

Balancing act

An 'ensuring council' can balance responsive front-line services at neighbourhood level with local government's wider strategic priorities, argues Mark Bramah

Neighbourhood management can help involve local residents in decision-making and deliver on the things that really matter to them, such as refuse collection, road repairs, street cleansing and tackling graffiti, vandalism and anti-social behaviour. This must be balanced with council-wide priorities however. And the Total Place agenda and demands of combating climate change, achieving efficiencies and promoting economic development all make strategic approaches more vital than ever.

APSE's latest report 'Creating an ensuring council' draws upon the concept of an 'ensuring state' co-ordinating all areas of policy and practice, which was put forward by Lord Anthony Giddens in his recent book on the politics of climate change. An 'ensuring council' is one that can negotiate tensions and trade-offs that inevitably arise between an authority's corporate goals and providing responsive services at the most local area level.

A team of researchers, led by Dr Steven Griggs from De Montford University, mapped out neighbourhood governance models and organisational structures and analysed case studies including Birmingham City Council, Edinburgh City Council and Nottingham City Council in depth. They found that the population of the 'neighbourhood' tends to range between 5,000 and 15,000 people, with an average of 8,500 residents.

The research showed a diverse pattern of arrangements has evolved to suit different circumstances. Councils from across the UK discussed ways in which they are co-ordinating the macro demands of national policy drivers and limited resources with the micro dynamics at play in neighbourhoods during a recent APSE recent conference in Manchester.

David Lyon, strategic support manager at Edinburgh City Council, co-ordinates performance and service improvement in housing and regeneration across the city while also supporting the devolution of management and budgets to local areas. He explained arrangements for street cleansing, parks and grounds, roads and street lighting, libraries, housing and community safety in six neighbourhoods. The city also has 12 neighbourhood partnerships between the council, health services, police and voluntary sector, which determine a strategic direction for joint activities. The latest annual residents' survey showed 92% of residents were satisfied with their neighbourhood and a 15% overall performance improvement during the last three years. A key to Edinburgh's approach is that plans for each of its six neighbourhoods are related back to the corporate centre to ensure strategic co-ordination and consistent service quality.

Graham Brown, operations manager at Argyll and Bute Council, told delegates in Manchester how streetscene and roads services have been reorganised in his authority and local environment teams have been created to serve 91,000 residents in spread over 2,676 sq miles. Elected members in Argyll and Bute have been highly proactive to ensure the delivery of services at neighbourhood level is linked to the council's key strategic objectives, which are environment, social change and economic development.

These and other examples show that neighbourhood working need not be just about improvements in service delivery. At its best, it can deliver benefits at the most local level and also contribute to social, economic and environmental well-being of the whole borough. But this means political fiefdoms must be avoided and capacity to deal with wider issues must be retained.

In these difficult times creating an 'ensuring council' can perform an important but delicate balancing act between giving citizens what they need in their neighbourhoods and rising to the massive challenges faced by local government at a strategic level.

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