

Devo Max: eight things we've learnt about a more radical approach to devolving power to communities

At the Local Government Association conference in July 2016, we invited local and national political leaders and others to two fringe events on the value of devolving power to communities.

At Local Trust we believe that supporting people to come together and improve their communities can build social capital, maximise resources and foster community cohesion. Our Big Local programme provides residents in 150 areas around England with at least £1m and 15 years to make a massive and lasting positive difference to their communities.

At our events, there was consensus that devolution from Whitehall shouldn't just stop at the town hall. But there was also an acknowledgement that devolving more power to communities is easier said than done. The insights in this document are a summary of the debate.

By sharing what we heard and learned at the conference, and drawing on examples from Big Local, we want to inspire more debate and encourage public services to take their first steps towards 'devo max'.

With grateful thanks to our panellists:

- Steve Reed MP, LGA vice president and former Leader of Lambeth Council
- Cllr Simon Blackburn, Leader of Blackpool Council
- Cllr Lester Hudson, Deputy Mayor at Newham Council
- Sue Miller, resident and Whitley Bay Big Local partnership member

1. You need to give more power to communities if you're going to respond successfully to current challenges

Cllr Blackburn told our fringe audience: 'Communities up and down the country feel threatened, feel unsure, feel confused.'

All our speakers agreed devolving power to communities isn't, in itself, a solution to shrinking budgets. But it is a way for Councils to build trust with their communities, so you can co-create, involving them in tough choices and public service reform, while providing a sense of purpose.

Steve Reed said: 'If we can give people a bigger say over the things that happen to them, we are looking at a radically different model of politics and decision making that starts to answer the questions austerity has posed.'

Cllr Hudson added: 'Sometimes you have to give up power to meet your objectives.'

2. By placing more trust in local people, you can turn cynicism into energy, and unleash creativity

Sue Miller from the Whitley Bay Big Local partnership in Tyne and Wear, says that her town was 'famous for our moaning' but things are changing: 'It does feel as if, in the face of massive austerity, there's beginning to be a sense of pride: it's our town and we can make it special.'

According to Cllr Blackburn, one Blackpool community where the population were 'deeply sceptical about the ability of government to have any influence over their living conditions' is now flourishing, having taken control over the things that matter most to them about where they live.

Big Local residents in [Blackpool Revue](#), described by Simon as 'part of a poor town that has got poorer' are working with businesses to improve the look of a main shopping area. 'If we as the local authority had gone to shopkeepers on this, they'd probably never have done anything at all. We are looking at a community that feels more involved in their future, more at ease with itself, and more in contact with each other,' said Simon.

3. Empowered communities are self-reliant, have better health and wellbeing, and understand their role in the social 'eco system'

[Early findings of long-term research by the National Institute for Health Research \(NIHR\)](#), shared by our fringe chair and Local Trust chief executive Debbie Ladds, showed that communities who are given the opportunity to create lasting change report growing confidence in people's ability to believe things can change. According to Debbie, the research shows empowered residents begin to work positively with services and other organisations, recognising they have a role to play.

Steve Reed said: 'Let's start to give people control of complex areas that really affect them in their lives. When it's tried it gives people a sense of wellbeing – that important sense of self-reliance that helps people feel able to aspire to something bigger and better.'

Sue Miller added: 'It's about being real with each other so that, eventually, we'll do something for the town together that we can tell our kids about and be proud of.'

4. Communities can become more cohesive and less likely to call on council and public resources

According to Steve Reed: 'Whatever level of resource we have available, giving people more control over how that resource is used results in greater efficiency, and better outcomes for citizens.' He and Cllr Hudson both mentioned employment programmes that are successful because they give participants control over the kinds of support they feel most benefits them.

Cllr Blackburn said: 'It's going to have positive outcomes for health and wellbeing, and social cohesion which means there's less call on council resources.'

5. Services can work better when users take control

We heard many examples of service users becoming involved in commissioning, procuring, designing and managing services – like the tenant management board at an estate in Brixton

who hold the housing repair staff to account and have the power to end contracts if they don't think services are up to scratch.

Other radical suggestions public service providers could consider include collective use of personalised budgets by users of adult social care services – where people can specify and commission services as a group rather than singly – and more community-led regeneration projects like the one Debbie Ladds outlined for our fringe audience. She explained how in Goldthorpe, near Barnsley, residents involved in Big Local are [buying and renovating dilapidated empty homes](#) to help provide affordable housing.

Meanwhile, Cllr Hudson shared the experience of introducing [nine 'community neighbourhoods' in Newham](#), where community engagement takes priority, has resulted in wider use of public spaces, reduced isolation and extended library opening hours.

6. It won't work if you hand over responsibility without resources

Under Whitehall's devolution activity to date, local authorities have sometimes complained of finding themselves responsible for more services, but without sufficient resources to provide them. Everyone at our fringe events agreed on the importance of not inflicting a similar situation onto our communities.

'If you give away responsibility without adequate resources, you're going to have resistance,' said Cllr Hudson, while Steve Reed added: 'If we're devolving services to communities we only do it on their terms. It isn't an abdication of responsibility.'

7. We need to find different and new ways to measure what happens when a community empowers itself

The gains from placing trust in local communities, and empowering them to take control, are real and important – but harder to quantify and measure using traditional tools. Cllr Blackburn said of Blackpool Revue: 'It's given people a real sense of purpose, a sense of area and a sense of community. That's something all the league tables in the world can't show you.'

Steve Reed adds: 'You get different areas doing things differently, and we can all learn from what works best.' In Big Local, [we use a range of methods to show the changes communities are bringing about](#). These range from deep-dives into areas to surveys of the wider community and, crucially, reviews the communities do for themselves.

8. See yourselves as facilitators of community action rather than service delivery organisations

Our learning from Big Local is to provide support where it's needed, while leaving people room to learn for themselves. Cllr Blackburn said: 'Local authorities are going from a provider of services to facilitating community action. There's no getting away from the fact that's difficult.'

For Sue Miller, the breakthrough came when the Council and Big Local residents began to behave like equal players in the same team: 'The Council don't want to rescue us or show us how to do it. We're building a sense of team instead.'

Clever collaboration: get inspired by these links to examples from Big Local...

From running the local library to establishing a car sharing scheme – here are five examples of residents in Big Local areas working with local public services, from **Scarborough** to **Shropshire**. Plus some top tips to get started on collaboration:

<http://localtrust.org.uk/news/blogs/how-can-residents-and-public-services-work-together>

WestRaven Big Local in **Peterborough** discovered that local people wanted a place for their community to eat together, meet each other, grow and be inspired. So community volunteers brought on board a housing association, a prison, a school, the council's youth team and a local environment charity. As a result, a new community space is opening in September:

<http://localtrust.org.uk/news/blogs/unexpected-partnerships>

A neglected woodland is being transformed into a visible, vibrant and safe community space after **Ealing Council** agreed to a proposal from residents in Hanwell Big Local to regenerate the land, transforming it into a conservation area:

<http://localtrust.org.uk/news/blogs/a-gift-of-land-and-money>

With support from **Wirral Council's** leisure services, a group of residents in Beechwood, Ballantyne & Bidston Village Big Local have purchased leisure passes at a discounted rate to offer free to local residents who undertake an NHS healthcheck – a simple way of promoting health and wellbeing:

<http://localtrust.org.uk/news/blogs/healthy-lifestyle-project>

You may also be interested in our web resource for Big Local communities on the value of building collaborative relationships with their local Council, including successful examples, from **Luton, Bolsover** and **Whitley Bay**:

<http://localtrust.org.uk/library/case-studies/councillors-and-big-local>

How are you engaging your communities, and empowering them to take more control over what matters most to them? What's working in your area when it comes to collaboration and devolving power?

We're interested in developing case studies, exchanging knowledge and speaking at events on this topic. If you're interested, call Rachel Taylor on 0203 588 0565 or email rachel.taylor@localtrust.org.uk