




Delivering Distinctiveness

The future for district councils

An essay collection edited by **Daniel Goodwin**



New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this report as part of its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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Introduction

Daniel Goodwin, Chief Executive, St Albans City & District Council

The purpose of this collection

This collection of essays has been drawn together to examine the opportunities and limitations of English District Councils. Districts are a tier of local government in shire county areas which provides and/or commissions a range of largely universal services such as planning, social housing, waste collection, environmental and regulatory services, and cultural and leisure services. They are also the tier responsible for Council Tax collection and housing related benefits. There is a wide range in scale and type of districts, with West Somerset (pop. 35,000+) and Northampton Borough Council (pop. 205,000+) at the two extremes.

In common with most of England's government structure, Districts are a part of a framework which is a result of emergence, happenstance, primary legislation and compromise rather than a clearly set out constitutional settlement. District Councils in their current form have been in place since local government reorganisation in 1974. Their role and function was set out in the 1972 Local Government Act and resulted from a constitutional compromise when the incoming Conservative government of 1970 rejected the proposals of the Redcliffe-Maud report of 1969 to create a national framework of unitary councils. Instead it retained a range of Counties and Districts for large parts of England, many of which remain following further reorganisations. Many of these councils retain the title of 'Borough Council' or 'City Council', however throughout this document we have for simplicity referred to them generically as 'District Councils'.

Forward looking district councils have adapted to community needs and adopted roles which extend well beyond the traditional framework that was set up in 1974. The District Councils' Network has many examples of entrepreneurial practice, built up over the last decade focused on both shaping and shielding place, in particular in relation to the impact of economic downturn. Nearly forty years on the balance between state,

market and civil society is shifting and the precise role, nature and scale of local government is in question. This collection of essays therefore examines the position of District Councils in 2011 and seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the role of Districts going forward?
- How do Districts need to relate to other parts of government and the community?
- How can elected members be empowered to fully represent their communities?
- With devolution in mind, how could the system of government function more effectively and what functions might be devolved or taken on by District Councils?
- What are the implications of forthcoming legislation such as the Localism Bill, and the Open Public Services White Paper?
- What framework of governance might make sense for the future, what barriers might need to be overcome and what opportunities exist to make this a reality?

Overview of the essays

Our writers were approached by the New Local Government Network and me to try and provide a range of viewpoints and voices. We were anxious to ensure that these reflected the views of leading elected members and senior managers, that they reflected the voice from District Councils but that this was set in the wider context, and that the District Council's Network had a clear voice as a representative body.

Cllr Neil Clarke and Steve Atkinson, writing on behalf of the District Councils' Network set the scene by outlining their view of the role of Districts in providing leadership, local focus and opportunity. This theme is continued in Ruth Marlow's essay on leadership of place, which considers Mansfield Borough Council's experience and the development of leadership arising from an executive mayoral mandate which covers the whole district. The

way in which Counties and Districts can interrelate productively is examined in a County case study from Hertfordshire in which three leaders, Julian Daly, Robert Gordon and Tony Jackson discuss their perspectives of the two tier relationship between Districts and Counties. Manjeet Gill describes the practicalities of service delivery across the tiers in a Lincolnshire case study. Sandra Whiles sets out how Blaby District Council has used a range of systems-thinking based approaches to improve service delivery and share risk. The final essay from Liam Scott-Smith of NLGN draws together some of the emerging themes and applies some of NLGN's recent 'Future Council' thinking to it. The concluding chapter examines the emerging themes from the essays and our initial questions and considers what all this means for how Districts might develop in the future.

The essays are intended as practitioner reflections rather than academic contributions, offering useful insights to elected members and officials working within and with the sector. I would like to thank all the writers for their contributions and James Blake for discussion and thoughts on the final chapter and closing questions.

1 *Leading, local focus and opportunity*

Cllr Neil Clarke, Chairman of the District Council's Network, Leader of Rushcliffe BC and Steve Atkinson Chairman of the District Chief Executives Network, Chief Executive of Hinckley and Bosworth

The prominence and priority being given to 'decentralisation' and 'localism' since the advent of the Coalition Government in 2010, both in potential statute (Localism Bill and Open Public Services White Paper) and in general exhortations from Westminster, have provided District Councils with an unprecedented and very welcome opportunity to make an indelible mark on the communities we serve; a once in a generation chance to be at the heart of what makes our communities tick, to help them (in David Cameron's words), 'come together and work together to make life better' - to make 'great things happen'. We are very excited with this opportunity although we do need to ensure the Government listens to District Councils regarding how this can be achieved.

Whilst the new language - and the formal changes envisaged - are very welcome, much of it is not new. Indeed, District Councils have been at the centre of community-based activities for some time. The difference in 2011 is that central government is promoting our freedom to act, not telling us (in the main) what to do.

It is important, therefore, that we build on the solid foundations we have already laid and respond to our local citizens even more than we have before. This is both an opportunity and a challenge, or set of challenges; but we can meet both, provided we maintain the necessary balance between ambition, aspiration and the realities of the resource limitations we all face, because it is clear the limitations on finance will remain and that the way in which we will be financed in the future could be radically different.

Let's take the challenges first. Individual 'choice' is being propounded more and more; it is one of the five principles in the Open Public Services White Paper. Interestingly, the White Paper makes little or no reference to cost or resourcing. Therefore the challenge will be how radical District Councils are prepared to be in how they might work differently with others.

A second challenge is the definition of 'local' and 'locality'. Whilst it is unhelpful (and probably impossible) to try to secure agreement on a 'catch all' definition, it is more than a simple issue of semantics. A good deal of research has been undertaken in the last few years and it is increasingly clear that a 'locality' is not a county or, in many cases, even a town; depending on the issue, it can be as 'local' as a street or our next door neighbours. You can't get more local than that! Whilst that leads us into the temptation of the locality being a parish, town or community council, that temptation must be tempered by the 'critical mass' balance of resources. Therefore it is essential that there is a mechanism to determine how a locality will be identified, represented and supported. Government understands this issue and will need to demonstrate that it can balance the need for democratic representation with harnessing the power and enthusiasm of a local community. This is not an insignificant challenge but one which needs to be overcome if localism is to succeed.

Thirdly, there is the challenge of engagement; which is quite a different issue from mere consultation. Engagement is getting people to identify what they want and devoting time and resources (theirs and ours) into achieving those aims.

Lastly (but probably not least) we believe there are risks involved. What if it doesn't work? Will everything disintegrate into a paroxysm of blame and recrimination? Or can we/will we find other means of making things happen in different ways, in different localities? We know for certain that one size will not fit all!

On the positive side, there are important opportunities. District Councils have a distinct role and can contribute significant added value in making these 'great things' happen. To some extent, the opportunities are provided by the challenges. How we address them will be the key to successful delivery of the Big Society and all that that entails.

The additional costs, either of choice or of changed/improved provision, can be met by our transformation and efficiency work, in which all Districts have been and continue to be particularly effective. We are already on the way to securing the 28% reductions required by the Chancellor and the Secretary of State and, at this point at least, there aren't too many customers/local

citizens demonstrating outside town halls about how it is affecting them. Our employees are taking the strain commendably well and continuing to do what is asked of them. The upshot is that finding new ways of working, securing efficiencies (not cuts), is now a way of life for the average District Council employee, their managers and the elected Members. In truth, it has been for a number of years; it's now at the top of the agenda, not hidden lower down.

Examples of how District Councils have introduced new ways of working and secured efficiencies/service improvements are freely available on the District Councils' Network website www.districtcouncils.info. They range from Adur and Amber valley to Wychavon and Wycombe; looking at shared management/services, improving service delivery, improvements in recycling, efficiencies, value for money and regeneration – to name but a few of the 200+ case studies.

So what is 'local'? Having stated the impossibility of a definition, we do have to have some idea of the area in which we are going to concentrate our collective public/private/ voluntary sector activity. In most cases, the services which our communities see, and with which they engage every week, if not every day, are those provided by District Councils (with due apologies to our Unitary colleagues). Refuse collection/recycling, housing provision for those in need, assessment and payment of important benefits, cleaning the streets, keeping our public space tidy, dealing with anti-social behaviour - there are more - but all of them are, at some or at all times, experienced by every citizen in every part of the land. And yes, it is vital in the interests of the future cohesion of our community, that our citizens have a say in what is done to meet their expectations - and how; especially if it costs hard cash.

District council politicians live and make their decisions in premises located within the communities in which they are elected to serve. Those who have jobs often work in the same community. Not only that, District Councils have shown that we can control our management and service overheads, whilst having the critical mass to be able to spread those overheads effectively. In terms of the alternatives: whilst both have important roles to play in strategy and service provision, separately and in partnership with Districts, Parishes lack the necessary critical mass and Counties in two tier areas are too remote for either to claim the role of 'locality manager' in the sense of being close to

and responsive to a definable (if not defined) community and the individuals within it. This has often been achieved by Districts having the ability to be fleet of foot and searching for innovative solutions resulting in them often being early adopters of new initiatives or thinking.

Quite apart from the day to day activities of Council Ward Members in their communities – and the best of them do an outstanding job - we undertake a variety of communications with our citizens - satisfaction surveys, annual reviews of complaints, service/budget consultations, specific issue focus groups and citizens' panels/juries. These are all about issues of day to day resonance for local people. Many of these have consequences which go well beyond the immediate or the short term. Consultation on core development strategies, local development frameworks and housing/site allocations are considerable and have engaged local communities in the fullest sense. These engagements have resulted in real, tangible differences in what happens in our communities on vital issues affecting every one of their citizens.

On these issues, the implications will be far reaching. Growth, both economic and housing, is a high priority for the Coalition Government and District Councils are in a unique position to promote and deliver both. District Councils collectively invest more on economic regeneration than their equivalents at County level in two-tier areas. A great deal of regeneration has very local foundations, hence the fundamental principle of the reforms central to the Resources Review launched recently. The incentives for economic growth - the right combination of locations, premises, practical support, local co-ordination, and concessions - are within the remit and capability of District Councils, working together with other public bodies, including Further Education. In Hinckley, for example, a Town Centre Regeneration Masterplan, adopted in late 2005, has been the foundation of developments which began in 2006 and will continue into 2015. The added dimension here is the growing partnership between the District Council, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College (which has relocated its creative/arts activities to the town) the Town Centre Partnership (Business Improvement District) and MIRA (the advanced technology vehicle facility). Other private sector partners are also playing a significant role in premises' development/regeneration and the sourcing and relocation of organisations of different sizes.

That emerging success story has been replicated across the country, although at different stages and speeds. District Councils have shown great vision and are, in many cases, the catalysts, if not the drivers, of such positive activities. On the housing front, as well as being providers of last resort (or the facilitators of such provision), District Councils have a statutory responsibility to identify overall housing need in their area and promote its provision - again of the right type and in the right areas. This is by no means an easy task and one which, in a great many cases, is a source of robust debate with and within our communities. Fortunately for everyone's future, it is not a debate which District Councils shirk, thankless though it may often seem. Within Rushcliffe they have taken the debate to their communities and this has been a very successful exercise with the community demonstrating that they are not anti growth but want growth on their own terms without the threat of centrally imposed targets

So, what is the distinctive contribution of District Councils? What do we add that others can't? District Councils have a very local democratic mandate. We have statutory duties which touch the lives of everyone in our communities. Our very closeness to our communities and proximity to the place they all recognise (to a greater or lesser degree) as 'their place' makes us far more accessible and responsive to their needs. When people talk about 'the Council' or feel the need to approach the local body from which they expect a response, it is in most cases the District Council they mean or approach; even when we are not the responsible body for that particular activity. So we are the recognisable face and provider of all local public services. We are the organisations which hold our communities together, drive economic regeneration from the grass roots, provide the services necessary to maintain a clean and healthy environment and plan ahead for our communities' futures. We are all of these things, all of the time, to everyone in our communities.

And the risk? In the end the biggest risk is that we don't take it seriously and don't deliver with and for our communities. However, given our track record over the last ten years, that really isn't a risk, is it?

2 *The role of Districts in leading place*

Ruth Marlow, Managing Director, Mansfield District Council

There has been much written about the Leadership of Place and the role different stakeholders might have in the shaping and forming of the environment in which people live, the services that support the health and well being of local people and the role local leaders play in creating the opportunities that drive growth and prosperity in any particular area.

The idea that local authorities, and more precisely their political and managerial leaders, are place shapers has developed with the increasing complexity of the society in which we live, as has interest in understanding the challenges that face public service provision. The global economic down turn and its impact on public finances has added further urgency to the need to find increasingly cost effective and efficient ways of sustaining communities, ensuring meaningful employment opportunities exist and that the most vulnerable in our society have access to appropriate services that can enable them to live fulfilled lives.

The different tiers of Local Government have historically fought, and continue to do so, over exactly where the responsibility lies for taking the lead in the Leadership of Place discussion; Unitary, two and three tier local government systems continue to all jostle for position to justify why their particular model or specific tier of local government has the greatest legitimacy in the leadership of the places to which they provide services. Added to this, the current coalition Government in the development of its vision of the Big Society has recognised that communities themselves and unelected leaders of civil society shape place, often completely unconnected to the formal democratic bodies that seek to provide local leadership.

Within this context an argument that seeks to support the position that District Councils, or indeed any particular tier or model of local government, has the greatest legitimacy to lead a place would seem naïve and to deliberately ignore the point that leadership of place is by its very nature a complex matter. What I want to describe briefly is the important contribution and particular quality that District Councils can and do play in providing leadership of place and some of the particular merits this form of local governance can bring to the table.

So what do we mean by 'Place'. A dictionary might describe 'place' as 'a geographical point, such as a town, city etc.' Many Districts provide local government to very clearly defined places made up of single towns or cities or closely associated settlements that locally describe themselves as a single place. Other Districts, however, provide local services to far larger areas, often sparsely populated, that would be difficult to describe as a single place as they are made up of a number of towns, villages and hamlets that would each fiercely defend their individual identities as specific places, with characters, identity and aspirations unique to themselves.

District Councils through their democratic leadership processes seek to describe the aspirations, challenges and achievements of the place or places they represent in a way that is meaningful to, and recognisable by, all the people that live there, to provide the vision for the development of that place or places, which will ultimately lead to the place shaping outcomes to which the community aspires.

Scale is extremely important if this is to be done well. Largely speaking District Councils are well positioned in terms of scale to get the balance right between the strategic and the detailed needs of the place or places they serve. The economic reality of finances available to fund local government at a district level has meant that there is often very little managerial distance between the officers advising leading elected members about the strategic policy options for the area and the delivery of front line services. This connectivity ensures there is realism between planning and delivery which moulds and forms the places each District Council represents.

At the same time District Councils, working within larger county structures and encompassing smaller Parish Councils, have, by necessity, to reach out to and link in with wider strategic, sub-regional and regional bodies, as well as extremely local communities and neighbourhoods, to create their plans for the effective provision of services and economic and social well being of the area. This reaching out to stakeholders is of course wider than just those represented in other tiers of local government, but also to the wider public sector, business and civil society. District Councils have become pivotal players and experts in the creation and facilitation of networks and partnerships that embrace the uniquely local with wider strategic considerations. I would argue that it is the skills required to make

this approach to partnerships successful that marks District Councils out as leaders of place.

The relationship between the local district councillor and the electors they represent through community leadership and advocacy is crucial in the leadership of place. Scale is again crucially important, as elected members need to be close enough to their electors to understand the issues, concerns and needs of their ward. They need to be recognisable to the electorate and also to the wider players representing communities of interest in their locality. To do this well, the area they represent at ward level needs to be manageable in size and sufficiently homogenous in character, a recognisable local community, to enable them to provide one voice for that area.

The democratic accountability of elected members brings a greater legitimacy to this role. With the development of the Big Society, this is arguably an increasingly important role, rather than a diminished one as has been suggested by some, in listening to, influencing and facilitating the ambitions of other non elected community representative and individuals. District Councils are well placed, due to their size, to take this very local leadership of place forward through the creation of single member wards, creating a level of connectivity between elector and elected member that is difficult to replicate in the largest councils.

Mansfield District Council has sought to create an approach to local governance that helps to punch above its weight in the leadership of place. The District is a compact, largely urban area made up of a number of clearly recognised communities with a population of just over 100,000. For the last nine years the District Council executive has been lead by a directly elected Mayor providing a very recognisable focus for the strong leadership model the Council has adopted. The electoral mandate that the position of directly elected Mayor holds for the whole district has facilitated the creation of successful wider partnership working within it and beyond its boundaries.

Through the Local Strategic Partnership the Mayor, as the recognised directly elected leader of the place rather than simply being seen as the leader of the council, has been able to articulate a clear vision for the District. This has been embraced by key partners across the public, private and community sectors and provided the framework for the development of a suite of

interconnected strategic plans, including the emerging Local Development Framework, the Economic Masterplan, the Local Investment Plan and the Housing Strategy that will guide and shape the future direction of the District.

The Mayor has been a strong advocate of the strengthening of the relationship between the electorate and their local elected members, successfully leading the campaign for the creation of single member wards across the entire District. The rationale for this is a desire to see the reconnection between an elected member and a distinct community in a ward of manageable proportions, harnessing leadership at a local level. Whilst this strong expression of local leadership adopted by Mansfield District Council might not be suitable for all 'Places', it demonstrates well what can be achieved because of the unique position of a District Council which is able to combine its proximity to the people it serves with the strong leadership at a strategic level, influencing key players within and outside the District, ensuring plans for the wider economic, social and environmental well being of the area are relevant and meaningful locally. This powerful formula, in the leadership of place, is underpinned by the advantages of scale and whilst some have argued, that in these fraught economic times, scale is the Achilles' heel of District Councils, this need not be the case.

District Councils can succeed where they embrace modern approaches to service provision through increasingly more efficient procurement, made possible through strategic procurement partnerships. This success occurs where politicians see that local identity and policy priorities need not be compromised by the development of shared senior management and service delivery with like minded neighbours. Through such creative foundations, the opportunity is created for an exciting reinvigoration of District Councils at the centre of leading the future direction of the places they serve.

3 *Hertfordshire case study: Leaders' perspectives*

Julian Daly - Leader of St Albans City & District Council, Robert Gordon - Leader of Hertfordshire County Council, and Tony Jackson - Leader of East Hertfordshire District Council

Hertfordshire is arguably one of England's most diverse counties. It is wealthy and a net economic contributor, yet it also has areas of deprivation and social need. It has some of the country's most beautiful rural landscapes, yet borders London. It has a city and towns with extremely long and valued histories, yet it is also home to four early new towns. With this complexity in mind, Hertfordshire provides a useful case study of how Districts' roles are developing. We asked three council leaders to give their perspectives on Districts' now and in the future.

Tony Jackson has been Leader of East Hertfordshire District Council since 2006, a largely rural Council that is stable politically. Tony is also an Executive Member of the District Councils Network. Julian Daly is Leader of St Albans City & District Council, which covers a rural and urban area. He became leader in May 2011 and is the first Conservative leader of the council for 20 years. Robert Gordon has been Leader of Hertfordshire County Council since 2007 and is Chairman of the County Councils' Network. Here they give their perspectives:

Cllr Tony Jackson, Leader of East Hertfordshire District Council

Change often brings with it opportunity. Local government, at all levels, has certainly experienced significant change in recent years. At district council level the opportunities for adding even greater value to the lives of those who live, work and play in our areas is exciting.

District and borough councils are at a hub from which spokes to a wide range of partners extend. In recent years councils have strengthened valuable working partnerships with the police, health authorities, social landlords, the voluntary sector, business and of course town/parish and county councils. By providing services that directly and indirectly touch people's lives on a daily basis, district councils exercise real local leadership. As we meet

the challenges of planning reform, economic and housing growth and the maintenance of key services that impact daily living, our role as community leaders will become even more significant and influential.

Local Councillors will be crucial influencers and negotiators within their communities. For example, who will take the lead in local discussions about housing growth and the potential benefits to a community the New Homes Bonus might leverage? Who will assist local Town and Parish councils to evolve neighbourhood plans that can help local people shape their community in a way that is acceptable to that community? Who will support local groups that want to keep a local shop or pub open? These questions are only the tip of the iceberg – what about the challenges of an aging population, economic vitality in our towns and villages, support for voluntary and community groups, the provision of social and affordable housing and the list continues.

Whilst the close connection with residents and businesses means we are often the first point of contact, both the local district councillor and the council itself will need to work closely with Town and Parish councils and county councillor colleagues. For instance, when an allocation of the New Homes Bonus is made to a community it will provide an opportunity for all levels of local government to work with the residents, enabling them to exercise greater local influence.

As Local Enterprise Partnerships and Health and Wellbeing Boards take shape district councils need to find the ground that enables them to be seen as invaluable enablers and not blockers of these bodies' agendas. Our credibility is on the line, but then so is the chance for us to demonstrate the indispensable advocacy role we play for our electorate. We are, after all, the only elected representatives on these boards.

Standing back and waiting for the future to unfold is not an option. District councils have the greatest chance for a generation to influence how their local areas are shaped and for local people to genuinely feel that they have a say in their community.

We should certainly see all tiers of local government working even more effectively for the benefit of resident and businesses – after all they don't really care who delivers the service so long as somebody does at a price and quality that is acceptable!

Cllr Julian Daly, Leader of St Albans City & District Council:

District Councils deliver the quality of life services that really matter to residents. In our case we do this in both rural and urban settings, so it is important that we represent the entire district – not just the City. Our focus is very much on the delivery of a cleaner, greener and safer environment, working closely with residents, community groups, the Parish Councils, the County Council and other partners.

Our size and local focus means that we can listen carefully to the needs of everyone from senior citizens to young people, or from businesses to tourists. However our size also means that we can not do it all on our own. We can only achieve what our residents expect through joint work. For example, working with the County Council on primary and secondary school places for local children, or working with businesses and retailers for economic strength and social landlords for affordable housing and good quality sheltered accommodation. In all this we need to be alert to a public confusion about which layer of government is responsible for which service.

We must also ensure that the District is sensitive to the national context. Both Localism and the National Planning Policy Framework look set to create a generational shift in the way Councils deliver for their residents.

I want mine to be a decisive administration that gets things done effectively, having listened to what people have to say. All this involves working effectively and influentially with other agencies and avoids meaningless activity. We want to focus on facts and use performance management for improvement. At the local level it is important to be politically inclusive where possible and especially where people really share a common agenda. I believe that elected members are a hugely important resource. Their talent needs to be valued. Members need to be equipped and supported with the information they need to make good decisions, represent their communities effectively and work productively with the officer team.

In order improve our service (and to be more cost effective) we are bringing many services together in one place from a wide range of agencies. The pilot will be based in our civic centre and include the Council for Voluntary Services, the CAB and the local FE college, alongside our own services. We

will be linking this in with County work and we have other agencies that are keen to join in.

We are also already planning to implement a range of devolved arrangements. In these we will be working with other agencies to ensure the delivery of services at the best value for residents and the full handover of assets to Parish Councils or other local groups that want to run them in ways specific to their own localities.

We want to lay down good foundations for the future, so we are keen to take a long term view. People will be engaged in what we are doing if they can feel a positive impact on their lives and those of their friends, families and neighbours. Delivery of substance is crucial.

Cllr Robert Gordon, Leader of Hertfordshire County Council

In two-tier areas, Counties and Districts have responsibility for different functions, but ones that complement each other in offering a good quality of life to the residents and communities we serve jointly. In Hertfordshire, the County Council's social care services are supporting thousands of families and vulnerable people in each District and our education, libraries, community safety and highways services have a direct impact in every community. Many of our responsibilities are better discharged in partnership with the Districts - and some, such as highways, waste, economic development and our new health duties - in more formal arrangements. Governing locally in two-tier areas is a team game.

Attrition between tiers cannot provide the enhanced services for which we all strive, and competition for resources risks short-changing the needs of our residents. It does not benefit the people we serve jointly to provide top-class leisure facilities at the expense of investment in schools, or excellent roads but substandard social housing.

It is our duty, and it is one we take very seriously in Hertfordshire, not to compete, but to complement one another, whilst endeavouring to keep the tax bill low for our residents.

Proper representation and an appropriate balance of numbers also requires a mature approach from both tiers. The County Council recognises that

the district perspective must have direct representation on Hertfordshire Forward, the Local Strategic Partnership, the Local Enterprise Partnership and the Health and Well-Being Board. However that cannot mean a seat for all ten District Councils, particularly for those bodies where local government is but one voice. It is therefore important that those districts with a seat speak not just for themselves, but do represent their colleagues as well.

In the current financial climate, we are also acutely aware of our responsibility, on behalf of our residents, to provide access to our economies of scale to other parts of the public sector. An illustration of where we have acted upon this responsibility is the Shared Managed Services (SMS) contract. Initially between SERCO and the County Council, the contract has been designed to create an offer of high quality and cost-effective joint back-office functions, drawing on the economies of scale provided by the County Council, but also available to the Districts. The offer includes many services, including occupational health, ICT, facilities management and HR. To date there has been interest in parts of the offer from all districts and also from other public sector partners, including the Police. While it is still early in the life of the SMS arrangement, many of our district partners have already shown further interest, requesting business cases for multiple services available within the contract.

Conclusion

Two tier relationships work best when there is a healthy mixture of respect, challenge and co-ordination between District and County Councils. There is a vital leadership, brokering and representational role for District and County Council politicians particularly aided by those who are members of both types of Council. There are opportunities in this framework to balance local focus with opportunities of scale. The challenge for all is to regulate the balance between these two carefully and manage the potential for structural complexity and public uncertainty. However it is possible to achieve such a balance and provide clear leadership of place.

The key themes running through Hertfordshire's approach reflects a pragmatic openness to change and an understanding of the realities of maintaining local focus in a County of around a million residents. The role of district councils is seen as one of enabling connections between

neighbourhoods, parishes, partners and the County Council. As such there is a clear understanding of the necessity of working across all tiers to benefit residents and a focus on putting in place the means to enable this to happen effectively.

4 *Working across tiers in Lincolnshire*

Manjeet Gill, Chief Executive, West Lindsey District Council

This essay sets out my perspective on how West Lindsey District Council has worked with its partners to define the many layers of localism and how we have attempted to define the different roles of Councils. It examines how we have developed our role as the Entrepreneurial Council, which is about investing more in our communities, including Parish Councils and how we plan to work in the future with the County Council. When I was asked to write this essay on ‘Working Across Tiers’, my first thoughts were, ‘why do we refer to two tier local government?’. The reality is we are three tiers and even in certain unitary councils, such as Milton Keynes, they are two tier, as we have Parish Councils, the other tier that is very rarely discussed in national policy circles.

The Entrepreneurial Council – with a social enterprise mindset

Uncertain economic prospects, a rise in demand for health services and an increase in an ageing population places many pressures on present and future public spend. Against this backdrop reduced expenditure, localism and big society are all debates being played as national policy, on the role of Government and Society and what happens at which level. What did Localism and Big Society mean? At West Lindsey District Council, we attempted to define these terms and understand what our fundamental role should be. The first was obvious, in that we needed to be less government grant dependent and more commercial; the second, was to invest in our society to enable self sustainability and the third was working with the many layers of localism. That in essence was why we used the term ‘The Entrepreneurial Council’. A simple term to help change our roles, culture and develop the future skills needed.

This essay focuses on the concept of localism. So what does it mean to us and how does the state and Big Society work within it.

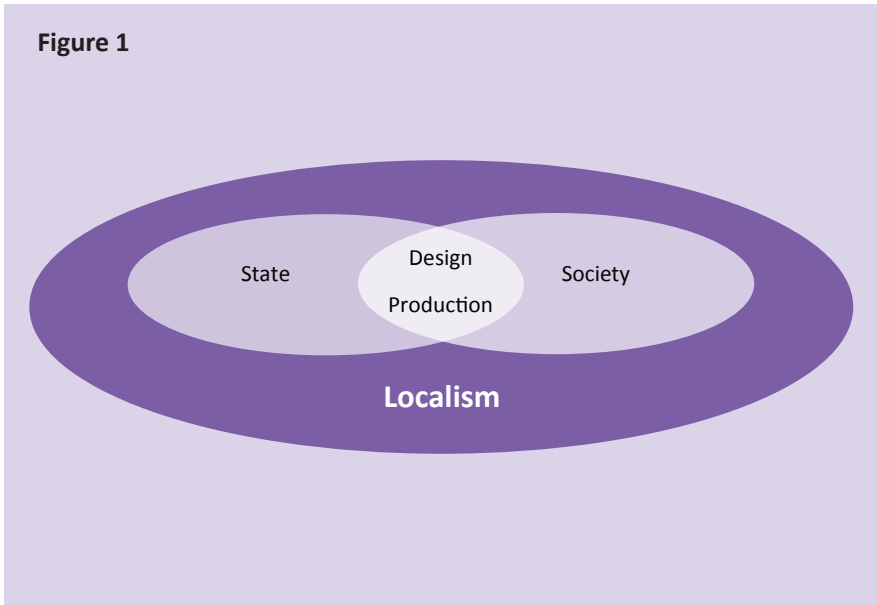
Figure 1

Figure one, above shows the state and society as overlapping circles within which greater co-design and co-production takes place. Where the circles do not overlap, there are things that we need to do as part of the state, such as regulation, protection of the most vulnerable and stewardship of our areas. Equally, for society, where possible, the task is about helping others to help themselves. The support required from the Council is to help connect communities to each other and give them the tools to manage their affairs, such as information, investment and technology.

The Layers of Localism

Firstly at a County level, the focus is on strategic commissioning, protection of the most vulnerable, infrastructure, such as roads or waste disposal and a lobbying campaigning voice outside the County. Clearly there are overlaps at a District Level and this relies on collaborative relationships that focus as equally on a style of mutual respect, as well as any formal decision making such as a Joint Planning Committee, a statutory body with membership of County and District Councillors, responsible for the Local Development Framework and Planning Policies.

At a District level, the key distinction we make is about shaping better services by ourselves or with others and providing the means by which communities engage and have a voice, in order to help themselves, help others and their local neighbourhood, village or street. As a District, our size has helped us to be agile and meant we are able to innovate with creative ways to reduce costs of services and deliver ideas faster than in a larger council.

Shaping better services has meant a better understanding of needs and the evidence to back this up, working with County and District Councils to share services. I currently chair the Procurement Board for the County Council and District Councils in Lincolnshire. The capability and capacity has allowed us not only to make savings on economies of scale, but also the capability to take real action around local procurement, to make our procurement more accessible to local and smaller businesses. Other work areas have included Legal Services and ICT. But our work is not restricted to sharing support or back office services. Our partnership Family Intervention Project is now one of the Community Budget pilots and developing good models for family support.

At a district level, we have also taken support and development of the Voluntary and Social Enterprise section seriously. Our 2011/12 budget not only resulted in no service cuts or redundancies, but also monitoring our funding to the Voluntary Sector, including increase in grants to Citizens' Advice as a result of the recession.

Thirdly, we have defined localism at an area level. West Lindsey is a geographically, diverse and large district for which we have defined six areas, although it has 128 town and parish councils (of which only 78 have a Parish or Town Clerk). We felt that the effect of simply focusing at a Parish level would mean that the relative sizes of Parish Councils could have a negative effect. For example a town like Gainsborough has a population of around 20,000, whereas a small parish, based around a village might only have a population of 200. Accordingly, whilst Gainsborough is an area on its own, the other areas consist of smaller Town Councils or larger urban Parish Councils and their neighbouring rural areas and Parishes.

This Area level is about co-ordinating better place plans, involving Parishes, District, County and partners such as voluntary sector, health, Job Centre Plus and Police. The purpose is for partners to work together on Area Priorities

informed by a high quality profile of the area, which analyses data from national, County and partner data sources or assessments. These include joint assessments for health and the economy.

Within an area, the next layer of localism relates to priority villages or neighbourhoods. These are places where there may be high levels of deprivation and or a need to build more cohesive communities. Examples are ex-MoD villages, with a sense of isolation due to little or poor community facilities and access to services in remote, rural areas. Another category is a deprived neighbourhood in Gainsborough, which has old poor quality Victorian housing and faces multiple deprivation with a need to provide decent housing, tackle fuel poverty and address high levels of antisocial behaviour. A multi agency approach that is more community led is therefore being developed with residents, local businesses, Police, health and Council colleagues.

Finally, at street level, this is where we want to work more with partners such as the Police and Health to enable more neighbourhood action and support development of residents groups, neighbourhood watch and initiatives that enable more community led solutions. With 'Officers on tap but not on top'.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to emphasise the different layers of localism and importance of subsidiarity, in that policy is developed or delivered at the most appropriate level. If it is strategic infrastructure it is County or sub-regional. If it is community action, it is felt more relevant for an area at neighbourhood, village or street level. West Lindsey District Council and District Councils generally have a crucial community leadership role, but it cannot do this without constantly developing and maintaining their relationships with their County and Parish Councils, as the other tiers of local government.

5 *Service delivery, systems thinking and risk sharing*

Sandra Whiles, Chief Executive, Blaby District Council

Introduction

At a time when many of the world's economies and communities appear increasingly fragile it's useful to sit back and consider what our bit of the world can do to make a difference. Perhaps seeing things in a different way can help us overcome what at times appear pretty daunting challenges or 'Wicked Issues', examining questions such as:

- With less money in the system how do we wring every ounce of value from our collective public and community resources?
- What is the real purpose of what we do?
- How does our purpose add value to individuals and communities – or is it at odds (sometimes) with their purpose?
- How on earth do we really get sectors, organisations, communities and individuals engaged and “working” on the things that need to be done together
- Why do some things work and others don't? Is it the place, the people, the process or magic dust?

If we are to believe the rhetoric of localism and Big Society there is a way. When we find this way what will be the role and function of District Councils? Or does it need District Councils to lead the way by being very clear and changing how things are done in their localities?

In this essay I will share some of our thoughts and experiences from Blaby District Council as we become a force for change in our Place.

Blaby District Council

Blaby is a relatively affluent district with a population of around 95,000. It consists of mixed rural and urban settlements nestling alongside Leicester City and neighbouring Leicestershire District Councils. The District has no major social or environmental challenges. It receives very low levels of government grant funding and has a very low spend per head of population. However there is a high level of customer satisfaction with our services.

A few years ago people describing the Council might have used words like average, insular, traditional, complacent, careful, comfortable and safe. All very nice words...but! So a few of us, members and senior officers who didn't want to be average, started hunting for a method to drive change. This was fascinating. There are lots of different approaches and management theories out there which worked in some places and not in others. Why? Was there something about rules, discipline and standardisation? Was it about values and behaviours? What were the ingredients which would lead us to become a sustainable, high performing excellent council which made a difference? Would the stakeholders in the 'business' accept the changes that would be needed in their roles and ways of working.

Innovation and Energy

One thing that often strikes me about many District Councils is their capacity for innovation and energy. Is this the magic ingredient and, if so, where does it come from? However innovation and energy, albeit infectious, will not work for long without structure and discipline. There is no proven off the shelf change 'method' that works for everyone. So we mixed a range of ingredients to come up with a strategy that worked – and continues to work – for us. Our method is based on 'Lean' (Systems Thinking), pragmatic project management, positive psychology, visible leadership and a healthy mixture of challenge and fun. We worked with the best out there and asked them to be brutal with us to make sure we became self sufficient about on-going change and improvement. We challenged ourselves to become a Systems Thinking Council which used coaching as its primary way of working. We became competitive – not with others but amongst ourselves and for Blaby. It was fun and built a strong team approach amongst officers and leading members. One of the odd things about Blaby is that we sometimes forget who works

for whom. We think that this is good. It has meant that our improvement journey has occasionally mixed members, officers, managers, community advocates, partners and all of the tiers of local government together. This has been invaluable as we start seeing each other as co-producers of solutions and move forward to meet the challenges ahead.

The Coalition Government is doing many things. Sweeping away bureaucracy and waste – things like the Comprehensive Area Assessment, national indicators, ‘Gershon’ targets and the requirement for a Sustainable Community Strategy. And it has introduced incentives for growth through things like the New Homes Bonus and retention of Business Rates. This is fine. It allows us to make decisions locally, but we have to step up to the mark and have ambition or we’ll blow it. If we don’t have data and feedback how do we know what’s being achieved? If we don’t have a plan how do we know what are the most important things to do? If we don’t hunt out efficiencies and better ways of doing things we will end up having to cut vital services. If we don’t have ambitions for sustainable growth how will we remain financially viable?

The Blaby Way

So what is the Blaby Way of doing things and what messages does this give around form and function? The table on the following page sets out some of our key tactics.

Tactic	Function	Form
Have very clear priorities, ambitious ambitions and be really clear about why things are done (purpose in Systems Thinking terms)	Visionary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Plan for Blaby District 2011-14 • BDC Corporate Plan and MTFS makes sure the Council delivers its part of the whole
Make things happen simply and pragmatically (cut out 'waste' in Systems Thinking terms)	Enabler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect organisations, resources, funding opportunities. • Invest in new models of delivery • Advocate for the Third Sector • Co-location of staff
Work well with others so that issues get aired and things get done.	Community Champion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vibrant Community Forums • Partnerships with a whole range of agencies and sectors • Engagement with the public and business partners • Neighbourhood planning • Use Social Media • Creative use of Scrutiny powers
Hunt out ways to add value, cut out waste and support staff, members and partners to do the right thing	Capacity Builder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place based leadership development programmes across sectors • System Thinking interventions and approach • Values, culture and leadership behaviour
Make things happen and know what to measure to track improvement	Deliverer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared service approaches across organisations where it makes sense • Do what's right for the issue at hand • Transfer of assets where it's the right thing to do • Manage performance and delivery across partnerships • Periodic Place Surveys to track customer views

What this means in the real world

A few stories or case studies can give you a flavour of the Blaby Way and what can be done by a District Council when the world is viewed in a different way.

A Place to Grow

We had some unused allotments by the side of our District Leisure Centre. We should have been sensible and turned them into a car park. Instead we transferred the asset to our local third sector partner. Three years on there is a thriving community garden on the site. Hundreds of vulnerable people visit the garden regularly. People have come off medication. Costs to health partners are reduced. There is a vibrant Cook and Eat project linked to our Children's Centre programme. The local community love the place and have become champions for the Garden and it's clients. And it is fun.

Managing Waste – Delivering Public Value

People in Blaby love their refuse and recycling service. Why? When it snows we grit streets and pavements in areas where we are due to collect. We issue snow chains for collector's boots and do our utmost to ensure we can work safely in delivering our service. Many years ago we introduced a first 'variable charging' scheme for refuse to encourage reduction, reuse and recycling – despite being told by civil servants that we couldn't. All of our front-line staff take responsibility for what happens on their rounds. They are proud of what they do. As a result we have one of the lowest cost services, highest customer satisfaction levels and excellent recycling rates. The results from our Residents Survey 2011 showed that 97% of people were satisfied or very satisfied with their refuse service.

Help in getting a roof over your head

We wanted to do something to stimulate the housing market and support local first time buyers. We heard about the Local Authority Mortgage Scheme (LAMS) in May. We decided it was the right thing to do (on the same day) and agreed a scheme in early August which will support around 50 first time buyers by underwriting 20% of their deposit. This may not solve all of our housing problems – but what an example of doing the right thing quickly.

Sharing the Load

Like most District Councils we share boundaries and common challenges with our neighbours. Capacity to deal with many issues is limited but we are clear that our job is to deliver far more than core statutory services. This means we have to be creative, with our partners, so we deliver real public value. Everyone talks about shared services. In our world we take a pragmatic approach to most things and this includes sharing. If things are best done together – in terms of cost and locally relevant outcomes – we want to do them together. Our experience of sharing has highlighted a few ingredients that are critical to success. These include:

- Being clear on the purpose of sharing
- Complementary values and behaviours
- Doing the right thing for the community or service
- Not being fixated with process or sovereignty
- Keeping things simple

Our sharing picture includes:

Type of Sharing	Examples	Partners
Shared operational management	Domestic Violence Substance Misuse	District Councils
Procurement of single issue services - where one organisation provides the service for another under an SLA	Land charges Internal Audit Procurement	District and County Councils and the Third Sector
Shared procurement	Research studies Energy management systems	District, City and County Councils
Pooled funding and single “contracts” with a third party provider	VCS infrastructure contract Economic Development delivery vehicle	District and County Councils, Police and Health

Shared service	Equality and Diversity service Emergency planning ICT	District and County Councils, Police Health Private sector
Pooled funding	Waste Strategy Learning and development	District and County Councils Police, Health, Probation and Third sector
Co-location	Advice services. Health improvement	District and Parish Councils
Collaboration	Legal services Customer services Community Safety Partnership	
Representation	Single 'voice' input into sub regional strategic groups	District Councils

We share lots of different things with different partners. This can look a bit messy and could result in us being criticised for not being strategic. But, from our experience, too much emphasis on high level strategy can slow things down and little benefit flows. The challenge is to take a high level approach to sharing which will bring organisations together over time without undermining sovereignty or common sense. If we are clear on priorities, values and behaviours this will happen.

Conclusion

Elected members and staff at Blaby District Council are very clear on what they are here to do. It is to make sure that Blaby residents and businesses get the very best deal possible by the Council working collaboratively with its partners, in order to deliver optimum public value. This needs healthy public services working across not only the voluntary sector but also the private sector; a vibrant economy; safe, sustainable places and people who care about what happens.

We know that the map of public services will change. We believe that our focus, flexibility and agility means we will carry on making a difference and stay strong – even though we may have to change a little along the way. Perhaps the most important function of District Councils, going forward, is to have the maturity to see change and challenge as exciting and not be afraid to be different. Just as Copernicus took a different view, this is our chance to see things differently... maybe as they really are or should be! For certain it's our chance to show others what can be done when members are in touch with their communities and the collective resources held by organisations working in localities are truly targeted at the 'wicked issues' that affect people the most.

6 *The future: a big question for Districts*

Liam Scott-Smith, New Local Government Network

In their attempts to manage the contradictions between economies of scale and public engagement districts have slowly begun to share services, make joint officer appointments and even in some cases reduce the number of councillors. Allied to this cross boundary blending we've seen central government and influential members of parliament call for a bottom up change.

"Nobody in Britain feels a surge of pride when the name of their district is mentioned... The coalition should abolish shire districts, passing most of their powers down to town and parish councils and transferring those responsibilities that affect a wider area to county councils." **Nick Boles MP**¹

Whilst Nick Boles' comments do not reflect the coalition government's official view on district councils there has been an undeniable move by Ministers to encourage the greater participation of more neighbourhoods and communities in the decision making process. In a parliamentary debate on the 13th December 2010 Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP, stated that "Increasingly, we will encourage more parish councils to be formed. We believe that the neighbourhood is the natural point to which funding should go for local authorities..."² In a world where the neighbourhood seems to be carrying an increasingly large amount of decision making power this will raise questions of political and managerial legitimacy for districts. Managing the desire for cheaper services, perhaps merging and sharing service delivery with other districts, whilst simultaneously pushing power down to a more local tier of government, will force onto the agenda questions about the very existence of district councils.

The solutions to their current problems will sow the seeds for the next ones which are sitting just over the horizon. With districts sharing services and

¹ Which Way's Up?, Nick Boles, 2010, Biteback Publishing

² <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm101213/debtext/101213-0002.htm>

delivering on localism there will be a coming discussion on local government reorganisation and *this* will be the major challenge facing district councils.

Tackling the question

District councils should not hide from the discussion of local government reorganisation but rather lead the debate. By initiating this conversation themselves districts can set the terms and frame the discussion. It's clear that we need something smaller than a County that holds power but is closer to communities. Districts will need to remake the case for their existence or work with the change and become something new entirely. We are already seeing the start of this discussion in Wales with the reported proposals to have certain services controlled by regional authorities which has been seen by some as an attempt to merge councils 'by the back door'.³

Winning the argument will be less important than owning the conversation, especially as such discussion looks likely to produce a change in some form. Deloitte found in their 2009 report *Pushing the Boundaries* that the success of such changes depends as much on the transition to a new arrangement as it does on what those arrangements actually are.⁴ Ensuring that any change that occurs has been done so with district authorities receiving due hearing to their thoughts and concerns can only be guaranteed if those same councils lead the discussion.

Observers may caution the suggested approach as a case of turkeys voting for Christmas but this view only remains credible if you also believe that the question of local government reorganisation will not be on the agenda in the next ten years. Surely it is better for districts to preempt such change rather than have it imposed?

If not you... then who?

If we accept the premise that this issue will be on the agenda at some point in the next decade, then if district councils don't instigate it... who might? Three potential sources beyond district councils seem plausible. The first is central government; with the danger that the discussion adopts

3 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-14735172>

4 *Pushing the Boundaries*, Mike Turley & Frank Wilson, 2009, Deloitte

a political slant and districts find themselves in a media war for which local government in general is ill prepared for. Secondly, there are the Counties; in search of achieving greater scale, efficiencies and savings (and with the tacit approval of Whitehall) the discussion is started with districts positioned as the problem to a savings question. Third and finally there are the voters; will changing demand and a reemergence of local identity force politicians themselves to kick start a reorganisation discussion?

Each appears to be an undesirable starting point for district authorities, further reinforcing the point that districts must take control of this discussion and that it will invariably mean starting it.

If we take as read that this fundamental question of reorganisation will come back onto the agenda, its worth considering how each of NLGN's charted future models lend themselves to district authorities in such an eventuality. Through consideration of what each model might allow a district to achieve this could potentially provide us with a steer as to where the logical future might be for district councils.

The Models

NLGN recently published a report entitled *Future Councils: Life After the Spending Cuts* which lays out, amongst other things, four potential future models for local government. Following the 2011-15 process of change in councils, best summed up as their march towards becoming more strategic commissioners, the four destinations envisioned are clustered, residual, commercial and lifestyle council models.⁵

- **Residual Councils** are authorities who outplace a large proportion of their services to outside providers. They may retain a pool of funding which can be targeted at specific projects or services for the poorest communities.
- **Clustered Councils** are authorities who through sharing so many services become de facto federations. Councils may cluster in major city-regions as each authority recognises the need to pool sovereignty to encourage greater economic growth.

⁵ Future Councils: Life After the Spending Cuts, Simon Parker, 2011, NLGN

- **Commercial Councils** are very entrepreneurial councils. They will set up trading arms and be heavily involved in selling services to other local authorities. These councils could also begin to trade with business and the community.
- **Lifestyle Councils** will focus primarily on promoting an areas brand and way of life. Such authorities will focus on capturing a niche focus through which to promote a distinctive local existence, both economically and socially associated with their areas.

These four futures are very far removed from where we are at present and this underlines the scale and pace of change for local government. County and Unitary councils authorities are grappling with the present challenge in a transformational way. Their major crisis, exemplified by the ticking time bomb that is adult social care, is one of demand. However Districts are not facing the potential explosive cost chain reaction that comes with the responsibility for adult social care, where demand is outstripping financial settlements. With the search for savings driving moves to clustering and residualisation, Districts might be tempted to see the present difficulties as merely an efficiency challenge. This would be a gross miscalculation of what the real confrontation for districts will be.

The sharing of services and the trend for joint chief executives is common in District authorities. Thus the clustered council model on the face of it appears to be a logical step for many districts. The most obvious driver behind this move to the clustered model is the search for savings. Because of the 28% reduction in grant to local authorities being staggered over the years 2011 – 2014 the need to continually find greater savings will remain a priority over the next 2 -3 years.⁶ As districts merge services and senior management posts the *clustered councils* will likely be able to keep council tax relatively low and potentially reduce it, depending on the scale of savings that are able to be realised. If the economy continues to stagnate and inflation begins to affect living standards then this council tax stability/reduction would be a real bonus for communities. However, these moves to achieve greater scale strike against localism and leave service decisions further away from residents. This raises questions about the legitimacy and function of local democracy. Should districts decide that the clustered

⁶ Shared Necessities: The Next Generation of Shared Services, Symons, Roth & Sturge, 2011, NLGN

council approach is best for them there should be a simultaneous move to reform their local democratic structures to ensure that i) citizens are not left disenfranchised and ii) local councillors remain relevant to their communities.

By clustering, councils leave themselves open to the *residual* option. It is arguable that clustering represents the first step towards becoming a residual authority. As authorities increasingly share and merge, the individual authorities retain less and less of a footprint. Geographic boundaries might provide a natural protection for the notion of *local identity* and its relevance to the make-up of the local state however there are already examples where shared arrangements have called into question the validity of this belief. In 2010, Breckland and South Holland District Councils decided to appoint a shared Chief Executive.⁷ Not revolutionary in itself but these authorities don't actually share a border. Another is that of East Devon and South Somerset, who do share a border and now share a Chief Executive, but are within the boundaries of different county councils.

Councils that see the clustered/residual future as simply the end point of an efficiency drive leave themselves ill prepared for future challenges. It is my opinion that those councils who walk down the clustered/residual route without a transformational mindset will leave them unable to defend themselves when the eventual big question of reorganisation comes back around. If those districts clustering and residualising engage in this change in a transformational way, then they will likely be confronted by questions of democratic legitimacy and community identity far earlier before they become a critical factor in the future of their respective councils.

If district authorities look to become *commercial* councils then this does not exclude them from becoming clustered/residual. However it would likely change the nature of any sharing. For example if you're able to generate more revenue locally then i) the financial pressure on you to share is not the same as an authority that doesn't and ii) the workforce cultural change NLGN has previously spoken of as being part of the commercial council destination would likely mean relationships between authorities would require more work as cultural barriers would become more prominent. Commercial authorities could however retain a stronger identity. This would

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-10704757>

leave them in a far stronger position when discussions begin about potential re-organisation.

Lifestyle authorities represent a departure from the traditional focus on service delivery and become more about promoting a particular area's way of life. By focusing on promoting lifestyle, councils would be investing resource, financial and human, into the public relations function of the authority, highlighting the benefits of the area as a place to live and to set up a business. Lifestyle authorities would look to develop brand values associated with their areas. For example, Brighton has made great strides in promoting itself as a green city and this embedded value association would be a hallmark of the successful *lifestyle* council.

Conclusion

Interestingly there could be multiple blends of the models that NLGN has suggested, all happening in different ways across the country. There isn't a right answer to the question of which model fits best with a district. There are some which look more likely to occur, such as clustered authorities, but the uncertain factor in all of this is a renewed focus on political leadership. The changes we are talking about are on a huge scale, only with strong and direct political leadership at the top of the council will it be able to move from where they are now to say a clustered or lifestyle authority or some variation of the others. Getting members engaged in the process of change as early as possible is not only the right thing to do but would also provide the political leadership that so many change programmes in local government often lack. This essay doesn't explore the politics involved in this as it would be a tome in itself, but without a discussion on it we are storing up trouble for the future.

Keeping an eye on the horizon and that broader question of what the landscape of local government will look like in ten years time should be factored into the present day decision making on the strategic direction of an authority. Different areas will adopt different models depending on their local strengths, their assets and their ambitions. We may well see federations of different models coming together to each take on a specialism. The future is very much in the hands of authorities themselves. District councils, just like all authorities, are asking the rather fundamental question about what they

are for. Having a clear answer to this question will, in large part, determine the journey and as such, their destination.

Central government has been clear in stating that there will be no top down reorganisation of local government in this parliament. I also believe that there will unlikely be one during the next parliament. However, the next reorganisation will not look like the ones preceding it. This will be a bottom up change. Whilst central government has said no to a forced reorganisation, the impact of the spending reductions has been to create the conditions for that to occur naturally in the future. It will be important for District Councils to appreciate that the future, irrespective of the currently desired destination, requires a conversation about the very existence of the authority in order that it be better prepared to shape an outcome which best reflects the needs of its citizens.

7 *An entrepreneurial future for Districts*

Daniel Goodwin, Chief Executive, St Albans City & District Council

Introduction

This final paper draws together the themes and questions in order to try and make some suggestions for the future for Districts.

What is striking about this collection of essays is that, despite potential pressures to focus on economies of scale and a minimised organisation, all the writers see an ambitious entrepreneurial future as a distinct possibility for districts. Broadly, this is seen as a localist future which, as Neil Clarke and Steve Atkinson have noted, builds on linkages which in some cases reach deep into the past and community histories and psyches. The four challenges they identify, of increasing requirements of individual choice, the varying definitions of locality, the expectations of engagement and the potentially increased risk of failure will provide the ground into which the foundations of the future will need to be set if they are to be turned into opportunities. Ruth Marlow accords with this view and sees the future as one which will need to be co-designed by elected politicians, officials and local partners in a collaborative and creative environment, leading to a reinvigoration of local leadership.

Councillors Tony Jackson, Robert Gordon and Julian Daly have set out a clear framework for political leadership for Hertfordshire, based on close working, an understanding of the different local political priorities of the County's districts and attention to matters that require a local focus and community response. Manjeet Gill takes this analysis a step further, setting out a multilayered framework from street to County communities, arguing that this level of complexity is necessary if we are to respond to widely differing communities and their requirements. Sandra Whiles emphasises the need for flexibility and agility to accompany community focus as traits which will help Districts adapt to future challenges.

However all is not straightforward. In his provocative essay, Liam Scott-Smith cautions that whilst there may be a future for Districts it would be possible

to blunder into something which is ultimately flawed. He argues that there is a real need for District Councils to choose and define their identity rather than simply to try to adapt. For example we might ask whether a commercial model might threaten community legitimacy and start to negate social enterprise, co-production and public involvement and debate in developing a cohesive community. So whilst there is a possibility of a positive future, attention needs to be paid to the development of a clear role for District Councils that has meaning not only in relation to the national framework, but most importantly to the communities that they serve.

Connected and credible

Our writers have illustrated that Districts need to relate to other parts of government and the community with confidence, working to build a credible voice, and taking steps to ensure that they are listened to. Neil Clarke and Steve Atkinson, have described how Districts can develop networks whose tentacles reach into every aspect of local life through engagement with the community. They believe that District Councils can be a clear voice of local identity, using the experience of ward members as representatives whilst balancing hard choices that need to be made between the needs of more local levels.

An outward view is necessary if Districts are to be able to reach out to others in order to perform. Engaging citizens, service users, businesses and local organisations as agents of change and elected members as the guardians of public accountability. The Hertfordshire Leaders see their joint role as enablers, managing the relationship the public has with local service providers. Their Councils are hubs whose spokes extend to partners, influencers and negotiators with, and for, their communities, and as Manjeet Gill says, thereby orchestrating a complex network of relationships across the public, private, voluntary and community spheres.

Helping elected members to link effectively with the community enables this network to be community led. Sandra Whiles has emphasised this community champion role for politicians. For Liam Scott-Smith, such relationships must be built upon a clear understanding of direction and destination. A view echoed by Ruth Marlow, who believes that it is important to articulate a clear vision for the District. She believes that Mansfield has

found that the electoral mandate of the Mayor has been beneficial in the way that it has provided leadership to local partnership and the development of interconnected plans and clear linkages between ward councillors and the community.

Local focus of local leaders

The need to value and develop the role of elected members at the District Council level is a key theme that runs through all the contributions. This is perhaps not surprising given the ratios where in a District the ratio of elected members to residents might be 1:2,500 or to staff 1:7, compared to a large County where these two ratios rise to 1:16,000 and 1:300 respectively, with the various forms of unitary council laying somewhere in between. Their local focus and connection presents an opportunity for District Councillors to act as vital influencers and negotiators in their communities.

Neil Clarke and Steve Atkinson describe the particular nature and local understanding of elected representatives in District communities. Julian Daly, Robert Gordon and Tony Jackson identify a need to value elected members' talent in order to achieve local communities' aims. Manjeet Gill and Sandra Whiles respectively discussed the partnership between County and District Councillors and between elected members and staff. In her discussion of Mansfield's arrangements, Ruth Marlow develops the idea of single member wards as a single point of accountability for an identifiable place.

Dogs that did not bark

What is striking from all of the papers is that whilst some moves are being made to consider devolution of powers between tiers of government, this is not yet at the forefront of activity. Perhaps this is understandable as Councils try to address challenging budget reductions, plan for increasing service pressures and await the finalisation of the debates on the Health and Localism Bills, and continue to consider the implications of the Open Public Services White Paper.

There was also little discussion, except in Liam Scott-Smith's paper, of the development of any future frameworks. Is this just boredom with old debates, pragmatism or an unwillingness to jump to structural solutions

for problems that simply need good cultures and effective networks? Particularly noticeable is a lack of discussion of Whitehall's perspective on, understanding of, this pluralistic and non-unitary environment.

Thirdly, whilst shared services, management teams and other new arrangements have been acknowledged in these papers, they are clearly not seen as the main challenge for Districts. Perhaps that is because even if two Districts merge completely one is still left with a District, with perhaps even more complex networks and relationships to lead and contend with. The challenges of change remain and capacity to think, plan and address them may not have actually increased if this has not been a factor in making the decision to merge.

Further, local government is clearly affected by the tensions between the temptations of centralism, the groundswell of localism and the pressure for a smaller role for government and a bigger role for society and the market. However this has not arisen as a key issue. The question has been asked elsewhere as to whether localism is increasingly being seen as a practical tool with which to address policies on growth, social cohesion and public service reform rather than a principal for leadership, community engagement and service delivery. I believe this lack of underlying foundations of principle is one which will continue to hamper Districts, unless they are able to claim their space more effectively in national government's psyche, a big challenge for DCN.

Finally, it may just be the luck of the draw, but there was little evidence from our contributors of what have traditionally been described as deep-seated tensions between Parish, District and County Councils. It may well be that they have been able to work through such issues, that they have simply ignored them or that testing times produce healthy alliances. However the papers hold out the possibility that effective networks of co-existence and co-operation are possible.

The distinctive role of Districts

If the structure of society can be described by the varying relationships between state, market and civil society, then uniquely local government has characteristics of all three in a way that differs from all other parts of

the public sector. It is an agent of the state, being a locus of democracy, point of taxation, provider of public service delivery and regulatory enforcer. It engages like no other with the market and is a provider, commissioner and facilitator, with a range of transactional relationships and income that is necessary for its survival. And it has a key role to play in community engagement, functioning as a social entrepreneur, community organiser and focus for civil society links and networks.

Accordingly, whilst for other parts of the public sector, the wider societal change is happening around the outside of their (rapidly contracting) boundaries, these changes are happening in the very hearts and minds of local democracy.

It is little wonder that local councils, and especially Districts, are feeling like they are on the front-line of social change, because they are. Whilst there are undoubted concerns about the capacity of District Councils to function effectively, and some are open to the charge of being an administrative fiction, it is clear that the possibility exists for District Councils to develop their distinctive role and function effectively. I believe that in the emerging environment they could develop as a focus for vision and purpose based on engaged and effective local civic leadership, electoral accountability and tailored service delivery in partnership with the community and other public agencies.

Conclusion

Is there a hint here of a more effective political framework for the future? There is, as Liam Scott-Smith points out, a real need for political leadership through future change. What could the local government community do to address the question of empowerment of elected members, to help them be at the epicentre of the plans for a future for their areas and to have an informed debate about the best partnership frameworks to deliver them? Returning to Neil Clarke and Steve Atkinson's essay, the biggest risk, rather than a lack of ability, may be one of abdication of influence, albeit perhaps an unconscious one. This could arise because District Councils misread their central position in their communities, undervalue their contribution, and fail to take their potential future seriously. And yet the story that our contributors tell speaks of District Councils at the centre of their

communities, effectively networked with the community, other tiers of government and their partners. They are not waiting for guidance but are getting on with business led by members with a clear vision and well thought out direction of travel. A journey characterised by capability, focus, openness to collaboration, maturity of relationships, energy and realistic optimism. Rather than concluding with recommendations, I believe that for this collection of papers it is better to close with some questions:

- How can District Councils better articulate a clear vision and required outcomes for their communities? How can they be a better focus for engagement, delivery and accountability? How prepared would they be to facilitate their own closure if there was a better solution for their citizens and local area?
- What do District Councils need to do to ensure that local distinctiveness is achieved through the engagement of citizens, businesses and the public sector in activities which build resilient places and high levels of well-being?
- How can District Councils be even more innovative and creative in their ambitions, analysis, organisational culture, methods and partnership working?
- What should the priorities be for the wider local political frameworks and the development of effective and efficient political, officer and partner organisation interaction in order to achieve strategic alignment, local economic stability and cost-effectiveness?
- Finally, are the councils mentioned here the exception? What do we know about the range of perspectives and challenges of District Councils, particularly the smaller ones, and what help might they need to make the jump into an uncertain future?



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This collection of essays has been drawn together to examine the opportunities and limitations of English District Councils. Districts are a tier of local government in shire county areas which provides and/or commissions a range of largely universal services such as planning, social housing, waste collection, environmental and regulatory services, and cultural and leisure services. They are also the tier responsible for Council Tax collection and housing related benefits. There is a wide range in scale and type of districts, with West Somerset (pop. 35,000+) and Northampton Borough Council (pop. 205,000+) at the two extremes.