

From Gatekeeper to Gateway Community Leaders

(Getting to Grips with Super-Diversity: Local Government Chronicle, 8th May 2008)

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We are now in an era of super diversity with over 300 languages in London schools and as many as 65 in small rural towns like Boston. Local authorities now need to have a much more sophisticated understanding of the composition of their communities – and be ready to abandon old forms of engagement with the ‘gatekeepers’ of communities and help to create a new style of ‘gateway’ community leaders.

Local authorities – especially elected members – have long been ambivalent about community leaders. They are often self-appointed and self-serving. They keep control of their communities, channeling all communications with statutory agencies through themselves, keeping others very much in the dark in a dependency relationship – if you want to know what is going on or get access to the corridors of power you have to go through your own community leader. And of course the community leader’s status – and frequently their salary – depends upon their position of power.

But local authorities have found that ‘gatekeeper’ community leaders can often suit their purposes too. They make it easy to communicate with a particular community and dispense with all of the messy intra-community politics. One dominant view is much easier to manage. And sometimes political deals are done to deliver the votes from most members of that community. The promise of continuing funding, a new project, or community centre may well be enough. These sorts of arrangements and deals are no longer tenable when so many communities are vying with each other for attention and funding – and the diversity within communities is also being recognized.

iCoCo recently released its report on the diversity of the Muslim community (Understanding and Appreciating Muslim Diversity) and this set out the wide range of ethno-national, religious and cultural

leadership patterns. It also described some of the tensions within the communities that we have mapped in towns and cities up and down the country and how some sections are frustrated by the lack of representation and even recognition. The Muslim community in Britain is possibly the most diverse in the world, but diversity exists within all communities (and we intend to review all others in due course) and we now need to develop a much broader range of contacts to reflect this.

In many cases, councillors and officers are often typecast because of their minority heritage and it is assumed that they will represent their views. We should remember that, all elected councillors and officials are required to reflect the aspirations of all residents in their area. Typecasting can push them into a gatekeeper role. Again the council needs to ensure that it is engaging through the widest range people from each community, but also that those representing the council are not only doing so because of their specialist knowledge – how else will the council as a whole mainstream its approach and develop a wider empathy?

The Commission for Integration and Cohesion also questioned the role of 'single group funding' and said that it should be used 'as the last resort'. Perhaps they needed to go further and question whether single group funding not only inhibited collaboration between different groups but also tended to assume that any particular group was 'single' or homogeneous. Councils need to ensure that they hear many voices and that these come from all sides of the minority and majority communities and reflect the diversity within them. We need to get beyond the usual suspects and ensure that we are helping gateway community leaders to flourish and undermine the dependency relationship of the gatekeepers.