

Why it's time to speak with a single voice

Respected academic Colin Copus has launched a Councillor Commission in pursuit of a voice for those at the forefront of local decision-making. De Montfort University's Local Governance Research Unit teamed up with *The MJ* to set up a round table examining the powers, roles, functions and responsibilities of councillors. **Sam Clayden** reports

There was a last minute scramble for extra chairs as representatives crowded around the table for the first Councillor Commission discussions at *The MJ*'s headquarters in London.

One attendee's plea that the commission does not 'get lost among the long grass' like those that have gone before it was met with nodding heads and harmonious agreement, but many topics were more hotly debated.

Talk of local authority structure dominated proceedings. While most participants agreed that trying to push policy through the old committee system was like drawing teeth, there were some mixed views as to the successes of the executive model.

One debater, who has served on both a committee and cabinet system, explained how power has been sucked into increasingly small groups, leaving ever-larger numbers of people on local authorities 'effectively disengaged'.

The delegate said: 'The majority party who are not on the cabinet just sit there, while the minority party may as well just twiddle their thumbs. It leaves too many disaffected people and is no longer sustainable.'

Another delegate argued that a move away from a strong leader model was a 'retrograde step'.

'It's a recipe for taking control of the council away from elected members and putting it in the hands of the civil service. If you have no strong executive and you go back to a committee system, then your officers will end up running most of the council,' the delegate said, before quipping that in some cases this was not necessarily a bad thing.

Another participant insisted that, rather than working collaboratively with the community, local government merely manages people.

The councillor admitted the executive model adopted by most authorities was the most effective, but claimed the scrutiny structure does not work. 'It has become too politicised,' the delegate said. 'Authorities use the scrutiny system to protect their parties. We can only get rid of that by taking the proportionality rules out of scrutiny.'

The debate naturally moved to the role of the opposition within, as one speaker asked: 'If scrutiny is not the place for opposition, where does it belong?'

The councillor explained how his authority had four short council meetings a year. The participant said: 'The majority group puts a guillotine at 10 o'clock and by the time we're done with the tributes to the councillors that have died we don't have a lot of time left to debate.'

Another delegate argued that the role of the opposition was linked to the size of the council and the power balance within it. According to the participant, the structure of the executive system 'doesn't allow the opposition to be oppositional'.

The speaker urged opposition groups to 'use the power of reason' with officers, who 'often listen quite readily'.

The conference was told that as councils get bigger, more people take up opposition outside of the political structures.

One of the major concerns for councillors was the lack of clarity as to their functions and responsibilities. One speaker bluntly asked: 'What is my role as a councillor?' Another, who has been in the position for less than a year, called on the commission to examine some of the difficulties new cabinet members face, such as how they are inducted and understanding what is expected of them.

A participant said: 'I didn't really appreciate what I was getting myself into when I stood. I think even now it's very difficult to put parameters around what it means to be a councillor.'

It was agreed that the specific role is so different between authorities it is 'impossible' to come up with a single commission view of what the role of a councillor is.



The question of a central body – provided by Whitehall – to determine the functions of councillors was posed. The councillor who aired the idea said: 'I'm not saying there should be a checklist of what you should and shouldn't do but the potential scope and possibility of the role is something that we are left too much to do ourselves.'

The conference heard how the differences in the way councillors perceive their role creates huge variations in the representations that residents receive.

As conversation turned to devolution, a healthy mix of scepticism and excitement filled the room. The conference heard how the process was merely a 'shuffling



of power and responsibility' and that authorities were being made to give away power in order to get power.

One councillor insisted the idea of regional mayors was 'brilliant', saying that London had been a success and Greater Manchester looked to be going in the same direction. However, he was quickly batted down as another delegate swooped in to voice his discontent.

'Greater Manchester is not the same as London,' the speaker disputed. 'The Greater Manchester mayor model puts anyone in charge of anything that the others says they can be in charge of. Clearly the chancellor thinks there is going to be a Boris in every town but that's not going to be the case. Metro mayors are only going to be able to operate within the parameters set out by the leaders.'

Most in the room agreed that a metro mayor was not necessarily the best model for two-tier authorities, while others highlighted how the number of referendums lost on executive mayors indicated that the idea of mayors in general had not caught people's imaginations.

'The bulk of the public doesn't mind, understand or care about the devolution of powers,' a speaker said. 'The concern is the imposition of a mayor. It's not a popular

concept. It is going to be a very difficult sell. The whole devolution process could hang on that.'

Attendees then spoke of how a lot of what authorities do is actually determined outside the council. One delegate said: 'Councillors and the cabinet don't have a huge amount of choice and so often what is to be debated is details – things that officers will know much more about than councillors ever will.' The councillor explained that this limits the potential for real engagement.

The idea was further developed when another debater told the conference that very few big decisions are taken through council meetings 'to the extent the meetings are almost irrelevant'.

'We have real difficulties getting people interested and that's because we are taking decisions in cabinet,' the councillor said. 'The debate about policy never really happens in public. The executive system is a good way of making firm decisions but it's just a question of where that policy debate happens.'

Others felt the public simply doesn't want to watch policy debate with one participant arguing that politics isn't a spectator sport. 'You can't expect people to sit and watch a debate and not take part

Commission for councillors

Policy-makers, the media and the general public all require a clearer picture of what councillors can and cannot do. Professor **Colin Copus** explains how the newly-launched Councillor Commission for England will address this issue

The Local Governance Research Unit (LGRU) at De Montfort University's Department of Politics and Public Policy and *The MJ* have launched a Councillor Commission to explore the roles, powers, responsibilities, tasks, functions and experiences of the councillor.

It will also examine how councillors can effectively govern their local communities and shape the decisions, policies and strategies of public and private organisations that impact on the long-term wellbeing of communities, but whose actions come without the democratic mandate of the councillor.

But, why launch another commission and why now, especially as past inquiries into the role of the councillor have resulted in cherry-picked policy change and a comfortable landing in the long grass?

The devolution agenda, continued austerity and financial uncertainty, the demands to pursue economic growth, the constant threat of structural upheaval, increasing pressures on public services, partnership working within complex networks, alongside central government's continued political, policy and financial control of local government all mean that the time is right to conduct a thorough exploration of how well placed our councillors are to deal with the constant pressures to which they are exposed.

Policy-makers, the media and the public all need to have a much clearer picture of what it is councillors can and cannot do, the pressures they experience and the demands made upon them personally and politically.

Without that understanding we will continue to see under-informed policy decisions made about local government in general and the office of councillor in particular. Moreover, the press and public will have a far from accurate view of the most vital office for government and democracy – the office of councillor.

The commission is seeking written evidence from councillors, local government officers, policy-makers, local communities and citizens and all those with an interest and concern for effective local democracy, with the aim of promoting a positive debate about the changes needed to enhance councillors' ability to govern our local communities.

The commission will also hold a series of round table discussions across England to explore with councillors and others how best to enhance councillors' ability to deal with vital local policy issues. Details of these round table discussions will be publicised on the LGRU's web page.

The commission will explore all aspects of the roles and powers of the councillor to suggest ways in which the office can be strengthened and local democracy improved and enhanced. Evidence can be submitted in any written form using the email address: councillors@dmu.ac.uk

Professor Colin Copus is professor of local politics and director of the Local Governance Research Unit in the Department of Politics and Public Policy at De Montfort University

Further details of the commission and commissioners can be found on the LGRU's web page: <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/research-faculties-and-institutes/business-and-law/lgru/local-governance-research-unit.aspx>

Delegates at *The MJ* / Local Governance Research Unit round table

Professor Colin Copus, director, De Montfort University Local Governance Research Unit

Heather Jameson, editor, *The MJ*, (chair)

Jessica Crowe, executive director Centre for Public Scrutiny

Charlotte Eisenhart, improvement and development manager, National Association of Local Councils

Gary Porter, chairman, Local Government Association

Cllr Angela Harvey, Westminster City Council

Cllr Nigel Haselden, Lambeth LBC

Cllr Guthrie McKie, Westminster City Council

Cllr Elin Weston, Haringey LBC

Cllr Peter Golds, Tower Hamlets LBC

Cllr Tim Cheatham, Barnsley MBC

Cllr Sally Gimson, Camden LBC

Cllr Krupesh Hirani, Brent LBC

Cllr Malcolm Grimston, Wandsworth LBC

Cllr John Moss, Waltham Forest LBC

Cllr Sharon Waldron, Waltham Forest LBC

Cllr Paul Tomlinson, Camden LBC

Cllr Sally Littlejohn, Waltham Forest LBC

Sam Clayden, reporter *The MJ* and rapporteur