

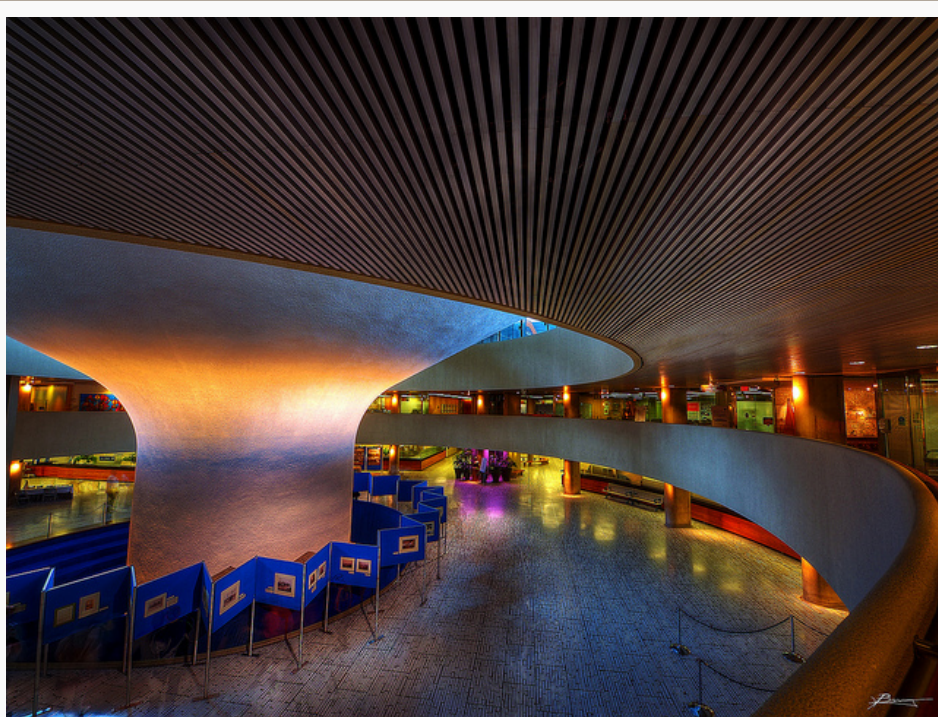
The future for Local Government in England could be bright, provided that it's accountable

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The mood inside local government is currently bleak, with worries about funding and demographic change chief amongst the sector's concerns. **Jessica Crowe** of the Centre for Public Scrutiny argues that the future for local authorities can be bright, provided that its leaders are willing to take steps to create a more accountable future.*



Credit: [Paul Bica, CC BY 2.0](#)

If I was feeling more pessimistic, I might have inserted “but only if” in brackets, not just “if” in the title of my contribution. I’m naturally an optimist but there are clearly major reasons not to be cheerful about local government’s future:

- “[The graph of doom](#)” showing how on current predictions spending on social services will soon swallow up all local government’s funding, leaving nothing for those universal, public-facing environmental, leisure and other services which are what the public think their council tax pays for;
- The crisis and decline of traditional organised politics in our democracy, leaving political parties casting around for decent candidates, whom the public are increasingly uninterested in voting for anyway. Local government’s ‘first among equals’ status in the local public sector depends on the democratic legitimacy conferred by elected councillors. So, the more this is eroded by declining turnout, an increasingly unrepresentative group of elected representatives and falling party memberships as the source – still – of most councillors, the more that role as ‘convenor’ and ‘place-shaper’ is undermined;
- High profile governance and service failure cases which further erode public trust in the motives, capability and general ethos of our public services: Rotherham, Tower Hamlets, Mid-Staffordshire, Doncaster and others

On the other hand, there are some positive signs:

- Does the Greater Manchester Agreement signal a first step towards devolution of real power and resources from the cold dead hand of central government, enabling councils to take control of levers which will help grow their local economies, develop their local population and close the jaws of doom from the other side – increasing income streams not just slashing service expenditure?
- Councils have already managed huge reductions in their expenditure without too many things falling over, and have done so at the same time as taking on new responsibilities, for example through the transfer of public health, development of Health & Wellbeing Boards and welfare reform;
- For every failure that hits the headlines, there are others ([Wirral is a good example](#)) who quietly managed to take responsibility for their problems and sort them out, making proactive use of the Local Government's sector-led improvement support system, and generating confidence that local government can be trusted with at least a degree of self-regulation.

However, in recent months there have been a slew of parliamentary and regulator reports highlighting that local government is under increasing stresses and strains and that many of these derive from a governance and accountability system that is not functioning as effectively as it could. So both the DCLG and Department of Health Select Committees have criticised these departments for not fully understanding or appreciating the impact of central government policy changes or funding reductions on local government.

The National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee have highlighted the pressures being placed on local accountability and scrutiny arrangements by central government's reliance on them for assurance and by the growth of complex, multi-agency, multi-funding stream, decision-making bodies, such as HWBs, Local Enterprise Partnerships, Combined Authorities etc, which make governance, accountability and scrutiny challenging, to say the least. And most recently the DCLG Select Committee has called for a national review of the effectiveness of local government scrutiny following their investigation into the child sex exploitation scandal in Rotherham.

The strength and resilience of local government notwithstanding, I think the cumulative effect of all these pieces of evidence means that we urgently need a new and better approach to local governance and accountability, or the very future of local government will be called into question. CfPS would endorse Clive Betts's committee's call for a national evaluation of the operation and effectiveness of local overview and scrutiny arrangements. We recently carried out a survey of scrutiny functions across England and Wales which revealed some worrying practices in a significant minority of councils:

- 36% said scrutiny requests for information were regularly or sometimes blocked or denied

"There is an officer & political culture to keep scrutiny away from the real issues"

- This could be more a senior officer issue than a political one: 71% said blockages come from senior officers, 40% from the leader / cabinet (respondents could tick all that applied, hence totals come to more than 100%)

"Scrutiny is not universally valued or well understood at a senior management level. It is currently perceived and used as a tick box exercise to try to keep back bench members quiet."

- Nearly 25% said scrutiny never or hardly ever robustly challenges the executive (20% said never or hardly ever robustly challenges senior officers)
- *"Leadership culture of evading challenge – and feeding fish to scrutiny to keep them busy. Probably a result of large political majority."*
- 31% never or hardly ever listen to other sources of evidence or service users to inform their challenge

This was a small survey with a limited response rate – although a reasonably representative spread across different

types of authority. However, I think these findings provide sufficiently worrying indicators that all may not be well that (a) they should be taken seriously by those in leadership positions and (b) they add weight to calls for a proper national evaluation to investigate the issues and root causes further. We will be publishing the full results of the survey shortly – these are just a few headlines from the initial analysis – and consulting scrutiny practitioners on what our recommendations arising from the findings should be.

If local scrutiny and accountability arrangements are currently experiencing difficulties in holding decision-makers to account, my assessment would be that this is only going to get harder in the future – given what we know about continuing pressures on resources, (positive) developments such as Combined Authorities and increased devolution, and limited signs of a reinvigorated local democratic politics. All these trends and developments are likely to combine to make local decision-making, and the exercise of power over people's lives which that involves, appear more remote, opaque and unaccountable.

My organisation, the Centre for Public Scrutiny's three guiding principles are accountability, transparency and involvement: we need to bring these (not structures) to the forefront of the debates about devolution, local power and democracy. If we do, then the future for local government could indeed be bright. If we don't, there are several potential futures – all of which are pretty dim.

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Note: this post gives the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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