

Community Leadership in the New Governance

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ABSTRACT

In many democratic countries local government leadership is subject to challenge from the 'new governance'. The impact of globalisation, Europeanisation and urbanisation, combined with the emergence of a diverse and sophisticated citizenry poses important questions about local government's role, purpose and capacity.

Classically leadership is about 'leaders' asking, persuading and influencing 'followers'. However, in the current environment this leader/follower dynamic is reversed. Now there is a need to begin with the identification of community needs and wants, to broker agreement where there is conflict and to facilitate collaboration with partners in achieving goals (Hambleton and Sweeting, 2004). Typically, the development of new forms of local leadership is associated with the introduction or refinement of a strengthened political executive leadership, most notably the directly elected mayor. However, in England 'community leadership' is much more than a motivation to streamline political decision making, though it does incorporate that.

'Community leadership' has been a feature of English local government since the mid 19th century, though its significance has varied in parallel to changes in central-local government relations. With the election of 'New Labour' in 1997 community leadership was rediscovered and became a key element of the 'local government modernisation agenda' (LGMA), symbolising the change from 'old' to 'new' local government and prescribing a new role for it (Sullivan, 2007).

This paper traces the evolution of New Labour's policy for community leadership and examines the policy's impact on local government, its key partners and communities. Drawing on empirical data collected as part of the LGMA meta-evaluation commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the paper explores: the extent to which there is shared understanding of the term community leadership; stakeholders' perceptions of local government's legitimacy and capacity to act as community leader; local government strategies for exercising community leadership; and evidence of the impact of community leadership.

The paper focuses on the ways in which community leadership is interpreted and enacted in different localities, paying particular attention to who performs (and is perceived to perform) the role of community leader within local government. The paper will argue that the emergence of the 'new governance' has offered public

managers greater discretion to act as community leaders and that this has important implications for how we understand the role of local government and in particular the role of elected members in the new governance environment.

Key Words: community leadership, public managers/politicians, collaboration