

Could local government govern? Rethinking the role of councillors

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5/4/2017

*What is the meaning of 'government' in local government? **Colin Copus** writes that, although local government understandably clings to its service provision functions, there is a broader role that councillors could assume, and argues that the concept of public accountability would be key in that role.*



We cling to the title local government almost from a romantic attachment to the words. Local Government in England has the biggest units compared to the rest of Europe and there are those in local government who wish to see it bigger still. Indeed the current Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Sajid Javid, is on record as supporting units of local government in the population range 300,000-800,00 – we forfeit the right to call much of English local government 'local' at all.

But what of the term 'government'? Much of what councillors do isn't governing; there are few powers over other bodies and organisations other than some statutory scrutiny functions – the recommendations of which are not binding on the recipients. So, do we forfeit the right to the term government too? Why doesn't local government govern? Well, currently, those seeking to ban some legal activity, or make some illegal activity legal, have to focus their campaign on one place – Westminster.

There has not been, neither is there any sign of, a radical devolution of power that would see primary legislative power passed from the centre to local government or local government handed real control over vast swathes of the public sector. While it may seem inconceivable that local government will lose its service delivery or oversight responsibilities, the landscape of the public sector is a changing one. New players emerge, old ones are abolished or re-shaped by the centre and service responsibilities do not only flow between local government and the private sector, but between different public sector players.

Local government shares a complex network of interactions with a range of private and public organisations, many of whom have different policy objectives, geographical boundaries and many of which are single service focussed unlike the multiplicity of services over which local government has a say.



Local government has one other unique feature which none of those organisations with which it interacts holds: it is democratically elected and comes with the legitimacy granted by the public vote. Despite that, it cannot control others. Rather, councillors and leading councillors in particular, must work by negotiation, compromise, coalition and

alliance building and above all by exerting as much influence as possible over those bodies that they seek to draw into some shared vision of their locality, or simply to get a single decision made that fits with the council's own vision.

So, the way for local government to emphasise 'government' is to act as a vehicle for the accountability of all those agencies that spend public money, make public policy decisions, and affect the well-being of communities but do so without the legitimisation of the public vote. Thus, councillors are faced with devising strategies to exert influence over and to try to shape and direct the policy decisions taken by players within governance networks and to draw a myriad of decisions into an overall direction and coherence. That influence can come from councillors acting as accountability agents, that is, seeing a central part of their role as questioning, criticising and seeking justification and explanation from any and all agencies and organisations.

If it is not our locally elected councillors who can hold to account powerful bodies such as the NHS (in all its organisational manifestations), the police, public utilities, transport companies, government executive agencies or non-departmental public bodies, charities and private companies and any and all of those organisations that make decisions affecting the public – then who will it be? In public accountability the role of the councillor becomes two-fold: first, holding accountable and answerable for their actions all those whose policy decisions impact on any council's local community; and second, attempting to mould the activities of actors within networks to match the policy preferences and political vision of the council.

Now if we take accountability to mean shaping the decisions, policies, and actions of others, and see it as a method of drawing together the disparate objectives of a complex network of organisations and players, we can start to see the potential for governing. That is, for getting the decisions made and policies adopted by others that the council – as an elected body – wants to see. It also means councillors operate within networks with a clear governing agenda. That is, they themselves must have a comprehensive and cohesive set of policies for what they want to achieve, across a raft of policy domains.

Council leaders, mayors, and cabinet members have recognised that holding others to account provides a new way of governing that has previously eluded local government and are grasping the 'governing through accountability' nettle. Local government is becoming the forum in which powerful organisations can be held to account and what they do or propose to do, shaped by the only elected body in town – the council.

Leading councillors are well aware that their office is sanctioned by the public vote and that this provides a moral and political lever to be used within governance networks. The diplomatic skills required of leading councillors attempting to influence the decisions and shape the policy preferences of those organisations over which they have no control will mean that they act as trustees of the wider public good. Moreover, it means they can fill the democratic deficit that occurs when public policy is set, and public money spent, by those with no direct link to the public.

Councillors outside of leading positions face a similar task within their wards and divisions. If leading councillors act as strategic accountability agents, then other councillors operate as functional accountability agents. That is, within wards and divisions councillors can challenge, question, criticise, negotiate with and seek justification from the same range of bodies that leading councillors interact with, but do so for reasons related to the functional provision of services and resources within their electoral patches. In doing this and in forging ward and divisional based alliances and coalitions, councillors will still be employing their elected office as moral and political leverage.

There is however, a scattered pattern of reaction from public and private bodies that councillors seek to hold to account and influence and that reaction depends not so much on the organisation concerned, but where it is located. In some areas councillors interact with the NHS, for example, in a constructive and positive fashion; in others, councillors all but find themselves excluded from any meaningful interaction. But, if we are to see any meaning attached to the term 'government' in local government, then it is ensuring the public accountability of others that provides that meaning. Local government may still cling to a service provision role and that is understandable. There is however, a broader and political governing role that awaits those councillors that seek to grasp it.

About the Author

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