One of this year's William Plowden Fellows, Alison Gilchrist, shines new light on the interplay between formal and informal ways of working, and the importance of using a mixture of both to achieve successful and sustainable partnerships between communities and more formal organisations such as councils, large VCS organisations and private business. In this special article for Community Matters she describes her findings and sets out important and practical recommendations for both communities and councils.

The annual William Plowden Fellowship supports an individual with a substantial record of achievement to research and report a subject of their choice within the theme of the role of good governance in supporting innovation and achieving positive social impacts. The aim is to stimulate debate and provide practical insights that can influence policy and practice. Alison Gilchrist has over 30 years of experience in community development, as a practitioner, trainer and writer, including at neighbourhood, regional and national levels of policy-making. She currently works as an independent consultant most recently with a number of Big Local areas.

Over my many years working as a community development worker, I have experienced and observed that difficulties often arise when formal institutions, such as local authorities, funders or private companies, seek to consult, support or collaborate with communities. They often try to run meetings very formally or attempt to set up formal bodies with selected 'representatives'. Some residents report that they feel intimidated by the surroundings or the official jargon used, and also get irritated at the number of bureaucratic 'hoops' they have to jump through in order to get the support or recognition they want.

I have also helped many groups to formalise themselves – indeed one of my first jobs as a community worker was to help set up a community association using the template constitution available from what was then the National Federation of Community Organisations (now Community Matters, of course). Outside pressures sometimes compel groups to adopt structures and procedures unwillingly or before they are ready. The triggers for this might be opening a bank account, applying for funds, employing a worker or signing a lease. Any of these require formal roles (e.g. treasurer and chair to sign the cheques) or legal incorporation and all too soon, members find themselves managing some kind of limited liability company, that might also be registered as a charity, with all the accompanying regulations and accounting procedures that this entails. It is often advisable for associations to adopt such formalities, not least because they provide indemnity for individual trustees, but at the same time, they should avoid losing those informal aspects that encourage community participation and accountability.

Partnership working, sometimes dubbed co-production these days, similarly involves people from different organisational cultures working together and this can cause frictions and tensions. Staff accustomed to quite formal ways of conducting business (for example from health authorities or local councils) see this as the default mode – formal as normal – and complain that the more flexible and informal customs of voluntary groups typifies the 'community not getting its act together' rather than simply being a different way of organising. They tend to see volunteers as either 'incompetent amateurs' or 'unpaid workers' who should follow policy and perform to certain standards. With the increasing policy emphasis on communities taking on responsibilities for services and facilities previously managed by the statutory sector, there has to be a change of attitude that appreciates the value of more informal approaches, while acknowledging that sometimes there are valid reasons for introducing some degrees of formality.

I set out to explore what was happening at this interface and points of transition between informal and formal modes of operating. Through a series of workshops, interviews and a focus group involving community members, practitioners, a councillor, local authority officers, civil servants and a number of academics and researchers in this field I gathered examples, evidence and opinions on what worked well and why things so often went wrong. Every conversation yielded new insights into the relative advantages and drawbacks of formal and informal modes and also powerful reminders of how they are often combined within single settings, organisations and events to create a balance between getting things done 'properly' and efficiently while at the same time ensuring that participants also enjoy themselves and feel they are making a worthwhile contribution.

I realised that to do this effectively, the people involved were using skills, judgements, strategies and values, which amounted to a 'praxis' (practice informed by theory and reflection). For now I refer to this as *'blending, braiding and balancing'* in the hope that this might capture the complicated nature of how formal and informal ways of doing things can be intertwined. For instance, we have probably all witnessed experienced chairs and facilitators who are adept at getting through an agenda on time with all the necessary discussions and decisions made, whilst maintaining a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. And events are usually more fun and inclusive if they include opportunities for food and face-to-face interaction between participants, allowing people to get to know one another, build trust and catch up with personal news.

Getting the balance right is crucial. Too much informality can mean that meetings are too casual and undemocratic; that continuity is lost or some people feel excluded by the apparent cliquey-ness and hidden assumptions. Conversely, an over-reliance on formalities can be daunting, or just plain boring for people who want to get on with things rather than sit in 'talking shops'. My research showed that both formality and informality serve important functions and need to be carefully blended and braided. On the one hand, informality seems to encourage people to be more creative and to share their emotions and thoughts more easily. It helps people to see each other as 'humans' and to relate more easily on an equal basis. It can therefore include and empower marginalised groups, and encourage higher levels of participation generally. Some elements of formality (such as vision statements, equal opportunities policies or minutes of meetings), on the other hand, are useful for preserving long term collective goals and to ensure democratic decision-making in ways that are clearly accountable and representative of all concerned.

Working together, whether as community members or with organisational partners, requires shared expectations and norms of behaviour. Sometimes these develop naturally through growing respect and familiarity, but sometime they are best enshrined in codes of conduct or benchmarks that measure improvement or progress. This in turn raises questions about how they might be understood by everyone and enforced in practice.

Risk management is another area where formal procedures appear to guarantee security or standards, but the use of specific checks or criteria may generate an illusion of safety and quality which distorts, rather than assures, 'performance', or makes people complacent, for example in relation to safeguarding measures or employment terms and conditions.

How we handle information is also shaped by formal and informal processes. Styles of learning and communication can radically affect how knowledge is accessed (or not), how ideas are valued (or not) and how people are able to learn from their experiences, as well as play a part in gathering,

sharing and analysing different kinds of evidence. Informal spaces and conversations, opportunities to 'have a go' at something' or observe expert practice, provide vital learning especially for people who might be less confident or who are 'allergic' to formal classroom situations or exams.

It would be too easy to advocate abandoning formal procedures or constitutional arrangements as many important organisational and inter-personal processes would be lost that are useful, if not essential, for good governance and accountability. Formal styles and structures are invariably associated with the trappings of institutional power, such as the 'top table', the insignia of office, styles of dress and address, e.g. through the Chair. But informal processes can also harbour covert forms of influence and personal preferences, for example towards friends or 'people like us', which can perpetuate prejudices and patterns of discrimination that disadvantage newcomers or community members with different mind-sets or cultural backgrounds.

My recommendations may therefore seem equivocal, but hopefully are not contradictory:

- Community groups and voluntary organisations should aim to operate as informally as possible, introducing formal procedures as minimally necessary and making sure they do not have unintended consequences of excluding some people or hindering active participation in debate and decision-making. The layout of rooms, how people introduce themselves and talk to one another, the provision of food to share and so on, all make it easier for people to relax, to enjoy the occasion and to connect in meaningful ways.
- In partnership situations, where organisations from different sectors are working together, the 'rules of engagement' should be clearly understood and applied to tackle unhelpful power dynamics or biases that would make proceedings unfair or exclusive. Allowing sufficient time to build trust and mutual respect is vital, so plan events to include informal networking opportunities that really help people to find common ground.
- Risks are often exaggerated and there is a tendency for those in charge to want to cover their backs, either through insurance schemes, disclaimers or by insisting on a variety of tests and rules that are often subverted or ignored. It would be better to develop a more evidence-based assessment of possible hazards and their likely occurrence, so that steps to manage these would be proportionate to the actual risk.

On the basis of this research I believe that everybody involved in community activities, community engagement and community development would benefit from 'loosening up' a bit, without completely 'letting go' of the reins altogether. There are a whole range of exercises and techniques that encourage greater levels of participation and lateral thinking, including ice-breakers, buzz groups, and 'art of hosting' methods for facilitating discussions and cooperation. Where formal structures and procedures are deemed necessary, then they should not be imposed 'off the shelf' or by external decree. A more organic, incremental approach is needed, introducing 'just enough' formality to perform organisational functions or to meet basic external requirements, for example from funders or statutory commissioners.

Ultimately, these recommendations involve a complex and delicate set of judgements and practices being applied by all participants, but the end result for both communities and councils will be more inclusive and democratic processes, and more sustainable partnerships and outcomes.

You can find more information about the William Plowden fellowship here, and in due course, a full version of Alison's research and findings: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/independence-values/william-plowden-fellowship. You can contact Alison direct on Alison@alisongilchrist.co.uk.