Introductory presentation

Today's event gives us an opportunity to reflect on the use of communities within recent policy agendas and to discuss what a co-operative response might look like. Over the last nine years there has been a whirlwind of policy interest in promoting local and neighbourhood-level control, both of public services and of the built environment. Much of that debate has tended to assume that there is something particularly virtuous about neighbourhood and community level activity. It has tended to represent it as having a greater degree of accountability than local government and as not being weighed down by time-consuming bureaucracy. Visually and aesthetically, local control has been associated with the kind of anarchic vision of community promoted by the 'godfather' of town planning Ebenezer Howard, through his vision of garden cities, and similarly by Sherry Arnstein. Her famous "ladder of citizen participation" saw the formation of local co-operatives (with public financial support) as intimately tied up with a redistribution of power from the haves to the have nots. Arnstein contrasted a kind of feigned interest in consultation with the radical promotion of citizen control. A similar vision, this time of neighbourhood renewal, was promoted by Colin Ward in the late 70s to suggest that fuel and housing subsidies could offer in a much more constructive, community-led solution to inner city decline: one based on collective solutions to reducing the cost of living rather using urban task forces to attract private capital. Regular nods towards this kind of localism agenda have been made by all the main parties, albeit within a different economic context.

If we go back to 2008 and to the emergence of the recent localism agenda we find New Labour's "Communities in Control" white paper which, rather cryptically, offered to put communities in the driving seat as part of a "single conversation" between localities and central government. While this ensured a measure of redistribution to less affluent communities, and supported a policy focus on area regeneration, it came at the end of a long period of "partnership working", which had seen relatively cosy relationships between private sector actors and local government that were often difficult for local citizens or community groups to influence.

With hindsight, the white paper might be seen as a failed attempt to head off calls for "localism", which were being promoted by both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives framed this in terms of a *zero-sum relationship* between state and community control which implied, not just the redress of power relations under Labour, but a wholesale shift in local government towards services being delivered by external organisations. Furthermore, this was to be coupled by a dramatic decline in funding and an enforced dependence on the local private sector to generate the business rates or developer contributions needed to support local services.

The influence of the Liberal Democrats within the post-2010 coalition, while often difficult to make out clearly, did help to secure public funding for self-help housing, the effect of which was to sponsor community approaches to self-reliance in less affluent urban areas and allow assets to be built up. But funding has not been continued. In fact, national government as a whole post-2015 seems to have moved away from a concern with communities to return to more centralised enforcement of market dependence and privatisation. The political right, having made a concerted effort to capture concerns around societal life and community, traditionally associated with the left, now seems to be abandoning this territory to concentrate on more divisive concerns such as nationalism and immigration.

What we do know, looking forward, is that a properly resourced commitment to considering the management of places over the long term is in danger of disappearing. Indeed, we've seen this before in the way that spending cuts worsened the effect of economic collapse on many places in the north east, from Scotswood to the Meadow Well to Middlesbrough's South Bank. The recent round of austerity has not only meant fewer services. It has sometimes meant more remote services, as economies of scale are sought in an attempt to save money. Pressures to deliver services through external suppliers favour a simplistic emphasis on a small number of targets, while removing democratic oversight from large areas of service provision. Movements by communities to self-organise locally, and to find ways of generating revenue from social-entrepreneurial activity, seem to be one of the few routes left available to maintain long-term, co-ordinated thinking.

There is therefore a huge opportunity for forward thinking local councils, together with citizens and community organisations, to set out a bold alternative to the kinds of localism that have been given to them over recent years. For those local citizens who care deeply about the places they live in, engaging with this agenda offers an alternative to feeling powerless about the currently quite depressing political and economic situation. There are also significant political opportunities to be gained by reclaiming community. Rhetorically, community offers a positive alternative to divisive, and sometimes racist, policy agendas around difference and immigration and practically, a re-engagement with community provides ways of rebuilding trust and solidarity. If this is to be achieved, however, we firstly need a clear, conceptual understanding of the political agendas to which a co-operative-inspired localism agenda might be turned.

Conceptual clarity

Conceptual clarity is needed because the images attached to recent versions of localism – of garden cities and support for co-operatives – have often masked the use of localism to advance quite different political agendas. Neoliberal thinking, for example, promotes a small state and the use of markets to organise society. But it may still promote co-operation as a substitute for tax funded welfare and, in the case of co-operative housing for example, as a stepping stone towards privatisation of home ownership. Parallels can be seen in the Conservatives' extension of right to buy to social housing providers and their use of neighbourhood plans as a mechanism to allocate more land for private development. In this model, co-operatives have little bearing on local democracy.

Liberal and communitarian uses of co-operatives might provide more inspiration for regions like the north east. Unlike the Big Society's 'zero sum' conception of localism, which sets up communities in opposition to the state, liberals such as John Stuart Mill have argued for a state that addresses inequality and is capable of fostering virtuous and tolerant citizens. Co-operatives might be balanced alongside market competition and systems of state welfare. Participative democracy, decentralisation, the nurturing of change from below and the promotion of accountability to users are all seen to address the tendency of remote state activities or large corporations to alienate and disempower citizens. There are parallels with the coalition agenda in the promotion of publically funded self-help housing as well as attempts to promote local accountability in public services.

However, the tradition of communitarian Socialism has always gone further than this. It emphasises the ownership of assets and economic activity within the co-operative sector as part of a challenge to broader market activity founded in collective and democratic organisation. For radicals, associations must be built up which can form the building blocks of a new society in the event of, for example, a worldwide environmental crisis. It is this definition of localism and co-operation that Howard, Arnstein and Ward were seeking to advance.

The Co-operative Councils agenda provides an opportunity to draw more strongly on our liberal and communitarian heritage. Some councils have awarded public service contracts to co-operatives or social enterprises in an attempt to drive services by a commitment to public service rather than targets, but this sets up conflicting lines of accountability. There have been efforts to join up public services and focus them on needs as defined by users and communities, but this offers a relatively limited role for civic engagement and is also being challenged by the sheer scale of budget cuts. There have also been attempts, some of which we'll hear about today, to share resources with local co-operatives, to promote the co-design and co-delivery of services and to devolve budgets or capital assets to them. Such moves create opportunities to draw on the work of communitarian writers such as Michael Sandell and Colin Ward, who have argued that active engagement of citizens in ethical and political decisions about common futures is of fundamental importance in maintaining peoples' sense of collective responsibility: it is critical to promoting and maintaining solidarity. Activists such as Paola Freire and Saul Alinksy have argued for the importance of political successes, that is, to avoid apathy citizens need to be able to experience the translation of collective organisation into real change through a circular pattern of activism.

There are also some more fundamental dangers associated with the promotion of any localist agenda which we need to include in our thinking. These include the structure of representation and accountability within co-operatives and community organisations, the differing ability of people to engage and the potential for community organising to be adopted for unexpected ends, for example the tea party movement in the US. The presentations this morning will provide space to discuss these concerns in more detail.

This event therefore provides an opportunity to debate which kind of co-operative vision we would like to see emerge across the region and to discuss the merits and risks of a greater focus on co-operative working. We have space to debate how we can activate communities and work together effectively, perhaps to co-design and co-deliver services, so that we can make thin resources go further. We need to have a shared debate about these issues that goes beyond any one organisation, because our political, social and economic future, particularly in the north east, depends on finding new ways of working together.