THE C’LLR INTERVIEW

HILARY BENN
– SHADOW COMMUNITIES SECRETARY

THE C’LLR AWARDS
THE AWARDS – AND HOW TO ENTER

SPECIAL FEATURE ON NEW APPROACHES
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Equality first

It’s important to make the right choices now about how to use resources if we want to make sure of a fair society in the future, it’s even more important to put equality centre stage, says Marie Pye, lead member for equalities for London Councils.

These are hard times, with difficult decisions for those of us in local government, and there is a tendency to think that this means that there is no longer time for the fluffy stuff. Fair enough when the fluffy stuff is going to expensive conferences or having new gadgets but there are some things which some may see as fluffy but actually are even more important in these tough times.

Talking to residents, engaging with communities, thinking about fairness, tackling inequality. Without these we are making tough decisions without proper information and understanding. Without these we are probably making the wrong decisions.

The essential question is can we afford equality and discussions with residents in times of austerity? We can’t afford to not consider it. If our decisions lead to less equal communities then they are likely to lead to less successful communities.

Considering equality and consulting residents is of course often a legal obligation, and one which many public bodies have fallen foul of. However, it’s not just about avoiding the judicial review, it’s about having a full picture of information to use when making decisions. The idea is that the more you understand what you are doing and what impact it will have, then the better decisions you can make.

Understanding and knowing our communities allows us to design and deliver services with residents’ needs in mind. Very often the most vulnerable people, who are most dependant on public services, are those from the protected groups whose needs will not be met by a one-size-fits-all approach.

In times of economic constraints, local government has to ensure that it targets its resources and priorities on the areas where it can make the most difference and focuses on the most pressing needs. There is no doubt that any reductions in services are likely to hit the most vulnerable and equality groups the hardest.

Some things are obvious, reductions in adult social care, cuts to homelessness services or reducing streetlighting. Others are less obvious – cutting planning enforcement will be felt more by disabled people if it means there is less focus on making sure buildings are accessible. Less money spent on anti-crime initiatives may be a bigger issue for some LGBT people who may be more concerned about community safety or not replacing worn out infrastructure like park benches can really impact on some older people or even pregnant women who just need somewhere to sit down occasionally!

Looking at the impact of our decisions on equality really means looking at the impact of our decisions on all of us. Having the information, having that perspective and taking the time may not change the fundamental decision but it may make us do some things differently and better. In one authority for example thinking about equality in relation to closing one-stop shops lead to targeted advice services but also increased services for everybody from other facilities like children centres and libraries.

The real thing about equality though is that it is the mainstream. Talking to residents and thinking about equality is far from being fluffy, actually it’s the day job and right now we need to be focusing on the day job more than ever.

“Even in straitened times the need for clear, well informed decision-making when assessing the impacts on less disadvantaged members of society is as great, if not greater.” Blake J in R (Rahman) v. Birmingham City Council (2011) EWHC 944.

Pause for thought

Sometimes my mind goes blank. I’ll stand up to speak and the words won’t come. Most of us have been there and even the most confident speakers are sometimes lost for words. We are afraid of silence, yet it can be a powerful thing. It is better to pause for thought than to say the first thing that enters your head. Some mediums are more forgiving than others. A moment’s silence on the radio lasts an eternity; a minute’s silence in a conversation can be a relief to all, depending on the context.

“ We are afraid of silence, yet it can be a powerful thing ”

Someone once gave me a tip for chairing meetings. When you first ask for questions or contributions, people are often shy. Sitting in silence is uncomfortable, but if you can hold your nerve, rather than leaping in with a question of your own, or by putting someone on the spot, a volunteer will come forward.

Brevity can be powerful too. In the recent debate in parliament about Europe, when many MPs defied their party whips to vote for a referendum, one speech stood out in the House of Commons. Charles Walker MP stood up and said simply “If not now, when?” In a debate that included 50 long speeches, this four word contribution was the most widely reported. It reminded me of when a backbench Labour MP stood up at PMQs to ask Tony Blair “How would he define his political philosophy”. The Commons fell silent and the Prime Minister was stumped.

“ In a debate that included 50 long speeches, this four word contribution was the most widely reported ”

If you don’t feel you are a ‘natural speaker’, you might find it helpful to experiment with silence, with pauses for thought and with brevity. Sometimes less is more.
P is for... well, a positive plethora of stuff, especially compared with the now worryingly looming Q. There are parks and parking, payments, penalties, permits and performance indicators, planning, pollution, and endless publics and privates.

Which reminds me: we used to have a procurement advisory service called 4ps – not one P of which, curiously, stood for procurement, but rather Public Private Partnerships Programme. It was additionally confusing, because many assumed the name referred to the 4Ps marketing mix: product, place, price, promotion. Fancy! – anyone thinking local government was about product, rather than service.

Then, talking of confusion, there’s the Peer Clearing House. It really, really should be the Parliament Square office from which Lloyd George’s theatre impresario, Maundy Gregory, flogged peerages at upwards of £50,000 a throw. In fact, it accredits and places those officers and councillors deemed suitable to support and mentor their colleagues – worthier, obviously, but still slightly disappointing.

P is also for what I once thought were ‘socids’, but later embarrassingly discovered were actually psocids or booklice. I still think it’s odd. I could understand cockroaches, say, or their infestees, wanting a euphemistic, Greek-sounding synonym, but why booklice – innocuous little beasts, caused more by high humidity than low hygiene?

Anyway, the subject’s pest control, and councils’ diverse charging policies. And we start with that rare commodity: Praise for Birmingham. It’s my own council, and one that takes its public health responsibilities sufficiently seriously to provide – as well as, until recently, an Environmental Warden in every ward – a (virtually) free domestic pest control service.

Unfortunately for me, the ‘virtually’ explains how I know these things. Their apparently single exception is that they charge for wasps – the only Brummie insectoid pest by which I’ve so far been afflicted.

I’d like to commend too the council’s proactive pest control practice – regular treatment of properties in high infestation areas. However, as a council tax payer, and knowing they carry out well over 20,000 pest control treatments a year, perhaps I should be more aware of what Ed Miliband might call the predatory pricing opportunities being missed.

Harrow charge £236 for cockroaches, albeit with gel bait included, while bedbugs in Croydon are £248.08 (don’t you love that 8p!). Chiltern DC, though, is the tricky one: £35 each for both. Per visit, it’s not bad; but suppose they mean £35 per bug or roach? Birmingham, eat your heart out!
The LGiU aims to keep councillors and those working in local government informed about the latest developments, writes Andy Sawford.

**LGiU at Westminster**

The LGiU’s national policy summit at the end of October focused on localism in a climate of austerity. It featured a keynote address from Andrew Stunell MP and the first public speech from the new Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hilary Benn MP.

The Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP, Minister for Employment, attended the local government APPG meeting on 25 October to discuss the government’s plans for welfare reform and the implications for local government.

**LGiU policy development**

The LGiU has published three new reports.

**Risk and Reward:** local government and risk in the new public realm from the LGiU and Zurich presents new LGiU research and examines councils’ readiness to harness the potential of individuals and communities to close the gap between demand for services and resources.

**Promoting Independence:** the future of housing related support a major research report from the LGiU with support from Circle Housing Group, brings together new LGiU research and previous studies to make the social and financial case for continuing to run successful preventative support programmes.

**Going where the eyeballs are:** how email is connecting councils with their communities. To many people new web technology seems the ideal way to engage in more dialogue with communities in a way that is low cost, time-efficient and allows a two way relationship. Produced with support from Govdelivery, this report draws on LGiU research to give some shape to what this approach means in practice for government.

To download PDFs of these and other LGiU reports go to www.lgiu.org.uk/reports.

The LGiU and Construction Skills are continuing their series of events around the country bringing together local authorities and representatives from the construction industry to discuss the role of construction in returning the economy to growth and creating sustainable local jobs. LGiU policy manager Lauren Lucas and I were at the event in Newcastle in early November and there are further events in December in Sandwell and Swindon. For more information please contact dan.garfield@lgiu.org.uk.

**LGiU/CCLA C’llr Achievement Awards**

The 2012 C’llr Achievement Awards are now open for nominations. There are 11 categories in this year’s awards, including three new ones. We are very pleased to announce the inclusion of the Bruce-Lockhart Member Scholarship award, supported by Kent, Essex and East Sussex County Councils. This scholarship carries a £10,000 bursary for the winner and aims to recognise and develop local government leadership potential.

For more information about the awards see page 9 or go to www.lgiu.org.uk/cllrawards or contact awards@lgiu.org.uk.

**LGiU events**

We’ve been running a series of well attended workshops on aspects of the Localism Bill. Still to come are Community Assets (7 December) and Right to Run Services (8 December).
The Health and Social Care Bill is now at Committee stage in the Lords where it could continue until January, writes Christine Heron. It signifies the most fundamental changes in the sixty year history of the NHS, and the role for local authorities in health will increase significantly bringing new opportunities, challenges and responsibilities.

TEN THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT...

1 Overview of the Bill. The Bill is intended to improve quality and cost effectiveness in health through improved commissioning. It establishes the national NHS Commissioning Board and local clinical commissioning groups (CCGs). Responsibility for public health will transfer to local authorities who will also establish health and wellbeing boards (HWBs) to lead integrated commissioning and provision.

2 The debate is not yet over. The Bill has had a rocky passage and further amendments, on issues such as limiting competition and increasing transparency in CCG governance, have been proposed in the Lords. The government may accept some changes to ensure that the Bill is passed before the end of the Parliamentary session. Subject to the Bill's enactment, most reforms should be in place by April 2013.

3 Many reforms are already underway. Strategic health authorities have been formed into four clusters – North, South, Midlands and London. The 151 PCTs have been clustered into 50 groups each with one chief executive. CCGs are considering their configurations. There is considerable uncertainty for staff and organisations at a time when £20bn in NHS savings is required.

4 HWBs are now forming. Over 90 percent of local authorities opted to become early implementers. In some areas, HWBs are viewed as providing some stability during a time of transition. Early implementers stress the importance of organisational development approaches to establish new relationships.

5 Some shadow HWBs have started work. Some are mainly focusing on elements of reform such as the transfer of public health, establishing CCGs, establishing HealthWatch, and developing Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and joint health and wellbeing strategies. Others are also starting to consider joint commissioning.

6 Overall, there has been support for public health reform. But now there are concerns about a lack of detail on implementation, and on how budgets will be identified and allocated. A baseline expenditure exercise in PCTs resulted in wide variations. Further information and shadow budgets are expected by December. An engagement team, chaired by the chief executive of Hereford Council, has been set up to road-test policy.

7 The government has stated that CCGs should not normally cross council boundaries. The original pathfinders ranged from populations of under twenty thousand to over five-hundred thousand. Now, smaller groups (possibly less than 200,000 patients) are unlikely to be authorised. HWBs will give a view on local structures, and discussions with CCGs should be taking place.

8 Councils will have a larger role in health beyond the interface with social care and public health. HWBs will be involved in the development of CCG commissioning plans and have the power to refer these back to CCG boards or even the NHS Board if they do not take account of the joint health and wellbeing strategy. The NHS Board (sub-national) will work with HWBs.

9 The new system will face challenges. For instance, reconfiguring unviable (but probably valued) NHS services is seen as critical by the DH. There are also concerns about potential conflicts of interest in CCGs through GPs taking on a commissioning role. Quality of healthcare provision is likely to be an ongoing issue.

10 When considering what to prioritise, councils should focus on developing an effective HWB and good partnerships with CCGs. They will also need to define the roles of the HWB and Scrutiny, and promote public involvement through developing a robust local HealthWatch. LGiU issues regular updates on the Bill and how it is being implemented.
Good journalists – what a relief!

This column has lamented frequently the declining quantity and quality of media coverage of local government. So it is heartening to be able to bring you news of one council doing something constructive about it, writes David Brindle.

Three cheers for East Lindsey District Council in Lincolnshire, which is running free training sessions for young local journalists to help them with their professional accreditation – public affairs being an essential component of the national qualification – and to improve their understanding of municipal issues. Better coverage a bonus.

The idea is that of James Gilbert, the council’s 25-year-old communications officer, who feels a mission to encourage local young people like himself to stay in the area rather than move elsewhere to further their careers. Getting to grips with local government, he says, “can be incredibly daunting for anybody”, let alone fresh-faced trainee reporters.

His half-day sessions, developed in consultation with the local Target newspaper group, cover all the essential bases and feature presentations from key council officers up to and including the chief executive. The final element is 15 minutes on council communications (finance gets 70 minutes), which includes basic contact information and a theme of “how we can help one another”.

Gilbert reckons that as much as 75 per cent of the news content of local papers in East Lindsey is related to the council in one way or another. While he doesn’t think the standard of reporting is necessarily falling, he does admit that coverage is increasingly based on council press releases and other third-hand sources rather than attendance at meetings.

“On average we get 70 to 80 media inquiries every month and we probably do 300 broadcast interviews a year,” he says. “They still actively report what we do and ask us difficult, challenging questions. But that is as it should be and I would far rather they asked them than misreported things.”

Lest there be any doubt that good, robust reporting of local government remains alive and well, at least in some localities, consider John Elworthy, editor of the Cambridgeshire Times and Wisbech Standard, who has been making headlines of his own and is the second recipient of this column’s hearty approbation.

After an independently-led panel proposed a 25 per cent increase in allowances for leading members of Cambridgeshire County Council, Elworthy smelled a rat. He immersed himself in the council’s constitution and discovered that the process had wrongly by-passed the authority’s standards committee. As a result of his subsequent story, the increase was scrapped.

But Elworthy (“always up for a challenge”) is evidently not a man to rest on his laurels. Within days, he was back in the spotlight with another local government scoop – one to which he has appended the immortal tag of “Bladdergate”.

The story goes like this: members of Fenland District Council’s planning committee are on an extended series of site visits by coach when several of their number need to answer the call of nature. They opt to nip behind a hedge. One of them, the octogenarian mayor of March, Bernard Keane, does so at two stops. Later, one of those on the coach, said to be a fellow councillor, makes a complaint. Elworthy finds out about it.

Had that been the long and short of the tale, it would have been good but perhaps not great. What sent it into orbit was that Fenland was at exactly that time considering proposals to close seven of the 11 public conveniences in its four market towns.

To his eternal credit, Keane agreed to go on the Jeremy Vine show on BBC Radio 2 and own up to his behaviour. Site visits, he said, presented certain challenges. “Quite honestly, you can be out for four hours, out in the sticks … and things can get desperate.” Elworthy, also on the show, told a surprised Vine: “Jeremy, if you came into Fenland this afternoon and relieved yourself against a hedge, and a member of Fenland District Council’s enforcement team spotted you, you would be hit with an £80 fine.”

The identities of the other Fenland councillors caught short remained a matter of speculation. But with one member fuming that “to implicate me is an absolute lie, a mischievous lie”, there was no doubting the power of the story – or, still, of the local press.
Wheeler’s World

Heather Wheeler, chair of the All Party Parliamentary Local Government Group tells us what’s been catching her imagination in Parliament and her constituency over the last couple of months.

**Jobs and the economy are on everybody’s mind at the moment. There has been mixed news from my constituency, but I remain optimistic that new jobs are being created.**

The difficulties faced by Bombardier have been widely reported. A tender process started some time ago resulted in this company, which is based next door to my constituency, not being awarded the contract to build trains for the Thameslink line. As a constituency MP, I’ve been busy making a case to the Prime Minister and Transport Secretary to make sure the company has a fair crack of the whip at any future opportunities. Some 1400 jobs are at risk as a result of losing out on the Thameslink contract, but I was cheered to hear at a local jobs fair that 1500 jobs were being advertised by other companies that offer hope to those facing redundancy. Many of these are jobs for skilled engineers and I get the impression that employers are queuing up to get good people from Bombardier.

**I also disagree with those who say the countryside is at risk from the National Planning Policy Framework.**

This is a key part of the government’s reforms to make the planning system less complex and more accessible, and to promote sustainable growth. I took part in the debate in Parliament. I used my contribution to get the minister to confirm that the framework does mean that brownfield sites should be considered first and it does mean protection for the green belt and green corridors. And it means that sustainability is a high priority. The minister also made clear that there would be a transition from the old system to the new, allowing councils to complete their Local Development Frameworks.

Westminster Hall debates can get to the heart of issues that affect constituents.

Westminster Hall debates are good opportunities to explore ideas and suggest solutions to issues raised by MPs and their constituents. We recently debated rural bus services. Many councils are reducing their subsidies to commercial bus operators and this is often leading to a reduction in services in rural areas – where for many people the bus service is a lifeline. However, a number of councils are not reducing the grants to community transport, so we were looking at whether some of these services can become a kind of ‘link’ service, taking people from villages to the main roads, where they can pick up commercial services.

**On a more national issue I spoke during the debate on whether we should hold a referendum on our membership of the EU.**

My view is that we shouldn’t be in the EU. But I think what’s most important is that the people of this country have the opportunity to express their views. The only time the nation was able to vote on the issue, it was to vote on what was then a trading association, not a political union. I think it’s time the public were given a vote on this – and said as much in the debate.
HAVE YOU REMEMBERED TO NOMINATE?

C’LLR ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS 2012

Closing date Friday 30th December.
Winners will be announced at the C’llr Awards Ceremony in February 2012

For full details, including categories, how to enter and rules, visit www.lgiu.org.uk/cllrawards
The grass isn’t always greener

With the financial difficulties of some larger nations coming to the fore, Dave Wilcox looks at how other European countries are tackling the problems.

Last week I took a few days out with my wife in Madrid.

When we left home there was going to be a referendum in Greece on the bailout deal, G20 was about to sort out the world economy, senior UK ministers were telling Europe that it needed to get its act together and Silvio Berlusconi was Prime Minister of Italy.

By the time you read this, the General Election in Spain will have taken place. It was such big news in Madrid when we were there, it squeezed the Manchester City win against Villarreal off the news bulletins.

For the first time in their history, the Spaniards were holding a major TV debate between rival leaders. Archive material from Nixon v Kennedy to Brown, Cameron and Clegg peppered the news bulletins prior to the formal debate. Afterwards, academics, pundits, spin doctors, politicians and news anchors debated the performance of the Prime Ministerial candidates.

By the time we were home, Greece and Italy had new prime ministers moving into office, the Euro was looking wobblier than ever, but the story was losing its freshness, if not its importance. True, the Prime Minister was warning that difficulties in the Euro Zone would impact on Britain, but the front pages of the quality press were focused on immigration, the Home Secretary’s clash with a senior civil servant, and the expulsion of Mike Tindall from the England rugby squad.

In that context it’s difficult to spare a thought for Croatia, but I think many politicians would be sympathetic if they knew what leaders of 4.2 million people living in a former war torn Republic of Yugoslavia face in the next few months.

After ten years of negotiation to enter the EU, outline agreement was recently given for Croatia to become the 28th new member. It’s been a gruelling process. The bar for entry into the EU has been raised considerably in terms of the necessary institutional framework. Europe wants assurance on free and fair elections, an independent judiciary and undertakings that the commercial sectors will be open to competition.

Having passed through those pain barriers, there’s a General Election due on 4 December. Unlike Spain, where it’s primarily a two horse race, the Croatian political structure appears to be racked with uncertainty as the people consider who to elect.

The incumbent government, damaged by allegations of corruption, is polling at only 13 per cent of the national vote. A new “Labour Party” formed only a couple of months ago and led by a former trade union official, is polling at 20 per cent. The former opposition party the SDP is polling more strongly than it did at the last General Election.

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An opinion poll conducted in September showed support for being in EU membership at 60 per cent. 150 of the present 151 MP’s support membership as do all the major political parties now in government. But users of social media suggest that support could be eroding.

In this context I thought local authority members might want to reflect on the challenge others sometimes face. Sometimes it’s helpful to examine the mountains others might have to climb if their ten year vision is to be achieved. Votes on Mayors and Police Commissioners may be troublesome, but give me those dilemmas before what the Croatians face any day.

Buildings in Osijec, Croatia’s fourth largest City, still bear the scars of the Homeland War/War in Croatia which ended in 1995.
**SOCIAL MEDIA**

Government news goes digital

How does the Department for Communities and Local Government use new media tools and techniques? LGiU’s Rob Dale found out from George Eykyn, DCLG’s Director of Communications.

Should all members and officers have access to social media?

I can’t speak for councils as their policy is a matter for them, but here at DCLG colleagues do have access to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, balanced by clear policy guidance on how and when it should be used.

Do all civil servants in DCLG have access to social media?

All DCLG civil servants with internet access are allowed to visit Twitter and Facebook social media platforms. We have an official departmental Twitter channel (@communitiesUK) which updates our 25,000 followers with news about the Department.

Who writes DCLG’s tweets?

Tweets are usually written by one or two members of the communications team.

What role does Twitter play for the Department?

We use Twitter as a means to inform and alert; it’s a way we can get information such as responses to breaking news or an announcement out swiftly to a wide audience. It also helps to drive traffic to our site which helps us to understand who accesses our webpage and what they are interested in.

In future, I hope we’ll use the channel even more, with more of a dialogue developing on hot topics that grab our followers’ attention.

Who are the best local government comms teams? What can other teams learn from them?

The best public sector comms teams have the individual citizen in mind as they design the service they provide. I look for clarity: concise information presented simply or innovatively! The best public sector comms teams have the individual citizen in mind as they design the service they provide.

Are there any initiatives or campaigns that have impressed you recently?

I was struck during the recent riots at how quickly councils (both those affected and those which weren’t hit by riots) responded online with information for residents about the riots and for recovery, and especially the ‘I love’ campaigns to regain social pride.

Are the ministers supportive of your new ideas? Are they actually contributing new ideas themselves?

Yes. All our Ministers have taken part in video clips to talk about new announcements, and are keen supporters of our new rebuttals page where we can quickly respond to any inaccurate reports in the media.

What is the most popular area of the e-Newsroom?

The home page, news stories, press notices and Twitter feed. Half the visitors to the DCLG website visit the e-Newsroom and half use it more than once a week. More members of the public visit the e-Newsroom (1 in 3) than journalists (1 in 6).

What information are people wanting from your e-Newsroom?

Feedback suggests the majority of users would like to see more stories that demonstrate and illustrate government policy, not just headline press notices. There’s a continuing demand for more data to be made available. The majority of journalists say they visit the e-Newsroom for DCLG data and for ministerial press notices, speeches and articles.

"I was struck during the recent riots at how quickly councils responded online with information for residents about the riots and for recovery."

What are you doing in DCLG that is different?

I am pleased with our use of free online mapping tools to show the impact of government policies, such as where housing cash will result in new homes, where neighbourhood plans will be piloted and also DCLG’s council ‘transparency timeline’.

What is the strategy behind DCLG’s e-Newsroom?

We’re moving towards supplying more news stories, demonstrating what policy means on the ground through increased use of examples and richer content extending beyond press notices.

We have put more emphasis lately on explanatory documents, FAQs and so on, to equip our media and citizen users better with the material they need to understand and re-tell the story in their own way.

We’ve also worked to improve signposting of content through the site: someone may come to us from a tweet, read a press notice or news story, view a video and then choose to visit the (more detailed) DCLG policy webpages on the topic. We want those choices to be easy and well signposted.

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We’ve also worked to improve signposting of content through the site: someone may come to us from a tweet, read a press notice or news story, view a video and then choose to visit the (more detailed) DCLG policy webpages on the topic. We want those choices to be easy and well signposted.

"Are the ministers supportive of your new ideas? Are they actually contributing new ideas themselves?"

Yes. All our Ministers have taken part in video clips to talk about new announcements, and are keen supporters of our new rebuttals page where we can quickly respond to any inaccurate reports in the media.

What is the most popular area of the e-Newsroom?

The home page, news stories, press notices and Twitter feed. Half the visitors to the DCLG website visit the e-Newsroom and half use it more than once a week. More members of the public visit the e-Newsroom (1 in 3) than journalists (1 in 6).

What information are people wanting from your e-Newsroom?

Feedback suggests the majority of users would like to see more stories that demonstrate and illustrate government policy, not just headline press notices. There’s a continuing demand for more data to be made available. The majority of journalists say they visit the e-Newsroom for DCLG data and for ministerial press notices, speeches and articles.

"I was struck during the recent riots at how quickly councils responded online with information for residents about the riots and for recovery."

What are you doing in DCLG that is different?

I am pleased with our use of free online mapping tools to show the impact of government policies, such as where housing cash will result in new homes, where neighbourhood plans will be piloted and also DCLG’s council ‘transparency timeline’.

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Mark D’Arcy talks to Shadow Communities Secretary, Hilary Benn.

“Ministers are ideological localisers, but they don’t display a great deal of enthusiasm for local government and what it does…”

“I just after the summer riots, Hilary Benn, Labour’s new Shadow Communities Secretary went back to his local government roots. The parade of shops in Ealing which was burned out by the rioters was in the ward he represented for 20 years. And he listened as one of the waiters in a familiar local café described how the mob worked its way up the street, smashing and burning as it went. He still finds it hard to imagine that such destruction happened there.

He doesn’t seek to draw glib political lessons from the riots, but the subject leads him into thoughts of local government as a power for good – an institution capable of improving people’s lives. His Westminster office window overlooks Victoria Embankment, Joseph Bazalgette’s engineering triumph, which housed the sewers which helped eliminate cholera from London in the 19th century. An example, Benn says, of how a civic mind and civic virtue could change things for the better.

**He detects a determination to force through policies he regards as ill thought out**

But he is not sure how much scope there will be for visionary projects in the near future. Since moving to shadow Eric Pickles in October, he has immersed himself in the detail of the government’s policies, and he doesn’t like what he sees. Across a whole range of policies he detects a determination to force through policies he regards as ill thought out – and a bad habit of dismissing objections as ideological and simply wrong.

On finance, he warns that priorities have changed since Labour left office. His party would have had to make some savings, but he’s concerned that under the Coalition, the ten per cent most deprived local authorities are facing spending reductions four times greater than those imposed on the ten per cent least deprived. “They don’t seem to be terribly worried about areas of greater disadvantage,” he adds.

And that, Benn warns, may be just the beginning of their financial woes. The Coalition plans to re-localise business rates may be something long desired by local government, but he fears the redistribution within the national business rate, from richer authorities to poorer, may shrink or disappear as part of the change. The implications could be huge, he says. Westminster City Council, for example, only keeps about a quarter of its £1.3bn business rate revenue – the rest is redistributed to other, less prosperous, authorities. The potential knock-on effects of change hardly have to be spelt out.

There’s no guarantee, he adds, that authorities will not lose out after the first year, and he suspects that the government might “top-slice” some of the revenue from business rates and take it for themselves. Such concerns, Benn says, are making local leaders, even those who wanted the business rate back, increasingly sceptical of the DCLG’s plans. He anticipates that final proposals will emerge next year because Parliament will have to legislate in 2012, if a new system is to be in place, as promised, in 2013.

Another area of concern is the localisation of Council Tax Benefit – local authorities are supposed to design their own systems for distributing CTB, according to local priorities. But they will be required to protect pensioners and certain vulnerable groups, and that means that, with a smaller pot of money to allocate, everyone else will face a sharp reduction. “It will bite most painfully on people who are working, so at a time when the Department of Work and Pensions is trying to make work pay, the DCLG is throwing a spanner in the works,” Benn says.

And there’s a similar point to be made about Housing Benefit, where he warns that if the government’s policy fails to drive down rents charged by private landlords, as ministers hope, local authorities will be left to house people who can’t find affordable private sector accommodation.

“He fears the redistribution within the national business rate, from richer authorities to poorer, may shrink or disappear as part of the change”

Ministers’ failure to engage with critics has already cost them dear on their planning reforms, Benn believes. He says the response to critics of the presumption in favour of development and sustainability sections of the draft National Planning Policy Framework was “a profound mistake.”

“Their tune has changed now, because they’ve realised they have a very big political problem,” he said. “When the NPPF was debated in the Commons in October a lot of their MPs turned up and started by welcoming the proposals, but then most of them added their ‘buts’. But they were worried about greenfield sites. But they were concerned about the scrapping of our very successful Brownfield First policy. Or they had concerns about the definition of the ‘sustainable developments’ for which there will now be a presumption in favour.”

He thinks the government will not publish a new version of the NPPF until the Commons Environmental Audit and Communities and Local Government committees have published their verdicts. In particular he hopes that they will push ministers into including office developments in the “sequencing” rules, so that...
planners can only give permission for offices to be built out of town if there is no suitable site left in the town centre. That, he believes is a small but vital change, which could help maintain the viability of town centre shopping.

This led on to the Coalition’s localism agenda, and the Localism Act, hailed by Eric Pickles as a major transfer of power to the grass roots. Benn’s riposte is that in many ways it is a centralising measure which gives substantial new powers to the Secretary of State – and he thinks Mr Pickles’ attempt to push local authorities into reinstating weekly bin collections, backed up with a quarter of a billion in extra funding, showed an unhealthy – and distinctly un-localist – willingness to override proper local decision-making.

Without ever dismissing it, Benn managed to look a little world-weary about the concept of localism. He is, he insists, a believer in taking decisions as close as possible to those they affect – but which decisions? He certainly didn’t seem particularly sad to see the dumping of the section of the Localism Bill which would have allowed voters to call local referendums on a host of policy questions. “In the end,” he said, “councillors are elected to take decisions.” He could see the case for a local referendum on something like a neighbourhood parking scheme, but thought choices on planning applications should be made by elected representatives – although they should always be sensitive to local opinion.

As for the referendums that were kept in the Bill and are now law, on large increases in council tax, Benn says they are a bit of a moot point, while the government is continuing to freeze the Council Tax. But he notes that the extra funding which makes the freeze possible is being provided on a one-off basis – and if they were not renewed, a reckoning, in the shape of a big increase, would soon follow.

His overall verdict on Eric Pickles DCLG team? “The ministers are ideological localisers, but they don’t display a great deal of enthusiasm for local government and what it does,” Benn says. “There’s a bit of localism, a lot of cutting and a lot of impositions on councils.”

To be sure, he agrees that a Labour government would now be cutting too – but at a different scale and pace, and with different priorities. And he reels off Labour’s policy alternatives on building 25,000 new homes, cutting VAT on home improvements and the rest. He has been impressed by some local initiatives like Kirklees’ Warm Homes programme – which he would like to see replicated across the country. He believes local authorities will have to find creative ways of maintaining services and maximising the value for money – Rochdale mutualising its housing, Lambeth devolving youth budgets to estate level – but he remains convinced of local government’s potential to be a power for good.

In his Ealing days, the council pioneered equal opportunities policies and was slammed for it in the press; recently he noticed identical equal ops language in an advertisement taken out by the Metropolitan Police. What was once derided as a piece of fringe nonsense is now mainstream practice.

The caricature, Benn says, is that all oppositions are localists and decentralisers, and all governments are centralisers – but he seems less enamoured of the localism agenda, and much more focused on bread and butter local government issues like housing and planning, and of course, finance. And the sweeping changes the government is pushing through will give him plenty to chew on.

“...He seems less enamoured of the localism agenda, and much more focused on bread and butter local government issues...”

Mark D’Arcy is a Parliamentary correspondent with BBC News.
Chris Naylor joined the LGiU earlier this year with a key remit to get out and talk to our members. Here he updates c’llr readers about what our members are telling us.

In March this year I started at LGiU as the new Partnerships lead – complementing the outreach work of Andy Sawford and other colleagues. I’ve been a warmly welcomed in Preston, Bristol, Gateshead, Blackburn, Merton, Norfolk, Southwark and St.Helens, to name but a few.

In Knowsley – where my LGiU colleague Lauren and I met with key policy leads – officers enthused about our briefings. In Three Rivers, the Chief Executive Steve Halls said how important it was that he read c’llr magazine himself – to prepare for questions c’llr would stimulate from his members. In Nottingham a former scrutiny chair relayed how much she valued LGiU’s face-to-face training: the value of our Learning and Development programme is reiterated by pleased participants from across the country.

I could have guessed some of these comments, but what I didn’t know about LGiU, until I started, was our major role at the Westminster level. The All Party Parliamentary Local Government Group, which we co-ordinate, offers our members opportunities to hear – and question – ministers at first hand. There are also events for members with ministers’ shadow counterparts; and roundtables bring councils together with senior politicians and civil servants. Then there’s the LGiU Policy Programme, with recent reports available on our website.

Our users’ survey in the summer confirmed the positive response to our work: 97 per cent said our briefings were “more or a lot more important” with current policy changes and the loss of the Government Offices in the regions; 94 per cent said they were “satisfied or very satisfied” with our work. Members were also keen to share in our policy research and innovation. Respondents asked us to do more to help policy officers share thinking and to improve our briefings access. We are now working on both of these.

I’m looking forward to more invites to visit members in coming months – and to building an ongoing dialogue to help us know your current needs and do our best for you. To arrange a visit please email chris.naylor@lgiu.org.uk or call 020 7554 2834.

Jason Lowther, Head of Policy, Birmingham City Council
NEW APPROACHES

Tough times call for imaginative solutions. Less money is a reality, so councils have to think of new approaches to do more with less. The articles over the next nine pages all look at how new thinking can bring real benefits to communities.

In search of ideas

In recent months LGiU chief executive Andy Sawford has been going around the country meeting leaders and chief executives to find out about new approaches.

I wanted to gain insights and stimulate thinking – theirs and mine – about the current challenges and opportunities for local government.

We know that councils are facing unprecedented funding reductions, and as they look ahead, cost pressures and demands are rising. As democratically elected community leaders, councillors must lead in developing a local vision that involves new ways of working, effective partnerships, and engaged communities.

There is much talk of how councils are doing this through different approaches, from the ‘commissioning council’ to the ‘co-operative council’, or even the ‘e-bay council’. In this feature we look behind headline language, to understand the potential for different models and approaches to service delivery, and what the role of the council in the community will mean in practice.

What is clear is that we are at a formative stage in what will be a fundamental period of change in the role and relationship between citizens and the local state. Some councils expressed a view that councils need to address the culture of dependency on public services. One council leader talked about the need to prepare people for “the changing relationship with public services”. Councils from across the political spectrum talked about taking a pragmatic approach to the future. One leader said “we don’t do ideology”, another said “we do things pragmatically, rather than grand visions!” Other council members mentioned the value of strong leadership.

All councils seem to recognise that the role of the council as a service provider, ranging from social care to transport and community facilities, such as libraries, will be reduced in the future. For some councils this is a source of regret, caused by financial pressures. One leader told me that “the funding cuts from central government are pushing us down a particular road”. Other councillors may see service reductions as a positive thing, like the leader who said “this is a unique opportunity to break it [local provision] down and build it back up again”.

The speed and nature of the changing role was articulated in different ways. Some councils still talk about services from the perspective of a provider of services, while the majority are now thinking much more about becoming a facilitator or enabler. One leader said: “in the long term we don’t expect to have direct services, just some social workers to do assessments and commissioning.” Another leader put it like this: “there is a ‘core’ that we are going to deliver, and we will hold the ring on all the commissioned services”. Another council described it as providing “part of the support people want, but not seeing ourselves as the total solution”. While another said “councils have responsibility to ‘arrange’ services for all”. One council went further still saying “there will be no resemblance between what services looked like in 2007 and in 2014”.

I have queried the impact of ‘localism’ on the ground and how this could manifestly change local services and local engagement with citizens. Leaders acknowledged the current variations between local authorities in the type and nature of local services, and in areas such as charging. They agree that the variations are likely to become wider and more controversial. Leaders welcomed ‘localism’ but one commented “it is frustrating to be told I’ve got the freedom to do something, then be told I’ve got no money to do it”. Another felt it was important that government learned to “let go and let local government make mistakes”.

In the next few months, working jointly with Age UK, I will be publishing a more detailed review of my conversations with councils about new approaches. We will be exploring issues such as the changing nature of local partnerships, the impact of new legislation, revising inspection, assessment, guidance and duties, as well as how councils are meeting funding pressures.
NEW APPROACHES

Take a risk and reap a reward

A recent report by the LGiU and Zurich Municipal has found that councils are increasingly concerned about their management of risk. Could their often cautious approaches stand in the way of greater community involvement in service delivery? Report author Lauren Lucas summarises the findings.

In a national survey undertaken with more than 90 councils, 50 per cent of respondents described their organisations as “risk averse”. You might say that a certain level of risk aversion is healthy for an organisation holding responsibility for large sums of public money, and undoubtedly councils cannot afford to cultivate a laissez faire attitude to risk. Equally, however, complete aversion to risk can stifle innovation.

Risk and Reward, a new report from the LGiU and Zurich Municipal, argues that there is a great need for innovation in local government service delivery. A tough spending settlement, a rapidly changing policy environment and increasing pressure on council services all call for greater collaboration between state and citizen. Issues such as population movement, climate change and an ageing population cannot be resolved by governments alone, but will require a new level of engagement with citizens. At the same time, the renewal of the localism debate and reduction in central government targets has left a space for solutions to be sought locally.

But with new approaches come new risks. Our report suggests that the need for greater collaboration will bring with it the need for investment in capacity and resilience building, and a more flexible understanding of risk management.

In researching this project, the LGiU spoke to senior councillors, chief executives, policy managers and local government partners. The responses reflected a high level of concern about the future of risk management and illustrated some of the potential pitfalls in facilitating greater community involvement in service delivery.

• Councils are concerned about low-levels of demand and capacity in their local communities. 64 per cent said the capability of the community sector in managing services or assets was “low” or “very low”. 66 per cent said they would be “unmotivated” or “very unmotivated” to take on such responsibilities. However, under 20 per cent had formally assessed the community’s appetite for more involvement.

• Councils may limit opportunities for community sector involvement as a result of their pre-occupation with controlling risk. Half of respondents rated their council as “risk averse” or “very risk averse”. Although 50 per cent said their authority was “risk tolerant”, they were predominantly prepared to take risks in discretionary services such as arts and sports development. Two fifths of respondents said they were “unlikely to take any risks” in commissioning children’s services. A third reported the same for adult social care.

• Councils may limit opportunities for community sector involvement as a result of their complex structures. Over 60 per cent said that their commissioning and procurement processes would be “difficult” or “very difficult” for the community to access.

• Councils are not prepared for managing the risks created by greater community involvement in service delivery. Nearly 99 per cent had not considered a strategy for managing risk associated with the new community powers. 65 per cent of respondents said that elected members were “ultimately responsible” for risk in their organisations. However, over half said their scrutiny panels were “not very”, or “not at all” effective in managing risk.

Some authorities were of course taking a more radical approach to community involvement, but overall there was a perception that risk was regarded as something to be avoided rather than managed.

What are the implications of this approach for community collaboration in service delivery? First, if councils are not prepared to take a more flexible approach to procurement and commissioning, they may prevent community groups from participating. Second there will be an opportunity cost to this if community groups become disillusioned by the process and less likely to participate in future.
NEW APPROACHES

Risk and Reward argues that a flexible, strategic approach to risk management is required to deal with the challenges facing councils in future. Increasingly this may involve building resilience in the community, and developing a more prominent role for elected members in managing risk.

While any review of risk management will need to relate to the local context, the report makes a number of recommendations for councils.

1) Establish a scrutiny panel dedicated to corporate risk management and the voluntary/community sector. The risk management panel would take on a strategic role in relation to risk across the whole authority, establishing the council’s risk appetite across a range of services.

2) Produce a risk appetite assessment for services across the council, determining the authority’s appetite for risk, and which areas are most appropriate for community involvement. The assessment should seek to address the following questions.
   • How much risk is the authority willing to take on?
   • How much is it willing to pass to the community?
   • What services have the greatest capacity to tolerate risk?
   • Where will a capacity to tolerate risk return the greatest rewards?
   • To what extent does the organisation support Community Right to Buy and to Challenge?

As part of this assessment, local authorities should audit their local communities’ appetite and capacity for risk. Less than 20 per cent of surveyed councils had made this assessment. By establishing the strengths and weaknesses of the community sector, councils can target capacity building and market stimulation.

3) Develop a strategy for managing the impact of the Community Right to Buy and Community Right to Challenge. Only 1.2 per cent of respondents to our survey had considered their response.

4) Review procurement and commissioning policies. Over 60 per cent of respondents to the survey felt that it would be “difficult” or “very difficult” for the community sector to access current commissioning and procurement procedures. Although EU procurement regulations will remain in force, there is scope for local authorities to re-assess their current policies in partnership with the local community and voluntary sector with reference to the risk tolerance assessment above.

5) Clarity of communication is needed about the council’s aspirations for community involvement in the local area, and about the distribution of risk when community groups are involved. If the risk is to be shared, clear communication of the risk appetite and tolerance of all partners around shared objectives is critical.

6) This links closely to the need for investment in capacity and resilience building. Investment in resilience should be recognised as an efficiency measure in the long term, particularly given that 52.4 per cent of respondents to our survey saw ‘problems with sustainability’ as a high risk in relation to service or asset transfer to the community. Of course capacity building needs to take place within both the community sector, and local authorities. If councils and communities are to collaborate effectively, it is essential that they share an understanding of risk and of risk management. With this in mind, there is a need for risk education among local government officers and elected members and their community sector partners.

The research in this report has revealed a varied landscape in local government risk management. When it comes to engaging with the community sector, a strategic evaluation of risk appetite will be crucial, as well as an audit of the local community’s capacity for risk.

To read the full report, please go to www.lgiu.org.uk/reports

Risk and Reward can stifle innovation

Complete aversion to risk can stifle innovation

How easy would it be for the community sector to access your current commissioning and procurement processes?

- Very difficult: 51.1%
- Difficult: 37.8%
- Easy: 1.1%
- Very Easy: 10.0%

How would you rate the current capability of your local community to take responsibility for running council services or assets?

- Very low capability: 53.3%
- Low capability: 33.7%
- Fair capability: 2.2%
- High capability: 10.9%
NEW APPROACHES

Rights of redress

The Centre for Justice offers an adjudication service, settling disputes in a non-adversarial way that saves stress and money. The Centre’s Director Anthony Hurndall describes its work.

A councillor’s life is a tough one. Apart from the enormous range of stakeholders to consider, information to absorb, and priorities to juggle, there is the overriding need always to remain accountable and steadfast to voters.

In this difficult landscape, the Open Public Services White Paper and Localism Act are going to be of great interest to every councillor. The Localism Act signals the end of the ‘quango state’ and a move to greater local influence while the White Paper is challenging in its call for greater accountability and a more effective right to redress when users are unhappy with public services. Both of these policy drivers will put users at the heart of public services.

Without effective redress for non-delivery, the right to a service is illusory. The great thing for councils is that, with the right approach, providing redress does not cost them money, but saves it.

Existing options do not serve the public or local authorities well, whether it’s over a housing repair complaint, a social care issue or a dispute with a supplier. Presently, there is only the option of going to court or to the relevant tribunal or the Ombudsman. However, courts and tribunals are notoriously costly, slow and unpredictable – and out of the reach of typical service users. The Ombudsman scheme is not viewed by the public as being effective or independent and your constituents have to exhaust all internal complaints procedures before even being referred. This can take months if not years.

Senior local government officials tell me the Centre for Justice approach ‘ticks all the boxes’ – it saves money, helps win the trust of service users and improves social well-being, health and cohesion.

An example of how our non-adversarial approach can not only make substantial savings but also keep reputations intact was a recent case involving a mistake in service delivery by a council in the South East. This resulted in a claim against that council of around £30,000. When the matter was referred to us, more than this amount had been run up in costs on the claimants’ side alone and the costs at that point were less than a third of the amount it was likely to cost the council if the case ran the full course. The claimants had nothing to lose as they were on a no-win, no fee contract. Within two months of referral to the Centre, the matter had been resolved, the claimant accepting less than a third of the amount claimed, and the council paying only our fee, less than £1,000. The saving in costs alone was over 90 per cent, before you even consider the cost of staff time had the matter continued.

This is not the exception but typical of the results on offer. By adopting a Centre for Justice approach, your local area can similarly do the ‘right’ thing in policy terms and save money.

Our research already shows the efficiencies can result in as much as a 10 per cent reduction in total public sector expenditure. That’s 10 per cent that can be redirected to securing frontline services. If you add to this, the value of a preserved reputation and less ‘wear and tear’ to staff morale and health, the savings are incalculable.

We will soon be issuing a call to action for all in the public sector. Tell me of a local authority facing massive cost-cutting which can afford not to embrace this service, especially when commentators predict policy changes are likely to lead to more disputes not less.

You should be insisting on knowing the figures behind your local authority’s spend on complaint and dispute handling, not just in direct legal and complaint staff costs, but in time spent by other staff in dealing with long-running disputes and complaints, since this is a guaranteed route to savings which will help preserve vital services.

We’re ready for this challenge – are you?

www.centreforjustice.org

If you would like to find out more or assist us with our research, please contact me on 020 7726 or email me at dab@centreforjustice.org

“Tell me of a local authority facing massive cost-cutting which can afford not to embrace this service”
NEW APPROACHES

Nottingham – finding new forms of partnership

Nottingham City Council leader Jon Collins explains how the council has turned to new approaches to maintain democratic accountability for services now distance from the local authority.

At Nottingham City Council we’ve always sought innovative ways of tackling the challenges we face.

We have a track record of bold partnership working – setting up an Economic Resilience Board with businesses, partners and the council to help during the recession. Our community safety programme; bringing the Police and council services closer together has delivered a 52 per cent reduction in crime since 2002.

Today challenges are coming thick and fast. We could see an irreversible shift away from democratic accountability for public services which could undermine the sense of partnership working we’re proud of. However, Nottingham is looking to develop new approaches. In education and health we’re looking for ways to protect influence over the services our citizens value most. That’s why we’ve launched Nottingham Learning Trust and supported the establishment of Nottingham City Care Partnership.

In education we have seen a swift acceleration of the Academy programme; an acceleration which concerns many. Academies are something we tentatively embraced when they brought much needed investment to our schools and helped us raise the number of children receiving five good GCSEs from 26 per cent in 1998 when we took control of education, to 76 per cent today. However, the current government’s academies and free school programme sees councils lose more influence without the benefit of new investment in our children’s future.

With schools being forced to become academies against their will, we believe this will lead to a dangerous loss of accountability over children’s education, loss of economies of scale and find the schools left holding the risk when things go wrong. No doubt local authorities will be left to pick up the pieces if it fails.

That’s why we hope the Nottingham Learning Trust will be an arm’s length organisation to which we will transfer all local authority schools.

The Learning Trust is still in its early stages but led by head teachers, with very reduced council representation, it retains all the advantages of partnership working with the local authority but will give more control to those schools attracted to greater freedom and give the option for those schools forced to become academies to academise to the Learning Trust; hopefully meaning little real change. It will also be providing commissionable services to all Nottingham’s schools and academies such as HR and music lessons.

“We could see an irreversible shift away from democratic accountability for public services... we are looking for ways to protect influence over the services our citizens value most”

In health, the break up of PCTs threatens the joined up nature of service delivery. The NHS is dear to people’s hearts and while the government promises that changes will not affect the frontline, we want to maintain the partnership approach which has worked well. We’ve always benefited from GPs who work well together.

We actively worked with the management team of the PCT’s Community Services provider department and Nottingham Emergency Medical Services (a social enterprise providing out of hours GP Services) to form a new social enterprise “Nottingham City Care Partnership” (NCCP) which won the right to deliver £50m of local NHS community services. As part of this work the council has established a legal Joint Venture Agreement to achieve greater integration of frontline health and social care services. Areas being explored for more integrated working include intermediate care, care homes, health visiting and children’s centres.

The establishment of our Health and Wellbeing Board this October ensures that the council, GPs and other key players including our hospital trust, the police and housing company can oversee a vision for better connected, more efficient and joined up services for our citizens.

The ambition – keeping Nottingham’s health service as joined up and effective as it has been for many years.

Overall in Nottingham, while gravely concerned, we see and acknowledge the direction of travel for public services. We may not agree with it all but we’ve always been focused on working within the parameters set by government to ensure the best deal for our citizens. New approaches appear to be the only way forward in the modern era in order to ensure Nottingham’s services remain fit for the purpose our citizens rightfully demand, with the democratic accountability they deserve.
Investing in the future

Southwark leader Peter John explains the approaches his council has taken to invest in the future of young people in the borough, giving them hope and helping to sustain stable communities.

Southwark was one of the boroughs particularly hard hit by the disturbances this August – suffering 10 per cent of all of criminal offences in London. What was interesting about those events was the tendency to heap blame on young people for the acts of criminality witnessed.

While there is no doubt that some young people were involved, only 18 per cent of people arrested in Southwark were aged between 12-17. The trend towards overstating the involvement of young people in crime is reflected in the latest British Crime Survey which showed that people blame children for up to half of all crime when in fact they are responsible for only 12 per cent.

At the same time, there is concern that this generation of young people may be the first to have fewer opportunities than the one that preceded it. As a council we have made investing in young people a key part of our administration. Before we came to power in 2010 there were two predominating issues affecting the life-chances of young people in Southwark: high levels of teenage pregnancy and the second highest level of childhood obesity in the country.

To tackle these problems we pledged to establish a Teenage Pregnancy Commission to look at how we can reduce teenage pregnancy by 2014 and to deliver free, healthy school meals for every primary school child in the borough.

Our Teenage Pregnancy Commission brought together members of Southwark’s diverse communities, including young people, parents, voluntary and faith groups and health professionals. In under six months the Commission came back with 19 practical proposals including creating a specialist sexual health outreach worker role and providing targeted mentoring opportunities for vulnerable young people.

We are committed to free, healthy, school meals because healthy eating is absolutely key to ensuring young people have the best possible start in life. There is a wealth of scientific evidence to support this assertion and, since the election, there has been added impetus with government cuts impacting upon women and children more severely. This policy is putting money back into families’ pockets at a time when costs are rising.

Circumstances since the election have also forced us to think innovatively about how we can support our young people. Over 25 per cent of our young people are out of work. 3,700 who used to receive EMA have had it cut. University tuition fees have trebled and measures that were seen as an investment in our young people – Building Schools for the Future and the Future Jobs Fund – have been scrapped. These decisions are not only short-sighted but send a clear message to young people; that society does not value their education as much as it once did.

In a direct response to these challenges, we established a £3m Youth Fund that will do three things: help young people get to university, help them stay on in education or help them get a foot on the jobs ladder. The first strand – the Southwark Scholarship Scheme – is the first of its kind in the country and will see the council pay the tuition fees of six young people for the duration of their university course.

Our Educational Maintenance Supplement will be used to help those students who are most in financial need to remain in post sixteen education; supporting some of those who would have previously claimed the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA).

Finally, Southwark’s Employment Training Scheme will help 1,500 young people aged 16 to 24 leaving education and looking for jobs. Advisors will provide help with CVs and employment skills, offer valuable work placements and paid internships and ongoing job brokerage. We are now consulting with local businesses about how we deliver this scheme.

As a council with a massively reduced budget we know we are limited in the support we can give. It is right, however, that we continue to challenge the negative perceptions that have built up around young people. Southwark has many talented and hard-working students and we are actively investing in them so they can reach their full potential.
Spend now, save later

The Supporting People programme has led to demonstrable savings for councils. A new report from the LGiU and Circle Housing argues that cuts to preventative services will result in more costs further down the line for local authorities and other organisations. Lauren Lucas explains.

In 2003 the government introduced Supporting People, a programme that helps the most vulnerable people in our communities to manage their lives and remain at home, without having to go to hospital or a care home. Now many councils, faced with tough decisions about their budgets, are having to cut back on housing related support, despite evidence that is effective in the long term.

Local councils are having to make £89bn of cuts and in some areas this has led to cuts to Supporting People of over 40 per cent, with serious consequences for the services that vulnerable people rely on. Promoting Independence, a recent report from the LGiU in partnership with Circle Housing, looks at the value of housing related support, and its future as a council service.

The report finds that there is a strong financial case for housing related support. In 2008 Capgemini research indicated that every pound spent on the programme across England saved £2.11 for the public purse. We spoke to several authorities that had also calculated their savings locally and they had saved an average of £13.5m a year. Dorset County Council alone had calculated their savings as £20.1m.

In our survey of 139 local authorities, over three-quarters had seen their Supporting People budgets cut. More than four in ten were making their savings by reducing the level of services they could offer. However, around 90 per cent also recognised that cutting these services would “put vulnerable people at risk” and “create costs elsewhere in the system”.

More positively, our research also found a great deal of innovative work by local authorities to maintain services. Many councils had been able to make efficiency savings without this impacting on the front line. Councils are also making more use of technology, such as telecare. The London Borough of Bexley had increased its capacity by over 30 per cent by offering individual budgets to its clients, while Derbyshire Council was in the process of developing a payment by results model for its provider organisations.

Promoting Independence makes a number of recommendations for local authorities. Councils are encouraged to:

• recognise the value of preventative services in their commissioning strategies
• share information about the value of these services across the council
• consider where preventative support is represented in local authority cabinets
• continue to collect key data about outcomes, which show how effective housing related services are
• make sure that housing related support is connected to local health services, through the new health and wellbeing boards that are being set up in every council area.

Preventative services can save money in the long-run and the potential savings generated through the prevention of crime, anti-social behaviour, insolvency and hospitalisation need to be weighed against the benefit of addressing immediate budgetary concerns.

But councils cannot do this alone. The government can help by introducing ‘community budgets’ that help councils to connect up local services, and crucially, to make the best use of all the public money spent locally, including on welfare and health care. Preventative services don’t just help local authorities: they benefit all the players in the local state, including the NHS, the Police and Job Centre Plus.

“Preventative services don’t just help local authorities: they benefit all the players in the local state, including the NHS, the Police and Job Centre Plus.”

Promoting Independence is published jointly by LGiU and the Circle Housing Group. To download a copy go to www.lgiu.org.uk/reports

NEW APPROACHES

LGiU & CCLA c’l1r Achievement Awards are open see page 9

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Healthy savings

Councils could use their new public health role to pilot preventative programmes which would achieve cost savings for both the council and the NHS, says Glyn Gaskarth.

In Payment by results: The perfect storm of public sector finances the LGiU and Westminster Council suggest that councils target their resources on meeting three big public health challenges; diabetes, dementia and heart disease.

Britain spent almost £100bn on health care in 2010. This will increase as Britain’s population ages and becomes increasingly overweight. One fifth of Britons will reach 100. Two thirds of Britons are overweight and this is predicted to increase by 10 per cent over the next decade. These twin factors will increase cases of dementia, diabetes and heart disease.

Dementia costs the UK an estimated £23bn - £10bn of which relates to health and social care costs. Every sufferer costs the economy an estimated £27,000 a year. Dementia risk factors include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, smoking and heavy alcohol use.

Diabetes costs are estimated at 10 per cent of NHS expenditure. Around nine in ten diabetes sufferers have type 2 diabetes. Risk factors include being overweight, having a sedentary lifestyle and eating an unbalanced diet. Overweight individuals are twelve times more likely to contract this ailment. The NHS spends around £9bn a year treating this condition. If left undetected it can cause blindness, heart disease and strokes.

Heart disease costs the NHS around £3.2bn a year. Cardiovascular diseases in general cost the NHS around £15bn a year. Hospital care costs account for 73 per cent of costs to the NHS. Risk factors include high cholesterol, high blood pressure. Each of these conditions can be tested for (dementia tests are at experimental stage). Early detection combined with lifestyle changes can delay or prevent these conditions. So why don’t we invest more in prevention?

We have a national sickness service not a national health service. Government budgets are deployed in acute services. The economic benefits of prevention are dispersed and don’t all accrue to those who fund prevention. Without sufficient targeting it is difficult to prove positive outcomes are a product of intervention and without defined payback rates these schemes won’t be initiated.

Payment by results suggests a pragmatic approach based on savings to the council alone and a transformative approach based on central government agreeing to share cost savings. Expenditure should be targeted at screening citizens in age groups most at risk of heart disease, dementia and diabetes. Private providers could be paid to screen citizens. Individuals screened could be paid a small sum for participating. Funding could be obtained through a social impact bond, the general council budget or preventative health budgets.

Under a social impact bond, bondholders would be rewarded according to the number of residents screened. Tesco has screened customers in its pharmacies since 2007 for blood pressure, cholesterol and susceptibility to diabetes, charging £10. PruHealth members are offered annual health checks for cholesterol, blood pressure and body mass. Westminster, Hammersmith and Fulham and Kensington and Chelsea offer residents aged 16-24 a £10 HMV voucher if they return a free chlamydia testing kit. US Medicare gives individuals free annual checks for Alzheimer’s. Residents become eligible for Medicare at age 65.

“Private providers could be paid to screen citizens. Individuals screened could be paid a small sum for participating”

Councils could provide ‘free’ (council funded) health screening on the condition that users agree to share their susceptibility to these conditions with the council. Prevention schemes could then be targeted at those most susceptible. Providers of preventative programmes could be paid on a payment by results basis. The pay-out ratio would need to allow for the council to pay for the initial social impact bondholders (if this funding option were chosen), reward successful providers and for the council to achieve cost savings.

These measures could deliver savings for councils and the NHS and build a preventative health structure that helps citizens lead longer healthier lives.

To download a copy of Payment by Results go to www.lgiu.org.uk/reports
Local authorities can lead the way on a committed partnership approach to tackling gang violence, says Chris Robbins, Leader of Waltham Forest Council, where a programme of intensive, targeted support is beginning to reap benefits.

If the scenes of disorder we witnessed across the country this summer have taught us anything, it’s that communities are incredibly resilient in the face of adversity. But in dealing with the aftermath, the message from residents and businesses here in Waltham Forest is clear: they’ve had enough of crime on the streets, and enough of gang violence.

This is why Waltham Forest was working towards tackling gang crime – so often the cause of wider criminal activity – before youth violence hit national headlines. Our landmark project, Enough is Enough, is effective, cost-efficient and already yielding promising results.

Enough is Enough is intelligence-led and seeks to bring about long-term change. It works by offering targeted support to those most involved – or most at risk of becoming involved – with gangs and is underpinned by robust police enforcement and a series of measures which aim to strengthen local communities. The council, police and community have come together in a way not seen before.

Key to this is our Family Partnership Team, which works with individuals, families and communities involved in or affected by gangs. Their intensive support means that they’re not just helping people to a better life but also supporting older and younger generations of the same family to make better choices. This work is strengthened by the A Better Way Partnership, a group which comprises local voluntary groups, community members and public agencies to ensure that intelligence is shared and that there’s a collective responsibility for delivery.

So far, nearly 30 families have been identified for intervention and 80 per cent have agreed to work with us. Young people have started attending college or training courses, secured apprenticeships and successfully gained employment as a result. Even parents have entered training and the job market, some for the first time in their lives.

The benefits speak for themselves: the drop in crime experienced in the first six months of our programme is estimated to have saved the taxpayer £2.3m. This is set against an estimated cost of £21,000 to put one family through a tailored programme.

Our work is gaining recognition. Elements of Waltham Forest’s approach can be seen in the government’s recently-announced gangs strategy, which, like ours, places a heavy emphasis on prevention and ‘pathways out’ as well as partnership and cross-agency working. The implementation of any national strategy must obviously reflect local needs and circumstances, and local authorities should be government’s main ally in getting this right.

Yet, as we in Waltham Forest have seen even over the past few months, the hard work of joined-up and committed partners delivers real results if adequate resources are in place. We must invest to save.

In the worst economic times Waltham Forest has invested almost £1m of new money to the programme this year alone, and we expect to equal that amount next year and the year after. It is a concern that the government has only announced £1.2m of new money to support its entire gang strategy – almost the same as we have committed for just one year.

While the work of the police and the local community is invaluable, I firmly believe that only local authorities can comprehensively lead on gang prevention. Waltham Forest’s project has demonstrated this, and the wider social costs of gang activity make it a social and political imperative for all of us.

There are early signs that there was less disorder in Waltham Forest this summer than in neighbouring boroughs because of our strategy. Intelligence was critical to the borough’s response to the riots, and thanks to the excellent relationships that we have built up with the police and the community reliable, up-to-the-minute information was a valuable tool at our disposal.

In other words, we’re beginning to put prevention into practice.
Health fair helps to tackle obesity

Catherine Heffernan found the public reacting with enthusiasm when the way to healthy life is entertaining and engaging.

Recently, a group of mothers with babies asked me the way to the Civic Centre. They were on their way to a Health Fair. I quickly gave directions and rushed ahead, thinking to myself that at least a handful of people would show up. Then I was met with a surprise. The fair was about to begin and already more than 250 local people were there. I gasped. The fair had started as a simple idea to promote tackling obesity in a fun way. Clearly the public had an appetite for it.

I chair the Healthy Weight Board in the London Borough of Hounslow. This is a partnership board made up of representatives from public health, GPs, hospital clinicians, dietetics, healthy weight teams, weight management providers, voluntary and independent sectors and from local authority, planning, transport, environment as well as adult services and children services.

Back in April the Board came up with a delivery plan taking a life course approach to tackling obesity from maternity to adulthood including actions to be taken at removing barriers to healthy weight, such as lack of green spaces. Both preventive activities and weight management interventions are included. In a way, the delivery plan was ahead of its time. It predated the new national obesity strategy which recommends a similar approach.

Local councillors were quite keen that the public were informed that we were working together to tackle obesity, particularly childhood obesity which is a huge problem in the borough. My team and I wanted to do it in a fun way and the idea of a health fair was born. Providers of various healthy weight services were invited to have stalls or taster sessions of the services they provided.

So members of the public were able to sample ‘dietary makeovers’, make smoothies using a bicycle, do Zumba and Bollywood dancing, Nordic walking, football and dance mats amongst other activities. Children were overhead exclaiming that they never knew that exercise made them ‘hot’ and ‘happy’. Parents commented that they had no idea that being healthy could be so much fun.

Leading up to the day, we ran a ‘Healthy Project’ competition during the summer holidays for school children. Primary and secondary school children were encouraged to be as creative as possible in thinking of how they would get their families to eat and live more healthily. The entries were all outstanding from short stories on protagonists learning the value of healthy eating to comic strips and movable cardboard models on exercise. Prizes were given out on the day by a local celebrity, Red Madrell (star of ‘Kidulthood’) and we also launched the first “Healthy Hounslow’ Cookbook. This was a collection of recipes from members of the public and reflected the diversity of cooking in the borough from Irish to Caribbean recipes, Indian to New Zealand cooking. Dieticians checked all submitted recipes and the idea behind the book was to promote the message that healthy eating starts in the home. Just like how oral traditions are passed from one generation to the next, cookery skills can also be passed on from parent to child, enabling them to look after themselves when they fly the nest. This free cookbook is now ‘sold out’ and following calls from residents, it is planned to be used in cookery classes in children’s centres.

What was innovative about this event was this was the first time we used a fair to promote public health messages. It was time consuming to organise but the evaluation of the event so far has seen an increase in use of weight management programmes and other leisure activities available to the public. There has also been a surge in requests for information. This has had a larger impact than the traditional methods of mass media campaigns and information from health professionals, which we had previously utilised. So much so that it is likely we may make this an annual event. I guess you could say that just like the film, ‘Field of Dreams’, “if you build it, they will come”.

Children were overhead exclaiming that they never knew that exercise made them ‘hot’ and ‘happy’.

Mallinaltzin/Wikipedia Commons
Doing what’s best for the people of Wiltshire

Wiltshire’s tough decision to adopt a new model of leadership that deletes the post of chief executive has prompted a great deal of speculation and debate, particularly around how they will manage such a large and diverse organisation without one. Leader Jane Scott OBE explains why the council took this step.

I have to start by saying that Wiltshire – a Conservative led council – has never towed the party line, or made decisions to please those in central government. We have always been driven by what we believe is best for the people of Wiltshire, and our decisions have always been made on that premise. Our bid for unitary was a visible and vocal demonstration of this ethos. We knew that Wiltshire had to do something drastic to manage the pressures and challenges it faced. Our ageing population – higher than the national average – and reducing resources, meant that to survive and to continue to invest in key front line services, the solution was unitary.

This decision, in the face of both local and national opposition, means that we are now weathering the economic storm better than many others. We are making savings and investing in some key front line services, as we had the room for manoeuvre, but, like many others, we have been affected by the cut in grant funding and we have had to make tough decisions.

Earlier this year we reduced our management team by 220 managers and saved over £8m. Our recent decision to save more money by further reduction of our senior team was not taken easily or without a great deal of thought and debate.

Removing the post of chief executive is both radical and untested, especially by a large and relatively new unitary council, but, we are confident that we are ready for this decision and that it is the right one for Wiltshire.

We have strong political leadership and a clear vision and goals. Working with our senior officers we have translated this vision into a four-year business plan that sets out how we will save money, invest in key services, and protect the most vulnerable in our communities.

We have the breadth and strength of management and leadership expertise in our senior officers and they openly and constructively challenge me and my team to strengthen and shape the decisions we make.

They are visible to our staff and together drive a culture that promotes an open, transparent and totally can-do organisation. The new model is already building closer ties between the team and together they are leading the organisation.

I am aware that there has been a great deal of academic research and literature on leadership that supports our model. Most writers argue that a devolved model of leadership is fundamental to achieving organisational success. They argue that you have to have leadership at three levels; strategic, operational and team.

We recognise that we are in the spotlight and that there is growing interest to see if, and how, our model will work. We know that other authorities may want to also consider this radical step and I can state without hesitation that we would not have made this decision without either the confidence in our senior team, or if we didn’t believe it was right for the people of Wiltshire. Other authorities must do what’s right for them but we look forward to sharing what’s worked in Wiltshire and the success of our model.
One aim, three candidates, three visions

Even before England’s second city has decided on whether or not it will embrace the government’s policy of directly elected mayors three potential candidates have already come forward. The only problem is that all three are leading lights in Birmingham’s Labour party and all are hoping to be the official Labour candidate. Rob Green spoke to them about their aspirations.

Sir Albert Bore, Siôn Simon and Gisela Stuart have made it clear that if the people of Birmingham vote to adopt a directly elected mayor, they want the position.

Gisela is the current MP for Birmingham Edgbaston, Siôn is the former MP for Birmingham Erdington and Sir Albert is the current leader of the Labour Group on the city council and former city council leader.

Despite chasing the same goal, all three are very clear that they need to work together in a bid to secure a yes vote when Birmingham is given the chance to decide on whether to elect a mayor. That vote will come during city council elections in the summer.

“Most people will vote yes if they know what is on offer,” said Siôn. “It’s a shame the national government hasn’t backed an awareness campaign. It is after all a government policy to have elected city mayors, but no resources are being put into it.”

Sir Albert agreed, saying: “There will be only one Labour candidate when the election comes around and it will be for the local party to decide who that is.

“All three are leading lights in Birmingham’s Labour party and all are hoping to be the official Labour candidate”

“As it stands now we are all part of the yes campaign and the first hurdle is persuading the residents of Birmingham that an elected mayor would benefit the city.”

At this stage the campaign to get a change in place is the most important thing for the three prospective candidates. Gisela adds that it is not just Labour who should be pressing for a ‘Yes’, adding: “We do not even know if the people of Birmingham want it at the moment. So that needs to be the first issue. The political parties need to put party politics to one side and join the campaign for a yes vote.”

When it comes to engaging with the local electorate all three say they are simply concentrating on the first obstacle of securing a yes. However they are well aware that if they get a yes the next step is persuading the local Labour group that they have what it takes to be the official candidate.

“I think I realise the scale of the job having been an MP for 14 years. It’s important to understand the sheer size of Birmingham – if it...
Elected mayors – the context

There are usually two reasonable expectations of Bills introduced by governments with safe parliamentary majorities. First, there won't be many significant changes or concessions. Second, there will be fewer uncertainties at the end than at the beginning. On both counts, the elected mayoral sections of the Localism Bill/Act proved exceptional.

The original Bill outlined a clear 3-stage timetable for all 11 designated English mayoral cities – Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol, Coventry, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield and Wakefield – the twelfth, Leicester, having already decided to jump the gun.

Stage 1: following Royal Assent, existing council leaders would become shadow mayors. Stage 2 (May 2012): mayoral referendums. Stage 3 (May 2013): cities voting Yes would elect mayors, who, under ‘mayoral management arrangements’, would become their council’s most senior officer, with most of the responsibilities of the Head of Paid Service. These mayors would also have substantial, though unspecified, additional powers conferred on them, to enhance still further their strategic leadership role.

By Royal Assent on 15 November, much had changed, but major uncertainties remained. Shadow mayors have gone completely. Mayoral management arrangements have become permissive – adoptable only if, like Leicester’s Sir Peter Soulsby, the Mayor chooses. Additional powers, though still undefined, are potentially available to all cities, mayoral or not.

The timetable was unclear. Lord Adonis, former Labour Minister, mayoral enthusiast, and Director of the Institute for Government, toured the 11 cities and was not, evidently, hugely encouraged. He recommended to the DCLG that the referendums be phased over two years, with just three – Birmingham, Leeds and Bristol – in May 2012. The Communities Secretary confirmed that phasing was being considered, but then for two months said nothing (pertinent).

The consequence, in the West Midlands, was that Coventry assumed it was off the hook until 2013, while Birmingham was gearing up on all fronts: candidates confirming their intention to stand, pro- and anti-mayoral campaigns being launched, and both major parties considering open primary contests to select their candidates.

Finally, in local newspaper interviews on 17 November, Local Government Minister, Greg Clark, reconfirmed that all 11 referendums would take place in May 2012. As for any ensuing elections, he wasn’t saying.

Chris Game

As it stands now we are all part of the yes campaign and the first hurdle is persuading the residents of Birmingham that an elected mayor would benefit the city.

Siôn announced he was standing down from Parliament at the 2010 elections to concentrate on becoming the city’s first directly elected mayor. He said: “It’s because I love Birmingham and grew up in the city and live here. It’s a great city and the role of mayor will give me the ability to go out and change things. In government I got a taste of what could be done. As a constituency MP it’s often frustrating as you are not necessarily able to do all the things you want to do. You just don’t have that power.”

Sir Albert says his role on the coal face of local government sets him apart from the other two candidates. Having called for the city to adopt a directly elected mayor some 12 years ago when he was council leader he says that “it’s not come as a surprise that I have thrown my hat into the ring. With my roles within local government and my knowledge of Birmingham, I see it as the natural thing to do.”

All three are quick to point out the city has strengths and weaknesses. For Siôn it is Birmingham’s success as a multicultural city that is home to a thriving art and cultural scene combined with the pockets of deprivation that are still evident and the need to improve local services across the board. Sir Albert sees how investment has brought much-needed redevelopment to the city, yet there are still large areas of poverty. Gisela says large scale projects like the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and the redeveloped New Street Station have helped improve the city, but believes there is still much to be done to improve the state of health, education and commerce.

A directly elected mayor would allow the city to make the most of the positives and help eradicate the negatives, they argue.

Gisela says: “It’s difficult for Birmingham to speak with one voice because there isn’t a strong central role. We need to start doing things differently.”

Again all three are in agreement that a change is needed. As Sir Albert puts it: “At the moment there is no focused political agenda to improve Birmingham, but with an elected mayor there will be.”
C’LLR Achievement Awards

This year’s c’llr Achievement Awards are bigger and better than ever. Here we look at two categories new for 2012. The closing date for entries is Friday 30th December. Winners will be announced at the awards ceremony in February.

Judges’ Special Award for Contribution to Local Government

It is easy to think of political progress in terms of sweeping legislation, dramatic landslide elections, or grassroots movements building an unstoppable momentum on their brave journeys toward seemingly immovable barriers.

No doubt some of the most seminal political events have followed these paths, but to end our analysis here would be to mistake salience for significance.

Progress is often the result of a thousand small changes: many of the things that we view as intractable elements of our current political landscape only reached their present destination at the end of a slow, winding march.

It is exactly this incremental aspect of good governing that the Judges’ Special Award for Contribution to Local Government at this year’s c’llr Achievement Awards aims to recognise. The award, newly created for 2012, will be presented to a councillor who has served their local community outstandingly over a sustained period.

Although longevity is not necessarily praiseworthy in itself, it is unsurprising that those who choose to devote a significant part of their lives to public service are often the most effective at getting results for those they serve.

On a grand scale, the fact that the two longest serving MPs of all time are Winston Churchill and Lloyd George lends some pretty heavy, albeit rather narrowly focused, support to this hypothesis.

At the other end of the scale, a quick google search of ‘long serving councillors’ brings up a plethora of honours and tributes. Moreover, very few of these read as formal acknowledgements of a councillor’s ability to endure; rather, the vast majority come across as genuine pronouncements of heartfelt gratitude for the contributions that these individuals have made towards bettering their communities.

Perhaps the most poignant example of the intimacy that can grow between a representative and their constituents is the story, covered in the Weston Mercury, of 300 local people cramming into a church to pay their respects to a long-serving councillor. When a colleague was asked – by way of an explanation – what this man had achieved, he simply replied, ‘look around you.’

John Wilesmith

Age UK Pride of Place Award

Councillors are in a unique position to make a difference. They can provide a voice for those who would otherwise go unheard and bring about changes to neighbourhoods that can make life easier and better.

In recognition of this important role, Age UK is working with LGiU and CCLA to sponsor the Age UK Pride of Place Award as part of 2012 c’llr Achievement Awards.

Age UK’s Pride of Place campaign is calling on all councillors to improve neighbourhoods in their ward or division. Small improvements to local neighbourhoods can have a big impact on older people, enabling them to go on getting out and about and contributing to the local communities.

This award is for a councillor who has made the biggest contribution to improving local neighbourhoods for older people in their community whether it be providing more bus shelters, enhancing street paving or overseeing any other improvements.

Michelle Mitchell, Age UK’s Charity Director said: “Councillors have the ability to transform their local neighbourhoods and improve the quality of life for older residents. We know that many councillors are already doing just that.

“We think it’s time these unsung heroes are recognised and applauded nationally for their efforts and for the excellent example they are setting in how to listen and help their constituents by making their neighbourhood as accessible and safe as possible.”

The winning councillor will show us how they have made time to listen to older people, actively engaging with them and understanding the issues that concern them; leading to changes to the neighbourhood which directly benefit older people. This councillor will be committed to ensuring any improvements are maintained in the long term and that older people continue to be consulted and involved.

For full details of the awards, including categories, how to enter and rules, visit www.lgiu.org.uk/cllrawards
The answer to the council cash crisis lies in pooling public sector money together in a specialist secure fund, explains Andrew Robinson, Director at CCLA, the fund manager for charities and the public sector.

Imagine this – a highly competitive, safe and secure deposit account built for parish, town, district, county councils, police constabularies, fire and health authorities, national parks... and any other public sector organisation, for that matter.

We did (well, almost).

Local authorities and other public sector bodies are responsible for the cost effective delivery of services to residents and businesses. One important element of this which has recently attracted a good deal of media attention, is the management of their cash – which can range in size from a few tens of thousands of pounds to hundreds of millions.

The management of cash is a matter of balancing three requirements:

• keeping the risk low
• making sure enough is available every day
• getting the best return possible, but without jeopardising the first two requirements.

This apparently straightforward task does carry significant challenges as was demonstrated in the 2008 financial crisis when many public sector depositors were left exposed to possible large capital losses. £450m of public money was lost, which will now be returned to many councils after an arduous battle ending with a ruling by the Icelandic Supreme Court.

In order to avoid a repeat of this experience and to deliver strong returns it was proposed that public sector depositors should pool some of their funds in a properly regulated UK based money market fund. Not many are. Working closely with representatives from across local government, CCLA built from scratch The Public Sector Deposit Fund. Shares in the fund are within the range of investments appropriate for approval in annual investment strategies, and an advisory board has been established to guide the development and management of the fund.

According to Councillor Richard Kemp from Liverpool: “After the problems caused by the Icelandic banking crisis, many councils have sought absolute safety which has meant miserable returns on their cash. By forming what is, in effect, a mutual of councils they are getting good financial returns by using the muscle of the entire sector. I see no reason why all councils will not keep some of their money in this fund.”

“The fund meets a clear need and will help generate additional revenue for local authorities”

CCLA has a long history of providing market leading deposit funds to the charitable sector. Being owned by its charity and local authority clients, we were in a position to provide the management and administrative and regulatory structure required to launch and manage such an initiative. Furthermore, without the inherent conflicts caused by external financial shareholders, we were able to build in features where any success will be shared with all public sector clients of the fund – a good thing according to Robert Hughes-Penney, Chairman of the Investment Committee at the City of London Corporation. “The fund meets a clear need and will help generate additional revenue for local authorities, which should be welcomed in this time of public spending restraint.” As the fund grows, all clients will find their management fee reducing.

But the immediate worry for treasury managers is finding good quality counterparties. Increasingly difficult as once mighty financial institutions suffer from the current global economic situation. A situation where the benefits of scale and diversification of The Public Sector Deposit Fund come into their own.

The chairman of the advisory board is Stephen Jones, Group Finance Director for the Local Government Group. He said, “The Public Sector Deposit Fund is a ground-breaking initiative that will bring the substantial but often elusive benefits of cooperation between public sector organisations within reach at a very challenging time for local authorities.”

According to Councillor Kemp, “The fund meets a clear need and will help generate additional revenue for local authorities.”

We think you will want to use it. You can find further detail at www.psdf.co.uk
Since being elected to Worcestershire County Council in 2005, Anthony Blagg has pushed hard to get environmental issues high on his authority’s agenda. But the winner of last year’s c’llr Achievement Awards’ sustainability champion award sees himself as essentially an environmental realist. He spoke to Elizabeth Thompson.

We’re not being all fluffy about it”, says Councillor Blagg. “But we are saying that the environment is an integral part of everything we do; of our economy and our society. It’s not just environment for environment’s sake but making sure that it’s protected for everybody’s benefit and for future generations.”

The county’s first ever cabinet member for sustainability, and ward member for Bromsgrove, didn’t come into politics on an environmental ticket. “People moan about lots of things and never actually do anything about it so I decided to join my local party and get elected. Interest in the environment was something that came along the way.”

Anthony has since embraced sustainability in his home life. He doesn’t drive a car and takes public transport whenever possible. He’s a keen composter, recycles anything he can get his hands on and has done much to make his home energy efficient.

In office his achievements range from making Worcestershire one of the UK’s top recyclers to winning Beacon status for efforts on climate change. He has also brought kudos for the county as a national voice on sustainability and has been named one of the region’s top 50 green leaders. “Getting that recognition was good”, he says, “but it’s not just an accolade. It’s about promoting what we do and networking.”

Making sustainability a cabinet level issue has upped its profile, but getting there wasn’t always easy.

Making sustainability a cabinet level issue has upped its profile, but getting there wasn’t always easy. “The leader at the time wasn’t exactly a sceptic but had other issues that were more important to him. I badgered him and he agreed to make it a cabinet post which was quite refreshing.

“Now sustainability is embedded in our corporate plan as well as in cabinet. Every department, whether employment or education, highways or children’s services, recognises that it’s part of what they do and not a luxury.”

This has helped keep sustainability on the agenda in a time of stringent budget cuts – combined with its money saving potential. One initiative, the Spend to Save scheme, invests in projects that will bring cash benefits long term. It has seen its budget increased by an extra £2m this year. “We’ve extended that project a couple of times so we’re actually saving money in the long term. Investment is being made in solar panels and biomass boilers – infrastructure that costs quite a bit but will give a payback over ten years.”

Energy efficiency savings are being built into plans to help the council cut £70m from its budget over four years too. As Anthony explains: “We’re looking at street lighting and energy efficiency in schools where there are automatic meter readers to cut down on energy use and save money. We’ve got actual cash targets for savings there.”

And the future? “I’d like to sponsor alternative energy parks. We’ve got the Worcester Bosch boiler company who do a lot in that field and we work with them. I’d like to attract more companies as a magnet for others and for Worcester to be known as a destination for alternative technology and business.”

But for Anthony one of the most satisfying things has been how easily residents have embraced sustainability and made it part of their everyday lives. “That we’re among the highest recyclers in the country is down to public. We’ve tried to make it easier but they’ve surprised me by getting on board. And it got people thinking of other ways of behaving; being concerned about extra packaging in supermarkets, for example.”

“One of the most satisfying things has been how easily residents have embraced sustainability and made it part of their everyday lives”

“We’re very much concerned with the realism of sustainability. People have to live, eat and have jobs. But I’m pleased we’re embedding it in people’s consciousness to such an extent that they’re not even thinking about it.”

C’LLR AWARDS
Six degrees of separation?

Alan Waters finds an unlikely link between the theories of a former Austro-Hungarian cavalry officer and David Cameron’s Big Society.

Six degrees of separation refers to the idea that everyone is on average approximately six steps away, by way of introduction, from any other person on Earth. The idea has its origins in a short story by Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy published in 1929. It caught the imagination. First in academic and philosophical circles and latterly, with the internet and explosion in social networking, six degrees, arguably, has helped shape and influence popular culture. It’s quite entertaining as a game to see where ‘six degrees’ can take you. However, I think it has more potential than a simple association with individuals of the ‘Lloyd George knew my father’ variety (that’s one for older readers – but you get the idea). It can be a connector for shared ideas.

It is in this vein that I embark on an improbable journey of connecting Karl Polanyi (1886 – 1964) a former cavalry officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army in World War One and David Cameron, former public relations man, ex-Etonian and currently our very own Prime-Minister. A bit of a cul-de-sac one might imagine; particularly when we consider the rest of Polanyi’s later career as a radical intellectual and historian who fled fascism in Austria in the 1930s and moved to London where he earned a living working as a journalist and tutor and took up a position as a lecturer for the Workers Education Association before moving to Canada with his communist sympathising wife.

A more promising link with the Prime Minister is the research Polanyi conducted for his best known book ‘The Great Transformation’ (1944). The story begins in a Dorsetshire pub – quintessentially part of the ‘Big Society’ geography; however it has nothing to do with a sturdy peasantry demonstrating the virtues of self-help, scything the village green for free. The Dorsetshire pub is the setting for Polanyi’s description of the enclosure process in England and the creation of an industrial economy.

Polanyi’s premise was that the supposedly self-regulating free market that emerged in Britain in the late 18th eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was not the “natural” product “of unfettered human instinct and a self-regulating market”. It had to be “brutally” imposed on the existing society. This required “an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organised interventionism” by the State. It further required the “commodification” of everything – land, labour and money. The norms of the market were the norms of society. Now if Dave and his ‘Cameroons’ were reading this, I suspect they would be in hot denial that Polanyi’s thesis has anything to do with the ‘Big Society’ whose central ambition is to get government and the state out of people’s lives.

Actually the opposite is true. Look no further than the centrally imposed Localism Act, with its frontloaded budget cuts and powers given to, Eric Pickles, to drive local government into the market. And not just local government – health, education: the whole of the public arena are on the same journey.

So, reader, if you want to understand where ‘Big Society’ is taking us; you need look no further than Polanyi’s seminal work. The Coalition’s programme for Britain is part of a second ‘great transformation’, which again requires the state to increase its power rather than give it away so it can dismantle the public domain. By the mid 19th century there was a growing reaction to centrally imposed laissez-faire. Then local government played its role in creating a public space, ring fenced from the market. Will it do so again?
POSTCARD FROM SAN FRANCISCO

A university with a town attached

Chris Mead travels to Michigan and finds that a mention of c’l’lr magazine opens doors to the mayor.

Good news darling” my wife said recently, “we’re going to Milan.”

“Splendid!” I cried, “I’ll pack my opera glasses and bunga bunga shorts.”

Immediately, I found myself encased in a block of ice.

“You know where I mean” she said.

Indeed I did. Milan, Michigan, is Jennifer’s home town and where her parents still live. So off we went to help Marvin and Eileen celebrate their golden wedding anniversary.

The state of Michigan (BTW, it’s pronounced MISHigan) is a giant peninsula nestled among the Great Lakes in the north-east of the US, some 2,000 miles east of San Francisco. Just flying there, rolling over the Sierra Mountains, Western Desert, and endless farmlands, reminds one of this country’s vast size. Remember, dear reader, your home is almost as close to New York as mine.

Milan is a small municipality of some 5,000 souls tucked away in the southeast corner of the state. Like most suburban towns in the Midwest it consists of one-storey family homes sitting on large lots. How large? Milan’s zoning regulations say that each new house should have a minimum of 2½ acres of land, which is what we call a park in San Francisco.

The nearest decent-size city is Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan. It is reminiscent of my old stomping ground Berkeley, but whereas Berkeley is a town with a bloody great university in the middle, Ann Arbor feels more like a bloody great university with bits of city filling in the spaces between the academic buildings. The scale of U-M is mind-boggling, with 6,000 staff attending to the needs of some 41,000 students; all this in a place with a population of 114,000.

Like every other college in the country, U-M is bonkers about sport. The football stadium, aptly dubbed The Big House, home of the Fighting Wolverines, accommodates 110,000 spectators, and it is packed for every game. (We’re talking American football of course, not soccer.) College football in the US is big, big business, and some universities possess the air of professional sports franchises that have a sideline in academic studies. Picture merging Manchester United with Oxford.

The city of Berkeley’s relationship with its university can be tactfully described as “lively” and I was curious about how things were in Ann Arbor, so I called the city manager’s office.

Clearly the name of c’l’lr magazine resonates in the international corridors of power and I soon found myself speaking with the mayor, the Honorable John Hieftje. Like any good politician, Hizzoner accentuated the positive, pointing out that the University has become less economically and socially predominant as the city has attracted high-tech businesses. True, I’m sure, but Ann Arbor’s entry in Wikipedia still manages to mention the University 58 times.

And get this, U-M has the power of force majeure, what you Brits would call compulsory purchase, so in theory if they decided that your treasured Ann Arbor home was just the place for the Botany Department’s new conservatory, they could force you to sell it. And it does happen: when Pfizer closed their Ann Arbor facility in 2007 U-M snapped it up. To add injury to insult, the University does not pay property tax so at a stroke the city was deprived of 4.6 per cent of its revenues. Yikes! You could almost smell the tear gas if they tried that in Berkeley.

Mayor Hieftje wants to make his city attractive to the creative classes, a popular idea in economic development circles: if your municipality is the sort of place where entrepreneurial young people want to live, they will settle down and start the Next Big Thing, although I’m not sure Marvin and Eileen want to be next door to the new Facebook. Living in San Francisco it is easy to forget that many Americans still march to a different beat, a measured cycle of ice cream socials, church attendance, family gatherings, and backyard barbeques. In might not be your correspondent’s idea of paradise, but as it says on the Great Seal, E Pluribus Unum, which in the vernacular means, “each to their own, dude.”

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