

Making Community Leadership Real

An NLGN publication

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Acknowledgements

This New Local Government Network (NLGN) report, written up by Kiran Dhillon, Council Relationship Manager and Anna Randle, Head of Policy, reflects the themes of a discussion at a 24 hour 'Policy Summit' hosted by NLGN in December 2004. It should not be assumed that all participants at the summit (including NLGN attendees) agree with all the statements made within this report.

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Preface

Everyone is talking about Community Leadership. Developed out of debates about 'New Localism' – the rebalancing of power from the centre to the local within a framework of national minimum standards – this new role for local government attempts to capture the unique legitimacy and potential of local government to deliver real local outcomes.

The debate about Community Leadership signifies a shift in the local government agenda. NLGN believes that central government is listening to ideas about how the limitations of centralism in achieving core policy objectives might be addressed in partnership with councils. Exciting new policies have emerged – Local Area Agreements in particular, building on earlier progress made by Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Public Service Agreements.

NLGN organised this discussion because we wanted to ask senior thinkers from within local government – Leaders and Chief Executives – as well as a few individuals from central government and other key agencies, what they thought Community Leadership means, and what will be required to develop it further. As this account of the discussion reveals, there was much encouraging agreement on core aspects of the role and the changes which might be needed for councils to develop it further.

Since the discussion took place, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) has published papers from its 10 Year Vision exercise which explore many ideas also integral to our discussion. This indicates further space for building a consensus around the future role of local government, and a debate in which NLGN believes local government should be an active and vocal partner.

We consider the Community Leadership role as something councils should take seriously. It builds on their unique and overarching democratic legitimacy, it offers them influence over a wider range of public services than they are directly responsible for and it strengthens their accountability and offers the chance to really prioritise local needs.

In addition, policy ideas such as the building of new neighbourhood governance structures and increased emphasis on citizen empowerment, offer councils new opportunities to build this role further. Through close contact with citizens and their needs, councils have a legitimacy to exercise influence and work in partnership with other bodies.

New freedoms are likely to be needed to meet these challenges, all of which is considered in this report. Mechanisms and structures for ensuring partnership working, engagement and joining-up is done correctly, might need more development. It may require some high level signals about the fundamental value of local democracy and local government. But in our discussion, it was agreed that Community Leadership should be central to the way we think about local government.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This paper is a summary of a 24 hour policy summit organised by NLGN in December 2004. The participants included senior council Leaders and Chief Executives drawn from authorities across the CPA spectrum; individuals from the key Whitehall departments and agencies including ODPM, HM Treasury, IDeA, and the Audit Commission; and representatives of the private sector. We were also joined for part of the discussion by two local partner speakers from Cannock Chase Primary Care Trust (PCT) and Shropshire Divisional Police Headquarters.

Community Leadership is being widely used to describe the key and unique value that councils can bring to their localities. As the only over-arching locally elected body, councils have a uniquely democratic role within the locality. In this capacity they are increasingly being asked to perform a visible Community Leadership role, focusing on bringing partners together, joining up local services, exercising influence in developing a shared local agenda and high quality local services, engaging with citizens and creating a vision for their localities.

Local authorities have, to varying degrees, always performed a form of Community Leadership. However, with councils now being asked to view this as their fundamental role, there are questions about what a strengthened Community Leadership role really means for local government in practice, and for development of its role in the future. Opinions vary in terms of the impact this has on our conceptions of local government as a service deliverer, and there remains suspicion from some quarters about the ultimate motives behind the ideas associated with it. Those who value the direct service delivery role of councils question the change of emphasis and see plots to trick local government into accepting a newly denigrated settlement. Certainly the nebulous quality of the term 'Community Leadership' leaves room for doubt in a way that talking about services arguably does not.

There have been some indications of central government's vision with regard to this. The speech given by Rt Hon Charles Clarke MP, in October 2004 (then Secretary of State for Education) gave some pointers which provided much needed clarity for some in local government, while instilling fear in others:

"Let me face you quite directly and say that your role is not (for the most part, in my view) concerned with directly providing services. It will increasingly be about commissioning and working with and through others – through the voluntary community organisations, private companies, co-operatives – whatever it may happen to be. You face huge and critical leadership challenges – of vision and strategy; of joining and empowering; of supporting and training others. Joining up services and maximising linkages, increasing choice for users of services. Getting people to work in partnership – difficult though that often is. Spotting and addressing weaknesses; filling gaps".

"Again, I argue, a role that plays your historic strengths, your role as community leaders to your fundamental local democratic legitimacy. But, at the same time, leading operational freedom - the freedom to run things, using a variety of partners in the public, private and voluntary sectors to deliver day-to-day services and so offer local people choice and quality".¹

This statement takes place against a backdrop of government thinking which suggests that perceptions of local government and its capacity to help deliver on key government agendas may be in the ascendancy. Through continuous improvement and inspection regimes such as Comprehensive Performance Assessment, local government has demonstrated that at its best, it is worthy of the trust of citizens, partners and government. With growing consensus around the New Localism agenda,

¹ Speech by Rt Hon Charles Clarke to National Social Services Conference, 20th October 2004, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Whithall appears to have realised that the creation of thriving communities, responsive services and engaged citizens in our localities cannot be achieved simply through central command and control.

A range of new policies, pilots and powers for councils testify to a progressive rebalance of power from the centre to localities, and an enhanced role for councils in determining and delivering on their own local priorities. Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), the Power of Well Being, Second Generation Local Public Service Agreements (LPSA 2), and most recently Local Area Agreements (LAAs) have all been introduced to this effect.

In addition, the current 10 Year Vision debate within the ODPM, which is looking at fundamental questions concerning the role of local government in modern communities, has also created a window of opportunity to influence the agenda. Papers published in January 2005 appear to outline a clear commitment to developing the role of councils in leading their communities and engaging with citizens.

This all amounts to the possible opening of new space in central government with regard to local government's role. The agenda at NLGN's Policy Summit was designed to help a selected number of senior thinkers and practitioners flesh out the concept of Community Leadership, defining it clearly and working through some of the issues involved in delivering this vision of local government. It aimed to support local government in seizing this opportunity, actively engaging in the discussions around its future role and legitimacy, and demonstrating its capacity to help meet the challenges facing local communities. Key questions included:

- How can we define Community Leadership?
- What do councils need in order to play this role?
- Where should the line be drawn between influence and service delivery?
- Are there services the council should not deliver directly?
- Will Community Leadership make sense to the public?
- Is there a need to develop scrutiny?
- What are the implications for inspection and central accountability?

The Policy Summit aimed to achieve some clarity about this changing emphasis on local government's role with those who are engaged in making a reality of it on a day-to-day basis: local government politicians and officers, together with key policy makers.

Chapter 2 Why are we considering Community Leadership now?

In the previous chapter we considered a number of contextual drivers towards Community Leadership, including recent policy initiatives, and new space within central government to influence the agenda with regard to local government's role. However, it is also important to reflect that the growing profile of the Community Leadership role in policy takes place against a background of modernisation in local government and its development since the introduction of the Local Government Act 2000.

That legislation made many new demands of local government, including political restructuring, new roles for councillors and the introduction of scrutiny arrangements, with the aim of improving service delivery and accountability, and streamlining council decision-making processes. This has taken place against a tough performance regime, including the introduction of CPA, new targets and centrally-driven schemes and programmes.

Although some councils have a long way to go, and the emphasis on performance and improvement is certainly going to remain, there is a sense that local government has made big improvements. Within CPA terms, the inspection results for December 2004 demonstrated that two thirds of upper tier councils are now in the 'good' or 'excellent' categories.

However, the Government still has a number of key problems it wants to address. Step changes in some services have not occurred, including many that are outside the direct delivery remit of local government. Many improvements are to be found on the margins between different agencies, and a silo-driven approach cannot address this.

There remains a democratic and accountability deficit at a local level, where people still feel disengaged and lack the levers necessary to effect change or influence local outcomes.

And finally, many of the more intangible changes in our civic society which the Government seeks to encourage – the building of social capital and community capacity, the achievement of social mobility, the creation of 'voice' and 'choice' for citizens - are proving beyond the reach of centrally-driven initiatives.

It is perhaps helpful therefore in considering the value of the Community Leadership role for local government, to begin by asking ourselves what the problems are that the Community Leadership role might help to solve?

In other words, what are the issues that we are trying to address in developing local government's role? And thinking strategically in terms of local government's case to central government: what are the priorities for central government which local government can help deliver?

Service delivery

Firstly, central government is concerned about the improvement of service delivery within our localities and creating genuinely responsive services. Government has experienced frustration that target setting and initiatives driven from the centre have not produced fast step changes in service outcomes.

In addition, the nature of our localities has fundamentally changed. Local government does not have a monopoly on service delivery, and in any one locality there are a huge number of single service organisations involved at different spatial levels and from different sectors: Foundation Hospitals, PCTs, schools, the police service and a range of other local agencies.

However, the problems that citizens have do not neatly fit service boundaries. Solving problems and achieving real improvements for citizens may therefore involve local co-operation between a number of different service providers. Hence, as public service agencies concentrate on their own agendas and targets, there becomes a very real need for an organisation at the local level

to pull together local partners and join-up these services to ensure responsive services which are based around the needs of local citizens.

Local government's potential within this context has become increasingly clear as an organisation which has an interest in outcomes across the whole locality, regardless of service boundaries.

Accountability

In performing this function of joining-up services, local government can help address another important issue around accountability at the local level. With a multitude of different agencies and organisations delivering different pieces of the local service jigsaw, there are important governance questions raised about accountability to citizens and users.

The way in which institutions are structured and services are delivered makes little sense to the citizen and user, and there is often confusion about which institution is responsible for what service and accountabilities become blurred. However, it is important that when something goes wrong, citizens have somebody to hold to account for the services within their locality. There is therefore, a very real need for clear and transparent accountability at the local level.

Central government knows there is a need to empower citizens through ensuring service delivery agencies and government are accountable to them, and that they have levers over them should they fail. Councils are well placed to provide wider accountability at the local level. They play a central role in bringing partners together and joining-up services, and they are the body with over-arching democratic legitimacy through local elections.

Citizen engagement

Finally, there is currently much focus within central government on the problem of citizen disengagement. Government is committed to the principles of building a civil society, where people feel that they have a voice and some input into the services they receive. However, in empowering citizens they need to address the vacuum of trust in politicians and the disengagement of vast numbers of people.

It is an inescapable fact that what matters most to people is their locality: the area in which they live. Therefore it is here that greater community involvement and engagement can be built, where the needs and aspirations of the local community can be heard and understood. It may also be easier to engage citizens in local issues and decision-making about services that matter to them. Hence, there are considerable opportunities at this local level to address these key issues of citizen engagement and empowerment.

So it is with reference to these problems of driving service improvements, improving accountability at the local level and addressing citizen disengagement that we turn to local government to provide part of the solution. In doing so however, we must look beyond councils' traditional roles as service provider, and articulate a new and central Community Leadership role for local government.

Chapter 3 What does Community Leadership mean?

We have established that central government cannot address key priorities without effective local government. Creating sustainable communities, places where people want to work and live – now and in the future – requires a new responsibility for local government to push beyond their traditional service delivery role and fulfil their role as Community Leaders.

The discussion at NLGN's Policy Summit produced the following ideas about why local authorities are well positioned to play this role; what Community Leadership will mean to them in terms of both the impact on their functions and responsibilities; and what tools they might need to carry out the role.

Conditions

The Community Leadership role of local government is founded on its **democratic legitimacy and accountability** as the **Primary locally elected body**. As such local government has a mandate to represent and act on behalf of the whole community, and to think across service silos and boundaries. Also as a local level body, local authorities have a **unique 'sense of place'**, of a distinct geographical area. It is these roots in the locality that put them in a unique position with regard to local communities.

Representing local communities

Local authorities have an over-arching representative role in an area which no other body can provide. In performing a Community Leadership role, councils can use this representative function to **articulate the views of, and lead, the local community**. This involves **listening** to the local community, **ascertaining** what they want and **brokering** between the different views.

Local authorities must then **make choices** and **articulate these wishes through actions**. Local authorities orchestrate and bring coherence to an area but should not exclude disagreement. Consensus will not always be possible. At such points, democratic legitimacy enables a council to make **difficult choices in the interests of the long-term social, economic and environmental well-being of the area**. Councils can **design and articulate a vision and strategy** for the community and the future of the area and its communities.

Councillors have a key role to play in Community Leadership at different levels. They provide an essential **local knowledge**, usually living in the areas they represent (unlike many officers). They must build strong and close **local relationships**; ensuring local needs are represented at higher levels. Community Leadership is about political leadership as well as managerial competency.

Engaging communities

By performing a representative role through listening and articulating citizens' views, local government can play an important role in **engaging local people in the political process**. Community Leadership is about creating opportunities to render **greater community empowerment, galvanising** people and **creating trust** at the local level.

Essentially the council's Community Leadership role should involve creation of a **community architecture**, through which **citizens can be involved in decision-making through a dialogue** with their elected representatives, articulating what they want and **exercising their influence**, possibly through very local structures such as neighbourhood governance or area committees.

Building social capital

Through engaging with and empowering citizens and communities, local government has the potential to help **build social**

capital by creating a situation where people have a voice and stake in improvement of their local areas, and where they feel that if they want to influence something then they are able to do so.

Responsive services

Whilst most agree that councils need to continue to deliver at least some services in order to maintain credibility and legitimacy, it is also recognised that there must be a shift from emphasis on direct service delivery, to create the space and capacity to perform the developing Community Leadership role.

However, whilst not necessarily providing or even purchasing the services, councils are uniquely placed to play the important role of **ensuring that services are delivered to a high standard**, by **bringing local partners together, holding them to account** and **ensuring that services in a locality are joined-up**. As a body with over-arching legitimacy, accountability for services in a locality ultimately lies at local government's door. When something goes wrong in the police or health services it is to the council that citizens turn. People do need a route of accountability when they are dissatisfied with services and that is where elected representatives can play an important role – as a **lynchpin** in the system – **promoting good practice and mediating when things go wrong**.

Influencing a wider set of services

A fundamental facet of the Community Leadership role must therefore be the **capacity to influence local partners** and agencies and **act to solve problems** that arise. This role demands that councils **extend their reach to influence issues and organisations beyond their direct sphere of control and responsibility**. In extending beyond their core services and networking, influencing, persuading people, councils can further build their legitimacy and ownership within the community.

It was agreed that local partners do recognise that the local authority has a special role within a locality that derives from their representative role. Partners realise that it is important to have a good working relationship with the council. They also recognise that real leadership from the local authority can be a great advantage in terms of ensuring a high standard of service delivery.

What does Community Leadership look like?

We have described above many features of Community Leadership, all of which refer to the 'extra' beyond core service delivery within a locality. We also asked our participants for direct and tangible examples of what Community Leadership might mean within individual localities, some examples of which are listed below. Core to this discussion however, was an agreement that the activities conducted under a banner of 'Community Leadership' will, to some extent, differ for each locality, reflecting local needs and circumstance. Examples included:

- deciding not to licence a new local casino because of concerns about alcohol misuse or disorder and the wider impact this might have on the social and environmental well-being of the area
- long term planning for a likely change in the local economy – for example, closure of a dominant local industry and the impact that this will have on local employment
- providing a point of contact in the event of an international disaster
- funding the cleaning up of land or space owned by other organisations in order to improve local liveability
- freeing up land owned by the council for development by others in tune with local plans and vision
- using rural mobile libraries as Post Offices, in response to permanent closures of the latter

How is Community Leadership different?

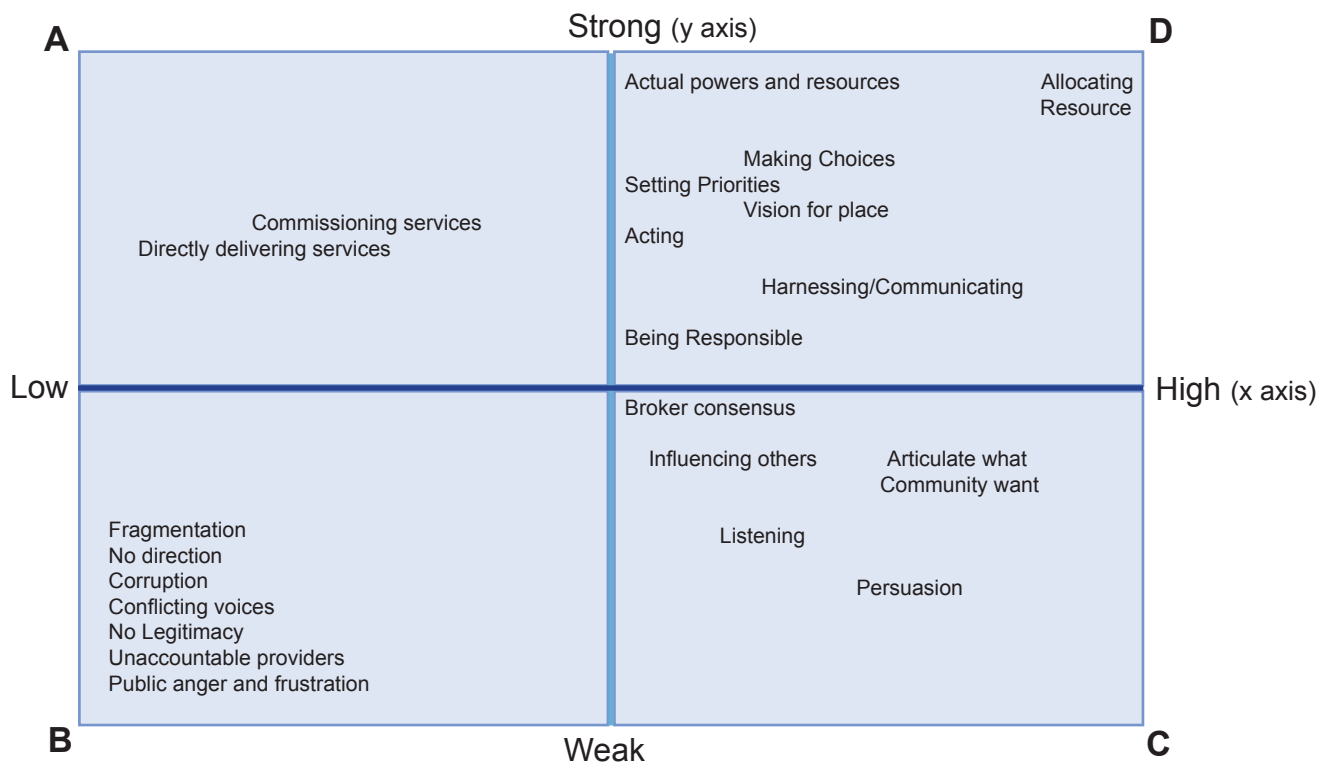
In thinking about how the Community Leadership role of local government might be differentiated from the traditional role of local government, participants in the discussion created the diagram below (Fig 1) – which aims to illustrate the different

emphasis that can be placed on the two functions, and where councils might sit within the spectrum of responsibility and accountability.

This is in no way intended to reflect an exhaustive illustration of councils' roles, and indeed provoked a fair amount of discussion in its own right. However, it does usefully suggest a fairly simple way of thinking about the two functions and the relationship between them.

In the diagram, the vertical axis represents the actual powers that local government has at its disposal, including control over resources. The horizontal axis represents the legitimate capacity of local government to exert influence over the resources and outcomes secured by other agencies in the interests of the local community. The horizontal axis might therefore arguably be seen to represent the Community Leadership axis of local government.

Fig 1



X axis = capacity of local government to influence

Y axis = direct power and responsibility of local government

The functions that are plotted in the top-left quadrant 'A', illustrate local government's role as a delivery arm: responsible for service delivery. Whilst the power of councils to directly deliver services is considerable, their capacity to influence a wider set of outcomes is fairly low. The roles outlined on the right-hand side of the diagram, quadrants 'C' and 'D', are examples of councils performing Community Leadership, whether or not they govern resources.

This diagram is helpful in illustrating the difference between the traditional service delivery role and the Community Leadership role. A council can be an excellent provider and deliverer of services, but this does not necessarily mean that they are performing Community Leadership; engaging with communities and partners, creating and articulating long term vision and balancing different interests. This type of council would therefore be placed in the top left hand corner of quadrant 'A'. An organisation with a largely strategic and influencing role but little direct service delivery, for example a Regional Development

Agency (RDA) or perhaps even the Greater London Authority (GLA) to some extent, might be placed in the top left hand corner of quadrant 'D'. A 'failing' council would be in the bottom left hand corner of quadrant 'B'.

The roles in quadrant 'D' were seen by participants in the discussion as the most desirable within the context of local government's role and Community Leadership: where the local authority has the necessary powers to secure its own high quality service outcomes, and is also capable of using its powers and legitimacy to influence outcomes in a wider range of areas. However, it was also recognised that the roles and responsibilities of local authorities would vary with respect to the different service areas. Hence the positioning of local authorities within the diagram would be different for each council and for each service area.

Community Leadership is a much more ambitious role for local authorities than traditional service delivery. It requires not only high standards in these 'basics' in order to build legitimacy, but also development of the ability to influence others, work in partnership and take a wider view.

Do councils need to deliver services?

The question the diagram above arguably raises is whether councils need to be able to deliver some services themselves in order to be able to provide Community Leadership.

As discussed at the start of the report, some within local government have seen Community Leadership as a plot by which central government might remove direct responsibilities from councils and leave them lacking in core accountability as a result.

The participants in this discussion were in agreement that local government needed to have direct responsibility for some services in order to be able to deliver Community Leadership. However, these might not necessarily include all the services currently delivered by councils, and equally might include some others not currently delivered. Responsibility for services could also imply commissioning and partnership working, and other ways of ensuring that a high quality service is delivered.

Most fundamental however, is getting the balance of levers right in order to enable councils to play an influencing role within the locality. We turn to these questions in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 What powers do councils need to develop their Community Leadership role?

Discussion at NLGN's Policy Summit arrived at a basic level of agreement both about what the notion of Community Leadership should mean in terms of the responsibilities and functions of local authorities and what it should accomplish in localities. However, the conceptual notion that has been outlined does not necessarily fit squarely with the experiences of Councils. The real world of local authorities is often challenging and argumentative, and in order to fully realize the role of Community Leadership that has been described, we need to reflect upon what tools might be required by local government to make this vision a reality.

On the one hand it is suggested that local government must earn its own credibility, and thus leverage over local partners, stemming from the efficient delivery of its own services and from performing the job of a local authority well. However, in order to wield influence over local partners and meet the challenging demands of Community Leadership, local government will need to have some more formal leverage beyond its earned legitimacy and beyond its current powers in the form of additional freedoms from central government. If Community Leadership is about genuinely responding to the expressed needs of local citizens and communities, councils themselves – and their partners – need to be able to act locally.

Financial resources

For councils to fulfil their potential of creating and promoting a vision for the people in the locality, greater autonomy is required over the spending of money in their area. Local authorities can only make and act upon decisions for their communities if they have the financial autonomy to make these decisions a reality.

This means an end to much ring-fencing of central government money, and more control for local authorities over resource allocation. This financial freedom will permit them to spend according to the priorities of their locality.

If this is the case, it may also be necessary to examine how local government is financed. Would it be beneficial for councils to be given the power to raise local tax so that they have clear legitimacy to decide how money is spent, or is it enough to give them freedom over how to spend the money? It was felt by participants that the Lyons Review of local government funding should lead to greater financial autonomy for councils.

However, it is not simply about financial autonomy for councils. To achieve genuinely joined-up local outcomes, there also needs to be greater financial freedom for other local partners. Money needs to be put behind partnership working by all stakeholders.

It was agreed in the discussion that Local Area Agreements (LAAs) are a very important step in the right direction and that the (recently announced) pilots should be radically tested, by both councils and central government.

Aligning priorities

Increased financial freedom must also be awarded alongside the freedom for partners to align priorities and programmes of action. Local Strategic Partnership (LSPs), Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) and LAAs all move in this direction, and there has been much progress in the partnership working between councils and their local partners. Yet problems do still exist.

In particular, local agencies with central government accountability, such as the police and PCTs, have their own centrally determined targets, which sometimes conflict with those of the local authority, as well as local needs. In the face of a myriad of competing targets from central government, partnership working can be difficult. Government needs to allow proper alignment of the targets and activities of agencies in a locality so that partners are working for a common purpose. This would greatly

improve the capacity of local authorities to perform the Community Leadership role.

Scrutiny powers

Scrutiny offers councils an important lever over other agencies in safeguarding the well-being of the local community. However, although there are some examples of councils beginning to exercise real influence through scrutiny for instance, through their current health scrutiny powers in many councils it has not become fully embedded in some councils, arguably at the expense of a focus on services and performance.

In order to articulate and respond to the needs of local communities, councils might need to be given formal scrutiny powers over all local agencies and locally provided services to enable them to hold other providers to account.

Furthermore, the scrutiny function could also be backed up with powers that allow and compel local authorities to trigger action to address failing services in their locality.

Regulatory powers

It was agreed that powers such as Licensing are helpful new levers to local government in performing a Community Leadership role, although there are clearly challenges too on delivering on this new agenda. Regulatory powers such as these in a broader range of areas might also be considered.

Strengthened definition of 'Community Leadership'

It was suggested by many participants in the discussion that although local authorities and their partners do understand the foundation on which councils' Community Leadership role is based, it may be that it could be strengthened and placed more at the heart of local government's role.

Perhaps this requires a stronger legislative definition than currently exists, or that councils are subject to a duty of well-being, rather than simply a power. This will help councils prioritise their activity locally and extend their remit; provide clearer lines of accountability for partners and citizens; and provide a stronger marker of central government's intentions towards, and belief in, local government than to date.

The ODPM papers published at the end of January (after NLGN's Policy Summit took place) also suggested that there needed to be: "development of the community leadership role of councils who have a key role ... focused on networking, influencing through partnerships, building on governance arrangements for LSPs and Local Area Agreements".² Within the context of this discussion, such a move, perhaps embedded in legislation, would be very supportive to councils in developing this agenda.

² Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005) *Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity*, London: ODPM

Chapter 5 What other issues may need to be resolved?

Beyond the additional powers and tools that local government requires, there are also some barriers currently in place that may need to be considered more fully. For example, what obstacles might be created by central government to local authorities acting as Community Leaders?

Not all of the issues outlined below were finally agreed upon by all participants in the Policy Summit, and some may consider further consideration. This is merely a pointer to the types of questions that may need to be addressed in future in order to develop local government's Community Leadership role.

Role of inspections

If local authorities' main role is to act as Community Leaders, then the role of inspection must be understood and reflected in the inspection regimes of both local government and its partners. If inspection is to continue to be relevant and helpful to local authorities, the Audit Commission will need to design a methodology that adequately assesses Community Leadership and gives room for local variation and decision-making in accordance with priorities. This evaluation is likely to be outcome focussed rather than process-focussed, possibly with reference to some core minimum national standards, but also through assessing whether councils are delivering local priorities in the immediate and longer time.

In addition, there may have to be more joined up inspection across bodies involved in local partnerships, and a greater flexibility in the inspection regimes of other partners to reflect partnership working at the local level.

The Audit Commission has already acknowledged that the Community Leadership role of local authorities should be assessed in inspections, and there are also moves towards joining-up different inspection regimes. It was agreed by participants in the discussion that there are some encouraging signs of progress in the proposals for CPA 2005.

Organisation and Structure

Certain questions left unresolved in relation to the size and structure of councils, have been raised by this debate. If local authorities act as Community Leaders for a local area, then there needs to be some consideration of how their size and structure fit with existing communities. The question of organisation and the capacity for local authorities to act as Community Leaders is particularly pertinent in two-tier areas. If considering the optimum conditions and environment for councils to act as Community Leaders, there may be issues for local and central government to address about organisation.

Multiple Community Leaders

Whilst many local partners do recognise the earned legitimacy of councils, they express justifiable concern that they should not be dismissed just because they are not democratically elected. It was agreed that this discussion should not imply that local government has a monopoly on Community Leadership. It may be appropriate for other local agencies to take the lead on issues in some cases, and it should not always fall to local authorities to act as leaders just because they are democratically elected.

Community Leadership can therefore also be about creating an environment where other leadership roles develop and the local authority steps back. In some localities there may be other champions of the area whom people identify with, and in this instance there will need to be a consideration about how local authorities relate to these other leaders.

Partnership working

Another potential barrier identified at the Policy Summit was that, in some cases, local agencies do not actually perceive their local authorities' legitimacy to act as Community Leaders. Local partners, particularly in the voluntary and community sectors, may feel that councils do not adequately understand or respond to them. This breakdown in partnership working means that

local partners do not always recognise councils' legitimacy to act as a Community Leader and to exercise influence over local agencies. Therefore, a committed effort needs to be put into partnership working and building good working relationships with all local partners.

Citizen engagement

For councils to legitimise their claim to represent the whole local community, they must lead the way on citizen engagement in order to genuinely understand diverse community needs. Success with engagement varies across different councils, with some making this a higher priority than others. To perform effective Community Leadership however, councils are likely to have to work harder in this area.

Devolution to neighbourhoods and area committees/area forums

It was agreed in the discussion that the progress of councils on building more localised mechanisms for engagement and service delivery was, to date, uneven. However, this local and neighbourhood agenda has an important role to play in the context of Community Leadership, because it enables councils to work more locally, ensuring more responsive services and understanding community needs, and also because it can help achieve community well-being through empowerment of citizens.

High level, strategic Community Leadership is not at the expense of local community leadership by councillors and others, rather it is predicated on this local connection. Councils may need to focus on developing governance below the Town Hall as part of their Community Leadership role.

Capacity of councillors and officers

Community Leadership presents many challenges to politicians and officers. Councils need to be prepared to 'let go' in some areas, being more relaxed and innovative about ownership and delivery. They also need to be prepared to move into new areas of activity and to take on new responsibilities.

Politicians – in particular council leaders and elected mayors – need to provide high quality, visible and accountable leadership. All councillors will need a skill-set that involves building effective local partnerships, understanding the local community and building suitable governance arrangements.

Equally, talented and able officers are also needed in order to meet these aims in a strategic setting and in ensuring services meet new requirements.

Councillors and officers may need training and support, as well as strong messages from central government in order to build this capacity.

Poorer performing authorities

More broadly, in terms of the capacity of councils to be Community Leaders, there is a question about what will need to be done about poor performing authorities. Participants in the Policy Summit agreed that councils should not necessarily have an automatic entitlement to perform the Community Leadership role because of their democratic legitimacy. Before they can take on this more challenging role they must earn the right and demonstrate their competence by efficiently and effectively delivering the basic and essential services.

Although at the end of 2004, two thirds of upper-tier authorities were rated as 'good' or 'excellent' under CPA, there are still challenges in many councils, and there must be consideration about how to improve the poorer performing authorities before they can begin to take on the Community Leadership role.

Challenges to central government

The challenges in this agenda apply equally to central government as to councils. To genuinely enable local Community Leadership, and the alignment of actions with local priorities, central government needs to address its centralist tendencies and truly allow local discretion. It must trust local government and its partners, within a framework of national minimum standards and expectations. Central government must be brave and really test pilots in new ways of working. We consider this more fully in chapter 6.

Chapter 6 What are the next steps?

Having articulated a Community Leadership role, we now turn to the question of what practical steps can be taken to influence the current agenda in order to achieve this vision.

Given the ODPM 10 Year Vision debates and the general thinking about Community Leadership, it is important for local government and other organisations to take this concept forward and develop a strategy for making their vision a reality.

Changing the mindset of central and local government

We must search for a change in mindset between and within both central and local government. There has been in the past, and remains to some degree, distrust of councils from central government. Local authorities need to respond to central government anxiety and broker the relationship by demonstrating their capacity to deliver Community Leadership by engaging local communities, delivering efficient, responsive services and creating thriving communities.

Conceptually however, we need to be clear that local government should not just be delivering 'for' central government but 'with' it. Whitehall needs to recognise the crucial role that local authorities have in the social, economic and environmental well-being of an area, and display greater trust in their ability and capacity by giving them the freedom and tools to play this role. Central government must also demonstrate a commitment to delivering the freedoms that councils need.

Local government needs to articulate to central government the further powers and resources needed to reinforce their Community Leaders role. These levers could be, as identified in our discussion, in the form of financial freedoms, extended scrutiny powers, or the ability to trigger action from local partners.

It was agreed that central government does have the right to expect local government to sign up to minimum standards – a key tenet of New Localism – but that these should be few and clear. They should be outcome-based rather than process-driven. Although currently there is a shared performance and management framework in the form of LPSAs, there is still too much emphasis on centrally-determined targets. There should be a shift to a few core targets that are centrally-determined, but beyond such minimum standards there should be genuine independence for councils to set their own targets based on local priorities.

This change in mindset between central and local government, and the demand for extra powers and freedoms, will require trust and confidence in the ability in local authorities. Local government must therefore open a dialogue, and offer a compelling and convincing case to central government. What are the immediate ways for local government and other organisations to influence the agenda and current debates?

Strategy: actions to influence the agenda in the short and medium term

- In terms of the ODPM's 5 year plans and 10 year strategy, local authorities should contribute to a policy paper with a harder edged version of Community Leadership
- Local authorities should contribute to the Audit Commission's CPA 2005 consultation to help identify how the Community Leadership role of local authorities should be inspected and evaluated
- Councils should continue to test the limits and existing powers and work through the vehicles that are available to them such as LAAs, LPSAs, LSPs, the Power of Well-Being and Public Service Boards

- Councils must put pressure on central government to roll out the LAAs to all councils and to make them radical
- Local government and other organisations could try and identify the core national minimum standards which could be acceptable to both central and local government, and argue for freedoms outside of these
- Local authorities need to work at understanding what local agencies, business, and the voluntary and community sectors have to offer, in an effort to improve partnership working and to convince them of their ability to act as Community Leaders
- Central government will not hear local government until they convince them of their ability to deliver, so they need to do their job well to demonstrate competence to fill the trust gap. Achievement in delivering services will also build ownership in local communities
- Councils need to communicate the stories on the ground of good community leadership to both central government and local communities. Branding and image development will improve confidence in the ability of local authorities. Organisations such as the LGA and IDeA can help by drawing upon what is working in local authorities and what is not
- Local authorities need to deliver a convincing story about how to raise the game of poor performing authorities who are not delivering. The Audit Commission helps to mitigate the worst, whilst organisations such as IDeA play important role in improving performance. Councils also have an important sharing and mentoring role to play
- A dialogue needs to be established between central and local government, whereby councils can communicate and articulate their needs. They must focus on the issues that matter to central government, using their language about outcomes and relate this to how local government can work to help deliver solutions to problems in localities, for example building citizen engagement and social capital, delivering responsive services

Chapter 7 Conclusion

In our discussion, it became clear that the concept of Community Leadership is something which has real meaning for local government practitioners.

In essence, it is about the unique and overarching democratic legitimacy of local government to articulate and work towards a shared vision for a locality, in partnership with communities and other agencies.

Beyond this straightforward definition however, it is clear that there is also something harder to define about the Community Leadership role. It is what the Audit Commission struggles with when attempting to design inspection regimes and methodologies which measure Community Leadership and reward councils for exercising this role. It is what drives citizens to go to the Town Hall to sign a book of condolences after a major tragedy. It is what councillors run up against when local people phone them up to complain about their local GP or train service, only to be told “Sorry, we’re not responsible for that”.

In meeting the complex and diverse needs of modern communities, central government has a ready and willing ally in a tier of government – local government – which already thinks in a cohesive way about the needs of a locality.

This is not to say that all councils are already playing the Community Leadership role fully or testing current powers. But it is to say that there are people there already who want to be able to respond to citizen needs in a joined up manner, which makes sense to local people and priorities.

Community Leadership therefore is also about the ‘added-value’ – the ‘extra’ which councils are uniquely placed to offer. It is not just about excellent services. Many councils deliver excellent services but do not perform the Community Leadership role. It is a role which cannot be played by an organisation which has only a specific service delivery remit. Indeed, it is broader than that. It is about vision, ambition and direction for an area, in the long term and in partnership with citizens and other agencies. It is about direction. It is about filling the gaps between services which make a difference to people’s lives. It is about the long-term well being of an area and a community.

In seeking the answers to the seemingly intractable challenges of public service reform, citizen engagement and building sustainable communities, central government should not underestimate the value of a local tier of democracy. Clearly not all councils have the capacity to deliver Community Leadership now, and it will require changes to their ways of working as well as that of central government. But developing the Community Leadership role of local government and the powers to exercise it, should be at the heart of modern local government.

Appendix

**Attendance list for NLGN 24 hour Policy Summit:
'Making Community Leadership Real'**

Facilitator: Sue Goss, Office for Public Management

Tuesday 30th November – Wednesday 1st December 2004, Weston Park, Shropshire

Leo Boland, Chief Executive, *London Borough of Barnet*

Cllr Peter Box, Leader, *Wakefield Metropolitan District Council*

Tom Carroll, Managing Director Public Sector, *ITNET*

Selina Chen, Senior Policy Analyst, *HM Treasury*

Dan Corry, Director, *NLGN*

Kiran Dhillon, Council Relationship Manager, *NLGN*

John Foster, Chief Executive, *Wakefield Metropolitan District Council*

Sue Goss, Associate Director, *Office for Public Management*

Lucy de Groot, Executive Director, *IDeA*

Cllr Hazel Harding, Leader, *Lancashire County Council*

Warren Hatter, Head of Research Unit, *NLGN*

Paul Johnson, Director of Local Government, *ITNET*

Bob Kerslake, Chief Executive, *Sheffield City Council*

Mark Kleinman, Director of Policy & Strategy Planning, *Audit Commission*

Cllr Pauleen Lane, Deputy Leader, *Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council & NLGN Trustee*

Susan Law, Managing Director, *Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council*

Cllr Richard Leese, Leader, *Manchester City Council*

Mark Mason, Head of LSP Policy Team, *ODPM*

Cllr Simon Milton, Leader, *Westminster City Council*

Ita O'Donovan, Chief Executive, *Stoke-on-Trent City Council*

Cllr Kath Pinnock, Leader, *Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council*

Anna Randle, Head of Policy, *NLGN*

Colin Sinclair, Independent Consultant & *NLGN Trustee*

Jane Scullion, Assistant Chief Executive, *Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council*

Paul Walker, Chief Executive, *Hartlepool Borough Council*

Matthew Warburton, Head of Strategy, *LGA*

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NLGN is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this report as part of our programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners.

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