

delivering **change**

New Localism in Action

An NLGN collection

Forward and Summary

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foreword



The New Local Government Network has been in the vanguard of the debates about new localism. This collection of essays is another important contribution to the discussion. The NLGN's approach to the issues surrounding new localism seems to me to be the right

one: a combination of fresh and innovative thinking, but grounded in the practical realities of service delivery and local democracy. We need to be creative in our ideas, but we need to have our feet firmly on the ground for policies to work in practice. The NLGN's roots amongst academia, service deliverers, and working councillors and officers means that its policy ideas usually pass the 'would it work?' test.

One important practical reality is the continuing vital role for local councils. On the outer fringes of the debate about new localism, there have been some who seem to think councils can be sidelined or by-passed altogether. This is a mistaken approach. Local councils are essential to any process of passing power from central government to local communities. Local councils will remain the predominant form of local democracy in this country, alongside neighbourhood, regional, and national governance. What will change is the broader tapestry of local civic society. Across a range of services, new forms of local democratic control, accountability and participation are being tried out. Local councils must have the maturity and confidence to work in partnership with new forms of local democracy. A dominant feature of this collection of essays is that the thrust of new localism applies to a wide range of local issues, from transport to anti-social behaviour.

New localism is more than an interesting academic dialogue. The basic premise that new forms of local ownership and control should be introduced to local services and activities goes to the

heart of what progressive governments should be all about. New localism is about democracy and citizenship. It has at its heart a basic notion that ordinary people are capable of taking decisions about their own services and communities. This is the idea that has fired the imaginations of radicals and progressive people since the Industrial Revolution. It inspired the early trade unionists, the co-operative movement, the builders of the municipal authorities, and should give us confidence today.

Policy-makers and politicians are grappling with some epoch-making issues: a growing demand from the public for excellent, cost-effective public services, the need for equity between disparate groups of people and different parts of the country, the desire to create greater choice whilst maintaining fairness, and the pressing urgency to reverse the long-term disengagement of people from traditional politics. The answers to these dilemmas will not come from greater centralisation – they will only come from decentralisation and devolution of power.

It would be wrong to assume that every policy prescription in this collection will be welcomed by ministers, but that is not the point. Governments, especially those of the left, need to be challenged, tested, and injected with new ideas from outside of the rarefied atmosphere of Whitehall and Westminster. For progressive governments to be sustained, they must learn to renew themselves in office. That requires external support from those who wish them well.

The next phase of British politics will be characterised by the recasting of the relationship between state, citizen and society. We are moving away from the age of the expert, planner and official, and into the age of people power. It may be messy, and it may lead to mistakes, but the opportunity for our country to become a fully-grown mature citizens' democracy is too great to miss.

Hazel Blears

MP for Salford and Minister of State at the Home Office

introduction

1 background: New Localism in action

Warren Hatter

The New Local Government Network has been a key protagonist in the debates about the way we deliver our public services and govern ourselves. Our argument, laid out in the 2002 report, *New Localism: refashioning the centre-local relationship* is that we need to devolve down decision-making to the lowest sensible level. Our belief is that – wherever possible – decision-making should be as close to the user as possible, that the ‘joining-up’ agenda happens more easily at more localised levels and that clear accountability, efficiency and engagement are much more likely to be achieved when this is the case. But we have also been clear that in almost all services there will be key roles for all the different tiers of governance – national, regional, local and even neighbourhood. We are not arguing for a naive ‘localist’, ‘free-for-all’ position.

As a think tank focused on local government, NLGN has also been keen to see how these agendas play out with respect to local authorities. Despite many false starts from New Labour, they are now being given new freedoms and flexibilities, with the prospect of more to follow. These are mostly in the form of reduced ring-fencing of funds, ‘lighter touch’ inspection from the centre, having to produce fewer strategies and plans for central government departments, and freedom to trade and to borrow. We need to know how these freedoms and flexibilities can be used innovatively to make a difference on the ground. We also need to know what the barriers are to effective action – and which freedoms most need to be developed in the near future.

The strength of New Localist ideas reflects the current government’s commitment to decentralisation, which has arisen as ministers and policy makers have realised the limitations of a ‘command and control’ approach to government and delivery. In effect, the Government understands that it has achieved all it can with this approach and has spent the past 18 months turning back the tide and feeling its way towards decentralisation. This is emphatically about much more than local government. For one thing, the type of decentralisation envisaged by some departments is essentially managerial – delegating to regional or local managers, not elected representatives. Also, some departments are trying to find ways to shift power towards communities (bypassing the Town Hall, as some in local government would characterise it). Nonetheless, as the local

body with the strongest (or only) mandate in any given area, local government has to be considered in any aspect of decentralisation from the centre. Hence NLGN’s interest in the impact of decentralisation on policy areas that are not seen as ‘belonging’ to local government.

Rightly, there is now a debate about the perceived drawbacks of New Localism. For instance, won’t more local freedoms and less centralism lead to more ‘postcode lotteries’? As centrally-imposed targets are relaxed, what will happen? Will there be an even wider range of service levels and quality, and is this acceptable? We need to address these issues head on, to see what practical issues they raise – and find out how to overcome them.

So much for the theory. For in truth the key question has to be whether if we did alter our centralised state in a New Localist direction it would lead to better outcomes for citizens. In a series of seminars entitled ‘New Localism in Action’, NLGN has therefore attempted to pin down the implications of New Localism across a range of key services delivered locally. We wanted to look at the opportunities and challenges presented by potential moves to decentralise decision-making across a range of policy areas, namely transport, education, tackling anti-social behaviour and housing and sustainable communities. The contributors and discussants at each seminar were experts in the field in question, so we have been able to hear a very different perspective to that often heard from the local government community. This collection pulls together papers from the ‘e-pamphlets’ that were published on these four policy areas following each seminar.

Up for grabs, now

Drawing a conclusion from all four policy areas and seminars is challenging. Not least because different approaches are developing in each policy area. In transport and housing for sustainable communities, the centre of gravity is shifting towards the strategic, regional tier. In education, the move is towards more autonomy for schools and less financial clout with Local Education Authorities – either a very localising move, or (as is the consensus interpretation in local government) an über-centralist approach. In the world of crime, anti-social behaviour and policing, the move is now towards increasing community accountability and responsiveness. So the plates are shifting in different ways in different policy areas – what they have in common is that they are shifting.

This gives rise to a common feeling that emerged throughout the seminars that the future is 'up for grabs'. Even if some departments are not yet credible in their claims to be decentralisers, people are arguing for change – especially for having the right powers at the right levels of governance or management. In the seminars, there was no escaping the sense that, if we were designing our policy and services from scratch, we would not invent systems and processes much like the ones we have now.

Looking through the New Localist prism

In each seminar, the starting point was not New Localism – it was the desire to paint a picture of how the policy area in question could develop and improve over the next few years. And, much as we would be happy if this were not the case, it is clear that practitioners and policy-makers in these areas rarely use localism (New or otherwise) as a point of reference. However, seen through the prism of New Localism, there is a lot to learn from their discussions.

First, on **accountability**. There is no escaping the fact that accountability to the public – in any democratic sense – tends to be far from practitioners' minds. A housing expert may be well aware of the 'democratic deficit', but is not seeking to address it in her work. An example is local officers who deal with anti-social behaviour policy on estates. They feel visible and therefore accountable, but with no reference to democratic accountability. Clearly you do not need to be elected to deal with closing down crack houses, but this raises questions about how communities' views are reflected in local policy.

This is related to a view of local government and elected members among many professionals, which can be characterised by low expectations. Outside of our project, this is reflected by the views of health professionals, whom, we have found, need prompting before considering the potential role of local representatives in, for example, public health policy. We should not ignore the mismatch between this approach and members' views which can often be characterised as a core belief that they, and they alone, have a mandate from local people – and that they are therefore the natural point of reference for consultation on community views.

Second, **joining-up** is happening, and it is happening locally. Nothing we heard in the seminars shook our belief that it is at the local level that it can happen most effectively. In a world where

government departments bicker and horsetrade behind the scenes over, for example, powers that can be delegated to Regional Assemblies or Local Area Agreements, it is a joy to hear of a Luton Headteacher who is able to join numerous funding streams together into a cogent whole. The centre has a lot to learn from the local.

If we are honest however, it is impossible to tell how deliberate other examples of joining up really are. Addressing anti-social behaviour, for example, we heard of a fine situation in Camden, where a social approach and 'big stick' approach operate side-by-side. In truth, we cannot say if this is a brilliant example of local joining up, facilitated by superb community leadership, or happenstance.

Third, **co-production** is clearly becoming more important. We are encouraged by the seminars to believe that the 'we know best' attitude is genuinely on the wane, as it seems that involving citizens and communities is almost a given in many circles. Of course, there is a risk that professionals simply believe that they don't know best, but that is another story.

However, there remains – especially among special interest groups – an overriding **faith in the power of central government**. This was reflected in the seminars by a desire to achieve specific outcomes by central diktat, even when those outcomes (such as those relating to bus service levels in rural areas) are essentially local in nature. It may take decades of decentralisation before this begins to change.

Issues raised

A number of issues are raised by all of this, not least those of equity and the barriers to real decentralisation.

On the **barriers**, our interpretation is that people are now so used to working in a hierarchy – thanks in part to our massively over-centralised state – that it is hard to envisage anything else. Many discussions understandably begin with, and often refer back to, the Government's view; but we surely will not make the step change we need to make until we can imagine conversations on policy that normally begin with the community or service users. This makes us believe that a new 'settlement' is required. It may not matter that this is a genuine constitutional settlement – what matters is that it is *perceived* to be real. This is why we believe that it is helpful to talk about New Localism.

On **equity**, examples such as the Luton primary school do raise some unanswered questions. There is surely another school and surrounding community with comparable needs, which does not get the resources it needs because it lacks the leadership demonstrated by the school that contributed to our seminar. This dilemma needs solving – but let us not fall into the trap of discussions about a ‘postcode lottery’. With no local variation, we either have neither school tapping into those resources (which is surely a worse situation), or we have to rely on Whitehall to account for all the local nuances and circumstances.

A bright future

All in all, these seminars suggest a bright future, if we can grasp it. And they tie in very much with the arguments NLGN has made in *Joining-Up Local Democracy: governance systems for new localism*.¹

There is more of a role for local government in these developments than is transparent from the seminars. Elected members, over time, will focus less on doing, a bit more on commissioning and much more on community leadership. Sometimes, this means taking a step back; often, it means not taking the credit, even if you have played an important role in facilitating the work of people like the local players who enlightened our seminars. It might also mean we move to a world with some competing mandates or – at least – organisational drift away from core objectives, as we all try to be ‘joined up’. This is an inescapable conclusion when you hear Housing Associations talk of their work supporting private renters and even owner-occupiers.

Messages

If there is a message for local government in all of this, it is that you are not the centre of the world (not even the centre of public sector plc) now, and probably never will be – and this is not a problem. NLGN has long said that New Localism is not ‘New Municipalism’, and we have seen plenty of evidence for this.

The message for localisers and localists is that things are happening – but there is not a smooth path to a blueprinted settlement. The world is complex, and we don’t need to pretend otherwise.

Read on, and see how New Localism is being put into action.

¹ 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, January

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The New Local Government Network has been a key protagonist in debates about the way we deliver our public services and govern ourselves. Advocating 'New Localism', we have long stated that decision-making should be as close to the user as possible, that the 'joining-up' agenda happens more easily at such levels and that clear accountability, efficiency and engagement are much more likely to be achieved when this is the case. But we have also been clear that in almost all services there will be significant roles for different tiers of governance.

The primary question has to be whether major changes to our centralised state would lead to better outcomes for citizens. What opportunities and challenges would be presented by moves to decentralise decision-making across a range of policy areas, namely transport, education, the tackling of anti-social behaviour and housing for sustainable communities? *New Localism in Action* is an NLGN collection of essays focussing both on the key issues affecting each of these policy areas and on the implications of moves to devolve decision-making.

The report is the ninth in NLGN's 'Delivering Change' series, which aims to help senior officers and elected members learn from practical evidence of change to respond positively to the local government modernisation agenda.



ISBN 1 903447 45 3

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