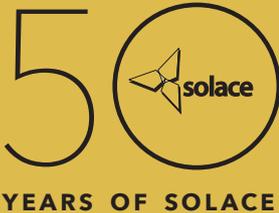
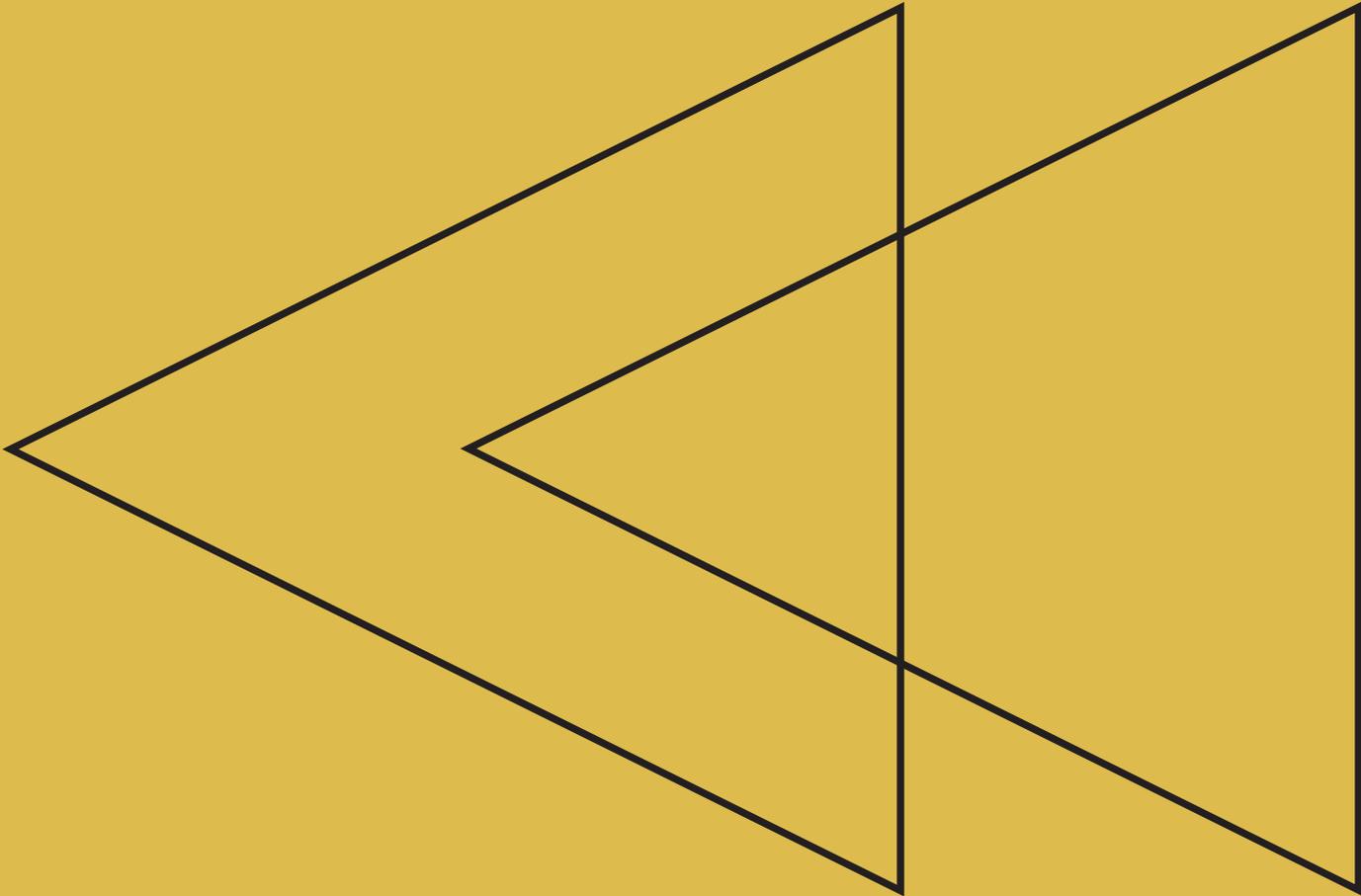


# REWIND



SPECIAL  
ANNIVERSARY  
REPORT

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# FOREWORD

By Sir Michael Lyons



Sir Michael served a total of 17 years as chief executive of three councils (Wolverhampton, Nottinghamshire and Birmingham) and was knighted for services to Local Government in 2001. He is currently Chair of the English Cities Fund and the SQW group. He is a former Chairman of the BBC (2007 to 2011). During 2014 he led the Lyons Housing Commission, to produce a road map for building 200,000 homes a year by 2020. He led the national 'Lyons Inquiry' into the functions and funding of local government (2007), which argued for greater devolution and emphasised the local authority's role

in place shaping, and two other significant reviews concerning the relocation of government services (2004) and the management of public assets (2004). He was Deputy Chairman of the Audit Commission (2003 to 2006) and Professor of Public Policy at Birmingham University (2001 to 2006). He has been a board member of a number of companies and bodies and chaired the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra for six years. He was both a board member and governor of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

“[There is a] strong sense of purpose and pride reflected in all the contributions despite the myriad challenges, changes, and opportunities that have occurred over the course of the last half century”

▶ I am pleased to have been asked to introduce this collection of articles and reflections, prepared by former council chief executives.

Its publication marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of Solace and comes at a moment when local government may be facing an existential crisis, with nine councils already conceding they cannot balance their budgets and the Local Government Association estimating that one in five councils will face the same dilemma in the coming year. The great irony is that many of the UK's most profound challenges require effective local action, whether in relation to addressing social care issues, the housing crisis, community cohesion, or economic growth.

So, what can we draw from these 18 contributions that cover many different locations and periods from the past 50 years and reflect the quite different professional and personal backgrounds of the authors? The first conclusion might be the strong sense of purpose and pride reflected in all the contributions despite the myriad challenges, changes, and opportunities that have occurred over the course of the last half century. The second is that, because of the historic, ongoing, and future challenges the skills now required

to be a successful chief executive may be quite different to the qualities displayed by their predecessors.

But before I go much further: a disclaimer. While I will highlight a few articles I don't intend to mention every contributor here. They are all, however, worth reading not least as each provides a unique insight into the role of the chief executive and how it has changed over time.

I should also add that this collection of personal contributions is not intended to be a comprehensive historical account of the last 50 years in local government so there are inevitably some gaps in terms of themes and/or major events, such as the impact of the accelerated deindustrialisation of the late 70s which prompted councils to look for new skills and an understanding of economic development. One area of local government endeavour which has limited exposure in these articles (apart from the understandably painful reflections on the Grenfell disaster) is the wider role in providing safe, secure and affordable housing. It is also notable that the third sector has little visibility despite the fact, I would suggest, this is a significant issue for most chief executives in terms of service quality ▶▶

and delivery as well as local cultural provision. And interestingly, whilst local government re-organisation is touched upon, it is given limited coverage even though arguments for or against changes in local structures have, for many periods in the last 50 years, preoccupied councils and particularly their chief executives.

However, if there is a useful conclusion with regards that debate it could perhaps be that, rather than a local civil war over boundaries and responsibilities, better cooperation between neighbouring councils and those who lead their office bodies might always be the best solution. Indeed, Eamon Boylan's paper on devolution does underline the importance of councils cooperating with their neighbours but it is perhaps surprising that this is one of the few references in this set of papers to the revolution that has reshaped decision-making by elected members in all councils: the rise of the directly elected mayor, the creation of executive cabinets, and the separation of scrutiny. All these amendments to the council governance architecture have changed the way that councils work and, notably, what is expected of the chief executive. And the result can be considerable conflict with elected members seeking more direct control of service delivery and the council's voice in relations with other agencies, and which is further accentuated by frustrations at the limitations of local government powers and resources. I hope a future report will look at the dangers of ignoring the potential for conflict between the respective roles of those elected and those paid to serve councils, not least

as there should be much to learn from exploring the longer history of councils as well as those currently seen to need direct intervention by ministers and the appointment of commissioners – itself a route, unlikely in most cases, to lead to longer-term strengthening and accountability to local residents. And with public finances set to remain tight for the foreseeable future, managing tensions and nurturing strained relations is likely to become an even more prominent part of the role of the chief executive.

As 'father of the chapel', Sir Rodney Brooke offers a contribution which spans not just the 69 years of his own career, but also delves back as far as 1388 to underline that in local government, like many other walks of life, 'the past is a different country'. It is difficult to imagine that the elected members of any council in the last 50 years routinely stood to welcome the chief executive, although perhaps a few managed it for his or her retirement! Respect now is won not just for holding a post, but for performance in it as well as style, empathy and understanding of the community and its inevitable complexity.

Barry Quirk's wonderful survey of more recent years provides further historical context, highlighting the successive waves of national policy strongly influenced (for all governments) by neo-liberal philosophy and an emphasis on the rights and aspirations of the individual, market solutions and personal choice. Few would argue with the popularity of some of the promises made but many councils, and perhaps many

more CEOs, might acknowledge that a stronger emphasis on collective action, greater recognition that rationing of public services is inevitable, and acknowledgment of the 'good enough' principle might have led to a more balanced set of outcomes across the UK.

The contributions from Pamela Gordon and Wallace Sampson relate first-hand experience as pioneers in the increasing diversity of the chief executive cadre. Few leaders in local government will not have been faced by the challenge of reshaping their organisations to better reflect the communities they serve. While I'm aware of Solace's recent attempts to drive improvements within the sector around transparency and data collection relating to equality, diversity and inclusion, it's somewhat a surprise that, in the 21st century, there still is not a comprehensive breakdown of the characteristics of serving chief executives. However, there is no doubt that many more women have taken up the most senior role along with more, but still not enough, colleagues from the minority ethnic communities. That said, increasing the diversity of the chief executive population should not be limited to gender and race but also class and professional skills.

The reflection I would offer from my time in three authorities, where increasing diversity among the workforce was amongst the highest priorities, are that it is not enough to rely on procedures, rules and training. It needs positive intent from the very top of the organisation and it is inevitably complex and painful dealing with the frustrations of those (amongst councillors and colleagues) expecting faster progress. Encouraging pioneers to follow the path found by the likes of Pamela, Wallace and others, mentoring and supporting emerging talent, and simply imagining jobs done differently by someone with different life experiences, are all part of the tool kit.

Just as creating more diverse council workforces remains an issue, as a collection this set of papers provides strong testimony of the other big challenges – and opportunities – local government has faced over 50 years, in addition to many economic storms, and of course, more recently, the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic. Policy changes and subsequent impacts relating to children's and adult social care, devolution and the advent of elected mayors, and the importance of the community as partners in the design and delivery of services, are also explored, while there ►►

**“A strong theme running throughout this collection of articles is that the role of the council and its chief executive extends well beyond responsibility for its services”**

## “Being the chief executive of any council is a job unique in place and time”

are also rightly reflections on the upheavals of compulsory competitive tendering and the comprehensive performance assessment, among much more.

However, a strong theme running throughout this collection of articles is that the role of the council and its chief executive extends well beyond responsibility for its services.

Colleagues who moved to local government from leadership roles in the private sector are often shocked at the constraints on the council chief executive’s personal authority. Those that enjoy the role recognise that it is at the heart of local governance and not simply the management of people and resources. The skills needed by an effective chief executive relate to communication, empathy, and team membership. Most firmly acknowledge that the chief executive role is one of team leadership, working closely with the special mandate of elected members, drawing together council endeavours and working closely with a range of partner agencies, as well as engaging with private investors. Eleanor Kelly and Carolyn Wilkins both underline the importance of building strong relationships outside the council, and how important these are especially when faced by a crisis or emergency. The job is inherently complex and those who hunger for command and control (whether they’re elected cabinet members or chief executives) would better look elsewhere.

But most of all, many of the papers underline that being the chief executive of any council is a job unique in place and time. The importance of place and the context of different histories, demographic complexions, economic structures and local aspirations demand bespoke responses rather than blueprints handed down from national level or borrowed from other places. I favoured the term ‘place shaping’, in my work on the role and funding of local government, completed in 2014, because it better emphasises the importance of a focus on the software and shareware of community life, as well as the hardware of infrastructure and the built environment. As captured by Kersten England, it is the privilege of playing a prominent part in shaping the future of a whole town, city or county, in all its rich complexity, that really makes the chief executive role special. We might see this focus on place as one of the major developments of the last 50 years, although we should humbly recognise that it is no more than a mutation of the Victorian civic pride that bequeathed us some of our great town halls, as well as great strides in public health, housing and education.

But, as I touched upon at the start, the overarching issue facing the sector – and therefore chief executives – over the last 50 years was, is, and will continue to be finance or, as has been the case in recent years, the lack of it. Rob Whiteman, as the outgoing Chief Executive of CIPFA, is in a strong position to reflect on the

funding of the sector. It is the need for a new constitutional settlement between central and local government which was at the heart of my work on the role and funding of local government completed in 2014. Without greater clarity about who is responsible for what, with funding tailored more clearly to those different responsibilities, I concluded that it would be impossible to undertake a radical reshaping of local government funding and there was, first, a need to build more confidence among residents, as well as greater and wider skills in local authorities themselves.

I emphasised the importance of councils playing an active part in the growth of their local economies to strengthen their own tax basis as well as local prosperity, while also arguing for the urgent revaluation of council tax; if not, its early replacement with a tax (new or reformed) capable of raising a larger part of the cost of local services and effective place shaping, I concluded that apportionment of income tax receipts (in proportion to national and local responsibilities) might strengthen both accountability and provide a stronger and more dependable basis for the future. Put simply we need a fundamental reset of the local government finance system so that it better reflects the role local government plays.

The skills required to be a competent, successful chief executive now are far different to what was needed 50 years ago. Each Chief executive role poses its own specific challenges but that

should not detract from efforts to learn from others – whether that be via closer links with academic institutions, bodies explicitly intended to improve evidence and understanding for local government, or through peer support networks. There is, thankfully, much more focus on professional development now than the annual golf tournament (fun though that must have been for some). My own experience in leading action learning groups during my period at the helm of INLOGOV reinforced for me the importance of learning from others playing the same role in other settings. The importance of reflection connected to future action is recognised as key to good management, whether in public or private sectors, and there are outstanding examples in this collection of articles of colleagues contributing to a thoughtful literature on the way the chief executive role has changed, the lessons that have been learned, as well as pointers for the future.

And who knows what the next 50 years will bring? But one thing this report tells us is that the role of councils and their chief executives will not remain static. And given the challenges the country faces, the next Government (whatever the political colour) should be investing more in the development of a strong local leadership pipeline so that the council chief executives of today and tomorrow have the skills to ensure that the communities they serve not only survive but thrive. ■

# INTRODUCTION

By Matt Prosser

“It really is a singular honour to be the public figurehead of this fantastic organisation during this special year”



With more than thirty years of experience in local government, Matt currently serves as Dorset Council's Chief Executive, having previously led the Dorset Councils Partnership. He played a pivotal role in establishing two new unitary councils in the region. Matt prioritises customer-centric services, actively supports elected officials, and fosters the development of employees and communities. Leveraging his expertise in management consulting and

strategic team development, he advocates for technology-driven enhancements in service delivery. As Solace President, Matt is dedicated to promoting leadership diversity and providing support to council executives across the country. Outside of his professional commitments, he finds enjoyment in staying active through half-marathon running and riding his Triumph motorbike.

► It is a huge privilege, as Solace President, to introduce this report which is published almost precisely 50 years to the day since Solace held its first meeting.

Over the last five decades Solace has gone from strength to strength despite (or perhaps partly because of) the many challenges the local authorities, and by extension our members, have faced during that period, and continue to face today. Such a special anniversary warrants special celebrations and Solace will be marking its 50th year through various events and outputs, including this report – the first of three which will look, in turn, at the past, the present, and the future of local government.

Solace was formed from an amalgamation of town clerk associations, roles to which references can be found in texts written not long after the Domesday book. The chief executives of today therefore inherit a very long and distinguished history not just of local administration but of place shaping. Over those centuries, Solace members' predecessors played a unique and vital role in creating the communities and localities we live in today, most visibly during the Victorian era when many of the institutions and public realm that is so familiar to us today was built. Yet local government developed not as a single entity but as a loose collection of public services. It wasn't until the 1960s that a more corporate strategic approach was considered which led to the 1972 Bains report on management and structure which set out four principle aspects of the chief executive role:

- Managerial leadership of the organisation;
- Providing and securing advice to the Council on strategy and policy;
- Acting in an executive capacity by making decisions or ensuring a system is in place for other officers to make decisions, as authorised by the Council; and
- Delivering probity, value for money and continuous improvement.

The Local Government Act (1972) entirely reconstructed the local government system in England and Wales so that by 1 April 1974 about 1,300 local authorities were transformed into a more standardised pattern of about 400 councils. Separate Acts for Northern Ireland and Scotland, with similar ramifications for restructure, followed in 1972 and 1973 respectively, and the present structure of local government in the UK derives largely from these reforms.

Councils took the opportunity of reorganisation to introduce a more integrated approach with a single chief executive leading the team. In essence it was the managerial equivalent of the introduction of the leader and cabinet model to local politics under the Local Government Act 2000.

It may come as a surprise that the job itself has never been clearly defined in legislation - the last national consideration of the role of chief executive was in the context of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 which required councils to designate an officer as Head ►

of the Paid Service and define certain limited functions for that post. Sir John Boynton, the founding President of Solace, said the best way to describe the chief executive was to use the story of the small boy asked to describe an elephant he had seen for the first time at the zoo. “He could not, the small boy said, describe it; but he would know one if he saw one again.”

In his book *Job at the Top* (1986) Sir John also said the role of the chief executive is to lead “at all times”, be politically adroit but intervene where necessary, provide effective management but develop and train people, but, above all, the chief executive “must spring from a conviction that the authority is – or can be – something more than the sum of its different parts”.

Throughout my career in local government I have been lucky to work for, alongside and with some incredibly skilled colleagues. And while those who are appointed to the most senior positions tend to be talented and highly motivated individuals, this should not prevent them from having support and development opportunities in place to help them succeed in this increasingly complex and visible role. That’s why Solace offers a wide range of learning and development opportunities for our members; whether you are an apprentice or graduate, or an aspiring or current chief executive. If you’re not familiar with our offering, head on over to our website [www.Solace.org.uk](http://www.Solace.org.uk). And while we have recently launched our new Local Government Chief Executives’ Development Framework, it is Solace’s ambition to use the framework, resources, and

insights from this initial chief executive-focused work to develop the support offer to all of our staff; be they directors wondering if the next step is for them, middle managers looking beyond their immediate service boundaries, or someone starting out in their local government career navigating their way.

While the future may be uncertain, the need for top-quality local leadership will remain. This report – a collection of articles from some of the sector’s most prominent senior professionals from the last half century – highlights not only how the role of the chief executive has changed over the last 50 years, but it also gives a flavour of just how varied, exciting, and challenging a role it can be too.

This is a fascinating and incredibly useful collection of articles in which the contributors reflect on their own careers and the events that shaped them, their leadership styles, and how all of that has impacted on their successors too. So I would like to profusely thank all who have contributed and taken the time to offer important insights, helpful reflections, and powerful prompts which should provide some learnings to our current and future crop of chief executives too.

This ‘personal history’ approach is the theme of this report – and so it is important to make clear that it is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the last 50 years of local government, or touch on every major event during that period. And while we have sought to commission

a diverse set of contributors we are acutely aware of the shortcomings, especially with regards to race, that this report displays. Sadly, this is symptomatic of the fact that even now local government continues to struggle to create diverse workforces – let alone senior leadership teams – which truly reflect the communities councils serve. As the UK’s leading members’ network for local government and public sector professionals, we are committed to ensuring diverse talent is encouraged, supported, nurtured and recognised across the sector. That’s why we launched in 2022 our AMPlify programme which is specifically designed for staff from ethnically diverse backgrounds who have the ambition and potential to become future leaders within local government. So Solace has unapologetically started to agitate for an acceleration in how equality, diversity and inclusion is monitored and addressed – and we will continue to do so because diversity is intrinsic to both democracy and leadership, two principles of Solace’s code of ethics and at the core of our sector. That’s why we need more of it.

**“While the future may be uncertain, the need for top-quality local leadership will remain”**

We also need more money – to not only invest in our people but our places too. The financial failure of a small, but not insignificant, number of councils in recent months and years (with

the potential for more to follow) has shone a spotlight on the sector’s budgetary pressures and there is now growing, widespread and cross-party agreement that the finance system is broken and in need of reform. While the state of public finances and the wider fiscal constraints means it would be naïve to think there will large sums of additional funding for councils anytime soon, that will not stop Solace from arguing loud and proud that inadequate funding for local government is the ultimate false economy and that changes to the system could reap far-reaching benefits. But we will have more to say on all of that in our next report.

So, for now, whether you’re an aspiring, current, or former local authority leader, an interested observer, a local government history geek, or anything in between I’d urge you to pick up this compelling collection of articles. As ever, there is much we can all learn from the knowledge shared by those who have come before us.

To return to where I started, when I think about the tens of thousands of Solace members and dozens of Presidents who have preceded me it really is a singular honour to be the public figurehead of this fantastic organisation during this special year. Do keep your eyes open for further announcements and invitations, and make sure you get involved in Solace’s celebrations in one form or another.

But, for now, here’s to Solace, its magnificent members – past, present, and future – and to the next 50 years. ■

# THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

- I The impact of the 1972 Local Government Act
- II To fifty and beyond

**I**t may come as a surprise to some that the role of the council chief executive has never been set out in black and white. The closest this country came to defining the role of the council chief executive in legislation was the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 which required councils to designate an officer as head of the paid service and defined certain limited functions for that post. As a result, for all who have held the top job before that and since have had to learn to navigate and lead in the grey. The role of the council chief executive is, however, far from dull as Sir Rodney Brooke's article illuminates. Sir Rodney's career in local government spanned either side of the introduction of the 1972 Local Government Act – reforms which simplified the local government landscape by reducing the number of councils from about 1,300 to about 400 – and his reflections give an indication of the impact this legislative change on not just the sector but the role of the chief executive too.

Barry Quirk, having served 45 years in local government, then picks up the baton to talk about how the role of the chief executive has evolved since the reorganisation of 1974, and Solace's inception of the same year, covering the major social, economic, and political events from recent decades. A former President and Chair of Solace, Barry also offers thoughts on the qualities the current and future crop of chief executives need as they continue to lead councils, and their communities, through increasingly uncertain times.

# The changing role of the chief executive I: The impact of the 1972 Local Government Act

By Sir Rodney Brooke CBE DL



Sir Rodney Brooke CBE DL was Chief Executive of West Yorkshire County Council and Westminster City Council. He was Secretary of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities until its absorption into the Local Government Association in 1997 when he was appointed CBE. He subsequently held several national appointments and worked extensively overseas. He was knighted in 2007 and holds the Orders of Merit of France, Germany, Qatar and Senegal and the Order of the Aztec Eagle of Mexico. He has published *The Winding Stair*, his record of seven decades of local government service.

**Pub Perspective:** Sir Rodney Brooke CBE DL, former local authority chief executive, reflects on local government power dynamics while seated in a traditional English pub, a nostalgic symbol of community gatherings and political discourse.



## Where the power lies

In 1955, aged 15, I was a cub reporter on the *Morley Observer* in Yorkshire. My big scoop was an interview with a talking dog but my regular beat was to seek news at the Morley Town Hall.

In those days local government stories filled the local newspaper. The Morley Council's Labour group fed the press with stories which the Conservative administration wanted to keep quiet. In reprisal the local Tory magnate, Harry Hardy, bought the newspaper, closed it down and sold the title. Shortly afterwards a grateful country ennobled him as Sir Harry.

Clearly the town hall was where the power lay: I joined the Morley town hall as the office boy, sticking on the stamps and making the tea. My career in local government narrowly escaped a premature end when my labour-saving practice of putting milk in the teapot was discovered.

Morley Council was towards the bottom of the local government pyramid. But the Council issued its own bonds, paying half a per cent more than Leeds City Council bonds and a full percentage point more than the West Riding County Council bonds. It had important functions, including slum clearance and housing. The town's water supply ►►

came from the Council's reservoir at Top Withens in Brontë country, high in the Pennines. My first experience of litigation came when a prize boar plunged to its doom in a midden, thanks to the negligence of contractors working on the pipeline from the Council's reservoir.

### **The self-importance of local government pre-1974 reorganisation**

Looming above borough councils like Morley were great cities like Leeds, Manchester, and Birmingham. Top dogs were the county councils, which traced their ancestry back to 1388 when the courts of quarter sessions were established. In deference to their origin, the national organisation of the county council clerks styled itself 'The Clerks of the Peace Society'. They sat as clerks to the quarter sessions until quarter sessions were abolished in 1972. The county clerks were usually clerks to the lieutenancy: the Lords-Lieutenant held the office of Custos Rotulorum, keeper of the court records. In their role as clerks to the lieutenancy, the county clerks were a conduit to honours – including appointments to the magistracy. They vetted the guest lists for royal visits and stood high in the social hierarchy of the county.

In my book *The Winding Stair* I chronicle the grandeur of the former clerks of the county councils. Their portraits were prominently displayed in the county halls. Sir Harcourt Clare was clerk of Lancashire County Council until

his death in 1922. His combined emoluments exceeded the total salaries of every employee in his department. When Sir Harcourt fell ill in 1913, King George V and Queen Mary stopped their carriage at the lodge gates of Sir Harcourt's mansion and enquired upon his health.

Clerk of the Warwickshire County Council for almost fifty years was Sir Edgar Stephens. When interviewed for the post, the 24-year-old Stephens was asked whether he was not too young for such a responsible job. He responded magisterially that William Pitt the younger was Prime Minister of England at the age of 24. When negotiating his salary Sir Edgar accepted a lower wage, provided that he could keep the fees imposed for searches of the local land charges register. He retained those fees until he retired in 1967 at the age of 70. By then they amounted to over £100,000 annually – equal to about £1.5m in 2024 money.

When Sir Charles McGrath, one of my predecessors in the West Riding County Hall, went to Whitehall, the London train was held at Wakefield station until his arrival. When in London he would send his card to the Permanent Secretary of the Local Government Ministry, announcing that Sir Charles was in residence at Claridges and would be pleased to receive the Permanent Secretary if he cared to call.

In the social scale the town clerks of the cities were a notch below the county clerks. In

compensation they affected florid names – R. de la Zouche Hall (Halifax), R. Horsfall Turner (Scarborough), Julius Caesar (Keighley), R. Ribblesdale Thornton (Salford). The clerks of the county councils regarded their counterparts in the cities with undisguised condescension. The town clerk of Sheffield wrote to Sir Bernard Kenyon, Sir Charles's West Riding successor, saying 'I must now discontinue this correspondence since I fear that I can no longer match you for calculated rudeness'. Sir Bernard terminated a meeting with the town clerks of Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield, with the words 'What a load of bloody fools! No wonder you finished up where you have.'

## **"It is difficult for their successors to imagine the self-importance of local government in the days before the 1974 reorganisation"**

### **A varied role**

It is difficult for their successors to imagine the self-importance of local government in the days before the 1974 reorganisation. Though the supply of gas and electricity, public assistance

institutions (the former workhouses), hospitals and asylums had been removed from local government, the responsibility of local authorities still included police, public transport, further education, water and sewerage. My departmental portfolio as a county council chief executive included administrative responsibility for the criminal prosecution service, the probation service, coroners, archives, archaeology and the public analyst.

The clerks of the larger county councils were usually knighted, as were the town clerks of the bigger cities. Even the town clerk of a small authority like Rotherham (Sir Charles Des Forges) could collect a knighthood if he were felt to be particularly meritorious. Indeed I held three jobs in local government where all except my immediate predecessor had been knighted. Contrast today, when there are no knights or dames among current local government chief executives – and only four CBEs.

In a small county borough like Rochdale (whose staff I joined in 1962) public life in the town revolved round the Council. The courses in the further education college were tailored by the Council to the economic needs of the area. The Council's blue and cream buses brought residents of the surrounding districts into the town. Its reservoirs provided the town's water. The town's five burglars were tracked by the head of the town's CID, a chief inspector. My staple duty was ►►

prosecuting for the police, whose priorities were steered by the town's Watch Committee and reported weekly in the Rochdale Observer.

In Leicester, my next employer, the Council, ran one of the most important municipal museum services in the country. Its imaginative planning committee contemplated (unsuccessfully) an overhead monorail system. When Town Clerk Sir George Ogden entered a committee meeting the councillors stood up respectfully until he sat down.

When I moved in 1965 to the County Borough of Stockport, I was despatched by the town's chief constable to quell a mob by reading the Riot Act – the last occasion the Riot Act was invoked before its repeal. Stockport Council had the distinction of building Errwood reservoir in the Peak District, the last municipal reservoir completed before privatisation. (In England no reservoir has been planned and constructed since privatisation.)

#### **The dawn of the long decline**

Then came the 1974 reorganisation of local government and its loss of responsibility for water and sewerage. Some of the old chutzpah

remained: when the President of Solace, Sir John Boynton, chief executive of Cheshire County Council, was asked why the Society was to hold its annual dinner at the Savoy at a time of financial stringency he responded 'Because we can't afford Claridges'.

After the 1974 reorganisation I became chief executive of the West Yorkshire County Council, successor to the West Riding County Council and itself doomed to abolition by Mrs Thatcher only twelve years after its creation. The County Council's predecessor authorities had left a Victorian thicket of local legislation. In Huddersfield passengers had to notify the driver before taking a corpse on a bus. Citizens had to whitewash their front step before 8am or face a five shilling fine. West Riding dogs were forbidden to bark at night.

As the County Council chief executive I had to cope with the political sensitivity of policing the miners' strike; induce Mrs Thatcher not to take charge of the investigation into the Yorkshire Ripper murders; persuade Home Secretary Willie Whitelaw not to sack the Chief Constable after the Ripper continued to evade capture; arrange the

**“My seventy years of involvement with local government has coincided with the decline in its prestige as its powers dwindled and its financial autonomy was removed”**

inquest into the mysterious and violent death of Helen Smith in Jeddah; and warn Bradford City Football Club of the fire danger in their ancient wooden stand. [Despite my warning the Club took no action: in 1985 65 fans burnt to death in front of the television cameras.] If a nuclear bomb descended on Yorkshire I had to retire to an underground bunker in the Pennines, taking with me three councillors who were to restore democracy when Geiger counters permitted us to emerge from the cavern.

The post-1974 decline of local government is symbolised by the moth-balling of the great county hall in Wakefield, once the power base of Sir Charles and Sir Bernard. At least one remnant of the West Yorkshire County Council is still active though under-funded – the magnificent West Yorkshire History Centre, survivor of the former County Council's archive service.

My career as a local authority chief executive climaxed in 1989, when the national press, cameras poised, camped all weekend on my lawn after I resigned as chief executive of Westminster City Council – whose leader, Dame Shirley Porter, was then surcharged £42.5m over the 'homes-for-votes' scandal.

My seven years (1990-97) as secretary of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities (AMA) saw local authorities' autonomy continue to erode as first Margaret Thatcher and then Tony Blair demonstrated their dislike of local government – though my service at the AMA did

result in my appointment as CBE when the AMA was absorbed into the new Local Government Association.

My seventy years of involvement with local government has coincided with the decline in its prestige as its powers dwindled and its financial autonomy was removed. The turning point was the 1974 reorganisation. Before 1974 there was a belief that local problems were soluble, that resources would be found to address them, and that local government would be the medium by which they would be resolved. That faith dwindled after reorganisation. Many of the 'solutions' – high rise flats, urban motorways, town centre shopping malls - became discredited. Paradoxically the loss of functions emphasised the local authority's overall responsibility for the welfare of its community.

The overweening arrogance of the former county clerks has disappeared. Local government does not enjoy its former grandeur. But, despite the post-1974 decline, local authority chief executives continue to play a vital part in the life of the country, even in the world of section 114 notices and budgets crippled by the mushrooming cost of social care. Paradoxically the fifty years of decay in its functions and finances have arguably enhanced the influence of local government and its importance to the citizen. The modern local authority conceives its responsibilities to extend beyond its statutory powers to the overall welfare of its community. Though much is taken, much abides. ■

# The changing role of the chief executive II: To fifty and beyond

By Barry Quirk CBE



“Many senior council staff retired during the major reorganisations of the 1970s, and were replaced by a new cadre of energetic and career focused managers eager to pursue the corporate agenda”

Currently a special advisor to the LGA and also to PwC, Barry retired from RB Kensington and Chelsea in October 2022 after 45 years working in London local government. He was chief executive at LB Lewisham from 1993 until June 2017 when he went to manage RBKC in the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy. Barry has deep leadership experience in

service, organisational and democratic innovation, in elections management (35 elections at national, regional and local level), and in community development. A former President and Chair of Solace, Barry is also an academic with a track record of publications of books and articles, and a PhD in the geography of public policy.



**Snapshot of 1979 London:** Amidst the wider backdrop of global economic turmoil, a suburban district on the outskirts hosts social buildings, residents, and parked cars, against the backdrop of the UK's decade-long struggle with 16% average inflation and 7% unemployment rates.

## ▶ The context in which Solace began

The 1970s saw major economic turmoil globally and nationally. In the UK, for the entire decade, the average rate of inflation was 16% and unemployment rates averaged 7%. It was against this dreadful economic background that the government implemented a complete re-organisation of local government in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Alongside these changes to local government structures, there was a need for a significant improvement in the way councils were managed. Instead of councils being a collection of functions and services accountable to separate committees, enhanced corporate governance and management was required. And so, in 1974, step forward Solace - a fledgling professional

association of individuals tasked with improving the managerial coordination and the policy coherence of local government.

Many senior council staff retired during the major reorganisations of the 1970s and were replaced by a new cadre of energetic and career-focused managers eager to pursue the corporate agenda. During this initial period, the majority of individuals appointed to the position of chief executive came from two professional backgrounds: accountancy and law. Accountants were knowledgeable about the detailed budgets of all services and the investment requirements of the council's main functions. Lawyers were closely involved in clerking council meetings and therefore understood the intricacies of meeting ▶

management and the political realities involved in decision-making.

### The assertion of centralism

Although the structure of local government had undergone significant change, its purposes remained largely unchanged. The main objective was to provide a variety of functions and services mandated by central government. However, this stable and steady consensus was challenged in the 1980s. The election of a Conservative government in 1979 brought plans to curb public spending, including local government spending. In 1984, this government introduced a process of 'capping' local rate rises. Some councils resisted this new approach by trying to raise local taxes (the 'rates') or by proposing unbalanced and deficit budgets, so as to maintain spending levels. However, this clash of legitimacy between central and local government could only result in one winner: the centre.

Unfortunately, this decisive outcome laid the foundation for the weakening of councils. Innovation was stifled, and caution and self-restraint became the primary means of operating. As a result, councils became even more dependent upon central government. The regulations, which were intended to provide

guidance, were often perceived as a straitjacket of controls, policy prescriptions, and reporting requirements.

In 1991, a degree of consensus between central and local government was re-established only after the introduction of the 'citizen's charter' approach by John Major's Conservative government. This renewed emphasis on meeting user needs and addressing poor performance through redress, while allowing councils to set their own performance targets, chimed with a new 'public service ethos' that was being developed by some councils.

During this period, councillors started appointing chief executives with an explicit mandate, not only to manage services in a more consumer focussed and integrated way but also to engage with other local public service partners - such as the police and local health services. This new emphasis required an open, outward focus for the chief executive role, rather than the principally internal focus that had preceded it.

When I was appointed as a chief executive in 1993, the pattern of recruitment into the role of chief executive was already beginning to change. At that time, only four of London's 33

"No one in the sector anticipated the magnitude of change that the world, our nation, and our local communities were about to face"

chief executives were women, and almost half of the remaining 29 men had previously been their council's Director of Finance. However, councillors were increasingly appointing individuals with management credibility and an outward focus. They also started seeking candidates with a wider range of experience and with varied professional backgrounds.

### Problem solving partnerships

During the three terms of the Labour government (1997-2010), the demands on chief executives changed again. They were expected to help elected members convene public service delivery locally and ensure that the core functions were not only well-managed but also operated effectively with other public functions to deliver joint outcomes through 'local public service agreements'.

No longer just the controllers of budgets and the clerks at meetings, chief executive's role evolved into being on the threshold between the Council's organisation and that of other public institutions. Furthermore, the demands for service innovation and for organisational transformation placed chief executives at the threshold between their organisation's current state and its desired future state. This shift in role required chief

executives to possess change management skills and capabilities. Especially, those capabilities associated with the leadership of others.

So the period leading up to 2007 saw increasing demands on chief executives to promote greater corporacy in the direction and performance of their councils, as well as to convene complicated partnership networks locally. Some of these partnerships focussed on 'wicked' or cross cutting issues locally (such as social exclusion and crime reduction), while others focussed on the possibilities of service integration (across health and social care for example).

### A series of crises

However, no one in the sector anticipated the magnitude of change that the world, our nation, and our local communities were about to face. In 2007, the period of relative economic calm known as the 'great moderation' came to a sudden end. The positive growth of public value and the role that councils were playing, in an ever-widening arc of ambitions for public betterment, was about to be reversed.

Shortly after Steve Jobs launched the iPhone in 2007, which brought about remarkable changes in our personal and professional lives through ►►



our constant use of these incredible devices, so the US housing market collapsed and triggered a global financial crash that would reverberate through the global economy for years to come.

The response to this global financial crash was the ballooning of public debt which in turn led to governmental fiscal consolidation programmes, so as to consolidate that public debt. This resulted in the imposition of harsh austerity measures on public service budgets. In the UK, government applied the brakes more firmly than most. The most severe savings targets in the UK, were applied to local government budgets - and not just for two years but for eight. After being the local government efficiency champion for several years, I quickly realised that what the sector achieved in the early 2000s was insignificant compared to the budgetary challenges faced by local government politicians and managers in the period 2010-2018.

Surviving this austerity period was a deep management challenge; actually thriving in this operating environment required unbounded optimism from both politicians and managers alike. The publication of "50 ways to save: sensible savings in local government" by the (then) MHCLG on 19 December 2012 marked a low point in central-local government relations. The document, which contained a mix of extraordinary and peculiar illustrations, failed to provide a practical guide on how to achieve real-world cost savings, efficiency measures, and

productivity gains. Despite this, most councils were able to navigate the challenges and find a way forward. Repeatedly, they demonstrated managerial acuity and practical political wisdom.

One positive outcome of this period was the reconnection between local authorities, their local economy, labour markets, and businesses. The fear of local economic decline drove change through the council and its senior managers. This gave impetus for councillors to appoint new professionals with backgrounds in valuation, regeneration, planning, and local economic

## "Local government's role during the pandemic was central to safeguarding the health of the nation"

development to chief executive roles. Local government's renewed emphasis on the diversity and vitality of local economies and on the unique and distinctive economic capabilities of different localities was one positive outcome of the era of austerity.

Unfortunately, just as this period of financial strain was ending, a global pandemic emerged. As Vladimir Lenin famously said, "there are

decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks when decades happen." Almost overnight, the partnership working we had been involved in with the health sector seemed more like a parlour game. This challenge was real, dramatic and threatening. Partnership working transformed overnight into real operational connections on the ground. Piloting and trialling of flexible and remote working became something that was implemented over a single weekend.

Local government's role during the pandemic was central to safeguarding the health of the nation. The sector had to ensure that service silos, such as adult and children's social care safeguarding, planning and transport, as well as investment in housing and the environment, continued to function effectively. However, we had come to realise the truth of the old saying that successful organisations are greater than the sum of their parts. Therefore, in this unpredictable and unfolding crisis, chief executives had to make sure that their whole organisation practiced creative collaboration. And they had to pay special attention to ensuring that elected politicians were closely involved in leading the response, so that councils were not only agile and responsive, but also able to complement the capabilities and energies of local civil society and the community sector.

The response to the pandemic bent our organisations and our budgets out of shape, but it also showcased the agility and responsiveness of

local government. It sharpened our organisations' approaches to understanding the realities of inequality in our localities, to targeting help where it is most needed, and to attaining greater equity in outcomes. We have gained valuable insights from this experience and must use them to prepare for the future.

### Looking to the future

Overall, the UK local government sector employs some 1.5 million people, with an additional 1 million employed by our suppliers in social care, construction, waste and environmental management, and cultural services. To help locally elected politicians achieve the public's aims and priorities, we must harness the creative imagination of all these individuals. And we need to make sure that everyone can contribute their skills, talents and ideas for improving the future quality of life for local communities.

A young person starting their public service career at a council this year may work until 2070 - close to the 100 year anniversary of Solace! And during this time, the lifespan of their skills will progressively shorten as the pace of change in technologies quickens. This means that they may need to re-skill and develop their capabilities multiple times throughout their working lives.

In a world of accelerating change, it's best to view the future in four horizons. First, the most pressing challenges of change over the next month, the next three months, and the ►►

next 12 months. Secondly, the challenges of change that need to be faced over the financial planning horizon - which let's be honest, in local government it extends over the next two to three years at most. Thirdly, the challenges of change over the medium-term planning horizon of some ten years (or more than two political administrations). And fourthly, the challenges of change over the next generation of some 25 years, to at least, 2050. Current chief executives need to be varifocal in their outlook and in how they plan and implement change.

Solace can draw on 50 years of management experience in UK local government to support this way of thinking and acting. The collective

experience of the profession is based on managing change and responding to unforeseen challenges with openness, discipline and agility. It does not lie in simple professional codes of knowledge, but in ethical principles and the exercise of practical judgement in response to new challenges. And at the local level, it involves discovering the most appropriate ethical and practical approaches to solving problems - however knotty and irresolvable they appear.

Given the accelerating pace of change and the interconnected and multifaceted nature of global crises, local governments will face significant challenges over the next fifty years. While some challenges are unpredictable, others are already



apparent. Specifically, local governments will need to address five major challenges that will require significant changes in the way politicians, senior managers and staff work. They will need to adapt rapidly to the five Ds:

1. the impact of **demographic** change - particularly towards a rapidly ageing society. By 2050, almost 1.5 million people in the UK will be aged 90 years or over (much larger than the entire population of Birmingham now);
2. the profound changes of the **digital** economy and the need for digital era government. Generative AI is a general purpose technology that will be ubiquitous very quickly. Ensuring that its development and use augments rather than replaces human labour and creativity is crucial;
3. the need to fund and implement **decarbonisation** strategies at pace. The global ecological crisis that will flow from the heating of the globe can only be addressed if concerted global and local action is taken urgently;
4. the demands of our increasingly **diverse** communities will require a more open, curious and pluralist approach to everything that local government does. Old orthodoxies, whether they stem from overly rigid professional codes or relatively closed cultures of conduct ("this is how we do things around here") will need to be upended to ensure that councils remain relevant to the ambitions, needs and

preferences of their changing communities; and

5. the everyday challenges of trust and truth that threaten the very nature of representative **democracy**. Councils will need to encourage all forms of citizen participation and deliberation on local issues and problems. This will aid elected councillors not only to strengthen their democratic roots in local communities, but also to discover new democratic routes to address the challenges of the next fifty years.

To meet these five future challenges, chief executives need to be guided and supported by Solace, their professional body, to develop their learning so that, over the coming fifty years, they can continue to add management and leadership value to the councils and the public they serve.

The future of local government is only as bright as its ability to remain reliable and relevant to the communities it serves. In the swirl of fast paced change it is easy to become internally focussed on the managerial challenges of what needs to be done now. What's needed is varifocal management - not just about planning horizons but also about community needs and problems.

Our recent emphasis on protection from harm and risk has to be blended with our ongoing focus on the need for councils to generate public value and community betterment. And we need to ensure that democracy, kindness and competence flows through all of our connections with the public. ■

# Breaking the glass ceiling

By Pamela Gordon



Pamela Gordon read history at Oxford before joining the administrative stream of the former London County Council. She then rose through the many ranks of the Greater London Council, before becoming Chief Executive and Town Clerk of the London Borough of Hackney and in 1989 Chief Executive of Sheffield City Council – the first woman to hold these positions. She was elected as the first woman President of Solace and held the position in 1996-97. After retiring from fulltime work she held public appointments, as a member of the Local Government Boundary Commission and an Independent Assessor for Public Appointments. She was then appointed as one of the original Commissioners when the Electoral Commission was set up in 2001

and chaired the Commission's Boundary Committee for England, among other things leading the review of local authorities in the six northern regions of England in the context of the possible establishment of regional authorities there. After her second 'retirement' in 2007 she moved to live in Scotland and became involved with the voluntary sector, chairing Relationships Scotland, Borders, and for three years she was also Chair of the national board of Relationships Scotland. She continues to be an active member of various local organisations but, since her third 'retirement', her main occupation has been writing historical novels. She has published eight so far ranging from the Eleventh to the Nineteenth Centuries.

**F**or the two decades following the inception of Solace, all twenty-two Solace Presidents appointed were male. This gender gap was largely reflective of local government; during those decades there were only a handful of women in senior leadership positions, across both officer and councillor demographics. Pamela Gordon was, however, part of the small percentage of females in the top job as she became the first female chief executive of the London Borough of Hackney in 1985. This position was, of course, not only an achievement in virtue of Pamela's gender, but also on account of the tough conditions in which she had to steer the authority; Hackney was often described as one of the poorest boroughs in Britain throughout the 1980s and had suffered a number of scandals. Pamela continued breaking ground with her appointment at Sheffield Metropolitan Council during a time when the sector was regularly under fire from central government as funding was reduced, taxation was capped, and various services were centralised or privatised. At the forefront of change once again, Pamela was appointed as Solace's first female President in 1996, leading the organisation to become a much-needed voice for the sector and for its female representatives. As Pamela highlights in her enlightening article the days of the 'old boys club' are not so far behind us and it serves as a reminder that, while women in senior leadership are not such a rarity today, the equality and inclusion of women from all backgrounds is an important goal yet to be achieved.

**“When one gets to a top position it's more difficult for the disaffected to ignore one's presence and disregard what one says”**

### Leading the charge

My year as the first woman President of Solace needs to be put in context because so much has changed in local government, Solace and society since 1996-97. There were no executive council leaders or elected mayors then, but changes were in prospect after a period of high political tensions, attacks on local authority powers, and a growing recognition that local government needed to speak in a more co-ordinated manner. The role of the chief executive was evolving quickly and post-holders could feel battered from all directions - that's one element of consistency over the years. 'Professionalism' was in vogue and Solace was already considering widening its membership, raising standards, and appointing its first full-time director.

I'd made a few cracks in the glass ceiling already and was used to chairing meetings where the note-taker and I were the only women. In 1985 I'd become the first woman chief executive of a London Borough (Hackney), followed by a trickle of others over the next few years. These breakthroughs may have been facilitated by the fact that some authorities were in such dire straits they'd try anything as a means of extricating themselves and a few women were rash (or ambitious) enough to grab the opportunity. The bulk of my career up to that point had been with the Greater London Council where there'd been a scatter of senior women and I'd received encouragement to climb up the administrative hierarchy. Hackney, facing enormous problems, was also welcoming. ▶▶

**Leading the charge:** Pamela Gordon, trailblazer and former President of Solace, sits surrounded by a group of esteemed colleagues in formal attire, symbolizing her pioneering role in local government and her ongoing contributions to public service and literature.



My move to Sheffield in 1989, as the first woman chief executive of a metropolitan authority received quite a lot of press coverage and women I'd never met wrote to me wishing me well. I realised I was being viewed as having a wider responsibility towards women in local government service: rather a daunting challenge! At the same time I was (made) aware that my appointment was not universally supported by some with whom I would need to work, both within the local authority and more widely. There were, however, too many practical issues to deal with to be unduly bothered by any latent antagonism and in general I enjoyed good support.

#### **Breaking into the 'old boys club'**

And so to Solace, which I knew little about when I first qualified to join its ranks. My predecessor at Hackney had left me a diary showing all the future meetings of the Association of London Chief Executives (effectively a branch of Solace) and I duly attended the first one. I admit I found the appearance of those identikit, grey-suited men intimidating and I did certainly think of it as a cosy 'old boys club'. Nevertheless, initial impressions were not necessarily correct and as I got to know some of my colleagues I found they were welcoming, forward-looking and open minded. When I moved to Sheffield, I gradually became familiar with the Yorkshire branch of Solace and other groupings of Chief Executives in metropolitan authorities. It was Peter Bounds of Liverpool who twisted my arm, persuading

me to stand for President, and put forward my nomination. So it was that in 1994 I became Junior Vice-President.

By the time I assumed the role of President the number of women Chief Executives in local authorities had increased slightly but we were still a novelty. Within Solace I experienced no obvious hostility; indeed, the vast majority of members were in the mood for changes to boost the profile and influence of the organisation and a lot of preparatory work was in hand during my Vice-Presidency, fostered by my predecessors. The climax came at our AGM in Sheffield, when I took over as President, and a series of votes agreed to widen the membership to include chief officers, adopt a code of ethics and introduce a training scheme for continuous professional development. Maybe, with these radical departures in prospect, any die-hards might have thought a woman at the top table was the least of their worries! On the other hand, it felt appropriate that my Presidency should usher in significant changes to the Society. I found it particularly touching that some former Presidents, long since retired, sent greetings and wished me well. Sir John Boynton, Solace's first President when the organisation was set up in 1974, gave me an inscribed copy of his book *Job at the Top* which I still have.

During the Presidency I visited the regional branches, many of which had no women members at the time. I was very aware of being an object of curiosity but colleagues were courteous

**"I hoped my presence would be recognised as a small and belated step for womankind... and that Solace would reap some benefit from being seen as in the vanguard of the forward-looking"**

and discussions concentrated on topical issues; any reservations about an intrusive 'monstrous regiment of women' were unspoken and that suited me. It seemed important to concentrate on substantive issues which needed to be addressed, rather than being over-sensitive about how I was perceived. Besides, there are advantages, as I'd found when I first became a chief executive: when one gets to a top position it's more difficult for the disaffected to ignore one's presence and disregard what one says at meetings!

#### **Flying the flag for females**

The President's role included meetings with bodies representing other professions in local government, senior civil servants and sister organisations in other countries. In many cases there were no other senior women involved in these discussions so there was an element of 'waving the flag' for high-flying females more widely than just in Solace. I hoped my presence would be recognised as a small and belated step for womankind – in a terrestrial context – and that Solace would reap some benefit from being seen as in the vanguard of the forward-looking.

There is one anecdote which I treasure. It gives a flavour of how benighted things were a quarter of a century ago. I duly attended the annual

conference of the association representing City Managers in the United States, held in Washington. Its opening event involved much razzle-dazzle, passionate Gospel singers and an introduction to members of the all-male committee of the host organisation (introduced individually, each with his 'charming' partner). There were several guests like me from various countries (but all the others were men) and I was invited to respond on behalf of us all to the welcome we were given. The occasion called for something a bit over-the-top and, after the formalities, I couldn't resist voicing the wish that "sisters" in the City Managers' society would soon have one of their number at its helm. This was greeted with huge applause but the corollary was even more pleasing. Next day when Peter, my partner, bravely joined an otherwise all-women group of partners for a visit outside Washington, his companions were full of enthusiasm about what I had said!

It seems a long time ago and much has changed (although often not as quickly and fundamentally as might be wished). I'm proud to have chipped the glass ceiling for Solace and been part of a wider development which opened the cracks through which younger women might aspire to scramble, as of right. ■

# The challenges of becoming a local government senior leader from a BAME background

By Wallace Sampson OBE



Wallace joined Harrogate Borough Council as chief executive in August 2008 and served in that role until local government reorganisation in April 2023. Over a 40 year career he developed extensive experience in customer service delivery and transformation with award winning projects and teams whilst at Bradford MDC and Harrogate BC. He undertook a number of lead responsibilities in the Yorkshire region including tourism (with Harrogate hosting the Grand Depart of the Tour de France in 2014) and climate

change where he was instrumental in supporting the establishment of the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission. At a local system level, he was the chair of the Harrogate District Public Services Leadership Board. Since stepping back from his chief executive role, he has developed a diverse portfolio of responsibilities supporting the public sector. Wallace was awarded an OBE in the New Year's Honours List 2020 for services to business and the community in Yorkshire.

**A** persistent failing of the local government sector is its historic and current lack of inclusion and representation of ethnic minorities at all levels. The data currently available shows that council workforces under-represent minorities in all regions across England and Wales, and it is likely that representation in senior leadership positions is worse still. This is a fundamental flaw in a sector which purports to closely represent and speak for our communities and respond to their needs. The challenges faced by ethnic minorities climbing the ladder to senior leadership is illuminated by Wallace Sampson, former chief executive of Harrogate Borough Council, who shares personal experiences of race-based discrimination in the recruitment process. Unfortunately, Wallace's story portrays a sector which has not changed quickly enough over the last fifty years in this respect. Indeed, Solace's 2023 report on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion across the sector describes a disappointing record of data collection on representation, which must improve if councils are to make progress on this incredibly important issue.

## ▶ The highs and lows of a life in local government

As Solace reflects on fifty years serving local government and the wider public sector, it gives me an opportunity to also reflect on my own forty years public service.

I have so many wonderful memories to look back on and undoubtedly the highs considerably outweigh the lows. My early career coincided with a significant period of change in local government taxation as we moved from general rates to community charge (poll tax) and council tax in a very short period of time. I still have a vivid recollection of recording rating transactions in a huge ledger, and sometimes calculating

voids, reliefs and occupations manually. The transition to new systems of taxation required great change and the introduction of new technology, so it was an exciting time for people like me who thrive on transformation.

I was fortunate throughout my career to work for councils who believed in my ability to deliver, and I can look back on many successes with a strong focus on service improvement, the customer and communities. I was privileged to work with staff, partners and teams that delivered award-winning outcomes and provided legacy benefits. Without a doubt, however, one of my proudest moments was Harrogate hosting the finish of the ▶

Grand Depart of the Tour de France in 2014. It is one of Yorkshire's proud moments and Harrogate was very much at the heart of the occasion, with hundreds of thousands of visitors to the region and millions watching worldwide.

Much has changed since I entered local government in 1983, but undoubtedly the last 15 years has been the toughest of them all. Local government has borne the brunt of austerity more so than other parts of the public sector, and we now have to do so much more with so little. As I step back from the day-to-day challenges of being at the helm of a local authority, it is with the knowledge that the system is now at breaking point and the future sustainability of some councils is a realistic prospect.

#### **A source of shame**

However, one issue which has changed little over the past forty years, is how few chief executives, or even senior leaders more generally, there are of colour in public service compared to the demographics of our society.

A survey was undertaken in 2018 by Green Park that estimated that there were 16 persons of colour in chief executive roles in local government. Despite some changes in the last five or six years, my guess is that the changes are not seismic.

The statistics clearly do not match the demographics of our society. According to the 2021 Census data 18% of people in England and

Wales belong to a black, Asian, mixed or other ethnic group. Reflecting society would mean that there should be about 58 people of colour leading the 320 or so local authorities across England and Wales. That would really be a seismic shift.

My earliest recollections of persons of colour at chief executive level in local government are (Lord) Herman Ouseley and Gurbux Singh, and they were followed by others that I recall such as Heather Rabbatts and Darra Singh. All have had the level of profile and success that should have opened the gates for many others to follow, but it hasn't happened and we should ask why.

A good friend of mine undertook research as part of his doctoral thesis into why there were so few people from a BAME background in leadership positions in local government and the NHS. In his thesis he emphasises the importance of "gatekeepers" – the people who are in a position to select and appoint senior executives. He argued that these gatekeepers need to question their true levels of commitment to achieving greater levels of diversity.

#### **Battling bias**

Perhaps my own experiences can offer some further insight.

Until recently I was the chief executive of Harrogate Borough Council in North Yorkshire. I served in that role for almost 15 years and for a lot of that time I was the only local authority chief executive from a BAME background in the

whole of Yorkshire and the Humber, a region which covers a population of 5m people. To my knowledge during that 15-year period there was one person of colour in the North East briefly in a chief executive position, and there were none in the North West.

## “Leadership is tough in any environment, regardless of colour”

Notwithstanding my appointment at Harrogate, it has been a mixed picture to get to where I am. In some respects, being black has shone a spotlight on me, but my perception has been that sometimes I have had to work harder to prove myself because I am black.

On at least one occasion I believe there was bias in the process because of my colour. I recall vividly how I felt after one council said that a degree equivalent qualification was not enough in a chief executive recruitment process, even though it wasn't stated that 'degree equivalent' would be ineligible. I have always been honest with myself in recruitment processes. There have been occasions when I have not performed well enough and I am the first to acknowledge it. There have been other occasions when I know that I have performed well but not been

appointed to the post. I have never had a problem with that because I understand that sometimes there will be the simple reason of not being the right 'fit' for the organisation. However, to fail to reach a shortlist because you only have a degree equivalent qualification, an ineligibility which is only introduced once the process has started, is much harder to understand. I met all of the other criteria and it was such a minor reason to not shortlist me, that it is hard not to conclude that colour played a part in the decision, at least with the senior decision makers knowing as I do the demographics of that particular area.

On another occasion I was in a long list interview process with a recruitment consultant and technical assessor. Part way through the interview the technical assessor asked me why X, who is a high profile former chief executive, thought so highly of me. I have only met X once and it immediately struck me as a case of mistaken identity, and to make matters worse I know the person that the technical assessor believed I was. Again, I am honest enough with myself to acknowledge that my performance in that interview did not merit moving from longlist to shortlist. What disappointed me was that I was mistaken for another black person bearing in mind that there are so few of us in local government. Do we all look the same?

For those without the mental toughness and resilience that I possess it would have been a very difficult situation to be faced with. You consider whether you should challenge and if ►►

so, how does it affect your future prospects in an environment where recruitment consultants are very powerful in the search and selection process. Or alternatively you dust yourself down and go again. There is no right and wrong in how you should approach this but situations such as this shouldn't happen in the first place.

### How to drive diversity

So, if we are to move towards a more diverse and inclusive workforce where the demographics of our senior leaders reflect society, how can we better support people of colour in their career progression in local government? I would suggest four things from my own personal experience, although I accept that the views of others may differ.

Firstly, without a doubt the sector has to showcase successful people of colour as role models more than we currently do. We can go further and establish specific buddying and mentor programmes for aspiring black leaders to be supported by successful leaders from the BAME community. Success breeds success and emerging leaders will gain confidence and learn from being closely associated with people that they can more easily identify with.

Secondly, we need to have a more targeted approach to spotting and nurturing emerging talent from the BAME community at the earliest opportunity. I am aware that Solace is working jointly with the Local Government Association to create a broad programme of activity around

leadership and development as part of its sector support offer to local authorities. It will certainly assist the sector as a whole but, Solace's AMPLify programme aside, very little is specifically targeted at talented rising stars from under-represented groups. Perhaps, for example, there should be targets within the National Graduate Development Programme to ensure that the cohorts from each intake reflect the diversity of our community.

Thirdly, there should be short-term placement opportunities created for aspiring leaders to be placed as heads of services and directors as development opportunities. It will be challenging to establish, but it is possible to do. The NHS has an Insight programme for placing people from diverse backgrounds into Non-Executive Director roles for a period of nine months to help their development. Many NHS Trusts have joined the programme and I know of individuals from the BAME community that have benefitted from the Insight programme.

And finally, we need to work with the decision makers, particularly councillors, because not enough emphasis is placed on diversity issues in recruitment training for those that are the final decision makers and gatekeepers for the most senior roles in local government.

### The attributes that make a good leader

To conclude this essay, I wanted to share my thoughts about being a leader, because leadership is tough in any environment,

regardless of colour, and especially challenging in local government today.

In my experience there are essential attributes that differentiate good leaders from others. Other leaders may have a different perspective so these are certainly my own personal reflections.

Firstly, it certainly helps to have the ability to articulate a vision for the organisation and a clear strategic direction. This needs to be aligned with good communication skills so that the whole organisation understands where you are going and how you will get there. Not everyone will buy in, but they do need to understand.

**“My perception has been that sometimes I have had to work harder to prove myself because I am black”**

Secondly, good leaders are also visible and not remote, and can move comfortably from coal face to the boardroom. Technology advances now mean that you can be visible to the whole organisation, so it isn't always about being seen 'in person'.

Thirdly, the values and behaviours of the organisation must be owned and embraced from

the top every single day. Don't expect others to behave in a way that you are unwilling to.

And finally, resilience is so important in the modern environment of constant pressures - if you are not durable you won't last in the role. It's important to find your own ways of ensuring your resilience. Mine was through exercise and sport as well as having a strong buddying network. I have a chief executive colleague who I have been close friends with for almost 25 years, and we have created an environment of mutual support and trust. I would definitely advise building networks of like-minded peers that will support, challenge, and inspire you.

Not everyone is suited to leadership but looking ahead the sector is going to need strong and resilient leaders who get a buzz from the ability to influence change and make things happen. It isn't easy to reach the top but it is even harder to stay there. It is such a challenging landscape that the best leaders will thrive on the responsibility and accountability, with a sound understanding of the critical relationships required to succeed in their environment.

There are so many amazing people working in local government with great leaders at the helm that I am optimistic about the future. I hope that the sector continues to deliver on its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, so that Solace can celebrate in the next 50 years a leadership profile that truly reflects the diverse society of our nation. ■

# From relative riches to rags: local government finance

By Rob Whiteman CBE



“Local government finance is at the heart of the society we are and, without parallel, shows the success or failure of our politics to problem solve”

Rob Whiteman has been Chief Executive of CIPFA since September 2013. Earlier in his career, he had a range of senior roles in local government. He led the Improvement and Development Agency, and from 2005 to 2010 was Chief Executive of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. Prior to that, he was director of resources at the London Borough of Lewisham. Before joining the institute he was a senior civil servant, serving as chief executive of the UK Border Agency. Graduating with a BA (Hons) in Economics and Government from the University of Essex, he started his management career at WH Smith plc, before moving into the

public sector. An accountant by profession, he qualified with CIPFA early in his career whilst working at the London Borough of Camden. He has since held several local government finance advisory roles for the Local Government Association and CIPFA, and for many years served as secretary to the Society of London Treasurers. He is a well-known commentator and writer on a wide range of areas such as leadership, partnership working across local and central government, and building community cohesion. Rob was awarded a CBE in the 2020 New Year's Honours.

If there is one subject which has remained in the sector's spotlight throughout the last half-century, it's finance. From the introduction of rate capping in 1984 to the short-lived implementation of the poll tax in the early 1990s; austerity measures to business rates retention and council tax which hasn't been modernised since its inception in 1993 - finance policies are a regular topic of discussion, debate, controversy and activism in the sector. As an expert critic with a long and wide-ranging career in the public sector, including over a decade as Chief Executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), Rob Whiteman is well placed to share his analysis of the sector's finance system's turbulent story, as he does below. Rob diagnoses the persistent fiscal challenges local government has navigated; they are symptoms of both the centralising tendencies of Westminster and the sector's impotence to advocate for long-term solutions when confronted with dominating short-term crises. Rob's article ends with an appeal for local government to be empowered by the credibility of local democracy and drive much-needed finance system reform.

## ▶ The heart of society

When George Lansbury was imprisoned with 30 councillors for mounting the 1921 Poplar Rates Rebellion against the unfairness of the local government finance, he already had form in the preceding decades pushing at the boundaries of provision. Introducing excursions for poor children had caused outrage amongst the establishment media which argued that schools' role was to discipline children rather than care for them. A parliamentary committee was established to examine "the extravagance" of the scheme.

The perspective of history can help us consider the present. It now seems Dickensian that the poorest families or businesses of Poplar should pay rates over to wealthier areas whilst it was normalised that the nation's poorest children should not be given fresh air in the Essex countryside.

But juxtapose this to today, where it is normalised that the elderly receive substandard care or children are not optimally cared for because resources are inadequate to meet demand. We see public services losing productivity through ▶▶

## “Until the introduction of rate capping in 1984, local authorities had freedom to set domestic and business rates locally”

exorbitant agency costs because they are not set up to function well. What will people think in a hundred years' time? And what will they make of the decline of public housing at a time of housing shortage which over recent decades has seen stock transmogrified into pretty much unregulated Buy to Lets?

So, remember there is nothing more important than local government finance! It's at the heart of the society we are, and without parallel shows the success or failure of our politics to problem solve.

### A centralising force

Though there are variances between the four nations of the UK, it's not unreasonable to say that the similarity of the weaknesses outweighs any strengths of their difference. All four nations' governments are centralising by nature, including the devolved ones.

Until the introduction of rate capping in 1984, local authorities had freedom to set domestic and business rates locally. General Rates were then abolished in Scotland in 1989 and England and Wales in 1990, with the replacement system of business rates, National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), being nationalised and set by

government. Poll Tax came and went, but the introduction of a VAT increase to reduce community charge levels meant the national management of local taxation levels would remain in the Westminster psyche. Today's referendum rules effectively cap the Council Tax. His Majesty's Government does not win a general election only to then separately hold a referendum on its tax policies. Successive governments have used the language of devolution whilst systematically reducing the value of local democracy. And during this timeframe functions have been nationalised to central government oversight, for example FE Colleges, schools and courts.

### So where are we now?

The imposed weakness of local government makes for a less effective state, whilst the state has no political will to reverse where we have reached. Beyond that service standards can be driven by regulation, the degree of innovation needed to tackle the nation's ills will not be achieved by Whitehall. Why can't a local authority, for example, experiment with 14-19 schools linked to vocational training that's consistent with their economic growth plans? Well, they don't have permission or resources to experiment in this way

is the very simple answer. They have far less room for policy manoeuvre than Poplar in the 1920s.

Meanwhile the sector cannot cope with the demand and cost pressures of children's and adult social care, special needs and homelessness. The most hoped for by at any council is to avoid bankruptcy, which many achieve but it's not sustainable.

### Hopes and fears for the future

What next? If what local government does is to remain roughly the same, the pre-COVID consensus that more business rates should be localised with an aligned "fair funding" review of distribution to match spending to need is not now sustainable given structural economic changes affecting business rates. If the function of local government were to alter, at one end say the nationalisation of adult care and children's care by DHSC and DfE respectively would mean more than enough council tax resources to pay for what's left; whilst devolving more to councils would further expose the need for additional resources beyond retained and redistributed business rates. Where we used to worry about the balance of funding, we now just worry about funding!

But back again to George Lansbury for a second. When Poplar confronted central government by extending services and withholding the transfer of resources, it was before the Labour Party had formed its first government. They were relatively independent of Westminster politics. No political party today whether in government or opposition would sanction such free thinking.

And so lobbying is entirely focussed in the moment, asking for money to cover pressures rather than articulating medium term reform. We have normalised that there is no consensus on the form or function councils should take by our consequently voiceless sector on the potential for reform. A sector that should be so strong in shaping its destiny is reduced to commenting on a limited short-term set of asks that do not offend national politics.

To daydream for a second. Could all parties in local government lobby to undo the limitations imposed over the last forty years under successive governments to:

- Set business rates locally,
- End referendum arrangements on the council tax
- Locally manage schools and FE colleges
- End the Right to Buy to build a million council homes?

And from learning to speak again, could it argue for what's needed next to confront the current set of challenges?

- Integrating health and care budgets under councils
- Assigning other taxes to local decision making
- Finding new sources of income from city/ tourism taxes and charging
- Experimenting and innovating locally with new forms of schools and service provision
- Varying taxes and benefits locally to reduce poverty and incentivising growth ►►

Well, that's all pretty much pie in the sky. We are more likely due more of the same where we articulate the problem but do not lobby for the fundamental and far-reaching reforms needed to locally problem solve the fundamental weaknesses of UK.

Looking at international systems, varying my income tax would be something best done on a regional basis by a mayor or governor who's directly elected, or by a devolved regional assembly or parliament; whilst locally I might pay a precept for a new park. Direct democratic legitimacy is key. That Ken Livingstone was only made Leader by his political group after local elections undermined the case to retain the GLC. So, however many tiers of political governance exist to deliver double devolution, one day perhaps to regions and ultra-local parishes, I wish the sector would embrace the credibility that direct election brings to local democracy.

In conclusion, the reason that local government and its system of finance remains unchanged is

**“Successive governments have used the language of devolution whilst systematically reducing the value of local democracy”**

that the sector itself is not asking to change it. Yes, lobbying asks for more money to cover short-term pressures, but it does not challenge the form or function of the system. The sector is remote from its own reform.

As we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Lyons Inquiry, a lesson is that setting up reviews to propose reform does not work. One day we need a government, probably via a second- or third-term manifesto, to boldly set out the reform to take place and then establish review/s to recommend how best to implement this. Because nationally the main parties are unlikely to reach a consensus on reform, in effect this precludes those same parties in local government articulating a changed state.

So, is our only hope that one day a royal commission is charged with designing devolved and self-funded sub-national government? Whoever leads it, I'd want to call it the Lansbury Commission. ■



# Relational leadership in action: creating cohesive communities

By Kersten England CBE



**T**he role of local authorities to ensure their communities are cohesive is essential in fostering equal, resilient and harmonious places; but each place requires a bespoke approach responding to its unique history, demographics, and culture. Kersten England's article discusses how chief executives have stepped up to spearhead good community relations, pinpointing the turn of the century as a decisive moment at which long-term international phenomena, domestic and global events, and legislation combined to provoke this enhanced role. While the Local Government Act 2000 empowered local authorities to promote the wellbeing of their areas, rising community tensions in several English regions led to an exploration of how councils could foster a more open and honest dialogue between detached cultures. Informed by her fourteen years as chief executive across both City of York Council and Bradford Metropolitan District Council, Kersten discusses the ever-changing responsibility of civic leadership in an increasingly turbulent world.

London, UK: A poster with the message Community is Strength on display near London Bridge station in London, UK.

Kersten England works for ALACE representing local government senior managers and Chief Executives, she is also Chair of the Young Foundation and of the Bradford Culture Company which will deliver the UK City of Culture in 2025. Kersten was a local government Chief Executive for 14

years until October 2023, initially at the City of York Council but for the last eight years at the City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council. With a lifelong commitment to social justice, equality and inclusion she is also a passionate believer in the vital importance of local democracy and local government.

## “We are a long way from the days when the town clerk focussed on smooth governance, civic affairs and putting a steady hand to the operational tiller of the organisation”

### ▶ **The civic leadership revival**

Thirty-three years of my life were spent working in local government, from 1990 until 2023, 14 years of which as a chief executive in two amazing northern cities. Beginning before my time but increasingly in the 1990s and early 2000s we saw a progressive shift of focus which brought to the fore a renewed role for local authorities in civic leadership. Local authorities increasingly stepped forward as leaders of place; convening the institutions and sectors of a place to plan for its prosperity, alongside what had increasingly since the second world war been seen as its primary purpose, the provision of essential services. And as concerns grew about a perceived deterioration in community relations across the UK so did expectations that local authorities would take a lead role in building and maintaining good community relations for their places.

The ‘Duty of Care and Wellbeing’ enshrined in the Local Government Act 2000 is the most explicit expression of this. Taken at its most basic it gave local authorities the power to do whatever it determined (within the law) would best create prosperity for the people of a place, in the immediate and long term. What followed in the 2000s were requirements for sustainable community plans, local strategic partnerships, scrutiny of issues and provision not directly under the control of the local authority, local area agreements and a drive towards pooled budgets across agencies. Achieving purpose

was as much if not more about the leadership skills involved in convening, influencing, and facilitating shared purpose and action rather than the managerialism of previous decades.

### **Community cohesion in a changing world**

This shift of role coincided with significant social, economic, and environmental change affecting both the prospects for places across the UK and the challenges for local government to address in seeking community wellbeing. De-industrialisation, increasing levels of economic exclusion, persistent and discriminatory practices in institutions, significant actual or perceived shifts in demographic composition, the emergence of extremist ideologies and the events of 9/11 and 7/7 all had very uneven impacts on certain communities and places across the UK.

Whilst not wishing to suggest that the UK had previously enjoyed harmonious community relations – thinking back to the riots of the 1980s and indeed the deep community tensions unleashed in the miners’ strike - nonetheless these developments presented a deepening challenge to the maintenance of good community relations across many parts of the UK, and placed high expectations on civic leaders in their community leadership role. Let me be clear: many locally elected representatives had always worked hard at understanding and championing the needs of the people and communities they represented, including mediating between

conflicting needs and expectations of different communities, but more often in situations where some levers of control were at their disposal.

Around the turn of the century Ted Cattle led a review of community relations following a spate of major disturbances across English cities and towns, including Burnley, Oldham, and Bradford. From this emerged the language of community cohesion and a placing of importance around building solidarity and connection between communities alongside the previous focus on equal opportunities for specific communities and, in the 1980s, a focus on economic regeneration/ economic opportunity. More recently we have seen the Casey review and the ongoing work of Sarah Khan as the government’s independent advisor for social cohesion.

A lot of attention has been paid to residential, occupational, and educational segregation, the potential for people to become radicalised, and debates about adherence of certain communities to ‘British values’. The debates on these issues have become contentious, within communities and for local politicians, variously seen as pathologising of certain communities, holding local authorities to account for ‘adverse outcomes’ that are to a significant extent the product of a market economy and consumer choice, or avoiding of attention to the deep drivers of structural inequality. But it is for local authorities to find a way through this territory as it seeks to

create the highest possible levels of wellbeing for the people and communities of a place and good community relations are a prerequisite.

### **The role of the chief executive**

I guess it’s possible for some chief executives to remain on the margins of this work. But we are a long way from the days when the town clerk focussed on smooth governance, civic affairs and putting a steady hand to the operational tiller of the organisation. In relation to community cohesion and the building of good community relations there is a significant contribution for the chief executive to make across their responsibilities for support to elected members, strategic planning and partnerships, and effective management of the organisation. In particular, I would highlight the following:

- 1. Bring the agenda into mainstream strategic planning with partners and within the local authority.** This is an agenda that has had intermittent attention and investment from central government in the last decade. But it is central to delivery of social and economic wellbeing. So don’t wait for the next government’s flurry of interest and short-term funding, although make no mistake chief executives will have to manage and respond to government reviews and policy making when they come. What are community relations like in your area? How do you know? Are the voices of diverse ▶▶

communities heard and present in strategic arenas? Are their needs understood? Where are the fault lines of differential outcomes in terms of wellbeing? Where is community infrastructure and activity thriving and which communities are isolated and disconnected physically and socially? What do we know about discrimination and hate crime? How do we build trust and confidence between agencies and communities? What's the evidence base? Does public health include this in their development of the joint strategic needs assessment and health and wellbeing strategy? What does that mean for your strategic partnership plans and the daily 'business as usual' activity of partners? In recent times Covid taught all agencies stark lessons – let's not lose these.

**2. Make it an agenda that communities, politicians, and agencies recognise as of 'their place'.** Be self-aware and alive to, but not dictated to by, fluctuating government concerns and external views. In Bradford, for example, our approach is fourfold: i) 'getting on', creating opportunity for every community and tackling differential outcomes; ii) 'getting along' creating spaces, places, events which bring different communities together and deepen understanding such as our linking schools and neighbourhoods programmes, inter faith events etc; iii) 'getting involved' which supports community action, civic engagement and volunteering; and iv) 'feeling safe' and standing together against hatred, including community tension monitoring, community mediation, and our hate crime alliance.

**3. Build relationships with all communities, faith, and community leaders.** As a non-political system leader, I don't think it is possible for a chief executive to operate effectively without their own unmediated direct experience of the people, communities and place they serve, in all their diversity. And at the same time it is critical that boundaries are managed and the role of the elected member as the representative of communities is paramount. This is a nuanced, subtle, and necessary art for chief executives working in, and serving, a political system. This is about more than standing next to faith and community representatives at Remembrance Sunday. This is knowing that in times of challenge and opportunity you can pick up the phone and work together to find a way forward.

**4. Build a culture of curiosity and deep understanding within the local authority about the communities they serve.** A huge asset for local government is that in many authorities most staff live in the area. They are passionate about the future of their neighbourhoods, families, and communities. They have direct lived experience. Harness it! At the same time make sure that work continues to build an organisation that is truly representative and diverse – that is about culture as well as workforce composition. Challenge assumptions, 'received wisdom', and speak about difficult things. I remember in an authority – not, I hasten to say, Bradford – a planning officer recommending that the first mosque to be built in the place should keep its dome discreet, despite it sitting close to

## “The work of maintaining good community relations will and indeed must remain an abiding concern”

churches with high spires. And I remember being told that our traveller sites didn't have 'tenants choice' over fixtures and fittings unlike our housing tenants. So there is work to be done by all chief executives both in understanding where discrimination has been unconsciously hard-baked into service provision and to enabling the organisation and themselves to question, challenge, and improve. In recent times it has become increasingly apparent how little we know about neurodiversity and its implications of how we enable everyone to give their best, and equally how important it is to take an intersectional approach to our work. I know I am still learning.

**5. Supporting the administration and elected members.** This has been an abiding and vital part of a chief executive's role. And, of course, elected members have extensive experience of working in and with communities and of political management. At the same time, they can be buffeted by competing demands and vested interests within communities, divisions on these matters within their political groups, issues and events and government policy around cohesion, integration or combatting extremism to which they may be opposed. And there are tricky conversations to be had, for example balancing the right to freedom

of expression against the intention of others to divide and disrupt community tensions. It has always been the role of the chief executive to find ways to bring, in private, inconvenient, and difficult news, and to have the confidence to speak about unspeakable things.

### Community relations are key

The work of maintaining good community relations will and indeed must remain an abiding concern of local authorities. The world and our operating environment have become increasingly turbulent, and the winds of polarisation and division have strengthened. No place will prosper or achieve the levels of wellbeing to which we aspire for our communities without good community relations, which build civic pride, trust, and confidence between communities and with partners and create a strong positive narrative of the place to potential investors. And the chief executive has a massive part to play as a system and relational leader, dedicated to creating common cause and harnessing all the energy and assets of a place. It was really pleasing to hear Louise Casey in her recent series 'Fixing Britain' reflect so positively about the progress that we have made in Bradford on solidarity and cohesion across communities. But this is an agenda no chief executive can turn away from right now, whichever place they serve. ■

# RESPONDING TO MAJOR INCIDENTS AND EMERGENCIES

**A** local authority's responsibility to provide civic leadership and promote cohesive communities is closely intertwined with its critical role in emergency response and prevention.

The promotion of trust and open and honest dialogue is essential in preventing, responding to, and recovering from various major incidents and emergencies, where pulling the community together is never more important. Even prior to legislation such as the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 which conferred 'category one responder' status onto local authorities, councils have long played a role in building community resilience on account of their specialised

local knowledge. This leadership was crucial during the unique and salient challenges that faced Northern Irish communities during 'The Troubles'. During the three decades during which this violent conflict occurred, resulting in thousands of deaths, local authorities had to maintain day-to-day services while participating in the peacebuilding efforts, requiring chief executives to encourage cross-community relations, work collaboratively, and operate through deadlock and deep mistrust. In his impactful and poetic article, Desmond Mitchell reflects on his time in two chief executive roles in Armagh and Omagh councils throughout this conflict and its culmination with the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998. His fascinating insights illuminate a unique and challenging career which demonstrates perseverance and commitments to building peace from the bottom up.

The critical role of civic leadership in emergency response and recovery is further explicated in Eleanor Kelly's article. Having had chief executive and other senior roles across several London Boroughs, Eleanor has been privy to response and recovery efforts following a number of tragic major incidents, including the London Bridge and Borough Market terror attacks, the Grenfell Tower fire and not least the pandemic. Eleanor shares her reflections on the need for meaningful community engagement and support in the aftermath of these events and notes the support leaders must lend each other across networks as the effects of traumatic events reverberate.

- I **Lessons from managing through Northern Ireland's Troubles**
- II **The best of times, the worst of times**

# Responding to major incidents and emergencies I: Lessons from managing through Northern Ireland's Troubles

By Desmond 'Dessie' Mitchell MBE



Desmond 'Dessie' Mitchell is retired from the position of Chief Executive of Armagh City and District Council, a post he held from 1988–2000. Before this he was the Chief Executive of Omagh District Council from 1973 – 1988, having been appointed from his position as acting Town Clerk with Armagh City Council, which he joined in 1968. During his career, Dessie oversaw major service and project developments, and engaged across the public, private and voluntary sectors to advance economic and community development. He was a member / advisor of many key bodies on economic development, peace and reconciliation, EU monitoring

committees, etc. He was an Independent Expert to the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland and has also undertaken many International Consultancy Assignments, including Governance Reform and Strategic Development Programmes for Local Government in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, and Russia. Dessie was awarded the MBE for services to Local government in 1999 and was High Sherriff for County Armagh in 2008. During retirement, Dessie was a part-time Consultant and Advisor on Public Sector Policy and held positions as a trustee and director in several important community organisations.

Author Desmond 'Dessie' Mitchell extends a handshake to former U.S. President Bill Clinton in September 1998 after major peace speech in Armagh City. Their meeting underscores the importance of dialogue and diplomacy in resolving conflicts and building lasting peace..



**Devastation on the Streets:** Ruins of Armagh City Hall after bomb blast in 1972, a building which author Dessie Mitchell escaped prior to detonation. A grim reminder of the violence during 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland.



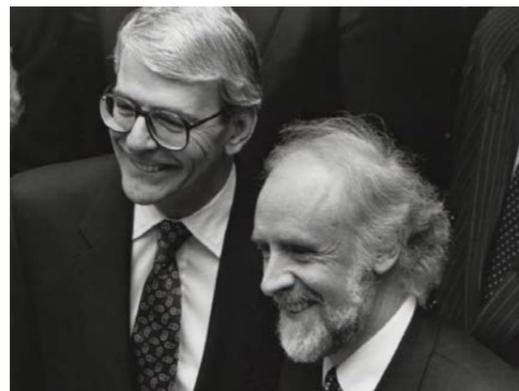


Author (front row, second from right) with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip in 1995 after Armagh was conferred City Status, a testament of its significance in Northern Ireland.

Author with Mace after HM Queen conferred City Status on Armagh in 1995.



Meeting with John Major PM as part of the Peace Process.



### ► The importance of good governance

Reorganisation of Local Government in 1973 resulted in my appointment as Chief Executive of Omagh DC at age 29. After conducting PR elections, I set upon developing new governance arrangements including standing orders, a committee system, HR policies, financial arrangements, numerous social, economic, and environmental policies.... In creating a new staffing structure, I followed my '4x4' principle – four strategic departments (horizontal) and four levels (vertical) from top management to the interface with the community; lean and fit for purpose. Change was central and required vision to build a progressive local authority. I adopted the same approach when I became Chief Executive in Armagh City & District Council in 1988. Visioning, corporate and local plans, capital programming, best value and performance management, etc. were the 'meat and drink' of effective and efficient operations in both councils. I recognised that effective leadership was critical for success as a chief executive. Creative commitment, change management, perseverance, courage, political insight, etc., was amongst the management norms deployed.

However, local government amid 'The Troubles' also required unique dimensions not found in the accepted academic management theories. I don't imagine a management course would prepare me for jumping over two suitcase bombs when exiting at speed my office building before it was demolished 10 minutes later. In the same vein, providentially, I didn't take the advice of police who failed to find a bomb in the Omagh Town Hall and advised me that it was clear to enter the building as 30 minutes later it was demolished by the bomb they didn't find. Coordinating emergencies when urban centres were being targeted with car and firebombs was a constant challenge. During my periods in both councils, I had councillors murdered, security forces and civilians killed and injured – these memories don't fade easily. Political instability and inter community conflict is a poisonous cocktail!

### Harmony and mutual respect

As the peace process gathered pace, my experience and personal commitment to harmony and mutual respect across the ►►

political and community boundaries became more into play. Armagh, as the Ecclesiastical Capital of Ireland, had a critical role to play in advancing the process. Senior civil servants and diplomats sought my view on innovative policy options, new political arrangements, potential community response, etc. I had the first Sinn Féin Chairman of a Council – this was breaking news across the UK and beyond. During the lead up to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement I was engaged in facilitating VIP visits to the council for John Major PM, Tony Blair PM, and Bertie Ahern Taoiseach. HM Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip paid a special visit restoring City Status to Armagh. All this helped advance the political process to agreement. A new political era was emerging, and I was helping shape it. Local government provided the space for local dialogue and cooperation between opposing factions. President Clinton delivered his major peace speech in Armagh City having just arrived from Omagh where a few days earlier a bomb had killed many people. His speech was carried worldwide. Working with US security in organising the Clinton visit was a rare and exceptional challenge.

When my local government career ended in 2000, I continued with some public administration involvement. I was appointed an Independent Expert by the NI Executive to its Review of Public Administration (RPA) and the Public Services Commission. I also provided consultancy advice on local government reforms as part of EU programmes in Bulgaria, Macedonia, and

Romania as they emerged from communist rule. Several councils sought my advice on governance issues following the last NI local government reforms which I helped develop through RPA.

**“I don’t imagine a management course would prepare me for jumping over two suitcase bombs when exiting at speed my office building before it was demolished 10 minutes later”**

On reflection, here are some thoughts regarding a few key lessons I learnt as a chief executive.

#### **Keep going**

Perseverance is critical. There will always be challenges; some will be political, others personal. Be confident in your ability and learn to say ‘no’ when required. I have had to do so in a surcharge case despite politicians pressing me hard for approval to proceed with a decision against my recorded advice. Despite the circumstances, keep going! I believe that this sustains organisational confidence in the ability to cope in the inevitable hard times. I believe in ‘endless hope’, not a

‘hopeless end’. ‘For every problem there is at least one solution’ is what I constantly told my staff. Be available to those who need support, especially to those who need it most. As I reflect on my years as a council chief executive managing throughout ‘The Troubles’, which inflected its unique stresses and challenges not found in management theories, I sometimes wonder why I stayed the course. I suppose the words from the Eagles song ‘Hotel California’ summed up my attitude: “You can check out any time, but you can never leave.”

#### **Managing the pressurised triangle: public, politics, policy**

I always preferred a holistic approach to public administration. This requires the chief executive to balance the tensions in this ‘public, politics, policy’ triangle between the competing interests. Sometimes, this may require spelling out unpalatable consequences to the politicians when the policy positioning may not be in the wider public interest. If necessary, be pragmatic – develop ‘best fit solutions’. When political selfishness (party interest) may override political selflessness (public interest) don’t be afraid to employ the management tool of ‘procrastination’ (regarded by some gurus as ‘disreputable’) and/or encourage the ‘scenic route’ to decision making to arrive at the best possible policy decision. This creates the space for reflection and learning to a better destination but let’s be careful of the plague of risk aversion! Local government should not be embarrassed or deterred to extend the envelope of its roles beyond its central government permitted remit.

I believe we made great progress in service development and facility provision in both councils. Whilst they had limited functions, my approach was to encourage and equip councils to exert its political clout beyond its statutory functions. For me, ‘90% of political power is influence.’ This enables and reinforces politicians. If they act in unison and are properly equipped with cogent arguments and evidence, much can be achieved. I also used the community development role to push engagement with service providers and policy development across the public sector, akin to the present community planning function.

For me an informed public view should usually be the default position when developing policy; however, there are occasions when politicians must be prepared to say ‘no’ to unjustified public demands. Managing the balance is a must – policy, politics and public are interdependent, at least that’s my view. Martin Luther King said: ‘On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, “Is it safe?” Expediency asks the question, “Is it politic?” And Vanity comes along and asks the question, “Is it popular?” But Conscience asks the question, “Is it right?”’

#### **Change is constant**

Change is often unpredictable like the weather, but always requires preparation to manage the coming headwinds and ‘making hay while the sun shines.’ Divisive ‘events’ usually emerge at the most inconvenient times so the ability to be quick footed is essential; chief executives require

a mindset that intervention to assist a political solution in the wider public interest should be contemplated and acted on. For me, it was always important to secure goodwill and support from members that I could 'bank' and then call on those reserves when the challenges arose. I found that politicians mostly welcome independent help to avoid going down the confrontation route and the need to make embarrassing u-turns. It is often best to change your mind early and for good reason. Albert Einstein concludes: "The measure of intelligence is the ability to change."

### Tipping points

One of the quandaries for a chief executive in the political process is identifying the 'tipping point' prior to transitioning to challenging problems. There are discernible elements that should alert the chief executive to the potentiality of an unplanned shift in policy/decision approach giving rise to the 'tipping point'. An insight into the settled interplay between parties and a good knowledge of the key characteristics of the council relationships is a must. This shift may be discerned by sensitive political mood changes, the discreet distancing from accepted governance arrangements, and a confidential voice (in the ear) raising an alarm, etc. Well thought out intervention is required to prevent spill over from the point of difficulty to the reality of travel along an unacceptable route with undesired consequences. The brake needs to be applied. Also, the same rules apply when you act to speed up progress when the tipping point is moving in

the positive direction. The accelerator should be applied to advantage in such occasions. When the position seems bleak and finding a constructive path though political stand-off/confrontational stances seems indecipherable it is important to explore all dimensions of the issues. Leonard Cohen (songwriter, and poet) has written: "There's a crack in everything, that's what lets the light in." This is where experience, political insight and subtlety, and the skills of facilitation are essential to enable the light of compromise, common-sense and community responsibility to flood in. For every problem there is at least ONE solution!

### Relationships: spill-over effect

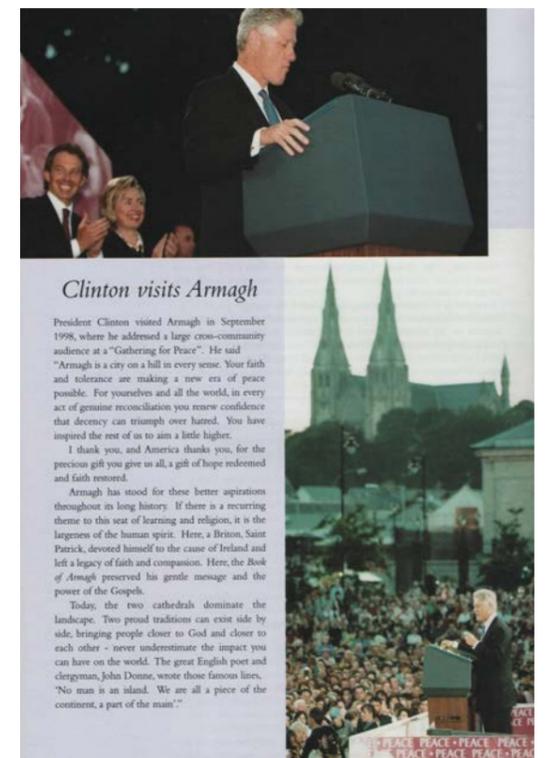
Effective relations are critical to the effective operation of a Council. Personal contact can reduce 'fear' which is at the root of most of our community/societal problems. Structural arrangements can help oil the wheels of effective relationship making and sustainability. Relationships must embrace - Reform, Respect, Reflect, Restore, Rescue.... The relationship continuum may follow this path - Consultation - Cooperation - Collaboration - Partnership - Interdependency. Partnership is fine, but if it is imbued with a high-level degree of interdependency, it has a better chance of relationship success. I was keenly aware of what I call the 'spill-over' effect. What happened in the council chamber could have a positive or negative impact on community attitudes and responses, and vice versa. Nothing happens in isolation! Council-public relationships for me

were important, and at its heart must be mutual respect. Building a structure with effective council interfacing between community, sporting, and social organisations is a must. By doing so we can avert futile conflict, we can avoid disastrous change, and we can make transformation happen for the better. Mother Teresa said: "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples."

### Bridge building

Throughout all my time as chief executive 'The Troubles' were alive and political change constant. I found myself on a personal level committed to building bridges in pursuit of peace and mutual understanding. I recall the trauma of visiting bereaved homes, meeting victims, and attending funerals - at least 20 in one two-year period. This was not in the job description, but relating to hurting people and was important for me. In a sense this vocational attitude became inherent in my professional role. I was aware that I was a small cog in a bigger wheel, but I was convinced that 'bottom-up' approaches were critical to peacebuilding. Local government stood alone as the democratic organ and voice amid shifting chaos in Northern Ireland. It was the glue that made communities work, was a learning place for councillors and provided a bridge to NI Assembly politics. Everyone can make a difference for the better. As the African proverb puts it: "If you think you're too small to make a difference, you haven't spent the night with a mosquito." ■

"There will always be challenges, some will be political, others personal. Be confident in your ability and keep going."



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# Responding to major incidents and emergencies II: The best of times, the worst of times

By Eleanor Kelly



“The impact of traumatic events reverberates around communities for a long time”

Eleanor Kelly is a CIPFA accountant and a Fellow of Kings College who has dedicated her career to supporting communities and improving local government. She started as a clerk at Corby Development Corporation in 1974 and developed her career, including a five-year period with KPMG, to become Director of Finance and then combined Chief Executive/S151 officer in Tower Hamlets. Following a job share of the Chief Executive role in Merton and

several interim roles, she joined Southwark in 2006. Eleanor was Southwark's Chief Executive for over a decade until 2022 when she retired. Eleanor has been called upon to lead a number of sub-regional, regional and national responses, including being the Local Authority Chief Executive advisor on the National Vaccination Programme. Eleanor has recently taken on non-executive strategic advisory roles in the public and private sectors.

▶ I started my career in local government in 1974, the same year that Solace was established.

My first job as a clerical officer did not make me think that I could ever aspire to the lofty heights of belonging to the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, but in time the public sector had its own ways of recognising and rewarding hard work and tenacity. As my career progressed, and I thought about more senior roles, I can reflect that my focus was on honing leadership and managerial skills, political acumen and orientation to the system and its challenges. I would have to confess that the responsibilities that came from resilience legislation were not uppermost in my mind. By the time I achieved my first chief executive role in Tower Hamlets in 1999 the threats and the responsibilities were real – particularly having experienced the South Quay bomb in the Borough in 1996.

#### **It's not what you know but who you know**

Emergency planning, training and preparation were a fact of life, although an unusual one in that there are very few full-time emergency planning officers – we rely on a network of rotas, volunteers and third-party partners like the Red Cross. Understanding and being connected to that network is a great way of getting close to the genuine heart of your organisation – which is not based on organisational hierarchy, is genuine teamwork and where people are working to their strengths and to a recognised and mutual common goal. The relationship with the other category one responders is also crucial – I think any chief executive faced with an emergency situation would agree that it's not what you know but who you know that makes a difference.

The ability to get directly to the person that can make something happen NOW is not to be underestimated. In the final decade of my career we were focused in Southwark on a decade of delivery - a great strap line but a genuine challenge in the face of austerity to create homes, jobs, a better start in life, equality and prosperity for all our communities. I can look back now and reflect that the final half of that decade of delivery also went hand in hand with major incidents and emergencies that touched us all.

I was privileged to speak in Southwark cathedral on the 5th anniversary of the London Bridge and Borough market terrorism attacks where I said that I was honoured to have served the Borough for ten years as chief executive and that half that term was in the light of the London Bridge and Borough Market attack. I said “in the light of” because terrible events can actually allow a light to shine through the darkness. The light of remembrance, of hope, of courage, of service and of pride. I can now reflect that there is also shame in regard to other events, but more of that later.

#### **Don't worry, plan**

I am a firm believer in not wasting time worrying - not least because the most challenging things come out of the blue and have to be dealt with without time to worry. It is better, in my view, to have things under control through good planning, systems and processes so that the governance structure is in place and strong enough to deal with whatever may happen. In the end, this was proven to be the right approach across the piece – including when major incidents happened to challenge and disrupt, whether they were Southwark specific, needed a more ▶▶

collegiate approach across London or were on a national scale. As an example, I was not even in the country when the Borough Market attack took place - I was 4,000 miles away in the Caribbean. I received a phone call just before the breaking news started to scroll across the TV screen. I was horrified and galvanised in equal measure. I was very proud of the way the plans we had laid sprang into reality and everyone worked so hard to support the response and move quickly into the recovery phase. As I flew back and I had to be out of touch with the team for a few hours I thought "this is your chance to get some sleep" and then across the eleven-day period from the attack taking place to the market reopening everyone worked tirelessly to restore the area, reassure the local communities and put in place the longer-term support needed when such traumatic events take place.

The impact of traumatic events reverberates around communities for a long time. I also think the pandemic years have played tricks with time, distorting our perception of how fast or slowly time is moving. That is particularly painful for bereaved families for whom time often stands still. Time passes slowly too for those who are still recovering from their mental and physical injuries. In the same way that they sometimes reflect on the courage and kindness of strangers that came to their aid we must remember to reach out to help, support and sustain them in their continuing journey. In that context major incidents are never really over in the communities in which they have happened.

There was a photo in the Financial Times on the reopening of Borough Market. I am in that photo

looking up towards the bell that is rung to signify the opening of the market. I can see in my face that I was pensive rather than celebratory. I was torn between reflecting on the success of the market reopening so quickly against the fear of the tragedy that had unfolded in the early hours of that morning at Grenfell Tower. It felt very close to home as we had experienced the tragedy of the fire at Lakanal House in 2009 that claimed six lives, and we therefore had experience of the Coroners inquest and the subsequent recommendations, responses and prosecutions, over the intervening eight years.

#### **A privilege to lead**

I was privileged to be asked to help with the Grenfell Tower tragedy. It is often overlooked that the Tower was part of an estate of more than 1,000 properties and that the impact on the whole of the Lancaster West estate was devastating. The experience of engaging directly with that community will never leave me. An abiding memory is the first meeting with the bereaved and survivors followed by a meeting the following evening with the Lancaster West Residents Association. I have never felt so humbled in the face of such grief and anguish, and rightful anger, nor so ashamed that we were the first people in authority standing up in front of them a full six days after the terrible fire. That couldn't be fixed, or forgiven, we just had to find a way forward in partnership with that community. It took a battalion of colleagues from all across London to help and I remember being heartened by the willingness and generosity of support.

Following all of the events in 2017, especially the catalogue of experience in London (including

Westminster Bridge, London Bridge, Grenfell Tower, Parsons Green tube and housing emergencies in Camden and Southwark) the Chief Executive's London Committee (CELC) decided to find out how people were feeling about their own resilience and the ability of their Boroughs to deal with emergencies. I was privileged to interview all of the then incumbent chief executives and to hear first-hand both their confidence and their concerns. I was not ashamed to speak about having therapy after the events of 2017, and to encourage others to consider the effect that responding to traumatic events had on them personally. As a result of that work more was done to provide mutual support and dialogue across CELC and, in some ways, it helped to identify the strengths that we relied on during the covid pandemic. One thing was clear in 2020, though - none of us had ever faced a pandemic before so we were all equals in trying to find our way through. The resulting sub-regional, regional, and national working has strengthened bonds across local authorities - and from my vantage point of having been the local authority chief executive representative in the national vaccination programme I do hope that the important role that all local authorities played in the success of the programme has improved the NHS knowledge and appreciation of our sector.

#### **Preparing for future incidents**

Whether big or small, a feature of any incident is the lessons learned from it; to hone our responses and improve our coordination and approach for the next time. In a more formal sense the public inquiries, coroners reports and media interest bring a pressure which is not just about learning

lessons and avoiding future fatalities but can feel overly judgemental, especially with hindsight that was not present at the time. The reviews and inquiries that have been undertaken and are still underway have policy implications at a local and national level and the work of the National Preparedness Commission will also be important for the way forward. It is incumbent on Solace, LGA and others to ensure that the emerging and newly appointed senior leaders in local government are suitably prepared and ready to fulfil their responsibilities to their communities under existing, or new, resilience legislation. This has not really featured as much as it should have in past leadership programmes.

In the meantime, please do not let the fear of getting it wrong, or of being given learning points after the event, stop you from getting involved in the first place - no one can be helped if there is no one there to help, and the principle of mutual aid means if you don't step up to provide it then who will come to the aid of your community if the need arises.

In all of the emergencies, critical incidents and tragic events that I have been involved in over the years I can reflect that the worst of times really can show the best of times - the selflessness of the response from all category one responders, the heart and courage of communities, the dedication and willingness to engage from all quarters and do what is needed are all a source of pride. Be prepared, be willing and be compassionate and you won't ever feel that there was something you should have done that you didn't do - whether that is in the best or worst of times. ■

# Learning the lessons of leading through the Covid-19 pandemic

By Carolyn Wilkins OBE



**“The COVID pandemic represents a pinnacle of complexity and unpredictability”**

Professor Carolyn Wilkins OBE is currently Professor of Practice at Birmingham Leadership Institute, University of Birmingham, focused on systemic leadership practice. She is Chair of Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. She is an experienced chief executive and public sector leader. She has held senior executive roles at local, city region and national levels. Her national experience includes Expert Adviser Health and Care, Number 10 Downing Street and Director of Contain, NHS Test & Trace. In Greater Manchester she undertook a range of system leadership roles

including for Complex Dependency and Population Health. Her academic interests include leading across boundaries, and her doctorate explored the relationship between trust and control in organisations. She supports a range of senior executive and graduate development programmes including Solace Total Leadership programme and LGA National Graduate Programme. Carolyn is Chair of Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) and a member of the NHS Assembly. In June 2016 she was awarded an OBE for her services to local government and public service reform.

**T**he Covid-19 pandemic is a prime example of how local leaders must step up and adapt to global events. During the pandemic, local government was at the heart of implementing the government’s response, playing a crucial role in convening and galvanising other public, private and third sector organisations to address rapidly arising and evolving issues. In her article below, Professor Carolyn Wilkins outlines the conventional chief executive role before drawing comparisons to the experience of being in this position during the pandemic, a time when relational skills, adaptability and creativity became even more critical. Carolyn offers a unique perspective on this time, drawing from her experiences locally as chief executive of Oldham Council, and at the national level as both Director of the Contain strand of NHS Test & Trace, and Expert Advisor on Health and Care to 10 Downing Street. Her reflections offer fascinating insights into the barriers which siloed working between central and local government pose to good policy making and crisis response.



As the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly changed lives in our communities, local authorities were at the front line of implementing the government’s response.

“What do you like most about your job?” Not an uncommon question during my time as a chief executive. And my responses typically included some reflections about the variety and sheer unpredictability of the role – with no one day the same as any other. Of course, there are certain underlying rhythms in the world of local government: rhythms shaped by the electoral cycle; the financial year; the academic year; the strategic planning cycle and, of course, by the seasons themselves. But many days ended with none of the things I’d planned to do being completed, usually because my attention and energy were diverted to other pressing matters.

#### **A relentlessly relational role**

Much of the unpredictability of the job of chief executive arises from the volatile times we live in. But it’s also a consequence of the incredible breath and diversity of the role itself with its wide array of responsibilities and the expectations on it. Chief executives lead and manage their councils, but they also have significant roles in leading within and across systems and places. They are focused on the future whilst delivering in the present, repeatedly needing to pivot from detailed operational issues to long-term strategic matters; from day-to-day delivery to planning for the next five to ten years.

These roles require an incredible range of knowledge: from understanding many hundreds of different services and their inter-relationships, to the legislative frameworks within which councils and partner organisations operate, to ensuring effective governance and developing impactful insight and understanding of different

communities and geographies. And more than this, the role of chief executive is relentlessly relational. Chief executives are constantly connecting with their wider workforce, and with elected members. They’re building relationships with a myriad of other organisations and groups. They work with colleague chief executives in neighbouring authorities, across devolved governance arrangements such as city regions and act as advocates and representatives of the local government sector as a whole. Chief executives take on wide ranging responsibilities on behalf of the sector - championing, educating and promoting. From site visits to formal meetings; from ward walks to virtual calls; from challenges and disagreements to shared successes and celebrations - chief executives are connecting, and collaborating across much of what they do.

## “The role of chief executive is relentlessly relational”

But of course, there are many occasions when the variety and unpredictability is not a positive or generative experience. I’m sure we’ve all been taken off track by frustrating occasions when important local focus is diverted as a result of poor planning or short notice imperatives from another part of the system. And then there are those darker moments, when the unpredictability is driven by major infrastructure failure or other critical incidents.

#### **The pinnacle of complexity and unpredictability**

The Covid pandemic represents a pinnacle of such complexity and unpredictability and included many such darker moments. Chief executives trying to navigate their way through had to draw in multiple ways on all of the assets of their role and ways of working, in order to try to continue to deliver a wide range of services, adapted where possible for the extreme circumstances. And then adapted again as rules and guidance changed, and then adapted yet again following the latest updates. From registrars to refuse collection, from social care to supporting schools, from ensuring good governance to managing impact on local elections, from emergency planning and piloting new elements of the Covid response. There were seemingly endless ways to try to keep services running and teams supported.

Collective working was essential, with chief executives drawing on their relationships with each other, as well as with organisations such as Solace and the LGA. Their extensive networks were crucial, enabling multiple perspectives, ideas and resources to be brought together. To be able to piece together input from multiple sources to build responses, to learn the way forward together. Alongside the creativity, working in this way enabled valuable spaces and moments for testing ideas and for developing mutual support and understanding.

I was privileged to work at national, city region and borough levels during this time. I saw first-hand the generosity and commitment of chief executives, with so many taking the time to

come together and support each other. I also saw the challenge and advocacy on behalf of their communities and on behalf of the sector as a whole. Despite the frustrations and, at times, the anger at lack of engagement and communication, and the ignorance of the breadth and depth of contribution local government can and should make, I saw people constantly working to find the best ways to protect and help their communities.

I hold strongly to the principle of subsidiarity – with challenges and opportunities best tackled as closely as possible to the people and places affected. Both local and central government can do much more to build the connections and networks that make this possible. But I was struck working at the national level just how faint or absent many of these feedback loops from places of implementation are; and, therefore, how much risks being missed because of the sheer effort needed to breakthrough and be heard, which in turn creates a significant issue for responsiveness for policy implementation.

#### **Appreciating agency and agility**

The complexity of processes in both forms of government can be astonishing but after my experiences at national level I appreciate very much more the agency and agility of local government. It was clear in many moments in the work just how much more needs to be done to develop the desperately needed understanding of the power and possibilities, rules and realities of the local government sector by those in central government. Particularly at times when a deficit narrative is so prevalent. The challenges of and from siloed working continue across government ►►

– both local and central. But there are significant opportunities for local sector to play a much greater role in developing insight in terms of policy and impact within a complex web of other policies, directives, resource assets and needs.

Across all my roles it's clear there is huge talent and dedication across central and local government. But a time of such scarcity it is imperative we work harder in building relationships and working on the quality of these connections, as well as valuing the understanding and amplification of effort such links can bring.

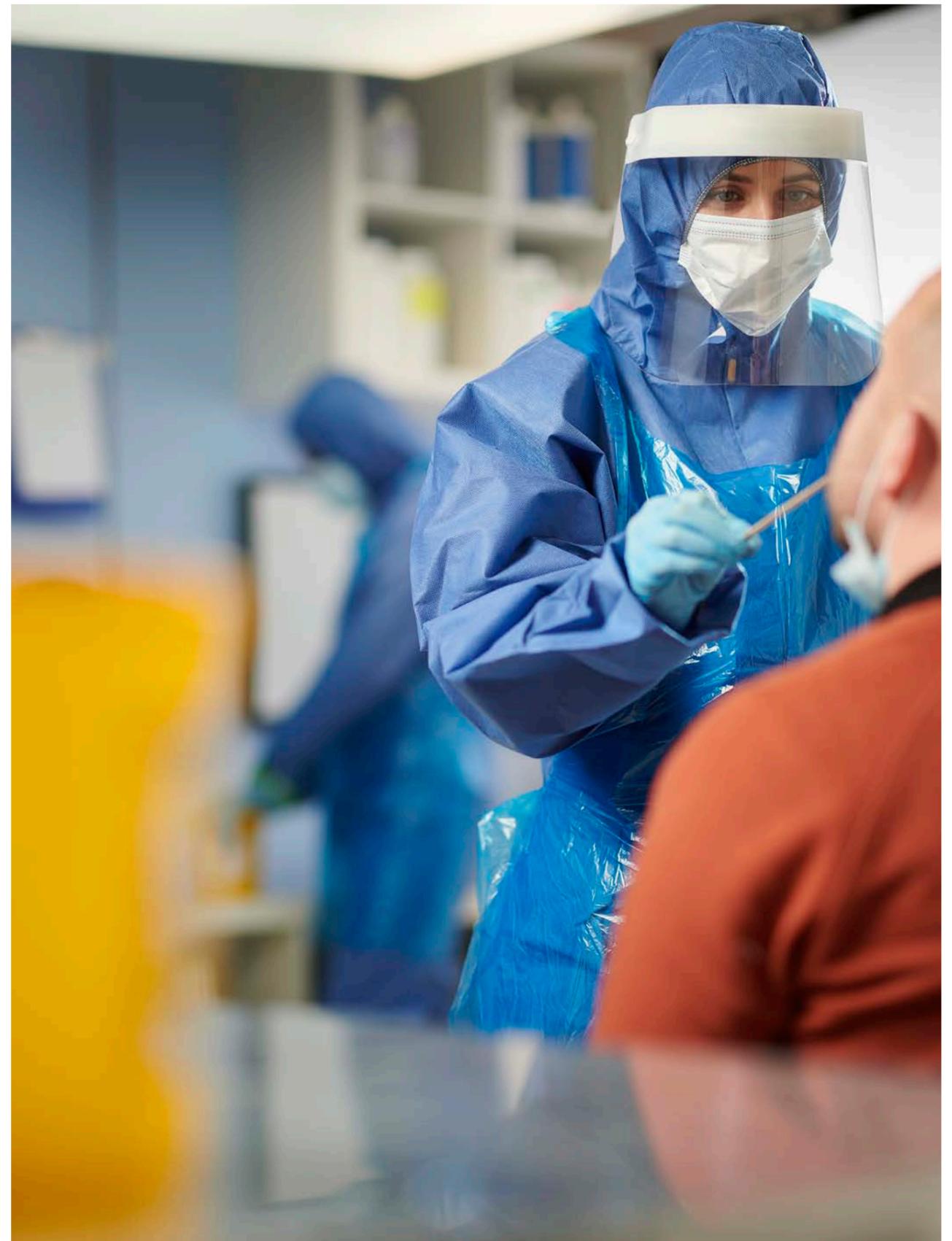
The experience of the pandemic has left many questions for chief executives to take from their learning and reflections. There were times we felt first-hand how it is to be marginalised or overlooked in decision making. So how do we do better in our own work in future? We experienced the frustration and the consequences from the

lack of insight and understanding of the role and contribution from local government in the processes of making informed decisions. So what does this mean for how we connect with different perspectives and voices going forward, and how do we build a better sense of what is going on in our communities beyond our own contributions?

We also saw how deeply reliant we are on the relationships and connections we have and how much harder and less impactful it was when these relationships were weak- or absent. So a final question with which to close. With the legacy of recent years, together with the ongoing pressures and disruptions we're experiencing, how do chief executives continue to build not just the skills and knowledge the job requires but continue to find time to invest in widening and deepening the relationships and connections so absolutely crucial in facing unpredictability that shapes their days? ■

**“After my experiences at national level I appreciate very much more the agency and agility of local government”**

**Carolyn Wilkins OBE was Chief Executive at Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council for 8 years, serving the council throughout the pandemic.**



# Power to the people: the importance of community

By Fiona Lees



“There is a need, now more than ever, for strong place-based leadership to drive public service reform”

Fiona started her career as a Community Worker in Strathclyde Regional Council from 1978 to 1982, becoming a Senior Community Worker until 1987 and an Area Co-ordinator until 1990, holding a wide range of posts supporting community regeneration in places across the West of Scotland. Fiona then took up a role as Sub Regional Officer in the Chief Executive's department in Ayrshire

and, in 1995, became Depute Chief Executive of the new East Ayrshire Council. In 2004 she was appointed as East Ayrshire's Chief Executive, holding the post for 17 years until her retirement in 2021. Fiona was also Chair of Solace Scotland in 2016-7 and was appointed to the Scottish Government's Social Renewal Advisory Board.

Local authorities are best placed to respond to the needs of their communities because they are closest to the people they serve. But successful services are not just delivered in virtue of their proximity to residents; success stems from designing services ‘with and for’ communities, rather than ‘doing to’ them, as illustrated by Fiona Lees’ article below. Starting her career as a community worker demonstrated to Fiona the potential of the community voice and her experience shows the value of removing organisational barriers which in turn help communities to prosper. On this basis, as Chief Executive at East Ayrshire Council, Fiona led a transformation strategy which, with the assistance of communities, provided quality and cost-effective prevention and early-intervention services.



### Understanding what matters most

Solace's invitation to write this article has highlighted that while we have both served local government for almost the same time, my journey may have been different to that of other chief executives.

In 1978 I was employed by Strathclyde Regional Council as Community Worker in North Forge wood, Motherwell. Like so many post war housing schemes, North Forge wood had been 'award-winning' in its day. But by the late 70s it was better known for its levels of poverty and inequality. As an incoming worker I naively asked the housing department if there were any vacant houses in North Forge wood – I could take my pick. Entire streets lay empty awaiting demolition.

To this day, I maintain that my North Forge wood years taught me everything I know about communities and what matters most to local people. North Forge wood was a proud community, where family life mattered and people worked hard, often against all odds, to give their children the best in life. People looked out for and looked after each other. If someone had a pot of stovies, no one was going hungry. Local people knew what they loved about North Forge wood and they also knew what had to change. But public authorities were not ready to listen.

### By the people, for the people

In the eighties I went to work in Castlemilk, one of Glasgow's post-war housing schemes where

thousands of houses were built but little else by way of amenities. Billy Connolly described these schemes as "deserts wi' windaes." But in Castlemilk community organisation was strong and, here too, local people worked hard to improve community facilities and opportunities for their children. They were determined change should be "by the people, for the people" and demanded that public authorities were accountable and worked in this way.

Although I was still social work-based, I was becoming increasingly aware that meaningful and lasting change can only happen if you harness all of the public sector's resources. For people to have happy and healthy lives, the communities they live in need to prosper. More and more, I started to work across council departments and with other agencies including health, social security and the Scottish Development Agency.

There was (and still is) no place for silo working. The public sector needs to put communities first and work across organisational boundaries. My next few years were spent in area regeneration which included being employed jointly by Hamilton District Council and Strathclyde Regional Council. Little did I know how well this would prepare me for the new unitary authorities which were to follow in less than a decade.

A word about projects and special initiatives. My working life up to this point had been in time-limited projects, nearly always funded through

the Urban Programme. All of this work was well intentioned and much of it highly impactful for local communities at the time. However, the changes these projects nurtured and supported were not sustained beyond the funding period and lessons learned seldom led to new ways of working becoming the norm. Change therefore needed to take place at the centre of councils with strong leadership championing new ways of working, rather than merely piloting small scale projects and expecting mainstream transformation as a result.

### Embracing reorganisation

My next step took me to the chief executive's department and to Ayrshire. By this time local government reorganisation was on the horizon. In 1996, the existing regional and district councils in Scotland were replaced by 32 unitary councils.

I will always feel a sense of loss over the abolition of Strathclyde – I was so proud to work for the council. It served 2.3m people: 45% of the Scottish population. Its budget then was £2.5b. Strathclyde played to scale, setting policy strategically but delivering locally and allocating resources where they were needed most. When required, it took on the government of the day with memorable examples being welfare payments to striking miners and the referendum on water privatisation. However, the die was cast. From all of my work in communities and seeing first-hand the benefits of joint working, I welcomed that the new unitary councils would bring all local government services 'under one

roof! In the new world, the buck would stop with us.

I was thrilled to be appointed Depute Chief Executive of the new East Ayrshire Council. East Ayrshire is made up of diverse urban and rural communities where poverty and affluence sit side by side. The principal town of Kilmarnock had been home to manufacturing and engineering with Massey Ferguson, BMK and Johnnie Walker Whisky amongst our industrial giants. While in the south of the authority, the closure of deep mining had led to the loss of 10,000 jobs in Cumnock and Doon Valley. Work to close the inequality gap became a constant endeavour for the council.

While some commentators argued that merging the functions of three former councils would be difficult, we relished what we were creating and being responsible for something new. What an enduring strength this has proven to be. East Ayrshire Council in its infancy was both pragmatic and purposeful: it recognised that it did not have the answers to all of the challenges our communities faced but as the only locally democratically elected body, it had significant convening power and used its community leadership well.

### Transforming community relations

Almost immediately we were on the road, talking to our communities and hearing from them what kind of council they wanted East Ayrshire to be: communities needed to be at the heart of everything we were doing. Later we would build ►►

on this when we transformed our relationship with our communities with a renewed focus and resource on early intervention and prevention. Vibrant Communities wasn't just a team it was a philosophy which would underpin all council services.

The council sought to work in partnership with others and to build alliances wherever possible. The Community Plan would become the sovereign plan for all public services in East Ayrshire - something no other part of Scotland has been able to achieve. We pioneered co-location – calling it the bricks and mortar of community planning.

In 2004 I was appointed East Ayrshire's Chief Executive and it was the privilege of my life to hold that post until my retirement in 2021.

From early in my working life I recognised that trusting and respectful relationships between members and officers are key to the success of any council. Collaborative leadership ensures that the executive leadership of the chief executive and the senior team, complements the political leadership of the elected members. Members and officers being seen to work well together, is vital to the culture of the organisation.

It's funny, when people ask me what I am most proud of my immediate response is not 1,300 new social houses, or the 38 new or completely refurbished schools the council built or the Transformation Strategy which enabled the council to reduce expenditure by over £50m

through focussing on what mattered most to our communities. No, what comes to mind are times of adversity, when our communities experienced tragedies, when companies closed or when Covid struck. This is when the council would run towards our communities to see how it could help.

#### **Driving reform through strong local leadership**

During my time in East Ayrshire I witnessed significant and unparalleled changes across the public sector including: devolution; the creation of new public bodies; cuts to local government funding; removal of previous functions; ring-fencing; stringent conditionality linked to new monies; a punitive welfare system; and, withdrawal from the European Union.

At a time when the role of local government feels increasingly like it is being relegated to local administration, there is a need, now more than ever, for strong place-based leadership to drive public service reform.

And this brings me nicely to Solace. I have valued the support and collegiality that membership brings. In Scotland, Solace runs a tight ship with meetings running alongside CoSLA Council Leaders' meetings. A highly effective portfolio system means that the views of Solace are regularly canvassed by government, public agencies and civic Scotland. I was privileged to be Chair in 2016/17 and made it my mission to spend time with every Chief Executive in their patch. I wanted to shine a light on the work of councils and the leadership role colleagues perform. My



Fiona partaking in an election count.

time as Chair only strengthened my view that there is no more authoritative voice, in terms of public sector executive leadership, than Solace.

So my final thoughts? I came into public service to make a difference and this principle has stayed with me to this day. I believe in the power of communities and my focus on people and place has been steadfast. I am so lucky to have had a job that I loved and to have had the opportunity to give life to the values I hold. I have often said "I've always been a community worker – I've just had a bigger community."

But my last word must go to today's chief executives. No matter the challenges I may have faced, you have a much harder shift. Everyday your leadership matters. Go safely and go well! ■

**"Meaningful and lasting change can only happen if you harness all of the public sector's resources"**

# The long dawn of devolution

By Eamonn Boylan OBE



“It is impossible to integrate policy or investment at a local level if it is attempted through a nationally determined process”

Eamonn Boylan was appointed Chief Executive of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in January 2017. Prior to that he was Chief Executive of Stockport MBC from 2010. While at Stockport Eamonn led the Council’s £1billion programme of investment in infrastructure and town centre regeneration. Previous roles include Deputy Chief Executive of both the Homes and Communities Agency (responsible for all national regeneration programmes) and Manchester City Council where he led the Regeneration Division and helped shape Strategic Regeneration programmes

across the City. As the Chief Executive of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Eamonn chairs the Greater Manchester Wider Leadership Team and has responsibility for Policy & Strategy and a wide range of Greater Manchester wide services including Fire and Rescue, Waste, Transport Economic Development and Planning. He also is jointly accountable for the Greater Manchester Strategic Plan for the transformation of Health and Social Care. Since November 2018 Eamonn has also undertaken the role of Chief Executive/Director General at Transport for Greater Manchester.

**N**otwithstanding devolution to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland the UK remains one of the most centralised developed democracies in the world. The creation of the directly elected mayor in England has, however, been nothing short of a game-changer, as illuminated in Eamonn Boylan’s insightful article below. With a career that has bridged significant local government milestones — from spearheading Stockport MBC’s billion-pound infrastructure and regeneration projects to leading the Greater Manchester Combined Authority — Eamonn has been at the forefront of transforming how local services meet the needs of communities. His tenure has seen the advent of strategic devolution deals in England and the integration of critical services like health, transport, and social care across Greater Manchester, showcasing the profound impact that devolved powers and localised leadership can have.



### ► Rising up the agenda

English devolution and elected mayors have risen up the political agenda in recent years. To many commentators, they seem to have appeared out of nowhere with the now famous first Greater Manchester Devolution Deal in 2014. But in truth, the story begins much earlier and has much deeper origins.

The call for devolution of key strategic powers was a natural evolution of the emergence of sub regional collaboration, in pursuit of effective strategic coordination and delivery of services to people and place where it could add value to the efforts of local authorities and other agencies.

Since 1986, and the abolition of metropolitan councils, Greater Manchester has worked in unison, initially to ensure effective oversight of key functions across the city region (such as transport, waste, blue light etc.) and to enable a coherent strategy for economic development for all 10 boroughs. The Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) carried this collaboration through the 1990s and 2000s, supported by an emerging set of city-regional institutions like New Economy and Marketing Manchester.

However, little progress was made in discussions about devolution until the decision was taken to create a legal entity, effectively an 11th local authority, in the form of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in 2010. Crucially, this

‘combined’ authority would be a model to enable collective decisions, not a London-style separate tier.

The existence of that entity removed a significant barrier and provided a simple answer to the question “To whom are we devolving powers?” and enabled a proper discussion about what might be devolved. Initially, it was assumed that the existence of the Combined Authority was, in itself, a sufficient basis for devolution. It is fair to say that the creation of a position of city region mayor was never a key priority for local leaders. But the clear understanding that Government saw that as a precursor to any meaningful dialogue created the basis for a pragmatic decision to agree to proceed with that step in 2015 when the Interim Mayor was appointed by the leaders as chair of the Combined Authority.

### A genuine gamechanger

The first direct election of the Mayor of Greater Manchester in 2017 was a genuine gamechanger, creating a single focal point of accountability for the electorate working alongside the ten leaders. That focal point was not just in those areas where the Mayor held statutory powers. Concerns over rough sleeping, historic abuse of children and the need for fundamental reform of emergency services in the wake of the Manchester Arena bombing led the Mayor to intervene through the exercise of “soft power” in areas that were way outside those laid down in statute. This was not always welcomed in the first instance by all

leaders but there was a rapid realisation that this was a route to more effective and decisive intervention and to greater engagement than previously.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this was that the Mayor, and the Combined Authority, were seen, immediately, as the right agencies to lead the city region’s response to the Covid pandemic. As many will recall the Mayor led a challenging dialogue with the Government of the day with very strong support from the citizens of Greater Manchester. But for most of the pandemic period, the focus was on local coordination of services in question “To whom are we devolving powers?” and enabled a proper discussion about what might be devolved. Initially, it was assumed that the existence of the Combined Authority was, in itself, a sufficient basis for devolution. It is fair to say that the creation of a position of city region mayor was never a key priority for local leaders. But the clear understanding that Government saw that as a precursor to any meaningful dialogue created the basis for a pragmatic decision to agree to proceed with that step in 2015 when the Interim Mayor was appointed by the leaders as chair of the Combined Authority.

The Mayoral role has signalled other changes. I think that it is fair to say that the political dynamic is often very different at local level, where the primary commitment has long been to place rather than to political party. The opposite is true at Westminster. The Mayor of Greater Manchester,

along with many of the other elected mayors in England, has been on a journey and would now, unequivocally, say that he shares that local, place and community focus. That is not to say that party politics has gone away... far from it, but the primacy of place is clear.

### Think local

It is that primacy that has driven the commitment to devolution. It is a simple statement of fact that it is impossible to integrate policy or investment at a local level if it is attempted through a nationally determined process. The understandable desire to ensure effective ministerial accountability for policies, programmes and budgets often produces excessive bureaucracy. This makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to apply a place-based approach to coordinate action by Government. But there is an absolute requirement for local influence informed by local intelligence. That influence must go further than limited flexibility around predetermined and centrally designed programmes and is essential to delivering successful outcomes for places and people. We have seen clear examples of this in Greater Manchester. Our approach to work and health (where the locality-based approach to integration of health with other public services was made possible by the devolved arrangements agreed in 2015) has seen the first reduction in the gap in healthy life expectancy between poorer and more affluent communities in Greater Manchester in living memory. Similarly, in regeneration the ►►

flexibility and local control of programmes such as City Challenge have yielded genuine and sustainable benefit in places like Hulme.

It is this drive for local flexibility, and the ability to integrate in a place-based way, that led the West Midlands and Greater Manchester to our “Trailblazer” devolution deals in 2023. Those deals signal a significant change in the nature of the devolution journey which should not be underestimated, taking a step toward the devolution of both responsibility and accountability for the first time. At the heart of the deal is a “single settlement” that, while not being quite what it says on the tin, represents a step toward us being able to manage resources flexibly across policy areas over the course of a Spending Review. The settlement will be based upon an outcomes framework articulating our commitment to deliver tangible outcomes and impacts for our citizens through the deployment of the resources within the deal. It will cover whole policy areas, meaning that any Government programme within the relevant functions is in scope. Essentially this is the first time that we are seeing the devolution of whole functions with the flexibility to invest as we see fit in delivering the outcomes agreed with

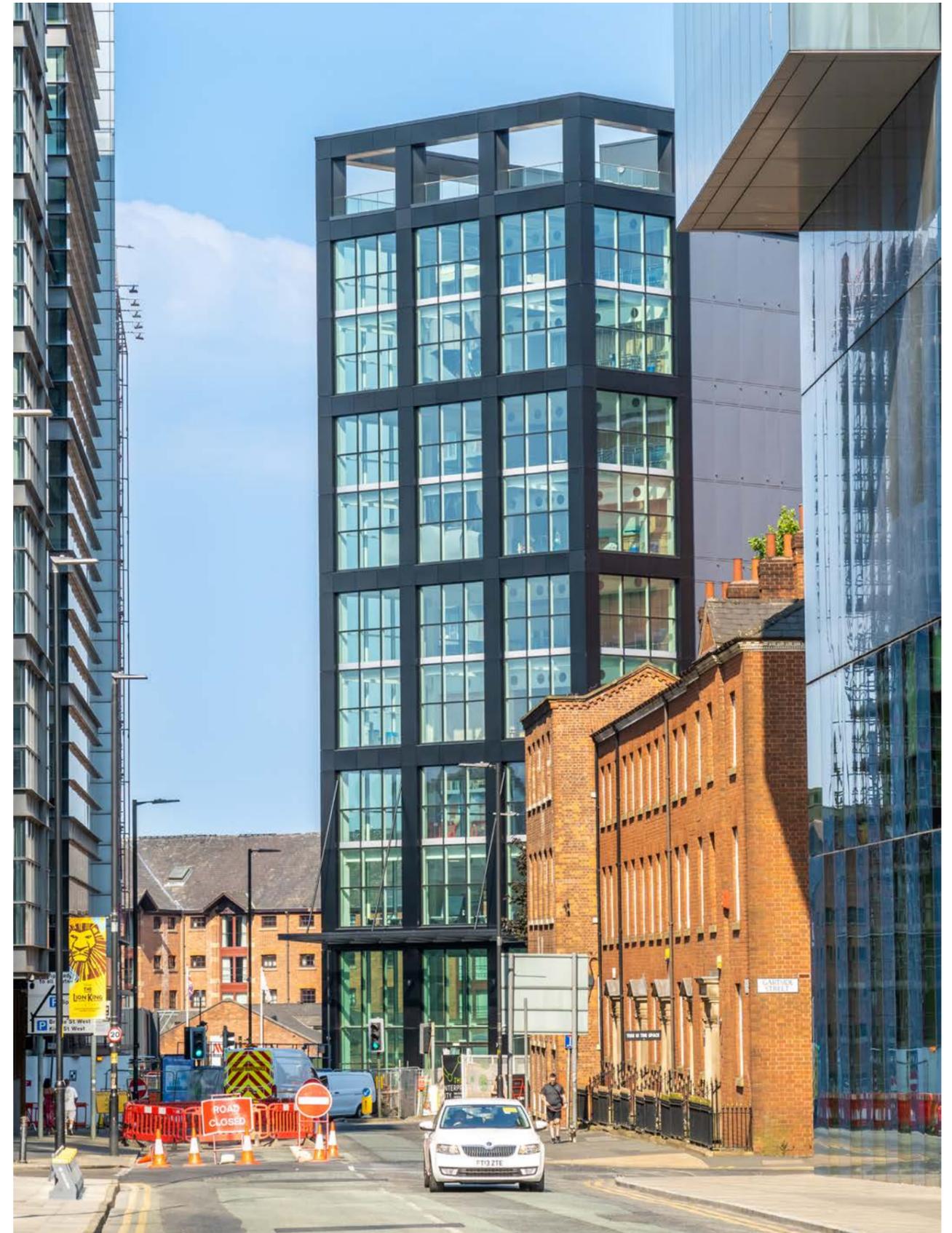
Government. Hitherto we have, in the main, operated on the basis of devolved (or delegated) responsibility for predetermined programmes with their own individual input and (at least in some cases!) output metrics. It also begins to offer solidity and longevity to the devolution settlement, applying to both current and future UK Government programmes or initiatives that fall within the scope of the agreement.

This is a huge step forward and the beginning of a more consistent approach between the funding arrangements for the combined authorities and that for devolved administrations in the UK. While this is an unfinished journey, it enables us to visualise a very different future for the government of cities in England.

The dawn of English Devolution was shaped by episodic and varied “deals” between localities and central Government. We now have the opportunity to change gear and look to a more confident future based on a clear and sustainable settlement, with properly devolved responsibility and accountability for core outcomes. That will enable real reform of services to better serve people and places and will enhance the credibility of local democracy. ■

Devolution to Greater Manchester Combined Authority has allowed the flexibility and local control to drive regeneration.

“While this is an unfinished journey, it enables us to visualise a very different future”



# Place shaping with purpose

By Byron Davies OBE



The Principality Stadium, Cardiff, was delivered as part of a place-shaping programme through a partnership between the Millennium Commission, Welsh Rugby Union and the private sector.

Following private sector construction industry experience and a BSc Degree in civil engineering from Swansea University, Byron qualified as a Chartered Civil Engineer in 1973. He was appointed to a number of engineering posts in the public sector within South Glamorgan County Council and in 1977 completed his MPhil degree from the University of Glamorgan. In 1992, he was appointed Chief Executive at South Glamorgan Council and following the reorganisation of local government in Wales in 1996 appointed the first Chief Executive of the City and County of Cardiff Council. He played a leading role in delivering the Cardiff 2020 vision, the privatisation of Cardiff

Airport, the development of the city centre and the transfer of responsibility from the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation to the Cardiff Harbour Authority. In 2008 he was awarded an OBE for services to local government in Wales. In 2009 he established his private sector consultancy business working with a range of private sector organisations large and small in the UK, Europe and North America. He was during this time engaged by Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association to turn-around local authorities. He was the voluntary Chair of the Wales International Business Council and a governor at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

**S**ir Michael Lyon's 2007 report 'The Future of Local Government' defined 'place shaping' as the creative use of powers and influence to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens. It encompasses a wide range of activities which function to create a distinct sense of place and identity. This was particularly important for local authorities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland after the three nations were devolved in 1998. In Wales, Byron Davies, former Chief Executive of the City and County of Cardiff Council, was in place during this momentous moment in Welsh history. Over the next decade, Byron led the strategy to shape the new capital of Wales as a distinct place which required developing the city's economy while ensuring growth was balanced and marginalised communities felt included. Throughout his career, Byron has witnessed several other significant transformations in Welsh local government, including its reorganisation as a consequence of the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994. This act reshaped the local government system from a two-tier model to the system of 22 unitary authorities which still exists today. Byron's recount of his experience and the lessons he learnt reveal the impact these significant pieces of legislation had, while also reflecting on learnings from his stint as Solace President.

**"A city's success hinges on more than infrastructure—it involves economic vitality, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability"**



Cardiff Bay, a derelict dockland before regeneration efforts in the 1990s.



Cardiff Bay regenerated as a result of the 'Cardiff 2020' place-shaping plan.

“As regeneration attracted new residents, businesses, and investments, it also led to the potential for social fragmentation”

#### ▶ **The transformational power of people**

As we celebrate fifty years of Solace UK, it is heartening to witness its continuous growth as the premier professional body for local authority and public sector chief executives. Through my tenure as President of Solace in 2007 and as chief executive in two local authorities, I had the opportunity to observe firsthand the evolving role of chief executives. There were many challenges created by the changes that occurred and reflecting on them in this essay may assist a new generation of aspiring chief executives.

Whilst my first role was in the private sector, working on infrastructure projects, my experience was a platform to transition to public service roles in Swansea and Devon which provided me with wider management roles. This led to being appointed as Chief Executive of South Glamorgan

in 1992 followed by my appointment as Chief Executive of Cardiff Councils in 1996.

Throughout my career I witnessed the transformational power of people and change first hand. This placed me at the heart of effective political and professional leadership within a dynamic landscape. My learning was the need to be adaptable, to provide people leadership, and to accept the redefinition of roles to fit changing environments.

One such change was the reorganisation of local government in Wales through the 1990s. The task of winding down South Glamorgan between 1992 and 1996 was distributing the functions and budgets of South Glamorgan to the Cardiff Council and the Vale of Glamorgan unitary authorities. It required a collaborative



The site on which the Principality Stadium was built.

and transparent approach with councillors, trade unions, employees, and other public bodies. The creation of the new Cardiff City Council was equally complex as it involved the distribution of functions, senior staff appointments, the transfer of existing staff and establishment of a new culture which set a platform for my personal growth to establish a long-term vision for the future.

#### **Embracing a holistic approach**

The next challenge was the task of creating a capital city for Wales, articulated within Cardiff 2020. Working with visionary politicians this created a 20-year plan to position Cardiff as a UK core city, recognised internationally. This was a renewal plan which transcended mere public service delivery, embracing a holistic approach based on economic, social, and environmental

dimensions that later became known as 'place shaping'. This concept recognised that a city's success hinges on more than infrastructure — it involves economic vitality, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. Public and private sector partnerships became the bedrock of our endeavours. Together, we shape Cardiff's future, leaving a lasting legacy. The key was delivering through people and partnerships.

The first partnership was with the Millennium Commission, Welsh Rugby union and the private sector which commenced during 1992 and created the Millennium Stadium. The private sector partners were capable of innovating and competing to deliver the Rugby World Cup on time and on cost that aided the regeneration of the city centre. The public sector inputs were important in providing a stadium that focused ▶▶



Cardiff city centre today.

on serving the public as a whole and creating a wide range of events and sports. The council approach to the partnerships was based on the European Foundation Quality Model (EFQM) that was extended to create the Wales Quality Centre to benefit local SMEs in aligning with the approach. The partnership expertise flowed both ways, creating a dynamic momentum for Cardiff's city centre regeneration with key tourism benefits and local and supplier benefits that provided employment opportunities.

#### **Adapting to emerging challenges**

The changes made to achieve this long-term vision were delivered within a framework that required the consent of differing political leaders, parties, employees, trade unions,

citizens, private and public sector organisations. It was necessary to adapt strategies to address emerging challenges. It was necessary for me to extend my role beyond routine administrative tasks to address economic shifts, technological advancement and societal changes. Navigating these uncharted waters demanded resilience and the ability to lead with conviction. The changes required chief executives to remain agile when setting a long-term vision that required the consent of differing political leaders and parties. The political leaders and parties needed to be and seen to be the democratically elected stewards of their communities to foster a collaborative spirit.

During the consultation process for Cardiff 2020, a key challenge emerged: how to transform and

unite two separate and distinct areas of the city—the city centre and Cardiff Bay. Cardiff Bay was the former industrial and docklands area to the south which lay derelict following the closure of heavy industry, while the city centre to the north faced inner city decline. The 2020 vision was to “level up” these areas and create a balanced capital city that citizens could take pride in. Despite the formidable obstacles, we persevered with the delivery.

The 1997 devolution process marked a significant shift in governance in Wales, with roles and responsibilities becoming uncertain. Politicians, public servants, and citizens all needed to adapt to new decision-making processes and power dynamics. The period required embracing change and adjusting strategies, and the personal learning gained during the local government reorganisation process provided Cardiff with coping strategies for change based on people and partnerships. The devolved National Assembly for Wales was eventually located in Cardiff Bay in 1998 which further fuelled regeneration efforts. By 2000, the Assembly decided to dissolve the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, entrusting Cardiff Council with the continuing regeneration of the Bay through a transfer to a Council-managed Cardiff Harbour Authority which, using the lesson of Partnerships, allowed a successful integration of the Cardiff Bay and the city centre area.

The need for modernisation of the city centre and Cardiff Bay needed to be balanced with preserving community bonds. As regeneration

attracted new residents, businesses, and investments, it also led to the potential for social fragmentation if original inhabitants felt marginalized or excluded. The increased mobility across the city and the link between the city centre with Cardiff Bay needed to be matched with public spaces, community centres, and events to foster social connections. Effective communication was essential.

#### **The only constant is change**

A few last words on my Solace Presidency. When I stepped into the role of Solace President in 2007, I found myself at the crossroads of the legacy and reinvention of Cardiff. I saw an opportunity to gain both a UK and international perspective and experience. The colleagues I met through Solace were, in the main, like-minded people addressing similar challenges in their respective localities. The Solace period made me realise that a chief executive journey isn't a linear path—it's an upward spiral of continuous learning.

The changing role of the chief executive demands adaptability, vision, and collaboration. As we look ahead, let us continue to champion innovation, engage stakeholders, and navigate uncharted waters. Solace UK remains at the forefront of this transformative journey committed to empowering chief executives. As they navigate critical issues—from economic challenges to climate resilience—Solace provides a supportive ecosystem. By fostering collaboration, advocating for excellence, and nurturing visionary leadership, Solace ensures that chief executives lead with purpose and impact. ■

# Creating a high performing council out of reorganisation

By Jacqui Dixon MBE



Jacqui Dixon MBE, DL, BSc, MBA, commenced employment with Newtownabbey Borough Council as Economic Development Manager in 1999. In 2005 she was appointed as Director of Development Services at Craigavon Borough Council and returned to Newtownabbey in 2007 to take up the post of Director of Development Services. Jacqui went on to be appointed Chief Executive of Newtownabbey Borough Council in 2012 and subsequently Chief Executive of the merged Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council in March 2014. She retired in October 2023 and was recently conferred with the Freedom of the Borough in recognition of her outstanding service to the Council and special contribution to the development of the Borough. She was also

recently appointed as a Deputy Lieutenant for County Antrim. During her career, Jacqui worked with ambitious Elected Members and talented employees to reshape the Council's operating model, reduce costs, and improve and expand services and outcomes for the Council's customers and residents. Through leadership, partnership working, empowerment and a focus on outcomes, Jacqui's attention was recently focused on implementing the key objectives of the Council's Covid Recovery and Corporate Plans which aim to improve the environment, encourage and support economic growth, engage and empower local communities and improve the lifestyles of residents.

**T**he local government sector across the UK has, over the last five decades, seen regular reorganisations in its composition as councils are created, merged, abolished or combined in response to changing demographics and efforts to modernise and streamline governance structures. The 2015 reorganisation of local government in Northern Ireland was one such occasion during which the system of 26 local councils was reduced to eleven. As chief executive of one of the abolished councils in Newtownabbey, Jacqui Dixon oversaw the transition period to the newly amalgamated Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council. Below, Jacqui reflects on how proactive and bilateral communication was indispensable to ensuring the smooth transition of two legacy councils into one while maintaining consistent and high-quality resident services.

## ▶ Leading change

Prior to my retirement at the end of October 2023, I was employed in local government in Northern Ireland for almost 25 years. For almost 15 years of this time I was Chief executive of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council and the legacy Newtownabbey Borough Council.

In 2015, Local Government in Northern Ireland went through a period of unprecedented change when the number of councils was reduced from 26 to 11 new 'super councils'. This proved to be the most challenging period of my career in terms of leading change. As a result of this, Antrim and

Newtownabbey Borough Council was established through the merger of Newtownabbey Borough Council and Antrim Borough Council.

The key reason for this reform was to achieve significant financial efficiencies. Some additional new responsibilities, most importantly the power of planning and community planning became the responsibility of the new councils.

To assist with the vast amount of preparation work required for a successful transition, a local government election was held and a 'shadow council' was established in May 2014. ▶▶

## “My priority during this somewhat turbulent period was to make sure that the services provided to our residents were seamless and consistent”

### Setting the tone and culture for success

New chief executives were appointed in January 2014. These positions were advertised widely across the United Kingdom and interested existing chief executives were required to apply for the posts. I was fortunate enough to be successfully appointed as the Chief Executive of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council.

At that time, I was Chief Executive of the legacy Newtownabbey Borough Council and therefore in terms of setting the tone and culture for the new organisation I very quickly had to reach out to all our employees and elected councillors to reassure them about a whole raft of issues arising from the merger.

Understandably, there was significant apprehension amongst staff about potential redundancies and closures, particularly because the main objective of the reform was to find financial efficiencies. There was also a genuine fear that because of my previous role, the Newtownabbey staff would be favoured over the Antrim staff. I quickly moved to allay these fears and recommended that the council should introduce a policy of no compulsory redundancies and an attractive severance scheme to those staff who did not want to come on the new journey with us. I organised and attended a series of roadshows to engage with the staff as I

recognised that they both wanted and needed face to face communication and reassurance.

In terms of the councillors, I quickly began to develop relationships with the leaders of the five main political parties represented on the council. Again, I was particularly mindful of the legacy Antrim councillors who perceived me as favouring Newtownabbey and I therefore took every opportunity to assure them that there would be a balance in terms of investment and service delivery across the borough.

The shadow council operated for one year and effectively during that time I was leading two organisations. The two legacy councils were required to seek permission from the shadow council to make certain strategic decisions and that did not go down well in some quarters.

In addition, I had:

- newly elected and inexperienced councillors on the shadow council;
- some councillors who were on both a legacy council and the shadow council;
- councillors on the legacy councils who had stood for election to the new council and were unsuccessful;
- councillors on the legacy councils who decided not to seek re-election.

All of this presented its own challenges during that period in terms of managing relationships.

### Getting ready for business

My priority during this somewhat turbulent period was to make sure that the services provided to our residents were seamless and consistent.

I had 12 months to ensure that a wide range of tasks were completed to allow us to successfully open for business in 2015.

This included the development of a new brand, logo and crest which can be controversial at the best of times. I recall the competing interests I dealt with in terms of this exercise. I decided it would be best to incorporate aspects of the two legacy logos and crests and this was accepted by the new council.

A consolidation of our assets was also required. A decision was required as to where the new civic headquarters would be located. This was heavily debated as there were two suitable existing civic buildings which were relatively close to each other. I proposed a campus approach which again was adopted by the new council.

I do believe that I used the transition period very effectively and on 1 April 2015, all the necessary

changes had been successfully made and the new council was open for business.

### Making the most of change

The new councillors in Antrim and Newtownabbey were extremely ambitious for the borough and therefore I commenced a process with them to agree a vision and develop a community plan and corporate strategy. I used this as an opportunity to address any remaining suspicions about the merger. I engaged heavily with them to determine their priorities for their respective areas and made sure these were included in the plans.

However, there was still a lot of work to do culturally. The reform introduced a legal duty on councils to improve services on an annual basis and which would be audited independently so I used this as an opportunity to drive a culture of performance right across the organisation.

I believe that I successfully created a culture of high performance by working in partnership at all levels. Partnership with councillors who are extremely skilled at articulating the needs of the people they represent, as well as partnership with staff and, of course, partnership with other external stakeholders. ►►

I also believe that Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council has earned its place as one of the top performing councils in the United Kingdom across a range of metrics including waste management, leisure, planning, and economic development where we set an extremely ambitious target to achieve £1bn investment and create 2,000 high quality new jobs by 2025. This level of investment has already been secured and job creation levels currently stand at approximately 3,600.

Council staff have played a major role in achieving these enviable standards of performance – and key to that has been communication and engagement, both with employees and communities. One of the biggest lessons I learned during my career was that the key to success, especially during a period of such unprecedented change, is strong communication - ensuring effective two-way dialogue with not only elected councillors, but staff, residents and customers too. In fact, one of the biggest changes I noticed during my career was how the increased use of technology allowed customers to access services and communicate with the council online.

The council's performance and achievements has also been recognised by several national external accredited organisations over recent years, and it has been an enormous privilege for me to have led such an ambitious and highly motivated team of councillors during my tenure as chief executive. Getting ready for business

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# Lessons from leading managing change and improvement

By Joyce Redfearn



Joyce Redfearn with Wigan Forward Board.

I was a chief executive for 17 years, first setting up a new unitary Monmouthshire County Council and being a member of the National Advisory Group on setting up the Welsh Assembly. Then chief executive in Gloucestershire where getting the basics right in finance and governance were important after a period without a chief executive. In Wigan as chief executive

the challenge was to work with our local community and improve life outcomes for our residents. For three years I chaired nationally chief executives of Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships and chaired the North West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership. Eventually I was in a shared local authority and health (PCT) chief executive position.

**T**he responsibility of local authorities to improve both the quality and efficiency of public services is hard-baked into what councils do. This has, however, been formalised through a timeline of different policies over the decades, from the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) in the 1980s, to New Labour's Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPAs) tracking the overall performance of councils, and the Leadership Centre's Total Place initiative which mapped a whole-place approach to public services to meet citizens' needs and aspirations. With experience as chief executive of three local authorities and chair of the North West's Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership, Joyce Redfearn has led and advised councils through this raft of improvement policies and shares important lessons on leading councils through change. In her article below, Joyce highlights how performance improvement is driven by accountability, illustrating that what matters is not just what councils do to improve, but how they do it.

## Expanding roles and responsibilities

Within the last 50 years the role and expectations of chief executives have shifted and grown as the roles and responsibilities of councils have also changed.

At the end of the 1970s I was a graduate trainee and met my first council town clerk. It was a long walk across a vast room to his desk, clutching the minutes I had to deliver. He went on writing, then without looking up tapped one of several wooden trays on his desk. Chief executives were

often white male solicitors in charge of ensuring appropriate governance and service provision. Fifty years later the responsibilities have been expanded to include many important new responsibilities such as building relationships and partnerships; leadership; engaging with the community and more. For about 10 years from 2012 I was lucky enough to facilitate the Solace New Chief Executives workshops. The new chief executives are a more diverse group in terms of professional background and gender than 50 years ago, although we still have some way to ►►

go on broader racial diversity. Experienced chief executives used to join the network meetings sharing their perceptions and debating them with the new chief executives. There was no shortage of challenges both experienced and new chief executives faced and it was inspiring to hear their unwavering determination to make things better and to support each other. It felt very different from the hierarchical days.

Council and chief executive roles have shifted over the 50 years and so has the approach to managing change. There is so much change I have decided to just pick out a few examples.

#### The drive to improve

Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) was legislation introduced in 1988. It required councils to open up services to private sector bids and to form internal businesses (Direct Labour Organisations) who could compete for the work. The detail of what, how and when were all specified. I was recruited to a new senior management post in a northern authority to prepare the strategy and implementation needed. It definitely disrupted the status quo and challenged both councillors and the majority of officers' assumptions on how local authorities should be run. Reactions ranged from avoidance, anger, and bewilderment. The key to making things happen though was by finding allies internally and building a broad range of relationships both internally and externally, including great support from the LGA. Internally, the councillor who chaired the CCT Committee quickly understood why one of the DLO managers could not do as he threatened and run the whole tendering process himself to make

sure he won the work. With two further allies from legal and audit we could safely raise issues and build a realistic implementation plan.

## “The key to making things happen was by finding allies internally and building a broad range of relationships”

The heavy handedness of the CCT framework eventually was removed but the business-like/entrepreneurial ethos lived on and made more councils open to working in partnership with the private sector. Much of the learning from CCT informed the best value approach. The Audit Commission CPA inspection framework which followed included all services and broadened to look at leadership and performance management. As a chief executive in a local authority which had done poorly on the basics in both social services and education inspections, it was hugely helpful (and terrifying) several years later to be CPA inspected. We involved politicians and officers in creating our self-assessment. It helped everyone recognise what had been achieved since those inspections and what more needed to be done. Preparing thoroughly helped us speed up some of the changes and made us all feel 'good' was an achievement and an appropriate rating. We knew there was more we wanted to do.

A few years later I was chief executives in another authority and faced CPA again. An even more thorough engagement process, a very well-oiled performance management regime and strong local political leadership gave us an 'excellent' rating. We celebrated and then paused. There were and always would be more issues to tackle particularly around our engagement of customers. We needed to reframe and create the conditions and energy for improvement to continue.

And then there was Total Place which took an even broader view looking at a whole area approach to public services and how to deliver improved services at a lower cost. There were three elements -counting the public money in a place; looking at the culture process and how it helps or hinders change; and finally customer needs and insights which provided the opportunities for collaboration between agencies to reform radically how and what services were provided. Total Place was facilitated across Whitehall and local government by the Leadership Centre. I, on behalf of the Manchester City Region with Warrington, chaired a pilot into 0-5 provision. We held amazing events or just got out more in our places to learn from a broad range of perspectives, connecting the system to more of itself. The power of stories from service users/non-users and frontline staff got us to imagine alternative futures and, in many cases, experiment with implementing changes within each local authority area. Talking with teachers in a local school about how the children from the same families from Victorian times onwards turn up not school ready and have never had any pre-school experience lives with me still. We had

supposedly looked at access to services; we needed to look again.

#### Learning the lessons

In all of these examples the support of the Local Government family i.e. LGA, IDeA, Solace and the Leadership Centre has been invaluable. They have changed a lot within those 50 years and continue to adapt.

The lessons and learning I draw now from reflecting on the past in the three interlinked examples are:

- Building relationships with politicians, staff, partners, or public was central to being able to change a place;
- We had to have good management and good leadership. We needed to do the basics well and spot the time when it was right to tackle the system/adaptive challenges;
- We needed leadership at all levels;
- We needed to create the conditions for change and protect that space or environment to enable others to operate safely within it;
- We needed to monitor the outcomes and let the evidence drive what we did next.

The last few years have been very difficult and challenging financially. There is a much-reduced staffing capacity. Yet I am struck by the energy and ability to continue to deliver radical reform of services and savings which councils continue to show. When you read the adverts for posts there is a sense of hope and purpose too. Councillors and officers are still determined to make a difference for their places and are managing to do so. Society is changing significantly, and local government is changing with it. ■

# Successfully managing shared services

By Sir Derek Myers



“Shared services can illustrate that collaboration, trust and shared values can be achieved”

Derek Myers was the first Chief Executive to run two principal local authorities as part of the Triborough initiative sharing services and management between three London Boroughs. Originally a social worker, he completed 13 years as a chief executive of three authorities. He has been a NED at both the Department of Health and Public Health

England; Lead Commissioner for Rotherham, and Chair of the Review of Jersey’s pandemic management, as well as a director of various commercial and charitable enterprises. He has now awarded himself a sabbatical and is restoring an early Victoria Farmhouse and an acre of garden outside Edinburgh.

**J**ust as preferred models of local government have changed, so too have vehicles for service delivery. While the contemporary trend throughout the 1970s was in-house provision, subsequently local authorities have used approaches such as outsourcing to the private or voluntary sector and the establishment of local authority trading companies. These changes have been encouraged by legislation such as the ‘Best Value’ regime under the Local Government Act 1999 and the 2011 White Paper ‘Open Public Services’ which stimulated different forms of service delivery to achieve financial efficiencies. Simultaneously, in 2011 a ‘shared service’ model of delivery gained traction, exemplified by the ‘tri-borough’ project between three west London councils which provided various services to their residents on a joint basis. Drawing from direct experience as the former chief executive of two local authorities involved in the tri-borough partnership, Sir Derek Myers sets forth the challenges he faced at the helm of this ambitious project in his article below. As Sir Derek reports, shared service initiatives have had mixed success and it is clear that the transferal process is never easy and requires commitment from all involved. Nonetheless, there are many learnings to gain from these experiences, which Sir Derek shares below.

## ► Sceptism over sharing

Shared services are completely routine. No organisation; no council expects to be or is capable of being completely self-sufficient.

The established list is long: energy, banking, insurance, equipment supply are all examples of services which represent shared risk; routine

procurement or elective dependency on the expertise of others.

Yet councils have historically been remarkably monolithic. Partly this comes from the history of being large employers. Partly it might be based on poorly evidenced beliefs on the benefits of horizontal and vertical integration. Partly it has ►►

## “If you don’t believe it yourself, it’s hard to convince others”

been mistrust of the profit motive which is held to drive (and corrupt) commercial providers.

This landscape has sometimes changed by central dictates. Oldies might remember the Thatcher government’s new grants for community care, post Griffiths Report, which had to be spent partly in the private care sector. As a response, many councils set up new organisations to take over provision. Some of these providers expanded to run services for others. Greenwich Leisure might be the best example; launched in 1993, it now runs over 370 facilities for 50 councils with a turnover in excess of £300m.

Or change is driven indirectly, by central environment conditioning. In the UK, central government has shrunk its role as majority funder for principal councils but its funding level, and council tax caps, still set the rate of marginal change between gentle growth or rough reductions. District councils, not so dominated, face just as many pressures.

### **Change is central to the task of the chief executive**

Change is hard. Staff and trade union interests have to be managed if not confronted. Political anxieties might be overwhelming. Change might not deliver planned benefits (though the benefits of the status quo are rarely so brightly examined). Most change, therefore, is a distress purchase; considered reluctantly, sold as non-elective.

Over my professional lifetime council senior managers have become better trained, more powerful and better paid. They have taken more out proportionately; the vast majority understand the obligation to put the most in.

Change is the central task of a chief executive and her senior team. They have to drive for change in benign weather as well as foul for the following reasons:

1. Councils can always do more and do better. No community is free from legitimate unmet need, services are never completely optimised; the expectation of community leadership and community advocacy is a mountain with seemingly endless slopes. It follows that energy is always out of balance with demand so focusing on where management time adds most value is essential.
2. Inefficiency is a theft on the working classes was the argument one of my colleagues used to urge his Labour group in his council to back change. Of course, perfect efficiency is a nonsense fantasy - tolerated inefficiency is a perfectly fair price to pay for social benefits. The trick is to try to dispassionately illuminate alternatives. The duty to seek Best Value, still extant, is a terrible example of the Government telling councils to ‘Be Good’. We should constantly assert our expectation that,

driven by our moral purpose, we are going to ‘Be Very Good’.

3. Council services and the wider roles of councils depend upon and are entwined with public understanding of tax, welfare transfers, and debates about equity and fairness. In short, I believe these council goods are simply too important to be left to an elite in town halls, whether elected or appointed. The more folk who are involved in public services the better. All change should spread ownership and responsibility.
4. Best practice is illusive, slippery, and often contested, but it is rarely to be found in dark corners. Change must involve debate, challenge and objective measurement to work towards consensus on best fit solutions. An open mind about who can bring fresh ideas, new technology, existing experience and better energy is a decent starting point.

### **Sharing risk, sharing solutions**

And so where do shared services fit in?

Well, they fit well. They allow councils to divest themselves of operational responsibility for non-core tasks. They can be a vehicle for seeking marginal gains in unit costs and quality enhancements. They can spread ownership of council services or other ‘products’. They can open windows to new thinking and ways of working.

In my categorisation, shared services might arise in a variety of organisational forms: staff co-ops, lead council/health trust arrangements, voluntary sector or for-profit externalisations, bespoke new vehicles, to name a few.

And so why is the history of shared services so complicated? Every example is likely to have a period of being oversold or observed with gleeful scepticism by peers. Though there must be plenty of examples of success, there are certainly examples of failure or at least asserted failure.

### **Culture eats strategy for breakfast**

My central hunch is that shared services are often messy, demand cultural integration - or at least cultural co-habitation -, and require individuals to be co-operative, positive, optimistic and trusting. Much as we might lay claim to these virtues we also find behaving well hard and tiresome.

As an employee I remember every exhortation to ‘share’ being inherently unwelcome. I was proud of my team’s uniqueness. I was worried about my own career prospects. I doubted whether my new boss and colleagues would like me. Later, as a change sponsor, I tried to remember this experience and tried to work at pace to establish certainty about who would be the new bosses, whose job was safe, what work locations would change, what in practice would change and when. Attention to these hygiene factors felt like a parental duty as well as a business advantage. ►►

## “Change is the central task of a Chief Executive and her senior team. They have to drive for change in benign weather as well as foul”

My other core belief is that I had a profound duty to explain my personal belief in the change. Triborough was a moral mission to reduce management overhead costs and therefore protect front line services. And such a mission ought to be important enough to prevail against political nervousness and professional jealousies.

If you don't believe it yourself, it's hard to convince others. In addition, an academic study would help examine what has worked or not.

It seems likely that in many cases, one or more of the following are true:

1. The compelling case - the burning deck - that was the propulsive force for change becomes less visible.
2. Familiarity breeds contempt. From the outside the service rendered looks easily replicated - “we could do that”.
3. “Strangers are bad” - it seems like human instinct, sometimes not actively restrained, to criticise others who are outwith our felt tribe.
4. “We must do something” - so let's just reverse the last change and hope...

5. Shared services try to expand and like many growing businesses, misstep.
6. The change was always too much associated with a change proponent. Over time, that change agent's reputation is revised from visionary to charlatan.
7. The business case that explained benefits was rubbish: inflated; unrealistic, unfunded, dishonest. Benefits are not fully delivered and disappointment flourishes.

Does this suggest shared services are a busted flush? A weird transitory concept that sinks into the silt of history? I suggest not.

Shared services can be the hallmark of a council that is clear about its core priorities, that is open minded about how best practice can be sought, that accepts its duty to make funds work harder, that believes spreading ownership is likely to increase confidence in taxation spent on community and individual benefits.

And shared services can illustrate that collaboration, trust, and shared values can be achieved. And that's a story that's good for all of us. ■



# FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE: THE CHANGING ROLE OF SOCIAL CARE

- I Children's
- II Adults

**F**our years prior to the establishment of Solace, the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 required councils to establish social service departments and undertake a wide-ranging duty to promote the welfare of vulnerable residents. This laid the foundations for a responsibility which today necessitates more than 60% of the overall funding received by councils with social care responsibilities. The increasing number and complexity of social care caseloads combined with the spiralling placement costs and limited workforce capacity means that social care – for both children and adults – is often at the forefront of the chief executive’s agenda. With extensive experience across education, local government and national government, Mark Rogers has first-hand knowledge of the challenges posed by children’s services. Below, Mark – a former Solace President – underscores the gravity that quality leadership and management hold when complex organisational systems determine the welfare of children – lessons which hold strong today.

Complementing these insights, Dwayne Johnson discusses the evolution of adult social care and the myriad of government policies implemented throughout his forty-year career in the sector. Dwayne describes his time in various social work roles during which social care was transformed as service provision was outsourced to the private sector, and he provides an overview of several important policies aimed at improving the quality of care throughout the 2000s. Taking insight from his rich experience, Dwayne’s article below celebrates schemes which have increased the efficiency and quality of care, highlights the challenges, and comments on the untapped potential of initiatives like integrated care boards.

# From cradle to grave I: The changing role of social care children's

By Mark Rogers



**“It’s the people we serve and the outcomes that most need improving that matter - and this requires a shared vision, aligned values and a common purpose”**

Mark has extensive leadership experience across education, local and national government. He has been a teacher and head teacher in a variety of special schools between 1985 and 2001. Subsequently, in local government, he became a Director of Children’s Services (Solihull 2006-09) and twice a Chief Executive (Solihull 2007-14 and Birmingham 2014-17). Following 15 months of consultancy work with KPMG and CollaborateCIC, in June 2018 Mark became

Director General for Children, Young People, Education and Skills for the Government of Jersey. In January 2022, Mark moved back to the UK to become chief executive of the Leadership Centre and, since August 2023, he has been complementing this role with leading the establishment of the new East Midlands Combined County Authority. For more information about the Leadership Centre: <https://www.leadershipcentre.org.uk/>

## ▶ **Sharing responsibility and accountability**

My introduction to Solace in 2007 was as an acting up chief executive still holding the director of children’s services (DCS) role, something I double ran for two years thinking it was a sensible thing to do. Consequently, I quickly picked up the children’s services policy portfolio which I worked on for a good number of years in a partnership with the lovely Phil Norrey. Our missions were: to make children’s services the number one issue for chief executives, and to persuade Whitehall (and maybe Westminster) that we should be listened to and taken notice of because we actually knew how to make things work.

The Children Act 2004 was our lode star, an essential and fundamentally good piece of law executed through the incomparable Every Child Matters programme. But as chief executives we had an issue with the Act in that it created this notion of the single point of accountability. The importance of a lead officer (the DCS) and a lead member was not disputed, but children and young people’s safety and well-being need to be everyone’s business – in the council, in the local partnership and across communities. So, through Solace we pushed the importance of all the leadership – elected and appointed – sharing in the responsibility and accountability for delivering on the five outcomes that underpinned Every Child Matters. Consequently, we developed a framework that chief executives could use for understanding their role, particularly how they might assure themselves of the effectiveness of services in their area.

I can’t say that this always made Solace or me popular with the DCS community. I remember

one particular conference in Manchester where I was greeted by a former boss of mine remarking that I was “still peddling this nonsense”. But we stuck to our plan and I was delighted when, after quite some negotiation with civil servants (aided and abetted by the wonderful Clive Wilkinson at the Government Office of the West Midlands), an amendment was made to the statutory guidance at the time requiring chief executives to become the hirers (and firers, if needs be) of the chairs of local safeguarding children boards. Adding this into the existing duty as head of paid service to ensure the recruitment of a director of children’s services undoubtedly helped to emphasise the crucial role of chief executives in keeping the interests of children and young people at the forefront of their minds and council deliberations.

Whilst much has moved on from those days, I am still proud that Phil and I – with growing but never unanimous support from our peers – argued for the importance of chief executives being central to the leadership, performance, and continuous improvement of children’s services.

As I reflect on my career path, I was perhaps fortunate to have the background I did. I trained specifically to teach children and young people with the most significant and complex additional needs and spent nearly seventeen years working in specialist education settings, the last seven of which were as a headteacher. Consequently, I saw from the outset and at first hand the necessity of working both passionately and collaboratively across disciplines, agencies and sectors if the best outcomes were to be achieved for these youngsters and their families. This set me up well, I believe, for my later roles in local ▶▶

government. It's the people we serve and the outcomes that most need improving that matter - and this requires a shared vision, aligned values and a common purpose. When children's safety and well-being are determined by the complex human and organisational system into which they are born and develop, it seems to me to be obvious that leadership needs to reflect and address this complexity.

The challenges today in children's services, whilst greater than ever, can only be tackled sustainably if there is the recognition that everyone has a part to play - and that the key to any kind of success is when the leadership task is collectively owned. Only within such a framework, can you then most effectively exercise your individual responsibilities and accountabilities - and that is, most definitely, why you need your DCS and lead member.

#### **A focus on great leadership**

My other focus at Solace was on leadership. When becoming President, I inherited a strong platform from my immediate predecessor, Martin Reeves, who himself had built on the commitment to making the understanding and practice of great leadership central to the mission of the Society.

Whether or not I made any lasting (or even ephemeral) difference in this space is not for me to say. But what I look back on fondly is a time when there was a healthy debate about leadership and management and the differences, as well as interdependencies, of the two disciplines - and, crucially, I still see this in play today. Healthy debate about the adaptive and technical challenges inherent in the chief

executive role and how best to hone and balance them is something that needs to remain at the heart of the Solace mission.

I would like to think that, if nothing else, during my time as president there was an ever-present focus on what we meant by leadership, the positive difference it can make and how we become better at it. And, something that I have perhaps realised more clearly latterly, that leadership is no respecter of hierarchy and, because of that, as chief executives we have a responsibility not just to be good at it ourselves, but also to nurture and grow it in others at all levels and in all kinds of roles across our organisations, partnerships and places.

For all the other things that Solace does - all of which are important - I would like to think that I was one in a line of presidents who agitated for the leadership task to be afforded the same seriousness of consideration as that already attached to the managerial one. With Martin Reeves before me and Jo Miller after me, we advocated that chief executives should know both how things worked and how to make them work - bringing the technical and the adaptive into the same space to the benefit of the organisation and the communities it serves.

This debate is never more alive than today as councils face even greater challenges to serve their communities well. If the generation of presidents I belonged to did nothing else, keeping the debate about leadership (and management) at the forefront of the Solace agenda is something we can be proud of.

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# From cradle to grave II: The changing role of social care adults

By Dwayne Johnson



**“Creating the right culture as a Chief Executive... is an essential component of running a positive, inclusive organisation”**

Dwayne started his career in Durham as a Care Assistant working in care homes and studied for his social work qualification during this time before managing a 48 bed Care home for 3 years. There after Dwayne worked in a number of social work roles before moving to the north west where he was appointed as an Assistant Director for social care and became a Director of Adult Social Care in 2005 a role he held for almost 15 years in a number of Councils. These roles were expanded over this time to include housing, community safety, cleansing services and later education and children services. Dwayne was the national

lead for ADASS for older people services and safeguarding adults for 8 years and gave evidence at Parliamentary Committees and in 2010 when was invited to 10 Downing Street to talk to Ministers about what good adult social care looks like following the improvements of ‘not serving people well’ to ‘excellent’ during the previous Inspection regimes. Dwayne was Chief Executive at Sefton Council for 4 years before establishing his own Consultancy in September 2023. Dwayne has been a Solace Board member for 3 years and is now the deputy lead spokesperson for adult social care and health.

## ► The ever-changing care landscape

It's just over 50 years since social services departments were formed and almost 40 years to the day I started my career as a care assistant working with disabled and elderly people in residential care homes. In this short piece I look back on some of the significant transformation and how its shaped adult social care.

In the 1980s the care sector was heavily dominated by local councils. However, the private sector was beginning to flourish and with the introduction of the Community Care Act 1990, introduced in 1993, all that began to change and the ‘charging for residential care’ regulations in 1992 led to the rapid expansion of the private sector as more people had the opportunity to have their care costs met by local councils. This had the added benefit of choice, which I have to say is a significant benefit to many, albeit now care costs is a matter of policy which Government must grasp.

This ‘enabling role’ in local councils led to the proliferation of ‘commissioning’ and over the course of the next 20 years the vast majority of local councils divested themselves of their care services. Starting my career then, though, had multiple benefits and the training opportunities were extensive. At that time I decided to undertake my social work qualification and after qualifying in 1987 I was appointed as an assistant manager in a new type of residential care home with different care units - one such unit was to support people with dementia and another unit supported people in semi-independent living, which later became referred to as ‘extra care housing’. At the time this was seen as the new

beginning of social care and one of which has changed little in the last 35 years.

I later became an ‘officer in charge’ of one of the council’s own 48 bedded care homes. Sadly, my home was one of 12 in the council area which closed at the same time, but it launched me into my social work career at the same period that the Children Act 1989 (introduced in 1991) and the Community Care Act (1990) was being introduced. This led to a seismic change in social work with generic roles abandoned and more specialist roles in ‘fields’ became far more common place. By then the days of social workers doing ‘everything’ was largely gone and the social work degree emerged in 2002 - I have to say this was one of the better government policy decisions over the last 50 years. However, the downside today is that social workers in adults have to have a myriad of skills and experience to navigate a complex legislative environment, but largely do this admirably.

The introduction of commissioning in the early 1990s changed everything. The concept was to provide greater efficiencies, innovation and responsiveness. My personal view is that this has been relatively successful and evidenced through many different periods of change over the last 25 years, none more so than ‘austerity’. It also threw up massive opportunities of partnering with health, however successive governments have tinkered, experimented, and changed health commissioning so much we have lost time and many opportunities to make the innovation we all sought in the 1990s. This is evidenced by the constant bickering over delayed discharges, continuing health care and responsibilities for community care needs vis-a-vis health and social ►►

care needs - what a shame. The key question now is: will the introduction of integrated care boards improve systems or merely reinforce the organisational and structural differences in the NHS and local councils?

As we entered the new century there were some key, but often forgotten policy changes which changed adult social care: in 2001 the introduction of Better Care for Older People, and then a number of National Service Frameworks for various adult groups; the publication of the 'No Secrets' policy and the introduction of the new safeguarding legislation; in 2006, the vision and principles in the concordat 'Putting People First' which enshrined the first steps on the road to 'personalisation'; and the national Dementia Strategy implemented in 2008, the Care Act 2014, and its support to carers, as well as many more.

#### **Operating beyond traditional boundaries**

By the early 2000s, many directors of adult social care had, like myself, extended roles incorporating community safety, culture and leisure services, trading standards and housing functions. This built upon their traditional roles but at the same time added value to the well-being and prevention agenda. Not all of this was about structure: directors who have not incorporated these extended roles have long demonstrated how they can use their adult social care role as a lever to draw in other areas such as planning, transport, and other businesses. And there are good examples to be found within working across wider geographical areas and other local council boundaries.

Starting my career in the care industry often influenced my approach as a chief executive as it taught me about respect, listening, confidentiality, and equality. These principles are also key components in the approaches to our residents in our communities and in particular were at the forefront of my mind during the Covid pandemic. One of the other important elements of being a chief executive is how we work with partners and, aside from the text book definitions of building partnerships it's about personality so that means working as a team, being a team player, leading where people expect you to lead, and having the courage to take decisions or speak out where you believe something isn't right. So creating the right culture as a chief executive is an essential component of running a positive, inclusive organisation and not too dissimilar to working within the sphere of adult social care.

Shortly before I provided evidence to the All-Parliamentary Committee in 2008, I wrote an article which was published by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, where I stated that adult social services were at a crossroads. At that time, I argued that the pressure to make efficiencies, the increasing focus on safeguarding, and the emerging informal league table of who is still providing moderate care was being published was too much. I argued that efficiency, safeguarding and the wellbeing agenda do not sit comfortably together and, 16 years on, what has really changed?!

There have been some excellent examples of initiatives that have created efficiencies - improved procurement, shared services, and

outsourcing more services to the independent and third sector for example. But we are fast moving towards a cul-de-sac where we will find it more difficult to elicit more savings yet at the same time demonstrate that councils are committed to investing more in the wellbeing agenda and support to vulnerable people in our communities. Of course, the other question it throws up is: have we gone too far by divesting local council services across all care groups and to become increasingly reliant on the private sector?

#### **Facing future challenges**

We know that there will be rapid demographic change, rising expectations, significant pressures on a diminishing workforce as it too ages and increased financial constraints. But we again need to highlight the many examples of how we are contributing to the wider wellbeing and prevention agenda. Apart from the well-reported use of direct payments we need to be highlighting how we can focus on leisure to promote healthy living, the arts to stimulate functioning and lifelong learning, libraries to open up new opportunities to access IT and learning and work with adults surrounding community safety and reassurance. Additionally, as communities expand and develop we need to ensure that new planning applications focus upon the needs of disabled and older people and those from ethnic communities, lifetime homes and extra care housing. Finally, we need to consider the use of digital technology. It has huge potential to address the workforce shortages we will face, replace some of the mundane tasks staff undertake, and revolutionise social work practice.

We can't do this alone and wellbeing isn't just about our responsibility within councils. It needs to be undertaken with other statutory partners, the third sector, the independent sector and businesses. But just look at how many good examples there are, up and down the country, of how this can operate effectively. Many local authorities, for example, have integrated library and one-stop-shops where citizens can pay their council tax, review benefits, learn more about service provision, and pop into the library sections to access the many services on offer now in library facilities and where the workforce have multi-faceted skills.

We also have many good examples of integrating with primary health care. In addition, we are seeing new services develop for people which mix support and personal control, for example telecare and self-assessment. These initiatives demonstrate that we can still operate from physical facilities while at the same time get out into the community to deliver services.

I can't finish without referencing resources and unfortunately for many councils the financial realities mean that using their expertise is extremely restricted against ever tightening budget constraints and it has the potential to alienate the workforce and make the partnerships with health even more challenging. However, 50 years on our experiences offer us an opportunity to highlight our creative side and remind people that social services are not an adjunct, outside the realm of other partnerships. This will require some re-focusing on our roles and responsibilities, but I believe that councils are up for such a challenge. ■

# Being a chief executive

By Sally Loudon OBE



“One thing that has never changed is a clear belief that as a Chief Executive it is important to look after yourself”

Recently retired former Chief Executive of COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) for 7 years, Sally had a particular interest in Local Government being in its rightful place in the governance of Scotland with a focus on relationships and partnerships. Previous to that role Sally was Chief Executive of Argyll and Bute for 8 years and has also held office-bearer positions within Solace Scotland, the Electoral Management Board for Scotland and with ALACE (Association of Local Authority Chief Executives) as well as Prosper Scotland,

the Improvement Service and The Promise Scotland. Sally was also the co-chair of the Scottish Leadership Forum, a peer development network for all senior people in Scotland’s public services and large voluntary sector organisations. Sally is a trained and accredited mediator and has recently set up a consultancy business covering relationship management, leadership development and strategic advice. Sally was awarded an OBE in the New Years Honours List in 2024 for services to Local Government.

**T**his report has comprised insights into distinct fragments of the chief executive’s role. As lead advisor to the council, managerial leader, and head of paid service, the job requires a huge amount of knowledge, experience, and good judgement, meaning the chief executive never stops learning. Sally Loudon shares her wisdom on these core elements of the job drawing on her experiences as Chief Executive of Argyll and Bute Council and as a representative of the sector across many organisations including as Chief Executive of COSLA, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. A true champion of the power of local governance, Sally has advocated the sector nationally and internationally, pushing for a truly collaborative relationship with other public sector bodies.

## ▶ Seeking Solace in Solace

I started in local government in Scotland in 1989 in a district council near Edinburgh - this was before unitary authorities were introduced in Scotland in 1996.

My first role was as a trainee committee clerk and very rapidly realised I wanted to do the talking and not the writing.

I quickly moved to international work, working in the chief executive’s office – the first of three such offices I worked in. I was really grateful that from

age 23 I got direct exposure to chief executives, corporate management teams and interaction with elected members.

My route to becoming a chief executive in 2008 was through the generalist, policy, performance and partnership route and I suspect many chief executives appointed then came from a similar background. It’s fair to say that it was a huge shock to be appointed and looking back I really wasn’t ready, but with the enormous support from Solace colleagues in Scotland I survived and personally thrived. ▶▶

I was Chief Executive of Argyll and Bute Council for eight years – it has a land area covering nearly 9% of Scotland, a population of 88,000 with three peninsulas and at that time 25 inhabited islands. It is vast, sparse and with communities ranging from towns to tiny rural and island populations. What struck me first was how different the politics were. Having come from councils with strong party political roots, the council was a mixture of party, but mainly community-based councillors which meant I learned quickly about the power of relationships to get things done. The words of a community activist from one of Argyll's islands have stuck with me for many years, "Aye lass, it's not your words I'm interested in, it's your actions" What a driving motivation that still is for me!

From Argyll and Bute, I moved on to become the Chief Executive of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) – Scotland's Local Government Association. This was a really different role, promoting and protecting local government and communities, working with colleagues in Scottish Government, UK Government and Europe – at the interface between different spheres of government in Scotland.

I very much saw my role as creating the environment for others to do their jobs - creating and developing those necessary relationships with all partners, leading to the signing of the Verity House Agreement between Scottish Government and local government and to strong

partnerships with police, health and voluntary sectors to name but a few.

#### **Putting people – and yourself - first**

I've learned so much over the years, particularly softer stuff like being true to your values and knowing what you're good at and what you're not. Getting the best teams around you is so important - people who trust each other and work collegiately in the best interests of the area. The collective leadership work we do with elected members is also key to create the right culture, putting the human being first, whether that be a child, a family, a community, a member of staff, a colleague or elected member themselves. In many ways, the more confident I became as a chief executive the more important all of this became.

I've learned that developing real and trusting relationships is a key part of the role – genuinely trying to understand partners' perspective, walking in their shoes, realising that informal meetings were every part as important as formal governance to get things done, being part of the solution and creating win-win solutions.

The environment for being a chief executive has significantly changed; in Scotland there is less discretion for councils to apply flexibility in finding local solutions as more funding is directed by Scottish Government when council resourcing has become more challenging. The Verity House Agreement sets out not just which priorities

Scottish and local government want to achieve, but also how the two spheres will work together – so far, this feels disappointing and there is little progress on devolution beyond Holyrood to the sphere of government closest to people.

The need for supporting and working with communities has never been greater. Where they still exist the days of organisational siloes have to go and so too do organisational hierarchies. We have learned that we need to work across whole systems with communities, families and people at the heart – and chief executives are leading this work in their areas, building the relationships needed to be truly transformational. This can be complex, but it can be done, deliver results and be enormously rewarding.

One thing that has never changed is a clear belief that as a chief executive it is important to look after yourself. It has been an enormous privilege to have been a chief executive for 15 years and both roles would have been impossible without the support from Solace colleagues – it is difficult to put into words how grateful I am to each and every one and there have been many I have called on over the years. I've also benefited enormously from support from coaches and formal and informal mentors – having a safe space to work through issues has been essential.

I wish Solace and all chief executives every best wish for the next 50 years – and to get through the next budget round! ■

"I very much saw my role as creating the environment for others to do their jobs"



# SOLACE PRESIDENTS

PRESIDENT	YEAR	PRESIDENT	YEAR
Sir John Boynton MC, DL	1974/1975	Alan Taylor	1998/1999
Sir Alan Dawtry CBE TD	1975/1976	Sandy Blair CBE	1999/2000
Sir Stanley Holmes DL,LLB	1976/1977	Sir David Henshaw	2000/2001
Frederick Ward CBE	1977/1978	James Hehir OBE	2001/2002
William Jackson OBE	1978/1979	Sir Michael Pitt	2002/2003
Morris Scott	1979/1980	Paul Croft	2003/2004
Sir James Swaffield CBE	1980/1981	Cheryl Miller CBE	2004/2005
Robin Beechey	1981/1982	Barry Quirk CBE	2005/2006
Harry Tee OBE	1982/1983	John Schultz CBE	2006/2007
Alfred Stocks CBE	1983/1984	Byron Davies	2007/2008
Clifford Smith CBE	1984/1985	Trish Haines	2008/2009
William U Jackson CBE	1985/1986	Katherine Kerswell	2009/2010
Patrick Rust MBE	1986/1987	Kim Ryley	2010/2011
Michael Rush CBE, DL	1987/1988	Terry Huggins	2011/2012
Andrew Forbes Watson OBE	1988/1989	Martin Reeves	2012/2013
Sir Robert Calderwood	1989/1990	Mark Rogers	2013–2016
Roger Jefferies CBE	1990/1991	Jo Miller	2016–2018
Jeffrey Greenwell CBE, DL	1991/1992	Martin Swales	2018–2020
Roger Paine	1992/1993	Joanne Roney CBE	2020–2022
John Horsnell CBE	1993/1994	Matt Prosser	2022–Present
Samuel Jones CBE	1994/1995		
Roger Morris	1995/1996		
Pamela Gordon	1996/1997		
Robert Hughes CBE	1997/1998		

Published: March 2024  
 Edited by: David Paine  
 Designed by: Jonathan Kay  
 With thanks to: Alex Thomson,  
 Freya Pierrepoint, Ellie Bentham,  
 and all of the contributors.