CfGS

Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

"Docking in": changing the way we act on local democracy

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"DOCKING IN": CHANGING THE WAY WE ACT ON LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Introduction

This paper has been funded by a grant from JRSST Charitable Trust, as part of a project on post-pandemic governance. It forms part of work that CfGS is undertaking through 2021 and into 2022 on governance innovation, painting a positive vision for how we can think differently about the way that councils (and other public sector bodies) do business. It takes as its foundation the idea that we are at a period of profound change, that the pandemic has accelerated that change, and that our current assumptions about how local government, and local governance "works" mean that we are ill-equipped for a more complex and demanding future.

This paper is not a research study – it is intended to provoke and challenge councils to take practical action. It is, though, directly informed by the recent research of others (as well as recent CfGS research).

This paper is not, in itself, a campaigning document exhorting Government to "do things" to "free up" local government. The steps that we suggest councils take in this paper are in their gift to act on right now. The responsibility for action sits at local level. Success, or failure, will be on our own terms, and will be ours to own.

Finally, this paper does not provide a convenient menu of community engagement or participation methodologies for councils and others to try out and experiments. More information about those methods – varying models of co-design, deliberative decision-making, co-production, and other forms of engagement and empowerment – is available elsewhere. We think that the gap – and the gap that we aim to fill in this paper – is a practical understanding of how councils (and others) need to change their mindset and approach to make those different methods "stick", and to link them to traditional governance systems. This is the essence of "docking in".

Where our thinking comes from

A full bibliography is provided at the end, but the research and campaigns that have informed this work particularly are:

- The final report of the Localism Commission (Locality, 2018)

- Various recent publications from New Local, including:

    - The community paradigm (2019)

    - Think Big, Act Small: Elinor Ostrom's radical vision for community power (2020)

    - Communities vs Coronavirus: the rise of mutual aid (2020)

    - Trusting the People: the case for community-powered conservative (2021)

- Various recent publication from Localis, including:

    - Building communities: planning for a clean and good growth future (2021)

    - The Medici Code (2022)

In describing and defining the various tools and terms used in this paper we have used descriptions developed by Involve, which can be found on their Knowledge Base [link].

Over the past eighteen months we have been talking to a range of people and organisations active in the sphere of governance and democracy in England and Wales. We have used these conversations to advance some key arguments – and some possible solutions.

Those arguments are:

- the way that services are designed and delivered is subject to sudden and swift change – governance will also need to bend and flex to accommodate this. Overly rigid systems risk being overwhelmed or simply ignored;

- as things stand the way that decisions are made can be opaque – even to those within traditional systems. Friendliness is about transparency, clarity and trust – so that everyone in the system understands their roles, and those outside the system understands who does what and – crucially – who holds accountability and responsibility;

- local councils do not "own" local governance. Many different partners are involved – they will each have their own responsibilities but need to recognise their collective responsibility to support and protect good governance across a place. Local areas are likely to want to experiment with more local forms of decisions, and with co-production and deliberation through methods like citizens' assemblies. "Hyper-local" governance and decision-making could proliferate. Here, fragmentation may well be a good thing – it promotes resilience and cuts down the traditional boundaries between organisations, as well as empowering decision-making at the most local level;

- governance has a job to do – that job is supporting and empowering others to do *their* jobs. Governance has to be focused on this end result. Systems have to designed to facilitate high quality decision making which makes a real difference, proportionate and punchy oversight of those systems, targeted and meaningful involvement by a wide range of local stakeholders and the transparency to knit it together – all of the service of the ultimate goal of making a difference;

- we may need to think differently about the formal, and legal, structures that underpin local governance if it is to be robust and sustainable. Protections and safeguards – for the roles of individuals and groups – need to be built in. This is about structural safety but also about culture – developing mindsets so that the bulwarks of good governance lie in the way that we relate to one another, not just the processes set out on the pages of a constitution.

Overall we think that there is a new space for the exercise of community power in local areas – and an urgent need for this space to be occupied by public servants, public representatives and local people working together. But our traditional governance systems – and as professionals our outdated assumptions of what community engagement, and community organising, look like – risk holding us back. Worse, they lead us to complacency, thinking either that we can weather the challenges that face us or that the future is by and large a "steady state", where services can be designed and delivered much as they have been for the past thirty years.

We need to find ways of reimagining those systems so that they are more open to influence by local people. Where councils are innovating to create new models for participation and involvement by local people – citizens' assemblies, co-production and co-design processes – there needs to be a clearer way to link them in to these redesigned formal governance processes. This is what we mean by "docking in".

The pandemic is not the only reason to imagine the need for a different future. Other trends predate the pandemic and are likely to persist beyond it. We explore those possibilities in the section below on scenarios for the future.

THE CHALLENGE

What needs to change?

In **local government**, we need to:

- Understand that we are at a point of transition – that our traditional ways of thinking and working, and our traditional ways of designing and delivering services, are no longer fit for purpose and will continue to deliver dramatically diminishing returns in meeting local people's needs;

- Understand that as we transform in other areas, we also need to ensure that our governance systems keep pace with that change, otherwise they will increasingly be seen as barriers to innovation rather than enablers;

- Ensure that change centres the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion – that new systems that we, and others, design bring about meaningful participation, removing barriers (some of which may not currently be visible to professionals or elected politicians);

- Support our councillors to understand the scale of this change, and to think seriously about how their role(s) are likely to transform as a result;

- Understand that we will also need to transform our organisations, and the way we work, to collaborate more meaningfully with local people, ceding power in doing so;

- Take clear action to bring about the transition, even though we may not know what the "end state" looks like – the transition involving opening ourselves up to influence from "outsiders" and taking action that reflects their aspirations.

In **central government**, civil servants and Ministers need to:

- Understand that local services should be subject to strong, local accountability, and that oversight and stewardship of the sector by Government should reflect that;

- Understand that this transition to a fundamentally different relationship will have an impact on the way that Government promotes and develops its own agenda – particularly around levelling-up.

We should stress that this paper does not make "asks" of Government – it should not require Government action to take steps to make changes and improvements to local governance right now. Government action (particularly around levelling-up) brings with it risks and opportunities. Local governance systems need the flexibility to accommodate these factors.

More than anything, those at all levels need to articulate clearly what is happening – how our public services, and how they are designed and delivered, might change over the course of the next decade and how that affects how we live and work right now. The more that professionals, elected members and others talk to each other about these changes the easier it will be to make the transition.

The first step is an acknowledgement that the nature of this shift is different to that which public services, and local democracy, have faced over the course of the last few decades. The change now is similar to the transition that local government faced between around 1989 and 1999. In that era the transformation of the local government finance base (abolition of rates, the failed attempt to introduce the poll tax, the introduction of council tax), the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) and the introduction, in the first term of the Labour government, of the Best Value regime all brought about a profound shift in assumptions about how local government "works", and how it relates to local people.

The current era demands that we answer questions of what and who local government is for, and how a sense of purpose in the way that councils and their partners work gives the sector vitality and direction. To that end, action at all levels involves changing our mindset of what we mean by "governance" – who is involved in decision-making and what the nature of that involvement should be.

We can choose to look at governance in two ways.

The first model says that governance is a compliance matter, focused on how institutions choose to run themselves. By and large, this has been the dominant framing device for governance in this country in the modern era. It was solidified, in the 80s, in the form of New Public Management – the focus of NPM being on structure, conformity and compliance with systems, processes and rules.

Rules and processes are important. They provide consistency and accountability, when managed properly. But they only tell part of the story.

The second model is a more connected and distributed one. This holds echoes of the "web of accountability" that we first posited in our publication "Accountability Works", twelve years ago. It is a model that takes account of complexity and that, instead of seeking to batter that complexity into submission, embraces it, recognising that true good governance is about human beings, understanding each others needs and working together to try their best to reconcile them (when they conflict) and ultimately to meet them.

The second model is, we think, the only one that can meet the challenge of the many different directions that we could head in – one that can cope with the necessary complexity and flexibility of the challenge that now faces us.

This paper explores, in detail, the kinds of practical steps that councils can take to put in place systems to capitalise on this changing landscape.

Using scenarios to anchor our thinking

In order to support that clear explanation of what change might look like, we are setting out what we consider to be four of the most likely scenarios for the development of governance, accountability and decision-making in our sector. These allow us to talk about the practical ways in which councils can make certain elements of these scenarios more likely – and avoid parts of those scenarios which have negative connotations. We first outlined these scenarios in late 2020 and have been developing and refining them since.

We have developed these scenarios because we don't know what's coming. We need to prepare for a significant range of possibilities. With that in mind:

- Not all these changes will happen to all councils. Some may be able to grasp more opportunities than others. We will see a divergence in councils' business models – and possibly some councils at real risk of failure;

- All of these models involve increased structural complexity. The creation of independent trusts for some services, of new combined authorities, new parishes and area working arrangements – all involve a diffusion and fragmentation of traditional power;

- A tussle between upstream accountability (accountability to Government) and downstream accountability (accountability to local people) is a theme for at least two of these scenarios. On some matters Government may assert the need for more oversight – local people are likely to demand more accountability – the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, and the Government's wider levelling up activity, will bring with it additional obligations on data reporting, for example. We will have to design governance systems which account for both.

These scenarios do not present an end-point – a destination which the public sector might reach in ten years or so. Rather they seek to provoke thinking about how various current trends may develop in the near future. They are framed by an understanding of the "three horizons" approach to thinking about the future.

We should stress that these scenarios are not framed by "what Government decides to do in the next four or five years". But they are framed by what the local government sector, and what local communities, decide to do in response to Government action.

Scenario 1: community focus

In this model, local government and its partners at local level reinvent themselves to be driven by the needs of people on a street-by-street, neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood level.

The Government's "levelling up" missions and priorities continue to be relevant, but councils are able to use them to build their own, locally-led objectives and vision for the future of the area.

In this model the "council", and other traditional institutions, are far less evident as monolithic bodies. They might provide the framework within which a range of individuals and groups operate, and some assurance that people's needs are being met overall (given their statutory responsibilities). They could be guarantors of local services, and spaces for democratic challenge on how those services are designed and delivered.

Handled poorly, this could lead to a crisis of legitimacy – traditional democratic structures could be seen to have peeled away. Community power, in this context, could be seen as a veneer for the privatisation and atomisation of local services – an undemocratic free-for-all benefiting only the sharp-elbowed.

If replaced by new and meaningful forms of direct democracy part of the risk of this could be allayed but what such a shift would look like in practice is a huge issue in itself. There is the risk that a model where "communities lead" is seen as privileging those with the time and capital to be active citizens, unless we remake the spaces which exist for community dialogue and discussion, and can develop the skills as individuals and communities which involve an awareness that local policymaking involves dialogue and compromise rather than traditional campaigning.

This highlights the need for capacity within local communities – civic education, support to people's caring responsibilities, the design of fully accessible systems for participation and deliberation – as a necessary precondition for an exercise of real "community power". Such systems would need to provide for the likelihood that while people will be interested in the outcomes that

Scenario 2: democratic growth

In this model, councils experiment more with novel approaches to decision-making. Increasingly, the use of collaborative methods to make decisions is seen as the norm. Councillors are intimately involved in steps to engage with and understand local people. There is a deepening use of such conversations at the most local level. These conversations actually lead somewhere – they directly inform local decisions in a way that is clear and understood by all.

This collaborative working is framed by something like a "community constitution" – a protocol which gives local people the confidence to engage at a time and in a manner that suits their needs and expectations. Councils, and other public service institutions, act as the custodians of these agreements. They provide a way to anchor local conversations into the way that public bodies make formal decisions. This, and related, activity, provides a way for local authorities to meet opportunities provided by the devolution agenda, an agenda which focuses on changes to systems, behaviours and attitudes around governance (and who "leads" on governance and decision-making) as much as on changes to structures.

The challenge is whether all, or most, councils, have the resource and capacity to carry out this kind of experimentation. For some, more participation brings the risk of raised expectations – many officers and councillors believe there is little other option than to retrench into the delivery of statutory services. For some councils, these conversations are challenging – it proves difficult to broker consensus in a politically febrile environment.

Scenario 3: assumptions of a steady state

In this model, little changes in the medium term – the focus lies on maintaining existing working arrangements. Local government continues to feel an inability to innovate because of enhanced resource constraints. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act sparks some conversations about system change, but these end up being drowned out by a focus on structural reform around the "devolution framework". Local policymakers' strategic attention is drawn away from local communities towards securing central Government funding for local growth.

Councils recognise that they need to improve the relationships they have with local people but lack the resources and consistent political commitment to do so effectively. Examples of high quality engagement do exist (designed and championed by both councillors and professionals) but are difficult to sustain because they do not link particularly well to "formal" decision-making processes. This lack of an obvious link between engagement and decision-making means there is a tendency for some to think of some forms of council engagement as window-dressing. Some local activists challenge the assumptions made by such engagement activity. In some areas this leads to further disengagement from local politics, the growth of "insurgent" local political parties and campaigns to change councils' formal governance option.

Innovation in local government becomes increasingly challenged as resource constraints continue. Some councils withdraw entirely from attempts to engage the public, arguing that there is no alternative but to retrench to a position where they only provide statutory services. In these places council/community relationships degenerate into unproductive protest and argument.

Scenario 4: centralisation

In this scenario, the future holds fewer councils and fewer councillors. The need to cut costs drives restructures in many areas. Although not centrally driven, in many areas it is provoked by worries of sustainability relating to the agreement of county deals.

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act puts in place a structure of upward reporting which focuses on data collection under the threat of Government intervention, leading councils to adopt a defensive approach to the way that they work.

Councils by and large retreat to a focus on the provision of statutory services and the design of consultation mechanisms which are traditional and unresponsive to local need. Local partnerships and relationships fragment; the resilience of local communities reduces. Some formal duties are removed from local authorities – in some areas this involves social care and/or children's services being hived off into trusts, and/or designed and delivered across a wider geography (perhaps reflecting an integrated care board (ICB) footprint).

Local councils, struggling to remain financially sustainable, find themselves subject to more central oversight systems designed to predict and monitor their ongoing effectiveness.

All of these arrangements together compel local government to see themselves as accountable upwards to central government, rather than downwards to local people.

What we mean by "docking in"

A common feature of the scenarios we talked about in the section above is the creation of new mechanisms for local participation and involvement. We are concerned that these mechanisms could be seen as being in tension with existing, traditional models of accountability.

"Levelling up" provides an opportunity, but also a threat, to this activity. At the time of writing, the passage of the Bill through Parliament makes it easier to discern the ultimate impact of this legislation, but some uncertainty remains – and our scenarios above reflect this. Levelling up presents a series of overall strategic objectives for the public sector – set out in the "missions", which will be given statutory force. The delivery of those missions hinges on transformation in governance at national and local level – the agreement of devolution deals, but also the creation of systems for the gathering and use of data, for monitoring purposes.

This is an opportunity because there is a future in which levelling up acts as a hook for greater public involvement and greater transparency – where the missions act as a galvanising force to draw together communities and partners, and where local leaders are able to align their own objectives to the missions in a way that provides some tangible relevance to the communities they serve. There is a risk, because there is also a future in which levelling up becomes about structures and data collection, and the reporting of performance against arbitrary targets, in a way that works against local decision-making and local governance.

We have heard that activists and campaigners are often frustrated that there are often few "routes in" to influence council decision-making, and that there is an obvious and significant power imbalance between themselves and the council. We also know that some councillors can be wary of approaches to participation that "leapfrog" their representative role – particularly where those methods can inadvertently give a voice to the loudest voices. There considers to be a worry that participation, where it happens, is with "the usual suspects".

In local government, how might citizens' assemblies and co-production arrangements (for example) dock in to Cabinet, to full Council, to scrutiny? No-one wants to be in a situation where councils can, and do, simply ignore the outcomes of innovative experiments in local democracy where the results aren't what formal decision-makers like the look of. These kinds of experiments always run the risk of failing at the final hurdle – when proposals, pored over by local people over many weeks or months, flounder on implementation or stay stuck on an officers' desk.

Our systems need a redesign to provide more certainty – a formal role for new modes of participation, and political and organisational commitments that outcomes will be taken seriously even if a council's leadership disagrees with them. This is what "docking in" is[1].

Constitutions need to be amended, to recognise the presence now, or presence in the future, of those bodies, and to provide certainty to participants that arrangements exist for autonomous, local decision-making, with the council as the guarantor of those arrangements.

This will involve a ceding of power and control. Recognition of the need to expand out decision-making, to democratise local democracy itself, will help in the kind of local debate that will be necessary if we are to weather the uncertainty of the coming months and years.

In recent years many national and local bodies have made strong arguments for a different relationship between national and local government and between government and local people.

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1   The phrase initially emerged through discussions at the Newham Democracy Commission (2019-2020)

Reflections from others: The Localism Commission

The report "People power: findings from the commission on the future of localism" (2018) brings together findings and suggested outcomes from a Commission established by Locality in 2017. The Commission was chaired by Lord Bob Kerslake.

Strengthening community power requires action in four key domains of localism:

1. Institutions for localism: healthy local governance structures across the country, integrated within wider governance;

2. Powers and mechanisms for localism: ensuring there are meaningful powers, levers and resources for communities to take action locally;

3. Relational localism: changing culture and behaviours requires embracing risk and establishing trust in devolution to communities, local leaders acting as facilitators for community expertise, and disrupting hierarchies;

4. Capacity for localism: ensuring localism is not the preserve of wealthier communities or those with the loudest voices requires building community capacity, supporting community organising, community development and sustainable spaces for participation

Initiatives to strengthen localism should be subject to six key principles:

1. People are the end goal of localism. Interventions should be judged by the impact they have on people, rather than institutions alone;

2. Equality in local participation. Not everybody wants to participate in the same way, but there needs to be equality of consideration and an equal opportunity to participate;

3. Dynamic local accountability. Accountability must not be based on consultations and voting alone. It must value ongoing community participation, relationships and local action;

4. Local leadership is build around place. In whichever form, party politicians or community leaders, leadership should be built around place, convening community partnership around shared local concerns;

5. Localism requires meaningful powers and integrated structures. Local powers should not be easily dismissed by "higher" tiers of governance, without clear reasons and means of redress;

6. Economic power must support community responsibility. Communities must have the means and resources to match powers and responsibilities, and to realise the potential of localism.

Councils (councillors and officers) feel a reticence about opening up decision-making in the way that some local activists might want. We have been told that there are a number of reasons for this:

- Councils have limited headspaces and resources for such conversations. There is an understandable focus on operational delivery – on supporting communities and individuals whose resilience has been limited by the pandemic, on managing immediate financial pressures, on 101 other pressing demands which make "having conversations about the meaning of local democracy" feel self-indulgent. But we would argue that having those conversations is precisely what we need to do in order to manage these pressures and threats successfully. Professionals and politicians act on behalf of local people – in a world of sharp edges and tight resources, being able to be frank and candid with local people, and to draw them into the conversations about things which directly affect them.

- People aren't interested in things unless and until they are directly affected. This argument reflects the cynicism that many in public service feel, that a direct personal connection to an issue is needed to galvanise public feeling. This connects to the frustration felt by some local people who try to unsuccessfully challenge decisions, finding themselves thwarted because the strategy setting the framework for that decision was decided far earlier, and with less fanfare. This has lessons for the way that we in public service frame involvement on strategies and plans – and how we might deprofessionalise that process;

- The expectations of activists may be unreasonable. Activists can be dismissed as unrealistic, and not aware of the significant challenge that public bodies face. Involving them in big decisions can bring with it risks – around raised expectations, and around managing arguments in favour of actions which strike professionals as being unsustainable. The answer to this challenge lies in better civic and political education – more thought about giving local people the tools to understand these issues better. And, of course, the answer also lies in understanding that a lack of understanding goes two ways – the expectations of officers and politicians may be unreasonable too, framed by an imperfect understanding of local people and their needs. Dialogue is the way through;

- Activists may not be "representative" or legitimate. This has long been a bugbear of traditional consultation in and around local government, and wider public service. Traditional consultation privileges certain voices because it is designed in a way that makes it difficult to engage – it rewards engagement from those already familiar with local systems and, arguably, those already "connected" to those systems. In redesigning our systems we need to work with people to understand that there may not only be power differentials between councils and communities, but also within communities. This is why centring equality, diversity and inclusion in these conversations is so crucial.

Structural solutions will play an important part in bringing better participation about. Being able to practically demonstrate to the public how and where opportunities for influence lie will encourage participation. Structural solutions may also be about creating more spaces for formal accountability. But as we will see, success here is as much about creating new mindsets as it is about building new processes and systems.

THE SOLUTION

Anchoring the solution: a community constitution

We said above the structures only form a part of the solution, and that culture and mindset are equally important.

New structures can provide the framework within which new approaches can develop and grow. People need certainty, transparency, accountability – people need the assurance that new systems will be equitable. Common principles need to be developed, understood and acted on. Importantly, we need checks and balances – a way to hold people with power to account if they fail to live up to the principles and commitments that the wider community expects. Wherever power imbalances exist, these checks and balances are necessary.

We think that the main way to do this will be through the development of a "community constitution" – a document setting out outcomes, priorities, relationships and mutual expectations, a document designed to cede, and spread out, power and control within an accountable, equitable and consistent framework. Individual institutions may have constitutions, articles of association or other governing documents, but the community constitution would be designed to set out how those bodies work together across an area.

In the world of "levelling up", a community constitution could provide a mechanism to ensure that the various public, private and voluntary sector organisations coming together to tackle the challenge of economic growth (as well as broader social challenges) share common systems for transparency, decision-making and oversight – important for enhancing public confidence.
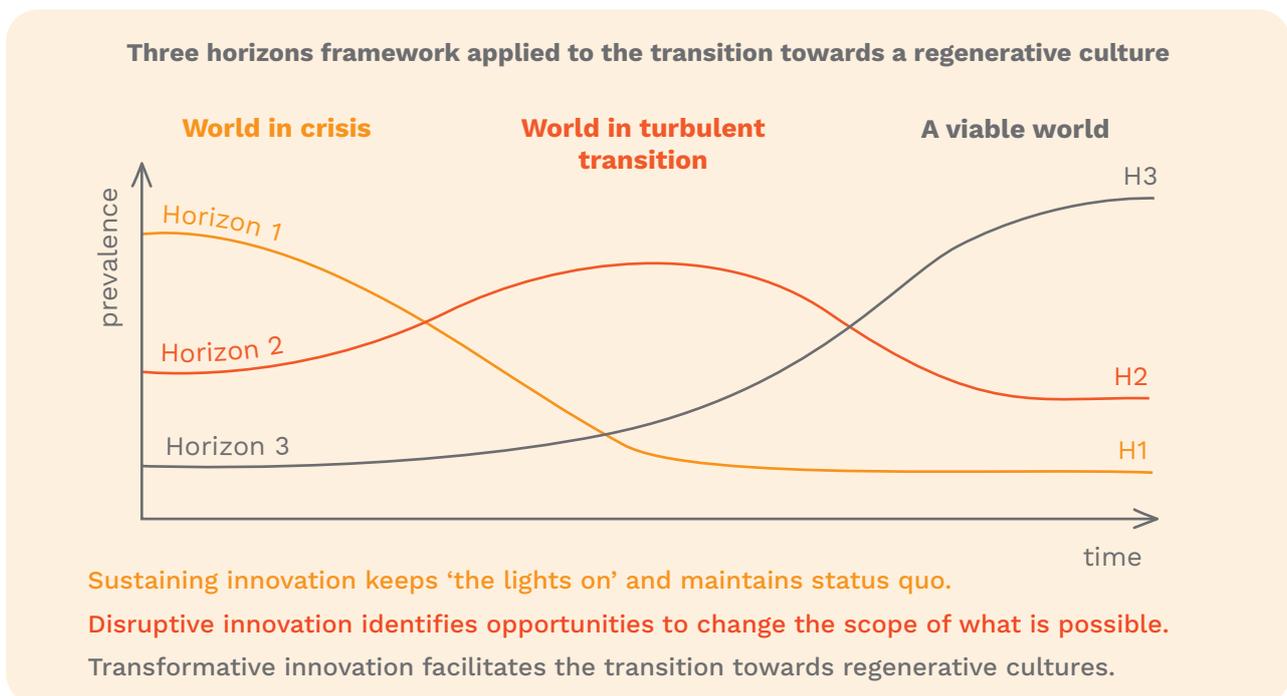
A constitution would:

- Create a framework which allows agreement of mutually endorsed outcomes and priorities. Agreement, here, is about more than the agreement of professionals, councillors, and traditional public sector "partners". The agreement may derive initially from the manifesto of a council's administration but would go beyond this – outcomes and priorities would need to be clearly and transparently developed and owned by a far wider range of people. The constitution would set out the way that this agreement would be brokered, recognising that unanimity is impossible but that we can proceed if we know that the legitimate interests of everyone has been properly understood and laid in the balance;

- Be owned by all local partners and leaders in an area (bearing in mind our broad definition of "leaders" and leadership). Everyone is, in some respect, a "leader", but some hold more power and control than others. A constitution would identify where that power currently lies and seek ways for others to influence and inform how it is exercised;

- Provide a mechanism for leaders, across the place, to hold each other to account. Relationships between partners can be fuzzy and indistinct. People want to be able to hold each other to account for the commitments they make about the "place"; without that ability it may be more difficult to work together. Accountability arguably rests on the presence of good relationships, meaning that people can engage with each other frankly and candidly – but this should be backed up with clear rules, systems and processes;

- Clearly articulate roles and responsibilities, and set out the framework for collaboration and deliberative decision-making. Accountability, as discussed above, brings with it a need for clear roles and responsibilities. People have to know who is doing what – who feeds in and when. This can't be accounted for for every single issue and decision, but a constitution can put in place a consistent set of principles so that everyone has realistic, shared expectations of what involvement will look like, and where individual and collective responsibility for action lie;

- Set out the new behaviours – including the new political culture – necessary for these things to be successful. Traditional constitutions, articles of association and similar governing documents may explain expectations on conduct matters, but may not explore wider expectations around behaviour – the need for collaboration and reflection, and for self-awareness and self-criticism – all necessary for people to recognise where power imbalances might exist that need, within a community, to be equalised;

- Establish the changes that councils and other bodies might need to make to their governance and communications systems for this to work. We think that a community constitution should have objectives – it should be directive. It would by definition not be a neutral document simply explaining how relationships work. It would instead be a document setting out people's shared objectives for how those relationships should evolve, flexibly, to meet new needs and to focus on the need to make local decision-making more equitable, and to enhance local accountability;

- Establish how information sharing, transparency, insight/evidence-led decision-making will operate. Functionally, informed decision-making (and informed oversight and scrutiny) relies on access to information. Public access to information is especially important, if the public are going to play an active role.

Managing the process of change and redesign: the three horizons

These ideas on how councils could both lead and respond to change are based on the conversations we have had since autumn 2020.

We think that there is value in understanding and acting on this transition by using the "three horizons" approach to consider what the future may look like, and how we can act to reach it.

Three horizons framework applied to the transition towards a regenerative culture

Sustaining innovation keeps 'the lights on' and maintains status quo.

Disruptive innovation identifies opportunities to change the scope of what is possible.

Transformative innovation facilitates the transition towards regenerative cultures.

The "three horizons" framework provides a way of thinking and acting on our expectations of significant change, and of making a transition to a more sustainable future. It provides a way of doing this, long term, in a way that does not lose focus on the need to manage that transition effectively and equitably in the short and medium term.

The first horizon presents our sense of "business as usual". It's possible to innovate in a way that attempts to sustain "business as usual" approaches – making gradualist improvements to existing systems to make them more efficient in their own terms - but we know that our traditional idea of "usual" is coming to an end.

The third horizon is the more viable, sustainable world we are trying to get to. This future, at the moment, feels indistinct. We are aiming for the future set out in our first scenario – one in which local people are meaningfully embedded within local democracy and local decision-making. It may or may not be the case that "levelling up", and the missions associated with it, provides a target on this horizon – whether LU will persist as a component of public policy for the next decade remains to be seen.

The second horizon represents the steps we have to take to make the necessary transition between where we are now and where we are trying to get to. We can see this space fairly clearly, and we have a good idea of the kinds of innovations that we can use to occupy it. These innovations serve to disrupt "business as usual" rather than support it.

The three horizons approach suggests to us that there will come a point, quite soon, where these "innovative" second horizon approaches will become more effective than our existing way of doing things. But because we recognise the nature of the transition we need to make, we can weather this disruption as we move towards the third horizon.

If we don't take this approach, or something like it, we will continue to plug away at the same solutions that may have worked for us for the past thirty or forty years, but which now deliver diminishing returns. We will continue to feel the crisis of a lack of local legitimacy – we will find ourselves struggling to remake our systems in an unplanned and chaotic way as "business as usual" becomes less and less able to help us to meet the new challenges we will face.

The three horizons approach is something that will probably need to be understood by some, but not all, of those involved in delivering change in governance at a local level. In truth, intellectualising the problem isn't strictly necessary – it may be enough to be able to describe a shared long term objective and talk about the steps we need to take to reach it.

In having these conversations it will be important to recognise that existing cynicism and suspicion of professionals' motivations may play in to how people choose to respond to the prospect of change. We note elsewhere that a democratisation of decision-making, an opening-up of ownership and responsibility for key issues across a place, can easily be interpreted as privatisation, the balkanisation of public services, and the movement of those services out of public control to vested interests in the community who may not have the interests of the wider public at large. This is why honesty about motivations is critical – and why we think that this process should at the outset be defined through the preparation of a "community constitution" to make expectations and responsibilities clear.

It is also important that conversations about long term plans happen in a way that reflect electoral reality, and the fact that local authorities have elections, the results of which may change the direction of the authority (sometimes quite fundamentally). Ideally, the kinds of changes that we are talking about in this paper are about redesigning the superstructure of local democracy so that it can better support the policy priorities of different political parties.

Practical steps to take and things to think about

There are, we think, some first steps that councils and others in the community can take to begin to better understand what changes need to be made. These start with "discovery" – understanding where we are now and how things currently work (in a way, capturing our understanding of the "first horizon"). They then move on to the necessary steps to take action – adopting approaches to disrupt current ways of working through the "second horizon".

Discovery

■ **Understand what you already do, and how you already work.**

■ Local governance is likely to involve a mix of formal and informal systems. Formal systems are relatively easy to itemise and understand – they are the legal relationships that govern decision-making within, and between, different organisations. They are also local democratic systems – council meetings, elections. But informal systems will also be present – these are arguably as important, but far less visible. In a council these can range from semi-formal spaces (political cabinet meetings, Corporate Management Team) to highly informal ones (ad hoc conversations between senior officers and cabinet members). Beyond a council, these informal conversations might be business meetings between two or more partners, the outcomes of which could be fed into formal decision-making. Who speaks to whom, about what, and when? Are these conversations visible to others? How are other stakeholders involved – or excluded? Are there certain groups or individuals in the local community who are privileged with access that others lack – because they are seen as safe and predictable partners, or because they "speak the language" of professionals and politicians? Do those involved formally acknowledge that informal spaces and privileged conversations exist or do they avoid mentioning them? While it may not be necessary to formally "map" these spaces, acknowledging their existence is important – as is committing to restrict informal, less visible activity, pushing more activity into the public domain;

■ Local party politics. Local politics is not all about political parties. It's also about relationships. In some places, animosity within political groups is greater than that between them. Some councils boast excellent and nuanced relationships between members and officers – some decidedly less so. Behaviours and relationships here are as much about personal character – in particular the character of those in key positions of power and authority – as they are about political balance. An additional dynamic that needs to be brought to the fore is the political astuteness of both councillors and officers. How well do people understand each others' motivations? How frank can people be around each other? How do disagreements get surfaced and discussed? Politics is a vital part of local democracy because it is a key way that we can determine what is a priority, and what isn't – those priorities being best informed by councillors' political viewpoints. But part of the discussion about the future of democracy then needs to consider how local people can also inform those priorities directly.

■ How existing powers are being used, and have been used – and what existing experiences show. Decision-making, oversight, challenge, management – the exercise of power can be complicated, and in order to change it we need to understand where it currently lies. In a local area there isn't a single source of power – there are lots of people with different competencies and responsibilities rubbing along next to each other, and sometimes overlapping. While we wouldn't suggest a mapping exercise to understand these links and connections, a general awareness of how decisions are made in practice – who's involved, when and how – will help us to get to grips with what a change from this approach might look like.

■ Existing resource and capacity, amongst professionals and amongst the wider community. People are people, with other needs and interests outside local democracy, and limited time to devote to those issues. This goes for professionals, politicians and "ordinary" members of the public. Some areas may benefit – for historical or other reasons – from particular capacity in the local community, and a willingness on the part of that community to engage with others (including councils) to drive change and improvement. Other areas are likely to have pockets of that capacity. Councils, and other partners, are also likely to have variable capacity and ability to engage in a sustained way in this work. Getting a clear sense of this is crucial to managing expectations.

■ How those in power and control are perceived by "outsiders". This is one of the most important parts of a discovery process. Many who aren't able to access, influence or inform the exercise of power may be cynical about those people who are in control. It's important for "leaders" and decision-makers to understand where and how that dissatisfaction comes from – to understand why people may be understandably suspicious and think of ways that they can act that can allay that suspicion.

■ **Understand your existing relationships with local people – as customers, partners, clients, stakeholders, challengers**

■ The different roles of different stakeholders, and their different aims. "Local people" are not a monolith – everyone has their own motivations. Even individual local people will engage with a council, or another public sector body, in a variety of different ways – an individual can be a library user, a user of adult social care services, a parks user, a user of local education services. In some of these areas people may be happy to be passive recipients of services – in some they may want a more active role. Local people, whoever they are, are unlikely to want to be "empowered" on every issue in every way.

■ Breaking down professional and political assumptions about engagement, and the willingness to engage. The cliché of there being "hard to reach" people has not entirely gone away – with it comes the assumption that councils (in particular) should set up their own spaces for discussion and debate in local communities (area forums, ward committees) and that local people should naturally engage with them. Disparagingly referred to by some as "if you build it, they will come", this approach favours those familiar and comfortable with the way that local politics and local democracy currently works – which can sometimes be exclusive, and pay too little regard to the needs of a wider range of people. Part of breaking down barriers is about understanding that barriers exist in the minds of professionals, and that they have to dismantle those barriers in order to "allow" some people to engage and participate equitably;

■ Admitting and committing to act on the imperfections in existing systems. In the next section, we talk about the need to draw in "outsiders" to critique your current systems. This involves recognising that some local people will already be cynical about your commitments, and that cynicism may voice itself with anger, and suspicion. People may perceive steps to enhance participation as a way to get local people to fight amongst themselves for the sharing of scarce resources. Equally, some may refrain from speaking out for fear of losing access, or being seen as difficult. Not everyone in the local community will want to be engaged (certainly not at this stage).

■ How relationships could be improved through more effective civic education *for everyone*. When we talk about the need for civic education we often talk about the public, and civic education is described as being about the existing structures and systems that support the work of councils and other public bodies. But professionals and politicians also need their own education in civics – a better and more nuanced understanding of the communities they serve;

■ Understanding the practical impacts that better relationships will bring about. This refers back to the "three horizons" model – and the importance of keeping an eye on our overall objectives. Understanding the practical, positive impacts of change is about "horizon two" – being prepared to admit that while the transition to new arrangements may be disruptive, it holds out significant opportunities. Without a positive sense of what these opportunities are like, drivers to change look more abstract. The obvious focus will be on better engagement leading to better services, designed by and with local people to be more responsive and reflective of their needs. Community action is also likely to increase local buy in to change, it will make communities and the services provided to them more resilience. But what this means practically may need to be unpacked differently for different services and issues.

Taking action

Using a "discovery" phase to get a baseline of where you are, where you're going and what the first steps might look like is important. But that quickly has to translate to doing things. As the three horizons model shows, you don't need a clear sense of what the far future holds in order to start making changes now.

- Create your community constitution, to embed the above and provide certainty. We have already talked about this constitution – we think that the first step in making changes is likely to set the framework for those changes in this form. It may need to include guides to that constitution and other online material to help local people to navigate more complex systems, while those complex systems remain in place – but overall we should look to ensure that systems can be simplified. The constitution will set out the basics for how, exactly, the improvements we talk about below will be designed and delivered.

- **Challenge yourself to make immediate, practical improvements within existing systems**

  - Look at your systems from the point of view of an outsider – and bring outsiders in to critique them. This will identify some immediate short term wins. While this is "innovation" within the confines of our usual business as usual approaches, it will serve to make some tangible changes while bigger wins are planned and delivered. There will always be process improvements to be made. Sometimes these will only be apparent with an outsider's viewpoint. Seldom heard members of the public are likely to be able to provide sophisticated critiques of current systems – their blockages and shortcomings. This may be about the way that traditional consultations are designed, the availability of information, the ability to ask questions at council meetings – practical challenges which can be easily addressed once they are understood and acknowledged. The important thing is to recognise that these quick wins are the first step, not the destination.

  - Solutions look different everywhere and won't be perfect first time. Set mutual expectations, understand that things won't work perfectly, trial and improve – but keep moving, reflecting and learning from those experiences.

  - Decide how you will bring governance to democratic improvement itself – you will be in control of the first steps because you still hold most of the power, but how can you ensure that your actions on those steps are accountable.

  - Have a direction of travel and stick to it. This will be aided by the community constitution. This is central to the three horizons model but the need to keep the outcome in mind will be important throughout – all stakeholders are likely to need to be constantly reminded of it by each other to keep efforts moving in the same direction.

- **Pilot, experiment and iterate with new modes of decision making that could dock in to traditional governance.** Community governance can only flourish when people understand the rules and when they are treated fairly. Trialling and doing new ways of working requires transparency, consistency and accountability – and often culture and behaviour shifts within councils, and other public bodies. This is likely to involve working together to develop a menu of different approaches to make decisions differently – different approach with which you can experiment. At the very start of this publication we noted that we are not intending, here, to set out what the different methods for enhancing engagement and participation are likely to be – the possible models may look different for each area. A huge range exist – from more traditional consultation, through questionnaires and surveys, online "placemaking" tools like Commonplace, and public and community meetings. More ambitious approaches include deliberation, where the council and a range of local people work together to solve a problem, co-decision, where decision-making is shared between the council and local people, and citizen's assemblies and

juries, where local people might take the lead on decision-making (usually on a complex, high profile topic). Initially people may want to experiment with more conservative models, before becoming bolder and experimental as confidence grows. The important thing is to have a way to design (usually with a wide range of people), deploy and deliver those methods, in a way that's transparent and consistent – and then to be able to openly evaluate how it's gone, and iterate improvements;

■ **Review how these new approaches are used, and refine your approach.** Some approaches may work well – others not so well. At first, councils may struggle to understand and reach the wider community. But trialling different approaches and techniques will lead to greater confidence, and an understanding of what works and what doesn't for your community. It's important though that this learning happens in a planned way – otherwise attempts to enhance participation will look scattergun.

■ **Build the feedback loops essential to "docking in".** Changes may be necessary to council constitutions, to rules of procedure, to standing orders, to produce a formal expectation that decisions and insights gathered through different methods of participation will be properly and honestly considered by councillors. Systems may also need to provide for more formal bodies, like citizen's assemblies, to make recommendations direct to the Council or Cabinet, in the same way as a council committee, with the expectation of a prompt response, and action.

Developing further

■ **Support and champion the work of others, and ask for support yourselves.** Once new arrangements are in place one of the biggest challenges is for them to persist. It can take only a small change in personnel, in the leadership of a council, for positive changes to unravel. Positive reinforcement will be necessary as new arrangements bed in – between the council and the community as much as between council officers, and between councillors. The community constitution might, for example, provide a mechanism for mutual support and challenge between the community and local politicians on the commitments that have been made.

■ **Set a role for elected politicians, and party politics, in a transformed system.** Representative democracy and participative democracy aren't necessarily in tension. Neither is party politics the enemy of a more consensual approach to decision-making. These systems can provide a way to talk about priorities, and to discuss what's important to a community.

■ Understand how the councillor role has changed and will continue to change. What will be councillor role be, in the future? The traditional model of the councillor – or anyone else – acting as a "community leader" feels out of date, and not in keeping with the need for a more pluralistic approach. With new systems for participation in place, thought will need to be given to councillors' roles within those systems – as mediators, or convenors? As facilitators of discussion, as people gathering evidence from the local community? This is likely to involve support to councillors to develop new skills;

■ Ensure that systems work with and around party politics (particularly in environments of high political contestability). This always goes for taking account of the views of independent, non-aligned councillors. Public debate is inherently political. Evidence can be used to inform decisions, but it will always be filtered through the subjective viewpoints of those involved. Elected councillors will have a right, by virtue of election, to pursue the policy objectives that form the manifestos on which they have been elected – more collaborative decision-making should not be seen as being in opposition to this. As time goes on, community constitutions will need to firm up where expectations lie on those matters where councillors must continue to have a final say, and on which points they should be comfortable to cede more power.

- Act on reframing "formal" checks and balances around the views and priorities of the public. Community spaces and community discussion may in future provide more of those checks and balances, with councillors and local people working alongside each other to provide oversight. This may involve rethinking the role of the overview and scrutiny function.

- **Join with others to begin dismantling and rebuilding systems – including looking at the council's formal governance systems**

  - Expand the scope of the exercise – recognise that rebuilding systems more sustainably will involve more fundamental change. Where democratic and governance systems have been subject to alteration, other ways of working may need to change too – organisational hierarchies and management structures, and internal monitoring systems, could well do with change – to open them up to external scrutiny;

  - Rethink the legal underpinnings of how relationships develop and are sustained, including (community) constitutions and other governing documents, where they exist. The council is likely to be a contractor and partner to a wide range of organisations. In the short term, commitments to others may limit the scope for some community involvement. In time, the need for it can be built into some of these other relationships.

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