Connected Communities

Connecting Local Communities to the Nation

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Connecting Local Communities to the Nation: A Review of the Relationships between Local Communities and National Policy Systems

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Executive Summary

The framework outlined reflects the realities of service delivery for the purposes of research and to assist practitioners to reflect on their policy context. The evidence indicates that service delivery remains predominantly vertical, connecting the centre and the locality, while the recently much touted horizontal, ‘cross-cutting’ links across services remain underdeveloped. The framework hinges on the key point that local discretion must be understood as a function not only of the freedom enjoyed by those within a service delivery chain but also of their ability to influence national policies which determine how those chains work. The framework has three components:

(1) service delivery chains are characterised by tensions over how problems should be defined or understood, how specific policy frameworks should be and how (and why) providers are subject to multiple, and often competing, accountabilities. These chains are also associated with:

(2) mechanisms of representation which refer to the ways in which some stakeholders are recognised as ‘representative’ and formally integrated in the policy process, and others excluded, and by

(3) routes to influence which are available to those seeking to influence the policy settings and operation of the chain, or even resist change.
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A Review of the Relationship between Local Communities and National Policy Systems

Summary

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Setting the scene

Local communities exist within a wider set of social, economic and political relationships which extend beyond the locality to embrace the regional and national levels. The discretion of these communities depends crucially on policy decisions and frameworks determined at the national level and, to a lesser extent, the European level. The present Coalition government shares the previous Labour government’s concern with promoting localism and local communities despite differences in strategy. They both assumed that further public sector reform depends on harnessing local communities. Yet they have neglected the questions of how communities can voice their interests, be integrated into wider national policy systems and how they are, and should be, represented at the national level.
This scoping study addressed these questions by developing a framework for analysing the connections between communities and national or central government. The background to the study is the trend in governance forms towards a more diverse group of public, private and voluntary organisations acquiring major service delivery roles, with central and local government aspiring to take a strategic and commissioning approach to managing service delivery. In particular this governance trend means that there are now potentially many more channels or pathways linking national and local policy processes rather than just the traditional, institutionalised central-local government channels. This shift towards diversity in delivery organisations and central-local linkages is manifest in different ways and the study looked at three contrasting policy areas to capture these differences – economic development, child protection services and social and affordable housing (further details of the framework can be found in Laffin et al. 2011 and ILG website has details of the workshops).

The Coalition Government and its ambitions

The Coalition Government has brought ambitious policy aims to government which are reshaping central-local relations as ministers seek to abolish or re-engineer a wide range of service delivery chains. Their Big Society approach stresses the need to create new relationships between the individual and the state through, in David Cameron’s words, ‘a new focus on empowering individuals, families and communities to take control of their lives’. The assumption is that if government withdraws a service, and if that service is really necessary, local communities themselves will organise to provide it. The Government is seeking to limit itself to less prescriptive policy frameworks, compared with Labour. Similarly the localism agenda commits the Government to devolve power to local communities, promising to introduce ‘powerful new incentives for local people so they support development in the right places and receive direct rewards from the proceeds of growth to improve their local areas’ according to the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). Meanwhile public sector ‘delayering’ involves removing ‘unnecessary’, intermediate levels of government, particularly regional governance structures and the former government offices. Substantial cutbacks over the next three years mean that government will inevitably lose capacity. DCLG is losing a third of its administration budget and local government expenditure is being cut by a quarter. The voluntary sector will also lose around 8 per cent of its income from central and local government. These cuts raise questions over the viability of the localism and Big Society agenda.

Thinking about national-local connections

Recently governments, both in the UK and internationally, have stressed inter-service coordination, or ‘joining-up’, in service delivery and a large academic ‘governance’ literature has emerged focussed on these relationships. However, our literature search and workshops point to the continuing dominance of vertical, rather than horizontal relationships, in service delivery. Indeed, the governance shift is typically associated with central government policy initiatives to strengthen its control, often to evade local political control by moving service delivery into the private or voluntary sectors. Consequently, service delivery should be understood primarily as involving vertical
relationships in the form of service delivery chains, the formal mechanisms of accountability built into the chains and the routes of influence available for those seeking to change policy or even resist change.

(1) Service delivery chains (SDC) can be understood as linking problem definitions, policy frameworks and multiple accountabilities. **Problem definitions** refer to the question of how people at the various levels within the chain do, or do not share, similar views on the problems confronting them. The relations between central policymakers and local decision-makers typically exhibit tensions over how problems should be defined in service areas of any complexity. For example, in housing those in the north-east argued that housing policy largely reflected the realities not of their housing problems but of those found in south-east England. Similarly, many voluntary associations complain of the tension between how government policymakers see problems, and their ‘solutions’, in terms of governmental priorities rather than the values espoused by voluntary organisations themselves. **Policy frameworks** denote the formal rules and guidelines which constitute government policy in a specific area. In some services those frameworks are quite detailed and backed up by very specific monitoring requirements. For example, children’s protective services are characteristically governed by very detailed frameworks, reflecting the powerful imperative to minimise the risk of further child abuse scandals. In other services, the frameworks are looser and central government less concerned with monitoring. For example, the Coalition’s policy framework governing the Local Enterprise Partnerships allow considerable discretion for each LEP to adapt itself to local circumstances. **Multiple accountabilities** inevitably arise where decision-makers work in chains which involve conflicting policy guidance, major stakeholders and, particularly, elected levels of government. For instance, the local government chain of accountability – with officers accountable to elected members who are, in turn, accountable to the local electorate – has been weakened by a long tradition of strong, and detailed, central direction. The Coalition ambition is to reverse this trend and allow local units of government, at the sub-municipal as well as the municipal level, to act with greater initiative and defer less to the centre.

This delivery chain framework provides a basis for understanding the challenges facing central policymakers in the design and the management of service delivery structures. Territorial and organisational distance complicates these challenges by creating the potential for tensions over problem definitions, straining the perceived appropriateness of policy frameworks, and stretching and obscuring lines of accountability. The Coalition’s cutbacks and rapid policy shifts raise questions over the capacity of central departments to cope with these challenges. Already the search for territorial manageability has led DCLG to re-invent a fourteen ‘regional’ structure for the purposes of organising their own work in monitoring the implementation of their policy frameworks, although the Department has sought to present this development purely as an ‘internal’ structure largely to avoid demands for new MoRs and not to be seen to recant on the issue of intermediate governance levels.

(2) Mechanisms of representation (MoR) refer to the ways in which stakeholders are represented at different territorial and organisational levels within a SDC. Central
policymakers bear the weight of deciding who is, or is not, to be represented and how the MoR should be designed. These decisions can reflect a desire to involve 'representative' individuals both to add legitimacy to a policy as well as to provide a source of information about providers and consumers. These MoRs can take the form of quango board membership, regular and formal meetings between policymakers and stakeholder 'representatives' or associations, like the Local Government Association, which are given formal consultative recognition by central government. Who is or is not a 'stakeholder’ to be ‘represented’ is often contested. Under Labour the regional development agencies included a wide range of stakeholders (local government, voluntary sector, unions and others), while the Coalition government has taken a more restrictive view of representativeness in economic development with the new Local Economic Partnerships including mainly representatives of business. Meanwhile those involved in the service chain as providers or as service consumers typically organise themselves to advance and protect their own values and interests. Not least they typically seek formal recognition in a MoR by arguing that government should recognise their representative status. Another example from economic development is how many political and community leaders in north-east argued that the former regional structures provided MoRs through which that region could ensure that its interests were represented within government. Yet, in contrast, their equivalents in the south-east saw little value in the regional structures as MoR.

(3) Routes to Influence (RtL) are less formalised than MoRs. They refer to the routes whereby local interests are, and can be, communicated and through which pressure can be exerted on central policymakers. These routes are much more diverse than MoRs. One important change, under the Coalition, has been how the removal of the former regional structures, including the government offices, has led people to search for new routes of influence to compensate for the loss of MoRs. These routes are also more uncertain than established MoRs and require greater diplomatic skills if people are to use them effectively. In some policy areas, such as economic development and housing, local interests will seek to mobilise support from political parties and local MPs. In other, less politically contentious, policy fields the main stakeholders are typically the professionals and managers who deliver the services and specialised stakeholders rather than elected politicians. They may well be less closely connected to local interests and reflect the interests of their professional group or employing organisation in the private or voluntary sectors. A notable trend, over the last decade or so, has been the emergence of a wide range of alliances and umbrella associations which seek to represent service provider, voluntary and private sector organisations in a policy area.

Conclusions

The framework is intended to reflect the realities of service delivery for the purposes of research and to assist practitioners understand the context in which they operate. It hinges on the view that local discretion is not only a function of the freedom those within a service delivery chain enjoy but also their ability to influence the chains which provide them with both the resources and powers to take and implement decisions. The framework, then, has sought to capture the ways in which the providers and the
consumers within a chain are, or are not, formally integrated and then how they may seek to influence the chain and the wider policy process.

**Recommendations for future research**

(1) **Central-local relations.** The Coalition is radically changing central-local relations. There is a pressing need to monitor these changes and assess the extent to which the Coalition’s Big Society and localist ambitions are being achieved against the background of substantial service cutbacks. There is a range of possible foci:

(a) **Self-organising communities.** It is not clear how far local communities at the sub-municipal level are capable of self-organising themselves consistently across the country, especially when support functions such as neighbourhood management and community development were being removed (a point made in the Workshops) (we note that the literature is too dominated by exemplar cases of community activity rather than overall assessments of the potential for communities to organise themselves).

(b) **Limited voluntary sector capacity.** Similarly, the message from the voluntary and community sectors was that private sector organisations were winning the contracts because, at least in part, the former lacked the financial capacity to cover the risks of taking over large service contracts, again how can their involvement be underwritten by government or private collaborators?

(c) **Core government capacities.** Over recent years a key debate in practitioner and academic circles has been over the capacity of ‘core’ central departments to monitor and direct (when ‘necessary’) delivery chains – thus can a department, like DCLG, be redesigned to be more strategically effective yet with significantly fewer staff?

(2) **The function of intermediate levels of government.** The present government has already had to recreate an, admittedly very limited, ‘intermediate’ ‘regional’ structure, between central government and local authorities, through which to organise DCLG’s work. Even the much smaller devolved nations of Wales and Scotland have a ‘regional’ structure. Future research could assess the function and value of intermediate levels of government.

(3) **The increased significance of routes to influence.** The removal of intermediate institutional arrangements and the decline in number of mechanisms of representativeness means that the routes to influence are acquiring greater significance. How is this change shaping the way in which locally-based interests organise themselves at the national level and the extent of lobbying?

(4) **The participation of vulnerable groups,** such as cultural minorities and the disabled, and especially their representation/involvement in national policy systems and capacity to use routes to influence may be becoming more difficult. As presently formulated the localism agenda makes little allowance for groups who lack the skills and resources to take advantage of the new freedoms on offer, a key point arising from the workshops was that these freedoms are more likely to be taken up by people from
relatively well-privileged backgrounds rather than by those from less privileged backgrounds.

(5) **International comparisons and learning** must be part of any next steps in research. These developments are not unique to the UK, again discussions with European colleagues suggests that this framework could be developed comparatively.

**About the project**

The project involved a literature review and two practitioner workshops plus a few discussions with individual practitioners. The Institute of Local Governance Management Committee was used initially as an ‘advisory group’ to reflect on key issues and provide some early steers on the work and the design of the workshops. The literature review sought to summarise the insights from the academic and grey literatures. The north-east regional-level workshop explored the changing regional connections and the post-government offices regional architecture. The national-level workshop in London, held in conjunction with the Local Government Information Unit, focused on the national/English level experience, and examined the similarities and differences between the national and the regional levels.

The Institute for Local Governance (ILG) is a research and knowledge exchange collaboration in the north-east across the five universities, local authorities, police, forces, fire and rescue services, and other public sector partners. The importance of the ILG as a model for the co-production of knowledge has been recently recognised by a grant of £100,000 from the ESRC Venture Fund.
References and external links


Reports of the two workshops can be found at: http://www.ilg.org.uk/researchpublications/
**The Connected Communities**

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

> “to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

[www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx)