

**Big Society Consultation by the Public Accounts Select Committee  
Submission from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations**

**18. 03. 2011**

**Response to point 8: The place of local authorities in the transfer of power from Whitehall to communities and the role democratically elected local councillors should play.**

**Summary**

- Much of the current discourse about the role of the public sector, and local government in particular, lies in a diminution of its role and putting more of the delivery and service planning functions in the hands of the Voluntary and Community sector (VCS) and community groups. However, the solution to current problems need not lie in cutting out a key sector: in this paper we argue for developing the whole system, with local government, the Voluntary and Community sector, local politicians, local citizens and communities taking up their different and complementary roles.
- Our research shows that there is a lot of variation in the capacity and willingness of citizens to take up the demands of the 'big society'; in how local authorities respond to their local communities and in the capacity of the VCS to organise and take up a leadership role to develop 'big society' ideas. Within this context, local government should continue to play – or even further develop - an important strategic role and support the development of the VCS and individuals and communities.
- The council's role becomes that of facilitator – creating active communities and providing these communities with a democratic conduit to shape places they live in. In the case of many local authorities taking up this role will require a change in culture, which would allow its officers to look out and work more closely with the communities they serve, to understand that citizens can take up and provide solutions to local dilemmas.
- A key role of local politicians is about helping communities to adapt to new challenges and supporting people to make the best choices. In this model there is an enhanced role for ward councillors to improve civic engagement, to facilitate partnership working between communities, different agencies and sectors, including the local authority, and working with citizens about the choices that need to be made.

**1. Introduction**

The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) is a long established not for profit organisation and charity which undertakes research, consultancy and professional

development activities across a range of sectors including local government and the voluntary and community sectors. In particular, we undertake large and small scale research and evaluation assignments commissioned by central government, local government and the VCS and we also work with the sectors on organisational development and change projects.

Some of our relevant recent work includes the national evaluation of the Timely Information for Citizens programme (final report forthcoming); local and Peer evaluations on Preventing Violent Extremism (PREVENT); the evaluation of the Right Here Initiative: improving young people's mental health and wellbeing; and work with Brighton and Hove City Council and its partners on a 'behaviour change' project focusing on reducing risky behaviours in young people, setting this in a wider context of support for young people and their families. We have also reviewed a number of strategic partnerships (Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Southend-on-Sea).

In relation to this inquiry, we have a number of observations to make about the role of local government in the emerging big society.

## **2. The Challenge**

Our response is framed in the current economic climate where councils are pursuing efficiency savings on an unprecedented scale: 'needing to do more with less.' The cuts that are presently being implemented have difficult consequences at very local levels.

In part to deal with these difficulties, the shift of power from the centre to local is important and attempts by governments over the last several years to introduce a localist / localism element to policy making which focuses on place is very helpful.

Much of the current discourse about the role of the public sector, and local government in particular, lies in a diminution of its role because of a tendency to over-bureaucratise, be inefficient and put up barriers when dealing with the general public. The answer, it is assumed, is to reduce the role of local government in particular in relation to a number of functions, in service planning and delivery and put more of it in the hands of the voluntary and community sector and community groups. (The extent to which services the Coalition government sees this applying to needs to be clarified).

However, the solution to current problems need not lie in cutting out a key sector; rather we argue for developing the whole system, with local government, the Voluntary and Community sector, local politicians, local citizens and communities taking up their different and complementary roles. This is likely to require a shift in the way we conceptualise local governance. Historically the UK has had a 'functional', even paternalistic, approach to local governance, often where services are delivered to people along the requirements of services rather than the people. However, an alternative model is a 'communitarian' approach to local governance focusing on working with people to support their development as people in places. Research also suggests that policies 'co-produced' by government departments, local partners and communities, encourage greater 'buy in' and better results<sup>1</sup>. We outline this model in more detail below.

## **3. Variations in practice**

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Boyle D, et al (2010) *Right Here, Right Now, Taking Co-production into the Mainstream* NEF/ NESTA

The whole systems approach that we take at the Tavistock Institute, sees all players (local authorities, sector partners and communities) potentially playing a role in the planning, design and delivery of public services, which make them more citizen-focused and relevant. Our research also tells us that this system-wide view means that councils and partners need to find different ways of working each other and with their communities to develop solutions together<sup>2</sup>.

Our experience through numerous research and consultancy assignments, which take us around the country, suggests that the practice of local authorities and their partners varies across the country in relation to how they respond and work with local communities and the extent to which local communities are ready and have the capability to take up different roles.

There are of course local authorities who continue to put the shutters up, and engage little with their citizens to encourage them to develop more resilience and taking up a more active role in local communities. Others are more open, already using information and new media, for example, to be creative with citizens and develop the capacity of the populations to be more resilient, pledge time to volunteer, develop local networks. Local politicians also vary (even within localities) in their capacity to work and for local citizens.

Equally, there are communities in which some citizens are ready, willing and have the skills to take up the challenge of running specific services – for example local sports facilities, or improving local living or play conditions. However, our work indicates there are many communities who are not able to work in this way, for reasons of deprivation and dislocation from organising structures.

Finally, there is variation in the capability and capacity of the VCS to organise and take up a leadership role to develop ‘big society’ ideas. In some areas the VCS takes on a strategic and organising role, and in others it comprises a number of small competing organisations, sometimes unable to work together and represent each other. It is simply unrealistic to say that the sector can take up the challenge uniformly across the country.

#### **4. Roles**

In a national context where there is so much variation in the capacity and willingness of citizens to take up the demands of the ‘big society’, we see there being a continuing and important role for all constituencies in working together. Local government should continue to play – or even further develop - an important strategic role and support the development of the VCS and individuals and communities, having the vision and capacity to bring people together, provide information and support. Service delivery and support in choices around delivery will still matter, but the focus will need to change: it is about ensuring supporting / encouraging citizens to make better choices for themselves, rather than necessarily directly delivering them.

In redefining and re-conceptualising their role, some local authorities have already begun to understand their leadership role as a ‘stewardship’ function in relation to its public. ‘The public sector is owned by the public, after all’ as one Chief Executive put it, in our recent study of the pilots developing innovative ways of producing Timely

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<sup>2</sup> Child C, *Scoping research: What LSPs can do to support behaviour change in local communities* (2008) IDEa (now Local Government Improvement and Development)

Information for Citizens. This different response requires a deeper understanding of local communities and being open to learning with and from them. Services can be commissioned and organised around the needs of the citizens (expressed as outcomes), not council staff (see for example developments in Brighton and Hove). At its best, the council's role becomes that of facilitator – creating active communities and providing these communities with a democratic conduit to shape places that they want to live in.

In the case of many local authorities this will require a change in culture, which allows its officers to look out and work more closely with the communities they serve, to understand that citizens can take up and provide solutions to local dilemmas (even difficult ones such as street behaviours, developing aspirations).

A word about culture: while many demonise the public sector for its 'negative' culture and behaviours, we prefer to think about how it has developed. For many years it has been recognised in the literature that individuals and organisations develop routines which defend them against the anxiety and stress of the work that they do. (See for example the seminal work of Menzies-Lyth, Argyris and Schon).<sup>3</sup>

In this context, we understand the behaviours we all experience to be learned institutional behaviour, one which results from dealing for so long with the difficult, demanding, traumatising public; a sector which take on the complex problems that many in society would not wish to face. No wonder then that over time shutting the door on the public and developing complex systems and hurdles has developed and agencies continue to work separately rather than together. But, with enlightened leadership and a focus on culture, behaviour can change – and modelling different behaviours can have a powerful impact. In our work in Brighton, which emphasised the closer working of agencies, we called it 'behaviour change for behaviour change.' In one recent example, the process of opening up data was described as a massive culture change, the effects of which were likely to be lasting.

There are a number of roles local politicians can take up in this scenario. A key role in this is about helping communities to adapt to new challenges, setting a vision for 'places' and supporting the vulnerable to make the best choices. In this model there is an enhanced role for ward councillors to improve civic engagement, working with citizens about the choices that need to be made, and helping local people think about the complexity of the system we live in, so that decisions made here, will have an impact there. Fostering these local connections also reinforces a sense of accountability. Councillors can take up a role to facilitate partnership working between communities, different agencies and sectors, including the local authority.

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<sup>3</sup> Menzies Lyth, Isabel (1959) 'The Functions of Social Systems as a Defence Against Anxiety: A Report on a Study of the Nursing Service of a General Hospital', *Human Relations* 13: 95-121; Argyris and Schon (1990) *Overcoming Organisational Defenses Facilitating Organisational Learning* Boston Alyn and Bacon  
Also Hoggett, P. (2006) "Conflict, ambivalence, and the contested purpose of public organisations" *Human Relations*, Vol. 59 No 2 pp175-194

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