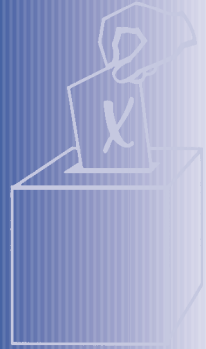




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LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT
RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Research Summary

Continuity or change? Officers and new council constitutions

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Introduction

In December 2001, INLOGOV, University of Birmingham, were commissioned to work in collaboration with ODPM's Local Government Modernisation Team, to undertake an exploratory study of the implications for officers of new council constitutions, in particular executive forms. The study commenced with a review of the literature relating to the impact on officers of new council constitutions together with an assessment of the wider environment in which new council constitutions were being introduced. Briefing papers were then used as the basis for a further roundtable discussion in January 2002 and exploratory discussions with a small number of practitioners. The study also reflects wider observations from the then ongoing ODPM research on overview and scrutiny and a key academic involved.

The report is intended to aid the understanding of policy makers in central and local government and to stimulate debate and identify ways in which the issues

identified can be tackled. More broadly, the report aims to stimulate discussion on some of the tensions and opportunities facing officers as a result of recent changes in local government and its wider context. It is produced as an independent report and does not necessarily reflect the views of Government.

CONTEXT

The place of local government officers has been brought into new relief as a result of changes arising from the introduction of new council constitutions, but also other developments in the environment of local councils. This creates a renewed debate about officer roles and responsibilities, their relationships with executive members, other councillors and the community at large. It poses questions about the design of the top officer structure, especially in those councils with a directly elected mayor – but also where there is a powerful leader. And there are issues about the maintenance of a unified officer structure in the face of the executive/scrutiny divide.

The underlying debates about officer roles are not new. It has been a consistent theme in local government over the decades. However, during the past twenty years, the public management reform movement and developments in individual councils have shaken some of the traditional assumptions underpinning the officer role – especially in terms of their relationship to the whole council where there is a strong political leadership.

Identifying New Roles

The emerging environment is creating two officer roles which differ from those in the past. We term these:

- Council custodian – managing the internal constitutional processes of the council, responding to external and internal challenges to policy and practice, and having a primary relationship to the executive.
- Community enabler – engaging in a more political (small ‘p’) relationship with interests in the community, and in some ways undertaking roles traditionally adopted by members.

New council constitutions, the growth of full time executive members and the performance and inspection regimes are pushing towards the council custodian role. In contrast, the democratic renewal agenda, partnership working and neighbourhood approaches are stimulating the community enabler position.

Within councils the emergence of these roles is reflected in an increased pace of change in officer arrangements and some challenges to the principle of a unified officer structure. The rigid departmental structures traditional in local authorities are now beginning to break down and are being replaced by much more flexible arrangements. A number of authorities are now beginning to think about changes at officer level in a whole-organisation way.

Officers at middle and front-line service delivery levels are being exposed to a wider range of interactions and agendas. They are finding themselves at the heart of the delivery agenda, and are having to forge new ways of working with a series of other public, private, voluntary and community players, and with members who may not be part of the executive decision-making structure.

This is combined with a renewed interest in the adoption of protocols and conventions as a way of helping to identify the respective roles and encourage constructive relationships between members on officers, particularly in highly politicised authorities.

The role of chief executive is open to debate in the context of leader and elected mayor constitutions, with growing interest in the concept of ‘managing director’. However it evolves, the fortunes of senior officers will be more closely tied to those of leading members than in the past. By comparison to the increasing closeness between executive members and senior officers, there has been a corresponding decline in the amount of contact that senior officers have with non-executive members.

The Impact of Wider Processes

The new political management arrangements are intimately connected to a wider set of processes which are introducing radical changes to the traditional mode of local government:

1. Partnership working requires new skills and roles for officers, including networking, negotiating and alliance-building. It also places officers in new settings where they may be representing the authority on decision-making boards.
2. Consultation and closer working relationships with the community opens officers to new pressures and challenges. The key feature for officers is that they become identifiable individuals with the perceived capacity to shape the authority’s policy and practice. There may be role tensions with ward councillors.
3. Public Service Agreements (PSAs) may orientate officers’ activity towards key national objectives and away from local priorities. There are new ‘professions’ – well-defined bodies of expertise associated with cross-cutting issues, and distinctive languages, national structures and standards.
4. Local authorities have taken major steps in developing new forms of service delivery, including considerable interest in public-private partnerships of various forms. These developments raise new issues about the role, loyalty and accountability of officers who are working for the council but are also closely associated with the partnership.

These themes all generate major challenges for officers at all levels in the organisation. They also impact on the relationship with members. While they suggest a move towards the community enabler role, there are also pulls towards council custodian.

Recommendations

The report makes a number of recommendations:

1. That further work is undertaken on the tensions faced by the unitary officer structure as a result of the new council constitutions, including the implications for officers working principally for the executive and for overview and scrutiny;
2. That further work is undertaken on the changing role of the head of paid service (chief executive/managing director/council manager) in terms of the different types of constitutions that have been adopted;
3. That a similar analysis is undertaken of officer roles in alternative arrangement constitutions;
4. That data is gathered on the member-officer protocols contained in council constitutions, and an assessment is undertaken of their operation in practice;
5. That there is a review of the support available to local authorities to foster good working relations between leading members and senior officers and to develop their capacity to perform their respective roles under new council constitutions;
6. That there is a review of the ways in which authorities might best be provided with the types of support and capacity building identified by our participants (i.e. access to learning networks and 'critical friends' rather than formal and centrally delivered programmes of training, etc.);
7. That case study and good practice material on member and officers under new council constitutions is produced on a regular basis and made available in an electronic and interactive form (e.g. via the IDeA's Knowledge website);
8. That a 'toolkit' is produced to assist authorities in determining the shape of officer structures and working relationships to support new council constitutions, building on the self-assessment toolkit designed by Dr Stephanie Snape and colleagues (Snape 2000);

9. That urgent attention be given to exploring the concerns raised during our study about member bullying and harassment of officers;
10. That information should be gathered on any changes that might take place in the implementation of new council constitutions, and the impact of any such changes on officers, following the 2002 local government elections;
11. That a series of workshops should be held to disseminate and debate the findings of this study, including events that bring together practitioners, observers and advisers to enable them to share their different perspectives on the changes that are taking place as the result of the introduction of new council constitutions;
12. That regular research is carried out to build on this pilot study and establish emerging trends and themes relating to the impact on officers of new council constitutions.

Further information

Copies of the full report, priced at £7.50, are available from:

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This summary and full report are also available on the ODPM website:

<http://www.local-dtlr.gov.uk/research/index.htm>

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