The Shared Power Principle
How governments are changing to achieve better outcomes
Foreword

Acknowledgements
The ideas behind this note emerged from numerous interviews, conversations and interactions with practitioners, scholars and experts. We are grateful for their input and feedback. They are listed at the back of this report in alphabetical order.

The Centre for Public Impact (CPI) writing team included Elena Bagnera, Danny Buerkli, Margot Gagliani, and Magdalena Kuenkel. We would also like to thank Dr Toby Lowe, Senior Lecturer, Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University, UK, for his coauthorship of this paper and the rest of the team at CPI for their patience and ongoing support.

About this discussion paper
At CPI, we have been looking at the future of government and seeing how governments are responding to the new and ever more difficult challenges they face. What we have found has given us hope that governments can adapt rapidly to change. Our worldwide legitimacy listening project, Finding Legitimacy, also found that citizens, despite falling levels of trust in many countries, do want to play a bigger part in building solutions with their governments.

In what is an important piece of work for CPI, we are looking at how governments, the public sector, their partners and citizens can play – and are already playing – a more meaningful role in shaping policies that impact on their lives and their communities.

In this discussion paper, we look at how the public sector is already challenging old notions of power, so that decisions are taking place where they should – with those who can make them happen and those who need them most. They are reshaping and reimagining power for better outcomes.

About CPI
The Centre for Public Impact is a not-for-profit foundation, founded by the Boston Consulting Group. Believing that governments can and want to do better for people, we work side-by-side with governments – and all those who help them – to reimagine government, and turn ideas into action, to bring about better outcomes for everyone. We champion public servants and other changemakers who are leading this charge and develop the tools and resources they need, like our Public Impact Fundamentals, so we can build the future of government together.
Governments have always faced two serious challenges: bringing about the results people expect, while remaining trusted and relevant.

Interconnected and global shifts such as urbanisation, demographic change and digital transformations are putting ever more pressure on governments. The gap between what citizens expect from governments and what governments are seen to be delivering is growing.

At the same time – and partly because of these developments – the legitimacy of public institutions is being questioned. Many people feel left behind, frustrated and disconnected. Governments struggle to engage meaningfully with them and make them feel they belong.

Many of the current ways in which governments operate and seek to address these challenges are reaching their limits, and the negative effects risk offsetting any benefits.

There is, for example, widespread evidence of the negative effects of the overuse of command and control management by public administrations. Public entities have been gaming their performance metrics: schools are getting rid of low-performing students in an attempt to preserve their standing in league tables, and police officers are choosing not to record certain crimes in order to achieve crime statistics officers are choosing not to record certain crimes in order to achieve crime statistics.

The emphasis on optimisation and performance has also negatively affected public servants, who feel it is hard to make an impact within the constraints of the system. Delivery targets and inspection regimes – despite often being well intentioned – have in many cases undermined professional judgment, increased stress levels, increased bureaucracy, and led to professionals having less time to spend with those they serve.

In many cases, these practices have also adversely impacted public servants’ mental health, as seen in recent reports from professionals such as teachers and nurses.

Other negative effects arise from the way many governments operate, including rigid silos, an inflexible hierarchy, and increased competition between different public sector organisations rather than collaboration. These all impair government’s ability to tackle complex problems. Public trust and social cohesion have suffered as a result.

People inside and outside government are reporting that they are feeling disenchanted with a system that undermines professional expertise, the value of relationships and – ultimately – the ability of public servants to improve lives. This makes citizens feel undervalued and undermines the legitimacy of government.

The twin challenges of effectiveness and legitimacy require a radical rethink of how governments work. For governments to keep improving people’s lives, public administrations need to find a way of responding effectively to these challenges.
The Shared Power Principle as a convincing response

In public administrations around the world, we have observed various encouraging approaches to tackling the twin challenges. These approaches have two things in common: they locate power within the lowest appropriate entities both across and within organisations, and they create the environment for this shared power to be used to develop effective and legitimate solutions. We summarise these approaches under the term “Shared Power Principle”.

By “power”, we mean the ability to make decisions that are crucial for a specific outcome. This might be more intuitive for federally organised public administrations, which are, by definition, already doing that. The default concentration of power at the top of organisations applies, however, to most governments, irrespective of their context. The Shared Power Principle is bringing about better outcomes for people. It is particularly promising in situations that are characterised by complexity, where local and implicit knowledge is required to understand a problem, where circumstances change quickly, and the strength of relationships are central to the quality of the outcome.

What are the characteristics of the Shared Power Principle?

The Shared Power Principle locates power within the lowest appropriate entities both across and within organisations and creates the environment for this shared power to be used to develop effective and legitimate solutions.

---

The four patterns that characterise the Shared Power Principle

The Shared Power Principle, as it emerges from numerous conversations we have had with pioneering practitioners over the past 18 months, is characterised by four patterns: subsidiarity, relationships, accountability and learning.

These patterns are described in more detail below and are accompanied by examples to illustrate them. This discussion paper is an attempt to describe the contours of this emergent practice. It is not a "blueprint" or "roadmap", but rather the summary of emerging patterns. The patterns are interdependent and each is as important as the others. Obtaining better outcomes through the Shared Power Principle requires action across all four patterns.

1. Who gets to make decisions?  
   Subsidiarity as a guide

2. How do we relate to one another?  
   Relationships first

3. Who is accountable to whom?  
   New forms of governance and leadership

4. How does improvement happen?  
   Building a culture of continuous learning
The four patterns that characterise the Shared Power Principle

Who gets to make decisions? Subsidiarity as a guide

Subsidiarity is the idea that decision-making should be placed at the lowest appropriate level. Instead of “pushing information to authority”, subsidiarity is about “pushing authority to information”. This means putting decision-making power into the hands of people or organisations with the greatest knowledge of an issue and helping them exercise this power as effectively as possible.

Place-based working
An implication of subsidiarity is that places have more power to shape the solutions that work best for them, given their deeper understanding of the local context. This is achieved by collaborating closely with local communities and making good use of local intelligence. This shifts the focus away from applying “what worked” elsewhere towards exploring problems and finding solutions that reflect the unique needs and circumstances of a particular place. Importantly, this does not mean that all solutions have to be invented from scratch – place-based decision-making is at its most effective when building on a culture of learning from other places.

Professional judgment
Subsidiarity places a high value on making use of individuals’ tacit knowledge and professional experience and judgment, giving them as much responsibility for their own work as possible. It works with people’s intrinsic motivation, rather than relying on external incentives such as performance-related bonuses or competitive league tables.

Example
Educational reforms in Finland in the 1990s devolved more authority and autonomy to municipalities. One aspect of this shift was that teachers were entrusted with planning their own curriculums and assessments, and state inspections were abandoned. These reforms brought about “a new culture of education characterised by trust between educational authorities and schools, local control, professionalism and autonomy”. Finland has performed consistently well in international student assessments, and its education system is admired around the world.

Questions
- What are the structures that get in the way of giving more decision-making power to those closest to the issue?
- Where would you feel comfortable allowing the people closest to an issue to make decisions?
- How can you empower everyone who works with you, especially those who are more junior, to make important decisions given the right circumstances?
- What success indicators would your team members set for themselves to hold each other accountable for their actions?

How do we relate to one another? Relationships first

The Shared Power Principle embraces human complexity. It acknowledges that we should not seek solutions with the “average” citizen in mind. It demands more bespoke approaches, which require deep and trusted relationships that go beyond mere transactions. This is true for relationships between organisations as well as personal ones. For personal relationships, both those between civil servants as well as those between them and the public they serve are crucial.

Collaborative working

The complexity of many problems requires approaches that bring together different actors and skill sets. In most cases, these are not found within a single organisation or department, but rather across a variety of places. The Shared Power Principle emphasises the fact that collaboration between actors is fundamental to achieving the shared purpose of delivering the best possible outcomes for people. Collaboration is, however, difficult to achieve. It comes with uncertainty, and it requires decision-makers to share power and be open to sharing data, lessons and failures. This is much easier for organisations and people with strong and trusted relationships.

Culture of trust

Strong relationships and trust are the basis of a government and policy’s success. For power to be shared successfully, people and organisations need to trust each other’s motives and capabilities – inside and outside government. Creating space for people to have meaningful conversations and understand each other’s experiences and strengths – rather than just each other’s needs – is an important step in building a culture of trust.

Example

Wigan Council in the north of England has put a radically different relationship with residents at the heart of its “Wigan Deal”. The council has consistently adopted “strength-based” working, seeking to build on the strengths and assets of Wigan’s residents, communities and public servants to improve outcomes. This is a highly collaborative approach, in which voluntary and community sector organisations and local businesses are seen as partners in activities such as health and social care, and are actively supported by the council in developing and improving public services.

This approach has increased healthy life expectancy in the most deprived areas of the borough by seven years, saved the council over £141 million, and increased staff and resident satisfaction – despite lower spending on public services.

Questions

• What do you want the relationships you currently have with the people you work with (from your team to the ministries you serve) to feel like?
• How much time do you spend personally, and how much time do you give others, to build trusted relationships with members of your team, external organisations, and the public?
• What is getting in the way of your effective collaborations with other colleagues and organisations?
• How well do you know your team and what drives them and what they want to be valued for?

The four patterns that characterise the Shared Power Principle

Who is accountable to whom? New forms of governance and leadership

The Shared Power Principle encompasses new forms of accountability. At its heart, accountability is about asking people to account for their actions. Government is accountable first and foremost to the people and communities it exists to serve.16

Given the complexity of the issues governments seek to address, accountability mechanisms should promote conversations and not rely exclusively on numerical reporting. In addition, the notion of accountability is broadened to not only include hierarchically superior individuals and organisations, but also peers and the constituencies those in government are ultimately serving. We are seeing the emergence of more diverse accountability structures that give people time and space to make and discuss decisions.

Alternative governance models
This richer notion of accountability encourages the growth of new governance models that are more participatory. These can take the form of boards with more representation of local and interest groups, in bodies such as schools and hospitals. Another example is peer networks, where similar organisations oversee each other’s work and focus on shared lessons and high-quality services.

Distributed leadership
We are seeing a shift away from traditional, top-down management towards more distributed leadership styles. Good leaders are stewards. They use their knowledge of systems and the various actors involved to steer people towards common goals.

Example
In 1988, the Illinois Senate and House of Representatives changed the governance of the Chicago public schools system by creating 580 local school councils, which are elected by the members of the school community.17 They consist of “six parents, two community members, two school staff persons, and the principal”, and have far-reaching authority over the school’s governance and spending. In this model, the council members are collectively accountable to the school community for any decisions they take.

Questions
• How can you encourage and develop a more rounded sense of accountability, rather than focusing on targets and KPIs?
• Identify who you are accountable to today and who else you interact with. Does this create accountability for the people you serve? How could you change this?
• What steps can you take to ensure greater representation of those you serve in your organisation’s governance structure?

With the Shared Power Principle, we see a strong emphasis on a culture of continuous learning within teams and across different organisations. To create this culture and improve practice over time, new systems and structures capture lessons from local and central government’s successes and failures. This implies that practitioners can access the right levels of support to experiment with different approaches and are given the time and space to learn from existing approaches elsewhere.

**Support systems**

It is difficult to work under conditions of heightened uncertainty. For people to learn and thrive in those environments, they need support from their peers, leaders of their organisation, and higher levels of government. This can include the creation of “communities of practice”, where people can openly share and discuss their achievements and the difficulties they encounter in their work, learn from one another, and ask for support.

**Data sharing**

To enable continuous learning, it is important that data flows freely within the system, so that all the relevant actors can learn from existing practice and collaborate successfully. If spending decisions and outcomes are made transparent, then communities and relevant actors can determine how those decisions affect them.

---

**Thoughtful experimentation**

Experiencing with different approaches to complex challenges is crucial for improvement. To encourage experimentation, governments are starting to build a culture in which failure is seen as an opportunity to learn, and employees are given the permission and space to try out new approaches.

**Example**

The State of Victoria’s public school system in Australia underwent a radical transformation in 2003. The system, which consisted of more than 1,600 schools, 40,000 teachers and 500,000 students was already highly decentralised, giving schools the freedom to make many key decisions independently, but there was a widely held view that there needed to be a cultural change in teachers’ performance and development (P&D). The education minister was keen to achieve that change in a way that respected the each school’s autonomy. The state government provided the supporting environment: it laid out the evidence, provided a clear sense of shared purpose by describing five criteria essential to a strong P&D culture, and encouraged local innovation by giving teachers the freedom to design a P&D approach suited their own circumstances. By 2008, five years into the initiative, 94% of schools had received accreditation from the University of Melbourne for making substantial progress against the five P&D criteria.

---


**Questions**

- Are you making the most of your data by reflecting on the information and sharing it with others who might find it useful?
- Which support mechanisms can encourage people on the ground to experiment with different approaches?
- What can you do to help grow a culture in your organisation that encourages continuous experimentation, embraces “good” failures, and rewards responsible risk-taking?
- In which area of your work could you start experimenting with different approaches tomorrow?

---

Exploring the limitations of the Shared Power Principle

There are good reasons why people may not want to choose what we are describing as the default. There are several domains where concentrating power is perfectly appropriate and indeed very effective. This includes areas with high negative externalities (e.g. pollution), high gains from central coordination (e.g. some climate change action), as well as public goods (non-rivalry and non-exclusionary, e.g. national defence). This also includes the delivery of public services which are transactional and low in complexity (e.g. the issuance of passports or the registration of motor vehicles).

Institutional circumstances, pressures from interest groups and the public, accountability requirements from supervisory bodies, and a relentless news cycle all have also contributed to the concentration of power as a pragmatic answer to some demands.

While legislative and other structural changes might be needed to facilitate the spread of the shared power approach, much can be done within the confines of current systems.

Local councils in the UK, for example, which operate within the boundaries of a highly centralised government system, have demonstrated how the concept of subsidiarity and shared power can radically improve the quality of public services, the relationship between government and citizens and ultimately people’s lives.
Where do we go from here?

This is an attempt to articulate what we have found from speaking with and observing people who are trying out new ways of working in the public sector. We are grateful to everyone who has so willingly shared their experience, expertise and insights with us.

With this discussion paper, we are hoping to contribute to the emerging understanding of these approaches and inspire governments to try out new ways to address the twin challenges of government effectiveness and legitimacy.

To start this journey, there are two things that you can do:

- Share your feedback, opinions and questions on this discussion paper online on Twitter (tag us @CPI_Foundation), email us (info@centreforpublicimpact.org) and comment on the “Frequently Asked Questions about the Shared Power Principle” (https://bit.ly/2RQp2Ca)
- Consider whether this is for you – our questions included in the report might be a starting point for reflection for you and your team
It takes a village…

The ideas behind this discussion paper emerged from numerous interviews, conversations and interactions with practitioners, scholars and experts. We are grateful for their input, feedback and participation in seminars and roundtable conversations. They are listed below in alphabetical order.

While they have shaped our thinking we do not mean to imply that they necessarily agree with the argument presented here (though we know that many do). All errors are, of course, entirely ours.

Finally, we would like to particularly acknowledge the emerging community of organisations, networks and individuals around approaches similar to the Shared Power Principle, and that we have had the pleasure of interacting with. Some of these include:


**Losing Control Network**: A movement for 21st century social change for “people who want to let go of power to unleash social change”. ([https://www.losingcontrol.org/](https://www.losingcontrol.org/))

**New Local Government Network**: Their mission is to work with partners in local and national government and in the public sector to transform themselves in line with the “Community Paradigm”, a new vision for the public sector based upon handing power and resource over to communities. ([http://www.nlgn.org.uk/](http://www.nlgn.org.uk/))

**OneTeamGov**: A global community of civil servants working to “radically reform the public sector through practical action”. ([https://www.oneteamgov.uk/](https://www.oneteamgov.uk/))

Amanda Greene (Lecturer in Political Philosophy, University College London, UK)

Andreas Amsler (Head of Unit, Open Government Data, Canton of Zurich, Switzerland)

Ant Roediger (Managing Director & Senior Partner, Boston Consulting Group, Australia)

Arndt Husar (Advisor, Global Centre for Technology, Innovation and Sustainable Development at UNDP, Singapore)

Berndt Reichert (former Head of Unit, “SMEs in Horizon 2020”, European Commission)

Brendan Martin (Managing Director, Buurtzorg Britain and Ireland, UK)

Chris Eccles (Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria, Australia)

Christian Bason (Chief Executive, Danish Design Centre, Denmark)

Clive Grace (Co-Founder and Director, UK RSC Ltd, UK)

Daniel Thornton (Director of External Relations, Ark Schools, UK)

Donna Hall (Chair, New Local Government Network, UK)

Helen Sanderson (Founder, Wellbeing Teams, UK)

Jon Alexander (Co-founder, New Citizenship Project, UK)

Julian McCrae (Managing Director, Engage Britain, UK)

Dame Julie Mellor (Chair, Young Foundation, UK)

Kate Josephs (Director of National Operations, Department for Education, UK)

Ken Smith (CEO and Dean, Australia and New Zealand School of Government, Australia)

Kit Collingwood (Co-founder of OneTeamGov, UK)

Larry Kamener (Founder, Centre for Public Impact and Managing Director & Senior Partner, Boston Consulting Group, Australia)

Laurent Ledoux (former President of the Executive Committee, Federal Ministry for Mobility and transport, Belgium)

Mandip Sahota (former civil servant working for societal change, UK)

Manoj Srivastava (former member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), India)

Mark Adam Smith (Public Service Reform, Gateshead Council, UK)

Mark Foden (Host of “The Clock and the Cat” podcast, UK)

Matthew Taylor (Chief Executive, RSA, UK)

Paula Villaseñor (Public Policy Specialist, USA)

Sir Peter Housden KCB (former Permanent Secretary of the Scottish Government, UK)

Peter Hughes (State Services Commissioner, New Zealand)

Polly McKenzie (Director, Demos, UK)

Rachel Coldicutt (CEO, doteveryone, UK)

Ruth Kennedy (Founder Director, ThePublicOffice, UK)

Sarah Hurcombe (Director, New South Wales Treasury, Australia)

Terry Moran (former Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australia)

Vera Kobalia (former Minister of Economy, Georgia)

Vicky Pryce (Chief Economic Advisor, Centre for Economics and Business Research, UK)

Vicky Robertson (Secretary for the Environment, New Zealand)
There is an entire universe of reports and books that engage with the topics we touch upon in this note. Below we list a small selection which readers might find interesting and relevant.

**Related CPI publications**


**Books and reports**

- New Citizenship Project. (not dated). *This is the #Citizenshift: A Guide to Understanding & Embracing The Emerging Era of The Citizen*. https://www.citizenshift.info/