

# Municipal futures

How we might begin to think  
differently about local government

**LGiU**  
the local democracy think tank

**LGiU (Local Government Information Unit) is a think tank and membership association, with c200 local authorities and other organisations subscribing to its services. LGiU's mission is to strengthen local democracy to put citizens in control of their own lives, communities and services. LGiU is a registered charity run by its members for its members.**

**LGiU works with NDPBs, NGOs, and private and voluntary sector partners, as well as councils: providing briefings on emerging national and regional policy, publishing its own policy reports and recommendations, and seeking to influence decision-makers and policy teams locally, regionally and centrally.**

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## **Introduction**

**“We think it’s time to reclaim ‘municipal’ and to reframe it for the 21st century. Not just about cities but about relationships and flexible geographies.**

**Not just about physical infrastructure and grand buildings but about a social architecture, a civic infrastructure in which local government catalyses the collaboration of citizens, communities and institutions to work together for the public good.”**

# Introduction: municipal futures

Jonathan Carr-West, Chief Executive, LGiU

The word ‘municipal’ can have a rather dreary image these days. For too many people it is evocative of concrete, of multi storey car parks and of faceless, labyrinthine bureaucracy. Once, things were different. Once, municipal spoke of the civic pride of great cities; of education for the masses, of clean water and sanitation, the biggest increases in public health and life expectancy this country has ever seen.

We think it’s time to reclaim ‘municipal’ and to reframe it for the 21st century. Not just about cities but about relationships and flexible geographies. Not just about physical infrastructure and grand buildings but about a social architecture, a civic infrastructure in which local government catalyses the collaboration of citizens, communities and institutions to work together for the public good.

Last year, in *Connected localism*, we wrote that local government stands at a cross-roads: faced with a choice between reinvention and decline.

Twelve months on, while we have seen councils across the country continue to innovate in the commissioning and delivery of public services, the challenge remains as stark as ever. The most obvious element of this is the immediate fiscal outlook.

We know that local authorities are less than halfway through the total spending cuts they need to make. But

climbing this fiscal mountain needs to be seen in the context of the profound questions raised by longer-term challenges such as an ageing population, a fluid global economy, population movement, climate change, urbanisation and technological development.

Taken together these short-term fiscal pressures and long-term changes present a formidable set of obstacles. Over the past four years councils have responded to this challenge by focusing on efficiencies, on back office systems and on reducing head count. While this has been painful for the organisations involved it has largely protected frontline services, with the result that public satisfaction with local authorities has stood up remarkably well.

But by and large councils have now made most of the obvious savings; so there's a growing consensus that implementing further cuts, let alone meeting the long-term challenges, means doing public services differently: thinking both about service transformation and, especially, about demand reduction.

This has given rise to an important but increasingly familiar set of discussions about transformation and innovation. We all talk about things we know we need to do, such as: shared services; prevention, smarter commissioning; re-organisation; sub-regional growth agendas; greater financial freedoms; city deals and pooled budgets.

All of these things are important and they're all things the LGiU is working on with councils across the country. All of them are part of the answer to the question of where local services go next. All of them are a demonstration of the fact that it is local innovations rather than one size fits all national solutions that will drive real change in response to complex problems.

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It's a very welcome change that conversations among council leaders and chief executives now focus not just on cashable in-year savings but on big picture transformation. Though, as always, there is a danger that we talk about such things so much that the talking comes to substitute for doing them.

And of course there remain profound difficulties in implementing these sorts of policies.

The recent uncertainties over the future of the Better Care Fund illustrate the power of entrenched interests and hint at a deep scepticism within the Cabinet Office, shared by the Treasury, around any form of invest to save programme. Essentially, there is an anxiety that new demand will always emerge to take the place of the demand you are preventing and you end up spending on both prevention and cure.

These sorts of challenges can and will be overcome but they obscure a more fundamental question.

Do any of 'solutions' we are currently invested in actually meet the real challenges we have? How will our older people be cared for when there are a hundred times more of them? Will our children have the right skills for jobs that don't yet exist? How do we rebuild local economies in a changing global context? How do we manage local resources? How do we do all of this whilst spending less money?

There are, of course, many great ideas being developed in and around local government but the questions we must always ask ourselves are: Do these ideas meet the scale of the real challenge we face? Do they even lay a foundation to meeting this scale of challenge?

I would suggest that they do not and cannot as long as we see them as ways of refining and improving our current public service offer or as something that government (local

or national) can deliver. Instead, we need a process of wholesale transformation through networks of local innovation. This is what we mean by connected localism: connected across places, across services and across the public realm.

This demands a different approach to public services: a synaptic approach. Synaptic as in a network of connection, stimulation and catalyst. Synaptic as in the way the brain is formed of structures across which signals can be sent and actions triggered.

Synaptic public services are about councils shifting from doing things to making things happen. That sounds like a small difference but it's actually a fundamentally different approach.

It means thinking about the total asset base of a community and the value in social networks and civic energy. It means thinking about early intervention, not just in terms of invest to save but as building capacity and resilience. It means really considering how we structure incentives for action: for the market and, most importantly, for citizens. It means understanding the networks of social action already present in every community and aligning public services with them.

That's huge rethink of how we see the public realm and we're only at the beginning of understanding what it means in practice. We see some foreshadowing of it at the best edges of social innovation and in the best practice of local authorities acting as facilitators and hubs of local engagement. But inspiring as these examples can be, they remain the exception rather than the rule, marginal rather than central. They remain locked in innovation ghettos of local community action or fashionable web start-ups.

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For local authorities they are too often an addition to current services rather than a replacement for them.

We need to go much further than this.

Public agencies need to become the synaptic network across which “neurons” of social action can travel.

That means finding a new language to talk about local authorities: about what a council does and what it is.

We need to move away from the predominantly technical discussions about service transformation that currently dominate the debate and develop a new language of political vision: a vibrant narrative that captures the key characteristics of future local government (or governance) and that creates a shared space in which to debate our municipal futures.

The essays brought together here represent an attempt by the LGiU’s policy team to begin telling that sort of story.

They consider local authorities as relationship builders, community curators, power generators and as sites of adaptive, reflective leadership.

**Andrew Walker** argues that we need to stop thinking about decentralisation as a political project in which power is wrestled away from a grudging centre and re-think it as an emergent phenomena which recognises and develops the power that already exists in communities across the country.

**Josephine Suherman** looks at how councils need to take the best from the rest and become centres of adaptive leadership that are continually learning both from their own practice and also from that of other sectors; thus setting the scene for new and deeper forms of partnership.

**Ingrid Koehler** believes that councils need to focus more on building relationships. Both the relationships within communities that create wellbeing and allow mutual support

and the relationships between people in the council that enable employees to feel secure innovating.

Finally, **Lizzie Greenhalgh** challenges us to broaden our perspective and to think about localism in a global context. Issues like migration, climate change and economic growth are better managed, she claims, between cities and localities, than mediated by national governments.

We hope that these provocations will prove useful, but we're realistic about our ambitions. They are not intended as detailed policy programmes but, just as journalism is the first draft of history, we hope that these sorts of interventions can be a preliminary sketch of a new way of talking about local government that opens the way towards more detailed practical thinking.

These ideas are not offered as definitive solutions or even as confident predictions of what is going to happen, but they do attempt to describe a direction of travel and to offer a fresh, defamiliarised way of thinking about public service.

Most importantly, they're intended to start a conversation: a conversation with you our members and with the wider local government family. A conversation about what local government is and what it might be.

We look forward to seeing how the story develops.

## **The powerful council**

**“The reinvigoration of localism will rely on power developing in and flowing from the places and communities that councillors represent.”**

# The powerful council

Andrew Walker, Policy Researcher, LGiU

*Power is not a zero sum game, to be grudgingly devolved from the centre. Local government could be far more dynamic by nurturing and transmitting the power that emerges from within communities; the conduit through which power is shared between society and the state, rather than simply a deliverer of services.*

Devolution and decentralisation are destined to be important, if not decisive, elements of UK politics in the near future. Numerous politicians have claimed they are committed to localism over the years, but ultimately they have always maintained the traditional model of centralised governance.

This makes it almost impossible to harness the capacity and energy of citizens, to tap into the rich networks within communities, and to build services around the people that use them. If there is to be an effective shift that enables these things, then there needs to be radical change in how we think about power at the local level.

Democracy is a two-way street. Local leaders need to challenge the zero-sum model implied by decentralisation, whereby power is given away from the centre to the periphery. The reinvigoration of localism will rely on power developing in and flowing from the places and communities that councillors

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directly represent. This essay will outline a vision of councils asserting the power they already have by virtue of their proximity to citizens. It will also sketch out an alternative model, in which power is not a zero-sum game, but something that can be maintained and shared simultaneously, with mutual gains for both citizens and the state.

Peter Mair argued that the space for meaningful participation in national politics has shrunk over the past few decades, and has coincided with a weakening of the links between national parties and their traditional bases of support.<sup>1</sup>

The parties' role as representatives of citizens in government has diminished, Mair argues, as has their ability to respond to demands. The partnership between civil society and the state has weakened and politicians have taken up professional positions as representatives of the state.

During this time it has become a widespread opinion that, when it comes to making big decisions and running efficient public services, either experts or the market are most effective. Good quality services are too important to be left to democratic control by citizens, either directly or through the ballot box. In this context the argument that we need less democracy, not more is disturbingly widespread.<sup>2</sup>

Other than during the Schumpeterian competition for votes that takes place in general elections, citizens have a largely passive role to play. The result has been mutual disinterest and mistrust between politicians and citizens, between society and the state.

1 Mair, P. *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, 2013

2 Pettit, P. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, OUP, Oxford, 1999

Mair's argument is intriguing and he goes on to discuss how the opportunity for popular control or participation is reduced further when we look at the power of supranational institutions, such as the EU. It is a shame, however, that his analysis does not move in the other direction to encompass politics at the local level, where elected councillors have a very direct connection with the communities they represent and where the opportunity for interaction between citizens, society, and the state is far more meaningful. Such an analysis might just reveal a transformative potential in local government; a dynamic sphere of power shared throughout society.

Decentralisation, though a popular notion in recent years, has not actually resulted in a significant shift of power from central to local government. Vested interests have retained power in Westminster and Whitehall, vast budget cuts have stymied the capacity of local government to make decisions freely, and regulations continue to close down the space to shape its own destiny.

The referendum on Scottish independence this September is driving these arguments up the political agenda once again, and the issue is being compounded by the long term by economic imbalance between London and the rest of the country.<sup>3</sup> Whether Scotland votes to separate from the rest of the UK or not, tough questions are being asked about the relationship of local areas to Westminster and Whitehall.<sup>4</sup>

3 <http://www.neweconomics.org/blog/entry/Breaking-free-of-London-focused-growth>

4 Merrill, J 'Devolution in the North East? The possibility that Scotland will govern itself has re-invigorated those in the north of England who want more local powers' *The Independent*, Saturday 26 April 2014. Online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/an-independent-northeast-the-possibility-that-scotland-will-govern-itself-has-reinvigorated-those-in-the-north-of-england-who-want-more-local-powers-9292704.html>

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This renewed focus on localism opens up an opportunity for councillors. As the most direct connection the majority of citizens have with the state they already have a pivotal democratic role to play. The *Financial Times* noted recently that when Whitehall politicians talk about decentralisation they do so with a certain lack of imagination.<sup>5</sup> Why only discuss localism in the context of enterprise and tax-raising powers? Why not include greater freedom for local government to create holistic plans that include house building, education, energy transport, public health and so on, while providing the institutional support for it do so effectively?

These are all questions to which councillors could legitimately demand answers from central government, and their arguments could be reinforced by talking about power in a different way. Rather than conceiving of it as a purely zero-sum game, whereby gains for one party necessitate losses for another, it would be more constructive to see it as something that can be shared and maintained, with mutual gains for both.

Local government could be far more dynamic by nurturing and transmitting the power that emerges from within communities; the conduit through which power is shared between society and the state, rather than simply a deliverer of services.

There is a commonly held perception that central government is necessary to guarantee social justice because it oversees equitable distribution of resources and

5 Editorial 'Whitehall should set UK's cities free' *Financial Times*, Tuesday 8 April, 2014. Online: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/56d570ec-bf36-11e3-a4af-00144feabdc0.html>

services. But, as Ed Cox argues,<sup>6</sup> there is no convincing reason why central control is necessary for ensuring equanimity. Indeed, one could make the case that proximity and knowledge of local communities is essential for socially just services that actually meet the needs of users.

Councillors should turn the argument around and make plain to those in Whitehall that they are the ones delivering services, engaging communities, and making change happen on a daily basis. This means exercising that power, too. National government needs to reinvest in local capacities and to trust in decisions that are made locally, but it is crucial that councillors start to assert, and use, the power they draw from their proximity to citizens.

This relates to similar criticisms of localism, which highlight a lack of local capacity or expertise at the local level and argue that it increases the risk of poor services. But networks that tap into dispersed power are arguably more efficient at delivering services and eliminating waste than systems that rely on centrally-administered targets and outcomes. In fact, a culture of targets and metrics has undermined the ability of councils to respond to local needs, as well as limiting the access that citizens have to actually shape those services, driving the wedge further between state and society.

Another objection is summed up by the *The Economist's* warning that “many Britons may be too apathetic, too accustomed to dependence on the state and too lacking in democratic know-how to use any new power”.<sup>7</sup> It is possible

6 Cox, E ‘Decentralisation and Localism in England’ in Guy Lodge & Glenn Gottfried [eds] *Democracy in Britain: Essays in Honour of James Cornford*, pp.145-159, IPPR, London, 2014

7 ‘The Great Giveaway’ *The Economist*, 29 October, 2009.  
Online: <http://www.economist.com/node/14750203>

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that this is a widely-held view up and down the country and the increasingly low turnout in national and local elections may be a strong indicator here. However, surely councillors are in the best position to begin to turn this around as both representatives of local people and “ground troops of national parties”.<sup>8</sup> It is councillors, therefore, who have the capacity to engage with supposedly apathetic Britons, bringing a sense of vision, or collective purpose back to politics.

The challenge to councils must be acknowledged too. Local politicians also need to be prepared to adapt and to open up access to power. The pattern sketched out here of the council as an intermediary between local and national, and a conduit between citizens and the state, will hopefully be conducive to this task. Its role is precisely the reflective and responsive leadership that is required.

There could be a far grander vision for local government, in which its role is redefined as a locus of power through which citizens and the state can collaborate. If this is articulated clearly and put into practice in a meaningful way then it could help to navigate one of the more chronic political dilemmas by drawing society and the state together.

Councillors should confidently articulate their dual position as leaders and conduits of power, demanding more power from central government, and sharing it with citizens.

8 Gash, T. Randall, J. & Sims, S *Achieving Political Decentralisation: Lessons from 30 years of attempting to devolve political power in the UK* Institute for Government, p.7, London, 2014

## **The learning council**

**“To inhabit and move between different spaces seamlessly, as it must in this new enabling role, local government needs to incorporate into its DNA the best characteristics of its partners.”**

# The learning council

Josephine Suherman, Policy Researcher, LGiU

***Councils need to become learning organisations: constantly reflecting on their own practice and those of others. By becoming more efficient, more flexible, and more adaptive, the council of the future will be the ultimate shape-shifter.***

It's hardly news to anyone that the role of the council is transforming. The LGiU's collection of essays published last year, *Connected localism*, laid out in detail how a combination of rising demand and shrinking resources, new demographic and cultural pressures, and policy change leading to new responsibilities, have made transformation in local government both necessary and inevitable.

The collection spoke to the ways in which the sector's survival relies on combining a commitment to localism with genuine collaboration with all parts of the public realm. It recognised that in the future, local government will no longer be able to occupy the position of director, but must become a conductor and facilitator. It highlighted the importance of partnership working in achieving a truly connected localism.

This essay builds on the ideas in *Connected localism*, arguing that to equip itself to meet the challenges it faces, local government should go beyond partnership working

and learn how to become a little more like its private and voluntary sector partners.

To inhabit and move between different spaces seamlessly, as it must in this new enabling role, local government needs to incorporate into its DNA the best characteristics of its partners. Becoming more efficient, more flexible, and more adaptive, the council of the future will be the ultimate shape-shifter. It will be comfortable with approaching opportunities like a business, at ease with thinking like a charity, and equally happy inhabiting either world.

The council of the future risks inhabiting a reduced role, only delivering or commissioning the services it must by law. This is a future in which councils have failed to make the case for localism and greater devolution. This case rests in part on councils' ability to demonstrate that they inhabit the role of enabler naturally; that they can share and learn and collaborate to deliver a relevant, tailored service which takes the 'best from the rest' – the rest being not only other councils, but the private and voluntary sectors as well.

Set out below are a number of ways in which councils are already recognising a need to learn from the best of other sectors. Of course, all sectors can boast leaders who explode clichés about what it is to be a business or a charity; what follows is meant as a general framework for councils to understand new ways of thinking.

There is a pressure on councils to think more like businesses in tough times. They are required to deliver the same or better services to residents with less and less. The onus is on councils to think harder about ways to deliver value for money and efficiency, which requires a higher level of business nous than ever before. Councils have known this for a while and are already starting to think creatively about

how to use their unique position and resources for the benefit of residents.

**Councils are creating successful initiatives which then expand into other areas.** One example is the chain of Better public leisure centres. Better began life in 1993 as a few centres run by Greenwich Council under the Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) brand. Today it runs more than 115 centres across London and the South East under the Better brand, a large-scale social enterprise which, in expanding due to its success, behaves like any business worth its salt. When councils hit on a good and moreover original idea such as Better, they should export their model and their expertise, and muscle other less successful models out of the market. Interestingly, GLL and Better emerged from the necessity for spending cuts at Greenwich Council, demonstrating that there is opportunity in austerity.

**Councils have also been maximising their existing physical assets to generate income.** Often councils do not realise, in both senses of the word, the value of their existing assets. They have resources at their fingertips which could be working harder for them if they started to think a bit more like a business. For example, Chelmsford and Great Yarmouth councils have both undertaken major refurbishment projects to turn their dated town hall venues into state-of-the-art facilities. The council, local residents and local voluntary organisations benefit from beautiful new town halls – and the council can compete with other conference facilities and generate income by hiring the facilities out.

**Councils have spotted a gap in the market for a much-needed service and taken the initiative to fill it.** One example is Stoke-on-Trent Council, which has created a local energy company in its drive to become an energy self-

sufficient city. Stoke identified the need to reduce the city's dependence on external energy sources and, rather than cast around for companies that could address this need, it decided to create one itself. Supported by innovation charity Nesta, Stoke-on-Trent inhabited the role of creative entrepreneur and achieved energy independence.<sup>1</sup>

**One way that councils could be more like private businesses is in recognising that risk often comes before innovation.** Businesses cannot afford *not* to take risks. If they don't constantly innovate and improve, another company will come along, do it better, and render them irrelevant. Evidence can sometimes be a sticking point for local authorities. It goes without saying that no pilot or project should go ahead without sensible assessment of its impact and value, but we should not allow ourselves to become paralysed into inaction by the search for impossible levels of definitive evidence. Nor should failure necessarily be seen as a disaster or the death of an idea. The outcome of not acting could be much, much worse.

**Councils are also taking lessons from their voluntary sector partners.** They have a lot in common. Both sectors exist for the sole benefit of the groups they serve, and where they make a profit it is only to be reinvested to pursue the social goals at the heart of the organisations. Where in the past councils could think about their responsibilities in a linear way, as a straightforward transaction between the state which provides formal services and the citizen which receives them, in the future councils must adjust their thinking. Their responsibility is now to think holistically about the health and wellbeing of their residents and to think

1 Nesta, Creative Councils. Online:  
<http://www.nesta.org.uk/project/creative-councils>

about this as a joint endeavour. In this new role, the voluntary sector has much it can teach councils.

**Councils are increasingly delivering services that recognise the importance of prevention.** Voluntary sector organisations have long approached their role in a holistic way and, with their new responsibility for public health, councils must too. One example from an innovative council is the Be Active Birmingham Scheme, which offers free swimming, exercise classes or gym use, and some community activities, to all Birmingham residents. The scheme aims to tackle health inequalities and prevent chronic illness and 'lifestyle diseases', such as smoking, obesity and diabetes. The scheme proved to be a huge success: Birmingham found that access to free exercise increased people's likelihood to participate, hard-to-reach groups including women and ethnic minority communities engaged with the scheme, and demand for other lifestyle information such as smoking cessation and alcohol advice increased among participants.<sup>2</sup>

**Councils are also starting to incorporate a social value mission into their approach, which recognises their responsibility to consider the wider social implications of how they commission.** One example of a council learning from the way that the voluntary sector defines value is Knowsley. The council has set out social value criteria in every contract covered by the act and is aiming to give it a 10-20% weighting in the final assessment of bids. One of the organisations delivering social value is First Ark (Knowsley Housing Trust) which has an annual social as well

2 Community Links 'The Deciding Time: Prevent Today or Pay Tomorrow', 2012. Online: [http://www.community-links.org/uploads/documents/Deciding\\_Timefinal.pdf](http://www.community-links.org/uploads/documents/Deciding_Timefinal.pdf)

as financial audit.<sup>3</sup> Another example is Liverpool Council, whose Procurement Board ensures decisions have a positive impact on jobs and skills with rules favouring organisations with a smaller gap between the highest and lowest paid staff, social enterprises that put profits back into creating more jobs and firms that demonstrate clear local benefits.<sup>4</sup>

The examples above are just the beginning. Councils face an uphill battle on a number of issues now and in the future; only by recognising the fundamental transformation in outlook required will they have any chance of tackling them.

Of course, no one is claiming that the private and voluntary sectors are homogenous, or that there's not significant variations within sectors, or that any one sector has all the answers, but by learning from and applying new ways of thinking, which challenge traditional notions of public service activities and the 'character' of local government, councils will go some way to learning how to become the kind of flexible, adaptive organisations they need to be.

- 3 Winyard, P *Top tips on commissioning for social value*, NCV0, 2014. Online: <http://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2014/04/07/top-tips-on-commissioning-for-social-value/>
- 4 *50 Top Achievements by Labour Councils*, LGA, 2013. Online: <http://lgalabour.local.gov.uk/documents/330956/1072424/50+Top+Achievements+by+Labour+Councils/c66f20a4-05d8-4a9c-af88-1429f11b6100>

## **The social council**

**“From planning to housing to working with the voluntary sector, councils can choose to enhance the possibility of relationships or they can choose to ignore the impact of policy on how people connect and interact where they live and work.”**

# The social council

Ingrid Koehler, Senior Policy Researcher, LGiU

*Councils need to think less about service and more about relationships. Good relationships underpin individual wellbeing and community resilience. They are the key to real demand reduction and to better outcomes for everyone.*

Relationships matter. We all know that. We feel it. In our personal lives, good relationships fuel our happiness and success and poor ones sap our energy. The same can be said for communities and organisations and partnerships. Relationships impact every aspect of our lives, from a productive workplace that gives us a sense of accomplishment and pride to the sustaining friendships and connections in the place where we live.

## Relationships in communities

Well-connected communities are stronger communities. They're more resilient to change and negative impacts. They're more likely to cope well with natural disasters, such as flooding.<sup>1</sup> They're more likely to be able to support individual members with chronic illness, the natural hazards of aging and mental illness. Connected communities are built on individual relationships and there's much that

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councils can do to support those better relationships that national initiatives such as The Big Society have sometimes failed to do.

The idea of council matchmaking, as some Japanese authorities have done to encourage higher birth rates,<sup>2</sup> seems laughable to some. The very idea of a council picking our significant others sounds insane – though I'm sure my own council couldn't have done much worse selecting dates than I have myself on certain dismal occasions. These councils aren't picking mates, but instead working with third party organisations to encourage vibrant, sustainable communities. The third parties organize events for young singles, promoting the local area and waiting for the magic to happen. Local authorities are providing a platform for stronger relationships.

We develop social connections through propinquity – closeness of interest or location. Councils are very much the conveners and overseers of propinquity; children attend local schools, service users share common experiences, sporting teams form and are tested on grounds in local parks and mates meet over drinks in licensed public houses. From planning to housing to working with the voluntary sector, councils can choose to enhance the possibility of relationships or they can choose to ignore the impact of policy on how people connect and interact where they live and work.

- 1 'Unravelling the Complexities of Disaster Management: A Framework of Critical Social Infrastructure to Promote Population Health and Resilience', *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 93, pp.238-236, September 2013
- 2 <http://www.theguardian.com/local-government-network/2014/apr/16/japanese-local-authorities-matchmaker-low-birthrate>

For most areas of council provision, supporting relationships may be little more than thinking through things with relationships in mind.

Questions to be considered might include: Are we supporting community sport through park provision? Does this planning proposal include places for people to meet? Are we creating vast stretches of much needed housing without including things that 'make a neighbourhood' such as pubs and playing areas? Are we making it easy for people who can easily be isolated in their locality – from mothers of young children to busy commuters – to find and make friends?

Much of the propinquity-making in local government has a cost, even if marginal. There's some cost to information provision for local clubs and activities. It costs to provide space to parent and toddler groups. It certainly costs to maintain rugby pitches and bowling greens and wickets in public parks. It costs to run reading groups in libraries and even to keep libraries open.

But people who are passionate about their interests and the relationships they form around them can help with effort, skill and even money in keeping these things going. And in doing so, the bonds they make in the local community will be even stronger. The ties they have will be of friendship and of responsibility beyond paying council tax.

Which brings us to the most important aspect of any relationship – trust. Governments have been keen for decades to measure the level of trust citizens have in government, but very little effort has been made to find out how much people who work in government trust people.

Some of the reluctance to engage people in delivering services that were once the domain of public service

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employees has been because there's a deep distrust of the motives or ability of people to deliver those services.

The excuses range from health and safety to lack of skill to volunteers being 'unrepresentative' of communities. Certainly, it's not easy to organise volunteers and it requires a huge shift in thinking about what public services are there to do.

Almost a third of British adults are willing to spend at least a few hours a month<sup>3</sup> supporting public services and this does not take account of people wanting to help through other volunteering opportunities. People want to do more for their communities, but they need to be trusted and welcomed to do so.

Show me a council that doesn't want cleaner and greener and stronger communities. But many councils are now worried about being able to meet their statutory obligations, which makes it tempting to worry more about provision and less about community.

But this is a false economy. Most 'upper tier' councils spend much of their money on mandated social programmes. It's expensive to look after people. And, as we expect to have many more older people as a proportion of our population in the years to come and with families more spread out, we need to think much more creatively about relationships which are sustaining.

Loneliness and isolation are rising in the policy agenda, and rightly so. Some reports have suggested that loneliness is more damaging than smoking and isolation causes greater physical harm and poorer outcomes than lack of

3 *The Collaborative Citizen Report 2014*, Collaborate, 2014. Online: <http://www.collaboratei.com/media/8174/COLLABORATE%20-%20The%20Collaborative%20Citizen%20-%20Report%202014.pdf>

exercise and obesity.<sup>4</sup> Men in particular seem to benefit more from good relationships<sup>5</sup> and from social interaction – but all genders experience greater longevity and improved health with positive social connections.<sup>6</sup>

Too much care commissioning is based on ‘task and time’ and takes little account of the social interaction people need to feel well and valued. The answer is not necessarily to spend more money to give time for care workers to befriend, but to take account of people’s existing social networks, their families and friends and neighbours and to support people to tap into local communities strengthened by trust.

Social workers, too, need to come back into the system to do really social work, helping people to be part of someone’s care and wellness package. Some councils are already working to support this. Nottingham Circle connects over-50s and local volunteers. Casserole Club connects people who need some support with others who provide dinners for them. KeyRing connects those with learning disabilities and neighbourhood volunteers to help members contribute to their local neighbourhoods as well as providing social support.

These are not easy programmes to run, but they do a tremendous amount of good for ‘recipients’ and for volunteers who often feel they’ve gained more than they’ve given.

4 *Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review*, 2010. Online: <http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1000316>

5 ‘Stressful social relations and mortality: a prospective cohort study’, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, May 2014. Online: <http://jech.bmj.com/content/early/2014/04/02/jech-2013-203675>

6 ‘Social ties in health: a social neuroscience perspective’, *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*, June 2013. Online: <http://www.science-direct.com/science/article/pii/S0959438813000226>

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In each case volunteers are vetted and in some cases people have to undertake enhanced criminal records checks. While we do have to be cautious, the presumption should be one of trust. In my own local volunteering I've had to get checked because I work with children in an abusable position of trust as a coach, but common sense must prevail when it comes to supervised volunteering. For councils this requires a different approach to risk, yet research by the LGiU in 2011 found that eight out of 10 councils were unwilling to take more than a very low risk involving the community in the design and delivery of such services.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, there will always be room for the state in providing social care. We cannot expect families, friends and neighbours to always be up to the task. The most complicated cases of care need professional input. But councils actively need to provide space for people to care and connect.

### **Relationships inside councils**

*All happy councils are happy in the same way,  
all unhappy councils are unhappy in their own way.  
(with apologies to Leo Tolstoy)*

When I visit a public service organisation, I can usually tell, within a few moments, how effective it is, how happy its employees are. This may be a self-deception on my part, for I rarely visit an organisation without knowing something about it beforehand, but there is a certain feeling, an energy in reception that tells me if an organisation is functioning well.

Similarly there's a negative energy in councils that aren't

<sup>7</sup> Lucas, L, Thraves, L, Carr-West, J *Risk and Reward: local government and risk in the new public realm*, p.17, LGiU, 2011

effective and where employees don't work together well. There have always been organisations that are characterised by toxic relationships. This doesn't just have an effect on morale or staff retention, it has an overwhelming impact on performance. An Audit Commission report on corporate governance found that in all cases of high profile public failures it reviewed, such as the preventable deaths of children, bad relationships between staff and partners at the individual and corporate level featured strongly.<sup>8</sup>

Just as councils need to focus on relationships outside the council, so they need to look at relationships within the council and with professionals in key partnerships. For the same reason that people feel better with good connections, negative social interactions provoke feelings of stress that have a poor impact on work relationships.<sup>9</sup>

All councils are feeling financial strain, services are being cut and people are being made redundant. People under stress can act like rats in a sack. They can be closed, protective and even aggressive in defending their patch. It's precisely during times like these that we need to focus on good professional relationships and in valuing those who work well with colleagues, citizens and partners.

Employees who are well connected, share their learning and support their colleagues are the kind of people who are able to deliver positive relationships outside the councils and are more able to deliver and implement innovation. Middle managers, essentially service heads, are the people who

8 *Corporate Governance: Improvement and Trust in the Public Sector*, Audit Commission, 2003

9 'Social ties in health: a social neuroscience perspective', *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*, June 2013. Online: <http://www.science-direct.com/science/article/pii/S0959438813000226>

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deliver innovation and service transformation. It's been shown that without their engagement and drive, innovations are unlikely to succeed. A recent report from SOLACE showed that middle managers wanted to support innovation but needed to feel engaged and part of the vision; they needed positive and engaging two-way conversation with elected and appointed leaders in councils.

In some ways, councils are a difficult place to promote positive relationships. There is a natural political tension that is an organic result of the party system and contested democracy. So senior managers and councillors have a responsibility to ensure that these tensions don't impact on staff unduly or create strains between areas of the council that should be cooperating. Just as focusing on relationships in communities isn't necessarily about focusing on work, relationships within councils don't have to be about expensive team-building exercises – the best team building is through shared work objectives, project working across councils and partners and with communities.

### **Conclusion**

Good relationships matter. Councils can create spaces and opportunities for good relationships within communities that have impact across the widest spectrum of public objectives. Relationships inside councils matter, too – tremendously.

In both cases, good relationships rely on trust and on assessing the impact of our actions on relationships, asking the questions of whether our actions are supporting good relationships or harming them. This isn't touchy-feely nonsense. This is a hard-nosed and well-evidenced key success criteria, with a properly human slant.

## **The global council**

**“More flexible, open and nimble than the nation state – mayors and council leaders are increasingly proving the more effective global players. This is ‘connected localism’ but on a global scale. Our municipal futures will depend on it.”**

# The global council

Lizzie Greenhalgh, Policy Researcher, LGiU

***Councils need to start thinking of themselves as global players. Complex issues such as migration, climate change and economic development go beyond the capacity of the nation state and are better managed by localities and by networks of localities.***

The word ‘globalisation’ is used so frequently it can be hard to define what it really means. It refers to our ever more integrated global economy, to our increasingly multicultural societies, to the ways in which new technologies enable the ready flow of people and capital between different nation states.

It can also refer to the increasingly interconnected and complex problems we face.

We’ve typically sought to understand these issues through the nation state framework – and it would seem logical to assume the increasing irrelevance of the local, as we become ever more integrated within the global sphere. But I will highlight why this renders local leaders of the future more, rather than less, important.

Decades of gridlock and failure to address the complex, cross-border issues we face demonstrate the inability of the nation state to operate successfully within the global sphere. More flexible, open and nimble than the nation state –

mayors and council leaders are increasingly proving the more effective global players.

Frequently bypassing the nation state, local leaders are forging new collaborative, global relationships. From setting up new commercial trading relationships to cultural exchange programmes, from managing the effects of global migration to combatting global threats such as climate change, drug trafficking and terrorism, local leaders are delivering solutions and creating global alliances while nation states still struggle to square the ever greater insignificance of national sovereignty within today's interdependent landscape.

I will look at three issues: the global economy, global migration and climate change to explore why our municipal futures must increasingly be understood within the global context.

## **The global economy**

The shrinking regulatory role of the state, the opening of markets to foreign firms, privatisation and the emergence of new technologies mean that our economies are increasingly interconnected; characterised by multinational corporations and hypermobile capital.

As the role of national economic regulation is eroded, local economic strategies are becoming more important, not less, within our global economy.

Opportunities are plentiful. They include the chance to take advantage of new trade networks, to re-orientate the local economy towards exports, to bring in foreign direct investment and to attract global talent.

But there are also challenges. Cheap labour elsewhere in the world creates particular pressures on domestic

industries dependent on low-skilled workers. There are challenges in ensuring that the interests of multinationals align with the interests of the local community. There is a need to ensure integration of foreign workers within the community and a need to manage the inflationary impact that foreign capital can sometimes have within a region.

To compete successfully within the global economy, it will be crucial for local leaders to carve out a niche that makes the most of local strengths and assets giving them a global edge.<sup>1</sup> These policies cannot be prescribed at a national level, rather local leaders must design unique and distinct economic strategies that build on local networks and local strengths.

Local leaders have a number of levers to hand, which they can use to enhance their region's global competitiveness. They can enhance connectivity through investment in infrastructure – both physical and digital; they can prepare for future skills needs by shaping local education and training; they can drive innovation by supporting and incentivising industry clustering, and they can forge new trade and investment relationships.

We already see examples of civic leaders championing local economies within the global sphere.

For instance, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority has placed a strong emphasis on improving international trade relations; investing significantly in the city's transport links – including through the innovative 'Earn Back' mechanism – in order to enhance the city's connectivity. The city is also backing its sectoral strengths, supporting, for instance, MediaCityUK, an initiative which aims to confirm

1 Katz, B and Bradley, J *The Metropolitan Revolution*, Brooking Institution Press, USA, 2013

Manchester's status as the global hub for creative and digital sectors.

Elsewhere in the world, local leaders are also proving ambitious in their aspirations. Barcelona City Council, for instance, led the transformation of 494 acres of an old industrial area into a thriving urban community, channeling efforts into attracting intensive knowledge-based activities around five economic clusters.<sup>2</sup>

In this evolving global economy, trading goods, knowledge and innovations between different localities will become increasingly important. Urban theorist Saskia Sassen foresees “a transnational network of cities”,<sup>3</sup> but we can broaden this vision to capture the role actors such as Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs), combined authorities and even non-metropolitan areas play within the sphere.

But as local leaders become more empowered and assertive within the global economy, what role does this leave for the nation state? As local economies become the central determinant to our nation's role within the global economy, continued central government interference will prove increasingly unjustifiable. Local economies must be set free.

## **Global migration**

Local leaders in the future must be at the forefront of debates regarding global migration. While typically we have sought to understand global migration through the nation

2 For more information about the project 22@Barcelona, see the website: <http://www.22barcelona.com>

3 Sassen, S 'The Global City: Introducing a concept', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol.1.1, No.2, pp.27-43, 2005

state framework, this overlooks the fact that the effects of immigration are frequently felt locally rather than nationally.

As place shapers, local authorities play a central role in determining how we understand and perceive the impacts of immigration. National policy, by contrast, proves unable to understand the nuances of the unique and specific needs of differing communities and immigrant populations.

Managed effectively, immigration can prove valuable to a community. High-skilled immigrants can bring expertise and knowledge to the local economy, while lower-skilled immigrants can help address recruitment problems with jobs less favoured by locals. Alongside boosting the local economy, immigration can also enhance the diversity of the local culture, bringing new ideas and new experiences. Immigrants offer access to transnational social and business networks, enabling the community to tap into the global economic, social and political opportunities.

With such advantages come significant challenges. Local authorities must plan public service provision to meet increases in demand. They must encourage integration through adequate provision of community spaces, good transport and well-designed housing policies. Municipal leaders must also seek to manage the effects on the local economy, sufficiently supporting any losers within the local job market and ensuring that immigrants' labour rights are upheld. As the provider of many frontline services, local authorities must also be aware of the criminal and exploitative dimensions of global migration, such as illegal immigration and human trafficking.

The nuances of this debate highlight why local leaders must be central to our future discussion of global migration. Some have even called for immigration policy to be

determined locally. Tony Travers, for instance, has suggested that London merits special treatment because of how critical immigration is to its economy;<sup>4</sup> an idea similarly put forward by the Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, who called for 50,000 visas for skilled immigrants to move to Detroit.<sup>5</sup>

Prompting controversy, New Haven, Connecticut went and in part did this, providing the Elm City Resident Card to undocumented residents.<sup>6</sup> This won't be right for every authority, but it does show the importance of a local response.

Furthermore, local leaders are sharing ideas and learning from one another in order to enhance their approaches. United Cities Local Government (UCLG), for instance, is supporting the South Mediterranean initiative between 10 cities to support city-to-city cooperation. The cities were ill-prepared to deal with recent increases in migrants, but the programme aims to share practices through networks of local innovation to develop common standards and promote solutions.<sup>7</sup>

- 4 Travers, T 'London merits special treatment on immigration', *Evening Standard*, 2013. Online: <http://www.standard.co.uk/comment/tony-travers-london-merits-special-treatment-on-immigration-8949005.html>
- 5 Litcherman, J 'Michigan governor urges 50,000 visas for skilled Detroit immigrants', Reuters, 2014. Online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/23/us-usa-detroit-immigration-idUSBREA0M1P120140123>
- 6 The card serves as a form of identification, a debit card with a capacity of \$150, a library card and a way to pay for parking meters. The card aims to promote integration and financial independence. More information about the card can be found on the City of New Haven's website: <http://www.cityofnewhaven.com/csa/newhavenresidents/>
- 7 To find out more about this project, see the UCLG website: <http://www.uclg.org/en/issues/migration>

Polarised rhetoric and hostile discourse may work at a national level but civic leaders know that a far more pragmatic, collaborative and localised response is required if we are to manage global migration effectively in the future.

## **Our shared environment**

Our global interdependence extends beyond the economic, social and cultural ties we share. We are also united by the common global threats we face; threats which can only be solved through a coherent and cooperative approach.

Such security risks include terrorism, drug trafficking, nuclear threats, and perhaps most significant of all, climate change. Yet in each of these instances, despite the potentially catastrophic consequences, we find international dialogue stagnant. But while nations' states dither, local leaders across the UK and the globe are taking action.<sup>8</sup>

Taking climate change as an example, we see a host of innovative local responses to this global problem. In Bristol, for instance, carbon emissions have dropped since 2005 despite the economy growing.

The city council has set ambitious targets to reduce energy use by 30% and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 40% by 2020 and 80% by 2050. Aims include doubling the number of cyclists by 2020 and using smart technology to support electric vehicle infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>

8 For further discussion, see, for instance: Barber, B *If Mayors Ruled the World*, Yale University Press, USA, 2013

9 These targets are set against the 2005 baseline. Bristol was declared European Green Capital of the Year. More information is available here: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/winning-cities/2015-bristol/index.html>

Driving innovation within the industry marks another important way in which local leaders are at the forefront of combatting climate change. The Humber LEP, for instance, has identified renewable energy as a priority, with the region home to the Humber Gateway offshore wind farm.

Further inspiration lies beyond our borders. Seoul, for instance, has set up an online 'eco mileage system'. Households can track their energy usage – those with good energy savings are incentivised to drive further reductions by gaining points which can be exchanged for LED lights and energy saving taps among other options. Membership has surpassed one million, with more than 10% of users receiving incentive points for energy reduction.<sup>10</sup>

But to combat climate change successfully, we will need to work together and this is where the real distinction between local leaders and heads of state emerges. Across the globe, we see localities collaborating. The viral nature of city bike schemes, for instance, demonstrates the agility of civic leaders to learn from one another and react. Networks such as C40 Cities and World Mayors Council on Climate Change, as well as the UCLG, facilitate such discussions and opportunities to learn from one another.

As political theorist Benjamin Barber notes, such work can be "too easily overlooked because it is voluntary and cooperative",<sup>11</sup> rather than a formal state treaty, but its impact must not be underestimated. We see connected localism happening on a global scale.

10 'Seoul's Eco Mileage System wins 2013 UN Public Service Award', C40, 2013. Online: [http://www.c40.org/blog\\_posts/seoul's-eco-mileage-system-wins-2013-un-public-service-award](http://www.c40.org/blog_posts/seoul's-eco-mileage-system-wins-2013-un-public-service-award)

11 Barber, *B If Mayors Ruled the World*, p.117, Yale University Press, USA, 2013

## **Conclusion: a global connected localism?**

New technologies have changed the boundaries of the public realm. Our world is increasingly interconnected – connected through our integrated economies, through the global movement of people, through our shared cultural and social networks and our shared global problems.

An intuitive assumption therefore might be that the local neighbourhood within this context is increasingly insignificant. But instead what we see is the growing prominence of the local leader in today's interdependent landscape and the diminishing role of the nation state, unable to adapt to the growing irrelevance of its national borders and learn to cooperate.

Our interdependence demands such cooperation. In this essay, I sketch out the beginnings of what this might look like; a world where local leaders – more pragmatic and agile – are at the forefront of global discourse, taking advantage of the opportunities presented by our ever more interconnected world, while also sharing lessons and collaborating in order to learn how to mitigate its disadvantages.

## **Conclusion**

**“Shared power, mutual responsibilities and strong, supportive relationships, that’s how we begin to redefine municipalism for the 21st century.”**

# Conclusion: where do we go from here?

Jonathan Carr-West, Chief Executive, LGiU

This is connected localism, but on a global scale. Our municipal futures will depend on it.

*The world is but a perennial see-saw... Constancy itself is nothing but a more languid rocking to and fro*

– Michel de Montaigne, On Repentance

Imagine all of this was true. Imagine a world in which councils were really at the heart of global municipal networks, in which they were not dependent on powers and budgets delegated from central government but were able to develop and share power with their own citizens and to raise and spend money locally. A world in which the relationship between local government and local citizens is mediated not by a set of public service transactions but by a genuine dialogue about how they might support each other. A world in which councils were focused on building strong resilient communities rather than just on picking up the pieces when things go wrong.

It's a vision that makes our current debates about 'decentralisation' look hopelessly impoverished. But what would such a world be like?

It would be a world with many opportunities, but with challenges of its own. There would be a clear challenge to the role of the nation state.

Central government would be less all-pervasive, as many of the activities it has hoarded to itself began to happen elsewhere. National government would do less, but it would thereby be able to do better the things that only it can do. That's why power is not a zero sum game. Increased focus and clarity of purpose creates more power through sharing power.

A similar dynamic applies at local level. Communities and citizens would have the opportunity for public services that are responsive to their needs, adaptive and rooted in real social connections, but they would have to play their part in producing these services and in managing their lives and helping manage the lives of their friends, family and neighbours to build resilience and mitigate the demand for acute service interventions.

Shared power, mutual responsibilities and strong, supportive relationships, that's how we begin to redefine municipalism for the 21st century.

It's hard to imagine such a world, but it's not impossible.

As these essays demonstrate, elements of this future are emerging already in councils up and down the country and across the world. Innovation, albeit born of crisis, is an increasingly familiar part of the local government scene.

What we need now is to go further and faster, to scale up and to systematise.

No one is pretending that's not hugely challenging. This collection is unashamedly utopian: an evocation of what local government could be rather than a prediction of what it will be, or a plan for how to achieve it.

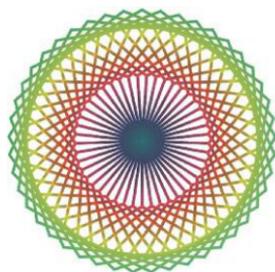
Clearly we need a road map (or a set of road maps) that takes us from the current isolated pockets of innovation to this new vision of municipal futures.

## CONCLUSION

That's a huge task and one that comes with no guarantee of success, but it is the real task we face. The big changes we pointed to at the beginning of this pamphlet – ageing populations, climate change, a mobile global economy – are not going away. We do not always know how things change but change itself is the one constant we can be sure of. We cannot then simply stop the world and get off.

So, charting routes to our new municipal futures must be attempted. That's not something that one organisation, party or sector can achieve. As we see from the essays above, it must be a collaborative project that engages people and agencies across society, and indeed across the world. It is a project that must be simultaneously local and cosmopolitan. A project that must engage with grand visions but also with the realities and constraints of service delivery.

At the LGiU we look forward to being part of this project with local government and with its partners; a journey we continue on with curiosity, with some trepidation, but most of all with excitement about the municipal futures we can all achieve together.



**This collection of essays rethinks municipalism for the 21st century. Not just about cities but about relationships and flexible geographies. Not just about physical infrastructure and grand buildings but about a social architecture, a civic infrastructure in which local government catalyses the collaboration of citizens, communities and institutions to work together for the public good.**

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