Connected Localism: A blueprint for better public services and more powerful communities

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Summary

This briefing gives an overview of LGiU’s new collection of essays on Connected Localism. The collection is introduced and concluded by LGiU Chief Executive Jonathan Carr-West and features contributions from:

- Patrick Diamond, senior research fellow at Policy Network
- Anthony Zacharzewski, Chief Executive of Demsoc
- Sophia Parker, Research Associate at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and a Demos Associate
- Richard V. Reeves, former Director of Strategy to the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg MP.

The essays look at how a localised, yet connected approach to public service innovation can help us meet complex social and political challenges.

This briefing is relevant to policy teams, elected members with responsibility for policy and strategy and anyone with an interest in the theory of localism.

Overview

This new collection features contributions from Patrick Diamond, Anthony Zacharzewski, Sophia Parker, Richard V. Reeves and an introduction from LGiU Chief Executive Jonathan Carr-West.

- In Jonathan Carr-West’s chapter, “Putting the local jigsaw together”, he introduces the concept of connected localism as a way to tackle the long term challenges facing local government. He argues that the really difficult challenges we face cannot be solved by institutions (of state or market), or communities or by citizens working alone but require a collective, collaborative engagement of all parts of the public realm that draws on local innovation.

- In his chapter “Connecting communities: neighbourhood empowerment”, Patrick Diamond argues that serious structural reforms are needed to relocate powers in the face of profound social challenges which can only be addressed by working in partnership with local neighbourhoods. Diamond maps out the empirical argument for greater localism, anchored in a rationale provided by Amartya Sen’s theory of human ‘capabilities’. He examines how a new political and financial settlement will help to drive transformative change in the organisation and management of public services locally, and focuses on constitutional reform, and the case for local taxation and revenue-raising powers.

- In his chapter “Open, networked, democratic: a localist future”, Anthony Zacharzewski argues that localism as a philosophy has been confused, and as a practice has been patchy. But
localism is worth fighting for. It should be characterised by openness and democracy. This means more power for councillors; a different sort of leadership internally; a different sort of communication externally; conversation not consultation; a thoroughly digital approach; councillors as conductors not directors; and good accountability and flow of funding.

- Sophia Parker argues in her chapter “Connected localism and the challenge of change” that transformation in local government is urgently needed, but that traditional cost-cutting tactics, competition and outsourcing simply won’t be enough. A growing number of councils are beginning to explore how they can focus on better lives, which will require a willingness to consider fundamentally different ways of working.

- In his chapter “Localism and opportunity: friends or foes?”, Richard V. Reeves argues that the individual is the focus of attention in terms of policy to promote social mobility. But findings from the US which suggest that even when income, family form, education and health are taken into account, neighborhood still has a huge influence on life chances, should prompt us to reevaluate this approach. Reeves considers the interaction between place and mobility which takes place in two ‘hard’ dimensions—education and housing—and two ‘soft’ ones: culture and social capital.

**Briefing in full**

**Jonathan Carr-West**

**Introduction: putting the local jigsaw together**

In his introduction, Jonathan Carr-West argues that local government stands at a crossroads, with the spectre of reduced influence, minimal service provision and public disengagement in one direction, and the promise of reinvigorated civic economies, public services genuinely built around the needs of citizens and engaged, resilient communities in the other. This critical juncture for local government is defined by three key factors.

1. First, an ongoing struggle to try and balance rising demand with shrinking resources.
2. Second, legislative and policy changes creating a changing environment within which local government operates.
3. Finally, and most importantly, local authorities operating within a context shaped by long-term challenges.

Carr-West argues that tackling these long-term changes to our society and economy and the challenges they create will demand innovation and inspiration, new ways of thinking and doing and fresh ways of thinking about what a local authority does and is. He argues that, if the last 20 years has been about local government moving from delivering services to commissioning them, the next 20 years will be about moving from commissioning services to ‘curating’ places and working with communities so that fewer services are required. There are three interrelated reasons why this must inevitably involve a relocalisation of politics:

1. Localism has a democratic premium
2. Complex problems are rarely solved by centralised one size-fits-all solutions.
3. The really difficult challenges we face cannot be solved by institutions (of state or market), or communities or by citizens working alone but require a collective, collaborative engagement of all parts of the public realm.

Carr-West argues that there are compelling arguments for localism and for the engagement of citizens in the design and delivery of public services – but against them should be set a sense that localism can seem out of kilter with a world that is increasingly globalised and connected and in which people identify with many communities beyond the local/geographic and seek to act in these communities more than in the ones they live in. He argues that what we need then is a way of thinking about localism that preserves the value of the local while simultaneously tapping into broader networks. In this context local government is crucial.
But this involves putting together a jigsaw of bewildering complexity. One in which the pieces include different parts of the country, diverse bits of the public sector, a broad market of service providers, civil society and community sector groups, social networks, budgets deriving from different Whitehall departments and an expanding set of political geographies. All to be brought together in one coherent whole. This is connected localism: connected across services, across places and across the public realm.

Patrick Diamond
Connecting communities: neighbourhood empowerment

Patrick Diamond argues in his chapter that the centre of British government has historically sought to do too much, but this position has become increasingly untenable. Local government and local communities are among the best placed to respond to the growing demands on public provision, and to resolve the competing choices and trade-offs arising from the fiscal squeeze and long-term structural pressures on the state. He argues that in the past, politicians and policy-makers have talked the language of ‘localism’, but have resisted attempts to transfer substantive powers from Whitehall to local authorities and neighbourhoods. However, serious structural reforms are needed.

As ever, there is a crucial role for local government both in providing strategic leadership, enabling services to be effectively organised at the local level, while in turn being willing to devolve power from Town Halls to local neighbourhoods. Over time, it may be possible to progressively close the ‘power gap’ which still afflicts democracy and governance in the state.

In the first section of his essay, Diamond maps out the empirical argument for greater localism, anchored in a rationale provided by Amartya Sen’s theory of human ‘capabilities’. Sen’s framework emphasises the importance of local knowledge, and the imperative of decentralisation and devolution to the local level. This means giving individuals an opportunity to shape the local state, influencing the decision-making processes that affect their lives: promoting self-actualisation rather than paternalism. Abandoning the ‘deficit model’ in public services which undervalues the capacities, resources and human capital that exists within disadvantaged communities and families is particularly important given the growing pressure on public finances.

He then examines how a new political and financial settlement will help to drive transformative change in the organisation and management of public services locally. Inevitably, there is a strong link between local public service delivery and local governance. This includes both the empowerment of local government at sub-regional level, particularly cities and major conurbations, together with improved local leadership to unlock devolution, re-engage citizens, and deliver high quality services. Participatory budgeting would give people far more of a stake in setting local priorities, making tough decisions about the allocation of resources. This should help to entrench intrinsic support for public services and collective provision among citizens.

Diamond goes on to consider what political, structural and budgetary reforms are necessary to deliver a more ‘connected localism’, focusing particularly on constitutional reform, and the case for local taxation and revenue-raising powers. Public services will only be redesigned locally if there is greater financial devolution, with local government having additional scope to raise revenues, borrow flexibly, and decide on mainstream spending priorities.

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Anthony Zacharzewski
Open, networked, democratic: a localist future
Zacharzewski argues that many in government believe in the devolution of power to local people and organisations, but there are powerful pressures in the other direction too. Politicians may think that only by keeping their hands on the levers of power will they be able to implement the changes they have been mandated to make. As a result, localism as a philosophy has been confused, and as a practice, it has been “spotty”. However, Zacharzewski argues that localism is worth fighting for. Flexible, personalised services can answer the discontent that people feel with the mass compromises of politics. Big services cannot afford to go on spending billions of pounds in big unmodified ways – but cuts are unpopular. Localism seems to be a way of squaring the circle by using local knowledge and action to reduce costs of service delivery, support cheap community action and improve its local fit. Localism comes from a political position that supports personal action, small-scale community initiatives, and scepticism about large institutions both state and corporate. Finally, the trend towards personalisation and personal action is an epoch alone, and the rise of the network society is not about to reverse.

What would a democratic localism look like?

1. Openness – every decision should be taken in a way that is actively open throughout the decision-making process.
2. Fundamentally networked - supporting openness requires a networked approach, which understands and works with a place as a network of overlapping and interlocked networks.
3. Democratic - this means more than the representative process. It means balancing participation and representativeness so that residents feel that they can influence decisions if they want to; expanding the network of participation and ensuring that where services are provided in the community or outsourced to others, they inherit the same democratic responsibilities.

What does this mean for local government?

More power for councillors: A networked and democratic local public service does not mean the end for councillors – quite the reverse. The reach and deliberation of representatives and the traditional structures allow for community-wide trade-offs and are an essential part of government, for the foreseeable future.

A different sort of leadership internally: The nature of leadership in a localist world will be very different from the current hierarchal models. To lead in a network means to lead without directive power – without even the appearance of directive power.

A different sort of communication externally: A communications team in a local, open, and networked public service will be less and less needed. All staff should have familiarity with the public, readiness to engage, and ability to respond helpfully rather than fend off queries.

Conversation not consultation: As communications has to move from directed hierarchies to supported networks, similarly consultation has to shift towards conversation.

Thoroughly digital: Digital collapses distance, and allows busy people to time-shift their participation or catch up after the event. It also enables those who are geographically dispersed to participate without travel.

Conductors not directors: Officers will need to be facilitators of change. The essential role of many local officers is to bring people together, to listen and to create solutions using all the resources available – central, local and community.

Accountability and flow of funding: Localism will not be localism if it constrains all public spending to publicly-delivered services. Some services are better delivered in the community, but democratic control and accountability can fail at the boundary between deliverer and commissioner.

How we get there
Act on principle: agile and flexible working practices, even if guided by local vision, need to understand the direction that the service as a whole is taking, and the ways in which services need to develop to make them ready for the future.

Building the local Internet of citizens: the use of open platforms and technologies for civic action is essential if we are to create a localist public service.

Experimentation: a localist approach does not need pilots in the traditional sense, devised and tested within the council structure. It needs experiments that are undertaken across sectors, as far as possible in safe spaces with good evaluation, and in such a way that when failures happen they can be identified and corrected quickly.

Collaborative learning: alongside experimentation comes collaborative learning. This means collaborating across organisations in different geographies, as well as working together with partners at local level.

Sophia Parker
Connected localism and the challenge of change

Parker argues that there has never been a time when transformation in local government was more urgently needed. At the same time as pressure on budgets reaches fever pitch, the pressure on councils to tackle a wider range of issues than ever before is also growing: where current policies aren’t working well enough, or where new issues are emerging that haven’t been on the agenda in the past. On top of this, the face of local democracy is changing fast, as public health responsibilities come back to councils, elected police commissioners get their feet under the desk, and the new powers conferred by the Localism Act take hold. She argues that the scale of these changes makes it very hard to see how councils can avoid thinking differently about their purpose. The question is what kind of innovation might emerge. Here there is not yet a clear answer.

Parker argues that traditional cost-cutting tactics, competition and outsourcing simply won’t be enough, and a growing number of councils are beginning to explore how they can focus on better lives rather than just cheaper and more efficient services. Taking this approach will require a willingness to consider fundamentally different ways of working. How can services empower and build community capacity as well as deliver more effectively? How can public, voluntary and private sector organisations knit together to provide not only safety nets but also springboards? What kinds of partnerships and delivery models would be needed to achieve these goals? These kinds of questions need to provide the point of departure for councils wanting to think differently. Simply focusing on costs may yield some innovations, but they will not necessarily lead to better lives.

Is the sector ready to embrace connected localism?

Parker argues that local government could play a catalytic role in translating these lofty ambitions into real policy and practice, in three related ways:

1. Councils could incubate wholly new models of public service provision that capture the spirit of connected localism through focusing on co-production, community empowerment and building resilience.
2. Councils could drive local innovation, creating new partnerships across sectors to join up services, unlock new resources of support and strengthen local economies.
3. Councils could act as constructive disruptors, working together to highlight areas of national policies that are inconsistent or counterproductive to enable new models of public service provision to emerge.

Generating the innovations that matter

Parker argues that councils committed to serious change would need to grapple with two deep issues in order to develop the kinds of innovations that will unlock connected localism:
1. first, truly understanding how the world looks from the eyes of citizens – easy to say, very hard to actually do; and
2. second, fundamentally re-imagining the resources that councils have available to achieve their goals.

The connected localism agenda presents councils with an opportunity to reimagine and redefine their role in relation to local people and the local economy. It is from here that the most exciting innovations will emerge – the ones that might actually have a real, tangible impact on the quality of people’s lives and the places in which they live.

Richard V. Reeves
Localism and opportunity: friends or foes?

Richard V. Reeves outlines in his chapter the tension between the coalition government’s commitment to both social mobility and localism. According to one analysis, the job of policy makers at the national level is to try and level the playing field with tools and materials controlled and produced at the centre. According to another, many of the engines of personal advancement are at least partly in the hands of local institutions, and less visible factors such as social networks and norms cannot be generated from Whitehall. However, a naïve localism that simply assumes central government has to get out of the way, and all will be well, is no recipe for greater fairness.

Reeves argues that so far, the debate about social mobility has been conducted at a national level. But the focus of attention, in terms of policy, is the individual. Localities and communities have barely had a look in. In part, this is because the liberal philosophy underpinning social mobility contains a strong strand of scepticism towards communities. It’s felt that communities can crush life chances and individual freedom as well as enhancing them. Reeves says this essentially been his view to date, but he is in the process of revising it, in large part because of the empirical work of Professor Patrick Sharkey of New York University showing the difficulty of detaching the life chances of individuals from the quality of their localities. This interaction between place and mobility takes place in two ‘hard’ dimensions—education and housing—and two ‘soft’ ones: culture and social capital.

1. Education

Reeves argues that there is clearly a need for an education overhaul at the national level. But Local Education Authorities have a vital role to play too. How many have social mobility as a core goal? All too often, LEAs appear, fairly or otherwise, as defenders of a status quo that is unacceptable. LEAs ought to see themselves as champions of social mobility. Local authorities are also necessarily critical in the delivery of early years education.

2. Housing

Reeves argues that one way in which people can become ‘stuck in place’ is through poorly designed tenure arrangements, and geographical concentrations of joblessness and welfare dependency. One of the most dramatic social trends of the last half-century is the transformation of social housing into a safety net for the poor. The future of social housing has to be very different to the ‘council estate’ model we have inherited: smaller groups of affordable homes, in mixed tenure areas, spread out more evenly across localities, with greater incentives to work in our approach to tenure. Of course the social housing problem is a sub-set of the broader housing problem in the UK, which is that land is absurdly expensive, under-taxed and over-regulated. Again, the government is battling to liberalise planning laws, and liberals continue to argue for more coherent land taxation. And again, local authorities, as much as national government, hold the balance of power.

3. Culture

Reeves argues that it is impossible to quantify culture. But it is absolutely clear that one of the most powerful elements of the ‘neighbourhood’ effect is the prevalence and perpetuation of certain
social norms with regard to schooling, welfare and work. Teachers who have low expectations of their pupils; pupils content to live down to them; parents who are disengaged; gangs offering more immediate rewards and status; multi-generational poverty: all the evidence is that people are acutely sensitive to their immediate social environment. To the extent that local culture influences local prosperity and wellbeing, and by extension individual life chances, local authorities have to see themselves as being in the culture business.

4. Networks

Reeves argues that social capital, in particular in the form of social networks, is another ‘soft’ but powerful factor in social mobility. This means that in order to promote mobility, we need to work hard to build social capital within less affluent neighbourhoods and connect them with broader networks, too. Jobs are often filled ‘on the grapevine’ rather than through job centres. Tending and extending that grapevine is therefore an inescapable element of employment and therefore social mobility strategies.

As part of a concerted, continued drive for social mobility, national policy makers need to think local. And local authorities need to pursue not only stronger communities in themselves, but brighter opportunities for the individuals that comprise them.

Conclusion

Jonathan Carr-West concludes the collection, underlining that connected localism is not proposed as either a political ideology or a public management method, but as a way of thinking and doing that builds on the creativity and civic energy of local people and connects it into a dynamic network of innovation and strategic governance. He argues that within local government, there is increasingly a recognition that we are approaching a moment of crisis. Both short-term and long-term pressures on public services, many of which are described in this collection, mean that we need to think hard not simply about how we deliver our current services, but fundamentally about what a council is and what it does (and does not do), about the nature of public service and about the boundaries between citizens, state and communities. Localists do not believe that there can, or should, be a single answer to these questions. Local authorities, and indeed local areas, will be re-imagined and re-made in ways that suit different places and the people within them. He emphasises that the ideas gathered in the collection are only a beginning, and that much, much more thinking and experimentation needs to be done to bring the concept to life.