Localism:
Literacy and the importance of localised approaches
A policy discussion paper

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About the National Literacy Forum

The National Literacy Forum is attended by representatives from Government, business, local authorities and the voluntary and community sector and meets twice each year to discuss policy themes pertinent to addressing low literacy.

The forum's aims are to:
- Inform the development of national policy around literacy – following each meeting the National Literacy Trust writes, publishes and disseminates a short policy paper. These papers are intended to influence policy makers in the lead up to the 2015 General Election, prompting them to consider the role of literacy in addressing child poverty and social exclusion.
- Update forum members on the National Literacy Trust's work in local areas and identify where and how members' programmes and interventions can be linked into this activity.
- Support members by providing a space to discuss national policy, build consensus, reflect on service development and support collaborative working.

If you represent an organisation with national reach, a commitment to literacy and would be interested in joining the forum, please contact Joe Morrisroe at joe.morrisroe@literacytrust.org.uk.

About the National Literacy Trust

We are a national charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK. We work to improve reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in the UK's most disadvantaged communities where up to 40 per cent of people have literacy problems. Our research and analysis drive our interventions. Because low literacy is intergenerational, we focus our work on families, young people and children.
- We establish literacy projects in the poorest communities
- We campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians and parents
- We support schools

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Introduction and Context

In times of economic instability, low literacy makes individuals and communities more vulnerable to inequality, increases the risk of social exclusion and undermines social mobility. In the current national context of austerity, cuts to government funding has also meant that services traditionally provided by local authorities that may remove barriers to social immobility and increase educational attainment have become unsustainable. Within this context, the second meeting of the National Literacy Forum focused on localism (the local ownership of services) and how this might relate to literacy policy.

Localism has become increasingly relevant for local government seeking to mitigate the negative impact of funding cuts and employ alternative solutions to service provision. Integrated services, for example, seek to address multidimensional needs of local populations in a more efficient manner. For charities, localism raises the question of how agencies in the third sector can best operate, both in the service they provide to communities and the relationships they hold with other sectors. Specifically, localism has raised the question of whether community mobilisation rather than service provision can be a more effective strategy for fulfilling objectives. At a political level localism has been reflected upon positively by all parties. However, there is little coherent national policy that exists. The forum discussed the significance of localism within this context, providing a number of key discussion points.

Why is localism important?

While the Localism Act introduced by the coalition government in 2011 has faced political contention, the basic concept of transferring power from national government to local governments, communities and individuals has been well received across the political spectrum. This acceptance has stemmed from the notion that local people recognise the problems in their communities and understand the solutions for solving them. Despite this, devolvement of power to local government and a willingness to increase public participation has not automatically translated into citizen empowerment. The long-term decline in turnout at local elections has been interpreted by some as evidence of diminishing trust in public agencies and institutions, and critics argue that local administrations do not always understand the needs of their electorate. Furthermore, the mandates of local politicians who hold key decision-making power have been questioned; in 2012 local councillors were elected with an average turnout of less than one third of the voting population, and won an even smaller proportion of the vote.[1] Part of the challenge in empowering communities through devolution of power is that communities are hard to define and often do not have clear figureheads.

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[1] The Guardian Online, (Dec, 2013). *UK Election historic turnouts since 1918.* Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/nov/16/uk-election-turnouts-historic

Inclusion of local communities in decision making processes are conceivably one way to ensure the needs of locals are addressed. Participatory budgets, individual budgets and deliberative forums are all examples of mechanisms that can be used to encourage participation and devolve power to the public. Some evaluations of these mechanisms have concluded that involving people in decision-making improved public services, albeit in different ways, at different levels and to varying degrees.[2] However, these mechanisms do present challenges of accountability between communities, local and national government. Firstly, participatory budgeting can result in disproportionate attention to preferred services over other important responsibilities; for example, environmental and children's services may be more popular in participatory budgeting than adult services. Secondly, local interests may not be conducive to the interests of national government and visa versa; growth in the national economy, for example, does not equate to growth in a local economy, nor does it guarantee that the type of growth taking place complements the needs of communities.

Despite these challenges, the importance of localism stems from the potential it offers to support local government in providing services and creating positive change in society. It is widely argued that public participation can build social capital by bringing people together for a collective purpose and building networks, trust and values between them.[3] Furthermore, one reaction to a retracting remit of local authorities is the mobilisation of communities in reconstituting these resources or guiding the efficacy of service provision through participatory processes.

i. Recognising the relativity of local needs

The question of what service ownership means to communities is highly significant. The paradox remains that in the case of education those who 'need' to learn do not enrol in educational courses. A critical perspective of the interface between service providers and communities raises the question of whether agencies infantise individuals by prescribing them with needs and services without consultation. One response to this question is not whether individuals need improved literacy skills, but how literacy can be located as relevant to these individuals' lives. Being able to demonstrate the relevance of literacy is crucial to the uptake of literacy improvement strategies in communities.

Recognising that local communities face differing contexts, situations, history and attitudes is important because this in turn affects local perceptions of

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[2] McLean, S. and Andersson, E. (2009) *Activating empowerment: Empowering Britain from the bottom up.* Available at: http://www.involve.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Activating-Empowerment.pdf

[3] Davies, A. and Simon, J. (2012) *The value and role of citizen engagement in social innovation.* A deliverable of the project: "The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe" (TEPSIE), European Commission – 7th Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research http://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/value-and-role-of-citizen-engagement.pdf

needs and the relevance of literacy to individuals' lives. Therefore, the uptake of literacy strategies may be improved by measuring what individuals want to learn and evaluating the uptake of support offered and received. Measuring whether strategies have been adopted by the people they were created for is a key measure of success. Utilising local knowledge is a powerful tool for delivering effective services.

Recognising the local relativity of needs and attitudes is crucial to creating relevant services and improving uptake of literacy improvement strategies.

ii. Joining up services and creating integrated responses

An important way in which service providers may be able to mitigate funding cuts and improve outcomes is to create integrated responses to needs. Literacy skills are the foundation stone for success in educational attainment, employability, community participation, individual confidence and well-being.[4] However, literacy is not the whole story. Multiple barriers exist to improving literacy skills in the same way that low literacy is a barrier to social mobility and individual wellbeing. There is a strong argument for more collaboration between service providers so that approaches are relevant, effective and efficient. It is important to share intelligence and embrace alternative perspectives to create a joined-up message, rather than one message for education and another for health services. The National Literacy Forum believes that collaboration between different services is fundamental to tackling these multidimensional issues.

Common barriers can be addressed through integrated approaches and intelligence sharing.

iii. Mobilising communities as well as providing services

It is important to recognise that communities are proud, creative and resilient. Communities are a wealth of intellectual, financial and personal resources that can be mobilised in effective ways. Some organisations are moving from conventional charity frameworks of service provision and are inspiring individuals to act independently in the charity's interest at 'arms-length control'. The current context of retracting local authorities presents opportunities for local government and charities to work in a new way to maximise the resources of communities.

However, mobilising individuals to act for a collective good requires strong social capital, which is often lacking in areas of deprivation. There is concern that energy needed to support these communities cannot be created internally; investment into communities with low social capital is required. A second important issue is that of accountability; there is a challenge in the underlying quality of community services. Community libraries, for example,

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[4] See, *Literacy Changes Lives,* National Literacy Trust, 2008
http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0401/Literacy_changes_lives_2008.pdf

are a healthy response to cuts, however they have limits as a professional service. With this in mind, local governments face a serious challenge. Middlesbrough Council, for example, faces budget cuts of £70 million over three to four years, making the council's current model of service provision unsustainable. Problematically, cuts to services disproportionately effect areas and communities with the greatest needs, and many such areas have a higher proportion of public sector employees. A strategy that relies on communities to support services is presented with risks.

The outcome of cuts that make important services unsustainable will be felt worse by communities with low social capital.

Conclusion

The community ownership of services is important because matching the needs of communities with relevant services is essential to successfully engage individuals with literacy improvement strategies. Partnerships between sectors, and integrated services, both offer potential because barriers to improving literacy skills are multifaceted and intergenerational. In addition, integrated services may prove both efficient in mitigating the negative impact of cuts and powerful through efficient use of intelligence sharing. Finally, localised community services may provide a response to service cuts, however an upsurge of community resources is not inevitable. In fact, the disappearance of services in the most deprived communities impacts those who are most in need and who are often least able to take ownership of them and self-generate additional capacity.

The National Literacy Trust proposes that national policy relating to local services should consider the following recommendations:

- **Recognising the local relativity of needs and attitudes is crucial to creating relevant services and improving uptake of literacy improvement strategies.**
- **Common barriers can be addressed through integrated approaches and intelligence sharing.**
- **The outcome of cuts that make important services unsustainable will be felt worse by communities with low social capital.**

The financial climate means that, as never before, policymakers need to think with greater dexterity about how to face the ongoing social challenge of deprivation and low social mobility. We hope that this paper has given a new perspective on both literacy and localism and consolidated key ideas rising from the forum.

We are keen to meet with individuals or organisations working in policy to discuss this paper and welcome comments or feedback.

Finally we would like to acknowledge the input of the members of the National Literacy Forum whose discussions informed the writing of this paper.

Members include:

- Arts Council England
- Barnardo's
- Beanstalk (formerly Volunteer Reading Help)
- Booktrust
- Booker Prize Foundation
- Campaign for Learning
- Capacity
- Centre for Literacy in Primary Education
- Cllr Alex Bigham
- Community Foundations Network
- Department for Education
- Education Endowment Foundation
- Esmee Fairbairn Foundation
- I CAN
- Middlesbrough Council
- National Literacy Trust
- NIACE
- Pearson
- Pre-school Learning Alliance
- Save the Children
- Shared Intelligence
- Springboard for Children
- Teach First
- The Prince's Trust
- The Reading Agency
- UK Literacy Association
- 4 Children

4. Forthcoming paper:

In preparation for the forthcoming general election and in response to the recent spending review, the National Literacy Trust is examining future literacy policy in the United Kingdom. This is the second paper to be published during the period of 2013-14 reviewing the literacy issues that policy should address and making recommendations for change. The next policy paper will address the role of business in local areas and literacy improvement.