We use cookies to ensure that we deliver the best user experience of our website. If you would like to, you can change your cookie settings at any time. Continue

Local elections: challenges and opportunities for new administrations

Catherine Staite

Following the elections, both new and continuing local authority administrations, of all political hues, will face significant challenges. The 'irresistible force' of increased demand is meeting the 'immovable object' of financial stringency, creating an annual cycle of despair, where councils struggle to do 'more for less' – something which becomes progressively hard to achieve. Many will manage to balance their books till 2014 but face a financial cliff edge thereafter.

These apparently irreconcilable pressures may actually be the saving of local government by creating pressure for change – if it can reimagine and reinvent itself. What local government need to *do* in response to these challenges is less important than how it needs to *be*.

Councils are moving to commissioning from direct delivery, to supporting independence rather than dependence and to better understanding of the capacity of communities to improve their own lives. Local authorities are good at working in partnership – with health, the police, education and business. They need to get three other key relationships right; with the communities they serve, with each other and with central government.

Local authorities need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the diverse and complex capacities and needs of their communities. Engagement should be woven into the fabric of local government. There is a wealth of evidence that shows people do know and care about their local services. Without this public support no real transformation of local areas and services will be possible. The relationship between local authorities and their communities should therefore be less benefactor-to-beneficiary and more partner-to-partner – underpinned by mutual respect.

Many local authorities already work collaboratively to bring down costs and improve quality. This patchwork of ad hoc arrangements is often driven by enthusiastic individuals and is consequently fragile. Cooperation between local authorities is too often constrained by parochialism and soured by old rivalries, too much defending of council's sovereignty and not enough drive to deliver efficiency and improved outcomes. The experience of successful collaboration tells us it should be the norm and not the exception. Councils will have to explain why they are cutting services or ceasing to invest for the future before doing everything possible to reduce costs and improve outcomes by working together.

The relationship and the balance of power between central and local government generates much debate. We have the most centralised model of government in Western Europe. Central government demonstrates a lack of trust in local government and an abiding reluctance to devolve financial control although they delegate to councils the implementation of their funding cuts. If central government acts like a disapproving parent, local government is likely to act like a recalcitrant child. Neither set of behaviours will deliver the outcomes that the Coalition and local authorities want to achieve for the people they are all are supposed to be serving.

It is time for local government to take the initiative in reshaping their relationship with communities, each other and central government. Local government is remarkably efficient and reliable. Serious service failures are only newsworthy because they are so rare. That competence confers authority and local government needs to get off the back foot, stop waiting for the green light from central government and make the changes needed to meet the challenges of the future.

Catherine Staite, Director of the Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham.

© University of Birmingham 2014