



Governance, culture and collaboration

Discussion Paper

The governance implications of
moving to a “community paradigm”
of local government

Introduction

What is culture? How does political and organisational culture influence governance – and vice versa? And what does this mean for local government?

By “culture”, we mean the shared attitudes, behaviours and values that define how organisations work. “Organisational culture” is a familiar concept – it can be a barrier or enabler when organisations try to embark on major changes. “Political culture” is more complex. It is a part of organisational culture – that part that engages with the way that party politics, and politicians, engage with and influence organisational culture. Individual parties at local level will have their own cultures; councils as a whole may have a prevailing political culture, the attitudes and behaviours exhibited by elected members as a whole. Amongst other things this political culture may influence the extent to which councillors are involved in decision-making (at strategic and operational level), the extent to which members are considered bound by professional standards of behaviour and discipline, and the way that executive decision-makers and those who hold them to account (through overview and scrutiny) relate to each other.

Drucker’s aphorism that “culture eats strategy for breakfast” is often quoted, but poorly understood. Often people mean that an organisation’s culture and its strategy can find themselves in tension – worse, it can be used to sell simplistic solutions on culture, behaviour, values and attitudes. It is all too easy to “plan” for “culture change” – often in the mistaken belief that a strong leader, or leaders, in an organisation, can drive that change on their own. What we know is that others in the system – those involved in the reflective, challenging work of scrutiny, for example – have just as much of a role to play.

This is not something of purely academic interest. The local government sector continues to face range of stark challenges, and an uncertain funding landscape¹. We have to have

the assurance that we are making the right decisions, in the right way, and at the right time. Unless we understand how clear and effective leadership fits into this need, unless we understand how councils’ ways of working can help or hinder us in this aim, we may not be able to give these assurances to ourselves and others.

All organisations profess a commitment to a positive organisational culture. Large organisations in particular will often have an organisational development strategy, a set of corporate values, and commitments of various kinds made at Board level.

But what is often forgotten is that developing a positive corporate culture is not automatic, a natural consequence of setting yourself on that path. It takes more than deciding to do it, and saying you will do it. Cookie-cutter solutions – the overlaying of “lean” or “agile” systems onto existing organisational hierarchies, or changing structures in lieu of addressing culture – are tempting and are often a short cut that won’t help us reach our destination.

In short, changing cultures is complicated, and long-term. It involves a wide array of stakeholders and partners. It starts with leadership. Leaders of culture change are not just those who might traditionally direct a local authority’s activity in terms of their hierarchical position, but a huge array of stakeholders with their own part to play in the system. This requires a different form of leadership – systems leadership² – framed with an understanding that collaboration forms the foundation on which new cultures have to be built.

Councils play a prominent role amongst all of the stakeholders active at a local level. Councils’ democratic nature presents particular demands – but notable opportunities, in part in the legitimacy they have to take a primary role in understanding and shaping professionals’ response to what local people, communities and places really need. Much of the literature on

¹ LGA: “Moving the conversation on” (2018); LGiU/MJ, “State of local government finance survey” (2019)

² SOLACE et al, “Systems leadership in local government” (2019)

leadership and organisational culture does not take this key dynamic into account, and we have attempted to address that.

Democratic organisations like councils, particularly ones which work with a wide range of partners, are influenced in their culture by a huge range of intersecting factors. Local politics is one of these factors, but there are many more. Research and thinking about corporate culture, on the other hand, can tend to look at organisations as “closed systems” – machines where all the variables are more or less understood and where key leaders have a variety of levers at their disposal to take action on those variables.

The potential rewards of a shift in mindset are significant. This paper is an attempt to articulate them – insofar as this is possible at a national level.

There is no one template for adopting and pursuing more positive cultures of leadership, accountability, openness at a local level. Work like this can provide a framework but conversations must be defined, and decisions made, locally. Political cultures differ from council to council (and different cultures can present themselves within the same organisation) – structural approaches adopted in one place may not work in another.

What we do know – and what this paper sets out – is that while change needs to be incremental, and while the process of making changes to councils’ political culture will no doubt be complex – doing so is critical to being able to respond to local people’s needs now in the future. And good governance forms the bedrock from which councils can build and sustain those changes.

The context – the paradigm shift

Our work is driven, in part, on work recently carried out by the New Local Government Network, and in particular their expression that local public service is entering a new paradigm; what they called the “community paradigm”³.

NLGN argue that the history of public services lies in shifts between different “paradigms” in terms of how people think and act – most recently, the prevalence of a “market paradigm”, the notion of public services as transactions between the state as provider, and the public as consumer. This is the mindset that birthed “new public management” – value for money is arguably about making “marketisation” easier and more efficient by having a common framework for understanding how services are delivered. The requirements for governance, and scrutiny, under that paradigm naturally reflect Walker and Tizard’s sense of what’s needed – essentially the collection and collation of more, and better, data so as to allow for more robust oversight and better management decision-making. It is a model which says that value will look the same across the country.

Now, we are moving to a new paradigm, one that recognises the public demand for increasing influence in a world of rising demand for public services. It is about participation, and producing new models for local people, their representatives, professionals and others to collaborate to deliver the change that people need.

This has profound implications for government. Our old systems, created for a marketised world, are implicitly based on the sense that there is a “single version of the truth” – a universal conception of value that we can use to reach straightforward, clear, unambiguous and understandable judgements about equity, efficiency and effectiveness. Governance under these circumstances is straightforward. We can review scorecards and how they are put together – we can review other management information and the data that sits behind it. We can assign and assert responsibility in key places in the management chain for delivering high performance under these systems. And yes, under those systems we can have strong

³ NLGN: “The community paradigm” (2019)

national oversight systems – because this consistency means that comparison across the country is not only possible, it is desirable in the interest of checking adherence to national standards.

Governance in the community paradigm is, necessarily, messier. It is about collaboration – a multiplicity of different partners coming together, recognising that everyone’s sense of what “value” looks like will be different, recognising those differences and seeing how we can work together to better understand those needs, and to act on them. Under this model,

national systems of oversight are essentially meaningless, because value is defined entirely locally. Governance, too, is wholly local.

Trying to apply our traditional models of governance to this new world is likely to result in failure. Local democracy and the relationship between local people and the public bodies who work to fulfil their needs is likely to shift, and significantly.

This hinges on a change in culture and mindset, which is what this paper is about.

How councils can take action

This paper sets out a governance-led framework for understanding and addressing how councils’ prevailing organisational and political culture may need to change in response as we move towards a paradigm of public service focused more on collaboration and deliberation⁴.

We think that councils, and the wider areas they serve, can do two things – diagnose and understand their existing organisational and political culture, and then take action to improve based on this understanding. The sections below explore those tasks in more detail – in this section, we introduce and outline what are, to us, some of the key issues.

Diagnosis: councils need to develop a clearer understanding of their culture and values now. Councils are comprised of a variety of individuals and groups who take the lead on strategy, operations, accountability and governance – these various leadership responsibilities are complemented by leaders beyond the authority. Increasingly, councils will need to recognise the need to build a political and organisational culture which reflects the existence of collective, collaborative leadership across a place – the traditional way that we have thought of “leaders”, as a small group of individuals making decisions – is likely to be increasingly

inaccurate. This may rub against traditional ideas about the role of councillors as decision-makers.

As we make clear later in this paper, the “leaders” in a local area – those people who are involved in change, in taking action, in making decisions – are an extremely broad group. They are not just decision-makers, but can be those holding them to account too – the public can and should be leaders too, in their own communities and across a wider area. Given this, these leaders have to be clear what their current mindset is towards responsibility and governance. An attitude focused on rules and compliance is likely not to be fit for purpose in this new landscape of collaboration. These leaders have to be more comfortable with arrangements whereby everyone has a stake in decision-making and everyone has a stake in accountability too.

Action: councils need to be clearer on the change required and be able to articulate it well. Wholesale reform of political and organisational culture to account for new paradigms of joint working is an extremely large task to swallow. It is wiser to talk about the vision for how those systems will interact to deliver what outcomes in a decade’s time, and of the need to undertake a number of considered steps to reach that

⁴ This expands on ideas developed in Colin Cresswell, Jonathan Moizer & Jonathan Lean, “The Role of Organisational Culture in the Merger of English Local Authorities into a Single Unitary Authority”, *Local Government Studies* (2014) 40:3, 356-379. There, the focus was on developing new cultures and systems for collaboration within and beyond a new council; our work is more about developing a model for collaboration between and within existing systems.

point in the meantime. Each of those steps needs to have positive impacts and results itself – the benefits of this approach cannot be backloaded to the very end of the process.

For us, this starts with a commitment to begin using deliberative methods in a way that demonstrates how they will influence the way that the council formally makes decisions, accompanied by clear and understandable formal commitments that give local people, and others, the confidence to engage. It involves experimenting with different approaches to deliberation and collaboration – things that require cultural change, but which can also work to drive and embed that change.

In due course, this can lead to the evolution of systems that see those deliberative processes owned collectively and changing to meet the needs of its participants, not just owned and directed by the council – it will also mean the council's governance systems (and the systems of partners, and other formal decision-makers) changing to provide clear space for these systems to operate – a clear and unequivocal transfer of power and responsibility from formal places into more deliberative forums, where the council and others will still play a leading role.

This can and should be led by a strategic focus on governance and communications.

“The community constitution”: a constitution for the place

Using an understanding of local governance to bring about these changes is about understanding where existing systems are barriers to change, and where opportunities are presented. We suggest the creation of a “constitution for the place”, an evolution of agreements piloted by Wigan and Preston amongst other area. We have dubbed this a “community constitution”, to emphasise the focus on collaboration⁵.

The constitution for the place would:

- Create a framework which allows agreement of agreed outcomes and priorities;
- Be owned by all local partners and leaders in an area (bearing in mind our broad definition of “leaders” and leadership);
- Provide a mechanism for leaders, across the place, to hold each other to account;
- Clearly articulate roles and responsibilities, and set out the framework for collaboration and deliberative decision-making;

- Express the new behaviours – including the new political culture – necessary for these things to be successful;
- Establish the changes that councils and other bodies might need to make to their governance and communications systems for this to work;
- Establish how information sharing, transparency, insight/evidence-led decision-making will operate.

This is about understanding how individuals with formal, traditional leadership roles can see those roles adapting and evolving as deliberation and collaboration becomes more mature. It is about creating a new political culture that sees governance as an enabling framework, and which promotes the positive behaviours that will see us taking practical action to make this happen.

⁵ This idea is not new, but to our knowledge it is the first time that the idea has been updated and developed to fit the post-2010 public service landscape. Credit is due to Dr Dave McKenna who blogged on this subject in 2010 - <http://localopolis.blogspot.com/2010/04/1-local-constitutions.html>

Diagnosis

► Gaining a clearer understanding of the council's culture and values right now

Diagnosis and discovery is an important element in understanding why improvement might need to happen. There is an argument that a lack of focus on cultural change can be part of the reason that complex and ambitious service change and transformation plans fail⁶.

We think that there are three elements to this:

- Understanding who leads (we think that all stakeholders are “leaders” in some way);
- Understanding how leaders work together (people’s relationships, as defined by their culture and values);
- Understanding how leaders think of their responsibilities (whether they are focused on adherence to rules, or whether responsibility operates in a different way).

Understanding who leads

In many areas leadership will still look and feel quite traditional. Councils’ governance is tied to the requirements of the Local Government Acts – these formal structures cannot easily be changed. These structures reinforce the belief that councils are bodies where decision-making, influence and leadership are concentrated in the hands of a small group of people.

Formal systems – particularly as they are presented in council constitutions – only take us so far, however.

It is important to understand the links between “formal” and “informal” models of leadership and decision-making. All organisations will involve decision-making happening in informal spaces, to a greater or lesser extent. In recent years, the expansion of partnership working, and the complexity of collaboration between large numbers of public, private and third sector

organisations has meant that these informal spaces have expanded. Formal decision-making feels increasingly performative – a place to push through decisions that have already, in practice, been made. No-one would seriously argue, for example, that a council Cabinet meeting, or an NHS board meeting for that matter, is somewhere genuine debate happens – they are places in which decisions are formally made, but the process of coming to that decision happens well away from the public gaze.

Traditional governance systems are increasingly finding this partnership model of decision-making difficult to deal with⁷.

In reality, everyone has a stake in leadership – everyone leads in their own way, in a variety of formal and informal spaces. Across a council and across an area, all have a duty to lead and champion the things for which they hold responsibilities, in different and complementary ways⁸. Where these collective responsibilities are poorly understood, tensions can build up, and gaps can emerge. Leaders also have a responsibility for holding each other to account. Where individuals and groups are unwilling to accept this need for challenge – either on a theoretical or practical level – the sense of common purpose necessary for governance systems to work properly can break down.

This sense of collective responsibility makes building collaborative enterprises easier but it does make governance more of a challenge. This is particularly so when one considers the huge range of people beyond the walls of the civic centre, leading in other communities and in other organisations. We will talk about the specific leadership roles that various individuals can play in the section below on page 7.

Even in more traditional organisations, this more

⁶ SOLACE, CIPFA, Civica: “Invigorating the public sector revolution” (2018)

⁷ One potential solution to this challenge is for partners to develop a common “theory of change” to act as a foundation for collaboration – see Local Partnerships: “Why consider developing a theory of change?” (2018), which provides a general introduction to this in the context of local partnership working.

⁸ In the healthcare sector the concept of “collective leadership” has become central to both overall governance and to specific needs around patient safety – see The King’s Fund: “Developing collective leadership for health care” (2014). The concept of collective responsibility is a narrower one usually applied to Board decision-making – our conception of it is broader, about shared responsibility within a whole system.

distributed form of leadership will have become a feature in recent years even if it is not fully recognised. In these organisations, it may have begun to create tensions – as those focused on hierarchy and “clear” lines of accountability have sought to reassert those old systems and to shore up their own power base. The need for strong and straightforward governance is often used as an excuse for why these traditional systems need to persist.

Understanding how leaders work together

Do leaders collaborate, or is there tension? Leaders’ objectives may work against each other. Personal relationships are often crucial to this collaboration, which can hinder if they don’t work effectively.

How people work together is defined by culture – the culture of the organisations they represent, but also the existence, or otherwise, of a culture of partnership working and collaboration across a whole area. These cultures build up organically over time. Recognising their existence and establishing whether improvement is necessary is critically important, but often overlooked in favour of putting in place more robust structures, in the erroneous view that this will make accountability and governance stronger.

On this point we defer to work already done by NLGN as part of their changemaking campaign. In “Culture shock”⁹, NLGN set out to apply the academically-rigorous “competing values” framework¹⁰ to the local government sector as a whole. There are four components to this framework – four competing models of leadership:

- Clan – collaborative culture focused on human development and participation;
- Adhocracy – a creative environment, focused on innovation, vision and new resources;

- Hierarchy – a controlling environment, focused on control and efficiency;
- Market – a competing culture based on the belief that competition and customer focus produce effectiveness¹¹.

Market and hierarchical models are more focused on stability and control, and NLGN consider that – sector wide – councils gravitate towards these values. The hierarchical approach is of longer standing and stronger, with a market focus having emerged in recent years.

NLGN consider that councils should consciously move towards adopting clan and adhocracy cultures. These more flexible ways of working encourage collaboration and creativity. They “fit” within a public service environment that is increasingly difficult for councils alone to control and direct – one where, as we have noted above, collaboration is likely to become a dominant feature in the future.

NLGN rightly identify this shift as a huge challenge¹². We would add to that challenge by noting that it will present itself differently in every authority. Some councils have been undertaking “transformation” exercises, consciously focused on moving to a more collaborative, or flexible, or agile culture. Others are further behind; some, worryingly, more may lack the reflective capability necessary to bring about this kind of change¹³.

Some councils may have political challenges – or political enablers – which may influence how values express themselves. Different sets of values may exist in the same organisation, across different groups of members¹⁴. These different values may not express themselves cleanly (for example, as the divisions between different political groups) but they may well, even so, be highly political in nature. They are likely to reflect different visions and objectives for the local area, and for the council’s role in

⁹ NLGN: “Culture shock: creating a changemaking culture in local government” (2018)

¹⁰ Cameron, Quinn: “Diagnosing and changing organisational culture: based on the competing values framework” (Wiley, 1999)

¹¹ Supra, n9

¹² Ibid – see also NLGN: “From transactions to changemaking” (2019)

¹³ This is a feature in the literature on “organisational capacity for change” (OCC) – see Judge, Elenkov: “Organizational capacity for change and environmental performance”, *Journal of Business Research* 58 (2005) 893-901 and PMI: “Organisational capacity for change: increasing change capacity and avoiding change overload” (2014)

¹⁴ NLGN, LGA: “The council workforce of tomorrow” (2016), especially pp19-20; see also Needham, Mangan: “The 21st century public servant” (ESRC, 2014), and Mangan et al: “The 21st century councillor” (ESRC, 2014), and Copus, Wall: “The voice of the councillor” (De Montfort University / The Municipal Journal, 2017)

helping to deliver those objectives. Councils' different sets of political values influence everything – their attitude to risk, their attitude to collaboration, their attitude to councillors' representative role and their appetite for more deliberation. A change in those occupying traditional leadership roles may change these values – sometimes abruptly. Traditional corporate planning – the setting of a “vision” for a local authority which may run for three, five or even ten years – can happen in a way that fails to take account of these differing political values, making the ability of the council to deliver against these objectives over this timescale particularly challenging.

In our view, this cultural challenge, and its intersection with local political cultures in particular, is the kind of thing towards which the improvement systems within the structure – those operated and guided by organisations like the LGA, SOLACE, CIPFA, ourselves and other national sector bodies – should be turning their minds – building on the recognised successes of the existing sector-led improvement system as it currently exists¹⁵.

Understanding how leaders think of their responsibilities, and how they think of governance

Do we “comply” with duties and responsibilities set by others – is our sense of leadership constrained by how we conceive of governance?

There are two ways to think about the governance frameworks within which we operate, from a cultural perspective.

The first is to look at governance as a rulebook¹⁶. This is not necessarily to see governance as a “constraint”, but as a set of rules which have to be by and large followed unless creative ways around those rules can be identified. This also guides how we think about our responsibilities. A sense of rigidity pervades this mindset, which expresses itself in gatekeeping and a preoccupation with organisational boundaries. Often it is an approach that is defended in the interests of maintaining clear and transparent governance.

The second is to look at governance as a framework, to guide us, that we can apply and interpret intelligently according to our objectives and the objectives of those around us. It is more flexible in the hands of informed people, and groups, who have the confidence in themselves and in their relationships with others to react intelligently and creatively to governance challenges rather than interpreting rules rigidly.

In both the private and public sectors there are a range of statutory and non-statutory provisions around decision-making with which organisations must apply. In local government, the form of governance is set out in legislation – the detail of how decisions are made, although notionally largely at councils' discretion, is in reality highly circumscribed – both by judicial review caselaw, and by guidance, Regulations and Orders.

Councils' Constitutions – governing documents which define decision-making – set out structures, systems and processes. While these documents should reflect and govern each council's unique organisational culture, in practice they tend not to. Most contain large amounts of content transposed from the Government's example “modular constitution” produced as part of the local government modernisation programme in 1999/2000, which may increasingly not reflect contemporary needs. Some undergo revision on an ad hoc basis, with elements being added on to deal with problems as they emerge – leading to a complex tangle of rules and procedures. Some undergo revision only occasionally. We have noted that many council constitutions make reference to legislative provisions that ceased to apply, were repealed or otherwise superseded several years ago. In itself, incorrect legislative references are not the cause of governance crises, but they can serve as evidence of an environment where governance is not taken seriously, or where a proper resource does not exist for its oversight – a symptom of a wider problem.

Looking at the Constitution as, exclusively, a document full of rules to be complied with is a

¹⁵ LGA: “Evaluation of sector-led improvement: interim summary report” (2018)

¹⁶ Or, alternatively, to see governance as about compliance, a criticism made of the direction and oversight of the local government performance system by the Audit Commission.

dangerous mindset. It will become something to be adhered to unthinkingly, or creatively ignored or “got around” when inconvenient. It is part of the intellectual landscape that sees governance as acting as a “brake” on innovation and dynamism. Compliance here intersects with heuristics¹⁷ – the organisation’s “behavioural norms” which guide and drive how people interact with each other, and with the rules, structures and systems which they have created to govern those interactions.

This goes more so for the wider compliance landscape. A range of other rules and principles will exist within and outside the council; they will intersect with each other, and they will intersect with culture as well.

Rules, and the law, are of course important. Following the right process, in the right way, is

critical – particularly when big decisions, with big consequences, are in play. But following rules, that we may have set arbitrarily and imperfectly, just for the sake of following rules, is circular.

How we conceive of our responsibilities hinges on this understanding of governance. If responsibility is about compliance – about meeting standards – then responsibility will end up being limited, and difficult to manage in the context of the more dynamic needs of collaboration.

Leaders should think of governance as a framework within which they can exercise their responsibilities creatively.

Action

▶ Being clear on the change required and articulating it well

Once the process of discovery has revealed some of the fundamentals about the organisation, its political and organisational culture and the context in which it sits, and once opening discussions about how the change might be carried out have been discussed, we can turn our minds to what that change actually looks like.

We favour a direct, but incremental, approach. Direct, because it faces up to what changes need to be made and consciously puts in place a foundation on which to build a new political and organisational culture. Incremental, because it recognises that it will take time for that culture to mature, and because trying to achieve this substantial shift quickly is likely to be challenging. In reality, we anticipate that proper maturity of these new behaviours, roles and approaches may take years. An iterative approach means that we can design approaches which will begin to yield results quickly, however.

Deciding to open up: committing to deliberation

First of all, those in traditional leadership positions (as decision-makers) need to make the decision to do this.

This kind of opening-up is challenging for those in traditional leadership positions. Traditional leaders initially committed to transparency can find their attitude changing quickly when the political realities of this become clearer¹⁸. The challenge for organisations lies in recognising that while in the short term, more openness (particularly around policy development) can lead to political and organisational difficulties, in the longer term, it could lead to more robust decisions, more accountable decision-making, a decisions (once formally agreed) to which more people feel able to sign up – making them more sustainable¹⁹. This is an easy enough argument to make in theory, but in practice it is much more challenging. A leap of faith may be involved

¹⁷ NLGN: “Culture shock” (2018)

¹⁸ CfPS: “Your right to know” (2015)

¹⁹ Ibid, see also Janssen et al: “Benefits, adoption barriers and myths of open data and open government”, Information Systems Management 29 (2012) 258-268

– it is easy to see how measures designed to increase collaboration could end up weighing down governance systems with a morass of new systems and processes which have the opposite effect to those envisaged. Getting this right will be difficult, which is why sustained top-level commitment is so important.

To understand the way around this issue we need to explore two issues.

- What are the implications of the decision to open up, both positive and negative?
- How can these implications be understood better – and the potential negative impacts mitigated?

Practical implications

A commitment to deliberation is perhaps one of the most challenging that an organisation can make because it involves consciously giving up power – pushing it away to other spaces.

A new paradigm in local government, one that focuses on communities and collaboration, places demands on us to use deliberation to make decisions, and in a much more systematic way than we may have done before. This raises profound challenges for governance and accountability.

Deliberative forms of decision-making have been growing in popularity, in part influenced by the transformative effect that the citizens' assembly on abortion had on the decriminalisation debate in Ireland. These ways of working involve two things – a recognition of the value of the insights that such a process would bring, and an understanding of the shift in power that it could bring about.

Deliberation can be supportive of an existing decision-making process, or can effectively “replace” that process. By this we mean that a deliberative system – a citizen's assembly, for example, can help “traditional” decision-makers to come to better, more informed decisions. Or those deliberative systems can themselves be the ones that make the decisions.

At the moment, we think it is most likely that experiments with deliberation will lean towards the first of these forms. But in due course, success will lead to a shift in power from traditional systems, to these new deliberative systems; as traditional policy-makers come to understand the benefit of more iterative, open ways to develop policy.

“Iterative” decision-making is about working through policy-making in a deliberate, reflective way that gains more definition, and is refined, as it goes through various stages – as business cases are prepared, as options are evaluated, discarded and chosen, and as assumptions are identified and challenged. When decision-making is more closed in nature, this process will probably still happen – but often more haphazardly, more idiosyncratically and in a way that makes it increasingly difficult to hold to account – as we have noted above when we spoke about the link between “formality” and “informality” in decision-making. A more open approach, where leaders and decision-makers “show their working”, is clearer, more accountable, and ultimately more satisfactory from a governance point of view. The influence of various individuals and groups on a decision or policy as it develops becomes clearer.

A citizen's assembly-type approach to deliberation can bring some of this out into the open – but where the decision itself is still made in a traditional space by traditional decision-makers, not much may be seen to have changed. Such an approach may be a useful staging-post – a necessary step, as we move to a more meaningfully collaborative system. But it is not sustainable in the long term.

A more transformative change is needed in how we conceive of local leadership, and local decision-making. Part of this is about understanding that everyone holds a leadership role of some kind²⁰. If leadership is a shared responsibility, it follows that policy-making – and identifying solutions to our problems – has to be more open and iterative, because this is the only way to involve a wider range of people in policy-making.

²⁰ SOLACE / CIVICA: “Invigorating the public sector revolution” (2015)

Ownership of the system is also shared, under this model. It is not “the council consulting people” or “the council putting in place deliberative systems, the outcomes of which it takes into account in how it makes decisions”, but deliberative systems being designed and developed by a group of local leaders, who then collectively own those systems. Governance systems will need to be designed to account for the fact that these new systems will have to align with whatever formal, legal systems for decision-making that individual partners need to maintain (in accordance with the law).

Some of the spaces in which deliberation happen will be formal and some informal. Collective ownership of the system means that all leaders with a stake can be part of a discussion about the methods, as well as the substance, of deliberation.

Some of these will be “owned” by the council – some will not be. The shift in mindset involved amongst leaders should not be underestimated. It is likely that a sensitive and steady experimentation with a variety of techniques and approaches, across time, will yield better results here.

A commitment to deliberate could be followed through in a number of ways. Councils could experiment with citizens’ juries²¹, and could work with existing groupings of residents and third sector organisations to enhance their capacity to engage. Local people could be encouraged and supported to self-organise, and councils’ scrutiny functions could play a role in supporting and overseeing the process – making a contribution to iterative, deliberative policy development itself.

Important here is the need to experiment. No council will be able to design the perfect approach from day one – in line with the indirect, incremental approach that we suggest, one that encourages simply trying things out is likely to be most productive. Of course, this itself requires cultural change – a tolerance for failure (along the lines we have already set out) in particular.

Internally this will require, in due course, fairly substantial changes to councils’ governance arrangements. These changes, too, will need to be iterative.

- At first, deliberative systems are likely to look and feel more consultative in nature – an adjunct to existing systems as they exist in councils and partners.
- This may involve councils making initial statements of their intentions in using these systems to encourage others to engage in the design of those systems – but in due course ownership will become collective;
- Internal financial and legal controls will need to change to ensure that those expectations are reflected in the council’s formal systems. These include local systems of scrutiny and audit. The same might be the case for other local public bodies – a particular challenge for those with upwards accountability towards national bodies, including Government.

Framing these implications positively

Ultimately there is only a point in doing this if by doing so we improve the quality of decisions, and the outcomes those decisions have on the ground.

Improvement in decision-making has to be framed around the value in bringing a wider range of voices into the debate, in order to make decisions that are more informed and sustainable. This could be about helping councils to develop more profound evidence bases on which to build outcome-based commissioning approaches (the implementation of which have proved a real challenge in the sector).

The only way to demonstrate this is through experimentation. In a section below we highlight the behaviours necessary to embed better political and organisational cultures – one of these is a tolerance of “managed failure”. Part of finding practical, positive implications is

²¹ A good example of the citizens’ jury / assembly model in practice is provided by the citizens’ assembly on social care, providing recommendations for the future funding of adult social care, carried out by Involve and supported by the House of Commons in 2018 (https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Citizens%27%20Assembly%20on%20Social%20Care%20-%20Recommendations%20for%20funding%20social%20care_2.pdf)

about finding ways to test new approaches, new methods of collaboration and joint decision-making, in ways that demonstrate their wider applicability.

This is not necessarily the same as traditional “piloting”, but it is about identifying opportunities for different ways of working now that could help to manage particular local tensions or policy logjams. For example, deliberation could naturally provide a way to open out the exceptionally challenging financial decisions that councils are having to make – in a way that give councils a new perspective on the decisions which they are coming to make, and citizens a new perspective on the trade-offs that such decisions inevitably involve.

Being clear about roles in a messy governance landscape

We have set out above an overall framework for deliberation, and the kinds of governance changes that might need to be overcome. Now, we have to understand the roles that individuals and groups need to occupy within these new systems.

This begins to get to the heart of the cultural challenge with which councils and their partners are faced. In order to exercise these new roles effectively, people need to understand the changes to their values, behaviours and attitudes that might be necessary.

This is about recognising that everyone leads in a collaborative system. This could be seen as messy – a world with a complex set of overlapping relationships, where mutual roles and responsibilities are unclear. Part of taking action is about understanding this messiness and what it means for the way that we act together.

Without an understanding of the roles that we perform, deliberation will result in confusion, tension and overlapping responsibilities. It will risk traditional leaders reverting to type, and withdrawing from deliberative arrangements

In an earlier section we mentioned how important it is to recognise that everybody has some form of leadership role. Recognising

these complementary roles is critical to a strong governance framework in which everybody takes responsibility for high quality decisions being made, and in which people understand their specific duties.

For example:

- **Political leaders in local government** lead by setting the overall strategic direction for the authority and a framework within which others can act;
- **Senior officers in local government** lead by translating councillors’ objectives into realistic plans – they understand the resources that the council has at its disposal and the council’s formal, legal duties;
- **Non-executive councillors** lead by holding to account, by questioning and challenging others, by seeking to open up decision-making, and possibly by leading the development and oversight of deliberative systems themselves;
- **Decision-makers in partner organisations** lead by ensuring that their organisations’ priorities and work is fully reflected across the way that a range of partners take action at local level – they promote and foster a spirit of collaboration and sharing of objectives, resources and information;
- **Local community and advocacy groups** lead by reflecting their own interests and insights into their own needs – they are uniquely placed to ensure that professionals and elected representative are apprised of their needs, and they also lead by taking a part in holding to account, possibly alongside non-executive councillors.

This is of course by no means a remotely comprehensive list – we present it mainly to illustrate how the traditional concept of “leadership” is one that we need to stretch to encompass a far broader range of behaviours and activities.

These complementary roles and responsibilities demand that leaders collaborate with one another. Collaboration requires clarity of

expectations. We earlier mentioned council constitutions as documents which, considered creatively, provide a framework within which innovation can happen. There is no reason why the same cannot happen on an area basis.

This is not the same as suggesting the rebirth of local area agreements. LAAs were technocratic agreements that aligned partners through performance management – not culture and mindset.

What we are talking about is, perhaps, something which looks a bit more like a development of the principles in play in places like Wigan and Preston.

In Wigan²², “The Deal” has been a way for the council to articulate the relationship between the council, partners and the wider local community. The oft-quoted “Preston Model”²³ provides one route to a more collaborative way of working for some councils. Both examples demonstrate council leadership – but a recognition within this that the articulation of others’ roles and responsibilities is important.

It will not necessarily be for the council on its own to articulate these roles – to carry out its own “mapping” exercise and parcel out roles and responsibilities. But the council will have a role in influence and persuasion – seeking to ensure that its own priorities, and the priorities of its partners, increasingly align with a shared understanding of what’s important to local people. The council will, then, have a role, in leading to construct the framework on which collaborative activity is based – alongside others.

In some cases, this may involve agreements or protocols between organisations, formal documents setting out what roles are. But too much rigidity can be dangerous – it should not become a substitute for self-aware officers and councillors who bring a nuanced understanding of the relationships to their everyday roles. Importantly, the value in such protocols and other documents does not lie in their existence, but in the dialogue that leads to those documents being in place. The need

to keep those documents “up to date” acts as a useful prompt to ensure that this dialogue continues. Importantly, it’s an approach that makes sense only with a culture with a positive attitude towards “compliance” – otherwise some of the problems that we have highlighted in the sections above which touch on this issue will come to pass.

This will also involve setting out some of the basic principles – and behaviours – on which ongoing collaboration will be based.

Seeing governance, and communications, as strategic function – the “community constitution”

Our idea of a community constitution places governance at the heart of new systems – it avoids a continuation of the “ad hoc” approach that has typified many other attempts at partnership working and collaboration. It faces up to the fact that, if we are moving to a markedly new paradigm in the way that we conceive of how public services work and operate – one that centres on community and collaboration – governance has to provide a framework for that to happen.

Communications also forms a critical part – in using governance to make clear a “strategic intent” to work differently in the future. This has to do with the way that the council, as a corporate entity, works with its partners and the community, and how it articulates its vision for the future alongside its partners.

Positive behaviours

A “community constitution” might set out the kinds of behaviours, attitudes and values that leaders from across that place ought to bring to the way they work.

These values will reflect the kind of organisational culture that the council is trying to build for itself, and the political culture that a wider range of partners might be trying to build across the place itself. Naturally, it will also reflect the main themes of the “community paradigm”. Leaders, under this new paradigm, would have:

²² See <https://www.wigan.gov.uk/council/the-deal/the-deal.aspx> (accessed April 2019)

²³ See <https://www.preston.gov.uk/thecouncil/the-preston-model/preston-model/> (accessed April 2019)

- **An enthusiasm for collaboration.** This is about recognising that different organisations in a given place will have differing priorities – collaboration is about making the commitment to finding alignments between those priorities and using that to change the way they, and their organisations, work;
- **A realistic sense of responsibility.** Ownership of risk, and the interface between risk and responsibility, is particularly important. This dynamic – between the individual duty to account for one’s own responsibilities, alongside the need to share a collective responsibility with other leaders for delivery and decision-making – is central to meaningful collaboration. This is also about consistency and accountability – an environment where everyone holds everyone else to account;
- **A commitment to listening (and hearing).** Having conversations, understanding the points of view of others, and potentially changing your own point of view in consequence, is central to collaboration;
- **An understanding of the political dynamics of decision-making.** Decisions, and leadership, is informed both by evidence, and also by personal experience and viewpoint. Our own ideologies and subjective ways of understanding how the world works influence how we interpret evidence and data. Collaborative leadership is about recognising these differing perspectives on the same information, and coming together to collectively understand what this means for the decisions that result;
- **A tolerance for managed failure.** Experimenting with different ways of working will inevitably involve failure – things will not turn out or work as we may have expected. In public service, however, failure can have real world consequences on people’s lives, and this can lead to an aversion to trying new things. Understanding

failure, how to manage its risks, and where those risks might be managed so as to experiment with new things, is something where partnership and collaborative working can help with. Collaboration can help us to understand risk, and the risk of failure, better – it helps us to reflect the multifaceted ways that failure can present itself;

So, how do these more positive leadership styles come about?

New behaviours, and a “constitution for the place”, would need to recognise that councils are “systems integrators” – they sit at the centre of a complex local partnership made up of a number of public, private and third sector organisations. Their unique democratic legitimacy leads easily to an assumption that they should “lead” in local decision-making but in fact things are rather more complicated than that.

Councils have developed significant experience in recent years in embarking on similar change programmes within their own organisations. The challenge lies in sharing that learning across a whole place – the development of “community constitutions”, and the planning of change across an area, could help to do this.

The requirements of partnership working are already shifting the mentality of leadership – and particularly political leadership – in local authorities. Traditional hierarchies are breaking down.

The pressures and opportunities that this places on those in leadership positions are significant – and have been well articulated in research carried out by APSE²⁴. The issue of cultural incongruence and differing priorities is particularly telling in this analysis²⁵. This will inevitably produce a degree of tension and is a natural feature of complex partnerships – the articulation of a strong set of common, shared behaviours and approaches will help to set the framework to overcome some of these potential problems. Sign-up to the behaviours we’ve outlined earlier, and to a clearer articulation of

²⁴ APSE / De Montfort University: “Bringing order to chaos” (2017)

²⁵ Ibid, p27, expressed in the context of the local government / NHS relationship but in our view of wider application to a range of partners and partnerships

mutual roles and leadership responsibilities, will provide a much clearer way for these tradeoffs and tensions to be managed.

Effective local leaders are likely to need to move towards a model of mutual accountability typified by a transparent approach to identifying compromise, trade-offs and common solutions.

It may be right that councils lead this conversation, but we shouldn't assume that this means that councils' own priorities should be shared by the priorities of other local partners.

The need to share information

Information sharing is not automatically successful. The political dynamic in which information is collected and used itself has an impact on this sharing. For example, organisations which consider that they operate “outside politics” may also consider that the way that democratic institutions (like councils) use information leads to decisions that are not “evidence based”²⁶.

The recent development of local “digital services”²⁷ points the way towards a melding of technology and data use to inform service design and delivery.

The task for those in leadership positions lies in recognising in – and investing in – the sharing and use of information in an intelligent way, and in spreading the understanding of these benefits to partners in a way which fosters a spirit of collaboration. This will require different tactics and approaches in every area, reflecting different priorities. This will need to be another feature of “constitutions for the place”

Accountability in the place

We have above described a model in which a range of leaders hold each other to account, in a collaborative governance framework that is owned by everyone.

Inevitable, the “distributed” form of accountability in which all own and challenge within the system presents challenges for formal, traditional accountability.

There is still a place for formal accountability systems here – just as there will be a need for “traditional” decision-makers. For us, in the council context, this means two things – local overview and scrutiny and, potentially, local Public Accounts Committees.

- Local O&S can take a part in the deliberative process through a focus on policy development. It can gather, collate and examine evidence that relates to ongoing deliberative exercises – providing a mechanism for councillors to feed into those systems. We think it is important that councillors have a valuable and recognised role in this deliberation – we think that this should be supportive of deliberative activity. It may be that O&S could “champion” and protect deliberative activity within the council. This may be especially valuable as the cultural commitment to deliberation is only just becoming embedded, where the risk remains of organisations “withdrawing” from what may still be seen as experiments;
- Local PACs may be able to mirror the role that we discussed above of councils as “systems integrators”. These bodies, looking across the place, could play a key role in evaluating and assessing whether the system itself is operating effectively. They could be the guardians of the “community constitution”.

²⁶ This is a philosophy that has, in part, led to the establishment of the What Works Centres, which aim to use more rigorous research methods to lead to better policy outcomes - <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network> (accessed April 2019)

²⁷ Such as the Croydon Digital Service – see <https://croydon.digital/2019/01/21/about-the-croydon-digital-service/> (accessed April 2019)

Our own actions

We plan to talk a lot in 2019/20 about political culture in the context of the changes that we think need to happen in order to bring this collaboration vision about.

This work will influence:

- Our continued support to scrutiny in local government, particularly in the light of the production of new statutory guidance from Government;
- Our support to governance in other “collaborative” environments – the operation of Police and Crime Panels, and the governance of LEPs and combined authorities (especially in the light of the Government’s publication of its devolution framework);
- Our work with the LGA and other partners, as plans for a “continuous improvement tool” for the local government sector develop.