

[The street that didn't cut enough](#) [1]

Written by [Anton Howes](#) [2] | Tuesday 17 May 2011



If you haven't already, you should watch last night's "[The Street that Cut Everything](#) [3]", presented by Nick Robinson. The idea was that a small cul-de-sac in Preston would have all council services withdrawn for six weeks, a council tax rebate given for that period, but that no private money could be spent on replacing the cut services. And therein lay the fundamental flaw: by forcing the residents to supply these services within the limits of their council rebates, all sorts of potential solutions were ruled out.

The most obvious example was when a group of nurses wanted to spend £10 buying their own torches for when the street lighting was shut off. Apparently this was not allowed. If private money could have been used to replace services, any entrepreneur in the area would have jumped at the chance to make a profit providing lighting, or collecting rubbish. But then six weeks for just a handful of households is not enough to merit that kind of endeavour. Instead of rationing public services within strict limits, a whole service industry involving growth and increasing productivity could have been created, particularly if done on a larger, longer-term scale.

The residents were also called upon to devote their personal time to council services. However, this neglects the fact that we have a medium of exchange. Instead of effectively bartering their labour, the reality is that the residents would have used their wages to pay for expert services. It sounds obvious, but this remains a supposed criticism of the Big Society. If people had to devote their time so specifically to everything they needed, most of the things we now take for granted simply would not be feasible. After all, no one person could have made the keyboard I am typing this on!

But then reality would have made bad television. It was far more interesting to force the residents together to form a strong sense of community spirit and also highlight divisions. Huge problems arose surrounding a particular household on housing benefit, but the community still offered to help out. The best outcome however, was for an elderly neighbour who suddenly found herself receiving more personal care than ever before. Above all, the programme demonstrated how government provision of a service crowds out people's personal responsibility for themselves and others: it would be interesting to see the trial repeated without the flaws and cameras.

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