

Policy Platform

ENABLING COMMUNITIES: Local Government's Role in the Big Society

Introduction

Tom Simpson, Localis



Since its launch in the run-up to the 2010 election, David Cameron's Big Society concept has rarely been absent from the national and local press. Among the people it proposes to empower – the general population – it has garnered praise and opprobrium in almost

equal measure. It appears that feelings towards the Big Society are similarly divided among supporters of all the major parties; certainly, few other Coalition policies gain support from some Labour MPs while bemusing a few on the Government's own benches.

But despite the quantity of ink spilt and words spoken, the Big Society still faces a problem – some would say crisis – of definition. Perhaps the search for a firm notion of an idea premised upon the dismantlement of uniform structure is inherently flawed. Nonetheless, if the Prime Minister's favourite project is to flourish, it is important that the limits of communities' self-starting capabilities are established and government and third sector organisations are clear on their roles in providing a helping hand.

The four contributors to this month's Localis Policy Platform offer their views on how local authorities can support the process of community empowerment which lies at the core of the Big Society. Leaders of London Borough Councils from both sides of the political divide, a Project Manager at the Big Society Network and the Chief Executive of the Community Development Foundation all write in support of some form of Big Society. They agree that local government has an important role to play in bolstering communities and individuals in the myriad interactions that will be necessary if the Big Society is to be a success.

Alison Seabrooke, the Chief Executive of the Community Development Foundation, argues that the local authority which truly embodies the Big Society mantra will have a core focus on Community Development, which has a vital role in enabling local communities to become more self-sufficient and less reliant on state provision. She also envisions that local authorities will have an important role in ensuring that the Big Society is not a society in which the voices of alternative, minority groups are silenced and the loud majority is able to impose its own preferences of all.

Steve Reed, the Leader of Lambeth Council, agrees with Alison Seabrooke that the state should have a continued role but must change its focus to place service users and local communities at the forefront. He outlines the key aspects of the 'Cooperative Council', a concept Lambeth launched in January, which seeks a "rebalanced settlement between the citizen and the state" and has the potential to form a key part of the Labour Party's future vision of local government.

Despite approaching the Big Society from a different party political perspective, Edward Lister, the Leader of Wandsworth Council, shares with Steve Reed a vision of local government flexibility which empowers people to shape their local area. Cllr Lister sees the ideal Big Society council as one in which is comfortable with change and is prepared to free local residents to do what they want.

The final contribution, from Oli Henman of the Big Society Network, emphasises that the Big Society debate need not be one that divides right and left. He argues that the Big Society is about harnessing the creativity of local communities in process of services co-design and co-delivery, which will continue to involve local government but will remove the onus on councils to be the stand-alone local service providers.

We hope that you enjoy these stimulating contributions to an extremely relevant area of political debate.

Community Development Foundation

Alison Seabrooke, Chief Executive



The coalition believes that as government becomes smaller and smarter, a more vibrant civil society will take its place. According to Nick Clegg, “the job of government is not to run people’s lives. It is to help people to run their own.” For local government, this means councils

will move away from being the main delivery agent in a neighbourhood to become enabling councils – ones that commission strategically and work with alternative providers.

The coalition envisages a huge culture change where every adult in the country becomes an active member of a neighbourhood group. Several ‘Big Society’ initiatives will encourage communities to take local action, hold government to account, and even take over local services and assets. But these initiatives cannot be separated from hugely reduced local government settlements, massive redundancies

in the public sector, reduced funding to the voluntary and community sector, and the removal of national performance targets. The changes will have very different impacts in different areas, and as a result the Big Society will vary with each local authority.

The responsibilities of building the Big

Society – combined with the lack of financial resources to do it – leave communities in need of the skills, knowledge and aptitudes to help themselves and each other. For decades community development (CD) has been doing just that. The Community Development Foundation (CDF) believes that a Big Society council will be a council that integrates CD principles, values and techniques into every aspect of its role as an enabler. But according to the latest survey of CD workers, CD is fading from sight in a lot of local authorities. Many use CD workers in strategic and targeted activity, particularly in disadvantaged communities and those with tensions. New rights and responsibilities fall against the backdrop of a traumatised public sector dealing with cuts and restructures, and CDF believes CD workers’ role

will be critical in helping local authorities and communities interpret and navigate their own roles. Without them, it becomes ever more uncertain whether communities will be empowered to achieve sustainable change in their areas.

From service provider to strategic enabler

The shift “from service provider to community leader and enabler, consumer advocate and market maker” (Chief Fire Officer at Suffolk County Council) means a council’s role in assessing and determining the priorities and aspirations of its community will be its main role. Suffolk has labelled itself a virtual council – only there to facilitate the needs of its community. The council’s new role as community facilitator presents great opportunities for communities to shape services from the outset. It can lead to more transparent, accountable processes in local service provision such as participatory or community budgeting. More control over spending in public services has been shown to increase feelings of empowerment among citizens, and of legitimacy and trust in public agencies.

Using community development to mediate tensions

CD principles should be at the heart of all public bodies’ new roles as commissioners to ensure service equality and quality, as well as accountability for providers. These principles include supporting dialogue and individuals whose voices would not normally be heard. CDF’s work with self help groups has identified a role for intermediaries in building relationships between local people and the public sector, and drawing attention to community needs, demands and interests that have previously gone unnoticed. For example, community empowerment activities in Haringey resulted in registrars being available 24 hours a day to accommodate religions where the deceased must be buried within 24 hours. These intermediaries need not be limited to CD workers and can be anyone from housing officers, local community leaders, elected members or citizens.

Increased involvement in priority setting will require mediation between competing groups, particularly in areas where tensions between ethnic, socio-economic or religious groups are already high. Tightened resources and increased transparency means that decisions about public services will be public. Councils will need to be clear why suggestions to spend the community budget on for example, facilities for travellers and gypsies, succeeded over suggestions for more street lamps. Local authorities have to be aware of the risk that these processes will accentuate power imbalances and tensions. The support of trusted intermediaries who know and understand the community is absolutely vital.

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Giving active citizens sustainable skills and know-how

To achieve social action on the government's proposed scale, as well as greater equality between different groups, methods and support for community empowerment need to be carefully considered. The Big Society involves breaking down barriers to community action and gently 'nudging' people to act. The Localism Bill expects communities to bid to run services that are not running well or do not meet their needs. However, social action is unlikely to flourish unaided – not on the scale needed and not in a way that ensures lasting change.

CD plays a key role in ensuring that engagement empowers and does not overburden or discourage citizens from their new responsibilities. Approaches such as the CDF-run programme Take Part focus on community-based learning to slowly build the skills, confidence and experience needed to tackle local political, social and technical challenges, particularly for disadvantaged communities. Open dialogue and reflection serve as key learning tools to recognise that change emerges over time from individuals working together. When people are supported in these ways aspirations are raised and greater numbers of people

volunteer, become community leaders or service providers, and influence local decision making.

Greater community involvement in prioritising and running services blurs lines of accountability and responsibility for local authorities. To ensure new powers are equally accessible to marginalised, quieter and alternative groups, at least an element of oversight at a local authority or supra-

local level may need to be retained. Where citizens take majority control over decisions, local authorities need to give them the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions. Communities must be able to understand the consequences of shutting down their library, setting up a free school or vetoing an increase in council tax. Where community groups take over service provision, they not only need to understand the associated risks they will take on, but will need appropriate technical expertise and support to cope. If communities are not empowered, supported or resourced, there is a huge risk that they will feel set up to fail and will be turned off any further participation.

Finally it is important that the adoption of service provider roles does not eclipse the important advocacy roles groups play on behalf of their communities. Active citizens are not solely those who provide services, they are also those who make demands on authority and power.

Creating an enabling culture

An enabling culture demonstrates to citizens and community groups that their participation in deliberative processes, civic roles or service provision makes a difference. Citizens' expectations of the empowerment process will be high. They will expect to see evidence that their involvement has a genuine impact, particularly as there will no longer be inspection or assessment to guarantee quality engagement. Cultural change across public agencies will need to be paired with pressure from communities and groups. The local authority should not feel that it cannot say 'no' to citizens, but it should be prepared to explain its decision making.

Embedding CD values across the organisation

The Big Society means that local authorities must undergo a culture change to create an enabling culture that supports and empowers citizens to take control over their communities. A common observation from CDF's work with local authorities is that there is a disconnect between strategic management and frontline practice. While intermediaries or communities should have a key role in stimulating empowerment, it cannot and must not be solely their responsibility.

Empowerment must be a central feature of service provision – in decision making, feedback, design, delivery and assessment. The Network for Empowering Authorities has developed a framework for an ideal empowering authority. Such an authority would have structures in place to enable agencies and partners to work effectively with neighbourhoods and communities of interest, and would give councillors a key role in all empowerment processes.

Such an authority would view empowerment as part of service improvement, and support communities and the VCS to be stronger and more active. It would integrate empowerment work with community cohesion, equalities and human rights. Senior management would show clear leadership and work in partnership with other agencies. Finally council staff would feel they own the empowerment agenda. As CDF found in Town halls in a post-bureaucratic age, if staff have an agenda forced on them, they will resist.

The ideal Big Society council will not be the one that launches the most initiatives or the one that contracts out the most work to the VCS; it will be the one that embodies CD principles from start to finish across its operations, culture and staff. And the culture of any organisation is usually determined by its leader. It is imperative that council chief executives and leaders convey this new approach to staff, delivery partners and communities. Only then will local authorities succeed in achieving lasting social action that truly flourishes.

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The London Borough of Lambeth

Cllr Steve Reed, Council Leader



In January, Lambeth Council launched plans that detail how we will become Britain's first cooperative council. So why are we doing it, what difference will people see, and are there wider lessons for local government?

Public services in Britain have reached a tipping point. The right in the Tory and Lib Dem parties wants to privatise public services as a matter of ideology, and that is a real threat. But public services are also under threat from falling public confidence which, if it is not addressed, will make large-scale privatisation more likely to happen. Falling confidence in services as different as the health service and the police, despite significant improvements in performance, arises from a sense of disempowerment and remoteness people feel in the face of top-down public services that owe their shape to the Beveridge-inspired post-war settlement.

To give public services a sustainable future we need to combat that loss of confidence by handing more power to individuals and communities as part of a rebalanced settlement between the citizen and the state. In handing more power to the people we can expect public services to change dramatically as they shift to meet people's real needs.

That's the idea, and we explored it in detail through Lambeth's

Cooperative Council Commission. The Commission consulted with over 3,000 Lambeth residents and heard from over 50 organisations nationally that have experience in delivering services in ways that put the users rather than the providers in control. But people want to know what difference they will see, so here is some of what we plan to do.

Youth services will be run by the community using a model called 'community-led commissioning'. That involves the council supporting communities to decide what kind of youth services will best meet their needs, then helping them buy the appropriate services from whoever is best able to provide them.

Sometimes that will mean community involvement in delivering the services – such as running groups or activities. Sometimes the services will be delivered by qualified professionals or voluntary organisations, depending on the needs the community identifies.

Adults receiving care services will have more control of their own budgets, and some buildings – such as Lambeth's Disability Resource Centre – will be transferred to mutual ownership including service users. That means people who are supported by services including home helps, respite care, day centres or support for disabled people to live independently at home, will decide what help they need and where they get it from using their own personalised care budget. They will be offered professional guidance to take their decisions, but the key is that the people using the services will be in control of their own lives instead of finding themselves under the control of others.

Lambeth will encourage local schools to become cooperative trusts, forming strong bonds with the local community and other schools in the area. This gives the local community a bigger say over how the school is run, and it creates communities of schools that can share or pool resources so children at each school benefit.

We are exploring putting all our libraries into a trust owned and run by the local community. This model works well in the borough of Queens, New York, where the foundation library attracts outside investment and provides services that better meet the needs of local people. Any libraries that have to close because of Government funding cuts will be offered to the community as a standalone mutual or trust.

There are a range of different models for cooperative housing, which makes up a tiny fraction of the housing market in the UK compared with other countries including Germany, Sweden and Canada. The options range from tenant-managed estates where ownership remains with the council, through to shared equity models where the housing is owned by a company in which every resident owns a share. This model allows mixed-income communities to develop where people on lower incomes can own shares in their own home without running the risk of defaulting on a mortgage if their income suddenly collapses as, in that case, they can simply reduce their monthly equity purchase rather than lose their home. Lambeth's estates will be able to choose which housing model best suits them.

Local communities will be encouraged to develop neighbourhood micro-plans and to help take decisions over how their share of the council's overall budget is spent in their area. The Council will make

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sure that all parts of local communities are listened to so the plan isn't run in the interests of only one part of the community.

Residents will be encouraged to take part in shaping or running local services through a Lambeth Cooperative Incentive Scheme. This will take the form of credits that people can use for discounts in local shops, for local leisure or sports facilities, or as a council-tax discount. To make sure the money is spent locally, any credits will be awarded in a new local electronic currency, building on the success of the Brixton Pound that already operates in the borough and is the UK's only local currency in an urban area.

What's clear from this small sample of services is that the model operates quite differently in different services but the principles of empowerment and cooperation remain the same. Local communities and the people who use services will be in the driving seat instead of the people who deliver those services. In this way services will become more accountable to local people, and more responsive to local need. By allowing people to exercise more choice we expect both better services and higher levels of confidence in those services. This transformation offers a radical new vision of what Labour local government can become by supporting

the development of cooperative communities.

“This agenda must be about changing the role of the state and not about rolling back the state as some would have it”

There are similarities with some of the rhetoric of the Big Society. David Cameron announced his ideas some months after Lambeth launched

our cooperative council proposals. If the Government is moving towards this agenda too then that's good. What is key is that this agenda must be about changing the role of the state and not about rolling back the state as some on the right would have it. That means putting the resources of the state under the control of local people and people who use public services. That is true empowerment, it offers us the chance to rebuild confidence in public services while making a reality of that long-held rallying cry of progressive politics: power to the people.

The London Borough of Wandsworth

Cllr Edward Lister, Council Leader



We've always had a very clear vision of the kind of local authority we want to be in Wandsworth. In many ways it's a form of contract with our customers in which we promise to deliver the right local services at a price people can afford - the kind of council

that does not add to people's problems.

Focusing on results in this way has enabled us to steer clear of the distractions which can get in the way of effective performance. Too many councils are still preoccupied with process when they should be concentrating on what works for their residents.

Thankfully the coalition government shares this understanding of what people expect from their council. After 13 years of Labour meddling it's a relief to be set free. Today's ministers don't expect every council to be the same and they won't judge us on how slavishly we bow to their own centrally-imposed targets.

It's quite a change from the dictatorial approach of their predecessors who told us who we had to work with and saddled us with partners we didn't want and plans no one would understand.

It means we can concentrate on putting our residents' priorities first, being accountable for our own decisions and getting on with the job free from interference.

The abolition of much of the inspection regime, the removal of many of the top-down targets, the localisation of public health services, the restoration of borough housing priorities and the promise of wresting control of housing finances away from central government are all part of this new agenda which puts the emphasis on what works locally.

This builds on much of what has gone before. Wandsworth has consistently delivered low taxes because that is what residents say they want. It gives people choice and the freedom to decide for themselves how their money is spent. We have focused our service delivery on the areas that surveys tell us matter most to local people – decent housing, clean streets, modern leisure facilities and well-kept parks while at the same time investing in regeneration initiatives that deliver safe, attractive neighbourhoods.

The Big Society is therefore familiar territory for us – but it challenges us to do more. The very best councils have a real capacity for innovation in public service that goes far beyond their historic remit. And because Big Society is about smaller government local authorities must be clear that the process of devolution cannot stop at the town hall.

So while councils might be happy to seize their new responsibilities for public health and champion joined-up approaches to local joblessness, they should be just as enthusiastic about supporting groups of parents who may be keen to set up their own schools outside local authority control.

Big Society has changed all the rules for local government. It's driving our response to both the localism agenda and the financial challenge. It's not enough any more for councils to be efficient – we've got to matter to local people and be important in their lives.

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That doesn't mean a return to big council corporatism where the authority's brooding image dominates every aspect of local life. Local government has to respond flexibly in every situation so that people feel not just that they belong but they are playing a part in shaping the world around them.

Councils today are in a fight for their lives. The strong shift to personalisation and individual accountability and the urgency of the economic situation have taken away any presumption of relevance. We will only get the job of championing the interests of local residents if we can prove repeatedly that we are equipped for the task.

This is a real test of community leadership. It's not just about being better than Job Centre Plus or the PCT at delivering a local service. We have to show that we can develop local responses that people feel they can own.

In Wandsworth we've branded this new agenda as our 'Wandsworth Challenge'. We want to exploit the new freedoms that are now on offer for local authorities but at the same time need to be sure we are channelling our energies in the right direction.

We have to be alive to the contradictions in this approach. In staking out our claim to be the big public sector player in our area we must be careful

not to close down options for real community engagement.

This means becoming a different organisation - leaner, sharper and more in tune with the way people live their lives in a busy city. This will be less about the council 'doing things' to its residents and more about freeing people to do or decide things for themselves.

We are questioning the rationale for every service. Can we do it differently, can someone else do it better, can the individual do it for him or herself – or does it need doing at all?

We are making this simple. We won't retain our legitimacy in the eyes of local people by forcing them to turn up at the town hall to conduct transactions that could be done from a lap-top or iPhone. A personalised service does not have to be delivered face to face. A growing number of our residents are young, working and highly mobile. In most other areas of their lives they get and demand their services when they want them. Increasingly that means doing it online.

So we are investing in our IT and updating our systems so that more and more transactions such as paying bills and ordering parking permits can be processed online. This is a challenge for a local authority because we have a unique responsibility for everyone in our community – particularly the most disadvantaged for whom many of our services are geared. We do not have the freedom of, say, an online bookstore, to insist all transactions are carried out in a single way. Nor can we make it hard to find a telephone number to ring when things go wrong.

It's also about making sure as a council we do the things that matter – big and small. These could be big issues where we take up a battle on behalf of our residents – the controversial third Heathrow runway for example – or smaller, more localised initiatives where we help a local gardening club get started or keep a local grit bin stocked which residents can use to help clear a path in the snow. The test in every case is the impact on people's quality of life and the potential to make things better.

This touches every area of town hall life. The celebrated Battersea Arts Centre company used to rent the former Battersea Town Hall building. The arrangement suited neither side as the building was expensive to maintain and the lack of long-term security stifled BAC's entrepreneurial spirit. Once the property was transferred on a long lease it became possible for the company to exploit new funding opportunities which would guarantee

its future. The result is a new spirit of commercial creativity that has the potential to extend throughout the local arts sector.

It's the same vitality we see in the new private sector operator who took over the former municipal zoo and the charitable foundation which relaunched the Wandsworth Museum. If this kind of local enterprise can work for zoos, museums and arts centres then why not for schools, libraries and adventure playgrounds?

The smaller deals have to work too. We've started a Big Society fund so that if a group of residents come up with an idea to tackle an issue in their neighbourhood which needs a bit of cash to get off the ground, we can be ready to help. It could be as simple as buying a community shredder that the whole street can use for their garden cuttings. Or it might be a scheme to tackle a localised anti social behaviour problem. For this to take off people have to see that their council is in the market for

good ideas and is prepared to cut the red tape and take risks. It's not the traditional approach to grant funding and not every idea will work but it recognises that the council can never have the right answer for every situation.

It's a different relationship to the one many of us have been used to – but with

ownership comes responsibility and the chance to tap the potential for creative solutions that exists within local communities. It's a vital step too in repositioning the local council as an activist partner working alongside local people rather than a remote organisation that hands down all the decisions from the town hall.

So where residents see that a service could be run differently they might come to the council with a proposal of their own. They might do this to prevent a service from closing – a popular neighbourhood library for example. But the inspiration might just be that people can see a way of doing things better. This after all is why residents on housing estates form management companies to run their affairs. It's also what drives groups of parents to set

up their own schools when they see the local offer does not match their aspirations.

The changes heralded by the free schools probably represent the biggest challenge to local education authorities. Making sure each school could offer something different was the first stage in raising standards and opening up choice for parents. But offering variety within the system is not enough. We now have to create the conditions where new school providers are able to respond quickly and flexibly to changing demands.

It's our job to make sure free schools get off to a flying start. Free schools enable parents to decide their own priorities. Some might opt for smaller class sizes, others would go for a longer school day. What's clear is that as more parents see the potential for change this will feed through into every school. Councils will need to resist the temptation to control this process if the benefits of increased parental control are to be shared more widely.

In some areas then Big Society will mean councils being prepared to let go and run with the changes. It's also about a readiness to embrace new ideas – wherever they come from. Not every service can be devolved down to the individual – new delivery models could also involve increase collaboration with other councils and public sector agencies. What will mark the Big Society council is a readiness to think outside the box and challenge existing orthodoxies. What residents need to see is not a council hiding behind its established structures but one that is modern, open and comfortable with change – a council for the age.

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The Big Society Network

Oli Henman, 'Your Local Budget' Project Manager



The current debate about the Big Society has led to a radical re-evaluation of the role of local authorities. Across the country the balance of power between citizens and local authorities is changing, new opportunities are opening up, while at the same time many organisations are facing much tighter spending. The concept of the 'Big Society' has received a high level of attention, while the debate around major spending decisions has sometimes overshadowed the wider organisational change that is taking place.

In my view, the changes for local government represented under the 'Big Society' fall in three main areas: a) prioritisation of need; b) allocation of resource; c) co-delivery of services by local community organisations. So what does this really mean for the role of local government?

“Local government’s role is increasingly as an ‘enabler’, with the delivery of services carried out in partnership with local civil society bodies”

To address these themes, it is essential to focus this discussion on a wider change in the institutions of government and their relation with the citizen. It is unhelpful to characterise this as a debate between left and right, as many of the cultural changes required

apply to councils across the political spectrum; there are local authorities of all backgrounds with good experience of sharing power with local communities, for example cities such as Liverpool and Leeds agree with the need for a shift towards greater power for local citizens even if they choose not to use the term 'Big Society', just as there are examples of less successful practice across the board.

We’re witnessing an acceleration of change towards local citizen-focused services and greater sharing of responsibility between local government and community organisations. Core relationships at the local level are changing and local government’s role is increasingly as an ‘enabler’, with the delivery carried out in partnership with local civil society bodies. This change is leading to a shift in how

the priorities are set, towards joint responsibility combined with a wider appreciation of key needs in a locality. The natural next step involves allocation of resources to match the overall needs, which requires the participation of a full-range of partners in identifying funds and developing new funding models, leading finally to the development of a co-production model whereby local government works in close partnership with community organisations.

To try to develop a way forward in this process, I’ve been leading a piece of work around Participatory Budgeting, 'Your Local Budget'. This project highlights the experiences of a range of local authorities across the country as a way to unlock wider changes in local relations. Our pioneers are from a wide-range of backgrounds, including small parish councils in Herefordshire and large city councils such as Sheffield, inner city boroughs like Tower Hamlets and semi-rural areas like Windsor & Maidenhead. In its purest sense, Participatory Budgeting is an approach to involving people in the economic decisions that affect their local services. It is much more than consultation and puts real power in the hands of citizens, enabling communities to work with budget holders to define local priorities, identify available resources and allocate these accordingly. A method that originated in Brazil at a time of economic hardship, Participatory Budgeting has since been adopted in various forms in authorities across the UK over the last ten years. To date, however, many Participatory Budgeting exercises in the UK focused on decisions on additional investment (such as discretionary grants) rather than main public service budgets.

In this project we are working closely with local authorities that are willing to begin a process of sharing an element of core service processes with citizens. The aim is to provide some answers to the questions around how local needs can be better met and how innovations in public service delivery can lead to more efficient local spending. We are witnessing a range of changes in the use of PB, including an overlap with place-based budgeting, as well as approaches to pooling resources and neighbourhood level agreements.

This can offer a range of improvements, such as:

1. Better, more effective choices
2. Recognition by citizens of trade-offs in services
3. Development of a sense of collective decisions
4. Opportunities to innovate with service provision

We are exploring whether these processes, if applied to mainstream budgets, can help councils in the fair and equitable allocation of stretched resources. Decreasing government budgets are leading to a challenging reality and a high risk of conflict over scarce resources. In this challenging time, authorities are tasked with making real savings and efficiencies whilst continuing to deliver services which meet the rising expectations of the public. It is clearly a very difficult situation and the role of local government is crucial; there is an increasing need to provide an inspirational role to take forward wider social change.

The process that is emerging would look something like this:

a) Prioritisation of need

It is increasingly clear that multiple needs require a long-term approach; this can only take place with a long-term commitment to deliberation on core needs and an ongoing forum to monitor delivery of services.

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b) Allocation of resource

Once needs are understood, the budget prioritization that best fits this situation is carried out with access to

transparent data. This is ideally supported by the provision of accessible web resources and apps for easy understanding by citizens in complex situations; new web tools such as the ‘Budget Simulator’ and ‘You Decide’ can provide a very useful entry point for people who have limited experience of budget data.

c) Co-delivery of service

Finally, the third part of the picture is how the service is delivered. In this case it is important for local authorities to uncover how best to connect the energy raised at open events, and discover how PB and local meetings might act as a springboard for innovation in local service delivery. This is based on a further relationship with specific providers from the voluntary sector who would still be accountable to the wider citizens in the original forum.

This requires a balance between building on existing forums, both face-to-face and online and

also identifying ways to reach new citizens who have been less engaged. Furthermore there is a clear separation between the role of participant in a wider process and the contractual relationship in delivering a specific service, these roles will need to be defined in order to avoid any potential conflict of interest.

The picture that emerges of local government involvement in the ‘Big Society’ is an opportunity to harness the creativity of local people and local community groups so that scarce resources are allocated to meet the most pressing needs. This in turn can lead to wider opportunities for social innovation that are stimulated in active partnerships. This is an opportunity to restore the role of the town hall as the vibrant community centre that brings citizens together in a dynamic process of co-design and co-delivery.

About Localis

Localis is an independent think-tank dedicated to issues related to local government and localism more generally. We carry out innovative research, hold a calendar of events and facilitate an ever growing network of members to stimulate and challenge the current orthodoxy of the governance of the UK.

For more information, please visit www.localis.org.uk or call 0207 340 2660.

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