Public Health: What's in store for councils?

The Big Society Issue

The C'llr Interview

Decentralisation Minister Greg Clark

Public Health: What's in store for councils?
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Local Government Information Unit
22 Upper Woburn Place
London WC1H 0TB
020 7554 2800
cllr@lgiu.org.uk

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THE FIRST WORD

REMEMBER WHEN...

...there was a lot less fuss about how many university places were up for grabs. There was a time when youngsters were happy to sign-up for a traditional apprenticeship and enjoy their special graduation ceremonies. This was at a Watneys brewery, which explains a lot about the beer!

In this issue of c’llr

Another celebrity cover! The man with the slightly puzzled look is none other than Phil Redmond, creator of Brookside and Grange Hill. He’s pictured at the event in Liverpool held to launch the Big Society. In his blog in the Liverpool Daily Post, Redmond pondered on how “a natural red, not a blue, end up being Tour Guide to the Big Society band wagon?”. It was, he said, because someone at No 10 had seen him “mouthing off about it all. My basic point was simple. If the core idea is really about giving permission to allow the public to take more control of their lives, cut back bureaucracy and let people sort out their own problems; then the best place to test it was not on television or in Westminster debates, nor in leafy Tory controlled communities, but in the socialist heartlands of Merseyside.”

There followed some misunderstanding where the PM said he liked Redmond’s idea to run museums with volunteers. Redmond said that’s not what he said, but he had worked with staff and unions to promote volunteering.

It shouldn’t be surprising that misunderstandings cropped up at the launch of the Big Society. The idea that looked like it would be a centre piece of the election campaign drifted out of sight; now it’s back in the news and on the lips of almost every minister. But it’s a fair bet that most people still don’t really know what it is: a genuine attempt to devolve power to the people, or cover for cuts?

We’ve tried to get to grips with the Big Society in our feature in this issue. We’ve got a range of thoughts on what it is and what it isn’t, how councils and councillors should respond, how it will affect the voluntary sector and what the Big Society Network is aiming to do. And there’s a look back in history to see if we’ve been here before.

And, we have an interview with a minister who holds the Big Society close to his heart – decentralisation minister Greg Clarke.

Elsewhere in this issue, we look at the implications for councils of the proposals on public health and consider the discussion paper on the natural environment.

REALITY CHECK

I suspect that 2010 will go down in the history books as the best year for blackberries since records began. As a semi-rural dweller, I’m of course referring to the jet black brambles, rather than the omnipresent BlackBerries, which were only invented in 1999, and have spread worldwide more quickly than the shoots that sprout from the wild variety.

As my contribution to the Slow Food Movement I’m fortunate to be able to pick my annual quota within a 50 yard radius of home. This year, in a couple of hours, I’d bagged sufficient fruit to produce 13lbs of blackberry cheese. If rain hadn’t stopped play I’d have probably run out of jam jars.

Of course, it helps to live next to a semi-derelict graveyard which the blackberries have been colonising since the Council took over maintenance. And therein lies a conflict. My Swedish neighbour Agnietta thinks it disrespectful to collect Nature’s fruits from the graveyard, whereas I find it poignant that neglected, ornately carved and ivy-clad headstones which tower at a variety of angles over graves, proffer fruit from below that produces jam sans rivale.

Whilst all the graves volunteer berries of varying distinction, the fattest, juiciest and firmest sprout from a plot, which according to the inscription was last topped up by 24 year-old Mary, wife of Albert Sykes of Tintwistle in 1886.

The sweet irony of this for me is that it was a namesake of Mary’s husband who asked me a question, etched on my mind since 1981.

“As a newly elected councillor, can you tell me the position on mountain sheep?”

Neither he, nor seemingly others round the table, who were already aware he was involved with a constituent seeking compensation for damage to his front wing sustained in a collision with a lamb, noticed the double entendre in the question.

“As a newly elected councillor, can you tell me the position on mountain sheep?”

So as I collect my blackberries and listen to the tweeting and twittering in the sky I still fondly ponder the answers I could have given.

Unfortunately, the best responses are not appropriate for a magazine of this respectability, but if you see me in a bar sometime a pint could unzip my lips.

Dave Wilcox is chair of the LGIU
Tough choices need political decisions

A journalist called me recently asking for comment on the curious case of the ex council chief executive who said he was prevented from saving hundreds of millions of pounds in council budgets. Peter Gilroy, who spent six years at Kent County Council, knew that he would create a stir by saying on TV that politics was the obstacle to making savings, and that there is a “lack of political courage”.

It won’t surprise readers of c’llr to know that I took to the airwaves to say that politics, and the role of elected councillors, is part of the solution, not the problem. Now, even more than ever, local communities will face tough choices. There is no doubt a top down and managerial approach could create significant savings, and councils will want to look at these options. But where changes impact on the public, there should be clear political accountability for them.

Where changes impact on the public, there should be clear political accountability for them.

If a councillor said to the voters “don’t blame me, blame the chief executive” they would surely get short shrift. That doesn’t mean though that councillors shouldn’t act on the advice they receive and the ideas they hear from officers, whether it’s the chief executive or front line workers.

Transforming services over the next few years will require the council to come together with the community. This is the unique role that councillors play, and whatever frustrations council officers may feel from time to time, they should always respect the democratic process. Andy Sawford is LGIu’s chief executive

His comments raised the hackles of some chief executives and some leaders, but could the idea work? Local government eyes are looking towards Rugby for clues. Rugby has been in the headlines over the past couple of months for its decision not to replace the departed chief executive. C’llr asked Rugby’s leader Craig Humphrey to tell us how things were working out.

“It’s too early to comment fully on how our new arrangements are working out, but I think there are things that other authorities can learn from us.

“Over the past few months the system has worked well. I have attended to the political side of things while the technical side of running the council has been left to officers. We have a protocol between councillors and directors to direct our work and our actions.

“Contrary to some of the headlines, I have not become the chief executive. But I have taken a more hands-on role in the running of the authority, supported by two executive directors.

“Our new arrangements were put in place as an interim measure. Our chief executive had left and we were anticipating a move towards a shared chief executive with Nuneaton and Bedworth BC, eventually leading to a shared management team and back office.

“However, following the local elections, the new administration at Nuneaton and Bedworth decided against a formal union with Rugby. Therefore, we made the changes permanent at the end of July.

“While some elements of the roles of leader and chief executive are distinct and separate, there are also areas of considerable overlap. One of those areas is being a representative and advocate for the council and its interests at county, sub-regional, regional and national level. It is in this area that I shall be looking to increase my involvement.

“The role of leading and managing the workforce, including the role of head of paid service, will remain with the two executive directors.

“I will also be spending an increasing amount of time in helping to set and lead the council’s strategic aims and long term plans. Making these happen will require good teamwork. It will demand a close working relationship with the two executive directors and a deep knowledge of the council as an organisation.

“However, I know that I lead a council with a strong tradition for innovation and flexibility. Up and down the country councils and the public sector at large are being asked to deliver more with fewer resources. The departure of our chief executive left us with a problem but at the same time an opportunity. We might be one of the first councils to restructure its management arrangements without a chief executive but I am sure we will not be the last. We need to squeeze every penny of value out of every pound handed over to us in taxation, it is more difficult for small authorities to absorb costs and cuts together but I remain confident that here in Rugby we will keep our eye on the ball.”

ANDY SAWFORD

TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE?

“Where you have chief executives and elected leaders responsible for the same thing, it’s both expensive and pointless.” So said Eric Pickles at the LGA conference.
I is for Integrated Inspection, one of the core components intended to distinguish Comprehensive Area Assessment from previous inspection regimes. But it didn’t. With two-thirds of inspectors surveyed by Ipsos MORI agreeing “we didn’t come across to assessed bodies as a joined-up team”, they at least can hardly have been surprised by CAA’s fate and their own redeployment.

On to more interesting matters: Islands. Born within flooding distance of what is today England’s third most populous island – Roman-settled and much regenerated Canvey in the Thames Estuary – I’m fascinated by these infinitely varied land features and their predisposition towards Independent politics.

Anywhere else in Europe, the 40,000 Essex islanders would have their own local government. But Canvey’s was effectively lost in 1974, when the urban district council and its name were merged into Castle Point – a meaningless coupling of Hadleigh Castle, uninhabited since the 16th Century, and the equally empty saltmarsh, Canvey Point.

It’s a politically discordant coupling too. With 25 of 41 seats, the Conservatives control Castle Point BC, the sole opposition party – I use the adjective advisedly – being the Canvey Island Independents, with 16 of the island’s 17 seats, plus control of CI Town Council. This summer’s skirmish has been over the inaptly named Concord Beach paddling pool, fingered for demolition by the Borough but rescued by the Town Council, at least for the season.

England’s geographically largest island is the Isle of Wight, where Independents also constitute the main opposition to the Conservatives. They don’t form an IoW Independent Party per se, but they surely would if, as in the 1880s and 1970s, a Hampshire takeover were threatened.

Indeed, a OneWight campaign is already fiercely challenging government plans to split the island’s single, but enormous, parliamentary constituency in the name of representational equality. Few decisions would be more dismissive of local opinion, but, were it to happen, one of the ‘mainland’ constituencies into which hived-off voters could be absorbed might actually be an island seat itself. It’s the pub quiz question: England’s most populous island is Portsea, within and comprising a large part of our only island city, Portsmouth.

Since becoming unitary, Portsmouth has had not one Independent councillor, but, as a substantially island authority, it is an exception that proves a strong tendency, if not a rule. Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles, Arran, Bute, Anglesey, Portland, Barrow, Scilly, Channel Islands: all emphasise their localism by electing Independents. Good for them!

As the spending cuts begin to take their toll across the UK where exactly does the coalition’s regional policy sit and how does local government fit in? In theory the new mantra of localism means a greater role for local government in developing policies to attract inward investment. Indeed CLG ministers believe that allowing councils and businesses to plan their own local economic areas, or Local Enterprise Partnerships, makes more sense than having the government impose structures from above. In practice there are fears the new LEPs could be too much of a patchwork quilt.

While the word “regions” may have been banned in the CLG corridors of power it does not necessarily mean policy for the regions has ceased to be. Indeed the LEPs have been introduced with great speed.

There is a powerful reason for such haste. Economic surveys continue to show regions in the Midlands and North still heavily dependent on public sector jobs and as we know these are diminishing at speed.

While it was clear the RDAs would not survive in their present form under this government, there was still a view back in May that some, principally those in the Midlands and North, would carry on albeit with different name and focus. Their abolition, while causing few tears in local government, nonetheless creates a vacuum. The new regional growth fund has been set up partly to fill it, but with half the budget of the outgoing RDAs. The main engine for regional growth therefore lies with the new LEPs, whose first 56 bids were announced in September.

The LEPs in principle meet the new mantra of localism and must be welcomed for being locally sourced rather than being imposed. In some areas, especially the city regions like Leeds and strong inter-county partnerships like Essex and Kent, they will fit easily on already established networks.

Many, however, are based on existing council boundaries which hardly suggests much strategic thought while there are also early fears that there will be so many LEPs they will still require a regional body to coordinate them. In the North East for example five LEP bids have been submitted covering 12 council areas and there are a number reflecting single county boundaries.

Regional policy is littered with failed attempts to knit business, the public sector and skills more tightly together in order to attract inward private sector investment. What we do not need, as the regions face a downturn in public sector funding, is weak talking shops with neither focus nor funding.

Michael Burton is editor of The MJ (Municipal Journal)
Sometimes the summer months provide a brief respite from the whirl of politics, local and national, but not this year. The General Election has been followed by a frenzy of activity and announcements from the new coalition government. Here at the LGiU our team has been busy keeping our member councils up to speed and ahead of the game. Our activities, including briefings, seminars, speeches and pamphlets, blogging and media comment, have focused on the big changes that are taking place. In Parliament and government we’ve been in touch with the key players, ranging from Ministers and officials in Whitehall, to new MPs and those in key positions, such as Select Committees.

The first Bill off the blocks by the new government was the Academies Bill, that was passed in record time. As well as our regular briefings the LGiU’s education experts have written a guide to the Bill and its implications for local government which is available from the LGiU website. There will also be an Education and Children’s Bill to take forward the coalition policies on reform of the curriculum and inspection. The Bill is also part of Michael Gove’s approach as Education Secretary to give councils more ‘freedom’. This includes not only the ‘free schools’ but a wider approach to make schools more independent. Our survey of councillors shows that the overwhelming majority of you believe that schools and councils should be connected because schools are part of the community in which they are located.

We are now in the build-up to a series of other major pieces of legislation such as changes in healthcare and in welfare but perhaps the most talked about changes are in the Localism and Decentralisation Bill. This will undoubtedly shift the balance of power between local and central government. It includes the important new Power of General Competence, a more sweeping version of the Power of Wellbeing. The LGiU’s legal eagles have been looking at what the new powers mean and how councils can use them. Taken together with the removal of ringfencing and the end of inspection by the Audit Commission, Eric Pickles is making good on the promise to set councils free.

These changes should be a cause for celebration in local government, yet the response has been subdued. At a time of unprecedented public spending reductions, councils might be forgiven for thinking of a line from the Kris Kristofferson song Me and Bobby Megee: “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose”. The mood though should be more upbeat. There may be tough times ahead, but councils know that they must grasp the nettle.

I’ve visited many different local authorities and talked to hundreds of councillors and officers during the summer and I sense a real determination to make the best of the current situation. Less Whitehall interference will clearly help, because councils can determine locally what the priorities are. In addition, the Big Society concept has created a positive way of looking at the opportunity to engage the public in a new way in their communities and the decisions that affect them. There are cynics of course, who think that the Big Society doesn’t amount to much. The truth is that it will require vision and leadership in communities, particularly from councillors, to make it happen. It reflects a second wave of devolution from the Town Hall to communities, building on some of your existing good practice, and engaging communities in new ways, such as in the provision of services. This is why we have launched our Big Society Learning Network for councils, and published ‘People, Places and Power’, a free pamphlet exploring the current political context.

The deficit, localism and the Big Society form what I think of as an interrelated set of challenges and opportunities. Our role at the LGiU is to help councillors make the most of them. As ever I would welcome your questions, feedback and input.

Go to the LGiU’s website for more information on what we’ve been doing and for links to briefings and publications.
Big Society – not such big news

To put it at its most positive, not to say most polite, the media jury is out on the merits of the Big Society, writes David Brindle. “This is a serious idea obscured by a childlike name,” says The Times, “a Kennedy speech rewritten by George Bush.” Ouch.

Commentators and PR experts are baffled by David Cameron’s failure to sell the concept more convincingly. The usually slick Tory leader, with – let us not forget – a background in marketing, has appeared incapable of coming up with tangible ideas that people can relate to and media can develop. In the Daily Mirror, columnist Brian Reade described the Big Society launch in Liverpool as “waffle doused in honey and baked to perfection”.

Granted, the Mirror isn’t likely to be a cheerleader for the plan. But analysis of all coverage of that Liverpool event by Kantar Media Intelligence, reported by PR Week, suggested that only 26 per cent was positive, 31 per cent neutral and 43 per cent negative. The proposal for a Big Society Bank, using funds from dormant bank accounts, was “largely the only part to be reported positively”, PR Week said. Note that the bank was a concrete idea, if one that was inherited from the Labour government.

Some national newspapers have expressed their disdain for the whole Big Society enterprise by ignoring it. In the four months after the general election, the concept was discussed in 227 articles in The Times and 200 in the Guardian, but only 92 in the Independent and 28 in the Daily Mail. Far be it from me to suggest that the Daily Telegraph may have banned the term altogether, but the words “Big Society” appear to have featured not once in its pages in all that time.

For those papers that have deigned to discuss the Big Society, it seems to be an infinitely malleable notion that can be adapted for any audience and any occasion. Perhaps that’s its appeal, as well as its weakness.

To the Daily Express (33 articles in the four months, incidentally), the vision is represented in “teens on national service”, or, to be rather more accurate, the National Citizen Service pilot schemes by which 16-year-olds may volunteer for eight-week community work placements. “The prime minister has put the plans at the heart of his Big Society agenda,” the Express asserted.

The Mail, meanwhile, sees so-called “free schools” as “the first measure in a ‘big society’ programme”. For good measure, it has also applied the brand to the crackdown on street clutter by communities secretary Eric Pickles. But the Sun (36 articles), loyal to Cameron but seemingly struggling to make his big idea come alive for its readers, has resorted to attaching the label to entrants in its own Sun Wondermum competition. “When David Cameron talks of creating a Big Society,” it said, “these brilliant parents will be at the centre of it.”

How about sport? Well, why not? “Owned wholly by its supporters … and staffed by 250 unpaid volunteers, AFC Wimbledon can be seen as ‘the big society’ in action,” said the Guardian of the south London football club set up by fans. Wonderful mums, wonderful Wimbledon, wonderful Big Society.

In the absence of clarity from the politicians, the media can’t be blamed for trying to find their own pegs on which to hang the nebulous Big Society tag. But leaving the definition so ill-defined risks it being tainted by unfortunate associations.

Cue the good folk of Shitterton, in Dorset. For reasons one can only guess at, people kept pinching the village name signs. By means of a whip-round, the villagers raised £680 to pay for a weighty stone on which the name is now inscribed. Hey presto, petty crime problem solved. “This is a good example of what David Cameron means by the Big Society,” Shitterton parish council chairman Ian Ventham said in the Daily Star (five articles in four months). “I am not sure if he is thinking about Shitterton signposts, but I think he is talking about people getting off their backsides and doing things, rather than expecting them to be done to you.”

Now, that’s putting it all a bit more clearly.

David Brindle is the Guardian’s public services editor.
Time to get fit for the future

As the new financial realities start to bite hard, councils will need to prepare for taking on their new responsibilities for public health. Janet Sillett looks at what’s in store.

The politics of public health are changing. The health white paper, Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS (July 2010) sets out major reforms: the establishment of a new national public health service; responsibility and funding for local health improvement activity transferred to local authorities; and local directors of public health jointly appointed by local authorities and the Public Health Service.

Radical stuff – though the new type directors of public health echo the old medical officers of health that existed until the 1970s and, before 1948, public health was indeed largely the responsibility of local authorities.

Councils will be taking on a very challenging role at a time of unprecedented financial pressure. The timescale for change is short. The transition period is going to be difficult – with the NHS undergoing huge structural change. Local government has, however, despite the problems it will face, widely welcomed these reforms as a major opportunity – to bring together in a more coherent way public health and the wider policies and services that fundamentally affect the health and wellbeing of communities.

Many councils already recognise their role in health improvement and see it as the responsibility of the whole council. These councils are working well with their health partners in promoting health and tackling health inequalities. No-one pretends that these are easy tasks – health inequalities have widened, despite the previous government’s policy emphasis on tackling the health inequality gap. There will, also, no doubt, be difficulties in building relationships with the new GP consortia.

How can local government get to grips with this exciting, but challenging, new agenda, which also includes additional responsibilities for influencing and coordinating commissioning through new health and wellbeing boards?

Councillors will need support to manage the transition, and for when they take over the public health function. The new health and wellbeing boards will probably need statutory underpinning. The government and the NHS have to ensure that support is in place – the soon to be abolished PCTs and the directors of public health have responsibility for working with local government on managing the change, and many directors are now joint appointments, which should help.

However, given such radical and rapid reform, and the context in which it is happening, councils need to take the initiative in their areas for the transition and adjustment, building on the strengths of partnership working and their strategic leadership role. Councils will need to develop mutual support networks – again, building on previous experience and success.

Many councils already recognise their role in health improvement and see it as the responsibility of the whole council

Health Secretary Andrew Lansley’s unexpected health reforms will see public health moving to local authorities. It is clear that local government is ready for the challenge. It is not yet clear, though, that all government departments equally recognise the local government role, or understand that every department has responsibilities in this area, not just health and communities and local government. Funding decisions in the spending review and beyond, and how budgets are treated at the local level, need to reflect the impact on health and wellbeing of public spending in departments as wide ranging as transport and work and pensions. Local government will want the maximum flexibility to manage budgets at the local level, including public health funding, to support collaboration and joint working.

The next period is going to be indeed interesting for local government. The health white paper, undoubtedly, presents new opportunities for councils. Local government has to now press for the appropriate powers, support, resources and authority to be able to deliver on its new responsibilities.
Lady Gaga is now the reigning Tweeter, with the largest following on Twitter. One question I dare say she never gets asked is “what is it that you do?” The same cannot be said for the public health doctor. Public health is a term that is mysteriously misunderstood. True it means the health of the population but it can also be defined as the art and science of improving and maintaining the population’s health. Or, in the case of the public health specialty, it takes a population-wide view of health and other social issues.

The public health service is due to be operational by April 2012. It will incorporate public health directorates from primary care trusts with the current Health Protection Agency. It is expected to have responsibility for screening, immunisation, emergency planning, communicable diseases, chemical incidents and bioterrorism.

The new Public Health Service will also integrate and streamline existing health improvement functions. Current primary care trusts’ responsibilities are expected to be moved to local authorities, who will employ the director of public health, jointly appointed by the Public Health Service. There will be a ring-fenced public health budget and within this, local directors of public health will be responsible for health improvement funds.

So what does this mean for the local authority? What can public health offer? I very often describe my role as consultant in public health like Gordon Ramsey in ‘Ramsey’s Kitchen Nightmares’ or Mary Portas in ‘Mary Queen of Shops’. There is a service that’s not delivering or it doesn’t suit its customers’ needs. The public health consultant comes in, evaluates it, checks out the evidence and best practice elsewhere, talks to the frontline staff and the consumers and putting this together, revamps the service. She returns after some time to check on the service to see if it is still operating efficiently. Sometimes the job is like ‘Location, Location, Location’: someone comes to you with a need (for example, there may be a group of people with a disease that needs looking after). You have a budget and your job is to find or adapt a service to meet the health need. Other times, we’re like the ‘10 years younger’ programme, giving populations makeovers by tackling poverty and unemployment, encouraging changes in lifestyles and promoting healthier eating and living.

Public health can be divided into three areas: health protection, health improvement and improving quality of health and social services for the general public. Health improvement includes health protection, health improvement and improving quality of health and social services for the general public. Health improvement includes health promotion and tackling social determinants of health. So it looks to increase physical activity, reduce obesity, smoking and alcohol consumption and moderate other lifestyle effects that could result in illnesses. It also includes reducing health inequalities. Public health is interested in reducing the impact of social and economic conditions known as ‘upstream’ factors. These include housing, education, income, poverty, transport, health care organisation and environmental and genetic influences. By targeting these factors we can prevent illness from happening and so save costs and lives. Working with local authorities provides public health with ample opportunity to do this.

In terms of improving quality of services, public health teams are specialised in health economics. We can tell you how cuts will affect other parts of the systems, help opt for the cost-effective option rather than the cheaper option and improve long-term planning, and advise on invest to save initiatives and prevention of future costs.

What can public health offer local authorities?

1. Systems approach – we know who’s doing what and where the gaps are.
2. Strategy development, action planning and business case design.
3. Surveillance of needs, health information and health intelligence.
4. ‘One stop shop’ for best practice, evidence and research.
5. Outcomes focused approach which can be applied to performance management, quality control and evaluation of services.
6. Designing models of care and patient/user care pathways.
7. Partnership working and negotiation – we can bring all relevant parties to the table and co-ordinate, avoiding duplication of work and alleviate any tensions.
8. Problem-solving consultancy – we can diagnose service problems and offer solutions based on evidence and which are cost-effective.
9. Specialists in change management.
10. Foresight – we can identify emerging problems, prevent them and so save you money!
The coalition government is to be applauded for quickly recognising the parlous state of the UK’s natural environment and opening a national debate about what can be done to save it, writes the LGiU’s Andy Johnston.

Caroline Spelman’s discussion document ‘An invitation to shape the nature of England’ is necessary and timely because the statistics are sobering. Woodland birds, bees and habitats such as peat bog, all are showing chronic decline.

At the heart of the paper is an opportunity to position management of natural resources at a more human scale and to change the terms of the debate from targets to economics. Specifically, the paper talks about the link between the quality of the environment and economic prosperity.

The first consultation question is ‘What do we need to do to embed the true value of our natural resources in decision making at all levels?’ Local politicians are very adept at identifying what people value and are an essential voice for putting those concerns at the heart of decision making. So how do we take the next big step?

It seems pretty clear that however rose tinted your view of society (big or otherwise) a proportion of any valuation must be monetary. We do already use financial proxies for the services provided by the environment. Someone, somewhere decides how much we should spend maintaining nature reserves, we are fined if we pollute and power stations have spent millions cleaning up their emissions. However, the approach has been piecemeal and the values are pretty arbitrary.

The first real attempt to put a value on an environmental service is the price for carbon. The service we’re buying from nature is a stable, life supporting climate, so we’re starting big and the course has not run smooth.

How much is a clean river worth? How much is a butterfly worth? It may seem crass to even ask, but the actions that harm the river or the butterfly are usually supported by robust financial and legal arguments. Nature needs to be armed with the same strong arguments. Put simply if nature didn’t provide a service how much would it cost to replace it? On the Essex coast salt marshes provide flood protection; if they were drained for farming how much would a sea wall cost? Replacement value fits quite nicely with two other big themes for local government - community budgeting and the big society.

Community budgeting, the successor to Total Place, strives to identify duplication and overlap in the provision of services and then to identify the most efficient way of spending taxpayers money to achieve the relevant policy goal. Quite often prevention is better than cure and using existing assets is more efficient than creating new ones. Nature fits nicely into this thinking. Its well known that parks and rivers enhance people’s physical and mental health. If the council keeps these assets accessible and well maintained it is saving the health sector money.

If we move beyond the narrow confines of service provision we recognise that nature provides a service that communities value and often nurture. If nature wasn’t providing that service what would it cost to replace? For example street trees provide shade and cooling in heatwaves, the replacement would be air conditioning. The keen gardener who maintains their trees rather than pave over their front garden is contributing to the big society and their contribution can be valued.

Of course the Big Society is about more than just individual actions. There is a long history of collective action to help the local environment, from clean river groups to volunteer nature wardens. When councillors are given the chance to spend money in their ward, invariably it goes on the ‘clean green’ projects.

Perhaps the time has come to rediscover local enthusiasm. Many places have Fairtrade status, Transition Town groups, an established Friends of the Earth and local Wildlife Trusts. Something else has also changed, groups who previously would have ignored or resisted debate about nature conservation, big business, farmers, quarries, even parts of government itself, are now much more engaged.

There is an opportunity for councillors to encourage and involve the whole community in something very positive which isn’t about cuts to services but the beauty and vitality of their wards. I find it astounding that something as common as the sparrow is disappearing in my lifetime, now seems like a good time to act.

“Local politicians are very adept at identifying what people value and are an essential voice for putting those concerns at the heart of decision making”
Deal or no deal?

Local authorities and communities across the UK are getting on with tackling, and adapting to, climate change. As she looks ahead to the next climate change conference and next year’s Climate Week, the LGiU’s Joyce Lee says the international picture is not so rosy.

The work of councils and communities seems a million miles from the international efforts of trying to secure a climate deal to set binding emissions targets. In December, Mexico will host the 16th conference on climate change (COP16) at picturesque coastal city, Cancun. However, there is very little media attention compared to Copenhagen. After the highly criticised failure to agree an accord at COP15 last year at Copenhagen, there is virtually no expectation that any agreement will be reached in Mexico.

Even at the EU and UK national level, the effectiveness of targets has been patchy. Both the EU and UK have a cap and trade scheme to push big emitters to become more energy efficient by putting an economic value on carbon. The UK is also the first country in the world to have a Climate Change Act that sets binding emissions reduction targets of 34 per cent by 2020 and 80 per cent by 2050. These initiatives may be ambitious and forward looking but emissions continue to rise in the EU, and the UK is nowhere near meeting the targets we have set ourselves.

The failure to reach internationally agreed targets has not dampened local efforts. For example, some local authorities are ahead of the game in using certification schemes and grants to support individuals to make more energy efficient choices. Others are finding innovative ways of incentivising recycling and waste management. There are also councils that have excelled in managing local flood risks and increasing cycling rates in their local area.

The power of incentives has been the key driver to strong and effective local action. People can see the economic and social benefits. For example, installing solar panels or other energy efficiency measures at home reduces electricity and gas bills. There are lower risks and reduced insurance premium from retrofitting homes to prepare for flood risks. People also feel good about doing something beneficial for society and the environment. That “feel good” factor can be a strong incentive for action.

Incentives are harder to identify at the international level. Individual countries rarely see the benefits of setting ambitious targets if other countries are not also doing so. Similarly, headline news about global catastrophes and economic losses as a result of climate change are not powerful enough incentives to drive change at the global level, as the most severe effects are often felt in developing countries who have less influence in climate change negotiations.

One should not disregard international efforts to agree on a climate deal and setting ambitious targets. For a start, they provide the profile and motivation for local actions by setting a framework and enabling debates on different policy ideas that could be translated into local delivery, such as carbon trading, eco-footprinting and adaptation to climate change.

Whether we approach the Mexico negotiations in December with anticipation or not, we know that local authorities and communities will just get on with doing their bit to strive for greater energy efficiency and prepare for a changing climate. From 21 to 27 March 2011, Climate Week will provide an opportunity for organisations across the UK to run events showcasing the positive steps, bright ideas and inspirational solutions to help prevent climate change. With the endorsement of the Prime Minister and over a 100 national networks, including several local government organisations, Climate Week will reinvigorate the vision of a low carbon Britain and show how, even without inter-governmental decision-making, action is being taken at a local and regional level. It is hoped that by shining a spotlight on local action, international action won’t be far behind.

To find out how your council or organisation can take part and to join the growing number of organisations involved in Climate Week, please contact Lydia Walles, Campaign Manager, at lydia@climateweek.com or on 0203 397 2603. More information can be found online at www.climateweek.com.
The innovators on your doorstep

Public services are about to enter a decade of austerity. At the same time, writes Jonathan Kestenbaum, Chief Executive of NESTA, a host of exciting ideas are being discussed about the future of public services, especially how to involve individuals and communities much more in their delivery.

The test of the next few years won’t be whether we can spend less – however difficult, previous periods of restraint have shown this can be done. The real test will be whether we can use the tough circumstances of the next few years as a spur to put new ideas into action, so that we emerge with services that are cheaper and better because they work more effectively with the public.

We know this can be done because we’ve seen it in action. Across the country, local authorities are finding new ways of working with the people they serve – from inviting communities to get involved in planning and budgeting, to working with community groups and social enterprises to deliver services.

A focus of our own work has been finding ways of supporting local communities to develop their own ideas for dealing with social problems. This isn’t about improving what’s provided, it’s starting with the community and an open mind. We think it represents a largely untapped source of imaginative new approaches to many of the problems we face.

For example, our Big Green Challenge programme for local communities to reduce their carbon emissions demonstrated that, with the right incentives and support, communities can come up with solutions. We received over 350 entries, including more than 150 proposals from entirely new groups created in response to the challenge. Amazingly, the four winning groups reduced their carbon emissions by up to 32 per cent in a single year.

Programmes like this point to a bigger shift that’s going on in the relationship between citizens and the state. A NESTA survey showed that eight out of ten people believe the government should allow communities to come up with their own solutions to problems such as youth crime, obesity and climate change. But the biggest barrier to taking action is that people don’t know where to get the right advice and support.

A recent report from NESTA, called ‘Mass Localism’, identified five principles for working successfully with communities to develop new approaches to problems: establish and promote a clear, measurable outcome; presume that your community can innovate; provide advice and challenge more than money early on; identify existing barriers to participation and remove them; and don’t reward activity, instead reward outcomes.

What does this mean in practical terms? The following represent good starting-points:

- **Identify and understand existing community resources.** What are the local community networks and the key groups that already exist?
- **Stimulate community action.** A small challenge prize – where you set a challenge but only reward those groups who achieve the goal – can be an effective way of stimulating local activity. A very open first stage can encourage lots of entrants and bold new ideas.
- **Re-think grants.** Avoid the dependency on short-term funding that can develop amongst local groups. When groups realise that funding probably won’t be available in the future, they can start to think about how they can generate their own sources of revenue, for example by delivering services that people will pay for.
- **Use digital technologies.** Social media – such as Facebook and Twitter – is increasingly familiar to all of us. It offers a range of ways for local authorities to engage quickly and cheaply with their communities, to tell people about what you are up to but also to invite ideas on what you could do differently.

Working in partnership with local communities can bring tremendous rewards in the form of new ideas, community buy-in and greater efficiencies. We have a unique opportunity to transform public services but it will require a new approach to the relationship between citizen and state. Local authority professionals have a pivotal role to play in driving this change and helping us all to reap the benefits of the innovators who exist on our doorsteps.

NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) www.nesta.org.uk

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TEN THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT...

...the Academies Act 2010

Michael Gove rushed the Academies Bill through Parliament in record time. While the demand from schools to become academies was less than he expected, more will follow. Hilary Kitchin provides a handy guide to what councillors need to know about the new legislation.

1 Which schools can apply? The governing bodies of all maintained schools, including primary and special schools, can now apply for Academy status. Up till now, Academies have in the main replaced weak or underperforming secondary schools as a result of intervention. From September 2010, unless there are good reasons not to, all applications by schools which have been judged ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted will be pre-approved.

2 How do Free Schools fit in? The legislation allows individuals to apply to set up an additional school – which can be a mainstream or special Academy – so providing the basis for the free school policy initiative. A decision to approve an additional school or ‘new Academy’ must take account of the impact of the new school on maintained schools, Academies, and the further education sector in the area.

3 Who should be consulted? The governing body of a maintained school must consult “such persons as they think appropriate” on the question of whether the school should convert to Academy status. The requirement to consult the relevant local authority is abolished. It is up to the school’s governing body – or to those initiating a free school – to decide who should be consulted.

4 When should consultation take place? Governors of a maintained school can consult at any time: it is enough for there to have been consultation before the final funding agreement is signed. Trustees of foundation and voluntary schools must be consulted and agree to an application. TUPE requires consultation of staff.

5 Effect of Academy status: the school will be run according to arrangements agreed between the proprietor – the individual or organisation responsible for the Academy – and the Secretary of State. Provision for special educational needs is protected. Academies must provide a balanced and broadly based curriculum but are not required to comply with the National Curriculum; they must take pupils of mixed ability, wholly or mainly drawn from the area; admission by selection is limited to existing selective schools; secondary schools must emphasise a particular subject speciality. There are no requirements to promote well-being of pupils or to have regard to the local authority’s Children and Young People Plan.

6 Financial arrangements: Academies will be funded centrally at a comparable level to maintained schools – they will also get the share of central funding previously spent on their behalf and be allowed to keep any surplus balances that they hold. Funding agreements will normally be for seven years, or be indefinite subject to seven years notice. A distinct scheme of grants for innovative free schools is anticipated.

7 Transfers of property: a school will retain electronic hardware, furniture, and contracts on adopting Academy status; land owned by the local authority and used by the maintained school that is about to close can also be transferred.

8 Accountability and regulation:
   b. Ofsted inspection
   c. Charitable status of Academies subject to a regulator appointed by the Cabinet Office
   d. Young People’s Learning Agency will fund, monitor, regulate and handle complaints
   e. New Schools Network can handle initial funding to support local free school initiatives.

9 Local authority: role limited to administration of transfers, with care needed over role in relation to remaining maintained schools.

10 Elected members: no formal responsibilities but should press for effective consultation processes that ensure that all voices are heard and taken into account.

Coalition government plans:

October: White Paper on structural reform of the schools system, reform of Ofsted, funding, discipline, teacher incentives, and responsibility of parents.


Is bigger always better?

In recent years NHS managers have been subject to considerable pressure to reorganise hospital provision based on a belief that larger hospitals lead to lower average costs and better clinical outcomes for patients despite evidence from research not supporting this. Samena Chaudhry says it’s not that cut and dried.

My 19 year old brother was recently admitted to hospital as a result of suffering severe shortness of breath. Air had collected inside his chest causing his lung to collapse. A drain was inserted into his chest in an attempt to allow the lung to reinflate.

While the medical team were hopeful that this might be a successful option he remained an inpatient on a medical ward at a district general hospital (DGH) near us. But when he failed to improve after four days he was transferred to a large teaching hospital under the care of thoracic surgeons and underwent keyhole surgery on his lung.

Most of his patient ‘neighbours’ had also been transferred from a DGH. Most agreed that they were grateful to be in a large hospital where the doctors were experts in the field with high success rates. They felt safe and in good hands. One was additionally impressed with the large menu choice.

But on the other hand I noticed the concentrated attention my brother received at the DGH compared to the larger hospital where I often had to beg nurses for communication about the day of surgery or the chance to speak to a member of the surgical team. At the DGH everything seemed more transparent with every member of the medical team and nursing staff attending regularly with good communication about the next plans. Any investigation was organised almost immediately.

If you’re part of a large hospital, are your safety practices – and results – likely to be different than those of smaller facilities? The answer is yes, according to a growing body of research.

More experienced surgeons with larger caseloads and who end up performing a large number of similar operations almost always get better results. However interpreting variations in hospital death rates is far from straightforward. This was demonstrated by a recent Guardian newspaper report on elective treatment of Aortic abdominal aneurysm across hospitals in England.

On the surface the figures seem to show that hospitals performing more operations get better results. But the detail reveals that there are some hospitals doing very few operations (fewer than 50) that have death rates equivalent to hospitals carrying out more than 300 operations. There are also those performing large numbers of operations who have death rates similar to those doing relatively few cases.

The data also show that there is a greater variation in death rates across hospitals carrying out low numbers of operations compared with those doing more. Death rates in hospitals doing between 50 and 100 operations over three years have death rates varying from zero to roughly 12 per cent, while those doing more than 300 procedures vary from 1 to 7 per cent.

For some hospitals carrying out large numbers of operations but which have relatively high death rates too it might be that they deal with complicated and difficult cases.

An analysis of mergers of hospitals in the United States offers no support for the hypothesis that costs are lower in multihospital systems or that mergers lead to reduced costs by being more efficient. In fact unexpected costs often arise.

The literature in this area is extensive, and most published papers report a positive association between the volume of activity of hospitals or clinicians and outcomes. However, the problem is that most studies don’t adjust for differences in case mix and prognosis between hospitals. If smaller hospitals admit a larger number of emergency/difficult cases, observed differences may be confounded by differences in severity.

The process by which we compare hospitals may be flawed as we rely too heavily on death rates and clinician experience. Equal importance needs to be given to understanding the impact of differences in the availability of other services to enable a smooth patient experience such as imaging and intensive care. We need to look into the skills and training of individual doctors and surgeons and in the extent of cooperation not only amongst clinicians but also other members of the multi-disciplinary team we increasingly rely on and of course between clinicians and hospital managers.
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Greg Clark – the minister for letting go

“We want to be the Department that likes to say ‘Yes.’”
DCLG minister Greg Clark tells Mark D’Arcy that heavy handed central control of local government has “no place in a decentralised world.”

Greg Clark appreciates the internal irony of his title; Minister of State for Decentralisation. He doesn’t plan to issue edicts requiring local authorities to become more independent, or to set rigorous central targets for just how independently they should behave. His strategy to transform Town Halls into pillars of the Cameron Big Society revolves around giving new rights to people at the grassroots. Then, he hopes and expects, pressure from communities will transform local government.

Clark, who entered the Commons in 2005 as MP for Tunbridge Wells, might be seen as one of the casualties of the Coalition. Before the election he was Shadow Energy Secretary, and would have expected a place in Cabinet if the voters had returned a Conservative majority. But he doesn’t seem too crushed about finding himself in a middle-ranking ministerial post, piloting reforms which could completely change the culture of the local state.

The job is a fitting challenge for a high powered policy wonk. Clark is a former head of policy for the Conservative party, a traditional nursery for high powered Tory thinkers, with alumni in almost every post war Conservative cabinet. And he’s done time in another key Conservative incubator – Westminster City Council. In his youth, he flirted with the SDP, but, as one exactlying Thatcherite MP from a nearby constituency once told me: “there’s no doubt Greg’s a proper Tory.”

When he speaks about his agenda, he leaves little doubt that he has thought long and hard about the implications for local government of the Cameron aim to roll back the frontiers of the state, so the Big Society can flourish in the space thus created.

One of the early manifestations of this policy was the scrapping of the Regional Spatial Strategies with their district-by-district targets for new house building. In a speech in July he delighted in the replacement of three thousand pages of guidance for the South East with just six pages. Another was giving local authorities the power to stop ‘garden grabbing’. But there will be more significant changes in the forthcoming Localism Bill.

This will be a major piece of legislation covering planning, housing, and new freedoms for local authorities. But Clark is most excited about the provisions designed to empower the grassroots. First will come what he calls the “redistribution of information.” He wants councils to publish very detailed information about all significant expenditure, so that the public can see where the money goes. It’s not just, he says, about finding more efficient ways of achieving a particular end, but about allowing local people to weigh the priorities of their local politicians.

“Diversity in the way services are delivered

He rejects the idea that the most deprived communities will not be able to find an effective voice, and will be drowned out by the demands of the well-heeled”

If people can see where the money is going and what things cost, it can trigger real creativity – crowdsourcing, if you like – where people can see better ways to use the public money being spent in their area,” he says. The inspiration is Windsor and Maidenhead’s online publication of their spending, but Clark is wary of the government setting an over-prescriptive standard for the level of detail, preferring to rely on competition between authorities to be open, and on public pressure to be given the facts.

But it’s no use the community producing good ideas if nothing then results. So the government is consulting on what Clark calls the “right of challenge,” a formal process by which local authorities will have to consider alternative policies proposed from the grassroots. He’s clear that informal mechanisms – perhaps a blizzard of letters to the local paper – will not be enough, so he’s talking to the LGA about how a process can be designed for councils to take up suggestions, or explain why not. The germ of this idea was first put into law in a private members bill, the Sustainable Communities Act, which was piloted onto the statute book by the Conservative MP Nick Hurd, with all party support. But Clark doesn’t think that legislation is “powerful enough to reach the potential that there is within the idea,” and he intends the Localism Bill to provide a beefed-up framework.

The result, he hopes, will be much greater openness in local government, “within a matter of months,” followed soon after by a wave of innovations in the delivery of local services, as community groups get their teeth into the information thus revealed. Innovation should then spawn imitation as neighbourhoods notice that others are getting better services, and demand that same of their local authorities.

“Diversity in the way services are delivered
should lead to comparisons, with people looking at what is being done in neighbouring areas," he says. And he warns that those local leaderships who fail to pick up the new approach and run with it could be punished when their voters notice how much better others are doing. "One sign that this is working will be if local election results stop tracking the national opinion polls and start reflecting the performance of individual authorities," he says.

But will all this simply be a charter for the sharp-elbowed middle classes to seize a bigger share of the local cake? Clark expects better. "It’s a pessimistic view that I don’t share, that if you take away top down control, all that will happen is that the nastiest, most selfish short-termism will win," he says.

He rejects the idea that the most deprived communities will not be able to find an effective voice, and will be drowned out by the demands of the well-heeled – but at the same time he expects local authorities to make every effort to engage with every community and help them formulate exactly what they want. The expectation is that, in the end, the result will be much more effective targeting of limited resources.

The third element is his aim of “turning central government on its head,” making it work for citizens’ agendas as well as for ministers’. “Historically the DCLG has been a regulator of local government and a generator of requirements that have been placed on local government,” he says. “Neither function has any place in a decentralised world. What the department should be doing is acting on behalf of local government and communities to get rid of burdens and obstacles and bureaucracy, which stand in the way of them solving local problems.” He has already set up a “bureaucracy-busting” unit within DCLG to do just that. “Like the old Midland Bank ad, we want to be the department that likes to say ‘Yes,’” he adds.

Clark makes sympathetic mention of the bid by authorities in Greater Manchester for new economic development, transport and housing powers for their city region – an example of local authorities seizing the moment. Does it run against the grain of “localism?” – not necessarily, seems to be the answer, if it’s the product of a local initiative to solve local problems. As a Westminster City councillor, he remembers how hard they worked for the “earned autonomy” which the previous government promised to the best performing authorities, only to be disappointed at how little extra freedom was ultimately given. His intention is that all councils should have “far greater freedom to be different, without being sat on by government.”

One emerging snag is that decades of ever-tighter direction from the government and the soon-to-be abolished Audit Commission have left many local leaderships extremely wary of striking out on their own. Others suspect that the government’s enthusiasm for handing down responsibilities is really an enthusiasm for shuffling off responsibility for difficult spending decisions. Clark denies there’s any cunning cuts strategy lurking behind his approach – he has been working on this agenda at least since his days as shadow minister for the voluntary sector, and published papers on the virtues of decentralisation well before the economic crisis was even a cloud on the fiscal horizon. But he does hope more effective use of public resources will at least soften the blow.

There’s little doubt that Clark is a true believer. He has drunk the decentralist Kool-Aid, and he says the Prime Minister has quaffed it too. Next summer all government departments will be reporting on their decentralising progress to David Cameron. But by then the huge cultural change he hopes for will have barely begun.

Mark D’Arcy is a Parliamentary Correspondent for BBC News.
Agents of change

The LGiU’s Jonathan Carr-West thinks that local government could be the key to the Big Society’s success – but only if councillors rethink their role.

The coalition government has placed the Big Society at the heart of its political programme: a radical commitment to the transfer of power from the state to citizens and communities.

As David Cameron has described it “The Big Society is about a huge culture change where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace don’t always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.”

Already we are beginning to see the policy shape of this agenda with proposed new powers for citizens to take over assets, run public services and determine planning decisions.

This political momentum offers a fantastic opportunity to help citizens and communities become more involved in shaping the places they live in and the services they use. In many communities it could enable a grass roots re-invigoration of civil society and enable more effective and cheaper service provision.

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This political momentum offers a fantastic opportunity to help citizens and communities become more involved in shaping the places they live in and the services they use. In many communities it could enable a grass roots re-invigoration of civil society and enable more effective and cheaper service provision. This is a vital agenda. At LGiU we have long argued that the changing nature of the challenges we face, from climate change to an ageing society, means that government cannot act alone and will need to work in partnership with citizens to achieve collaborative solutions.

Of course many questions remain to be answered about the Big Society. How will communities be motivated to take up these opportunities? How will we ensure that they are supported and that they are properly accountable? The government will want to achieve this without reintroducing the deadening hand of the Big State through a regime of targets and bureaucratic procedures.

We will also need to determine how the bottom-up collaborative approach of the Big Society can be made compatible with the strategic approach to the planning and delivery of public services that we need to achieve major reductions in public spending.

Most importantly of all perhaps, we will need to think through how Big Society initiatives interact with the formal governance and service delivery functions of local government.

This is particularly important because the relationship with local government could be the key to the Big Society’s success. Who better to catalyse the new politics than the network of more than 20,000 local councillors who work in every ward and every community in the country? As volunteers giving up more than twenty hours a week, they are the Big Society in action. For many councillors, however, this will require rethinking their role, seeing themselves less as Burkean representatives of the people and more as community facilitators, who inspire action, hold the ring between competing interests and insure inclusivity and accountability.

Similarly, local government will have to take a long hard look at its processes to determine whether they help or hinder the creation of the Big Society. Research that the LGiU did for the Eden Project’s Big Lunch, confirmed that there was a huge latent desire amongst people to feel more plugged in to their communities. We also saw though that despite supportive guidance from CLG and the LGA, councils too often hampered community initiatives through an over restrictive application of rules around street closure or public liability insurance.

So local government will have to make a judgement on when to step up and when to step out of the way. Elected members will play a crucial role in pushing councils to do this. Where this can be achieved, local government: a unique nationwide network with a democratic mandate, working for and rooted in every community in the country, is in a unique position to nurture and support the emergence of a citizen led politics.
Back to the future

The Big Society may not be such a new idea after all. Professor Jim Chandler looks back at a time before the rise of municipalism and finds some parallels.

David Cameron’s Big Society promises a return to a citizen-led volunteer ethos at the heart of public service provision. From an historical perspective this may suggest a return to the early 19th century structure of local governance. In 1800 this was based on some 15,600 parishes and approximately 180 boroughs. The duties of parishes included administering the Poor Laws by providing social support to the unemployed and infirm, maintaining law and order within the community and repair of local roads and bridges.

Many parishes were governed by an open vestry, a meeting of all male householders paying rates to the parish. Given that many parishes had few resources, they relied on the use of volunteer labour to undertake their tasks. A parish constable charged with ensuring law and order was usually a volunteer, often pressed into the role by local pressure. Roads were repaired by the poor of the community in return for their support from the parish. Boroughs, established by Charters or custom and practice had a wide range of possible tasks but many were unable even to raise rates and often survived on renting out property. They were, like most parishes, dependent on the willingness of local citizens to volunteer both their time to help govern the parish and undertake the implementation of its policies. Was this ever, therefore, a ‘great society’?

By the time of the 1832 Great Reform Act the voluntary democratic structures of the open vestry and borough were under sustained attack by liberal politicians and businessmen. Parishes governed by a meeting of rate payers were often dominated by the local landed squire who paid the highest rates and demanded cuts in poor relief by joining with neighbouring parishes to place the poor in workhouses.

In 1834 legislation required parishes to adopt such a scheme of Poor Law Unions to be locally controlled by elected boards employing paid staff who were scrutinised by central government inspectors and expected, nationally, to provide worse conditions for those who could not find work than was open to the lowest paid labourers.

As the century progressed the public health duties of supplying clean water and sewage facilities were similarly removed from the parish volunteers and entrusted to elected district councils as were police services and maintenance of highways. The 1894 Local Government Act finally ensured all but the smallest parishes were controlled by elected councillors who had but a fraction of their previous duties and little need for recruiting volunteers.

Many boroughs had never been open or elected organisations and were governed by a council formed from the wealthy property owners of the town who co-opted like minded successors to control the local council. Income from these boroughs was as much invested in winning and dining the councillors as it was in developing the infra-structure of the borough or aiding the poor. Even in the 18th century the Big Society approach to urban governance was evolving through private Acts of Parliament from volunteer based community government to elected Improvement Commissions that could raise rates to develop local infra-structure. In 1835 the Municipal Corporations Act removed the status of borough from the smallest and most corrupt towns and allowed the largest towns to petition the government to establish elected local authorities that could raise a rate and thereby employ permanent staff.

During the 19th century the modernisation of local governance gradually ensured local authorities were led by elected councillors with the power to appoint professionals to undertake their functions. In most towns the councillors were local businessmen and the most advanced development of this trend was Birmingham led by Joseph Chamberlain which from the 1870s municipalised local tramways, gas and electricity services.

These public enterprises managed by qualified engineers and using professional accounting practices ensured that the services brought in substantial profits to the City. In practice the 19th century industrialists who built the world beating economy of Britain, realised that voluntary unprofessional support was of little value in developing a modern local government system when compared with the capacity of paid professional managers and operatives to develop vibrant and effective urban services.

David Cameron perhaps needs to consider whether attracting able elected local councillors to oversee the work of qualified professionals in managing local services may be a much more effective than a system based on volunteerism.

Professor J. A. Chandler is Emeritus Professor of Local Governance, Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University.
Step by step, mile by mile

Paul Twivy, Chief Executive of The Big Society Network explains the plans to encourage communities to buy-in to the Big Society.

The Big Society Network is being set up as an enabler and voice of citizens and an independent, challenging partner to government. We have three goals.

The first goal is to encourage and enable meaningful, local action by citizens, especially among those who are currently unengaged.

The second goal is to raise the number of people who take part in groups outside of work and home and to support those groups as they grow.

Our third goal is to help community groups and social enterprises to access local powers and rights created by Big Society legislation.

To do this, we need to bring people with us in small steps that get larger and more confident with time; provide tangible rewards and incentives not just appeal to some vague altruism and break down the UK into bite-sized chunks: neighbourhoods. That's why our first initiative as a Network will be to launch ‘Your Square Mile’.

There are 93,000 square miles in the UK. We tend to only hear about two of them, the square miles of the City and Westminster, and many of us have felt badly let down by both.

‘Your Square Mile’ is about enabling citizens to make changes in as many of the other 92,998 square miles as possible.

‘Your Square Mile’ aims to launch on-line in December this year with a Personal Planner, and an interactive, visual representation of a typical square mile of the UK to play with, to help citizens work out what action they want to take in their square mile and how they can get started. At this point it will be an advice and planning service at a national level.

We will also encourage people to step forward and register as ‘Your Square Mile’ leaders in their neighbourhood, to set up their own simple web-presence using tools we will provide, and establish themselves a physical base within their area from which they can set up events and send out materials. We are also going to conduct carefully monitored and resourced pilots in a representative cross-section of 10 to 15 communities across the UK.

By June of 2011, having learnt from the pilots and early citizen leaders ‘Your Square Mile’ will launch in a more fully-developed form as a Mutual: an organisation owned by its members and run for their benefit.

Every citizen of the UK will be able to join for a very affordable fee of say £5 a year, and become a member and shareholder, in receipt of benefits and dividends.

The first benefit is likely to be very cheap but comprehensive Public Liability Insurance to cover any kind of volunteering action or community event.

More and more Square Miles will register their information, groups and ideas so that by Spring 2012, a significant proportion of the population will be able to enter their postcode and get a body of well-organised information about their neighbourhood.

Councillors can play a vital part in ‘Your Square Mile’ as the single most influential group of elected, grass-roots opinion-formers.

To do this, we need to bring people with us in small steps that get larger and more confident with time; provide tangible rewards and incentives not just appeal to some vague altruism and break down the UK into bite-sized chunks: neighbourhoods. That's why our first initiative as a Network will be to launch ‘Your Square Mile’.

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‘Your Square Mile’ aims to launch on-line in December this year with a Personal Planner, and provide professional support such as pro bono legal help to community groups; promote ‘Your Square Mile’ groups and activities via their communications channels and promote Big Society legislation and ideas as they come on stream.

Together, by collective will-power, skill and resource, we can create The Big Society not just talk about it.
The Big challenge – join in or miss out

James Cousins argues that councils need to get on board the Big Society before they miss the bus altogether.

The Big Society’s greatest strength is that no-one actually knows what it is, possibly not even the Prime Minister whose stroke of genius was to create a concept so vague, but so obviously ‘good’, that almost anyone can support it. Whether you want a small state, government involved in every aspect of community and social life or something in between you can find something in the Big Society that will fill your needs.

Trying to divine what the government actually means by Big Society has become a small industry. Taking David Cameron’s speech in Liverpool as a starting point he outlined three strands, social action, public service reform and community empowerment and peppered his speech with words like philanthropy, innovation and ‘voluntarism’. But these are hardly new concepts, most have appeared in various government fads that have come and gone over the years (I was struck by how much the themes of public service reform and innovation resonated with the early 90s vogue for Osborne and Gaebler’s ‘Reinventing Government’). Indeed, David Cameron might view the philanthropic founding of Eton College several hundred years ago as nothing more than a proto-Big Society free school!

What is new is the need for central government to dramatically reduce public spending at a time when government – for good or bad – impinges on more aspects of people’s lives than ever before.

It’s tempting to take the cynical view that it’s a smoke screen policy to offer warm and fuzzy feelings the Treasury can no longer afford. Yet that would be overly simplistic and fail to reflect the reality. Big Society is the mantra of all politicians in government. Every department has a Big Society minister, every announcement a Big Society reference. UK government websites already contain over 13,000 Big Society references and the total grows daily. Across the country voluntary organisations and community groups are starting to think about the opportunities the policy gives them. Slowly and surely a Big Society is being built, even though no-one quite understands the architect’s drawings and vision.

If there is a common understanding it’s that local councils are not a part of the Big Society. While there may not be any diktat stating that local authorities can’t join the Big Society gang, the language rarely mentions them. In the Prime Minister’s announcement he may have named four councils as early pilots, but then went on to address the people of those boroughs and challenged them – not their councils or councillors – to identify the blockages they needed removed to build the Big Society.

And it almost seems that councils have rolled over and let this happen. Two months after the Prime Minister’s launch of the four pilot areas only Windsor and Maidenhead had published anything other than press releases related to the Big Society and how they were helping to make it work. Liverpool had not even published a press release, despite being host to the launch.

It is almost as if, after decades of centralisation and Whitehall direction, Town Halls are unable to take on the opportunity without being told. The irony is that while this is the biggest chance in a generation for councils to exercise freedom in shaping their areas, it might also be their only chance for another generation. The government’s approach to local government seems to have been populism rather than localism; should a localist minister really be telling Newham if it needs a chief executive, or Leicester its councillors’ IT needs?

If the vague nature of the Big Society is its greatest strength, it can also be a great opportunity for local government. The choice is simple, either stand back and watch the Big Society being built around us, or join in with the building and help our communities improve our neighbourhoods; and isn’t that the reason most of us got into local government?
Civil society’s big challenge

Jasmine Ali asks what the Big Society means for the voluntary and community sector and says it provides opportunities for councils to provide leadership to new partnerships.

When David Cameron launched his Big Society programme to bring power to communities in July, he paved the way for significant change in the relationship between the government and the voluntary and community sector.

The Prime Minister, speaking at the launch in Liverpool outlined the Big Society vision when he said groups should be able to run post offices, libraries, transport services and shape housing projects. He described how communities “will be self sufficient through the formation of ‘little platoons’ to ‘create communities with oomph with neighbourhoods in charge of their own destiny, who feel that if they club together they can shape the word around them.’”

The new policy’s emphasis on devolving power to communities and local government is what is making the Big Society challenge so hard to resist.

Cuts in services pose a dilemma for the voluntary and community sector, the extent of which will be better known following the October spending review. On the one hand public sector cuts have forced councils to cut voluntary organisations; on the other hand the Big Society programme provides voluntary organisations with a tremendous opportunity to actually shape priorities to strengthen local communities. Small organisations are seen as important to the delivery of the Big Society vision, but the threat of further cuts in their funding undermine their very existence. If the Big Society is to deliver its aim to bring about a broad culture of social action, it will need these very small community groups to help do it.

The Big Society is also about encouraging greater volunteering and philanthropy, something at the heart of the voluntary and community sector. The coalition plans to release funds for this from dormant bank accounts to kick start community projects.

Predictably the Big Society comes with a change in terminology so the voluntary and community sector will be referred to differently – we must wave good-bye to the ‘third sector’ and say hello to ‘civil society’. More interestingly it brings a fresh emphasis to the public policy agenda where neighbourhood groups, volunteer services, social enterprises and community organisations will mushroom, as individuals and groups are positively encouraged to have a greater stake in the design and delivery of local services.

The Big Society will depend on a much bigger market for the charity sector than we have seen before which will leave an important role for local government. In the mapping and shaping of the Big Society programme local leaders will have to consider what services people want and how they can be delivered differently, how to secure the involvement of new groups and individuals and more importantly how to make sure that all services are locally accountable.

Local leaders will clearly require a big change in partnership working with the voluntary and community sector and with local business and enterprise. Nevertheless the role of local leaders is vital to ensure that the Big Society is not just successful in running community or environmental services, but can also contribute to running harder edged services like children and adult social care.

“"The Big Society will depend on a much bigger market for the charity sector than we have seen before"”

The current financial climate poses a threat to the most vulnerable children, young people, families and adults in our communities. Local authorities can work closely with voluntary groups to make sure that the recipients of ‘social’ services get the opportunity to have a say in the design of that very provision.

As part of the Big Society devolution plans, local authorities will be given a general power of competence so that they will have explicit authority to do what is necessary to improve their communities. Local authorities have the necessary experience in partnership building and working, and crucially it has experience of working across traditional service boundaries through the joint strategic commissioning of services. So Big Society must not be seen as a way for local authorities to simply contract the running of its services out – by contrast it is an opportunity to provide effective leadership to a wide range of new partnerships to find the most optimum and equitable way to meet the obligations to its communities.
Co-operatives are enjoying a renaissance. Their strengths as a business model based on shared ownership and profits are now being appreciated, with the government seeing co-operatives as an alternative way to deliver public services and create the Big Society.

At Co-operatives UK – the trade association for co-operative enterprises – we are excited about this resurgence in interest. But we’re also cautious: just as we don’t think the plc model should be the default option, neither should co-operatives. In this economic climate even more than ever we should be making smart, informed choices.

Innovation
For decades co-operatives have provided innovative solutions to issues that the traditional public and private sectors struggle with – from providing good food to helping tackle inequality. Take Harwich Connexions, a community-owned co-operative that began by managing the community transport service on behalf of Essex County Council. It provided such a good service that it now manages the town’s Tourist Information Centre, enterprise centre, youth hostel and nursery.

Or look at the housing sector. Evidence shows that management quality and tenant satisfaction is significantly higher in housing co-operatives than in public or association owned housing.

The Big Society
These co-operatives – and more than 4,800 others like them in the UK – are successful because they come from the grassroots: they are started and run by people who work together to help themselves.

The co-operative sector has grown by 15.9 per cent over the last three years and we want to see this continue, whether that’s co-operatives in the market place or helping to deliver public services.

But as the co-operative sector has long known – and IPPR researchers said in an opinion piece this July – “simply rolling back the state and expecting communities to leap into the driving seat will not be the answer.”

There are two key factors that are needed if the Big Society is to flourish – not just in co-operatives but in all kinds of organisations.

Freedom
The first is freedom. People – whether they are NHS employees or residents looking to run their local park – need to choose to take over and run public services. They can’t be forced to do it. Successful co-operatives are those that have the commitment and support of their members.

If there’s no support for a co-operative among the potential members – whether the local community or employees – it will be hard to get off the ground, let alone sustain it.

Co-operatives are trading enterprises, so if donations are the key source of income or there is only one contract for the co-operative to deliver, then a co-operative may not be the answer. The co-operative model should be considered alongside a range of options. The business model should be informed by the raw components of the business – who it is for, whether relationships are long or short term and what the income streams are likely to be – rather than the other way round.

Support
The second factor is support. Starting a new enterprise is a complicated job that requires different areas of expertise.

From feasibility studies and market research to business planning and community engagement, there is a lot involved in starting a new co-operative or community enterprise.

There is even more to learn for public sector employees or local residents who will be running an enterprise for the first time.

Support is essential to enable entrepreneurs with drive and ideas to turn them into a viable, sustainable business.

Government – and local authorities where appropriate – need to guarantee support to help new co-operative and community enterprises get off the ground. And so far there’s little evidence this will happen: a £3 million fund to provide start-up support to communities wanting to buy their local pub was scrapped by the government in July.

Supportive – but not seduced
So we support the government’s bid to get people working together to do things for themselves. But we refuse to be seduced.

Co-operatives can play a big role in the Big Society, but the whole vision will be successful only if communities and employees have a free rather than a shotgun choice on whether to run services and get the support they need to make them happen.

If you would like more information about co-operatives and their role in delivering public services please visit www.uk.coop/publicservices.
Councillors are the key to success for community initiatives

Community groups and activists are expected to play a central role in the Big Society. But what is less talked about is the role of councillors in helping community groups to achieve their objectives, writes Rachel Newton, Head of Policy and Research at Urban Forum.

To ensure that local services are genuinely closer to the communities they serve in the Big Society, it is essential for councillors to link up with community groups in their wards. Councillors can provide critical support for volunteers, social enterprises and charities to create initiatives and deliver services. They can enable communities to influence local decision-making, and hold to account (through public scrutiny) all those delivering public services – whether public, private or charitable.

Recently Urban Forum and bassac, looked into the experience of community groups working with their local councillors for a joint publication Local Action: The Handy Guide for communities working with councillors.

Interviews with 10 case studies across the country showed that whether taking over a public service, involving citizens, or campaigning for change, councillors and community groups can, and should, be natural local allies.

The local activists we interviewed highlighted practical ways in which joining forces with councillors had increased their projects’ potential for success – helping to cut through bureaucracy, providing a route to key decision-makers, giving credibility, expertise and backroom support, and attracting publicity.

The guide draws out top tips from the case studies, providing practical advice for community groups who wish to involve their local councillors. It’s also useful for councillors wanting to develop their relationships with community groups in their ward.

Friends of Witton Lakes, Erdington, Birmingham

We spoke to community activist Linda Hines and Councillor Matt Bennett who worked together to set up Friends of Witton Lakes in 2008, having established a shared concern that the park needed to be better looked after.

Friends of Witton Lakes is a group of park users who have carried out a number of initiatives to look after the park, including organising offenders to improve the park through the Community Payback scheme; educating park users on picking up after their dogs; planting trees; and setting up Duckling Watch where residents take action to protect nesting birds.

Linda described how people now felt differently about their local park: “People feel more ownership of the park now that they are involved and they talk to each other”. She described how Councillor Bennett, played a leading role from the outset. According to Linda, “Anyone can do it. You just need a leader, confidence and a councillor”.

Councillor Bennett recognised the benefits to the group in getting support from council officers: “What I’m doing is representing the views of the community and engaging with them – they’re involved every step of the way so I’m properly representing the community, not just using my judgement about what they might want.”

Parent power in Leicestershire

In Leicestershire, parents joined forces with their local councillors to save their local nursery. At an early stage the campaign got in touch with councillors from all parties, and gained strong support.

We talked to Beverley Curry who helped to set up the campaign. She described how councillors had helped in a variety of ways. They provided advice on how to present their argument to the council – including key pieces of information, such as the need for the council to factor in new family homes being built in the area, and guidance on travel distances to nurseries. Councillors also put the campaign in touch with people in the council they needed to ‘get on board’, and added credibility to the cause.

“Until you see it first hand, you don’t necessarily realise what an asset councillors are to the community . . . if you want to change something, their door is open . . . I think you need to have the backing of your councillor. It does just give you that extra weight and momentum for any campaign.”

And the result? The parents were successful in convincing the council that the nursery should be kept going, and it is now thriving, taking on more children and generating income.
The Yes Project – tackling youth crime through volunteering in Cricklewood, Barnet

The Yes Project was set up by the charity, Cricklewood Homeless Concern (CHC). It aims to involve young people in volunteering as a way of reducing street crime, and reducing the arrests and court appearances of street active young people.

To achieve this, they have worked with the police to ‘sentence’ people to volunteer at the project as an alternative to entering into the criminal justice system. The project gives the young people increased responsibility and independence, and it recently won a Metropolitan Police Award.

We spoke to Danny Maher, Chief Executive of CHC, who described how the support of two local councillors had made all the difference – facilitating contact with the police and the Home Office and helping them to access funding.

We also spoke to one of the councillors involved, Councillor Hayley Matthews. She talked about the value and reward of being involved in community projects such as this “It’s my role, being a councillor. It’s an enabling role, to make lives better and to improve the area.”

Community consultation in Archway, Islington

The Better Archway Forum was set up because of residents’ concerns about the proposed demolition of a local landmark – the historical archways – and about the poor quality of the consultation on the redevelopment which was carried out by a firm of private consultants employed by the council.

We talked to Kate Calvert, who helped start the campaign by contacting community groups in the area and arranging a meeting at the local school. She described how they convinced councillors that not only was the forum a worthy cause, but it was also valuable to the councillors themselves – enabling them to harness local knowledge and expertise from the group to help the council make better decisions, and fulfil its role in the local community.

Since succeeding in its campaign to save the archways, the Better Archway Forum has continued getting residents in the area more involved in decision-making that affects them. It has over 1000 residents on an email list, and organises community planning sessions and focus groups. At its last AGM, councillors thanked the Forum for its help in shaping the redevelopment study, and expressed a wish to continue with the relationship.

Conclusion

Talking to these and other community groups and hearing what they had achieved for their communities, was inspiring. All show the importance of the relationship with their councillors for community groups. These examples are by no means unusual. When we started the work we were inundated with community groups wanting to talk about positive experiences of working with councillors. This factor needs to be considered as a fundamental feature of building the Big Society.

Urban Forum is a national charity with a membership of mainly local voluntary and community groups.
bassac is a national membership body for community organisations. www.bassac.org.uk
You can download a copy of the report from www.urbanforum.org.uk
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The deadline for entries is 5pm, Friday 3 December 2010. These prestigious awards are being judged by leading councillors and experts in local government. Winners will be announced at the C’llr Conference in February 2011 where they will be presented with their award.

These awards are supported by LGiU and CCLA. LGiU is the leading local democracy think tank and membership organisation for local government. CCLA has managed local authority and charitable funds for over 50 years and is part owned by the Local Authorities Mutual Investment Trust.
Ross Grant couldn’t make it to the c’llr 10 conference to pick up his award for being our online councillor of the year, so Alan Pickstock went to Leicester to present it to him and find out the secrets of his success.

Ross Grant’s first forays into the world of social media were as a blogger. “It was a good place to begin because there are plenty of services you can use for free. I soon found that blogging gives you a much greater ability to develop an argument than traditional media. Like a lot of councillors, I put out leaflets, but there’s only so much space.

“Initially my blog was a way of letting off steam and having a bit of a rant. Then, when I found that people were actually reading it, it became a useful tool and a good way of engaging people.”

From blogging he says he was ‘pushed’ to Twitter. “Originally”, he says, “I thought Twitter was about what celebrities had for breakfast”. But, encouraged by friends, he gave it a go. “I said I’d do it for a month. I didn’t think anyone was listening, then some people started talking back. I’ve no idea how they knew I was there, but people I didn’t normally speak to, such as academics, responded.

“I was then able to link to my blog and Twitter activity through the council’s website. Some of my political opponents complained, but I made sure my site looked nothing like the official council site.” There was still a bit of a row locally, but the publicity resulted in more followers. Now he’s approaching 1,000 followers. “It’s very much a conversation tool but you get a quick response.”

He says that his presence on Twitter has raised his profile nationally and locally. “You can put something on Twitter and journalists come back to you. It has increased my ability to get stories in our local media. And as councillor, people talk to me through Twitter who wouldn’t speak to me in other ways. I’ve gone on to meet people face to face when it’s clear that we can’t take a conversation any further in short Twitter messages.”

But Grant didn’t get his c’llr award for, if you like, the day-to-day social media activity of a councillor. His entry stood out for his involvement in Amplified Leicester, a project to bring together people from different backgrounds with the aim of boosting the innovation capacity of Leicester and sharing new skills which are fast becoming essential in 21st Century workplaces and communities.

Every fortnight participants attended inspiring lectures and workshops and in between meetings worked together via Twitter, Facebook and other social media applications. They filmed interviews in their communities and shared the videos online.

“The project showed how you can get people who are not using social media to engage with it. People who may feel isolated can feel connected. The formal phase of the project is over, but I am planning to run some social media surgeries in the autumn to show more people how to do it.”

Grant’s passion for technology has led him into some conflicts, most notably over his championing of the use of I-Pads by councillors. He rejects reports which say he’s proposing all councillors should have I-Pads. He is one of four councillors from different parties piloting the use of I-Pads. If the evaluation proves positive – and he’s convinced – then they’d be offered to new councillors after the elections next year and to other councillors when the time came to replace their lap-tops. In this way, the cost comes from existing budgets. “It was never about shifting all councillors to I-Pads, it’s about what works for people. He’s convinced they can lead to savings. “For example, the council used to send a van to my house three times a week with papers. Now I see all papers on the I-Pad, the van’s been cancelled.”

Ross Grant doesn’t need encouragement to use social media any more. He’s an evangelist. Expect his reactions to this article to be Twittered.

To find out more about the c’llr awards contact laura.wilkes@lgui.org.uk
Don’t be fooled by appearances

We shouldn’t let fear of crime drive policy, says Dave Wilcox, especially when our perceptions are out of sync with reality

I was in Istanbul at the turn of last year, 200 metres off the main tourist track in some narrow back streets.

The retail outlets around me were universally the corner type. A shoe repairer’s sat next to a place vending pots and pans and other tinkers’ wares. A few lads bunched around an electronic gadgetry shop, scuffling, laughing, pushing, joking, running, yelping and having fun. The fruit in the shops looked deliciously genetically modified and the fish as fresh as when they had been pulled from the Bosphorus only hours earlier. I merrily snapped the images with the Panasonic.

So much had I been enjoying my immersion in the people’s Istanbul, I’d failed to clock that the bustling boys from the music shop had split in to two gangs of four or five people. They’d transformed themselves into whispering “youths”, and positioned themselves fore and aft to relieve me of both my camera and wallet. Fortune had it that there was a side street to scurry down and a café to dive in. When I emerged twenty minutes later the night sky had blackened. The alleyway was deserted.

If this were a novel, the gang would have been lying in wait down the nearby cellar stairs, or be waiting to pounce from behind the curtains of the balconies above.

In the event, and happily for me at least, the bunch of criminals had simply disappeared and I swiftly strode the five minutes up the hill into the thronging brightness and relative safety of the main drag.

Of course, I can’t be certain of the intention to rob. I’m not sure our antennae always give us the right messages. The hoodies who collect around the cenotaph in my town on Friday night are generally a fun loving, insecure lot, but filled with a couple of rowdiness cans they soon pose a perceived threat to everyone over 40. Interestingly however, it’s not the 40-pluses, but males under 25 who are most likely to be beaten up on the street.

It is fascinating how we all find it difficult to reconcile intuition with facts. Take homicide rates for instance. I use them because they’re not subject to the same vagaries of collection methodology as are statistics on sexual offending or car crime. In England and Wales

- The number of murders in 2008/9 fell to a 20 year low of 651.
- Of those homicides, only 39 were caused by guns.
- 255 people died from stabbing.
- Twice as many males died than did women.
- 80 per cent of female victims knew their killers as did half the men.

Somehow those statistics don’t sit easily with a media that suggests violence is much more prevalent. Nor do they sit easily with the stranger-danger concept that characterised my Turkish hunch.

If, as looks likely, the Tory/LibDem coalition picks up former Home Secretary Jackie Smith’s baton and continues to run with an elected police commissioner model, what are those elections likely to feature? I’ve little doubt that youths and criminality in neighbourhoods will feature strongly in the debates.

But therein lies a real opportunity. If we tackle crime at its roots and can establish a system that makes offenders account for their actions, facing their victims in the process, there’s at least a chance that the community might feel more satisfied with the judicial system.

Best of all, were such an approach to be fully integrated with the services of the local authority there could be a chance for restorative justice to be dispensed by the localities rather than the formal courts. Can we show that we are up to dispensing community justice and head off the Commissioner ballots? I sincerely hope so.
New leader means business

One of the keys to being a successful football referee is to make your mark early in a game. Know which players are likely to cause problems, stamp on trouble quickly and be consistent and firm in your decision making. A thick skin and confidence in your ability also help. These are all attributes that also come in handy for a council leader, agrees Merton’s new leader, Stephen Alambritis, a qualified referee. He spoke to Alan Pickstock.

Given that he’s refereed a match where two of Wimbledon’s famous Crazy Gang – Dennis Wise and Vinny Jones – took part, Alambritis knows a thing or two about dealing with tough customers. They are skills that might have helped, too, in building the support necessary to form the administration in a council where his group is the largest party but doesn’t have an outright majority.

That’s where the similarities end: a good ref shouldn’t be noticed, says Alambritis, “but as a council leader you do want the electorate to notice you and what you’ve done”.

He puts his party’s success at this year’s local elections down to making straightforward pledges to residents about things they care about: refuse collection, street cleaning, bulky waste and a ‘cashback’ offer of £25 a year for each of the next four years on council tax.

And while he’s been upfront with local people about the scale of the cuts ahead – Merton is planning to cut £70 million from its spending over the next four years – he’s keen to emphasise his commitment to equality and ensuring that “the cuts are handled in a way that doesn’t affect the most vulnerable”.

“The equalities agenda has all-party support in Merton. I am passionate about equalities and believe that the public sector has to lead by example.” In December last year Alambritis became a commissioner for the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Previously he has been a member of the Disability Rights Task Force and a Commissioner of the Disability Rights Commission.

He thinks it is important to balance the bad news of cuts with good news where possible. And he’s got ideas to lift the spirits of the borough. For example, he’d like to see AFC Wimbledon have a home in the borough and he wants to talk more to the All England Club about raising the profile of the borough when the world’s media descends for the Wimbledon fortnight. He’d also like to build on Merton’s royal connections to push for Royal Borough status. “I’m toying with that idea. It would be good for tourism, but it’s something I’ll come back to as we have more pressing priorities right now.”

Party politics are taking a back seat in Merton’s drive for savings and efficiencies and, says Alambritis “organisational jealousy will be a thing of the past. We are already sharing HR with Sutton [Lib Dem] and legal services with Richmond [Conservative] and are in discussion with Sutton about more sharing. The days of competition and big communications budgets are a thing of the past. It’s now about sharing the load”.

Alambritis is a name that will be familiar to many readers, who’ll also recognise his voice. As Head of Public Affairs for the Federation of Small Businesses, he’s a frequent visitor to national radio stations.

He’s quick to reject the suggestion that there’s a contradiction in being a Labour politician who represents small businesses. “The small business vote is always up for grabs. What they mostly want is to be heard and recognised.” They are also crucial to successful local economies. He points out that his predecessor as leader signed up to the Small Business Accord, the intention of which is to get the council and small businesses to work together. He shares the government’s aspiration that 25 per cent of council business should go to small businesses.

The business background may also be a driver in his desire to strike a balance between housing land and employment land: “if you have that balance, unemployment will be low”. His agenda also includes continuing the work to improve Merton’s town centres and the work to bridge the gap between the borough’s most and least deprived areas. He also wants to see more local children going to secondary schools in the borough.

Merton Civic centre is high-rise office, but Alambritis isn’t one to sit in an ivory tower. After this interview, I spotted him personally taking an elderly resident to the department the resident was looking for. Just like a good referee, a good council leader needs to combine steel with a gentler personal touch.
Wheeler’s Westminster whirlwind

Heather Wheeler, former leader of South Derbyshire and a former Wandsworth councillor, was elected to Parliament in May. She’s been elected chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Local Government Group. She spoke to Alan Pickstock about life as a new MP, the APPG and the new agenda for local government.

“I’ve been running around from meeting to meeting”

Life as a new MP is hectic. Ten weeks in and Heather is loving it. We met while the Academies Bill was going through the House of Commons, so one eye was on the TV monitors providing a feed of the debate from the chamber in case a vote was called. “I am good at time management but it’s so frustrating. I need time to follow things up. I’ve been getting back to my office at 10 or 10.15pm and spent time catching up on correspondence. But I am beginning to see the wood from the trees.

“The APPG does what it says on the tin”

Heather is the new chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Local Government Group. The cross-party credentials of the group are illustrated well by her praise for the previous chairman, Labour’s Clive Betts, for his good work in speaking up for local government in Parliament. “Clive was generous in giving me time and we had several conversations about the group. I’m delighted he’s now chairing the local government select committee.”

Other parties provide vice chairman: Alison Seabeck (Labour), Dr Julian Huppert (Liberal Democrat) and crossbench peer Lord Best.

“I’m delighted to take the chairmanship. As an LGiU board member I tried to get to meetings in the House and built up a relationship with the group. I am trying to get Eric Pickles for our first meeting in September. Then we are looking at two or three areas of work. We’re grateful for the back office support we get from the LGiU and others. That means we can put out professional reports which are well-respected and carry weight.”

“The Big Society is the big idea – councillors should not be wary of it”

“The really good councillors are doing it already. They’ll be involved with Age Concern, local youth groups, village green groups and so on – or they may be Parish councillors as well. It really is about engaging all of the different social groups in society that do so much to making everyday pleasant and pleasurable. “And of course, it can get more serious. Perhaps the WRVS could take on meals on wheels or a scout group could expand to run youth clubs for a wider audience – without uniforms! “The opportunities are there for local groups and societies to make their area a better place and councillors should be at the forefront of this. Are people up for this? The councillors who love their area and want to roll their sleeves up will be.”

“We made big savings in South Derbyshire without cutting jobs – in fact we created jobs”

“When I became leader in 2007 the council was practically bankrupt. It was spending a £1 million a year more than it was getting in. Now, three years on, the plans are in place to have a balanced budget at the end of year four. And we’ve done that without a single compulsory redundancy.” The authority finished in 57th place in the prestigious Sunday Times list of the top 75 Best Public Sector Companies to Work For 2010.

“It’s not a matter of a land grab, but if there are other areas that can’t manage effectively, maybe there are opportunities for local government”

Barack Obama’s Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel once said a serious crisis shouldn’t be allowed to go to waste. Heather shares that view and thinks our current economic woes could be an opportunity for local government. “We all know in the local government family that we do a great job at a very affordable price. So in stringent times maybe this is the opportunity. For example, look at the money the Ministry of Justice spends on probation or the money spent on job centres that could be managed locally. If local government could say, look, we can do it for 80 per cent of the current costs, that would be an attractive offer. And I’m sure local government would come up with innovative ways of running services for less money.”

“I’m confident that local government has the ability to respond. The state of the economy has brought it home to councillors and senior managers that they have to look at every budget head, see what’s important and what’s necessary. Then, having done the sums, find innovative ways and different methods of delivery.”

And then it was time to go and vote. Heather isn’t about to forget her local government roots, but councils will need to show they are up for the changes ahead if they are to get her support in Parliament.
As the arguments raged over whether the budget was progressive or regressive Alan Waters was on the beach. But his holiday reading had a lot to say about the effects of an unequal distribution of resources.

While it is always a pleasure – for most of the year – to immerse one’s self in the many specialist and general publications dedicated to local government (not forgetting the convoy of documents emanating from Whitehall and its agencies to provide instruction and guidance) the holidays are always a good time to read a little more widely.

Daniel Dorling’s book ‘Injustice – why social inequality persists’, published in March, may not seem at first glance a natural choice for the beach. However it is full of memorable facts.

For example in 2007 the most it was possible to spend on underwear was US $5 million on a diamond-studded bra: of interest to someone like Paris Hilton, but not within the reach or much practical use to the rest of us. Dorling also tells a rather poignant story of the daughter of one of the ‘super rich’ who for her birthday asks for an economy passenger plane ticket to experience the adventure of flying with ordinary people rather than the usual splendid isolation of the family private jet.

Even the best health care that money can buy has its drawbacks. Private physicians have an interest in maximising the cost of their patients’ health care – since money is no object – rather than their patients’ health.

The broader point is that the very rich do not in the end benefit from the isolation and obligations that great wealth brings. It is a constant worry maintaining all those homes and staff, the boats and the planes and the nagging fear that you might be slipping in status in relation to the others up in the stratosphere.

The more significant issue is what is the effect on society of a misallocation of resources? After all Britain (along with the United States) is one of the least equal societies among the world’s 25 most affluent states. For Dorling, how we got this situation are about lessons learnt and lessons forgotten.

The 40 years between the start of the New Deal and the mid-1970s saw a strong social democratic commitment to redistributive policies from rich to poor; progressive income tax; effective inheritance taxes; higher minimum wages; strong unions fighting for workers’ rights. For Dorling the tragedy is that the lessons so forcefully learnt during the Great Depression were forgotten or wilfully ignored by the 1980s allowing “a tiny minority to amass runaway wealth and effectively opt out of normal society”.

Yet according to Dorling the way we are engaging in that conversation is framed in the terms that George Orwell described in his essay ‘Politics and the English Language’: that “political language is designed to make lies sound truthful”. For Dorling there is a 21st Century Orwellian ‘newspeak’ designed to sustain and justify dangerously widening inequality: these are: ‘elitism is efficient’; ‘exclusion is necessary’; ‘prejudice is natural’; ‘greed is good’ and ‘despair inevitable’. His book explores in detail each of these themes.

In local government we are, inevitably, largely preoccupied with the local, often the very local. It is an obvious point to make, but one I will make anyway, that our actions are strongly influenced and often determined by what happens, nationally, internationally and globally. We need to understand those forces. Dorling’s book will not be to everyone’s taste, but it does make a serious attempt to explain the causes and consequences of inequality and how we might begin to address these issues. On the basis that ‘all politics is local’ it is a book I would recommend to every councillor.
California vote goes to pot

Chris Mead turns his attention to the US mid-term elections, where the Democrats are struggling, the Republicans are turning more to the right, and one local candidate hands out leaflets in the nude.

One of the pleasures of waiting in line at the Pack’n’Save checkout is the opportunity to browse magazines you would not be seen dead purchasing. My hand hovered over Guns and Ammo (“This year’s must-have accessories for your AK47?”) but I eventually chose Modern Glamor. After a furtive fumble through the Summer Swimsuit Special I arrived at the agony column. My friend Barack used to write to me all the time, one letter began, but now I never hear from him. What happened? It was signed Lonely Chris, San Francisco. Dear Lonely, Auntie replied, there could be many reasons. Have you sent Barack any money lately? Perhaps he’s feeling shy because he’s not as popular as he was. Give him time, two years from now you won’t be able to get him off the phone!

Why the ennui? Wasn’t General Motors saved, healthcare reformed, financial regulation instated? Yes, but folk are still hurting, and you can only blame the last lot for so long. (Enjoy it while you can Dave and Nick.) And many of my pinko pals’ pet issues have been put on the back burner. There’s a sense of abandonment as if Moses had turned round and said to his flock “thanks for the company guys but from now on I can find my own way to the Promised Land.”

Meantime the other lot are doing their best to miss an open goal. Driven by my old friends the Tea Partiers and a claque of media blowhards, the Republicans are shooting rightwards like a Malibu speedboat with a stuck rudder. Here in California Barbara Boxer is defending her senate seat from one Carly Fiorina who is best remembered as the CEO of Hewlett Packard. After running the company into the ground and laying-off 30,000 employees she was eventually fired with a golden handshake of $21 million. Perfect candidate, what?

In November our governor, Arnold, will be hanging up his posing pouch, leading to a lack-luster contest between former governor Jerry Brown and yet another ex-CEO, Meg Whitman, who used to manage eBay. (Before that she ran Hasbro where she oversaw the global marketing of Mister Potato Head, as good a skill for running the state of California as you will find.) Jerry is often described as ‘quixotic’, which means looney-tunes, but he does have name recognition, a vital attribute in our west coast culture – heck, it got a Austrian bodybuilder elected.

Despite the goofy GOP candidates the Dems are undoubtedly in for a spanking this Fall, but no Republicans will be rearing their heads in our local elections to choose new supervisors, as we call councillors. In the downtown district a bewildering fifteen contestants have tossed their hats into the ring. Well, make that fourteen. One candidate, George Davis, doesn’t have a hat or anything else. Boy George believes that the key to happiness lies in being buck naked and he is taking his message to the people. Nudity per se is not illegal in San Francisco and our would-be supe can be seen on Market Street strutting his stuff and handing out leaflets to the delighted tourists, although the advent of the coolest summer in 35 years has led to a certain diminution in his public standing.

And finally what California election would be complete without a controversial proposition on the ballot? Step forward Prop 19, which would legalise the growing and selling of marijuana. No mainstream politician dare voice support, leaving the field open to a strange coalition of Young Democrats, right-wing libertarians, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Food Workers Union (jobs, jobs, jobs!), and the entire population of Berkeley. Your correspondent, who generally prefers his intoxicants ice cold with a twist of lemon, will vote ‘Yes’ just for the hell of it. Mind you, if the price of gin at Pack’n’Save goes up any more…