

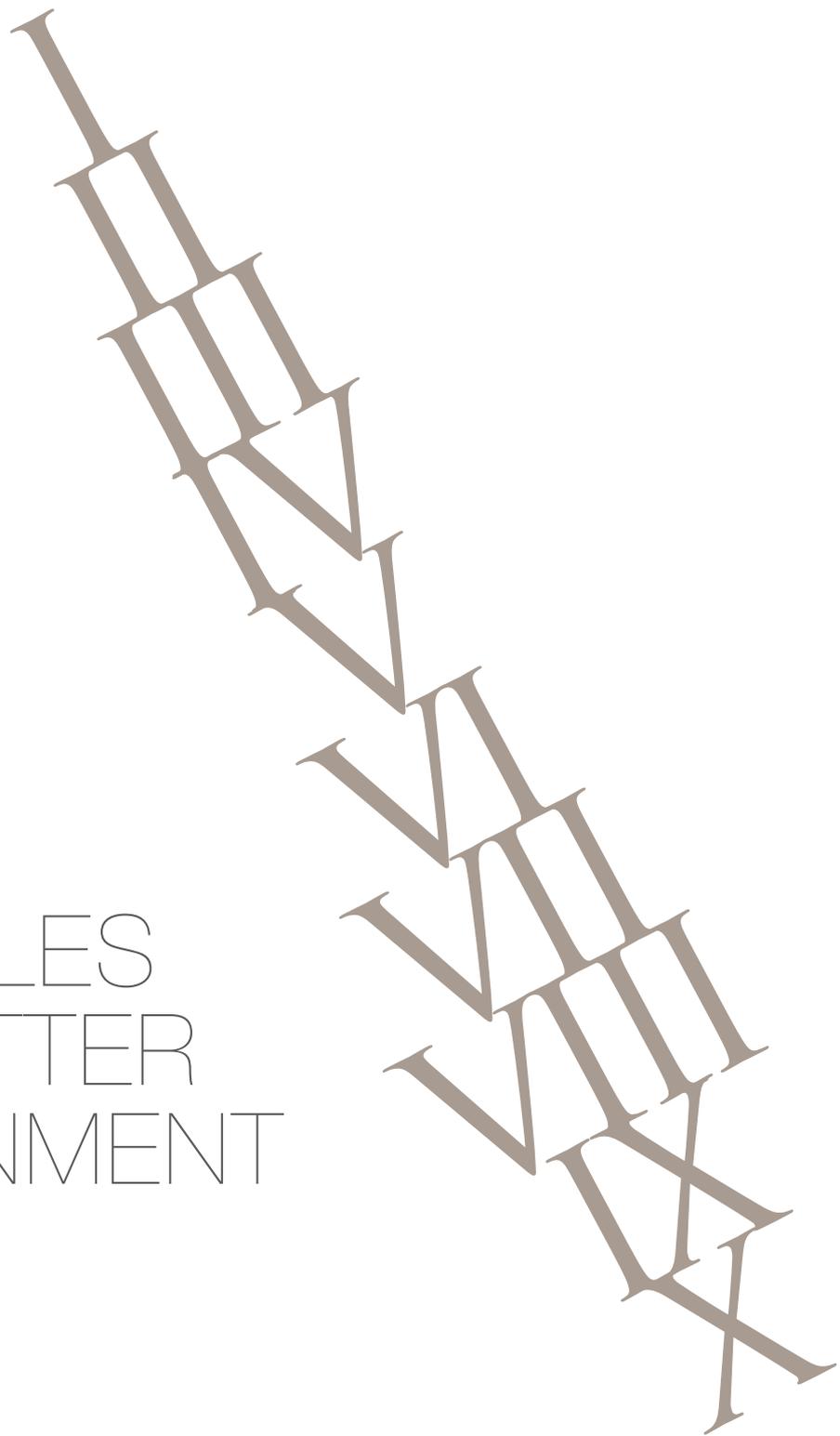
ESSAY

10

PRINCIPLES  
FOR BETTER  
GOVERNMENT

David Robinson

August 2013  
© IPPR 2013





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Robinson** is co-founder and now senior adviser to Community Links, a charity working with communities in east London and sharing the learning to achieve social change – visit [www.community-links.org](http://www.community-links.org) for more.

## ABOUT IPPR

IPPR, the Institute for Public Policy Research, is the UK's leading progressive thinktank. We are an independent charitable organisation with more than 40 staff members, paid interns and visiting fellows. Our main office is in London, with IPPR North, IPPR's dedicated thinktank for the North of England, operating out of offices in Newcastle and Manchester.

The purpose of our work is to assist all those who want to create a society where every citizen lives a decent and fulfilled life, in reciprocal relationships with the people they care about. We believe that a society of this sort cannot be legislated for or guaranteed by the state. And it certainly won't be achieved by markets alone. It requires people to act together and take responsibility for themselves and each other.

IPPR  
4th Floor  
14 Buckingham Street  
London WC2N 6DF  
T: +44 (0)20 7470 6100  
E: [info@ippr.org](mailto:info@ippr.org)  
[www.ippr.org](http://www.ippr.org)  
Registered charity no. 800065

This paper was first published in August 2013. © 2013  
The contents and opinions in this paper are the author(s) only.

## ABOUT 'THE CONDITION OF BRITAIN'

In the early 1990s, IPPR ran the Commission on Social Justice, which redefined the mainstream political response to core social policy questions. Now IPPR has launched a new programme called 'The Condition of Britain', with similar scope and ambition.

This major work focuses on the resilience and resources in British society, but also the pressures faced by individuals and neighbourhoods. It considers how to harness the state, market and community to advance core social goals.

For more information and the latest updates, visit <http://www.ippr.org/research-project/44/10307/the-condition-of-britain>

This paper sets out a vision for a state that is less dependent on the market-based assumptions that have dominated policymaking over the last 35 years and which puts people at the heart of its thinking. There are 10 principles that should drive this transformation.

### Introduction: Our time

Public services are changing, and will change more radically and more fundamentally between 2010 and 2020 than in any other decade since the 1940s. Demographic change is increasing need at the same time as expenditure is being reduced, while many services are shrinking. In combination, these trends are creating a spiral of decline. As the remaining resources are sucked into managing the greatest needs, earlier-stage interventions are abandoned – spending on prevention fell by almost 10 per cent between 2010/11 and 2011/12 (Reeder 2013) – and more problems are becoming more difficult, when instead they might have been prevented entirely. Effective services fall into a tailspin, leading to crisis management, with inevitable consequences.

Eighty per cent of the deficit reduction strategy is staked on cost-cutting and there is a long way to go. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that 69 per cent of the cuts to current spending (excluding benefits) will still be outstanding at the end of this financial year (March 2014) – there is no precedent for administrative cost-cutting on this scale in the UK (Emmerson et al 2013). Christopher Hood and Ruth Dixon have shown that even the most effective period of cost reduction (in the later years of the John Major premiership) yielded less than one-fifth of the goal being pursued by the present government (Hood and Dixon 2012).

What if the targets are not achieved? Maybe the chancellor will return for another assault on local government – although Birmingham city council leader Sir Albert Bore was warning before the last budget round that we were witnessing ‘the end of local government as we know it’ (Butler 2012). The options get more limited and increasingly desperate.

In short, cuts without fundamental systems reform disrupt and disfigure without resolving or transforming. They generate more needs and more expensive needs, may well fail to deliver the short-term savings target, and are very likely to be storing up problems that will only become increasingly complex and expensive.

We need now more than ever to challenge and change culture, systems and structures, to take a different approach. It must be grounded in an understanding not just of the economic context but of the nature of the society that we are becoming, and it must articulate a more effective, sustainable and equitable alternative.

### Reclaiming the old normal

The report into management and care at Mid Staffordshire hospital published in February 2013 revealed ‘the unnecessary suffering of hundreds of people’, ‘a lack of care, compassion and humanity’ and a ‘system which put corporate self-interest ahead of patient safety’ (HOC 2013). Three weeks later, Professor Bruce Keogh started work as the new NHS national medical director promising that hospitals would be fined if they failed to provide the best care (see Campbell 2013).

Care driven by fear of punishment? The prospect is discomfiting but it isn't new. Talk to social workers, teachers, probation officers and care workers and you will find that regulations and systems, impersonal transactions and a fear of risk and reprisal shape the culture in which they all work. Public services are reduced to a set of transactions when the real need is for a more personal relationship, for common sense and human kindness.

Now listen to those who use the services and those who do not. For some, family, friends and neighbours are more than adequate but for many they are not – moments of joy go unshared, battles are faced alone. More than a million pensioners enjoy less than 30 minutes’ social contact in any given week, despite our understanding that social isolation increases the risk of death in older people by 26 per cent (Steptoe et al 2013). Our public services must change. And so must our communities.

England is more segregated than at any time since 1966 (Dorling et al 2008). Weak communities and social isolation are widely considered to be one the greatest challenges facing Britain today (JRF 2008). Just one in five people know their neighbours well; one in 10 claim to be too shy to say hello, even though 95 per cent believe that knowing their neighbours better could have a positive impact on their community (Big Lunch 2010).

It is not a ‘new normal’ that we need to embrace but some part of the ‘old normal’ that we need to reclaim – our common humanity, mutual trust and a willing kindness. Perhaps a piecemeal, programmatic response is one option, layering specific initiatives and isolated pilots over a failing system, more sanctions, inspections, enforcement, more waiting for trouble, more belated reaction and – ultimately and inevitably – more failure.

A better government, on the other hand, would understand the scale of the challenge and the importance of bold, whole-system reform. It would structure its narrative around the shared values which give our lives meaning, identity and purpose. It would align its vision with the deep-set rhythms of our daily lives, talking about opportunities and transitions and making readiness its primary goal. It would prevent the preventable and champion relationships as the organising principle at the heart of all our public services.

Then, because government can lead and can enable but cannot achieve anything alone, it would co-produce and co-locate, fostering cooperation in our communities, services and politics, and changing the structures and the behaviours that right now are getting in the way. Its plans would be based on 10 principles and would be bold, collaborative and just.

The 10 principles for whole-system services reform are:

1. Build readiness .....	page 3
2. Prevent the preventable.....	3
3. Prioritise relationships.....	5
4. Combine functions .....	6
5. Co-produce services .....	7
6. Co-locate the public estate.....	9
7. Cultivate the willing .....	10
8. Reduce inequalities .....	12
9. Commit to common cause .....	13
10. Tell the story of our lives .....	13

## 1. Build readiness

A better government would work for a community that is defined not only against all the bad things that tend not to happen – heart disease, underachievement at school, violence in the family – but also by reference to its strengths. By this alternative view, we would all be ready and able to benefit from opportunity, to learn at primary school, to thrive in secondary, to succeed at work, to be responsible parents and contributing adults. Moreover, because we all experience difficulties at some point in our lives, we would be ready and able also to manage adversity, to cope with losing a job or a relationship, to rebuild after illness or bereavement, to adapt to change.

The language of ‘resilience’ – withstanding the worst – presupposes problems, victims and perpetrators. It is reactive, reductive, pessimistic, discouraging and, even at its very best, insufficient. The language of ‘readiness’ – becoming the best that we can be – identifies assets and builds on strengths. It is proactive, optimistic, aspirational and motivating.

Policy derived from an understanding of readiness would do the things we need to do today in order to make possible the things we want to do tomorrow. Eligibility for public goods would be based on our sense of aspiration rather than our sense of failure. Services would prepare us, collectively and individually, to seize opportunity, to cope with setbacks and to prevent the preventable.

Planning and equipping ourselves for the major transitions would benefit the individual as well as the state, where unnecessarily high costs cluster in the wake of failed transitions, such as from school to adulthood, from care to independence or from prison back into the community. Our school-leavers would be literate, both educationally and emotionally; our prison-leavers would have a home and work placement to go to; our looked-after children would have someone to turn to for as long as they need, even in adulthood. The spending would not be increased but it would be moved, to occur before the event, not after.

Readiness would shift the UK from what Adam Lent (2013) has characterised as a ‘failure state’ to a ‘success state’ – ‘less about protecting people against the flaws of a free society and economy and more about helping them to enjoy all that a free society and economy has to offer’.

## 2. Prevent the preventable

It is not always possible to prevent a problem from occurring. But where it is possible, it is almost always preferable. To give one example, a report by the Audit Commission (2009) showed how a child with behavioural problems at age 5 who is dealt with through the criminal justice system will cost £207,000 by the age of 16. Alternative interventions that divert the child away from crime cost £47,000 (ibid). From youth offending to homelessness, literacy and numeracy, drug or alcohol abuse, debt, domestic violence – across all these areas, the evidence is the same. Earlier action yields a triple dividend of thriving lives, lower public spending and greater contribution (Early Action Taskforce 2011).

The NAO’s ‘landscape review’ published in January 2013 revealed that, despite numerous government reports repeatedly pressing the case for prevention over many years, the proportion of government spending that is focused on such services has consistently remained at a very low level – approximately 6 per cent (NAO 2013a). What is more, the Early Action Taskforce has shown that spending in real terms is now falling as public expenditure cuts in the last two years have hit primary and secondary prevention services disproportionately hard (Early Action Taskforce 2012).

As the taskforce has identified, there are many reasons for the lack of progress on this agenda: The public sector works in silos. The savings that result from, for instance, an investment in youth work may accrue to the criminal justice system but be paid for by the local authority. Costs and benefits are rarely shared and often misaligned. A better government might develop pooled early action funds, formed from existing budgets. The community budget model of joint investment agreements and social profit-sharing could be applied more widely.<sup>1</sup> The approach could also include ‘responsibility charging’ – fining organisations that push costs on to others – and rewards or ‘prevention premiums’ for organisations whose early action saves costs in other parts of government.

Short-term planning and budgeting is probably the biggest structural obstacle. Now more than ever we need to be reaching for the goals of the government’s own fiscal framework – ‘sustainable public finances ... promoting intergenerational fairness’ (HM Treasury 2010). Future spending reviews must ‘look beyond near-term pressures to support reforms that better position the UK for meeting long-term demographic, economic, environmental and social challenges, any of which could imperil long-term fiscal stability if left unaddressed’ (ibid).

These Treasury goals are unachievable without changing a spending review process which sets the parameters for planning and budgeting in government and beyond. The normal three-year outlook is inadequate when, as the framework document insists, we need policies that add up in the longer term. A better government would develop 10-year spending plans, with costs for years 1 and 10 published and updated in each spending review.

This would include firm plans for the first few years, as it does now, and the implications of every spending decision, over the next 10 years. The plans would of course be subject to regular review and updating, as circumstances and governments change, but the projections would enable current priorities to be established on the basis of longer-term value.

Other factors, particularly the electoral cycle, also contribute to a short-term bias in public policy, but it is in the processes of government as much as in elections that choices are framed and, almost by default, options constrained and decisions made. Without a ‘10-year test’ little will ever change. Spending reviews will come and go but public policy will continue on an unsustainable trajectory, barely meeting current needs while accumulating unmanageable liabilities for the future.

The Welsh government is introducing legislation to make sustainable development one of its central organising principles and imposing a statutory duty on all public bodies to consider the longer term (Welsh Government 2012). The UK government should do the same and install the same kind of thinking into planning, budgeting, delivery and assessment.

This might, for example, include a more ambitious role for the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR). As its chair Robert Chote noted recently:

**‘By international standards, the OBR has a relatively narrow remit, focusing very much on fiscal rather than broader policy analysis. In contrast the Danish, Dutch, German, South Korean and Swedish watchdogs comment on employment, growth and other structural policies ... we confine ourselves to analysis of the current policies of the**

---

1 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/giving-local-authorities-more-control-over-how-they-spend-public-money-in-their-area-2/supporting-pages/community-budgets>.

**current government. It will be interesting to see if there is any demand for the OBR to look at alternative policies once we have established ourselves more firmly in our current role.'**

Chote 2013

A better government would respond to Chote's gentle hint and require the OBR to examine longer-term plans, trends and options.

These and other systemic measures would help to install prevention as the core operating logic underpinning the way in which government and civil society spend their resources and judge their success. Over time and in aggregate they would establish the capability for a different kind of society – one that recognises the importance of readiness, is prepared for the future, and values sustainable solutions above short-term crisis management.

### 3. Prioritise relationships

To return to an earlier example, most of the patients and relatives of patients at Mid Staffordshire hospital weren't complaining that the medical science fell short. Rather, it was the human kindness that went missing (Francis 2010) – the capacity to see the person, not the operational target.

Personalisation has been a policy objective in the past. But governments have confused *customising* services with *humanising* them – both are worthwhile goals, but they are quite different. Big polyclinics, even call centres, may offer a service that will meet individual needs more quickly, efficiently and flexibly than the individual GP working on their own, but the service will be less personal. The polyclinic suits the busy commuter seeking holiday jabs (customised); the small-practice GP may be preferred by the parent of a chronically sick child visiting the surgery every week (humanised).

A huge body of evidence supports the proposition that consistent, high-quality relationships change lives and that better results are achieved where, in design and delivery, primacy is given to the quality and consistency of the individual interaction – that is, where the service is humanised (Bell and Smerdon 2011). Yet services are increasingly structured to, for instance, support the most troubled families with a dozen or more caseworkers, each of whom manages to maintain only superficial contact with the family. Over and over again child abuse inquiries have revealed not that there was no professional interest but that professionals were falling over one another. 'Deep value' relationships should replace transactions as the organising principle at the heart of all our public services because they have a material and well-evidenced impact on the outcomes, on our physical health and economic performance, and on long-term costs

A better government would lay the foundations with a set of generic, deep value service standards, and it would require an implementation and evaluation framework to be developed in each service area. Community Links has begun this work, producing service standards and an implementation framework that are being piloted with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Now we need a cross-government commitment to this approach and to the transformation of every service through the systematic prioritisation of relationships.

Ministers, however, should not – in the words of TS Eliot – 'dream of a system so perfect that no one will have to be good'. Systems alone are not enough. We also need to have the maturity and the good sense to speak about love, what Barbara Fredrickson (2013)

has called ‘that micro-moment of warmth and connection that you share with another human being’. We need to understand the place of trust and kindness in the public realm and, above all, to consistently and deliberately design it into service reform, rather than design it out.

#### 4. Combine functions

An alcoholic and unemployed partner, a child who is struggling at school, an eviction notice and a stress-related illness – these things are not unconnected. Public services should be considered as a whole and delivered coherently and collaboratively, as they should be experienced, not as separate and distinct entities or steps. One person, one family: one plan.

Over the last two decades we’ve had Total Place, Neighbourhood Budgets and Community Budgets, and the minister now in charge is asked at select committee who was previously responsible. He’s not wrong when he says it’s ‘the secretary of state for good intentions’ (HOC 2011: Q81): local collaboration is still little more than an aspiration and a handful of small-scale ‘pilots’ on the ground. I sometimes wonder what might have happened if more recent administrations had received the Beveridge report. Six pilot clinics and a special local authority ringfenced match fund for the purchase of bandages perhaps.

Successive governments have tiptoed around budget boundaries and institutional fiefdoms, offering programmes that have been relatively small and thinly scattered, despite consistently encouraging results. The four areas currently piloting community budgets, for example, estimate they can save £800 million over five years (NAO 2013b) and a recent Ernst & Young report (2013) suggested savings of £4 billion per year could be achieved if comparable initiatives were implemented nationally.

Currently there is duplication *and* there are gaps. Patrick Dunleavy (2010) has reported that participants in Total Place estimate the degree of overlap in local service streams at between 25 per cent and 35 per cent. Leading practitioner Hilary Cottam (2011) is also right when she argues that ‘when the Treasury say a family ... ‘costs’ a quarter of a million pounds what they really mean is that the system around [the family] costs a quarter of a million ... Not one penny touches [the] family in a way which supports change’. Savings could be made and services could be improved. Radically reconfiguring responsibilities would enable individual professionals to spend more time on smaller caseloads, bridging the gaps without duplication and developing the deep value relationships which, we know, achieve better results for less money.

A better government would bring clarity, focus and, above all, scale to this agenda with more determination and a new approach. Not ‘how do we join up local services here and there?’ but ‘how can we *combine* them?’

If there is still a need to learn more, random and diffuse pilots could be replaced with more focused prototypes committed to a timetable that sees them starting small, learning hard and growing fast.

Taking a lead on seamless service delivery might also include reviewing the separation of responsibilities in Whitehall. Unlike many other governments, the UK government organises its administration around functions rather than people. It might be useful to revive the Department for Children, Schools and Families, for instance, with a clearer brief – or perhaps, given current priorities, to consider the case for establishing a new

Department for Older People. This latter possibility would have the incidental but useful consequence of transferring the 42 per cent of the DWP's budget that is now spent on pension and related benefits for older people, thereby better informing a welfare debate which is increasingly ill-informed and vindictive.

Establishing a local authority 'duty to collaborate' and a matching 'right to lead' for other partners might help to focus minds closer to the ground. It would require councils to involve others in the integration of budgets and services. Other local service providers would have the right to lead such collaboration and to require the cooperation of the council if the authority failed to step up.

Transforming the degree and the quality of local collaboration also requires a fresh approach to scale. The prevailing orthodoxy suggests that efficient production relies on economies of scale. This may be true of manufacturing but it isn't true of most public services. As Neil Berry has written:

**'Perceived inefficiencies almost always seem to lead to strategies based on a further tier of aggregation, scale and management control, often to a point where inefficiencies become so opaque that they become desperately difficult to address even as they become more apparent to the rest of us. As we do this we also drive out the plurality of supply and local multipliers that are widely recognized as vital for high performance in public sector spent ... the more complex the social problems, the more important it is to design services in such a way that deep value relationships can be formed between service users and providers. More accessible, responsive and embedded provision can then deliver stronger and more cost effective outcomes.'**

Berry 2012

## 5. Co-produce services

'Accessible and responsive' services, to borrow Berry's vernacular, delivering 'stronger and more cost-effective outcomes' is about more than the excellence of the professional provider. Co-production is based on a philosophy which values individuals, builds upon their own support systems, and considers their place in the wider community. It requires a move away from service-led or top-down approaches and towards one of genuine citizen empowerment. This would see service-users and their communities participating in the co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-evaluation of services and it utilises the experience, knowledge and abilities of everyone involved – a resource that currently goes largely untapped.

Services become more effective and relevant when service-users and their communities are helping to design and deliver the outcomes. In turn, service-user engagement encourages commitment and ultimately ownership, resulting in genuinely sustainable projects. More effective and sustainable outcomes offer better value for money, not only from the specific service but also from the knock-on benefits for a community which now feels plugged in and empowered.

Co-production that is locally appropriate and culturally sensitive – which is not a 'one size fits all' option – can be delivered following a range of methods and models: cooperatives, social enterprises, mutuals, time-banks and so on. The only consistent

feature of co-production initiatives are the core principles: valuing people as assets; building on their existing capabilities; partnerships of mutuality and reciprocity; peer support networks; facilitating rather than delivering.

As Ruth Dineen has suggested,<sup>2</sup> a better government would use what it spends on public services to facilitate collaboration, opening up systems and structures and enabling the contribution of others. It would:

- ensure that co-production principles are written into all relevant legislation and regulation
- create a commissioning strategy which prioritises co-production, citizen empowerment and collaboration
- move to an exchange model of assessment and evaluation based on personal outcomes rather than organisationally-determined outputs
- build consensus through ongoing discussion, sharing best practice, and collection and dissemination of evidence
- support leaders, managers and frontline staff through accessible and relevant training and resources.

#### **Case study: Welfare, new style**

An example is provided by the Netherlands' Social Support Act (WMO), which was introduced in 2007. This legislation required a shift in care work towards what is known as 'welfare new style'. Much of this was driven by the mismatch between increasing care costs and shrinking public funds, but it included an explicit recognition of pre-existing connections. The WMO imposed an obligation on service-users to make use of their own networks before becoming entitled to professional help. It has therefore become necessary to consider how such networks operate along with their possibilities and limitations.

There are 3.5 million caregivers in the Netherlands, of which 450,000 are significantly or seriously overburdened (Kruijswijk 2012). A non- or poorly functioning care network is a disadvantage for both clients and caregivers, so targeted support is now focused on the opportunities and threats in the network. The main points that have dominated the development of Dutch care practice have been (see Harris 2011):

- to focus on the strengths and resources of the individual, not on their problems
- to map, stimulate and involve the individual's social network as a key resource
- to emphasise collective rather than individual support solutions
- to use professional care as a 'last resort'.

This agenda is bigger and wider than co-production, and some aspects of the WMO agenda do not translate into the UK context. Nonetheless, the emphasis on understanding, strengthening and supporting the caring network would represent a cultural and systemic shift in the UK and a good place for a better government to begin its public service reforms.

---

<sup>2</sup> See <http://allinthistogetherwales.wordpress.com/>

## 6. Co-locate the public estate

If combining functions and co-producing services is to mean anything in practice then surely it means sharing a kettle: operating for one community from one, recognisably common location.

The public estate is a huge national resource with a book value of £354 billion (LGA and Centre for Cities 2013). A better government would promote the principle of public agencies operating from shared neighbourhood buildings and in facilities that might also include space for appropriate private or third-sector partners. This kind of collaborative management of the estate would help in the delivery of better services and in the organic development of local networks and social capital. Potentially, it would also raise money from letting to partners, saving not just on premise costs but on front- and back-office functions as well. It would stem naturally from the breaking down of the public sector delivery silos that have imposed the perverse budget incentives and disjointed structures which have led to such fragmented delivery.

Ultimately, and with appropriate safeguards, the neighbourhood estate might be given over to endow a local community trust. The financial asset would give substance to the rhetoric of local ownership and common wealth, and potentially it could be used as a cornerstone for realising other local aspirations – a new and communal version of the ‘property-owning democracy’.

Councils alone control combined assets valued at £230 billion, and some are already rationalising. However, their coordination with other public sector asset-holders is patchy, at best. Each local authority should be responsible for contributing to a 21st century Domesday book, cataloguing the estate and facilitating collective planning of a collaborative approach to the use and management of premises.

The Local Government Association has been developing the idea of using special purpose management vehicles to lead on the delivery of such plans with a view to, among other objectives, optimising the value of the assets, improving access to other funding, and investing in measures to enhance the asset. This model may not work for everyone, but regardless of the mechanism the principle of co-location should become the expectation not, as it is at the moment, the exception.

Co-location is not only about better use of buildings, cost-savings and more efficient working. The parent of a primary school child knows how their local network expands and improves when they join the school-gate fraternity. It is a physical locus, of course, related to their child’s education, but it also brings together neighbours informally and regularly. A peer network evolves, sharing knowledge and, often, practical help.

Individually we may not need the dentist very often or the GP or the social worker; we may rarely visit the library, or the housing office or the police station. Regardless, we would stand a far better chance of getting to know the staff and our neighbours if these services operated from one building that served everyone. Building supportive networks is not the *purpose* of the school gate – or the council office, the library or the police station – but it would be a priceless bonus.

Howard Schultz led the Starbucks coffee chain in its growth from 11 stores to 7,000 with the mantra ‘everything matters’. It’s not just what we do that makes a difference but also where we do it and how we do it. A rambling, disjointed, apparently random public estate is the face that government currently presents to most of its citizens. Co-location is a

bricks-and-mortar proposal with immediate practical benefits, but it would also have a wider totemic purpose. It would say that these are good-quality services run by thoughtful people with respect for you, for the interests of future generations, for the limitations on the public purse and for the convenience and the contribution of the people that we serve.

## 7. Cultivate the willing

Combining premises, reconfiguring service delivery and prioritising relationships are all part of the change that we need, but a better government would not only be concerned with the provision of public services. A million pensioners enjoy less than 30 minutes of social contact in any given week. This has a message for us all, and is a challenge to our society as much – perhaps more – than it is a challenge to the state.

Consider two elderly women both living independently at home. One falls ill, stops eating properly and forgets to take her medication. This leads to a series of problems eventually resulting in her permanent admission to a nursing home. The second belongs to an allotment group – has done for years. When she becomes unwell, group members take turns to share their meals with her, checking on her daily and helping with errands.

The first is unhappy and costs the state more and more. The second is happy and costs nothing. No one is asked, trained or paid to support the second woman; no one involved would call themselves a ‘volunteer’. They would say, (indeed, did say, for these are true stories) ‘we did what anyone would do’.

As cuts bite, eligibility criteria for public services creep up. This means that the woman who missed a tablet occasionally doesn’t get help until she collapses. By then the ‘solution’ is much more expensive, and it may never be totally successful. A supportive community ‘doing what anyone would do’ benefits us all and – given current trajectories on aging, spending and service decline – is an increasingly urgent objective.

Much of this happens already around the allotments, the school gates and the places of worship. Driving the co-location of public services help, but much more could be done with the built environment. Indeed, 150 years ago policymakers began to realise that designing and building homes, streets and public places with due regard to sanitation and public health directly impacted on individuals’ health and fitness and thus on the economic productivity of the nation. A series of public health measures were enacted which were radical at the time but which today we take for granted.

We know that the built environment affects our mental wellbeing as much as our physical health, but still planners in the UK largely ignore this dimension. A better government would enact the planning measures necessary to ensure that the design of the physical environment facilitates personal connection, that it creates the social plumbing. Such regulation is in place already in other countries. Ignoring it in the UK should be just as unthinkable for planners, architects and builders – and just as illegal – as ignoring the need for water pipes and sewage mains.

Of course, cultivating an environment in which communities thrive isn’t just about bricks and mortar. The Local Government Information Unit found that 74 per cent of the 8.5 million people attending a ‘Big Lunch’ event in July 2012 now feel a stronger sense of community, and 80 per cent feel closer to their neighbours (Carr-West and Wilkes 2013). Similarly, the Garage Sale Trail in Australia, Vide Greniers in France, the global History Pin project and numerous Meet Me in Winter choirs have all adopted indirect approaches to the building of social capital, all with similar success. It doesn’t much matter if its

sandwiches, jumble sales, old photos or new songs – each of these projects are enablers of change. They provide platforms for developing peer networks, for connecting and relating, and for building communities that are mutually supportive.

I concede – perhaps investing in picnics as an alternative to care homes may seem ludicrous. However, the rationale is well understood in the business world. The commercial success of Facebook, say, is in its ability to provide a platform for people to run their lives, to calibrate and project their own identity, and to build third-party applications. One platform, 800 million users connected together in one community and in an infinite number and variety of human interactions.

The internet enables us to build networks on a scale and at a speed that would not have been possible in the past, but the principle is bigger and older than the technology. The allotment group, no less than Facebook, is a platform for developing and realising a vibrant, give-and-take community.

Importantly, members of both communities collaborate not because they feel they *have* to but because they *want* to. They are willing citizens (Council on Social Action 2008). This gives their effort energy, creativity, confidence and the commitment to persevere. It is not driven by the crude and transactional motivation of ‘something for something’ or the onerous drag of duty and personal responsibility. They choose to be willing citizens not because they are forced from without but because they are compelled from within. This motivation sets a course that is positive, proactive, creative and energetic and much more likely to be sustained than if it were motivated by guilt or the terms of a contract.

Every service is potentially a platform. At the moment, government invests very modestly in promoting greater social connection – by supporting the Big Lunch, for instance – but systematically designs isolation into our way of life. Take the recent news story about the council letter telling all tenants that they had to pay their rent by direct debit or risk eviction. One elderly woman was so upset she complained to the press. She was not distressed by the threat of eviction – she never missed a payment – but by the loss of the opportunity for a regular social connection on her weekly visit to the post office.

A better government would directly encourage the development of networks by interrogating all its own provision: how can we design and deliver this service in ways that support human connection, the growth of networks, peer support and willing collaboration? And it would work with partners on new projects with the specific purpose of developing new platforms.

To reiterate, this is not peripheral to the business of government. Needs are increasing and public funds are falling, and cuts can be managed – and are being managed – by raising the threshold for accessing a service. An elderly person receiving a home visit every day might be reassessed as now entitled to a visit every three days. But this is almost always a false economy, making savings in the short term that create unmet needs and so exacerbate the original problem.

A sustainable deficit reduction strategy depends on a sustainable *need* reduction strategy. And this calls for an entirely different approach. Willing neighbours cannot provide full-time nursing care but they can provide the support that prevents small problems from becoming big ones or even from occurring in the first place.

Informal support networks are, for some of us already, the first line of prevention. Using the services and the facilities we already pay for, the technology we now have available and the best thinking in other fields to extend that support widely, deliberately and systematically should be at the heart of a progressive strategy for delivering a better society and for living within our means. If we regard it as merely peripheral we will get merely peripheral results. A better government would lead a change in the way that we support one another that is at least as fundamental as the change in so many other aspects of our behaviour led by the private sector – but do so by exploiting the same principles.

Beyond the support of informal volunteering there is a case to be made for transforming the scale and function of formal volunteering. A better government might make the link with the social care debate, where we know that the combination of economic and demographic trends demand a fresh approach. We know that there are broadly two phases to retirement, with a period of activity moving into a period of increasing dependency. We know also that keeping active keeps us healthy. Maximising the length and quality of the first period is clearly of benefit to us all.

We need to think of older people as an asset, not a problem, of our own later years as an opportunity, not a worry. If we valued and sought to benefit from the accumulated wisdom of our elders, as some societies do but ours does not, we would improve the quality and even the length of our active lives and achieve positive outcomes for the wider community. We need to think about the role of older people in supporting others in our schools, hospitals, other public institutions and neighbourhoods.

This is much more fundamental than a new version of the disappointing Experience Corps or a rebranded version of the vacuous ‘big society’. A better vision needs funding and infrastructure, which the big society never had, and it needs a bigger narrative and a wider debate – it must be much more than just another funding programme. This is about evolving a new social contract for our older years, providing financial security and opportunities to contribute.

If all this, from networks and platforms to formal volunteering, sounds hopelessly naïve, reflect on the National Blood Transfusion Service. At first blush it seems improbable, even counterintuitive, that so many people would willingly endure the inconvenience of donating precious fluids to a stranger without recompense. In fact, more than 2 million donations are collected every year, and the NHS depends upon them. Moreover, international evidence shows that such results could not be bought: we give but we would not sell. The service has become an institution, part of our culture, and a process in which thousands of us engage willingly and regularly. A better government would understand that harnessing the giving impulse is not just cheap. Sometimes it is the only way.

## 8. Reduce inequalities

The more powerful people feel, the more likely they are to join institutions, to participate and to build relationships. Fairer and more equal societies are more collaborative, happier, and healthier. This means they are ultimately lower-maintenance, happily aligning the arguments for social justice and for financial prudence. A serious determination to build more muscular communities must therefore be underpinned by a commitment to active equality.

This provides one more reason, alongside the many others, why a better government would accelerate the redistribution of economic and educational opportunities, power and resources. In doing so, it would be promoting economic growth ‘from the middle

out' (to borrow Barack Obama's slogan), addressing the policies and the behaviours that categorise and divide people, embedding 'nothing about me without me' in all decision-making, and matching the generous imagination of its collaborative approach to community building with a sustained commitment to social liberalism. Give and take – live and let live.

We have a mountain to climb on the reduction of inequalities. A child born in Canning Town today – a couple of miles east of the financial heart of the fourth-richest country in the world – is half as likely to live to 75 as the average UK baby. A better government would be galvanised by the challenge and proud to work for a more equal country, not only because it matters for the poor but because it matters for us all, now more than ever.

## 9. Commit to common cause

Ask almost any politician to list the nation's proudest achievements in recent years and the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games will feature close to the top. This was not achieved by one government in one term. It was, and had to be, a 15-year commitment honoured and delivered by successive governments and local administrations

Youth offending costs the nation as much as the Olympic Games *every year* – £11 billion (NAO 2010). We know that the costs – social and financial – could be significantly reduced with earlier action, yet the overwhelming majority of the budget is spent on imprisonment. Less than 10 per cent is invested in prevention. Here is just one challenge that can only be met with long-term collaboration and sustained commitment. There are many more.

Ed Balls promised in October 2012 that a Labour government would not 'duck ... the hard long-term issues we know we haven't properly faced up to and which transcend parties and parliaments and where we badly need a cross-party consensus.' He proposed 'a long-term plan to support the most vulnerable in our society – looked-after children and adults needing social care.' The rationale, he said, was 'not just about policy, but about the kind of country we want to be and the way we do our politics' (Balls 2012).

Such collaboration will always look more attractive from the opposition benches than it will once ensconced in Number 11, but the Canadian experience of cross-party support for a consistent approach to criminal justice shows that it is neither naïve nor impractical for the major parties in a parliamentary democracy to collaborate on the kind of agenda that cries out for sustained commitment to long-term goals and strategies.

Some of the biggest challenges that face our generation can only be resolved with a plan that reaches beyond the lifetime of one government. Failure to deliver on such a plan will blight our lives today and leave our children with problems of a much greater magnitude. A better government would identify these challenges, formulate 10 year plans, establish the mechanisms for delivering and evaluating them and offer them up for commitment across the parties. It's not an approach that would work on many issues, but where it does there will be more to make us proud than one glorious summer.

## 10. Tell the story of our lives

Two sets of issues were conflated in the Conservative party's big society proposition: public service reform and community-building. They are not one and the same, but they need to be closely connected and should hold fast to a common set of underpinning principles. The social alternative outlined in this essay is characterised by an emphasis on readiness; on relationships, not transactions; on willing engagement, give-and-take not

'something for something'; on justice and active equality and on collaboration. A better government would cultivate an environment in which these principles are enabled to flourish in every aspect of our lives.

Our values, expressed both in what we want for ourselves and in what we admire in others, are consistent across cultures, faiths and income groups. We want peaceful and stable communities, good health for our families (and if we can't have good health then good health services), a decent education for our children, and security and care in old age.

In memorial services we do not say 'he had three homes and a large share portfolio'. We say 'he was a supportive colleague, a caring son, a devoted father, an active and much-loved member of our community'. What we want to achieve together and individually and what we respect in one another is rooted in our values and celebrated in the traditions and the customs which install a common rhythm to our lives. Across income groups, regions and cultures we come together as families and as communities to mark the universal rites of passage and celebrate expressions of our shared values.

These social institutions give us a sense of identity and a shared history. They form the fabric of our society – and the best policy works with the weave. For instance, for the last 75 years, the government in Finland has given a gift box to all expectant mothers who visit a pre-natal clinic before the fourth month of pregnancy. The box doubles as a bed and contains indoor and outdoor clothes, toys, books, bedding, bathing products and nappies. It's not a cheap promotional gimmick – it provides good-quality products in a comprehensive package designed to give every child a good and equal start in life. The gift has now become a tradition uniting generations of mothers, and it has helped Finland to achieve one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world.

Policy, and its expression, should bring us together in common cause, not drive us apart: a better government would not invent a narrative of its own but derive its policies from our lives as we live them. It would prepare us to realise opportunity, to achieve what we believe is most important, to cope with setbacks between one milestone to the next, and to support one another.

None of this is about saving money but all of it would. It is about a social alternative that works better for us all, now and in the future.

## References

- Audit Commission (2009) *Tired of Hanging Around: Using sport and leisure activities to prevent anti-social behaviour by young people*, London
- Balls E (2012) speech to the Labour party conference, 1 October 2012. <http://www.labour.org.uk/ed-ballss-speech-to-labour-party-annual-conference-2012,2012-10-01>
- Bell K and Smerdon M (2011) *Deep Value: A literature review of the role of effective relationships in public services* London: Community Links
- Berry N (2012) 'Locality: Scaling up not always best', Guardian Public Leaders Network blog, 11 October 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/public-leaders-network/2012/oct/11/locality-public-sector-scaling-design>
- Big Lunch (2010) 'Not so nosy neighbours: millions of shy Brits have no idea who lives next door!' press release, 14 April 2010. <http://www.thebiglunchers.com/?p=923>
- Butler P (2012) 'Birmingham city council warns of effect of 17% spending cuts', *Guardian*, 23 October 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/oct/23/birmingham-city-council-cuts-warning>
- Campbell D (2013) 'Hospitals that fail patients will be fined, says NHS chief', *Guardian*, 29 March 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/mar/29/nhs-fine-poor-service>
- Carr-West J and Wilkes L (2013) *The Big Lunch: Feeding Community Spirit*, London: Local Government Information Unit
- Chote R (2013) 'Britain's fiscal watchdog: a view from the kennel', Institute and Faculty of Actuaries Spring Lecture, 9 May 2013, London: Office for Budget Responsibility
- Cottam H (2011) 'Relational welfare', *Soundings*, 48: 134–144
- Council on Social Action (2008) *Willing Citizens and the Making of the Good Society: The ideas underpinning the practical work of the Council on Social Action*, CoSA paper no 1, London: Community Links
- Dorling D and Vickers D (2008) *Changing UK: The Way We Live Now*, Sheffield: University of Sheffield
- Dunleavy P (2010) *The Future of Joined up Public Services*, London: 2020 Public Services Trust and ESRC
- Early Action Taskforce (2011) *The Triple Dividend: The first report of the early action taskforce*, London: Community Links
- Early Action Taskforce (2012) *The Deciding Time: Prevent Today or Pay Tomorrow – The Second Report of the Early Action Taskforce*, London: Community Links
- Emmerson C, Johnson P and Miller H (2013) *Green Budget, February 2013*, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies
- Ernst & Young (2013) *Whole Place Community Budgets: A review of the Potential for Aggregation*, London
- Francis R (2010) *Independent inquiry into care provided by Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust January 2005 – March 2009*, HC375, London: TSO
- Fredrickson BL (2013) *Love 2.0: how our supreme emotion affects everything we feel, think, do, and become*, New York: Hudson Street Press

- Harris K (2011 'Social networks and informal support: the big shift for policy', The Neighbourhoods blog, 24 February 2011. <http://neighbourhoods.typepad.com/neighbourhoods/2011/02/social-networks-and-informal-support.html>
- HM Treasury (2010) *The Spending Review Framework*, CM 7872, London: TSO
- Hood C and Dixon R (2012) 'A Model of Cost-Cutting in Government? The Great Management Revolution in UK Central Government Reconsidered', *Public Administration*, 91(1): 114–134
- House of Commons [HOC] (2011) 'Local Government Resource Review, Uncorrected Transcript of Oral Evidence', HC1470-I, London. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcomloc/uc1470-i/uc147001.htm>
- House of Commons [HOC] (2013) Report of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry. HC 898, London: TSO
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation [JRF] (2008) *What are today's social evils?* York. [www.sociale evils.org.uk/documents/social-evils-summary.pdf](http://www.sociale evils.org.uk/documents/social-evils-summary.pdf)
- Kruijswijk W (2012) *Informal Care Scan Aid: Mapping out the composition, organisation and risk factors of a care network*, Utrecht: Centre of Expertise for Informal Care
- Lent A (2013) 'We need to discover something akin to the "spirit of 45" if we are to replace our "failure state" with a "success state"', LSE British Politics and Policy blog, 25 March 2013. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/31764>
- Local Government Association [LGA] and Centre for Cities (2013) *City Deals Core Package*, London
- National Audit Office (2010) *The youth justice system in England and Wales: Reducing offending by young people*, HC 663, London: TSO. <http://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-youth-justice-system-in-england-and-wales-reducing-offending-by-young-people/>
- National Audit Office [NAO] (2013a) *Early action: landscape review*, London
- National Audit Office [NAO] (2013b) *Cabinet Office and HM Treasury Integration across Government*, London
- Reeder N (forthcoming 2013) 'Government ambitions for a preventative agenda: fact or futurewash?' London: Head and Heart Economics
- Stephoe A, Shankar A, Demakakos P and Wardle J (2013) 'Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women', *PNAS*, 110: 5797–5801
- Welsh Government (2012) *A Sustainable Wales: Better Choices for a Better Future*, white paper, WG17030, Cardiff. <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/desh/consultation/121203asusdev.whitepaperen.pdf>