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Briefing 697

Public decision making in rural areas

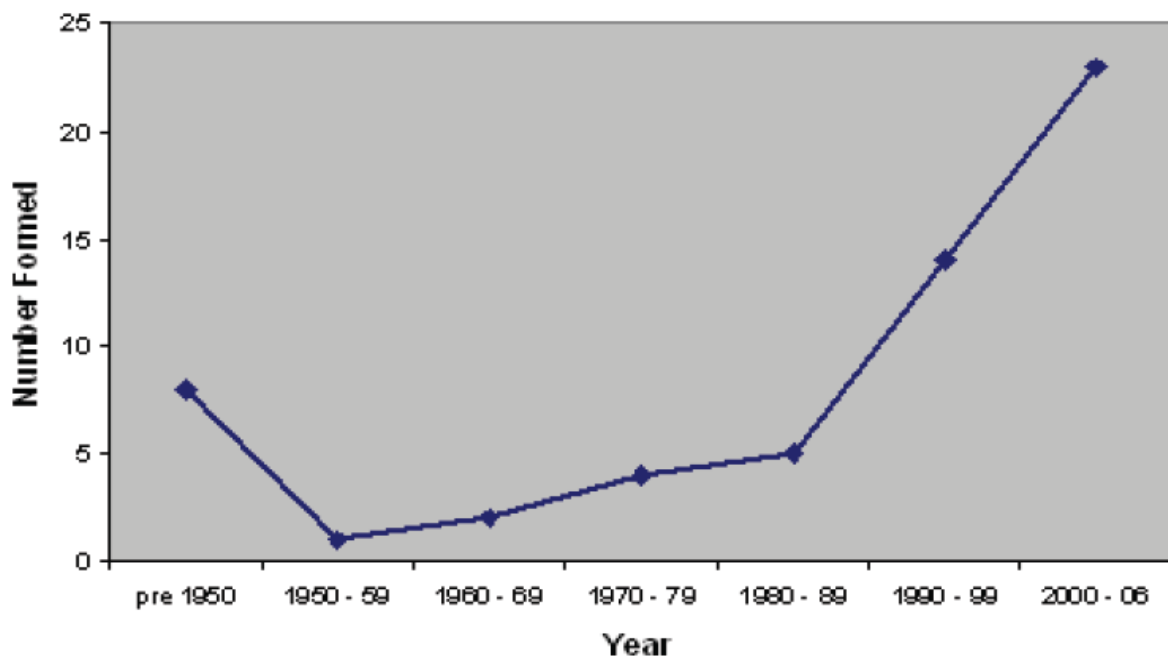
Summary

Whilst there has been a considerable increase in community involvement in rural decision-making over the past 20 years, the structures within which decisions are made have become more complicated and who actually makes decisions, and for whom, is often less clear than it was. There are 175 Agents of Rural Governance in Gloucestershire who are responsible for crowding, knotting, clouding, meandering, subverting and impoverishing the democratic process.

This briefing has been summarised from *Public decision making in rural areas*, Countryside & Community Research Institute Research Summary No. 3. The full paper is at <http://www.ccri.ac.uk/News/Summaries.htm>

A study of rural decision-making in England in the late 1970s found it to be overly-complex because of the number of organisations involved. But such organisations have grown in number considerably since then. For example a total of some 175 of these Agents of Rural Governance (ARGs) were identified in Gloucestershire in 2007. They ranged from government bodies, through development agencies, voluntary bodies, community groups, partnerships and networks, to mutual aid groups. The rate of growth in their formation is shown in the figure below.

Dates of formation of Agents of Rural Governance in Gloucestershire



As well as a growth in their number, the jurisdiction of ARGs also has changed. Whitehall government has been displaced by a growth in networks and partnerships with public, voluntary and private sectors working together. The 1995 and 2000 Rural White Papers promoted much more community involvement and also localised decision-making.

The democracy of decision-making also has changed. Unelected partnerships make decisions about the EU Structural Funds and the Regional Development Agencies Government Offices and Regional Assemblies also have no direct democratic mandate. At the local level too, most rural community groups are not actually elected by anyone.

The constitution of ARGs, too, is diverse. There are no set rules for how ARGs conduct their business and many networks have neither a set of guiding rules nor a clear way of working. More localised stakeholding also is increasingly influenced by the power of individuals rather than through constitutional norms.

Funding arrangements have changed and ARGs now spend much more time bidding for funding which means less time for their core business.

ARGs, in this increasingly complex structure can be considered to 'clog up' rural decision-making. Some of the problems are:

- Crowding is simply where there are too many ARGs involved to be able to make effective decisions.
- Knotting is where the interrelationships between ARGs (and their respective objectives) are complex, overlapping or confused. It is often difficult either to separate out the roles of certain ARGs or to see how they interrelate.
- Clouding is where the functions of ARGs are implicit to such a degree that their operation is not transparent.
- Meandering is where an ARG has no clearly stated purpose at all in its role in the decision-making process. At the extreme some ARGs have no identifiable purpose as individual entities
- Subverting is where unelected bodies develop agendas for their own ends or for ends that are not consensual. In a sense this can be an extreme form of 'clouding', where motivations for particular actions become deliberate and covert.
- Impoverishing is where there is not enough money in the system for people (certain or all) to participate properly or where decision making is dominated by those who can

Alan Spedding, 18 September 2008

RuSource briefings provide concise information on current farming and rural issues for rural professionals. They are circulated weekly by email and produced by Alan Spedding in association with the Arthur Rank Centre, the national focus for the rural church. Previous briefings can be accessed on the Arthur Rank Centre website at http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/projects/rusource_briefings/index.html

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