'Enabling' – the future of local public services in the 'big society'?

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Suffolk County Council's recent decision to outsource almost all of its services to social enterprises or private companies has intensified the debate about the future of local public services. The council's intention to stop providing services directly and to commission other organisations to provide them will, it is hoped, save the council significant amounts of money. It will also transform its role in the local community turning it into what it describes as an 'enabling authority', encouraging local citizens to do more for themselves in addition to involving voluntary and private organisations in service delivery.

The idea of the 'enabling authority' was popularised by the Conservative politician Nicholas Ridley. In the 1980s he proposed a vision of local government where councillors met only once a year to allocate contracts to external providers who would deliver services cheaply and efficiently. Citizens' interests whether as customers of services or as tax-payers would be satisfied through the workings of the market.

However this is not the only version of 'enabling authority'. Alternatives highlight local government's role as a democratic political institution concerned with seeking out and mediating the views of diverse local interests, including those with little voice or power, and acting in pursuit of community well being. Citizens are first and foremost defined as members of multiple communities with collective as well as individual attachments that need to be negotiated through the workings of the democratic process.

These alternative versions are more than simply variations on a theme. They are based on different conceptions of what local government and local public services are for and they also work with different interpretations of what it is to be a citizen. While 'choice' defines contemporary versions of Ridley's model, 'care' is the watchword of alternative approaches. Both approaches support citizen power and voluntary action but they do so in different ways.

As the public sector spending cuts take effect more local authorities will be contemplating the merits of 'enabling'. The University of Birmingham's first Policy Commission on the future of local public services in a 'big society' will be examining these issues too. Over the next nine months experts from the public, private and third sectors will work together with Birmingham academics and colleagues at Demos to consider the evidence of enabling in practice and to identify innovative but practical alternatives.

The findings of the Policy Commission will be published widely and will inform future research, teaching and knowledge exchange activities within the University.

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Read the Birmingham debate on the Big Society at **www.birmingham.ac.uk (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/)**

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