



Progressive Thinking: Ten Possible Futures for Public & Community Services

Local Government and Well-being in a Post-Covid 19 World

Peter McKinlay

Globally an enormous amount of high-quality thinking and evidence-based research is going into how societies should approach a post-Covid-19 recovery strategy.

Much of this thinking and research is coalescing around a view this means reformulating democracy around empowered communities. It means devolving centralised powers to local areas, establishing local systems of decision-making based on genuine engagement and deliberation and requiring elected representatives at national and local level to take far more account of their constituents' views when deciding policy and legislation between elections.¹

It's an approach supported by reflecting on what contributes to community well-being. The Carnegie UK Trust, which has worked on the development of well-being policy and practice in a number of different national jurisdictions and co-published research with the OECD, adopts as its four well-being domains environmental, social, economic and democratic outcomes. There is a very specific reason for the latter. From its experience in working in a number of jurisdictions, including Northern Ireland, it has concluded voice, choice, control and a sense of belonging to place are integral elements of community well-being. Unsurprisingly the trust is among a very significant number of think tanks and others now arguing that building resilient communities should be at the heart of well-being.

Increasingly this is seen as part of the core business of local government. This flows logically from the reality local government is closer to its communities than other parts of the public sector. Like them or hate them, regard them as effective or incompetent, councils have the unique advantage of being the principal expression of local democracy, an advantage which will be critical for managing Covid-19 recovery strategies.

This does not reflect how successive central governments and the officials who advise them have typically regarded local government. Go back over the legislative changes and significant policy statements from central government in recent decades and there is an increasing although fluctuating emphasis on regarding local government as primarily a grouping of local infrastructure companies with a few 'nice to haves' and some local regulation as add-ons. It's fair to say that a number of people in local government act as though they share this view. One reason for this is, unlike local government in any other developed country jurisdiction, New Zealand local government has virtually no responsibility for the delivery of major social services.

That's a history which flows over into thinking about well-being and who might have responsibility for its promotion. The dominant public sector influence on well-being status is generally considered

¹ much of this paragraph is taken from a recent blog by Adam Lent director of the highly regarded think tank the New Local Government Network and accessible at: <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/2020/defenders-of-democracy-need-to-wake-up-urgently-to-the-threat-posed-by-another-crisis/>



to be through services such as health, education, social housing, justice, welfare... But there is another dimension, the role of place. The UK government in 2012 transferred responsibility for public health from the NHS family to principal local authorities on the rationale the principal determinants of public health are place based. One amongst a number of positive results has been much greater coordination between health need and access to local government provided recreational facilities.

Government has made it clear that as part of the post-Covid-19 recovery strategy there will be substantial realignment of major responsibilities between central and local government. This is expected to include rationalisation of water and wastewater services into one or a few standalone entities and is already seeing changes in the provision and funding of infrastructure, and to the Resource Management Act. Other possible changes include the establishment of a single building consent authority, removing the consent role from local government. All these changes reflect a concern a disaggregated local government sector has meant too much uncertainty and variation in areas where consistency and certainty are critical.

What about the local government perspective? Initially at least very real concern the sector is losing or likely to lose some of its most substantial functions. But go back to the beginning; post-Covid-19 recovery includes reformulating democracy around empowered communities. Reflect on the direction of public sector reforms with the emphasis on greater collaboration at a regional level in order to improve well-being. Consider this inevitably means designing and delivering services to respond to need at a community level and ideally reflecting community preferences (for intelligent policy-making and service design, there is no such thing as regional well-being but rather variations in well-being within a region).

Community level begs the question of how to find New Zealand's communities. The term 'community' carries with it an enormous number of different meanings depending on context and user. In the context of needing to work at a community level for service design and delivery, the primary emphasis is on place-based communities; geographical entities whose inhabitants share a common sense of belonging. A complication for public sectors which like efficient structures is evidence suggests the typical place-based community in the sense of the primary area with which people identify is in the order of 5000-7000-9000 people even in large metropolitan centres.

This is where local government comes into its own. Councils' principal contribution to post-Covid 19 recovery should be enabling and supporting resilient communities able to come together to help develop their own solutions and support each other. Logistically this probably means the emergence of a new form of regional governance as developing the requisite resource capability to support communities is a matter of scale. It means councils as the advocates for and representatives of their communities in the development of well-being policy and practice.

There is a wealth of examples of how councils are working with their communities. They include Portland Oregon's support for resilient residents' associations, community wealth building now being adopted by a number of UK and European cities (see Preston City Council), the Mayor of London's civic crowdfunding initiative, participatory budgeting, community or neighbourhood planning, social procurement, anchor institutions... The list goes on.





The clear message, despite New Zealand's historical preference for top-down centralised policy-making, is local government has a unique role which will be essential for managing the recovery from Covid-19. It's time to take seriously the exhortation we are all in this together and promoting community well-being is the responsibility of both central and local government, not central government bypassing local government in the belief acting on its own it can find and work with New Zealand's many and diverse communities.

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