

Elected Councillors: How much influence and power are they able to exercise?

Professor John Raine

What might we expect of the county councillors we select next week? Will those elected be able to implement the initiatives they have pledged in their campaigns? In this respect, we might reasonably be a tad sceptical for a number of reasons.

First, councils no longer occupy the core policy-making role of previous times. Nowadays there is more emphasis on multi-agency partnering in local public policy-making so that key matters are often decided in conjunction with other local public, voluntary and private sector organisations. While this may be beneficial in ensuring more 'joined up' public services, it has weakened the power and influence of elected councillors.

Second, the 'cabinet' model, introduced a decade ago, under which an elite group of councillors lead on policy-making, has also disempowered other councillors. While some can be influential internally on scrutiny committees reviewing policy and holding the cabinet members to account, many others act mostly as ward representatives, with little opportunity to contribute to decision-making.

Third, many of the services are now provided as 'shared services' with neighbouring councils and other local public organisations; others have been contracted out or are tied up in long-term public-private-partnership arrangements. While this may have reduced costs, it has also become more difficult for individual councillors to be influential in relation to those services since any proposed changes have to be re-negotiated with other partners and may involve complex contractual issues that are expensive-to-unpick.

Fourth, the move by councils to establish front-line, multi-service, 'customer contact centres' and public websites that not only provide information but also allow the public to interact directly, e.g. reporting maintenance and other problems, has diluted the role of the councillor as conduit to getting matters remedied. Indeed, in the digital era of sophisticated telephony and CRM systems, the elected councillor may well be last to learn about the problems that previously they might have championed on behalf of the public.

Fifth, the on-going austere financial climate facing councils means that there are generally less resources for new initiatives unless there is the prospect of efficiency improvements and financial savings in return. Moreover, lack of money provides a convenient excuse for the political leadership and officers to say 'no' to other councillors whose ideas happen not to find favour.

Overall, then, one might conclude that, despite all the rhetoric from government about 'localism' and the empowerment of councillors as community leaders, the power and influence of those we elect next week to make a significant difference will unfortunately seem quite limited. But candidate for councillorship should not be deterred; 'where there is a will there is a way!' And for those elected and with sufficient commitment and determination to confront the obstacles and to press their cases for change effectively, there is certainly much to be done to make councils work better and for the benefit of those they represent.

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