Congratulations to the Newly-Elected Councillors: But how much influence and power will they be able to exercise?

Professor John Raine

With the local elections now behind us for another year it is timely to ask what we might now expect of those newly elected to office on Thursday of last week? Will they be able to implement all those initiatives and pledges that they made in their campaign leaflets? Will they be the agents for change that they promised us they would be? Certainly there has been quite a significant shake-up in the local political map of several counties and of unitary councils – and particularly because of the impact of the UKIP vote. But then, for a number of reasons, making the changes will probably not prove very easy for the new broom of councillors, at least not in the short term. And for those councillors elected for the first time (like this author), exerting influence and making a difference will probably prove especially challenging, if not a little frustrating. This is for a number of reasons.

First, councils no longer occupy the core local 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, without doubt 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 and without much opportunity at all 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 about the empowerment of councillors as community leaders, our newly elected councillors are likely to struggle to effect the changes they promised and will unfortunately find their scope for exercising influence quite limited. But then they should not be deterred from trying. 'Where there is a will there is a way'! And provided they remain committed and determined enough 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 more for the benefit of those they represent.

Professor John Raine, Professor of Management in Criminal Justice, Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham (who was successfully elected to Worcestershire County Council on Thursday)

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