PARTNERSHIP AND POLICY NETWORKS IN RURAL LOCAL GOVERNANCE: HOMELESSNESS IN TAUNTON

PAUL CLOKE, PAUL MILBOURNE AND REBEKAH WIDDOWFIELD

In this paper we discuss the importance of ‘partnership’ and ‘policy networks’ in the new contemporary governance of rural areas. We use these notions to contextualize the representation of, and policy response to the particular issue of homelessness in the rural service centre of Taunton in Somerset. Here particular partnership networks have been brokered by the local authority which bring together a wide range of business, voluntary and community interests with a stake in the homelessness issue. Strong pre-existing discourses of homelessness in Taunton characterize the issue as one of a town centre problem of ‘beggars, vagrants and drunks’. We offer evidence from the local press to suggest that these discourses have been persistently peddled by particular interests in the town. New forms of partnership were inevitably embroiled with the pursuit of these existing discourses, and contrary voices were unable to redefine existing social relations within policy networks. The evidence from Taunton suggests that where partnership merely involves attempts to repackage existing resources, it seems unlikely that it will fulfil some of the more optimistic claims for a more pluralist form of governance in the local arena.

RURAL GOVERNANCE: THE EMERGENCE OF PARTNERSHIP

In a recent paper, Mark Goodwin (1998) has highlighted the reluctance of rural scholars to engage with new ideas about governance: ‘... despite huge changes in the processes and structures of rural “governing”, academic debate in the rural literature has steered clear of any serious engagement with what we might term the “governance perspective”’ (p. 6). He proposes a re-orientation of research which re-evaluates the old distinctions between market, state and civil society and which recognizes the importance of new dependencies and relationships. The re-orientation will involve new understandings both about the structures and fissures of power in rural areas, and about the ways in which social, economic and political interests are represented in national, regional and local arenas. In this paper we acknowledge the validity of this evaluation, and use notions of governance, policy networks and partnership to contextualize the representation of, and policy response to, a particular social issue – homelessness – in a specific rural locale. We suggest that while particular forms of policy praxis emerge...
from the configuration of networks and partnerships in a local rural area such as Taunton, there is also evidence that more general and long-standing processes of discrimination against ‘other’ social groups will persist under these seemingly new arrangements. Despite the apparent wish for the voices of homeless people to be heard within new partnership networks, those voices are effectively overwhelmed by the louder, more powerful voices of political and economic élites, for whom partnership provides opportunities to manipulate the cultural representation of issues such as homelessness.

Recent conceptualizations of governance (see, for example, Goodwin and Painter 1996; Jessop 1995, 1997; Judge et al. 1995; Rhodes 1996, 1997; Rose 1996; Stoker 1996, 1997a) suggests a new interdependence of governmental and non-governmental agencies, a new collectivity of action, and a move away from assumptions about the primacy of the state as the site of political activity. A governance perspective therefore theorizes a ‘blurring of boundaries’ (Stoker 1996) between distinct private sector and public sector activities, and poses important questions about the changing nature of power, decision making and agency interaction. It emphasizes how a wide range of actors and agencies are now required to contribute resources and skills to a tangled web of policy making, and how in so doing the very meaning of government is being altered. In some cases new forms of governance can be seen as being associated with the New Right ideologies of the 1980s, which promised a rolling back of government, but delivered instead a shift in the form of government, characterized by the rise of quangos (Cloke 1992). To this context should be added the increasing importance of European Union funding which, as Ward and McNicholas (1998) suggest, results in ‘local, regional and national actors . . . being required to work in new ways to plan for and administer rural development programmes’ (p. 27). Equally important in rural areas, however, is the long-standing ethic and cultural package of self-help, and the rather convenient reliance on voluntary agencies to provide services which either were previously provided by the state, or were never statized at all.

What interests us particularly in this paper is the way that governance is characterized by the development of new localized policy networks. According to Rhodes (1997) a policy network is ‘a cluster or complex of organisations connected to one another by resource dependencies’ (p. 37), and can range from ‘highly integrated policy communities to loosely integrated issue networks’ (p. 38). A network is rooted in resource exchange: ‘... the distribution of resources between actors in a specific network remains central to any explanation of the distribution of power in that network. Equally, the different pattern both of resources, and their distribution between the several actors in networks explains, in part, the differences between networks’ (p. 37).

In the post-1979 period in Britain, the nature of policy networks has changed significantly. The previously functional networks based on central
or local government departments have been made more complex with the addition of new actors and agencies from the private and voluntary sectors. Government institutions have been differentiated and pluralized, with the result that service delivery systems have become fragmented. Increasingly, the key role of central and local government has been reduced to one of seeking to co-ordinate or manage policy networks through facilitation and negotiation. As Rhodes (1997) indicates, these changing networks pose new issues for the public manager: ‘Is their role to regulate networks (in the sense of maintaining relationship)? Do they act as guardians of the public interest? Do they still have the authority and legitimacy to claim a privileged position in the network? Can they be privileged actors in the network without undermining the discourse’ (p. 58). This mention of discourse reflects an alternative understanding of policy networks. Thus far they have tended to be viewed in the light of powerful actors or agencies controlling networks through resource or position or both. There is scope, however, for the new fragmented networks to act as arenas of more pluralist participation. Fox and Miller (1995), for example, argue that some contemporary policy networks and inter-agency consortia represent sites where discourses on particular issues can be influenced by a variety of interests, including less powerful ones. Here, they envisage a situation where ‘think tank experts, legislative staff, policy analysts, public administrators, interested citizens, process generalists, even elected officials [are] participating together to work out possibilities for what to do next’ (p. 149).

The generation of complex policy networks is also often characterized by the valorization of ‘partnership’. Lurking close to the surface of partnership discourses is the vague promise of citizen self-government – an opportunity to participate in these new forms of governance and an opportunity to raise the profile of issues, interests or client groups by entering into ‘partnership’ (see Stoker 1997b). For some, the new partnerships of governance offer an opportunity for revitalized systems of bargaining, negotiation and collaboration in the ‘fragmented post-Fordist context’ (Mayer 1994). As Murdoch and Abram (1998) suggest, however, only those citizens and voluntary groups with the requisite resources and skills are likely to be able to discharge the responsibilities that partnership entails. Moreover, the very proliferation of experimental and often competitive partnership initiatives (see Bassett 1996) can be seen as further undermining the potential for policy and action from within the state, and at the same time as achieving precious little in terms of establishing an effective alternative service delivery system.

These concepts of governance, policy networks and partnership offer important insights into new forms of policy and action at various scales, including the localized contexts which are emphasized in this paper. Who controls the membership, agenda, business and outcomes of new networks? Are ‘partners’ willing to relinquish control/resources to fulfil the aspirations of other partners, or is partnership essentially an exercise of maximizing what can be gained from participating in that particular policy network?
Will new collaborations be used to develop new discursive representations or merely to reinforce existing discursive hegemonies? What new forms of power will result from the exercise of particular social relations and practices within partnerships, and in particular what are the consequences of actions which serve practically to define or redefine what ‘holds everyone together’? It is these questions which we seek to address in a localized study and representation of partnership, dealing with homelessness issues in Taunton.

HOMELESSNESS AND RURACITY

How the issue of homelessness is dealt with in Britain very much fits the partnership pattern. There has been an underlying assumption that central and local government will collaborate with a range of non-governmental agencies to provide a response to homelessness. Central state action on homelessness is limited and has been focused on dealing with street homelessness through the Rough Sleeper’s and Cold Weather Initiatives and, as such, has been predominantly city based (Webb 1994; DOE 1996). Other responses to homelessness have been essentially punitive (Daly 1996; Lowe 1997). The 1996 Housing Act for example, abolished priority for homeless households on the waiting list for a council property and removed the duty of local authorities to provide permanent accommodation for these households in response to the unsupported belief that homeless households were ‘jumping’ the queue. Under the new Labour administration, priority for homeless households has been restored, and plans to restrict Housing Benefit for people over 25 have also been scrapped (though there has, as yet, been no move to restore full housing benefit to the under 25s). In addition, initiatives to reduce unemployment and poverty, such as the ‘welfare-to-work’ programme, hold out the possibility of reducing the vulnerability of young people in particular to homelessness. There have, however, been few direct measures in tackling homelessness, and it has been predominantly left to the local state to deal with homelessness against a background of changing legislation, decreased social housing stock and reduced public spending. In such constrained circumstances, the role of voluntary agencies, often working in partnership with local authorities, has been fundamental in tackling the problem, and without the work of bodies such as Shelter, Citizens Advice Bureaux and locally specific organizations, the scale and severity of homelessness would undoubtedly be much worse (Daly 1996).

‘Tackling’ the problem of homelessness is itself constrained by hegemonic discourses which seek to define and to problematize homelessness in very specific ways. In particular, the minimalist definition of homelessness as rooflessness continues to dominate political agendas. This emphasis on the most visible form of homelessness ignores the needs of those experiencing less extreme, yet still distressing and potentially destructive, forms of homelessness which are hidden from the public purview of the city street. A number of commentators (for example Watson 1984; Watson and...
Austerberry 1986; Blasi 1990; Hutson and Liddiard 1994) have conceived of a wider definition of homelessness as being a continuum of housing situations ranging from life on the streets to people living in inadequate or insecure housing. However, while there is a general consensus that those without any form of shelter are homeless, as the definition is extended to encompass people with recognizable but less extreme housing problems – for example, those living in insecure or overcrowded accommodation – it becomes increasingly difficult to draw a distinction between those with and without a home. This difficulty feeds into a broader debate on the distinction between a house as a means of shelter and a home which implies much more than a physical structure. As Hutson and Liddiard (1994, p. 29) contend, ‘in its broadest sense, the term “homeless” means not having a “home” . . . the problem, however, lies in defining what one means by the term “home”. A “home” . . . clearly means more than a house’. Given such complexities, the more ‘graspable’ idea of rooflessness continues to dominate ‘official’ discourses of homelessness, and more ‘hidden’ forms of homelessness – including, for example, people who do not register under the formal system or who are not prioritized in homelessness legislation, concealed households and those who sleep rough but not regularly or in known sites – remain hidden.

One very crucial element of the hiddenness of homelessness is spatial, in that hegemonic discourses and definitions serve to conflate the ‘problems’ of homelessness with imagined geographies restricted to big cities. Yet there is clear evidence both in the UK (see, for example Lambert et al. 1992; Bramley 1994) and in the USA (Fitchen 1991, 1992; Lawrence 1995; Walmer 1989) both that homelessness does occur in rural areas, and that the scale of the problem is significantly underemphasized by official data sources. Moreover, there are recognizable characteristics of the geographies of rural areas which seem to contribute to the assumption that homelessness is an urban phenomenon, and is rendered invisible in rural space. First, there are the well-charted disadvantages of living in a rural location. Reporting on a conference on youth homelessness in rural areas for example, Button (1992, p. 7) outlines the rural context:

Whatever the local infrastructure or individual reasons for wanting to leave home, when they do leave, young people inevitably find themselves in competition with people who are more affluent, can afford to buy available local housing, and who are not necessarily dependent on local services for their existence or for maintaining their lifestyle. As more people like this move into an area, buying up housing once available for local people to rent, all local people and services suffer. Shops close, public transport dwindles and villages become museums rather than thriving communities made up of a range of age groups and types of people. The dilemma for young people in these areas occurs when they leave home to be independent but lack the resources to realistically achieve this.
As a result there has been a movement of people with housing difficulties away from rural areas to larger settlements in what Ford et al. (1997) have recently referred to as the ‘export’ or ‘urbanization’ of homelessness.

Secondly, the invisibility of rural homelessness may be compounded by socio-cultural barriers which prevent or hinder people from receiving the assistance they require and ensure that their homelessness remains hidden. Numerous studies (see for example Scott et al. 1991; Cloke et al. 1995, 1997; Woodward 1996) have reported a reluctance among people living in rural areas to acknowledge the existence of poverty and deprivation in their communities and it might be expected that this attitude extends to denying or failing to acknowledge the existence of homelessness. Evidence from research into rural deprivation suggests a high degree of self-reliance, dependency on local, informal networks of support, and related to this, feelings of shame at requiring ‘outside’/professional help which, along with the lack of anonymity in a small community and fear of being stigmatized, may deter people from approaching their local authority and other agencies for help.

Thirdly, the much vaunted notion of the rural idyll serves to keep the problem of homelessness in rural areas hidden. Rural life has been cherished and idealized, and notions of close-knit communities leading happy, healthy lives in an idyllic and problem-free environment have become a powerful representation of rurality (Cloke and Milbourne 1992). Discourses of rural life screen out antithetical problems such as poverty and homelessness which challenge these popular constructions of rural life as a problem-free living environment (see Cloke 1995). For example, the recent White Paper *Rural England: A Nation Committed to a Living Countryside* (1995) eschews discourses of poverty and homelessness in a rural setting preferring to talk – and then only briefly – about deprivation and housing need.

Consequently, knowledge about local homelessness problems in rural areas is seldom sought after, and when it comes to light tends to be argued away as non-conforming and relatively unimportant compared to elsewhere. The net result of this ‘othering’ of problematic issues within dominant social and cultural constructions of rurality and rural life, is that homelessness is deemed out of place in rural areas. Following Sibley (1995), we can identify the countryside as a purified space whose boundaries are policed and where the rejection of difference is embedded in the social system. As we suggest elsewhere (Cloke et al. 1999), homeless people do not ‘belong’ in this purified space, and this experience of being out-of-place, or not belonging, is a major cultural prompt to rural residents and to those agencies whose jurisdiction covers these geographical areas, not to acknowledge homelessness as a legitimate part of their discourses on rurality.

However, although discourses of rural social space generally serve to exclude many forms of homelessness as a potentially transgressive issue, it would be erroneous to suggest that the application of these discourses

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2000
is in any way regular. Distinctions between rural and urban geographical spaces are often significantly blurred (Wilson 1992) and social spaces of rurality are becoming increasingly detached from geographical spaces (see Cloke and Little 1997). Therefore it is to be expected that homelessness will seem more out-of-place in some rural environments and places than in others. Moreover recent research (Button 1992; Wright and Everitt 1996; Ford et al. 1997) has highlighted the interconnection between (small) towns and their surrounding rural areas and Shelter have stressed that the interaction between a market town and its surrounding rural district must be looked at in order to appreciate the scale of homelessness. While ideas of rural idyll, and perceptions of homelessness as an urban problem which is ‘out-of-place’ in rural spaces, tend to be worked out in the geographical imagination of small rural villages, our work in Taunton has revealed that these ideas often emerge in the larger settlements which service them as well. It is to this example we now turn, using our study of homelessness in the town to examine the issues of partnership and representation in contemporary local governance in rural areas.

**HOMELESSNESS IN TAUNTON**

Taunton is a market town in South West England, with a population of some 45,500, and a rural hinterland containing a similar number of people again. This serving of a hinterland is crucial to its place in the understanding of rural homelessness. In 1995, of the 750 individuals or households seen by Shelter’s Taunton office, who were either homeless or threatened with homelessness, only one-third were based in Taunton itself, while two-thirds came from the surrounding rural areas (The Big Issue 192, 29 July–4 August 1996). In a previous study of the area, Woods (1998) has demonstrated how the local authority – Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) – has actively been repositioning itself both as an advocate of local people and local interests, and as an advocate of idyllic representations of rurality. Moreover, he shows how discursive prompting of local public opinion is strongly influenced by local news media, which in turn becomes a platform for the voicing of certain kinds of élite discourses about the town and the area. This is especially the case where homelessness is concerned. Archival research on stories and letters carried in the local newspaper – the Somerset County Gazette (SCG) – provides very interesting illustrations of the discursive representations of homelessness in Taunton.

The following narrative of homelessness in Taunton enables reflection on a number of the important theoretical issues raised above. We are interested in examining the nature of local policy networks, especially in relation to how such networks are held together, who controls membership, business agendas and outcomes, and what role is performed by public sector managers. We are also interested in the ways in which inter-agency partnerships emerge as the mechanisms by which governance occurs in the context of representing and responding to homelessness issues. In particular we pose
the questions of whether such partnerships are responsible for the development of new discursive representations of homelessness, rather than merely reinforcing existing ones, and whether these discourses can be accessed and influenced by less powerful agents within partnerships. We begin, therefore, by surveying the representations of homelessness in Taunton and assessing the localized nature of homelessness issues which form the context for partnership within and between policy networks.

THE REPRESENTATIONS OF HOMELESSNESS IN TAUNTON

Perhaps one of the clearest strands to emerge from a review of local press coverage is the way in which different groups of people and individuals with different sets and sorts of problems are all lumped together in one homogenous mass in discussion of ‘the problems’ of the town centre. Articles frequently refer to a trio of ‘undesirables’ namely, ‘beggars, vagrants and drunks’. The ‘homeless’ are blamed for the problems of drunkenness and aggressive begging in the town centre, yet while undoubtedly in some instances there are relationships between the two, it cannot be assumed that all beggars are homeless or that all homeless people beg, or are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. Indeed, as an article in The Big Issue discussing ‘the recent moral panic in Somerset’ pointed out, “begging, street homelessness, drunkenness and street crime should only be banded together in one way. They are all symptoms; the result of some other failing in society” (7–13 October 1996). However, despite the tendency to conflate the issues of homelessness and begging, some differentiation is perceived within the homeless population with a distinction drawn between the ‘genuine’ homeless – reluctant victims of their circumstances – and the ‘idle’ homeless for whom their situation is considered to represent a lifestyle choice. Several articles report the suspicion of a number of individuals that people on the streets are not really homeless. And it is here that key actors in local policy networks emerge as ‘discourse-formers’. One such actor is a local Conservative councillor, James Meikle, who made frequent use of local newspapers to stylize a discourse of the undeserving nature of forms of street homelessness. For example, in one letter he claims, ‘beggars and buskers are not all destitute. State benefits are often received and they are often not homeless as claimed on their cardboard signs’ (SCG 30 August 1996).

In addition, not even the ‘genuine’ and thus, presumably ‘legitimate’ homeless, as personified by sellers of The Big Issue, gain unequivocal support and acceptance. Here, public managers and local politicians are embroiled in the issue in terms of their local regulatory functions. For example, TDBC’s Policy Committee came to the decision that that Big Issue vendors would be exempt from any licensed trading scheme. The clear implication was that this exemption represented a regulatory limitation of the scheme. More overt reservations about the selling of The Big Issue on the streets of Taunton were voiced by another key actor, the then MP, David Nicholson, who while recognizing it as a legitimate activity seemed to see such selling...
as the start of a downward spiral into (even) less desirable activities: ‘once it is established you can solicit money by playing music or selling The Big Issue, then it’s only a matter of time before people sit there and ask for your money’ (SCG 13 September 1996).

The discursive arena, therefore, was divided between those who see the ‘beggars, vagrants and drunks’ as problems, and those who regard them as people with problems. However, the editorial policy of the SCG was loaded in favour of key actors who were promoting discourses which problematized homelessness as an unwanted blot on the townscape. Thus press reports based on the comments and concerns of businessmen such as Kit Chapman (who is the Managing Director of the Castle Hotel in Taunton) received prominence on the leading pages of the SCG. However, the letters page of SCG demonstrated a much greater appreciation of, and attention to, the causes and some of the experiences and circumstances which lead people into (and also hinder their exit from) begging, homelessness, and drug/alcohol addiction. For example, one letter notes, ‘once homeless, you leave society and it is difficult to return . . .. For those who have become streetwise and survived, street-life has become habitual, without expectations for anything else’ (30 June 1997). Another correspondent talks about the ‘truth of homelessness’: ‘young people who had been brought up in care, or fled their families because of violence, or people who through a series of misfortunes found themselves penniless and alone’ and argues, ‘People living on the streets of Taunton deserve respect, compassion and practical support’ (21 March 1997). A third writes, ‘It is largely as a direct result of the government’s policies that so many people find themselves homeless today . . .. Homeless people do not need to be referred to as a “problem”. What they do need is respect as fellow human beings’.

While there is potential here for hegemonic discourses to be influenced by these less powerful voices which express sympathy for homeless people, the principle discursive impetus for action came predominantly from key actors who were less sympathetic and whose local social or political position placed them at the accessible nexus of discursive formation on the issue. One of the key tactics here was to channel discursive attention into how homelessness was a problem ‘for the town’.

HOMELESSNESS AND BEGGING IN TAUNTON – A PROBLEM FOR WHOM?

Two, contrasting, moral convictions seem to underpin the local press coverage of homelessness in Taunton. First, as expressed by concerned individuals and representatives from various voluntary bodies, there is a sense of outrage based on a moral conviction that in the twentieth century, and in a supposedly developed and civilized society, people should still find themselves with nowhere to live and be reduced to begging for spare change from passers-by. The second, as expressed by key actors, particularly conservative politicians and business leaders, relies on a sense of
outrage that ‘normal’ hard-working people should have to encounter the
nuisance and perceived threat of begging while going about their legitimate
business. In the words of local business leader Kit Chapman, these beggars
and vagrants, ‘do nothing to enhance the area for people who come here
to use business facilities and spend money’ (SCG 14 March 1997).

It is this second set of moral convictions which has been powerful in
representing ‘the homeless’ and beggars on the streets of Taunton as both
a physical and economic threat. These threats are related, with obvious
economic consequences if fear or abuse or harassment deters shoppers and
tourists from visiting the town. This risk to trade/profit is of paramount
importance and is perhaps the driving force behind, certainly the business
community’s, concern to tackle homelessness and begging. James Meikle
for example, Conservative town councillor (and, the owner of a local
business) talks of the need to control the ‘vitaly important shopping
environment’ and calls for a ‘Shopper’s Charter’ ‘so the people of Taunton
can shop in the town centre without feeling a sense of potential danger’
(SCG 30 August 1997). Other local businessmen have bemoaned the
unfavourable impression of the town created by the presence of ‘beggars,
vagrants and drunks’, while the Liberal Democrat leader of TDBC
expressed the need to ensure that public drinking and begging do not drive
away potential visitors.

However, while the reaction of the business community to homelessness
and begging highlights an ordering of priorities which places profit before
people, TDBC – while anxious to protect the economic viability of the
town – has been responsible for the introduction of more humanitarian
concerns into public discussions of issues relating to homelessness. Thus,
the wish ‘to ensure that the enhanced town centre continues to be a safe
and pleasant environment for all members of the public’ is linked with the
wish to ‘get the balance between caring and the need to ensure a viable
and prosperous town centre’ (Inter-Agency Meeting on homelessness, 12
December 1996).

These twin objectives are also emphasized in the press which recognizes
the need both, ‘to help people who are vulnerable and to protect towns-
people who are frightened’ (SCG 13 September 1996). What is less apparent
however, is any recognition that these aims are compatible rather than con-
tradictory. Helping people who are vulnerable move out of the circum-
stances that lead them into homelessness and/or begging will, if not ‘elim-
nate’, at least reduce the number of people on the streets and with it the
fear felt by some members of the public and the consequent detrimental
impact on trade and tourism if people are deterred from coming into the
town. In addition, as a special feature on homelessness in the SCG ques-
tions, ‘are street people really threatening and intimidating or do we just
see them that way because they are different?’ That is not to deny that
perceived threats, as studies into the fear of crime demonstrate, can exert a
damaging and constraining affect on people’s lives, but at the same time
it would suggest an alternative approach to resolving the issue, one which is based on education and contact between these ‘others’ and the town’s more conventional residents. As Sibley (1995, p. 15) points out, ‘fear precedes the construction of the bad object, the negative stereotype, but the stereotype – simplified, distorted and at a distance – perpetuates that fear’.

INSIDERS/OUTSIDERS

By drawing a distinction between townspeople and people who are vulnerable, the SCG also highlights the way in which ‘the vulnerable’ are seen as ‘outsiders’ not only in a social/moral context but also geographically. Time after time, and in a number of different arenas, homelessness and begging are presented as problems predominantly created by people coming from outside Taunton. For example, minutes from a meeting of the TDBC Policy Committee (3 October 1996) refer to an ‘influx of beggars and the homeless on the streets’. Here we detect one discursive mechanism by which potential inter-agency partnership can be ‘held together’. Any assistance to be given to homeless people is circumscribed by the insistence that too sympathetic a response or too generous a provision of services would exacerbate problems by attracting more homeless people into the town. David Nicholson, Conservative MP for the area before losing his seat at the 1997 election, for example referred to the dilemma of ‘how to provide help for people who are genuinely in need without attracting more homeless people to Taunton’ (SCG 4 October 1996).

In addition, it is not only that the individuals themselves are perceived as outsiders but the problems they manifest are seen as disingenuous to images of the rural – these are problems that you might expect to find in cities but are out of place in a more rural setting such as Taunton. Homelessness and begging are seen as totally alien to the rural environment and the idea that rural space is being defiled by these urban problems is perhaps reflected in Kit Chapman’s comment that without action ‘the centre of Taunton will become another nasty inner city ghetto’ (23 August 1996). As such the appearance of homeless people and beggars on the streets of the town represents both a challenge to the popular construction of rural life as being problem-free and a transgression from the socio-spatial expectation of homelessness and begging as urban problems. These constructs are held by most if not all potential ‘partners’ who might be called upon to implement governance with relation to homeless people. The action outcomes from any new networks are therefore constrained by the everyday imagined geographies of rural and urban life.

HOMELESSNESS AND BEGGING A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH?

In October 1996, concerns that improvements to the town centre could be spoiled by ‘the influx of beggars and homeless on the streets’, led TDBC to draw up a ‘Six Point Initiative’ ‘to ensure that the enhanced town centre continues to be a safe and pleasant environment for all members of the
public’. The initiatives proposed involved: information gathering with two surveys, one of homelessness and begging and the second to establish the attitudes of town centre users towards vagrancy and the consumption of alcohol in public; practical measures with improved street cleaning and plans to introduce a system of diverted giving in which so-called ‘begging boxes’ are placed in a number of stores as an encouragement to shoppers to help ‘the homeless’ in this way rather than giving money to people on the streets; and moves towards greater official regulation of public space with investigation of the possibility of introducing a local bye-law to restrict sale and consumption of alcohol and proposals to establish a licensing scheme for street trading.

The proposals were drawn up jointly by leaders of the three main political parties, and involved a number of organizations, including: the police; the Town Centre Partnership (set up in response to an identified need for the business sector and TDBC to work more closely together for the benefit of the town, and consisting of representatives from major national retailers within the town, the Chamber of Commerce, TDBC and Somerset County Council) and voluntary organizations such as Shelter, Taunton Association for the Homeless (an organization running hostels) and Open Door (who run a drop-in and advice centre). Here is clear evidence of the establishment of ‘partnership’ within contemporary local governance. However, it is important to recognize that this partnership arose under particular circumstances. Discourses of the ‘problem’ of homelessness in Taunton had already been formed and negotiated in the local press, and although two ‘sides’ to the issue had been aired, the loud voices of local businessmen and some elected representatives have successfully framed the problem in terms of ‘unacceptable’ street behaviour. Moreover, dominant discourses also pointed to a regulation of the problem (that is by a stricter ‘policing’ of public space) rather than a response to the needs which some voices suggest underlies the problem. In particular the interests of local capital and consumers were set against those agencies who were seeking to enhance the welfare of homeless people. This, then, was a partnership in which, initially at least, there seemed to be little willingness to relinquish control or resources in order to fulfil the aspirations of other partners in the policy network. Partnership in the network was undertaken from a platform of pursuing key sectoral interests.

The role of a key local government officer – TDBC’s Housing Officer – was crucial in the establishment of a wider policy network with which to engage in homelessness partnership in Taunton. Soon after the ‘Six Point Initiative’, he brokered a ‘Town Centre Inter-Agency Meeting’ which brought together more than 40 individuals representing 19 or so agencies including the Town Centre Partnership, the police, the Private Landlords Association and local business (those, perhaps most interested in regulation ‘solutions’), but also including local housing associations, Citizens Advice Bureaux, Shelter, the homeless agencies (Taunton Association for the
Homeless; Open Door) local churches, *The Big Issue*, detached youth workers and TDBC itself. There was a strong sense that by calling together these potential partner agencies something was being done about the ‘problem’. There was also a sufficiently wide constituency to allow participants the prospect of participatory citizenship with partnership. A sense of pluralism within partnership was fostered in this and subsequent meetings by the organizational gambit of going around the room asking each participant for their particular views and reactions.

It would be overly simplistic to define the various interests represented in terms of business interests, housing agency interests and council interests, with the latter being a complex amalgam of concerns relating not only to housing and homelessness responsibilities but also to maximizing local economic growth and to the need to maintain voter support. However, although such categories are by no means mutually exclusive, they do illustrate the varying motivations for the involvement of individuals and agencies in the partnership approach and the different priorities which are likely to result. What emerged most clearly from the meetings therefore, was the concern of the business community that homelessness and begging have a detrimental affect on trade. So far as the voluntary agencies are concerned, while it might be considered that the motivation for their involvement in the partnership approach is fairly unequivocal – a desire to help those in need – talking of the voluntary sector as a whole disguises differences between the organizations within the sector. Although there was no evidence of this in the Taunton case, other studies (Hutson and Liddiard 1994; Oldman 1997) have pointed to inter-agency rivalry where there is competition for limited funds. Tensions may also arise over differences in approach – for example, the extent an individual is considered responsible for their situation – and in the nature of an organization’s response to homelessness – for example whether they simply react to the situation in hand, through, for instance, the provision of overnight accommodation, or whether they are more concerned to prevent homelessness occurring in the first place.

Perhaps the most complex motivational influence was that of TDBC, whose officers and members were positioned so as to attempt to balance the needs and demands of a number of different constituencies – including local electorates, businesses and people in need. However, although the council leader stated a belief that the Six Point Plan ‘gets the balance between caring and the need to ensure a viable and prosperous town centre just right’, it is perhaps not overly cynical to regard the council’s pursuit of an inter-agency/partnership approach in tackling the problems of the town centre, as being primarily financially driven. Indeed, at the Inter-Agency Meeting, the Borough Housing Officer spoke of ‘maximizing existing resources’ and, having highlighted the constraints on public expenditure stated, ‘it is therefore imperative that we make the best use of existing
provision and services and hence the encouragement of this inter-agency network approach’.

The Council is also under pressure from the public and business community to show that something is being done to address the problems of the town centre and to counter claims in the press that they are taking no action to resolve the situation. There is thus a political dimension to their response with the failure to achieve a satisfactory solution liable to lead to a loss of public support. As a correspondent to the SCG warned,

if Jefferson Horsley [the council leader] really believes by-laws about dogs on leads coupled with sanctimonious platitudes are in any way an adequate response from the Deane Council leader to an extremely serious and growing problem facing Taunton, then the sooner his party makes way for an alternative administration willing and able to take decisive and positive action the better (SCG 6 June 1997).

PARTNERSHIP: INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

It should also be recorded that key individuals and groups were absent from the Inter-Agency Meeting, and hence from the partnership process. In particular, despite being the focus of discussion, homeless people and beggars were not present at the meeting and it was left to workers from agencies such as Taunton Association for the Homeless and Open Door to represent their interests and speak on their behalf. This emphasizes their position as ‘other’ with the exclusion of homeless and other vulnerable people from mainstream society reflected and indeed reinforced through their exclusion from the political process. Barriers are consequently strengthened when, it could be argued, the opportunity provided by such meetings for ‘engaging with the other, what bell hooks calls repositioning, might lead to understanding, a rejection of stereotype and a lesser concern with threats to the boundary of community’ (Sibley 1995, p. 29). In addition, it could be argued that such exclusion may lead to an incomplete or inadequate understanding of the needs and requirements of homeless people and consequently may result in inappropriate strategies for dealing with the problems.

Having said that, excluding homeless people themselves from the partnership process is not necessarily wholly disadvantageous. As Sibley (1995, p. 29) warns, there are drawbacks if contact with ‘the other’ is only partial or brief and limited engagement or superficial encounters, ‘might result in the presumption of knowledge which could be more dangerous than ignorance, if this were in the province of state bureaucracies or academia’. In addition, the voluntary agencies lend a degree of respectability to the issue of homelessness which perhaps ensures a greater receptiveness, especially among a conservative audience, to the views and needs of homeless people than they themselves would be able to achieve.

In terms of other ‘groups’ who were missing from the Inter-Agency Meet-
ing, although all the participants at the meeting were members of the public, each were there representing a specific organization and there was no one who was there simply as a resident of Taunton and/or a town centre user. Yet, the ‘public’ also need to be part of the partnership approach. As the Director of Taunton Association for the Homeless pointed out, in an article in the SCG, ‘continued multi-agency work between voluntary and paid agencies in the Deane will produce results if supported by public support and understanding’ (SCG 9 May 1997) (emphasis added). Furthermore, it is implicit in this kind of claim that one of the key roles for public managers within the new policy networks of governance by partnership is to represent ‘the public’, and to arbitrate on their behalf. Of course there is no such thing as the ‘general public’ in the sense of a homogenous mass of people with shared aims and ideas. However, elected local politicians and their employee ‘public servants’ do seem to exercise their positional power within networks at least partially on the grounds of being able to represent the public electorate. However, the role of arbitration is made significantly more difficult when other ‘partners’ also make strong claims to represent ‘the public’. In Taunton, this challenge came from some members of the business community who spoke on the homelessness issue ‘on behalf of’ their customers. For example, the manager of the local Marks and Spencers speaking at the Inter-Agency Meeting stated ‘In a sense, Marks and Spencers can claim to represent a constituency of 25,000 people a week, all of whom have legitimate views about the environs of the town centre’. However, he gives no indication of what, if any, research has been carried out to establish these views and consequently it is at least questionable as to how far he can claim to represent public opinion.

Partnership will be characterized not only by who is included and excluded, but also by the power of particular voices over others. The management of the Inter-Agency Meeting seemed to reflect a model example of the partnership process at work. Seats were arranged in circular form and, following an introduction from the Chairman, contributions were invited on a ‘round-the-table’ basis. Yet this deliberate spatial configuration belied a clear hierarchy of power. While ostensibly about partnership it very soon became clear that some interests were more powerful than others. In particular, this applied to the dominance of business concerns in the debate – even though, in numerical terms agency representatives far outweighed those from the business community.

The primacy accorded to business interests was evident from the outset of attempts to tackle the problems in the town centre. Despite requiring the involvement of a whole host of organizations, a meeting of the Council’s Policy Committee (3 October 1996) a few days after the Six Point Initiative was drawn up, recommended that the proposals, ‘be passed onto the Taunton Town Centre Partnership for comments and endorsement with suitable action and funding being made available through both the council and the Town Centre Partnership itself.’ Consultation with other bodies and, in
particular voluntary agencies in the town was limited and on a more informal basis. This is not perhaps surprising given the Council’s dependency on the business community, particularly in the light of constraints on public expenditure. Right from the beginning of discussions, the Town Centre Partnership were accorded a degree of financial responsibility for the programme to deal with the problems in the town centre as apparent from the minutes of the meeting of the Policy Committee (3 October 1996) which recorded: ‘Clearly ownership must be shared with the Town Centre Partnership who if they approve the thrust would be expected to pick up some of the costs’. It can be concluded, therefore, that the membership, agenda, business and outcomes of the ‘partnership’ network were controlled perhaps implicitly, but often more openly, by the objectives and willingness-to-act of this powerful business lobby.

In Taunton, as elsewhere, local traders constitute a powerful lobby force, with the economic well-being of the town and its citizens resting upon the jobs and direct financial support they provide. This is a lever which companies have proved themselves willing to use. For example, speaking at the Inter-Agency Meeting, the manager of Marks and Spencers, referring to pressure to move out of town seemed to make a veiled threat to withdraw from Taunton and suggested continuing investment was incumbent upon action to address the problems, commenting, ‘Marks and Spencer are investing millions in Taunton but expect a return’. Consequently, the council is reliant on the approval of the business community before embarking on a course of action, but has less need to take account of the opinions of the voluntary agencies who have no financial hold over the council and little or no power to exercise in order to ensure that their voices are heard.

DISCURSIVE INCOMPATIBILITIES

To some extent presenting a division of interest between the business community – who seek to protect trade in the town centre – and the voluntary agencies – whose concerns are more geared towards the needs of the beggars and homeless people identified as the cause of the town’s problems – is something of an artificial distinction. These two objectives are not incompatible and both groups seek, albeit for different reasons, to end homelessness and begging on the streets. Nevertheless, the different priorities and motivations of the business community and the voluntary agencies, are reflected in the very different discourses of homelessness which they promote. While the business community tend to see the people involved as problems, the voluntary agencies are much more likely to see them as people with problems. This is not simply a semantic distinction but has an effect on the type of approach and strategies adopted to deal with the situation in the town centre. The presence of incompatible discourses was highlighted most graphically at the Inter-Agency Meeting in discussions of plans to conduct a survey of homelessness and begging. Both the council, and representatives of the business community, underplayed the ethical
issues and complexities involved in conducting such a survey and struggled to understand concerns of the agencies, expressed most forcefully by workers from Shelter, Taunton Association for the Homeless and The Big Issue with regard to the use to which information might be put once it was in the public domain and its potential to be used as political ammunition. Although a considerable amount of time was spent at the Inter-Agency Meeting discussing the matter, it is salient to note that the minutes of the meeting prepared by the TDBC do not record, even in passing, the reservations of the agencies with regard to the survey, perhaps reflecting the lack of recognition of the importance of ethical issues and the legitimacy of the concerns expressed. (An alternative reading is that omission of the discussion from the minutes was less an oversight so much as a conscious attempt to gloss over what were, at the time, quite heated differences of opinion.)

The discursive distance between the commercial and the voluntary sector was also apparent in their different reaction to some of the measures proposed by the council to deal with homelessness and begging in the town centre. In particular, plans to implement a ‘diverted giving scheme’, whereby shoppers place donations for ‘the homeless’ in collection boxes placed in stores rather than giving money to people on the street, were strongly supported by representatives from the Town Centre Partnership. In contrast, a number of the voluntary organizations expressed their suspicion and reservations about such a scheme with the most vehement opposition coming from representatives from The Big Issue who were concerned about homeless people being ‘further’ stigmatized and alienated. Despite such opposition a diverted giving scheme in Taunton was launched at the end of June 1997. Although it is too early as yet to assess its effect, the fact that a collection for the local dogs home outside ASDA for a day raised £700, while Taunton Association for the Homeless did the same and collected only £80 perhaps raises doubts about the fund-raising potential of the scheme.

THE OUTCOMES OF PARTNERSHIP

After the Inter-Agency Meeting in 1996, there was a commitment from the council to hold a further meeting in a year’s time ‘to review the position at that time and to consider what developments have occurred in the intervening period’ (TDBC minutes). The council suggested that some of the organizations who attended the meeting would continue to meet in the meantime, ‘with a view to maximising existing resources and developing new initiatives where this proves possible’, and this suggestion permits some interesting interpretation of how inter-agency partnership is being constructed by the public managers concerned. The Inter-Agency Meeting was convened to ‘deal with’ a situation which had become increasingly the focus of public debate. The local authority was unable to solve the ‘problem’ from its own resources, and within its own powers, yet the situation had
to be addressed as the various shades of public opinion were being stirred up by the discursive output of the local press. Therefore the seeking of ‘partnership’ between a wide range of interests and agencies provided a clear way forward, and the roles of bringing together these interests and seeming to arbitrate between them, presented a key role for the authority and its officers and members. However, this partnership soon highlighted irresolvable discursive and resource-related differences amongst the ‘partners’. In particular, the very different objectives of ‘clearing the streets’ and resourcing existing and new initiatives to house homeless people, meant that business had to be controlled into manageable areas rather than being allowed to escalate into arenas where expectations from partners could not be met. Therefore, public managers acted to limit the scope of business, and to engineer manageable outcomes that could still be presented discursively as ‘addressing the issue’.

These limitations led to two main outcomes. First, the meeting led to the creation of a directory of agencies, which provided a brief summary of the work of each of the organizations represented. Such information is essential to the success of a partnership approach. An awareness of the existence and remit of other organizations can lead to more effective and efficient provision both by preventing an unnecessary duplication of services and by facilitating the referral of clients to the organization best able to meet their needs. In addition, such a directory provides the opportunity for contacts to be established and may enable different organizations with similar concerns to come together to lobby for policy changes and financial support.

However, the main outcome (‘the substantive commitment’) of the Inter-Agency Meeting as the minutes record, ‘was an agreement to prepare a survey of the people who are on the street’. As the meeting progressed, it was fairly obvious that the council had a clear idea of what it wanted to achieve from the meeting, namely a survey carried out by the voluntary sector with minimal, if any, local authority funding, to which end a sub-group was established. Subsequent meetings of this group once again highlighted the differences between the different bodies involved and the consequent difficulties encountered in pursuing a partnership approach. Representatives from the voluntary agencies revoiced the reservations they had expressed previously regarding the purpose of the survey and to what use the information would be put, and restated their concern not to alienate the people they were trying to assist. While the council officers present argued that the survey was not intended to stigmatize homeless people, they were at something of a loss to explain exactly why a survey was required. As a result, the idea of conducting a survey of homelessness was eventually (after several meetings) abandoned in favour of carrying out a simple count of the number of people on the streets as the basis for a bid to obtain funds under the government’s Rough Sleepers Initiative, with any further information required by TDBC being supplied by the voluntary
agencies present, so long as this would not breach their codes of confidentiality or infringe the rights and privacy of their clients.

The restricted nature of these outcomes is perhaps understandable. TDBC seemed very committed to a partnership approach, but resource constraints limited their ability to provide directly for homeless and other vulnerable people. Therefore, at the Inter-Agency Meeting, the Borough Housing Officer noted that expenditure constraints and a shortage of affordable accommodation meant that priority was given to households with children and ‘concern for the single homeless has to take its place within those priorities’. While the council acknowledged at an early stage that, ‘development of a multi-agency programme towards reducing homelessness would be extremely resource intensive’ and that ‘extra funding would be required, possibly for additional staff’ this appears not to have been forthcoming. Indeed, the two principal providers of support for homeless people in Taunton – Taunton Association for the Homeless, and Open Door – have struggled to maintain their current levels of service, and have both faced financial problems sufficiently severe to have to contemplate cutbacks or even closure.

The lack of financial support from TDBC and the business sector for voluntary agencies dealing with homelessness provides a significant indicator of the limitations of their commitment to partnership. These ‘loudest voices’ are clearly pursuing their own goals through the partnership approach. If partnership is a sharing of interests, risks and resources – collaboration of players on the same side of the game – then the Taunton partnership has made relatively few gains. Indeed it could be argued that participation in partnership has allowed the most powerful and loudest voices to continue to (re)construct discourses of homelessness which are principally motivated by self-interest and profit. In other words, partnership has provided a further platform within which exclusionary social practices are legitimized discursively while the parties concerned can wear the clothes of reason and collaboration. Within unequal partnerships such as this, it is much more difficult to deconstruct the discursive power of ‘loud voice’ groups.

A letter to the SCG sums up this dilemma: ‘If we allow people motivated by profit to sanitise, normalise and regulate our society we will, by our inaction, support their spiteful tricks. After they have handed in the poor and the unlucky, who will be next? Answer: anyone they cannot see commercial value in’ (SCG 4 October 1996). This is not as exaggerated or sensationalist a conclusion as it might at first sound. The latest controversy to embroil Taunton’s town centre revolves around the objection of a number of traders to a scheme to improve access for people with disabilities by creating a paved strip across an area of cobbled pathway in the centre of the town, on the grounds that it will disrupt pedestrian flow and that the £16,000 cost ‘would be far better spent on ridding the town of the various beggars and vagrants who continue to pollute the streets’ (SCG 13 June 1997). Attitudes to homeless people and those with disabilities are linked
in this apparent desire to remove anyone from the town centre who does not conform to a particular brand of ‘normality’. As the Press Officer for Somerset Coalition of Disabled People writes, in a letter to the SCG, ‘we can see that some traders have extended their definition of undesirables (from homeless people) to include disabled people’ and echoes the warning issued by the previous correspondent with his concluding question ‘who will these people want to exclude next?’ (SCG 20 June 1997).

CONCLUSIONS

Under the ‘New Labour’ government, the political air is thick with talk of ‘partnership’, and as a broad political discourse, partnership is clearly being characterized as being about inclusion in a stake-holding society, with pluralist visions about who ‘has a say’ and who ‘takes part’ in the running of the country. The Taunton case clearly suggests that partnership requires investment of human and capital resources from its participants in order to be successful. Voluntary agencies dealing with homelessness in Taunton face a continual struggle to survive, and are certainly not in a position to deal with gaps in existing provision – for example, the lack of a ‘wet’ hostel in the town for those with drug/alcohol addictions. The partnership of government, business and voluntary agencies has resulted in little change to this situation. Thus, although not denying the potential benefits of pursuing a partnership approach, our conclusion is there is a danger that such an approach becomes a way of devolving responsibility and side-stepping the financial and other support necessary to deal with problems as well as a useful way of avoiding blame when things, as frequently happens where complex issues are involved, do not go according to plan.

In Taunton, despite the apparent concern to tackle the problems in the town centre and ‘help the homeless’, the rhetoric of partnership has not been backed up by concrete measures and direct action to provide any real improvements to the lives of the ‘beggars, vagrants and drunks’ who have become such a public concern. Although, there may be work going on behind the scenes and informal contacts between the local authority and various different organizations, in the more formal and public/publicized arena, the council’s decision to adopt a partnership approach can be seen to be as much motivated by a desire to limit calls on spending and deflect public criticism as an urge to work together to tackle the problems identified. (It should be noted, however, that more recently the council has adopted a much more positive and constructive approach towards dealing with homelessness with the launch of a ‘Single Homelessness Strategy’ in which the council aims to work together with voluntary agencies to identify gaps in provision and reach agreement on future priorities ‘for the benefit of vulnerable single people’.)

Evidence from this study of ‘partnership’ in Taunton throws interesting light on more general discussions of how policy networks and partnerships operate at the local level. Partnership in Taunton was clearly managed at
the outset by agents within the local authority who enrolled particular participants, set the agenda, scheduled the business and manoeuvred the outcomes. This is not to say that council members and officers were solely concerned to manipulate partnership for their own ends, or were unsympathetic to the issue of responding to the needs of homeless people. However, their actions were underpinned by a requirement that local government needs to be forging new roles for itself in an era of dwindling powers of direct investment. One principal role is that of brokering partnerships. Not only does this permit a public image of councils being active in addressing issues, but it also provides an arena for highly motivated individuals to seek out new ways of getting things done within environments of resource constraint. It is, however, the central role of broker which permits local authorities their impression of continued focal importance in new forms of governance.

However ‘honest’ the brokerage is, it will inevitably be influenced both by pre-existing discursive characterization of ‘issues’, and by unevenness in the distribution of resources and regulatory powers which can be brought into partnerships. In Taunton, key discursive narratives of homelessness, which conflate social need with the perceived street behaviours of ‘beggars, vagrants and drunks’, had already been established in local cultural circulations, notably the local press. These representations were not accidental. Rather they had been persistently peddled by particular interests in the town such as key business leaders and some elected politicians. Partnership does not start with a clean discursive sheet. The representational battle had to a large extent already been won, as the ‘issue’ was perceived as the ‘town centre problem’ rather than as the social problems experienced by homeless people. As we have pointed out, responses to these issues are by no means incompatible, but their conflation into a single homelessness problem dominated by images of ‘beggars, vagrants and drunks’ established an agenda which was very difficult to deconstruct within a partnership framework. This is particularly so since the power of threat, resource and regulatory control was so unevenly distributed within the new policy network. Voluntary partners were already fully stretched, and sought ways in which their action could be enhanced with further funding. They had little power of veto or threat. Business partners on the other hand, were seeking to protect their profitability, and carried considerable ‘threat’ in terms of grave predictions for the outcome of the local economy if the ‘problem’ was not dealt with. Such weighty matters were clearly influential in any political evaluation of the issue. Moreover, the available powers of regulatory control could also be used to support the business case. Put simply, begging, vagrancy and drunkenness can be deemed as unlawful; homelessness cannot.

There was little evidence, then, of some partners being willing to relinquish control or resources in order to fulfil the aspirations of other partners. Indeed, the reasons for joining this particular policy network seemed
mostly to revolve around maximizing what could be gained from that membership. Neither is there evidence that new discursive representations were developed as a result of partnership. The two ‘sides’ to the issue of homelessness showed little sign of mutual attraction, harmony, or even respect, and dominant discourses stemmed from dominance outside of the partnership rather than from negotiation within. The exercise of social relations of partnership, then, did not seem to result in new forms of power, and the attempts by local authority brokers to ‘hold everyone together’ were not able to redefine these social relations. Where partners come together to bid competitively for new external resources (for example from central government or the EU) then it is possible to foresee new forms of social relations and consequent new forms of power emerging from partnership in policy networks. Where, however, partnership merely involves attempts to repackage existing resources, it seems unlikely that it will fulfil some of the more optimistic claims for a more pluralist and post-Fordist form of governance in the local arena.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the ESRC for their research on ‘The Homeless Poor In Rural Areas’ (R000236567) in which they investigate the hiddenness of rural homelessness and the movements of homeless people through and between rural and urban spaces.

REFERENCES


Walmer T. 1989. ‘Families with “no place to go” on rise’, *USA Today* 12 Dec.


Date received 23 February 1999. Date accepted 11 May 1999.