# findings

## Local political leadership in England and Wales

**There is considerable interest in the role of effective political leadership within local authorities in achieving the goals of the Government's modernisation agenda for local government. This agenda is intended to improve service performance and strengthen community leadership and democratic renewal. Central Government has legislated for executive or cabinet government in the majority of local authorities to strengthen clarity of vision, community leadership and visibility. This study, by researchers from De Montfort and Warwick Universities, explored this agenda's impact on local leadership priorities, behaviour and skills, and found that:**

- The introduction of local executive government (mayoral and non-mayoral) has not led to more uniform political leadership. Leaders have interpreted their role in diverse ways.

- The new political management structures and powers have had less impact on political leadership than expected: context and personal capabilities have been equally influential.

- Elected mayors generally recognised the need for a high degree of visibility and responsiveness to public and stakeholders' concerns; non-mayoral leaders varied more in the extent to which they recognised this.

- Most elected mayors saw external networking and community leadership as key roles. However, in general, political leaders have yet to give these roles the importance implicit in the Government's agenda.

- Where authorities had adopted the 'cabinet and leader' model there was little evidence of party pressure or adversarial party politics having diminished.

- Possessing a wider range of formal powers (as in the mayoral option) has not necessarily led individuals to exploit these powers proactively: leaders with a strong power base did not necessarily behave like strong leaders.

- Strong leaders could emerge without having either a strong power base or, sometimes, a formal leadership position.

- Strong individualistic leadership did not necessarily equate with effective leadership. Shared or collective leadership was also effective.

- Strategic ability, personal effectiveness, political intelligence and organisational mobilisation marked out political leaders. Several of these skills are acquired through work as a leader. This finding has important implications for the development and support of political leaders.

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## Background

This research developed from an interest in how local political leadership has been changing as a result of the Local Government Act 2000. This introduced new forms of executive government into local authorities in England and Wales. The four models introduced were 'elected mayor and cabinet', 'elected mayor and council manager', 'cabinet and leader' and a streamlined committee system (an option available only to authorities with populations under 85,000). The focus of the research was not on the working of the new political arrangements, but on how local political leaders were responding to external and internal pressures and opportunities under these new conditions.

The Government has placed particular emphasis on the following aspects of leadership:

■ clarity of vision – the capacity to identify and focus on clear priorities for action;
■ community leadership – the capacity to develop connections with local stakeholders and local communities;
■ visibility – the capacity to generate recognition on the part of the local population and so strengthen accountability.

The research team incorporated these priorities into an innovative framework of analysis for its local authority case studies, in-depth interviews with leaders, workshops and a self-report political leadership survey used in the study. This framework combined concepts and insights from both political science and organisational behaviour.

The framework analysed leadership tasks, suggesting that these were likely to be reinterpreted as a result of the revision of local government leadership under the Local Government Act 2000. The four key leadership tasks were:

■ maintaining a 'critical mass' of political support;
■ developing a strategic policy direction;
■ seeking to further leadership priorities outside the authority;
■ ensuring accomplishment of tasks.

However, the way in which leadership tasks were likely to be interpreted locally depended on two further factors: the political traditions and cultures of different local authorities, and the capabilities or skills of leaders.

## Impact of the new arrangements on political leadership

The study found that the 2000 Act has not resulted in any convergence in the practice of local political leadership. On the contrary, diversity prevailed within both the mayoral and non-mayoral models. The Government's 'ideal type' of strong, individualised, outward-looking local political leadership – one which is less encumbered by the traditional expectations of party group behaviour – has been realised only sporadically and partially.

The introduction of local executive leadership, in whatever form, has not generated any move towards a more uniform pattern of political leadership. The directly elected mayors who were interviewed approached their leadership role in diverse ways. Some were committed to a long-term strategy; others operated with a handful of disconnected priorities. Some prioritised external networking; for others this had become marginalised in the face of other challenges, notably Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).

Among cabinet and leader councils, practice ranged from high-profile individual leaders to a form of leadership that could only be described as nominal. Although the 2000 Act's inherent scope for reinterpreting leadership has been exploited creatively in some cases, in others the introduction of new formal structures has changed very little.

The diversity in how both mayors and non-mayoral leaders interpreted their roles and priorities indicated that the new structures and the formal powers associated with them were by no means a decisive influence on local political leadership. Context and capabilities have proved equally influential. Indeed, the interaction between constitutions, contexts and capabilities accounted for the styles of leadership which emerged. New institutions for local political leadership are emerging, using both old and new and formal and informal elements creatively and pragmatically.

## Context

Four important contextual categories impinged on leadership agendas:

■ the legislative framework governing political management structures;
■ socio-economic and demographic characteristics;
■ the wider external central government agenda for local government (and associated legislation);
■ local political and organisational traditions and culture.

The legislative requirements of the 2000 Local Government Act have not amounted to a 'constitutional straitjacket'; many authorities have recognised that there is a good deal of scope for interpretation. For example, constitutions can empower non-mayoral leaders to operate in much the same way as elected mayors or can impose considerable limitations on leadership capacity.

Internal political resistance to the introduction of local executives (elected mayors in particular) has had profound constraining effects on the leadership capacity of political leaders. This has been evident not just in formal consultation processes, but also through informal patterns of behaviour within party groups.

There were circumstances in which leaders could change the context in which they operated, particularly in relation to local political and organisational culture. Thus context did not determine leadership behaviour but did define the scope for choice in the circumstances. Leaders' skills in reading, articulating and acting within these contexts appeared to increase with greater experience.

## Leadership tasks

### Maintaining a critical mass of political support

Despite the Government's emphasis on other leadership tasks, the challenge of maintaining a critical mass of political support remained a high priority for most leaders. In most circumstances, politically affiliated mayors were able to operate an arm's-length relationship with their party group on the council. However, the cabinet and leader model means leaders still have to be re-elected annually; they therefore need to prioritise maintaining good relations within their party group (and, in a hung council, relations between party groups).

### Strategic policy direction

All political leaders identified strategic priorities. However, the extent to which these priorities provided an adequate basis for a comprehensive corporate strategy varied considerably. The priorities of non-mayoral leaders typically reflected the content of the most recent local party manifesto, though often with scope for personal interpretation. Mayors, and in particular independent mayors, were less constrained in how they identified strategic priorities.

Electoral timescales matter. Effective strategy-based leadership tended to be more feasible in mayoral authorities and in authorities holding elections every four years.

### External networking

While recognising the importance of partnership working and Local Strategic Partnerships, council leaders (including elected mayors) varied in the degree of priority they personally attached to leading on this task. Some delegated this role to a leadership colleague or to the chief executive.

Key stakeholders often perceived elected mayors as being more legitimate community leaders than council leaders. But some elected mayors could not give the priority they wished to community leadership because of pressure from other factors (such as budget crises, or poor or weak CPA assessment).

Elected mayors paid more attention to sustaining or enhancing public support than did other council leaders. They saw public recognition as a particularly important opportunity for developing a stronger base of public support.

### Task accomplishment

All political leaders regarded it as legitimate to seek to ensure that political priorities were implemented effectively. This task was particularly important for elected mayors, given their dependence on direct election.

Political leaders used a range of mechanisms to chase progress on issues of concern to them. Some delegated this to a cabinet colleague or political adviser; others chased progress personally.

Political leaders had a legitimate concern with task accomplishment but recognised that they needed to negotiate around this role with the chief executive, with flexibility to operate within mutually agreed boundaries. In the most effective relationships, leaders and chief executives worked together to manage this potentially difficult area well.

## Leadership capabilities

Possession of a wider range of formal powers (as in the mayoral option) has not necessarily led individuals to exploit these powers proactively: leaders with a strong power base did not necessarily behave like strong leaders. To be effective, political leaders needed to draw on a wide set of behaviours and attitudes and to have a high degree of self-awareness. However, strong individualistic leadership did not necessarily equate with effective leadership. Shared or collective leadership was also effective. Strong leadership could also develop without a strong power base, and sometimes those without a formal leadership position undertook a leadership role.

The research drew on analysis of ten key dimensions of capability for political leadership. Of particular importance to those in senior leadership positions were:

- personal effectiveness (the ability to work with and understand other people, as well as being aware of personal strengths and weaknesses);
- the ability to be strategic;
- showing political intelligence (having the ability to understand and work effectively with the political currents and dynamics both within and across groups);
- the ability to mobilise others in the organisation – both members and officers – to bring about substantial organisational and cultural change (transformational change).

The research suggested that while some capabilities (such as personal effectiveness) were inherent individual characteristics, other skills (such as developing a strategic direction and political intelligence) were honed through leadership experience.

## Comparisons between elected mayors and council leaders

The position enjoyed by elected mayors – for example, security of tenure, formal power base, democratic

legitimacy and more freedom from group discipline – provided a basis for a stronger, more proactive and individualised style of leadership than the other models. However, elected mayors varied greatly in their personal capacity to exploit these resources.

Leaders and chief executives had a common interest and a crucial role in mediating between political and external pressures for improved performance (particularly external inspections such as the CPA).

There was a particularly strong feeling of 'common purpose' between elected mayors and chief executives. However, common purpose did not mean they were duplicating their roles. In many cases, each recognised the distinctive roles that the other played within the shared agenda. For inexperienced mayors, there could be a degree of dependency in the relationship, with the mayor relying on the chief executive to steer him or her through the strategic agenda.

## Conclusion

What are the implications of the research for the Government's efforts to reform local political leadership? As institutional change is a contested process, dependent on local context, it is particularly difficult for its instigators to control. Those who benefit from existing arrangements or who see new rules as hostile to their interests may resist or 'hijack' new institutions in local governance. At the same time, development will be shaped by interactions with existing, 'embedded' institutional frameworks within the local authority itself, the wider locality and in the external political environment.

This suggests that changing formal structure can be important, but it is not in itself sufficient to secure meaningful or consistent changes in political behaviour. Successful institutional design also depends on diversity. It needs to allow for development (through 'learning by doing') to suit different circumstances and which is adaptable over time. New institutional designs should be sufficiently flexible to exploit the creative efforts of those charged with implementing them, rather than frustrating

them. In addition, this research has shown that leadership capabilities are particularly significant in the success or otherwise of managing change, and that many of these skills can be developed.

By recognising the importance of contexts and capabilities, as well as constitutions, it is possible to turn these factors into resources for, rather than obstacles to, institutional change. Experimentation and learning were hallmarks of the Government's original strategy for modernising local government. The limited and sometimes perverse effects of the 2000 Act on local political leadership are testimony to the costs involved in moving towards a more prescriptive, top-down approach.

## About the project

The study was carried out between autumn 2001 and autumn 2003 by a research team from De Montfort University (Local Governance Research Unit) and the University of Warwick (Local Government Centre), led by Steve Leach and Jean Hartley.

The research was based on case studies and a self-report leadership survey. The nine case-study local authorities in England and Wales represented a diverse range of political arrangements, political control and culture, and size and type of authority. The researchers carried out semi-structured interviews with a wide range of politicians, managers and external partners in these authorities. Qualitative evidence from these interviews was complemented by quantitative data from the Warwick Political Leadership Questionnaire. This was distributed in the case-study authorities, with additional analysis of the national database of completed questionnaires.

A further seven local authorities formed 'mini case studies'. The research team used in-depth interviews with the leader and chief executive to reflect on a wider range of leadership models and experiences, and tested out different contexts of the arguments emerging from the original case studies. A series of workshops with political leaders was also held.

## For further information

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