

Local political leadership in England and Wales



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Local political leadership in England and Wales

**Steve Leach, Jean Hartley, Vivien Lowndes, David Wilson and
James Downe**



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE
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1 Introduction

The inspiration for this research was the interest in how local political leadership is changing, due to the impact of the Local Government Act 2000, which 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. The final option was available only to authorities with populations of less than 85,000. This legislative change reflected a desire on the part of the Labour Government to make local political leadership more effective and, in particular, more transparent, accountable and visible. This was an objective to which other elements of their democratic renewal agenda also contributed – for example, the emphasis on community leadership and partnership working. The focus of this research is not on the workings of the new political arrangements as such, but rather on how local political leadership has been affected by the introduction of the new arrangements.

In addition, over the past 20 years, there have been major changes in the role of political leaders in local authorities. This has occurred, not only because of changing local demographics, needs and aspirations, but also because of the policies of successive governments, in both governing parties. These pressures, from communities and from government, have meant an increasingly external role orientation for local authorities and political leaders alike (Leach and Wilson, 2000; Hartley, 2002a). They now operate in a world where they are much more reliant on co-operation with the public, with other agencies, and with central government, to achieve their

objectives. Partnerships and networks are prominent. The recent paper from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister entitled *Vibrant Local Leadership* (ODPM, 2005) signals the need to pay attention to, among other things, the skills required for political leadership in this changing context.

The research brief required the team to pay particular attention to the impact of the new executive models on the following aspects of leadership (Cabinet Office, 2001):

- *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 to strengthen accountability.

These priorities were incorporated by the research team into a framework of analysis, which is innovative in that it combines concepts and insights from both *political science* and *organisational behaviour*. It uses these approaches to identify and explore the factors that support or inhibit effective political leadership in local government. The framework of analysis starts by analysing *leadership tasks*, proposing that they are likely to be reinterpreted as a result of central government’s new conception of the leadership of local government under the Local Government Act 2000. However, the way in which leadership tasks may be interpreted locally will depend on two further factors: the *political traditions and cultures* of different local authorities and the *skills and capabilities* of

leaders. The research also assesses, as far as is possible, the *effectiveness of leadership* by identifying a number of outcome measures.

Research design and methods

The research is based on an innovative integration of concepts and methods from political science and organisational behaviour. A range of methods have been employed (see Appendix for fuller details), consisting of the following.

- 1 Nine in-depth case studies, visited in two time periods, of local authorities in England and Wales, chosen across the four types of political arrangements, and with a range of internal and external informants in each case, plus relevant documents and some observation of meetings.
- 2 A further seven 'lighter' (single visit, fewer informants) case studies to explore particular themes in more authorities.
- 3 Questionnaire results from the Warwick Political Leadership Questionnaire (WPLQ), which was completed by senior elected members in the in-depth case study authorities. Each member who completed the WPLQ was provided with a personal analysis of their profile of capabilities, or skills, along with analysis of the way that they read the context and the challenges they give priority to in office. This report analyses the aggregated results of the 'leadership team' (e.g. mayor or leader plus cabinet/executive) by authority.

- 4 WPLQ results for the national database of political leadership capabilities, held at Warwick. This enabled the research to examine skill differences between senior and other members, as part of the analysis of how skills are acquired.

The research design did not lend itself to the systematic testing of hypotheses, which requires large datasets of local authorities (e.g. Stoker *et al.*, 2003). The data analysis focuses instead on identifying and exploring key themes from interviews, and analysing the quantitative data from the WPLQ to draw out implications for the policy, practice and conceptualisation of local political leadership.

A framework for understanding political leadership

Leadership is viewed in this study not as a set of individual skills alone, nor simply as a particular role in the local authority (e.g. leader, portfolio holder) but rather as a set of social processes of influencing and motivating individuals and groups, and of shaping goals and outcomes through influence, persuasion and negotiation. The work of Heifetz (1996, 2003) is valuable for its emphasis on leadership as an active process of working with individuals, groups, communities and organisations.

Four key elements of leadership were instrumental in designing our research instruments and interpreting the results. These are:

- leadership context
- leadership tasks

- leadership capabilities (also called skills)
- leadership effectiveness.

These are depicted in Figure 1.1, which also incorporates the recognition that leadership may be shared among a range of actors.

Leadership context

There can be a danger that leadership theories are expressed as universals, as though they were appropriate in all circumstances. Yet the context can be very important. In terms of political leadership, the significance of context has been emphasised by a number of writers, including Leach and Wilson (2000) who suggest that the local demography, the political traditions and the history of political control all play a part in the constraints and opportunities open to political leadership 'teams'. In examining the literature on organisational and cultural change, a number of writers have pointed to the importance of understanding the external – and sometimes internal organisational – context as a way of analysing the processes of change and

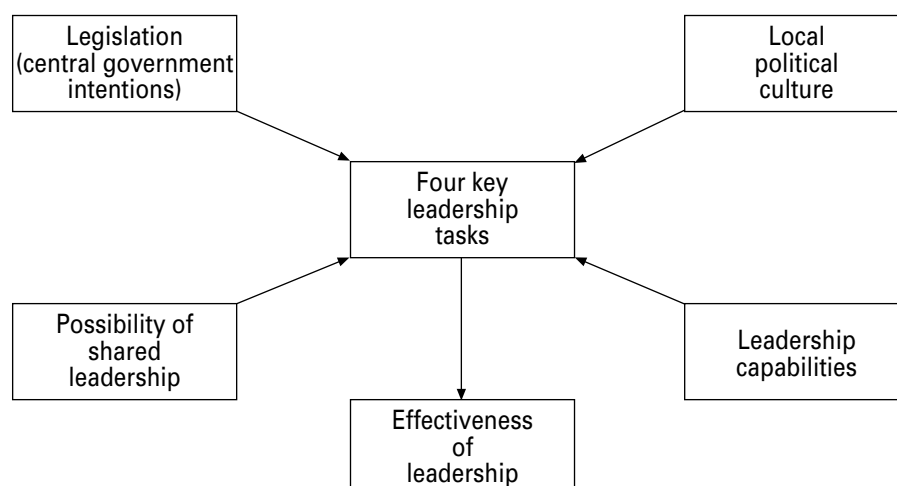
the opportunities for leading change (e.g. Heifetz, 1996; Hartley, 2002). In the field of local government, the critique of 'one best way' in evaluation studies and in organisational theory has emphasised the value, both conceptually and practically, of paying attention to the particular local context. Leadership context, incorporating both local and national influences, is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

Leadership tasks

It is possible to identify from the literature four key leadership tasks, which will be of relevance *whatever* the pattern of powers and expectations established by central government (see Leach and Wilson, 2000, drawing on the work of Selznick, 1957; Kotter and Lawrence, 1974; Stone, 1995). But the *relative priority* given to these tasks may differ both between central and local government, and between local government and other local stakeholders.

These tasks, which are outlined in more detail below, may be characterised as:

Figure 1.1 A framework for understanding political leadership



- maintaining a critical mass of political support
- developing strategic policy direction
- seeking to further leadership priorities outside the authority
- ensuring task accomplishment.

Maintaining a critical mass of political support

There is the need to ensure the cohesiveness of the party group, and among the leading members and officers. This task may be significantly different for an elected mayor, who has a separate democratic mandate, compared with a leader in the cabinet model, who is reliant on the party group for election. An elected mayor cannot ignore his/her relationship with the council, as support will be needed to approve a range of policies that the mayor wishes to promote. It therefore matters whether or not the council has a party majority that matches the mayor's own party affiliation, if any, or whether it does not. However, the leader in the 'cabinet and leader' model is more dependent on party group support, or the support of other parties in a no-overall-control situation, and this may constrain performance.

Developing strategic policy direction

This task requires the setting of a strategic framework within which the authority can work. This key task equates with the 'capacity to identify and focus on clear priorities for action' or clarity of vision (Cabinet Office, 2001). It is a task that has increased in priority, not least because of the new emphasis on community strategies, local public service agreements and partnership arrangements, all

of which imply the need for a 'clarity of vision' on the part of the local authority. There is likely to be a difference between mayoral and non-mayoral options. The mayor will have a mandate based on a personal vision, which may also reflect the priorities of his or her party affiliation, whereas the vision of the leader in the 'leader and cabinet model' will be more circumscribed by the way the local party manifesto is constructed. A mayor may also have more scope to link the vision with action because a leader and cabinet may be more constrained by their dependence on the group.

External influence: seeking to further leadership priorities outside the authority

This requires leaders to establish or maintain contacts with a wide range of individuals and organisations to ensure that the authority's strategic agenda is furthered, and to respond to their concerns (see also Benington, 1997). This covers 'the connections which the leadership has with local stakeholders and local communities' and 'visibility of leadership' (Cabinet Office 2001), although it extends beyond this into advocacy in regional, national and European settings. An elected mayor may be more likely to recognise and respond to this new task than at least some leaders of cabinets in the more traditional local authorities. Given the visibility of an elected mayor and the way he or she is likely to develop wide constituencies of support in seeking election, it could be argued that mayors will start with a greater interest in this task than their 'cabinet and leader' counterparts.

Ensuring task accomplishment

Political leaders generally believe that they have a responsibility to ensure that what the majority

party, or coalition, wants to happen actually does happen. This task could either be diminished or strengthened in significance, depending on local choice. Guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) includes an encouragement to executives to devolve more decisions to officers to avoid ‘cabinet overload’. However, the legislation does not prevent the continuation of the status quo – or indeed a movement in the opposite direction. An executive could decide that its future electoral chances would be enhanced by taking more direct responsibilities for detailed policy implementation. This would be particularly true of elected mayors who, if USA experience is anything to go by, may see considerable advantage in a capacity to deliver for individuals who approach them.

Leadership skills and capabilities

The decision-making structures and powers set out in local authority constitutions are likely to provide constraints on the opportunities for political leadership. Local political institutions will produce a different range of constraints and opportunities. But, *whatever* the pattern of constraints and opportunities involved, there will always be an *interpretive space* within which there is scope for the *skills and capabilities* of a political leader, or leaders, to be exercised, either within a personal agenda or within the requirements of ‘good performance’ in authority-wide terms. In other words, we would expect an interaction between structure and agency. There is scope for individual action within the constraints of the context, given that individual behaviour is also shaped by context.

The conceptual framework presented here builds on the academic and policy literatures about personal skills and competencies. While such research has largely focused on managers, researchers at Warwick have modified and developed this approach to reflect the particular roles, skills, knowledge, abilities and values of political leaders (e.g. Morrell and Hartley, 2005, submitted for publication; Hartley *et al.*, 2005, submitted for publication). Kanungo and Sasi (1992) argue that capabilities represent a wider set of abilities than skills alone, which enable the non-specific, non-routine, discretionary and unstructured parts of the job or role to be achieved. Hirsh and Strebler (1995) describe ‘the skills, knowledge, experience, attributes and behaviours that an individual needs to perform [a role] effectively’. Boyatzis (1994) argues that skills need to be set in the context both of role demands and the environment. This reinforces the conceptual approach presented here, which is that skills cannot be seen in isolation, but must be set in the context of the environment (context) and of the role demands (challenges) – see also Dulewicz and Higgs (2005).

The interplay of capabilities with contexts and challenges is reflected in the WPLQ. The WPLQ has been developed from detailed empirical research with several hundred elected members in England and Wales, and is based on ten dimensions or clusters of skill, along with analysis of how political leaders ‘read’ the context and interpret their key challenges or priorities. The detail of this framework is given in Chapter 7. To use Rab Butler’s phrase, effective political leadership can be epitomised as the ability to identify the ‘art of the possible’ and to act on this perception.

The effectiveness of political leadership

There are three starting points, or agendas, from which local political leadership can be approached. There is the *modernisation agenda driven by central government*, which is performance driven and currently organised primarily around the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process, but which also embodies a series of assumptions and expectations about how local political leadership should operate, with an implied link between 'strong political leadership' and good performance. There is the *local political agenda*, which will be an expression of the political priorities, and traditions, of the party or parties in power locally, and which the political leadership will be expected to strive to deliver. And there is the *local managerial agenda*, which may be closely aligned with achieving central government's performance expectations, though less so with the political leadership expectations, but which has to take account of the reality of the local political agenda. These different agendas develop a dynamic within local authorities that is focused on the political leader–chief executive relationship, although the leadership may operate in a more collective or corporate way.

Questions to be explored in the research

We set out to undertake the research with a series of questions about the tasks, the context and the capabilities of political leadership. Our detailed interviews from case studies and our analysis of the WPLQ have enabled us to develop this outline into a set of key themes, which are explored in the research. They reflect the conceptual distinctions identified and discussed above.

1 Understanding effective political leadership

- To what extent, and in what ways, do *leadership base* (leadership powers), *strong leadership* and *individualistic leadership* contribute to effective leadership?
- What is the relationship between effective leadership, in terms of local authority *performance*, and effective *political leadership*?

2 Impact of political control

- In what ways do the different *attitudes to leadership among the three major parties* (Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat) influence political behaviour and shape the scope for effective political leadership?
- To what extent is effective political leadership possible in *hung authorities*?

3 Impact of structural/constitutional framework

- What differences do leadership *powers* as expressed in the *constitution* make to leadership behaviour and effective leadership?
- Does the *differential power base* underpinning mayoral leadership and 'leadership of cabinets' affect the behaviour and effectiveness of political leaders?
- Does the mayoral model result in an enhanced concern with *visibility* and *community responsiveness*?

4 Impact of local political institutions

- To what extent have *local political traditions and culture*, as embodied in political institutions, influenced the *scope for effective leadership* in both 'political' and 'authority-wide' senses?

- How are *differences* between the *Government's agenda* for local political leadership and those of the *local party group/machinery* mediated by political leaders?
- To what extent have the new political institutions associated with the Government's democratic renewal agenda become embedded in the culture of local authorities?

5 *Leadership tasks*

- To what extent, and in what way, has the introduction of new political management structures changed the understanding of, and balance between, the *four key leadership tasks*?

6 *Impact of political leadership—chief executive relationships*

- To what extent can 'leadership' be understood as a tension between the demands of '*good performance*', as interpreted by the chief executive, and *political considerations*, as understood and experienced by the dominant party group / coalition?

7 *The variety and impact of leadership capabilities*

- To what extent do *leadership capabilities* shape priorities and outcomes, for example, the ability of political leaders to draw political groups towards 'effective leadership' in authority-wide terms?
- Are particular capabilities associated with particular local authority contexts or configurations?
- Do more experienced political leaders have particular capabilities?
- To what extent are capabilities inherent or learnt?

2 The context of political leadership

The crucial importance of context in shaping the experiences and choices of an individual leader is well recognised in the traditions of historical, political and organisational analysis (e.g. Scott, 2001). Leaders in local authorities face a shifting but always limited set of choices that stem from the internal and external context of the authority, both current pressures and future trends.

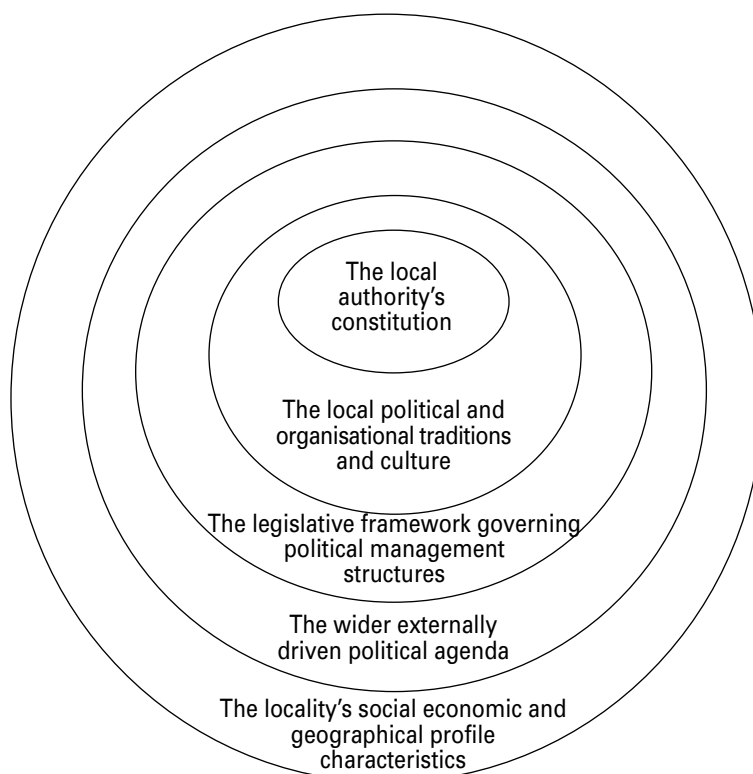
We distinguish between four categories of 'context', which can be depicted as a series of concentric circles around the core of the local authority's constitution (see Figure 2.1).

At the core of the circles of context is the local authority's *constitution*. The constitution itself is not part of the context, because it is an internal instrument, which is amenable to

change – however difficult, particularly in the short term, this is perceived to be. The constitution is the formal expression of how an authority has responded to the legislative framework set out in the Local Government Act 2000 and its accompanying guidance.

While the constitution contains many fixed points, it is open to interpretation and is indeed interpreted in each local authority in the light of its distinctive *local political and organisational traditions and culture* or 'organisational biography' (Lowndes, 1999). This forms the innermost circle of context, being in principle the most amenable to change, although harder in practice. Culture operates, not only through formal rules and requirements, but also through perceptions and assumptions – often shared,

Figure 2.1 A framework for analysing 'relevant context'



sometimes contested – about the value of particular practices or ‘ways of working’ (Stewart, 1986; Schein, 1992). The informal institutions of local government provide a powerful set of constraints on the direction and extent of change. Their taken-for-granted nature means that they are at least as influential as their more formal counterparts. Informal institutions – whether general to local government or specific to a particular authority – may be especially hard to change, given that they embody dominant values and identities, though skilled political leaders may try to shift such values and identities over a period of time.

Traditional ‘institutions’ are of particular importance because they often act as barriers, though sometimes also provide opportunities, to the incorporation of new values and ways of working associated with the Government’s democratic renewal agenda. Familiar examples include ‘the committee style of working’, ‘the ultimate authority of the party group’ and ‘the principle of unified advice from officers/ departments’.

Beyond this circle of context is the *legislative context associated with the introduction of new political management arrangements* per se. But it is not only the 2000 Act which provides relevant context to the exercise of local political leadership. The *wider political agenda, which is largely generated by central government*, is a further important contextual influence. The introduction of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) system has had an impact on leadership agendas as have the various partnership opportunities – Private Finance Initiative (PFI), public service agreements, community strategies – provided by the Government. This ‘wider agenda’ can be

influenced by local authorities acting individually or, more likely, collectively, but only at the margins.

Finally, in the outermost circle, there is the impact of the *social, economic and geographical characteristics* of the local authority’s area, and future trends in these characteristics. This contextual category is arguably the *least* amenable to leadership influence, though the skills of a political leader in ‘reading’, interpreting and articulating this context to others, and taking the context into account in strategy, is crucial to effective political leadership.

In the analysis that follows, we illustrate the way in which context impinges on and is interpreted by local political leadership within each of the four broad categories identified above. In doing so, we make use of both interview material from the case study authorities and the data from the WPLQ, which illustrate the importance placed by political leaders on different elements of context and the way in which leaders interpret context to develop their own agenda.

Social, economic and geographical context

Some elements of this contextual category are well known to the authority concerned – for example, the multicultural and multifaith characteristics of the Leicester population, the presence of a large gay and lesbian community in Brighton and Hove, and the large number of asylum seekers in Kent. A knowledge of such demographic characteristics does not determine what the leadership response will be, but may be taken into account by the leadership and acted on in particular ways. The social context

was mentioned spontaneously by the leaders in the research as elements of their leadership agenda. In the case of Milton Keynes, the impact of the high growth rate was spelled out to us in detail – for example, the high social services costs of supporting young families without extended family support and the challenge of building ‘community capacity’ among a relatively transitory population. Kent County Council is also experiencing the challenge of planning for the level of population growth earmarked for it within the South East regional plan.

Perhaps the best example of the influence of socio-geographic context on leadership was, in the perception of several leaders, that they should respond to the growing assertiveness of the local population. This is an interesting example of a social characteristic that cannot be identified from published census data; rather, it is sensed by leaders on the basis of local knowledge or from specific examples of behaviour. One leader in a case study authority had set out in a personal manifesto a number of responses to the assertiveness of the authority’s population. The manifesto promised that the authority would become even more of a listening council and that the leader intended to ‘engage directly with the many diverse voluntary and community organisations which exist in the borough’.

Many other examples illustrate the significance of the social, economic and geographical context of authorities in shaping the leadership agenda. But they also demonstrate the *selectivity* of the process whereby leaders single out particular elements of this context for priority action. This process of ‘prioritisation’ was a key element of effective

leadership shown in both the interviews and the WPLQ data.

The external political agenda

The Local Government Act 2000 is not the only element in the external central government agenda that constitutes a challenge for local political leaders. For example, in 2003–04, the revised basis of central government grant distribution shifted resources away from more rural shires into the urban conurbations, and from the south of England to the north. This has posed major problems for those authorities losing out. In some Conservative-controlled counties, council tax increases approaching 18 per cent were introduced in 2003, simply to maintain existing service standards. Leaders in affected counties were involved both in trying to persuade central government to amend the new formula and in managing the budgetary consequences of the new allocation.

However, the most striking example of the impact of central government initiatives comes from the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). In December 2002, the CPA scores for all London boroughs, metropolitan districts, shire counties and unitary authorities were announced. With benefits and penalties attached respectively to high or low scores, local authorities took this process extremely seriously. Leaders were directly involved often in the development of strategies of preparation for the CPA inspection and occasionally in deputations to the Audit Commission to persuade it that an erroneous assessment had been made. A particular challenge for leaders in some of our case studies has been dealing with the consequences of a weak or poor CPA. The first

elected mayor of North Tyneside, Chris Morgan, who resigned in April 2003, could hardly be held responsible for the authority's poor CPA assessment in November 2002. He had been in post for only eleven months. But the agreement of a recovery plan with ODPM officials and then putting the plan into operation was a major feature of his mayoral agenda between November 2002 and April 2003, pushing into the background his desire to establish a stronger presence in the partnership arena.

One of the challenges for council leaders is the substantial impact of agendas generated by central government on local authorities, involving a succession of major initiatives and policies. Responding to an externally imposed agenda can act as a distraction from other leadership tasks – for example, the building of robust local partnerships. There is an implied need for selectivity and prioritisation on the part of leaders and the sharing of leadership responsibilities within the leadership group if the full range of challenges are to be met effectively.

The legislative context

There have been complaints from local authorities that the legislative requirements concerning new forms of political management structure (Local Government Act 2000 and the associated guidance) amount to something approaching a constitutional straitjacket. Concerns have been expressed about the lack of choice, particularly around the limitations of the options available in relation to executive government, i.e. mayor and cabinet; mayor and council manager; cabinet and leader; and, for authorities with populations below 85,000, a

streamlined committee system. The 'constitution' that each local authority is required to adopt is the formal expression of how the authority has decided to operationalise the requirements of the 2000 Act and its accompanying guidance. Because the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) circulated a 'model constitution' as a reference point in developing constitutions, it is perhaps not surprising that there is a distinct similarity in the broad format, though not necessarily detail, of local authority constitutions. This outcome too has added to the feeling of a straitjacket – a centrally promoted model constitution designed to respond to a very limited agenda of choice among centrally imposed executive options.

However, the reality, as an ODPM report emphasises (Leach *et al.*, 2003) – and some, though by no means all, local authority leaders have come to recognise – is that, far from being a constitutional straitjacket, the 2000 Act and the local constitutions that reflect it offer considerable scope for local choice and, hence, local political leadership.

Anna Randle (2003) has made a similar point in relation to the role of elected mayors:

The constitutions of mayoral authorities vary widely in the freedom and authority they actually give to the mayor, usually in relation to whether the council was more or less supportive of the idea.

(Randle, 2003, p. 13)

There were many examples from our case studies that demonstrated the scope for choice that exists in relation to the post-2000 constitutions. In each case, the leadership recognised an opportunity for moving the

authority in a direction that they felt would be advantageous, and acceptable to a majority of the council. They looked for opportunities to exploit within the legislative context rather than regarding it as a constraint.

Local political and organisational traditions and culture

‘Organisational biography’ (Lowndes, 1999) has a crucial influence on the political leadership of an authority. Leaders may be seriously constrained by it in their scope for action and may need a shrewd understanding of the scope for choice and opportunity in this context, sometimes related to political survival. This emphasis on the significance of local political culture has a relevance to all the new executive forms.

There are, for example, a variety of political traditions regarding the legitimacy of strong personalised leadership that have facilitated the quasi-elected mayoral role of Sandy Bruce-Lockhart in Kent and Russell Goodway in Cardiff, but which would be viewed as inappropriate within Liberal Democrat-led Milton Keynes or Stockport, where the ultimate authority of the group is jealously guarded. There are important rule- and tradition-based differences between the parties but also considerable variation within them.

In addition, the traditions of inter-party relationships can play a crucial contextual role in facilitating or hampering leadership action. The long-standing co-operative relationship between the Labour and Opposition groups (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) in Warwickshire has clearly facilitated the scope for action of the county’s then Labour leader,

Ian Bottrill, despite his party not holding an overall majority. On the other hand, the resistance encountered by the two Conservative mayors in North Tyneside from the Labour majority on the council reflects the adversarial traditions of inter-party relations in that authority. A key problem that this tension between leader and council can generate is resistance on the part of the council to the mayor’s budget proposals (see Chapter 3).

The importance of this contextual category goes beyond inter-party relations. The chief executive, and sometimes other chief officers, can play an important part in facilitating leadership priorities, or sometimes failing to do so. The chief executive of North Tyneside has had a hugely difficult task in attempting to mediate between a Conservative mayor and an oppositional Labour-dominated council. Bedford’s chief executive has been increasingly effective as a broker between the elected mayor and the (no-overall-control) council. Sometimes, however, a close working relationship between leader and chief executive may contribute to difficulties in political leadership, with insufficient distinctiveness in their perspectives and agendas.

The most important contextual influence in the current circumstances is the way in which the move to executive government (mayoral or cabinet and leader) is perceived in the authority (see Randle, 2003, p. 13). The concept of local executive government has often been viewed as a potential threat to valued, traditional local government institutions, in particular the key roles of the full council, the politically proportionate decision-making committee and the party group. In authorities where these values have proved particularly dominant, the

scope for individual leadership has been circumscribed, although that has not necessarily prevented the leaders of these authorities from carving out a viable leadership role that has reflected a sensitivity to these enduring values. In other authorities, the political culture has been more supportive of the new system and receptive to a different conception of leadership.

The capacity for contextual interpretation

The research interviews confirmed a key element of the WPLQ conceptual framework, that one of the key political leadership skills was an ability to 'read', or interpret, the context in a way that provided a basis for effective action – for example, action that proved capable of implementation within the authority.

For example, Ken Bodfish, the Labour leader of Brighton and Hove, where Labour had enjoyed majority control in the period preceding the 2003 election, made an assessment in the election run-up of the options in the event of Labour losing majority control, which was indeed the outcome. He concluded that, so long as Labour remained the largest party, the possibility of any other two parties forming a coalition administration was remote, in which case Labour could press for a minority administration (i.e. one in which they held all the chairs) in the knowledge that there was no viable alternative. Labour was successful in achieving this outcome, largely because the leader had made an insightful reading of the political context and acted on it.

Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, the Conservative Leader of Kent County Council, recognised that, given the size and strategic significance of Kent,

coupled with his own status as a high-profile, visible and responsible leader – the kind of leader the Labour Government was trying to encourage – he was in a position to influence and to some extent negotiate with central government ministers and civil servants. He could do this in a way that would not have been plausible for the vast majority of local authority leaders. He has developed and articulated this opportunity, based on his reading of the central–local context in Kent, to considerable advantage.

Mike Wolfe, the then elected mayor of Stoke-on-Trent, perceived that, given his constitutional status and the limited degree of personal support he enjoyed within the council, there were more opportunities to exercise community leadership through partnership mechanisms than to lead the quest for enhanced service quality provision by the council itself, a task that he has in effect trusted the council manager to achieve. But his judgement was that his community leadership role would not best be facilitated by his becoming chair of the local strategic partnership – a view shared by Ray Mallon, the Mayor of Middlesbrough, about his own locality.

However, it would be misleading to view the key context-related leadership skills as solely *responsive* in nature. There are circumstances in which leaders can *change* the context, less so in relation to the first three contextual categories – although government ministers are sometimes persuaded to modify their intentions by influential leaders – but much more so in relation to political and organisational traditions. As Leach and Wilson (2000) have argued in their discussion of the relationship between leadership and political culture:

... there is the situation where the leader, through his/her own leadership qualities, persuades a political group that a change in leadership role is necessary ... even where this need is not initially widely perceived. In these circumstances, it is possible to characterise the situation as 'transformational'; it generates a change in political and organisational culture through action taken by leaders themselves.

(Leach and Wilson, 2000, p. 41)

The most striking example of this process that was identified in the research was the ability of Ray Mallon, the elected mayor of Middlesbrough, to transform the political climate in which he operated from one of initial hostility, on the part of a large section of the Labour group, to one of widespread support, not just for his own leadership but also for the value of an 'elected mayor' per se in Middlesbrough. A second example is provided by the way in which George Lord, council and Conservative group leader on Worcestershire County Council, has been able to transform the political culture from one of adversarial party politics, during the 1997–2001 period, to one of inter-party collaboration, in which all parties are represented on the cabinet.

Context as perceived by political leaders through the WPLQ

The Warwick Political Leadership Questionnaire that was used in this research is Version 1, which is based on 187 items covering how political leaders perceive their contexts, challenges and capabilities. It is a self-assessment version, i.e. political leaders rate themselves. (Since the JRF research, the WPLQ has been further refined to reduce the item stock

to 86 items and to produce a version in 360-degree feedback as well as self-assessment form.)

We argue from the research that developed the WPLQ (see Hartley *et al.*, 2005) that effective political leadership includes the skill of being able to 'read' the context, both observing and reflecting on changes, and making judgements about the degree and pace of change and what this suggests for action or inaction at any particular point. If community leadership is to become a lived reality, then effective political leadership requires the capability to interpret changes in the external context of the authority.

In the WPLQ, context is examined through the importance leaders accord to particular elements in the way that they undertake their work as a leader. Here, context covers political changes, economic changes, social changes and environmental changes. The WPLQ asks each respondent to consider changes listed under these headings and to rate how important each one is to them in their role as elected member, in terms of the extent to which the person takes this issue into account in their leadership role. Items are summed across particular aspects of context. It is not a measure of how much the leader works on that issue but how much they take it into account in their work.

The national database of the Version 1 WPLQ is based on the self-reports of 201 elected members in England and Wales. It is interesting to note from this research (Hartley and Morgan-Thomas, 2003) that longer service as a councillor is associated with leaders being more sensitive to reading social and demographic elements of the external context – they have had a longer period of time in which to observe and reflect on how this has the potential to impact on political choices and priorities.

Those who are in senior leadership positions also report that they pay more attention to elements of the external context compared with either those in scrutiny/overview roles or those in ward representative roles only. While there are no differences in terms of reading the social and environmental changes, political leaders in cabinet or equivalent are more likely to pay attention to political context issues (e.g. from central government, from local issues) and to economic context issues (e.g. economic activity, labour market issues). Scrutiny and overview members also pay more attention to these issues than ward representatives, though less than those in executive positions. This is shown in Figure 2.2.

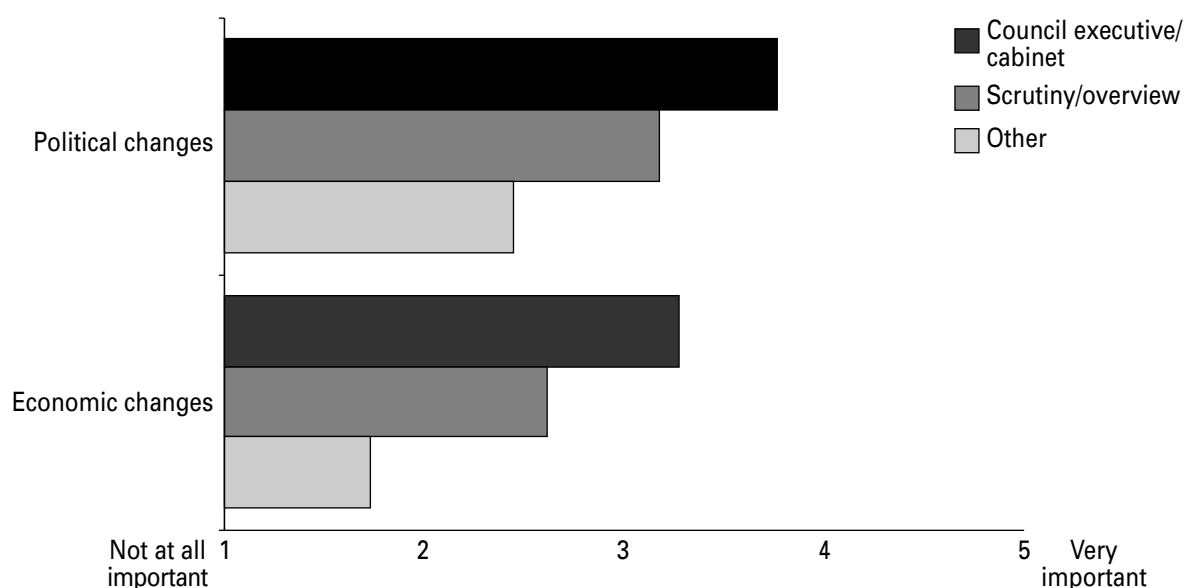
It is also interesting to note that differences in the reading of context were based at the individual level (role, length of service as a councillor, gender) but not at the level of the local authority (e.g. type of council). This suggests considerable variation within as well as across authorities in how the context is read,

interpreted and acted on.

We turn now to examine how the context is perceived within some of the in-depth case studies. The results are analysed in aggregate across the leadership group, i.e. leader or mayor plus executive members, in each case study. We examine the leadership group as a whole, both because it would be invidious to give detailed information of this nature about individuals and also because this is a valuable unit of analysis given that the actions of the political leadership are likely to take into account the perceptions of the whole group. Table 2.1 shows the size of the leadership group and the WPLQ responses for the five local authorities where the majority of executive members responded to the Questionnaire. More details are given in the Appendix. We draw on these profiles in this chapter (contexts and challenges) and in Chapter 7 (capabilities).

The leadership groups also vary in the importance that they attach to particular

Figure 2.2 Significant differences by cabinet, scrutiny and backbench roles



Local political leadership in England and Wales

elements of context. Leaders do not passively react to contextual forces. Rather, they interpret the significance of such forces in the light of their own political and organisational values and experiences.

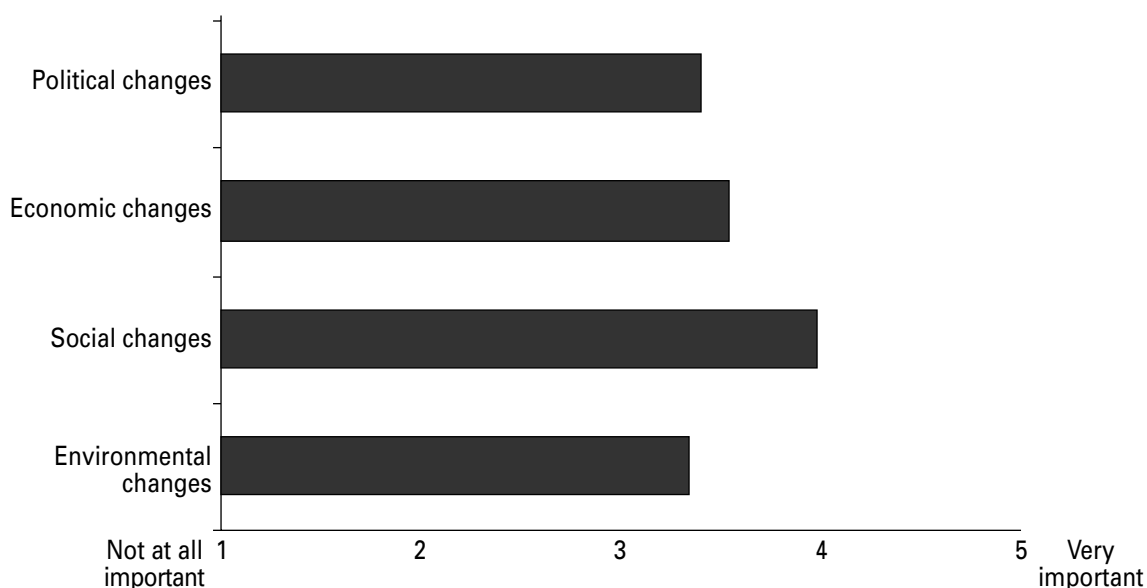
We illustrate the findings in three case studies. The aggregated results for the Kent political leadership show that they rate social changes as a particularly important element of the wider context (see Figure 2.3). This rating is consistent with the description of the locality given in interviews, where community plans, housing development – Ashford and the

Thames Gateway are scheduled by ODPM for substantial growth – are important changes. In addition, a number of those interviewed mentioned the high level of transient populations in Kent, including refugees and asylum seekers. Kent's public service agreement (PSA) targets and social policy innovations are focused on reducing dependency on the State, and this is also consistent with the WPLQ analysis. So, overall, there is a high degree of consistency here between perceived importance and documented information about context.

Table 2.1 Size of the leadership group and WPLQ responses for the five local authorities where the majority of executive members responded to the Questionnaire

	Size of leadership team	Responses
Cardiff	10	6
Kent CC	10	8
Lewisham	9	6
Milton Keynes	7	6
Warwickshire	12	10

Figure 2.3 Context: Kent County Council



In Milton Keynes, the most emphasis is placed by leaders on environmental change (see Figure 2.4). This emphasis is consistent with local and political priorities and recent experience. 'Green' issues were prominent in the Liberal Democrat manifesto when the party came to power in 2002; there was a major issue facing the leadership over a popular movement to prevent a waste-processing plant in the locality. In addition, the 'reading' of social changes is consistent with concerns about the impact of the rapidly growing population of Milton Keynes, in terms of the data lag and the financial lag on resources, and also the desire to build community capacity in a locality with a high level of mobile, working young couples and the concern about national plans for the rapid growth of the city.

However, from an objective perspective, the low rating attached to economic changes may appear surprising given the anticipated growth profile of the city. It may be the experience of *sustained* economic growth over the past 30 years has reduced the perception among leaders of its significance – that is, to some extent, it is 'taken for granted'.

Turning to the Cardiff leadership group, there is a high rating given to all four aspects of change (see Figure 2.5). Environmental changes, which include sustainable development and public transport, are rated highest and this reflects the priority attached by leaders to strengthening Cardiff's role as a capital city and as a significant European city. Equally, the economic development of the city is an important potential contribution to this goal.

Figure 2.4 Context: Milton Keynes Council

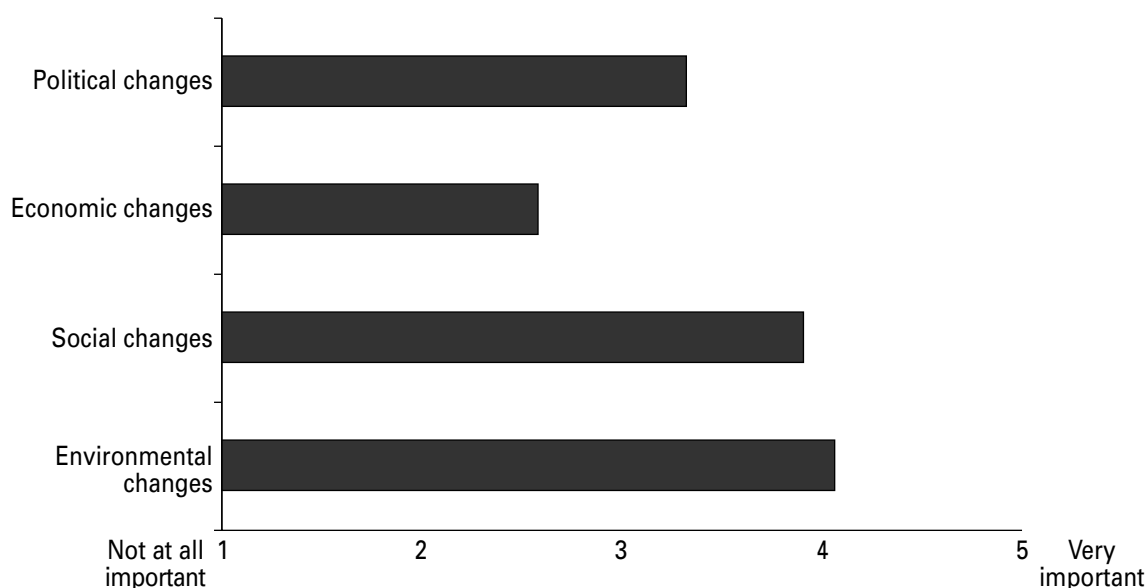
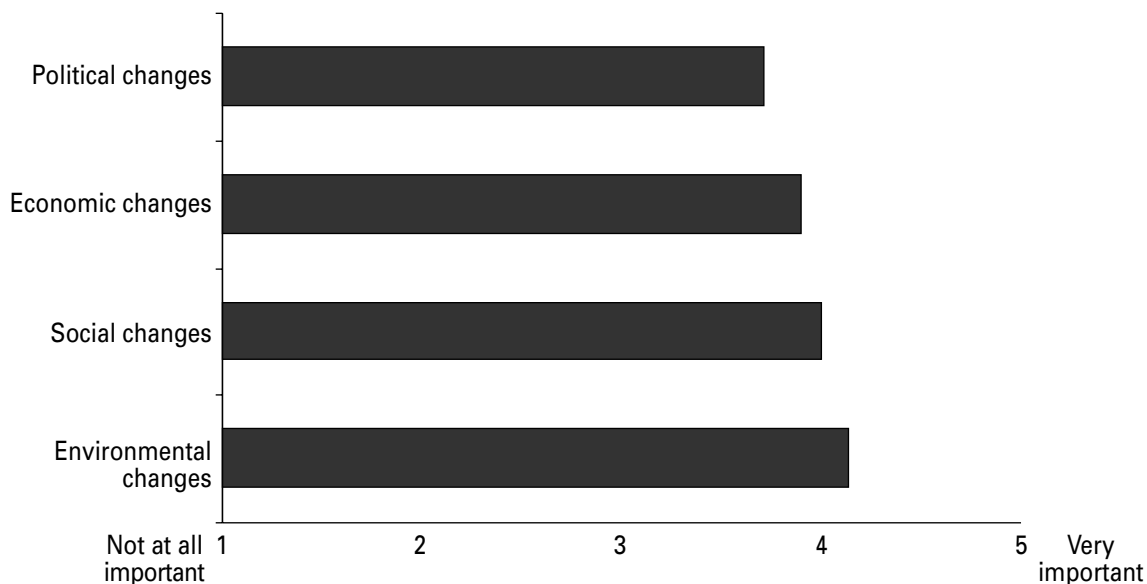


Figure 2.5 Context: Cardiff County Council



Leadership challenges as perceived by political leaders through the WPLQ

Leadership does not take place in a vacuum, but is shaped by the purposes or tasks of the political leader. This is a critical element of any leadership, though the context-free approach of some leadership theories inappropriately belies this perspective. One of the key characteristics of political leadership is that it involves having to make choices that are sometimes incompatible or at least having to manage tensions created by different pressures, stakeholders and timescales.

Our research in developing the WPLQ indicated a large range of priorities, seen as challenges, to address, with sometimes contradictory implications. We have conceptualised these challenges using a framework derived from Taylor (1993) and used in a number of Warwick studies (e.g. Taylor, 1993; Hartley and Benington, 1998; Hartley,

2002b). Taylor (1993) conceptualised civic leadership as consisting of four arenas. These have been described as follows.

- 1 Shaping and supporting the development of grassroots communities.
- 2 Negotiating and mobilising effective partnerships with other public, private and voluntary bodies.
- 3 Voicing the needs and interests of the local community in regional, national, European and international arenas.
- 4 Leading the local authority organisation and giving its services clear strategic direction.

To which the WPLQ research added a fifth challenge.

- 5 Working with party groups and coalitions to build support and achieve outcomes.

This framework is shown in Figure 2.6 and is used as the framework for considering how political leaders perceive the main challenges or priorities of their work. There is some overlap in the 'leadership tasks' model of this study, but with the Taylor (1993) model treating the 'external world' as having different components.

The national database of the WPLQ is based on the self-reports of 201 elected members in England and Wales. It is interesting to note from this research (Hartley and Morgan-Thomas, 2003) that there were no statistically significant differences in the challenges as perceived by political leaders on the basis of size or type of council. There is considerable diversity across local areas and the challenges that are thrown up from the five arenas. However, some individual and some role variables were important. Those who have been councillors for over 20 years are more likely than councillors with shorter service to perceive challenges derived from working with other tiers of government. This is not associated with them being more senior, which was checked in a separate analysis. It is associated simply with age and length of service – that is, it is not because they have more

experience of working with other tiers of government but because of length of service. This may be because they rate the current challenges from central government more highly in contrast with their experience in earlier years. This is 'organisational biography' as evidenced by the responses of the longer-serving cohort of elected members. These councillors are more influenced by the traditions, cultures, values and deeply held views of what it means to be a council and what a local authority's relations with central government should be.

Using the national database, when we compare executive members with all other roles, there are two statistically significant differences. Leaders/mayors and executive members report that they rate the challenges of working within the party/coalition and working within partnerships more highly than other elected members. This is interesting because these are the challenges of holding together political support and working in a community leadership way which are particularly relevant for a strategic approach to leading and managing the local authority. This is shown in Figure 2.7.

Figure 2.6 The Warwick model of five arenas of civic leadership

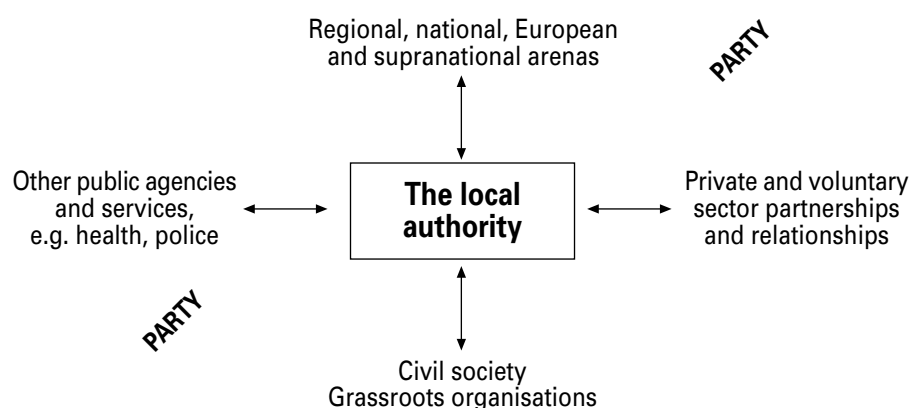
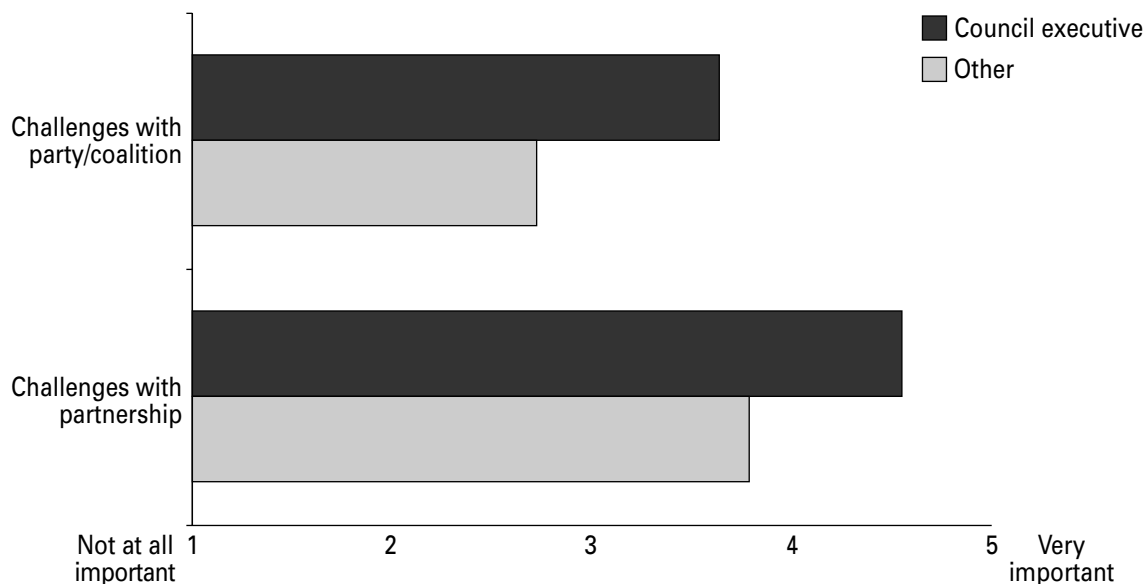


Figure 2.7 Significant differences by role (two categories)



We turn now to examine the WPLQ profile of the leadership challenges, as seen by the senior leadership group in the case studies – for example, leader/mayor plus executive members – in three of the in-depth case study authorities.

The WPLQ profile for Lewisham shows the greatest importance being accorded to the challenges of ‘working within partnerships’ (see Figure 2.8). This emphasis reflects the fact that Lewisham is one of the few authorities where there is an elected mayor, an executive model in which particular importance is attached to community leadership and the development of the local strategic partnership (LSP). The importance attached to ‘working within the authority’ reflects a concern to ensure that some of Lewisham’s basic services should operate more effectively. In this connection, the mayor had taken a ‘hands-on’ role in dealing with some worsening problems with the refuse collection service. The importance attached to working within the party group reflects the

challenge of overcoming factional differences within the local Labour party following the adversarial nature of the contest for the candidature of the Labour mayoral nomination.

Warwickshire’s aggregate WPLQ profile, as a hung authority, is based on the executive plus the two minority party leaders, as our interviews showed that they are reported to have an influential role in policy and strategy through the Leader’s liaison board.

The profile is fairly even across the challenges, suggesting no arena of challenge has been identified as requiring particular emphasis by the authority (see Figure 2.9). All of the five areas are seen as important challenges. The importance attached to challenges within the party group/coalition reflects the county’s ‘no-overall-control’ position, with Labour operating a minority administration. The somewhat lesser emphasis on other tiers of government reflects their importance, though still above the midpoint. The authority had a history of

Figure 2.8 Challenges: Lewisham, London

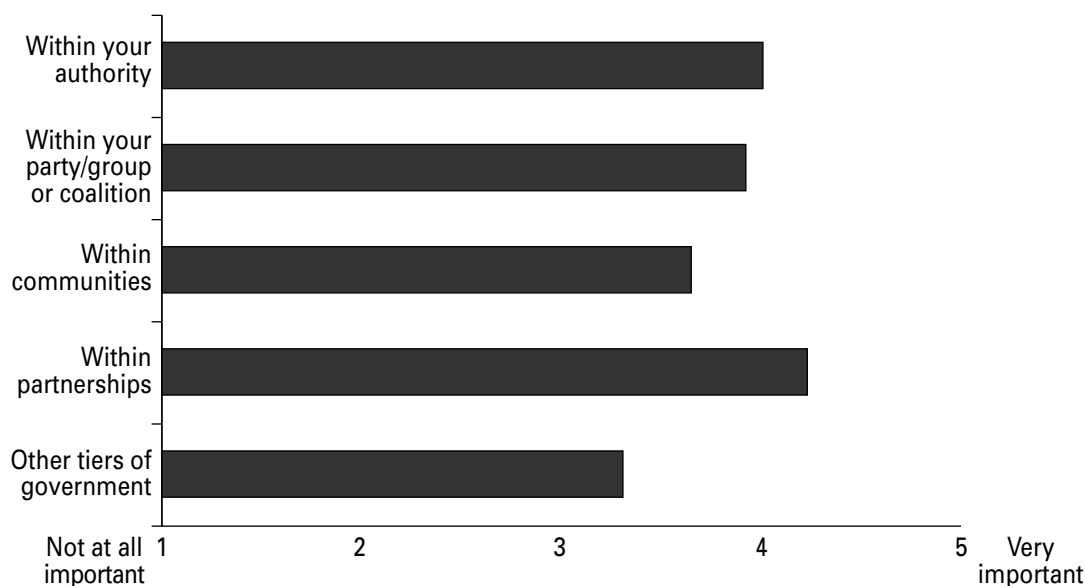
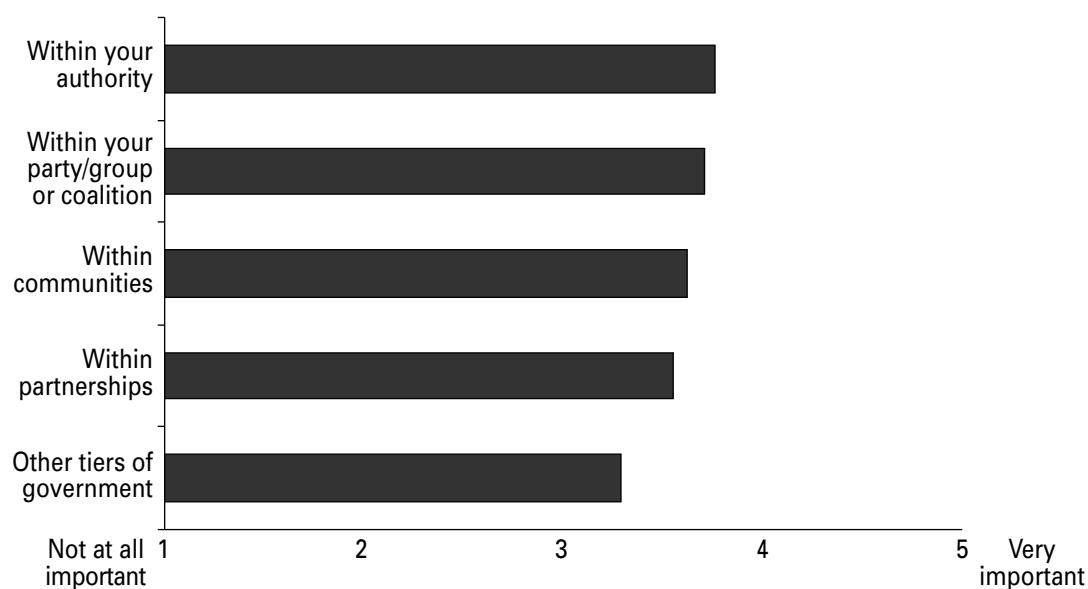


Figure 2.9 Challenges: Warwickshire County Council

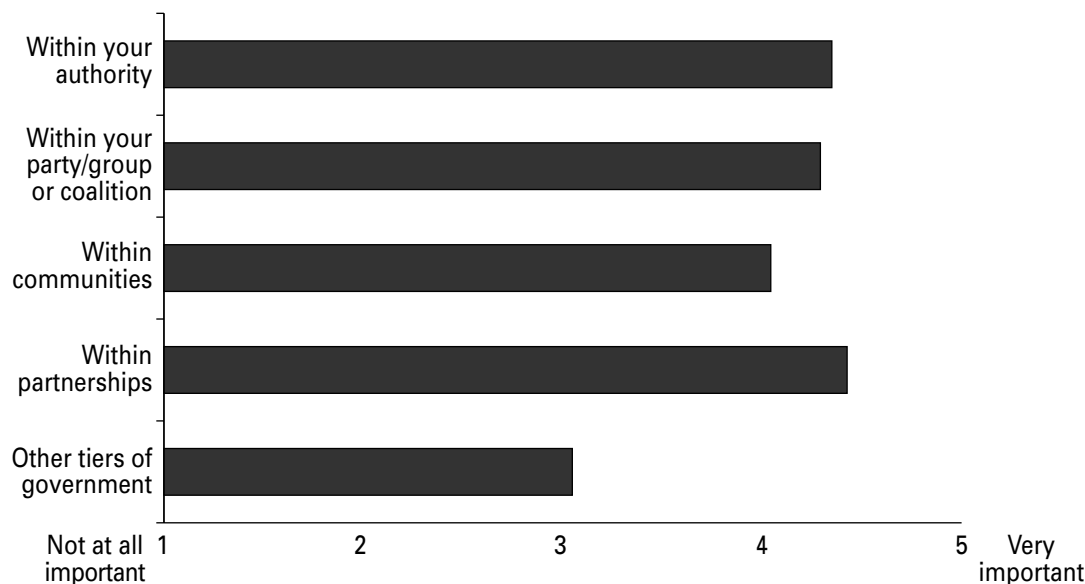


difficulties in sustaining positive county–district relationships with other councils.

In Milton Keynes, the highest degree of importance is attached to partnership (see Figure

2.10). This challenge is focused on the ‘growth agenda’, i.e. the continued development of Milton Keynes as a city over the next 30 years and who should lead the development. The

Figure 2.10 Challenges: Milton Keynes Council



political leadership has taken a number of actions in this area, including building and repairing relationships with partners, particularly with the previously disgruntled business sector, and is working with ODPM and ministers to shape the future governance arrangements for growth. The second most important challenge is perceived as 'within the authority'. This is an area that was flagged up in the Liberal Democrat manifesto in 2002 and has been reinforced since by the IDeA peer review, and by the 'weak' rating achieved by the council in the CPA process (at the time of the research) and the challenge of developing more cost-efficient and effective services.

Also rated as a challenge is working with the party/group. Our interviews provided evidence that Milton Keynes has developed a way of working across the ruling group that is strongly cohesive, though also time-consuming, both in formal meetings and in informal soundings and discussions. While the outcome might seem

assured (a cohesive group), the WPLQ ratings here suggest that this requires time and attention, and is therefore a priority challenge for the political leadership.

Conclusions

The influence of 'context' is most helpfully seen in the terms in which it was characterised at the start of this chapter:

... a shifting but always limited set of choices that stem from the internal and external context of the authority, both current pressures and future trends.

If context is seen in these terms, it becomes clearer why there is so much diversity in the experience and practice of leadership (see also Stoker *et al.*, 2003). Context may define or constrain choice but it does not determine the choices made. The content of the Local Government Act 2000 and of local constitutions,

the social and demographic structure of an area, and the range of other government legislation – and exhortation – that impinge on the agenda of local authorities will clearly influence leadership priorities and behaviour, but invariably leave a good deal of scope for interpretation (see, for example, ODPM, 2003, Chapter 5). In particular, although the political and organisational culture of an authority is an important influence on the council leadership, and is ignored at the leader's peril, it does not determine leadership action, but rather defines the scope for choice that is feasible in the circumstances.

An effective leader can be seen as one who can accurately read the context surrounding the authority and can adjust his or her leadership behaviour to respond to, but also shape, that context, conscious of the boundaries and whether or not to overstep them. Thus a leader faced with a traditional Labour group unwilling to change its ways of working, despite the inappropriateness of several of these in the (post 2000 Act) circumstances, would not see that element of context as a given, but would constantly be looking for ways to change it, without undermining his or her own leadership credibility. Effective leadership is about sound judgement and 'the art of the possible', but it is also sometimes about attempting to change the context, and hence the scope, of 'what is possible'.

The main conclusions from this chapter can now be summarised.

- Four important categories of context impinge on leadership agendas: the legislative framework governing political management structures; socio-economic

and demographic characteristics; the external political agenda and legislative framework; and local political and organisational traditions and culture.

- The legislative requirements of the Local Government Act 2000 do not amount to a 'constitutional straitjacket'; there is a good deal of scope for interpretation, which has been recognised in many authorities.
- Constitutions can empower non-mayoral leaders to operate in much the same way as elected mayors or can impose considerable limitations on the formal capacity for leadership.
- In all authorities, there are economic, social and demographic characteristics that are perceived by leaders as priorities, although such characteristics do not determine the nature of the response.
- The regional government proposals, changes in the basis of central government grant distribution and the requirements and impacts of the external inspection, especially the CPA, provide examples of important contextual influences stemming from the national political agenda.
- The CPA in particular has had profound effects on leadership priorities. Responding to the experience, or expectation, of a weak or poor CPA evaluation often acts as a distraction from more proactive leadership tasks.
- Internal cultural resistance to the move to local executives, and in particular to the idea of elected mayors, has had profound

constraining effects on the leadership capacity of political leaders, sometimes working through the constitution, sometimes through more informal practices.

- There are aspects of leadership that relate to individual characteristics and that are not best explained by structural theories. There is an irreducibly personal component to political leadership. One of the key leadership skills is the ability to read or interpret context in a way that provides a basis for effective action.
- Longer service as a councillor is associated with being more sensitive to reading social/ demographic elements of the external context. This is associated with length of service, not age, so this is primarily an experience not a maturity effect.
- Those in senior roles pay more attention to political and economic context than those in other roles.
- This capability is not wholly responsive in nature. There are circumstances in which leaders can change the context in

which they operate, particularly in relation to local political and organisational culture. This contextual element does not determine leadership action, but rather defines the scope for choices that are feasible in the circumstances.

- Effective leadership involves sound judgement, the 'art of the possible' and an ability to extend the boundaries of choice to the limits, without overstepping them.
- There is also considerable personal, rather than structural, variation in how political leaders prioritise particular challenges in each of five arenas of activity.
- Those with long service and a more traditional view of the role of local government are more likely to perceive challenges in working with other tiers of government, underlining the issues of 'organisational biography' raised earlier.
- Leaders report that they put greater time and attention into the challenges of working within the party/ coalition and in working with partnerships than other elected members.

3 Relationships between leadership and the council; maintaining group cohesiveness and a critical mass of support

Introduction

The essence of this task is the incentive all leaders have to generate a critical mass of support, in order to ensure that the formal decision-making process, whether in the executive or the full council, reflects the leader's preferences.

The division of responsibility in all the current models, including the fourth option, is that decisions on policies – some legally specified, some optional – including the annual budget, are made by full council, on the basis of recommendations made by the executive, whereas decisions made within the policy framework are the responsibility of the executive itself. Thus there are two distinct elements in this leadership task:

- 1 gaining support for decisions in cabinet
- 2 gaining support for policies, and the budget, in full council.

Leaders and cabinets

In general, the first element of this task is much more straightforward than the second. If the leader is empowered to select his or her own cabinet – all elected mayors and one-third of cabinet and leader executives (see Stoker *et al.*, 2003) – then it would be surprising if the leader's views did not prevail in relation to decisions on which they have a clear view. Many executive decisions will of course be

delegated either directly or indirectly to cabinet members other than the leader. There are exceptions to this normal expectation; 'generating a critical mass of support within cabinet' can be a problem for a leader where there is an all-party cabinet and the party to which the leader belongs does not have a majority of cabinet places.

Leaders and councils

There are important distinctions between mayoral models and cabinet and leader models, and between situations of majority control and no overall control.

Of the 11 mayoral authorities, there is congruence between the party affiliation of the mayor and dominant party on the council in six. Where there is party congruence, the mayor, and his or her cabinet colleagues, would normally expect to receive the necessary level of support to ensure that mayoral policy and budget proposals get through council. There is no guarantee that they will, but, if the mayor ensures that the party group to which he or she belongs is consulted on such proposals, then it would be very unusual for a leader's proposal to be blocked. The greatest danger of this scenario would be if there were a 'factionalised' majority group or a group opposed to the principle of an elected mayor.

For the other five elected mayors where there is not a party congruence between mayor and council, there is more of a problem. They

have the advantage that a two-thirds majority in council is needed to substitute an alternative budget or policy for the mayoral proposal. Four of the five mayors had to amend their original budget proposals for 2003–04 to ensure they gained council acceptance. The challenge in future is for them to develop informal links with enough groups on the council in preparing budget, or policy, proposals to ensure acceptance without amendment.

For cabinet and leader councils in majority control with a one-party cabinet, the challenge of building a critical mass of support is in principle similar to the situation that prevailed before the implementation of the 2000 Act when informal cabinets were widespread in party political authorities. The main difference under the new arrangement is that, because the executive meets on a more frequent basis than former policy and resources committees did, the scope for group influence over the full range of executive decisions has in many cases reduced. There remains in all parties a normal expectation that the party group will follow a leadership steer, not least because the other cabinet members will be supporting it, giving an inbuilt support factor of eight to ten votes as a starting point. However, groups vary in the latitude they are prepared to give the leadership and leaders vary in their ability to persuade groups to follow their lead.

The position in cabinets based on coalitions of two or more parties is similar in some ways, different in others. Once the executive has agreed a desired course of action, the leaders of the parties concerned would normally expect to be able to persuade their party colleagues to support them, although there is often, in such situations, an element of suspicion among party

members who are not on the executive that ‘deals are being done’ between leaders, which undermine party priorities.

The alternative to a coalition-based cabinet in a no-overall-control situation is one in which one party, usually the largest, is allowed, through support or non-opposition at the crucial council vote, to form a minority administration, i.e. one in which all the key cabinet positions are held by the minority party. In one of our case studies, the minority-based cabinet is able to work effectively, with a reasonably high degree of certainty that its proposals will not be opposed or ‘called in’, because it operates in conjunction with a ‘leadership group’ – a regular informal meeting of the three leaders in which the key issues coming before cabinet are discussed.

The role of chief executive

One would not necessarily expect a chief executive to play a part in the role of ensuring a ‘critical mass of support for the administration’, which sounds like and normally is an intrinsically *political* leadership role. However, there are situations in which chief executives do regard it as helpful, and appropriate, to become involved in *either* the composition of an administration *or* its sustainability once established.

For example, the chief executive of Bedford has played a vital role as an intermediary between the elected mayor and the council. None of the three main parties represented is committed to supporting the mayor (although individual Conservatives do sit on his cabinet) and, given the antipathy to the mayor on the council, there is at present little possibility of

him using informal mechanisms to persuade and negotiate. It is the chief executive who discusses mayoral proposals with the party groups on the council and who managed to negotiate a compromise solution over the mayor's 2003–04 budget proposals. In these circumstances, the mayor is to a significant extent dependent on the chief executive's negotiating skills to overcome obstacles.

Individual and collective approaches

Although 'maintaining a critical mass of support' is a task that most leaders in the cabinet and leader model would regard as an *individual* priority, not least because their own continuation as leader depends on the quality of this relationship, it is possible, particularly for a leader with a high profile externally, to share this role with a trusted cabinet colleague, i.e. someone who can be relied on to keep the leader in touch with group opinion or to sound out its reaction to tentative proposals from the leadership. In mayoral authorities, where the mayors' direct election gives them a level of detachment from their party group, there is often a more explicit delegation of the task of 'keeping the group on board'. Indeed, in mayoral authorities, the role of 'leader of the group' on council is always held by someone other than the mayor.

In authorities where there is a strong *collective* approach to leadership, the maintaining of links between the leadership (on the cabinet) and group is seen much more as a shared function.

A leader, or leadership group, has to decide how to allocate tasks and decision-making responsibilities among the members of the

cabinet. In reality, this choice is often – particularly in the cabinet and leader model – a heavily constrained one. Whereas elected mayors have the power to determine the size of their cabinets, the definition of the portfolios held and distribution of decision-making powers within the cabinet, non-mayoral leaders of cabinets frequently operate within the terms of a constitution that denies them these powers.

These differences are important. In principle, a mayor, in the mayor and cabinet model, could allocate all responsibilities for executive decisions to himself or herself and use other cabinet members as policy advisers rather than decision makers in their own right. No mayor has gone quite this far, although there are one or two examples that approach it. In contrast, the majority of leaders of cabinets have to operate with cabinet colleagues they did not select, and in some cases would clearly not have wanted, operating with portfolios they did not define and did not allocate, in a system where all, or the vast majority, of executive decisions are made collectively. There are, of course, situations where experienced leaders can influence the pattern of nomination for cabinet positions within their group, but, for recently elected or vulnerable leaders, this may not be an option. For such leaders, the capacity to *influence* is a much higher priority than it is for elected mayors.

The research has shown that, *within* the cabinet, much will depend on the traditions that operated prior to the introduction of the cabinet and leader system. If that tradition involved a strong sense of independence on the part of service committee chairs (now portfolio holders), then it is likely that the same expectations will prevail in the new system. If,

on the other hand, the authority is one with a tradition of strong leadership, where the legitimacy of a leader's influence was a dominant norm, whatever the formal allocation of decision responsibilities, then that tradition too is likely to survive under the new system. Thus political culture can play an important part in constraining or extending the scope for proactive leadership, both in collective decision-making arrangements and in situations where power has formally been delegated to individual portfolio holders.

The underlying challenge involved for all leaders in this process is that of ensuring the maximum degree of leadership influence on the roles and tasks that the leader regards as priorities. No leader – even a powerful elected mayor – can dominate the four key leadership tasks that we have identified. In relation to 'maintaining a critical mass of support', the challenge is to manage the operation of the cabinet, using whatever powers or channels of influence that are available, to ensure that the leader's own priorities are facilitated rather than frustrated.

In achieving or moving towards this preferred distribution of responsibilities, a leader will of course have to take account of the political culture and expectations of the cabinet, the dominant group in council and, in some cases, the council as a whole. Thus one leader told us that one of the cabinet appointments he made was not one he would have ideally preferred, but one in which the expectations of an influential member of the group, and the potential leader of a disruptive faction, could not realistically be ignored.

Finally it is worth noting that, although there is some supportive evidence for a 'decrease in

priority' in relation to 'maintaining a critical mass of support' in *mayoral* authorities, that is not the case in the *cabinet and leader* case studies. With the benefit of hindsight, this finding is not surprising given that the basis of the relationship between leaders and party group, or between leader or leaders and party groups in a no-overall-control situation, has been largely unaffected by the change in political management arrangements. The *dependency* of the leadership on the continued support of the group(s) remains.

Conclusions

- Minority-based executives work most effectively when they are linked to an informal, all-party 'leadership group' meeting, underpinned by good personal relationships between the respective leaders.
- All-party executives may operate very much like old policy and resources committees, unless the leadership role of one party is tacitly acknowledged, or can be developed.
- There are situations in which chief executives become involved in forming or sustaining a political administration – either by acting as 'honest broker' in a hung authority or by acting as an intermediary between an elected mayor and an unsympathetic council.
- Both mayors and council leaders may in effect delegate the task of securing a critical mass of support in council to a trusted cabinet colleague.
- There are significant variations in the extent to which political leadership is perceived and operates in individual or collective terms.

- The power base of elected mayors enables them, in certain circumstances, to dominate executive decision-making processes, with the role of other cabinet members becoming largely that of ‘policy advisers’.
- Leaders have to work within the traditional ‘role expectations’ of leadership that prevail in their authorities, although effective leaders can, to some extent, change these expectations.
- Leaders have to manage different sets of pressures coming, on the one hand, from the chief executive, emphasising the importance of high levels of performance, and, on the other hand, from party groups or coalitions, emphasising the importance of party political considerations.
- In most circumstances, politically affiliated elected mayors can operate a more relaxed and arm’s-length relationship with their ‘party group’ on council, and maintaining a critical mass of support diminishes in relative importance, though it cannot be ignored altogether.
- Despite the Government’s emphasis on the leadership tasks of ‘strategic direction’ and ‘external networking’, maintaining a critical mass of political support remains a high priority for most leaders.

4 Developing and sustaining strategic direction

The importance of strategic direction, quite apart from its contribution to effective leadership, is recognised by all authorities that have undergone a recent CPA inspection or IDeA peer review. The Audit Commission and other inspection bodies have placed strong emphasis on the importance of this leadership task.

The pressure to produce a coherent corporate strategy that provides a basis for co-ordinated action is one element of the context driven by central government that faces local authorities. They cannot ignore it – or, if they do, they do so at their peril – but there are different ways of responding to it.

The key issue in a study of *political* leadership is the extent to which it is leading politicians who set the strategic agenda. If they do not, it is always likely that chief executives will attempt to ‘fill the gap’. But, if what they produce generates no sense of political ownership, it is unlikely to become influential, for example in relation to the budget, although it may prove successful in achieving a tick in the relevant inspectorate box! Strategic direction can be seen, therefore, as an area of negotiation between the political and managerial leadership of an authority, incorporating a greater or lesser degree of distinctively political input.

The political leaders interviewed in the case studies were all able to identify a number of priorities to which they were committed. There were significant differences, however, in their *scope*, the extent to which these were *personal* (political) priorities, and the way in which the leader intended to *take them forward*.

All the elected mayors interviewed had stood for election and campaigned on the basis

of personal manifestos, recognising the need for some kind of contract between themselves and the electorate. In some cases, these manifestos were quite lengthy and elaborate affairs. Mike Wolfe, the elected mayor of Stoke-on-Trent, identified four key themes: ‘individuals’, ‘a single city’, ‘community’ and ‘government’, with a range of proposals under each heading and an overall objective of trying to develop a stronger sense of civic consciousness and empowerment in Stoke, moving people away from their deep-rooted parochialism and fatalism.

A mayoral manifesto is not in itself a corporate strategy, though it should at the very least form an important ingredient. One of the tasks identified by chief executives in the mayoral authorities was that of developing the mayor’s manifesto into the kind of corporate strategy that would be likely to gain approval from Audit Commission inspectors. Part of this task was ensuring that the strategy was in an appropriate format, but, in other cases, depending on the scope covered by the mayoral manifesto, the chief executive felt it necessary to suggest additional priorities for inclusion.

In the cabinet and leader case study authorities, there was a considerable diversity of practice. One chief executive had difficulties in the mid-1990s in developing a coherent corporate strategy when the council was hung. The problem was overcome in 1999 when the Liberal Democrat group won a majority and produced a distinctive strategic agenda, ‘Cleaner, greener, safer, stronger’.

In one county, the chief executive took the manifesto priorities of the incoming

Conservative-led cabinet, which emphasised the need for enhanced resourcing of education, adult social services and road improvements, and negotiated the inclusion of two significant additional items – ‘partnership working’ and ‘improving libraries’. He felt these were important for the future credibility of the county council, as well as transforming the manifesto-based priorities into an appropriate inspection-relevant format. In Kent, the strong personality and leadership of Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart led to a situation where he was the prime mover in deciding the strategic agenda: ‘The philosophy and the principles are entirely mine’.

The pressure to implement manifesto priorities is likely to be stronger for elected mayors, because of the perceived greater public knowledge of these manifesto statements (cf. party manifestos in the cabinet and leader model) and the perception that they are likely to be held to account if the priorities are not achieved, certainly by the local media and, in due course, possibly by the local electorate also. It was certainly the case that elected mayors were aware of these pressures and keen to demonstrate what they had already achieved.

The pressure on chief executives in all authorities is to demonstrate the feasibility of implementation of the corporate strategy and, in due course, its success in achieving the stated objectives.

The problem with any political manifesto statement or corporate strategy is that it is likely to be overtaken by events, on a regular basis. Strategies cannot take into account the unforeseeable. Isobel Wilson, Liberal Democrat leader of Milton Keynes, exemplified the problem clearly:

Much harder are the issues which seem to have come up from nowhere, for example, the incinerator issue. This was a huge issue, which suddenly blew up. The landfill contractor put in an application for an incinerator a couple of weeks after the May election. Local people were not at all keen. We decided we had to work with the protestors.

Local authority leaders – whether political or managerial – have to find ways of responding to unforeseen strategic issues, for which the existing corporate strategy offers little if any guidance. One of the key political leadership skills in this respect is the ability to deal with such issues, which may have profound consequences for the future well-being of the authority, while retaining a commitment to the priorities in the corporate strategy, i.e. not allowing them to be sidetracked or marginalised.

Changing patterns of task significance

Although, as noted above, all the leaders interviewed had a set of priorities that were capable of development into a corporate strategy, the task of doing so was not always seen as a high priority, even for elected mayors. One important reason for this has been the impact of the CPA process, which was of course introduced *after* the new political management structures. In three of the case study authorities where a poor CPA result had either been experienced or is anticipated, there has been a much higher leadership priority on ‘ensuring task accomplishment’, i.e. remedying poor performance, than on strategic direction, which is seen as a task ‘for the future’.

Even leaders, including mayoral leaders, of authorities with ‘good’ or ‘fair’ CPA

assessments may give a higher priority to the task of dealing with a financial crisis and/or specific underperforming services rather than 'strategic direction'. Steve Bullock, elected mayor of Lewisham, felt that it was right to pay attention to basic services, especially environmental services, in the first year of his mayoralty, with an expectation that he would subsequently move on to emphasise the longer-term priorities to which he is committed – community safety, citizenship and youth.

The impact of leadership roles

It is clear that the variety in leadership approaches to 'strategic direction', illustrated in this chapter, reflects a key element of our overall framework (see Chapter 1) – the irreducible *personal* elements in role interpretation. Those who move into leadership positions do so with their own baggage of experience, values, expectations and competencies. They take over a position where there are very few formal rules, although a good deal of advice and guidance – some of it contradictory – from party colleagues and the chief executive respectively. The mayoral role in particular is a wholly new role (in this country) in which precedents are extremely limited. Mayors have in many ways defined their role on the basis of experience in the job. In these circumstances, it is not at all surprising that there is such a degree of disparity. Mayors and council leaders will tend to concentrate on those activities that they personally perceive to be important or that they think they are good at. The extent to which leaders pursue strategic agendas beyond an initial statement of priorities reflects their own capacity for longer-term visionary thinking. If

they are convinced of the value of this kind of activity and feel competent to engage in it, they will do so. If they recognise the value of the activity but do not wish to play a leading role in it personally, they will provide a steer to the chief executive and leave him or her to get on with it. If they do not recognise the significance of the activity, then it may be difficult for a chief executive who does to develop a strategy that can generate any kind of political ownership.

Why should there sometimes be political resistance to what would appear to be a desirable and increasingly necessary role? There will be circumstances where the perceived demands of the political situation – for example, elections three years in four, a volatile political climate with changes in control always possible, adversarial party politics – increase the likelihood of a focus on party, rather than authority-wide, interests, short-termism and the extension of the political into the managerial agenda. This position is not necessarily irrational in political terms; it reflects the logic of the political situation.

Conclusions

- All political leaders can identify a series of *priorities*. However, the extent to which these priorities provide an adequate basis for a comprehensive corporate strategy varies considerably.
- The manifestos of non-mayoral leaders typically reflect the priorities of the party group/local party with some scope for *personal* priorities. Independent mayors are less constrained in their choice of manifesto content.

- Chief executives typically seek to fill the strategic gaps and negotiate with political leaders in an attempt to persuade them to adopt such additions.
- In situations where new leaders were elected in authorities with a long tradition of one-party rule, there is often a recognition that it would not be appropriate to argue for a major change of strategy.
- The commitment to implementation of manifesto priorities is likely to be stronger for elected mayors, because of the perceived greater public knowledge of these manifesto statements and the perception that they are likely to be held to account by the local media and the local electorate.
- Any political manifesto statement or corporate strategy is likely to be overtaken by events on a regular basis. While some future changes can be confidently predicted, others cannot. Such unanticipated issues often require a strategic response from the leadership.
- Local authority leaders have to find ways of responding to unforeseen strategic issues, for which existing corporate strategy offers little if any guidance. One of the key political leadership skills in this respect is the ability to deal with such issues, which may have profound consequences for the future well-being of the authority, while retaining a commitment to the priorities in the corporate strategy.
- The task of taking forward a strategic agenda is not always seen as a high priority, even for elected mayors. In particular, where a weak or poor CPA score has been experienced, dealing with the recovery plan can become *the* strategic priority.
- The extent to which a leader can articulate and carry through a strategic vision varies considerably, depending on the state of inter-party relationships. In hung authorities where there is neither a minority administration nor a two-party coalition, a leadership vacuum may develop and a corresponding lack of a politically led set of strategic priorities.
- The implementation of mayoral priorities, whether or not they are articulated into an explicit 'strategic vision', is more difficult where there is a mismatch between the mayor's political background, or lack of it, and the political composition of the council.
- The extent to which leaders pursue strategic agendas beyond an initial statement of priorities also reflects their own capacity for longer-term visionary thinking.
- Effective strategy-based leadership tends to be more feasible in mayoral authorities and county councils, where elections are held every four years, and authorities with more stable political environments.

5 External relations and networking

Introduction

The scope for leaders, if they so wish, to spend time outside the council offices attending meetings with partners, meeting the public, lobbying central government or dealing with the media is immense. Leaders have, of course, a long tradition of involvement in external relations, especially local authority associations, inter-authority relationships – either within or between tiers of government – and relations with the local media. But, in the days of the inward-looking, self-sufficient authority (Stewart, 1986), the priority was clearly within the authority rather than outside it. The internally oriented tasks of political cohesion and service management were rarely challenged in importance by the perceived requirements of external networking.

Various pressures – some local, some national – have impinged on local authority leaders in a way that has influenced them to change these priorities, even when not particularly predisposed to do so. Since 1997, there has been the explicit central government prioritisation of the principle of community governance and all that this entails: local strategic partnerships, community strategies and stakeholder engagement. There has been the exponential growth, which predates the election of the Labour Government, of multi-agency partnerships with specific remits, operating at anything from sub-regional to neighbourhood level on issues that include regeneration, community safety, health action and social exclusion among many others (see Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002, pp. 228–37 for details). More recently, public service agreements (PSAs) have come into this frame.

There has been the establishment of regional chambers, or assemblies, in the English regions, within which delegated local authority leaders have the majority of seats. There has been the growth in public participation, not just in relation to Best Value and community strategies where it is legally required, but also across a whole range of local authority activities (see Lowndes *et al.*, 2001). The growth of the significance of the European Union has drawn some leaders into its ambit and, for elected mayors, there is the impact of direct election by the local population and the implications of this relationship for their continuing contact and responsiveness to individual and collective local concerns.

These pressures cannot be ignored by leaders. However, they respond to them in many different ways. Leaders, faced with the impossible time commitment implied by a full involvement in all the opportunities for external activities that present themselves, have to make judgements about priorities both on a personal basis and within the wider leadership group. Those who have difficulty in doing so are likely to experience problems of overload and to find other important leadership tasks – for example, strategic direction – are being neglected.

Newly elected leaders are often faced with a range of external positions, which either their predecessor held or there is an expectation within the authority that they should take on, and typically undertake a period of assessment as to which of these many time-consuming commitments are worth persevering with and which are not.

In examining the process of sorting out and prioritising the many demands for external involvement that leaders face, five categories, or

different types of external arena, can helpfully be identified:

- 1 local strategic partnerships
- 2 other forms of local stakeholder involvement
- 3 links with central government
- 4 regional and sub-regional linkages
- 5 links with local population and the media.

Local strategic partnerships

The structural importance of the local strategic partnership (LSP), and the community strategy for which it is responsible within the Government's democratic renewal agenda and the accompanying legislation, is such that local authority leaders have to take it seriously. In almost all cases, they attend its meetings, if only to display an indication of commitment that is crucial to its credibility with other partners. But that formal involvement and commitment can mask a range of different attitudes and differences in the extent of the real priority that leaders allocate to LSPs.

For leaders whose personal interests and capabilities do not draw them enthusiastically into the LSP world, there are two options. First, they can delegate the lead role in the LSP to a leadership colleague. Alternatively, they can delegate it to the chief executive, while maintaining a personal presence at meetings. The second choice is consistent with the perception of one chief executive, who told us that, once a community strategy had been developed, the ongoing operation of an LSP did

not really need a major involvement from political leaders.

Brighton and Hove among our case study authorities provides the clearest example of an explicit delegation of the leadership task of managing/steering partnerships from the leader to a colleague. Although partnerships are recognised as a high priority by the leader, Ken Bodfish, he is happy for his deputy, Sue John, to play the leadership role in the LSP and other local partnerships, which matches her personal interests and capabilities.

Elected mayors, given the particular emphasis on their community leadership role in the legislation and their enhanced legitimacy within the partnership arena – reflecting the personal mandate flowing from their direct election – expressed a perhaps surprisingly diverse range of attitudes to the importance of the LSP, and of their own role within it.

The attitudes of two of the elected mayors interviewed – Ray Mallon of Middlesbrough and Mike Wolfe of Stoke-on-Trent – are of particular interest. Both have chosen not to become chair of the LSP. In Ray Mallon's case, he was the chair for a year, but then decided to step down, against the advice of the chief executive. He felt that his personal agenda, as elected mayor, could be compromised by being the LSP chair and wanted to be free to argue in this arena, and elsewhere, what he thinks is right for Middlesbrough without having the formal responsibility, as chair, for negotiating compromises. Mike Wolfe, who had been an active member, as National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) representative, on the Stoke LSP before becoming mayor, had a similar view. He has a detailed knowledge of how the LSP works and

is confident he can influence it, when he needs to, without the formal responsibility of chairing it, a perception shared by Ray Mallon. This confidence reflects the good relationships that both mayors enjoy with their respective LSP chairs: a business community representative in Stoke; the chair of the local Primary Care Trust in Middlesbrough. The 'ability to influence' is also aided by the 'lead role' played by the two local authorities in servicing the LSP. Their dominance in relation to agendas, working group operations and outputs, and formal reports is a crucial factor here.

Other forms of local stakeholder involvement

LSPs, though the dominant arena linking an authority's leadership with key stakeholders, are by no means the only channel of communication between these entities. As noted earlier, there will be a range of other important partnerships on more specific topics such as health/social service community safety, regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods and particular development schemes. The direct involvement of political leaders in these more specific partnerships will reflect their importance to the authority, or sometimes the leader. In some cases there may be a mismatch between these two perceptions. One chief executive would have liked the leader to play a more decisive role in the local health partnership, which he described as a 'dreadful mess'. Another felt that the leader perhaps needed to be more strategic in his choice of partnership involvement.

One finding of significance that emerged was the importance of informal one-to-one

meetings between key stakeholders and local authority leaders, sometimes involving the political leader, sometimes the chief executive and sometimes both. These meetings usually had the benefit of strengthening the inter-agency relationships involved and underpinning the behaviour of the participants at formal meetings, for example the LSP. The meetings can act as channels of advocacy or negotiation.

Three of the elected mayors – Steve Bullock, Mike Wolfe and Ray Mallon – had recognised the way in which the status and legitimacy of the elected mayor as community leader had enhanced the responsiveness of key stakeholders to them, thus enhancing their potential influence. Steve Bullock was particularly aware of the differences, having been a non-mayoral council leader in the 1980s and 1990s. He noted a comment from a local area police superintendent – 'how can we help you achieve your mayoral agenda?' – which he was clear would not have been said to any previous council leader. Mike Wolfe was also clear that mayoral status had changed the perception of other stakeholders. He cited an example of speedy police action to deal with a public space that was being used for drug dealing, to which he had drawn their attention. Ray Mallon's ability to influence local stakeholders, including the police force, reflects not only his perceived legitimacy as elected mayor but also the blend of charisma, conviction, friendliness and courtesy he displays in his meetings with stakeholders, although he can be openly critical when he thinks it is justified.

Although, in some authorities, there appears to be a well-established *network* linking the local

authority leaders (political and managerial) with key stakeholders – typically, representatives of health, police, the business sector, the voluntary sector and learning and skills councils – in no authority had this network developed into anything resembling a *regime* (Stone, 1995).

In general, it is probably fair to comment that the anticipated shift in leadership priorities from internal local authority issues to external community leadership and networking concerns has not been as marked as the Government might have anticipated. There has been a change but it has been patchy – more significant for elected mayors than council leaders, but subject to considerable variation within both categories. The logic of the Government's agenda has not yet worked through into fundamental changes of attitude and practice.

Links with central government

There are two principal manifestations of the link with national government. The first is a direct link, whereby authorities have developed an individual channel of communication with the centre. The second is collectively, through the Local Government Association (LGA), whereby representative local authority leaders attempt to influence government policy and periodically meet ministers for round-table discussions of current issues.

A direct link between an authority and central government is unusual, except over a particular issue, for example, a deputation of local leaders to protest about the impact of the change in the formula in the allocation of central government grant – as in Worcestershire in 2002.

Very few authorities are in a position to develop an ongoing relationship of this nature. Within our case studies, there were two such examples. Kent CC is bigger than Northern Ireland in population and has a strategic significance within the South East and in its relationship with France. It is also widely perceived as the 'Tory flagship' authority in local government. The Conservative leader Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart has been able to exploit these characteristics in developing a 'special relationship' with central government.

Given Kent's strategic position in the South East, links with France were of particular importance to the leader. Otherwise Europe did not feature significantly in the priorities of leaders, apart from Ken Bodfish in Brighton and Hove who is currently leader of the UK delegation to the Committee of the Regions.

Regional and sub-regional linkages

Regional linkages, in some cases involving membership of the Regional Chamber, are particularly important for authorities in regions where elected regional government was seen as a real possibility, for example the North East, or where the authority has a significant strategic position in the region, for example Kent in the South East. Thus Mick Henry (Gateshead) and Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart (Kent) gave a higher priority to this level than did most other leaders.

For metropolitan districts such as Stockport, the area-wide joint arrangements that were the legacy of the abolition of the metropolitan county councils in 1986 are often a more important and time-consuming consideration. For counties and districts operating under a two-tier system, county–district relationships

are usually an important consideration for leaders at both levels.

Links with local populations and the media

There is an important distinction between public participation involving local stakeholders – for example, representatives of business, the voluntary sector and health and police authorities – and public participation involving the general public. All the elected mayors interviewed recognised the importance of sustaining, and ideally enhancing, the public support they enjoyed at the time of their election.

Mayors used a range of different methods to further this objective of ‘public approval’. Dorothy Thornhill, mayor of Watford, conducts surgeries in all parts of the borough, and provides a phone-in service (‘If I can help I will’) and dominates much of the public-facing work of the authority. Steve Bullock had made his e-mail address available to all Lewisham residents, an initiative he has sometimes regretted! Mike Wolfe, the elected mayor of Stoke-on-Trent, does regular ‘walkabouts’ in the various town centres of the city and makes regular visits to Stoke’s community forums. Ray Mallon in Middlesbrough attends the ‘community councils’ within the town on a regular basis, as a channel of information about local concerns and as a way of maintaining a public presence.

While some council leaders have made a point of emphasising their concern to enhance levels of public participation, and of council responsiveness to local interests, they recognise that their own position is less vulnerable to public support than their mayoral counterparts,

and that it will be a public view of the party’s performance that is likely to be a more influential factor at election time. However, what all leaders, mayoral or otherwise, have to be able to do is to respond to collective public concerns over issues such as an incinerator proposal (Milton Keynes), a proposed new airport (Rugby in Warwickshire) and a public outcry about the way the council has dealt with the gravestones in the cemeteries (Stockport).

While public recognition cannot in itself guarantee public support, it certainly has the potential to do so. Visibility is particularly important to elected mayors.

However, proactive initiatives by elected mayors are probably less important in this context than the scope and nature of the coverage of their activities in the local, and occasionally national, media. In this respect, mayors have been fortunate in relation to the degree of coverage, if not always the content. Elected mayors are probably the only feature of the new political management arrangements introduced under the 2000 Act to have caught the imagination of the media.

Elected mayors have experienced both positive and negative coverage. In general, the Stoke *Sentinel* has been positive in its coverage of Mike Wolfe; it had, after all, itself campaigned for an ‘elected mayor’ referendum. Stuart Drummond in Hartlepool has, however, experienced less than sympathetic coverage from the local press.

Non-mayoral council leaders generally have a similar concern with the way they are depicted in the local press, but have fewer exploitable opportunities than elected mayors. Russell Goodway, as a high-profile leader of Wales’s capital city, has enjoyed a level of press

coverage certainly equivalent to that of elected mayors, but much of it has not been positive. Other leaders have seen the media as less of a priority, particularly in county councils, where the interest of the local media is often focused at a sub-county level.

Conclusions

- Council leaders, including elected mayors, while recognising the importance of local strategic partnerships (LSPs) to the authority, vary in the degree of priority they allocate to *personally* leading on this task. 'De facto' delegation to a leadership colleague or the chief executive is sometimes arranged, though the council leader invariably attends LSP meetings.
- Elected mayors do not always chair LSPs, although they invariably wish to exert a strong influence on their work. Some mayors perceive that their personal mayoral agenda for the city or town would be compromised by holding the chair of the LSP and hence do not choose to do so.
- The priority given by leaders to external networking and partnerships is likely to be reduced in situations of performance crisis (budget or weak/poor CPA assessment) or in a conflictual and difficult-to-manage political climate.
- The direct involvement of political leaders in partnerships that are topic or area specific, or PSAs, will tend to reflect their perceived importance to the authority and/or to the leader.
- Informal relationships between key stakeholders and the local authority leadership (political, managerial) may be just as important for 'effective networking' as the LSP itself, which these informal relationships often serve to underpin.
- Elected mayors are perceived by key stakeholders as having a greater legitimacy for community leadership, reflecting the mayoral agenda, than council leaders.
- The anticipated shift in leadership priorities between internal (local authority based) and external (involving community leadership and networking) agendas has been patchy, and subject to considerable variation.
- Only large or strategically placed local authorities are in a position, through their leaders, to develop an individual relationship with central government. Others have to work through the LGA.
- Leadership emphasis on regional networks is of significance only where there is a strong regional identity, and pressure for an elected assembly, or where there are important regional planning issues affecting the authority.
- Elected mayors pay more attention to sustaining or enhancing public support than council leaders. They use a range of different methods to try to achieve this objective.
- All leaders pay serious attention to local controversies that generate a high level of local concern.
- Elected mayors see public recognition as a particularly important opportunity for developing a stronger base of public support.

Local political leadership in England and Wales

- There has been a considerable degree of media interest, especially local, on elected mayors, and more rarely on council leaders. Such interest may not necessarily have positive consequences for mayors or leaders.
- There is usually an agreement between leader and chief executive that the former should play the dominant role in media relations. This agreement can be difficult to sustain if the chief executive is perceived by the media as high profile in his or her own right.

6 Task accomplishment

Introduction

If the conventional allocation of responsibilities between members, including leaders, and officers was universally accepted and implemented, then there would not be a significant leadership role in relation to 'task accomplishment'. The conventional division of labour is clear; officers develop policy on the basis of political priorities in a way that sometimes involves informal working arrangements between members and officer. Draft policy documents are then presented under the new arrangements to the executive who will 'agree' them, sometimes with modifications. Some policies also require approval from the full council. Once a policy has been formally adopted, it is the job of officers to implement it, although it is perfectly legitimate for members to monitor its implementation and raise questions if there are performance shortfalls. Indeed, the guidance accompanying the Local Government Act 2000 recommends the delegation of a greater number of executive decisions, i.e. decisions that implement an agreed policy, to officers to reduce the pressures on the executive and to mitigate 'cabinet overload'.

But it is not and never has been as simple as that. Elected members are judged by the impact of policy 'on the ground' rather than by the content of policy documents. The traditional distinction has come under extra pressure from the heightened political priority attached to performance through the CPA assessments and targets. Also, since the introduction of the new political management structures, there has been an increasing tendency for cabinet members to become full time, particularly in the unitary and

upper-tier authorities. Cabinet members with a 'full-time' commitment are expected to develop a more detailed grasp of the technicalities of the services for which they hold a portfolio and to have more time available to become involved in policy implementation issues. In addition, it is important for all local councillors in terms of their re-election prospects – individual or party – that they can 'deliver' for local constituents, whether this is in relation to a personal grievance or an adverse reaction by a local pressure group to a council decision.

There is an added incentive for elected mayors to succeed in dealing with such grievances and adverse reactions, or at least a majority of them. They know that they will be judged as *individuals* by their capacity to deliver. Hence the concern to build connections with local populations (see Chapter 5) and an understandable reluctance to delegate operational decision making exclusively to the managerial domain.

There are three possible stances regarding involvement in operational decision making on the part of the political leadership.

- 1 *Acceptance of the conventional division of labour:* leaders are responsible for policy and strategy, officers for implementing it. Leaders may 'make representations' on implementational issues to officers, and monitor performance, but the responsibility lies unequivocally with officers regarding decisions delegated to them.
- 2 *Flexible interpretation of the boundary:* it is recognised that some 'delegated (implementation) decisions' will actually be of high political salience, and it is

appropriate to identify mechanisms through which such decisions can be discussed and the member view clarified, even though formal responsibility remains with the officers.

- 3 *Extension of member responsibilities into implementation territory:* in some, though not many, authorities, the scope for member decision making extends directly into what would normally be regarded as implementation territory, *either* formally through the delegation scheme *or* informally through the expectation that officers will reflect member preferences in exercising their delegated powers.

This first stance is illustrated by two quotes from interviews with chief executives. One chief executive told us:

There must be a clear dividing line between member involvement and officer involvement in decision making. As chief executive it's up to me to maintain that line. The dividing line is movable, but it has to be there – without it, there's chaos.

The 'nightmare scenario' for a newly appointed chief executive is a recognition that the line has not been at all clearly defined:

I inherited a situation where the Labour leadership had a history of 'interference' in managerial concerns, including officer appointments.

Mechanisms for political leaders to 'chase progress'

Chief executives often prefer to operate as the conduit through which this process of leaders 'chasing up' issues of implementation detail

takes place, rather than sanction a wider access on the part of leaders, particularly to middle managers.

One chief executive was uneasy about a new leader's propensity, in the early months of his leadership, to contact middle managers directly when he felt that they weren't delivering. The chief executive recognised that such managers would find it difficult to cope with the 'personal criticism' from the leader, which was either expressed or implied. He has managed to persuade the leader that it would be better to channel such progress chasing through the strategic directors.

Other arrangements are possible. In one authority, the cabinet member for policy development was clear that 'progress chasing' is a major expectation:

My main task is to ensure that the council performs. I take action to pick up information and act to improve performance ... I let the managers know what they have to deliver ... I'm the 'hard man' around this place, make no mistake about it.

The way this cabinet member characterises his 'progress-chasing' activities raises the issue about the degree of challenge involved in this role and the capacity of the officer structure to deal with it.

Ken Bodfish, leader of Brighton and Hove, believes that a challenging stance from a leader in relation to officer advice is a positive virtue:

I argue with officers all the time. They get credit for telling me I'm wrong! I believe the leadership team should have the capacity to argue with a manager's proposals.

The value of these kinds of 'robust exchanges' is that, assuming they can be

resolved, both leader and chief executive end up more convinced of the 'rightness' of the final decision. They provide a mechanism for enabling political leaders to express their concern with task accomplishment, without jeopardising the traditional division of labour. But the mechanism can work effectively only if there is a high degree of mutual trust and respect between the two protagonists, or between the leader and the directors' team.

In principle, leadership interest in task achievement could also be sustained through a vibrant system of performance monitoring. As one chief executive put it:

It's important that we have systems for performance management based on objectives. That way the members can hold us to account.

The problem with this logical and systematic approach to politically led performance monitoring of the success of officers in achieving political objectives is that it does not fit easily with leaders' immediate concerns about the specific performance issues of the moment. One of the implications of a concern with task accomplishment, particularly for elected members, is that prompt responses are sometimes required, not simply systematic periodical performance monitoring. Some leaders deal with this issue by presenting chief executives with regular lists of specific issues that require action.

The important general point is that, in all authorities, there needs to be a mutually acceptable way of dealing with such issues. It is legitimate for leaders – in particular elected mayors, given their unique constitutional position – to seek to influence action on detailed issues of policy implementation that they

perceive as problematical. If there is too rigid an adherence within the authority to a policy–implementation or political–managerial divide, which prevents such a process, leaders will understandably become frustrated. However, it is equally important from the perspective of effective management that a leader's involvement in such detail does not develop into the adoption of wide-ranging executive powers or, probably worse, what one chief executive referred to as 'hybridity' in decision making:

I am very much against the process of delegating decisions to officers, and then requiring them to consult with members. The authority for decision making should be clear, although I'll always listen to what members have to say.

Hands-on involvement of leaders in project management

One way for leaders to ensure that their priorities are implemented is to become personally involved in implementation. The case studies provide two vivid illustrations of this propensity. Ray Mallon, the elected mayor of Middlesbrough, emphasised community safety in his election manifesto. Once elected, he had to decide how to take this issue forward. A key element of his programme was to establish an information system that would tell him on a day-to-day basis where the 'trouble spots' in Middlesbrough were – the crimes, the vandalism, the graffiti, the abandoned cars. Partly, the information came from the police, but, just as importantly, it came from the system of community wardens that Ray Mallon instigated. There are 75 community wardens,

16 parking attendants and five litter officers, all of whom have the responsibility to pass on details of incidents/trouble spots and to enforce council policy. A weekly meeting held between Ray Mallon, the relevant cabinet members and a small group of officers reviews the evidence and develops a plan of action for the week. Now this system is working effectively, Ray Mallon and the other cabinet member attend some meetings, but play a background role.

Mark Hunter's personal agenda following his election as council leader of Stockport in May 2002 included a commitment to 'cleaning up the borough' (Operation Springclean). He decided that, because this was such a key priority in his programme, he wanted to chair the officer task force implementing the programme. This was a new precedent in Stockport and there was some unease among the senior officers when it was first mooted. However, both leader and chief executive now feel that this 'hands-on' involvement from the leader worked well and the programme has been successful. Mark Hunter is clear that he would use the same arrangement again for a similar issue, but only extremely selectively.

These forays into 'hands-on' management among leaders appear at first glance to be incompatible with the familiar policy-implementation division of labour. But in none of the illustrations set out above did either leader or chief executive perceive the process to be problematical. So long as such ventures are seen as 'untypical' political leadership roles for use in 'special circumstances', and so long as the respective roles of political leaders and managers are agreed and understood in the operation of the task groups involved, they can operate within the understood 'division of labour'.

In situations where chief executives and leaders have enjoyed a long and positive relationship, the ability of chief executives to sense what a leader would expect to know about can become so well developed it is almost intuitive. This kind of relationship does not involve a merging or blurring of roles: indeed, it is often underpinned by a clear mutual recognition of the *distinctiveness* of the roles. What it does provide, however, is a flexible vehicle for information, discussion and negotiation over the many issues that have both a political and a managerial dimension.

The challenge of 'task accomplishment'

Of the four key leadership tasks, it is 'task accomplishment' that is potentially the most problematical. The dominance of the political leadership in maintaining a critical mass of political support is widely accepted. The logic of a political lead over strategic direction coupled with a recognition that the managerial leadership has an important steering role to play, and will sometimes act to fill the gaps, is uncontentious. Most authorities can work out an acceptable division of political-managerial labour in relation to external networking. However, in relation to task accomplishment, the political leader's need to be *seen* to be delivering on its manifesto commitments or to be dealing effectively with an unexpected crisis will necessarily challenge the conventional policy-implementation division of labour, particularly if an election is on the horizon. In this sense, the logic of the political, 'How do we maximise our chances, or my mayoral chances, of re-election?' comes up against the logic of the managerial, 'Managers should be left alone to

manage on the basis of policies agreed by the executive or council'. Both views are legitimate within their respective assumptive worlds. But they may, in certain circumstances, pull in different directions. In the centre of these opposing forces will be the political leader and the chief executive.

In the exchanges that develop around 'task accomplishment', the leadership capabilities of political leaders and the political judgement and sensitivity of chief executives become crucial influences. The concept of a 'dividing line', which is flexible and can occasionally be crossed, and a 'bottom line', which isn't and can't be, is central here. For this kind of flexibility to work successfully, a high degree of mutual trust is required.

Where leader–chief executive relationships are based very much on strong interpersonal and mutual knowledge and trust, there is a particular challenge of sustaining the quality of such relationships when the individuals change. In one or two of the case study authorities, considerable attention had been paid to 'succession planning'. In Gateshead, a change of political leader had been prepared for in this way and a change of chief executive is being approached from a similar standpoint.

Conclusions

- There is a legitimate political interest for political leaders in seeking to ensure that political priorities are being implemented effectively.
- The political importance of this aim is strongest for elected mayors, given the unique qualities of their constitutional status.

- A range of different mechanisms is used by political leaders to 'progress chase'. These include the allocation of the role to a cabinet colleague or a political adviser, a reliance on the chief executive, or a personal propensity to 'progress chase' at different levels in the organisation.
- Robust, challenging exchanges between leaders and chief executives can provide a valuable mechanism for leaders to express their concerns with task accomplishment, without jeopardising the traditional division of labour.
- The use by leaders of the authority's performance-monitoring mechanisms to identify performance shortfalls is a valuable process, but also needs mechanisms for shorter-term progress chasing.
- Political conventions can help to structure and facilitate this potential problematical area of the involvement of political leaders in implementation detail.
- The hands-on involvement of political leaders on specific projects can operate without detriment to the conventional division of labour, so long as the respective roles of the political leader and manager(s) are clearly agreed and well understood.
- Positive long-term relationships between leaders and chief executives do not involve a merging or blurring of roles; rather, they are underpinned by a mutual recognition of the distinctiveness of the roles, and a high level of mutual understanding of the priorities of and context in which the other works.

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- The legitimate concern of political leaders with 'task accomplishment' requires a mutual recognition of a potential area of negotiation around this issue and a flexibility that operates within clear, mutually agreed boundaries.
- One of the opportunities provided by the new executive arrangements is that they create both capacity and legitimacy for leaders to respond to 'exceptional circumstances' that require decisive leadership action in a proactive and transparent way.

7 The skills of political leadership

Introduction

This research is based on a framework that takes into account structures of leadership (e.g. constitutions and political arrangements), cultures of leadership (e.g. organisational and political cultures) and the role of individual characteristics (will and skill) in political leadership. This chapter focuses on that third element: the personal characteristics that are associated with skilful leadership. In shorthand, they can be called skills, though a broader concept includes capabilities, or competencies.

We argue here, and elsewhere (e.g. Hartley and Morgan-Thomas, 2003; Hartley *et al.*, 2005) that leadership capabilities need to be interpreted in their organisational and local *context*, as well as in the light of how the leader interprets their key priorities or *challenges*. This is recognised in the Warwick Political Leadership Questionnaire (WPLQ), which underpins the analysis of skill analysed in this chapter (see Hartley and Morgan-Thomas, 2003, for a fuller account). Context and challenges derived from WPLQ data were examined in Chapter 2.

This chapter focuses on the skills of action and interpretation, within the authority and in working with and influencing others, and mobilising organisations and networks. We draw on the systematic identification of ten dimensions of personal skill in action, which have been derived from extensive research with elected members using Version 1 of the WPLQ (see Hartley and Morgan-Thomas, 2003 and Appendix for more details).

Capabilities

The conceptual framework about capabilities for effective political leadership builds on the academic and practical literature about personal competencies (Hartley and Morgan-Thomas, 2003; Hartley *et al.*, 2005). While research on competencies has focused largely on managers, we have extended and modified this approach to reflect the particular roles, skills and mindsets of elected members in local government.

While it may be possible to identify particular skills for particular circumstances, a context-based approach to skill does not attempt to define a universal set of traits, abilities and skills that are effective in all circumstances, but rather asks what works, for what type of leader, in what role and in what circumstances. This is particularly important for leadership in complex settings (cf. Dulewicz and Higgs, 2005).

The identification and development of competencies for managers and staff in a range of organisations has been prevalent for some time. They are a feature of many organisations and are likely to increase in the future (Strebler *et al.*, 1997; Hodgkinson and Sparrow, 2002). Increasingly, in the field of local government, there is an interest in clarifying the roles of elected members, and the skills and competencies, both for effective leadership and for member development.

Kanungo and Sasi (1992) argue that competencies represent a wider set of abilities and approaches that enable the non-specific, non-routine, discretionary and unstructured parts of a job or role to be achieved – which of course is central to any type of leadership role, and to political leadership in particular.

The seminal writer on competencies, (capabilities) Boyatzis, wrote that:

A job [role] competency is an underlying characteristic of a person in that it may be a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge that he or she uses.

(Boyatzis, 1994, p. 16)

Boyatzis suggests a framework for not only thinking of the capabilities of individuals but also setting these in the context of both role demands and organisational environment (see Figure 7.1). This reinforces our conceptual approach, which includes context and challenges.

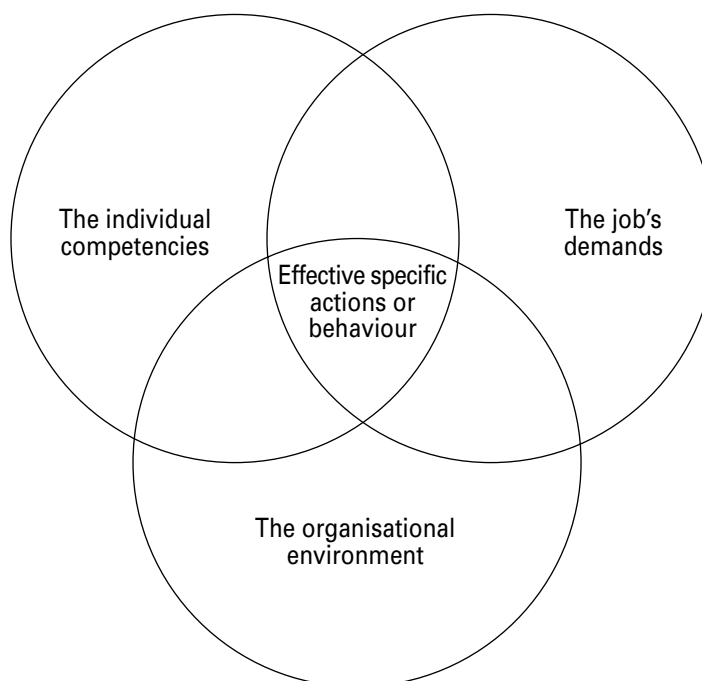
The capability framework of the Warwick Political Leadership Questionnaire

The section of the WPLQ that focuses on the capabilities of elected members is concerned with the behaviours, skills and other qualities that, from earlier research (Hartley and Morgan-Thomas, 2003), distinguish effective from ineffective political leadership, recognising that the specific combination of capabilities in any particular context will vary.

The WPLQ identifies ten key dimensions of capabilities as follows (the defining dimension in *italic*, with behaviours and attitudes constituting that dimension alongside).

- 1 *Public service values*: service, integrity, courage.

Figure 7.1 A model of effective job performance



Source: Boyatzis (1994)

- 2 *Questions thinking*: skills of questioning, self-reflective, learning, challenging, creativity, lateral thinking, imagination.
- 3 *Decision making*: making tough choices, seeing different possibilities, balancing competing possibilities.
- 4 *Personal effectiveness*: self-awareness, managing emotions, energising, persistence, handling difficult relationships.
- 5 *Strategic direction*: strategising, planning the campaign, mobilising, gaining the high ground.
- 6 *Advocacy and representation*: shaping and voicing the needs of the electorate.
- 7 *Political intelligence*: understanding collective responsibility, the boundaries of party discipline, building coalitions, negotiation skills, the art of judgement.
- 8 *Communications*: persuasion, engaging in dialogue, listening, understanding different perspectives.
- 9 *Organisational mobilisation*: inspiring and motivating, galvanising across boundaries and spheres, partnership working.
- 10 *Systems and tasks*: managing roles, boundaries, implementing and tracking progress and performance.

Each dimension is based on a number of questions completed by the political leader. These are added and weighted to give a score for that dimension on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being relatively low skill and 5 being high skill on that dimension.

The version of the WPLQ used in this research is a self-report version (Version 1). (At the time of the research, the 360-degree feedback version of the WPLQ, which is based also on views of informed commentators, was not yet available and the WPLQ has since been further developed.)

As part of the commitment to the research, we produced a personal report for every elected member who took part in the WPLQ enquiry, regardless of the number of returns from each authority, and this was sent directly to the person. The report was based on their responses on the three sections of context, challenges and capability.

First, though, we present data about leading elected members compared with other elected members from a national database of elected members in England and Wales who have completed the WPLQ. This gives some interesting insights into the development of skill among leading members, which provide broader clues relevant to the analysis in this report.

Leadership profiles in England and Wales

The WPLQ national database consists of responses from 201 elected members from a substantial number of local authorities in England and Wales. The responses are from elected members in all roles – leaders and mayors, cabinet members, scrutiny chairs and panel members, regulatory committee members and those who have only ward responsibilities, sometimes called ‘backbench’ members. In a comparison of leading members compared with non-leading members (115 and 85 respectively in the database, and shown to be typical of

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councillors across England and Wales), some significant statistical differences emerged. Leading members rate themselves as higher on the following.

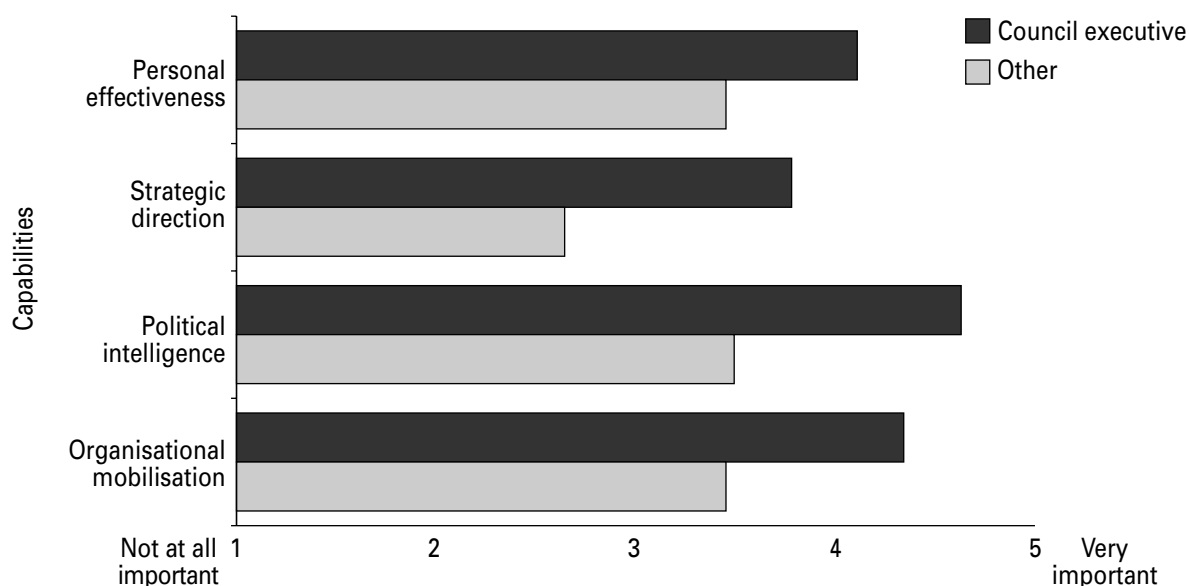
- *Personal effectiveness*: self-awareness, ability to work with and understand other people, and to handle difficult relationships.
- *Strategic direction*: the ability to be strategic and to take an overview.
- *Political intelligence*: having the ability to understand and work effectively with the political currents and dynamics, both within and across groups.
- *Organisational mobilisation*: the ability to mobilise others in the organisation, both members and officers, to bring about substantial organisational and cultural change, i.e. transformational change and across organisations.

On the other six dimensions of capability, there are no significant differences between leading and non-leading elected members.

These statistically significant differences are shown in Figure 7.2.

We can consider three possible interpretations of these findings. The first might be that leading members are more generous to themselves in their rating of themselves than those who are not in leadership positions. However, this is not supported by the evidence from the other six dimensions, where no significant differences between leaders and non-leaders were found. The second possible explanation is that ‘born leaders’, or at least those with particular leadership skills, have come to the fore within the council. The third explanation is that skills are improved through experience in the role of being a councillor or senior member. Examining the results in relation to demographic variables, roles and council characteristics shows that the capabilities of

Figure 7.2 Differences by executive versus all other roles



personal effectiveness and organisational mobilisation are not related to length of service or role, but that having strategic direction and political intelligence are improved by length of service and by being in a senior position. Thus both the second and the third explanations may be true for different reasons for the different capabilities. This suggests that some skills, such as strategic direction and political intelligence, are honed not only through maturity but also through the learning that occurs in undertaking tasks as an elected member. These are acquired skills. This is an important finding in relation to policy and practice for leadership development and succession planning.

Capabilities in case study authorities

Data about individuals are not presented in this report, for reasons of confidentiality (see Appendix on methods). Instead we focus on the profile for each authority, based on the aggregated scores across the senior political leadership at authority level. In interpreting these data based on the leadership group profile, it is important to bear in mind that the number of elected members who have completed the WPLQ in each authority is inevitably small given the size of the executive (between six and ten members in each council). Therefore, the results are not reported in terms of statistical findings, but rather as the profile of each leadership group. We examine three authorities in detail to illustrate the analysis.

Capabilities: Kent County Council

Eight out of the ten members of the cabinet completed the WPLQ. The individual WPLQ reports showed that there was considerable

variation between people in the profile of their skills (not shown here). This is consistent with the interviews, which emphasised the different and complementary roles played by cabinet members both formally and informally, and the different skills within the group. The overall leadership group profile is presented in Figure 7.3.

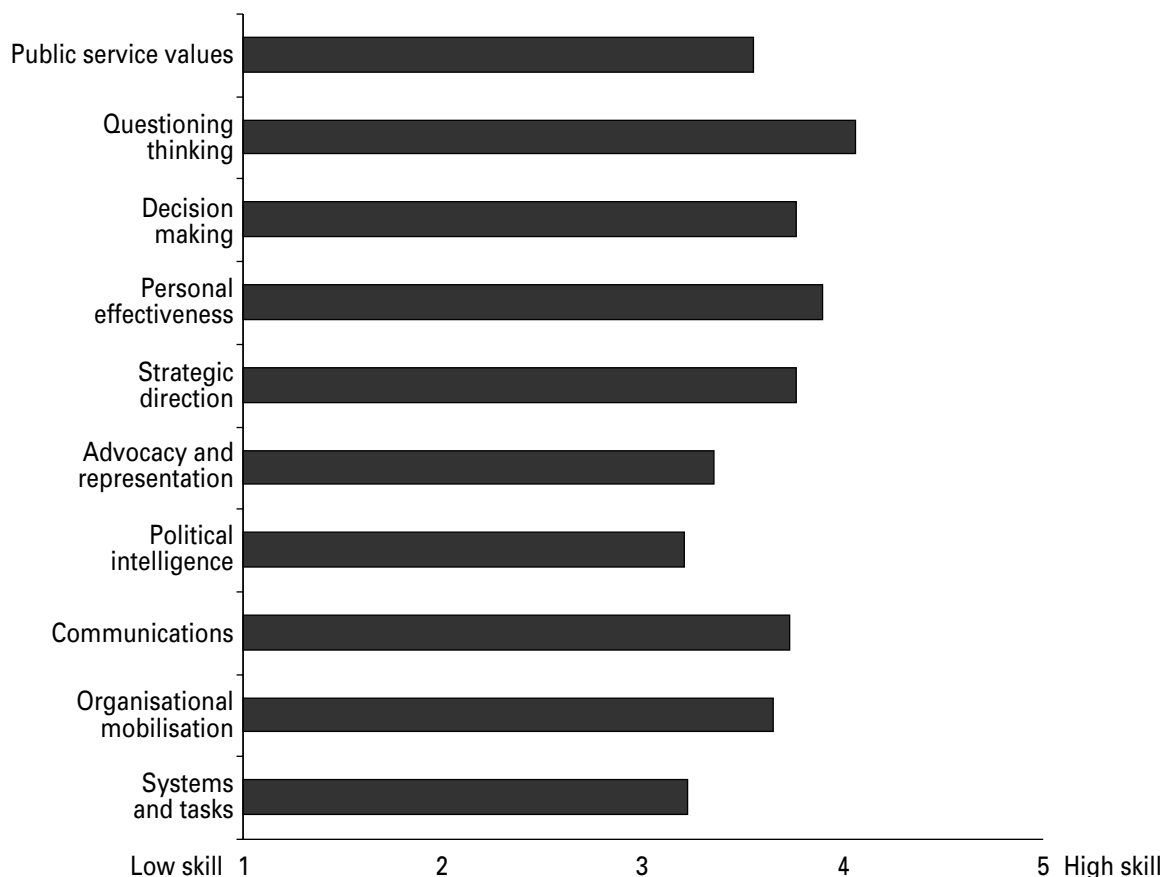
The four most evident capabilities across the whole leadership group are questioning thinking, personal effectiveness, strategic direction and decision making.

Questioning thinking covers skills in critical thinking, being able to question and reflect on what is heard, being able to use creativity and imagination, and being able to draw on lateral thinking. A number of the interviews corroborate this element of political skill in the Kent leadership, who have shown the capacity to innovate, to develop and build new ideas and policies, and to set these in motion. For example, the local PSA targets are a major innovation at a national level, in terms of their policy content. The questioning thinking approach is consistent with the leadership's intention to change the performance of the authority in the way that it delivers services.

The leadership of Kent also shows skills in personal effectiveness. This is the capacity to comprehend and work with other people, particularly in terms of having an understanding or intuition for other people's feelings and motivations, and an awareness of one's own feelings and motivations as these affect both social interactions and leadership actions. This personal element of social skills has also been called 'emotional intelligence'.

The authority's leadership has also scored highly in strategic direction, which represents

Figure 7.3 Capabilities: Kent County Council



the ability of the leadership group to have a strong sense of strategic purpose and to be able to concentrate on the overview. A group with high strategic direction avoids getting caught up in detail. Kent has been a pace-setter in terms of its social and economic strategy. The authority has thoroughly analysed its social and economic pressures and opportunities, and the leadership has translated that understanding into a wider vision and strategy, with a particular perspective on social inclusion. The leader has described this as a 'noble goal', which is both strategic and also sufficiently down-to-earth and practical to engage staff in that strategic purpose.

The leadership is also rated as having high skills in decision making. It is an authority that has not only a strategy but also the ability to make decisions to support that strategy. It is decisive and able to make decisions even where there are competing interests or difficult choices to be made. There is considerable respect for the approach to decision making by the political leadership of the authority.

Three capabilities where the Kent leadership score less highly on the WPLQ are advocacy and representation, political intelligence, and organisational systems and tasks. The relatively low rating for political intelligence is perhaps surprising, given the national stage on which

Kent's leader is performing, though we note that the rating is above the mid-point of the scale and that this capability is based on the leadership group overall.

The leadership was rated relatively lower on the skills of advocacy and representation. This dimension concerns the skills of being able to help constituents and groups to articulate their needs, and persevering in pursuing the issues and concerns of people in the ward or division. Our interviews showed that there was awareness in the leadership group that the focus on strategy by Kent Council had perhaps been at the expense of working with individual cases and concerns. A number in the leadership group commented that they worked with local groups on particular planning appeals (e.g. transport infrastructure), but that advocacy work was relatively underemphasised. One interviewee commented that a possible weakness of the council was that its emphasis on major strategy might be at the expense of some attention to practical details.

This is also consistent with the other dimension with a relatively low score, which is that of being able to implement policies and practices at a detailed organisational level. This is the dimension of 'systems and tasks', and this represents the necessary elements of transactional leadership – being able to make things happen in a day-to-day way. This reflects the Kent culture among elected members of leaving the practicalities of implementation to officers. A couple of interviewees commented on the danger of 'members getting into the boiler room' and members tended to be quite aware of the need to avoid this. Thus, while there is a high emphasis put on meeting key targets, the elected members recognise the

importance of delegating implementation to officers. The WPLQ dimension, though, raises a question as to whether there is sufficient monitoring of such work.

The WPLQ results for Kent show a profile that reflects the interests and style of the leadership: particularly acute skills in terms of being able to 'think outside of the box', i.e. being imaginative and questioning with ideas; being strong in terms of strategic direction and decision making. The WPLQ profile also suggests that the leadership group rates itself as less strong on the detail – for example, in advocacy and representational work, and in systems and tasks.

Capabilities: Milton Keynes Council

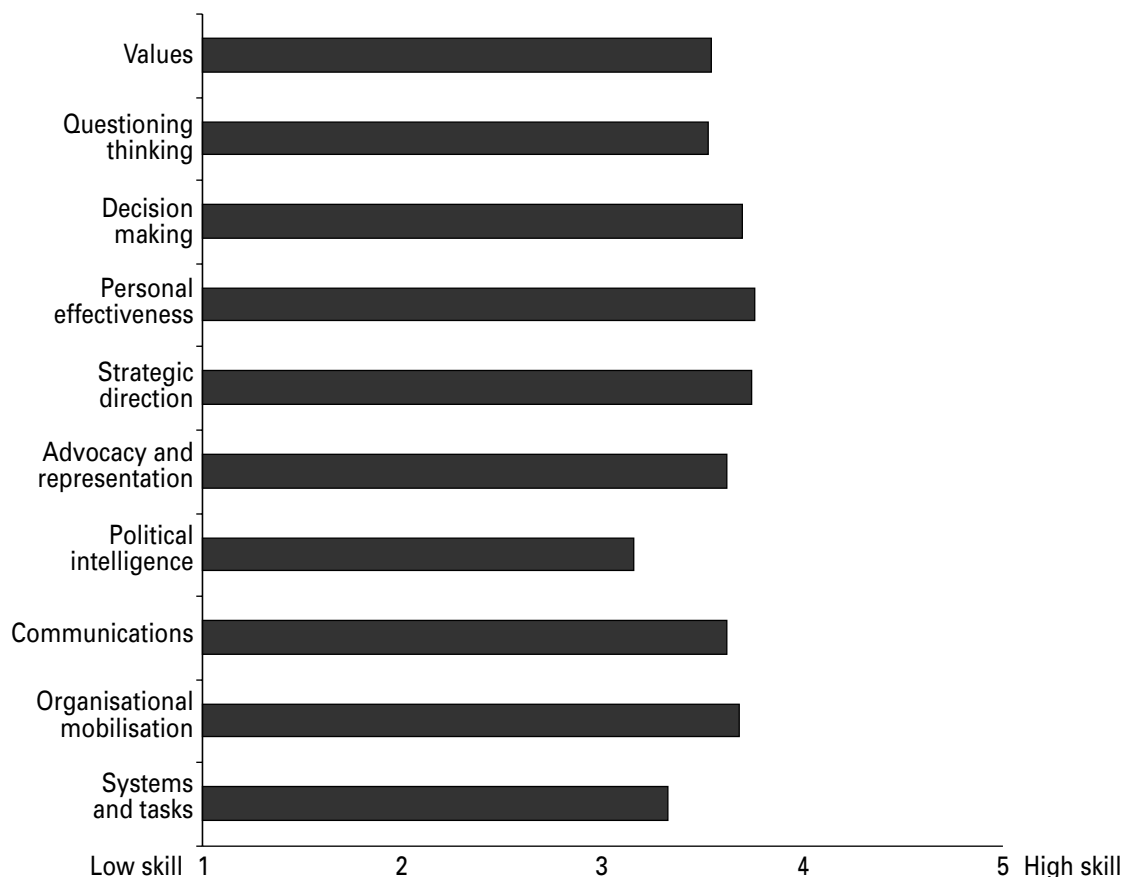
The analysis of capabilities is based on the WPLQ results for six out of the seven-strong leader and cabinet.

The Milton Keynes leader and cabinet arrangement is reported, from our interviews, to operate as a close-knit team. While each cabinet member has specific responsibilities in their portfolio, the cabinet meets on a regular basis to share views and to explore areas of overlap/implications across portfolios. They work closely with the Liberal Democrat Group to develop policies.

Figure 7.4 shows how the Milton Keynes executive scored in terms of their self-rated capabilities on each dimension.

For the Liberal Democrat leadership of Milton Keynes, strategic direction and personal effectiveness are rated as the capabilities the executive is strongest on, with decision making and organisational mobilisation running very close. This reflects data gathered from interviews, where a clear sense among the

Figure 7.4 Capabilities: Milton Keynes Council



political leadership of aiming to take the authority in a new direction and having to grapple with some large strategic issues was evident. Having a strong sense of strategic direction has helped the leadership in its analysis of, and action to tackle, the complex long-term and strategic issues facing the council. These include not only the growth agenda, i.e. the plans of central government for the continued and rapid expansion of Milton Keynes as a city and locality, but also the public-private partnership for support services and the service improvement action plan following CPA, including trying to build a more

strategic and more corporate approach, while having to deal with forceful political opposition.

Personal effectiveness is a key element of the political leadership, with an overall style of administration that is reported to be relatively informal, with a greater emphasis on building relationships as a means to achieve outcomes than relying on rules and procedures to get things done and/or to govern the work of members with officers. It is also consistent with the evidence of a cohesive political group, with fewer of the tensions between cabinet and scrutiny than is currently found in a number of councils.

The leadership also shows strengths in decision making and in organisational mobilisation. The decision-making process for the political leadership of this authority is described as being effective in the sense of being able to take some tough decisions about the growth agenda and services improvements, though some have commented that decision making about the financial legacy of tight resources is somewhat less bold. Its decision-making process is cohesive – close consultation with the Liberal Democrat Group, but considerable responsibility for individual cabinet members.

Organisational mobilisation, which comprises the skills of transformational change – mobilising and influencing people to create change, shaping people and plans to achieve substantial organisational and cultural change – is part of the explicit platform of this administration, which sees itself, in its manifesto and in office, as concerned with improving the quality of life for local residents and addressing some of the perceived shortcomings in the ways in which services are delivered.

The leadership profile shows that some skills are relatively less well developed, though above the mid-point of the scale. This shows in terms of the two dimensions of political intelligence and of systems and tasks. Political intelligence is concerned with skills, not only in understanding and influencing the dynamics of the leaders' own political party, but also in working with other parties or political alliances in the council in order to achieve outcomes. The cabinet members were still relatively new in post at the time of completing the WPLQ and it may be that they were somewhat tentative at that stage

about their political intelligence skills. On the other hand, the difficult state of cross-party politics in Milton Keynes may have contributed to the leadership rating themselves as somewhat less skilled on this dimension. It would be interesting to return to Milton Keynes to reprofile the executive to explore whether changes have occurred over time in this capability.

The administration has also, in aggregate, rated itself as somewhat less skilled in terms of systems and tasks, i.e. the skills of ensuring that services are provided and improved, within the boundaries of the local authority structures. It is transactional leadership – an important component of making improvements and as necessary in many circumstances as transformational leadership. This is an area that has been the source of some frustration to the political leadership, where, at the time of the second round of interviews, there was a sense that they were able to communicate a large and engaging strategic vision but were having difficulties in ensuring this was enacted in practical changes to front-line services. Changes to improve waste recycling and to refurbish bus shelters, to give just two examples, had been problematic in implementation, causing a negative image of the council in the press and among some of the public.

Overall, the profile for Milton Keynes shows a new administration that is strong on strategy, decision making, personal effectiveness and organisational mobilisation, which together suggest skills in spelling out and shaping a new agenda for the locality. The profile also shows that the executive rates itself as relatively less skilled at ensuring implementation, i.e. systems

and tasks, and at political intelligence. The leadership was aware of these areas for skill development and it would be interesting to see if these capability dimensions were strengthened over time.

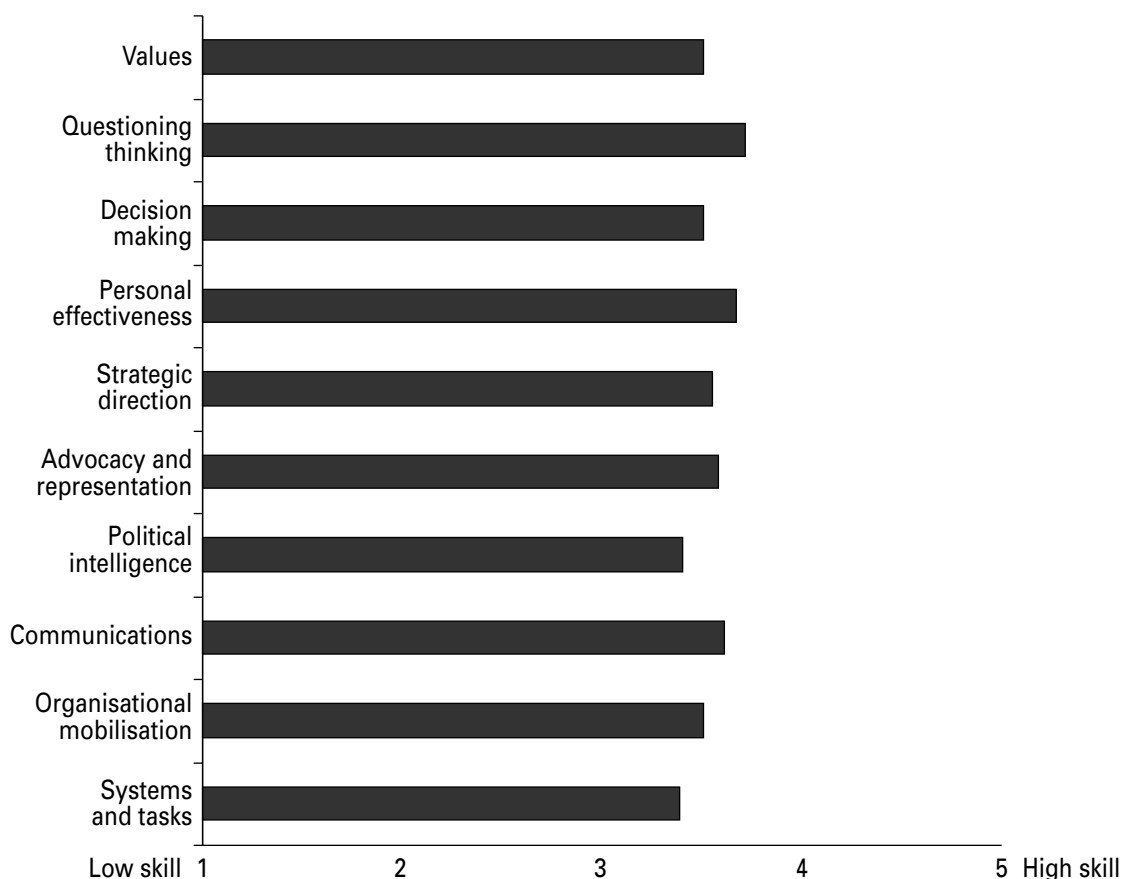
Capabilities: Warwickshire County Council

This case study is based on returns from ten out of the 12 senior elected members to whom it was sent. Unusually, among the profiles, this one is based on leadership across all parties. Warwickshire is a joint administration, based on a Labour cabinet of ten, including the leader, but with the active engagement of all three parties

through the leaders' liaison board and also through the two minority party leaders attending the cabinet ex officio. We have included all these members in the analysis because they are all reported to play a significant part in the leadership tasks of the council in this joint administration.

In examining the capabilities profile for this group of influential senior elected members, we see a pattern that is somewhat less differentiated than for the previous two cases (see Figure 7.5). There is less range in the scores across the ten dimensions, which gives a picture of all-round capabilities but without clear

Figure 7.5 Capabilities: Warwickshire County Council



outstanding strengths or weaknesses in terms of WPLQ dimensions.

This reflects the political culture and operational activities of the political leadership. Our interviews show a strong emphasis on consensus, mentioned spontaneously in all first-round interviews, with a degree of co-operation between parties that had led one member to question whether the authority had got 'too comfortable'. The authority governs a county that ranks low in terms of indicators of social and economic deprivation, though with areas of deprivation in the north and east of the county. It may be that the resource base, the demography and the 'good' rating on CPA have all contributed to a sense of moderate skills (capabilities) across the range of dimensions. Warwickshire's sense of being above average is shown in the ratings on the WPLQ.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have examined the skills of political leadership through the concept of capability, which covers the underlying characteristics of a person in that it may be a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge that he or she uses. A political leader needs to draw on a wide set of behaviours, self-awareness and attitudes in order to be effective. Earlier WPLQ research had defined a skill set, comprising ten skill clusters or dimensions.

This research has shown that elected members in leadership positions do show skills beyond those manifested by the ordinary member. In an analysis of just over 200 elected members in local government in England and Wales, political leaders (mayors, leaders and

those with executive responsibility) rate themselves as higher on:

- personal effectiveness: ability to work with and understand other people, also self-insight
- the ability to be strategic
- showing political intelligence, i.e. 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).

In addition, it is clear that some skills are sharpened through practice. This is particularly true for having a strong sense of strategic direction and for having political intelligence. This suggests that such skills can be heightened through practice and development, which represents an opportunity for policy and practice. This analysis also undermines the 'born leader' approach to leadership – leaders do increase their skills with experience.

In five case studies, it has been possible to examine the profile of the leadership group, teasing out where it is particularly strong on specific skills and examining where the skills are less well developed. Three of those cases are presented in this chapter. The authorities vary in their profiles. Kent stands out as taking an innovative approach to its strategy and this is confirmed through the analysis of questioning thinking. Milton Keynes' leadership group profile shows skill in organisational

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mobilisation. Warwickshire's profile shows strength across the dimensions without being outstanding in any particular one.

8 Elected mayors, and cabinets and leaders: two executive models compared

Introduction

Government's approach to political leadership (see Chapter 1) places an emphasis on strong visible and outward-looking qualities. In relation to its preferred executive option – the elected mayor – there exists a range of underpinning powers and resources that, mayor and council manager option excepted, are significantly greater than those that underpin the leadership role in the leader and cabinet model. This difference means that, *if strong, visible and outward-looking leadership behaviour* is facilitated by a *strong power base* in structural terms, then we would expect to see some major differences in the incidence of these behavioural qualities among elected mayors, compared with non-mayoral leaders. We would also expect to see some differences in *task orientation* (see Chapter 1).

In this chapter, we explore the extent of these differences, both within and between the two executive leadership models, drawing on our case study material.

Resources of mayoral and non-mayoral leaders

Security of tenure

Elected mayors know that, once elected, their position is secure, assuming 'disqualification' is avoided, until the next election in four years' time. Leaders of councils do not enjoy this security and are vulnerable to removal at any time by, for example, a coup within the ruling group (see Leach and Wilson 2000, 2002).

Formal powers

Elected mayors have the constitutional right to select cabinet colleagues, identify and allocate portfolios and decide the distribution of decision-making responsibilities within the cabinet (individual-collective; between mayoral and other cabinet members). Some or all of these powers *may* be held by council leaders, but only if the council constitution so permits (see Stoker *et al.*, 2003).

It should also be noted that the elected mayor and council manager model, of which there is but one example (Mike Wolfe in Stoke-on-Trent), provides a greatly diminished set of formal powers for the mayor, compared with the mayor and cabinet model. There is no cabinet, and the formal power to make executive decisions is delegated to and exercised by the council manager. At the appropriate point, all such decisions will have been subject to policy advice from the elected mayor.

Democratic legitimacy

Elected mayors, of both types, enjoy a heightened degree of legitimacy that is not shared by their council leader counterparts. They have been elected *directly* by the local electorate, unlike council leaders who have been elected by the council or, in reality, by the majority group on the council, assuming there is one. One implication is that, if mayoral intentions are thwarted by the council – particularly intentions that have been signalled in advance through the mayoral manifesto – the council is vulnerable to accusations of unreasonable (anti-democratic) behaviour, a view likely to be highlighted in the local media.

Visibility

Recent evidence from a New Local Government Network (NLGN) survey, conducted in November 2003, confirms that mayors are better known than council leaders to local people. On average, 57 per cent of people could identify their mayor, from a list of five, compared with 25 per cent who could identify their council leader in non-mayoral councils. This level of visibility is an important further indication of democratic legitimacy, although interestingly it was not backed up by any greater level of satisfaction with mayoral performance, compared with the performance of non-mayoral leaders.

Detachment from group discipline

It follows from the fact of direct election that politically affiliated mayors are not subject to the same processes of group discipline and control from their party group on the council that constrain a council leader. The group cannot unseat an elected mayor and, although they could choose, collectively or partially, not to support mayoral proposals that require council support, they would normally be reluctant to do so in the interests of party unity. That does not mean that elected mayors with political affiliations can afford to ignore the views of the party group, and none does so, partly to pre-empt resistance from disaffected, unconsulted party group members when mayoral proposals come before the council, but also in the knowledge that such members may be influential in supporting, or opposing, their renomination at the next mayoral election. Although it is the local *party* that decides mayoral nominations, local councillors typically hold positions of influence within local parties.

Nonetheless, the increased *detachment* that elected mayors feel in relation to the party group on council is apparent. Steve Bullock has expressed this view forcefully:

I know the mayoral model makes a difference ... this struck me most profoundly at the annual [post-election] meeting of the Labour group, which would have been a crucial event for a council leader ... it just washed over me ... because I'm not dependent on the group for my position, it means I can do things more quickly and do more difficult things.

(Presentation at Constitution Unit seminar, University College, January 2003)

These constitutional strengths mean that, in theory, there is greater scope for strong, decisive *individual* leadership from elected mayors than from council leaders. Indeed, there are circumstances where a mayor, who has been able to utilise his or her constitutional position in this way, becomes the key reference point for chief officers, with other cabinet members sometimes being 'bypassed', whatever their formal responsibilities. However, the extent to which the opportunities that these resources provided have been realised depends on some of the *differences* between elected mayors, in particular their experience, their level of support from the council membership and their capabilities in exploiting these resources.

Leadership tasks

The detachment of politically affiliated mayors from the traditional constraints of the party group is illustrated by the quotation from Steve Bullock (see above). This means that, for elected mayors in his position – i.e. with the support of

the majority group on the council – maintaining the leader–group relationship is indeed less time consuming than it would be for council leaders. However, for elected mayors not in this position, the challenge of gaining the requisite critical mass of support in council for measures that require it – especially the mayor’s budget proposals – is a major consideration.

Even for mayors who do not face party-based opposition in council, the task of re-establishing unity within the majority group may still be an *initial* priority, particularly where unity has been damaged by the adoption of the mayoral model and the subsequent contest for the nomination. Steve Bullock was selected as mayoral candidate in Lewisham only after two closely fought contests with the then council leader, Dave Sullivan. The result of the first contest was declared invalid (see Bullock, 2002 for details). In January 2003, he identified as his most satisfying achievement to date:

... sorting out the cabinet and its relationship with the group in the difficult aftermath of the contest for the mayoral nomination.

The emphasis on the ‘strategic direction’ and ‘external networking’ leadership tasks, which is an explicit part of the Government’s democratic renewal agenda (see Chapter 2), particularly so in relation to mayors, has in some cases been followed through. These two priorities have been emphasised by Mike Wolfe in Stoke-on-Trent, reflecting *inter alia* the limitations on his powers relating to executive action. Ray Mallon’s agenda since the election, and indeed before, has emphasised these two elements, though not at the expense of a developing concern with selected elements of service delivery. On the other hand, the agendas of the

elected mayors of Watford, Lewisham and North Tyneside were dominated by budgetary crises and/or critical CPA assessments, leaving less scope than mayors would ideally have preferred for external networking in particular.

This ‘action orientation’, which can be seen as an expression of the fourth key leadership task of ‘task accomplishment’, has a resonance for other mayoral leaders too. Mayors know that, if they are to be re-elected, they need to have established a positive reputation with the local electorate. There are two principal ways in which this outcome can be achieved: first, by establishing a positive profile in the local media, particularly the local paper if one exists, and, second, by developing a reputation among local constituents as a ‘can do’ leader. Thus the expectation that mayoral leaders will necessarily accept the Government’s assumption that the move to local executive government should result in a greater degree of delegation of decisions to officers is doubtful. Several of the mayoral leaders have emphasised and publicised their accessibility in relation to individual constituents, and their readiness to ensure appropriate action in response to their concerns.

Interpretations of the mayoral role – the capabilities dimension

In two case study authorities, the elected mayors have experienced difficulty in playing the high-profile individual leadership role that the legislation appeared to be encouraging. Other mayors have found their own inexperience a problem in this respect. Among the authorities visited, the three mayors who have most clearly embodied the Government’s expectations

regarding the mayoral role have been Steve Bullock (Lewisham), Ray Mallon (Middlesbrough) and Mike Wolfe (Stoke-on-Trent). All have used their personal capabilities to make the most of the opportunities facing them.

In Steve Bullock's case, he has drawn on his long experience as a senior politician, and his conciliatory personal style, to rebuild bridges within the deeply divided Labour group, and to overcome the financial crises that faced the council when he was elected. He is well aware of the need to strengthen his visibility locally, which was one of the reasons he decided to combine the role of elected mayor with that of civic mayor. His status as elected mayor has changed perceptions among key local stakeholders; for example, from the local police commissioner: 'how can we help you achieve your mayoral objectives?'. His long-term interest in the local strategic agenda will equip him well to move away from an 'improve problematical services' role emphasis to a community leadership role over the next year or so.

Ray Mallon's astute management of the hostile political environment that faced him after his election helped him generate a critical mass of support within the council much more quickly than might have been expected. He invited applications for cabinet membership from all councillors, knowing that those who were fundamentally opposed to him (roughly half of the Labour group on the council) would not apply. His first cabinet comprised one Conservative, one Independent and seven Labour members, all of whom were prepared to put the interests of Middlesbrough above the hurt pride of the Labour group, which had expected to win the mayoral contest. In particular he appointed as deputy mayor an

experienced Labour member who retained a considerable degree of influence within the Labour group at large.

Ray Mallon's strategic agenda, based on genuine consultation with local people, developed further as he relatively quickly identified the key services areas in Middlesbrough that required his attention, for example, the looming social services overspend. Recognising the benefit of making an early impact, he built on his previous experience as a senior police officer to initiate a radical and original scheme for dealing with crime – a comprehensive, up-to-date information system combined with a task force of community wardens, parking attendants and litter officers, which has already had a beneficial impact. Thus he has succeeded in overcoming political resistance, developing a strategic perspective and achieving task accomplishment within an 18-month period.

Mike Wolfe developed an imaginative, long-term strategic vision based on a real understanding of the root causes of the decline in civic consciousness and low levels of empowerment in the borough. He recognises that community leadership is both his strength and a realistic role for him to emphasise, given the limitations in his executive powers in the mayor and council manager model. Like Steve Bullock, his legitimacy as community leader, stemming from his election as an individual, has been increasingly recognised by local partners. He is a natural leader, though not interestingly the *formal* leader, of the local strategic partnership. He has developed a productive working relationship and a division of labour with the council manager, and uses this relationship to influence executive decisions

regarding council services, even though he has no power to make them.

What is apparent from the above analysis is that, whereas the structural underpinnings of the directly elected mayor option provide *opportunities* for mayors to develop a different interpretation of political leadership to non-mayoral leaders, the extent to which they have responded to these opportunities is strongly influenced by the context in which they operate (particularly the local political context), the way they have responded to these contextual pressures and their capabilities in dealing with them (see Chapter 7).

Political leadership in the cabinet and leader model

Although the move to the cabinet and leader model is less radical in structural terms than the move to the mayoral model, and more capable of interpretation in ways that are congruent with the prevailing organisational biography, the very 'break with tradition' provides a parallel, although different, range of opportunities for non-mayoral leaders. We discuss below the variations in political leadership that have emerged in cabinet and leader authorities in response to these opportunities, highlighting the importance of organisational biographies, including the attitude to individual or collective leadership and the impact of the particular circumstances of hung authorities.

Impact of organisational biographies

Three of the ten authorities in this category – which includes, for the purpose of analysis, Brighton and Hove, the one 'fourth option' authority we studied – argued that the move to

a formal cabinet system had made relatively little difference to the practice of leadership. Leicester, Gateshead and Warwickshire all emphasised the *continuity* between the two systems rather than the differences. In Leicester, the policy board, a private meeting between the political and administrative leadership elites, which was the key arena for the discussion and choice of decision options, has operated in very much the same kind of way under the new system as under the one that preceded it. Differences in leadership practice here have been much more a result of the personal preferences and skills of the leaders themselves than of the changes in formal structure. In Warwickshire CC, the leaders' liaison group continues to provide a key reference point for the council's leader and minority Labour administration in identifying which decisions they can expect to be supported and which they cannot, in which case there is a 'search for a compromise solution'. Although, in formal terms, the minority cabinet does not require the support of another party in relation to the decisions for which it holds responsibility, the leadership knows that it is in existence only because one or more of the other parties supports it and it is vulnerable to any breakdown in the inter-party 'goodwill' that cements its operation.

In Labour-dominated Gateshead, there was a concern to sustain three important elements of the old system: the role of the group, the primacy of full council and the ability of non-executive members to influence executive decisions, previously exercised through committees. The response to the third priority provides a particularly interesting example of the scope for interpretation inherent in the 2000 Act.

Gateshead has established five 'cabinet advisory groups', which operate on an informal basis, each reflecting one or more cabinet portfolios. This practice might be viewed critically as an attempt to reintroduce a committee system under a different guise; but it clearly works in Gateshead, where there is little of the backbench discontent experienced in other authorities.

On the other hand, the introduction of new structures has clearly made a big difference to the practice of leadership in Kent, Stockport and Brighton and Hove. In Kent, as noted earlier, because there was a strong commitment to the concept of strong and visible leadership among the majority Conservative group – and an *in situ* leader, Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, who was trusted to perform that role effectively – the constitution was drafted in such a way as to maximise the authority of the leader. This led to the common use of the term 'a mayor in all but name' to describe his leadership style. Although this concept of leadership would have been possible under the old system, it has clearly been facilitated in Kent by the new constitution and the leadership opportunities it embodies.

In the other cabinet and leader authorities, there has been more of a balance between the pressure for continuity and the pressures for change. In Milton Keynes, the collective approach to leadership, which has been a feature of the Liberal Democrat group's way of working, has survived the party group's move from a minority to a majority situation. However, the leader is aware of the 'fragmenting' forces operating within the cabinet – the tendency of some cabinet members to 'go native' in relation to their particular service areas – and is working hard with the new chief executive to counteract this tendency.

Impact of attitude to 'individualistic' leadership

The Government's preference for strong and visible *individual* leadership is most likely to be realised in respect of elected mayors. However, in relation to the cabinet and leader model, there is a much greater scope for choice. Some authorities may wish to develop the potential for individual leadership that is inherent in the legislation. Others may choose to resist it and emphasise a more collective approach or a shared approach to council leadership.

The authorities visited in the research exhibited a wide range of different approaches to this opportunity. In some cases (Milton Keynes, Warwickshire, Brighton and Hove), a shared approach to leadership was emphasised with an explicit distribution of leadership tasks among a wider leadership group, sometimes service-based, as in Warwickshire, sometimes cross-cutting, as in Brighton and Hove. In other cases, there was an emphasis on the primacy of the leader, sometimes explicitly so (Kent, Cardiff), sometimes through the ability of a new leader to develop a wide-ranging brief (e.g. Worcestershire). In three cases – Stockport, Gateshead and Leicester – a change in leadership signalled a new view of the leadership role, to some extent reflecting the different priorities and style of the incomer.

Impact of 'no overall control'

It has often been argued that, whereas the cabinet and leader model was workable in authorities that enjoyed majority control, it was *not* appropriate to authorities where there was no overall control. The reality, as our research demonstrates, is that the *fact* of no overall control does not necessarily form an

impediment to either an effective role for the executive or effective political leadership. Much depends on the political context of the authority and the composition of the executive that is negotiated. There are three possible options: a one-party minority executive, a coalition executive or an all-party executive.

In each of our no-overall-control case studies, a way of working that enables executives to operate in a way that was not dissimilar to majority-controlled authorities has been established. In each case, a decisive factor was the ability of the council leader to negotiate the form of executive involved, and then to sustain its viability.

The crucial role of the relationship between leaders and chief executives

We noted in Chapter 1 the existence of two different leadership agendas – *political leadership*, which is geared towards the achievement of political objectives, and *organisational leadership*, which is geared towards organisational performance. The primary concern of the leader, or mayor, is political leadership, although he or she would normally also be concerned that the authority performs well, for example in CPA terms. The primary concern of the chief executive is organisational performance, although she or he knows that support and co-operation is required from the political leader if good organisational performance is to be achieved. The relationship between these two office holders is thus of crucial importance.

The chief executive–mayor relationship

Some of the structural/constitutional characteristics of mayors, vis-à-vis council

leaders, would be likely to predispose them, all other things being equal, to the Government's leadership priorities. They are, as we have seen, more *detached* from *party politics*, even when party affiliated, and correspondingly more likely to adopt an *authority-wide* perspective ('what is in the best interests of the authority?'), including an *externally oriented* agenda, although not necessarily to the exclusion of a concern with local council services. The implication is, first, that there is a greater potential area of common ground and shared agenda between mayors and chief executives, and, second, that the effectiveness of elected mayors can be facilitated, or restricted, by the quality of the mayor–chief executive relationship.

The interrelationship between the interests of the mayor and the interests of the chief executive was widely recognised. The feeling of common purpose is particularly strong where there is a compatibility between the perceptions of leadership priorities on the part of the mayor and the chief executive. But common purpose does not imply duplication of role. What was noteworthy in the three above authorities was the recognition that the contribution of leader and chief executive respectively to this shared agenda should be *distinctive*.

If the division of labour over leadership tasks is well understood between a chief executive and mayor, or indeed a council leader, then frequent meetings between the two may not be necessary. Indeed, a situation in which chief executive and mayor are 'in and out of each other's offices on a daily basis' may be an indication of role overlap and confusion, or an indication that the mayor wishes to extend his or her influence into the area of detailed implementation decisions, delegated to officers.

If there is no chief executive in post or a chief executive is felt to be unresponsive, there is a temptation for the mayor to encompass that role. That was the situation facing Dorothy Thornhill (Watford) when she came to power. Her experience convinced her that a different type of lead officer was required in a mayoral authority – a ‘managing director’ rather than a ‘chief executive’. She wanted a capable individual who would be the ‘chief of staff’ and recognise the leadership authority of the mayor:

I know there are some chief executives who really think they run the authority's agenda. That isn't going to happen here and the managing director knows this.

There are other examples of ‘high-profile’ mayors who have provided a challenge to chief executives who previously enjoyed a significant agenda-setting role. Strong mayoral agendas can force a chief executive into a predominantly implementational role, which may become a source of frustration.

So far the mayor–chief executive relationships described have been between individuals who each had relevant experience as leaders, or who quickly developed a sense of what each expected of the other. For less experienced mayors, such as Stuart Drummond (Hartlepool) and Frank Branston (Bedford), the relationship may have a greater degree of *dependency* in it, with the mayor relying on the chief executive to steer him or her through the agenda, while developing the experience necessary to play a more proactive role.

The chief executive–non-mayoral leader relationship

The experience of leadership in the cabinet and leader model confirms the evidence that

emerged from the discussion of mayoral leadership. Chief executives under both executive models play a crucial role in shaping the agenda of the political leadership in a way that meets the wider (non-political) performance goals of the authority. In doing so, he or she will sometimes want to draw the leader away from the logic of party politics towards a concern with the future of the authority as a whole and in particular to argue against any political initiative that might impede the performance objectives of the authority. This is the essence of the symbiotic relationship between council leader and chief executive. The former needs the latter to deliver on political priorities; the latter needs the former to remove obstructions to achieving corporate priorities.

As with elected mayors, if the leader–chief executive relationship is working well, it provides a forum in which the chief executive can identify ‘gaps’ in the strategic agenda that he or she needs to fill, and on which the leader can *either* generate the requisite political support *or* assure the chief executive that he or she can get on with it. The chief executive’s contribution to the fine-tuning of council strategic priorities in Worcestershire is one illustration of this process. The division of labour that operates in Stockport in relation to work with partners, with the leader playing the key role in the formal partnership meetings, whereas the chief executive manages the informal one-to-one meetings with key partners, is another. Where these reciprocal expectations cannot be fulfilled then the authority’s performance will suffer. For example, the difficulty that one chief executive experienced in trying to persuade the political leadership of the need for a priority-based

corporate strategy in the 2001–03 period probably hindered the achievement of a better CPA assessment.

There is a further significant impact of the CPA regime on member-officer leadership patterns in a broader sense. Particularly in authorities where the responsibilities of portfolio holders and chief officers are matched, it is not uncommon for portfolio holders to become very close to chief officers, which, in the context of CPA, can turn councillors into apologists and defenders of services rather than commissioners.

Conclusions

- The resources enjoyed by elected mayors – for example, security of tenure, formal power base, democratic legitimacy and freedom from group discipline – all provide a basis for a stronger, more proactive and individualised style of leadership than in the other models. There is, however, a great deal of diversity in the personal capacity of elected mayors to exploit these resources.
- Even for mayors who do not face party-based opposition in council, the task of establishing unity within the majority group may still be an initial priority, especially where unity has been damaged by the adoption of, or contest for, the mayoral model.
- Mayors differ in the emphasis they give to the four key leadership tasks in ways that sometimes reflect contextual pressures and sometimes personal preferences.
- Mayors have generally emphasised and publicised their accessibility in relation to individual constituents, and the readiness to sort out problems, using a variety of different mechanisms.
- There are several examples of elected mayors retaining a ‘hands-on’ approach to the implementation of initiatives in which they have invested a good deal of personal credibility.
- Leaders and chief executives have a common interest and a crucial role in mediating between political pressures and organisational (authority-wide) pressures.
- For elected mayors facing a hostile council, the constitutional constraints on their power have become apparent, particularly in relation to the budget.
- There is a particularly strong feeling of ‘common purpose’ between elected mayors and chief executives. However, common purpose does not imply duplication of role. In many cases, there was a recognition of distinctive roles that each played in relation to the shared agenda.
- For inexperienced mayors, there may 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 facing the authority.

9 Conclusions

The diversity of leadership approaches

At the end of Chapter 2, a number of research questions were set out. Most of them are addressed in this final chapter, but not in the order in which they were posed earlier. It was felt more helpful to the reader to incorporate the conclusions organically into the text, where they seemed most appropriate. Key points related to the research questions are highlighted in the text. The only question not directly addressed in the text is the extent to which attitudes to leadership vary among the three major parties and influence political behaviour. We found little evidence of significant variation, either in interviews or from the WPLQ analyses.

One impact that the introduction of local executive government, mayoral and non-mayoral, has clearly *not* had is to generate a move towards a more *uniform* pattern of political leadership. As we have demonstrated, there is a profound degree of *diversity* in the approach that elected mayors have taken to their leadership role. Some have developed and are committed to a long-term strategy, others operate with a handful of disconnected priorities. Some see external networking as a major priority, others see it as a relatively unproductive use of time, or as something that is important in theory, but has become, temporarily, marginalised by more important tasks – for example, dealing with a weak or poor CPA result. Some pay a good deal of attention to ‘getting things through council’, others have either delegated the task to a cabinet colleague or do not regard it as a problem. While all elected mayors are concerned about developing a positive profile in the local media and with local people, which

involves a concern with ‘task accomplishment’, the way in which they approach this latter task is extremely varied. The evidence from the six mayoral case studies in this research signals the same diversity of practice as Gerry Stoker’s fourfold categorisation of elected mayors (Stoker *et al.*, 2003)

The same point can be made about political leadership in councils that have opted for the cabinet and leader model. Interpretation of the leadership role in the eight relevant case studies demonstrated a variety of practice ranging from *de facto* mayoral interpretations (Kent and Cardiff), to collectivist interpretations (Warwickshire, Milton Keynes), to a form of leadership that can only be described as nominal (Charnwood, pre-May 2003). Although the scope for reinterpreting leadership that is inherent in the Local Government Act 2000 had been exploited creatively in some cases (Worcestershire, Stockport), in others one sensed that there had been very little real change associated with the introduction of the new political management structures.

The first important general conclusion to emerge from the research reflects these findings. The degree of diversity in the role interpretations and task priorities of both mayoral and non-mayoral leaders indicates that *the new structures, and associated powers, have so far proved less decisive an influence on political leadership than would have been forecast, from a structuralist perspective. Context and personal capabilities have been equally influential, often more so.*

This conclusion is worth unpacking further. The reason for the expectation of a convergence of leadership styles follows from the Government’s clear statements of how it wanted local leadership to change and their enactment

of a piece of legislation that facilitated these changes. The Government's 'ideal type' involved a strong, visible, individualised form of leadership, where the leader's responsibilities were much more transparent than under the previous system and with an associated heightening of accountability. Hence the preference for elected mayors, where all these features were potentially accentuated, not least by the stronger power base enjoyed by elected mayors (cf. non-mayoral leaders, and excepting the mayor and council manager model). It involved a new emphasis on setting strategic policy direction and a corresponding retreat from policy implementation, where a greater degree of delegation to officers was encouraged. It implied a greater emphasis from leaders on external networking, partnerships and stakeholders' engagement – i.e. the community leadership role. And it included the hope, rather than the expectation, that party politics, in the traditional adversarial sense, would play a less dominant role in the new arrangements, freeing leaders to seek the best interests of the authority, and the area, rather than the narrow party-based interests. At the same time, it would reduce the need for a constant 'reference back' of decision intentions to party groups.

The reality, as we have seen in previous chapters, is that examples of the realisation of this ideal type in practice are rare indeed. In just a few of the mayoral authorities – Lewisham, Middlesbrough, Stoke-on-Trent – has anything approaching this ideal been manifested. Elsewhere, crucial ingredients are missing, in some cases most of them. Thus, *although elected mayors have generally recognised the need for a high degree of visibility and responsiveness to public and stakeholder concerns, only a small number of non-*

mayoral leaders have operated in this way. Indeed, some have gone out of their way to emphasise their belief in a collective approach to leadership that rejects the concept of strong, visible individual leaderships.

Similarly although some, but by no means all, mayoral leaders have been successful in detaching themselves from the demands of clearing everything with the group, and thus have been able to free up time for more strategic and partnership-oriented concerns, there is no structural guarantee that this will be possible, even if desired. As the elected mayors of North Tyneside and Bedford would be the first to acknowledge, *the existence of a hostile council makes it almost inevitable that one of the mayor's priority tasks will be negotiating a critical mass of support.* Mayors have to depend on council support for a range of policy and budgetary measures almost as much as non-mayoral leaders. *In the authorities that have opted for the cabinet and leader model, there is little evidence of any weakening of group discipline or, with a few exceptions, adversarial party politics.*

It is also apparent that *external networking and community leadership have yet to be given the role emphasis among political leaders that the Government's agenda implies.* Most of the elected mayors see it as a key role, especially, though with one notable exception, those who are not party affiliated. However, other priorities that have become apparent since the enactment of the Local Government Act 2000, and that were not foreseen in the run-up to the Act, have sometimes switched the priorities of both elected mayors and council leaders away from an external to an internal emphasis, particularly in relation to preparing for, or responding to, the CPA process. Although non-mayoral leaders are

also affected by CPA and other pressures, there is evidence that, if they are personally interested in the wider partnership-based agenda, it becomes a high priority. If they are not, however, it is either delegated to a cabinet colleague who has a greater level of interest or the key task moves into the officer domain, where it may well be competently handled but with dangers of an adverse reaction from key stakeholders – ‘if the leader isn’t interested, why should we be?’.

One of the misconceptions of the thinking behind the introduction of the new leadership forms was that leaders – mayoral and non-mayoral alike – would concentrate their energies on the strategic agenda and delegate an increasing range of executive decisions, formerly made by committees, to officers. This expectation reflects a political naivety. Elected mayors in particular know that they have to convince the voting public that they can deliver ‘on the ground’ whatever they promised in their manifestos, for example, safer cities, cleaner streets, revitalised town centres. It is service delivery and perceptible change on which they will be judged rather than glossy strategic documents, whether corporate or partnership-based. There is the same political imperative to ‘deliver’ for non-mayoral leaders, although, in this case, it is less personalised and more a concern of the dominant party group, or coalition. For all leaders, there will be a particular concern to follow through issues of service delivery, or problem resolution, in relation to poorly performing services (in the context of the CPA) or local crises (e.g. the incinerator proposal in Milton Keynes). A variety of different methods of ensuring delivery, or task accomplishment, is apparent. It is not unusual for ‘progress chasing’ to be

delegated to a cabinet colleague, or a member of the mayor’s office. But *it would be unrealistic not to recognise the legitimate interest of political leaders in the effective implementation of their priorities.*

Much of the diversity associated with the introduction of the new structures can be explained by variations in the context and capabilities of leadership. *Context is multilayered*, such as the effect of the different traditions and cultural expectations surrounding leadership – Kent compared with Gateshead, or Milton Keynes compared with Cardiff – and the impact of the external context in terms of both central government and the characteristics of the locality. Two features of the context are interesting, as shown from the interviews and the WPLQ analysis. First, *context is not immutable and there are opportunities for the role of political leadership in shaping some limited degree of change over an often extended period of time.* Second, there is an interaction between context and capability, in that *leaders vary in the way that they ‘read’, interpret and articulate the political, economic, social and environmental context, and the opportunities for and constraints on action.* Furthermore, they become more skilled at this over time, both with longer experience of being a councillor and in a senior leadership role. If politics is indeed ‘the art of the possible’, then having the skills to read and interpret context is important and builds with greater experience. This is also reflected in the varied ways in which political leaders view the challenges they face in achieving outcomes, with different leaders paying different degrees of time and attention to priorities in a range of arenas of activity.

Diversity is also associated with the variations in the capabilities of individual leaders. This key part of the research is

elaborated on below. Overall, *structure appears to matter less than might have been expected.*

The leader–chief executive relationship

The focus of this project is political leadership, but it has proved necessary to include consideration of the role of the chief executive, and sometimes other senior officers, in the analysis of political leadership. Chief executives are rarely simply implementers of political leaders' wishes. They are active participants in a dialogue that shapes and amends political priorities. In all the key political leadership tasks – including that of developing or maintaining a critical mass of political support – chief executives can play a major role that helps shape outcomes. Some of the examples set out in Chapter 3 – for example, Bedford – illustrate the way in which chief executives can become involved, legitimately, in this ostensibly purely political task, although, in other cases, they have made a point of distancing themselves from this kind of involvement. In respect of the other key leadership tasks, their involvement has often been more widespread. *Chief executives are adept at 'filling gaps' in the leadership agenda of the authority, provided they are allowed to do so.* For example, *chief executives help to shape the strategic agenda*, or help to extend it beyond the limited set of priorities that may be provided by the political leadership in a way that they judge will satisfy external inspectors. They facilitate, and sometimes lead, partnership processes for similar reasons, where there is a political disinclination to do so. They also negotiate with political leaders to agree and regulate a viable division of labour, from their perspective, in relation to task accomplishment, including the

involvement of members in policy implementation. In all these ways, chief executives try to negotiate common ground and resolve tension between political and organisational agendas, as the political leadership is striving to do, though from a different starting point. The political leader attempts to find ways of taking forward a political agenda within which 're-election' is a key component, in a way that does not hinder the organisational agenda, i.e. the perceived performance of the authority. The chief executive is striving to ensure that the latter is not impeded by the former. Hence the crucial importance of the relationship between the two individuals, and *the importance of the capacity of each to challenge the other and to accept the legitimacy of robust challenge.*

The importance of leadership capabilities

In the conceptual framework, it was argued that, notwithstanding the importance of structure and context, (including local political culture), there remains in all authorities an interpretive space within which a leader's personal values, attitudes and capabilities come into play. However, leadership capabilities are not divorced from context and task priorities – we should not see leadership as a universal set of skills regardless of context, but rather capabilities interacting with context. We noted earlier the importance of *the ability to read the context* and in particular the identification of the scope for choice within legislative requirements and local political and organisational culture. This is not simply a reactive skill, identifying what is currently possible, but one that has a proactive element – 'what would I need to do to

make possible a choice that isn't currently possible?'. Context should not determine a leadership agenda, rather it should shape it. This is a key element of the WPLQ analysis and it has been supported in interview.

Reading context is a skill that is included in the cluster concerned with *the capability of strategic direction*. This includes being able both to take an overview of the internal and external conditions and opportunities, and to move between 'the balcony and the battlefield' in terms of being able to link small detail to a bigger picture. No leader, even an elected mayor operating in 'favourable' circumstances, can hope to transform an ongoing council agenda 'at a stroke'. The capability lies in the ability to sense the 'soft' points in the political/organisational culture where the leader's priorities can be introduced without eliciting stubborn resistance. This includes being able to identify the 'art of the possible' and act on it. This is the essence of strategic thinking and action. Leaders with these kinds of capabilities can transform the leadership agenda within an authority and the way their own role is perceived. Those who lack them will be much more limited by 'what exists' – the views of the majority group, the content of the constitution, the legal officer's interpretation of the 'requirements of the Act'.

The research found three further skill sets, or capabilities, to be important and these can be seen as relevant to the capacity to put strategic vision into action. First, *personal effectiveness* is found, both from interviews and the WPLQ, to be important. Sensitivity is a key skill and we can unpack this using the conceptual framework of the WPLQ to mean a cluster of behaviours, attitudes and motivations that

include the ability to read the emotions and motivations of others, to work with others effectively, taking these interpersonal issues into account, and to handle difficult relationships. Some have described these skills as 'emotional intelligence'. Second, *political intelligence* is arguably the political equivalent of emotional intelligence: being able to understand and interpret the interests, values, desires and motivations of others who are acting in a political context, formal or informal, and being able to work with and influence political currents, with a clear understanding of the formal and informal rules but also a capacity to shape these. Third, *organisational mobilisation* is a critical capability: the ability, not only to read and analyse conditions, but also to influence others in ways that achieve substantial change in the local authority, i.e. influencing officers as well as members to engage in cultural as well as other aspects of change.

What is also interesting is that some of these capabilities are learnt on the job – through being an elected member and through being a leader. The skills of strategic direction and political intelligence are honed, not only through maturity, but also through work as a senior member. These are acquired skills and this finding has important implications for the development and support of political leaders, as it suggests that they need the opportunities to learn from their experience; they cannot simply be selected as 'good leaders'. This also resonates with some of the themes contained within the recent Green Paper, *Vibrant Local Leadership* (ODPM, 2005), which argues for the need to identify and develop skills of political leaders. This research goes some way to filling the gap of understanding about skills, set in the context

of constraints and opportunities of the organisational and political context.

Rethinking effective leadership

The final set of conclusions focuses on the nature of effective leadership. We drew a distinction in Chapter 1 between strong leadership, which can be defined in terms of the scope of the power base and/or the proactive, individualistic exploitation of that power base, and effective leadership, which reflects the ability to interweave political and organisational agendas in a way that helps to steer the authority towards high performance. Effective local authority leadership can be characterised, in our view, by the ability to achieve synergy between two separate agendas – the political and the managerial. It involves the capacity to create a culture within the authority where the managerial requirements for ‘good performance’ can be synthesised with the political priorities set by the party or parties in power. It involves the ability to develop a clear and mutually acceptable division of labour between members and officers, and a stable climate of member–officer relations. Effective political leadership delivers the political side of this equation, effective managerial leadership the other.

It is clear from the case study and the WPLQ material that *the possession of a wider range of formal powers, as in the mayoral option, does not necessarily result in the proactive individualistic exploitation of those powers*, i.e. leaders with a strong power base do not necessarily behave as strong leaders. Indeed, *strong leadership in the behavioural sense – proactive, individualistic, high profile – can develop without a strong power*

base (indeed, sometimes without the advantage of formal leadership position per se). Nor is strong individualistic leadership necessarily effective leadership, in the sense of sustaining high performance, member motivation and good member–officer relations. Such outcomes can be and are achieved in situations where leadership is explicitly shared or operates on a collective basis. Effective leadership does not appear to correlate with mayoral status, full-time commitment or charismatic, individualistic leadership behaviour. It is as likely to be found in hung authorities as in those in majority control.

There is perhaps an implication here that, if the Government’s highest priority is ‘improving performance’, as assessed by CPA scores, it needs to pay little, if any, attention to strengthening leadership by structural means, such as encouraging the spread of mayoral options and strong, individually visible and accountable leaders.

The Government’s recent publication *Vibrant Local Leadership* (ODPM, 2005) continues to emphasise the merits of ‘strong’ leadership. Our research shows that this vision is too narrow and inappropriate to the overall aim of improving leadership within local government. It is based on a misleading and unhelpful interpretation of the term ‘strong leadership’ seen in isolation from the variety of contexts and leadership responses required in the field. The debate needs to move beyond such oversimplification to a concern with what constitutes *effective local government leadership* and to examine the complex interplay between structures, contexts and capabilities, with a recognition of the legitimate diversity of political leadership.

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Appendix: Methods

In this research, we have used a range of methods of data collection, both qualitative (e.g. interviews, workshops, documents) and quantitative (e.g. the Warwick Political Leadership Questionnaire or WPLQ), but both largely within an interpretive framework.

The research has been developed using the following data sources.

- 1 Case studies of nine local authorities in England and Wales (eight English and one Welsh) to reflect a diverse range of authorities in terms of political arrangements, political control and culture, size and type of authority. The cases have been selected to explore the varieties of contexts and tasks of political leadership, rather than as being typical, which would not be possible with such a small number. However, the case studies are in-depth and intensive – interviews with a range of stakeholders both inside and outside the local authority.
- 2 Interviews and visits in a further seven local authorities to supplement and extend the findings gained from the intensive case studies, in particular to gain knowledge of a wider set of authorities with mayoral arrangements and the one authority with a leader and city manager.
- 3 Completion of the Warwick Political Leadership Questionnaire (WPLQ) by the leading members in each of the nine case study authorities. The WPLQ was sent to the leader or mayor and all members of the cabinet or equivalent senior group that steers policy and strategy in the authority – for example, senior members with portfolios working with the mayor, or senior members working as part of a joint administration or as part of the explicit decision-making body of a council under no overall control. In total, 47 elected members completed the WPLQ, out of 73 to whom it was sent. (Some questionnaires were returned after analysis and so are not included in this report, although individuals received personal feedback reports, as promised.) This is a response rate of 67 per cent. Two authorities were not able to return many questionnaires because of changes in office (Brighton and Hove, Charnwood) and two authorities produced too few returns for analysis. Therefore, we have concentrated our analysis on the five authorities where there was a high return rate. In these authorities, 36 out of 48 Questionnaires have been returned, which is a response rate of 75 per cent.
- 4 We have also analysed the WPLQ national database with responses already collected prior to this research on 201 elected members from more than 60 local authorities in England and Wales. The responses are from elected members in all roles, i.e. leaders and mayors, cabinet members, scrutiny chairs and panel members, regulatory committee members and so-called ‘backbench’ members. The profile of member demographics is typical of members nationally, compared with the most recent census survey in England and Wales (IDeA, 2002). We analysed these data to provide information about differences between members in senior roles – i.e. leader, elected mayor or executive – and all other roles across a range of variables. Analysis of differences was undertaken using a technique

called analysis of variance and statistically significant differences are reported at the $p \leq 0.05$ level. This cut-off for significance means that we can be reasonably certain that the differences are 'real' differences and have not occurred by chance.

- 5 Workshops with elected members about the conceptual basis and design of the research (early workshop) or emerging findings (two later workshops). The first workshop took place at the annual conference of the Warwick University Local Authorities Research Consortium in January 2003 and was a two-hour session. The second took place with leaders/mayors, or their nominated representative, at Warwick University over a day. (Also present was the Director of the IDeA Leadership Academy and a representative of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.) The third was a session with the Leadership Academy, during a development module on political leadership, and the group consisted of a range of elected members from across England.

Case studies

Case studies are a research approach, containing a range of methods (Hartley, 2004). In this research, our case study approach included the following.

- 1 Interviews with leaders or mayors in all authorities.
- 2 Interviews with other senior elected members in all authorities. This consisted of all or most cabinet members, in most cases opposition leaders and, in some cases, those members

involved in key roles in authorities with no overall control.

- 3 Interviews with senior managers – the chief executive in every authority and a range of senior officers, for example, head of policy, head of key services.
- 4 Interviews with external stakeholders, for example, partners in the private, public and/or voluntary sector.
- 5 Analysis of documentation about the authority, for example, CPA report, strategy and planning documents, manifestos, etc.
- 6 In some authorities, we were able to observe meetings, for example, by attending a council meeting or a meeting of the cabinet.
- 7 We tracked some critical incidents across the period of the research in some cases.

We visited each of the nine major case study authorities on two occasions with an interval of nine months between visits. This enabled the researchers to track political leadership, not as a snapshot but as an ongoing set of challenges and tasks.

The seven shorter case studies consisted of visits and interviews with the leader or mayor, and chief executive or city manager. These investigations are, inevitably, more circumscribed but have the value of extending the work to a wider range of settings, especially in mayoral constitutional arrangements.

Each set of interview notes was written up by the interviewer and circulated to the research team. The team held a number of meetings to explore key themes arising from the research and to look, not only for patterns in the data, but also for situations that did not meet the

emerging theme, in order to ensure that both disconfirming and confirming data were discussed.

Use and interpretation of the WPLQ

The WPLQ is both a research and a member development instrument, used here in research but with reports giving feedback to all who participated in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) study. The WPLQ has been designed and developed on the basis of systematic and detailed research over a number of years with a wide range of elected members from England and Wales.

The Questionnaire is based on a model of political leadership that takes into account the following.

- How the elected member 'reads' the *context* they are working in.
- What *challenges* or tasks elected members are prioritising at the moment.
- What *capabilities* (skills and attributes) the elected member needs to be effective as a political leader and democratic representative.

The JRF research used Version 1 of the WPLQ, which is a self-report version with 187 items: 27 questions on context, aggregated into scales; 52 items on challenges, aggregated into scales; 93 items on capabilities, aggregated into ten scales. Since this research, Version 2 of the WPLQ has been launched with a shorter and more focused self-report version and a 360-degree feedback givers' version. (We mention both versions here to avoid any confusion across different publications.) Hartley and Morgan-

Thomas (2003) undertook detailed multivariate statistical analyses of the construction and scale properties of the WPLQ, and it is satisfactory for use in research.

It might be argued that the WPLQ use in the case studies is based on small numbers.

However, its use is justified on several grounds. First, the majority of cabinet, or equivalent, members completed the WPLQ – for example, eight out of ten, six out of seven – and this gives us some confidence in presenting the aggregated profile for the senior political leadership grouping. Second, we are dealing here not with a sample but with a population for each of the six authorities. In other words, in examining the results of, say, Kent, we are not trying to generalise the results about Kent to county councils in general but, rather, trying to understand the contexts and capabilities of *this* particular leadership at *this* particular time, and to use the data in an idiographic way to illustrate and explore features of political leadership alongside the data from the qualitative interviews. The focus is on triangulation and interpretation.

By contrast, the analysis of the UK database, (which excludes data collected through the case studies), can take a statistical approach aiming to explore significant differences across types of leader and local authority *as a whole*.

It is not a feasible operation to combine all of the WPLQ profiles of the executive members in the nine case studies to examine aggregate responses. This is because such an aggregation is not a meaningful unit; the case studies were not chosen to represent 'typical' or representative local authorities, but rather to explore a range of constitutional arrangements. In this analysis, although the collection of data

is quantitative, it is being used and interpreted in a primarily qualitative way, in that the profiles are triangulated with the data obtained from interviews, to assess the capabilities,

contexts and challenges as reported by the senior political leadership. Separate analysis shows that political leaders are more likely to underrate than overrate their skills.

