

The ensuring council

The pre-budget report highlighted the Governments continuing commitment to both national and strategic priorities, with everything from climate change to global anti-poverty initiatives. Councils are critical to the delivery of the big picture issues whilst at the same time needing to deliver front line public services within our neighbourhoods. Dr Steven Griggs, Reader in Local Governance at De Montfort University and co-author of APSE's latest research report 'The Ensuring Council' explains



In this current recessionary environment, councils are facing up to big picture or 'macro' challenges of worklessness and economic downturn, not to mention global imperatives such as climate change. Yet, at the same time, if a local resident hasn't had their bin emptied or their local park is in a state of disrepair, they will not be persuaded by arguments about the need to address 'macro' issues. They will still demand good neighbourhood services. They will still be concerned by the 'micro' issues of their own locality. And, as resources get ever tighter in the coming months, tensions will arguably escalate.

Our report, *The Ensuring Council: governance, neighbourhoods and service delivery*, explores how local authorities balance the demands of large-scale global environmental and economic challenges with the needs of communities at the most local level.

Whilst neighbourhood working is not a panacea, it has become a popular way of doing things in councils across the UK. By utilising neighbourhood models local people can be engaged in decisions about the places in which they live. Local services are important to them – particularly the 'cleaner, safer, greener' agenda. However there are limits to what neighbourhoods can achieve particularly in relation to wider strategic leadership necessary to tackle the big issues of climate change and promoting economic resilience. Therefore where conflicts between priorities at strategic and neighbourhood level exist, they need to be recognised explicitly and addressed upfront.

That is where our report comes in. *The Ensuring Council* explores the risks associated with neighbourhood working. It points to the challenges of maintaining equity in service provision alongside greater variation in service delivery from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. It questions whether neighbourhood working risks higher or additional costs and fewer opportunities for savings in terms of economies of scale. The report also explores the role of elected members within neighbourhoods. It suggests that we run the risk of divorcing the role of backbench councillors from that of executive elected members and putting pressure on those politicians and professionals who must act as 'boundary spanners' and co-ordinate interventions across the neighbourhood and strategic levels.

As part of our research we mapped neighbourhood governance models in councils across the UK to see how barriers to neighbourhood working were overcome or at least ameliorated. We found a number of interesting perspectives.

The sub-local level of the neighbourhood is usually comprised of areas, forums, towns or parishes. Its population tends to range between 5000 and 15000, with an average scale of 8,500 residents. We found a diversity of neighbourhood arrangements, with a 'messy' picture having emerged to reflect existing institutional arrangements, such as local authority wards and police beats.

As part of our research we examined three specific case studies of neighbourhood working in operation in Birmingham City Council, Edinburgh City Council and Nottingham City Council. In Birmingham, following a council-led review of community engagement in 2007, another round of restructuring of the institutions of devolved governance in the city has mapped out

25 'priority neighbourhoods' across the city, of which 13 have been selected for more 'intensive' interventions. In Edinburgh, following reviews in 2005 of both community councils and the local development committees, twelve neighbourhood partnerships were introduced in June 2007, supported by the introduction of neighbourhood working, a new Services for Communities Department and the creation of six neighbourhood teams across the city. In Nottingham, neighbourhood managers were appointed by the Council during 2006 and under new arrangements agreed by the Executive Board in November 2007, the authority has established sixty neighbourhoods across the city, which build into the political wards across the city and sit below the intermediate administrative tier offered by area committees.

Our research found that critical to the success of a neighbourhood model is to deliver on the things that really matter to local residents, such as refuse collection, street cleansing and tackling anti-social behaviour. Capacity to deal with wider or more strategic issues needs to be retained however. Neighbourhood working should not just be about perceived improvements in service delivery but complement the council's wider strategic role in social, economic and environmental well-being of the whole area.

The pressing global financial and environmental issues and growing emphasis on the Total Place approach to budgets and shared outcomes has brought the need for strategic approaches further to the forefront of public policy. In these difficult times,

local communities need an ensuring council that can balance macro imperatives of stewardship against micro-dynamics of neighbourhoods. The APSE report develops the notion of an 'ensuring council', which draws upon Anthony Giddens' concept of the 'ensuring state' in order to examine explicitly the tensions that neighbourhood working can generate. In his recent book on the politics of climate change, Giddens argues that an ensuring state has to have the capacity to ensure co-ordination across all areas of policy and practice and deliver economic interventions that are also designed to promote social and environmental well being. An ensuring council can, in our view, best address these macro and micro imperatives. Neighbourhoods and indeed neighbourhood services can form part of the solution in delivering local services but only if we have in place measures to steer such initiatives in the direction of wider strategic aims.

Local priorities cannot go to the wall in the search for solutions to global challenges, nor can pressing global challenges be sacrificed for the local. The local and the global must be balanced and the 'ensuring council' model offers a way of trying to do so.

Contact: Dr S Griggs c/o APSE email mbaines@apse.org.uk

The Ensuring Council; governance neighbourhoods and service delivery is available from APSE

Contact: Mo Baines at APSE email: mbaines@apse.org.uk, tel: 0161 772 1810.

Price £20 APSE members, £40 non-members.

Dr Griggs will address delegates at the APSE seminar **The ensuring council; governance, neighbourhoods and service delivery – rising to the challenges** on the 21 January 2010 at Manchester United Football Stadium. Other speakers include: Mike Chambers of the Government Office North West with case study authorities including Birmingham, Nottingham and Edinburgh.

Please email skeefe@apse.org.uk for a booking form or contact the APSE secretariat on 0161 772 1810.

