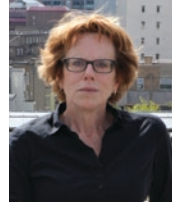


# LOCAL IS BETTER THAN NATIONAL

People need the power to shape the places they live and work in. Stewardship is a shared task but governments should stick to what they do well and stop trying to organise services and community life from the centre, set out aspirations not blueprints, recognise the value of locally based organisations, and only get involved in things which local people can't or won't do by themselves.

# LARGE CHARITIES SHOULD CHOOSE NOT TO COMPETE AGAINST LOCAL CHARITIES



## IDEAS FROM POLLY NEATE

In my role at Shelter, and previously at Women's Aid, I've had cause to reflect on the Better Way principle 'local is better than national'. It asks organisations to swim against the tide of competitive tendering. It's easy, as a national organisation, to float downstream on that tide, waving goodbye to the small, local organisations left behind. The choices large organisations make in response to local competitive tenders are easy to complicate. But the simplicity of doing the right thing cuts through the complexities we create – that's why it's so challenging. At Women's Aid I heard versions of the story that follows many, many times. That's what convinced me that we need to step up to the challenge as a sector – and we need to do it soon.

This story begins in the 1970s, when feminism was a march into the future. How many activists of

that time would have dreamed the movement would now, in some ways, look back on those days with nostalgia? You couldn't switch on the telly without seeing a woman the butt of the joke. James Bond casually slapped Moneypenny's bottom and the only eyebrow raised was his own. Violence against women was routinely condoned or disbelieved, and rape in marriage was not a crime.

**'Women's refuges had to be campaigners as much as helpers, and were often run by survivors'**

In this climate, the first women's refuges were born. Often founded by women who had survived abuse themselves, because only they could see domestic abuse amid the routine belittling and dismissal of women's concerns. They had to be campaigners as much as helpers. They begged or squatted buildings,

cobbled together meagre funds from here and there, gathered second-hand furniture and clothes for women and children who fled abuse with nothing. They had to convince all those with power in the local area that a refuge was even needed, that it relied on secrecy, that abusive men would stop at nothing to seek and destroy both their own partner and, often, anyone who stood in the way.

Over the decades, thousands of women's lives were saved. And running a refuge still involved constant fundraising. Then, a more secure funding stream was born. Supporting People, covering all supported housing, offered secure grant income from the local council. It wasn't perfect, but after years of hand-to-mouth existence, it was a relief. It also provided a way of establishing new refuges, and a place at the table among local decision-makers at last.

Finally, domestic abuse and the nature of its impact on women began to be understood. Refuges reached out to prevent future violence, speaking in schools and workplaces, training other agencies, and perhaps most importantly inspiring women who had fled abuse to volunteer and then move into paid work, with many themselves becoming refuge managers.

Roll forward to 2010: Supporting People was ended, at the same time as dramatic year-on-year reductions to local government funding, and the lifting of virtually all diktats on how councils should spend their money.

For many councils, the logical next step was to extend the market principles that had already taken hold in adult social care. The refuge became just one lot in a large tender. Frequently, the women founders were even barred from competing by size rules. In other cases, they competed and lost – usually on price. Between 2010 and 2015, one in six independent refuges were lost. The winners were often larger charities or housing associations, who competed on price with bland assurances that 'service delivery' could continue.

**'Is the charity sector about service delivery at the most competitive price? Or is it something more?'**

And there's the question at the heart of this principle. Is the charity sector about service delivery at the most competitive price? Or is it something more?

Large organisations who have won refuge contracts, putting those feminist activists out of business in the process, probably didn't see the

future of the charity sector as a factor in their decision to bid, or indeed as their responsibility. But they should. Quite apart from the question of whether the new 'provider' is as good as the old (which of course depends what you measure), there's another question which all of civil society must consider: what sort of sector do we want to be part of, and whose responsibility is it to create it? We had better be happy with the demise of small, local, activist-led organisations, because that's where we are headed.

The twin axioms of the current government – austerity and localism – mean that national lobbying will not achieve protection for local, independent organisations. It can produce a short-term injection of funds – in fact, that's a massive success in this day and age – but it won't level the playing field.

**'It's up to the large organisations themselves to rewrite this story.'**

So it's up to the large organisations themselves to rewrite this story: to choose not to compete. To choose not to win, even though they can.

At Shelter my perspective has shifted but the picture is still the same. Women fleeing domestic abuse are left with no one who will go that extra mile, who has been through it herself, who has devoted her life to the long and dangerous path to recovery from domestic abuse. There might be a bed available, funded through a generic supported housing contract. And a provider, and a commissioner, who don't even understand what has been lost.

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Polly Neate became Shelter's CEO in August 2017, having been the high profile CEO of Women's Aid and, before that, leading all external activities, strategy development and organisational change as Executive Director at Action for Children. She has always worked for social justice, previously as an award-winning journalist.

# THE LAMBETH WALK: LESSONS IN POWER SHARING



## A CASE STUDY BY RICHARD BRIDGE

Eight years ago, I was invited to be one of the ten commissioners on the Lambeth Council Cooperative Commission. Although originally planned by the then leader of the council, now MP Steve Reed, before the financial crash it was given greater impetus by the time we started with the emerging budget cuts of the then new Coalition government.

Its aspiration was to reimagine how councils could work, believing that greater partnership work with local communities, both of business and residents, could lead to better decisions, better marshalling and allocation of scarce resources, and better outcomes for all.

**‘What it all really came down to was changing the overall council culture’**

Three things stand out in my mind from that time. First, that we deliberately called it Sharing

Power, a new settlement between citizens and the state, wishing to put something on the lid of the tin so to speak that made clear what was inside. Second, is the repeated refrain of the Council Chief Executive in discussions after evidence hearings that he understood what we were trying to achieve but still wasn't clear on how he was going to make it happen. And third, that in my own opinion what it all really came down to, and the answer I think to the Chief Executive's question, was changing the overall council culture, of members and officers alike, from seeing themselves as 'gatekeepers' (whether of power, resources or wisdom) to 'facilitators'.

The Cooperative Council rhetoric remains the stated policy of Lambeth Council and was re-affirmed as recently as 2016 in the Borough Plan: 'We became a Cooperative Council because we wanted to continue

to improve as an organisation, and believed that working more closely with our communities would enable us to improve services and decision-making.....for us, being cooperative is about how we work with our residents, businesses and other partners, involving people in the decisions that affect them and supporting them in improving their communities.'

During 2016-17, I was providing consultancy support to a group of local residents inspired by the original report to come together to take on the Community Asset Transfer of the Carnegie Library in Herne Hill, one of many nationally that councils could no longer afford to manage or sustain the services therein. For five years this group of volunteers had trained, built their capacity, researched, planned, budgeted and gone through the at times interminable processes set up by the council.

Then without any consultation with the group who had spent so long planning to take on this asset, a cross-borough deal with Greenwich Leisure (GLL) was announced to take on a number of Lambeth assets, including Herne Hill Carnegie Library, at peppercorn rents in return for providing certain aspects of library services that the council could no longer fully fund and a rebate

to the council of £1 million on their extant contract with GLL.

All of a sudden the whole basis of the business plan that this group of local residents had been carefully building went out the window. The basement at the building would now be dug out (at the council's expense) to provide room for a gym run commercially by GLL. That the basement should be dug out and used to generate revenue to support the community facilities and library on the ground and first floor had been an idea first proposed by the local resident group. But the council's deal provided for no income from the basement (and other key areas of the ground floor) to any community group taking on the building. A proposed large-scale capital grant application to the Heritage Lottery (which the HL had signified interest in) was immediately vitiated by the council proposing to only lease a part of and not the whole the building to the community group. And all this had been discussed, negotiated and agreed by council officers (and this was pre-eminently an officer plan to resolve budget challenges) without reference to the community group who were already four years into negotiating with the council and who were now shut out from further negotiations with GFL on the grounds of 'commercial sensitivity'.

**'This has to be at heart an argument about distributing power differently as well'**

I would argue that when we talk of 'local is better than national' we need to understand that this has to be at heart an argument about distributing power differently as well; simply shifting the level at which certain power discussions take place is not in and of itself a sufficient panacea. That we say shifting the locus for certain discussions down the devolution scale (national to local, local to community) is a good thing is exactly because we instinctively feel that at a lower level it will be easier to give power over those decisions to voices and views currently not sufficiently heard and included.

The United Kingdom remains, notwithstanding, the most centralised state in Western Europe. 'Local is better than national' is an appropriate tactical riposte to that. But on its own it leaves untouched the underlying historical reason for that centralisation that is the 'gatekeeper' mentality of much of our country's power elite at whatever level.

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Richard Bridge was Director of Enterprise at Community Matters championing local community action and empowerment. He is an active member of his own local community in Waterloo and is a trustee of the [Florence Trust](#) arts organisation. He currently teaches Leadership and Management to Third Sector managers for [Cornel Ltd](#)

# PLAYFUL PARTNERSHIPS, LOCALLY AND NATIONALLY



## A CASE STUDY BY NICOLA BUTLER

When it comes to play, national and local government both have a role but it is communities who should be right at the heart of services, and that means local providers are often the best. Hackney is a good example of where this is being got right locally. Nationally, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are using partnerships with national organisations to good effect to support play providers locally.

### 'Hackney is getting it right'

Hackney is one of a small number of local authorities in England that is championing play and child-friendly initiatives, despite cuts from national government.

The partnership in Hackney supports seven thriving adventure playgrounds, fifty play streets, play sessions on estates and in children's centres, specialist support for disabled children, play training and resources for schools, improved playgrounds in local parks and an initiative by local

architects to improve the design of local housing and the public realm to support children's outdoor play. How has this been achieved? And what are the lessons learned for funding and commissioning elsewhere?

**The local context:** Hackney is a young borough with a quarter of its population under the age of 20. It is a highly diverse, densely populated. the population is growing and it is becoming more affluent. There is significant regeneration and a dramatic improvement in local schools over the last 15 years.

Increasing land prices and regeneration have enabled the Council to partially reduce the effects of austerity. However, persistent inequalities remain with growing child poverty, high levels of obesity and mental health problems.

### 'High-level council support and local partnerships are critical'



The Labour leadership of Hackney has given long term, high-level political support to play.

Play services are seen locally as a vote winner – something that people enjoy and that helps deliver Council priorities including: community cohesion, child health and wellbeing, reductions in car use, liveability, early intervention and help for families and ultimately quality of life.

The Mayor and councillors are often to be seen joining in with a bit of skipping or hopscotch.

The 2018 Hackney Labour Manifesto commits Hackney to becoming a Child Friendly Borough and supporting local adventure playgrounds, street play and play in parks and public spaces. The Council has appointed a Cabinet member for Families, Early Years and Play – taking the play brief up to Cabinet level for the first time.

The Council's approach to grant funding and commissioning of play services is based on a strong shared vision between council and voluntary sector. Commissioning has been delivered by Council Officers who have experience of delivering voluntary sector play and youth services themselves. They understand the challenges and opportunities

and are able to provide meaningful advice, challenge and capacity building support. The Council funds a play providers' network bringing together local statutory and voluntary sector play services to share good practice and support each other. Local VCS play organisations are invited to participate in meetings about strategic objectives including on childhood obesity and community reassurance (anti-gang initiatives).

The Council has also responded positively to initiatives from residents. Both the Child-friendly borough initiative and the Hackney Play Streets project were initiated by local residents with support from the voluntary sector and are now funded and supported by the Council.

**'Hackney puts a high value on understanding local needs and quality in commissioning'**

The Council consults with voluntary sector providers on the needs of the children and young people they work with, prior to commissioning, helping to inform what is commissioned. The Council puts a high value on understanding of local children and communities, and backs this up by including questions in the commissioning process that explore the provider's ability to meet local needs and challenges. This

has helped the local VCS to win contracts despite stiff competition from high profile, national charities.

Quality is also given a high priority in commissioning young people's services, ensuring that tenders go to those who can deliver a quality service, not those who offered the cheapest price.

**'Devolved governments operate play partnerships nationally to provide valuable training, professional development and standards'**

Since 2010, the UK government has cut funding for play services in England from £235 million between 2008 and 2011 to zero. In contrast, the devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have continued to fund national play strategies and national play organisations.

As a result, the national play organisations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales work in partnership with their governments and work with, rather than compete with, local play organisations.

This has enabled Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to work with their local councils, to provide training, professional development and standards for play provision, and to provide high quality information and advice for all those who want to support better play opportunities for children – parents, playground designers, schools and afterschool clubs, nurseries, planners and local voluntary organisations.

The previous National Play Strategy in England led to an eight per cent increase in children's satisfaction with local play facilities. As childhood obesity and mental health problems continue to rise, there is a critical role for national government and play organisations to support play and child-friendly initiatives, such as those in Hackney, for children throughout England.

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Nicola Butler is Director of [Hackney Play Association](#), a local charity that aims to improve children and young people's health, well-being and quality of life, through play. She is also Chair of Trustees of the national children's play charity, Play England.

# BOTH LOCAL AND NATIONAL HAVE A ROLE, BUT LOCAL IS UNDervalUED

## INSIGHTS FROM BETTER WAY DISCUSSIONS

During 2018, we discussed the Better Way proposition, local is better than national, in the London cells and came to these conclusions.

**Place still matters:** In the age of digital platforms and widely available travel most of us are connected to many communities, but it seems that place remains important. Place and personal contact cannot be replaced by the internet; and it is where the deepest and most lasting bonds are forged.

**Local and national:** Our proposition states 'local is better than national'. Community life is where human relationships can best flourish, and imposition from the centre rarely works when dealing with complex social problems, as it inevitably produces standardised

and transactional behaviours, and reduces the potential for people to discover their own solutions. But that doesn't mean that we can or should ignore the national dimension. For the local to function well, we need local action to be supplemented by a national system capable of sharing and promoting ideas, encouraging challenge, developing common standards, and providing validation – with all of this guided and informed by evidence from local practice.

**'Local institutions can be guilty of hoarding power'**

**Local institutions and communities are not always 'good':** Localism is not necessarily benign. Local institutions can be guilty of hoarding power just as much as national and international agencies. And

communities, at their worst, can be divided and dispiriting places, resistant to change, dominated by elite groups, hostile and oppressive for outsiders and minorities. At the local level, the quality of leadership, especially in the public sector, is generally weak, failing to attract real talent or younger generations.

One response to such problems has been managerial – attempts to professionalise local administration, with armies of paid managers (relatively wealthy) doing things for communities (relatively poor). We have seen a movement away from neighbourhood and community levels towards larger geographical regions, in attempts to create economies of scale, centralising political and executive power most recently with directly elected mayors. But this shift from localism to devolution leaves place behind, replicates the national command and control culture, and reintroduces many of the behaviours which leave people feeling they have somehow lost control.

### 'Untapped strengths that exist in even the poorest place'

#### **Social infrastructure is important:**

There are many places across the country where deprivation is high

and the local infrastructure is failing to cope, let alone improve things. In a time of austerity this is getting even worse. But while we need a strong and effective local infrastructure, especially where problems are most acute, we should not underestimate the untapped strengths that exist in even the poorest places. The answer is not to send people in to 'intervene', but rather to take steps to realise local capability and invest in the people who live in these places and create the conditions for them to design and manage their own social infrastructure.

**Organisations may sometimes be the problem:** As mentioned earlier, organisations can often 'hoard power' and create command and control barriers between themselves and those they serve. Power can corrupt but it can be important to understand the emotional drivers too. There may be anxiety about getting too close to those with whom one works, or fear of being attacked when something goes wrong. They may also suffer from a lack of aspiration and lack of belief that they can make fundamental change happen. Too narrow a focus on targets may lead to a loss of fundamental purpose.

## Making a Better Way place

We have heard about places where people, including in some cases those involved in the Better Way network, are attempting to operate according to the Better Way propositions. Examples can be seen in Coventry, Taunton, Stroud, Frome, Doncaster and elsewhere.

What would a Better Way place look like?

**‘Networked organisations are likely to work best’**

**Networked organisations:** local institutions, including voluntary agencies, would be doing far more to build contact and credibility with local people over time, doing things ‘with’ rather than ‘for’, with a willingness to operate across traditional sector boundaries, identifying common cause, while recognising that all communities are highly complex, with multiple competing interests. Networked rather than command and control organisations are likely to work best.

**Making community connections:** Sustained community connector or community organiser activity, as well as activities to build community ownership, and spaces for people

to come together to understand each other and make decisions together (such as participatory budgeting), alongside mechanisms to encourage transparency and challenge, all seem essential for real progress to be made.

**Stronger democratic institutions** and community based organisations would help give voice to local needs and concerns and provide a challenge function.

**Finding the right level:** We would have a better understanding of ‘subsidiarity’ – of where activity best takes place and how local activity is supported by national and regional actions.

**Ambition:** Local organisations would have high aspirations to solve problems, not just service them, and to create stronger communities, and would have the tools to deliver this eg through better feedback mechanisms, ways of spreading experiences and greater front-line autonomy which encourages a ‘journey of discovery’.

**‘Community organisations and activists often have lived experience and connections that make them more effective than national organisations’**

**Valuing 'context' skills:** There would be a better understanding of where local adds value and of what has been called 'context' as well as 'content' skills and knowledge. Community organisations and activists often have lived experience and connections that make them more effective than national organisations. The concept of 'professionalism' would be reconfigured to include 'kindness' and relationship building.

**Getting more money into communities.** Ways would be found to get more resources for local activity, for example local giving organisations, crowd sourcing and commissioning that recognises the value of local.

## What needs to change?

'Stop talking about scaling up, talk about spreading ideas'

**Valuing the local more.** Big is not necessarily better than small, and often the reverse is true, as large organisations are more likely to become disconnected from their communities and more inclined to self-protection. So we should stop talking about scaling up whenever we see an example of good local practice and talk about 'spreading'

instead. And large organisations would do well to consider whether they can let go, providing much higher levels of autonomy to their constituent parts.

### Making a better case for local.

We need to make a better case for localism and the power of place to drive positive change. Some national problems cannot be overcome without a much greater emphasis on local action (homelessness for example) and agencies working in fields where this applies need to be brave enough to say so, and change their operating model, even if that threatens the current way of doing things.

### Use national and international

**power too.** Some problems cannot be tackled only at neighbourhood level but there is still an important role for the national, which needs to be better understood and articulated. The challenges of migration and climate change for example need concerted action at international levels. Perhaps the best future will come from greater emphasis on the local and the international, and less on the national.