

double devolution:

the renewal of local
government

Edited by Geoff Mulgan and Fran Bury
of the Young Foundation

Deloitte.



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Neighbourhoods – the role and nature of the very local tier of governance

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Neighbourhoods – the role and nature of the very local tier of governance

Paul Hilder, Saffron James and Nicola Bacon

What is commonly missing from the debate about devolving powers to local government, and beyond that to neighbourhoods, is the citizen perspective. So far at least, the debate is overwhelmingly a top-down one, which tends to focus on the structures that are needed to empower communities and improve services. But what does devolution mean to real people who are trying to improve their communities or to tackle problems that affect their everyday lives? How can they imagine and engage with community or neighbourhood governance? What will they be able to do, and how?

What really matters

To answer these questions it is helpful to think about what is important to people and communities. At the top of the list is practical action. What matters most to people is being able to get things done to improve their quality of life, whether that means tackling antisocial behaviour, better street lighting, making sure that there is more for young people to do, more local nursery school places, or less rubbish on the street corner. The connections between politics, policy and public services are played out at the very local level where gaps and problems become pressing issues that affect people's sense of safety, security and belonging. And, it is at street level that practical action can have the most impact.

This suggests that structures are less important than practice in neighbourhoods. For frustrated mothers, disaffected teenagers or lonely pensioners, it doesn't matter whether the vehicle for change is a neighbourhood council, a parish councillor, a community trust or a neighbourhood management partnership, so long as their opinion is counted, their voice is heard at the right level and they see tangible results or, if not, get a reasonable explanation. While structures set the frame for action – enabling communities to engage with public authorities and service providers – they should be seen as a means to an end. The long-term vision of a new, localised future should not be imagined as a proliferation of new governance structures, but as a new relationship between citizens and the state, built on widespread participation, partnership and collaboration, and supported by an enabling and legitimate framework.

For citizens, this means new powers for people to make practical things happen in their neighbourhood – powers that are clearly communicated, easy to access and delivered in

a way that makes sense for the unique social, cultural, ethnic, religious and spatial configurations of different communities. Put simply: opportunities for people to influence decisions about the services they receive through participatory neighbourhood, community or parish planning; powers to tackle problems at a local level through partnerships between police, primary care trusts, schools and other bodies who can make things happen; rights to suggest improvements, ideas and initiatives where there are gaps or unsatisfactory services; and ways to shape local spending through delegated budgets.

In practice this means that people should be able to play a part in imagining and constructing a future for their communities – changing the way they react to the challenges, frustrations and possibilities of their everyday environment, as these visions of a new, localised future suggest.

What if...? Paths to a new, localised future

Irritated citizen: I think my local park could be much better. There's nothing for my eight-year-old, just a little playground for small children. I think there should be an area where dogs can't go and I don't understand why they keep planting all these boring flowers – some parks just look much better.

In the new, localised future: you send an email to your neighbourhood council. The neighbourhood council support team pass it on to the parks department and to your local community councillor. The parks department emails you back and sends you its plan for your park, asking whether you have any comments. The councillor replies and asks if you would like to be involved in the steering group. You say no (much too busy!) but you would like to be kept up to date. The park plan picks up on some things you want, but nothing about better planting. You have another thought about setting up a community garden in an overgrown corner where local people could get involved in gardening. It would be a great thing for the kids with learning disabilities who go to the centre down the road. A couple of months later, Groundwork contacts you to say it has been given a contract to develop community gardens throughout the area, would you like to talk to them about your ideas? You have become so enthused by the work you've done that you say yes.

Irritated citizen: There's nothing for older people in this area. I am really worried about my neighbour, who seems so lonely and depressed. I've got so worried I talked to the local pensioners' group, who say they are looking to see what could be done. They seemed great, but will anyone listen to them?

In the new, localised future: the pensioners' group, which is made up of local residents and has a strong tradition of advocating for people's entitlements, organises a petition of residents to ask their neighbourhood representatives to look at the issue. The petition of 1,000 signatures is easy to organise; the pensioners' group uses its local contacts. People in the area know this is a problem since the Age Concern day centre closed last year. The neighbourhood council responds by launching a local inquiry. This results in an action plan binding the primary care trust, local authority social services and the neighbourhood council together to take steps to resolve the issue. The local primary school becomes an important part of the solution – a spare Portakabin can be re-equipped as an older person's resource centre. Its users can tap into the school's IT, and many become volunteers at the nursery and helping older children with reading.

Evolution, not revolution

Is this vision unrealistic? At the moment, many people are disengaged from local democratic institutions, electoral turnout is low, and when services consult the public the response is far from overwhelming. A frequent response to debates about local accountability and new governance institutions is that apathy, disengagement and cynicism will make any new localism unworkable.

While there is profound disengagement from political processes and from local governance institutions, many small-scale examples do exist of people getting involved in running their neighbourhood. Some of these have been prompted by regeneration investment; others have emerged more organically, without state support. In most areas there is a small core of local activists who will step up to take part in new activities. Behind them stand many more people who want, in small ways, to become more involved in what happens in their neighbourhood and who could, if inspired and nurtured, contribute significantly to its governance. In 2005 half of the population volunteered at least once a month – equivalent to over 20 million people, a significant increase from 2001.³⁶

Many of the building blocks of this future can already be found in communities around the UK. Experiments in neighbourhood management in 250 different areas have shown how services and citizens can work better together, and from Wolverhampton to Lewisham, the process of reinvigorating the role of democratically elected representatives in leading such processes is under way.

36 Early results from the Home Office citizenship survey, 2005.

In Milton Keynes, neighbourhood councils work closely with their citizens, helping to tackle local problems and to shape the priorities of strategic councils, the police and other authorities, as do parish, town and village councils in rural areas. In Wiltshire, a lively community planning process is bringing local partnerships and elected representatives together to shape common visions and action plans (as well as organising events involving thousands of people at a time), and it has begun to influence service planning across the board.

We are starting to see how civil society can work collaboratively with the state, but equally can challenge it where necessary, operating through a combination of voluntary action and democratic representation. Significant value can be added by this kind of working, in limiting the costs of crime, poor environments and limited aspirations, but also in the more intangible dimensions of social cohesion, happiness and quality of life.

Over the past three decades, it is true that we have seen some failures, as well as the more successful devolution experiments. Baronial tactics, central government obstruction, failures to retain a centre or to mainstream neighbourhood activity, or over-large budgets have often been to blame. There are lessons to be learned here. Councils and local strategic partnerships should play a key role in creating minimum standards and a governance safety net for neighbourhoods to manage some of these risks.

In different neighbourhoods, the frameworks that evolve will combine elected councillors, local budgets, some influence over mainstream spending and services, officer support and partnership working. Neighbourhood charters could help establish ground rules, alongside better public information. Greater powers for community initiatives to be instigated through councillors or by petition will add a dynamic element of bottom-up proposal and challenge. However, citizens and local authorities should also have the opportunity to build stronger neighbourhood governance structures, ranging from recognised community forums or partnerships to more autonomous neighbourhood councils (next-generation parishes) that could be integrated with new model authorities and provide local community advocacy and engagement.

Representation of the interests of the whole community will always be best supported through participatory engagement, as in the best parish councils or neighbourhood management initiatives. Connecting shared space through neighbourhood hubs, civic media and the local public realm could help to underpin these developments. Finally, strengthening local strategic powers is crucial to neighbourhood empowerment: local decisions have to matter more for local engagement to grow.

Remember the citizen's perspective:

- The challenge is to bring local experience into larger processes of governance, not simply to replicate local government structures in neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood governance needs to be seen not as an arm of the state, but as a locally owned channel for influencing public priorities and a gathering point for collective voice, responsibility and action.
- A more flexible and less prescriptive approach to neighbourhood empowerment will create opportunities for very local governance arrangements to evolve over time, in line with communities' changing circumstances and developing capacities.
- Ultimately arrangements for neighbourhood governance will vary from place to place, reflecting the diversity and varying circumstances of communities. While we must recognise that not all neighbourhoods will need, or want, formal structures for community governance, there should be opportunities for all neighbourhoods with the appetite, need and capacity to take on new participatory and decision-making roles.