



## INTRODUCTION

From Policy Action Team (PAT) 16's report 'Learning Lessons' onwards there has been increasing government recognition of the importance of training regeneration professionals and decision-makers, as well as communities and their representatives, if regeneration and neighbourhood programmes are to be effective. PAT 16's report concluded that 'professionals are often not equipped to operate effectively in poor neighbourhoods; and that civil servants lack a full understanding of the communities they are trying to influence (PAT 16, 2000, p6). For PAT 16 the answer lay in improved basic training to make it more relevant, together with improved opportunities for people with community experience to obtain access to these types of professional jobs.

This issue of Local Work reflects on the author's current research project and a series of recent studies showing why support for regeneration professionals needs to go beyond just technical training and skills, as advocated in the Egan Review and reflected in the development of Regional Centres of Excellence. Rather, professional development should provide the necessary guidelines enabling front-line workers to navigate the dilemmas they face in the increasingly complex regeneration arena. To this end, the article will explore the ways in which front-line professionals and their managers identify and cope with the ethical dilemmas that are inherent in working with communities in the context of regeneration.

## AN EXPANDING - AND INCREASINGLY COMPLEX - ARENA OF PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY

There has been a significant increase in the number of professionals being paid to work with communities, due mainly to the proliferation of programmes and initiatives to promote participation, capacity building and partnership working since 1997. In the 1980s it was estimated that 5000

staff were employed in the regeneration sector yet by the beginning of the twenty-first century estimates ranged from 14,000 (Glen et al, 2004) up to 146,000 (National Training Organisation) .

Whilst there has been a significant increase in the number of jobs there are some concerns over the 'contract culture', as regards the quality of the jobs created to work with communities. To begin with the reliance on government funding for posts brings into question the sustainability of some projects, especially within the voluntary and community sectors. There is also concern surrounding the trends towards the increasing casualisation and associated deterioration of professional conditions. For example, just over half of all staff have a permanent contract, which represents a decline in the proportion of permanent posts. In terms of pay, it tends to be rather modest, with women disproportionately likely to be amongst the lower paid.

It appears there are stresses inherent in trying to combine professional values with the 'contract culture'. Studies have shown that workers express the need for more professional approaches, in which greater emphasis is placed on professional values. Therefore, it is important to consider the function of values amongst professionals working with communities. For instance, the Standing Conference for Community Development (SCCD) survey concluded amongst unpaid workers there is a 'strong allegiance' to

*"...the values of community, social justice and the importance of working with community members. These values were clearly defined and there was an overall idealism or belief system about community involvement that was clear and distinct from personal motivations, perhaps for social contact or personal interests in a particular area" (Gaffney, 2002. p8).*

The research found that for many unpaid workers this commitment is driven by personal experiences of social injustices. Whilst many of these people were involved in demanding work the report expressed serious concern about

## 'What about the workers?'

Front-line regeneration workers and their ethical dilemmas

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the level of training and support that is available. There is a 'substantial risk in some situations for alienation and burn out in those most likely to operate in facilitation roles' (Gaffney, 2000, p20).

As the research highlighted, there were grounds for similar anxieties about the risk of burn out for paid staff. The job of paid workers was seen as having become more complex, from regeneration and local economic development to community safety and crime reduction. Three quarters were involved in capacity building and two thirds were involved in facilitating and supporting self-help and/or consultation. These jobs typically involved complex roles with competing pressures, but supervision was all too often found to be inadequate. Furthermore even when supervision was forthcoming, this was not necessarily being delivered by colleagues with the relevant experience.

In the current policy context, however, professional supervision is becoming even more important. Front line staff face a number of dilemmas, challenging their values as well as challenging their professional expertise. These dilemmas include the following dimensions:

a) *technical challenges*: such as coping with complex systems for monitoring and evaluating progress against milestones and targets and accounting to different funders;

b) *challenges associated with inter-agency and/or partnership initiatives*: working across organisational and professional boundaries poses potential challenges, but workers may feel the need to contain tensions themselves, rather than taking up problems with their line managers for fear of jeopardising already fragile relationships with colleagues from partner agencies;

c) *challenges associated with their roles as both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'*: professional community work involves bridging the gaps between the voluntary and community sector and within and between communities and the agencies responsible for addressing their needs. There are inherent tensions here as well as potential strengths. In the current context the boundaries between the public, private and voluntary sectors are shifting and there is an increasing emphasis on localisation of service delivery. The outcome of this context is that responsibilities are increasingly being passed down the line to communities, without necessarily including the requisite resources, which is proving to be problematic.

Given the current context, in which front-line professionals are working, it leaves them in a position of having to attempt to deal with competing pressures from government and the differing priorities of partners, together with the differences to be negotiated within and between the voluntary and community sectors (Hoggett, 2003). This was the starting point for the research project - which set out to explore the ethical dilemmas faced by front-line professionals, together with the strengths and

support systems they were drawing upon to cope with the anxieties of front-line regeneration.

## FRONT-LINE PROFESSIONALS OWN VALUES AND COMMITMENT

Below is a summary of the issues which have emerged from recent research into the work of front-line professionals. At the outset of the research, it was anticipated expressions of anxiety, if not actual demoralisation, would be encountered, in some ways exemplifying the pressures of increasing demands for 'emotional labour' (i.e. the skills of demonstrating empathy, intuition, persuasion, even manipulation). This takes into account the context of increasing competition in the service sector.

From the research it is apparent that professionals seem only too aware of the inherent stresses and the potential ethical dilemmas involved. The research indicates there have been cases where individuals have had to take time off work with stress-related illnesses, yet these have not developed into a situation of burnout, in the sense of absolute demoralisation or loss of concern with work. On the contrary, professionals, who have been engaged with this type of work for some time, speak of their continued commitment. This commitment stretches to individuals preferring not to seek promotion in favour of maintaining the face-to-face interaction of working with communities.

The strength of this continuing commitment is to be located in the factors that have influenced people to work with communities in the first place. Within the emerging research findings, five categories of influence have been identified, these are:

1) *life changing events* (e.g. redundancy or an uninspiring regular job);

2) *influence of key individuals* (e.g. role models who encouraged others to have the confidence to pursue a career in this field);

3) *early influences* (such as parents or other relatives with strong values that related to public service values and/or concerns with social justice whether directly or indirectly);

4) *the influences of neighbourhood, and social context* (such as growing up in a strong working class community and/or faith community);

5) *influences from the wider social context* (such as growing up in the context of wider political struggles - the miners' strike was mentioned here, along with second-wave feminism, and anti-racist struggles in the aftermath of the New Cross fire in South East London in the 1980s).

These influences are central in the development and reinforcement of individuals' values and how these link into the front line professional's commitment to working with communities.

Whilst the factors influencing a professionals desire to want to work with communities have varied, common themes have emerged too. It is clear from the research that front-line professionals, for example, have been making powerful connections with their emotional lives. The notion of community and youth work as 'reparation' has emerged from a number of accounts. For one worker becoming involved in working with young people was a way of turning around their own negative experience of adolescence. Their commitment came from wanting to be the type of role model or support that they had or would like to have had themselves.

From this example, it appears that front-line workers' professional values have powerful emotional roots, which may explain the continuing commitment of professionals in the face of increasingly pressurised employment situations. It is important to emphasise the relevance of understanding workers' emotional investments in their professional roles, as well as their more practical contributions. The importance of these values needs to be more fully recognised, especially in light of how much could be at stake if public professional values were to be further undermined by increasing marketisation of the voluntary and community sectors and the public sector.

Another common theme is the insider/outsider tension, which may be a factor relevant to a number of participants, involved in the research, who have been exploring their feelings of ambivalence. So, for example, people have referred to themselves as feeling on the margins of the mainstream, of being an outsider with feelings of not belonging and/or having been a bit of a rebel, to now feeling under pressure to become 'poacher turned gamekeeper' as a public service professional. For some, these feelings of marginality represented sources of potential discomfort and continuing tensions in their professional roles. For others, however, this insider/outsider tension was seen as inherent in the role, indeed even as a potential source of strength.

### **FRONT-LINE PROFESSIONALS' DILEMMAS AND COPING STRATEGIES**

Even at such an early stage of the research project, it seems clear that professionals are indeed addressing continuing dilemmas and coping all too often with very little external support. Participants have commented, in detail about the technical pressures that they face in their professional roles. Problems, such as those associated with coping with complex systems for monitoring and evaluating progress and accounting to different funders have been encountered. Whilst targets and complex accountability systems have emerged as problems these have not necessarily been identified as being amongst the more difficult dilemmas. Rather, it is around partnership working and the shifting boundaries of the voluntary and community sectors themselves where some of the more difficult challenges are emerging.

There is a growing literature on the problems associated with partnership working, including the tensions associated with relationships and inequalities of power (Glendinning et al, 2002, Taylor, 2003). Front-line professionals may feel particularly vulnerable as marginalised actors in this context, potentially caught between the competing pressures of statutory agencies and the differing interests within communities. From the research, examples are being collected of sophisticated coping strategies, as front-line professionals find ways of negotiating between and around these competing demands.

Working in partnership is, in some cases, proving to be problematic for regeneration professionals. An example of why this is the case comes from one participant involved in the research, who gave an account of their dilemmas arising from working in a partnership setting. The specific example given was the consistent failure of another partner organisation to deliver the work it had promised to the partnership. While the individual over time came to understand the complex reasons why this situation occurred it created a professional dilemma. If s/he formally raised this issue, via their line manager, it could potentially jeopardise the fragile relations with the other partner organisation. Therefore, due to the potential repercussions the individual felt unable to speak to their line manager and, subsequently, had to cope with the issue on their own. This situation is indicative of how workers can find themselves effectively coping on their own because there is a lack of support available.

This lack of support seems to run across the statutory as well as the voluntary and community sectors. For those working in small voluntary and community sector organisations and agencies, however, there may be additional problems. In the research, for example, one participant explained that s/he had been faced with a complex issue amongst their own small staff group, in which one worker was alleged to have been behaving in a discriminatory way. The nature of the case raised issues relating to employment law, as well as issues around equalities procedures and practices. In a large formal organisation, the participant would have had access to specialist advice e.g. from the human resources and/or legal departments. However, in most instances, small voluntary and community sector organisations do not have access to the necessary or appropriate type of support within the organisation itself. As the participant explained, in this case they were very much left to deal with the situation on their own. Somehow people are finding their own ways of coping but typically they are doing this on their own, without professional support.

Meanwhile, the changing boundaries between sectors in an increasingly marketised economy of welfare, would seem to be exacerbating the pressures on front-line professionals. Some of the most painful dilemmas that have been recounted in the research, so far, relate to the tensions arising within the voluntary and community sectors. Participants have spoken of the 'brutalism' that can occur when voluntary and community sector

agencies compete for resources, fighting for their own organisational survival, in the context of increasingly short-term contracts and increasingly casualised labour.

Others have spoken of the dilemmas inherent in being a public service sector worker in such situations, being blamed for the shortcomings of the public sector in its entirety by professionals from the voluntary sector, who present themselves as the only true representatives of the community, whilst pursuing competing agendas for their own organisational survival. The role of insider/outsider may have its potential advantages, but this would seem less evident with the role of scapegoat or public enemy number one, in which they have no opportunity to reply to their critics.

It may be argued that being able to take pressure from all sides and to respond flexibly to that pressure comes with the job working in the public sector. The ability to accept this situation and to work within it is necessary in order to maximise the potential benefits from particular programmes without losing sight of the values that underpin front line professionals' commitments in the first place. But this also raises questions about the education and training of front-line professionals, together with their continuing management support, especially given the scope of the Egan Review (2003).

## CONCLUSIONS

Clearly it is far too early to begin to explore conclusions at this stage of the research. A number of areas of potential concern would seem to be emerging however. Firstly, there would seem to be issues emerging around the education and training of front-line professionals. We may need to be providing them with a greater understanding of differing approaches to professional ethics, to enable them to be more confident in making difficult choices as reflexive practitioners, critically aware of their own values and emotional motivations. Secondly, there would seem to be a number of implications for the management and support of front-line professionals, so many of who are seriously under-supported at present. And finally, there would seem to be issues for public policy and politics, issues with particular relevance in the context of debates around the new localism. Dumping the problems of inadequate service delivery onto front-line professionals may be just as stressful and, ultimately, just as problematic as expecting them to resolve the problems associated with the democratic deficit through programmes to promote community participation and empowerment.

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