



# Devolution and Divergence

Comparing English and Welsh approaches to  
citizen-centred public service delivery

**Anthony Brand**

New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to modernise public services, develop local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this White Paper as part of its innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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Prepared by NLGN  
First floor, New City Court, 20 St. Thomas Street, London SE1 9RS  
Tel 020 7357 0051 . Email [info@nlgn.org.uk](mailto:info@nlgn.org.uk) . [www.nlgn.org.uk](http://www.nlgn.org.uk)

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### Comparing English and Welsh approaches to citizen-centred public service delivery

#### Introduction

Six years of devolution have provided public institutions in the UK with an opportunity to re-evaluate their goals and develop new models for delivering public services. It is interesting to take stock now and see how local government in particular has developed and adapted to the new structures. This is particularly relevant in light of the publication of *Strong and Prosperous Communities* and the up-coming Lyons review. A step-change in local authority powers is expected soon. Localism appears to have been embraced by all the major parties and in the coming months local government may have the opportunity to fundamentally reshape its future. This paper asks what we can learn from the approaches of devolved nations that could help guide this process.

In 1999, the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly were established. This provided devolved nations with an opportunity to develop new priorities, structures and delivery mechanisms for public services. There were initial fears that devolution would reverse the progress made on the localism agenda, leading to a recentralisation of powers with the new assemblies.<sup>a</sup> This has not proved to be the case. Councils in Wales and Scotland have “*built on their advocacy of devolution*

*before 1997 to realise a closer partnership with devolved government.*”<sup>b</sup> Advocates believe a shared vision between central and local government has emerged, supported by new, more relevant policies for devolved areas. But how much has really changed and how far apart are the new devolved visions?

An analysis of recent reports, *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (October 2006) and the Welsh Assembly’s *Beyond Boundaries* (June 2006), can help answer these questions. The ideas within these papers provide a glimpse of how local government policies are diverging or converging across devolved nations. Both papers seek to improve the way services are delivered at a local level but each makes different assumptions and sets out a different path. This paper compares and contrasts these assumptions and the ideas that emerge, suggesting that there are lessons to be learnt from both. We propose that devolution has not taken local government to divergent extremes but has nevertheless led to differences in vision and approach that contain important lessons.

These variations are particularly evident in the design of services and this paper focuses on the notion of citizen-centred service provision. The strong values driving the Welsh approach, values based on community and collaboration, could be beneficial if fostered across all of local government. However, values alone are not enough to drive progress. The more concrete, tangible measures put forward by *Strong and Prosperous Communities* can help kick-start the process of redesigning services

around the citizen. This paper ends by asking what aspects work best, what difficulties might be expected and whether both models can learn from each other.

## What are the interesting themes?

A comparison of *Strong and Prosperous Communities* and *Beyond Boundaries* shows clear similarities. They both describe increasing citizen expectations and a desire for public services to match those they receive elsewhere in terms of personalisation, responsiveness, efficiency and value for money. Other common themes include the rationalisation of the performance management regime and improved powers of scrutiny. Both the Welsh and English systems started from the same point in 1999 so it is not surprising that similarities remain, but it is the differences that we can learn from most.

For our purposes here, we concentrate on the core notion of citizen-centred service provision. 'Citizen-centred' is a term now used widely across the public sector, yet not always understood or practiced. The Institute for Citizen-Centred Services (ICCS) has a simple definition:

*"Citizen-centred service describes what we have always known – our service improvement efforts should be rooted in citizens' and clients' priorities for improvement. We should, therefore, organise our services from their perspective, not from our organisation's perspective."*<sup>7c</sup>

## **DCLG White Paper: *Strong and Prosperous Communities***

*"Citizens and communities want a bigger say in the services they receive and in shaping the places where they live. .... We want .....people to be given more control over their lives; consulted and involved in running services; informed about the quality of services in their area; and enabled to call local agencies to account if services fail to meet their needs."*

## **Beecham Review: *Beyond Boundaries***

*"In the absence of the disciplines of the market, the citizen model relies on building challenge into all stages, and all levels, of the policy and delivery system in order to ensure the effective, efficient and responsive services which citizens require and deserve....Publicly available performance information is a pre-requisite for the success and sustainability of the citizen model of public service provision."*

As the quotations above show, both *Strong and Prosperous Communities* and *Beyond Boundaries* acknowledge the importance of a citizen-centred approach to modern public service provision. Delivery of services can no longer be constrained and dictated by outdated, siloed, inflexible departments and processes. Services cannot be producer led, but must be driven by the requirements of recipients.

With this in mind, there are two elements within the reviews that seem appropriate for comparison:

1) The requirement for local government to engage with citizens in the design, delivery and decision-making process to ensure that services meet the needs of those who use them.

2) The need to join-up and share across organisational boundaries to ensure the delivery of effective and efficient services.

These two themes are essential to both documents but the differences in scope, tone, style and approach are illuminating.

## What are the differences in approach?

It is helpful to begin by outlining the models that policy-makers in each nation are using to put the citizen back at the centre of local government policy. Firstly, we see *Strong and Prosperous Communities* continuing to promote choice. The 'public sector choice agenda' has been a recurring theme throughout this Labour Government and chapter two begins by stating that extending choice is "*the most direct way to increase people's control.*" The 'choice agenda' is a nebulous and contentious term, but essentially uses 'market forces' to drive service improvements. This approach assumes that service users would automatically choose the highest quality, best value or most appropriate service available. 'Exit', people leaving service providers for the competition, will cause poor services to fail while more adaptive, relevant services endure.

In contrast, the Welsh Assembly argues in *Beyond Boundaries* that the choice-agenda

*"has not found favour...on grounds of both principle and practicality."* They argue that the concentration of high levels of social need in Wales, the areas of sparse population, a greater concentration of older people, fewer people in paid work and higher levels of chronic ill-health, do not lend themselves to the provision of choice in services. Beecham writes that Welsh services must respond differently. Consequently *Beyond Boundaries* follows *Making the Connections'* vision for public services based around a 'citizen model'. This means a greater emphasis on engaging with the public and using citizen 'voice' throughout local government structures. This approach is based on the argument that:

*"what citizens value most is different forms of choice, personalisation and the opportunity to express preferences and influence provision."*

Once these models and their underlying assumptions are outlined, it is easier to see how and why the two documents develop in the way in which they do. In fact, the ideas within the two documents are not so far apart, but the two examples we use do draw out the important differences that exist.

## 1. Citizen Engagement

At a high level, the two models above can appear poles apart but the differences within these documents are more subtle than that. *Strong and Prosperous Communities* contains more about engaging with citizens than it does about real 'choice' in service provision. The white paper introduced the idea of a 'Citizen Call to Action' (CCA) which gives the public increased powers to hold services to account. It also asks for clearer statements

within LAAs and Community Strategies on how local partners will achieve meaningful consultation with the public. It goes on to create mechanisms by which citizens can take control of and manage their own services and functions.

These are not competitive, choice orientated policies. Rather, they are devices for ensuring authorities are engaging with citizens, designing and evaluating services based on citizen needs. In this vision, levels of satisfaction and public demand are driving more responsive services. Chapter two takes this further, urging authorities to “*involve citizens directly in designing, delivering or assessing a service.*” The section on *Securing Participation* promises new help and guidance for local government in achieving this.

This brings us closer to the Welsh approach, but there remain important differences in tone and scope. In *Strong and Prosperous Communities* citizen engagement is expected to hold services to account, ensure they respond to citizen needs and give people the power and capacity to make their own choices. It clearly raises the importance of citizen voice for service design and delivery but the points at which citizens engage are very much dictated, top down and evaluatory. In Wales they take engagement a step further. *Beyond Boundaries* makes ‘voice’ the whole fulcrum for local government change and the core driver for improvement. They have taken the definition of ‘citizen-centred’ and refined it to incorporate citizens’ concerns at every stage of the service design and delivery process. It goes beyond the idea of engaging consumers and moves to “*co-production:*

*active consumers who achieve desired outcomes jointly with the service provider.*”

This more comprehensive package of engagement and consultation means all citizens, not just service users, need the opportunity, information and incentive to engage with service design and delivery. The Welsh approach strengthens the collaborative, community, bottom up approach to citizen-centred service provision. It relies on contributions from all parties at all stages and prioritises the synergy of views and ideas. Satisfaction scores and evaluation of service performance remain important, but it is an ongoing process of improvement through continuous input and consultation at the bottom that is expected to drive change. *Beyond Boundaries* is building a community based strategy, uniting all partners in a common purpose. As Beecham writes, “*this shared understanding is the glue which will hold the different spheres ..together,*” and providing “*a constant reminder of why public services exist.*”

Beecham then outlines the support mechanisms necessary for ensuring that this engagement is enforced and entrenched throughout local government. There are bold recommendations for:

- increased powers of scrutiny and a depoliticisation of the scrutiny role.
- improving citizens’ access and ability to engage with the service design process.
- overhauling the blame culture and replacing it with a ‘listen and learn’ or critical friend approach.

- providing more accurate, timely, relevant information on services.

These proposals support an ideal system which places an emphasis on collaboration and consultation between *all* stakeholders. This idea of full community engagement, open consultation and collaboration comes through in every element of the Welsh vision. For example, both *Strong and Prosperous Communities* and *Beyond Boundaries* promote the need for more comprehensive and accessible information. For Beecham and the Welsh Assembly though, this information is not meant for league-tables or to drive competition but to give citizens the means and measures with which to involve themselves fully in the decision-making process. The whole system is moving, integrating and developing together towards a common good.

## 2. Collaborative Working

Similar differences in vision and tone are apparent in our second key area of analysis, joint-working and shared services. Both the DCLG and the Welsh Assembly believe that joining-up across services and agencies will be beneficial, but the arguments and core messages behind it are subtly different.

*Beyond Boundaries* focuses on the need for stronger partnerships and commitment to collaboration to improve ‘social efficiency’, (getting the right balance of services to deliver the best outcomes), as well as technical efficiency. It states that departmental barriers are first and foremost an obstacle to creating better, more citizen-centred services. The review points out the need to share in order

to increase service resilience in response to skills and capacity shortages. It remains focused on the impact on citizens first and foremost, though efficiency is recognised as an important benefit of joined-up services. As Beecham states, the efficiency imperative emerges from the changing relationship between citizen and service but is not the prime motive for sharing.

*“Improving service delivery will be achieved by more co-ordination between providers to deliver sustainable, top quality, responsive services, rather than by increased competition between providers.”<sup>d</sup>*

*Strong and Prosperous Communities* focuses more on “*collaboration between local authorities and across all public bodies, where **this improves effectiveness and efficiency***” (my own emphasis). Shared services remains a financially competitive field in England. It is portrayed first and foremost as a tool for reducing costs and meeting the challenges of Gershon and CSR07. Even where the paper discusses the role of joined-up services in providing for the vulnerable, the emphasis remains on efficiency, on “*tackling issues early and preventing higher costs at a later stage*”.

This is not to say that the white paper fails to recognise the other benefits of working across boundaries. The word “collaborate” appears almost forty times throughout the paper, in areas ranging from community capacity building to more strategic thinking on city regions. Nevertheless, efficiency is the term most often connected with joint-working in the white paper.

## Summary of key differences

Wales	England
Community based	A spirit of competition
Citizen involved at all stages	Citizens primarily involved in approving and mandating services
Full system approach	Targeted, specific and pragmatic goals
Ideological and 'big picture'	Pragmatic and tangible
Citizen is at the centre of the design process	Citizen is at the centre of local government's thinking
Citizen involvement is core driver for change	Competition, efficiency and satisfaction are core drivers for change
Power is shared between all stakeholders	Service users have the power to 'opt-out' and show dissatisfaction through exit

The two examples on the previous pages, *joined-up working* and *citizen engagement*, illustrate the subtle difference in tone and direction between the two policy papers. If accepted as ideal models and viewed as part of a policy spectrum we can draw out important differences. The table below summarises these differences in local government policy across devolved nations. These do not represent the realities of local government policy at present, or in the future, but are designed to draw out and highlight where the ideas behind devolved policy might differ.

### Analysis

We cannot be sure what policies will prove successful. Some will only be relevant within their specific context, others will be universal. Until we reach a time when we can actually measure their success, there are arguments for and against both visions that are worth our consideration.

### Beyond Boundaries

As highlighted by Assembly members on its release, this is a reflective, philosophical piece, not a list of things to do. Framing *Beyond Boundaries* in this way allows it to be more ambitious and wider in scope. The document provides **a framework and vision with which to bind authorities, citizens and other agencies together**. It is able to set out an over-arching strategy and direction that describes where all stakeholders would like Welsh services to be in a few years time.

The way *Beyond Boundaries* builds this framework is not by making specific, targeted recommendations to change existing structures. Often this just shifts emphasis without addressing the underlying ambitions of a system. Instead, *Beyond Boundaries* aims to change the entire way local government interacts with citizens. It requires **large-scale changes to the systems and culture of service delivery**. By taking a step back and re-evaluating what the final systems should look like, the report can build them up again

with the citizen truly at their heart. In turn, this allows the report to **look at the supporting structures and systems necessary** for delivering the core vision and ensure they are fit for purpose.

The need for a whole system change also **gives the report a sense of power and renewed optimism**. All stakeholders can use this as a starting point from which to build new, better and more relevant services in a way that is specific to Wales and the Welsh people. If they are able to build support for and commitment to this vision it could be a powerful motivation for change. The downside to this new approach is that it has no obvious precedent from which to draw useful experience and knowledge. Without this it is harder to take the first steps or build a consensus over the best way forward.

The Welsh vision itself relies on a **sense of responsibility and community**. It emphasises the role of *all* stakeholders in making the model work and promotes the importance of working together to deliver it. This tone suggests a true sense of partnership and mutual understanding, a synergy of ideas and closer relationships between all parties. These core values would underpin a set of new, more democratic, inclusive and relevant services that encouraged people to participate in and contribute to their design.

Beyond Boundaries sets lofty goals, but it is **not clear how Wales intends to achieve its ambitious vision**. Though its philosophical nature can be advantage (as above), it does not have a clear step-by-step route-map for authorities to follow. For example, the Welsh

system is expected to take on-board and support the wishes and opinions of all citizens, even those not engaged with the service itself. This may be too much to ask of those detached from political processes and with no vested interest in the delivery of the service involved.

Another danger is that **citizens can become complicit in the failure of services** to deliver. The Welsh approach is based on the assumption that co-production and continuous citizen engagement will lead to smarter, more effective decisions and better designed services. If this proves not to be the case then the driver for change is removed. The power to influence decisions and force change is shared between all stakeholders and it becomes more difficult for citizens to create any momentum for change on their own. There is also a risk that without other mechanisms the need for compromise, discussion and collaboration will lead to deadlock and stagnation.

There are other more positive elements to the Welsh approach. By portraying **engagement and consultation as the central tool for improving local government**, Beecham not only raises the profile of citizen engagement, he makes it the centre-piece of local government reform. This seems to be a more bottom-up approach to citizen engagement where the electorate can draw down powers and responsibilities at each stage, not wait to be asked their opinion at the end. This should ensure local service providers to pay heed to it in everything they do and **prevents it becoming a box-ticking exercise**.

*“This needs to be part of the normal run of business, not just initiated by a particular proposal.”*

Finally, another claimed advantage of this model is that it will **build greater trust between the public and their local authority**, a continuing problem for local government and politics as a whole. Continuous engagement brings the public closer to the decision-making process and fosters closer relationships, a freer flow of ideas and more relevant, adaptive services. An electorate that feels involved in the political system will feel a greater connection to it, affinity for it and responsibility for ensuring its success.

## Strong and Prosperous Communities

Strong and Prosperous Communities may not be as ambitious in its use of citizen engagement for driving change but there are reasons for that. For example, if a ‘co-production’ approach was adopted in England, how would local government go about involving 60 million people in the design and delivery of services across the country? The **large and heterogeneous nature of local government in England** does not lend itself so easily to the inclusion and integration of *all* citizen voice.

One advantage of the approach taken by *Strong and Prosperous Communities* is that it makes concrete recommendations for achieving its own citizen-centred goals. These include:

- One piece of statutory guidance on the

new best value regime.

- Identifying best practice in extending choice and involving citizens throughout the commissioning cycle and launching a new Beacon scheme: *Empowering citizens: Transforming Services*.
- Providing contractual incentives to meet the expectations of users.
- Working with local authorities to test methods for empowering people to help design services.
- Ensuring audit assessment gives weight to the use of citizen intelligence.

Without these levers and legislative tools it is hard to see how English authorities could drive change. Given the size of the structures and systems involved, it is **questionable whether engagement would provide a sufficient engine for improvement**, particularly within a monopoly public service provider. Strong and Prosperous Communities relies on the more obvious tools of public dissatisfaction (or discontent) and, where possible, exit to drive change. This puts the power solely and firmly in the hands of the user or consumer. When the final power to approve or mandate services lays with citizens, or where a viable choice exists, the motivation for services to adapt, change and respond is stronger.

This system is not without its own potential hazards. Should each and every user decide to make use of this power and ‘exit’, an unsatisfactory service there is nothing to prevent it collapsing entirely. As businesses know, the public can be unforgiving and where the **responsibility for improvement lies entirely with the service provider there**

**is nothing to ensure the public plays a role in its renewal.** This may lead to better, more responsive services, but it also has the potential to create a series of failing service providers unable to meet citizen demands or to maintain consistent, high quality services.

As we can see, satisfaction and choice are powerful and immediate forces already proven in the private sector. In fact, the fact that **private sector precedents exist might provide a ready source of inspiration** for councils looking to capture and respond to citizen satisfaction. In an era of increasingly personalised services but burgeoning competition, business has had to invest heavily in research and consumer intelligence as well as finding a balance between cost efficiency and service flexibility. These existing structures and systems provide a useful knowledge bank for local government. Local government also already has considerable experience working with and learning from the private sector. This experience will be beneficial within a more choice based and satisfaction driven public service sector.

Furthermore, **if public discontent can create more responsive services democracy itself will be enhanced.** The electorate currently feel most engaged with local politics when their dissatisfaction with existing systems leads directly to improvements - when councils show they are 'listening'. A greater focus on consumer satisfaction may help bridge the democratic deficit many feel exists today.

Another advantage to the English system is its willingness to **allow elements to move**

**at different speeds.** For the concept of a citizen-model to succeed all the elements must be in place to support a shift in culture. Because *Strong and Prosperous Communities* does not require wholesale changes throughout the system, certain elements are allowed to progress faster than others. Other recommendations within the paper are designed to ensure that appropriate lessons are learned from the trail-blazers and that best practice will spread over time.

Finally, by making efficiency central to the future of local government *Strong and Prosperous Communities* plots **a simple recognisable course that will provide immediate benefits** to councils. Financial benefits, such as those from joint-working, are a more tangible driver for change than the community approach of *Beyond Boundaries*. Authorities know already that they must deliver more for less and may be more inclined to share when the benefits are clear and measurable.

## What works?

Both the approaches above have their merits. The table below outlines, very briefly, the potential benefits and problems of each vision for public services.

Wales	England
Holistic approach, changing the focus of all systems and support mechanisms together	Able to build on existing systems and elements can progress at their own speed
Entering 'uncharted territory'	Has frames of reference from other sectors and previous experience
A strong new vision and philosophy. Aspirational and revitalising, but somewhat vague	More targeted approach with concrete recommendations and tools
Encourages collaboration, community and co-operation	Satisfaction/Choice produces a greater impetus and force for change
Requires the continued input of all stakeholders at all stages – prevents 'box-ticking' but potential for stagnation	Uses individual power of choice and approval, but at designated points within a more top down framework
New systems build greater trust, engagement and collaboration between state and citizen	Creates a sense of state responsiveness to public opinion

## Conclusions

Six years may be a long time in politics but devolution has not yet radically altered the approach to local government across the nations. An analysis of the Welsh and English visions as laid out in *Strong and Prosperous Communities* and *Beyond Boundaries* shows both seeking more personalised, responsive services, more value for money and more flexibility for the local authorities trying to achieve this. Many of their goals overlap and both will require new ways of thinking and new systems to do this. Both have strong visions for stronger, more effective local authorities with the capacity to put the citizen truly at the centre of what they do. This paper outlines the advantages to both the English and Welsh vision for local government, but an ideal scenario would see local authorities using the best from both.

### **Create a Bold, Flexible Vision**

The Welsh goals, though somewhat vague and philosophical in nature, should be applauded for creating long-term ambitions which local authorities and Government can unite behind. A clear, widely recognised and agreed upon framework for developing services will give the agenda the momentum and enthusiastic support to succeed. It will bind and guide local authorities together with a common purpose without restricting local innovation and flexibility. An absence of concrete recommendations and step by step guidance should not be seen as a barrier to progress by Welsh local authorities, but an opportunity to use this freedom to pursue a wider goal more flexibly and autonomously.

### **Make a citizen focus the driver of change**

This sense of collaborative purpose, bottom

up momentum and citizen-first focus is something that can feel missing from *Strong and Prosperous Communities*. Though it takes large strides in the right direction, in places it can still feel like a centrally driven drive for performance. This is particularly apparent with regards the shared services agenda. The moral imperative and citizen-centred focus that will drive sharing in Wales is not always apparent in the cost focussed shared services agenda in England. As a result, we may see progress on shared services in Wales happening faster, smoother and in a more strategic manner. Evidence from Scotland shows that a more 'community', citizen-centred and 'big-picture' approach can be beneficial to the success of shared services in the long-term. Wales looks set to benefit from a similar approach. The competitive, 'choice' based system favoured in England can sometimes crowd out the real goal of citizen centred thinking and service delivery.

### **Turn Aspiration into Action**

Any framework needs support and structures on the ground to ensure that it is implemented effectively. We may find in time that the grandeur of the Welsh vision is just too nebulous and intangible to make progress in the short term, while the tools in *Strong and Prosperous Communities* allow local authorities to maintain steady momentum and progress towards ever more ambitious goals. What happens next in the Welsh story will be vital. Progress cannot be delayed by indecision or philosophical disagreement. The difficulties in trying to involve *everyone* should not be an excuse for doing nothing. The forces for change must be strong enough to sustain progress. Any 'ideal' local government vision

will benefit from pragmatic, actionable targets as much as a broader strategy for change.

### **Create the Tools for Delivering Citizen-focus**

Whether satisfaction or co-production are going to drive improvements, local authorities must have better ways of connecting with and listening to their citizens. It is unlikely that it will be possible for all local authorities to interact with all people on all services all of the time. But it is a worthwhile goal if they aim to interact with as many as possible as often as possible. To do this effectively local government must invest in and make good use of the techniques available such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software, research tools and public satisfaction gauges. This will be an increasing priority for English local authorities following the focus of *Strong and Prosperous Communities* and its desire for satisfaction scores to drive performance. In Wales these information and engagement systems will be more essential still if local authorities are to truly work with citizens to co-design and deliver services.

### **Design A New Gauge for Success**

For either vision to succeed, and whichever tools are used, there must be a new way of measuring local government progress towards truly citizen centred service delivery. There may be a lot local authorities could learn from the private sector on this topic. Business must constantly respond to citizen demands, not just around the time of the AGM or election, but daily, in everything they do, to ensure they deliver what is needed. Businesses must be flexible to survive. They

must meet new challenges and keep up with the competition. For listed companies, share price is an ongoing indicator of the faith that investors have in the company. The electorate should not have to wait up to three years to voice their dissatisfaction with public services. Satisfaction scores, CPA and the performance framework all offer just a snapshot of local authority success. Perhaps a more responsive and constantly responding gauge is needed. If citizens are really to be at the centre of what local authorities do, then success measures must reflect the constantly changing views and needs of those local government is meant to serve.

## Useful Links

<http://new.wales.gov.uk/about/strategy/makingtheconnections/beecharreview/?lang=en>

<http://www.wales.gov.uk/themesmakingconnection/content/service-delivery-review-e.htm>

<http://www.wlga.gov.uk/content.php?nID=334;IID=1>

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1503999>

## Documents for Review

*Making the Connections: Delivering Better Services for Wales (2004)*

*Beyond Boundaries: Citizen-Centred Local Services for Wales (2006)*

*Strong and Prosperous Communities (2006)*

## References

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