Institutionalising leadership: community leadership in English local government

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Abstract

The ongoing programme of reform in English local government includes an expectation that local authorities will develop a capacity for ‘community leadership’. New duties and powers have been conferred upon local authorities in order to focus their attention on this role. This paper starts from a position that community leadership is not new and focusing on the post war period it illustrates the ways in which local authorities have adapted their approach to community leadership in a changing environment. Drawing on community governance literature, particularly the community governance frameworks of community government, local governance, and citizen governance, it argues that community leadership can manifest itself in different ways depending upon the role envisaged for local government and other actors within alternative community governance frameworks.

The paper outlines the New Labour Government’s prescription for community leadership in the context of the ‘local government modernisation agenda’ (LGMA) describing its core elements and manifestation in policy documents. Setting this prescription against the frameworks for community governance reveals the elasticity of the LGMA’s prescription for community leadership, the challenge this affords to local government in practice and the key issues that need to be addressed. Drawing on early data from the ongoing meta-evaluation of the LGMA, the paper examines how local authorities are beginning to respond to the challenge of community leadership, which interpretations of community governance dominate locally and the implications of this for the future.
1) Introduction

‘Community leadership’ has been a feature of British local government since the mid 19th century, though its significance has waxed and waned over time, in parallel to changes in central government policies towards local government. Under New Labour community leadership has been rediscovered and (formally at least) placed at the heart of the ‘local government modernisation agenda’ (LGMA).

In the 1998 White Paper ‘Modern local government: in touch with the people’ (DETR, 1998), the idea of local government as community leader is presented as symbolising a shift from ‘old’ to ‘new’ local government. As community leader local government would be: outward looking rather than inward looking; concerned with promoting the well-being of the locality and its communities rather than with protecting its own interests; determined to work in partnership with others to achieve improved outcomes, rather than exercising sole control; focused on identifying and responding to local aspirations rather than ‘knowing best’ for its communities; and oriented towards innovation and change rather than maintaining the status quo. The focus on community leadership remains seven years on, evident in Vibrant local leadership, a paper published as part of the Local Government Strategy, which advocates the ‘development of the community leadership role of councils who have a key role in leading their communities, focused on networking, influencing and working through partnerships’ (2005: 31).

However, regardless of these repeated articulations of commitment to community leadership, its local manifestation remains partial to date (Sullivan and Sweeting, 2005). This paper begins to explore the reasons for this. It will argue that the term ‘community leadership’ is itself potentially problematic, being sufficiently baggy and elastic to allow for numerous interpretations. This is illustrated by reference to the community governance literature wherein different manifestations of community leadership are derived from different models of community governance. Setting this prescription against the frameworks for community governance suggests that the LGMA offers up a mix of community governance models in relation to community leadership, raising some important issues that need to be addressed at the point of implementation. Drawing on early data from the ongoing meta-evaluation of the LGMA, the paper will examine the ways in which local authorities are beginning to respond to this agenda.

2) Community leadership in historical context

The idea of the local authority as community leader is not new. Prior to the introduction of the LGMA, many authorities regarded themselves as exercising community leadership. Indeed in its response to the 1998 White Paper, the Local Government Association (LGA) stated that it “welcomes the Government’s recognition of this community leadership role” (1998, p7, emphasis added). The formal articulation of the role built on a pre-existing base in local government, rooted
in the mid 19th century civic activism that was embraced by elected local authorities in England’s industrial cities. The civic entrepreneurship of city leaders like Chamberlain in Birmingham helped to transform local conditions and services, to improve community health and well being and to generate a sense of civic pride (Marquand, 2004). The role played by these elected local authorities in facilitating civic improvement in mid 19th century England is very closely aligned to that described in the White Paper, ‘Modern local government: in touch with the people’ a little over a century later. In both cases it is possible to define community leadership simply as ‘the pursuit of community well being through strategic interventions that would not otherwise have happened’.

In the intervening period local government experienced profound changes, which, one could argue, have made it necessary for local government’s community leadership role to be rediscovered and refashioned for the prevailing context. The local discretion and variation enjoyed by local government in the period of expansion up to the 1930s began to diminish in the post war years as the Labour administration’s ambition to rid society of all major ills resulted in the development of new institutions that were centrally organised and administered. Local government increasingly became an agent of central government in the operation of the welfare state and the basis of local self-government was steadily eroded (Sullivan, 2004).

Leach and Wilson (2002) identify three key phases in the life of local government in the 20th century which help to delineate the fortunes of local government as community leader. In phase one (1945-1981) local government’s primary role was assumed to be operational, delivering a wide range of services, often centrally determined. Community leadership in this period was minimal or expressed through the service delivery function, though there was some hint of the role in the ‘corporate planning’ movement that developed in local government in the 1970s (Stewart, 2001) and Elcock (2001) refers to the Redcliffe-Maud report in 1969 which speculated on a wider role for local authorities in the pursuit of well being.

Phase two (1981-1997) Leach and Wilson describe as transitional; here local government’s service delivery orientation was challenged in a variety of ways. Community leadership in this period was also related to service delivery. For example it was understood by the Conservative government as attaching to the local authority as an ‘enabling’ body, eschewing direct service delivery for the mixed economy of provision and involving consumers of services more directly in decision making. The use of decentralisation or devolution programmes was also proposed as one way of involving consumers. In the Government publication ‘Community leadership and representation: unlocking the potential’ (DoE, 1993), it was argued that a,

Community leadership role would be ‘enhanced by some degree of devolution of powers to area and neighbourhood…opportunities for local people to determine their own priorities…councillors to become community champions monitoring and reviewing not only the services provided by other authorities but by other people and private agencies’ (p41).
However, there were also opportunities for local government to act as community leader in other arenas. For example the Conservative government’s regeneration programmes, particularly City Challenge and the Single Regeneration Budget, required local government to facilitate local multi-agency partnerships to bid for and implement regeneration programmes. Here too there were opportunities for local communities to engage and act for themselves as partners in these processes of regeneration, identifying their own ‘community leaders’ outside the traditional representative structures (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002).

This emphasis on partnership emerged as the key theme in phase three (1997-present) of the evolution of local government in the 20th century. Leach and Wilson describe this as the collaborative phase, involving ‘a further move away from direct service provision and a new emphasis on inter-agency working or partnerships’ (2002:666). The fragmented governance environment, the challenges posed by complex cross-cutting issues such as community safety and environmental sustainability and the shifting balance between representative and participative democracy requires local authorities to be both proactive, yet sensitive community leaders, to engage in continuous dialogue with a wide variety of stakeholders and to orchestrate action that wouldn’t otherwise have occurred, through the exercise of influence.

This shift in emphasis was acknowledged by organisations such as the LGA which highlighted a key commitment for local government in the 21st century as ‘providing civic leadership by working with and speaking for our communities and together with central government and the private and community sectors to promote local well being, social justice and social inclusion’ (1998, p6). Others have taken the argument still further outlining a case for local government as community leader unfettered by the demands of direct service provision (e.g. Corry et al, 2002).

The previous discussion emphasises how community leadership can change in the context of different periods of time. In order to draw out some of the differences in context that appear in the present, we have drawn on debates relating to the ways in which local affairs are viewed and organised, emerging from a debate about the role and function of local government in the UK.

**Community leadership and community governance**

Amongst academics there appeared to be a lack of focus on local government’s community leadership role in the post war period. It was not really until the 1980s that academics began to seriously ponder the fate of local government and the potential for an alternative to the ‘enabling local authority’ outlined by the Conservative government. This alternative centred upon the ‘enabling’ capacity of local government but offered different versions of what enabling might be (Smith, 2000). One interpretation was ‘enabling communities to resolve their problems and meet their needs in the most effective way’ (Stewart and Stoker, 1995, p204).
Based upon their prior normative reflections on the role and function of local government Stewart and Stoker (1988) argued that the emphasis on local government as a service provider (which had provided the basis for justifying it in the 1960s and 1970s and the basis for challenge under the Conservatives) had meant that the political dimension of local government’s role had become marginalised and governing increasingly understood as a managerial rather than political act. For these writers ‘local government should not be defined by its task of service delivery rather it should be valued as a site for political activity’ (Stoker, 1994, p10). The ‘enabling’ local authority would embrace this responsibility and develop the capacity to provide appropriate leadership for local communities (Stoker, 1999).

This prescription became known as community governance, the literature which overlaps with that on community leadership. For Clarke and Stewart (1994), community governance is characterised by three principles:

- A prime responsibility on local authorities for securing the ‘well-being’ of communities in an uncertain and complex world
- Working in partnership with others to meet needs and secure well-being
- Finding new ways of communicating with citizens, to identify community needs in order that ‘collective choice’ may be exercised

The work of Clarke and Stewart in particular focuses on the role of local government as ‘community leader’. Paying particular attention to the role of local government is justified in their eyes because of the scope and scale of local government; its potential to promote ‘community well-being’ in various sites and at various levels and because of the responsibilities contingent upon the ‘democratic’ nature of local government, specifically the responsibility to be both inclusive and representative of local views and to be both transparent and accountable in relation to decision making.

However, while not necessarily disputing the particular nature of local government, other contributors to the community governance debate articulated community leadership rather differently with an emphasis on community leadership through networks of key governance agents (Stoker, 1996) or community leadership emanating more directly from citizens/communities themselves (Box, 1998; Atkinson, 1994). These variations and their implications for community leadership are described below and summarised in Figure 1.

- **Community government**
  This is the framework devised by Clarke and Stewart (1994). Their analysis of society’s complexities leads them to advocate the promotion of the local authority as an instrument of strategic governance. This places on local government the responsibility for developing the capacity to govern with partners and citizens and includes the requirement that local government set the framework and established the rules for involvement of partners and communities in the achievement of local well-being. Local government is also
responsible for developing more participative approaches to citizen involvement to complement existing representative mechanisms. The focus of activity is strategic (covering at least the local authority area). However realising community government requires local authorities to draw on a significant capacity to change, something they may not have.

Local government is clearly acknowledged as the community leader in community government and elected members play a key role in identifying and articulating the needs of their local communities and deliberating together to determine how best to meet these.

- **Local governance**

This framework is described by Stoker (1996), who is less convinced of local government’s capacity to play the role of ‘first among equals’ than are Stewart and Clarke. He argues that ‘good governance’ emerges from the mobilisation of public, private, voluntary and community sector resources based upon the power and resource capacity that each can wield through local networks. In a local governance environment, local authorities are obliged to work in partnership with designated lead agencies to deliver ‘joined-up’ policies and services. Their particular responsibility is to ensure that the community ‘voice’ is harnessed and heard. However, while opportunities to participate must be offered to citizens, citizens themselves should not be required to take advantage of them. The focus of activity would be strategic networks and this may limit the extent to which citizens are actually enabled to take part.

In local governance community leadership derives from matters of experience and expertise as well as election. It is distributed across many sites and levels and is regularly being revised and renegotiated. Local government is one among many potential community leaders in local governance and it needs to be able to adapt its role depending on the circumstances. It does however, retain the responsibility for ensuring that those who may not be powerful enough to exercise influence through local groups and networks do have a voice in the decision making arenas.

- **Citizen governance**

These frameworks are promoted by writers who are often suspicious of ‘government oriented’ theorists, seeing them as drawing on communities in order to shore up institutions of government rather than actually promote the increased participation and involvement of citizens in their own governance. Sometimes informed by communitarian principles, these writers advocate that community governance can only be relevant if it begins with a key component of the community – the citizens (Atkinson, 1994; Etzioni, 1995; Box, 1998; Tam, 1999). There are several different interpretations of citizen governance (see Sullivan, 2000, for a discussion) but in all cases developing the capacity to govern requires both that citizens and communities are empowered to act and that traditional governing institutions learn to become enablers of citizen governance. There are a number of common principles
contained in citizen governance frameworks, including the emphasis upon beginning from communities, either of place or identity and devising decision making processes and institutions that support this focus; operating at a number of levels within the locality and devolving decision making to the most appropriate level, which in many cases will be the neighbourhood; and the role of key agencies, e.g. local government, the NHS as enablers of community action with a specific remit to embrace community interests at the strategic level. The focus of citizen governance frameworks lies with ‘communities’ however described. Given the multiplicity of communities a key issue in such frameworks is how the linkages between ‘community’ and ‘strategic’ levels may be facilitated in reality.

In citizen governance community leadership privileges the ‘micro’ level. The exercise of community leadership is assumed to be derived from and best exercised within small communities (usually defined as ‘neighbourhoods’, but could include communities of interest and identity). Local government plays the role of enabler in citizen governance. Its core task is to support the development of ‘micro’ level community leadership and to be responsive to ‘bottom-up’ decisions in its resourcing and organisation.

This examination of the literature reveals that ‘community leadership’ can manifest itself in a variety of ways depending upon the context of its operation and crucially, the role envisaged for local government. The next section of the paper examines New Labour’s prescription for local community leadership in the LGMA, drawing out its key components and assessing these against the community governance frameworks outlined above.
**Figure 1: Community leadership in community governance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of elected local government</th>
<th>COMMUNITY GOVERNMENT</th>
<th>LOCAL GOVERNANCE</th>
<th>CITIZEN GOVERNANCE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Acknowledged as the community leader by all stakeholders. Responsible for developing a strategic capacity to act to deliver local well-being. Local objectives based on needs identified through local intelligence and deliberations of elected members. ELG represents views and needs of locality to other tiers and in other spheres.</td>
<td>One among many partners contributing to local quality of life, but with particular responsibility for ensuring citizens’ ‘voices’ heard in decision making arenas.</td>
<td>ELG has an enabling role, providing means for citizen community leaders to establish and operate mechanisms of ‘citizen governance’ which will include neighbourhood based mechanisms. Strategic framework for local authority area built up from arenas of ‘citizen governance’ and based on deliberation between ‘community leaders’ at different levels.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work in partnership with elected local government to deliver ‘joined-up’ policies and services. Focus on strategic level.</td>
<td>Multiple community leaders from amongst partners depending upon policy area and issue. Between them partners set strategic framework and establish rules for involvement of partners and citizens in decision making.</td>
<td>Work in partnership with community leaders at all levels to deliver ‘joined-up’ policies and services. Focus on devolution to ‘neighbourhood’ level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contribute to ‘community government’ via opportunities facilitated by ELG. Community activists and leaders of neighbourhood/faith/interest communities work within ELG mechanisms.</td>
<td>Participate in ‘local governance’ through multiple sites and networks established by range of different bodies including central government, local partners and voluntary and community groups. Citizens can take role of ‘community leaders’ based on legitimacy with communities of interest, geography or identity and capacity to exercise influence in strategic local networks.</td>
<td>Multiple citizen community leaders operating within ‘neighbourhoods’ (or equivalent) in relation to variety of community interests. Citizen community leaders focus on empowerment and ‘self-help’. Framework for engaging partners set by citizen community leaders and begins with ‘neighbourhood’.</td>
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3) Community leadership and the Local Government Modernisation Agenda

A review of policy documents pertaining to the LGMA reveals that central government makes use of ‘community leadership’ in a variety of different ways.

At its most specific government refers to local government having a ‘community leadership role’. Classically leadership is about ‘leaders’ asking, persuading and influencing ‘followers’ to act in such a way that they might not otherwise have been inclined (Leach and Wilson 2000, 49). However, the expectation from the Government is that, community leadership starts from finding out what communities want, brokering agreement where there is conflict and taking action in pursuit of community aspirations within (and sometimes beyond) local governance. Local government was given new powers and duties to fulfil the community leadership role in the Local Government Act (2000) which granted local authorities the power to take action to promote economic, social and environmental well-being, combined with a new duty to prepare local Community Strategies. The development and implementation of these Community Strategies was to be undertaken with partners through a new partnership mechanism, the Local Strategic Partnership. The community leadership role was attached to local government because of its democratic basis, as is indicated in the 1999 White Paper ‘Strong leadership, quality public services’ which states that, ‘[c]ouncils unlike any other local organisation are designed specifically to play this role (para 2.4).

However, the role is more complicated and demanding than might be thought. It is a multi-faceted, multi-layered role concerned with addressing complex cross-cutting issues through the development of new initiatives and the delivery of improved public services, as is revealed in the following,

Strong community leadership means providing the economic infrastructure needed by local businesses to compete successfully on the local, regional or wider stage. It means developing social capital by supporting civic engagement and networks of neighbourhood organisations. It means enhancing environmental quality by reducing waste, energy use and air pollution and improving public space. And it means safeguarding the interests of future members of the community. Many decisions made now will have long term implications. These need to be identified, understood and designed into local policies. These are not separate goals: sustainable development means addressing all of them at the same time (DETR 1999, para 2.8:7).

The community leadership role is also elaborated in other policies developed outside of the LGMA as the 1998 White Paper illustrates, ‘[in] shaping policy in a number of areas, such as on education, public health, transport, the environment and the attack on crime and social exclusion, the Government has mapped out key roles for councils’ (8.5: 80). The local authority’s role as community leader was clearly
identified in Home Office guidance on ‘community cohesion’, although importantly, here the role of other community leaders within neighbourhoods was also identified (2002). In other policy areas the leadership role is formally shared, for example with the police in crime reduction partnerships, but in all the local authority is intended to use its community leadership role to work in partnership with others to achieve change.

The community leadership role is not restricted but can be exercised by the local authority as whole, elected members (executive and non executive) and officials. There is a specific link, however, with politicians, echoing the already mentioned interdependence between democracy and community leadership. This is described in the 1999 White Paper as, ‘[a]n effective local democracy, with strong and accountable political leadership, is central to community leadership and the delivery of public services’ ( DETR, 1999:6 2.). The link is not just with the executive but with all councillors as is highlighted elsewhere in the White Paper:

Effective local democracy is essential to strong community leadership and improved service delivery. Because they are elected by their communities, councillors play a unique role in linking the delivery of services with local people’s needs and ambitions (DETR 1999:2.2).

In the 1998 and 1999 White Papers the exercise of community leadership is considered important for what it leads to, for example, the generation of improved local outcomes and better quality of life for communities. There is also evidence that government considers the exercise of community leadership as a means of assessing the capacity of local authorities for increased powers and responsibilities. For example the Foreword to the 1998 White Paper suggested that,

The more a council demonstrates its capacity for effective community leadership, the greater the range of extra powers which should be available to it to promote the well-being of its area. We will set up a scheme of ‘beacon councils’ so that the very best councils can be examples to the rest (p.3).

Finally some elements of the policy documents refer to community leadership as an important end in itself, a result of the successful application of the LGMA. For example, the 1999 White Paper revealed that:

To be successful community leaders, councils need:

- democratic legitimacy;
- sound governance;
- effective partnerships with other local organisations and their communities;
- powers that enable them to make a real difference;
- real community engagement and empowerment;
- room to respond effectively to local priorities;
- continuous improvement in their service delivery; and
• a willingness to exploit the potential afforded by new technologies (1999:2.14, p8).

The components of community leadership in the LGMA
Drawing on the above discussion it is possible to expand the definition of community leadership to:

‘the pursuit of community well being through the facilitation of strategic interventions that would not otherwise have happened and which are informed by and accountable to the public’.

It is also possible to identify a number of core elements to the exercise of the community leadership role, highlighted in Figure 2:

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<th>Figure 2: Core elements of community leadership</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Focusing attention on key community priorities. This requires the demonstration of the capacity to set a strategic direction that is shared with other key stakeholders and to represent community priorities beyond the locality.</td>
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<td>• Galvanising a range of actors to contribute to delivering these priorities. This necessitates the generation and/or harnessing of sufficient collaborative capacity amongst local actors to secure ‘joined-up’ action alongside the development of new approaches (innovation) in taking action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Involving citizens in the process of priority identification and delivery. The diversity of citizen ‘voices’ must be sought out and included and citizen action should be stimulated.</td>
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It is possible to map onto the forms of community governance the components of community leadership established in the above definition (see Figure 3). This helps to emphasise the potential range of responses to the community leadership role. For example, the community leadership role interpreted from a community government perspective entails local authorities taking the lead in focusing the attention of other actors, both within and beyond the local level, on community priorities. These priorities will have been largely defined from deliberations involving councillors and senior officers, involving consultation with other stakeholders and drawing on local authority organised community consultation exercises. Similarly, the strategic direction is led and set by the local authority, drawing on other agencies as necessary, and the local authority leads local action and the representation of priorities in other governance arenas. Citizen involvement is passive, primarily occurs through the representative process, and may be augmented by various participatory devices.

An alternative response to the community leadership agenda emerges from the local governance model. Here, the interpretation of community priorities involves the local authority and the organisations of local governance. While local authorities
might take an over-arching view, they would draw heavily on the expertise of specialist agencies in certain sectors (e.g. health, police). The strategic direction for the local area would be a negotiated process occurring between the relevant institutions of local governance. Negotiated co-operation would lead to local action, with actors prompted and spurred into action by the demands of other agencies, perhaps with local authorities taking the lead in community representation. Citizen involvement is a voluntary activity; while there are opportunities offered for participation, citizens may choose not to take part.

Within the context of citizen governance, the local authority assists and supports the community in its deliberations about its priorities. The local authority, and other local agencies, are expected to operationalise community priorities at the strategic level. All agencies are oriented to delivering services at the neighbourhood level and are responsive to community demands to deliver joined up services locally. Citizen involvement is active and intensive, occurring at the local neighbourhood level and feeding into the structures of governance, bottom-up style.
Figure 3: Aspects of community leadership and community governance

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Setting a strategic direction</th>
<th>COMMUNITY GOVERNMENT</th>
<th>LOCAL GOVERNANCE</th>
<th>CITIZEN GOVERNANCE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Undertaken by LA in consultation with partners. Community priorities determined by councillors informed by community consultation exercises</td>
<td>Community priorities determined through a two-way process of negotiations between organisations in networks and LA, drawing on respective areas of expertise</td>
<td>Task for LA but drawing heavily on decentralised governance structures through which citizens look to key providers to assist in the interpretation of their demands.</td>
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| Representing community priorities | LA is voice of community in governance and takes lead in representing priorities to other levels/spheres. | Representation undertaken by most appropriate ‘authority’ | Range of citizen bodies available to represent priorities. Local authority or other bodies may be called upon to act on their behalf |

| Galvanising local actors | Very much led by LA – it sets the ‘conditions and structures’ of local action | Emerges from negotiations between actors in local governance. Relies on voluntary co-operation within mutually dependent environment | Occurs at neighbourhood level through joined-up action of service providers |

| Innovation | Local authority defines scope for new ways of working | Local networks sponsor innovation and its communication | Shaped by citizens’ experiences of service and policy failure |

| Citizen involvement | Primarily through the representative process. Largely passive or additional and complementary to the representative process | Voluntary | Very active and intensive |

However, while these core components can be translated into each of the models of community governance, closer examination of the policy prescriptions of the LGMA
in relation to community leadership reveals some policy features that serve to ‘muddy’ the conceptual neatness.

Firstly, while the policy documents do identify the local authority as the community leader at various points suggesting an orientation towards ‘community government’, which is reinforced by the ‘duty of community strategy’ and the ‘power of well-being’, both emphasising the role of the local authority as a key strategic agent, some of the detail of specific policy instruments point in a different direction. For example, in relation to LSPs the local authority has the responsibility to set up and support the LSP but is not necessarily to be the body that takes the lead. This suggests an orientation towards ‘local governance’ with the local authority acting as a safety net, rather than the lead body. Elsewhere, policy documents make reference to ‘community leaders’ beyond the local authority and increasingly there is a focus on ‘the neighbourhood’ as a key site of governance (something emphasised in supporting documents to the most recent Local Government Strategy) suggesting that what is being promoted is ‘citizen governance’.

In practice therefore the LGMA offers up a mix of community governance models in relation to community leadership, leaving the question of how to resolve any tensions that arise to local authorities at the point of implementation.

4) Institutionalising community leadership: the key issues

Notwithstanding the malleability of the concept, and the alternative approaches that local authorities are likely to adopt in response to the reform agenda, there are several issues that emerge in relation to the ‘institutionalisation’ of community leadership at the local level. For local authorities, there is the question of whether local government can fulfil its community leadership role without directly providing services (Corry et al, 2002, Kitchin ed 1999). In relation to the formal leadership positions of local government, Leach and Wilson raise the question of the relationship between the local authority’s political and managerial leadership and community leadership (Leach and Wilson, 2000). This links to the question of who exercises the community leadership role. Government prescription leaves open the question of whether community leadership is exercised by individuals and/or organisations, elected representatives and/or officials, and/or appointees. More broadly, there is the issue of the potential tension between the role of the local authority as ‘community leader’ and the existence of other acknowledged ‘community leaders’ within neighbourhoods and interest groups who may neither know nor care about the LGMA (Purdue et al, 2000). Does the existence of multiple ‘community leaders’ preclude a common understanding of the role? Similarly, but in relation to the local institutional environment, there is the issue of how to understand the interaction between the local authority as community leader and the emergence of a collective ‘community leadership’ within the local institutional framework (which will involve a variety of players). We address each of these questions using the community governance frameworks outlined earlier (see Figure 4).
According to the community government framework, it is not possible for the local government to exercise community leadership effectively without undertaking considerable service responsibilities itself. Local authority services “are part of the contribution made by the authority to the welfare of the area” (Clarke and Stewart, 1998, 5). While not underlaying the local authority role in harnessing the capacity of other interests, service provision is an essential tool for local authorities in leading their communities. In contrast, the local governance framework sees local authorities as facilitators of collective action locally, as local authorities operate in a mutually dependent environment where they are required to involve other agencies to address priorities. A key community leadership task for the local authority is to access the resources and expertise available in networks of agencies pertaining to their area. Therefore, the service provision role of an authority is less important than its role in supporting and guiding local networks. The citizen governance framework differs again in that the role of local government within citizen governance relates to translating citizen preferences into action, whether delivered by a local authority or not. In citizen governance individuals are indifferent to the role of the local authority as service provider but will be keen to meet local needs through the development and operation of ‘community businesses’.

Within community government, community leadership is exercised by local authority members, and senior officers. Linked directly or indirectly to the representative process, these actors carry a legitimacy that other actors lack. The community leadership role is also attached to the local authority as a whole, and actors outside that organisation acknowledge the dominant position of the local authority as such. In local governance the role of the local authority’s political and managerial leadership is seen as contributing to a dispersed community leadership process; they are amongst many who may potentially exercise the community leadership role. Often, the contribution of local authority personnel will assist and support others in exercising community leadership – including leaders emerging from the institutional sector, and from the community. In the operation of citizen governance, community leadership is exercised as close to communities as possible and it interacts with political and managerial leadership through very decentralised structures and processes. Those issues that cannot be addressed locally will be delegated to senior local authority figures to co-ordinate strategic action involving partners where necessary. Nevertheless they are driven by and accountable to community leaders active in communities and neighbourhoods.

In community government the emergence of a collective institutional community leadership would be problematic. Given the primacy of the local government role in exercising community leadership, the dispersal of community leadership to other organisations would be a threat to the role of local government. Conversely, in local governance the dispersal of community leadership is seen as inevitable and positive, as the distribution of responsibilities in local governance demands pooled responsibility. In citizen governance reactions would vary depending on the site of collective institutional leadership. If it operated at the level of the neighbourhood or community as part of a highly decentralised system then it would fit with the aspirations of citizen governance. However, it were to operate at the level of the
whole locality this would be problematic as such a development would locate the exercise of community leadership away from direct citizen influence.

Like the response to a collective institutional leadership, the community government framework implies that the relationships between the local authority as ‘community leader’ and other ‘community based’ community leaders would create tensions. As the local authority, and actors within it, exercise community leadership, other community leaders are seen as illegitimate, and often regarded as parochial or self-interested. Within local governance, the local authority is not seen as the dominant community leader. While there might be tensions between alternative community leaders, the deliberation that occurs in the networks of local agencies is the site for addressing these tensions. Indeed, a role for the local authority might be in helping to resolve tensions between those actors exercising community leadership. In citizen governance, the role of the local authority as community leader is derived directly from the deliberations of citizens and community leaders operating at the neighbourhood level. Community leadership involves integrating these demands into the institutional fabric of the organisation and consequently it is not possible for the local authority to be separated from other community leaders.
Figure 4: Issues in relation to community leadership

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>COMMUNITY GOVERNMENT</th>
<th>LOCAL GOVERNANCE</th>
<th>CITIZEN GOVERNANCE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can local government fulfil its community leadership role without directly providing services?</td>
<td>No. One of the key means community leadership can be achieved is blending services, mixing and matching etc. Resources, money etc are key to CL.</td>
<td>Yes. Local government is the facilitator of collective public action. Resources and expertise are spread in local networks and CL as about accessing and organising them.</td>
<td>Yes, though the citizen governance perspective is indifferent as to who provides services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who exercises community leadership?</td>
<td>Elected members, and senior officers, and in a corporate sense the LA as a whole. Other ‘community leaders’ secondary.</td>
<td>Widely dispersed in local governance.</td>
<td>Community leadership exercised by individual citizens at the neighbourhood level. Role for local authority in operationalising demands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the relationship between the local authority’s political and managerial leadership and the community leadership role?</td>
<td>CL undertaken by political and managerial leaders (and elected members)</td>
<td>These actors facilitate and support the exercise of community leadership in local governance; including ‘following’ while others ‘lead’.</td>
<td>Interaction via highly decentralised local government structures. Community leaders delegate LA personnel to address issues where necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction between the local authority as community leader and the emergence of a collective ‘community leadership’ within the local institutional framework</td>
<td>Problematic. Local authority is seen as dominant via political and electoral legitimacy which others lack.</td>
<td>Unproblematic and to be encouraged. Leadership shared and dispersed in local governance.</td>
<td>Unproblematic providing it operates at the neighbourhood level and public service providers co-located here. Problematic if operates only at locality wide level as community leadership focused on neighbourhoods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tension between the role of the local authority as ‘community leader’ and the existence of other acknowledged ‘community leaders’ within neighbourhoods and interest groups</td>
<td>LA is seen as the dominant community leader. Other community leaders seen by the LA as parochial and self-interested. Consequently, tensions are irresolvable and intractable.</td>
<td>Common interests and understanding occur through deliberation in networks. LA role is to broker that understanding as part of community leadership role.</td>
<td>Other community leaders linked into and integrated with the local authority. Consequently not possible to separate the local authority as community leader and other community leaders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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5) Addressing the community leadership agenda

In this section we examine how local authorities are addressing community leadership by drawing on data gathered as part of ongoing research into the modernisation agenda. Within localities and within individual local authorities there can be considerable differences of interpretation. It can be difficult in some cases to distinguish between authorities operating more like one would expect them to under the community government framework from those operating as one would expect under a local governance framework. Nevertheless it is still possible to glean insights into how community leadership is being interpreted locally. As the research has been conducted primarily with local government members and officers, and with other local stakeholders primarily from other public, voluntary and community organisations operating locally, we concentrate on the roles of local government, partners, and (where possible) citizens (see table one) – though we do also refer to other aspects of community leadership discussed above.

In the community governance framework one would see the local authority widely recognised as the community leader, with other agencies working as partners to the local authority. There are many examples supporting the adoption of a community government framework approach when addressing community leadership. Respondents from one local authority said that the council was the community leader and believed that other stakeholders viewed them in this way. One authority was referred to as ‘the great enabler’. Some connected this role to being an elected body. In one council, one respondent said ‘The City Council is uniquely placed in being a democratically elected body’. Another connected the role to accountability by saying ‘the buck needs to stop somewhere’.

As for who in the council exercises community leadership, in one authority a respondent mentioned ‘distributed community leadership’ throughout the council. Respondents mentioned key roles for councillors and officers in community leadership, though there was some division amongst local authority councillors in particular about the term ‘community leadership’. For some community leadership reflected the work they did at local level championing ward or neighbourhood issues (perhaps aligning the more closely to the citizen governance framework), and the role that government was assigning them was different - more strategic and more accurately characterised in their eyes as ‘civic leadership’. Officers within the council - most often the chief executive, sometimes with senior management - were often seen as promoting the local authority role in community leadership and supporting members in this task. In one authority the community leadership role was seen by some as resting primarily with officers rather than members.

In two tier areas of counties and district community leadership could be contested between the tiers. One district council officer commented ‘I’m not sure anybody looks to their county to be a community leader… even if you look at [the county council] which sort of fancy themselves… if you talk to people in [the area] and say do you feel [the county council] acts as your community leader, I suspect the answer
is not’. Such tensions can be exacerbated owing to political differences, and differences between the nature of the areas. For example in another case study area the Labour City Council was not seen to share interests with the Conservative County Council which governs the rural areas around the city. In another area it was simply a problem of their being two tiers. A county council officer commented that ‘if the County is punching its weight, they will interpret that as the County throwing its weight about’.

One local authority was seen to ‘pushing the pace’ in partnership working in one locality – characteristic of the role of the local authority within the community government framework. Another council was seen to be open, engaging and consultative. The same council was expected by partners to support and resource the LSP well over and above what was expected of other partners. Another took a ‘lead role’ in partnerships. There can be tensions between local authorities who appear to want to take an active (community government-style) approach to community leadership but are perceived merely to want more control over partners. There was also an example of partners to a local authority being seen as community leaders only as documents said that they were, rather than exercising community leadership in any real sense. This fits with the stakeholder in another area who stated ‘I don’t like community leadership. I think we are public servants in one form or another, all of us, and it seems to me there is something about joint service rather than community leadership’.

There were several instances of the fractious relationships between the local authority and community actors characteristic of community leadership in community governance. In one local authority area where there had been a history of tension between councillors and community activists, community activists were labelled as ‘destructive’. In another area respondents expressed concerns about ‘troublesome activists’ and in one case an ‘incoherent sector of single interests’. Another respondent was suspicious or the representativeness of community representatives. In turn community and voluntary sector representatives referred to the ‘arrogant council’. This suggests that community leadership would be contested rather than shared between different interests.

There are also examples of supporting the adoption of a local governance framework approach when addressing community leadership. In some case studies, the local authority respondents welcomed the existence of other community leaders, expressing a desire that the appropriate role for the council was one of ‘co-leadership’. In some councils, the chair of the LSP was from outside the council. In one of those, where the health of the local population was a key issue, this task was taken on by the PCT (an organisation with an overview of health locally). In another, where they felt that they had a good record of partnership working that was supported by external partners, some of their regeneration partnerships also involved the private sector in lead roles. In the other, where there was ‘a growing climate of partnership’ the perception was that partnership working had enabled organisations from different sectors to ‘pull together in the right direction’ and that a non-council chair would lead to other non-council interests being engaged. Having a
non-local authority chair was seen as a signal that the local authority was less ‘paternalistic’, and one respondent expressed the view that other LSP members could be more demanding of the council when it was not also Chair of the LSP. However, local authority influence could still be evident. For example, in one authority council officers wrote the community strategy to which the LSP works.

In the cases where local authority was not automatically seen as the community leader in a manner suggested by the local governance framework, community leadership was more dispersed across local institutions. One voluntary sector interviewee said ‘a number of organisations do feel that [community leadership] is not something for the local authority on its own to be doing but that it is actually a key partnership role’. Nevertheless it was often unclear to what extent ‘other’ community leaders actually exercised community leadership as anticipated by the LGMA, or were named by respondents simply through their impressions about their reputation. Other community leaders included other local politicians (MPs, parish councillors), religious group leaders, business group leaders, newspaper proprietors, voluntary sector leaders, and a Duke. Interestingly some interviewees were unable to name any community leaders at all outside local authorities.

Tension between the local authority and particular sectors was reflected in those sectors reacting adversely to the prospect of the formalisation of the local authority’s community leadership role, triggering a dispersal of community leadership. In the case studies the acceptance of the local authority as the legitimate community leader was most hotly contested by voluntary and community sector respondents. Some community and voluntary sector representatives argued that while local government ought to be the community leader because of its democratic base it had failed to deliver on this responsibility in the past, for example in relation to ‘taking on’ the agenda of private interests in the locality. Others expressed the view that the governance environment had changed and participative democracy had a real role alongside representative democracy, implying multiple sites of community leadership, some of which will be hostile to the local authority. There can also be tensions between the partners. For example, in one of the cases referred to above, where the LSP was Chaired by the PCT, this was seen as part of a process that diluted the influence of the voluntary sector locally.

Within the local authority there was also some concern about the dispersal of community leadership, with one councillor complaining that (unelected) members of the LSP have ‘more of a say’ than elected members.

In some cases it is not clear cut whether an areas conforms more to either the community government or the local governance archetypes. For example, within the same area there can be different emphases according to the policy area. In one area an initiative called Environment City was ‘driven by the voluntary sector, whereas ‘the cultural quarter is absolutely and totally council led’. Such different relationships within areas mean it is often difficult to categorise an authority or area as being one thing or another. A slightly different problem arises as the differences between the roles of local authorities and partners between the two types relate to differences in
extent or degree. It can be very unclear, for example, the extent to which priorities are jointly agreed, or council led but jointly agreed and so on.

By comparison to the community government and local governance perspectives, there is little data supporting the adoption of a citizen governance perspective. If the citizen governance approach were apparent one would find local authorities and partners enabling the intensive inclusion of citizens including those based at the neighbourhood level in order to build towards the strategic, city-wide or area wide level. However, in the case studies conducted for this research, there was little evidence of such activity.

Decentralised structures are not the preserve of citizen governance – they can also be a part of community government and local governance perspectives. However, they are such a key part of citizen governance that this discussion focuses on them, as without their presence the routes for citizens to influence become very constrained.

At a general level respondents tended to say that the decentralisation of council structures helped to achieve a greater outward focus to partners, and that the development of area forums helped to more effectively engage with groups of citizens, both consistent with a citizen governance-style approach. However, when looked at in more detail there were few, if any, examples of local authorities offering appropriate spaces for citizen governance. This absence tended to relate to the scale of the arrangements, and their functions.

One authority had created four area partnerships, known locally as mini-LSPs. The community strategy was seen as being disconnected from local citizens, and the idea of the mini-LSPs was to take the community strategy down to a lower level, to engage stakeholders and to engage citizens. They had no budget and were consultative arenas. Each are covered about 80,000 people. Consequently the gist of the arrangements seems to be ‘top down’ rather than ‘bottom up’, with the emphasis on taking the (strategic) community strategy downwards rather than building upwards.

In another city there was a system of area committees for nine deprived areas. Here, there were problems related to how the boundaries were drawn, with the ward boundaries not matching the area boundaries, hindering the involvement of councillors. In another area, the County Council had established two ‘area forums’, and the District Council two ‘community forums’. The former had some resources devoted to them but again operated over a very large area. The latter were aimed at service providers and not open to the public. In this area there were 57 much smaller parish council areas (though only 17 of those held elections). However, such a number of parishes was felt to be much too large for a single authority to deal with; ‘it is difficult to develop a coherent vision when there are 57 parish councils’.

Outside of some form of decentralised structures, there councils did report various means to ascertain the views of citizens (e.g. citizens panels etc). However, given the absence of very local neighbourhood activity, it is therefore probably more accurate
to conclude that what we find is citizen governance influenced arrangements, rather than full-blown citizen governance type arrangements in the case study areas.

Much of the data gathered so far therefore indicates that community leadership interpreted locally fits with the community government and local governance frameworks, with little evidence of a take up of a citizen governance perspective. Local authorities do not necessarily fit consistently into one or other category. Rather, they can cross over different frameworks, though in some cases it would be possible to say that individual local authorities do exhibit characteristics linking them to one of the community governance frameworks more closely than the others.

6) Conclusions

This paper has explored the current Government’s community leadership agenda in the context of the community leadership role that local authorities have exercised for many years. Set against community governance frameworks, this analysis suggests that local authorities are responding to the community leadership agenda, though in different ways. The predominant responses to date seem to fit with the features suggested by the community government framework and the local governance framework, but much less so the citizen governance framework. The community government framework is closest to the traditional role of the local authority, based on service provision, and the primacy of representative government. The local governance framework is closest to that prompted by reform processes instigated centrally that challenged the old assumptions of the traditional role of the local authority, entailing a mixture of service providers and an inter-dependent institutional environment. While it may not be surprising that these are the two responses that predominate locally, this leaves in the background the citizen governance perspective.

This is significant, given the recent attention paid to a citizen governance inspired agenda by policy makers; see for example the local vision policy document Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter (ODPM, 2005), and a speech by the Minister of Communities and Local Government, David Miliband (ODPM, 2006). The former proposes, amongst other matters, the introduction of a national neighbourhoods’ framework, including a neighbourhoods’ charter (ODPM, 2005, p12). The proposed charter covers such matters as neighbourhood links with the local authority and co-operation and contracts with local service providers. In the latter, in order to address the ‘challenge of empowering citizens and neighbourhoods’, the notion of ‘double devolution’ is put forward that entails some type of decentralisation beyond local authorities ‘to neighbourhoods and individual citizens’ (ODPM, 2006, p8). It proposes matters such as extending neighbourhood management and neighbourhood policing, making greater use of devolved budgets, and transferring assets to community groups. These proposals imply a more decentralised approach to local governance consistent with the citizen governance arrangements.
Nevertheless, more decentralisation does not necessarily mean the abandonment of other community governance approaches. Decentralisation can be introduced within either community government or local governance frameworks although their manifestations will be different. However, what is also apparent in the Government’s new proposals for ‘neighbourhood governance’ is a stated commitment to the role of local councillors, suggesting a preference for the community government framework. For example there is a reference to proposed neighbourhood governance arrangements being ‘complementary to’ and ‘consistent with’ local representative democracy. The vision document also states that ‘ward councillors are democratically accountable to all the communities in the ward they represent, giving them a unique role, including the responsibility to act as advocates and community leaders for their ward and neighbourhoods’ (2005, p16). Consequently, the citizen governance framework is likely to become more prevalent within the operationalisation of community leadership if the current thrust of government reforms is sustained.
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Notes

1 This research, the ‘meta-evaluation’ of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda is being undertaken by a research consortium led by the Centre for Local and Regional Government at Cardiff University, including partners from Bristol Business School and Cities Research Unit (University of the West of England), INLOGOV (University of Birmingham), Local Governance Research Unit (De Montfort University), Local Government Research Centre (University of Warwick), MORI, PriceWaterhouseCoopers and York Consulting.
Evidence in this paper draws on the first report from the meta-evaluation team examining the impacts of the LGMA on local community leadership. The team has collected evidence from government documents, research evaluating individual streams of the LGMA, and through primary data collection, involving a national survey of local authority officers and case studies in six local authorities which included interviews with members, officers and other stakeholders, and focus groups with residents.