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Shared services – shared necessity: Austerity, reformed local government and reduced budgets¹

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Abstract

Shared services are now established as a core delivery model in local and regional governance arrangements. Shared services have emerged as a ‘common sense’ delivery vehicle with attendant efficiency and effectiveness gains. There is, however, a more complex intellectual provenance to a reliance on shared services. In essence, shared services are the logical outcome of the deliberate turn to neo-liberal thinking and the various iterations of the new public managerialism methodology which has progressively established itself in local and regional governance over the past thirty years or so. This paper explores the neo-liberal provenance of shared services and considers the consequential vulnerabilities to austerity, administrative reform and reduced public sector budgets. The central proposition of the paper is that while neo-liberal ideas have created the justification for shared services, this has embedded a set of systemic tensions in the delivery model.

Keywords: Shared services, governance, neo-liberalism, tensions

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Introduction

Shared services are now established as a core delivery model in local and regional governance arrangements. However, while there is a general or intuitive understanding of what shared services involve, specific definitions of the activities involved remain contested (Schulz & Brenner, 2010). Furthermore, the range of activities which can be delivered on a shared basis varies. In general, shared services in local and regional governance tend to involve 'back-office' activities with working arrangements based on business models of administrative organisation. In practice, however, this has been extended to emergency services and economic development, as in the cross-border context on the island of Ireland (Peel et al., 2011). Shared services can also be far more imaginative, as suggested by the maturing community-planning models in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These incorporate elements of local regeneration and social inclusion as part of the more conventional provision of local services (Pemberton et al., 2014). Intuitively then, shared services can appear entirely rational – providing what is, in effect, a 'common sense' delivery vehicle with attendant efficiency and effectiveness gains. There is also the potential to address wider distributional issues in local communities through, for example, closer working between educational, health and social work agendas.

There is an emphasis on realising efficiency gains in administration and implementation guided by perceived best business practices. In general, and certainly at a time of contracted resources in the public sector, these characteristics suggest a logical approach to the delivery of local services. On the face of it, together with the potential efficiency savings and improved effectiveness of local services based on the sharing model, this delivery format could be seen as a progressive step in local and regional administration.

However, there is a more complex intellectual provenance to a reliance on shared services. In essence, shared services are the logical outcome of the deliberate turn to neo-liberal thinking and the various iterations of the new public managerialism methodology which has progressively established itself in local and regional governance over the past thirty years or so. New public managerialism provided an alternative to the earlier prevailing and conventional arrangements for local service delivery – which tended to be fragmented by administrative responsibility, top down in function, *dirigiste* in delivery and based on the assumption of passive consumers (Hood, 1995). In effect, there

was little ‘joined up’ thinking, something which new public managerialism sought to address. There are parallels here with the similar centralist approaches of regional development policy, which also prevailed in the period prior to neo-liberal influences (Cooke & Morgan, 1998). The recent morphing of new public managerialism into new public governance, evidenced in part by the interest in co-production, is another manifestation of the line of reasoning drawn from a specific set of neo-liberal ideological imperatives.

The normalisation, maturation and recasting of neo-liberal thinking have had significant effects on understanding the changing nature of state–market civil relations (Mirowski, 2013). This has influenced thinking around the design and purpose of government and governance arrangements and relative performances, the role of business activities in the public domain and the nature of civil engagement in both public and private spheres. The changing landscape of relations between state, market and civil interests is highly complex and dynamic. Shared services are the direct consequence of these particular intellectual and operational contexts, and may be located directly within the broad neo-liberal ideological agenda. In effect, shared services are part of a deliberate programme of societal change.

This paper explores the neo-liberal provenance of shared services within local and regional governance, and considers the consequential vulnerability of shared services to the layered impacts of austerity, administrative reform and reduced public sector budgets – themselves intrinsic elements of the maturing neo-liberal project. The central proposition of the paper is that while neo-liberal ideas have created the justification for shared services, this has embedded a set of systemic tensions in the delivery model. Neo-liberal metrics also define the operational contexts in which local governance and shared services operate, with increased divisions and pressures between technocratic and democratic metrics becoming ever more evident. Neo-liberalism will inevitably continue to influence and shape the ways in which local services are designed and implemented. What are the likely implications of this specific political and intellectual trajectory?

Shared services in practice

In practice, shared services tend to focus on ‘back-office’ functions that serve internal administration and organisation in local authorities and other public agencies. The principal functions focus on human

resources, procurement arrangements and information technology. It is these functional areas that would appear to offer the most potential to realise economies of scale for the various bodies involved. Clearly that potential would be realised most effectively where there was an operational dovetailing in the different arrangements prevailing and which were put into place. Subsequently, shared services have been extended to include finance, communication technology, waste management and building control activities. Moreover, in the island of Ireland's cross-border context, research (Peel et al., 2011) suggests that shared service provision includes emergency services, tourism, economic development and the green economy. This suggests a greater potential for the model – the turn to community planning represents a greater reliance on shared delivery and integrated working in the public sector.

In general terms, Schulz & Brenner (2010) note that shared services tend to exhibit certain common characteristics, including the consolidation of administrative processes within an organisation, the coordinated delivery of support arrangements, a sensitivity to cost reduction as a major driver, a focus on delivery to internal customers, an alignment with the expectations of external customers and management operating in a business-style manner. These characteristics suggest a private sector or business-oriented model for the delivery of local public services. The Scottish Government has described this broad philosophy of intent as follows: 'Shared Services is more than just centralisation or consolidation of similar activities in one location. It is the convergence and streamlining of similar functions within an organisation, or across organisations, to ensure that they are delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible. In a Shared Services model, these activities will be run like a business, delivering services to internal and external customers at a cost and of a quality and timeline that is competitive with alternatives' (Scottish Government, 2012). These perspectives would point to the priority of securing economies of scale in service design and delivery together with the parallel realisation of network economies of scale as the agencies involved begin to establish joint or integrated working arrangements.

Such a positive 'feel-good' factor is enhanced by the delivery characteristics associated with the spectrum of shared services. The different domains – back-office administrative activities, integrated service activities and the actual delivery of local services into communities – can involve variations on collaboration. This takes

place at different levels involving inter- and intra-organisational relationships. Furthermore, securing integrated modes of service delivery (over and above any efficiency and effectiveness gains) can also address any areas of potential overlap and underlap. As another layer of gain, overlap and underlap can potentially be eradicated or minimised. Thus, reducing duplication of delivery arrangements by different departments or bodies can lead to a cost saving in administration and logistics. Identifying underlap or areas which were not addressed through separate provision by silo administrative arrangements – and particularly relating to relative social disadvantage – can then improve the effectiveness of local and regional governance. In effect, shared services seek to enhance the value, potential and better use of available public assets.

Research evidence, however, suggests that the relative performance of shared services remains uncertain. Peel et al. (2011) cite Audit Scotland, which noted that sharing services may not necessarily reduce the administration costs involved but that such arrangements may provide more effective service delivery. This raises an interesting trade-off in terms of the technocratic and democratic dimensions of local service delivery. The research demonstrates that moving to a shared services model of delivery requires up-front investment and organisation, with a particular emphasis on leadership and good working relationships in developing a shared services programme (Peel et al., 2011). This suggests another trade-off between intended cost savings and quality of local services with respect to both substance and delivery. Here the importance of stakeholder engagement is critical, including end users and those responsible for planning and delivering the services.

There is another necessity of devising new working arrangements to sustain local capacity – alternative administrative models will be required to address the parameters facing shared services. Shared services seek improved collaborative working between the various bodies involved, with greater integration at a local level driven by better partnerships across traditional service lines. This will become ever more necessary as the resource contraction continues. Community expectations will not disappear and there are extra pressures on this form of governance. In part, this is evident in the shift towards action based on prevention and a more deliberate and transparent focus on performance. The use of single outcome agreements and the National Performance Framework in Scotland, for example, illustrate the new focus on delivery and the effectiveness

of performance with respect to community planning design and delivery.

In and of themselves the perceived outcomes associated with shared service models of delivery may be considered laudable. These gains assume greater significance in conditions of austerity, and shared services may then be seen as a responsible approach to the allocation of constrained resources in serving the public interest. Austerity (which appears to be the outrider of current neo-liberal economic policy priorities) reduces the resource base for local and regional governance (Blyth, 2013). Some services may have to be eradicated or reduced – street lighting, for example, is under pressure in certain local authority areas. Some services may have to be deferred, being seen as premature in the limited resource availability limiting the introduction of potentially innovative responses to the complex demographic profiles of local communities. Austerity sets a constant backdrop to the concept of shared services – rather than a desired economic option, it becomes a necessity. The 2013 spending review in England confirmed, for example, that councils will continue to face public sector spending cuts up to at least 2016. Such conditions create tensions between the choice of service to deliver – and between back-office and front-line activities.

Shared services thus are a product of neo-liberal thinking and a means of putting such business-led metrics into effect. Moreover, shared service models (in whatever sphere) carry with them the embedded tensions of neo-liberal values – the conflict between individuals and the community, the private and public interests, and the extending polarisation of efficiency and equity (or social justice). As a consequence, shared services contain systemic tensions, and even as the spectrum of activities expands and the shared model extends, there are always vulnerabilities to the quality and quantity of service being made available. Why should this be so?

Neo-liberalism in its ascendancy

Neo-liberal ideas rest on an understanding that government failure is endemic and serves to exacerbate attempts to address business and market failures (Mirowski, 2013). The concept of state intervention ‘crowding out’ private investment and innovation captures this perspective. Neo-liberal reasoning asserts the relative efficiency and effectiveness of market-designed measures, processes and arrangements. It promotes the freeing up of markets through various

measures, including denationalisation, deregulation and privatisation. It asserts the importance of individualism and the primacy of private property rights (Marquand, 2004). In practice, neo-liberal axioms assert business metrics to inform the design and provision of public sector engagement and provision where this is held to be necessary. Clearly this is of significance for the delivery of local public services.

Neo-liberalism is described as having created a new moral economy in which private interests and property rights prevail over what may be construed as the broader public interest (Marquand, 2014). While there is a debate about the validity of a public interest (Marquand, 2004), it is clear that nearly thirty years of the neo-liberal ascendancy as a dominant economic philosophy have had an evident influence on state–market–civil relations. Indeed, neo-liberal ideas and agendas have been ruthlessly promoted on a global canvas, and manifest themselves to varying degrees across various advanced market economies (Klein, 2007). Following Judt (2010) and Sandel (2012), for example, neo-liberalism has permeated the modern world comprehensively to the extent that politics and policies in many societies are largely dominated by monetised values and templates.

Neo-liberal values have become a ‘theory of everything’ (Mirowski, 2013) and their effects and influences are pervasive. This extends to the transformation of intellectual thinking, policy discourse and practice (Fine & Milonakis, 2008). The turn to private metrics rests on the erosion of the public interest. This deleterious process is not new and has been taking place since the advent of neo-liberal agendas in the early 1980s. Indeed, the downgrading of the public interest was not only an early consequence of the ascendancy of individualism and market forces from the 1980s but that stage was also a necessary prerequisite for the sustainability of neo-liberal values (Marquand, 2004). Here the very nomenclature of political economy through to economics has involved dramatic changes to its foundational theorising and conceptualisation. Market norms are accepted as the prevailing idiom and, in effect, there has been an attendant and dramatic retreat from critical thinking around the arrangements for the allocation of resources and the associated distributional consequences. There is a turn to ‘what works’ and ‘solutionism’ (Milne, 2012). This captures the expediency and technocratic nature of neo-liberal measures and highlights, in particular, the short-term nature of its decision-making (Hutton, 2015). This intellectual milieu has created the conditions in which there has been a turn to shared local services.

Neo-liberalism and shared services

This paper argues that neo-liberal influences and ideas have had a number of related and parallel effects on local and regional governance. Here attention may be drawn to the impact on the arrangements for community-based planning initiatives with respect to ‘hollowing out’, ‘filling in’ and ‘policy mobilities’ (Pemberton et al., 2014). Hollowing out refers to the downsizing of the state apparatus in terms of its administrative capacities, functions and responsibilities, and resources. Hollowing out has taken a number of forms – privatisation of state assets and deregulation of private sector activities, including reforms to statutory land-use planning. Labelled as modernisation of planning, the intentions were to simplify and streamline decision-making so as to reduce costs of uncertainty and delay on the private land and property development sectors (Peel & Lloyd, 2007). In tandem, filling in involves the replacement of the more conventional state provision of services by private sector interests, partnerships and the turn-to-business models of local service delivery. Shared services and community planning are identifiable outcomes of this process of change (Pemberton et al., 2014). The ideas associated with the new public managerialism of local and regional governance reflect these neo-liberal tendencies. In effect, new public managerialism reflected the rejection of the conventional forms of local service delivery and their replacement by models based on private sector techniques (Bevir, 2010). Significantly this involved a refocus of engagement from process to measureable outputs.

Taken together, the concept of shared services then becomes an articulation of neo-liberal intent. It is important to note also that devolution in the UK, in particular, has promoted and enabled wider critical learning involving a deliberate exchange of ideas across the individual states with respect to policy transfer and learning (Jones et al., 2005). In Northern Ireland, for example, the potential use of the term community planning partnership would appear to suggest a ‘tracking’ of the approach as developed in Scotland (Northern Ireland Environmental Link, 2006). This dynamic policy-learning environment has encouraged the momentum of the turn to shared services.

Supporting the concept of improved local delivery is the move to monitor or contractualise the various interests and arrangements involved in the public service. There has been an evident interest in securing a culture change in behaviour to realise efficiency gains and effectiveness through greater certainty in the decision-making

processes. This particular form of ‘soft contractualism’ seeks to facilitate greater cooperation between the public and private interests involved (Lloyd & Peel, 2012). In effect, such an approach seeks a better understanding by both parties. An example in the context of land-use planning is the Edinburgh Planning Concordat (Peel & Lloyd, 2012). This sets out a considered shared understanding of the planning issues for the city and a better working relationship between the diverse parties involved.

It is argued that new public managerialism has itself matured – mirroring the maturation of the neo-liberal discourse? – into a more pluralist-based new public governance (Osborne, 2006). This iteration of neo-liberal thinking seeks to respond to the increasingly fragmented and uncertain nature of public sector management. This leads to a focus on service effectiveness and measureable outcomes (Bevir, 2011). A related facet of neo-liberal thinking, permeating between different contexts and resulting from critical learning and policy mobility, is the interest in co-production. Two points are important.

First, there is an explicit reference to performance. This may be illustrated by the use of outcome agreements and a National Performance Framework in Scotland associated with community planning – an expression of shared services. Community planning involves the delivery of local public services based on integrated partnership working (Lloyd & Peel, 2007). A critique of its performance identified a number of systemic barriers to effective policy implementation (Christie, 2011). As a consequence single outcome agreements were introduced between the individual community planning partnerships and the Scottish Government to ensure progress with respect to stated outcomes, indicators and targets. Issues of concern were also identified with respect to partnership working (Audit Scotland, 2013). A National Performance Framework was put into place to establish a ten-year vision for the delivery of local shared services by community planning partnerships and to ensure progress in meeting stated national and regional policy objectives (Scottish Government, 2013). The landscape of shared services is evolving in line with its ideological drivers.

Second, co-production may be seen as this particular articulation of new public governance. It has involved a rethinking of the ways in which local services can be provided – principally driven by the political aims of securing efficiency gains and effectiveness together with engaging the clients or recipients of the services. This is based on the deliberate and active involvement of those users of a particular

policy sphere or instrument to help devise mechanisms and arrangements to facilitate more appropriate, longer-term outcomes (New Economics Foundation, 2014). There are examples of the co-production approach in practice, such as the Joint Delivery Plan for Housing in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2015). This involved active engagement with those agencies with influence and experience in housing matters in Scotland to identify priority actions to deliver the intended strategic housing plan. The key points included addressing housing supply, investment and planning, promoting sustainability and place making, together with independent living, different housing options and the private rented sector. This may be seen as a particular form of a shared service methodology.

Shared services are an outcome of the turn away from a democratically informed notion of the public interest to a more (singular) technocratic model for the delivery of governance arrangements and local services in a business-informed manner. Here neo-liberal ideas create internal tensions for the shared services model as it is always vulnerable to cost-cutting narratives and austerity. Moreover, the future of shared services is likely to be further nurtured and guided by neo-liberal ideas – involving a shift to shared public services by private interests, and not confined to the public sector.

New neo-liberal forms of shared services?

If shared services are the product of neo-liberal reasoning and if the model is vulnerable due to its systemic weaknesses (private delivery of a public interest) and the associated environment around austerity, what are its likely iterations in the future? A hint may be gained from recent think tank advocacy. Think tanks have long played an important role in politics, policy and governance arrangements up to and into the neo-liberal period (Cockett, 1995). Think tanks provide ideas to influence policy innovation and implementation, and challenge both prevailing and alternative political priorities. Throughout more recent times with a prevailing neo-liberal emphasis, a number of think tanks have contributed to the sharpening of its ideological zeal. In a sense such advocacy offers alternative and diverse options in dealing with social, economic and environmental challenges (Webster, 2005). Not surprisingly this extends to institutional and organisational reform as well.

The focus of the think tank analysis, prognosis and prescription has been on what may be considered the conventional public policy

agendas – the provision of housing, the effects of environmental regulation, the costs of green belts, the case for and against high-rise building, the appropriate means of infrastructure provision and the implications of land-use planning. Alternative market-based approaches have been proposed based on the argument of securing greater social and economic benefits than those gained from conventional arrangements. The advocacy of the business improvement district (BID) idea – involving specific incentives, funding, and governance in defined localities – is important (Hoyt, 2005). BIDs involve a form of privatised sub-municipal governance in which an alternative framework for management and regulation is executed by the private interests involved in a given area (Lloyd & Peel, 2008). BIDs incorporate a local business levy which is then hypothecated to the improvement of that business locality over and above the conventional services provided by a local authority. Although the achievements of individual BIDs are contested, there is considerable support for continuing such designations in the context of the deterioration of conventional high streets and retailing centres (Nutt, 2015). In effect, a BID represents a very specific form of shared service. It incorporates the private interests in a defined locality (and within particular constitutional rules) and establishes a form of sub-municipal governance in which private players manage the locality. The management of that local environment is effectively being shared amongst the business interest involved. This is over and above, and instead of, the more conventional local authority fiat of responsibility.

The neo-liberal infused idea of managing the shared services in a town centre through private interests has been extended to the responsibility for local urban parks. These may be considered a particular form of service discharged by local authorities, yet such spaces are increasingly under pressure – growing urban population, restricted land supply and reduced public sector spending on green spaces (Policy Exchange, 2013). The concept of a park improvement district has been proposed, which is based on the US idea of green benefit districts (Policy Exchange, 2014). In practice, residents in an area would vote on whether to create a local park improvement district and, once it is established, a compulsory levy would be raised on residents within the area over and above the local authority tax. This additional revenue would then be hypothecated to support green space maintenance for the neighbourhood over and above what the local authority performs. Significantly, it is argued that such a measure would not necessarily be appropriate in all communities as it is

predicated on local residents' ability and willingness to pay. Yet the idea invokes another privatised shared service model whereby those with direct private interests assume the responsibility for the shared service. Again the funding for the service is shared amongst those involved. The idea is cast in a joined up way – Policy Exchange (2014) links the potential for improvement of the mental and physical health of individuals in the community and the organisation of public events that facilitate greater community engagement. This idea points the way to the future maturation of shared services – articulating the core principles of neo-liberal economics and politics.

Conclusions

The neo-liberal foundations of changes to the arrangements for local and regional governance have resulted in the widespread adoption of the shared services model. This has taken a number of forms – in terms of the internal administration in public sector bodies, the sharing of activities and the integrated provision of services to communities. The origins of the model have embedded tensions within, a consequence of a vulnerability of shared services to the layered impacts of austerity, administrative reform and reduced public sector budgets – themselves intrinsic elements of the maturing neo-liberal project. Notwithstanding contested views as to its performance, the shared services model is likely to be further explored as the neo-liberal ideology becomes more assertive and permeates all facets of conventional public policy domains. Here the idea of the public interest is likely to be discarded in favour of the neo-liberal agenda around private property, private interests and individualism at different scales of governance.

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