

International Journal of Applied HRM

Volume 1 Issue 3

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The Relationship Between Local Government Councilors and Senior Managers in a Period of Change

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ISSN 1742-2604

Abstract

Local government over the last few decades has moved away from institutional authority embodied in the structures of councils towards more complex networks of local governance. Local government has been at the centre of wider processes of restructuring aimed at modernising the local welfare state. Underpinning the changes that have faced local government in the creation of new forms of governance has been a series of assumptions about welfare and how it is best delivered.

The movement away from power and authority drawn from council structures has implications for managers seeking to implement policy in their relationship with councilors. This study found that senior managers in local government experienced perceived ambiguity and loss of direction as a result of the multi-faceted nature of the new forms of governance.

Introduction – Re-shaping the Local Welfare State

The last 25 years have seen continuing attempts to re-imagine and reshape the British welfare state. Since the election of the Blair government in 1997 a wide range of initiatives has been launched joined under the overall banner of ‘modernisation’ (Finlayson, 2003). The moves to re-define citizens as consumers or customers, as providers as well as receivers of care, as having responsibilities as well as rights, has affected local government (DTLR, 2001). In the new model local government, it becomes increasingly difficult to relate the old committees and sub-committees structures of representative democracy to the new managerial structures. As Lowndes (1999) argues,

‘many “new management” developments . . . were destabilising power relations within the locality . . . New approaches to local governance management were . . . restructuring constraints and opportunities for the exercise of local democracy and citizenship’ (Lowndes, 1999: p.37).

This quotation reflects the development of new political institutions in local governance as reflected in the modernisation proposals and infers that new management structures should complement those political structures (DTLR, 2001). New managerialism is therefore a key driver for political change at local level (Stewart, 2003). Hopefully, this means that the new forms of ‘leadership’ will cause a repeat of the narrow political battles of the past, either for senior managers or for elected politicians (Clarke, 2004). So the idea behind the modernisation programme that the strategic and executive management of local authorities should be improved by the greater involvement of Councillors appears to have produced little conflict with senior managers (Newman, 2001).

For the most part the greater involvement of councilors and, through Best Value, the community in the workings of local government services has supported the successful delivery of a range of community strategies, education development plans, local transport plans and a local performance plans (DTLR, 2001). The Best Value (BV) process has also created a continuous feedback on the quality, quantity and projected need of the local community for services to be received (Clarke, 2004).

Assets of New Local Governance

1	Strong leadership for local communities
2	Powerful roles for all councillors
3	High standards throughout local government

A New Relationship Between Managers and Councillors

The modernisation of local government under the Labour government of 1997 reveals a re-emphasis of accountability through the greater involvement of Councillors in the quality and quantity of services (DETR, 2001). To ensure that the conflict inherent in the officer/councilor relationship does not re-emerge in the new local government steps have been taken to re-define clearly roles and responsibilities and appropriate behaviour. Councils have been required to introduce a protocol following the Local Government Act 2000 seeking to ensure that councilors and officers have a productive working relationship characterised by mutual respect, informality and trust (Stoker, 2004). The protocol gives guidance on respective roles, on what they may expect from each other, and on what to do on the occasions when things go wrong. This Protocol must be read in the context of the Councils Constitution. Whilst the protocol does not form part of the councils constitution, the council in many cases has authorised their standards committee to consider alleged breaches of this protocol by councillors with the chief executive to take appropriate action where an officer is alleged to have breached the protocol. Such conflict as there has been has been because the modernisation agenda has not clarified and defined members roles and responsibilities at the heart of the change agenda as they were intended (Corry, 2003). Modernisation became, at one point, excessively technocratic and officer focused, over-influenced by the new public management theories. In truth a local authority will work best when its elected members are skilled enough, and understand the context in which they are working sufficiently, to provide the community leadership and connection to its locality (Corry, 2003).

There is also greater contact between service providers and the local electorate through the consultation machinery that forms part of the new Best Value regime (Finlayson, 2003). It has proved true, so it seems, that political processes and management processes need not be opposed to each other and do not need to be separated (DTLR, 2001). Effective management of local councils is now grounded in the purposes and conditions of local governance and the political process sets the purposes and focus of local government and its services (Keen and Scase, 1998). Whereas, before the political process was considered a constraint on management in local government and management appeared to have its own separate purposes and conditions, it is now no longer so (Keen and Scase, 1998; Stoker, 2004).

Frustration and Conflict – The Past Revisited

Clearly, in the past, trying to manage a local authority as if it were not a political institution lead to frustration and conflict between councillors and officers creating bad management because it denied the true nature of local government as community lead (Atkinson, 1999). It has proved meaningless to argue that management would be much more effective were it not for the political process, because it is through the political process that effectiveness is both defined and judged (Clarke and Newman, 1997). So the challenge for management in local government is to support the political process and recognise that it embodies a political-management system in which the political and management processes are intertwined (Clarke and Newman, 1997). If this thesis is accepted then clearly, any

alternative approach, which isolates management, to the particular responsibility of officer/managers, for example, will lead to frustration because management cannot be isolated from the political process. And attempts now to do so will create friction and conflict (Clarke, 2004). The aim now for local councils is the effective management of the authority and its services in accordance with political purpose and for that objective to be successful the councillor must play a role in management.

Overview of the Research

The research consisted of a postal survey aimed at the head of legal services or his/her deputy of 200 local councils representative of different types and locations. A senior figure was required because it was thought they were best placed to comment on corporate relations between officers and councillors. The survey was followed by interviews with ten of their number. The response rate was 60 per cent being 119 councils. Such a large sample was believed necessary so that a meaningful model incorporating the widest possible number of views could be produced, in confidence, identifying commonalities between those sources. By using a survey methodology and a large population, the possibility of an atypical source or sources providing misleading information was eliminated.

This information is shown below:

Men	Women	Total
87	32	119

The demographics within the survey show the population of chief legal officers in local government to be both stable and secure in terms of their employment status with the majority with more than ten years service with their current employing council.

The Perception of Officers in Local Government on Councillors involvement in Management (N=119)				
Measure of management role	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Conscientious about involvement in management role	18	70	22	9
Putting a party political interpretation on the management role	69	39	5	6
Having more say in operational management of the Council	53	48	12	6
Devolving more responsibilities to officers	6	61	45	7
More likely to refuse the advice of officers	2	56	58	3
Growing conflict between political and managerial (councillor and officer) roles in the management of the council	67	23	28	1

The findings of the survey show manager/officers saw elected councillors as involved in their new management roles, more often than not. However, how the management role operated was coloured by political considerations. The officer/managers indicated that councillors had extended their involvement beyond their designated strategic role into an operational role. The trend of the 1980s and 1990s to devolve responsibility to officers was, according to the interviews commenting on these overall findings, gradually reversing with councillors taking more operational power

back into their own hands. This was accompanied by a growing number of instances where officer/manager advice was ignored in preference to councilor-lead decision-making. Overall there was a perception that instances of conflict between councillors and officer/managers arising from the new roles and responsibilities of councillors was rising.

Discussion of the Findings

The new model local government, from the view of the officer managers involved in this study, has not yet removed the '...destabilising power relations within the locality ...' of earlier years (Lowndes, 1999: p.37). The new forms of 'leadership' while not tied into the narrow political battles of the past between senior managers and elected politicians still is seen by senior manager/officers as undesirable. The new roles and responsibilities trespassing as they do into the area which has always been the power base of the local government professions. This is the area where they decide the level and type of services the council provides to the local community it serves. Clearly, from the interviews the majority of manager/officers believe that the political processes and management processes should be separated.

They see effective management of the council, certainly at operational level as grounded in the purposes and conditions of local government not those decided by the political process. The interviewees reason that the partisan aspect of the political process is a constraint on management in local government and that the only way there can be equality, cost-effectiveness and fairness in service provision is to manage the council as if it were not a political institution. The manager/officers know that this view is likely to lead to frustration and conflict between councillors and officers, but they believe that political management is not effective because the local political process that defines effectiveness does not have a clear mandate from the local community. The interviewees express the view that local elections have both poor turn-outs and that voting patterns are determined by national political issues not local ones. In addition local political opinion amongst the electorate may not reflect the needs of a sizeable minority in the local community.

The interviewees suggest that challenge for management in local government is to ensure the political process underpins community needs so that there is continuity and consistency in service provision. The managers interviewed accept that there is now a clear political-management system in which the political and management processes are intertwined, however, where officers are strong enough, the extent and nature of the councillor's role will be contained. In other places the councillors role will vary with each stage in the management process, from positions where councillors are seen to determine the policy of the authority, while officers carry out the work of operational management, to situations where the lines are not as simply defined as that.

There are extremes, such as West Berkshire Unitary Authority, where no chief officers are employed by the council, to traditional councils where outsourcing has not taken place and all staff remain employees of the council. Despite these extremes, while councillors seem to accept that they determine policy, this does not mean that officers play no part in the policy process, and in some areas have no set themselves on a different course to members.

Officers, according to those interviewed, play a major role in the formulation of policy, preparing information, listing options and giving professional advice, shaping the councillors agenda and the decisions taken by councillors.

Councillors in many councils determine the framework within which management operates and monitor the results of departmental performance within the Best Value framework. As councillors have become more concerned with how services are delivered, in recognition of the CPA, Beacon and stars rating process, councillors have translated their legitimate concerns with policy into a concern about how policy is carried out, for in implementation policy succeeds or fails.

Ongoing Conflict or an Armistice of Sorts

It has long been the case that local authority senior managers and elected members have found points of conflict in determining in defining those issues which are purely managerial and those which are strategic. Certain issues arise based on conflicts in role, between the chief executive who is required in statute to manage the authorities operational matters and those office holders amongst the elected members who have the authority to determine matters in the name of the employer, the body corporate. The determination of the line between the responsibilities of officers and councillors has proved on occasion to be difficult to define.

Conflict, in a ritualistic sense, could always be found in the elected members committee role where councillors seek to gain a greater degree of involvement in the operational management of the authority than their role should allow, through the scrutiny of officers decisions and behaviour. The interaction between members and officers has often been deemed to be one of conflict based on the officers preoccupation with the legitimate and legal provision of service which have been different from the elected members policy initiatives which do not take account of the cost, legal or service development limitations on the council. Certainly this conflict is believed by those interviewed to have caused rifts between elected members and officers during the modernization process. Those interviewed feel that many members see officers as blocking their greater involvement, and consequently members seek to punish officers by seeking to reduce their status and involvement in policy development or even seeking to remove them through privatization, outsourcing or shared service arrangements. It has also been suggested by some interviewees that the degree of delegation of authority to officers plays a part in the degree of member involvement.

Where members have been heavily involved in management processes, officers encouraging radical delegation and devolution of responsibility, particularly financial responsibility, too officers, has caused members to focus on outcomes rather than functions or processes themselves. Authorities under financial or performance pressure seem more inclined to have elected members seeking to impose their notion of service priorities and alternative means of service provision over those of the officers involved. This is a common feature in larger authorities, such as County Councils, which are struggling with the funding of their social services and education provisions. As one interviewee stated

More involvement is occurring in what was and usually is a hands off organisation, this is mainly, but not solely, due to the increasing financial and performance pressures on the authority which are calling for more efficiency savings

Another officer identifies a change of administration as the source of greater involvement, but identifies that the approach adopted by the members and the style of that involvement, has caused less confrontation with officers

The different aspirations of political groups explains the involvement at different levels between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Following a change in administration when the Conservatives came too power there was far too much, the current Liberal Democrat arrangement is about right.

In balanced councils the removal of one party rule appears to have had the effect of preventing conflict between officers and members over questions surrounding the degree or level of involvement. One interviewee suggests that

Now we have a Labour and Liberal Democratic alliance we have no problems over involvement in operational management, they are heavily involved but reasonable in that involvement. When the Conservatives were in power five years ago they were as similarity involved as the present regime, but much less conciliatory. It may be that the balance of power, rather than absolute control produced a more conciliatory response, or that the political ethos of the current controlling parties is more staff friendly

The importance of 'staff friendly' councillors is an issue that arises in almost all the interviews held, and although the Conservative administrations receive the least favourable reports, the involvement of the other political parties and independent councillors in staff related management issues is far from rare. Certainly, should an officer openly oppose or be perceived to hinder the members approach to radical changes in staffing related to service provision the issue can be resolved by members forcing that officer out of the authority.

Anecdotal evidence of such situations amongst those interviewed along with stories of personal confrontation with members abound. This is especially the case where the member led introduction of consultants employed as strategic partners to investigate the efficiency of council services has taken place. While, the prospect of shared services, outsourcing or private-public partnerships has proved an increasingly contentious subject between members and officers in all authorities. The approach taken by non-Conservative authorities has been the least abrasive, with officers being allowed to shape arrangements in such a way as to enable some in-house services client functions to survive.

It appears from the comments of different officers that they have varying experience of working relationships with elected members, some relationships being more successful than others, those officers with long tenure report the lowest degree of accommodation between themselves and members often because they question the appropriateness of political-management in terms of local governance and accountability. Those officers interviewed report that some councillors accept or even ask for advice readily, others are less willing to seek or accept advice.

Even the reluctance of members to move against firm and strong advice from the officer body is under challenge with a range of alternative sources of advice available both from various bodies promoting modernization to local and national politically based pressure groups.

There is no longer a dependency on local advice on managing modernisation even from the chief executive although he or she still holds the statutory authority to arrange partnership agreements etc., as part of the modernization process. The reason for this lack of dependency on officers is one of self protection, as one officer states

I find members are less insistent on receiving officer advice before taking a serious decision than they were five years ago because they have far more sources of advice and often have the backing of government departments and agencies using the example of other councils here or abroad. Although advice is asked for, they have the political will to go against it, and do not fear the cost of experimenting with new forms of service delivery in search of performance improvement or cost savings.

Many councilors are pushing the legitimate authority to its fullest extent although their powers to influence and control change within the council and beyond into the local community have increased. Partnerships with other statutory and voluntary bodies are common place and widely encouraged by government allowing councilors to consider working arrangements in service provision beyond the experience of their officer advisors. One officer states that

Members are still cautious about officer advice, but it tends to depend on the issue. Service delivery issues provoke most difficulty, although this varies between individual members. As members involvement in management issues increases, I have noticed that they have a greater tendency to question officers judgement particularly of course where the political and management of services agenda's don't inter-relate and this is especially noticeable on staffing issues

The matter of trust between officer and counselor arises in situations like this where members may be ageing a pathway for services to be delivered in the future which means the redundancy or transfer of staff to another employer which directly affects even the senior council officers

As one chief described:

Generally, any advice from anyone with knowledge in these situations will be treated as suspect with the advice from external agencies or councilors in other authorities which have made the change deemed as accurate. I fell out with the leader of my previous authority who was unwilling to heed advice, and in one case he ordered me not to give specific advice caution him on the impact on services of merging services with a commercial organisation, I was forced to ignore that instruction

The danger of such situations is reported by most of those interviewed. Such disagreements are known by the officers to be a risky business, as one officer states:

Officers in local government are not usually the inspiration behind policy ideas such as outsourcing services. Differences on service provision in the future now causes disagreements with members. Policy issues, apart from those concerning finance or performance matters, are not, in my experience, common grounds for disagreement, at least in the open. Open disagreements with members on policy matters is a dangerous activity for any local government officer

The modernising culture of local authorities has changed the attitude of some elected members towards officers even when they have worked together or even been friends for several years. Interviewees report a new sense of political-management power amongst members based on a feeling that they, meaning the Council, can achieve substantial change and better services. Many of those interviewed

suggested that the conflict or at best rivalry between members and officers over who controlled the authority and who was acting in its best interest and that of the local community had entered a new phase with councilors very much in the ascendancy.

Conclusion

The greater involvement of Councillors in determining and monitoring the quality and quantity of services has created conflict in the officer/councillor relationship despite the steps taken to re-define clearly the roles and responsibilities of both groups and to ensure that all parties demonstrate appropriate behaviour towards each other (DETR, 2001). Such conflict as there has been has been because the modernisation agenda has not clarified and defined members roles and responsibilities at the heart of the change agenda as they were intended (Corry, 2003). The officers interviewed for this study agree that the modernisation process became, for a time, excessively technocratic and officer focused. The cause of this was the strong influence given to officers by the new public management theories which had instilled in them their right to manage (Corry, 2003). In many respects this conflict continues with the political processes and management processes opposed to each other with stresses and strains to keep them separated coming from officers (DTLR, 2001). Often this inability to control services and a lack of trust in officers has caused councillors to seek outsourcing so that a commercial contractual relationship replaces the employment relationship between councillors and officers. With such an arrangement the perception held by councillors is that effective control is restored over services. If this trend continues the effective management of local councils will be combined and integrated in the political process which will set the purposes and focus of local government and its services (Keen and Scase, 1998).

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