Towards the idea of total local sustainable places

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Abstract

The provision of local public services has to be re-thought from bottom to top. The term 'perfect storm' has been much used to describe the economic crisis but is appropriate here more widely. The current economic crisis not only presages deep reductions in public spending, it also calls into question the dominant models many local service providers have relied on.

The rapid deterioration in our global climate requires dramatic changes to social behaviour and services that cannot be brought about by governments alone, not least because politicians, particularly in the UK, are seemingly vying with bankers, estate agents and journalists to be the least trusted of professions, as voting levels and support for our main political parties both reach all-time lows.

Major demographic changes and migration patterns are transforming local cultures and communities and are challenging many long-established approaches to service provision. Additionally, in the internet-age, citizens expect to have choice and potential voice, when they want it. Involving citizens and service users in decision-making and budget choices will increasingly become the norm.

These challenges require more than 'tinkering at the edges' or incremental adjustment. They will only be achieved through root and branch change and will have to be led from the bottom, as well as the top.

Keywords: Localism, sustainability, citizen involvement

Introduction

The word 'crisis' and the phrase 'perfect storm' are over-used clichés. But few would begrudge the word 'crisis' to describe the recent collapse of part of the international banking system and the subsequent efforts of governments worldwide to bail it out. But crises don't always hit us straight between the eyes. Sometimes they just develop quietly and ominously. There is an even bigger crisis brewing over the sustainability of life on our precious planet. Each new authoritative scientific study and report paints a gloomier picture than the last over the impact of climate change and global warming. The connections between the

economic crisis and the environmental threat to humanity pose enormous challenges and opportunities in equal measure. Old assumptions and perceived wisdom need to be questioned if we are to find solutions.

There are other 'time-bombs' ticking away, apart from climate change, which threaten our usual ways of delivering local services in this country:

- Migration is steadily changing the face of (and faces within) many local communities, creating simultaneous tensions and opportunities around social capital and diversity. The

population is changing in other ways. We are living longer, much longer. The proportion of older citizens in society is growing exponentially, and the birth rate has recently begun rising too. Both demographic trends have huge implications for resources and service delivery as the working-age proportion of the population declines.

- 'Personalisation' and 'choice' are increasingly key watch-words in social care. Service providers now look to ensure that individual service users are given as much freedom as possible to shape and determine how, when and where services are delivered and by whom. In many ways, this approach pre-figures the broader moves towards empowering citizens collectively to influence priority setting and budget decisions.

- The recent MPs' expenses scandal pushed trust in politicians down to a record low, following on from the disillusionment with another key elite – the bankers. Rarely have the social, political and economic challenges been so great, and yet faith in the political and financial governing classes been so low. Apathy, xenophobia and anti-political responses are also growing. The opportunities for local service providers to offer some leadership in these troubled times is significant and perhaps unprecedented. But they will not succeed unless they encourage and facilitate the involvement of local citizens directly in the socio-economic, political and behaviour changes that are required to get us out of this mess.

Economic recession

No one should doubt the scale of the economic recession. Yet, at the time of writing this article, there are allegedly 'green shoots of recovery' appearing – house prices are rising (following their hefty fall), the FTSE is on the up again (after crashing by a third), and business leaders detect confidence returning (after universally gloomy predictions for the past year). On the other hand, there are signs of some uncertainty in the US economy and the risk of dipping back into serious recession and of the Chinese economy suffering significant setbacks.

The psychological impact of the recession, however deep it goes or how long it continues, should not be under-estimated either. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the dominant economic paradigm has been relatively unrestrained low tax 'workfare' market capitalism. Supposedly, markets could be relied upon to deliver in the most efficient way most services that people need. The bankers and the economic elite who oversaw a booming global capitalism knew best, could be trusted, and few leading politicians were persuaded of any alternative. Privatisation, Private Finance Initiatives (PFI), individual choice, consumerism, extravagant wealth, gargantuan bonuses, and incomprehensibly complex but quickly lucrative financial schemes were all somehow 'normal' and for the most part unquestioned. Indeed the then pre-ennobled Peter Mandelson was famously 'intensely relaxed' about people being 'filthy rich'.

The near collapse of the banking system last year and the subsequent multi-trillion dollar bail-outs have shaken faith in an untrammelled market approach and the extraordinary greed of some in the financial industries, despite their ready apologists, has shocked many. Bankers now vie with estate agents, journalists and politicians for 'least trusted profession'. Blind faith in markets and bankers has gone, replaced by a festering resentment towards these elites and allied professionals deemed to be self-serving and amoral.

Impact of recession on local public services

The implications of these crises and the attitudinal shifts that accompany them are important for those working in local public services. Notions of fairness and the public interest are now less likely to be seen as quaintly old fashioned and unrealistic. It is no longer a given that services should be out-sourced for better value for money. A recent study by the GMB union has revealed just how costly and inefficient PFI is as a mechanism for funding public sector capital schemes, with the revelation that PFI debts now total £250bn compared to assets of a mere £64bn (see http://www.gmb.org.uk/Te mplates/PressItems.asp?NodeID=99389).

With councils of all complexions increasingly intervening in their own local markets (e.g. creating local banks, taking over post offices earmarked for closure, time banks etc.) and with government relaxation of rules on the powers of local authorities, we may well see a flourishing of schemes and ideas predicated on community well-being and the public good, rather than upon purely market-led interests.

And yet, the limits of this attitudinal shift away from the market as the 'answer' to the problems of our time are also apparent. The dominant response to the economic crisis has been an assumption that public spending must be cut. Across the political spectrum nationally and locally, the message has been repeated that this is the only way. This is surely debatable, and flies in the face of much historical evidence across western economies when the opposite approach was successful in times of recession and depression and when public money was ploughed into the creation of jobs to carry out socially needed public works. Indeed, the notion that low paid public sector workers should have to sacrifice their jobs due to a global financial crisis caused largely by high risk and wholly dubious practices of a banking and financial services elite is likely to prove increasingly unpopular, especially as bankers have reverted to type and awarded themselves bonuses many times greater than the lifetime earnings of those whose jobs are now on the line.

Trust in the market may have been undermined, but in the absence of a popular coherent economic alternative, we will doubtless drift back to 'business as usual'. Yet there are policies that break from the market and its turbo-consumer culture, and which start from the needs of people and the planet, though there is little sign of the mainstream parties adopting these, viz - transparency for how the banks operate and for individual taxation and remuneration (in Norway tax returns are published online); ending tax havens and tax avoidance schemes; a maximum wage (including sport and entertainment) and a guaranteed minimum income for all; ensuring that banks and other services critical to the functioning and infrastructure of society should not be run exclusively for profit; giving people a direct say in how public money is spent nationally and locally. Whatever one's views of these individual policies, we surely need to examine with an open mind all genuine attempts to develop equitable and transparent socio-economic policies.

In a fascinating book by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Picket (2009), the authors demonstrate that countries with more equality have safer, happier, more collaborative and more sociable societies. Their message is that we can reduce or ameliorate the effects of most social ills - disease, mental illness, stress, violence, crime, teenage births, obesity - by making society more equal. The evidence and the arguments appear compelling. More wealth doesn't make us happier - but more equality can, even for the rich. Our political classes would seem to possess neither the inclination nor the courage to debate these policies with any conviction but, if they did, they might well find many people who supported them. Nonetheless, the movement

to shift the measurement of our progress from Gross Domestic Product to the amount of well-being and happiness we share, is an idea that is gathering pace – not just here with the arguments put forward by Professor Richard Layard (see Layard 2004; also Guardian Newspapers, 2009), but also internationally, witness the Stiglitz Commission (2008) endorsed by President Sarkozy of France, which concluded that improving quality of life should be the overall goal of government and society. Equality, happiness, ending misery – these terms deemed so 'old fashioned' and 'passé' to those mesmerized by the expanding consumerism of the past 20 years are now back on the agenda.

Sustainable development and climate change

Each new scientific study and report on global warming and other threats to the sustainability of life on the planet paints a bleaker picture than those before. We are literally running out of time before we reach a threshold beyond which we can no longer be certain of avoiding 'run-away' climate change. The New Economics Foundation (2008) estimated that there were 100 months from August 2008 when they launched their '100 months campaign' before the planet reached a tipping point, beyond which it was no longer likely that we might avert potentially irreversible climate change. At time of writing, there are just 84 months left. We remain without any agreed legally-binding international agreement on climate change since the failure of the Copenhagen Summit. The Climate Change Act 2008 made the UK the first country in the world to set legally binding 'carbon budgets', aiming to cut UK emissions by 34% by 2020 and at least 80% by 2050. But even these targets seem too little too late and the recent government consultation paper (*Strengthening Local Democracy,* Communities & Local Government, July 2009) revealed relatively unambitious and

disappointing proposals on the role of local communities in combating climate change.

Increasingly, people perplexed by the failure of international politicians are taking responsibility locally. Some 85% of people now consider that climate change is a significant threat – nearly two thirds feel they could do more, with 75% saying they could drive less and 67% that they could fly less (*Guardian Survey - see launch of 10/10 campaign, September 2009*). There are now more than 100 'transition towns' in the UK where communities take it upon themselves to transform their areas to being low carbon. The Guardian's 10/10 campaign has also attracted support from those unwilling to leave something as important as climate change to the Government. Yet the effects of global warming are already evident: the UN estimates that 300,000 people per year are already dying as a result. These numbers could be dwarfed in future decades if even scenarios far from the most pessimistic prove accurate. Given this deeply disturbing forecast, how do we explain our failure to act more decisively?

The answer lies in the previously mentioned economic crisis. The authoritative Stern Review (2006) of the economics of climate change famously described climate change as "the greatest and most wide-ranging market failure the world has ever seen". Decades of free market dominance and plundering of the world's natural resources has created extremely powerful vested interests within an international socio-economic, political and military global complex of interests from which numerous elites and networks have profited from their capacities to manipulate and abuse a market system that drives our unsustainable way of life.

The economic crisis and rising awareness of a fast approaching climate catastrophe should convince our political and economic leaders of the need for rapid re-alignment of the market towards social and sustainable

long-term needs. The opportunity and common sense of a Green New Deal (a massive programme of public works to rebuild a low-carbon economy and an infrastructure for sustainable energy) is unprecedented and yet has been all but ignored in the UK. The Economist (2009) recently analysed the 'green' investment deal within major countries' financial stimulus packages and reported that South Korea's was 81% green, China's 34% and the UK was unimpressive at just over 10%. At the local level too, we need clear leadership. We need a statutory duty on those who provide public services (be they public, private or voluntary) to promote the long-term sustainability of their local communities. Local public services have to put reshaping local communities to be low carbon as a top priority of their strategic agenda.

Demographic changes

Even before the economic crisis and the renewed focus on the dangers of climate change, experts have been warning of the impact of significant demographic shifts on our way of life. For generations, the proportion of the population of working age has remained relatively stable. Now that is changing radically. We are growing older. People aged 65 and over were but a mere 5% of the population one hundred years ago. Currently they constitute 21% (or 9.9 million people) but are projected to rise to 31% (or 19.7 million) by 2056. Indeed, by 2014 those over 65 will exceed the under-16 year olds and by 2025 over 60s will have overtaken the under 25 year olds as a proportion of the population (National Association of Pension Funds, 2009). Increasingly, the proportion of the population of working age is shrinking with all the worrying, if now familiar, implications for the scale of resources available to meet the needs of an ageing population.

The face of Britain is also changing - quite literally - as successive phases of migration introduce new communities. The economic benefits of migration are well documented – countries such as the USA and Germany which have welcomed the largest number of immigrants have some of the strongest economies in the world. And commentators have pointed to the necessity of immigration if the UK is to have a sufficiently large workforce to meet the challenges of the ageing profile of the population noted above. There are many social, political, cultural and intellectual benefits from migration but it would be naïve to ignore the challenges this poses, particularly in times of economic hardship. For some chronically deprived and disempowered communities, the notion that their troubles stem from immigration can be an easy resort. The constant repetition in some parts of the media that 'foreigners' and 'immigrants' get preferential treatment while 'hard-working indigenous' families are ignored, can combine dangerously with the security fears heightened by the so-called 'war on terror', into a toxic mixture of far right ideology. Such challenges to community cohesion require serious attention from national and local political leaders as they struggle to find solutions to our economic and ecological troubles.

Crisis of politics and leadership

The extraordinary but predictable public reaction to revelations about MPs' expenses displaced temporarily widespread anger over the incompetence, and immorality of banks and bankers who continue to reward themselves breath-taking bonuses while others must lose jobs and services to pay for their past greed. The loss of trust in financial corporations and their leaders compounds the lost faith of many in our politicians. Voting levels over the last decade or more continue to decline (not just in the UK, but also across much of Europe). Many voters increasingly feel (with some justification) that there is little difference

between the main parties and that their individual vote is unlikely to make any difference in a 'first past the post' system.

The percentage of electors not voting in UK general elections has more than doubled in the last 60 years from 15% to nearly 40% in 2005. Recent governments have won absolute majorities in Parliament with support from less than 25% of those eligible to vote. The Electoral Reform Society (2007) estimated recently that, all other things being equal, the votes of just 8000 people in a few dozen key marginal seats could determine the result of the next General Election, effectively relegating everyone else's votes to irrelevance. Yet there are policies that can begin to break the decaying mould of Westminster: proportional representation for national and local elections is essential to make the whole democratic system fairer; systems for local electors to be able to recall and get rid of their MPs and councillors; abolishing the unelected House of Lords; tying MPs' salaries proportionately to the average wage and pension levels; breaking the grip of the party machines by making it easier for individuals to stand for election locally and nationally; and ending the party 'whipping' system. But there seems little appetite from the main political parties to embrace any of this agenda.

Local politicians are seemingly not distrusted as much as national ones but inevitably some of the bad national publicity has rubbed off on local councillors too. In local elections, voting turnouts are even lower – dropping to below 10% occasionally, as voters sense what their councillors already know – that they have relatively little power and influence to effect substantial change. Central government provides almost three quarters of the money for local government. It still treats local services as little more than a delivery arm for its own national policies, enforced through controlling the purse strings, setting national targets and performance indicators, and regulatory systems.

People power

Notwithstanding the above, throughout the last decade there has been an inexorable rise in the expectations of citizens, consumers and service users for more choice and voice. With the ever-expanding reach of the internet, the wealth of information available to people has reached unprecedented levels. Information feeds choice – consumers and citizens expect to have choice and potential voice, when they want it. There are other strong underlying drivers for this 'empowerment' agenda. After decades of top-down centralism, Government in this country has finally realised that this does not always deliver the best services. In an albeit still unambitious conversion to citizen involvement, it has passed legislation that ensures that numerous local public bodies such as councils have to inform, consult and involve local people. The need for more public involvement and transparency in decision-making has never been on so many people's lips, especially since the MPs' expenses scandal. Whatever government is in office after the next election, it seems certain that involving citizens and service users in decision-making and budget choices will increasingly become the norm.

More importantly though, it seems inconceivable that bringing dramatic changes to society and to how people behave and interact can be achieved solely through the passing of laws and other 'top-down' approaches. The 'hearts and minds' of millions of people need to be won, deep-seated behaviour patterns challenged, old prejudices overthrown and new ideas embraced. This is not impossible - as the widespread change to culture and behaviour around drink driving and smoking in recent decades has demonstrated. But it takes time and to be successful requires a strong commitment to involving people systematically at every level in debate and

discussion on how things need to change. Personalised choice, participatory budgeting, the rise of parish and localised neighbourhood fora, e-petitions and online debates may well become part of the day-to-day fabric of local services.

Implications for services

At this stage it is difficult to anticipate what will be the consequences of the above for local services. But any notion that small incremental changes or 'salami slicing' of budgets will meet the economic, political, ecological and demographic challenges seems completely misplaced. We need literally to start from a blank sheet of paper to assess how we get from where we are now to where services need to be in 5, 10 or 20 years time. Services will have to be entirely re-engineered and re-designed. Major choices will need to be made about society's priorities – what can and cannot be funded nationally and locally. Holistic, sustainable services geared to safeguarding the future of communities will have to be at the fore. And this can only be done locally by involving local citizens and service users in the messy process of discussion and debate on priorities, choices, services and budgets.

Why local government is key

Despite local government having a strong track record of improving efficiency and innovating to solve problems, most authorities are not yet developing a vision for how to shape and lead their localities through the biggest changes they have ever had to face. This is not surprising. Having been beset by unparalleled challenges, an enormous amount of 'thought-leadership' is required in a short space of time. It is genuinely difficult to find the space, time and energy for this vital process. What is needed is to build a vision of low-carbon, high well-being, high-engagement communities, and the services and governance behind them.

In most places in contemporary UK, the only body with anything like the credibility or mandate to lead and facilitate fundamental local change are local authorities leading their local strategic partnerships. This is not because local authorities are widely seen as 'place-shapers' (they are not), nor that they will be the most appropriate body in a decade's time (other mechanisms may emerge). However, with an urgent need to start to shape new types of communities, we must now look to authorities and LSPs to shape our localities and facilitate the necessary new ways of living. There are some encouraging developments that mean this approach increasingly is 'with the grain' of thinking around local services. Every political party now favours localism and devolution of power to local services, and on to citizens. Services are increasingly reviewed from an area rather than from separate institutional perspectives. And the new *Total Place* initiative in England, attempting to track how the public pound flows from Government to local areas and how it is then spent locally, will also facilitate debate on the priorities for local services and spending.

The key questions we need to address include:

- Lifestyles – how will recession-proof, low-carbon living work in communities?
- Outcomes – what outcomes will we need to deliver/commission through public services and partnerships?
- Governance – how can we rebuild trust, and empower local citizens to lead, co-design and develop these lifestyles, services and partnerships?

Now is the time for local politicians and staff working for local public services to work with local citizens and service users to carry through serious 'root and branch' reviews of their services. We must not be numbed into powerlessness by the scale of

the challenges we face. We owe it to those we serve and future generations to grasp the nettle and develop a model of total local sustainable places.

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Notes on Contributor

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