



CIVIC LEADERSHIP

FOR THE NEW CENTURY



Introduction

Following the publication of *Vibrant Local Leadership* in January 2005, ODPM commissioned the Leadership Centre to undertake a series of workshops as a contribution to the debate.

Each of these workshops was held under Chatham House rules. Workshops were held in Bristol, York, London, Manchester and the University of Warwick. Invitees included council leaders and chief executives, academics, other stakeholders in the delivery of local services (police, health etc), political parties, community leaders and members of faith communities as well as representatives from ODPM.

In each of the workshops we explored a set of issues but starting from differing perspectives. However the topics that emerged were remarkably similar across the events.

Overleaf we highlight the major ideas that emerged. In addition to these metathemes, we are also reporting summaries of each of

the workshops, to give a flavour of the depth and individuality of each of the discussions.

The Leadership Centre would like to thank all the participants for the contribution they made – every participant took an active part in the process.

Joe Simpson

Director of Partnerships and Relationships
Leadership Centre

October 2005

Civic leadership for the new century

The overall thrust of the discussions revealed an appetite to engage in new civic leadership roles. The democratic mandate that local authorities have gives them a unique role in local governance – and not just local government.

The 10 issues addressed below might act as a manifesto for this new leadership role.

01

You cannot take the 'p' out of politics

There was a consistent view that a number of government initiatives intended to deliver a 'managerial' solution to political problems. This was not an argument against structural change per se. Rather it was an understanding that politics brings a distinctive aspect to local government that distinguishes it from other local services.

Politics also brings a different dynamic to the authority. Contrast a council with a typical PLC – imagine half the board trying to overthrow the incumbent leadership. It would naturally be seen as a sign of a dysfunctional organisation. In a council it's the norm – in fact it is the role of the opposition.

The corollary of this was a recognition that politicians and political groups (political parties in particular) could not absolve themselves of responsibility. Consequently, rather than assume we can depoliticise politicians, we should perhaps place greater emphasis on working with political groups and within political settings at the next stage of leadership development.

Alongside this was an acceptance that we needed to 'up the ante' on political leadership, both in terms of selection and development.

02

There has been a mismatch between the investment in political and managerial leadership

Over the last 20 years there has been significant investment in management development. Even the Capacity Building Fund has had a predominant focus on building managerial and organisational capacity. The fruits of this investment are becoming evident through the improvement in performance of authorities. However, in contrast, the investment in the development of political leadership has been scant. This is not to decry initiatives such as the Leadership Academy, rather to recognise what little else exists.

Also, and in great contrast to central government, there is still comparatively little support given to leading members while they carry out their roles. Thus while the civil service machine is focused on delivering support to ministers, support for councillors remains very sparse.

03

A new role for backbenchers

Different views were expressed about the cabinet and mayoral systems (some in favour of both and others not so), but there was general recognition that the role of the backbenchers had not evolved well. A better framework, perhaps, would be to think of them as front-line councillors (see also section four on Community Leadership). There was general

acceptance that the scrutiny function had not lived up to the expectations of its advocates (this was not to dismiss the concept, rather to suggest that in comparison with a select committee its impact was patchy). Nor were there now obvious routes for succession development and creating the next tier of political leaders.

04

Think community mediation, not just community leadership

A lot of the early rhetoric about community leadership roles presumes there is some simple identifiable 'community'. The reality of localities is that they comprise many different communities. The leadership role thus involves mediating different interests and making those interests feel that their views and concerns have been heard.

This, in turn, raises the issue of the 'representativeness' of councillors. The latest EO/IDeA survey confirms that councillors

continue to get older, that there is no significant increase in ethnic diversity and that the increase in the percentage of women is very small. We also need to recognise that compared to 20 years ago there are now a number of avenues via which someone can enter into a civic leadership role - and being a councillor is only one of them. Yet we continue to operate a model of selection that presumes there is such abundant interest that political groups are fulfilling a key sifting role.

05

Engagement – the new way to delivery

We have to move from the concept of delivery to a framework of co-design and co-delivery. Real customer focus creates new roles for political and managerial leaders engaging with users. This moves us to outward-facing and engaging roles rather than ones centred within the town hall.

Yet the evidence suggests that, if anything, there is even more focus on the town hall in political life. Councillors now spend significantly less time on civic engagements (such as sitting on school governing bodies, public boards or as members of voluntary organisations) than they did a decade ago.

06

Partnership working is hard work

There was clear acceptance of the need for partnership working and little appetite to return to more traditional ways of working - but partnerships are hard work.

We need greater recognition of the difficulties inherent in sustaining them and a realisation that we need highly developed skills in order to make them work effectively.

07

Communicate, communicate, communicate

Authorities have traditionally placed far too little stress on communications. We need to redress this imbalance. Primarily, recognition of what councils do is critical if citizens are to see councils as central to localities. The next stage

of the local political challenge is to create a narrative or story that helps generate and sustain that sense of locality and belonging. And thirdly, clarity creates confidence - for the workforce as well as the electorate.

08

View through the local perspective

Irrespective of party political allegiance, many local politicians felt they had a lot more in common with other local politicians than with their national counterparts. This was not necessarily because of different beliefs, but in fact the different perspectives - regardless of whether that perspective was a national or local one.

An equally compelling argument was the need for a framework that allowed some central

government-set core standards to be imposed but not so prescriptive as to create barriers. This naturally led us to the different tensions exposed by the "postcode lottery" critique and that of local choice - where opposing political groups can argue for both different priorities and different ways of delivering those priorities.

09

A new political/managerial paradigm

While the selected/elected comparison endures, we need to recognise the reality that officers no longer merely respond to the wishes of local politicians. Chief executives have clear targets imposed on them from central government which have to be delivered, irrespective of which political group is in control of the authority. These workshops have been held in parallel with the SOLACE Commission on managing in a political environment. This theme has, of course, been central to the latter enquiry.

But, in addition to recognising these other pressures, we also need to appreciate that in new externally-facing roles both political and managerial leaders are involved more in influencing than in direct control and command. This therefore places new challenges on both, particularly as each might have emerged through a system that has hitherto valued different attributes. (For politicians, it is often their ability to secure a majority within a political group. For managers, it is their ability to deliver against CPA targets).

10

A new set of conditions for councillors

With these new challenges in mind, there was recognition that we need to look again at the expectations we create for councillors. The move towards cabinet structures has increased the presumption that these effectively will be full-time posts. And, if this is the expectation, then how do we handle recruitment of the next generation of councillors? How do we encourage them to stay

(research indicates that there is an increasing tendency for new councillors to serve only one term)? Are there ways of better combining part-time and full-time roles?

As a counter-balance to this potential “professionalisation” agenda, there was also a strong wish for the role to continue to combine a significant voluntary civic element.

Workshop

London

The London group honed in on the complexity, uniqueness and paradox of the local leadership debate – highlighting the peculiar demands of leading in an environment in which the electorate is ultimately in control and the opposition is intending to undermine and overthrow the current leader at all times.

The politics of management

For leaders, pressures may arise as much from within their own local parties as from the opposition or perceptions of their local electorate. For chief executives, the challenges come from managing local demands and central government requirements and these are likely to become more complex as the community leadership role of local government develops.

Often local politicians like to pretend that their chief executives and their senior officers are there just to serve them. The reality is I spend...more of my time trying to meet government requirements than I do my local council's requirements as indeed do my local politicians even though they are of a different political persuasion, leadership, than central government.

Local authority chief executive

Participants were insistent that the recognition of politics and political difference are crucial to progress in local governance and leadership. The party political dimension to the reality of leadership in a local context is often not reflected in central government literature on developing local governance.

We need to think further about the legitimacy of political parties in the democratic process. Too much of what comes out of Whitehall [denies] the legitimacy of political parties.

Local authority leader

Some participants suggested that there were still things that local government might learn from the private sector in relation to succession management issues caused by the short-term nature of many chief executive and leader relationships.

What happens when it comes to an end? Whether it is the electorate that makes the decision, whether it is some outside force, how do we move on? Maybe that is something we can certainly learn from the private sector, where there has been a different churn for different reasons - perhaps we need to go there for some examples.

Local authority councillor

In the private sector you don't face the situation where [a proportion] of your board are actively trying to drive down your share price and see the executive replaced. You don't have the situation where people who don't want you to succeed have more or less the same access to information and knowledge as the people who are trying to make you succeed... It is not just customers and shareholders...it is government, it is regulators, it is the local electorate, it is other stakeholders and these multiple forms of accountability... We should only be worried about what our electors think...primarily that is what we are concerned about, but not to recognise that the people who we are expecting to deliver have to be actually accountable to a range of other people whose priorities are different and may well conflict.

Local authority councillor

Adapting to the leadership challenge

Participants also suggested that a hallmark of successful leadership was adaptability: the ability to change according to the changes around you. This approach requires self-examination and a willingness to learn new competencies and take on new challenges.

That leadership skill is a continuum and it is about having the greatest, fullest range possible whether it is intellectual and interpersonal drive and ambition or being able to deploy different skills depending on who you are dealing with....

Local authority chief executive

There was considerable agreement that local government leadership would improve with greater clarity and confidence. Indeed, these same qualities of clarity and confidence are also identified as the key difference between the best and the worst within the local government sector.

[There is a] direct correlation between CPA performance and leadership style, with some huge differences between people who do well in CPA and people who do badly. It is not around pay or being nice or anything else, but all around setting clear goals, giving people autonomy, listening to them... If you are first among equals, in a world where you are leading without 'control' then it is about telling the story and having a story that everyone can buy in to.

Research director

Partnership Working

Participants identified that partnership working has exercised local managerial and political leadership in new ways. Local strategic partnerships have acted as a catalyst to a step change in local government and seem to suggest two areas of focus in developing local leadership. On the one hand, reinforcing the messages of clarity and confidence: it is evident that partners are expecting local government to lead, and local leaders must demonstrate this leadership. This role is in keeping with the traditional function of politicians as local, public representatives.

The experience of greater partnership working has led to the recognition that local government must take a strong lead over its local area, simultaneously bringing its partners along with it. This is a key challenge for both leaders and chief executives.

You need... dominant leaders because there are a number of nuts to crack in local government - community safety and the like - which unless you pool together different players will not get solved. Local government is so obviously the group of people to lead on that.

We find that the key thing that people want to learn in terms of new leadership skills is influencing. It is about working through others, not having a command of direct resources at all but managing programmes, pulling together disparate groups in order to deliver working through others and trying to influence to make an agenda happen.

Businesswoman

For the people...of the people...by the people

Concerns about political legitimacy, public trust and community relations have meant that local government leaders have to provide greater community leadership. A key aspect of this discussion was how local political structures relate to local communities where the majority of people do not support the leading party.

*We are now moving away from a leadership model where power is invested in an individual... What **Vibrant Local Leadership** seems to be suggesting to me, is that we are now moving from a political leadership role where power comes from the representative electoral role - as you are not voted into power by a majority of the population... The power justification is moving from that to being able to exercise influence (rather than power) over a range of other power holders who are not there through a democratic route, but who may actually be more representative of the community than the people who have been elected.*

Local authority chief executive

There was also widespread agreement among participants that there is nothing as simple as the community view. Instead, community leadership is about community mediation, taking tough decisions and trying to resolve conflict.

There is almost a philosophical contradiction between aspects of participative democracy and representative democracy. Participative democracy often means fragmentary democracy. It means dealing with a wide range of different interests and pressure groups and needs and demands. It's terribly difficult to see them as a coherent whole.

Local authority leader

Workshop

Bristol

Delegates at the Bristol workshop were particularly concerned with the debate about recruiting and retaining political leaders for the future and identified three pivotal issues: the function of councils, the various roles of councillors, and their reputation amongst partners and the community. And at the heart of this debate were two fundamental views or functions of local government: councils as service providers and councils as community leaders.

Division of labour

Some participants saw an increasing division of political labour between the executive cabinet and backbenchers: with the cabinet focusing on strategic objectives and backbenchers taking on a stronger role in community engagement. This change has further heightened awareness among members of a lack of clarity about what roles they ought to be performing.

[There] is a lack of job descriptions for councillors and the fact that we haven't necessarily a defined set of roles. Partnership is helping us to develop these skills...we developed job descriptions for cabinet members and for our non-executive members but I don't know how many authorities would actually take this approach to setting down the job descriptions for a representative councillor, a cabinet member, a chair of consultative forum?

Local authority councillor

The professionals

The skills required to be a senior member mean that not all councillors have the potential to fulfil these roles, and for some participants this fact suggests the need for more professionalisation of local leadership:

There will be a number of elected members who will never get into the executive cabinet because they don't want to or because they don't have the time or they don't have that particular set of skills. We should recognise that, in my view, and equip them with the skills they need, which means leadership select committee or whatever role and recognise that a number of them will be part-time and will want to do that by fulfilling a fantastically valuable role. Others will have more executive abilities, strategic capability, and they should be paid.

Local authority councillor

Many participants were keen to formalise some elements of the councillor's role and suggested that this process would help to encourage new people to become councillors as well as provide clarity for existing incumbents.

...insisting that they not only stood for their party but they have to demonstrate they had some qualifications, not necessarily written - a qualification by experience perhaps. Some qualification that showed that they could do the particular job seems to me to be self-evident. Job descriptions? Well, yes, of course, why not?

Businessman

Tomorrow's world

A key challenge for local government, and political parties, is to recruit new councillors to become the local leaders of the future. The challenges surrounding councillor recruitment should be seen in the wider context of falling democratic engagement as evidenced by turnout levels in the previous two general elections and a desire for broader participation across local communities.

Significantly, recent MORI research shows that the public continues to be interested in politics and displays often high levels of engagement in civic society. However, given these motivations, very few people decide to become councillors.

One participant suggested that the public probably has greater opportunities today to fulfil a civic or community role outside politics than in the past and this is affecting recruitment.

You can do your civic role without becoming a councillor. Twenty years ago, becoming a councillor, frankly, was the only prominent route for a lot of that because there were fewer civic roles, and very little business social responsibility. There were things you could be involved in such as the Chamber of Commerce, now there's a lot more competition.

Government official

This community leader role may have greater mainstream appeal and non-executive appointments may present a way forward for encouraging broader connection to local democracy across local communities. There is also a challenge for political parties to be more imaginative in the ways that they recruit new councillors and how they retain them.

Lots of young people [have] part time jobs and they're the sort of people who are also locality minded, who could easily be persuaded to become non-executive councillors and even people who are 30 to 40 years old...One of the things we all need to do is to explain [the job of a councillor]...if you want good people you're going to have to advertise for them, and when you get them, you're going to have to look after them better.

Local government researcher

Support for councillors

Participants suggested that local leaders needed more officer support than they currently received.

I think members are appallingly supported compared with even less junior Whitehall ministers. When I first went to local government, I was shocked at how little real support of a party political nature they were being offered in terms of research, advice and so on. I think at the moment you're restricted to one adviser per party. I think that's ridiculous.

Local authority chief executive

Workshop

Manchester

Politics lies at the heart of the leadership of local authorities and an analysis that neglects this vital point will misunderstand the dynamics of local governance, the Manchester group debated.

Managing politics

There's real danger I think that government is trying to adopt a managerial model for local government. It's simply not appropriate to a political process.

Voluntary organisation leader

Engineering political leaders

The political leaders' views on leadership are framed by what is distinctive about their experience of leadership as they see it: democratic election. Their political election is based not just on the electorate itself but all the other stakeholders politicians must satisfy before they are given the opportunity to face the electorate as a leader.

It is also difficult for leaders to plan for political succession and equally precarious for them even to discuss the subject. It's very, very difficult... certainly in local government, certainly in politics... to engineer suitable leaders, and a good leader in one place may be a bad leader in another or vice versa.

Leader

In perfect harmony

One participant emphasised the need for a joined-up leadership development course across the different parts of the local public sector.

More resources for learning and development. One of my major passions is why don't we have leadership across the community? And my passion would be how we can work in harmony together... all the different services and agencies working together.

Academic

Barriers to change

However, there are significant barriers to large sections of the community wanting to be involved directly in political change in their local area.

What bothers me is where is the next generation of leaders going to come from?...How do people develop these skills? You don't do it overnight. I mean I'm horrified by the complexity of the world we've created for ourselves and the amount of learning that people in your position have to do continuously, so hence my question of where is the next generation? How do they pick up these skills?

Academic

I adore politics to my fingertips and wouldn't want to become a councillor because I can do other things that I am passionate about, because I've got forms of public engagement whether it is the chair of governors, or whether it's engaging in art and culture or what have you. There are other options of engaging in civic life than through the democratic process.

Academic

The freedom to act

Leaders and chief executives of well-rated councils want greater freedoms.

Basically...let go...those ministers who would probably say oh we'd love to let go but we don't trust you, or you're not good enough, or some of you aren't, some of you are. The truth is of that is you can take a differentiated approach; get rid of one size fits all. For places where you think they aren't any good would it make it any worse if you did devolve? And the answer is it wouldn't make it any worse there, what it would do is make it better in the places where the right leadership does exist.

Leader

Equally, there is a determination in local government to work positively with central government:

For leaders of big cities we tend to find that on major policy issues we have more in common with each other than we do with any of our respective parties at the national level and there is actually an enormous gulf there between central and local.

Leader

Delivering the goods

There is also a question about how services should be developed locally when the public has voted for one way of approaching local delivery but the legislation means that it is tied to a different set of political priorities.

How do you actually make national imperatives make sense locally? And I'm interested as to whether that's a dilemma for politicians of different political views or not.

Academic

Workshop

Warwick University

The Warwick workshop presented an opportunity for local leaders to discuss the real challenges of political leadership and to reflect on current academic theory concerning leadership.

Wrestling with the debate

Participants were mildly critical of the terms of the debate. The current literature on political leadership seems to skip over the politics, and the impact this has on the dynamic. The centralist views of political change fail to capture the political environment local leaders are working within. Political leadership development must broach this issue.

One of the things that I find about a lot of this and all of the literature that we were sent is that we frequently miss out the raw meat of politics. There are things that go on in politics that never really are reflected in any of the literature.

Local authority councillor

Personal development for leaders

What was still missing from this picture, according to some participants, was a transparent indication through training or assessment that a councillor is competent for their position. There is an important requirement for leaders in opposition to ensure that they have the requisite skills for a transition of political control and service delivery.

But at the moment, there is in industry, for example, mandatory training before people go into planning decisions. It is arguable that some other types of development and associated assessment could be of value. The reality is in my case I was a backbencher one day and the next day running a £4 million authority

Local authority councillor

Political planning in the hands of the public

Local leaders also pointed out that much of the effectiveness of leaders was about knowing when to pass on the leadership role.

I think that sorting out the right person for the right time, precisely because of the difficulty of sorting out leadership elections and trying to guess what's there, inside managerial posts succession planning is already well established. You're not well regarded as a manager if you haven't thought about succession planning and to be honest a lot of politics succession planning is voter led.

Local authority councillor

Let leaders lead

Some participants also pointed out that if local leaders are to lead then the current relationship between central government and local government needs to evolve. For some local leaders, the best way to motivate this change is not through structural changes, but through new freedoms.

What happened then was we had a very small area of responsibility but certainly [in our local area] we did things that we were told we could literally not do and we did them and we laid the foundation for a lot of what now is deemed to be very laudable though at the time people thought it was a bit off the wall. Regardless of what people say or the mechanism and so on and so forth, what we really need in local government is the freedom to be able to get on with doing things and the ability to raise our own money.

Local authority councillor

Workshop

York

The York group highlighted the difficulty in 'exercising sustained leadership' over a locality. By its very nature, delivery to the community required local knowledge and insight, as well as bespoke services for different groups of people.

Participants agreed the partnership arrangements that had arisen in recent years provided a step change for local government and partners. There was also widespread agreement that there was no real thing as a 'community view' and that the literature on community engagement often focused too heavily on consensus as opposed to tough decision-making and community mediation. Significantly, partners were looking to local government to take the lead on local community issues.

Importantly, participants emphasised that at a local level and especially at a very local level diverse communities tend not to agree. This meant the community leadership role becomes more about community mediation rather than consensus-building. Local leaders have to have the skills to operate within these kinds of dynamics with credibility.

What the public really wants

What people want are quality services not choice

Local authority councillor

Transforming communities

For lots of services the public expects high standards – schools, libraries, bins...why should we keep these? Why not focus on social transformation?

Local authority councillor

Defining communities

Some participants said that there were issues in identifying communities within their local area:

Could communities be described as where groups of people were distinctive e.g. better school grades, more pregnancies?

Local authority chief executive

Conclusion

These workshops have clearly demonstrated an appetite for engagement and change by local participants.

I think there are two clear points that have emerged. The first is a need for central government to redirect its next stage of the leadership agenda so that it looks upwards from the perspective of the locality and not just downwards from Whitehall.

Secondly there's a need to balance the enthusiasm for structural changes which have been prevalent in these discussions with an engagement of local political processes.

Joe Simpson
Director of Partnerships and Relationships
Leadership Centre

Workshop

Attendees

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Leadership Research & Development Ltd

Ms Jackie Bagnall

Programmes Manager
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Mr Andrew Barnett

Director - Policy, Development and Communications
Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Prof John Benington

Professor of Public Management and Policy
Warwick Business School

Lord Richard Best

Director
Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Cllr Paul Bettison

Leader
Bracknell Forest Unitary Authority

Cllr Malcolm Blanksby

Independent
Wycombe District Council

Councillor Ken Bodfish OBE

Leader
Brighton & Hove City Council

Cllr Allen Brett

Leader of the Council
Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council

Mr Mike Broussine

Bristol Business School
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Cllr Stuart Caddy

Leader of the Council
Burnley Borough Council

Ms Janet Callender

Chief Executive
Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council

Ms Sally Cantello

Chief Executive
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Mr Ian Caulfield

Chief Executive
Warwickshire County Council

Sir Chris Clarke

E-Government Implementation Manager
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Mr Colin Cramphorn

Chief Constable
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Mr Hamish Davidson

Chairman
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Mr Jonathan Evans

Head of Human Resources
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Mr Peter Fell

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Cllr William Forsyth

Leader of the Council
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Mr John Foster

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Mr Nick Gurney

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Mrs Cheryl Miller CBE

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Director of Corporate Personnel & Development
Essex County Council

Councillor Dame Sally Powell

Cabinet Member for Regeneration
Hammersmith and Fulham Council

Workshop

Attendees

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Deputy Mayor
Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council

Ms Ann Reeder

Head of Local Government
Labour Party

Ms Angie Robinson

Chief Executive
Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce

Cllr Barbara Ronson

Leader of the Council
Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council

Cllr Keith Ross

West Somerset District Council

Councillor Bryony Rudkin

Leader of Labour Group
Suffolk County Council

Mr John Savage

Executive Chairman
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Mr David Slater

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Cllr David Sparks

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Mr Tony Travers

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