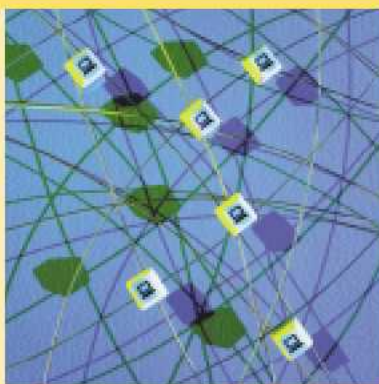


THE **next** PHASE



invisible villages

techno-localism

and the enabling council

Preface & Chapter 1

James Crabtree, William Davies
and Anna Randle

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preface

Recent years have seen the rise of two trends which can seem to be travelling in opposite directions.

On the one hand New Localism has come to dominate the political debate, with policy makers at all levels agreeing that devolution of power and decision making to politicians and managers at more local levels will help achieve improvements in services and create more engaged communities.

On the other, communities have become more complex and transient, and less tied to one geographical place. The rise of the internet has made new types of interest-based community more visible, and even where people have engaged online around local issues, there has been some tendency to by-pass traditional democratic institutions.

The second of these trends raises the question of whether the first is an anachronistic strand of thinking, based on out-dated concepts of place and identity. It offers challenges to the legitimacy of local government as the manifestation of a place-based approach to democracy and governance.

In this pamphlet however, we argue that changes in communities require local government to play a new enabling role within the locality, and that the New Localism agenda can in fact help councils do this. But there is a challenge for local government to understand and hear the voices of its communities, and for communities themselves to find new ways of finding common interests.

Technology has not played a part in debates about New Localism to this point. But if local government is to take on more power and responsibility within localities, and if much of that power is going to be exercised through responsive and devolved community leadership, then we believe it has an important role to play.

As we learn more about the internet and people's use of it, we find that technology offers new ways for the real shared interests that do still exist within localities – the 'invisible villages' – to become more visible. There is potential for local government here to play its new role effectively, in particular through building the types of tools necessary to reveal these connections. Such connections can help re-create a new conception of local community, which in turn can also help provide a firmer foundation for further localisation of political authority.

Local government cannot necessarily lead technology debates, but it can and should learn from and respond to trends in the way people use it. It can also provide some leadership in encouraging local people to get online, helping provide access, developing new means of accessing information and debate and enabling citizen to citizen contact. It can play a new enabling role in helping citizens to help themselves.

This is not about the 'heroic' civic leadership model of old, but a new way of working informed by diverse and multi-layered communities. This 'techno-localism' looks ahead to the next stage of e-government,

beyond 2005 targets and transaction-based interactions, and into real local debate and discussion. Technology and the internet should not be seen as a threat to local government and traditional institutions, but as offering new opportunities in a newly devolved world.

chapter 1 direction of travel: the rise of New Localism and new freedoms for local government

Consensus has grown across the political spectrum that devolution of powers and responsibilities is needed to achieve high quality services and help create engaged communities. Local government, as the closest tier of government to local people, has a key role to play in a more devolved world. This is a trend which looks likely to develop further.

New Localism

New Localism has captured the imagination of politicians and policy makers of all political persuasions in the last two years.

Although expressions of localism vary for different stakeholders – ministers, local politicians, public servants, press – the basic principle that high quality public services and healthy democracy will be achieved only through devolution of power from the centre to local institutions has become a widely accepted idea.

The debate about localism is based on the premise that localities – identifiable geographical areas around which institutions of democracy and service delivery are organised – know more about what is good for them than ‘the man in Whitehall’. They understand better their local priorities and needs, the demands of local people and local partners, and how best to tackle local issues and problems. The analysis is that Whitehall is too far removed from the realities of daily lives and localities to understand what is needed to achieve change and improvement on the ground.

To this extent, New Localism, or any form of devolution, does at least to some degree privilege ‘place’, and the understanding of a place by those who live and work within it.

Local government

As the tier of government which is closest to local people, rooted in locality and also currently unique in its local democratic legitimacy, local government has been one of the most relevant institutions in these debates.

Since the introduction of the Local Government Act 2000¹, local government has increasingly been called upon to exercise its democratic legitimacy by bringing local players together and setting and influencing local agendas. New freedoms have been awarded from central government, the number of centrally-set targets have been reduced and some ring-fencing of budgets has been removed. A number of initiatives have been introduced which increasingly enable local authorities to work to their own local priorities, such as Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs).

¹ DETR (2000) Local Government Act 2000, *Creating Sustainable Communities*, HMSO. Available at www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_control/documents/contentservertemplate/odpm_index.hcst?n=1878&l=3

There are signs that this trajectory will continue. There are plans being developed by the 'Innovation Forum' of councils rated 'excellent' by the Government's Comprehensive Performance Assessment for more significant local freedoms to develop. Ideas currently under serious consideration within central and local government include Public Service Boards as a stronger model for joining up services within the locality, and Local Area Agreements, which would give councils greater control over a rationalised set of funding streams. However, different versions of New Localism have also been proposed, ranging from a strong municipal model, with councils firmly in the driving seat, to more pluralist and enabling version which emphasises the joining-up role of local government.²

In much of the recent discussion about 'New Localism', it is the interface between locally delivered services and citizens which has provided the focus. Many of the ideas, proposals and initiatives emerging are aimed at increasing levels of local engagement in and influence over public services by citizens. How might services be brought closer to citizens? How might citizens engage, in ways which are realistic for them, given time constraints and possibly limited interests? To what extent should this be driven by citizens themselves, and to what extent should institutions of government and governance help enable new ways of interacting and influencing?

Techno-localism

This pamphlet considers the direction of New Localism – the privileging of locality and place in policy making, governance and services – in relation to such questions about the interface with citizens, who we believe should be the drivers behind moves to find new ways to organise our governance and services.

Our argument rests on the assumption that governance structures should respond to, and reflect as far as possible, the realities of the lives of those they are governing. Local government, and certainly a strengthened and more autonomous local government, does not have a valid role to play if it no longer corresponds with its communities. However, there is a challenge for local government in finding ways to relate to and serve its communities. In particular, because these communities have changed significantly since our democratic government structures were established. They have become more complex; concepts of identity are less connected to geography. This has implications for representative democratic structures.

Through considering new moves towards New Localism within the framework of new trends in community, this report hopes to find guidance for the direction which New Localism might take through a new role for local government, and how local government might respond to new forms of identity and engagement. It argues that if New Localism is going to have a real impact on the lives of local people, then councils themselves have an obligation to both understand and help build local communities. The question then is 'How are they to do this?'

² For a more detailed discussion of these debates, see Corry, D, Hatter, W, Parker, I, Randle, A and Stoker, G (2004) *Joining Up Local Democracy: governance systems for new localism*, London: New Local Government Network

Technology has not played a part in debates about New Localism to this point. However we argue that new technology, rather than posing a threat to the legitimacy of local government, offers it new opportunities within the context of its new role. Councils can use technology – and encourage and enable citizens to do so as well – in order to build a new conception of local community, which in turn can help provide a foundation for the firmer localisation of political authority.

We argue that despite changes in community, there are still links and common ground, based on geography, which provide a basis for connections and interaction between local citizens. These ‘invisible villages’, or new connections between people living in an area enabled by technology, should be supported by local government if it is to play a responsive and empowering community leadership role.

We now turn our attention to the changes in community and identity which make the building of techno-localism an important part of devolved local government.

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Rewiring local decision making for political judgement

Dr Perri 6

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In the past few years, the main changes in how elected council members make decisions have been structural – most notably the creation of council executives and attempts to develop the overview and scrutiny function. Contrary to this, there has been little progress in the way that local policy decisions are made.

Rewiring local decision making for political judgement illustrates the clear opportunities offered by the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Using case study material from the USA, Dr Perri 6 shows that the technology and data exists to radically change the decision making process.

As well as presenting a positive message about what the future holds for local decision making, the author is realistic about the nature of political life. It does not present ICT as a panacea for making easier, better decisions, but as a tool that can co-exist with the expressions of leadership, co-operation, conflict and political judgement that make political life what it is.

'We do need to see how we can use ICT to help us make better policy decisions, especially at local level. Of course, technology cannot substitute for difficult processes in policy making, not least the need for leadership and at the same time consensus. Nor can technology suddenly make people work together better. But in drawing our attention to the possibilities already available, NLGN... has done a great service to the continual drive for more modern and effective local institutions.'

Rt Hon Nick Raynsford MP, Minister for Local Government and the Regions,
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister



Joining-Up Local Democracy: Governance systems for new localism

**Dan Corry, Warren Hatter, Ian Parker, Anna Randle
and Professor Gerry Stoker**

ISBN 1 903447 32 1 · £10 (1-19 copies) or £7 (20+ copies) p&p

Since NLGN published its call for a refashioning of the relationship between central and local government in the UK, the phrase 'New Localism' has captured the imagination of policy makers and practitioners alike – with civil servants and politicians across the main parties increasingly keen to reveal their decentralising rhetoric.

Joining-Up Local Democracy: governance systems for new localism takes the debate back to basics and considers both the main principles on which sound local governance should be built and the criteria by which to best judge its performance. Proposals for the introduction of local directly elected bodies in health, the police and elsewhere are also assessed, as is the case for increasing the power of councils to join up services. In concluding, the authors argue that our increasingly complex society demands a pluralist approach to local governance with a strong but by no means exclusive role for local government.

'This is a debate that is long overdue. What is most needed now is greater imagination about what is possible, and greater rigour in thinking through the implications. This pamphlet – by some of the people most directly involved in recent arguments about 'New Localism' – is therefore extremely welcome. It helps to give shape to the arguments and usefully focuses in particular on what should be the unique selling point of local government – its ability to see things in the round. NLGN should be congratulated for leading the debate once again.'

Geoff Mulgan, Head of Policy, Prime Minister's Office

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New Localism has come to dominate the political debate in recent months. While the forms this might take might differ, policy makers and politicians of all persuasions agree that the devolution of power and decision making to more local levels with help achieve improvements in services and more engaged communities. Local government is being required to develop a new community leadership role and also to work at more local levels.

To date, there has been no consideration of the role technology has to play in supporting the development of local government's new role. Indeed, technology and the internet can often seem to support moves towards non-local communication and interest-based, rather than locality-based, community. However, as we learn more about the internet and the way people use it, we find that technology offers new ways for the real shared interests based around locality – 'invisible villages' – to become more visible. Such connections can help form a new conception of local community and also new ways for local councils to respond. Technology offers an opportunity for local government to play its new community leadership role more effectively.

***Invisible Villages: techno-localism and the enabling council* reveals not a model of 'heroic' civic leadership, but a new way of working informed by diverse and multi-layered communities. This 'techno-localism' looks ahead to the next stage of e-government, beyond 2005 targets and transaction-based interactions, and into real local debate and discussion. Technology and the internet should not be seen as a threat to local government and traditional institutions, but as offering new opportunities in a newly devolved world.**

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