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Matching the process to the challenge within small town regeneration

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that government initiated programmes have often failed to match the process of regeneration to the local challenges faced. This paper explores the potential for enhancing the efficacy of government support by means of a case study within which a government agency attempted to better match the process to the challenge. The findings suggest a need to be more realistic about what can be achieved through regeneration assistance. Long-term regeneration processes need to be locally led, where “big fix” external prescriptions do not adequately match the process to the challenge. New models for government support are required which recognise that successful processes are developed through sustained “small wins” over long periods. Whilst tensions between external governance ideas/concepts and the practical realities of local implementation remain, locally specific challenges to implementation cannot be circumvented through external prescription tied to funding.

Key words: regeneration; collaborative governance; small towns; rural settlements

Introduction

Viewed within the context of small towns, which is the focus of this paper, in-depth studies exploring the practical realities of regeneration processes have illustrated the lengthy timescales involved in making a difference locally (Paradis, 2000; Morris, 2011; Markey et al., 2012; Burayidi, 2013). Indeed, regeneration is a complex/multi-dimensional process. Robertson (2001) suggests the need to 'be patient ... revitalization efforts always take many years of small steady, incremental steps before noticeable improvements are evident to all' (p20). Favourable outcomes also require local collaboration, where the practical realities of regeneration are such that 'no single stakeholder has the resources or jurisdiction to tackle the multi-dimensional problems' faced (Markey et al., 2012, p226). Small towns vary significantly in terms of their history, geography, assets upon which they can draw, political and policy contexts, and local capacity/entrepreneurial initiative (Powe and Hart, 2008). Local flexibility and sensitivity must therefore be implicit within strategic thinking and the governance structures developed (Robertson, 2004; 2006). In summary, small town regeneration challenges are considered to be long-term, complex/multi-dimensional, involving many actors and having locally specific challenges.

Internationally, many schemes have been developed to try and address these challenges within small towns. These have differed both in terms of their focus and the involvement of external partners. Examples of where the process has failed to match the challenge include government interventions in Australia and Canada, that have led to top-down prescription rather than local specificity, and short-term rather than long-term support (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; Cheshire, 2006; Markey et al., 2012). Likewise in the UK context, which is the focus of this paper, government involvement has also often failed to match the process of regeneration to the challenge (Jones and Little, 2000; Edwards et al., 2000; Caffyn, 2004; Morris, 2012). Albeit prescriptive in terms of their narrow commercial orientation around a four point structure (organisation, promotion, design and economic restructuring) and perhaps lacking in funds (Burayidi, 2013), the use of local partnerships and strategy-led approaches within the Main Street and other charity-orientated programmes in the US has at least enabled longer term consistency of support and local specificity within delivery (Luther and Flora, 2000; Peiser and Nelson, 1997; Robertson, 2004; Daniels et al., 2007).

In terms of the UK, given the pressures to 'hit the ground running' within both urban and rural regeneration initiatives (Craig and Taylor, 2002, p139; Lawless, 2011), processes have often been given insufficient time for strategy formation (Jones and Little, 2000; Countryside Agency, 2004; Osborne et al., 2004; Lawless et al., 2010; Tallon, 2010; Morris, 2011; 2012; Henderson, 2012). Rather than a desire to address the long-term, locally-specific challenges faced, such initiatives have tended to be driven by the 'immediacy of ... political life' (Lawless et al., 2010, page 273). In view of these time pressures, efforts to engage local communities have often been rushed and ineffective (Jones and Little, 2000; Osborne et al., 2004; Morris, 2012; Lawless, 2011). Regeneration initiatives have also tended to be highly prescriptive. For example, in the context of rural Britain, Edwards et al. (2000) suggests that a government agency often 'sets the rules of the game, and is able to determine the types of partners enrolled, the lifespan of the partnership, its working practices and evaluation procedures, and its functional scope and territorial scale' (p45). Following the cessation of short-term funding, after the merits of the externally prescribed process have presumably been appreciated, it is left to local mainstream servicing agencies and the affected communities to continue the processes of regeneration. Although policy has, to some degree, responded to these criticisms, even in the case of the urban-focused UK New Deal for Communities (NDC) scheme, for example, which actively attempted to engage communities

over an unusually long ten-year period of external support, ‘partnerships operated in a political world where priorities and ministers changed and where pressures to “deliver” became ever more explicit’ (Lawless, 2011, p530).

This short review has illustrated how government-initiated programmes have often failed to match the process to the challenge. This paper explores the ‘art of the possible’ in terms of understanding the extent to which the political realities of government support can be better matched to the practical realities of local regeneration (Cloke and Little, 1990, p101). These issues are explored within this paper through a small town, post-industrial regeneration case study which actively set out to better match the process to the challenge. The Upper Calder Valley (UCV) Renaissance project in West Yorkshire (Northern England) was developed within a similar political context to the NDC, in the early 2000s, and also set out to address the transitory nature of government support. Running for approximately ten years, the programme attempted to develop a long-term regeneration process for a cluster of small towns, where regeneration within the area had previously been slow and ineffective. A key element of the externally prescribed process was cross-town collaboration around a locally developed, valley-wide strategy. It was hoped this prescription would challenge previous negative local practices (i.e. local competition, rather than the more desirable collaboration) and remoteness from their local authority.

Whilst central control continues to occur within more recent regeneration efforts (Bentley and Pugalís 2013), in the context of austerity in the UK, externally prescribed processes of change, such as the UCV renaissance, are less likely to occur (Deas and Doyle, 2013; Broughton et al., 2013). Whilst there are good reasons to be concerned about the lack of government regeneration funding, it is important to reflect on the efficacy of the government-initiated programme model of regeneration. Is the failure to match the process to the challenge due to poor design/implementation or is the approach fundamentally flawed? Through an in-depth study of regeneration that has been in place for over a decade, this paper questions whether government-prescribed processes of change, even in a more favourable funding context, provide the most appropriate model for regeneration. Do we need to be more realistic about the political realities involved in government support? Do we need to look for alternative models of support which might better match the process to the challenge? Viewing the UCV experiment through the more contemporary lens of austerity, with the implied greater pressure to prioritise the use of funding, this paper provides important insights that are helpful for the future design of government-enabling support.

Government-enabling support within local regeneration processes

Given the mismatch between the transitory nature of government support and the long-term challenges of local regeneration, one option open to local communities within small towns is to go it alone. However, this often represents a single issue/crisis response which may be short-lived, lack adequate funding and the necessary delivery mechanisms if not at least supported by external finance (Jeffreys and Munn, 1996; Osborne et al., 2004; O’Toole and Burdess, 2004; Bishop, 2010). Due to their size and dispersed nature, rural governance bodies at the very local level often struggle to address the scope and scale of the wider spatial challenges/impacts arising. Given the regeneration challenges faced by small towns, there may also be a need to better appreciate the ‘different ways of doing, seeing and knowing’ (Healey, 1997, p60). Yet, guided by ‘political satisfaction’ (Rose, 2005, p2), local partnerships ‘often face real political and organisational difficulties in moving from low-risk, traditional projects to more creative, risky, challenging ventures’ (Boyle, 1993, p322). In the absence of external authorities providing funding and taking some of the political risks,

perhaps ‘local officials [will] have their horizons confined by the boundaries of their county’ (Rose, 2005, p3). There may also be blockages/complexities within regeneration processes, perhaps including governance challenges (lack of consensus, contestation) and physical challenges (land assembly, infrastructure provision, remediation of contaminated land and removal of outdated structures) (Healey, 1997). Faced with a lack of market activity, some means is required to close the gap between potential financial returns and the costs/risks associated with private investment, which would enable the value of local assets/creative ideas to be realised. Given that external support can be crucial within local regeneration processes, the question remains as to how best to collaborate with external support agencies and how government support can be most effective.

Drawing from the collaborative literature, external agencies are likely to play a blend of facilitative (embracing, empowering, involving and mobilising those involved) and directive roles (manipulating the collaborative agenda, “playing the politics”) (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). Much criticism within the academic literature relates to the overly directive roles of government agencies, where their involvement has often gone well beyond the ‘healthy balance’ between developing a ‘spirit of collaboration’ and the ‘pragmatism’ of gently pushing the process along, as described by Vangen and Huxham (2003a, pS61). The overemphasis on the directive roles by government agencies might be due to the need to get things done within desired timescales (driven by national policy/political agendas) and a lack of trust in local level actors to deliver (leading to performance management). External organisations might be reluctant to ‘use their resources to support untried, and potentially troublesome, initiatives’ which have been developed locally (Lawless, 2011, p530). Vangen and Huxham (2003a) report how effective directive approaches need to reflect an understanding of the nuances of local politics and how to play them. This is a far cry from the nationally prescribed initiatives described in the introduction, which leave little space/time for facilitative activities and local specificity within delivery.

Collaboration to enhance local agency

The desire for self-help within local communities is not new (O’Toole and Burdess, 2004). However, in the context of austerity, the need for local actors to be active within regeneration has increased and, although perhaps secondary to growth priorities, the importance of self-help and self-determination have also been recognised within UK political discourses on localism¹ (Bailey and Pill, 2011; Deas, 2013). Working within the confines of austerity, much will be asked of small town actors. Indeed, local authorities will be increasingly focused on their statutory roles rather than regeneration activities. National funding has also become increasingly difficult to access through a ‘discretionary allocation of resources to bidding partnerships on a competitive basis’ (Deas, 2013, p78). Access to such resources will require enhanced local capacities. However, guided by the need to gain funding, local actors could be ‘transformed into fund-raisers and lose sight of the more strategic issues involved’ (O’Toole and Burdess, 2004, p442). Instead, local collaboration around a shared strategy may be important in helping to provide a ‘greater sense of purpose and direction’ and for local actors to ‘know what grants to go for, rather than being driven by random funding opportunities’ (Daniels et al., 2007, pxxii; Luther and Flora, 2000, p8). In the context of austerity and with less funding available, local contestation between individual towns may increase (Broughton et al., 2013), but such competition within an area can be wasteful, with ‘each [town] seeking to attract the interest of developers, investors and occupiers’ rather than

¹ It should be noted that localism is a contested concept and a move toward some form of localism is a common claim of many governments (Haughton et al, 2013; Bentley and Pugalis, 2013).

working together to address common challenges (Healey, 1995, p225; Markey et al., 2012; Bentley and Pugalis, 2013).

Faced with the complex/multi-dimensional nature of regeneration and a lack of relevant skills and finance, the ability of local agents to address such challenges may be enhanced through achieving a “collaborative advantage” (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). Such an advantage realised across a rural area could come from, for example, shared learning/knowledge, pooling of resources and rural communities speaking with a “collective voice” to influence servicing authorities. Such collaboration ‘can bring a force of weight to policy debates and the market place’ that might not otherwise be achieved (Caffyn, 2004; Markey et al., 2012, p247; Healey, 2013). As well as wasteful competition, a failure to adequately collaborate could also lead to the expensive and ineffective duplication of activities, neglect from funding opportunities and a failure to adequately address the scope and scale of the issues faced (Healey, 1995; Caffyn, 2004; Markey et al., 2012). Although collaborative processes do not represent the only way forward, it is argued that those towns most amenable to such processes are better able to demonstrate purpose/direction and are more likely to gain voice within servicing/funding agencies and access to external funding.

In terms of wider collaboration, small town actors are faced with a range of servicing bodies and departments, each with their own timescales and ‘foci of attention’, whereas these organisations are challenged to coordinate their activities across many small and dispersed rural settlements (Healey, 2007, p4; Owen et al., 2007). Not helped by the complexity of these “many to many” relationships, cooperation between servicing/local authorities and rural partnerships is often poor (Jeffreys and Munn, 1996; Cheshire, 2006; Owen et al., 2007). Indeed, large local authority units can generate feelings of remoteness, where the delivery of services may be more focused on the needs of the largest town/urban area, and/or issues of ‘cost-effective service delivery’, than on the nuances of local preferences and concerns (O’Toole and Burdess, 2004, p435; Newman et al., 2004; Markey et al., 2012; Bailey, 2012). Overcoming such “many to many” relationships may require a challenging transformation in the relationship, such that there is a shared understanding of the efforts of each party and a realistic appreciation of the potential roles which they can play (Hastings, 1996). The merits of rural communities addressing this challenge by developing a “collective voice” have already been stated. A complementary/alternative strategy is for local communities to become providers themselves through community asset transfer (Bailey, 2012; Healey, 2013). Such a local role would still require collaboration with the serving authorities, but would give town/cross-town governance more influence within delivery. However, not all communities have the necessary skills and/or are willing to take the risks involved in such enterprises, where, to be successful, local knowledge and management must lead to a more effective use of funding/assets than is achievable through local authority delivery.

Although collaboration has considerable potential to increase the efficacy of local efforts (which may or may not be recognised locally), it rarely occurs spontaneously and may be constrained by longstanding rivalries, as well as concerns about loss of community identity and control (Countryside Agency, 2004; Osborne et al., 2004; Daniels et al., 2007; Bishop, 2010). Markey et al. (2012) suggests that there will often need to be a ‘profound political culture change among local elected leaders and the local electorate alike’ for collaboration to occur (p176); particularly where there is no ‘ingrained history of cooperation between neighbouring communities’ (p214). This mismatch between external ideas/concepts of collaboration and the practical realities of local implementation is likely to lead to tensions between government agencies wishing to prescribe collaboration processes and the

willingness of local agents to cooperate. Encouraging external ideas/concepts to be adopted locally will require a balance between facilitative and directive roles.

Balancing facilitative and directive roles

How prescriptive should external agencies be in attempting to better balance facilitative and directive roles? As noted above, external involvement has often been quite prescriptive. Viewed through the lens of the emerging post-political literature, external direction in terms of prescribed processes of regeneration may represent an attempt to circumvent, rather than tackle, the underlying political challenges to collaboration (Haughton et al, 2013). For example, a key element of external prescription has often related to the definition of spaces of regeneration which can be seen as providing “soft” informal, or semi-formal, forms of governance that exist beyond, or in parallel with, the “hard” statutory entities, such as local authorities (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). Lacking sensitivity to local circumstances, collaborative spaces of regeneration “inserted” by external agencies may prove to be a ‘fabrication of [perceived] homogeneous place-bounded communities’ which pay little consideration to pre-existing political culture, tensions and/or local interactions (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004, p59; Markey et al, 2012). Rather than governance engineering, O’Toole and Burdess (2004) suggest that governance structures should vary ‘according to ways that local groups interact with their own community, as well as other levels of governance’, where ‘social, demographic, historical, economic and biographical factors all impinge upon the way that groups develop their internal and external relationships’ (p435). Indeed, there is a growing realisation that there is a need for local actors to choose their own “soft spaces” within which to work (Pollermann et al. 2013; Haughton et al, 2013). However, drawing from recent localism debates in the UK, self-selected boundaries are potentially exclusionary, where local partnerships ‘essentially define their own constituency and determine who should be included in the political community that is to be engaged’ (Davoudi and Cowie, 2013, p563). This would suggest some form of external arbitration on is still required.

Faced with a top-down, prescribed approach to regeneration, one local reaction might be refusal to get involved. As Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins (2004) suggest, this may lead to exclusion from other forms of support, as ‘those [towns] that pursue the “wrong” development strategies [differing to those externally prescribed], or that respond through ... protest, are consequently deemed as non-responsible communities undeserving of outside support’ (p300). Yet, rather than the dualisms of ‘faithful acceptance of policy, or its refusal through overt strategies of resistance’, rural actors at the town level have other alternative strategies available to them (Herbert-Cheshire, 2003, p468). Recognising the importance of external funding, town actors may consciously decide to “play along” with the demands of state agencies’ (Cheshire, 2006, p144). Such a temporary “buy-in” may be possible if it is seen to be beneficial to local communities. At other times, they may not be prepared to be ‘quite so compliant’ and ‘seek to effect change by pressuring local experts to represent their interests’ (Cheshire, 2006, p145). Given the context specificity required within the development of local governance processes, it is argued that generic top-down prescription is unlikely to lead to a process suitable for the delivery of long-term regeneration. Achieving genuine local “buy-in” and collaboration is best developed through “small wins” (modest/low risk schemes) (Ansell and Gash, 2008), where Vangen and Huxham (2003b) see the building of trust between collaborative partners to be potentially a virtuous circle, as gradually larger challenges can be addressed. However, such subtle and slow processes of development are unlikely to be consistent with the political realities of transitory support for rapid delivery.

One form of local collaboration which better matches this ideal is community enterprise. Responsible for a specific area (“soft space”), and sometimes a legacy from previous national regeneration initiatives, Bailey (2012) sees community enterprises as ‘a new model of neighbourhood regeneration ... which accentuates the people and their assets ... mobilising residents to manage their assets and to manage them in collaboration with statutory and non-statutory bodies’ (p32). In a similar way to the ideal described by Vangen and Huxham (2003b), such enterprises have developed incrementally through “small wins”, building trust within their local communities and with external funding bodies through their substantive outcomes. Reflecting better the practical realities of developing local capacity to manage long-term change, Bailey (2012) describes how it has taken decades for these enterprises to become established and financially stable. Given their long-term nature, community enterprises can develop a different relationship with external funding bodies, gaining a reputation for successful delivery, providing an alternative approach to new partnership formation and perhaps also influencing political priorities (Bailey and Pill, 2011; Healey, 2013). This illustrates that, whilst tensions between the long-term/slow regeneration realities of local implementation and the need for short-term results are perhaps ubiquitous within government initiatives, there may be alternative ways of channelling funding which better match the process to the challenge.

Case study background and methodology

Whilst there may be potential for the development of alternative models of regeneration, this paper focuses on government-initiated programmes. Although many favourable outcomes have resulted from externally prescribed regeneration initiatives, the literature review has illustrated how they have often failed to match the process to the challenge. Within the confines of government-initiated programmes, can the political realities of government support be better matched to the practical realities of local regeneration? This paper explores the “art of the possible” through a post-industrial, small town case study within the Upper Calder Valley (UCV) (West Yorkshire, Northern England), within which a regional government initiative attempted to better match the process to the challenge. The relevance of this case study can best be explained by developing an understanding of the context within which the regeneration initiative was developed.

The last decade in England perhaps represented a unique period, where small towns briefly became central to national, and then regional, policy drives for rural growth and regeneration, as a result of their prominence within the Rural White Paper published in 2000 (DETR and MAFF, 2000). The project in the UCV was part of the region-wide (Yorkshire and Humber) Renaissance Market Town (RMT) programme, which was developed in the context of the emerging England-wide Market Town Initiative (MTI). The MTI ran between 2002 and 2005, but was initially piloted within the Yorkshire and Humber region, through six towns (starting in 2001 and including the case study town of Todmorden). This was then extended to a further six towns within the region (12 towns in total) as part of the mainstream national programme (starting in 2002). Parallel to the England-wide MTI, the then new “Single Pot” funding, which pooled resources from a number of contributing government departments, allowed Yorkshire Forward (YF), and other Regional Development Agencies, to allocate funding within their region based on their perceived need for economic development. In many cases, small towns received a proportion of this funding (Morris, 2011). Early in the Yorkshire and Humber MTI programme, YF recognised that the MTI programme was not sufficiently strategy-orientated or community-led. Based partly on the perceived initial success of YF’s Renaissance Towns and Cities programme (implemented in 2001 for the regeneration of larger urban areas), the RMT programme was launched in 2002 as an attempt

to better match the process to the challenge. YF's involvement in the RMT programme ended in 2012, as it was disbanded by the UK coalition government.

Whilst the MTI was typically short-lived and process-driven, where, for example, community efforts were often developed simultaneously, rather than prior to the development and implementation of projects (Caffyn, 2004; Countryside Agency, 2004; Powe and Hart, 2008; Morris, 2011; Morris, 2012), the UCV Renaissance proved to be a more sustained, incremental and strategy-orientated process of change. Indeed, the resultant UCV Renaissance programme differs markedly from many other regeneration initiatives in terms of the length of external support, allowing sufficient time for community input to strategy formation and encouraging implementation to be strategy-led. As part of YF's attempts to better match the process to the challenge, the UCV Renaissance Programme was also prescriptive. The Programme was developed in the context of slow and ineffective local regeneration, where there were feelings within the UCV of remoteness from their metropolitan local authority (Calderdale Council) and an atmosphere of competition for funding, rather than collaboration across the valley (Yorkshire and Humber Assembly, 2004²). Directed and facilitated by YF, the Programme prescribed a cross-valley/cross-town collaborative process which sought to challenge what were perceived to be negative local practices and to realise a vision of better coordination and linkages across the valley and with the local authority, Calderdale Council (CC). As noted within the literature review, there is much academic support for the need for such local collaboration.

Focusing on the extent to which government support can be better matched to the regeneration challenge, the case study provides an excellent opportunity to explore the "art of the possible" within a more sustained and financially favourable context. A key challenge faced when undertaking in-depth research is gaining an understanding of what sort of case study is being investigated. At one extreme, this case study could be regarded as a 'crucial' or 'critical' case, in which a failure to deliver would seriously question the validity of the externally prescribed approach to regeneration (Gerring, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2011). In reality, such crucial cases rarely exist, where debates are likely to focus on the extent to which the unfavourable outcomes identified relate to poor design, challenging contexts or the fundamental inadequacies of the model. The UCV proved to be a challenging context, particularly in terms of encouraging collaboration. Within the contemporary context of austerity, the question here is different. Given the need for prioritisation of external support to circumstances within which it will be most effective, what lessons can be learnt in terms of how to better focus the minimal external support which will be available? Does the externally prescribed model still have relevance within this context? The lessons emerging from the case study analysis will be interpreted through this lens, where, consistent with an 'information-orientated approach' to case study selection, researching the UCV programme provides important insights that will be helpful in the future design of external enabling support (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p307).

The region-wide RMT programme consisted of 25 towns/larger rural settlements (five within the case study area), many of which faced problems of 'decline or peripherality' (YF, 2011, p5). The term "renaissance" was seen to reflect the desired 'rediscovery, rebirth and improvement' in the prospects of these settlements (YF, 2011, p5). The UCV was the first and, by virtue of which, the longest running programme – a key focus of this paper. It is also particularly interesting in terms of the collaborative vision. Local authorities across the

² This slow process and negative atmosphere was corroborated within the research interviews.

region often wished to have a 'single community body with which [they] can deal' (Yorkshire Forward, 2008, page 21), with six town clusters being formed (accounting for 15 settlements in the programme). The rationale for the clustered approach was strongest where towns faced similar challenges, often resulting from industrial decline and/or shared transport/recreational links, which were all present within the UCV partnership. Indeed, due to a lack of natural synergies between towns, and local opposition, interviewee comments suggested collaboration was not attempted with the same vigour elsewhere in the region.

The case study began with an initial documentary analysis and orientation exercise. In order to supplement this background understanding and help scope the issues to be considered within the case study, six themed in-depth interviews were undertaken with the former programme manager of the RMT initiative (2003-2010). This was followed by the case study analysis of the UCV, which focused on issues relating to the strategic approach, governance structures and the need to deliver a long-term regeneration process. Building on the findings of previous interviews undertaken in 2005 (interviews with four key actors), the case study was further explored in 2011/12 through a combination of semi-structured interviews (further interviews with nine key actors), partnership meeting attendance and documentary analysis (minutes of all partnership meetings available during the period of support, press releases, town-level internet discussion forums, newspaper commentary, policy documents etc.). Four further in-depth interviews were then held with the former programme manager, who was asked to reflect on the findings and discuss how typical the issues arising within the case study were within other RMT locations. Further research was also undertaken early in 2014 (mostly through further document analysis) which enabled a better understanding of what happened after the cessation of mainstream funding.

Within the interviews, a range of people were consulted (members of the local partnerships, CC, YF representatives, local councillors and an expert advisor), including a number of critical voices. The topics covered within the interviews related to reflections on the process of strategy formation, the appropriateness of the governance structures developed, challenges faced within implementation and the likely future prospects beyond mainstream funding. Given the sensitivities involved in this ongoing project, we are unable to give further details. All quotes from these interviews are anonymous. In total, over 40 hours of interviews were undertaken and a huge amount of UCV documentary evidence researched (in excess of 300 sources).

Case study area

The UCV case study area incorporates approximately a 20km length of the valley, with the largest settlements being Sowerby Bridge³, Mytholmroyd (approximate population of 3,730), Hebden Bridge (4,086), Todmorden and Walsden (combined population of 11,555). As illustrated in Figure 1, these towns are naturally linked by the stark physical geography of the valley and by the road, rail, canal and river networks which run along the valley bottom. The growth of the towns was largely due to the development of the textile industry, but this went into decline in the second half of the twentieth century, leaving a legacy of blight, socio-economic challenges and, particularly in the case of Todmorden, population decline (Jennings, 1992). Despite these negative factors, the area's rural character (including impressive views within the valley) and proximity to urban centres has led to it becoming a

³ The population figures come from the Population Census 2001 (Office for National Statistics, 2004). Sowerby Bridge was not identified as separate from Halifax within the population census and is thought to be slightly larger than Todmorden.

popular residential location. Constrained by the stark physical geography of the area and planning restrictions on change of use of employment land, better quality housing has been in short supply throughout the valley and house prices have risen significantly as a result (CC, 2011).

The towns are varied in character, with Todmorden and Sowerby Bridge being the most deprived (CC, 2011). Whilst Mytholmroyd is important in terms of employment (particularly manufacturing), it provides only limited retail services. Nearby Hebden Bridge is more focused on tourism and creative industries and has an unusually strong independent retail sector (New Economics Foundation 2005; CC, 2011). Its engagement with regeneration started much earlier than the other towns and it has laid claim to being an early adopter of heritage use within regeneration and has perhaps been most affected by gentrification (Fletcher, 1990; Smith, 1998). Todmorden is an employment (particularly manufacturing) and services centre (but with a high vacancy rate within its retail units) (CC, 2011). Todmorden was an early participant in the MTI pilot, which initiated efforts towards regenerating its town centre. Although part of the natural valley, Sowerby Bridge (located on the edge of the large urban area of Halifax) is less rural in character (including high-rise flats) and is an important service and employment centre (CC, 2011).

Balancing directive and facilitative roles

The UCV renaissance process began with the most directive, and perhaps controversial, act of the programme. The whole UCV (as defined by YF in consultation with CC) was chosen for the purpose of this regeneration. For most of the interviewees, this selection process was one of mystery and speculation. Two interviewees were more insightful in terms of the timing, confirming the minimal community involvement and explaining the motivations for including the more urban Sowerby Bridge (it was suggested that CC had been influential here, as the town had not been included within the Halifax Renaissance Towns and Cities programme). The upper valley-wide prescription speeded up programme design and reflected political objectives, but, the lack of ownership by the communities over its creation, or awareness of local history/culture within its definition, added to the challenges of delivering a long-term collaborative process. As such, the regeneration process was driven initially more by short-term expediency than the long-term practical realities of ensuring flexibility or sensitivity to local preferences.

In terms of the communities themselves, the process began with the development of a vision/strategy document for the UCV. Drawing from the Regional/Urban Design Assistance Teams (R/UDAT) (Peiser and Nelson, 1997), which sits within the American Institute of Architects (AIA), a yearlong strategy development process combined the input of local communities with a multi-disciplinary team of recognised external “experts” (specialists in design, highways, rural economy, agriculture and tourism). Consistent with the UCV-wide prescription, the lead consultants on the strategy document were instructed to “*look for issues which can draw people together within the valley, but without threatening the individual identity of the settlements*” (anonymous interviewee). A crucial part of this approach was the use of valley-wide community action groups on a range of important topics. The need to encourage valley-wide collaboration ran through the strategy document and included ideas/concepts for encouraging this process. These included: joint marketing strategies; development of the ‘valley voice’; and providing a network of ‘21st Century Marketplaces’ across the valley (p18). Comments on the process by interviewees suggested it was a “*useful exercise*”, “*very informative*” and “*enjoyable*”.

Despite the importance of the valley-wide approach within the “strategy document”, only the larger “rural” settlements within the UCV were to receive direct support and funding. This approach reflected the national government’s focus on towns within rural regeneration; with YF following an ethos (confirmed by interviewees) of avoiding ‘spreading resources too thinly’ (YF, 2011, p2). Due to complications with the main scheme for Walsden, no projects were developed in the town. As such, only Todmorden, Hebden Bridge, Mytholmroyd and Sowerby Bridge received support in the form of project funding from YF through the UCV renaissance.

In order to aid delivery of the “prescribed” cross-town approach, a community partnership Upper Calder Valley Renaissance (UCVR) was formed as a not-for-profit company. Community-based Town Teams were also developed, based on recent partnerships formed just prior to the UCV programme. Importantly, the partnerships across the UCV are non-hierarchical, where collaboration is voluntary and based on the mutual benefits that result. This non-hierarchical structure defined the character and roles of the partnerships, and also eased frictions that might otherwise have occurred. There was also a degree of empowerment at the local level. Whilst CC often played an important leading role within project delivery, the Town Teams were involved within all the projects and their support was required if financial assistance from YF was to be provided.

Unlike the MTI, which employed a town-level coordinator, the RMT programme ‘relied on developing the capacity of the community’ (those involved within the town partnerships) (YF, 2011, p1). As the ‘dissipation of skills and experience vested in the project officers’ was one of the ‘major losses associated with the wind-up of the whole MTI programme’ (Countryside Agency, 2004, p60; Owen et al., 2007), it was hoped this more community-orientated approach would provide a longer-term legacy. Community involvement and capacity was assisted through various support mechanisms, including a region-wide Partnership Skills Programme which provided a menu of voluntary training and support to develop skills, capacity and confidence. As such, an attempt was made to facilitate, as well as direct, although these efforts to enhance local capacity received mixed responses. There were many positive elements of this programme, but critical comments (“*patronising*”; “*insulting*”) were directed at the structured training which was prescribed at the “elite” management level within YF, despite evidence presented by staff most closely involved which suggested that formal approaches were ‘*not how communities learn*’. As such, the process could have better matched local challenges. Given that opportunities for external funding come and go, one of the aims of the Programme was to enable actors within the case-study towns to be in a better position to respond to new opportunities, as they emerge, and to assess whether such opportunities are appropriate to local goals. This objective would appear to have been achieved, as it was evident from the interviewees that the local capacity to manage local processes of regeneration had been significantly enhanced over the period of the Programme.

The key elements within the “strategic document” related, in particular, to removing blight and giving town centres a competitive and contemporary relevance, where there was seen to be potential to build on the towns’ assets in terms of their ‘unique cultural and physical heritage’ (JTP, 2003, pI). Although projects needed to be at least “loosely” linked to economic development to gain YF funding, this was not generally a problem in the UCV as the lack of vital and viable town centres was one of the major challenges faced. The projects were largely public sector funded, with most being jointly financed between CC and YF. This approach to funding seemed more facilitative than directive. Where projects did not fit

the required profile for YF, help was provided to identify other funding. Indeed, a key supportive role of YF officers was to encourage information exchange. Help was therefore provided in understanding forthcoming external funding opportunities and how to apply for them.

Realising the collaborative vision

One of the most directive elements of the UCV programme was the “prescription” of the cross-valley collaborative vision. Faced with an uncoordinated multitude of rural partnerships, a key challenge to governance within the UCV case study area was to nurture and operationalise cross-valley collaboration. Interviewees reported a “competitive” rather than a “collaborative” environment prior to the UCV Renaissance Programme. Such competition was particularly evident between Hebden Bridge and Todmorden, where two interviewees used the similar phrase “*these towns may be only five miles apart but are very different*”. Between-town rivalry was seen by interviewees to have a long tradition within the UCV. Jennings (1992) reports ‘stark contrasts’ in terms of former textile production. Todmorden produced cotton products, whereas woollen-based textiles were more common throughout the rest of the UCV (p162). For production reasons and its proximity to the county boundary, Todmorden was traditionally seen to have had closer links with the nearby County of Lancashire. Despite the natural physical linkages and the close proximity of the towns, this history/culture suggests that developing a long-term valley-wide collaborative vision would be a challenge. This section considers the extent to which the “prescribed” vision of cross-valley collaboration was realised.

Consistent with the work of Cheshire (2006), reaction to external prescription was varied. Some people were convinced of the merits of cross-valley collaboration: “*There should be a feeling of united we stand and we’re all the UCVR, it is a vision ... can I make a little plea to buy into the vision to work with towns across the valley*” (former community director of the UCVR, Todmorden Pride Minutes 2009). Others reported a “*playing along*” to gain external funding (“*you don’t think we were working together because we wanted to*”), and there was sometimes even a complete failure to appreciate the merits of cross-town collaboration. People may be passionate about their own neighbourhood/town but as one interviewee said there is the need to ‘*capture this passion and not dilute it if you consider a valley-wide initiative*’.

Commitment to cross-town collaboration would appear to be strongest in Hebden Bridge and Mytholmroyd, with less interest from the two peripheral towns of Sowerby Bridge and Todmorden. Key actors within the towns of Hebden Bridge and Mytholmroyd have been working together since 1937, when their urban district councils were merged (since 1974 this became the Hebden Royd Town Council) (HBCA, undated). Interestingly, HBCA (undated) report how this initial coming together in 1937 was ‘reluctant’ (p10). Although separate towns, they provide different roles in the UCV, and interviewees suggested there was little in the way of competition between them. Whilst town partnerships continue within Hebden Bridge, Todmorden and Mytholmroyd, the Sowerby Bridge town team had disbanded by the time of interviewing in 2012.

Studying the minutes of the Todmorden Town Team meetings and comments from interviewees, it is clear that some members had struggled with the cross-town collaboration idea. Indeed, some interviewees even felt the cross-town approach was a “*focus for rivalry*”. Based on comments from interviewees, it would appear to be a challenge gaining a consensus within Todmorden itself, where interviewee comments suggested that “*there are a series of*

groups which just don't communicate with each other" and *"I'm pessimistic about these groups being able to work together"*. To tackle these problems, following the cessation of YF, CC set up a Todmorden Development Board which only included elected members of Todmorden Town Council and CC. Justification for this movement towards a more directive representative democracy approach was to suggest that there have been 'a number of groups with an interest in Todmorden town centre set up over the last ten or so years ... [which] has led to a fragmented and disjointed approach, with no single, shared vision for the future of Todmorden and no overall governance process to drive this forward' (CC, 2013, p1). As demonstrated below, this more directive approach is being complemented with bottom-up community-orientated creativity.

In terms of collaboration with the local authority, one of the motivations for the UCV RMT programme was a feeling of remoteness from CC prior to the Programme. Remoteness from CC can be illustrated by some examples. The combination of the heritage, canal and landscape within the UCV suggested there was significant potential for tourism. Yet, there was no longer an associated Tourism Development Officer within CC (JTP, 2003). In Hebden Bridge, a controversial sale of Council buildings had also contributed to the strong feelings of remoteness from decision making, as the council attempted to restructure service delivery. Further similar concerns had been raised in the case of their town hall which was seen to have high architectural/heritage value, but, due to under-utilisation by CC, was in a poor state of repair. Other comments by interviewees related, in particular, to a previous lack of engagement with town-level actors.

The relationship between the local communities and the local council had certainly been strengthened since the conception of the UCV programme, where, to some degree, a mutual-transformation would appear to have occurred (Hastings, 1996). The most visible expression of this transformation was the recognition of town and valley partnerships within the local plans (unitary development plan adopted in 2006, and draft core strategy 2011). Integration of activities was also achieved within tourism. Following the collaborative work by the community valley-wide tourism group, the awareness and the role of the local authority in supporting this had been strengthened, with CC committing staff time and marketing efforts to its enhancement. Influence was also achieved in terms of economic development and transport linkages, where the "valley voice" expressed through the UCVR partnership proved to be important in getting the local authority and other servicing bodies to listen.

Despite this success, the UCVR was dissolved following the cessation of YF funding during 2012. However, to merely dismiss these efforts as a short-term solution to the challenges of developing long-term collaboration would be too simplistic. Whilst criticising the "big fix" prescriptive nature of the initial designation, at the time of writing (in early 2014) there have been some positive long-term outcomes of the process. In terms of cross-valley groups, transport and tourism were seen to be the most relevant; and a highly motivated group of individuals remained committed to these cross-valley issues. Whilst the "strategy document" emphasised the valley-wide vision, it was not until 2010 that a valley-wide project began to emerge. The canal which runs through all the towns is now seen as a "linear park", where efforts are being focused on improving accessibility, signposting and interpretation. This is a non-controversial scheme which was developed within the local communities. Another post YF development has been the Upper Calder Valley Plain Speaker which is a professionally-run, on-line news website which is funded externally by charitable trusts. "Small wins" such as these could slowly improve cross-valley collaboration, and perhaps prove more effective than external prescription.

Matching the process to the challenge within the UCV

As noted within the literature review, achieving political continuity within national/regional regeneration initiatives is challenging, as ten years of consistent external support is rare. As with the NDC programme described in the introduction, political continuity was challenging over the 10 year period of the RMT - with change in terms of the emphasis, themes and political motivations still occurring. For the UCV, however, the emphasis remained focused on the delivery of the small town elements of the valley-wide strategy. By the final cessation of the YF funding in 2012, the outcomes of this period of activity had not transformed the towns, but had contributed to the ongoing process of regeneration. Most of these projects relate to the town centres. Some blight has been removed and public realm improved (Todmorden, Hebden Bridge); car domination has been reduced (Hebden Bridge); heritage has been conserved and usage enhanced (Hebden Bridge; Mytholmroyd); and the relocation and improvement of a market has taken place (Sowerby Bridge). In the case of Todmorden town centre, the efforts within the RMT programme formed just part of the long-running, on-going and controversial regeneration. In contrast, Mytholmroyd now has a new, attractive and popular congregation point.

The findings illustrate that whilst a strategy, rather than a funding-led programme, may produce more appropriate outcomes, it can lead to frustrations as progress is often slow. Following publication of the valley-wide strategy in 2003, there was a long wait for delivery. Recognising the need for some projects to be delivered in the shorter term, a small grants programme was initially set up by YF, where modest funding was allocated by the UCVR for projects consistent with the strategy document. This further empowered the local partnerships. Yet, many local actors would appear to have been frustrated by the delays and the perceived lack of action. Indeed, a key finding from a feedback event in 2010, on the implementation of the RMT programme in the UCV, was the need for improved communication on the progress of key projects, where concerns were raised in terms of being kept informed of progress. Interviewees suggested that the main factors influencing the timing of delivery related to new information coming to light (particularly in terms of flooding risk), challenges gaining the involvement and agreement of key players, timing (as funding opportunities varied during the programme) and simply running out of time (key staff were lost as YF began to wind down their role in 2010). Negotiating with several agencies/developers/owners with their own foci of interest and timescales, balancing objectives, incorporating community input into design, gaining planning permission and receiving the support of the key actors affected and the wider community all takes time. Even with the generous length of the funding period, and a few inevitable mistakes along the way, most completed projects required between six and ten years. Other projects still require more time. These realities of local implementation are simply not consistent with the desire for short-term political satisfaction (Rose, 2005; Lawless et al., 2010).

A further important finding within this in-depth study is the importance of community activities emerging at the local level. In the context of globalisation and the lack of locational advantages of small towns (size and proximity to markets/large infrastructure networks etc.), creative/innovative solutions are required for these places to remain competitive. The results suggest there is potential for such solutions to emerge at the local level through community activity. Whilst an attempt by YF to transfer an asset to the UCVR was restricted by the rising price of the targeted property, other forms of community enterprise have emerged within the valley. The threatened Hebden Bridge town hall provides one such favourable outcome. Consistent with the aspirations expressed in the valley-wide strategy, the building

was subject to a community asset transfer followed by renovation; and an exhibition area/enterprise centre was developed behind the site. This community-run business centre was completed in 2012 and all the units were soon occupied. Whilst receiving help from YF in gaining significant financial support from the European Regional Development Fund, this project only occurred because it was championed by key individuals within the town. Based on the lessons learnt from this scheme, local partnerships are attempting to extend the community transfer approach to other local authority assets elsewhere within the valley. One such application is from Incredible Edible Todmorden (IET).

Started in 2008 by a group of activists, IET is a local food initiative, which involves urban gardening throughout the town, promoting food learning and local producers, distributors and retailers of local produce. This initiative has generated much media coverage and attracted many people to visit Todmorden. Developed simultaneously, but largely unrelated, to the RMT programme, IET is consistent with the valley-wide strategy and draws food produce from throughout the valley. Whilst this is "*Todmorden's scheme*", the ethos has spread both nationally and internationally, but, most importantly within this context, through the linear park project and the development of Incredible Edible Mytholm it has also spread within the UCV. Through the sale of local food to residents and visitors, IET has supported local retailers within the challenged town centre (Havers, 2013). Through the support of YF and CC, efforts to help regenerate Todmorden town centre have focused on the "politically unsatisfactory" processes of removing blight through necessary demolition (Rose, 2005). These blockages to regeneration were unlikely to be resolved by community activity. Yet, in the context of a highly politically-charged town, community efforts through the IET have provided a non-controversial focus for the revival of vitality, local pride, public realm and commercial activity within the town centre. These examples illustrate that 'no single stakeholder has the resources or jurisdiction to tackle the multidimensional problems' faced; and collaboration is required that involves community, local government and external agencies all playing their part (Markey et al., 2012, p226).

Conclusion

Drawing from a wide-ranging academic literature, a mismatch between the process and the regeneration challenge is commonly observed. Government-initiated programmes tend to reflect the political realities of transitory and generic support for rapid delivery, whereas the practical realities of regeneration require a sustained, collaborative, spatially-sensitive process of change. Given the continued importance of government support within place-based regeneration, this paper has explored the "art of the possible" in terms of better matching the process to the challenge. This has been explored through an unusually long-running, valley-wide, post-industrial case study in Northern England which set out to address the transitory nature of external funding and to prescribe a process of local collaboration. There is much support in the academic literature for such local collaboration. Although, in the context of austerity, such government-initiated processes are now less likely to occur, important lessons can be learnt from this experiment, the design of which was a reaction to the inadequacies of previous government initiatives.

The role of Yorkshire Forward was found to be essential in providing initial momentum, facilitating engagement, bringing new ideas to the regeneration process, and removing blockages which would have been difficult to deal with locally. Yet, consistent with other previous initiatives, frictions emerged as the regional development agency strived to balance facilitative and directive roles. Rural areas do not provide 'homogeneous place-bounded communities' (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004, p59) and "soft spaces" developed need to reflect

the local context. Drawing from the post-political literature, attempts to prescribe such “soft spaces” externally circumvent, rather than tackle, the underlying political challenges to collaboration (Haughton et al, 2013). The upper valley-wide collaborative approach speeded up programme design and reflected the local political objectives of the council, but, as there was little local ownership in its definition by the communities themselves, or awareness of history and culture in the Upper Calder Valley, which may have affected the legacy of the programme. Indeed, subject to external arbitration, there is a growing realisation within the literature that local actors need to choose their own “soft spaces” within which to work (Haughton et al, 2013; Pollermann et al. 2013). Indeed, rather than been imposed from above, through small incremental “wins” there would appear to be a slow realisation of the merits of valley-wide collaboration, with ideas for its realisation being slowly developed at a local level.

Once the governance structure had been externally prescribed, the ten year programme allowed time for strategy formation and the development/implementation of some strategic projects. This strategy-led process, which relied heavily on the local council and communities, was viewed locally as too slow by many residents. Interestingly, the immediacy of political life experienced nationally was found to also apply at the local level. Local communities want regeneration challenges to be dealt with quickly, even if this is not consistent with practical realities. These political realities are a fundamental flaw of government involvement, whether local, regional or national. In order to better match the process to practical realities of complex regeneration, ways of freeing the process from political pressure need to be sought. Freed from the pressure of politics, the experiences of Bailey (2012) and Healey (2013) suggest that community enterprises may be given more time by local communities to build up trust through “small wins”. A similar pattern would appear to be emerging within the Upper Calder Valley (UCV) and is likely to produce a revenue stream which can be used for the benefit of the local communities. This is clearly an area worthy of further research. In the context of globalisation and the lack of competitive advantage within small towns, the findings suggest that local communities may provide an important source of creative/innovative ideas leading to the necessary local distinctiveness in offer. Regeneration support must encourage such local initiative.

Although it will be very difficult for the political continuity of the government support observed within the UCV to be repeated, for some key projects and emerging regeneration ideas ten years was simply still not long enough. This moment of opportunity has now passed for the UCV, but the focus on capacity within the Programme will help local actors respond to future opportunities. The UCV programme formed one of many government efforts in the last decade in England, which provided a unique period during which small towns briefly became central to national, and then regional, policy drives for rural growth and regeneration. The timing of the external assistance was determined through national political priorities and it was up to local governance to respond to this moment of opportunity. This period of support and focus on small towns has been beneficial for many settlements; particularly those able to quickly develop capacity to realise this moment of opportunity. For other towns, the moment of opportunity has passed with little benefit. National/regional policy has its own timescales and political drivers, but so do the communities within small towns. This illustrates the importance of strategy development at a local level. Opportunities for external funding come and go. Small town actors need to be not only ready to respond, but also aware of, and able to demonstrate, whether the funding opportunities are appropriate to local goals (Luther and Flora, 2000, p8; O’Toole and Burdess, 2004; O’Daniels et al., 2007). Government agencies represent temporary partners within the long-term processes of

change and it is important to recognise this within scheme design. Viewed from this perspective, government support for communities to generate strategy, enhance local collaboration and set up community enterprises may be just as constructive as external finance for the delivery of individual projects. Indeed, consistent with the findings in this paper, community capacity can be ‘highly dependent’ on the nature and form of past policy interventions (Deas and Doyle, 2013, p374).

Through observing actual regeneration practice over the long-term, the case study findings have helped to develop a more nuanced understanding of the roles of external organisations within small town regeneration. Viewing the UCV experiment through the more contemporary lens of austerity, with the implied greater pressure to prioritise the use of funding, externally prescribed processes of change, such as the UCV renaissance, are less likely to occur (Deas and Doyle, 2013; Broughton et al., 2013). Whilst there are good reasons to be concerned about the lack of government regeneration funding, it is important to reflect on the fundamental challenges of such approaches identified within this paper. There is a need to be more realistic about what can be achieved through government support and new models are required. Long-term regeneration processes need to be locally led, where “big fix” external prescriptions will generally not work. Instead, successful processes are developed through repeated “small wins” over long periods. Whilst localism is important, there is also the need to separate regeneration processes from transitory political priorities at all levels. Whilst the UCV Renaissance scheme had drawn lessons from regeneration schemes in the US, perhaps there was also a need to consider the charitable nature of such programmes. This might suggest an alternative approach for channelling government funding to help build community capacity, as these charitable organisations tend to be less transitory than government agencies, both in terms of their nature and their underlying principles. For example, in England, government agencies have come and gone. Yet, the national charity Action for Market Towns (now called Towns Alive with a wider remit relating to towns and cities) has received funding to help town partnerships during the last decade and, despite cessation of that funding, has continued to provide support to town partnerships throughout the current period of austerity. Such organisations may provide a means of introducing more continuity into regeneration support.

In the context of austerity, the need for local actors to be active within regeneration has increased, with the importance of self-help and self-determination being also recognised within UK national political discourses. With local authorities increasingly focused on their statutory roles rather than regeneration activities, they are unlikely to provide much support for community capacity development or assessing external funding. Whilst new models of regeneration such as community enterprises might hold potential for matching the process to the challenge, they can have significant start-up costs and require the sort of practical support which is unlikely to be available from local authorities. Writing in 2014 there would seem to be inadequate support for such community development available, where the authors are aware of a common feeling within English small town communities that localism is more rhetoric than reality. Whilst community rights have been enhanced (for example community right to bid for important local assets which come up for sale), only limited funding is available to help facilitate such localism. Within the context of competitive bidding, local capacity in project development and the writing of funding applications will be at a premium, where in the current context projects have to demonstrate they are deliverable in very tight time periods. The specialist skills for such project development are beyond most communities, unless through serendipity, voluntary help is available from professionally experienced local residents. In the absence of external guidance and practical support in

developing new governance processes, such as a community enterprise, international experience suggests that “going it alone” without external support (at least in terms of funding) often represents a single issue/crisis response which may be short-lived, lack adequate funding and the necessary delivery mechanisms. Government-led initiatives can be equally as ineffective. From a research perspective there is a need to understand and demonstrate new models of how the process can be better matched to the challenge in the hope that this will influence future regeneration support.

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