

Evolving involvement: exploring the devolution effect on patterns of UK community involvement in urban green space

1st Author: Alice Mathers

University of Sheffield, UK, a.mathers@sheffield.ac.uk

2nd Author: Julie Frøik Molin

University of Copenhagen, Denmark, molin@life.ku.dk

3rd Author: Mel Burton

University of Sheffield, UK, mel.burton@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

Whilst public participation has long been a feature of UK planning policy (Skeffington, 1969), recent government momentum behind community involvement has resulted in devolution of resources and control from public service providers, placing power into the hands of the community through Community Assemblies. As a non-statutory service, open spaces have a historic relationship with community involvement programmes (Jones, 2002). However questions arise regarding the degree to which communities should and are capable of undertaking this pivotal role? This paper explores the impact of increased localism upon public and community partnerships and evaluates the extent to which community-led management is truly sustainable. In association we consider the role of partnerships within the concept of placekeeping (Wild *et al.*, 2008). We propose, whilst ‘top down’ governmental guidance continues to promote an ideal of long-term involvement, in practice alternative working models exist demonstrating the importance of related factors such as personal motivation and capacity. Forming a focused component of the wider MP4¹ transnational research project, this study involves the qualitative analysis of local authority and community partnerships within six UK urban case studies.

Key words: community involvement, devolution, partnerships, placekeeping and sustainability.

Introduction

Devolution in the UK

In the UK a continued devolution of control from governmental to non-governmental bodies, has altered emphasis on governance and reduced local authority access to funds, replaced by community and private interest grants. Within the last three years, political support for community involvement in public service provision and decision-making has appeared prominently on the agenda of the UK’s main political parties (Labour and the Conservatives). In 2008, publication of the then Labour government’s White Paper *Communities in Control* called for ‘ownership and control’ by communities whereby ‘people can own and run services for themselves either by serving on local boards and committees, or through social enterprises and cooperatives’ (Communities and Local Government 2008, p.118). Mirroring this in 2010, the Conservatives *Big Society* manifesto trumpeted ‘a redistribution of power away from the central state to local communities’. The *Big Society* was to be guided by three key principles: that of empowerment of individuals and communities through decentralising and redistributing power, encouragement of greater social responsibility and creation of an enabling and accountable state ‘transforming government action from top-down micromanagement and one-size-fits-all solutions to a flexible approach defined by transparency, payment by results, and support for social enterprise and cooperatives’ (Cameron, 2010). As a result, the latest incarnation of devolved governance, Community

¹ Making Places Profitable – public and private open spaces (MP4) is a transnational collaborative research and practical implementation project funded through INTERREG IVB. The project is undertaken by a partnership of nine Project Partners that include Universities and public bodies in the EU ‘North Sea Region’. The MP4 project aims to demonstrate how the positive socio-economic impacts of open space improvements can be maintained in the long term through innovative ‘place-keeping’ approaches.

Assemblies, now replaces Area Panels as lowest level of UK government. Community Assemblies are aimed at enabling the general public to have a greater say regarding priorities for public spending within their area. Within the remit of Community Assemblies, budgetary allocation can be decided for expenditure on services such as parks, libraries and street cleaning. As a key area of non-statutory service provision, the design, development and long-term management of parks and open spaces has always had a historic, and integral, relationship with community involvement programmes (Jones, 2002). Yet, with increased public spending cuts and Community Assemblies driving forward local agendas, the need to understand factors affecting the success or otherwise of community involvement in sustaining quality in open space has never been more relevant.

Community involvement, a balance of priorities

UNCED's Local Agenda 21 can be identified as an important milestone regarding engagement of communities in neighbourhood and open space decision-making by working as an international blueprint outlining actions that governments, international organisations, industries and the community can take to achieve sustainability (UNCED, 1992). Community involvement in open spaces can take many forms, occurring at a variety of political levels and stages in the design and management process. Involvement in the planning and design of spaces, or placemaking, is extensively covered in literature (Johnson, 2005; Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005; Van Herzele *et al.*, 2005a), and whilst a number of studies have reflected upon involvement after open spaces creation, for example in management and upkeep activities, most literature continues to concentrate upon cases found in the context of rural landscapes, national parks and nature conservation (Boon and Meilby, 2000; Grönholm, 2009; Lange and Hehl-Lange, 2010). In contrast, research regarding community involvement in urban green space management remains limited. Among the few examples are studies which consider the role of urban forestry volunteers in the US (Moskell, 2010) and of user participation in Swedish municipal park maintenance (Delshammar, 2005). In relation to these studies, it is clear that many societal benefits can be obtained through involvement of local communities in open space planning and management. Amongst these, that involvement in local green space activities acts as a means to increase wider awareness of comprehensive global environmental problems (Van Herzele and Denutte, 2003; Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005; Van Herzele *et al.*, 2005b; Ohmer *et al.*, 2009). In addition, where open space decision-making is seen as a more inclusive and transparent process, there appears an increase in feelings of site ownership by the community, which leads to a reduction in vandalism and anti-social behaviour (Van Herzele and Denutte, 2003; Ohmer *et al.*, 2009). In parallel, it is noted that the number of positive social interactions increase as does the sense of community (Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005; Ohmer *et al.*, 2009). Two final benefits identified are the opportunity to offset or accommodate public funding cuts through the volunteer involvement (Jones, 2002; Moskell, 2010) together with noticeable improvements to the physical local environment (Jones, 2002; Van Herzele and Denutte, 2003).

Nevertheless, processes of community involvement can be complex, with evidence from the literature identifying various challenges that should be considered when engaging the public. A key issue relates to representation, where research into collaborative urban forestry planning in Finland (Sipilä and Tyrväinen, 2005), demonstrated that the number of participants is often very limited and frequently agendas are driven by a minority of vocal individuals rather than collectively decided. Furthermore participatory approaches can be time-consuming for local authorities, with great sensitivity needed to manage expectations as to what can be practically realised in order to avoid disappointment. A lack of continuity within the process can also create difficulties. In a cross-European research project

limitations were identified regarding sustainability of engagement over long periods of time and ensuring stability between different stakeholder relations. This not only included community partners, but also green space managers and involved politicians whose roles and responsibilities were apt to change (Janse and Konijnendijk, 2007). Therefore, whilst community involvement is proven to be a less straightforward process than recent political manifestos would suggest, the many benefits it generates have far reaching and long-term consequences for both quality of life of populations and the quality of environment. However, how we think about the sustainability of these benefits must encompass not only the generation of space and place but also its future management or placekeeping.

Placekeeping or long-term management through partnership

The MP4 project has exposed the importance of partnerships and governance in sustaining the placekeeping of public open spaces (Burton and Dempsey, 2010). In this context placekeeping is defined as maintaining and enhancing the qualities and benefits of places through long-term management. Within placekeeping, partnerships between local authorities, communities and charitable trusts describe a shared responsibility for the long-term management of public open space. The emphasis is on a horizontal, rather than hierarchical approach in which the importance of formal and informal networks and contacts, that make use of local knowledge and enthusiasm, play an important role (Dempsey and Burton in press, Wild *et al.*, 2008). Placekeeping partnerships attract additional resources to an open space such as through organisation of events, acting as the ‘eyes and ears’ of a site and enabling access to funding streams not accessible by local authorities. All these are likely to become increasingly important in light of reducing local authority budgets and fewer resources for open space management. There is the additional benefit in that, through community involvement, the ‘lived in’ experiential dimension of public open space is revealed. This would be unlikely to be uncovered purely by professional involvement and adds richness to placekeeping to ensure experiential benefits are retained and developed.

Historic models of involvement

Whilst consideration of long-term management in terms of placekeeping is a relatively new concept, in the UK a number of national open space programmes have sought encourage community participation through placemaking and more infrequently placekeeping. As the first UK community-led green space regeneration scheme Pocket Parks was highly influential in the evolution of community involvement. Formed in 1980 by Northamptonshire County Council the scheme created of over eighty open spaces, which owned and managed by local people. In this respect, Pocket Parks proved to be a victim of their own success. The high demand for spaces was quickly out weighed by limited funding and staff, insufficient support for community training and a reliance upon a small number of dedicated individuals rather than wider community support. As natural successors of the Pocket Parks programme, Millennium Greens and Doorstep Greens, initiatives of the then Countryside Agency, aimed to promote greater involvement in the development and management of local green space by communities. Between 1996 and 2000, the Millennium Greens programme (supported by the Millennium Commission) took an increasingly direct approach to community governance, whereby communities undertook full responsibility for the purchase or lease and then management of sites. As subsequently acknowledged by the Countryside Agency this initiative was over-ambitious with issues of ‘over-strict rules, legal and land-ownership complexities, too few volunteers and long-term un-sustainability’ (Countryside Agency, 2006). Therefore whilst the scheme was successful in terms of placemaking, with two hundred and fifty new public open spaces created, in terms of a practicable model for community-led placekeeping Millennium Greens displayed key limitations. The Doorstep

Greens programme launched 2001, focused upon developing restorative benefits through everyday contact with green environments. Doorstep Greens provided grants for two hundred communities to 'create and manage their own special local space' and aimed to become a 'catalyst for far-reaching community regeneration' (Countryside Agency, 2006). The Pocket Parks model was highly influential in development of Doorstep Greens, breaking down barriers in professionalism that sustained a 'them and us' stance. Partnership was at the heart of this scheme with up to seventy percent of project costs funded through Doorstep Greens, whilst match funding generated the remainder. Sustainability was also embedded with a commitment to expert support, legal protection regarding community use of the site for a minimum of twenty-five years and a placekeeping safety net in the form of a framework agreement with the local authority. Doorstep Greens had many advantages over the Millennium Greens scheme, it was actively inclusive of less empowered communities, involved a greater level of expert staff support, structured the participatory planning and design process in response to community needs and provided funds for maintenance and securing community cohesion. However, without a formal (and realistic) agreement as to who had the capacity and responsibility for placekeeping, momentum gained during placemaking often dissipated as the enormity of long-term commitment dawned. This left site management to the committed actions of a small minority. More recently a new open grants programme funded through the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces initiative introduced Community Spaces (2009 - 2011). This scheme, managed by Groundwork UK, had once again a similar aim of empowering community groups to improve public spaces in their neighbourhood. The impact of this is yet to be fully felt, but once again achieving meaningful community involvement is placed at the centre of the schemes success.

In critically reviewing these community involvement initiatives a number of key themes emerge. First is expert facilitation. Community involvement initiatives appear most successful when a high level of support from the programme staff is involved i.e. Doorstep Greens. Second is flexibility. Where a long-term commitment and resourcing from communities is obligatory, projects have more limited sustainability such as Millennium Greens. Third is refinement. From Pocket Parks through Millennium Greens and Doorstep Greens it appears, through reflective reporting (Countryside Agency 2006) that organisations involved in facilitating community-involvement are aware of the shortcomings of previous schemes, and keen to amend these in future. Fourth is sustainability. Millennium and Doorstep Greens did not include formal agreements for placekeeping; therefore responsibility for long-term management was devolved from wider community participation to smaller groups and individuals, leaving the process highly vulnerable. Finally proximity. As highlighted by the success of Doorstep Greens the location of open space is closely linked to the level of community involvement. Where the space is visible and seen to be local there is a greater opportunity to develop ownership, pride, belonging, care and sustained collective responsibility. This paper now focuses upon understanding different patterns of community involvement, from the perspective of community groups and the local authorities that seek to support them, through application of an evolutionary involvement model.

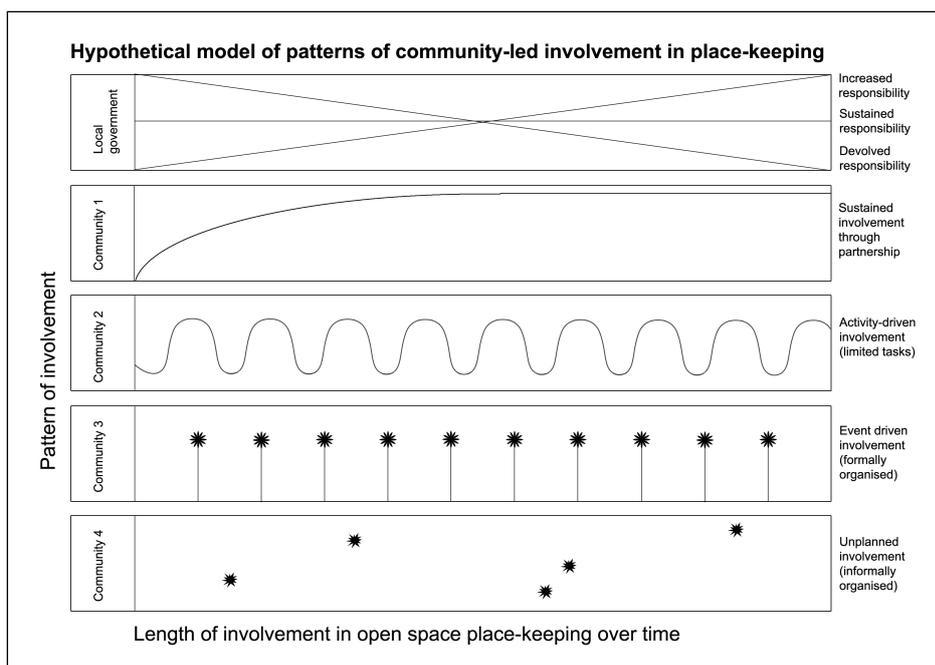
Material and Methods

Models of community involvement

From the literature a worrying disconnect emerges between *Big Society* aspirations of sustained community involvement (where public service provision is not only supplemented by volunteerism but in the extreme replaced) and lesson learnt from a legacy of participation programmes. In order to understand this divide, the following diagram illustrates not one but a number of community involvement models (evolved through critical reflection on past community involvement programmes), and asks that we consider the potential impact of

these in relation to devolved responsibility within local government (through the Community Assemblies) and budgetary cuts. Each pattern of involvement (*Local government* and *Communities 1 to 4*) is illustrated over the same management time period, from placemaking (planning, design and construction) through placekeeping (long-term maintenance). Involvement by *Local government* is seen to follow one of three potential patterns: increased, sustained or decreased responsibility. For the purpose of this paper we focus upon decreased responsibility, as is the current UK political situation. *Community 1* represents the purported governmental ideal of stable long-term community commitment. This relies upon formal, established community groups such as ‘Friends of’, undertaking a permanent commitment to the management of sites which grows over time until they reach a point of continuous, high level involvement. *Community 2* reflects a more activity-driven approach to involvement, whereby groups invest in a site through involvement in specific projects. In this model, whilst involvement is maintained over time there appears great variation in commitment, dependent on factors such as seasonal change, funding and personal interest. In the *Community 3* model, groups are only engaged occasionally in the site, through formally organised events such as tree planting, festivals and activity days. Between these events, open space involvement by the community is minimal. Finally, *Community 4* embodies an informal approach to participation through sporadic happenings. These open space activities occur independently of local authority involvement, for example through guerrilla gardening (Johnson, 2006).

Figure 1: Community-led involvement in placekeeping



To test the relevance of these models (in particular that of sustained community involvement) we qualitatively investigated factors affecting involvement of six community groups (Friends) in Sheffield and Stockton-on-Tees. The interaction between these factors produced a more holistic picture of each group’s capacity, or current sustained ability, to undertake a further formalised role in open space management (placekeeping). Friends are community groups whose voluntary commitment to the placemaking and or placekeeping of open space is officially recognised by the local authority. Once a Friends group is constituted, the local

authority enters into a formal community-public partnership with the group to support their activities and development.

Methods

Six community involvement case studies were undertaken to investigate the open space involvement of Friends groups and their relationship with the local authority. Formal semi-structured interviews (Schoenberger, 1991) were carried out with council officers responsible for green and open spaces and community involvement within the two local authorities. In Sheffield, this entailed three interviews with the Community Projects Manager, a Community Projects Officer and Parks Development Officer from the Parks and Countryside Team. In Stockton-on-Tees an interview was carried out with the Strategy and Development Manager from the Countryside and Greenspace Team. The interviews were held at the offices of the council participants, to best reflect the normal working environment of the interviewee and thereby create a comfortable interview situation. Awareness was paid to the potential for power relations to develop within these interviews, as has been well documented when interviewing elites (Schoenberger, 1991, 1992; McDowell, 1992; Cochrane, 1998). However the existence of prior research connections with the interviewees (as part of the wider MP4 project and the second author's PhD project) facilitated a more equal interview arena within which interview topics were discussed openly. Semi-structured interviews were then carried out with members of the six Friends groups. In order to create a more informal and neutral atmosphere, these took place within community buildings (such as cafés) in the open spaces with which the Friends were involved. In addition where possible, these interviews were followed by a walk around the site led by the Friends, with the researcher recording observations with use of a sound recorder and digital camera. Mobile methods such as participant-led walks and 'go-alongs' (Carpiano, 2009) have in recent years become a more established approach within qualitative research (Jones *et al.*, 2008 citing Ricketts Hein *et al.*, 2008), as they provide an ideal and informal method 'for exploring issues around people's relationship with space'. Within this project they were useful in providing the opportunity for the Friends to guide the direction of conversation. In turn this revealed a further level of detail regarding their involvement with the site, which was not always captured during the semi-structured interview.

Case study selection

Four case studies took place in Sheffield, where seventy-nine Friends groups are currently listed on the Sheffield City Council database (Community Partnerships, 2011). In the Sheffield City Council Friends of Parks and Open Spaces Survey 2010, key activities undertaken by Friends included open space improvement, practical conservation, fundraising and events. From this database, four Friends groups were identified who were currently actively involved, worked in differing geographic and demographic areas and whose sites provided contrasts of scale, nature and establishment. These were the Friends of Firth Park, Sheaf Valley, Porter Valley and Millhouses Park. Stockton-on-Tees is located in Northern England and has approximately 186,000 inhabitants. The Stockton-on-Tees Countryside and Greenspace team collaborate with a number of Friends groups both in urban parks and nature reserves. Activities undertaken by Friends in Stockton-on-Tees include manual work, lobbying, fundraising and events. Some of these groups are put in place as a necessity to draw in funding, whilst others have evolved out of local interest. From Stockton-on-Tees two urban case study sites were identified, Newham Grange Park and Ropner Park.

Case study 1: Firth Park, Sheffield. The Friends of Firth Park have been centrally involved in the park's regeneration since their formation in 1999. Firth Park is a traditional Victorian

park at the centre of the Firth Park residential area. The Friends involvement follows a number of modes but after the anticipated completion of their latest project in September 2011 they expect to be primarily event orientated. The group works in partnership with the local authority, particularly in the construction of funding bids, and has been instrumental in the park's securing of Green Flag status. However, they do not wish to take on further practical responsibility for the site. A concern for the group is their capacity to sustain involvement as their members are generally older and it is difficult to recruit younger people.

Figure 2: Firth Park, banner advertising the annual summer festival organised by the Friends.



Case study 2: Sheaf Valley Park, Sheffield. Sheaf Valley Park is a large, transitional open space located in the centre of Sheffield. The large scale nature of the site, combined with the capacity of the Friends group, has restricted the focus of Friends activities to date however they have contributed to understanding of local useability of the site particularly in relation to access issues and safety. Launch of the events space is anticipated to encourage involvement of other stakeholders through an events based programme.

Case study 3: Porter Valley, Sheffield. The Friends of the Porter Valley are an established group constituted in 1995. With over 470 members, many from professional backgrounds, they have considerable capacity to carry out placekeeping. Their focus on the regeneration of the Porter Valley river corridor has including improvement of natural, historic and archaeological features. They work in partnership with many local organisations, but receive primary support from the local authority. Their involvement is at present secure due to a number of highly motivated (and retired) trustees who personally commit a large percentage of time to Friends work. Some of the greatest challenges for this group are managing the different interests of the many site stakeholders and, as membership of the Friends grows, the capacity of a small number of trustees to carefully coordinate and handle these relationships.

Case study 4: Millhouses Park, Sheffield. The Friends of Millhouses Park are a high capacity community group in terms of membership numbers and individual capabilities. Since their constitution in 1991 the Friends have attracted considerable funding to the site and in partnership with the local authority have transformed a number of areas within the site, including creation of a sensory garden, outdoor gym, water play area, fish pass and most

recently a children's road way and new tree avenue (September 2011). The Friends have many plans for the site's future development and are well networked to achieve this.

Figure 3: Millhouse Park, the Fish Pass a project created through funds raised by the Friends.



Case study 5: Newham Grange Park, Stockton. The Friends of Newham Grange Park were formed in 2005 by local residents, who wanted to regenerate the park which was in a state of decline. The park is a large greenspace in the heart of Stockton serving as a recreational area for adjacent residential areas. The Friends of Newham Grange Park were involved in development of a park masterplan (partnership with the council) and now the subsequent delivery of this, including installation of a new play area, shrub clearance and enhancement of the gateway entrance. The group has approximately 60 members including 5-12 committee members. Committee members are on average aged 60 or over and female, with the group struggling to recruit younger members. The chair is very engaged and uses his experience with project management from his professional career. In the future the group will try to consolidate its activities and develop a junior section.

Case study 6: Ropner Park, Stockton. Friends of Ropner Park were founded in 2002 as a partnership with the local authority when the council received a large Lottery Grant for renovation of the park. The park has a Victorian design and was established in 1893. The Friends are responsible for organisation of all events in the park, including concerts in the bandstand and managing the café. Today the group consists of 145 members, six of whom are involved in the committee. The members are mainly elderly and there is a need for more young people to help with physical demanding tasks. Until now the group has not been engaged in manual work but they are now trying to become involved in this e.g. renovation of the park's rose garden.

Results

The interviews aimed to reveal different factors affecting the community groups' capacity to carry out placemaking and placekeeping. Table 1 below lists a number of dimensions of capacity for each Friends group as well as a suggested model of involvement (cf. Figure 1)

Table 1: Factors of capacity and suggested model of involvement for the six community group case studies.

| | <i>Sheffield</i> | | | | <i>Stockton</i> | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|---|
| Friends group | <i>Firth Park</i> | <i>Sheaf Valley Park</i> | <i>Porter Valley</i> | <i>Millhouses Park</i> | <i>Newham Grange Park</i> | <i>Ropner Park</i> |
| Members | 30 (12 active members) | 15 active members (affiliated members belong to the Residents Against Station Closure (RASC)) | Over 470 (10 in committee) | 250 approx | 60 approx (5-12 in committee) | 145 (6 in committee) |
| Remit of the Friends activities | Design of the feasibility strategy and master plan, collaboration on funding bids, litter picks (in the past), tree planting, art in the park, public talks, events and community consultation. | Community representation, tree planting, the events space launch, reporting changes in site maintenance and assistance with upgrading to Green Flag status. | Publicity and communication, collaboration with the council on funding bids, site maintenance (i.e. bench repainting, shrub clearance), public talks and events. | Park development strategy, events, publicity and information, funding, park security and some limited onsite maintenance. | Development of the site master plan, community liaison, events and practical work e.g. thinning of hedge. | Organise events in the park, bandstand concerts, and oversee management of the café. |
| Funded bids | MP4, Changing Spaces (Big Lottery Fund), Veolia Environmental Services, Sheffield Homes, Graves Trust. | EU funding (including MP4) and small grants scheme. | Section 106, Graves Trust, Fresh Water Trust, Charles Haywood Trust, Land Fill Trust, South Yorkshire Foundation, Church Burgesses and Town Trust. | Community Spaces, Environment Agency and Yorkshire Water, individual small grants. | Impetus Environmental Trust, Section 106 | The park has undergone a big renovation on basis of a Big Lottery Fund. |
| Members fees | Annual membership £2 per person | No (however a reciprocally supportive relationship with RASC has provided funding for Friends materials e.g. campaign banners. | Annual membership retired couple (£10), single retired person (£5), family (£15) and couples under retirement age (£15). | No. | Yes | £7/year |
| Regular voluntary work | Committee attendance at monthly meetings. | Committee attendance at meetings. | Key committee members contribute approx. 10-24 hours/ week to overall organisation and individual projects. | Six monthly meetings of committee. Individual sub groups meet very regularly on specific projects. | Committee meets every two month | Committee meets every two-month. AGM is only regular meeting for whole group. Craft group meet regularly. |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|--|---|---|
| Irregular voluntary work | Events i.e. summer and winter festivals, history walks. | Committee meetings, publicity and funding. | Events, monthly walks, seasonal six-month programme of activities. | Events i.e. project launches such as the Millhouses Mill building launch. | Walks in the park with community, Christmas carols | Informal talks with residents in the park, events. |
| Transferable skills | Some committee members come from professional backgrounds. | Teacher (chair). | Members are mainly from professional backgrounds i.e. academics, managers. | Members are mainly from professional backgrounds i.e. academics, managers, web designers. | Members are mainly from professional backgrounds i.e. engineering, project management and teaching (youth involvement) | More members have academic backgrounds. |
| Familiarity with the site | Very familiar, next to home, walks through every day. | Very familiar, next to home, walks through every day. | Familiar, local park. | Very familiar, next to home, walks through every day. | Familiar, local park. | All members use the park in some way. 'Attraction park' for people all over Stockton. |
| Capacity to undertake manual/active work | Low (most are retired) | Low (most are retired or elderly) | Good (retired but fit and healthy) | Very good (some retired but fit and healthy, other members are younger) | Not part of daily routine (chair can normally ask for help when needed) | Low (most are retired or elderly). Mainly interested in events. |
| Motivation | Improve the park and social opportunities for the community. | Improve the park and stop antisocial behaviour. | Improve the valley and share knowledge about the site. | Improve the park so it becomes a 'city recognised' site. | Improve the park and social opportunities for the community | Mainly socially motivated in connection with events and café. |
| Limitation | Mainly retired members enjoy attending the social monthly meetings but do not want to take on further responsibility. | Commitment has been sustained through 'local' involvement; people from outside the local area have not remained active in the group. | Women are mainly interested in events and social activities rather than manual tasks. Membership is elderly; difficult to recruit younger people. | Requires a large commitment from people, and so the next generation need to be involved now. | Women are mainly interested in events and social activities rather than manual tasks. Membership is elderly; difficult to recruit younger people. | Mainly elderly people; difficult to recruit younger people. |
| Internal communication | Emails, meeting minutes, telephone calls and newsletter | Emails, meeting minutes, telephone calls | Website, email, meeting minutes, telephone calls and newsletter. | Website, email, meeting minutes, telephone calls and newsletter. | Meetings, daily contact and personal network e.g. the chairs contacts in the church | Informal meetings and events. |
| External connectivity | Notices in park, newsletter, social media (Facebook), however this acts as a forum and is not used to advertise events. | Email and written communication. | Local press (radio, newspapers), website, newsletter, programme of activities, public talks. | Local press (radio, newspapers), website, newsletter, programme of activities, public talks. | Public exhibition of master plan, questionnaires, excursions to other parks, e-mails. | Website, newsletters |

| | | | | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|---|---|--|---------------------------|
| Degree of influence | Local but strong (through the Community Assembly) | Potentially good (through partnership with RASC). | Strong (through the Community Assembly, links with councillors and wider community) | Strong (through the Community Assembly, links with councillors and wider community) | Local | Local |
| Model of involvement | Combination: sustained, activity driven and event driven involvement. | Activity driven involvement. | Combination: sustained, activity driven and event driven involvement. | Sustained involvement through partnership. | Sustained involvement through partnership. | Event driven involvement. |

Discussion

As can be seen in Table 1 the capacity of the six case study community groups varies greatly due to a number of factors. This has obvious implications for the current political expectation of devolved governance in open space service provision (including the symbiotic processes of placemaking and placekeeping). Whilst some groups include members with transferable skills (i.e. from previous professional occupations in academia or management) and many bring with them a wealth of local and site specific knowledge (Jones, 2002), most groups lack individuals with the expertise (or inclination) to undertake long-term physical management activities. Groups therefore remain reliant on the local authority for primary support to sustain the physical quality of the site. Furthermore, whilst some of the high capacity groups (such as the Friends of Millhouse Park, Newham Grange Park and the Porter Valley) demonstrate a model of sustained involvement, with the potential to take on further responsibility, this is seen by the groups themselves as a fragile and temporal situation. Central to all the Friends success is a reliance upon a minority of dedicated members to sustain group momentum (Sipilä and Tyrväinen, 2005). As one of the key limitations identified through review of previous public engagement programmes (Pocket Parks, Millennium Greens and Doorstep Greens), this has wider implications in terms of inclusive participation and representation. Alongside the political shift towards localism, advances in communicative and collaborative approaches to planning (Healey, 1992, 1993, 1997 and 1999) have created opportunities for communities to take further control in decision-making, and through a more democratic approach challenge the dominance of the professional (Glicken, 2000; Irwin, 2006; Cohn, 2008). However, without methods to draw more underrepresented groups into the arena of public debate and community involvement, devolving power has the danger of favouring the interests of the prevailing few (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). In this project, those smaller groups from less affluent areas (Firth Park and Sheaf Valley Park) acknowledged particular difficulties in recruiting broad community representation (particularly younger people and those from ethnic backgrounds). In connection to this the cross case study demographic of the groups was generally older (retired) and predominantly female. In certain cases this revealed a deeper level of information regarding significant activity preference of the groups (Firth Park and Newham Grange Park) i.e. committee meetings (providing social opportunities) and events (familiar social activities and organisation). The majority of members in these groups were less keen to take on more formal sustained activities such as grant writing or practical work.

The ultimate sustainability of all of these groups is inherently linked not only to their internal organisation but also their ability to create and maintain partnerships through external networks. Those groups who were facilitated by a wide network of partners (Millhouses Park and the Porter Valley), in addition to the local authority, were able to draw upon these in

terms of public visibility and support and political backing. With the value of partnership in placekeeping clearly identified (Dempsey and Burton in press), a key to unlocking sustained community involvement is unravelling how these groups are so successful in developing networks. Consideration of the differing models of community involvement (Figure 1) in relation to the case studies, demonstrates that community involvement is not a static entity but one that has the potential to grow and also shrink over time. As a result many groups may not be able to sustain momentum on their own if local authority support diminishes or disappears. Where there is reduced stability between stakeholders such as previous secure relations with the local authority parks department, the smaller case study groups already display vulnerability, an issue identified of further international relevance (Janse and Konijnendijk, 2007). Therefore if we value the many benefits that sustained community involvement can bring, we must acknowledge the continued need for public authority support, be patient in allowing involvement to evolve over time and seek to understand factors that facilitate community network creation.

Conclusions

This paper reveals significant questions for UK local authorities, as they face yet another push from central government towards greater devolution of services. With expectation mounting as to the increased 'ask' of community involvement, it is obvious that some established community groups will have difficulties in riding this wave of change due to lack of internal capacity and external support. Currently all Friends groups work in partnership with local authorities, and from this research it is clear that they would wish to continue to do so. Long-term community commitment is closely linked to recognition of value by the local authority, should the move towards greater self-support continue, the public sector must invest in further development of the community's skill base through appropriate training. The Friends level of independence from the local authorities is directly related to the extensiveness of the group's external networks and collaborations. This is supported by a consensus in the literature and policy guidance, which states that a partnership approach to public space management is an effective one (Bovaird, 2004, Carpenter, 2006). Therefore we propose that a combination of the state, market and user-centred models would prove the most advantageous approach for effective community involvement in open space management (de Magalhães and Carmona, 2009). The involvement of Friends groups is a matter of evolutionary capacity building, and as such we suggest that in order for these groups to become more self-supporting, local government should look to providing support to develop partnerships outside that with the local authority. Hence, future research on how these networks facilitate community involvement is needed. In a wider Pan-European context, for example in Denmark where community involvement by local authorities is also on the agenda (Tortzen, 2008), the present study can be used to emphasize the importance of continuous support by the local authorities. We conclude that whilst community involvement brings many benefits it can by no means be seen as a quick fix in times of economical constraint.

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Bibliographies

Alice Mathers is a Landscape Architect and Research Associate in the Department of Landscape at the University of Sheffield, UK. Her work is driven by an interdisciplinary approach to people-environment interactions, which straddles the academic boundaries of landscape architecture, planning, sociology, disability studies, human geography and environmental psychology. Her research with disabled people seeks to challenge current professional, academic and societal constraints that inhibit the involvement of underrepresented communities in environmental planning and design.

Julie Frøik Molin is a Landscape Architect and PhD student at Forest & Landscape at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Her PhD project focuses on gathering existing experiences with involvement of citizens in management and maintenance of municipal green spaces, namely on how the local authorities are approaching involvement of citizens, the motivation and engagement of the citizens and the potentials for a beneficial collaboration between the two parties. Her research is carried out in Denmark and England.

Mel Burton is a chartered Landscape Architect and Project Manager for MP4 based in the Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield, UK where she teaches on wide range of subjects. She worked for many years in local authority and private practice with a particular focus on stakeholder engagement in green space regeneration.