have greater opportunities for citizen engagement. An Executive councillor expressed the distinction thus: ‘McDonalds say: there’s deluxe then super deluxe. Well, regeneration areas get super deluxe and everywhere else gets deluxe’. The ‘super deluxe’ nature of these opportunities can be seen more as a result of government interventions than city council ones. The City Challenge initiative in Hulme (Pares, 2009) and the New Deal for Communities programme in Beswick were both seen to offer additional opportunities for communities to engage in the planning and delivery of services than areas with only ward coordination.
However, in both case study neighbourhoods, officers and community workers voiced concern about the inclusiveness and sustainability of community engagement. In Beswick, one programme officer described the situation as having ‘pushed a ball half way up a hill’. When the NDC ends, all the gains made may be lost: ‘we need to keep them [the community] involved and keep pushing, or it will go bad’. Another neighbourhood worker commented: ‘in 2010 when NDC funding ends, this approach will end’. There seemed to be perception that when the neighbourhood went back to ‘deluxe’ levels of engagement, there was still a cultural barrier for officers and councillors in engaging with the community, as one programme officer summed up the challenge, ‘we must forget the fear of talking to residents and remember that consultation doesn’t mean making an area or a budget more difficult to manage’.

In addition, there are questions about the inclusiveness of NDC and city council strategies. In Beswick, particular concerns have been voiced by community activist groups that improvements within the immediate neighbourhood of Beswick have been at the expense of the neglect of other areas. There is also a perception from some community groups that the unstated aim of the regeneration programme has been to gentrify the area and re-locate the existing community in favour of attracting a different demographic (Rees, 2009). This process has also been termed ‘social cleansing’ by particular community groups.

Wider engagement of the community in decision making in Hulme is acknowledged by many to be dwindling since the direct regeneration funding for the area ended. One community activist in Hulme referred to this as the ‘magnolia mentality’ whereby residents end their involvement in the community once their own house has been improved and decorated (‘magnolia’ refers to the standard shade of new paint). But this may also be a reflection that the process of regeneration can be traumatic and draining for residents; it is perhaps unrealistic to expect residents to maintain such an intense level of involvement over a long period of time.

As in Beswick, groups that feel excluded by the city council from decision making are also vocal in their criticisms. In Hulme, there are ongoing tensions between tenants’ and residents’ associations (TARAs) and the city council. One councillor noted that in the past five years, the council had ‘de-recognised’ eight TARAs in Hulme. ‘De-recognition’ refers to the process where a TARA is judged to have contravened the requirements to be an official TARA and receive funding from the city council. Many TARA members have argued that de-recognition is a result of their criticisms of the council. A long standing umbrella group for the TARAs in the area is now failing, in part as a result of an ongoing conflict with the council about payment of business rates.

There is also significant activism in Hulme on environmental sustainability issues, lobbying the council for more open spaces, protection of wide areas
and arguing for support for local ‘green’ sustainable industries. This sort of activism is long standing in Hulme but is often seen by the city council to be the preserve of ‘activists’, who are dismissed as ‘not real people’.

That neighbourhood working can create opportunities for community engagement and participation is implicitly acknowledged by actors at different levels with differing perspectives. Neighbourhood level actors – some officers, community workers and community groups – acknowledge and support the opportunity for empowerment and dissent. Within the council, concern about this dissent is palpable. As a senior officer commented: ‘I am not sure why any local person would want to come to council meetings and discuss issues that maybe or maybe not affect their own lives . . . perhaps we should be suspicious of those who do’. Yet, in the context of a strong and robust Labour majority, such concern over the potential risks of engaging more with the community seems somewhat unfounded.

Conclusions – Contested Rationales within a Multi-Level Setting

The rationales for neighbourhood working provided by Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) provided a useful frame for drawing out the perspectives taken by actors at different levels in the complex governance context of neighbourhood working. The article has shown that different rationales for neighbourhood regeneration are employed by actors at different levels (national government, city and neighbourhood). Neighbourhood level actors expressed a strong commitment to ‘civic’ rationales emphasising neighbourhood based working as a means for the empowerment of citizens, particularly in deprived communities. City level actors, in contrast, emphasised ‘economic’ rationales focusing on efficiency improvements in service delivery. The neighbourhood approach was seen in essentially instrumental terms: as a means of accessing central government grants, for instance, or as a convenient location for testing citizen perceptions of services improvement. For Manchester’s entrepreneurial urbanists, neighbourhoods did not feature as actors in their own right, in the sense of expressing a set of collective interests or identities, or providing a basis for political or civic agency.

Durose and Richardson (2009) in a wider survey of neighbourhood working in the UK have acknowledged the ambiguous stance of most local authorities towards the ‘civic’ rationale, perhaps because of the inherent challenge it presents to traditional interpretations of local government’s role. However, it is the ‘civic’ rationale that captures the motivation and aspirations of neighbourhood-level actors, who perhaps feel distanced from corporate city visions. Ironically, in the face of city-level instrumentalism, in many localities it has been central government’s support for the civic rationale through neighbourhood-based funding programmes like City Challenge and NDC that has helped to sustain the commitments of neighbourhood level actors.
That the rationales are not able to give purchase on the full story of Manchester’s perspective on regeneration is not a surprise. Our research in Manchester shows that neighbourhood approaches to urban regeneration exist within a complex multi-level and multi-actor governance environment. Taking place in the most micro, localised arenas, regeneration programmes are nevertheless shaped by policy shifts and resource dependencies at the city, regional, national and European levels, which in turn involve many and varied actors from the public, private and community sectors. Significantly in Manchester, interventions at the neighbourhood level have shown potential for creating opportunities for citizen and community dissent and empowerment not subsumed with the narrative of the entrepreneurial city. As such, neighbourhoods are potentially important ‘counter state spaces’ (Brenner, 2004) or ‘subversive spheres’ (Sullivan, 2009). Indeed, neighbourhood regeneration programmes depend upon ‘negotiated, non-hierarchical exchanges’ (Peters & Pierre, 2001: 32) between actors at many different levels and in many different sectors – including civil society. ‘Neighbourhoods’ are not autonomous collective actors able to impact upon public policy independent of the ‘tangled scalar hierarchies’ that Neil Brenner (2004: 295) sees as characterising contemporary governance.

However, new shifts in urban policy away from the neighbourhood (Durose et al., 2009) present a challenge to the unlikely coalition between neighbourhood actors and central government. In the third term of the New Labour administration, central government has also begun to articulate a series of new narratives around regeneration, crucially around the notion of ‘place shaping’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006: Lyons, 2007). ‘Place shaping’ seeks to substantiate a broader strategic role for local government, a crucial aspect of which is the ‘building and shaping local identity’ (Lyons, 2007: 3). Place shaping does not explicitly exclude a focus on neighbourhoods, but they become less visible as place shaping is seen to operate at a ‘higher’ spatial scale – the city, sub-region or even region. It could be argued that Manchester’s ‘entrepreneurial urbanism’ over the last two decades pre-empted the place shaping narrative now being articulated by government. In fact, the agenda is itself informed by the experience of cities like Manchester and Birmingham, where Sir Michael Lyons was formerly Chief Executive.

Alongside place shaping, other national policy developments appear to be ‘bringing local government back in’. Local Area Agreements, for instance, have provided new opportunities for city-level discretion in the planning, resourcing and prioritising of local services (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008b). Government policy increasingly links ‘empowerment’ to a range of local authority mechanisms (redress, petitions, e-forums) rather than affording any privileged role for neighbourhoods (see Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008a). Neighbourhood working is becoming, quite properly, more a matter of local authority choice than central government mandate. It is less likely in the future to be
accompanied by special funds and new governance arrangements, which (in principle at least) have afforded new opportunities for community engagement. Future research needs to examine the legacies of New Labour’s fascination with ‘neighbourhood’, and how these are interacting with enduring, locally-derived traditions of sub-local working and of grassroots community action.

Further comparative research is needed to establish how different rationales for a neighbourhood approach to regeneration coexist within different contexts, how such mixes change over time, and whether a focus on neighbourhoods is proving sustainable. The Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) framework provides important analytical building blocks and illuminating tools for this work. But our case study research points to the merits of a dynamic approach that recognises the multiplicity of competing perspectives, and the contingency of prevailing power relationships and institutional settlements.

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Notes

1 The UK has on average 2,605 inhabitants per elected member and the average population per local authority is 118, 400. Both of these statistics are by far the largest in Europe (Council of Europe 1996, cited in Wilson & Game, 1998: 228).
2 The 25 interviews included: four senior city council officers; two executive councillors; one city council officer; three city level public, community and voluntary sector partners. Across the two neighbourhoods: five senior officers; three officers; one ward councillor and six community workers. Our thanks go to all those who participated in this research.
3 ‘Best Value’ is an initiative introduced early in the New Labour administration as part of the local government modernisation agenda aiming at improving service efficiency and effectiveness; the initiative is widely seen to have its roots in local government. It was piloted in Manchester in the late 1990s across three ‘neighbourhoods’ of varying socio-economic deprivation.

References


