

FUTURE COUNCILLORS

Where next for local politics?

Edited by Simon Parker and Liam Scott-Smith

With contributions from Guy Clifton, Sir Steve Bullock, Peter Fleming and Catherine Howe.



New Local Government Network (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 its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

In the first two months of 2013, NLGN ran a series of Future Councillors workshops for elected members designed to examine the future for local politics. We combined a scenario planning exercise with presentations from council leaders and other experts. This paper attempts to summarise our workshops for a wider audience. We hope it will spark debate.

This piece of work can be considered as the latest in our series of futures pieces, which has included Future Councils and Anticipating the Future Citizen.

INTRODUCTION

By Simon Parker

There is a raging debate about the future of local government. More or less every aspect of what a council does is up for discussion. But one topic is conspicuous by its absence: the role of local politics. This is peculiar, because politicians are at the heart of local government, providing councils with their very legitimacy. In this paper, we hope to redress the balance and start a new discussion about the future role of elected members.

We often take local politics for granted. Councils spend a huge amount of effort training their officers and improving their services, but make nothing like the same investment in developing their members and increasing turnout. This is a mistake, because we may be at a turning point for the practice of local politics.

English democracy is currently undergoing a profound period of strain. We have all read the headlines about political scandals, falling trust in MPs and rising interest in protest parties. This is the logical conclusion of a democracy in which turnouts have been falling for decades, to the point where we now think it unremarkable for a county councillor to be elected with just 178 votes.

The dramatic budget reductions councils currently face demand a new kind of leadership, focused on engaging the community to make difficult decisions about whether to cut social care, after school clubs or school transport. Councillors must also adapt to a world in which more services are commissioned at arms' length and the easiest way to engage with the council is via a smartphone.

Political theorists argue that we are seeing a move from hierarchical power, in which councillors can use their position to demand that something be done, to a form of networked power in which politicians must work with and through others. Alfred Salter, the Bermondsey councillor of the 1920s, could ask his grateful working class constituents to pay twice as much council tax as their neighbours for a basic health service. His successors chair health and wellbeing boards that possess almost no formal power at all.

This shift is a very real challenge both to politics as a whole, and to the culture and behaviour of individual politicians. Surveys of councillors often come to the unsurprising conclusion that they get into politics to take decisions as part of a group of like-minded representatives. The idea that they are there to share decision-making power with citizens often seems completely counter-intuitive.

Just as importantly, politicians often thrive in conditions of uncertainty and conflict. They enjoy the cut-and-thrust of debate, thrive on opposition and love the chance to express their values through the council. It is not clear how well these political values fit with a local government that has become highly technocratic. The move towards service commissioning cuts councillors out of much day-to-day decision making, while the move towards slicker customer contact centres means that citizens can increasingly resolve their problems directly with the council.

We might well be doing the right thing when we put customer services and citizen outcomes front and centre, but at the same time we risk debasing political language and turning our politicians into little more than elected service managers.

The good news is that there are tools available to councillors which can help them develop new roles, allowing them to thrive in the network. The Labour Party increasingly recognises the importance of grassroots organising, and is encouraging its councillors to become community organisers. Tools like twitter enable politicians to directly communicate with thousands of their constituents instantaneously. The mayor of Newark, Cory Booker, is famous for personally handling complaints online and in real time.

What will the councillors of the future look like? This paper starts with a short futures exercise which explores the styles of political leadership that are likely to emerge by the end of the decade as members grapple with challenges on a scale they have not seen before.

We then move on to explore new avenues for member development. Steve Bullock and Peter Fleming describe the leadership styles that the next generation of councillors will need to adopt: outcomes focused, humble and focused on the long term as well as coping with immediate events. It is often argued that

councillors are more empowered at a time of cuts, but Guy Clifton argues powerfully that this is not always the case. Members must not just accept the conclusions that officers offer up, but instead move upstream and start shaping the council's budget on day one.

Finally, Catherine Howe explores the scope for radical transparency in local politics, asking councillors to consider how they can use social media to bring the voters into the decision making process.

We make no apologies for the fact that this collection raises more questions than it answers. There are no magic bullets that can fix local democracy overnight. Councillors have to find their own way. If this paper helps them do that in some small way, then it has done its job.

DEMOCRATIC FUTURES

Simon Parker and Liam Scott-Smith

To understand the future of local democracy, we gathered 15 councillors and some outside experts together to run a scenario planning exercise. Scenarios are coherent and credible stories about the future. They do not aim to predict what will happen, but to explore a wide range of possibilities, enabling us to prepare effectively.

The scenarios are based on our analysis of around 50 trends affecting the future of local democracy. Participants ranked a range of data according to its importance and uncertainty, and then the scenarios were constructed by selecting two trends as 'driving forces' which they believed would be most important in shaping the future. These were about the leadership style of councillors and the level of public engagement in the work of the council.

An active, outward-looking political leadership would be able to make the case for change and drive economic growth, while councils that were forced inwards risked becoming distant and alienated from their communities. As so often, the essential conundrum was whether local government is doomed to decline, or whether imaginative leadership can help councils seize the initiative and reinvent.

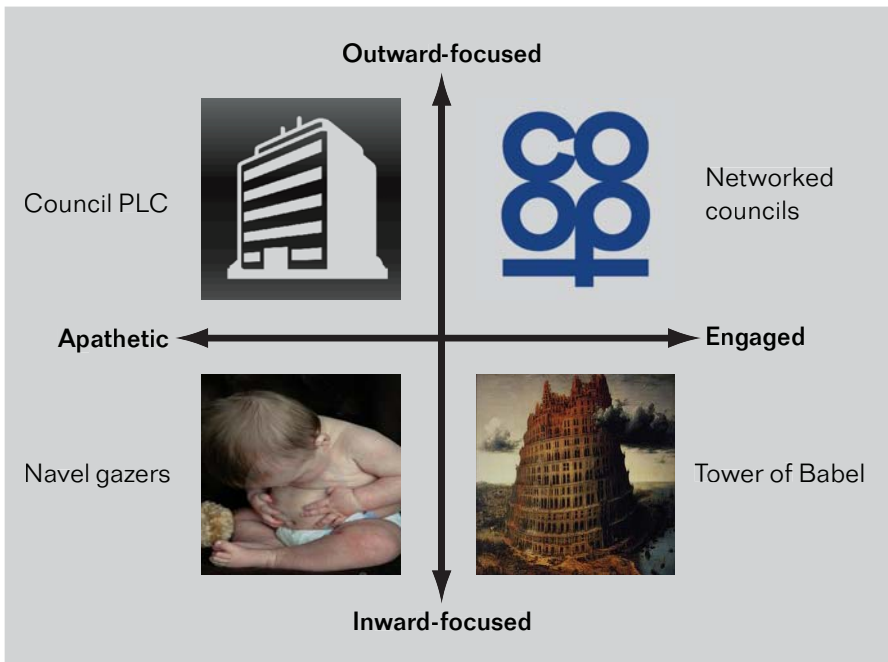
However, this optimism about the potential of leadership was tempered with very real concerns about spending constraints. Addressing social care funding emerged as a key issue, because if this is not resolved then local government will struggle to do fund anything other than elderly care. This raised questions about whether councils should be seeking to get out of some expensive functions such as elderly care (which could conceivably go to the NHS) and education (which could be provided direct to academies by others).

While public participation and activism were generally seen as a good thing, there were concerns about the centrifugal force of active communities. Councillors might be captured by interest groups, or politics could become fragmented as members are forced to constantly attend to the demands of an

active civil society. There was a legitimate question about whether outward-looking leadership might be easier in a world where (as seems likely) public participation remained relatively low.

We went through a range of scenarios looking at the factors which would shape future local government before arriving at four key stories that impacted directly on the leadership role for councillors. These stories are shaped by two critical uncertainties: whether leadership is outward or inward-looking and whether the public is apathetic or engaged. It should be noted that the idea of ‘open leadership’ was not defined very carefully, but appeared to involve characteristics like openness and entrepreneurship.

Although these scenarios were supposed to be about the role of local leadership in 2020, it is possible to recognise these different types of council emerging already, and in some cases to even identify individual councils that match the type – for instance, Lambeth already calls itself a ‘networked council’ and some counties are heading towards the ‘Council PLC’ model.



SCENARIO 1: NETWORKED COUNCILS

In this scenario councillors are outward looking and the public is highly engaged. Participants felt that this was the most positive scenario as the public would be able to do more for themselves and councillors were able to focus on economic growth. Councillors would have to be entrepreneurs and activist campaigners.

However, it was also pointed out that an active public could be a blessing as well as a curse. Active citizens could be very demanding and pull the council in many directions at once, particularly if they have single-issue candidates elected to the local authority. If this happened, it may become difficult for the council to pursue a clear vision of the common good.

A networked council would probably have devolved many of its services to neighbourhoods, perhaps through a series of community budget exercises, with the council integrating functions such as housing and social care with GP surgeries and neighbourhood policing.

It seems likely that in neighbourhood services would be governed by local residents themselves, perhaps through a revitalised form of tenant management organisation. Backbench members might well be involved in these governance bodies as a sort of 'micro-mayor', with a key role being to make their area's case in full council.

The public might be incentivised to move towards cheaper channels for service provision and co-production by the use of incentive schemes such as loyalty points or via time bank credits which they could use to exchange their talents with neighbours.

Networked councils would blur the line between the community and the council. Power would be shared with neighbourhoods and ordinary citizens. Executive councillors would have to give away some of their power, while backbenchers might be seen as first among equals, but no more. This scenario would require a very different kind of political leadership to that which is exercised in most councils today. Some politicians would resist the idea of winning power only to have to give it away again.

Perhaps most importantly, we have to consider how realistic this scenario is. Can we imagine local people really becoming this engaged in council services?

SCENARIO 2: COUNCIL PLC

In this scenario the council's leadership is outward-looking but the public are not very engaged. This sort of council would probably be businesslike, pragmatic and technocratic. Party politics would not be very pronounced, perhaps because this type of council is most likely to emerge in 'one party states' with very stable politics. Counties may often fit into this category because they are so big and strategic, rather than being rooted in specific towns and cities.

This kind of council might well be a high performer. It would find service redesign relatively easy because there would be little public resistance. It would probably pursue a commissioning role. However, the relative lack of public scrutiny might lead to technocracy slowly becoming plutocracy, with the council dominated by the wealthy and little accountability to hold them back.

Politicians in this scenario might look a lot like officers. Executive members might well come from business backgrounds and have a strong interest in bringing private sector ideas into local government – selling services to neighbours, moving social care onto e-bay style platforms and becoming ambitious investors in the local economy. With the political action taking place at the cabinet table, backbench members may find Council PLC less satisfying. Their role will be much as it is now, largely confined to scrutiny and casework.

The skills that characterise successful members in Council PLC will probably be entrepreneurial flair, commercial knowledge, the ability to think big and a paternalistic outlook. Participants in our futures exercise commented that they know how they would function as councillors in this scenario, but found it harder to imagine how they would be successful. Is the only point of Council PLC to be efficient?

SCENARIO 3: NAVEL GAZING

The cuts and the subsequent political blame game will probably turn some councils in on themselves. If this combines with low levels of public activism, then it could lead to an extended period of fiddling while services crumble. This kind of council will spend much of the 2010s treading water in a swimming pool which has had the plug taken out. Services will probably be stripped back to the statutory minimum and a weak civil society may not be able to step in to fill the gap.

This scenario is most likely to come to pass in councils that lack strong leadership, perhaps because they are hung and the leadership struggles to achieve consensus about budget reduction plans. Navel gazing politicians will give into their worse natures and focus on attacking each other rather than working together to tackle the problems their area faces.

Executive members will struggle to get anything done, and may spend a lot of their time managing unruly political group dynamics. Backbenchers will spend their time involved in political scheming and backstabbing, a role which a few of them might find superficially satisfying.

Just because a council is navel gazing, doesn't mean nothing will get done. Savings have to be made, but they will probably be realised by slowly laying off staff and residualising services. The public will notice tighter eligibility criteria for social care, increasingly unreliable refuse collection and potholed roads. Areas like leisure and education support will probably be cut entirely. Smaller navel gazers will probably not be viable by the end of the decade.

The point about navel gazers is that they will put short term politics ahead of taking more difficult strategic decisions. The only possible outcomes are failure or a backlash from the electorate.

SCENARIO 4: TOWER OF BABEL

In this scenario, the navel gazing council runs into a backlash from an active civil society. Local people spot the fact that local politics is failing them

and start organising themselves to fix the problem through the ballot box. This would probably take the form of public protests, increasing electoral challenges from residents' association candidates and other independents, and demands for extreme localisation of council services so that the public can take control. Alternatively, it could result in the emergence of new local and national protest parties. The Tower of Babel might be fertile ground for populists such as UKIP.

It is hard not to feel ambivalent about this scenario. Is a period of failure and conflict the price we have to pay for a renewal of local democracy? Or is that too big a risk to take? The Tower of Babel unleashes a new wave of political energy, so the question is whether councils can channel that energy into constructive and sustainable channels such as new forms of neighbourhood democracy and community associations.

For many councillors, the Tower of Babel is likely to be a very difficult future. Political paralysis will have left the council struggling to balance its books and presiding over a painful process of decline in the public realm. Members will be permanently on the defensive as local people and the local media lambast the council and demand change, and they are likely to face a stiff electoral challenge.

But for members who can adapt, this scenario might have some appeal – the Tower of Babel is an intensely political environment, with values and conflict coming to the fore. The most recent example of this sort of council is probably Hackney in the late 1990s. Traditional political skills such as communication, rhetoric, negotiation and mediation will be vital for political survival. Just as importantly, the Tower of Babel offers a clear job to do and straightforward criteria for success – politicians either find a way to save their council or not. There is none of the ambiguity of Council PLC.

THE NETWORKED COUNCILLOR

Catherine Howe

It can be argued that the Internet is the most significant technology advance of the past 100 years. At least. Its significance is not to be measured in terms of its technical wizardry, but in terms of the social changes it is unleashing. From self-publishing to virtual communities, radical openness and a collaborative culture, the Internet opens up the potential for a new participatory culture.

The most obvious implication for politics lies in a massive acceleration in the shift from hierarchical power towards networked power and this networked society will need a new generation of networked councillors.

Old fashioned political authority rested on roles, structures and deference. In the past, there was a real sense in which political decisions could make profound change happen on the ground and an acceptance that politicians would make these decisions on behalf of the citizenry. When the 1945 Labour government wanted to improve public health, they created an NHS. This sort of power still matters – look at the smoking ban or more controversially perhaps the creation of the role of Police and Crime Commissioner.

But networked power, in an aggressively public and open environment, is an altogether different beast. It requires politicians to work through connections, relationships and sharing. Promoting public health today means working with the population to persuade people to eat better and exercise more. The Occupy Movement represents an extreme version of networked power – no one is in charge, decisions are negotiated, objectives are contested and everyone is networked and agile.

My recent research work has shown that this emerging networked world creates new rules for politicians, whether or not they are consciously aware of them. Political parties become less important as voters interact directly with individual representatives via Twitter. Local media is squeezed out as politicians, and interest groups, directly address the public. Councillors

may find themselves more exposed in their thinking and as a result more accountable than ever before to local people, and at the same time there is the potential to use new channels to reach out to individuals and engage them in co-production.

This is good for democracy, but only if democracy process and democratic actors evolve and adjust to these changes. For example, it means elected representatives might have less space for personal discretion, they will need to learn to actively listen to broad spectrum views and it will be harder to resist the view of local people.

Councillors may increasingly find that the only way to survive in this world is to do more of their thinking in public. This means sharing your evidence base and decision making process via social media; not just justifying your decisions, but opening up how you made them.

Looking forward to the new skills needed to flourish in an increasingly digital and networked society there are four qualities that the networked councillor will require:

- Open by default: not just in terms of providing information, but also in terms of opening up thinking and decision making
- Digitally native: adopting the norms and behaviours of the digital culture
- Co-productive: an expectation that everyone in the conversation has power to act and the potential to be active in defining the outcome as well as the decision making process.
- And, as the name suggests, networked: able to master the use of networked power as well as hierarchical power.

This is not just about teaching councillors to use twitter. We need to support our elected representatives in a way which makes them effective and relevant in this networked and digital world.

LEADING IN HARD TIMES

Sir Steve Bullock, mayor of Lewisham

When the crash began in 2008 Local Government did not immediately feel the effects – although thoughtful councillors realised that there would be some difficult times to come and began looking at what measures they could put in place to help their communities. Making sure that bills to local businesses were paid quickly, keeping down the council tax and creating apprenticeships were just some of the responses.

By the middle of 2010 it was clear that Local Government was going to be hit hard, harder than any other sector in fact and that this was not the normal economic cycle – this was in effect a depression and the sector was going to have to downsize for the foreseeable future despite the fact that it would be called on to do more.

And so councillors began to face challenges on a scale that no one had seen before – “Front Line First” was the initial slogan and a wise one. Up and down the country councils looked hard at the “Back-office”, at the cost of contracts, the use of consultants and decide that those things should be cut before services.

But that was not enough to make the saving of 33% most faced. So councillors looked at the biggest item of expenditure – the wage bill – nationally a pay freeze last three years was put in place and locally many councils made changes to the terms and conditions of staff – and of course made many redundant.

But still more is needed and present and future councillors will have to step forward and make fundamental changes to the way services are delivered and how they lead their communities. But as they do so they must strike a balance between delivering a hard message and offering their communities hope. One of the lessons of the London Olympics was that when there is a chance to be positive and upbeat people will respond. In the years ahead councillors will need to find ways to do that in their own back yard on rather smaller budgets!

But in many places there are things that can be done – capital schemes to regenerate communities and create new facilities have been sustained – providing not just hope but much needed economic activity. As a nation we continue to have a shortage of decent, affordable housing in many areas and this offers a real opportunity to solve a desperate problem and create jobs and growth.

The most effective councillors know that they need to focus on the place not the organisation and while they need to ensure that the council operates efficiently and with care that is not enough by itself. They will be working with other public sector bodies, with contractors both private and third sector, with community groups and above all with citizens. They will make the council a positive example but not the fall into the trap of believing it can do everything itself.

They will strive to get the balance right between the services for a small number of residents which are essential to their health, well-being and security and those “universal services” which the majority of residents expect to be delivered without fuss. They will look at radical ways to deliver change – nothing will be unthinkable. Boundaries which add to costs will be removed and the tough choices will be explained and discussed with residents.

Through it all those councillors will keep in mind the strategic view they have for the future development and well-being of the community they serve. They will deal with short term troubles with vigour but keep them in perspective. They will share the many real achievements of the council and its partners without slipping into hyperbole. They will be prepared to make hard choices when necessary but not just to demonstrate their toughness. And they will listen and be able to demonstrate that they have acted on what they have heard.

Finally they will remember to thank those around them who do a good job in difficult circumstances but not expect thanks themselves. They will, however, know that they have done their best and tried to make a difference.

The great Olympian, Jesse Owens said “Find the good. It is all around you. Find it. Showcase it and you will start to believe in it” – He would have made a great councillor!

BUDGETING FOR CHANGE

Guy Clifton, Grant Thornton

Local government is facing generationally significant challenges. Budgeting cycles are where the big decisions about the future of councils are being made. So as councils grapple with the deepest funding cuts in living memory, many elected members are keen to take a far greater role in financial planning at their authorities. Every politician has a role to play, some as members of audit and scrutiny committees and others simply because their votes will be needed to pass the budget.

As part of NLGN's Future Councillors project, we explored the skills and capabilities that members need to effectively manage the budget setting - or financial planning - process. Key factors identified by the programme were: Effective communication: In particular between the Finance Portfolio holder and Cabinet colleagues and other Members, and between officers and Members. Financial planning information needs to be timely, accurate and in a format that is understandable. The effectiveness of the working relationship between members and officers was considered critical.

Maximising the Use of Key Skills: Councils need to invest in ensuring that all members have decent financial knowledge and help them access specialist financial advice as required. Some councillors are likely to have specific skills due to their professional background, so political groups need to recognise and deploy those people effectively.

Training, Support and Development: Even when councillors have relevant financial skills, such as via a business background, it was recognised that training and support was required from officers to ensure financial information is effectively understood - for example local government accounts are presented differently to a private sector organisation. The availability of national or regional forums for Members to share their experiences in relation to financial planning was also identified as important.

Understanding Financial Planning Tools: Members' understanding of budget setting tools and techniques, such as Scenario Planning, Zero Based Budgeting and Activity Based Costing, was seen as important, both for when they were being used by their authority, or for challenging why they were not being used. It was recognised that Members have a role to challenge whether the current way of approaching budget setting is appropriate or good practice, in the same way they challenge the status quo in relation to service delivery. There was further discussion regarding the need to adopt new financial planning approaches such as outcome based budgeting.

Knowing What Questions to Ask: Given that a key role and skill for Members in the budget setting process relates to scrutiny and challenge, knowing what questions to ask is critical. Some example questions discussed were:

- Have our strategic objectives changed, and is the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) aligned to them?
- Are resources aligned to our strategic objectives?
- Has the financial model that underpins the MTFP been appropriately stress tested using a range of economic assumptions and sensitivity analysis?
- Does the MTFP include outcome measures, scenario planning, benchmarking?
- Have changes in the external environment impact on resource requirements?
- Is the MTFP consistent with other strategies such as the Council's workforce strategy?
- How achievable is our savings plan?
- How can officers demonstrate that key assumptions are accurate and robust?
- Have prior year savings delivered in line with what was agreed by Members?
- Are there alternative ways of delivery available that haven't been considered?

- Are there any new ways of generating income?
- Have targets have been set for key indicators such as reserve balances and prudential indicators?

Effective Timescales: Financial planning was recognised as an all-year round activity. It is critical that the Medium Term Financial Strategy is being continually reviewed so that assumptions remain correct, and that there is appropriate time available to prioritise budget planning discussions, savings identification and undertake necessary stakeholder engagement.

Stakeholder Engagement: A key role for elected Members is how their engagement with citizens and businesses helps them inform key financial planning decisions, in particular service delivery priorities and savings identification. Understanding service users' needs, and the tools available to do this, was also recognised as important, particularly during periods of significant change and transformation. The electoral cycle was identified as a key inhibitor to medium term financial planning, so the ability for Members to take difficult but necessary decisions was seen as critical.

LEADING FOR OUTCOMES

Peter Fleming, leader, Sevenoaks district council

The shift from the world of performance management with councillors being presented with tomes of data are over, but many councillors and councils are trapped in that world we have inhabited for the last 15 years, they have no clear route out and the need to make decisions, particularly around finances and the future of services, is rushing past them at break neck speed.

So how do we enable councillors to let go of the security blanket of council reports on PI's and move to a world which is outcome focused, a world where it is the outcomes for local people that are yearned for and matter, rather than an accolade that such and such service has managed to perform a set task in x days.

When you start to look at outcomes the world becomes a fuzzier place, but this is the natural environment for councillors, gone is management speak and the reports that always follow, replaced by a world in which real life experiences and stories matter more. A community focused and networked councillor will feel the freedom that this shift to their natural ground will bring.

The officer corps in our councils will of course be resistant, along with some of our colleagues, their role changes from interpreting data to evaluating real life experiences.

The biggest change to the face of local government services is coming, and without this new breed of councillors local government will fail the task ahead. Fundamentally many local government services haven't radically changed in the last 100 years, councils have become adept at 'consulting' with the public. Giving residents a list of current services and asking them to rank them is not going to get us where we need to be. I contend that in the future councils will be going to their communities with a blank piece of paper and designing the services they provide in a totally different way, if at all.

We need councillors who can both tell the story of change and also implement it in our town halls.

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