Community governance, community leadership and the new local government

The Government’s White Paper on local government reinforces the shifting emphasis in defining its role. Community leadership and community governance are now important. A new study by Michael Clarke and John Stewart looks at the implications for local councils. It establishes some principles, argues for a systematic approach and identifies the changes which are needed.

The community leadership role of councils and the complicated world of community governance are not new. Government policy now brings them centre-stage, highlighting the complex relationships between public, voluntary and private sector organisations and with citizens and communities.

Community leadership can involve developing a vision for the locality, working in partnership to deliver that vision and guaranteeing quality services for all. New approaches and new ways of working are necessary for councils to be effective in this.

Community planning and partnership processes and innovative ways of involving citizens and communities will be needed as the local authority becomes more open and outward-looking.

These changes will make new demands on elected members and officers. Different relationships, more emphasis on networking and brokerage and new skills and competencies will all be required.

Political structures and processes and the officer machinery of local government have grown to support the management and delivery of services. The broader concerns of community leadership and community governance will change these.

The researchers conclude that:
- Every council needs to think systematically about its approach. The requirement on councils to review political leadership and management structures provides the opportunity for a radical look and for action to follow.
- The changes will need to be supported by a programme of organisation development and careful attention to training and development to encourage new cultures, new ways of thinking and a co-ordinated approach.
Introduction
There is a new agenda for local government. Its role is being re-defined as a key part of the complex system of local governance with a crucial role in community leadership. While none of this is new, there is a significant shift in emphasis. The White Paper, Modern Local Government: In touch with the people, makes this clear.

This study is designed to help council leaders and other elected members, chief executives and senior officers and all those involved in the governance of their communities to understand what is reshaping the agenda and its implications for the way in which local authorities will have to work.

Change is necessary. The existing structures of local councils and their ways of working were designed and evolved to support the delivery of services. New roles and interests need new approaches. Moreover, there is a need to reconnect local government with citizens and with the communities within a local area, both communities of place and communities of interest.

Complex relationships
Government at the local level has always been divided among different agencies and organisations. This division has become more complicated in recent years. At the same time, the public policy issues which dominate local agendas increasingly demand action across organisational boundaries. While each locality has to find its own pattern and solution, there is common ground in the search for mechanisms which integrate - and councils have a key role to play.

Citizens also have a direct interest. Many of the issues (environment and public health matters are good examples) require changes of personal behaviour or lifestyle. But there is more than this. Local government itself is based on the principle of representative democracy, yet democracy tends to be passive. Citizens have little opportunity to engage apart from periodic visits to the ballot box. Worse, for many, there is a sense of alienation and apathy.

New relationships with citizens and communities are needed. These will need to recognise and encompass diversity - in contrast to the all too common tendency to uniformity. Councils and councillors will have an important role to play in reconciling or balancing interests and giving leadership.

Principles for community governance
The changing structure of community government and the need for new relationships with the citizens and communities within drive the search for new approaches to community governance. This study identifies six principles which should underlie the approach to community governance:

- The concern of the local authority should extend beyond the services provided to the overall welfare of the area;
- The local authority's role in community governance is only justified if it is close to and empowers the communities within and the citizens which constitute them;
- The local authority must recognise the contribution of other organisations - public, private and voluntary - and see its task as enabling (not controlling) that contribution;
- The local authority should ensure that the whole range of resources in the community is used to the full for the good of its area;
- To make best use of those resources the local authorities will need to review rigorously how needs are best met and to be prepared to act in many different ways;
- In showing leadership, the local authority must seek to reconcile, to balance and in the final resort to judge the diversity of use and interests.

Underlying these principles is a common theme - the need for power to be exercised as close as possible to citizens and local communities.

The way in which other systems of local government work sheds some light on the British situation. In Europe, for example, local authorities do not exist primarily as agents to provide services but as the embodiment of the community governing itself. Rather than laws which prescribe particular responsibilities and the limits to them, councils have a power of general competence, enabling them to act in any way appropriate in pursuit of their communities' interests. Moreover, across the world, the complexity of local public policy issues and the multiplicity of agencies and organisations involved in resolving them is prompting a debate about the nature of local governance and the role of elected institutions. This is paralleled, in many countries, by a growing concern for finding new ways of engaging and involving citizens.

Government policy
Government policy under the last administration had already begun to emphasise the community leadership role. In its consultation process on modernising local government and its July White Paper, the present Government gives clear encouragement to develop this further. The role of
the local authority in community leadership is described as:

- Developing a vision for the locality;
- Working in partnership with others to deliver that vision;
- Guaranteeing quality services for all.

A new statutory duty for local government is proposed to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of its area and greater freedom is promised to councils to allow them to carry out this wider role. Community planning is seen as a means of giving expression to the role through a process drawing together all the stakeholders in local governance.

In parallel, there are proposals to reinvigorate local democracy and to find ways of encouraging involvement and participation beyond the ballot box. At the same time, the Government has been developing its ideas for ‘Best Value’. While this is about improving the level and quality of local public services, a key part of its agenda is to draw local people as taxpayers and service-users into the design and shaping of local services.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that the emphasis on community leadership and community governance cannot simply be tacked on to the existing structure and ways of working with government. A fundamental reconsideration is needed. All local authorities need to review systematically how they will approach the role and go on to tease out the implications for elected politicians and for managers, for political structures and processes and for the local authority’s structure and operations.

Although the shape and nature of new arrangements will vary from place to place, they will include:

- The idea of community planning, emphasised as a continuing process rather than as a standard routine. It can provide the framework within which partnerships can grow and the activities of public, private and voluntary organisations can be integrated.

- The involvement of other organisations and new approaches to involve citizens. Examples of new approaches to democratic practice are to be found in an increasing number of places. There is a wide repertoire of possibilities. The trick will be to find the right process for the right time and place, and to use a variety of approaches.

New demands on councillors. Not only is there a need to develop better working relationships with other agencies and organisations, there will be new emphasis on leadership, on networking and on brokerage. Responsibilities for service delivery will have to be balanced by the broader concerns of community governance. They will sometimes be in conflict but the old must not be allowed to crowd out the new.

Political structures which will have to change. Most of the existing political arrangements emerged to support the management and delivery of services. Radical changes will be needed if the roles in community leadership and community governance are to be properly reflected. This should be an important part of the parallel debate on structures for political leadership and new ways of working for councillors. The new community governance/leadership agenda must shape the emerging arrangements. New skills and competences will be required to allow councillors to contribute effectively.

Changes in the officer organisation. The role of the chief executive is crucial; there will be new demands on time and she/he will need support. Like the political machinery, officer and management structures have also been designed for service delivery. Partnership working - and other relationships with the extended community - have tended to be added on. New capacities now need to be developed to handle issues which cross boundaries and the management of complex sets of relationships.

Organisation development and the training and development of managers and other staff will also be crucial. New processes, new ways of thinking and new cultures to support them will be part of a systematic and co-ordinated approach.

Action required

Action will be required from central government and from the Local Government Association as well as from individual local authorities.

Central government

Legislative change to underpin the new roles and to secure a broader base for local government action.

General encouragement from ministers and government departments to both local government and other local public agencies to work differently and together.
Improvement in the capacity of central government to work with and respond to integrated local arrangements.
The removal of disincentives and the design and use of incentives to establish new ways of local working.

The Local Government Association
Pressure on the Government to secure these changes.
Encouragement and awareness raising for local authorities.
Discussion and co-operation with other national representative organisations (i.e. TEC National Council, National Housing Federation etc).

Local authorities
All councils require a more systematic approach.
New tasks and ways of working should not just be added on. There are implications for elected members and officers; for structures and processes; for attitudes, behaviour and skills and competencies. The study suggests steps which might be taken and examples of initiatives already developed. These include:
- creation of forums where the main stakeholder groups in a community can meet to discuss opportunities and develop approaches to meet them;
- ways of developing a shared understanding with partner organisations about issues facing a locality;
- developing a shared understanding amongst staff;
- improvising the capacity of members and officers to understand the organisations and agencies involved in community governance;
- developing of a process of community planning emerging from shared understanding;
- ways of listening to and involving the communities within a locality;
- understanding communities of interest as well as communities of place and engaging with both;
- creating the means to strengthen public accountability of agencies involved in community governance;
- new approaches to public participation.

About the study
The study is based on the extensive work done with local authorities developing their approach to community governance by Michael Clarke and John Stewart; on discussions with senior members and officers in local government; and on visits to local authorities.

How to get further information
The full report, Community governance, community leadership and the new local government by Michael Clarke and John Stewart (price £10.95, ISBN 1 899987 93 2), is published for the Foundation by YPS.