Shaping the Future Together Seminar Series
Summary Report and Recommendations for Action

1. Introduction

The new localism policy agenda has emerged and been developed since the coalition Government took power last year. Many words have been written and spoken about different facets of this agenda, not least about the ‘big society’, but it still remains unclear about exactly how such policy changes are to be implemented. This is due, at least in part, to the very nature of the policy.

This report, which is based on discussions from the University of Sheffield/Sheffield First Partnership seminar series, will offer some recommendations for the implementation of this new localism agenda in Sheffield. However, such recommendations will be limited, much as the state’s actions will be limited in this change, as by definition, the changes cannot be predicted or designed beforehand, but should come from local communities.

The seminars programme was attended by policy makers and policy shapers from the academic, public, private and voluntary, community and faith (VCF) sectors in Sheffield. Sessions were facilitated by speakers from within the city, and also from national arenas. A deliberate decision was taken to run the seminars over a six-month period, which allowed for local debate to be influenced and informed by the unfolding of national policy. In many ways, the seminars represented new localism in action, bringing together some of the intellectual capital of the city to help shape a new approach to working together.

2. New localism: the problem of definition

By its very nature, there is no general definition of what new localism will look like; it is meant to vary in each and every community according to the varying needs and capacities in each area.

Whilst this may make theoretical sense in terms of increasing the efficiency of service provision, it makes the policy changes more difficult to conceptualise operationally. Such complexities and ambiguities should not detract from the opportunity for positive change afforded by this permissive policy climate. The new localism agenda should not be seen as an unwanted imposition of a cost-cutting agenda from central Government, but rather as a chance for Sheffield to shape a
distinctive form of local governance that reflects local values. Indeed, as the recent report by the Select Committee for Communities and Local Government outlined, ‘localism should not be adopted purely as a way to achieve reductions in public sector costs, for it is unclear whether it will be able to deliver this in the short-term. It is not certain that the financial benefits of more tailored services will immediately offset losses in efficiencies of scale’. As such, the changes need to be conceptualised as a long term project, building sustainably on what already exists in Sheffield.

3. The Case for Change?

It is clear that there is deep ambivalence across Sheffield about the new localism/big society agenda. The inherent ambiguity of the agenda also confuses people. Many would say that there is a strong and effective existing model of governance and service provision in Sheffield, and that the key issue is the need for more resources. However, it is clear that increased resources from the state will not be available, and the agenda is therefore about more effective use of existing (and decreasing) resources. Alongside this, Sheffield will see a significant increase in demand on services, with higher numbers of older and younger people, and an increased demand on public services. Sheffield already has a significant challenge around inequality of outcomes in health, attainment, skills and employment, and the risk is that these inequalities will increase, potentially leading to social tension.

It is therefore imperative that local people and organisations find new ways of working together to deliver the desired social, economic and environmental outcomes for Sheffield. There is a danger of delaying too much and letting the moment for positive reform pass by. To fully utilise this opportunity, there is a need for collaborative action; as John Tizard put it during the most recent seminar, “we are all in this together, business, public, faith, third and community services”. Where previously different sectors have sometimes worked in opposition to each other, scrutinising other sector’s work and competing for resources, the imperative now is for co-operative action, utilising the expertise and specialisations of each other to make the most of the new approach to localism.

4. Managing the risks and realising the opportunities

The local discretion inherent to the new localism agenda will result in varying outcomes in different communities. One way of tying together such ‘chaotic’ policies is to build them around common principles that are city-wide and cross sector. However, defining these principles is not a straightforward task. They should not be overly prescriptive or based around too specific a set of operational arrangements. Rather, they should relate to general values which still allow for a degree of flexibility and local interpretation.

A major issue with the varying outcomes from the new policy agenda is the potential impact upon the level of equity and fairness within Sheffield. As the new forms of service provision are implemented and become established, different areas will experience increasingly different services and levels of service. Such outcomes have critically been labelled as ‘postcode lotteries’, a term which has become attached to the localism debate. Whilst the term captures a legitimate fear about the extent of
variation which the new localism policies will entail, the term itself is inaccurate. **Differing outcomes will reflect choices made by local people and as such will not be irrationally distributed.** As long as local people have a real voice in the changes, inequality of outcomes need not be a bad thing. The real danger is about a lack of representation for quiet voices of vulnerable groups in society. To counteract this, **a minimum, high quality, level of service must be guaranteed** – so that the variability across postcodes becomes a matter of how good services are, not how bad they are.

5. Putting local people at the centre

The involvement of local people in this agenda is essentially a matter of participation. The first question which should be asked is whether people actually want to be involved. The evidence suggests that **people will want to get involved so long as their participation is presented to them in a manner which they find attractive.** In terms of increasing participation, the task is made simpler by the fact that new policy agenda purports to focus on local and community issues and it is on this level that people can generally find the time and motivation to engage. Indeed, the most successful cases of new localism (or at least the closest to the theory of local knowledge in decision-making) will be those where a community identify a problem **and the solution with the public, VCF and business sectors providing aspects of this solution. For such actions to be effective, there must be a flexible and quick response from the service providers.**

A difficulty arises though when it is considered that the supply of local participation may not fit geographically with the demand for new service provision. Statutory sector provision and volunteers are generally highest in areas of least need. The solution to such a problem will need to see some departure from the theoretical ideal of the new localism agenda and could either see a **redistribution of volunteers and resources away from their immediate community, the development of a city-wide, cross sector strategy for active citizenship, and the variation of new localist policies across different areas.** Where there is a lack of 'supply', more traditional means of service provision may still need to exist.

In terms of the logistics of this engagement, **existing structures should be utilised where possible, even if they have to pursue non-traditional outcomes.** For example, the utilisation of Community Assemblies is preferable to investment in whole new structures. Whilst there is a lot to be said about the usage of new media in increasing engagement, such as internet or mobile phone based social networks, they should only be used where they can be effective. However, not all sectors of all communities have access to, or knowledge of, such media and it must be ensured that their usage is a factor towards increasing inclusion, rather than increasing exclusion. To engage with populations, bite-sized projects may provide straightforward clear opportunities for engagement that are accessible and short-term in nature.
6. Implications for Community Governance

For the changes in the new policy agenda to be effective, there is a need for a refreshment of the geography of governance in Sheffield. Active citizenship is likely to be very local, centred on issues which are only visible to citizens in a very specific area. Individuals coalesce more readily around a local neighbourhood or service rather than a political structure: community associations, "park user groups, Parent Teacher Associations, and 'keep our library open' campaigns are often strong and effective, whereas many Councils find that their local area-based structures struggle to attract large numbers of residents"ii. As such, there is a risk that the natural communities for certain issues cut across traditional ward or administrative areas, and, as such, these current structures could impede the effectiveness of new policies. Whilst the role and importance of current democratic representation should not be undermined, a simple and flexible structure of community co-ordinators needs to exist to utilise these naturally occurring (and often temporary) constituencies.

7. The changing role of the public sector (including the Council) in Sheffield

The changes associated with the new policy agenda will not occur simply by the existing actors standing aside and waiting. New localism will only occur if it is enabled and assisted by existing actors, especially the state. The Council has practical advantages as the engine of localism beyond its obvious democratic mandate. It has a locally capacity in terms of procurement capabilities, resources, convening power, and a whole area view. This broad remit of the Council, cutting across all public policy at local level, puts them in a unique position to think strategically and lead the collaboration and co-ordination between services which cannot be readily replicated by a patchwork of small organisations. As such, there is a balance to be sought after: on the one hand, the Council has an important role in setting out a vision and framework of how new localism will work - assisting, enabling, and encouraging groups which share common values; whilst on the other hand, it needs to refrain from over-designing these changes so that a significant input comes from local voices.

In further discussions of the role of the public sector, we should try and move away from the theoretical discussion and towards more practical issues of the public sector’s role in relation to distinct examples. However, before we can do this, there are still theoretical questions which need answering about the extent of the state’s role in facilitating the changes to the new policy agenda beyond its role as incumbent public service provider. The litmus test of the new policy agenda will be the state’s reaction to local decisions with which it disagrees. One way of pre-empting such occurrences is to ring-fence a minimum, high quality, level of service provision in critical areas. In this way, there will be fewer instances where the state feels the need to interfere with the new forms of service delivery.

Apart from this role as a safety-net, the state must also conceptualise of itself as an enabler and a support structure for the new service providers. Part of this role will be in effective communication of good ideas that already exist within the city so that they can be replicated. Examples of best practice providers and path finders will be
useful for those looking to participate in the changes. Moreover, to make the opportunities for new providers clear, the public sector needs to provide a clear statement on what opportunities exist and what the new commissioning policy will be.

There is an issue surrounding the conflict between collaborative and competitive behaviour inherent to new localism. On one hand, actors are being asked to work together to produce mutual outcomes – on the other, to compete against each other for competitive commissions. Whilst this may seem contradictory, it need not be problematic. Actors can adapt their actions to each circumstance and do not have to act in one mode at all times. Where the state can help this process is by making the opportunities and resources clear for all actors involved so actors do not waste their time competing for resources or opportunities which do not actually exist. It can be recommended that a straightforward one-stop-shop is established where everything can be clearly found and seen. This could involve sub-categories which are both sector specific and geography specific (bearing in mind that many organisations and opportunities will overlap).

8. The future role of the voluntary, community and faith sector in Sheffield

If support is needed for the VCF sector, it is to help the sector compete in a business environment so it is better placed to respond to the new opportunities. There is a belief that the VCF sector is less familiar with the risks involved in more competitive business environments. This may impede them when competing for commissions from the state. In this, links with successful local businesses may help. The state also has a role in supporting the VCF in its adaptation to this more competitive environment. Equally, links with the local universities, as centres of expertise and innovation will benefit the sector. The links with the universities in particular is a relationship that is often under-used and has much potential which needs developing.

There is a danger that the new policy agenda of localism sees the emergence of a ‘broad brush’ approach which excludes the existing small, selectively focused voluntary organisations in the city. Such groups often depend upon grants and may experience some difficulties with the switch to a commissioning culture. The state needs to ease this transition so that successful VCF enterprises in Sheffield are not lost with the transition, nor taken over en masse by (non-local) outside organisations.

Equally, the state has a role in acknowledging that sometimes things go wrong, as often happens in the private sector. The increasing commercialisation of service provision will carry with it the inherent consequence of the risk-taking, trial-and-error business environment. As such, it is important that a long term approach should be taken. The ‘chaotic’ nature of the new policy agenda means that actors will not get everything right first time around; there needs to be patience and persistence to find a balance where the new changes are effective.

Furthermore, the point might be made that the VCF sector do not particularly seem to need additional help. As the example of ZEST showed during the
seminar, the VCF sector is resourceful, capable, and innovative. If anything, it could be suggested that such successful organisations should have a larger role in the leadership of the changes. Part of the logic of the new localism agenda is about co-operative networks rather than traditional hierarchies. What better stage to implement such thinking than in the implementation of the policies themselves?

9. How can we better involve the business sector in this agenda?

As with the above sectors, business groups will only be involved in this process if they are aware of the opportunities which exist for their participation. A crucial role in this is effective communication about what is available and what is ring-fenced. For example, is there a ‘right to provide’? It is recommend that the local government set out the principles on which it will determine at what level different decisions will be made, and the principles which determine the grounds on which intervention in local services will be deemed necessary. Such questions should not be decided purely on a case-by-case basis; communities and businesses need clarity about which public services are available for new forms of delivery.

The enthusiasm for mutuals is an opportunity for collaboration with the state (see www.collabojam.net) and for local businesses to take on more of a social role. Whether this is through direct provision, the establishment of a new mutual, or through mentoring actors in the VCF sector – it has a positive effect on the role of business in the city. As such, there should be an embedded commitment to employee ownership – the prioritisation of local stakeholders rather than external shareholders. The effective communication of best practices and success of path-finders in this sphere will assist businesses looking to achieve high standards.

As aforementioned, there is a tension between collaboration and competition with the new policy agenda. As with the VCF sector, businesses will be expected to act in both ways at different times. To exemplify this, in feedback from the seminar, it was commented that other areas and groups need to replicate the good work that ZEST has achieved. Whilst this may be desirable from the position of the public sector looking for competent providers, it is presumably against the interests of ZEST to have their business model copied and competing with them for commissions. Any framework that can be laid out and communicated to addresses such apparent tensions will help businesses.

One method of linking small local businesses is to link them together through informal networks such as local business loyalty card schemes. Using new technologies they can carry reward points and be used for other local services like libraries and leisure centres - stitching together public, private, and third sectors within a common approach to local development. It may be that the state has to be the enabler in such schemes, or it may be that they are provided by innovative actors in the local area.

There needs to be a framework established to protect the sustainability of projects and provide an extent of local asset protection. The ‘locked-in’ local or mutual status of a competitor for public service commissions should be used as a criterion when judging who to award such commissions to. Otherwise, there is a threat that in
the long term, successful enterprises may be taken over by multi-national or other less local businesses.

10. Conclusions and Recommendations

The overall conclusion from this seminar series is that new localism provides an opportunity for positive change and that agencies need to work together to shape the Sheffield approach which is underpinned by local principles.

Core to these principles is that, a high quality, level of service must be guaranteed to all individuals and communities. Another principle is to accept that localism will vary in each and every community according to the varying needs and capacities in each area. Differing outcomes will reflect choices made by local people and as such will not be irrationally distributed.

Key recommendations are

1. The changes need to be approached as a long-term project, building sustainably on what already exists in Sheffield. The nature of the new policy agenda means that actors will not get everything right first time around.

2. Citizen engagement is a crucial ingredient for success. People will want to get involved so long as their participation is presented to them in a manner which they find attractive. To enable citizen participation, the development and implementation of a city-wide, cross-sector strategy for active citizenship is required with the willingness to consider a redistribution of volunteers and resources away from their immediate community.

3. A refreshment of the geography and process of community governance in Sheffield needs to occur, which is more responsive to communities formed to address certain issues which may cut across traditional ward or administrative areas.

4. The State needs to take an active role in enabling the change and empowering communities. The Council in particular has practical advantages as the engine of localism beyond its obvious democratic mandate. It has a capacity in terms of procurement capabilities, resources, convening power and a whole area view.

5. In developing the entrepreneurial skills of the VCF sector, links with successful local businesses may help. The public sector also has a role in supporting the VCF sector in its adaptation to this more competitive environment. Equally, links with the local universities, as centres of expertise and innovation, will benefit the sector.

6. The business sector needs to be involved as potential providers, but also as key players shaping the success of Sheffield. Consideration of local asset protection needs to be given through commissioning frameworks.
7. Such adaptation to these new roles will not come about overnight. It will be achieved as the result of sustained communication and increased collaboration between all of the different actors involved in this process. In such a way, the value of fora, such as this seminar series, are far from trivial in their impact. There is a high value in talking about these matters in an inclusive and open-minded forum, especially one which is not driven entirely at achieving narrow or end-specific outcomes. In this way, relevant actors can learn from each other and about each other and hopefully establish new links to strengthen the collaborative element which is essential for the success of this new policy agenda. In this light, there should be a reiteration of the thanks to all those who have given up their time to attend.

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APPENDIX

Useful links
On the third sector assembly: http://www.vas.org.uk/thirdsectorassembly

Useful resource for local collaboration: www.collabojam.net

The third report on the Localism Bill by the Select Committee for Communities and Local Government, chaired by the Rt. Hon. Clive Betts MP:
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcomloc/547/54702.htm

Rotherham ‘shop local’ loyalty card scheme:
http://www.rotherhamtowncentre.co.uk/shoppingandleisure/discountsandvouchers.asp

REFERENCES