**Local by default**

by [Contrafed Publishing](https://localgovernmentmag.co.nz/author/edie-asher/)July 9, 2019

Share[0](https://localgovernmentmag.co.nz/local-by-default/)



**Local governance in Wiltshire, UK**

**Anyone wanting to see how the localism model could play out in New Zealand would do well to look at Wiltshire in the UK. For the past 10 years, much of the decision-making in the county has been devolved to 18 community area boards carrying real powers. Steve Milton, writing from the UK, was part of the process.**

Wiltshire is a rural county in the South West of England about 160 kilometres south of London. It is characterised by rural market towns and villages sparsely scattered across a large and rich agricultural landscape. In contrast, Wiltshire is also home to about a third of the country’s military personnel with large garrison towns ringing the military training areas on Salisbury Plain.
Prior to 2009, Wiltshire, like most rural counties in England, had a three-tier system of local government – a county council, four district councils and around 300 local (parish and town) councils.
In 2006, the Blair government embarked on a new programme of local government reorganisation; rationalising the two-tier system by combining district and county councils into single, all purpose, unitary councils. Wiltshire County and the four district councils became a unitary authority in 2009 (the 300 local councils were unaffected). This is the point at which this story starts.
As part of the unitary process, the government sought assurances from the sponsoring councils that the new Wiltshire council would not be remote and unaccountable. It wanted to see how local people could be plugged into [local democracy](https://localgovernmentmag.co.nz/localism/).
In response, the council embarked on a radical plan of devolution based on the principle of subsidiarity – determining the locus of each of its functions and allowing those people most impacted to decide (or at least influence) the priorities and outcomes to be pursued.
To facilitate this, the council agreed to establish 18 community area boards. The boards are constituted under the UK *Local Government Act 2000* (Part II, Section 18) which allows councils to set up area committees with both executive and non-executive functions. They bring together the elected members for the area with co-opted community representatives.
Importantly, local parish and town councils also have a seat along with representatives from partner organisations (such as the Police and National Health Service providers) and other local stakeholders. Membership is determined locally by each board within a framework set by the council.
The boards in Wiltshire have endured for a decade and they work because they have real teeth. Similar experiments in the UK failed because the devolved governance structures were devoid of real local influence – often little more than ‘talking shops’.

**BOUNDARY SPANNERS**

In Wiltshire, members of citizen assemblies agree priorities by consensus.

Wiltshire’s area boards have powers that are enshrined in the council’s constitution. The community area board is the default body for all local decisions. They can take any decision provided it does not adversely impact another area, the decision is within budget and it does not contradict a policy or standard adopted by the council. Apart from that, anything goes.
The boards can consider any issue regardless of where the statutory responsibility lies. They champion local communities and challenge both the council and other civic institutions. Increasingly, local people are recognising that the community area board is the place where the decisions that affect them are made.
The area boards form the framework for community engagement, local partnerships and service delivery. They are the hub of wider community networks and they have established local structures to facilitate specific functions such as health, well-being, young people, transport, the economy and environment.
They use their democratic influence to bring key stakeholders together – solving local problems, sharing resources, aligning services and agreeing local priorities for action.
This stuff does not happen by chance: it is a facilitated governance model. Each area board has a dedicated officer (the community engagement manager) whose role is to establish networks, drive community engagement, provide effective communications, and facilitate the delivery of community priorities.
These officers are critical to the success of locality working. They are true ‘boundary spanners’ working across traditional organisation boundaries. They coordinate community area teams – officers drawn from the statutory, voluntary and commercial sectors where functions, policies and activity can be aligned around the priorities set by local people.
Wiltshire Council describes all this as ‘community governance,’ a concept that grew out of the academic work of political scientist Professor Rod Rhodes that was influential during the early years of the new century.
Rhodes had argued that the state was atomising and that power in society was becoming diffused through complex governance networks. He coined the phrase ‘the hollowed-out state’ and looked at how civic governance operates in this new world.
In the UK, the effects of austerity and the contraction of state institutions tend to support Rhodes’ view. The state has certainly receded over the past decade and vacated whole areas of civil society – more and more civic powers have been outsourced to voluntary, economic and quasi-governmental agencies and partnerships.
As our understanding of ‘civic society’ has shifted, so has our concept of governance. To be effective, local government now needs to deploy more nuanced governance skills. Rhodes describes this new role as ‘metagovernance’ (political philosophy trades in such neologisms). At its simplest, metagovernance is the way in which civic institutions use their collaborative and democratic influence to coordinate, facilitate, influence and control outcomes within complex networks.
Wiltshire embraces this concept, recognising that to effect change, it must enable civil society networks and communities to be co-producers.

**NUTS AND BOLTS**

So, after that rather heady philosophical turn, let’s return to the nuts and bolts. What does this mean for everyday civic practitioners?
I have talked about the importance of creating opportunities for democratic participation and co-production. In Wiltshire, this is provided by community area boards located at the heart of facilitated civic networks. Local people attend these meetings, raise their issues and participate in the debates – they can vote on many matters.
However, we all know local authority meetings will never compete with a night in watching *Game of Thrones*. So, much of council’s engagement work is digital. Each community area board has linked Facebook and Twitter accounts and an open community blog. Collectively, these platforms generate huge volumes of traffic across the county (over 10 million interactions in a typical year). Around 15 percent of the adult population is signed up and views, and opinions are regularly canvassed and exchanged across these channels.

**GYPSIES AND MEMORY WALKS**

Despite all we do, some voices are still conspicuous by their absence and it is just not good enough to ignore this inconvenient truth. So, we created a participatory documentary-making process called ‘Missing Voices’ to engage 13 of the most marginalised groups in the county.
It was important to shape each project around the needs of the groups we worked with. For example, we organised barbeques for the gypsy community and memory walks for those with dementia. This was made easier by identifying a project champion who could help canvass views on the type of engagement activities that would be most effective.
Through informal activity-based sessions, trust was established, dialogues initiated and concerns very clearly articulated. This information was used to inform filmed interviews with project participants.
The films enabled the team to:

* develop a clear understanding of the needs of each group;
* open up new ways of sustaining participation and dialogue over the long term;
* identify gaps in service provision and promote responses;
* promote local community-led projects, initiatives and campaigns; and
* Use the films to challenge common prejudices and build empathy.

Wiltshire works hard to facilitate community governance, which takes a lot of commitment, effort and resource to sustain. The council invests around £2.5 million [about NZ$4.79 million] each year in its community engagement activities (out of a total budget of just under £1 billion [about NZ$1.92 billion]). It also leverages its strategic influence through partnerships.

**OUR COMMUNITY MATTERS**

This has produced one of the most compelling features of the new system – the Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA). That is such a dreadful, jargon-laden, phrase that the council came up with a more suitable name for the process: ‘Our Community Matters.’
Our Community Matters is an umbrella brand for a range of engagement activities but, at its heart, it is an innovative participative policy initiative that enables communities to set the agenda at both community and strategic level. Every three years, the council and its strategic partners produce a comprehensive analysis of needs in the county.
This is published as the JSNA. There is some degree of comparability with SOLGM’s Well-being Indicator Framework in that the purpose of the JSNA is to provide a profile of health and well-being needs.
The JSNA is broken down thematically and has comparisons across Wiltshire’s 18 community areas. It also shows changes over time. For ease of access, the data is presented as infographics and charts, but the full analysis is also available for those with time on their hands.
This data is published, and a series of citizen assemblies are held to enable local people to consider the issues and to set local priorities. The assemblies are limited to 100 participants in each of the 18 community areas and the audience is carefully selected to provide a good cross section of the population.
At each event, people at 10 themed tables discuss the data, identify and then agree priorities by consensus. Each table reports back to the plenary and all participants vote on the recommendations. At the end of the session, each assembly has identified 30 priorities for action. The theme groups then reconvene in the second part of the event to identify local community-led actions that may help address the priorities.
This part of the process is facilitated by the use of ‘ideas cards’ – literally, cards identifying community-led initiatives that have worked in other communities in addition to new ideas generated by participants at the event. These ideas are collected and curated by the council’s community team in an online repository called the Wiltshire Project Bank.
The groups select those ideas they feel will work in their own area. By the end of the evening, priorities and actions have been agreed and the community area board is then charged with facilitating delivery of the desired outcomes. The boards use their own resources, grants, campaigns, partnerships and social media to help stimulate community-led action.
Progress is reviewed every quarter and reports are sent back to the Wiltshire Health and Wellbeing Board.
The Our Community Matters assemblies are not just about local priorities, they also influence strategic policy. After the local priorities and actions have been agreed this data is analysed and, while there are always differences in each community, there are also some trends and issues that are common across the county. The council and its strategic partners use this to reframe policy and priorities at a macro level.
Interestingly, the outcomes often validate existing plans, with consensus around the big themes, such as loneliness, social isolation, dementia and mental health.

**SOCIAL CAPITAL**

And at this point we reconnect with governance. Civic institutions in the UK now rely on social capital (the time, assets and resources held by communities) to deliver interventions. This may be through voluntary activity – local lunch clubs, dementia cafes and men’s sheds, for example – or, through specifically targeted interventions.
The community area boards support local activity through grants, funding and commissioning. In 2018, every £1 spent on interventions by the boards levered £6 of total community investment. So, from a purely economic standpoint, devolution and community governance make good business sense.
But, it’s about much more than simply mitigating the impact of austerity. It’s about local communities being co-producers of their own well-being, taking the lead and being at the heart of service delivery.
So, what has Wiltshire learnt from 10 years of devolved community governance? I think it’s learnt a lot. The council tried and tested many things, some worked well, some failed completely. But, for me, the main ingredients are pretty simple:

* We need to recognise that power exists outside of our hallowed civic chambers and is diffused through layered and overlapping community networks.
* We must be prepared to let go of the reins and trust the communities we serve.
* We make better decisions when those most affected have direct influence over the outcome.
* We need to ensure that governance is accessible, with devolved structures designed around the needs of participants.
* Devolution must be part of the organisation DNA; we must realign our corporate structures to support a ‘community first’ approach.
* We need to recognise that community governance is a facilitated approach and invest appropriate resources
to make it work.
* We need to be inclusive and work hard to listen to the missing voices.
* We need to demonstrate our commitment with our actions and resources.
* We have to understand that social capital is a gift and value those in our communities who give their time and resources freely.
* We must embrace technology to broaden democratic participation.
* We need to call for change and champion the power
of devolved community governance.

And, if we learn these simple lessons, we can expect to see very positive outcomes:

* Better visibility, representation and accountability of civic institutions and elected politicians.
* New, more appropriate attitudes and behaviours
in front-line and backroom staff.
* Engaged and actively involved local communities,
co-producing locally-led interventions.
* An ability to bring people together to solve complex local problems by consensus.
* Achieving better results and a more appropriate allocation of resources by responding more effectively to the different needs of each area.
* Increased investment in priorities through leverage of social capital.
* Safer, healthier and more environmentally sustainable communities.
* More cohesive, inclusive, empathetic and resilient places.

That’s a pretty decent outcome, don’t you think?

* Steve Milton is based in the UK where he has worked in local government for over 30 years. He was responsible for the design and delivery of Wiltshire Council’s approach to devolution and spent 10 years transforming the way the council works. In New Zealand, he is an associate of the [Local Government Think Tank](https://www.lgthinktank.org.nz/). spm1708@gmail.com

This article was first published in the July 2019 issue of *NZ Local Government Magazine*.