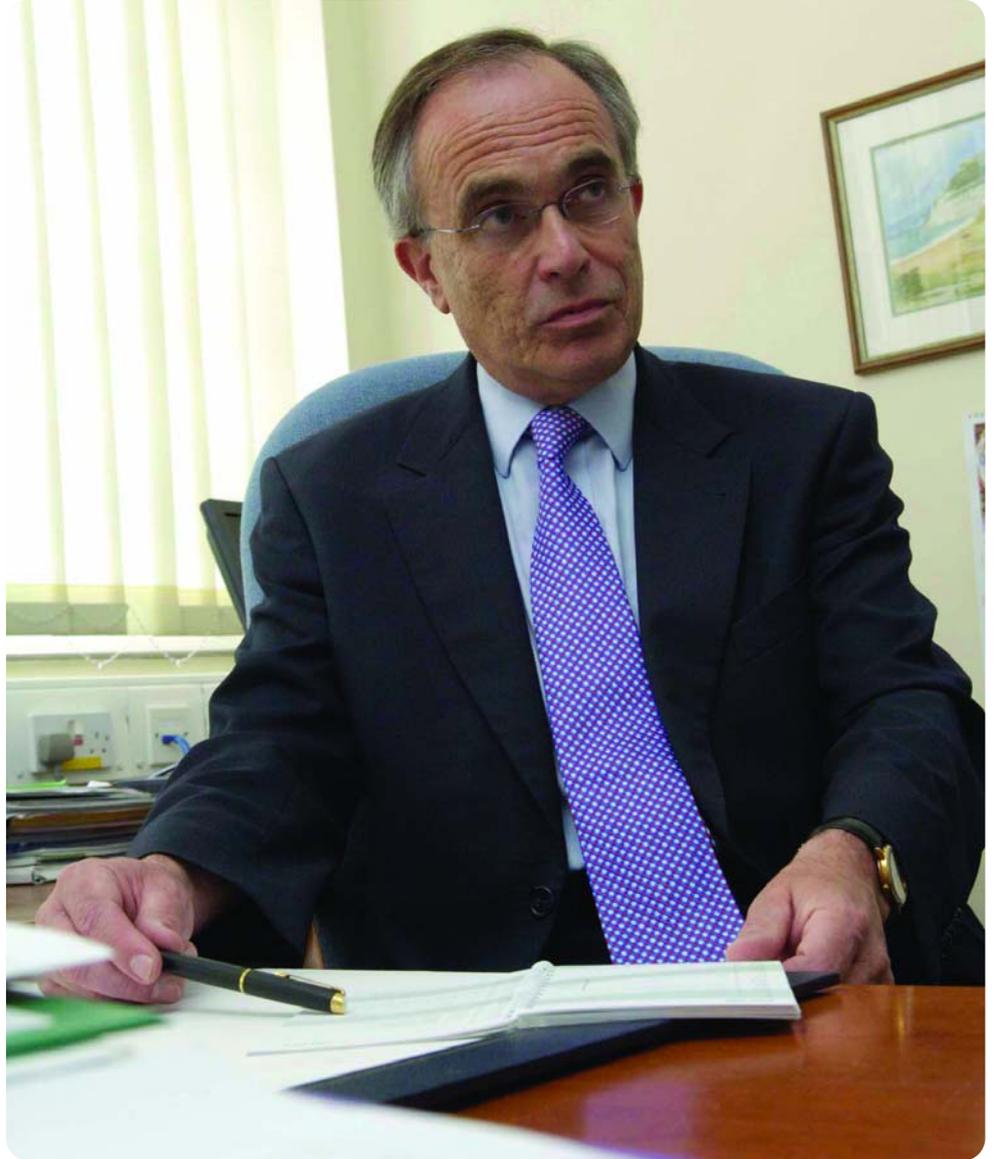


The Dorset experience

Helping county and districts lead together



Leadership in local government is changing
it is no longer just about leading an authority,
however big and complicated it may be.



David Jenkins, chief executive of Dorset County Council



Leadership Centre for local government

Today it is about leading a whole locality, what we at the Leadership Centre call 'leadership of place'.

What we mean by this is that the role of local government has evolved from that of traditional service delivery to one of offering leadership across all the different public service bodies and agencies that operate in an area.

In short, chief executives and leaders no longer lead just their own authority, but instead lead and represent their entire city, town or county. And by any measure that's a seismic shift.

This change hails an enormous opportunity for local government to play the lynchpin role in transforming their communities for the better - with the potential for improving the quality of their residents' lives in a way that perhaps has never been so attainable before.

'Chief executives and leaders no longer lead just their own authority, but instead lead and represent their entire city, town or county.'

This change brings its own mountain to scale – not least the pressing need to develop the skills to lead outside a person's authority.

Developing the necessary relationships to do this is no easy job, even in unitary authorities where there is just one political leader and chief executive operating in the relative comfort of being the only democratically elected authority around.

In a county, who leads is an altogether much more complicated issue. There may be as many as 20 different authorities who might need to work together in one county area, including the county council itself, the districts and any unitaries attached to the county boundaries. Bringing all these voices to the table, and getting them to agree to a common agenda, is hard. Traditional suspicion and rival ambitions, made worse by government reorganisations – both past and future – take work to overcome.

Yet if the authorities in a two-tier area can't put their differences aside and unite around a common agenda, the chances of them really being able to address the bigger issues that face the wider community in their area are very slim.

Developing this leadership of place is a priority for the Leadership Centre: the future of Local Area Agreements, the effectiveness of local strategic partnerships – the delivery of the best services to local people depend on it.

How can the Leadership Centre help?

The following case study is an example of how our expertise can act as the catalyst for a more united area-wide approach.

Dorset is a very good example of an area which, while understanding the need for all the authorities to work together, welcomed an outside resource to make that happen, to pull people together and create a common agenda. Read on to find out how the Leadership Centre helped the seven authorities involved reach a common sense of purpose.

The Leadership Centre The Dorset experience



Angus Campbell, new leader of Dorset County Council



Leadership Centre for local government

In most people's judgement, Dorset – the county and the six districts within it – is an area with a tradition of good county-district working. There is already good inter-personal cooperation and trust among the seven chief executives and leaders, and its strategic partnership is considered by government to be a very good example of such a partnership. On the basis of that, it was awarded a Local Area Agreement pilot project, in which districts are partners.

'In a multi-tier area, authorities can only lead with an awareness of the context in which they exercise leadership.'

Yet both the county and the districts recognised that though plenty of positive work had been done to build good relations and to work together, there was scope to do more to really tackle the issues facing Dorset – and to sign up to a shared understanding of what those issues were.

So when Dorset County was approached by the Leadership Centre with a proposal to sharpen its leadership, David Jenkins, the county chief executive, felt it was vital that it was done in collaboration with other areas of public service delivery in Dorset. 'In a multi-tier area like Dorset, it is a mistake to look at strengthening leadership in individual organisations removed from the public service context – authorities can only lead with an awareness of the context in which they exercise leadership,' he says.

This view was shared by his then leader, Tim Palmer, plus the chair of the DSP Simon Raynes, and the chief executives of the six districts. Tom Grainger, chief executive of Weymouth and Portland, puts the district perspective: 'The CPA of 2004 identified the need to improve the political leadership in four out of the six Dorset districts,' he says. 'As districts we needed to work out what we could do by ourselves and what needed to be done together to successfully tackle the issues in the locality.'

The Leadership Centre was happy to assist in building the leadership capacity of the seven authorities together, and employed Steve Leach, professor of local government at De Montfort University, to work with them to assess what the issues were they needed to address county-wide, and how they needed to develop the combined skills to do that.

In order to be able to make a difference in Dorset, however, what was crucial was the top-level commitment the process would receive. It was managed by a steering group of the leader and chief executive of the county and a district leader and chief executive, who met on a number of occasions to push the process along. There was also a real willingness among all the participants to work together and to put local people first. This was helped by Professor Leach's approach of focusing on solutions rather than problems.

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By talking individually to all the chief executives and leaders of the seven authorities (Dorset County Council, North Dorset, East Dorset, Weymouth and Portland, West Dorset, Christchurch and Purbeck), Steve was able to build up an impression of the issues and the common agenda. 'It was a deceptively simple exercise,' says David Jenkins.

'In partnership working leadership needs to be exercised through negotiation, bargaining and networking skills, rather than through hierarchical control.'

'In reality, Steve did little more than hear what people had to say, synthesise the information and mirror it back to us. But it focused our attention on the concerns and reservations of the county and the districts and it had a very powerful effect on us all.'

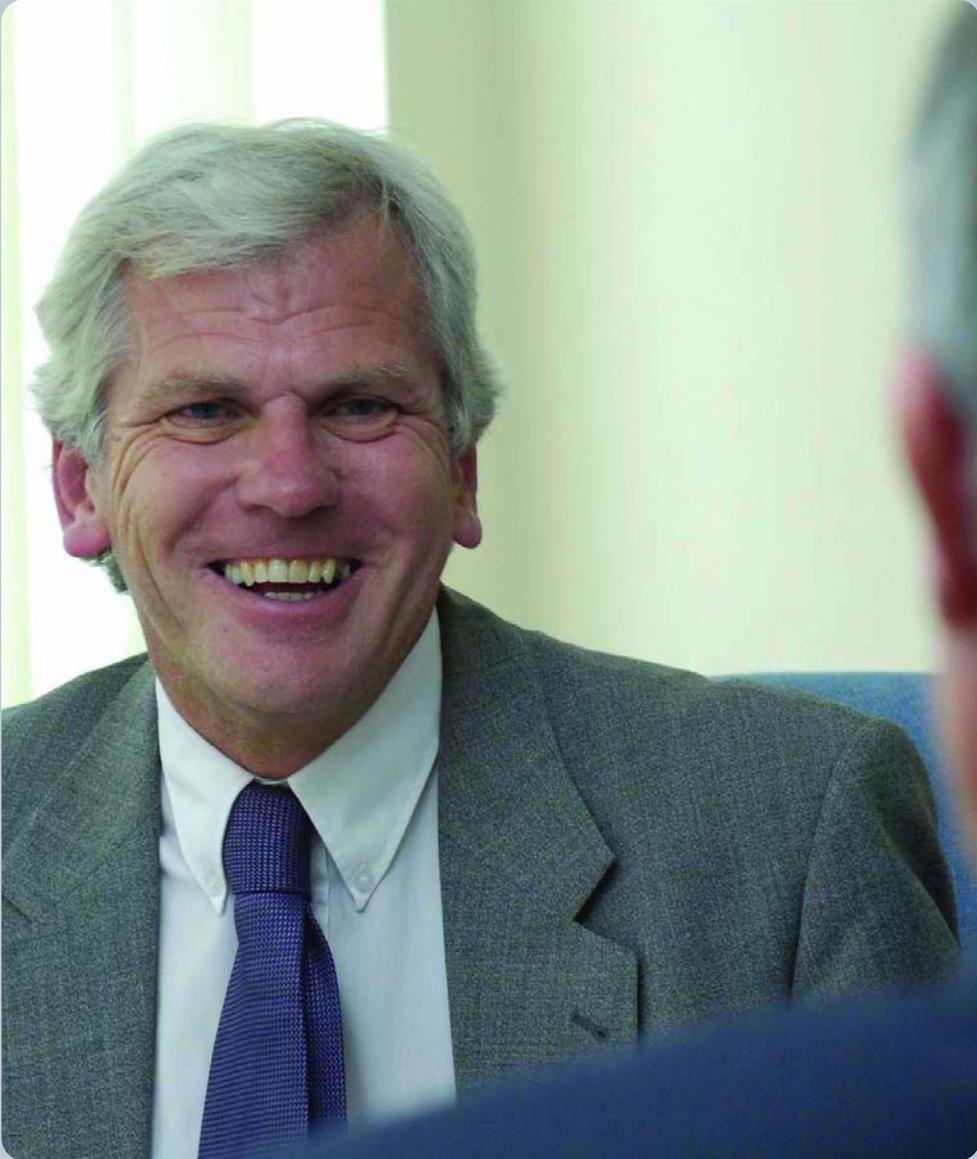
David Whitehead, leader of North Dorset district, agrees: 'Professor Leach was a great listener who encapsulated the issues well, and came to very sound conclusions with which we could all agree.'

'People often ask, "why do we need leadership?"' says Steve Leach. 'Well, what I found in Dorset is a good example that answers the question. It is important to recognise the difference in leadership required in a partnership. Ordinarily the emphasis in local government is on strong decisive leadership exercised by individuals with vision and charisma. But in partnership working, where no one leader can insist that his or her particular priorities be adopted, leadership needs to be exercised through negotiation, bargaining and networking skills, rather than through hierarchical control. That requires openness by all participants and pursuit of a common purpose.'

'There were lots of good things going on in Dorset – people meeting and talking – but there were also perceived to be a number of tensions that were preventing the authorities from making real headway in forming a county-wide agenda and acting on it.'

The tensions between the districts and county council in Dorset are similar to those in many other counties: there risks being a perception at county level that districts are small-scale organisations struggling to find a role, and find it hard to see the big picture, while the districts can see the county as aloof and unresponsive to community needs. Steve is at pains to stress that these were perceptions rather than facts, but that even as perceptions these tensions needed bringing out in to the open.

Other tensions revolved around government reorganisations, both the previous one in the mid-1990s and the potential reorganisation being talked about now, with different unitary options within Dorset causing suspicion of each other's ambitions.



Tom Grainger, chief executive of Weymouth and Portland District Council



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Leadership Centre for local government

Perhaps more unique to Dorset are the challenges the county as a whole faces over the next decade or two: there is a distinctive and urgent strategic agenda facing the county which provides a clear basis for collective action – a rise in the number of retired people, second home owners and outward commuters combined with a lack of affordable housing is threatening a demographic time bomb in the county as local people move away, businesses have difficulty in attracting employees and the gulf between income groups grows, threatening Dorset's economy and well-being.

'Steve's work with us left less room for anyone to hide from the pull towards collaboration.'

These issues were not unknown, nor misunderstood by any of the participants – not only do they form the first part of the Dorset Community Strategy, but to a greater or lesser extent they were the main issues faced by each of the authorities individually. What was missing was collective leadership on the issues – a sense that it was possible to act collaboratively and make a difference. There was also a lack of understanding of what each of their roles needed to be in taking the agenda forward.

'What Steve managed to do was help strengthen the common sense of purpose in Dorset. His work with us all left less room for anyone to hide from the pull towards collaboration, and caused people to address explicitly the issues that need addressing in relationships,' says David Jenkins.

'Steve articulated some of the unsaid,' agrees Tom Grainger. 'He got people facing the same way. Everyone knew that the issues were about affordable housing and older people, but I don't recall it being articulated so clearly in a cross-county forum before. Steve's work with us reinforced the agenda and made us realise it was a top-line priority.'

One of the things that all the participants commented on was the momentum that had been created by Steve's work with the authorities: 'He got people around the table and we've all agreed to take the work forward in partnership,' says David Whitehead.

'There are still issues to resolve, particularly around the Dorset Strategic Partnership which is too big and lacks focus, but as it is the best way of extracting money from central government, we've got to learn how best to use it.'

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Leadership Centre for local government

Steve's work was just the diagnosis of the problem. Once all the authorities had signed up to a common agenda, and understood what was holding them back, Steve took his leave. Now it is up to the seven authorities themselves to make sure that the work they have embarked on with the Leadership Centre does in fact lead to real changes for the people of Dorset.

'The Leadership Centre's work with us has helped us develop a framework for future action that would have been very difficult to create without the centre's inspiring intervention.'

In the medium term that means working with an adviser from the Leadership Centre to draw up a programme of leadership development that will extend the leadership capabilities of the Dorset authorities, and that will help embed the co-operative and communicative approach that has been developed in each of the member authorities.

But some immediate next steps have been decided to keep the momentum going. These include a facilitated meeting of the seven chief executives using Steve Leach's report as a starting point, which will look at where they should be going with the LAA.

This will be followed by an away-day for the management teams of all seven authorities to take stock of the range of collaborative projects and the LAA in which they are all involved. They are also talking about funding a post for a dedicated person to work on the joint development agenda to bring together various strands, and to keep everybody working towards it. Part of the funding for this may be supplied by the Leadership Centre.

The negotiation of the reward element of the LAA has created another opportunity for authorities in Dorset to take forward joint working.

'The Leadership Centre's work with us has helped us develop a framework for future action that would have been very difficult to create without the centre's inspiring intervention,' says David Whitehead. 'Because it's brought the different views out in the open, we now have a better chance of achieving more for the people of Dorset. It's now down to us to take things forward – and we are highly motivated to do so.'

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