fitness for purpose in the 21st century
strategic choice at local level in the new millennium

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– maintaining a sense of local place and purpose
– ensuring an effective political process, democratic, civic and public services
– making strategic choices to set the strategic agenda
– utilizing the opportunity of revitalization
– social, economic and environmental
– Public sector
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– 2060
– 2060

– showing the logic of the distinctive choices made
– highlighting the implications for corporate strategy
– maintaining a strong link with the shape and delivery of the local authority
– using the right toolkit to maintain direction

– maintaining sufficient capacity and performance capability
– setting the budgets and council tax

– determining the meaning of service improvement, community leadership and democratic renewal

– the underlying imperatives of service improvement, community leadership and democratic renewal

– reviewing and replenishing strategic choices, governing effectively and continually improving performance
– utilising the opportunity of new initiatives, eg new CPA, Local Area Agreements, Local Public Service Boards, civic renewal

– assessing the implications for organisational structure and processes, eg organisational culture, political leadership, management structures and processes, public participation, links with the private sector

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July 2005
This report was commissioned by the Audit Commission and the IDeA from Professors Steve Leach and Vivien Lowndes of the Local Governance Research Unit at De Montfort University and written by them. Its content was developed by a working group through a series of discussions, supported by working papers. The group included Claire Kaye (Buckinghamshire Fire Service); Mick Young (Leader, Northamptonshire County Council); Dr Lawrence Pratchett (LGRU, De Montfort University); Steve Rogers (INLOGOV, University of Birmingham); and Professor Helen Sullivan (Cities Research Centre, University of West of England).

The drafts also benefited from challenge and debate with a wide-ranging group of consultees which included James Strachan, Michael Lyons, Steve Bundred, Peter Jones, Pauleen Lane, Brian Pomeroy, Clive Grace and Frances Done (Audit Commission); Lucy de Groot, Richard Grice and Rob Pearce (Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)); Lee Childs (PricewaterhouseCoopers); Professor George Jones (London School of Economics); Margaret Martin (East Midlands Local Government Association (LGA)); Chris Raine (Wolverhampton MBC); Dennis Reed (Local Government Information Unit); Phil Swann (Tavistock Institute); Bob Coomber (London Borough of Southwark); Wendy Thomson (Office of Public Service Reform); Gordon Mitchell (Nottingham City Council); Katherine Kerswell (Solihull MBC); Geoff Alltines (London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham); Matthew Warburton (Local Government Association (LGA)); Sandy Blair (formerly of the Welsh LGA); David Clark and Mike Bennett (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE)); Jean Hartley (Warwick Business School). Special thanks go to Professor John Stewart (The Institute of Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham) for his important input at an early stage in the process.
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conclusion – looking to the future
Local authorities operate in a complex political environment, influenced by changing local, national and international circumstances. They strive to meet the needs and realise the aspirations of the people and communities they serve. To do this successfully, they must make strategic choices that reflect the specifics of their local area and the policies of the local politicians elected to provide community leadership. And they also need to make themselves ‘fit for purpose’ so that they can actually deliver on those choices.

The idea of ‘fitness for purpose’ in local government is often associated with the publication of that name in 1993 by the Local Government Management Board (LGMB). It was a groundbreaking analysis that captured the strategic dilemmas facing many local authorities at the time. Moreover, it advanced the core idea that councils could choose their own path, albeit within limits and subject to constraints. The Audit Commission and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) have now revisited that idea for 21st century local government.

The policy and regulatory environment for local government and other local services has of course shifted significantly since 1993 and will change even more. Compulsory competitive tendering has given way to Best Value, and Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) now provides the strategic regulation framework. Debates about devolution, localism and choice in public services have emerged. The Local Government Act 2000 created new constitutional arrangements for councils, as well as the power for councils to promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their areas.

All of this sets the early 21st century framework for the tough choices now facing local government on a range of governance, operational and financial issues. This report shows that opportunities exist for local authorities to seize these agendas and use them to make distinctive choices for their people and places they serve. Indeed, there is a responsibility on local authorities to do so. Their existence is rooted in understanding what their locality, and the people and communities within it, specifically require.
Without this, they will deliver poorer solutions. Ultimately, though, they risk seeing their democratic legitimacy wither as they either fail or become no different from non-democratic service delivery organisations.

Making truly local choices will result in councils doing things differently from one another, organising themselves accordingly and being distinctive in their public’s mind. *Fitness for purpose in the 21st century* both identifies the strategic choices available to authorities and outlines their implications for organisational design. The report highlights choice through the illustrative examples of the Service First, the Civic Leader and the Democracy Hub councils. But it does not suggest that ‘one of these three sizes will fit all’. Authorities need to develop their own approach that fits their circumstances and priorities, and in doing so they are most likely to create their own unique ‘mix’. We encourage them to do so, and we want this report to stimulate reflection and to assist local authorities facing change as they evolve and respond to the communities they serve at what is a decisive moment for local government as a whole.

Finally, we should say something about the partnership that has led to this report. The IDeA and the Audit Commission are different organisations with distinct remits but a shared commitment to local service improvement. We work together on key projects such as the Improvement Network, which has brought together a range of bodies to combine knowledge on making improvement happen (www.improvementnetwork.gov.uk). *Fitness for purpose in the 21st century* is another building block in our partnership. We see both of these initiatives as models for joining up organisations and resources to support change and improvement within public services, and we intend to develop them further in the period ahead.

James Strachan
Chairman
Audit Commission

Chairman
IDeA

Councillor Ian Swithenbank CBE

fitness for purpose in the 21st century 3
1.1 Local government faces the challenges of the 21st century in better shape than it has been for many years. It is armed with new powers and duties as a result of the Local Government Act 2000, which also provided for political modernisation and a stronger ethical framework. In the context of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (and the Wales Programme for Improvement), local services and corporate governance have been improving year-on-year.

1.2 But is local government making the most of its new powers and opportunities? Despite the official emphasis on community government, the visions and plans of different local authorities look strikingly alike. This report argues that the time is ripe for local authorities to assert their own strategic priorities, to review their organisational capacity to achieve key goals, and to seize the initiative on behalf of the communities they serve. Strategic choice and local difference is not just possible, it is also necessary. It is at the heart of what it means to be ‘fit for purpose’ for the 21st century.

1.3 All local authorities must respond to the imperatives of the Government’s reform agenda: service improvement; community leadership; and democratic renewal. Indeed, there is a great deal of agreement within local government concerning the validity and desirability of these goals. Gone are the major ideological divides of the past. But this is not a recipe for passivity or pragmatism. This report is an exhortation to local authorities to seize the responsibility of making strategic choices on behalf of local communities, in the context of unique situations and aspirations.
1.4 Despite the imperatives of the legal framework, there are three important areas of choice. The first set of choices refers to the relative priority given to each element of the reform agenda; the second to the interpretation of each element; and the third to how each element is implemented through political and organisational structures.

**relative priority:** What is the relative priority given to service improvement, community leadership, and democratic renewal? This is not an either/or choice, but concerns the weight attached to each element. Relative priority can vary among local authorities because of the different demands of their local contexts. It can also vary over time within particular authorities: as progress is made in relation to one element, priority can shift towards another. Or the political environment of a particular authority can change so that it becomes feasible to major on an aspect of the reform agenda that was previously marginalised. A three-legged stool will collapse if any one leg is missing, but the weight may be shifted between the legs in different ways.

**interpretation:** What is meant by each of the elements? There are different ways in which they can be interpreted. Service improvement can be interpreted in the terms laid down by central government, or in relation to the preferences of local communities, or the principles of local politicians. Community leadership can involve a top-down or a bottom-up approach and ‘community’ itself can be conceived in different ways (as the whole local authority area, or distinct neighbourhoods, or identity-based groupings). Democratic renewal can be interpreted from a representative perspective (eg improving voter turnout) or in terms of direct public participation.

**implementation:** What organisational structures and processes are needed to express and activate specific local choices? Relevant issues concern political leadership structures and councillor roles, management arrangements, approaches to e-government and e-democracy, partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors and with other public bodies, and opportunities for public engagement. The challenge is to establish an organisation that is fit for the purposes identified. Matters of organisational design are never ‘neutral’ – they need to be related in an explicit way to strategic choices.

1.5 There is evidence that local authorities do, in practice, place different degrees of emphasis on the three elements of the reform agenda (service improvement, community leadership and democratic renewal). For some councils, the driving force is the achievement of an excellent rating in service inspections, with other considerations subordinate to that goal. For others, an excellent rating is less important, compared with the drive to achieve additional valued outcomes. There are authorities which have invested heavily in partnership working and see it as the key instrument for exercising community leadership; for others, it is no more than icing on the cake. And while all authorities have responded to the democratic renewal agenda, some have gone much further than others in, for example, exploring innovative approaches to public involvement.

1.6 Prioritisation is a process which is clearly demonstrable in relation to the current behaviour of local authorities. But this process is too important to be happening in the shadows. An authority that seeks to be ‘fit for purpose’ needs clarity about its strategic direction and the organisational implications of that choice. These choices need to be made in an open and transparent way and to take centre stage within a local authority’s decision-making. Moreover, they need to be informed by a detailed and critical reading of the particular circumstances and context of each local authority. Context does not just shape the process of strategic choice – it fundamentally influences the content of those choices.
1.7 This report clarifies the nature of the strategic choices open to local government. It is local government’s responsibility to grasp this choice agenda with vigour and ambition. The report is a primer to stimulate and facilitate the process of strategic choice. Three ‘ideal types’ are specified – **Service First, Civic Leader** and **Democracy Hub** – in order to explore the implications of making different strategic choices in different local settings. The report does not recommend that local authorities select one of the three options. They are deliberately one-sided illustrative examples, and not models to be followed. Instead, local authorities need to clarify their role and purpose, and subsequently their organisational design, in order to arrive at an individual and distinctive approach. This will put them in the best position to achieve the aspirations of their communities.

1.8 The aim of this report is to assist councils in developing a clear sense of purpose for their communities and their locality. It stresses the role of local political leaders in clarifying purpose – leading the council, leading the area, leading change – and exercising the new executive responsibilities conferred by the Local Government Act 2000 with confidence and purpose. With the principle of greater local autonomy seemingly accepted across the political spectrum, the focus will increasingly fall on local government’s ability to deliver on the ‘localism’ agenda. This will demand strong, independent councils with a clear view of their role – councils that are fit for purpose.

1.9 This report provides a mechanism for linking purpose, through strategy, to the design of the structures and means by which the council operates. It talks of ideal types but recognises a need to balance strategic choices within and across them. Whether a council focuses on Service First, Civic Leader or Democracy Hub, or more likely a mixture of the three, it is vital that choices are rooted in a clear analysis of local people’s needs, aspirations and the interaction of the local context with wider public policy.
2.1 There is a strategic choice agenda for local government. Local authorities should not see themselves as the passive victims of external pressures. While they have a responsibility to deliver within the wider political and national frameworks in which they operate, they both can and should take an active approach in exercising choice in their local context and in identifying opportunities and resources for change.

2.2 It is of crucial importance to a local authority to be fully aware of the range of objective factors (and trends) that characterise its local context, which will have implications for policies and decisions. For example:
- A population structure skewed towards older age groups.
- An ethnic mix with a history of racial tensions.
- An influx of second home owners in an area of environmental quality.
- A ‘terrorist target’ which increases the possibility of a terrorist attack.
- The persistence of a low wage, partly informal economy.
- The steady decline in viability of a tourism capacity.
- Severe pressures from population and economic growth.

2.3 These objective pressures may have their origins in global trends, particularly in relation to economic restructuring and technological development. Nor are they confined to the big cities or counties – even the smallest district council will be affected. Other contextual pressures emanate from nearer to home in the form of national policy programmes (and their European counterparts), which are themselves in part a response to wider trends. Councils need a good understanding of the national policy environment in both its direct and indirect impacts upon local government. Government policy on public service reform clearly affects local authorities’ strategic choices. Changes in the structure of governance are of great significance, as well as the detail of specific policy programmes. Local authorities now operate in a multi-level and multi-sector system of governance, with the relationships between players subject to constant review and negotiation.

2.4 It is also important to recognise that not all contextual pressures are external to a council and its communities. Some relate to the ‘way things are done around here’. Particular localities have their own civic and political cultures, which may be characterised by strong neighbourhood identities, or traditions of collective action, or a history of charismatic local leaders, or of consensus politics. The dynamic interplay between local communities and political parties can generate change and tension. These factors may then be reflected in the local authority’s own ‘internal’ environment, and can shape (even override) the preferences of politicians and managers. Such factors need not determine a local authority’s response to the objective challenges of the day, but they do frame the repertoire of approaches – making some courses of action seem more appropriate than others. It is important that a council has a good understanding of them as they may act to facilitate or obstruct particular strategic choices.
2.5 Demographic changes (like immigration and aging) and social trends (like individualism) challenge the ‘old ways of doing things’. A traditionally secular local culture may become one in which faith plays an important role. Or a local political culture that was historically dominated by trades unions may, over time, become characterised by a more diverse range of community associations and pressure groups. Indeed, through their own interventions, local authorities themselves can (and inevitably will) influence how local contexts develop. Local authorities need to make choices about their strategic priorities based upon an in-depth and critical knowledge of the local (and wider) context, viewed through a political lens. Figure 2.1 provides a schematic representation of the different aspects of context, which both impact upon, and can be influenced by, local government.

**Figure 2.1**
A framework for analysing context
2.6 One would expect these differences of local context and different public concerns and aspirations to be expressed in very different community strategies, reflecting the different nature of the people, places and local economies involved. Yet the distinctiveness of such places often gets lost in the way that community strategy aims and priorities are defined and developed. The same or similar priorities appear with monotonous regularity. Compare, for example, the priorities set out for various authorities in the Audit Commission’s report, People Places and Prosperity (pages 40–49) – very different localities but remarkably similar strategic agendas. Such similarities are also apparent from a perusal of any random selection of CPA reports. The same priorities – economic regeneration, environmental quality, social inclusion, reducing crime and disorder, celebrating diversity – occur time and time again. The individuality and distinctiveness of local strategic agendas often seem to become marginalised under the weight of platitudes and ‘of course’ statements, typically reflecting central government priorities rather than local ones (which is not to challenge the importance of these priorities).

2.7 Given the significance of local contextual differences, there is a case for local authorities responding to their particular local circumstances in ways which emphasise these different characteristics and which may not be congruent with central government priorities. It would be good if local authorities could express their real local priorities in their corporate strategies, as illustrated by the following examples:

- ‘This area draws a lot of its strength and wealth from its heritage and we want the area to change as little as possible.’
- ‘We’re a dormitory suburb and always have been. We won’t waste resources on an independent local economy but will instead build on the power of our satellite position around stronger centres.’
- ‘Local people are getting a raw deal vis-à-vis tourists – we want to positively discriminate in favour of the needs of the resident local population.’
- ‘We recognise that there will continue to be a long-term structural unemployment problem in this area, and we should respond to this reality.’
- ‘Crime and disorder is not a problem here and there’s little point in allocating substantial resources to dealing with it.’
- ‘This district as a whole has no real identity – we will concentrate on fostering civic pride in the individual towns and villages, not in the district as a whole.’

2.8 Statements like these are rarely seen in corporate or community strategies. In the area of negotiation between central priorities and local priorities, the former are becoming increasingly dominant and local differences are hidden in generalities. Yet in reality local authorities experience their local context and its ‘problems’ through a political and an historical lens. But such differences are currently rarely made explicit. Different ways of understanding and responding to the needs and demands of local context, which have been the lifeblood of local representative democracy, have moved into the background as the twin forces of managerialism and centralism have grown in strength.

2.9 A local authority should always have a deeper understanding of local problems and their inter-relationship than a national government (or its agencies). Local authorities should also have a more realistic view of what policies and actions are likely to work, and which are not. If local authorities were to recognise this position of strength and to fight harder for their perceptions and interpretations of local context, this would open up an important area of choice. Local authorities have a special legitimacy in an area (in democratic terms) to arbitrate between different local interests and prioritise local problems. Potentially they have a democratic mandate to act on the basis of declared intentions in the electoral process. To rediscover genuinely local priorities and advocate them in dealings with central government, the local strategic partnership, external partners and with funders would be a major step forward.

**choices of relative priority**

2.10 The three key elements to the Government’s reform agenda for local government are service improvement, community leadership and democratic renewal. Although each of these elements will be of concern to all authorities, it is likely that different priorities will be attached to the three different elements in different authorities. For example service performance has clearly been the dominant emphasis in Hertfordshire, and remains so. Community leadership – centred on the regeneration of the city and its role as an international metropolis – has been a major priority for Manchester but less so for some other regional centres. And Salford has invested much more in the way of resources in democratic renewal (through a range of participatory area initiatives) than some neighbouring authorities.
2.11 The relative priority between the three main elements of the reform agenda is not an either/or choice. All three have to be addressed — indeed, it is a legal requirement for local government to do so. Service improvement, in particular, has been a major concern for all authorities, partly driven by central government measures (Best Value and then Comprehensive Performance Assessment) and partly by their own priorities. But other starting points are possible, where local authorities choose to prioritise community leadership or democratic renewal. Indeed, as the CPA process evolves, greater central government attention may be directed towards community leadership and democratic renewal, building upon the foundations of improved local services.

2.12 Such relative prioritisation already occurs in practice, and it is important to bring this process out of the shadows. Relative prioritisation between different aspects of the reform agenda is a key area of strategic choice through which local authorities can express the specific demands and aspirations of their communities. Clarity in this area is necessary to ensure fitness for purpose — i.e. the development of organisational and political arrangements appropriate to strategic priorities.

**choices of interpretation**

2.13 There is also scope for choice which is inherent in the interpretation of each of the key elements. The significance of these interpretive choices is illustrated below:

- **service improvement**
  - Whose agenda — ‘central government’, ‘local political’ or ‘public’?
  - Quality versus quantity — wide coverage or high standards?
  - Facilitating choice vis-à-vis ensuring equity?
  - Efficiency versus effectiveness?

- **community leadership**
  - A top-down or a bottom-up approach — starting with authority-wide stakeholders or local communities?
  - An authority-wide interpretation of community or one based on neighbourhoods?
  - Are communities seen only in geographical terms (of whatever size) or in relation to other core identities (including faith and ethnicity)?
  - A focus on regeneration (e.g. Manchester), growth (e.g. Northamptonshire) or conservation (e.g. New Forest)?
  - Leadership ‘from the front’ or as a participant in partnerships?
  - Are social, economic or environmental concerns the main driving force?

- **democratic renewal**
  - How is democracy conceived — in representative, market or participatory terms? Are these different approaches complementary or contradictory?
  - Should the emphasis be on locality-based or interest-based communities?
  - Is the main concern engaging with groups or reaching individual citizens?
  - Is the aim to empower local councillors, strengthen democratic leadership or open up decision-making to other stakeholders?

2.14 These distinctions (which are also distinctions of priority rather than either/or choices) are potentially helpful because they imply different criteria for success. For example, in relation to democratic renewal, the criteria for representative democracy would be likely to include increased voter turnout, and wider representation (gender, age, ethnicity) in party membership and among councillors. For ‘market democracy’, measures of customer satisfaction may be more relevant. And for participatory democracy, measures of community activity and citizen influence would come more strongly into play. The same reasoning can be extended to choices around service performance and community leadership.

2.15 Indeed, it is possible to demonstrate the significance of these choices of interpretation with an example. Set out on the next page is part of an imaginary but plausible transcript of a budget-setting discussion in the fictitious Metropolitan Borough Council of Milltown:
In the Municipal Offices of Milltown MBC the controlling Labour group is holding a budget-planning meeting as a kick start to the 2005/06 budget process. The main purpose of the meeting is to decide priorities between services. The leader, Councillor White, begins by making his position clear.

“Well we clearly have to continue to give education and social services top priority. The Government will expect us to reflect the earmarked increases in grant by pushing up the education and social services budgets proportionately…”

Councillor Grey interrupts:

“… but hold on there a minute, Alan. In our manifesto last year we said we wanted to ‘enrich the cultural opportunities and physical health of our residents’. That means spending more money on our civic theatre, our recreation facilities and increasing our support for the arts. We’re already getting perfectly acceptable Ofsted and Social Services Inspectorate reports. Let’s put our money where our mouth is…”

Councillor Green chips in:

“… that’s all very well, Martin, but let’s not forget either that we’ve got this manifesto commitment to respond to public preferences in the way we spend money. As I recall, the MORI survey we commissioned earlier this year came out with a clear message – the public want us to give priority to sorting out the dreadful state of the roads and pavements in the borough and keeping local streets cleaner and local open spaces in better shape. That’s got to be our top budget priority, surely…”

Councillor Brown, the deputy leader intervenes:

“Come on, get real. We’ve got a CPA re-inspection coming up in a few months time. It’s vital that we move up from fair to good at the very least. If we want to do that we’ve got to reflect the Government’s priorities and show them we’re trying to improve education and social services by spending more on them.”

Councillor Green is not convinced:

“But didn’t the last CPA report say something about the importance of consulting with public and reflecting their needs. Doesn’t that give us the go ahead to prioritise local environmental services …?”

Councillor Grey chips in again:

“And didn’t the report also say something about needing to make our strategic priorities clearer. So what we do is take our manifesto and rewrite it in a way that turns it into our strategic priorities. That’s a job for the chief executive and the officers.”

The leader re-enters the debate:

“I think what’s being proposed involves a very high risk strategy. When it comes down to it, the Audit Commission is a government-sponsored body. If it comes to a dispute they’d be on their side not ours. I remember looking through the last CPA report and thinking – whatever happened to local politics! There was no recognition of us being a party with a distinctive set of priorities, different from both of the other lot. I don’t think we’d get any credit for making a big thing of what was in our manifesto or what local people say they want. We may not like it, but that’s the game we’re in, so we might as well get used to it.”

The debate continued …
2.16 This fictitious example illustrates clearly the implications of the three different interpretative stances that could be taken in relation to service performance when it comes to making hard decisions about budgetary priorities – central government-based, local political-based, and public opinion-based.

2.17 By making plausible combinations of choices of relative priority between the three key elements of the Government’s reform agenda, as illustrated by the discussion in the example, we can demonstrate that local authorities can choose to go in very different strategic directions. A wide variety of combinations of choices is possible. But certain clusters of choices are, in practice, more likely than others. We can illustrate this through fictitious, but plausible, interviews with three chief executives in three contrasting local authorities: Greenshire CC, Castlemead MBC and the London Borough of Wythen.

2.18 These interviews are imaginary. But they realistically reflect different reactions to the choice agenda faced by all local authorities, and they express some important common features.

2.19 All three chief executives are clear about their authorities’ priorities: service improvement in Greenshire, community leadership in Castlemead (linked to urban regeneration), and democratic renewal in the LB of Wythen. In each case there is a relationship between the contexts in which the authority operates and the choices it has made. In the affluent county of Greenshire there is no particular case for a regeneration agenda. Many of the contextual problems identified in Castlemead and Wythen are of only limited relevance there. The impact of external influences (like demographic trends or economic restructuring) and of government policy will be experienced differently in different localities depending upon their external characteristics and internal features, particularly their political and managerial cultures.

2.20 In each case, the chief executive accepts the importance of the other two elements, but argues that they are not ‘the priority’. This leads them to interpret these other aspects in ways that support the achievement of the priority theme. Being clear about ‘the priority’ does not imply that they are neglected, but rather helps shape the way in which they are approached. An explicit and strategic process of prioritisation enables an authority to clarify its interpretation of all aspects of the reform agenda for local government. These interpretations tend to cluster, and in the next chapter we develop a series of ‘ideal types’ to explore these clusters of strategic choice, and the associated implications for organisational design.
The chief executive was well prepared for our visit. When we asked him what he regarded as his priorities, he produced a folder which, he told us, contained up-to-date performance information on each of the council’s services. He could identify which services were performing well (compared with comparator authorities), which were performing badly, which were improving, and which were declining. This information was discussed at every cabinet meeting and every overview and scrutiny committee meeting. He told us: ‘This is a performance-driven authority. All our councillors and managers know that service improvement is our primary goal. It gives the impetus to all that we do here. The Audit Commission inspectors were really impressed by our state-of-the-art performance monitoring system. I’m sure it contributed significantly to our ‘excellent’ rating.’

We asked him about the authority’s approach to public involvement: ‘We’ve built in public consultation to all our service reviews. We make sure we know what our service users think of the services they receive, and what improvements they’d like to see.’

And community leadership: ‘Well we’ve got a fairly low-key approach to that kind of thing here. As far as partnerships are concerned the ones we’ve found work best are the ones which help us co-ordinate our services better. So the Social Services/Health partnership is a priority for us. The LSP? – well it’s not much more than a talking shop really.’

And are the politicians happy with these priorities? ‘Yes, we work closely together. It’s a Conservative-controlled council, and they’ve always concentrated on services. ‘High performance services which provide value for money’ has been the catchphrase. They’re not keen on some of the participation ideas, like citizens juries. Their view is that they’ve been elected to do a job. The turnout here in the 2001 election was over 60 per cent, and they see that as a powerful mandate. Nor are they that keen on the community leadership side of things. They think they’ll be judged on the quality and cost-effectiveness of the services we provide, not on what’s in a glossy county strategy with no resources available to implement anything in it.’

Do you have any concerns about Greenshire’s strategic direction? ‘My main worry is our failure to find ways of involving the majority of councillors, since we moved to an executive system. There are no regulatory committees in counties and area committee agendas are carefully controlled by the majority party. They’ve been steered into performance monitoring activities which members can’t really relate to. And council meetings are a non-event. It’s not surprising, is it, that most non-executive members wonder what they’re here for? They’re always telling me they feel disenfranchised and there’s at least a dozen who’ve said they won’t be standing at the next election. It would be difficult to claim that our council was a viable example of local democracy at work. It isn’t and to be honest I find it impossible to see how we can change things, at present.’
The chief executive was on the phone when we arrived. We waited half-an-hour in his secretary’s office before he was able to see us. He apologised and explained it had been a return call from a senior civil servant in London. The chief executive wanted to make a case that the city should be included on the City of Culture 2006 shortlist, which was to be finalised in the next week or so. ‘I think we’ve cracked it!’ he said. ‘We’ve projected Castlemead strongly, and that helped us get the new rapid transit scheme, and the relocation of government offices.’

Was this kind of activity a big part of his role as chief executive we asked? He agreed that it was. ‘My priority is to make Castlemead a place of international status. That takes a lot of networking. There are some weeks when I’m hardly in the office. We’ve got a good set of links now with the people and agencies that matter, but you’ve got to keep working to sustain them – you can’t take them for granted.’

What about the key services provided by the city – education, social services, housing and transportation? ‘Well of course it’s important that our services continue to improve, and the ‘weak’ assessment we got in the recent CPA was embarrassing. But I’ve got a good team of directors, and I’m confident that they can turn round the more problematical services, to ensure we get a better result next time.’

Does the leader share your view? ‘Yes his priority like mine is to use every opportunity we can to regenerate this city, bring in external resources and move it up the international city league table. We’re a bit of a double act, although we recognise that there are settings where it’s right for him to take the lead, and others where it’s better for me to. He leaves the running of services to his cabinet colleagues, although he’ll intervene in a crisis.’

So the LSP is a key vehicle in all this? ‘Well yes, up to a point. Certainly the community strategy enables us to put our aspirations for the city on paper and get agreement from our local partners on the direction we want to go. But a lot of the most critical networking we do takes place outside the LSP, at regional, national and international level.’

What has been the public’s role in this agenda? ‘Well we’ve taken a lot of trouble to consult on and publicise the community strategy. We want to make sure that the people are behind us in what we’re trying to do. I think we do a fair bit of consultation on services too. But we don’t go for neighbourhood democracy here. It’s too costly, and unpredictable, and tends to be dominated by unrepresentative groups. We have to keep focused on the main challenge!’

Do you have any concerns about Castlemead’s strategic direction? ‘To be frank with you, we’ve experienced some difficulty in reconciling the aspirations of the public and those of our partners, particularly in some of our big regeneration schemes. One problem is that it’s hard to identify people who can speak up for the local population, in a partnership setting in the way that other partner representatives can. Another is that the proprieties of local people are sometimes very different from those of other partners. For example commercial tend to prefer a cleared site, while local people generally prefer piecemeal redevelopment. I can’t pretend we’ve found a satisfactory way of dealing with this. Partnership and participation can pull in different directions.’
The chief executive welcomed us but apologised for the fact that she would have to leave halfway through the allotted hour. She explained: ‘It was announced this morning that the local hospital trust intends to close the maternity unit at Wythen General Hospital. Local people are up in arms about it – it’ll mean a long journey to another hospital, with bad traffic. We’ve set up a press conference at which the leader, myself and the chairs of the six neighbourhood forums will make the case against the closure. The six neighbourhood forum chairs are all local people, not councillors, so it’s not just the local council making a fuss.’

We asked if working with local groups was one of her priorities. ‘It’s probably the biggest priority. Did you see the turnout figures here in 2002? It’s 27 per cent, one of the lowest in London. We have a real problem of democratic credibility here. Our aim is to try to build up a culture of civic involvement which means not just that people will be more likely to vote, but – just as important – that they’ll become more involved in civic affairs and more inclined to take responsibility for what goes on in their localities. In my view the only way the long-term future of local government can be safeguarded is through increased public involvement and support.’

Do your leader and her colleagues agree with this view? ‘Yes, they know you can’t any longer justify local democracy wholly on the basis of political parties fighting elections. It’s not just the low turnout, it’s the fact that party activism is at an all time low. All the parties are having difficulty finding candidates. Of course the ruling party has its manifesto and its own priorities, but it regards them as a basis for negotiation with local people rather than as tablets of stone.’

What about community leadership? ‘Well, economic regeneration is not a key priority. Most of our population work elsewhere in London and unemployment’s low, and the infrastructure is in fairly good shape. We see community leadership as trying to get the best deal for local people. Because they’re concerned about crime, we take the Community Safety Partnership seriously, and we’ve really made that work. Relations with the Police have improved tremendously. No doubt our protests about the maternity unit closure will put a strain on our relationship with the trust, but that’s too bad. We’ve got a job to do and that’s to speak out for local people.’

And service improvement? ‘Well again we take our cues from what local people say they want. They’ve been very critical about the level of rubbish on the streets – particularly in the local town centres – so we’ve put a lot of money into the budget this year to deal with that problem. It may not do us much good when the inspectors come – but there’s more to life than a good CPA score.’

Do you have any concerns about Wythen’s strategic direction? ‘Don’t get me wrong. We all recognise that trying to improve local democracy is going to present us with huge difficulties. We’ve already experienced takeover bids from unrepresentative minorities in two of our neighbourhood forums. We’re well aware that there are tensions between different ethnic groups in the northern part of the borough and that the increasing BNP presence is beginning to exploit these tensions. When you’re allocating scarce resources, there will always be winners and losers and the losers may understandably become disillusioned with ‘public participation’. We know it’s going to be an uphill struggle. But if we don’t try to revitalise the dormant civic culture in Wythen, who else is going to do it?’
1 What is distinctive about our area that is likely to have an influence on our council’s priorities?
A checklist of possibilities
– population structure (age; socio-economic status; ethnic characteristics)
– economic structure (agriculture/manufacturing/service balance; single industry/multi-industry; net importer/exporter of labour)
– settlement pattern (single centre/multi-centre/scattered population; employment magnet/dormitory suburb)
– current socio-economic trends (population growth/stagnation/decline; economic growth/stagnation/decline; diversification of population/economy)
… but there are many others

2 What is distinctive and important about how the council currently works internally?
A checklist of possibilities
– current areas of service strength and performance
– areas of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction
– the character of political/managerial relationships
– leadership capacity politically and managerially

3 What kind of local challenges do we face as a result?
A checklist of possibilities
– need to plan for population growth?
– need for economic regeneration?
– increasing tension between social/ethnic groups?
– increasing incidence of particular types of crime?
– need to improve customer satisfaction?
– need to improve political/managerial relationships/working?
– need to get closer to communities?

4 Does our current corporate strategy or vision statement reflect this distinctiveness … or could it be from anywhere?

5 What do the key context-based challenges faced by our authority imply for the priority we should give to service improvement, community leadership and democratic renewal, respectively?
For example:
– the challenge of urban regeneration may lead to prioritising community leadership
– the challenge of a disengaged local population may lead to prioritising democratic renewal
– the challenge of high public dissatisfaction with services may lead to prioritising service improvement

6 What do the political values of the party (or parties) in power imply for the priority given to these three elements of the modernisation agenda?
7 What do local challenges/party priorities imply for the interpretation of the three elements of the modernisation agenda? For example:

- is service improvement to be interpreted in central government’s terms? Or by local politicians? Or by local communities themselves?
- should community leadership involve a top-down or a bottom-up approach, or both? Should ‘community’ be conceived at a local authority-wide level or on a neighbourhood level? Or in relation to other identities?
- should democratic renewal be interpreted from a representative perspective (e.g. improving voter turnout) or a participative viewpoint?

8 With which of the ideal types – Service First, Civic Leader or Democracy Hub – do we have most affinity …?

9 Or are we a different type of authority entirely? In which case, can we summarise its main characteristics?
3.1 The ‘ideal types’ or illustrative examples, which we have identified are Service First, Civic Leader and Democracy Hub. These build on the experiences of the imaginary local authorities discussed in the previous chapter. Ideal types are, by definition, abstractions from and idealisations of ‘messy’ reality. They are not intended to be a direct representation of real life in a particular local authority or to be rigid models that describe the only clusters of choice available. Almost every local authority is likely to be a mix of the models, as they tailor their choice to the infinitely varied and unique combinations of forces and features of the context within which strategic choice has to be exercised.

3.2 But the ideal types do make it easier to draw out more clearly the implications of a particular cluster of strategic choice and to show how strategic choice can be linked to organisational design in the pursuit of ‘fitness for purpose’. As a mantra for organisational design, ‘fitness for purpose’ stands in contrast to ‘one size fits all’ (or more standardised interpretations of ‘best practice’).

3.3 The focus for this type of council is to continuously improve the quality of its services. Community leadership should be exercised in ways and through networks which have the potential to enhance service performance. Democratic renewal should be focused on the enhancement of the ability of customers to influence service provision.

3.4 The key features of this approach are:
- An acceptance of the agenda of service improvement as the top priority for local authorities.
- An interpretation of community leadership that has a service delivery emphasis, organised around service-specific (or inter-service) partnerships.
- The wider goals of the community strategy expressed largely in service delivery terms.
- An interpretation of democratic renewal largely in representative terms, with the public consulted primarily as service users.
- An expectation that better, more responsive services will lead to greater levels of public satisfaction and higher electoral turnout.
- A largely managerialist agenda with political differences downplayed.

3.5 The most important task facing this type of authority is to work with their partners to develop a series of co-ordinated responses to the medium and long-term problems facing the area. The council’s services should be designed and delivered in such a way as to contribute to these broader objectives. The emphasis in relation to democratic renewal should be to generate public involvement in and commitment to the community strategy.
3.6 The key features of this approach are:
  – An emphasis on community leadership, geared specifically to the growth or regeneration of the authority’s area, or sustainable development (or a similar overarching objective).
  – An interpretation of service improvement that is based upon a local political agenda (often linked to regeneration).
  – A ‘macro’ approach to community leadership that focuses upon the city or authority-wide level, involving close relationships with stakeholders in the private and voluntary sector at this level.
  – An emphasis upon local authority leadership of the local strategic partnership and a central role within a wider range of partnership opportunities which bring money into the authority (including the regional, sub-regional and city-region level).
  – An interpretation of democratic renewal largely in representative terms, seeing strong, local political leaders as crucial in steering partnership activity. Strong leadership is linked to a revival of public confidence in the locality, preferably reflected in increasing voter turnout and party activity.
  – A politically-driven agenda, but one which seeks to exploit a wide range of opportunities, at regional, national and European levels.

3.7 The most important task facing this type of authority is to re-engage with the local population and give real meaning to the concept of local democracy. Public engagement should be the driving force, not only in relation to service provision and delivery but also in relation to the community leadership agenda of the authority.

3.8 The key features of this approach are:
  – Democratic renewal is the key starting point, with the aim of ‘winning the hearts and minds of local people’ through a range of participatory initiatives (from consultation to deliberation and empowerment).
  – Emphasis on locality-based communities (through area committees and neighbourhood forums), but not at the expense of interest-based communities.
  – An interpretation of service performance from citizens’ perspectives, focusing not only on the views of current service users but also those of non-users and traditionally excluded groups.
  – Citizen participation may lead to the radical reconfiguration of services, which could take precedence over improving existing services and facilities.
  – The local authority does not seek to lead the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in a managerial sense, but to build a role as the legitimate voice of local communities.
  – The community strategy is viewed as a bottom-up process, identifying and combining the priorities of local communities.
  – The view of party group discipline is diluted to ensure that local representatives can effectively represent their local constituencies.
3.9 None of these choices of priority are necessarily sustainable in the long term. Contextual circumstances change, both externally and internally. Returning to our imaginary authorities, each may face circumstances in which their priority changes:

- Greenshire CC receives notification from the ODPM of revised housing allocation figures which imply a much higher than anticipated population growth rate over the next 10–15 years. It recognises that it needs to develop its community leadership role to work with other agencies in planning for this level of growth.

- Castlemead MBC experiences an increasing volume of protest from local residents’ groups. While the protest reflects shortcomings in some services, it is mainly symptomatic of a public frustration based on the perception that the council is not interested in public opinion. There is a growing sense that prestige projects have taken precedence over meeting local needs, in the absence of mechanisms to facilitate participation. The council recognises this shortcoming and moves democratic renewal up its priority agenda.

- LB of Wythen receives a critical CPA report which highlights deteriorating performance in some of its key services. Its rating drops from ‘fair’ to ‘weak’, with concern expressed about the possibility of a further decline into the ‘poor’ category unless urgent remedial action is taken. Wythen responds to this external assessment by carrying out a series of service reviews. The local neighbourhood forums are used as a key mechanism through which to involve the public in these reviews, reducing the focus (for the time being) on community development activities.

3.10 It is not proposed here that local authorities should choose between the models of Service First, Civic Leader or Democracy Hub. There are other possible responses to the strategic agenda facing local authorities, and a particular council’s repertoire of responses will be shaped by its specific local context and political perspective. Some authorities will identify with Greenshire, Castlemead or Wythen, but many others will not. The key point is that local authorities should create the space and time to address this strategic choice agenda and make judgements about how they want to respond to those opportunities for choice that exist. They should make explicit those decisions about prioritisation and interpretation that may otherwise be taken implicitly or informally, and without the possible implications or ramifications having been fully explored.

3.11 In order to explore the implications for organisational design of the three ideal types we now look at what ‘fitness for purpose’ might mean in relation to political and managerial structures, organisational culture, partnership working, public participation and e-government. There is not a deterministic relationship between the strategic choices made and any of these structures and processes. Rather, such choices are likely to predispose authorities to particular political and organisational forms, and approaches to external relationships. These potential links are set out in summary form in table 3.1 and then discussed in further detail.
table 3.1 – organisational implications of the three illustrative examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>service first</th>
<th>civic leader</th>
<th>democracy hub</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>organisational culture</strong></td>
<td>Performance culture.</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial culture.</td>
<td>Empowerment culture.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>political leadership</strong></td>
<td>Internally-focused, with an emphasis on corporate governance.</td>
<td>Outward-looking with influence through networking.</td>
<td>Transformational and devolutionary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>executive organisation</strong></td>
<td>Cabinet portfolios service-based. Emphasis on performance management.</td>
<td>Cabinet portfolios based on priorities of community strategy. Emphasis on mobilising support within the wider context.</td>
<td>Cabinet portfolios based on priorities identified through public involvement. Emphasis on accountability to active citizens.</td>
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<td><strong>overview and scrutiny</strong></td>
<td>Best Value ‘service’ based agenda (with some cross-cutting projects). Emphasis on working with the executive.</td>
<td>Reviews of cross-cutting issues, with co-option of partners. Scrutiny of partnerships themselves. Emphasis on working with the executive.</td>
<td>Reviews of issues of public concern, with high a degree of public involvement. Act for citizens in scrutinising other organisations. Emphasis on holding the executive to account.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>non-executive members</strong></td>
<td>Challenging effectiveness of services in the ward.</td>
<td>Campaigning for solutions to community issues.</td>
<td>Ensuring that all local viewpoints are aired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>management structures and processes</strong></td>
<td>Service specific directors with responsibility for large departments and budgets and a direct link to a cabinet member.</td>
<td>Strategic directors with cross-cutting and corporate responsibilities. Multi-accountability to politicians and engagement with partners.</td>
<td>Area-based service delivery and decision-making. Supported by central services like HR and finance. Bottom-up as well as top-down accountability.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>public participation</strong></td>
<td>Emphasis on customers, user groups and satisfaction surveys. Attempt to differentiate services to local area needs.</td>
<td>Emphasis on community groups and mobilising support for projects. Local advisory forums (multi-agency) feeding into LSP.</td>
<td>Emphasis on citizens. Opportunities for deliberation and empowerment (not just consultation). Focus on reaching excluded groups. Devolution to area committees with neighbourhood forums.</td>
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<td><strong>partnership</strong></td>
<td>Looking for benefits to services from inter-agency working. Preference for officer-led arrangements that are delivery-focused, and enhance customer experience.</td>
<td>Emphasis on member-led macro-level partnerships (especially the LSP) that address cross-cutting issues. Focus on leveraging resources and support for regeneration.</td>
<td>Emphasis on locality-based partnerships involving frontline services alongside the voluntary and community sectors. A ‘citizens’ champion’ role with the LSP, with input from non-executive councillors.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>service first</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>links with private sector</strong></td>
<td>Outsourcing services to achieve efficiency and effectiveness. ‘Open partnerships’ where the private sector provides a range of financial and managerial services.</td>
<td>Public/private partnerships to achieve regeneration goals. Active role for private sector in LSP. Outsourcing services in order to focus capacity on regeneration.</td>
<td>More cautious approach, in order to retain maximum flexibility to respond to local people’s needs. Emphasis on the direct accountability that is achieved by local authority directly providing services.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>e-government and e-democracy</strong></td>
<td>Emphasis on e-access to all council services, and to information on performance. Back-room service improvements via e-procurement etc.</td>
<td>Emphasis on e-access to services and facilities across the locality. Use of new technologies to share information between partners and to market the locality.</td>
<td>Emphasis on democratic innovations eg e-voting, online deliberation, web-based resources for community groups. Provision of community access points to prevent social exclusion as services go online.</td>
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</table>
3.12 The introduction of executive models of local decision-making, under the terms of the Local Government Act 2000 has already had a major effect on various aspects of political management processes, and its impact is likely to increase in the future, particularly in relation to:
- the role of political parties
- inter-party relations
- executive/non-executive member relations
- officer-member relations

3.13 The separation out of executive and non-executive functions has, in principle, strengthened the role of political parties by providing a much more explicit basis for developing policy and taking policy-related decisions than previously existed. There is now a clearer set of mechanisms (mirroring those which operate at Westminster) for transforming a party manifesto into a series of policy instruments and major strategic decisions. There is a clearer functional division between the roles of majority party and opposition party(ies) (or, in the case of hung authorities, between coalition parties/opposition party roles). And the role of non-executive members of all parties has been changed by the disappearance of their decision-making role at committee level (regulatory and area committees excepted), although they retain decision-making responsibilities at full council.

3.14 The logic of the new arrangements provides an opportunity for a more assertive wide-ranging political role with complementary public leadership and support roles for chief executives and other senior officers alongside their executive responsibilities. That this opportunity does not yet appear to have been widely exploited reflects the weight of countervailing forces in particular the emphasis in the CPA on national priorities, the search for consensual local priorities reflecting ‘what is best for the area’, and the crucial role of the chief executive in interpreting the CPA agenda and the expectations/requirements involved to local political leaders.

3.15 Taking our three archetypical authorities – Service First, Civic Leader and Democracy Hub – as starting points and recognising that despite arguments to the contrary there exists a reasonable scope for interpretation in the legislative requirements for new constitutions, it can be demonstrated that the executive/non-executive relationship is likely to be developed in different ways in these different circumstances.

3.16 In a Service First authority like Greenshire CC, there is likely to be a set of service-based portfolios for executive members, with the leader perhaps taking a non service-specific co-ordinating role and another cabinet member having responsibility for ‘external’ issues. Cabinet members with service portfolios are held accountable for performance management, enjoying a significant level of delegated decision-making responsibility for the service in question (or an expectation of regular consultation from the relevant directors on service issues with a political dimension). The cabinet is likely to set up small working groups to supervise Best Value reviews, reporting to full cabinet.

3.17 The emphasis on service performance will be reflected in other council mechanisms, with overview and scrutiny committees identifying and challenging areas of poor performance and appraising the process rigour of the Best Value reviews. It is likely, however, that overview and scrutiny committees will also be expected to develop policy proposals to deal with wider issues that the authority is expected to address (eg community safety). There will be an emphasis on overview and scrutiny working with the executive to support the service improvement objective, rather than ‘holding it to account’, although the latter will be important in cases of sub-standard performance or ‘performance failure’. The key role of non-executive members will be to assess the effectiveness of services from the perspective of service users in their wards.
3.18 In a Civic Leader authority like Castlemead MBC, there will be a different set of organising principles in relation to political structures and processes. The leader will see his or her role largely in external terms, emphasising the importance of networking and alliance building. There will be an aspiration to leading the locality as a whole, rather than the council as an organisation. A Civic Leader authority may consider the ‘elected mayor’ option for its benefits in relation to external visibility and direct accountability to citizens. Cabinet portfolios will be likely to mirror the cross-cutting priorities of the community strategy with services grouped to fit within the portfolios, or a specific service responsibility forming part of each cabinet member’s responsibilities. Each cabinet member will be expected to lead in relation to partnership working for their particular strategic priority, and each will be given a degree of latitude in these arenas, although major decisions will be discussed and approved in full cabinet. Overview and scrutiny committees will be expected to play their part in the civic leadership agenda, carrying out in-depth reviews of cross-cutting issues (with partner organisations co-opted on to each task force) and submitting proposals to cabinet. Where there is cause for concern, there will be scrutiny of the effectiveness of partner agencies in delivering shared agendas. A similar stance will be taken in circumstances where there is evidence of an adverse effect of the partner agency’s activities on the wellbeing of local populations. The key role of non-executive members will be to campaign for solutions to issues which concern local residents, whether or not they are the direct responsibility of the council.

3.19 In an authority seeking to be a Democracy Hub, like the London Borough of Wythen, the primary focus will be on community re-engagement. Here the likely basis for definition of cabinet portfolios will be priorities identified by citizens (through consultation and other participation exercises). These may be service-based or cross-cutting in nature. There will be a high level of delegation of local decisions to area committees, which cabinet members will be expected to attend on a rotating basis. Area committees will work closely with neighbourhood forums composed of a wide range of local interests. Overview and scrutiny groups will operate on behalf of local people, reviewing issues which have elicited a high degree of public concern and involving the public in the review process as co-optees or witnesses. Their role will include a readiness to challenge the executive and hold them to account where appropriate, but also a readiness to scrutinise other organisations on behalf of local citizens if their policies are giving cause for concern. Non-executive members will be actively involved on scrutiny panels and area committees. Group discipline will be relaxed in such a way as to enable ward councillors to act as genuine local advocates, so long as the core values of the group are not threatened.

3.20 There will also be different implications for relationships between majority party and opposition depending on which strategic direction an authority chooses to emphasise. In the Service First model, the role of the opposition is most likely to focus on the scope of the services provided (particularly discretionary services), the mode of service provision (especially the use of outsourcing) and examples of poor service performance which can be exploited for party political purposes. These opportunities remain in authorities with other strategic priorities, but are augmented in the case of the Civic Leader model by potential differences over the choice of wider objectives (eg economic regeneration/environmental sustainability, public transport/private transport-based solutions to traffic congestion) and the cost of implementing such objectives (eg Olympic Games bids, new ‘metrolink’ system bids etc). In the Democracy Hub model, the main sources of potential dispute are the interpretation of democratic renewal required (representative or participation base) and the costs of any decentralised initiatives.
3.21 The relationship between leading members and officers is more likely, in the short term, to be influenced by the traditions which underpin that relationship in the authority concerned, rather than the strategic choice of Service First, Civic Leader, Democracy Hub or any combination thereof. However it may be that the elected mayor and cabinet model offers particular opportunities for a political leader to change the balance of power between him or herself and the chief executive, at both policy and more detailed decision-making levels.

management structures and processes

3.22 In a Service First authority, there is likely to be a traditional structure with clear lines of accountability. There will be service-specific (rather than ‘strategic’) directors who have line management responsibility for large departments and budgets and a direct link to a cabinet/portfolio member. Career paths are likely to be direct – the director of education (or its equivalent) is likely to have been a teacher or educational administrator, and the chief executive may well have come from a legal or finance background. Professional staff tend to be comfortable with this structure – everyone knows who their boss is and career paths are easy to see.

3.23 In a local authority seeking to be a Civic Leader, there is likely to be a matrix structure. Directorates based on corporate priorities will have less clear direct lines of accountability. Service managers may find themselves working to different directors on different projects. Power may rest less with big budgets and more with wide public interest and influential local partners. The centre may be somewhat disjointed from service delivery with members going directly to heads of service for day-to-day issues. This structure is more likely to appeal to staff with generic and transferable skills. Most likely to get on are those with experience in business process re-engineering, change management, partnership working and public engagement. Experience outside local government is likely to be an advantage, given the close relationships with other stakeholders and the need to ‘think outside the box’ in developing new projects. Local government professionals may well feel disenfranchised.

3.24 In the case of the Democracy Hub, there will be attractions in a devolved structure where frontline services and decision-making are organised on an area basis, seeking benefits from ‘joining up’ services locally and increasing public access and engagement. Strategic and support services will remain at the centre (like HR or finance), but the slimmed down centre may feel remote from frontline issues. This structure will appeal to staff who like to ‘get their hands dirty’ and have direct involvement with citizens and their day-to-day concerns. Joined-up working and multi-service teams will present more difficulties for specialised staff (who may feel cut off from their ‘community of practice’) and for those individuals affected by long-standing professional rivalries.

public participation

3.25 In a Service First situation, an authority is likely to see the purpose of public participation in terms of its role in providing information on the needs and preferences of current and potential service users, and on the performance of those who provide services. Public participation can also play a role in re-engineering or re-configuring services to increase efficiency and effectiveness. A closer relationship with citizens will enable the local authority to develop new and more appropriate service options (and the phasing-out of irrelevant or unpopular arrangements), and can also lead to forms of co-production in which service users themselves take an active role in service management and delivery.

3.26 Public participation is likely to be seen in terms of a conversation with ‘consumers’, but this may be through the representative sampling of individual citizens (via citizens’ panels, satisfaction surveys or opinion polls) or through establishing user groups linked to specific services, localities or client groups. These forms of engagement will tap citizen views in a more finely-tuned way than is possible through traditional electoral process. They do face the challenge, however, of reaching those who do not currently use local services and those who are socially excluded in other ways (eg homeless, non-English speakers, those without access to a phone etc). The establishment of ‘one stop shops’ will help to overcome such problems, providing citizens with a single point of call for accessing and interacting with local services.
3.27 For the authority that aspires to the Civic Leader role, participation is likely to be regarded in terms of the public’s contribution as a ‘stakeholder’ in governance. Civic leadership depends upon bringing together local stakeholders from the public, private and community sphere to develop a vision and strategy for the whole city or locality. Accessing public opinion at this level is not always easy, and there is likely to be a bias in favour of established voluntary and community organisations, and ‘umbrella bodies’ (such as the Council of Voluntary Service). In the work of multi-agency task groups, there may be a reliance on single issue bodies (whether in relation to health, housing or the environment) to tap community views.

3.28 The Civic Leader authority may also establish a network of local advisory forums to feed into authority-wide partnerships (including the LSP), in order to gain access to ‘ordinary’ members of the public as opposed to paid voluntary sector professionals. Local forums will be intended to draw together different agencies and stakeholders at the neighbourhood level but are unlikely to have formal delegated powers from the local authority. Mobilising public interest and support is vital in developing civic leadership and promoting (even ‘re-branding’) the locality on a wider stage. This type of authority is likely to recognise the important role played by the media, the arts and local schools in fostering local identity. Participation may be facilitated through an interactive website that provides information on activities across the city or locality (not just council-run) and seeks the views of citizens and community groups on key developments. The Civic Leader authority is likely to face a challenge in terms of reaching marginal groups and neighbourhoods, and convincing them that their views carry as much weight as the established ‘movers and shakers’.

3.29 The authority that seeks to be a Democracy Hub is likely to prioritise public participation through a variety of methods, seeking to reach both individuals and groups via traditional and more innovative methods. Rather than simply consulting on officially established options, there may be a stress on harnessing local people’s knowledge and creativity through participatory planning processes (like ‘planning for real’ or visioning). This authority is more likely to experiment with deliberative methods such as citizens’ juries, which are policy oriented, or forums focusing upon particular citizen groups (like youth councils or ethnic minority forums). The difficulties with these approaches lie in their cost and also the difficulty in establishing agreement and managing, rather than provoking, conflict.

3.30 An authority prioritising democratic renewal is likely to experiment with decentralisation and devolution, usually via area committees. Such committees are likely to be made up of the councillors elected in that area, aiming to establish a closer and ongoing link between electors and representatives. They may have neighbourhood forums attached, with members elected on a street-by-street basis or selected from existing residents associations and community groups. This approach to participation risks tensions in terms of the relationship between elected and non-elected representatives at the local level. There is also a danger that neighbourhood structures run the risk of sidelining communities of interest that do not have a geographical boundary (eg in relation to age, gender or ethnicity), and of ‘closing off’ participation to the ordinary citizen who wishes to pursue a specific issue without recourse to neighbourhood intermediaries or any ongoing participation commitment. The best strategy here is to balance the area-based input with a diversity of other participation methods, eg interactive websites, citizens’ panels and so on.
3.31 Partnership is a flexible term and in practice can be associated with a wide variety of relationships and arrangements. The type and form of partnership selected by a local authority will reflect the underlying values and priorities of that authority. So, for example, in Greenshire CC where the focus is on service improvement, partnerships are considered valuable in so far as they help meet this end. Authorities like Greenshire CC will take little persuading as to the merits of the mixed economy of service provision and are likely to have in place a number of long-term partnership relationships with key service providers in the private and/or independent sector as a result. Partnership arrangements are mainly functional and bilateral, focused on a specific aspect of service delivery (eg the provision of residential care for the elderly) and negotiated between the local authority and partners. While the initial decision to engage in service-related partnerships will have been a political one, the development and management of the relationships is primarily a managerial activity. There is a heavy emphasis on the achievement of clear standards of service, supported by a specific service contract. Service users are engaged in the process of partnership through user forums that are invited to comment on service quality and ideas for service improvements.

3.32 By contrast in Castlemead MBC and LB Wythen, partnerships are not only delivery instruments but important elements in a developing model of ‘co-governance’, made necessary by the complexity of the prevailing environment and the issues to be addressed. Aspiring to be a Civic Leader, Castlemead MBC will see itself as ‘first among equals’ in partnerships seeking community wellbeing through strategic interventions in priority areas. Priorities are likely to be 'cross-cutting', with no clear causal relationship between intervention and outcome and unable to be addressed by any single body acting alone. Multi-agency and multi-level partnerships are formed to enable a more rounded deliberation of the problem and to identify possible interventions. Partnerships are likely to be led by senior elected members and supported by senior officials. The energy and 'weight' of the partnership is important in lobbying national government (and others) to secure the necessary profile, freedoms and flexibilities or resource streams to help make progress towards the desired outcomes.

3.33 ‘Co-governance’ is also important to LB Wythen in its aspiration to become a Democracy Hub within the locality. Here the key relationships are not with elite representatives of the different sectors, but with local community groups and frontline service providers. Elected members play an important role in facilitating exchanges, enabling community concerns to be articulated, and holding local providers and organisations to account. Considerable officer time is needed to help co-ordinate the engagement of all relevant local stakeholders, develop plans of action and oversee their delivery. Neighbourhood-level partnerships are likely to be seen as the basis of a bottom-up approach to inter-agency working, with ward councillors playing an important role as brokers in the partnership process. Such bodies will feed into authority-wide partnerships, at which senior politicians are keen to play the role of ‘citizens’ champion’, emphasising their unique democratic mandate among other stakeholders.

**links with the private sector**

3.34 Strategic choices in relation to engaging the private sector have a special importance, although they are essentially part of the broader partnership process. A Service First authority is likely to make considerable use of outsourcing, using contracts with private sector providers where there is evidence of benefits in terms of increased efficiency and/or effectiveness. There will be interest too in the potential of ‘open partnerships’, in which commercial bodies provide a range of financial and managerial services for the authority. For an authority like Greenshire, there is no preference for the use of in-house providers – achieving ‘fitness for purpose’ is a matter of putting together the right mix of providers to maximise value for money and service quality.

3.35 For councils emphasising the Civic Leader role, public/private partnerships are seen as an important vehicle for achieving regeneration goals (including, for instance, PFI and PPPs). The cross-cutting, locality-wide priorities of an authority like Castlemead require the active involvement of the commercial sector and maximum leverage in terms of resources and expertise. To secure maximum involvement by business, the council is likely to seek a pivotal role in the LSP (and specific regeneration partnerships) for private sector representatives. The Civic Leader authority has no assumption against the outsourcing of services, seeing this as a useful device for focusing its own capacity upon the broader goal of securing citizen and community wellbeing.
3.36 In contrast, an authority that prioritises the role of Democracy Hub is likely to take a more cautious approach to private sector involvement. It values the flexibility that direct service provision affords for responding to local people’s changing needs. There is also an emphasis upon the direct accountability to elected politicians that is afforded through direct service provision. An authority such as Wythen will be interested in the potential of service level agreements with voluntary and community bodies to provide local services. For both private and voluntary sector contractors there will be an emphasis upon the maximum involvement of service users and citizens in service development and management.

**e-government and e-democracy**

3.37 Websites, call centres, customer relationship management systems and other technologies are likely to feature in most local authorities, whether they aspire to the role of Service First, Civil Leader or Democracy Hub. These technologies provide the infrastructure of e-government and are now a common feature in most local authorities. Because of their novelty, it is tempting for councils to see new technologies as a necessary – and ‘neutral’ – tool of local government modernisation. This is not the case. The way in which local authorities use new technologies gives an implicit emphasis to particular priorities about role and purpose. Local authorities need to think consciously and critically about how e-government can support their strategic choices. By making this an explicit process, councils can ensure that new technologies contribute to ‘fitness for purpose’, rather than distract from it. Specific technological applications can be used to support the priorities of the authority, embedding strategic choices in the day-to-day activities of the organisation. If local authorities fail to grasp the ‘politics’ of e-government, they run the risk of creating or reinforcing patterns of organisational behaviour that are at odds with the strategic vision.

3.38 A local authority emphasising Service First is likely to prioritise ‘government to citizen’ (G2C) applications, which emphasise electronic service provision on a 24/7 basis, seeking to learn from commercial organisations which already operate in this way. This emphasis underlies much of the ODPM’s Local Government Online initiative and related targets for e-government. It has tremendous potential in terms of improving access and joining up service delivery. Systems of this sort prioritise a particular type of relationship with citizens – that of the ‘service consumer’. They downplay any sense of collective engagement with the authority. The local authority that aspires to the role of Civic Leader or Democracy Hub may see this as a challenge.

3.39 Such local authorities are likely to supplement G2C applications with innovations directed more specifically at e-democracy. For an authority like Castlemead seeking to prioritise civic leadership, website design can be organised around community issues, providing easy links to partner agencies and joint projects. Websites can also be used to market the locality as a whole to the wider world, including potential funders and investors at the regional, national and international level. For an authority like Wythen that seeks to be a Democracy Hub, the emphasis can be upon applications that support notions of collective rather than individualistic patterns of engagement. Such an authority can make particular use of community portals and moderated online discussion forums, rather than (or in addition to) online surveys and citizen panels. It is these types of choices that reinforce the strategic priorities of the authority, enabling the tools of e-government to support the strategic choice agenda in local government.
organisational design and strategic choice

3.40 This chapter has used the device of three ‘ideal types’ to draw out the organisational implications of different strategic choices. No one authority necessarily fits one or other of these models, though many do approximate to them. More usually, an authority will be a mix of all three. Moreover, an authority may be deploying a different mix in relation to certain of its functions, or in respect of parts of its locality. If this is the case, additional implications for organisational design will need to be drawn out. The way in which choices are phased is all important. One authority may decide to focus its capacity on service improvement initially, making only limited progress on community and regeneration strategies at this stage. Another may concentrate almost exclusively at first on regeneration strategy because of the long lead-in time involved, while accepting that financial resources and organisational capacity will not be available immediately for major service improvements.

3.41 The key message is that organisational design is too important not to be treated as a crucial element of the process of local strategic choice. Organisational forms and processes are the means whereby strategic priorities are embedded in the day-to-day life of the authority. It is the organisational arrangements of a local authority that frame the daily decision-making of members, officers, citizens and partners. How an authority organises itself in relation to partnership, participation or political leadership will have profound effects upon who is involved in which decisions, and on the perceived feasibility and desirability of different courses of action. Local authorities which neglect organisational issues (or treat them as purely technical) miss out on the opportunity to bring their strategic purposes to life, often perpetuating arrangements that divert or even undermine their strategic purpose. They also miss the opportunity to orchestrate in a more overt way the contributions which can be made by all the various players to help achieve key objectives – politicians and their political parties, senior managers, council staff, stakeholders and partners.

3.42 Organisational design is the key to marshalling the capacity to make things happen, including communicating key messages to staff and mobilising their energy and commitment in support of major objectives. It is about specifying and building the right extent and character of organisational capacity to support the execution of its strategic choices. It is a crucial stage in aligning the aspirations of a council and its communities with the capacity to realise those aspirations given the context in which they have to be fulfilled.

3.43 The choices which have to be made are tough ones. They involve a hierarchy of priority and an ordering of value, often between groups of people who all have needs that are legitimate and significant and deserve a response. In the short term, choices may have to be made between deploying available resources on improving current services and on investment in regeneration or the renewal of decaying infrastructure. Getting the right amount of organisational capacity, deployed in the right way, is a matter of making sure that a council has the right tools to tackle these difficult tasks, both to support the policy and political process in making those decisions and then to ensure delivery.
1  Are we making use of the range of opportunities for implementing our priorities?
   – for accessing external funding eg LAAs at the national level or via European budgets
   – for persuading other agencies to take supportive action, on a bilateral basis or a multi-agency basis
   – for private sector involvement, whether through PFIs, PPPs or outsourcing
   – for using the power of wellbeing
   – for influencing other agencies through the medium of external scrutiny
   – for harnessing public support for a priority, through partnerships with the voluntary and community sector or other means

2  Is the constitution an appropriate vehicle for achieving our priorities?
   If not, how does it need to be changed?
   – have we defined meaningful roles for non-executive members?
   – has the legitimate role of the opposition been facilitated?
   – is the officer/member division of responsibilities clear and fit for purpose?

3  Is our organisational structure and culture fit for purpose?
   – is the budget process appropriate as a means of expressing and implementing our priorities? If not, how does it need to be changed?
   – is the organisational structure appropriate as a means of expressing and implementing our priorities? If not, is marginal or radical change required, and what form should the changes take?
   – is the organisational culture conducive to the priorities of the authority? If not, how does it need to change and how can the change be achieved?
   – does our use of partnerships and participation mechanisms contribute positively to our priorities?
4.1 A local authority that seeks to be ‘fit for purpose’ needs clarity about its strategic direction, and the organisational implications of that choice. While national standards and central inspection are important, much greater attention needs to be directed towards areas of local strategic choice. There are important choices to be made in relation to the **relative priority, interpretation, and implementation** of the main elements of the reform agenda for local government. Local authorities need to make these choices in an open and transparent way, with a strong political lead and in association with communities and partners. In this chapter of the report we set out an eight-stage process for facilitating local choice (see toolkit panel on pages 37–38).

**an outward and politically-led process**

4.2 It is important to note that this process is not intended to be another formal planning system to add to the wide range of existing requirements. Instead it will provide an overarching planning framework for drawing up the community strategy, local performance plan and so on. It is important that the overall process is politically-led, although some stages will rely heavily on officers for input and development (eg stages 1, 5, 7 and 8). Elected members will focus their attention on Stages 2, 3 and 4 – and, of course, the budget setting in Stage 6. The determination, interpretation and development of local strategic priorities will be best addressed by leading members and officers in a relatively informal setting, perhaps one or more away-days, and through the use of appropriately imaginative and creative techniques. Neither should the process be confined to the town hall (or equivalent). It should benefit from dialogues with community leaders and local partners, perhaps through special road-shows, or via established consultation channels and partnership forums.

4.3 We recognise that the process we have set out is itself idealised, in the sense that it is offered as a series of logical and rational steps through which self-analysis can lead to a clearer definition of needs and priorities. Life is not often like that. Organisations often develop through a much messier and more dynamic process, involving experimentation and the testing of boundaries, as present capabilities are redefined in relation to new and desired goals. The latter approach may be an appropriate means of establishing fitness for purpose but it needs to be undertaken self-consciously and reflected upon.

4.4 Each local authority should make its own politically-led judgements about strategic priorities, whatever its size, location or political composition. It is important, however, that an authority takes account of how its ‘neighbours’ are prioritising and interpreting the three dimensions of the reform agenda – service improvement, community leadership and democratic renewal. This is an important feature of the context in which local authorities operate (see chapter 2) which they need to understand and interpret in forming their own strategic choices. Unitary authorities considering issues of community leadership, for example, need to take account of links with adjacent boroughs and sub-regional stakeholders.
For an authority located in the shire counties, the approach of the other tier of local government is of particular significance. Both districts and counties will be concerned with service improvement, but the negotiation of responsibilities in relation to community leadership and democratic renewal is potentially more complex. Community leadership is likely to be most effective within coherent socio-economic units (eg city regions or journey-to-work catchment areas). There may be a case for counties taking the lead here, possibly identifying more than one such area within their boundaries. In so far as democratic renewal is concerned, there may be a logic in districts taking the lead given their ‘closeness’ to individual communities. County councils may struggle administratively if they seek to manage a relationship with individual neighbourhoods and villages. It is unlikely that district and county councils within a single locality will come up with the same strategic priorities or with a neat and tidy division of labour. Indeed, as independent elected bodies, it would be odd if they did. But there is scope for an intelligent reading of local context that allows both counties and districts to make choices that build upon their particular strengths within a two-tier system. If authorities seek to avoid competition and duplication, there is potential for a creative tension to exist between the strategic choices of county and district councils. Ultimately this may contribute to citizen wellbeing, given the different responsibilities and resources of the two tiers.
**stage one – scanning the local contextual environment**
The authority reviews the social, demographic, economic and environmental characteristics of its area and examines likely trends in those factors over the medium term, identifying problems and opportunities. It also attempts to draw out the relationships between these trends and the impact of a range of non-local factors (eg globalisation, threat of terrorism). This is not new. Many local authorities already undertake such activities in a relatively systematic way. The important point here is that environmental scanning is seen as the first stage in a process of local strategic choice and not as a passive ‘monitoring’ exercise. Involving partners in this scanning exercise will provide access to important sources of information and also to diverse interpretations of current and future trends. This first stage should also involve a realistic assessment of the council’s ‘internal’ context, ie what stance the council currently takes on local priorities, how it is perceived, its political and managerial culture, and any associated barriers and enablers to change. The environment – internal and external – should not be seen as static. The scanning stage should involve a consideration of likely future developments (eg a change in local political control or a new EU directive) which may have a bearing upon the phasing of council priorities and organisational adjustments.

**stage two – determining substantive local priorities**
Political judgements are made, on the basis of the above evidence, about the key priorities facing the authority (at this stage independently of its own powers/ responsibilities). Judgements will be informed by dialogue with communities and key local partners. They may be quite independent, however, of the perception of central government regarding appropriate priorities for local government. It is usually helpful if strategic agendas of this nature are developed from an identification of problems and opportunities.

**stage three – interpreting local priorities in the context of the three elements of the reform agenda**
Political judgements are made about what this substantive strategic agenda implies about the relative priority to be allocated to service improvement, community leadership and democratic renewal respectively. Do the main problems to be addressed imply that the dominant deficit is in relation to service quality (failing schools, lack of affordable housing, chronic traffic congestion), community leadership (declining economy, outdated infrastructure, increasing racial tensions) or democratic renewal (low and declining electoral turnout, public apathy, lack of trust displayed by local population)? It is possible of course that an authority may wish to give equal priority to two of the three areas, or to all three equally but it should not do so automatically – only after going through consideration of each possibility.

**stage four – development of local strategic priorities**
This is the stage at which ‘substantive’ concerns are linked to priorities within the reform agenda to produce a corporate strategy. This document, which should be politically-led and politically-owned, aims to summarise the authority’s own position on what it sees as the key problems facing it and how, in broad terms, it wishes to tackle them. It should address some of the key interpretative choices associated with service improvement, community leadership and democratic renewal (see chapter 2) in an integrated way.
stage five – review of opportunities for implementing the corporate strategy
At this point the authority needs to undertake a critical but creative review of implementation possibilities. For example:
- Opportunities for accessing external funding, eg LAAs at the national level or European budgets.
- Opportunities for persuading partners to take supportive action, in some cases on a bilateral basis (eg health/social forums) and in other cases on a multi-agency basis, working through the LSP.
- Opportunities for private sector involvement, whether through PFIs, PPPs, regeneration bids or the outsourcing of services.
- Opportunities for influencing other agencies through the medium of external scrutiny (eg flood protection, rural bus services).
- Opportunities for harnessing public support for a priority, including the development of partnerships with the voluntary and community sector.

stage six – setting the budgets and the council tax
Typically this is regarded as the key strategic choice facing a local authority. Indeed, for some authorities, low taxation may be a key policy objective. But it is important for local authorities to recognise that further areas of local strategic choice may be opened up if decisions about taxation are left to a later stage. The authority needs to be clear about what it wants to achieve and then identify realistic targets for the achievement of priorities within acceptable levels of overall expenditure and tax. For many authorities, choice may be facilitated by a less finance-led approach. Rather than cutting the suit to fit the cloth, local authorities need to have higher aspirations. They need to establish their strategic choices and then set out to finance these priorities, while making as creative use as possible of options like those listed in stage 5. Developing this type of approach is a vital first step if local authorities are to make a case to central government for greater financial autonomy in the future.

stage seven – clarification of implications for organisational structures and processes
An authority needs to review its organisational strengths and weaknesses in relation to its agreed strategic agenda. Authorities that prioritise different elements of the reform agenda (in tandem with their own substantive concerns) will need to take a different stance on organisational issues including political leadership and scrutiny arrangements, management structures, partnership approaches, participation methods, and e-government strategies (see table 3.1). The challenge is to establish an organisation that is fit for the purposes identified. Matters of organisational design are never ‘neutral’. They need to be related in an explicit way to strategic purpose.

stage eight – capacity building and performance management
There are two important processes involved in this final stage. First, an authority needs to ensure that it possesses, or can develop, the organisational capacity to deliver its chosen strategic priorities – service improvement, community leadership, democratic renewal or some mix of these. Second, arrangements have to be initiated to manage and monitor performance in achieving these priorities. These two processes are familiar ‘good practice’ within any local authority planning process (and well supported through existing Audit Commission guidance).
4.6 In summary, the eight-stage model proposed in this chapter is not a blueprint. Rather it provides a guide to sequencing and supporting the process of local strategic choice. By undertaking such a process, councils will strengthen their sense of being in control of their own destiny (albeit in the context of specific constraints). They will be making explicit those choices that are usually made implicitly or informally, hence improving political accountability and perhaps increasing public interest and involvement. Local authorities will also be strengthening the credibility of the institution of local government by demonstrating collectively that there are still ways in which local authorities can choose to be different from one another and from any centrally-specified ‘preferred model’.

4.7 We are advocating a strategic approach that is politically-led and responsive to specific local problems and trends. In this scenario, the corporate strategy becomes the authority’s contract with local people about what it wants to achieve and how, in broad terms, it wishes to achieve its priorities. It forms the basis for exploring a range of opportunities for achieving those purposes, many of which will involve relationships with central government (eg through LAAs) and with local stakeholders (through LSPs and service specific partnerships).

4.8 Central government or certain local stakeholders may be indifferent or even hostile to a particular local authority priority but, if this has been arrived at through a legitimate political process, it should not be discarded or downplayed. There may be novel ways of achieving that priority, as indicated in the options set out under stage five of our process. The more extensive use of the wellbeing power, the scrutiny of the policies of other agencies which are causing public concern, and the identification of opportunities for joint action with the public are all mechanisms which could and should be more widely used to take forward authorities’ own agendas.

4.9 The process of exercising strategic choice is fundamentally one of leadership and the style and manner of that leadership. Not only will local authorities generally not fit neatly into one or other of the ‘ideal type’ models but also there is not any one model which is right, even in a specific set of circumstances. Local politics and policy will point in different directions even in an objectively identical situation. It is the character and direction of local leadership which will then settle the ‘mix’ that is adopted and the specific objectives which are chosen.

4.10 Furthermore, the process of exercising strategic choice is but one stage in a wider process. To achieve its goals, a local authority has to establish effective governance mechanisms, develop trust with citizens, engage the organisation and its wider stakeholders, and build the requisite capacity to ensure success. There are further choices to be made in relation to organisational style – the balance between, for example, a collaborative, networking or learning style. The exercise of strategic choice in the way we have described is an important starting point but it is not the whole story by any means.

4.11 The choice agenda identified in the previous chapter will need to be exercised in the dynamic context of a newly re-elected government with strong views about the importance of ‘localism’. Likely areas for development include an extension of the pilot schemes for Local Area Agreements which promise devolution of responsibilities and greater flexibility to develop local solutions to meet local needs. Furthermore, the new CPA system implies a greater priority in assessing achievements in relation to community leadership, an emphasis on users and a focus on choice, together with a less directive and more selective inspection regime.
4.12 Self-assessment and self-improvement are themes of growing importance within CPA. These themes continue to be at the heart of the Wales Programme for Improvement as it continues to evolve. The LGA and the Audit Commission have both published reports supporting the idea of Local Public Service Boards (LPSB), with sources of funding and decision-making powers which LSPs currently lack. In Wales we have seen the emergence of an approach which explicitly strives for ‘co-governance’ and ‘co-production’, and a strengthening of partnership between the Welsh national and the local government levels.

4.13 The ‘new localism’ agenda has been taken up by several government departments, with implications both for central-local relations and for the empowerment of neighbourhood-level bodies. The Home Office/ODPM “civil renewal” agenda promotes active citizenship and empowered communities, arguing that local people are best placed to identify and tackle their own problems, in partnership with public agencies including local government. ‘Democratic self-determination’ is cited as a core value.

4.14 At the same time, discussion continues regarding the possibility of further local government reorganisation to establish large unitary authorities in the shires. Other areas of policy debate include a renewed interest in the role of directly elected mayors, further reduction in LEA responsibilities, the implementation of the Gershon Report on efficiency savings and the extension of choice to service users (and ‘personalisation’).

4.15 In Wales, a general policy for public services change and improvement has been published which builds on ideas of ‘public value’ to help chart the course for the next 5–10 years. In England, an independent inquiry into local government funding is underway, investigating the future of council tax and additional sources of local income. The inquiry will consider the vexed issue of whether local authorities should be allowed greater flexibility to raise a larger proportion of their funding locally. It is already clear that support for such a case rests upon demonstrating the capacity of local authorities to exercise strong local leadership and to make locally distinctive strategic choices.

4.16 It remains unclear which current proposals constitute ‘fixed points’ and whether thinking is developing along similar lines in other relevant government departments beyond the ODPM but some themes appear to have developed momentum.

4.17 How might our hypothetical ‘ideal-type’ authorities that have made distinctive strategic choices respond to these various new developments? Would they be seen as congruent with their chosen strategic direction or detrimental to its achievement? Taking CPA first, an increased emphasis on community leadership and public engagement would clearly benefit authorities like Castlemead or Wythen which already aspire to be a Civic Leader and a Democracy Hub respectively. It may even cause authorities like Greenshire to re-assess their Service First approach. Existing CPA criteria have had a major impact upon local authorities’ strategic choices and changes in these criteria are likely to provoke further adjustment.
4.18 Other new developments can be seen to have a particular affinity with different strategic choices. There is a clear relationship between LAAs and the service improvement agenda. The intention is for local partnerships to agree specific service outcomes with central government that contribute to the achievement of national targets but express bespoke local solutions. There is an important link between LPSBs and the aspiration to community leadership. Such bodies could act to join-up governance, as well as service delivery, across the locality as a whole, perhaps even overseeing public expenditure in that area. Home Office led policies of civil renewal are closely related to the health of local democracy, particularly in the context of ODPM's renewed interest in cultivating neighbourhood arrangements at the local level. All local authorities will need to formulate a response to these different initiatives but the nature of their response is likely to vary depending upon their strategic starting point. We can illustrate this by contrasting the responses of the three local authorities.

4.19 Our 'local lens' examples serve to illustrate the way in which the adoption of a clear strategic position provides a basis for local authorities to assess the advantages and disadvantages of new initiatives promoted by central government. It provides a critical lens through which a local authority can assess the value of (or threat posed by) LAAs, LPSBs, civil renewal and other initiatives. A judgement can then be made about whether or not to support a new initiative or, if it is mandatory, how to interpret and respond to new requirements. Of course, such judgements may well be made in any event. However, the process advocated in this report encourages an explicit and strategic process of local choice, which is politically-led and context-specific.
Greenshire is enthusiastic about the potential of LAAs because of their direct link to the service improvement agenda and to LPSA2. The authority is waiting to see how the pilots work out before entering the fray. Greenshire wants to see evidence that the investment of effort will be met by sufficient rewards. Greenshire is nervous that, as a county council, it will be the key point of contact for all districts in its area and there are some tense relationships to be negotiated.

Castlemead is also keen on LAAs but for a different reason. The authority feels that LAAs have the potential to raise its profile, focus on cross-cutting issues and develop a relationship with central government.

Wythen is less positive about LAAs, seeing the initiative as potentially marginalising community and voluntary sector voices, particularly the most disadvantaged. There is concern that LAAs will operate at a level that is too far removed from the day-to-day priorities of citizens and that combining funds into a single pot could reduce sensitivity to different community needs.

**Local Public Service Boards**

Greenshire is impressed by the proposal for LPSBs, which appeals to the authority’s ethos of service improvement and efficiency. But Greenshire feels that the initiative has been designed very much with single tier authorities in mind. It is unclear how LPSBs will operate in a two tier context. The authority has decided to study the experience of other two tier areas before making any commitments itself. Greenshire also has some concerns about the additional costs likely to be associated with setting up and operating a LPSB. It intends to assess the potential benefit over and above its existing service related partnerships. Greenshire is happy with existing LSP arrangements that rest heavily upon district level input.

Castlemead is very keen on LPSBs seeing them as an opportunity to get a grip on patterns of total public service resource allocation in the borough and to identify opportunities for leverage and joint-working. Drawing on its experience with NDC, the authority believes that stakeholders take partnerships much more seriously when significant resources are attached. Castlemead believes that the local authority should chair any new board, allowing it to develop further its leadership role in the city and surrounding region. Castlemead’s only concern is to ensure that cross-cutting issues are prioritised and that the LPSB does not remain a collection of separate services.

Wythen is less positive about LPSBs seeing them as the antithesis of its community orientation. It does see some potential for a borough-wide LPSB to act as a strategic ‘joining-up’ mechanism in the context of empowered neighbourhoods. Wythen is concerned that the other agencies represented on a LPSB may not share its commitment to public involvement. Wythen sees its role on any new board as being to push hard for the interests of local communities, building on its approach to the LSP.

**Civil Renewal**

Greenshire is not especially enthusiastic about the prospect of new policies to ‘empower local communities’. The authority already has parish councils within its area and consults with citizens over service needs. Greenshire is more interested in the potential benefit of using a neighbourhood focus to pinpoint areas for service improvement, in cooperation with service users and other delivery agencies such as health bodies.
Castlemead also has concerns about the neighbourhood focus of much debate on civil renewal and new localism. The authority is concerned that such developments may fragment the city’s identity and capacity, encouraging conflict between areas and justifying different policies in different parts of the city. The approach could undermine the authority’s hard work in building city-wide coalitions. The authority already consults neighbourhood groups in developing its community leadership strategy and doesn’t want to see further power devolved. Castlemead also has grave concerns about the democratic legitimacy of non-elected residents making decisions. The authority prizes highly the democratic mandate of its members and the checks and balances of representative democracy.

Wythen, on the other hand, is keen to experiment with different approaches to political participation, given the lack of interest of most citizens in political parties and elections. The authority sees the civil renewal agenda as supporting its strategy of further devolving decision-making powers to the neighbourhood level, building on its existing area committees. Wythen welcomes the involvement of the Home Office, arguing that democratic renewal requires investment in social capital and active citizenship. The authority is concerned that any policy framework for civil renewal protects the interests of minority groups who may not be well organised or vociferous.
5.1 Local authorities should recognise that they have a responsibility to seize opportunities and to exercise all the powers that they have to make real choices. In the context of these responsibilities, local authorities need to raise their aspirations still further. They should be making claims for new powers where the existing framework inhibits their ability to find solutions that work for the communities that they serve. Responding to current initiatives is clearly important but the major themes of this report transcend any particular policy agenda. It makes a more fundamental point about the need for councils to focus upon what is right for them and their communities and to develop an organisational capacity tailored to these ends.

5.2 Representative democracy is the cornerstone of our system of local government and the diminishing role of political difference and political choice is a cause for concern. To achieve ‘fitness for purpose’, local authorities need to make transparent and accountable their choices about purpose. Then they need to design structures and processes that ‘embed’ these purposes in the daily life of the authority. Questions of organisational design are never neutral. They give life to local authorities’ strategic choices because they have the capacity to shape on a daily basis the behaviour and decisions of members, officers, partners and even citizens themselves.

5.3 This is a challenge to local government. It is not easy to seize and stake out the territory of local choice when central choices and directions are so demanding of resources and capacity. But it should be recognised that the central direction contained in the reform agenda has helped to create the conditions in which local choice can be better reasserted. Resources have been made available to rebuild and extend services, albeit largely those that central government regarded as the key priorities. The political role in local government has been reasserted through the development of political executives and the strengthening of responsibility on the part of local politicians. And new powers of community planning and wellbeing have placed the responsibility of community leadership firmly on the shoulders of local government. That responsibility should be taken firmly and it should be exercised locally.

5.4 The very specificity and ‘localness’ of local authorities means that they should not have identikit strategies or ways of operating. Local government needs to be open to challenge, committed to continuous improvement and responsive to the ambitions of 21st century people and places. It needs to do this to reflect and celebrate local choice and diversity.
5.5 There are three key messages in this report that help to explain what being fit for purpose could mean for local government. First, political choices need to be made and priorities set according to the specific needs of the local area. The context within which a local authority operates is influenced by more than just national policy and generalised demographic trends. The local specifics of the people, place, environment and economy converge to create a distinctive local context. It is within this context that a local authority has to make strategic choices about priorities and about the way in which it designs and manages its activities and relationships in order to achieve them.

5.6 Moreover, the aim of increasing choice in public services has become a persistent theme in political debate. Increased choice, both individual and collective, implies that differences between areas will intensify as local authorities seek to respond better to the complex needs of customers and citizens, who are themselves influenced by the local culture, economy, demography and so on.

5.7 Second, these choices can be made because there is more room for local authorities to choose than is commonly assumed. The principle of devolving decision-making to the local level is one that has wide-ranging political support. International comparisons demonstrate the highly centralised nature of the system in this country. Further, the trajectory of public services regulation, from Best Value and CPA towards peer review and increased self-assessment, is in the direction of greater responsibility for self-improvement and for local choice and aspiration. CPA 2005 and the Wales Programme for Improvement (WPI) are increasingly able to acknowledge that there is more than one kind of excellence and more than one way to do things even in a single set of circumstances. The development of policy on governance from community strategies and LSPs through LPSAs to Local Area Agreements and Local Public Service Boards shows a similar tendency.

5.8 Third, this report aims to help councils develop the sense of purpose for a place and, crucially, the role of political leadership in facilitating, defining and refining that purpose. It is central to developing the self-confidence of councils and of their communities. This report is about more than strategy in the conventional sense of ‘where we want to be – what is in the way – how do we get there?’. It is about the character of the local authority itself. It is about asking what sort of authority it wants to be to achieve broad, strategic priorities. It is about local political leaders clarifying purpose – leading the council, leading the area, leading change – and exercising the new executive responsibilities conferred by the Local Government Act 2000 with confidence and purpose. In other words, this report is firmly situated in the increasingly familiar territory of developing leadership within local government.

5.9 With the principle of greater local autonomy seemingly accepted across the political spectrum, the focus will increasingly fall on local government’s ability to deliver on the ‘localism’ agenda. This will demand strong, independent councils with a clear view of their role – councils that are fit for purpose. This report provides a mechanism for linking purpose, through strategy, to the design of the structures and means by which the council operates. It talks of ideal types but recognises a need to balance strategic choices within and across them. Whether a council is a Service First organisation, a Civic Leader or a Democracy Hub, or (more likely) a mixture of the three, the point is to be clear that the choices made are rooted in a clear analysis of the local people and place.

5.10 Making these choices is not a simple process that can be followed through in a mechanistic way. It is not a simple toolkit or a set of instructions. It is a way of thinking that must involve the messy business of discussing, debating and engaging. Those discussions will need to involve local politicians, officers, local organisations from all sectors and, of course, local people. This is the very business of local governance and politics and the lifeblood of local democracy.
1 Are we clear about the relevance of the following initiatives or proposals to our authority’s priorities?
   - Local Area Agreements
   - Local Public Service Boards
   - Civil renewal and empowered neighbourhood-level bodies
   - The extension (and personalisation) of choice for service users
   - New opportunities for introducing elected mayors
   - A less directive and more selective CPA inspection regime

2 How should we therefore respond to these initiatives and proposals?

3 What would be our honest response to the report’s three key questions?
   - Are explicit political choices made and priorities set according to the specific needs of the area?
   - Are we exploiting to the full the scope that exists to ‘choose to be different’?
   - Does the political leadership facilitate, define and refine a sense of purpose for the area we represent?
fitness for purpose in the 21st century
strategic choice at local level in the new millennium

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