

# A more direct way of connecting places and Parliament is needed in order for service delivery to move into the 21st century

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*In this age of austerity, there are many complex issues that face our society. In tackling them, communities need to be given more control over their local public services and budgets. **Sir Merrick Cockell** advocates giving neighbourhoods greater decision making powers as a way of progressing into the future.*



Aside from dealing with the major issue of unprecedented budget cuts of 28 per cent, councils face a myriad of further challenges at present. From troubled families to elderly care to providing affordable housing, there are many issues to tackle.

Unfortunately, neighbourhoods and local people don't have much control over their local public services. Instead, we have a 19<sup>th</sup> century Whitehall model of accountability, based on government departments rather than places, that contributes towards the problems by stifling innovation. In fact, there have been no major changes to how departments account for their budgets since William Gladstone initiated reforms in 1866.

There are alternative, 21<sup>st</sup> century ways of reforming and improving our public services, some of which councils are already utilising. These can include new commissioning models, improved [procurement](#), shared services, greater personalisation and [community budgeting](#) at both the whole and neighbourhood levels.

Community budgeting involves councils, charities and other local service providers, such as the police, health and Job Centre Plus, forming a group and sharing their funding and resources to tackle specific issues. Importantly community budgeting is about driving decision making and control down to the lowest practical level and putting local communities in the driving seat.

Community budget pilots have resulted in a turnaround in the fortunes of many troubled families, with millions of pounds saved in the process. For example, Blackburn with Darwen Council, expects to save up to £7 million.

Another area of policy in which community budgets could thrive is bringing young people into employment. ACEVO, a voluntary sector organisation, recently launched a report advocating youth employment partnerships that are locally driven, and again, these have all the hallmarks of a community budget.

In local government we are leading this agenda, with a number of county and district councils pooling budgets. In Kensington and Chelsea, we have gone further and shared resources with two other neighbouring councils -Westminster and Hammersmith & Fulham. Now councils are looking for Whitehall, which has borne less of the burden of the spending cuts, to follow the lead of councils.

Whilst some departments are making good progress, others are lagging behind and need to take much greater steps towards localism. Greg Clark's expected report on how successful each department has been at decentralisation will provide an important contribution towards this debate.

The current system of only having Whitehall departments and not places accountable to Parliament appears to make little sense and it is questionable whether this 19<sup>th</sup> Century approach can effectively operate in the modern day. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century approach to delivering services – based on outcomes and users – arguably needs structures which can compliment this ambitious approach of councils.

A more direct relationship between places and Parliament is required to achieve this. We need to encourage a cultural change across all parts of government, with people being prepared to let go of control, passing down powers to councils and local people.

The neighbourhood budget pilots present an even greater opportunity to develop this cause and give communities greater decision making powers. Whilst in their infancy, these have the potential to bring local people together and let them make decisions regarding the services they actually use.

However, while community budgets can play a central role, they can't necessarily be applied to everything – for instance some of our climate change responsibilities. But they are proven to work and should be looked at as a model for service delivery where appropriate.

The joint pilot work between central and local government on helping troubled families has proved a success and can be a blueprint for public services in the future. Departments right across Whitehall now need to show the same ambition as councils and move into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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### ***About the author***

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