

Filling the governance gap

As reorganisation unfolds, **Mark Smith** argues that supporting and building on town and parish councils offers a proven route to maintain strong local voices

I have genuine empathy with my chief executive colleagues in districts, who have the Sword of Damocles hanging over their councils. After years of financial pressures and a 'real terms' reduction in core spending since 2010, they now face abolition by 2027. This creates understandable uncertainty for their councils, local democracy, staff, and themselves.

Twenty years ago, I was a newly appointed director in a high-performing district council. Four years later, I went through the uncertainty of local government reorganisation. For me, it worked out well, leading to a director role in a newly created unitary council in 2009, and the opportunity to help set up a new council – doing things I could never have imagined in a smaller district setting.

Over recent months, I have been pleased to speak with many district council chief executives and corporate management teams, particularly in areas without existing town councils to become custodians of local services,

Shifting the levers of control to the local

Max Wide says it is time to fundamentally alter the dynamics of the relationships between localities and the institutions that serve them, and he sets out four keys to system change

There is nothing like a round of local government reorganisation to remind you where you sit in the tiered hierarchy of English local government. As the civil servant who ran the last round, the late Paul Rowsell, said to me often: 'The secretary of state will decide...' So it was then, and so it is now. With submissions for the six areas in the Devolution Priority Programme due at the end of September, much wordsmithing and change tracking is doubtless in progress on a multitude of laptops. More seasoned campaigners will know this is a political process as much as it is a technical one.

One of the areas in the contests will be the element of the submission that describes the way in which the requirement to establish 'effective neighbourhood governance structures' as set out in clause 58 of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (EDCE), will be met. My prediction having seen many drafts is that phrases like a 'once in a generation opportunity to...' will be ubiquitous. Levels of hyperbole will be high, but levels of clarity low.

I do not mean to be disparaging. The use and abuse of words in this space would have sent Orwell scurrying feverishly to his typewriter. The lexicon of localism resembles a hall of mirrors; with distorted meanings, flipped identities and confused reflections. For example, I regard my 'neighbourhood' as the streets, spaces and shops surrounding where I live. I have an intuitive sense of its boundaries, I know when I'm in another part of town. But in the 2019 NHS Long Term Plan and its intersection with social care, it is anywhere between 30-50, even in some areas 80 thousand people.

'Engagement or participation' can mean pretty much anything from ceding power and responsibility on the one hand, to pointless decision-has-already-been-taken, consultations on the other. The key word though, whose 'defanging' over decades is a tale that is darkly illustrative of the deeper issues involved here, will be 'empowerment'.

My experience is that power cannot be given, it has to be taken. Institutions can create the conditions for this to happen, but you can offer up resources, data, asset maps, spaces, powers, permissions and so on. Ultimately it is people in communities who will decide whether to 'step in' and use these things.

Colleagues in the international development community however tell me that it is a well-researched phenomenon, how the word 'empowerment' over decades has been through a process known as 'recuperation', in which

challenged institutions gradually appropriate and redefine terms to preserve the *status quo*. So it is nowadays primarily used by people with power and resources to describe an activity carried out by institutions themselves. Thus 'we will empower communities...'

From the international development field Cornwall and Brock (2005) write that: "'Empowerment', [is a word that is] 'warmly persuasive' and fulsomely positive, [promising] an entirely different way of doing business. Harnessed in the service of 'poverty reduction' and decorated with the clamours of 'civil society' and 'the voices of the poor', [it speaks] of an agenda for transformation that combines no-nonsense pragmatism with almost unimpeachable moral authority...institutions are working together for the good, they have now got the story right and are really going to make a difference.'

They go on to say that this unity of purpose emerged some time ago but through that time it is apparent communities themselves have never been so deprived, unequal, divided and threatened. Thus 'empowerment' is used to describe the granting of freedoms prescribed by institutions that do not actually fundamentally change any existing power dynamics, alter practices, push the envelope of (shrinking) resources or evaluate any real outcomes.

System perspectives

I think I should declare my hand here. I am a local government transformation specialist and advisor, and an associate director of the Leadership Centre who has worked as a strategic director at every level of local government. I am also an independent town councillor in Frome in Somerset and chair of the Vale of Frome Local Community Network (LCN), comprising the 18 parishes and community organisations in the area, working closely with the county councillors and other public sector partners. In short, I see this from all sides. I have lost track of whether I am a gamekeeper or a poacher.

As I look out from the chair of the LCN I am aware we are collectively dealing with a tapestry of public service provision that has been devastated by years of austerity. Huge holes exist in some areas and in others, bare threads just about hold things together. As a group we consider how to fill these gaps and keep things going as more reductions loom on the horizon. If we identify gaps it is then our responsibility to fill them. The delegated powers of councillors, even if enhanced, would do little to alter this



The local community in Frome, Somerset

pressing context. It can feel anything but empowering. The parallels with Cornwall and Brock's description, are stark.

Function over form

I do not envy the challenge (putting aside the irony) of those sitting at Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government HQ evaluating whether local arrangements are adequate. Everybody knows that the changes needed are profound and seismic; they will not be enabled by what appears in the Bill to be a glorified scheme of delegation.

The shift is not to give localities greater power over a very limited range of decisions delegated by local authority functions, it is to fundamentally alter the dynamics of the relationships between localities and the institutions that serve them. Rather than obsess about the form, the legislation should be clear about the function of the local arrangements, which should serve as the gateway to public service transformation.

How to do this? In 2020 Leadbetter and Willenall described four keys to system change: power, purpose, relationship and resources. Looking at each in turn through the lens of the LCN (which is after all a neighbourhood area committee so beloved of the minister Jim McMahon).

1. How do the arrangements help to ensure greater power is held locally?

assets, and facilities when unitary councils are created across the country.

It is encouraging that these officers and their political leadership are exploring the creation of town councils and considering how they might fill the local governance gap left by the abolition of district and borough councils.

At the same time, the Government is considering the creation of unelected neighbourhood area committees to address the challenge of large unitary councils, which can cover populations of over half a million. However, many town and parish councils already provide effective, accountable

partnership working at the community level – something we do regularly at Chippenham Town Council in partnership with Wiltshire Council and other partner organisations.

It is worth recognising and building on these existing structures, which deliver local services and community engagement successfully. Supporting and expanding town and parish councils offers a proven and democratic way to maintain strong local voices through times of change.

I'll leave it there... ▸

Mark Smith is chief executive of Chippenham Town Council



This isn't simply about delegated member decisions and small grant giving ability. It requires an obligation on all services to be visibly and tangibly informed by local community voices, demonstrating how they have used that information to be sensitive to and focused on the local context, and how this information has been used to deliver improvements. It is a shift in accountability, as well as the inevitable reporting lines from services to central government, there needs to be accountability to the local area, based on a local plan.

2. How do the arrangements work to change the purpose of service provision?

From cure to prevention, from serving problems to solving problems, from deficit-based to asset-based development, from a narrow service based focus to a broader place-based approach that delivers more success and less need in communities. Again there needs to be an obligation on public services to demonstrate these shifts and for the outcomes of that to be determined locally.

3. How do arrangements change the nature of the relationship between the locality and public services?

This is a movement from passive dependence to equal partnership. Service interventions are co-designed, data is shared and outcomes are jointly evaluated.

4. How do the arrangements move existing or create

additional resources for the local area?

Frome has published a local prospectus that makes the case for the devolution of assets and responsibilities, setting this in the context of a plan for the development of the place and showing how, under local control, the currently excluded capacity, networks, relationships, people and often extra funding can be harnessed for the greater good. Based on this prospectus, all these assets have now been transferred.

To deliver on the promise of devolution and empowerment set out in the title of the Bill it is necessary to think beyond the devices that appear to be taking shape. The Total Place initiative that emerged in the 2000's originated from real energy generated by communities. It was adopted by government and absorbed through civil service methodologies into a managed scheme that over time – as one senior local government chief executive said to me – became a 'total bureaucratic nightmare'.

Proper devolution and empowerment is more than delegated powers and an inclusive committee, it is a vehicle for a shift in the levers that control systems. Let us hope that for once culture does not eat strategy for breakfast. ▸

Max Wide is associate director of the Leadership Centre, an independent town councillor in Frome in Somerset and chair of the Vale of Frome Local Community Network

The importance of pre-planning to navigating LGR

Local government reorganisation (LGR) is a complex process, and the pre-implementation planning phase plays a pivotal role in ensuring councils are prepared for the journey ahead. This phase is not simply a holding pattern – it is a proactive, system-wide mobilisation effort that bridges the gap between proposal development and the formal transition phase.

At its heart, pre-implementation planning is about readiness. Speaking to those who have previously been through LGR the consistent message is that they wish they'd started earlier. Councils should use the time between submitting their case and the 'minded to' decision from Government to compile and assess key datasets, evaluate data quality, and generate the insights that identify risks and opportunities, informing strategic decisions for the next phase and beyond.

At Newtrality we are supporting councils to do this, including through the development of dashboards and heatmaps to highlight alignment, opportunities and risks across core services. This insight is imperative for a successful vesting day regardless of which number or configuration of unitaries is taken forward.

By investing time and attention now, councils lay the groundwork for a successful transition

The pre-implementation phase is a key opportunity for learning from others. We have access to a wide network of peers who have been through LGR and can provide valuable learning on what worked and what they would do differently.

Engagement within your council is equally important. A well-defined pre-implementation phase helps to maintain momentum beyond proposal submission, ensure activity is focused and proportionate for each stage and keeps officers and members focused on the long-term goal of effective and safe transition.

In summary, pre-implementation planning is a strategic imperative that enables councils to move confidently into the next phase of LGR. It fosters data-driven decision-making and enables you to focus on the core activities that will ensure a good outcome for vesting day and the transformation that follows. By investing time and attention now, councils lay the groundwork for a successful transition that is both technically robust and people-centred.

We recognise the time and focus that is currently on proposal development and the need to take a (well deserved!) break once they are submitted. However, learning from our experience in previous rounds of LGR we would urge you to begin thinking now about what comes next.

Do get in touch with our team for a conversation about how we can support you during pre-implementation planning and help you be ready for the challenges and opportunities LGR presents. ■

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Claire Corbett
Delivery Director
Newtrality
hello@newtrality.co.uk