Leadership, scrutiny or mutiny? New councillor roles in local government in the UK


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Introduction

In keeping with the reform agenda of the Labour Government in the UK, local government is being modernised. The key changes for local government in England and Wales currently underway include a move away from compulsory competitive tendering towards ‘best value’, the prospect of a duty on local authorities to promote the economic, social, and environmental well-being of their locality, some limited moves to relax spending controls on local authorities, the prompting of local authorities to engage more extensively with local communities, and imminent reforms to political management structures to replace the current method of decision-making, known as the committee system. While all aspects of the reform agenda will in some way impact on local councillors, the most far-reaching and the most direct changes will come as a result of the reorganisation of political management structures, and, to a lesser extent, proposed reforms to the way local authorities interact with their communities. It is on these two aspects of the reform process that this paper will concentrate upon.

This paper draws on a research project called ‘Leadership in urban governance: the mobilisation of collaborative advantage’\(^1\). The paper outlines the context of change in terms of the move from local government to local governance, the growth of partnerships involving local authorities, increased community participation in local government, and the new leadership agenda at the local level. The paper outlines new political management arrangements that are shortly to be introduced into local councils and examines changes to councillor roles in the light of the reforms. The paper also looks at the arrangements for the Greater London Authority and councillor roles there. Finally, the concept of collaborative advantage is introduced as a way of thinking about how councils and councillors can act most effectively in local governance. The concept connects the various trends in local governance and offers a way forward for local councillors. The paper concludes with some reflections on the roles of councillors, and argues that the concept of collaborative advantage is a useful way of thinking about behaviour in local governance.

Trends in UK local governance

Some key aspects of change in local governance at the general level need highlighting; they are the move from local government to local governance, the increased prevalence of partnerships

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involving local authorities, moves to increase public participation in local government, and the emphasis on a community leadership role for local authorities. These changes have forced a new direction for local authorities, a new role in the community and therefore require a new way of thinking about how local authorities act.

Local authorities are now part of a system of local governance; they operate alongside a network of diverse agencies at the local level, some of which have been created as functions of local authorities have been removed. While local authorities have always operated alongside other bodies at the local level, it is the extent and range of other bodies (quangos, voluntary organisations, private firms) now operating locally that have forced the local authority to see itself as one of a number of service providers rather than the dominant service provider, as was the case in the 1970s (Sharpe, 1970, p158). The move towards governance has brought a number of positive and negative aspects (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998, p107). These include the gains of challenging the producer-led system of service provision, allowing resources to be targeted more specifically with the use of ad hoc bodies, and forcing a more task oriented approach in public service. These gains are offset by the production of a complex system where accountability is hard to place, co-ordination difficult to achieve, and where the traditional democratic base that legitimates local authorities is undermined.

Second, local authorities have had to become used to operating in partnership with other agencies, often as co-ordinator or facilitator of joint action. Partnerships are now the norm rather than the exception in local governance, as “elected municipal governments…find themselves spending more and more time building networks and working in a variety of partnerships with other local agencies” (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998, p107). This development can be attributed to the loss of functions that local authorities suffered in the 1980s and 1990s, and to the concerted attempts to tackle ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973) or ‘cross-cutting’ issues (Stewart M et al., 1999). Local authorities are now required both by the organisational structures within which they work, and by the problems they face to work across and beyond the formal lines of demarcation between organisations. Similarly, within local authorities, it is more common for departments to deal with problems on an inter-departmental basis, though this has a longer history.

Third, public participation in the affairs of local government is increasing. Local government in the UK is based on a system of representative rather than participatory democracy, and has developed as a provider of services, giving elected representatives and professional groups considerable control over policy-making in local government, often pushing out a role for the community. This may be about to change as initiatives to increase participation in local government take hold. Moves to increase participatory democracy in local government and make
the views expressed there have a real impact on the making of policy have generally come a poor third place to those views expressed by councillors and put forward by officers. For example, Hoggett claims:

local political parties of all hues continue to act as if they have a monopoly on democratic power; a basic attitude of distrust prevails towards local citizens’ groups who will not or cannot play according to the rules of the local participation game (1995, p108).

In a similar vein, a study of participation conducted by Boaden, Goldsmith, Hampton and Stringer in the early 1980s was downbeat about such initiatives. They concluded that “in the end, elite perspectives have won out, and participation has served the purposes of building up a consensus for the proposals of those in power” (Boaden et al. 1982, p179). Nevertheless, despite these words of caution, it is possible to see local authorities becoming more active in democratising their activities. Perhaps the growth of unelected and unaccountable quangos has accelerated this process, as councils seek to lead the democratic agenda, defend their territory in local governance and set themselves up as the voice of the community. Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett (1994) detail radical decentralisation initiatives undertaken by two councils in London. Sweeting and Cope (1997) demonstrate that the activities of councils with regard to democratic innovations is considerable, and Lowndes et al. (1998 p3) point towards activities where public participation initiatives can be linked to strategies for inter-agency collaboration, albeit with difficulties. Moreover, the participation agenda is on central government’s list of priorities for local government, as the White Paper on the subject demonstrates (DETR, 1998a). Without being too prescriptive, the Government clearly wants more contact between councils and communities, and states “the Government wishes to see consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils... and undertaken across a wide range of each council’s responsibilities” (DETR, (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) 1998a p39).

Fourth, local authorities are being prompted by central government to take on a role in community leadership, acting as a conduit for the expression of community voice and for expressing the views of local people. Much of the leadership agenda comes with the personal endorsement of the Prime Minister. In an IPPR pamphlet written by Blair, he positions local authorities at the centre of local governance linking the various component parts, including local communities. Blair states:

The days of the all-purpose authority that planned and delivered everything are gone. They are finished. It is in partnership with others – public agencies, private companies, community groups and voluntary organisations – that local government’s future lies. Local authorities will still deliver some services but their distinctive leadership role will be to weave and knit together the contribution of the various local stakeholders. To ensure the shared vision is delivered by bringing cohesion and co-ordination to the current fragmented scene (1998, p13).
Indeed Blair puts a lack of leadership at the very centre of local government’s failings by saying “the heart of the problem is that local government needs recognised leaders if it is to fulfil the community leadership role” (1998 p16). The leadership role for local authorities entails developing a vision for localities, providing a focus for partnership, and guaranteeing quality services for all (Blair 1998, p13). This implies a new role for councillors. Leadership is not limited to councillors; in Blair’s vision, more leadership is needed in other settings as well. For example he states “senior managers must provide clear vision and leadership to their staff… they must engage with the leaders of the local community” (1998 p17).

The roles for councillors in relation both to the partnerships in which local authorities engage, and in the participatory strategies that local authorities devise are rather ill defined. With regard to the leadership agenda, what sorts of leadership can councillors give to the new agenda for local authorities? Many councillors certainly feel uneasy at the prospect of greater participation mechanisms, as it may usurp ‘their’ role. As representatives of both councils and communities, councillors may sit more easily on partnerships, but here the potential of leadership is under-developed (Hambleton and Stewart, 1997). However, if these factors provide the context for new roles of councillors outside local authorities, the major change that relates to councillor roles inside the council is that of the new political management arrangements that the Government is proposing local authorities adopt.

**New political management arrangements for local authorities**

The Government wants local authorities to adopt one of three new models of decision-making to replace the council and committees system. Currently, local councils are organised in to committees for particular services (e.g. education, social services), with an overarching ‘policy and resources committee’ to oversee the activities of the council as a whole. This model is set to be abolished and replaced in each local authority by one of three new models. The models are:

(i) a cabinet with a leader (the cabinet model).
(ii) a directly elected mayor and a council manager (the mayor/council manager model)
(iii) a directly elected mayor with a cabinet (the mayor/cabinet model)

These models draw heavily on experience in other countries, especially America, where mayor-council systems are common. However, each model will be new to Britain, and therefore the roles of the mayor, the cabinet, the officers and the members are to some extent ‘up-for-grabs’ as the processes and norms of the systems develop and unfold. For councillors, the key changes relate to the way in which they work. In each of the new models, a distinction is made between the executive and backbench roles in councils, where the executive (mayor or cabinet) sets the
general framework for councils to follow, including proposing the budget, while the backbench councillors propose amendments to the strategy of the executive, represent their constituents and scrutinise the decisions of the executive. These arrangements are justified by the Government as being an efficient way to make decisions, introducing transparency as to who is making decisions and where they are made, and consequently increasing the accountability of the executive to the electorate (DETR, 1998a, p26).

The diagrams on the following pages outline the processes and functions of each of the proposed new structures.

Figure one shows the cabinet model, where the council elects the leader. The leader proposes the policy framework and the budget, and has a formal decision-making role. The cabinet, which can be either elected or appointed by the council has responsibility for implementation and also has delegated decision-making power. The budget and policy framework are proposed by the leader, which is agreed by the council. Scrutiny rests with backbench councillors. In this model, it appears as though the council retains significant powers. For example, as well as selecting the leader and the cabinet, the council can also replace the leader (and presumably members of the cabinet). It may be that for this reason most councils seem to be opting for this model, as, while it does give considerable powers to the cabinet and the leader, retains significant powers ‘in reserve’ for the council.

Figure two shows the mayor/council manager model. In this model, the directly elected mayor delegates “both strategic policy and day to day decision making” (DETR, 1998 p27) to the council manager, who is appointed by the council. The council also decides the budget and the policy framework, which is proposed (in broad terms) by the mayor, and developed in detail by the council manager. The budget is developed and proposed by the council manager, but decided by the council. Again, backbench councillors scrutinise the executive.

Figure three shows the model with a directly elected mayor and a cabinet. In the mayor/cabinet model, the directly elected mayor is given significant powers, including patronage as he/she selects the cabinet, and the powers of proposing the budget and the policy framework. The council agrees the budget and policy framework set by the mayor, and the cabinet is responsible for implementation. Each cabinet member has a portfolio. Decision-making rests with the mayor, and where powers are delegated, with the members of the cabinet. Backbench councillors have a scrutiny role.
Figure One: The cabinet model

- **ELECTORATE**

- **CABINET LEADER**
  - Provides political leadership
  - Proposes policy framework
  - Proposes budget
  - Takes executive decisions
  - May appoint cabinet

- **CABINET**
  - Appointed by leader or council
  - Implements policies
  - Takes delegated executive decisions

- **BACKBENCH COUNCILLORS**
  - Propose amendments to budget to cabinet/leader
  - Propose new or changed policies to cabinet/leader
  - Represent electorate
  - Scrutinise executive

- **COUNCIL**
  - Agrees budget
  - Agrees policy framework
  - Decides political management framework
  - Appoints cabinet leader
  - May appoint cabinet

**KEY**
- Elects/appoints
- Scrutinises
Figure Two: The mayor/council manager model

**ELECTORATE**

**MAYOR**
- Provides political leadership
- Proposes broad policy framework

**COUNCIL MANAGER**
Under political guidance of mayor;
- Develops and proposes budget
- Develops and proposes details of policy framework
- Implements policy and secures service delivery

**BACKBENCH COUNCILLORS**
- Propose amendments to budget
- Propose changes to council policies
- Represent electorate
- Scrutinise executive

**COUNCIL**
- Decides budget
- Decides policy framework
- Decides political management framework
- Appoints council manager

**KEY**
- Elects/appoints
- Scrutinises
Figure Three: The mayor/cabinet model

ELECTORATE

MAYOR
- Provides political leadership
- Proposes policy framework
- Proposes budget
- Takes executive decisions within policy framework
- Appoints cabinet

CABINET
- Implements policies under political guidance of mayor
- Takes delegated executive decisions

BACKBENCH COUNCILLORS
- Propose amendments to budget to mayor/cabinet
- Propose new or changed policies to mayor/cabinet
- Represent electorate
- Scrutinise executive

COUNCIL
- Agrees budget
- Agrees policy framework
- Decides political management framework

KEY
Elects/appoints ➔ Scrutinises ➔
It is not clear whether the council has more influence over the budget and policy in the mayor/council manager model than the other models; in this model, the council *decides* the policy framework and budget, whereas in the mayor/cabinet model and the cabinet models, the council *agrees* the budget and policy framework. Another slight difference of the mayor/council manager model to the other two is that here, backbench councillors can only propose changes to council policies rather than suggest new council policies, which would certainly be significant to councillors attempting to carve out some sort of leadership role.

**Councillor roles in local government**

Generally, councillor roles have traditionally been defined around the concepts of representation and policy-making. The roles of scrutiny and leadership are largely absent in the academic literature regarding councillor roles, as a result of the lack of formal councillor activity in these areas. Mentions of leadership and scrutiny are embedded in a wealth of other roles, or not mentioned at all. Jones (1973 pp141-2) produces a three-fold categorisation of councillors as follows; there is (i) the representative, (ii) the specialised policy-maker, and (iii) the broad policy maker. In this model, no direct mention is made of either scrutiny or leadership, though within the representative function comes the idea of the “watchdog” (p141) and the “champion” (p142), implying that there is potential for both scrutiny and leadership in the role for councillors. Heclo (1969, pp187-197) argued that councillors’ roles can be though of as occupying three broad areas. Councillors generally were all three of the committee member, the constituency representative and the party activist, and their time is divided variously between these roles. Again the leadership and scrutiny elements are not mentioned directly, and if they do exist, are buried in the roles of committee member and constituency representative. Corina (1974) developed a typology of councillors which included the categories of party politician, ideologist, partyist, associate and politico-administrator, where again any references to scrutiny or leadership at most implied rather than obvious.

Stewart J (1983 pp74-78) observes the different roles that councillors who hold different positions play. The leadership (the leader of the council) can be differentiated according to their styles of leadership; dominant or negotiated, innovation or maintenance, political or administrative, external or internal. Service chairmen (*sic*) vary according to whether they take on a political or an administrative role, and whether they act as chairman or minister in committee. Backbencher roles are more fluid, and, according to Stewart “can be expanded or contracted, within the limits in which it is set” (1983, p78). The specific roles of councillors are working in committee and voting on policy proposals, working with departments and working with and for constituents. The party role for backbench members is important, but, according to Stewart, the “key elements [are] the committee and the constituency. They can be the effective limits of his role or they can be the
base on which he builds a wider role” (1983, p77). This ‘wider role’ is unfortunately left undeveloped, but could imply a role in leadership and scrutiny. Wilson and Game (1998 pp227-231) refer to a mix of councillor roles that are representative, policy-maker, manager, and monitor and progress chaser. The ‘monitor’ is more or less as close to any mention so far of a scrutiny role for councillors, though Wilson and Game seem to use the term in a rather ‘strategic’ sense concerned with generalities rather than specifics. No direct mention is made of leadership.

Byrne produces a six-fold classification of councillor roles. According to Byrne, the role of councillor embraces being representatives, ombudsmen, community leaders, managers, policy-makers, and politicians. Within the role of being community leaders, Byrne puts representing the concerns of constituents to outside bodies, and being “democratic advocates” (p186). Byrne’s is the only typology of councillor roles that explicitly mentions leaders outside the formal role for leaders of the council. The lack of recognition of leadership and scrutiny in the academic literature indicates that the changes that the Government proposes are radically different from the councillor roles of the past, and have implications for the way that councillors conduct their affairs.

**New councillor roles**

What is the exact nature of the new councillor roles? It was noted above that councillors under the new political management arrangements will be of two types, either executive or backbench. The White Paper specifies roles as follows:

The executive role would be to propose the policy framework and implement policies within the agreed framework. The role of backbench councillors would be to represent their constituents, share in the policy and budget decisions of the new council, suggest policy improvements, and scrutinise the executive’s policy proposals and their implementation (DETR 1998, p26).

This outline of councillor roles places responsibility on the executive councillors (whether mayors or cabinet members) for proposing policy and overseeing implementation, and backbench councillor roles in representation, limited policy-making roles, and scrutiny of the executive. The Blair pamphlet, however, urges backbench councillors to be much more proactive in their activities, arguing that there is potential for the exercise of leadership in their role as well. According to Blair, “many councillors are already acting as community leaders of their ward and there is great scope to develop this role” (1998, p17).

Bearing in mind the new decision-making arrangements in local government, the nature of local governance and the prompting of the Prime Minister, there is scope for local councillors fill substantially different roles to those they undertook in the past. These new roles are broader, more expansive activities, shaped less by the mechanics of the decision-making system and
more in tune with a proactive council. Anticipating many of the current changes, work has already been undertaken on categorising the new roles for councillors (LGMB, undated, pp31-32; Hambleton, 1998, p48). Councillors’ roles as actors in the new local governance can be broken down into the following four, overlapping categories.

1. **Community leader.** Councillors can be leaders of their wards locally. This leadership role may be exercised through representing constituents in various contexts; in the council, to the executive, or in the varied arenas of local governance. Councillors can draw communities in to taking part in public affairs, generating multiple points of view, which need to be reconciled with one another. Councillors can also lead in the Burkean sense by using their judgement on behalf of constituents.

2. **Scrubineer.** Councillors can, and under any of the new arrangements must, scrutinise the activities of the executive in their local council, as outlined above. However, a wider scrutiny role is possible where councillors, as democratic representatives of local people, scrutinise the activities of other agencies in local governance.

3. **Policy-maker.** Councillors can influence the making of policy through scrutiny committees, proposing amendments to existing policies, and suggesting new policies. They can also make policy by being members of the council and by being members of parties. This ‘new’ policy-making role does not preclude specialisation to particular areas of council work.

4. **Partner.** With the wealth of partnerships in local governance, important roles exist for councillors with regard to working with other agencies and with members and groups in the local community. Councillors can sit on boards and on partnerships beyond the realms of town hall offices, and can work in partnership with communities on various projects or to invite community participation in local governance.

Inevitably, these roles overlap and one will tend to merge into another. For example, only by being fully active in a partnership sense can councillors properly address the community leadership agenda. Nevertheless, an important point to be made is that in many ways the role for councillors is wider than before and offers more rather than less influence, and “establishing a separate executive does not need to imply a reduction in the power of councillors as a whole” (Hambleton, 1998, p49).

Community leadership is an especially difficult area to pin down. Indeed leadership skills may be varied and take a considerable time to develop. There is significant play in what can constitute leadership, so even in the setting of local governance, leadership can be highly individualised and unique. Some councillors may welcome a leadership role, while others may not want to see themselves as community leaders, preferring instead the relative safety of the committee room and the council chamber. However, as this paper stresses, councillors need to be more outward
looking, more aggressive, and engage more extensively with communities and more broadly with other agencies in local governance. Therefore, leadership is likely to embrace a mixture of the essential elements of representation, facilitating participation, and reconciling alternative points of view. These aspects of leadership are in addition to other councillor roles of policy-making, being a partner, and being a scrutineer.

The scrutiny role for councillors is elaborated upon by Hall (1998, pp18-19), who suggests various different types of scrutiny that councillors can engage in They are; policy review; proposal review; ‘call-in’ (scrutiny of decisions before implementation); ex post (scrutiny of decisions following implementation); service review (examination of all parts of an area of council work); and finally the allowing councillors to examine the actions of other public bodies and partnerships in local governance. This final function fits in well with the roles of councillors outlined above, as actors in a system of local governance rather than as council members. According to Hall, “this should enhance councillors’ roles, not just as scrutinisers but also as community representatives and local leaders” (1998, p27).

Criticisms of the proposals for backbenchers include the perception of unevenness of powers between the executive members and backbench members (Reed, 1999, p14). There is a danger that backbenchers will feel cut off from decision-making, and their scrutiny role reduced as ‘arrogant’ executive members take little notice of what the backbenchers have to say, and use the party whip to head off awkward situations which may embarrass the executive. This is one area where the proposals seem a little thin; reading through the White Paper, little mention is made to party groups, and it is as though parties will wither away as the new arrangements take hold. However, this will clearly not be the case. Parties will continue to assert some influence over the functioning of local democracy, and it seems likely that parties will retain their current authority under the proposals for a cabinet or mayor/council manager systems, but in the case of the mayor/cabinet system it is difficult to see how parties can continue in their present role (Copus, 1999, pp18-19). This reasoning may explain the preference of many councils for a cabinet system, as it maintains the possibility for a dominant role for party groups (and therefore councillors), and avoids concentrating power in the hands of an individual.

It is possible to imagine situations under the new management arrangements where parties continue to act as ‘democratic monopolists’, guarding the decision-making territory in local authorities, preventing proper scrutiny of executive decisions, and cutting out the community from decision-making processes. This type of occurrence would seem to run against the spirit of the reforms, and instead of opening up decision-making processes and councillor roles, keep them constrained within the current limited parameters. However, here is where the potential for ‘mutiny’ exists. If councillors take on board the reforms fully, it will enable them to legitimately
tackle executive members from their own party, and in effect ‘mutiny’ against the party whip, safe in the knowledge that they are acting within both the spirit and the letter of the reforms, acting as community leaders and scrutinising the decisions which are made on behalf of the community. This will require some reforms to party group processes, as Copus suggests (1999, p19).

**London**

In London, the reform process is more advanced than other parts of the UK. A Bill is currently going through Parliament to establish the Greater London Authority (GLA), a ‘strategic’ authority for the capital comprising a directly elected mayor and a twenty five person assembly (DETR 1998b). The GLA will have roles in transport, planning, fire, tourism promotion, inward investment, economic development and regeneration, police, the environment, public health, and sports and the arts. Assembly members will be elected in two ways. Fourteen members will be elected on a first-past-the-post constituency basis, and eleven members will be elected under a proportional system (DETR, 1998b, p33). A similar split to that outlined above exists between executive and backbench members. There is some debate as to whether the GLA can be considered part of a system of ‘local’ government, and whether members of the GLA can really be considered ‘local’ councillors. The GLA is a ‘strategic’ authority, covering the very large Greater London area, and representing some 5 million voters, covering the constituencies of 74 Members of Parliament. It is large by comparison with other UK local authorities (already large by international comparison), and perhaps deserves to be put under the category of regional rather than local government, as some commentators are already doing (Lynch, 1999). Councillors elected to the GLA under the first-past-the-post system will have constituencies the size of two London boroughs, and the rest will be elected under proportional representation. Members of the assembly of the GLA will be full-time and salaried, unlike councillors in other parts of the country. This brief cameo of the personnel in the assembly brings to focus whether the GLA can be considered in the same way as the rest of UK local governance, given the scale of government that it involves. However, as the form of government in the GLA is broadly similar to that proposed in the rest of the country, especially in terms of the executive/backbench split, it offers some insights as to how local government will work outside the capital.

Question are already being raised about the extent of scrutiny powers granted to backbench councillors. Jones and Stewart (1999 p14) warn that the mayor for London could turn into an ‘elective dictatorship’. They argue that too much power is concentrated in the hands of the mayor, too little given to the assembly, and no mechanism exists to remove from office an unsatisfactory mayor. Far from holding the executive in check, the assembly can be virtually ignored by the mayor. Jones and Stewart state that “no effective limits are set upon the mayor’s use of powers by the assembly which is so powerless as to appear pointless” (1998, p14). They point out that while
the assembly can investigate and prepare reports about the activities of the mayor, there is little
the assembly can do by way of imposing sanctions on the mayor. They also argue that
accountability tends to be ‘upwards’ to the secretary of state rather than ‘downwards’ to the people
of London, especially as there is no provision for the mayor to be removed from office once in
power. These considerations have considerable implications for the scrutiny role given to
councillors in other parts of the country, especially if the arrangements in other parts of the
country follow London’s lead.

Collaborative advantage

Local councils and local councillors must operate with other agencies and actors in various
settings. In the context of local governance, they operate in partnerships with other to provide
services and tackle complex problems. In the context of democratisation, they can operate in
partnership with local communities in order to act as representatives of those communities. The
concept of ‘collaborative advantage’ (Huxham, 1996) may be useful in helping to understand the
nature and goals of collaborative, inter-agency associations between actors at the local level.
Though the concept is primarily aimed at those partnerships between organisations with a view to
delivering some aspect of policy or achieving some pre-set output, it can also help to understand
the activities of councils with regard to involving the community in policy-making.

The concept of collaborative advantage is a move away from both the competitive and the
command models of policy delivery. According to Lowndes and Skelcher, collaborative
优势:

... presents an attractive alternative to the market, quasi-market and contractualised
relationships that have dominated the public management reform movement
internationally in the past decade. It also encourages progress away from the large-scale
bureaucratic and paternalistic public service organisations which developed to deliver
welfare state programmes in the third quarter of this century (1998, p313).

Huxham states that “collaborative advantage is concerned with the creation of synergy between
collaborating organisations” (1996, p14). In this context, ‘synergy’ refers to the cumulative benefits
accrued both individually and collectively in partnerships (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998, p317),
and offers participants in collective ventures the prospect of achieving their own aims, the aims of
their partners, and, when collaborative advantage is achieved, some ‘creative’ or ‘higher-level’
output than was originally envisaged. Collaborative advantage embraces practical, pragmatic and
normative aspects. Collaborations may be undertaken for reasons of efficiency, self-interest and
for what Huxham labels ‘moral’ considerations, where “the really important problem issues facing
society – poverty, conflict, crime and so on – cannot be tackled by any single organisation acting
alone” (1996 p4). One of facets of collaborative advantage is be empowerment of people affected
by issues that require multi-organisational collaboration (Huxham, 1996, p4).
There are direct links between collaborative advantage and local governance. The move from local government to local governance has challenged the bureaucratic hierarchies that dominated the post-war structures of public policy delivery. New public management reforms stopped short of full-scale privatisation, and what has emerged is a network of public, private and voluntary sector agencies, forming networks and engaging in partnerships. Some of these partnerships have the goal of tackling cross-cutting issues, and attempt to be of benefit to society as a whole. There is renewed interest in the arena of citizen empowerment and collaborative advantage links to much of the literature about citizen involvement in public policy (Burns et al. pp155-179).

Many of the new roles for councillors in modern local governance can be recast and thought of in terms of achieving collaborative advantage. Networking, facilitating, partnership working, empowering communities, representing key groups, all fit in with the broad thrust of collaborative advantage. The special status afforded to councillors as elected representatives – and their roles as representatives of councils in local governance, of parties in councils, of constituents – gives them a key leadership role in attempting to achieve ‘synergy’ in local governance, working for the goals of local authorities, empowerment and creating benefits for communities beyond specific policy outcomes. Moreover, thinking about councillor roles in this context seems to capture the multiple political roles of councillors as leaders in their communities; as leaders in their constituencies, as members of parties, as representatives of the council, and as members of the community. Perhaps the key leadership task for councillors can be thought of as attempting to achieve collaborative advantage for the multiple stakeholders in local governance, as councillors are well placed in the system to take into account the breadth of opinion, multiple goals, and varied needs of local areas.

Conclusions

This paper has reviewed councillor roles in the light of changes in local governance and to political management structures in local authorities, and suggested four roles for councillors in local governance; community leader, scrutineer, policy-maker, and partner. The concept of collaborative advantage has been discussed as it connects the various reform trends in local governance and offers some direction to local councillors within these roles.

A striking aspect of the current reform agenda is the how much councillor roles are changing. Previously, local councillor roles were local authority focused, based mainly on the representative system, and heavily influenced by party organisation at the local level. Now, councillors are forced to look outwards by the structure of local governance, and to interact more fully with communities as democratisation continues to make ground on the local government agenda. There is also
scope for councillors to be less tied to parties and party groups. Councillor roles can be more creative, based more on participation and partnership and less on representation. Whether councillors will assert the authority that these new roles have the potential to provide remains to be seen. That authority will need to be established by councillors in relation to other interests that operate at the local level, it will not necessarily be given. Councillors move in an arena occupied by executive members, senior officers, community groups, actors from the non-elected sector, and actors from the private sector. The onus will be on councillors to stake their claim as community leaders, policy-makers, scrutineers, and partners.
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