

Doing something Big

Building a better society together





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How democratic leadership, community action and empowered individuals can build a better society

Democratically-elected local councillors are at the forefront of developing stronger, more empowered and more resilient communities. By working together with local people, public service partners and voluntary and community organisations they are delivering different and better services for communities in difficult times.

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Executive summary

If we are to see stronger, more empowered and more resilient communities, then there will have to be a rebalancing of the relationship between residents and public services. Across the country, local councillors are at the frontline of redefining traditional service delivery. Ways of working are becoming more collaborative and preventative, and will rely increasingly on democratically elected councillors in their role as community leaders. The best councils have been doing this for years, and we continue to learn from their experiences.

Nevertheless, this is a challenging time for local government. Budgets are shrinking at the same time as demand for services is rising. Councils up and down the country are aware that providing the same services in the same way but more efficiently is going to neither meet the level of cuts required nor, more importantly, be in the best interest of the communities they represent. They are working with colleagues in the voluntary and community sector to find better ways of improving outcomes for residents, families and communities. There is a real danger that councils who do not adapt will struggle to survive and will not provide what residents need and want.

This report highlights a number of councils who are doing things differently. Swindon Borough Council is taking a radical new approach to working with families with multiple problems. The London Borough of Lewisham is putting local spending in

the hands of local people through its Local Assemblies. And Sutton Borough Council is taking innovative approaches to using its libraries for much more than traditional book lending. Throughout the report there are examples of innovative practice and new ways of working to illustrate the changes happening across public services.

The Task Force has found that there are nine themes that councils have discovered in their journeys. Together, they describe the ways in which organisations and communities will need to work differently with local people, families and the voluntary and community sector to deliver better outcomes for their local communities. They underline the necessity of a strong local democracy built on conversations, not communication and that makes best use of the expertise of local councillors. The nine themes are designed to assist councils as they develop their own responses to local issues.

The Task Force recognises national Government as an equal partner in this journey. To that end this report contains eight suggestions of where Government can make a tangible difference to councils, voluntary and community organisations and local people through amendments in legislation and support for new initiatives. We have made eight offers of how the Local Government Group will support councils and their partners in making these changes.

Introduction

There is an unexpected political consensus around the need for a 'bigger society' be it labeled as 'co-operative' or 'civic' or anything else that party politics dictates.

It's not just about the need to save money, though this is undoubtedly a driving force, it is about the need to recognise that society is changing with a more connected population demanding greater participation in shaping the lives of their communities.

This publication shows that this is already happening across the country, from North Yorkshire's Innovation Fund to Sutton's smarter transport and to the pioneering schemes to help people set up new voluntary organisations in Gloucestershire.

The common themes that emerge from this work can be summarised as three points.

First, councils are no longer hiding behind the walls of the town hall. They are actively seeking ways to involve more people and groups in service delivery.

Second, local government is essential to making this happen. A bigger or more civic and co-operative society is accelerated by good local government providing the expertise, cash and encouragement to help sustainable projects develop, for example through the Oxfordshire Big Society Fund.

Third, this will not happen overnight. My own authority, Westminster have been running neighbourhood budgets for four years. They've always been useful, but only

experience and trial and testing shows what really works to strengthen communities and how small amounts of money can lever in additional funding. This work in turn strengthens local communities with more volunteering and the increasing belief - against national trends - that the council is involving local people in its work.

In the years ahead we will have to do more together to shape services around communities, to save costs and meet public expectations. This paper sets out some of the pathfinding examples of these new civic policies and identifies the common themes.

It also has a 'big ask' of government to get out of the way make it easier for individuals, communities and councils to work together to develop cheaper and improved local services. Put simply, it is blueprint to a better society.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow councillors who have sat on this task group and for the valuable input and research undertaken by the Centre for Social Justice and NAVCA in putting this report together.

Councillor Colin Barrow CBE

Leader of Westminster City Council and
Chair Local Government Group Big Society
Task Force



Steps towards a new relationship between residents and public services

Democratically-elected councillors across the country have been working for many years to put more empowered individuals and strong community organisations at the heart of local services. The Local Government Group is committed to taking the lead in sharing that knowledge and highlighting learning points. We will also continue to work on councils' behalf to showcase their successes and address national barriers that they encounter.

The following case studies represent the many councils across the country working differently with their communities to achieve better local outcomes. This is not new territory for councils; it is how the best of them have been working for years. For example, a third of councils have ward budgets for individual councillors, and a fifth of councils use participatory budgets. Councils across the country are using their assets in a more creative way that makes it easier for locals to access services. Taken together with a host of other good practice from around the country, these case studies begin to illustrate how strong democratic leadership is changing councils' practices and supporting local people and groups to find their own solutions to local issues. Each case study is followed by three key learning points from their experience.

Family LIFE in Swindon

Swindon partners are committed to providing the best possible service to families. For some of the families that needed them most, public services in Swindon weren't working. Between 60 and 100 families in the worst state of chronic crisis were surrounded by a crowd of public sector agencies, each with a different offer, a different approach, and different forms to fill in. For some families, these had little effect on their lives and were in fact stopping families taking full responsibility for their own lives.

Recognising that the families themselves were the most informed about their own situations, and should therefore be at the centre of any efforts to help them, Swindon Borough Council and its partners on the local strategic partnership commissioned a social enterprise called Participle to find a new way forward together. The result became known as the Swindon LIFE team: building new Lives for Individuals and Families to Enjoy.

Together, they went straight to the heart of the system by inviting families to join a new way of working. Participle was given a base on a Swindon estate for six months, and worked closely with families and front-line workers to gain a deeper understanding of their daily lives and the challenges they faced. The LIFE team recognised that change wouldn't happen unless the families themselves wanted to change and were empowered to do so. Families hand-picked

their own multi-agency team who they felt they could communicate with and who understood them. This formed the core of the team who would take forward Swindon LIFE.

Following initial prototyping work, the team is working with a number of families, all of whom are invited, not required, to participate. One of the principles of the programme is that the team members themselves will be required to develop their own capabilities just as much as the families will be. They are learning to work in a radically different way. This has been so effective that one of the family members now works alongside the team.

As well as the important benefits to the social resilience of families and the wider community, the LIFE programme had by July 2010 achieved measurably improved outcomes: an 80-90 per cent reduction in police call-outs; seven eviction orders being prevented; four children no longer having a child protection plan; a reduction in domestic violence; a 90 per cent improvement in mental health conditions for those who reported this as a risk factor and 70 per cent of children re-engaged with education where this was an issue; and 70 per cent of family members building positive relationships between themselves. Furthermore, £720,000 of estimated savings in the second year (£235,000 on actual, £485,000 on preventative) have been achieved.

Partners across Swindon are now working with families and Participle to develop the LIFE Programme further, both in terms of numbers of families and its universality across local public services.

Swindon Borough Council and partners are now taking part in the first phase of Community Budgets, which aims to take a

pooled funding approach to helping families with complex problems. Swindon's overall vision is for Swindon to have no families in 'chronic crisis'. The LIFE model will be developed, resulting in an Integrated Life Programme and will seek to achieve further measurable improvements in family life.

Lessons

- Create an invitation to change rather than a top-down solution.
- Produce programmes in partnership with the people who will benefit from them.
- Work with local social enterprises, voluntary and community groups who have expertise in the areas that need to improve.
- Recognise that everyone in the system has to be open to change.

“In my view this is one of the most important pieces of social policy that any government, through community budgets, has sought to address, because of the large beneficial outcomes that can be achieved and the associated savings that can be released to support other key services.”

“More than anything LIFE has shown us that being non judgemental and prepared to challenge our own assumptions, provides the right environment for real change to happen”

**Councillor Roderick Bluh, Leader
Swindon Borough Council**

Local solutions to local issues – Lewisham’s Local Assemblies

The London Borough of Lewisham is home to more than 800 active voluntary and community sector organisations and over 200 faith groups. Through their Local Assembly networks, people in Lewisham are in direct charge of spending public money on issues that matter to them as a community.

The Local Assemblies are places where thinking about key issues can be done in an open forum, rather than behind closed doors in the town hall. Local people explore ideas with experts and council representatives and reach a consensus decision on issues that are important to their local area. They also give the flexibility to address issues where borough-wide policies don’t meet the needs of local communities.

Each of the 18 Assemblies – one for each of Lewisham’s wards – includes ward councillors, council, and voluntary and community sector representatives and local residents to reflect the unique character of the ward. Each Assembly sets its own priorities and has access to a council Assembly Fund to take real action on locally important issues. Councillors act as a key link by representing community views to the council and taking on issues as case work.

Since the assemblies started in 2008, over 13,000 people have attended. In 2011 the Assemblies are still going strong, meeting quarterly to shape the future of their neighbourhood. In addition, work is done outside of meetings to ensure as many people’s views as possible are heard. Residents can now keep up to date

with their Assembly through noticeboards, newsletters and various social media such as Facebook pages. Web pages for each Assembly show what has been achieved locally – anything from providing bowls club equipment to sponsoring a Scout minibus or bringing in counselling support for vulnerable parents and families. They are changes and resources that might seem small in comparison to the council’s total activity, but can make a real difference to the lives of local people and are an expression of local identity and distinctiveness. The challenge to local government more widely is now to explore the potential for using this and similar approaches to put communities in control of mainstream decisions about services and budgets.

Lessons

- Engaging with residents on a ward level can help develop a network of residents and voluntary and community groups who can tackle local issues effectively.
- Councillors speak for their community in order to shape public services.
- Funding small, locally-chosen projects is a step on the road to opening up public services.

The Mayor of Lewisham, Sir Steve Bullock, is pleased with what the programme has achieved so far. He says, “the real power of assemblies has been the way in which they have empowered local people to come together to make changes in their area, and influence decisions affecting their lives”.

Sutton libraries: beyond books on shelves

The London Borough of Sutton is taking an innovative approach to its libraries – not only in creating a new way to make a better range of books available, but also in using its library buildings to host other services that help local people.

A world first scheme which allows members of the public to open up their bookshelves and share their favourite books with their neighbours has been launched. Sutton Bookshare involves people listing the publications they own online so they can be borrowed by fellow readers. The free scheme, thought to be the first of its kind anywhere in the world, is open to anyone who lives or works in the London Borough of Sutton. It is an addition to the library service not a replacement – and the council is committed to keeping all of its libraries open despite the spending cuts.

Councillor Graham Tope, Sutton Council's Executive Member for Community Safety, Leisure and Libraries, says: "This is a very innovative project which uses a social website to help people get hooked on books. We also hope it will help people to get to know their neighbours better and build up new social networks, like work bookclubs. It's an excellent example of how the internet can be made to make a big difference in the real world."

Councillor Tope adds: "The reaction so far has been very positive. It may mean that more people use our libraries in the future because they read something through Bookshare and then go on to read more of that author's work either by going to a library or using a local bookshop.

"There's so much talk about cuts at the moment so it's very refreshing to be launching something new and vibrant, which will run in addition to our wonderful library service – not substitute any part of it."

The bookshare software developed under the project is free and open source. Anyone can use or modify it themselves for any purpose and it is hoped other councils will follow Sutton's lead and launch similar booksharing schemes.

Sutton is also using its libraries as a base to help out of work residents in the borough. The work clubs, which will be run by volunteers, will be available at the Circle Library, Carshalton. The project will give people the chance to meet others looking for work, build new contacts, share job hunting experiences and get advice on interview techniques, CVs and even volunteering opportunities to help them find employment.

Led by volunteers from nearby businesses and individuals from within the community, the sessions will enable those that attend to receive the best combination of specific guidance and local knowledge. Partners include Sutton Chamber of Commerce, Scola, Sutton Libraries and local residents.

Councillor Jayne McCoy, Executive Member for Planning, Economic Development and Housing at Sutton Council, says: "This really demonstrates how the Big Society idea can be put into action by supporting local people, organisations and businesses to collaborate and empowering them for the benefit of the community. These work clubs will make a real difference to those looking for employment in this tough economic climate."



Volunteer, Tom May, says “Research shows that the best way to find another job is through friends, family or social networks, which is why it is so vital to have a Work Club in this area. During every session, we will help people to look for work by swapping ideas and talking to guest speakers including people from local businesses, about opportunities in the area.”

This is the start of a programme of extra support for people out of work this will also include careers advice for young people available in all libraries.

Sutton’s adult education centre, Scola, will also offer additional training to boost residents’ skills. While Jobcentre Plus will support the initiative by providing advisors who will give advice on where to find vacancies, how to compile CVs and speculative letters, in addition to providing local vacancies.

Lessons

- Councils can act as the host for schemes that bring local people together to help one another.
- Used creatively, public buildings can support a range of services for local people.
- Local people have much to offer in helping councils provide even better services to their communities.

Nine ways towards better services for local people

All those involved in local services are beginning to see the need for re-examining some fundamental precepts of how to work together for different and better public services. Among other things, partners need to:

- use democracy to rebalance power from the public sector to residents
- reduce the demand for public services as they are traditionally thought of
- reposition the voluntary and community sector as a partner in the mainstream activity of local government
- reshape the central-local relationship so local decisions can be made freely.

We believe this is a fundamentally democratic project. Any one of these changes presents difficulties, but it is the interplay between the five that makes this a particularly complex challenge. Councillors will need to take the lead in demonstrating a new way of working.

This section sets out nine ways in which councils are working with communities and voluntary and community organisations in their places and taking on the challenges listed above by transforming their own practice. These are not set out as a prescriptive model, rather, as a set of ideas that councillors may want to select from and adapt to their place.

1. It's all about local

The traditional style of public service delivery would call for a national model of working

with communities. However, the most successful initiatives are often the ones that have been developed locally to meet local needs, and many of them have been happening since long before the 'Big Society' was named as such.

In the **London Borough of Croydon**, the Croydon Neighbourhood Care Association runs the Protecting Older People bus service, bringing health and other services to older people. The idea grew from an exercise run by the council looking for suggestions from local people about making Croydon a great place to grow old. The bus reaches 16,000 people a year, and in one quarter alone helped 13 patients avoid the need for a trip to hospital, saving around £26,000. The bus is also used by organisations such as Age UK and the Alzheimers Disease Society.

Beautiful North is an innovative new partnership established by **Liverpool City Council** and led by small team of elected councillors and city officers. The 'coalition of the willing' brings together public, private, and voluntary and community organisations that want to use their existing staff and resources to do things differently to deliver real and sustainable change on the ground in the North Liverpool wards Anfield, County and Kirkdale. Beautiful North is working on issues around local housing, regeneration, community safety, environmental management and help for young people.

In both Croydon and Liverpool, locally relevant solutions are being sought to local issues by including residents in their design and delivery.

There will inevitably be tensions between encouraging spontaneous local actions and decisions while at the same time as developing an over-arching national narrative. Those at a national level may not always agree with local choices, while local leaders will not always appreciate guidance being offered from the centre. Councils and their partners should continue to step up into the space for local innovation that is offered by the Government's national 'Big Society' agenda, and work constructively with Government and Whitehall to get the support at national level that will help and not hinder better local outcomes.

2. Look for leaders everywhere

Leaders aren't exclusively the people who hold formal positions of leadership. Creating fundamental change in the relationship between citizens and state will require leadership from all levels of organisations and communities. We hope to see public servants serving, not telling others what to do, and recognising that leadership could come from the voluntary and community or private sector.



For example, young people in Rossendale, Lancashire, wanted to change public perceptions of them as 'yobs' and do something good for their community. They connected with Groundwork, an environmental charity, to set up Action Teams Rossendale to make their neighbourhood a better place to live. The group shared their findings with **Rossendale Borough Council** and other local partners and now has a permanent seat on the council's Police and Communities Together group. Reports of antisocial behaviour have dropped from six a week to six a month.

Christine Gibson, from the village of Clapham, near Bedford, was awarded a Prime Minister's Big Society Award in May 2011. Ms Gibson worked with **Bedford Borough Council** and local housing associations to raise funds to turn unused land into a garden for the benefit of her local community.

Councillors, nevertheless, have the fundamental democratic role to play in shaping the future of their place and, through their election have a unique role in focussing community leadership. They hold the democratic mandate and accountability to convene disparate groups and services and they have the knowledge of their place and residents that allows them to best represent local needs. Councillors literally do know where the people who need most help live.

There must also be a change in the popular mindset that there is a distinction to be made between 'the council' and 'the community'. 'The council' isn't the same as the bureaucracy that works for it – it is the elected councillors who people voted for.

In fact, most councillors started out as residents who wanted to make changes in their local place. As elected representatives, their success as community leaders depends on the way they lead and convene these same self-organised and dynamic community activists in their wards, divisions or parishes, and on how they hold to account the executive arm of the council on behalf of voters. They will want to work with the Government-funded Community Organisers and the Community Organisers will want to engage with them.

All leaders have a role in developing new models of leadership that are based on addressing problems with residents, rather than delivering services to them willy-nilly. This is often described as a new way of working. But it isn't: it's been tried and tested, it works and makes democracy more alive and real. It isn't standard practice everywhere, however, and requires a change in culture across public services in many places. Councillors must assert their track record at the forefront of demonstrating this approach.

3. Democracy is essential

However the public sector delivers, whatever it delivers, and however it is structured, democracy is the way free people in a free society hold it to account. Democratically elected local councillors are the way communities hold the local public sector to account. Councillors must and will continue to grow in their community leadership role, acting as the 'leaders of leaders' in their place.

Strong leadership from councillors – not least ward, parish and division councillors – will be what maintains confident and self-reliant communities. To make this happen, councillors will increasingly need to influence

other organisations and services, and councillors must therefore be the leaders in shaping new models of how public services in their place are funded and organised. They will be at the forefront of making a success of the new Health and Wellbeing Boards, and of community budgets. Councillors at all levels, from parish to district to county and unitary need to keep working together to ensure that the views of communities of all sizes are fairly represented, and that councillors' local knowledge is best used.

Good councillors understand the problems faced by their residents and equally, the abilities that residents have to find solutions. Councillors lead conversations on residents' behalf with the council and local partners, providing a vital link between the two. Councillors also act as brokers: bringing together people and groups who share a common interest to act in the best interests of their place.

Councillors are therefore at the heart of strong, connected communities. Local Government Group initiatives such as Be a Councillor, 21st Century Councillor, the Leadership Academy and Next Generation are an essential investment in helping support councillors in their new role and working to encourage more people to stand as councillors and represent their community.

Shropshire Council has set up a member development programme in line with one of its core corporate aims of 'Flourishing Shropshire Communities'. This includes supporting the role of councillors as community activists and influencers; their work with the local voluntary and community sector in issues such as local assets and their work with Shropshire's local joint committees.

Across the country, councillors are working hard to bring powers and responsibilities to local people and encouraging community participation in addressing local issues.

Westminster City Council has introduced dedicated £50,000 Ward Budgets to address local priorities in all areas of the city. Local ward councillors are working with local residents and community groups to allocate the budgets.

Leeds City Council gave residents and community groups in Gildersome the option to pitch their ideas on how to spend £15,000 to improve their local area, with the ideas being judged by residents.

Oxfordshire County Council has recently launched a Big Society Fund of £600,000 to allow local people to bid for start up funding to help them take responsibility for providing services in their community. Councillors will be working to stimulate bids to come forward from their communities and make comments on the bids.

Councillors also have the opportunity, through their scrutiny powers, to contribute to better designed and implemented legislation and policy, bringing the views of experts and local people to bear on the development of policy.

4. Find the need, shape the response

Different people and places have different needs, and understanding these is what drives the best public services. Councillors' deep knowledge of their wards is what brings together the views of residents,

families, voluntary and community sector organisations, faith groups and others in developing a rich understanding of local places. Every group in this community will need to think and act differently about how public organisations work with communities to achieve the best outcomes for their place.

Kent County Council worked with trained researchers to not only ask families who are 'just coping' about their needs and wants, but to understand the challenges they faced in their everyday lives. Following the research, an 'innovation event' was held to address some of the issues raised and look to local communities for how they might tackle them. Ideas for projects such as a bulk-buying group for food were developed and carried out with local people.

Hartlepool Borough Council worked with Hartlepool PCT and Turning Point to determine the needs and aspirations of residents of Owton ward and their views on health and social care provision. The resulting Connected Care service is delivered through a social enterprise managed by residents and local community organisations. The development of a social enterprise is seen as central to the service, helping to ensure it remains focused on the needs of local people.

Reaching this level of understanding of people's lives will not be quick, and places will need to learn from those who have already done it well. However, truly working together to meet the needs of people, families and communities will bring about a lasting change in how our local places look and work.

5. Big society or little society?

This vision for local public services goes beyond engaged and empowered communities. It means, as one officer told the Task Force, that “local authorities don’t have the answers – the people we serve hold the key” – and different communities will have different needs and capabilities. In effect, we are seeing the development of hundreds or thousands of ‘little societies’ that are shaped by local people’s priorities. Councils might, for example, include their own vision for reforming local services with and for local people in their corporate plan, with councillors defining how to make it work on the ground.

This means thinking differently about how we ‘do’ services. Councils will increasingly enter into equal partnerships with willing and qualified voluntary and community sector partners as well as with the private sector that will provide new perspectives on meeting people’s needs.

It is important that councils involve the voluntary and community sector at an early stage so that they can together bring about the best results for local people.

Councils must look critically at their funding to voluntary and community organisations and plan for the long term by supporting those that can help them reduce future demands on services.

Essex County Council hosts a CVS director on placement to facilitate voluntary sector input and feedback to influence the developing commissioning activities.

Stevenage Borough Council has transferred the management of all its community centres to its communities, and has worked with a local junior football club to transfer assets to them that allow them to provide outdoor football training. Stevenage is looking to transfer more assets as part of its co-operative borough council initiative.

The **London Borough of Lambeth** is also exploring how a co-operative approach could put more power into the hands of local communities by developing a range of new models for service provision. Residents will also be encouraged to take part in shaping or running local services through a Lambeth Cooperative Incentive Scheme that builds on the success of local currency initiative the Brixton Pound.

Councillors, especially those with a community development portfolio, are already expert at working with local people to, for example, provide guidance on setting up a residents’ group that can then act as local champions on relevant issues. This development role will be even more important as local people look to be more actively involved in local services.

Councils and councillors are taking steps to cement lasting partnerships with the voluntary and community sector. Organisations such as NAVCA are working at a national level with the Local Government Group and others to develop ways to help their members do this better.

6. Better commissioning for better outcomes

Quality commissioning will be key to forming effective working relationships that can help communities become more self-reliant. The Local Government Group has since 2007 trained over 4,000 commissioners through its National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning to work better with voluntary and community organisations and to raise their awareness of the possibilities and benefits of including voluntary and community organisations in all stages of the commissioning cycle. This has resulted in large and small voluntary and community organisations working together to bid for contracts and work.

Sixty per cent of participants said the programme had made them more willing to work with the voluntary and community sector, and 70 per cent said they had increased their knowledge of how to make commissioning more accessible to these organisations. The programme has also started to build network between councils and voluntary and community organisations who can provide services.¹ This is a step towards embedding a new approach to commissioning across the public sector.

7. Be bold and look to the long term

Councillors all over the country are striving to deliver different and better services for communities in difficult times and in the face of rising demand for services. The change that they aspire to make is not one that can

be achieved by tweaking what we already do: it reaffirms the need to keep making the difficult decisions and practical changes in how we work, both within our organisations and in how we work with others.

Councils must continue to make the decisions about services that mean people have less need for them in future. This will involve building on successful, innovative approaches from leading councils and the voluntary and community sector, most especially in those that invest in prevention, so councils spend to avoid problems, not fix them after they have happened. It will also require a commitment to a new conversation about risk management, particularly with respect to changes to sensitive services such as adults' community services.

North Yorkshire County Council has established an Innovation Fund where voluntary sector organisations with innovative solutions to social care issues can apply for funding to get involved and help transform services. The council is also in discussions with the NHS on how together they can, using NHS money, create more 'out of hospital' and other services aimed at keeping people well supported in their homes and communities.

The **London Borough of Sutton** pioneered 'Smarter Travel Sutton', an initiative that encourages residents to change their behaviour away from reliance on cars and instead walk, cycle, and use public transport. The council has used the lessons from the initiative to embed an approach that is primarily about enabling residents to make smarter choices for themselves.

¹ Evaluation of the National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning, May 2009. www.tinyurl.com/nptsc09

These approaches can also extend to a more creative use of public sector assets.

The community-run charity, Hebden Bridge Community Association, took over control and management of the Town Hall from **Calderdale Council**. The Association has launched a fund-raising drive to improve the site (raising over £2 million), creating access to a range of services from Calderdale and the town and parish councils; facilities for community groups and a base for small enterprises.

Gloucestershire County Council is offering incentives to take over facilities and provide services and a package of support (including funding) to help get the projects off the ground, peppercorn rents, annual funding to help with running costs and training and advice including a new website set up to support local people to set up voluntary organisations.

Wiltshire County Council's Warminster Voices initiative, which recorded local people's voices in everyday places and played them back to the Warminster Area Board – allowing those who couldn't attend the meetings to have a say on issues that affected them. The Warminster Voices team encountered a common problem – how to effectively feed back to those who participated what has happened or changed as a result of their participation. They are exploring options including a newsletter and local radio, and hope that this will motivate residents to stay involved with the process. They are also looking at providing capacity building training that will increasingly support people to set the agenda of Area Board meetings, rather than just respond to it. Tackling the challenges that they are encountering in a creative way is allowing Warminster Voices to expand the project beyond its initial scope and have a potentially much greater effect on the community's capabilities.

8. Conversations, not communication

Councillors want their residents to be as informed and involved as possible in the decisions that make a difference in their lives. They have already developed innovative ways to help local people influence decisions, and hear from a wider range of residents.

The best councils are finding innovative ways of sharing information with their residents in ways that are accessible and meaningful, whether through local assemblies, as in Lewisham, participatory budgeting or through social and other online media.

Lichfield District Council has revamped their website to ensure that residents can easily find and access the latest information on planning applications in their area. This includes the option to 'follow' planning applications and decisions via Twitter and send email alerts to interested residents.

Councillors will be the key in representing what local people think and do with this information and helping them find ways to take action to find local solutions. They will also be critical in leading the way in using social media and other tools to broaden their options for talking to local people. Tools such as Tweety Hall (tweetyhall.co.uk), which gathers councillors' Twitter feeds together so that residents can find their councillor more easily, will help councillors and local people connect.

9. Be a leader of change in your place

Councillors across the country are leading the way in how to work with communities.

This involves changes not only in practical actions, but values, perceptions, ways of working and relationships – both for people and organisations.

In their work, councillors will have encountered a general resistance to change, complex relationships between different tiers of government, limits on funding, and the lack of understanding of residents' needs and capabilities. They have an important role as catalysts and drivers of change, articulating on behalf of their communities the case for doing things better. Initiatives such as the Local Government Group's Knowledge Hub will help to make such learning from others' experience of change more accessible to those who need it.



Better together: eight asks and offers to Government

We know that this is not something we can – or should – do alone. Local and central government will need to work closely together to change the system at all levels for the benefit of local people. We are already seeing this happening through developments such as the Localism Bill, the Sustainable Communities Act and community budgets.

We aspire to do even better. We have laid out below our eight asks to Government alongside our eight offers of support. Together, we can take action now that will result in real, lasting change on the ground. This can't be about ego or history; it has to be about working together for the best outcomes for our communities.

1. Our aim: to lower red-tape barriers to make it easier for voluntary and community groups to provide services.

We ask that Government implement the proposed community right to challenge in the Localism Bill as simply as possible, without extensive extra regulations; and widens the scope of the right to challenge so that it includes the greatest possible range of services.

We offer support to councils to help them with their own processes in order to make it easier for voluntary and community organisations or employee mutuals to deliver services; in particular, the LG Group offers peer support, our productivity programme work on innovative delivery models, and the Local Government

Employers guide to social enterprises, mutual, co-operative and collective ownership models; all of which are freely available to councils in England and Wales.

2. Our aim: to lower barriers to shared services delivery between councils and voluntary and community organisations.

We ask the Government to remove a barrier to cost sharing and efficiency savings through the sharing of services with voluntary and community organisations, by implementing the VAT exemptions in the EU Sixth VAT Directive Article 13 A (1) (f); this would remove the current disincentive to cost-sharing arrangements for these organisations.

We offer to work with councils and voluntary and community organisations to support this and other alternative ways of working together to help continue the important work that voluntary and community organisations do.

3. Our aim: to lower red-tape barriers to community engagement in using local assets more effectively and efficiently.

We ask for Government to avoid making detailed regulations and elaborating on the proposed community right to buy provisions in the Localism Bill; the intention of the law is clear, and detailed prescription about how to implement it

would place an unnecessary bureaucratic burden on councils and voluntary and community organisations; communities can be trusted to work out their own arrangements. We should also seize the opportunities emerging from community budgets to explore pooled assets as well as pooled budgets.

We offer to continue to support initiatives aimed at making the best use of public assets in communities; and to provide advice on key issues and good practice to support local areas to develop appropriate processes on the proposed community right to buy and neighbourhood planning provisions. We will continue to provide support for the first phase of community budget places and to other places that wish to adopt the model in the future.

4. Our aim: to help councils and voluntary and community groups make the best use of available funding.

Too often, relationships between councils and voluntary and community organisations – especially around commissioning and procurement – are damaged by the existence of centrally-imposed regulations which over-formalise the relationship, create transaction costs, and are widely felt to disqualify voluntary and community sector organisations from bidding for work.

We ask the Government not to add to the body of regulation and recognise that even well-meaning new regulations can have perverse effects.

We offer to, with the Government, continue to support quality commissioning through a third phase of the National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning, which aims to help increase the public sector's awareness and skills in commissioning services from voluntary organisations, as well as increase the capacity of third sector organisations who wish to develop their skills in this area. This will include myth-busting so that commissioners in councils have the confidence not to over-apply regulation.

5. Our aim: to provide more opportunities for people out of work to take part in local volunteering and service delivery opportunities.

We ask for Government to remove barriers to volunteering, in particular to allow local Jobcentre Plus advisers the flexibility to waive the requirements that bar those claiming job seekers allowance from volunteering for a specific period of time so that job seekers can pursue volunteering activity that will better prepare them for paid employment; and to cease scoring volunteers as economically inactive in unemployment statistics and recognise volunteering instead as valuable activity and an important part of an aspiration to caring, learning or earning.

We offer to continue to support the many councils that are extending the range of opportunities for local volunteers to share good practice and highlight the good work already underway by initiatives such as Slivers-of-Time, a social business that works with a number of councils to provide innovative ways to promote volunteering locally.

6. Our aim: to ensure that the Government's community organisers can successfully work alongside and in harmony with democratically-mandated local councillors.

We ask that the Government continue to ensure that the training provided to community organisers reflects the democratic context in which they will work.

We offer to work with Locality and the Office for Civil Society on behalf of councils to continue to support the many councils that are extending their range of opportunities for local volunteers, and to ensure the programme is well connected to the work of local councillors.

7. Our aim: better sharing and accessibility of meaningful information among agencies so that front-line staff can serve the public better.

We ask that Government continue to work with local government to reduce barriers to the sharing of data between front-line delivery organisations, including providing

guidance where necessary, as highlighted by the community budgets places.

We offer to continue to work on data-sharing within the ministerial group on community budgets, especially the work on sharing data currently underway.

8. Our aim: to use the Sustainable Communities Act to bring about change at a national level that enables innovative local sustainability initiatives.

We ask for continued commitment from Ministers and Whitehall officials to use the Act to decentralise power by listening to and implementing proposals from locally elected councillors and their residents and community groups, who are brimming with ideas to solve problems that affect people's everyday lives.

We offer to continue to champion innovative local ideas through the Local Government Association's role under the Act as selector and to support councils as they take action to implement the resulting changes.

Conclusion

Councils want to help build stronger, more empowered communities that play an active role in shaping local public services. Councillors are already working to make this happen, taking advantage of a local willingness to engage and a national agenda that sets out to move more power out of Whitehall.

Councillors are the democratic heart of their communities and must continue to play a leading role in shaping the future of their place with and for their residents. Councillors will build on their role as community leaders and must continue to be the means through which communities hold their local public services to account.

In challenging financial times, local authorities will need to redefine their role as deliverers of services and work closely with community and voluntary organisations to advocate a more preventative approach to complex social issues. Already, councils are looking to the future and reshaping their relationship with voluntary and community organisations to help not only deliver services better, but also to provide them differently, and with new focus, such as in Swindon's family work. This report has highlighted many examples of how councils are changing their practice and thinking to make this happen. By investing in innovative approaches and sharing experiences and good practice, councillors are acting as leaders in the public sector.

The Local Government Group will continue to promote, support and improve the work of councils and to work with national Government to address the barriers that can get in the way of councillors' work on behalf of their communities. We have outlined eight key asks to Government that will increase the pace of change on the ground and lead to more sustainable local outcomes.

There is a common ambition across the country to make the most of this opportunity for change. It may be called different things in different towns, boroughs, counties and cities, but at the heart of every policy lies the belief that local people hold the key to success, and that councils, through their local councillors, are at the centre of a new way of working on their behalf.



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