

Introduction

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This report examines the ways in which the relationship between central and local government has altered in Britain since the late 1970s. It assesses the view that, during this period, the power of central government has increased and that local authorities' ability to make policy has been reduced. The first part of the report reviews the period up to 1987, commenting on the degree and pace of change. The second part examines the recent changes introduced by central government in legislation which lays down new ways in which local authorities exercise their functions.

A new role appears to be emerging for local government in this later period. The government's intention is that local government should no longer be the sole provider of services such as housing, but should rather 'enable' other organisations to provide them. The model is of a plurality of agencies, rather than a local authority 'monopoly'.

The changes fit into a government philosophy of making local government more cost-effective and more responsive to its consumers. Central government wishes to introduce new forms of accountability between local government and citizens through the community charge and the new roles for schools and housing authorities. Market principles have been introduced, as in contracting services out. The funding of services is calculated more on a per capita basis, and subsidies and policies designed for social or redistributive ends may be curtailed.

The recent central government reforms raise several issues. One is the degree to which they will achieve their ends. Another is the extent to which the trends toward centralisation have continued. There is also uncertainty whether the new 'enabling role' for local authorities promoted by the reforms will leave room for local choice and discretion. Are the reforms leading to the diminution of elected local government or are they restructuring local government to be better adapted to the demands of the 1990s? This report tries to address these issues.