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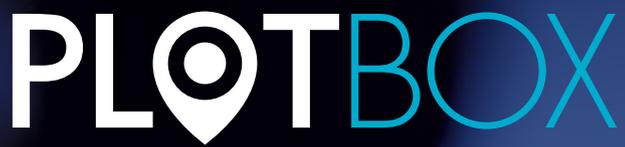
Association for Public Service Excellence

July/August 2020 • ISSN 16465-2493

Local by default

A route map for change for 2030

A special  LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION **2030** edition of APSE Direct



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APSE direct is published by
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LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION

2030

Oral Evidence Sessions February 2020



About the Commission

Exploring the core issues that will impact on local government in the coming decades

With the agreement and support of APSE's National Council and, in collaboration with De Montfort University's Local Governance Unit, APSE established the Local Government Commission 2030 to explore the core issues that will impact on local government in the coming decades.

After ten years of austerity across public services, local government faces a number of wicked policy issues, be it growing inequalities, housing, climate change public health or indeed the COVID recovery. At the same time, the organisational landscape of local government has undergone a patchwork reorganisation through City Deals and combined authorities, partnerships and shared services, asset transfers and local authority companies. Political leadership and democratic accountability have arguably become increasingly 'messy', as core internal capabilities and traditional ways of working have been challenged. Yet, there is equally a new municipalism that is emerging, one that advances new forms of local agency, inhouse services, municipal entrepreneurship and stewardship of place.

Membership of the Commission includes experts and representatives of those who have run, protected and championed local government frontline services alongside academic experts and research professionals.

The work has been informed by a plethora of evidence from across the UK wide local government sector, as well as those working in partnership with local councils.

The Commission has taken 2030 as its key date on the horizon, signalling its commitment to meet the challenges of climate change and sustainability, one of the pressing 'wicked policy issues' facing local councils today.



Elma Murray OBE
Interim Chair of the Accounts Commission for Audit Scotland 2020-2023

Elma has a local government career of over 35 years. Chief Executive of North Ayrshire Council between 2009 and 2018, she is passionate about the vital role of public sector services to support local people and the most vulnerable in our communities. She is the Chair of Young Scot (Scotland's youth information and citizenship charity) and has a specific focus on transformation, children's services, wellbeing and inclusive growth.

Over her career she has held several senior positions including Chair of SOLACE (Scotland), Directors of the Improvement Service and of Irvine Bay Urban Regeneration Company, Depute Director of Finance and Head of Service Reform at Glasgow City Council, Head of IT Services at North Ayrshire and at Strathclyde Police.

Between 2016 and 2018, Elma sat on the National Developing Young Workforce (DYW) Board and the DYW Delivery Group, working to support and oversee the development and implementation of regional Employer-led DYW Groups to create more opportunities for young people to get into employment.



Heather Wakefield
Head of Local Government, Police and Justice at Unison, 2001-2018

While at UNISON, Heather was a member of the Low Pay Commission and the Fawcett/LGIU Commission on Women in Local Government. She is a regular commentator and writer on local government issues and recently wrote 'Triple Whammy - Women and the Cuts in Local Government' for the Women's Budget Group.

Before joining UNISON, she was the Women's Rights Officer at NCCL (now Liberty) after working for a number of years on the Lewisham Women's Employment Project - investigating women's employment and training needs in London's Docklands. Prior to that she was a social worker and policy officer in the London Borough of Newham.

Heather also worked for Unison as a researcher for the National Union of Public Employees and as a Regional official in the Greater London Region.



Gary Porter, Lord Porter of Spalding CBE
Chairman of the LGA, 2015-2019

A former Chairman of the District Councils' Network, Gary chaired the LGA Environment and Housing Board for two years before becoming Conservative Group Leader and Vice-Chairman of LGA in June 2011. In 2013 he was awarded a CBE for services to Local Government. He was elected LGA Chairman at the General Assembly in June 2015.

One of Gary's main achievements in his time as Chairman was his leading role in the campaign to negotiate the scrapping of the government cap on how much local authorities can borrow against their Housing Revenue Account assets to fund new developments.

He also helped to secure an extra £2billion for adult social care, and following the Grenfell Tower tragedy successfully lobbied the Government to pay for all of the council and housing association buildings that required recladding. Gary was appointed as a non-executive director to the MHCLG Departmental Board in June 2021.



Neil Schneider
Chief Executive of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, 2008-2019

Neil was Chief Executive at Stockton Borough Council for 11 years where his commitment to people development and customer service assisted the Council in being shortlisted for APSE Council of the Year for 10 years consecutively, winning it in 2010.

He helped establish one of the country's first housing ALMOs and a thriving leisure trust.

He has held a variety of roles in local government spanning 37 years, during which time he has led major regeneration projects - recently helping Stockton win the Rising Star award in the 2016 High Street of the Year awards that led Bill Grimsey to describe him as a maverick and a visionary. Neil is now delivering leadership programmes in the public sector and was a non-executive Director of a local NHS Trust.



Jon Collins
Leader of Nottingham City Council, 2003-2019

Jon has 40 years experience of local government, the public and voluntary sector. He has been a Nottingham City Councillor for 32 years, Council leader for 16 years and variously responsible for community development, community safety, property and finance management, transport, neighbourhood and city centre regeneration

and economic development.

During his 16 years as Leader, Nottingham became Britain's cleanest big city and crime dropped from nearly 75,000 crimes per year to less than 35,000. Education results have improved significantly and over 90% of pupils are now taught in schools judged good or outstanding by OFSTED. Under his leadership, the Council also developed a reputation for innovation and enterprise, boosting its commercial income by over £20million in the last 4 years. This has included a joint venture housing development and regeneration company called Blueprint.



COMMISSION CHAIR - Paul O'Brien
APSE Chief Executive

Paul has commissioned and contributed to over 100 APSE research publications on topics as diverse as housing, energy, finance, scrutiny, commercialisation and devolution. These have been produced with respected bodies such as TCPA, CLES, NPI, CIPFA and CfPS. A key strand of APSE research is through an excellent partnership with De Montfort University. Through

this partnership, APSE took part in a Knowledge Transfer Programme, which was awarded 'outstanding' status by the European Social Research Group.

Paul was named in the LGC magazine's 100 most influential in local government and is a regular columnist at The MJ. He was a member of the Guardian's Local Government Network Advisory Board and is also a board member on the partnership which delivered the ODPM's National Councillor Mentoring Programme.



The vision for the Commission and its overarching findings

Paul O'Brien, Commission Chair

The APSE Local Government Commission 2030 was charged with creating a vision for the future of local government over the next decade. As the pressures mount on councils to deliver on many messy public policy issues, which remain unresolved, our starting point was to explore how we could support local councils with a vision for the future that would equip local councils with the roles, capabilities and resources to address those challenges. From climate change to housing, from digitalisation to 'levelling up', it is obvious to all that these matters cannot be addressed within a centralised system of governance and governments that treat councils as the troublesome younger sibling, disregarding their democratic legitimacy. Whilst we needed to reflect on the challenges and pressures building in the system in recent decades, we also wanted, as a Commission, to create a forward-looking vision for the future. A pathway to 2030 which would set out a realistic route map to change. Identifying what could be dealt with to improve things with more immediate effect, the medium-term changes which would require greater detail and agreements, and the long-term vision which we believe requires a system reset.

Over eighteen months we sought evidence from across the UK, engaging in a dialogue with witnesses from councils, national organisations, trade unions, voluntary sector organisations, industry, government bodies, think tanks and academics. Our evidence gathering - through written submissions, oral testimonies of witnesses, and engagement across the sector and across the UK - transpired into an early and apparent finding. The UK local government sector has been subjected to decades of centralising forces. It has created tensions between the centre and the local, with the centre controlling

powers and resources yet increasingly relying upon the local to deliver on the issues which matter at a community or neighbourhood level. The overwhelming evidence to the Commission suggests that this dominant centralising tradition, across the UK, is failing not only local government but also local people. Therefore, addressing the policy challenges facing local councils requires not a piecemeal approach across different policy sectors but an overhaul of central-local relations.

During the early stages of our Commission, the unforeseen circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic arose. This, of course, had an initial impact on the Commission's work but, more importantly, it helped to more fully inform one of our core workstreams; that of inequalities. The amplification of issues in terms of housing needs, or global inequalities in areas like climate change, or the gendered impact of budget decision making, and the crisis within the care economy, not just in terms of finance but the capacity and skills, all came to the fore. No longer niche discussion points amongst local government aficionados but front-page news. Too many people feel that the current system is not working for them. We therefore adapted our themes and witness sessions to ensure we were able to capture this unique moment in local government history.

What quickly became obvious to all of the Commissioners was that time and again our witnesses demonstrated that the knowledge of local circumstances is integral to finding solutions to the messy issues of policy and governance. But too often it is constrained and hampered by an over-bearing centre. This was a frustration felt by many as they had sought to do the best by their communities in response to the pandemic.

A misplaced faith in centralised systems

So, we asked, what has gone wrong? Why are local councils not simply trusted to get on with the job? The complex web of issues, embedded in UK administrations who attempt to manage problems from a distance is, we found, the source of many problems. The disregard within this system of governance of the rich local knowledge of people and places, and of elected local leaders, to resolve issues, is a fault-line which runs through the system. Decades of centralisation by successive governments has resulted in the roles, powers and resources to councils being systematically stripped away, leaving a weakening of the rock bed upon which successful local services are built. In short, this misplaced faith in the capacity of central governments to deliver on its own resolutions for local problems has been decades in the making and left local government in a weakened position.

The principle of local by default

Within this context, our Commission found one of our clear and overriding recommendations, which is that to change course we need to reset the system of governance in the UK. In reality what this calls for is an end to centralisation. In its place we want to see a collaborative system of governance. This must be effective in shifting powers and decision-making to a local level. As heightened by the pandemic, the current system of powers held centrally, or occasionally regionally, means too much is placed at the centre which then fails in its delivery. The Commission's view is that this is not justifiable. Whilst there are clearly tensions between local solutions and national policies, such as redistributive taxation mechanism and equalisation between local areas, it is sensible to suggest that these tensions can be resolved. We find that powers and responsibilities should sit at the local level unless there is clear evidence and sound reasoning to suggest otherwise. In other words, local by default is the starting point, turning on its head the current system which locks in centralisation as the factory setting for government.

Revitalising local government: A matter of constitutional protection?

Whilst arguing for this system reset, the Commission of course recognises that this will be of little use unless this new relationship is built on solid foundations. This cannot be about an unequal partnership, where one partner has the upper hand and uses this to their ultimate advantage. This is where, and why, we call for a new constitutional settlement for local government. A rebalancing of that relationship, a partnership of equals. To protect the role of councils, the Commission argues local government's role, and the powers it holds, must be enshrined with a new constitutional settlement for local government.

Such a settlement would help to rebalance the fractious relationship between the centre and the local, allowing for mature decision-making, empowering new collaborations, and addressing the damaging juridification of centre-local relations that has been a feature of the system for decades. This constitutional settlement would provide the basis for a much clearer devolution settlement, with the foundations allowing for the principles of subsidiarity, local autonomy and flexibility, underpinned by effective governance between the different spheres of government and institutions. Some argued this could look like an 'English' solution to a UK wide problem. We do not believe this to be the case. Starting with the principles of a constitutional settlement, this could be applied on a UK basis with the exact framework to be determined within each devolved administration. Indeed, in Scotland, the seeds of this approach are already starting to sprout.

Decades of decisions made at the centre have had a damaging impact on local government, ranging from its treatment as merely a commissioning arm for central governments to service providers with little ability to influence public policy. We firmly believe this new constitutional settlement will place local government into a new mature relationship. 'Local by default' will turn on its head a system which has disregarded local knowledge, aptitude and engagement into a system which is capable of harnessing these attributes.

"Local by default' will turn on its head a system which has disregarded local knowledge, aptitude and engagement into a system which is capable of harnessing these attributes."



The system reset

If we are to gain a new constitutional settlement for local government, and a system reset to provide a default option for the local rather than the centre, then all of this must be underpinned by the finances available to councils. Power must go hand in hand with resources. We are therefore calling for a long-term sustainable finance settlement based on need, and also a more immediate shot in the arm by restabilising local government finance now, as well as certainty over future finances and income raising powers for local councils. With the right resources those inequalities, thrown into the glare of the pandemic spotlight, can start to be addressed. Putting local councils in the driving seat for the delivery of ambitious plans on housing delivery, on levelling up left behind communities, on skills and employment, will make an admirable difference to the otherwise sticking plaster attempts to resolve these issues centrally. There is an opportunity to reinvigorate local democracy, and to support a diverse workforce, reflective of the communities it seeks to serve. All of this must be part of the system reset and a new and broad constitutional settlement.

Navigating the route map to change

We have been realistic in our calls for reform. The Commissioners unanimously agreed that if we had a blank piece of paper we would not be where we are now in designing a system of local government. The evolution of local government has grown into a complex and intricate system with counter-dependencies across public services and public agencies. We considered different approaches to the achievement of a system of local by default either by an incremental approach or by one of step change. On some matters, capable of more immediate resolution, a system of representative National Governance Committees across the nations of the UK, based on the principle of subsidiarity at pace, could help to expedite solutions. We are also calling for Ministers from all UK administrations to champion this change to a system of better governance by building it into their programmes of government. Alternatively, the establishment of a Royal Commission on Local Governance or a Constitutional Convention, could help to build the essential ingredients of cross-party support and consensus to achieve a transformation of UK governance in the longer term.

Whichever approach we take the situation is now urgent. Local government deserves much more than limping along, albeit with innovation and tenacity. Local councils deserve better, local councillors deserve better and our communities deserve better. We can reset the system by adopting the ideal of local by default and make it work better for all.



Revitalising local government: Its roles and powers

Gary Porter, Lord Porter of Spalding CBE,
Commissioner

As a local councillor since 2001, I am now privileged to serve as a member of the House of Lords following my role as Chair of the LGA from 2015 to 2019. I remain a council leader in South Holland. So, in terms of 'Centre-Local' relations, my experience probably places me as the dash in the middle! Having been a councillor for two decades I understand the frustrations of local councillors, and councils, at the long-reach of central governments, but equally I know that the workings of governments, across the UK, can create a disconnect at a local level. Well intentioned policy set in Westminster, Stormont, the Senedd or Holyrood can rarely accommodate the nuances of local areas.

There are clearly some issues that would demand the attention, and even direction, of central governments but is it really the case that local councils need to be told what bins to collect and when? This

is the bizarre case emerging in England with the Environment Bill, and, whilst I use this as an example, it is not the only one. Too often disjointed policy at the centre limits councils from acting on the issues that matter to their local residents. And yet history teaches us that when we need to get a job done well, and done quickly, giving it to those with on the ground knowledge will always produce better results.

I know I am not unique in this experience. Witnesses to the Commission were quick to point out that they have experienced similar frustrations. Too often this parent-child relationship between the centre and the local results in poor decision making and even poorer value for money. We know that when given the right resources councils can be much more effective in getting older people out of hospital and into their own homes. But take this away from councils

and the numbers able to leave hospital decline, whilst the cost to the NHS and social care goes up. But time and again local councils feel like they are on the naughty step. Well in my view its time we got off! We need to end the curious and unfathomable situation which allows fragmented responsibilities across our local areas, with different agencies and institutions, over which local councils have no say. We need to end the imposition of top-down devo deals and reorganisation proposals and be the dependable custodians of local places. Local government, when its trusted, can deliver accountable and efficient local services. We have the knowledge to meet the needs of local people.

We need clarity of who does what and where? The public at any one time could be voting for an elected mayor, an MP, a councillor, a metro mayor or a police and crime commissioner. We have devolution deals and reorganisation proposals that frankly turn off the public. The public want good local services and we should not, either at Westminster or elsewhere, be self-indulgent in assuming we can frame debates about structures or convenient geographics. These matters must be settled locally and by the sector itself.

So how do we get off the naughty step? A starting point is to enshrine with local government a constitutional settlement. We know this will be different and nuanced across the UK administrations but essentially this sets out a major step in treating local government as an adult. Giving local councils the roles and powers that it needs to effect its core role and purpose in local areas. This will also challenge and change the relationship on finances; if we are off the naughty step then surely we should no longer have to bid for pocket money but be entrusted with our own bank accounts and ability to plan in the longer- term.

“Local government, when its trusted, can deliver accountable and efficient local services. We have the knowledge to meet the needs of local people.”



Recommendations

- 1.** The role and powers of local government should be enshrined in a constitutional settlement.
- 2.** There should be clarity for the public over the responsibilities of local, regional, and national government.
- 3.** Government should agree and develop, in consultation with local government and the devolved administrations, a clear devolution framework, based on the principles of subsidiarity, local autonomy and flexibility. This should include a clear indication of powers and funding available and should allow all local authorities to access/benefit from it, although at a pace and scale that fits best local needs.
- 4.** Based on the principles set out in the framework, the Commission calls for new ‘Devolution Bills’ for all the nations of the UK. The Bills should not provide a ‘one size fits all’ approach across the nations of the UK, but deliver a flexible, place-based model of devolution that can benefit all areas by improving governance and addressing inequalities.
- 5.** The Commission calls for the creation of permanent National Governance Committees across nations of the UK, which should be consulted for any law and policy-making processes that affect directly local government and devolved institutions (such as reforms and re-organisation).
- 6.** The Commission supports local government determining its own structures, scales and size. Councils should be left to determine for themselves the organisation, configuration, and modes of service delivery, as fitting with local circumstances and choice.
- 7.** In England, we propose that structural reforms, mergers or reductions in scale are submitted to an independent and representative Standing Commission. This Standing Commission would make recommendations on proposals to central government.
- 8.** New powers should be transferred to local government as a major step towards the integration of local services and accountability for place-based services. The Commission strongly supports local government exercising responsibility for primary health care, local policing, funding for public housing and for further education and the management of local schools (allowing for differences across the devolved nations).



A sustainable financial settlement

Jon Collins, Commissioner

In the last decade, funding for local authorities has fallen, in real terms, by 19% between 2009 and 2018, and as a share of GDP it has slumped to its lowest level since 1948. These reductions in funding have fallen unevenly with the poorest areas hit the hardest. A New Policy Institute study found that 97 % of the reduction in council spending on services for disadvantaged adults and children had taken place in the most deprived fifth of local areas. The pressure on non-statutory services has mounted as the limited resources have been redirected to prop up gaps in statutory service budgets. In social care demand is simply outstripping supply. Sticking plaster budgets in social care have been used instead of the radical financial surgery the sector is crying out for.

Our evidence found that there is a tension between the drive for localisation and the need for redistribution between authorities. It was also clear from the evidence that current allocation formulae do not sufficiently take into account need, and is disproportionately geared to per capita allocations; this too means less affluent areas miss out of the most. The same is true of competitive bidding rounds, which favours those authorities with the resources to make the bids; this system was also perceived to leave matters open to accusations of patronage, which weakens the link to transparent allocation of funding.

Clearly the pandemic has brought to the fore the reliance on income generation and property taxes. With many businesses feeling insecure, and residents facing ongoing employment uncertainty, there are questions as to how much money can realistically be raised from

business rates and council tax. Moreover, councils will continue to feel the pressure for years to come on income generation, coupled with the potential increase in demands on services as we emerge from the pandemic, not least the public health and care issues, housing and climate change.

Witnesses and testimonies did not vary in their evidence; financial uncertainty, a reliance on bidding, uneven distribution of funding and the issues of quantum all need to be addressed. Our recommendations are therefore reflective of the evidence we received.

We have included some strong recommendations that funding should reflect need, in much the same way as NHS finances are seen as essential in meeting the needs of patients, then why should local government be treated differently in meeting the needs of residents? Setting a floor below which council funding must not drop, for example as a set percentage of GDP, is a proxy measure, but it helps to make the case that councils should not ever again be subjected to the decade of austerity that has left local finances in a perilous state. A long-term solution must be found, most especially in social care. Short term finance prioritised over long-term planning and investment must end, as should the constant round of costly and inefficient bidding for relatively small funding pots.

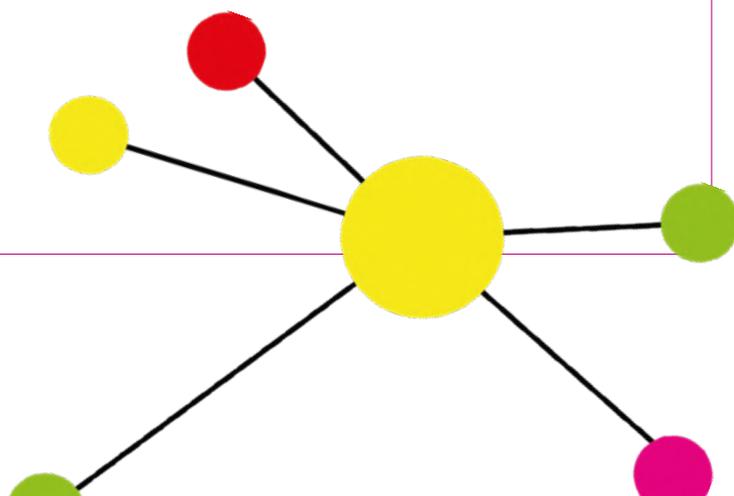
Instead of this constant yo-yoing of funding, we are calling for a system that offers stability and fairness, coupled with flexibility and accountability. A system which underpins the way we fund local services and the Commission's recommendations set out how we can achieve just that.

“Instead of this constant yo-yoing of funding, we are calling for a system that offers stability and fairness, coupled with flexibility and accountability.”



Recommendations

- 9.** To be effective, Councils needs stable finances, built on a long-term and predictable financial settlement so they can plan for the future.
- 10.** Total local government funding should not fall below an agreed percentage of GDP.
- 11.** Once total local government spend has been agreed with government, it should be local government itself that decides how funding is allocated between authorities.
- 12.** A significant part of council finding should continue to be raised locally.
- 13.** As well as a share of national funding, councils should be able to raise council tax and business rates and to introduce new specific local and hypothecated taxes as they see fit.
- 14.** The need for financial stability is urgent and in advance of a new way to decide, allocate and fund local government, central government should agree a transitional multi-year settlement to help repair the damage done by a decade of funding cuts and the pandemic.
- 15.** Centrally funded national programmes should no longer be distributed through competitive funding but on clear principles agree by central and local government.





Local democracy, representation and accountability

Neil Schneider, Commissioner

As we launched the Commission in Manchester, I raised a laugh by saying my Dad had always said to me 'never get on a plane with more than two pilots.' But joking aside, it is very much how I think the public feels about local democracy and accountability. We have a confusing multi-layered leadership model; with combined authorities headed up by metro mayors, some councils opting for elected mayors, two tier councils, parishes and towns, unitary authorities and police and crime commissioners. Let's then throw into the mix NHS commissioning boards, emerging Integrated Care Partnerships, schools and academies, outside of the LEA traditions, and a host of other unaccountable agencies. It is hard to imagine how to navigate this system from the inside let alone as a member of the public simply seeking a resolution to local issues.

Too often we heard from local councillors who were frustrated by a lack of control over what they could or could not influence in their local area. Many felt decisions were not anchored in the local place; indeed for backbench councillors, they felt a lack of control even over

ward level decisions, which they argued, ought to have been the bread and butter matters over which they could represent the views of their constituents.

Whilst many recognised that models of political leadership and decision-making should be a matter for local choice, there was also a sense that the current system did not work for many. Too often the times of council meetings put off the involvement of working parents, particularly women. It was felt that there are many barriers to getting selected for election – and whilst of course the public will vote for whoever they choose – there was some blame apportioned to party systems which do not support a more diverse involvement of the wider community. In some cases, attempts to do this had fallen flat.

The demography of local councillors remains older white males and there is a lack of representation of women and those from BAME backgrounds. In England, the 2018 national census of councillors found that the average age of councillors was 59.4 years old, when it

comes to ethnicity nine out of every ten councillors were white and three out of five councillors were men. These statistics had changed little since 2004. Political incumbency continues to favour men, such that out of those councillors serving for 20 years or more, 3 in 4 are men.

Moreover, there is a lot of work for little reward. Whilst attempting to widen the pool of candidates is an attractive proposition to better reflect the local community, and enhance decision making, there is little to entice people in. Remuneration is remarkably low for long hours, hard work and being constantly available to constituents. For some, a choice of a career or the councillor path has to be a realistic one – many would struggle to juggle both roles.

Councillors are under pressure - the image of the local councillor needs to be improved and the pool of people standing for election to local government broadened. But this is easier said than done. It requires a seismic effort to recalibrate the role of local councillors, properly reward them and make the role and indeed selection processes better to attract a wider group of more diverse people. This includes removing barriers to standing as a candidate across all social groups.

This is not however just an issue for the selection and election of councillors; democracy itself is at risk as institutional complexity hinders accountability. We strongly favour, as a Commission, the development of local public accounts committees. How can it be that other institutions, public or pseudo public agencies operate in local areas, which can impact adversely on local communities, not be held to account. Strengthening accountability bolsters the role of local councillors and councils and at the same time improves accountability to local people.

We are calling for councils to be recognised as the ‘democratic anchor’ in local places. Alongside the other powers we have called for, such as a new constitutional settlement, extending scrutiny powers to cover all local services will serve a vital purpose; one currently missing from the institutional complexity within which local councillors are forced to operate.

“It requires a seismic effort to recalibrate the role of local councillors, properly reward them and make the role and indeed selection processes better to attract a wider group of more diverse people.”



Recommendations

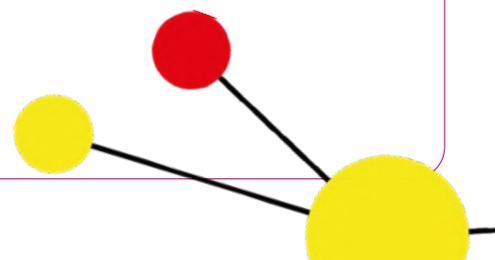
16. Models of political leadership and organisation should remain a matter for local discretion. There should be no ‘top down’ imposition of any particular form of organising.

17. Local scrutiny should be strengthened with formal recognition of local government, the locally elected body, as scrutineer of other agencies and services in a place, with formal rights to information and meaningful impact. This might take the form of Local Public Accounts Committees. In return, councils themselves should be open to independent scrutiny.

18. It is strongly recognised that communities are better served when the body of councillors reflects the diversity of their communities. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty to tackle discrimination, councils as public authorities should develop and report on local action plans to make strident and conscious efforts

to ensure access to political office for people of all backgrounds. The development of local action plans should be supported by national local government bodies and associations.

19. There should be better remuneration, training, and support for local councillors, as well as the introduction of a national remuneration scheme for councillors in England. National bodies on remuneration should make recommendations on how councils can best support the work of local councillors and ensure access to political office to all.





Organisation and the workforce

Heather Wakefield, Commissioner

Local Councils are often one of the largest employers in cities and towns across the UK. Alongside the NHS, local councils are key employers when it comes to women workers but, since 2010, overall workforce numbers have severely reduced. In fact this translates to a reduction of 782,000 in England between December 2009 and December 2018, or over 32% of the total workforce. In Scotland, there has been a loss of 63,000 posts or the equivalent of over 20% of the workforce. In Wales, a reduction of 37,000, which is just under 20% there. In Northern Ireland, the local authority workforce has thankfully remained relatively stable.

However, evidence to the Commission suggests that job losses have not fallen evenly; larger employers have lost the most as a proportion of the workforce and some 65% of the job losses have fallen on women workers. Redundancy payments have topped £4 Billion in

England alone. What these reductions mean in terms of workforce planning and the impact on remaining staff is also alarming.

Many chief officers reported that covering a multiplicity of roles has left them with little time or space for strategic reflection. They are increasingly juggling multi-focused departments and spanning their time across a number of roles, and often conflicting ones at that. Workforce planning is more akin to crisis management than genuinely having the time to look at current and future workforce needs, and the ability to match skills to meet new and emerging service demands, such as green jobs and skills to help develop responses to the climate crisis.

It is often argued that cuts to the 'back office' are less harmful, after all these are not posts recognised as 'frontline'. But studies have

shown that the loss of these posts is overwhelmingly felt in frontline services, as support functions fall away. Coupled with cuts to training in local government and reports of increasing stress amongst council employees, the picture is an unhappy and unsustainable one.

When it comes to the organisation wide issues, the evidence to the Commission found that women, BAME and disabled people are underrepresented in senior management roles. The same is true of councillors where again women are underrepresented as are BAME communities. The majority of councils do not have a maternity policy in place for councillors – is this really good enough in 2021?

Whilst we debated as a Commission how best to ensure a more diverse organisation, both amongst employees and councillors, and we recognise the practical difficulties of how this can be achieved within a nuanced political party system for selection and election of councillors, we did all agree on one overriding principle. Communities are better served when local councils reflect the diversity within those communities.

As we emerge from the pandemic and raise our heads above the parapet now is the time to consider how we can develop a better way forward when it comes to the workforce and organisation of local government. We do not believe, as a Commission, that any of our recommendations are unachievable or unaffordable; but we do argue that we need to be bold, held to account at a local level as to where we are heading on equalities and diversity issues, and once again become the gold standard employer, particularly when it comes to training and developing our workforce. Some have argued that time has moved on and if people don't stick to working in local government our efforts have been wasted. We reject this assertion. As stewards of local place we have a long history in local skills development. If these are subsequently used in the wider local economy, we will have made a valid contribution. However, with the right skills pathways we hope that local councils can once again become an employer of choice for local people.

“Communities are better served when local councils reflect the diversity within those communities.”



Recommendations

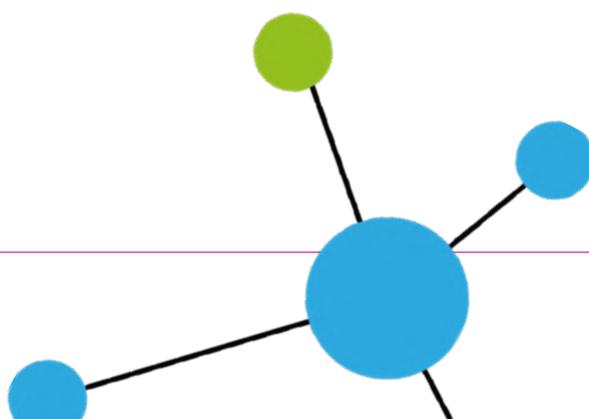
20. It is recognised that communities are better served when the local government workforce reflects their diversity. The Commission supports the introduction of a duty for the local government workforce to be representative of the communities it serves, with an annual reporting mechanism on progress.

21. The Commission calls for the creation of a national linked system of pay and conditions across the public sector, removing pay gaps between equivalent jobs in local government and other public services, in line with the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

22. The Commission calls for the establishment of new skills and capability career pathways into local government, training and career development for existing employees, and workforce planning to counter the ageing workforce. The Commission recognises the particular urgency for career pathways in the environment and

climate change mitigation, digitalisation, and the care economy in the post-Covid recovery.

23. The Commission argues that providing an integrated set of services directly, that are democratically accountable but flexible and adaptable to local people's needs, should be the default option for local services where they are best able to provide high quality, effective and socially just outcomes for local communities and local economies.





Addressing inequalities and engaging communities

Elma Murray OBE, Commissioner

I make no apology for being passionate about young people and the life chances that they can expect. Of course it is not my job as a Commissioner, or indeed that of any council, to tell young people what they think – but to ensure that we are able to listen, and engage, to better understand them. It is in this context that I approached my work on the APSE Local Government Commission 2030 to explore what local government and central administrations can do better, or differently, to improve the life chances of young people and those across our communities.

Some of the evidence to the Commission was therefore alarming and proved to me that we have an uphill struggle. This is not simply a matter of finance but of the disproportionate impact of those finances on children and young adults.

We know that cuts to frontline services in local councils have hit the poorest communities the hardest. In particular with drastic cuts to spending on children's and young people's services my concerns are for the immediate and long-term impact on the well-being of young people. Local authority spending on youth services dropped by £400 million between 2010 and 2019 with 4,500 youth work jobs lost and more than 760 youth centres closed since 2012.

With £2.2 billion cut from local authority children and young people's services between 2011 and 2018, the number of children using children's centres dropped by 18 per cent. This also translates to a startling 97% of the reduction in spending by English local authorities on services for adults and children, taking place in the most deprived fifth of local areas.

There is also evidence that cuts to local services, together with welfare changes, have disproportionately impacted on women, particularly BAME, lone parents and disabled women.

Of course, children and young people are not the only ones to suffer the impact of austerity but it is worth noting that the impact of such spending reductions on future generations may be felt all the more acutely; exacerbating existing issues and feelings of being somehow caught outside a system which is not geared towards them nor understands their needs.

There are similar impacts felt with BAME communities and the impact of cuts on women, and although covered in greater detail by my Commissioner colleagues in other chapters of our report, there are synergies between the recommendations in different areas. With a fall in capacity in an exhausted voluntary and community sector, particularly post the pandemic, we know that the local authority alone cannot begin to tackle all of the inequalities and need for greater engagement. Local councils can only act as a partial buffer against the existing system, and the post-pandemic recovery.

So we are clearly calling for a renewal of co-production and community planning. We need to maximise the innovative use of deliberative forums and citizen assemblies. We need to use these approaches to strengthen the foundational and caring economies. The new-found collaboration may not resolve all of the finances but they can help to rebuild the capacity at a community level, and support better our future generations.

“There is evidence that cuts to local services, together with welfare changes, have disproportionately impacted on women, particularly BAME, lone parents and disabled women.”



Recommendations

24. Councils should follow a principle of care to ensure that community engagement encourages all voices, provides diverse modes of engagement, and aligns representative and participatory forms of decision-making.

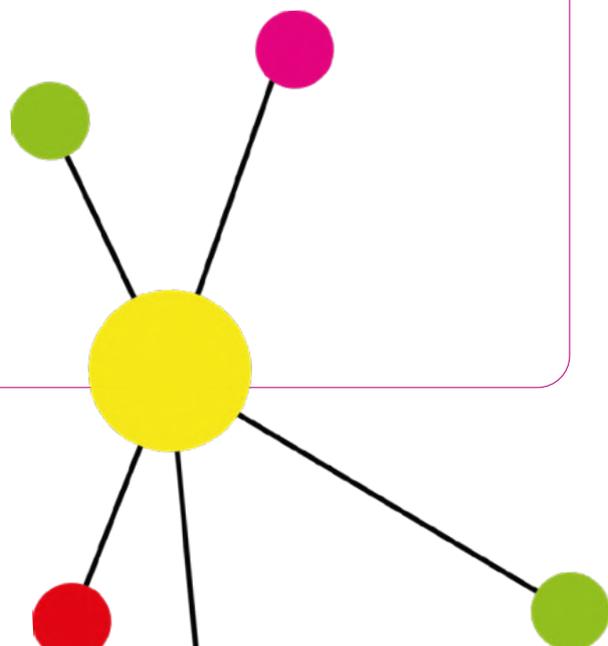
25. Councils should look to the long-term impacts of their decisions and work with young people to ensure positive outcomes for current and future generations.

26. Councils should comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty and undertake meaningful equality impact assessments that evaluate how outcomes of their policies impact on services across their diverse communities.

27. The role of councillors as community leaders should be strengthened through individual councillor budgets and acceptance of the principle that councillors

have the right to be engaged in any decisions or negotiations impacting on their wards.

28. Where possible, councils should use the council pound to buy local and support inclusive economic growth and community well-being.





About the Commission Executive

When we set out on the journey of the APSE Local Government Commission 2030, we wanted to give a voice to local government. However, we were acutely aware that across the UK there is no 'one voice' for local government, rather a multitude of different voices which sometimes disagree over the direction of policy and service. The spread and depth of local government, and its many functions, meant that pulling together this rich tapestry of views and issues, in a way which would reflect the differences across the sector, soon came to dominate much of our thinking and indeed our work. We hope that all the voices across local government can see their views and positions across the different chapters and sections of the final report. Our work, we want to acknowledge from the outset, was made so much easier by the sustained engagement of the local authorities, national associations, think tanks, practitioners, elected members, and political parties who entered into dialogue with the Commission.

Over eighteen months, the Commissioners availed themselves to a great many witness sessions, workshops, and stakeholder presentations. Behind the scenes, we ploughed through hundreds of submissions, and analysed the oral and written evidence, to further dissect and explore lines of enquiry. Following the guidance from

the Commissioners, we also undertook systematic reviews of existing research, determining where there were gaps in the evidence. Here we relied upon an extensive literature review of existing material on local government from academic, technical, and official sources, such as datasets provided by Government(s) and agencies across the UK. Wherever possible we included UK wide sources reflecting the Commission's clear approach to speak to the different contexts of local government across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In gathering evidence, we were particularly keen to capture alternative practices that have or are emerging across the different systems of local government, assessing the potential for these elements of 'good practice' to be taken up across the UK.

At each stage of the Commission, the reflective dialogue with and amongst the Commissioners provoked further challenges to the evidence, prompting further inquiries and targeted evidence sessions. The robustness of this approach is, we hope, evident, in the depth of the evidence-base upon which the recommendations of the Commissioners are based. The report has 28 recommendations. These not only address the complexity and breadth of the challenges facing local government in the UK, but also emerge from the applied

methodology of the Commission through which Commissioners sought solutions based on the myriad of issues and evidence mined during their work.

Whilst the Commission was formally launched in September 2019, at APSE's Annual Seminar in the glorious municipal surroundings of Newcastle City Council's Civic Hall, of itself a testament to the boldness of local government design and municipalism, we did not foresee the health pandemic. During the spring of 2020, we paused our work shortly to take stock of the situation and enable APSE and its member councils to work on the local government response to the pandemic. We re-established our work online, transitioning from in-person evidence hearings to online sessions. With the benefit of hindsight, this was in fact a process which enabled us to extend the reach of the Commission to many more who were able to provide evidence through digital platforms.

We are of course indebted to the witnesses for their time and expertise, and to the many senior officers who pulled together the views of their councillors and councils, using their skills, to articulate nuanced and complex views. We would also like to thank the young people who organised and gave their views to the Commission through a series of focus groups on the future of local government. In Appendix 2 of the final report, we list those who kindly contributed their ideas and reflections on the future of local government, animating the work of the Commission and helping to form the thinking of the Commissioners. However, we want to take this opportunity to thank APSE and its membership for supporting our engagement with the work of the Commission.

We do not believe the work of the Commission is over. The strength of the Commission in many ways rests on how we now move forward. Its recommendations will now be open to debate and challenge. As members of the Executive, we are keen to engage in this debate moving forward and we will continue to assist the APSE Local Government Commission 2030 in the expansion and promotion of its findings. 'Local by default', the overarching philosophy of the Commission, calls for a reset of our system of governance. Such calls have never been so timely.

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The APSE Local Government 2030 Commission Executive

About the executive

The Executive was made up of Neil Barnett (Leeds Beckett University), Dr Arianna Giovannini (Deputy Director of the Local Governance Research Centre (LGRC) at De Montfort University) and Professor Steven Griggs (Director of the LGRC at De Montfort University). Dr Mark Sandford joined the Executive from March to October 2020 to support the analysis of emerging evidence, specifically in the field of centre-local relations, devolution, and local government finance.

[Click on the image below to download the report](#)



"We wanted the opportunity to take a long hard look at the future of local government – we think the past year has shown the capabilities and compassion of local councils – we have been there for our local communities – but our role has been undermined for decades - by governments of all political persuasions."



Cllr Mark Pengelly
APSE National Chair, speaking on behalf of APSE's National Council who supported the formation of the Commission

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Rewatch the live launch of the final report

Thursday 22 July, Midland Hotel, Manchester

This special event, one of APSE's first in-person events since the start of the pandemic, provided an opportunity for interactive discussion with the Commission panel, academic advisors and respondent panellists.

A limited number of in-person places were available, alongside access to a livestream link. Delegates joined us from all across the UK to debate the findings of the report.

You can watch each Commissioner present findings from the report by clicking on the images below.

Speakers from the launch included:

The Commissioners: Paul O'Brien; Lord Gary Porter, CBE; Elma Murray, OBE; Heather Wakefield; Jon Collins; Neil Schneider.

Commission Executive: Professor Steven Griggs; Professor Arianna Giovannini; Dr Neil Barnett;

Respondent Panel Symposium: Colin Everett, Chief Executive, Flintshire Council; Katie Kelly, Depute Chief Executive, East Ayrshire Council; Andy Burns, Associate Director, CIPFA.



The vision for the Commission and its overarching findings

Paul O'Brien, Commission Chair



Revitalising local government: Its roles and powers

Gary Porter CBE, Lord Porter of Spalding, Commissioner



Addressing inequalities and engaging communities

Elma Murray OBE, Commissioner



Organisation and the workforce

Heather Wakefield, Commissioner



A sustainable financial settlement

Jon Collins, Commissioner



Local democracy, representation and accountability

Neil Schneider, Commissioner



Local by default showreel

APSE Local Government Commission 2030

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