

Ensuring the leadership of the new municipalism



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APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence) is a not for profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK. Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority front line services, hosting a network for front line service providers in areas such as waste and refuse collection, road and highways, renewable energy, parks and environmental services, leisure, school meals, cleaning, as well as housing and building maintenance.



This research was a collaboration between APSE's long-standing research partner the Local Governance Research Unit (LGRU), based at Leicester Castle Business School, De Montfort University, which is an internationally recognised centre of excellence for theoretically informed, robust and rigorous policy research and development. The research was conducted by Dr Neil Barnett of Leeds Beckett University, Dr Arianna Giovannini of De Montfort University and Professor Steven Griggs, De Montfort University. It was commissioned and scoped by Paul O'Brien, Chief Executive of APSE.



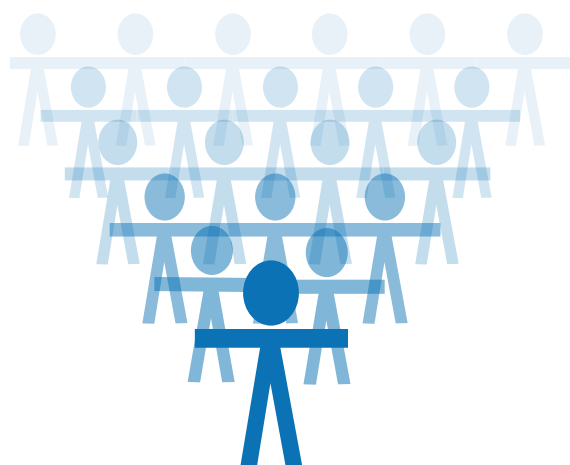
The research team would like to thank the many Chief Officers who freely gave their time to take part in interviews and workshops. Their invaluable contribution and reflections on their professional practice made this research possible. We hope that they can recognise themselves in what follows, even if just a little bit. Many thanks to them all.

Published by APSE, May 2019

ISBN: 978-1-907388-57-6

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Foreword

The local government world has undergone, and continues to undergo, fundamental change as a result of the impact of austerity and the multiple policy crises society faces. Chief officers, who sit just below chief executives, have to navigate this often complex world, implementing the vision of council leaders, elected members and corporate management teams. They do so whilst continuing to co-ordinate the daily responsibilities and commitments of middle management and staff to deliver services.

In this complex new world, it has become apparent that the skills required pre-2010 for chief officers are not necessarily the skills for 2020 and beyond. There is a continual evolution and expansion of their role, which often plays out in contrasting ways in different areas. This means that the role of the chief officer needs reframing. This report seeks to do this.

The rise of the super directorate has eroded the traditional model of individual professional disciplines, replacing it with a much more generalist approach. This has been accompanied by a requirement to think strategically more regularly, whilst balancing this with a need to firefight operationally, in the context of diminishing budgets. Operating across multiple geographies and multiple sectors, necessitates a need to continue to play many different roles, at one meeting a partner, at the next a competitor, continuously shifting roles and redefining relationships almost instantaneously.

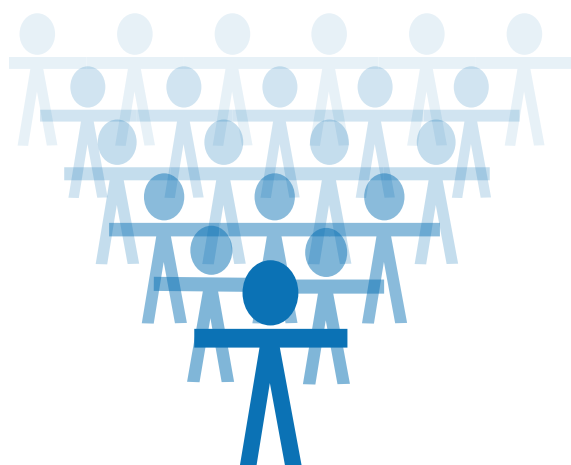
Chief officers have always been used to working in a political environment and managing the politics that this brings. The continual 24/7 scrutiny of social media adds a whole new dimension to this, especially in a time of rapidly contracting finances.

To be a chief officer in 2020 and beyond requires resilience; it's not a role for the faint hearted. As we move towards a new municipalism that goes beyond efficiency, the mind set and skillset required to embrace innovation, commercial acumen and entrepreneurship have become ever more important.

If you are a chief officer at present, I am sure you will identify with some of the key messages emerging from this report and hopefully realise that you are not alone in facing up to the demands of a rapidly changing local government world.

Paul O'Brien

Chief Executive, APSE



Executive summary

This report contributes to debates over the future of public leadership, examining how chief officers in local authorities are experiencing the shifting landscape of local government and how they are making sense of its leadership challenges. Chief officers, we suggest, are a relatively neglected corps of actors in local government, with their roles and how they are exercised, it is fair to say, subject to relatively little, and only sporadic, analysis. Yet, this lack of attention is surprising, given that, as heads of directorates and members of senior management teams, they are often charged with driving forward transformational change and exercising local stewardship, both within and outside the council.

The overall picture(s)

1. Spatially, chief officers sit at the apex of super-directorates which amalgamate an increasing number of different services, teams and responsibilities. In managing across these directorates, they operate in both administrative and political worlds, with the latter's calculations and rationalities repeatedly framing their thinking and decision-making. But, at the same time, they move in and out of different decision-making arenas, internal and external to their authorities, representing, as they do, the council in new collaborations, partnerships and quasi-regional bodies. Indeed, chief officers are, our research suggests, increasingly moving up and down different scales of government, thereby moving in and out of different geographies, while navigating the increasingly hybrid landscape of local government.
2. Temporally, they are similarly pulled in different directions. Budget cutbacks have increasingly led chief officers to 'live' in the short-term or present, with chief officers repeatedly recognising the daily challenges of 'firefighting'. But cutbacks have simultaneously demanded a focus on the strategic, a realm of managerial thinking which is often more closely associated with the long-term or future visions. As such, chief officers work to different rhythms or timescales, typified by the temporal pressures of reconciling the strategic and the everyday. Such pressures have been amplified by the transformation of how officers experience time, with officers arguably recognising an 'acceleration' or 'shrinkage' of time. This transformation comes in part, we suggest, from the speed of information communication technologies and social media, which have placed increasing communication and administrative demands on officers, particularly in the context of austerity governance, although we note that such demands are not necessarily negative; they can generate increased transparency or accountability of decision-making for example.
3. Significantly, traditional ways of seeing chief officers no longer exhaust the challenges that they face in their work, if they ever did. Firstly, the rise of super-directorates has in practice put an end to the dilemma over whether to privilege technical or generic skills. All chief officers have to be generalists if they are to oversee the amalgam of services under their responsibilities. Secondly, the image of the Janus-faced chief officer looking at one and the same time to her department and to the broader strategic of the authority fails to capture the multiplicity of spaces within which chief officers move. The tension, at the very least, is no longer between department and corporate responsibilities, but between department, authority, and partnership or regional responsibilities and loyalties. It is this competing assemblage of interests and accountabilities that chief officers increasingly have to navigate. Finally, the myth of political neutrality may well be repeated and 'grip' the *corps* of chief officers, but the nuances of the divide between the so-called administrative and political worlds are well known. The worlds of chief officers intersect with those of elected members, as chief officers operate in the political domain both directly and indirectly through how they frame their advice and policy practices. But more importantly, our evidence suggests that the multiplicity of new governance spaces across local government, many of which may be characterised as relatively informal arenas without rules, may well trans-

late into chief officers being dragged into what might be seen as political roles of representation. By default, they risk standing in for practices of accountability, having to give an account of developments across such fora to elected members and indeed fellow officers.

Five lessons

1. It is all about moving in and across different spaces!

The primary challenge facing chief officers is moving across and in different spaces as they bring into being and 'manage' different organisational logics and demands. The work of officers becomes, we suggest, navigating between the different dimensions of the alternative spaces which they inhabit. Three primary dimensions characterise what we call the spatial work of officers. First, chief officers traverse different institutional arenas, moving from sedimented to emergent arenas. Sedimented arenas are relatively rule-bound, with clear modes of decision-making and well-defined performative roles and scripts. In contrast, emergent arenas are more fluid, highly political in that the rules and norms of decision-making, and indeed roles and membership of the arena, are in the process of being defined and remain more open to question and challenge.

Second, chief officers move between two forms of leadership: 'leaping in' and 'leaping ahead'. This dimension speaks to the complex temporality of the different spaces in which chief officers operate. 'Leaping in' bring officers firmly into the immediate and the present, requiring them in a logic of substitution to intervene in, and at times take control of, a situation. 'Leaping ahead' follows a logic of empowerment, obliging officers to 'move' into the future, opening and facilitating future possibilities and alternatives.

Third, chief officers move increasingly between bonded and bridging relational spaces. Here we draw on the work of Putnam and social capital. Bonding relates to closing down spaces, to building the identification of actors with spaces, to drawing boundaries or incorporating actors and demands into existing spaces. Bridging refers to opening up spaces, to working across different communities, to drawing equivalences across different groups and potentially across different spaces to forge new relations and ways of working.

2. Chief officers have to be serial adapters.

Given the multiplicity of spaces across which chief officers work, it is tempting to prioritise visions of senior public managers as weavers of different narratives or holders of different geographies whereby officers translate across different networks and arenas, acting as a nodal actor capable of bringing multiple institutions into dialogue and coordinating policy responses across different spaces of governance. Our research supports such roles of boundary spanning. But, importantly, it also challenges them, arguing that we should recognise the potential for the compartmentalisation of the different spaces in which officers work. It suggests that it is not always possible to bring spaces together or to translate across different spaces so as to ensure a certain fluidity or flow across different arenas. Rather, certain spaces remain highly fixed and bounded, with officers moving into them and adopting different roles and responsibilities. In short, officers might well have recourse to an alternative set of practices, not always spanning boundaries, but taking on different roles, registers and performances as they move from space to space. They might not join-up spaces or hold them together, but they may well have to live with rupture and disassociation. They may have to operate as serial adapters, entering different spaces, speed-reading scripts, grasping alternative rules and roles, and transforming their leadership appropriately.

3. The demands of serial adaptation

Such serial adaptation across multiple spaces poses a number of challenges for chief officers. One primary challenge is that of shape-shifting, whereby officers act instrumentally to adopt multiple

roles, but in so doing, they lose any claims to legitimacy. Indeed, intervening across different spaces requires chief officers as public leaders to remain anchored in a self-identity, or set of personal values or convictions. This is not to advocate a particular leadership style. Instead, it is to support visions of leadership that foreground the importance of leading from conviction, from lived experience while demonstrating integrity, particularly in the consistency of actions and expressed beliefs.

However, for us, appeals to such authenticity should be married to an awareness of, and challenge to, one's own values, habits and default positions. This ethos of critical self-reflection is a key component of defining life stories and experiences, for to 'know' yourself is to take distance from one's own identity. In fact, challenging embedded habits through processes of 'puzzling' means that chief officers should at times be wary of default established routines and being too grounded in the everyday. Any blinkered perspective risks losing the capacity to see alternatives, or other ways of knowing. But, our research suggests that it is difficult to avoid the normative justification of certain values. Here we argue in support of a set of values associated with the ensuring council and the new municipalism. The ensuring council endorses the ethos of stewardship, entrepreneurship and innovation, collaboration, social justice and sustainability. But, such values, as we argue, cannot be seen as a straightjacket. They too need to be challenged, subjected to critical evaluation by other ways of knowing.

4. Supporting the resilience of chief officers

Faced with such multiple demands and skillsets, one of the primary skills of chief officers is that of resilience. Indeed, chief officers themselves value resilience as a key skill in the delivery of their responsibilities. Resilience can be seen in many ways as dealing with ambiguity or the emotional labour that uncertainty can produce. In part, calls for resilience respond, we suggest, to the tensions for chief officers in reconciling their public and private selves. Here, the experience of chief officers under austerity is arguably little different from that of other members of the local government workforce. The private self, or the personal identity, emotional commitments and identification with public service, can come into tension with the public self, or the professional roles or institutional responsibilities, particularly the demands for budgetary cutbacks. In this context of austerity governance, the evidence suggests that resilience is becoming an increasingly important skill: senior officers need to be resilient to deal with the growing complexities and pressures they face in the current environment, and with the emotional labour which these demands entail.

5. 'Leaping ahead' and the discourse of the new municipalism

Finally, our evidence suggests that the demands of austerity governance are increasingly incorporated by chief officers into an emerging discourse of what we name 'the new municipalism' or the investment in the agency of local authorities and new ways of working to bring about change. In the first instance, we found chief officers regarded austerity and budgetary reductions as the 'new normal', part and parcel of their everyday practices. This may well be seen as another process of adaptation to the new environment of local government as chief officers have adjusted over time to the stark reality of cutbacks. But, our evidence suggests that we cannot simply read off from this process of adaptation an acceptance by chief officers of austerity and its logics of cutbacks and service reductions. Rather, after some ten years of austerity, chief officers articulated the demands of austerity through a discourse of new municipalism. This new municipalism privileges forms of public entrepreneurship and commercialisation for the public purpose. In making such claims, chief officers attributed local government with new forms of agency to engage in place stewardship and transform local ways of working and centre-local relations. Again, this should not be seen as an endorsement of austerity. At the heart of this discourse there sits a rejection of austerity, but it is married to an acceptance of the need for transformation, and a growing belief in the agency of local authorities to deliver new forms of stewardship.

Recommendations

1. The strategic leadership capabilities of local authorities will wither on the vine unless chief officers have the opportunity and spaces to engage in reflective practice; to benefit from mentoring and peer review; and to scan for future challenges and alternatives.
2. Local authorities should revisit and future proof core competency frameworks for chief officers. The skills and capabilities required of chief officers have changed since 2010. And, looking ahead, local authorities should have in place the workforce development plans to drive forward the skills and capabilities associated with serial adaptation, municipal entrepreneurship and place-shaping.
3. Local authorities should investigate new ways of working which take account of the broader responsibilities of chief officers, as well as the declining numbers of staff employed by local councils. Traditional ways of working, which often means in practice a default recourse to meetings, boards and processual governance, risk becoming increasingly unsustainable and less and less fit-for-purpose.
4. After almost 10 years of austerity, local councils are facing organisational fatigue, if not, exhaustion. Like all local government staff, austerity has tested the resilience of chief officers. Local authorities, as part of a strategy of retention, should re-assess how they can further build the resilience of chief officers and all staff.
5. Organisational churn and staff turnover can deplete corporate knowledge and dilute organisational memory. Local authorities should audit their internal in-house organisational capabilities, evaluating how they are banking their corporate knowledge and capturing learning and innovation.
6. New forms of delegation, partnership working and collaboration have the potential to stretch traditional mechanisms and practices of accountability. Local authorities should review how far adequate mechanisms are in place to ensure political oversight and accountability; if not, chief officers risk becoming a 'stand-in' for established accountability procedures across local authority landscapes.

1: Ensuring the leadership of the new municipalism

Local authority officers or managers increasingly inhabit and move across a hybrid policy environment, in which they encounter multiple and competing governance logics and practices.¹ In recent years, new spaces and scales of governance, presenting opportunities for public innovation and market disruption, have come into being. City deals, combined authorities, partnerships, shared services, local housing and energy companies all operate across multiple and shifting arenas.² Each arena brings into being a new constellation of actors, a plurality of identities, interests and values which enter into the policy process. Indeed, the local policy landscape has been pulled and twisted in opposing directions by different forces from globalisation, localism and devolution through to austerity and shifting citizen values and expectations.³

Of course, this hybridisation is not new. We would be misguided to argue that local government ever worked to the rhythm of a single drum. New governance logics and practices have always been layered onto established regimes and ways of working. New public management with its logics of measurement, competition and consumerisation emerged in and around the 1980s, calling into question what were then seen as the inefficiencies of traditional public administration, which had already been brought into focus by the demands of techno-managerialism. Public governance with its logics of collaboration and engagement arguably followed in the wake of new public management, a counterbalance to its potential for fragmentation and contractualisation.

But, since 2010 and cuts to public funding, the focus on the hybridity of the local landscape, coupled with the demands of austerity governance, new digital technologies and forms of co-production, has arguably triggered a renewed wave of critical thinking on the role of the public manager in the shifting landscape of the local. Indeed, a novel school of thinking around the 21st century public servant has come to redesign the skills and craft of public leadership, drawing attention to relational and emotional work, to much-needed storytelling, to the challenge of orchestrating networks of providers or acting as a system-architect or boundary spanner. Generic skills are increasingly seen to trump specialist or professional skills, while the emotional labour of working across spaces and the demands of emotional intelligence have been re-asserted. Taken together, these demands have arguably come to militate against long contested but still embedded models of heroic-leadership.⁴

This report engages in such debates over the future of public leadership, examining how chief officers in local authorities are experiencing this shifting landscape and how they are making sense of its leadership challenges. Chief officers, we suggest, are a relatively neglected corps of actors in local government, with their roles and how they are exercised, it is fair to say, subject to relatively little, and only sporadic, analysis. Over the years, explanations and characterisations of their roles have been simply read off broader debates about styles of management in local government. They have received less attention than chief executives, front-line staff, councillors, and perhaps even middle managers, who are often assumed themselves to be neglected in studies of local organisations.⁵ Yet, this lack of attention is surprising, given that, as heads of directorates and members of senior management teams, they are often charged with driving forward transformational change and exercising local stewardship, both within and outside the council. And, with imminent changes to the regime of local taxation from 2020 now firmly on the horizon, not to mention the demands of any Brexit settlement, the continued generation of public value will require authorities to rejuvenate place-based policy levers if they are to act as stewards of place and local communities.⁶

Addressing this relative absence of attention and contributing to the debates surrounding the future of public leadership and the new municipalism, the study draws upon a series of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with chief officers working in authorities across the United Kingdom, as

well as two workshops attended by some 46 chief officers.¹ Interviews were designed to capture the perceptions of officers, generating an arena in which officers could voice, and reflect critically on, their daily working practices and routines in the context of austerity. We focussed on teasing out how officers have experienced (or not) change in their work, questioning the relevance of established ways of working and how far new demands are challenging the established craft of local leadership and stewardship. Put alternatively, what are the demands of the multiple arenas and governance logics that populate the local government landscape? What are the skills and capabilities required by officers to move across these arenas and harness different logics? Are there shared understandings and alternative visions of the work of local authorities emerging within the corps of chief officers? If so, what does it take to be an architect of the new municipalism?

What do we mean by ‘chief officers’?

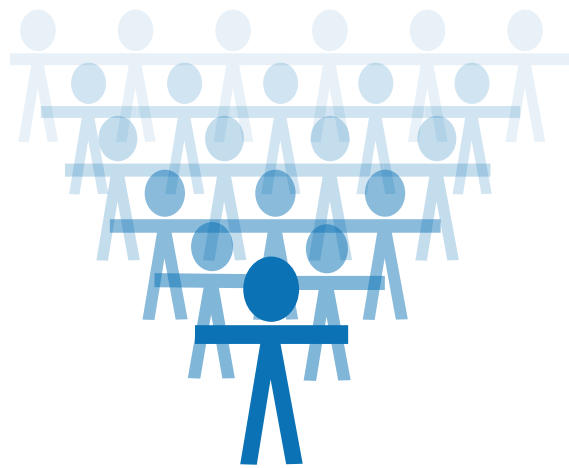
Over the years, titles and job descriptions change. The Chief Officer, at the head of functional Department in the 1960s, had a very different role to someone who is now the head of a large multi-functional directorate. At the same time, the status and authority given to such titles change over time, morphing and evolving across political and organisational contexts. This has significant implications for how we talk about ‘chief officers’. On the one hand, when we refer to earlier studies and debates, we have to be aware the title ‘chief officer’ carried with it a whole set of assumptions at the time and take these into account in our analysis. On the other hand, we need to be transparent about what we mean by ‘chief officers’ in our own analysis. This is perhaps easier said than done. The title of ‘chief officers’ can sometimes be used to refer to ‘chief executives’, while that of ‘senior managers’ might refer to chief officers and chief executives at one and the same time. For clarification, in this study, we use the term of ‘chief officers’ to denote the second tier of officers who sit ‘below’ the office of the chief executive. Typically, we are referring to directors, members of the senior management or leadership team, who sit at the head of cross-cutting directorates or departments such as ‘place and regeneration’ or ‘community services’. These officers, we suggest, sit firmly within the strategic apex of the authority, with outward-looking responsibilities to make sense of the shifting context, threats and opportunities facing the authority. They are more often than not the privileged interface for elected members. Yet, at the same time, they anchor and steer such strategies within departments, with responsibilities to co-produce and translate strategies into practice across ‘their’ directorates. In short, chief officers are the lynch-pin between the strategic apex or the ‘joint executive’ of elected members and senior officers, and the middle-line management in local authorities. We thus focus more on function than on title.

The structure of the report

Against this background, this report takes a fresh look at the roles and responsibilities of local authority chief officers. It seeks to capture and evaluate their everyday experiences, generating much-needed evidence on a relatively neglected group of local public servants. The next chapter assembles a composite picture of the work of chief officers, challenging traditional ways of framing the core challenges and questions facing these senior officers in local government. It first draws attention to the rise of super-directorates and the demands of firefighting before examining the demands of strategic policymaking and the potential limits of processual governance. It then identifies how chief officers move across multiple geographies and engage in shifting and multiple relations with elected members, before valuing resilience and surfacing how chief officers increasingly articulate a discourse of new municipalism. The final chapter sets out the lessons of the study, suggesting that we need to reframe understandings of the work of chief officers by by concentrating on how they move in and

¹ In support of the interviews, we undertook a desk-based literature review of academic articles, policy briefings and position papers in order to identify and map current thinking on the role, skills and competences of local government officers and the broader public sector workforce. Interviews were semi-structured and engaged a purposive sample of chief officers across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. All interviews used a standardised topic guide and were audio recorded. The two workshops were held at the 2018 autumn conference of the Association of Directors of the Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (Manchester, 22 November). Ethical approval was granted by De Montfort University.

out of different spaces, while 'leaping in' and 'leaping ahead' in different temporalities, bonding and bridging different relational networks, and operating in sedimented and emergent institutional rules and norms. In many ways, chief officers are, we conclude, serial adapters.



2: Chief officers and the new municipalism

As well as being under-represented amidst the plethora of literature and policy guidance on local government management, dialogues over the roles and responsibilities of chief officers have been locked into long-established dominant framings or ways of seeing. In fact, these ways of seeing were embedded into the networks of policymakers and local government commentators from the mid-1960s through until the mid-1970s. During this decade, there was a 'flurry' of interest (comparatively) in the senior management of local government, as local government itself became a larger and politically contentious area of public policy. The Committee on the Management of Local Government (the Maud Report 1967), reflecting contemporary concerns over the limits of departmentalism and functional hierarchies, as well as the growing budgetary and staff capacities of local government, stressed generic management skills over professionalism and recommended the development of council-wide management teams made up of Chief Officers and headed by a Chief Executive. This view was shared by the general line taken by the Redcliffe-Maud Commission Report (1969) and, in particular, by the Bains Report (1972). Most new authorities established after reorganisation in 1974 followed the recommendation of Bains for a management team of senior officers to be charged with overseeing the coordination of the work of the authority.⁷

Importantly, the framings that emerged out of this flurry of work on chief officers have, we suggest, exercised a longstanding influence over the shaping of debates and dialogues over their roles and responsibilities. In some quarters, it is arguable that they still frame how we understand how officers 'should be' and 'what we should be concerned about'. Indeed, debates can still revolve around the concerns of the 1960s and 1970s, namely (1) the traditional place of chief officers as professionally qualified, technical advisors, against the perceived increasing need for them to be generic managers; (2) their 'divided loyalty' as head of a professional, service-led departments, against their role as part of the council's overall corporate/strategic management team; and (3) their political neutrality, based on professional codes of ethics, which was seen to be increasingly incongruous with their actual close relationship with ruling councillors and political groups.

Of course, over the years, new skills have been added to the portfolio of chief officers, be it the competitive skills of compulsory competitive tendering or the tools of strategic steering and public governance. Equally, professionalism has been increasingly married to managerialism, while the political nature of the job of chief officers has been viewed in nuanced ways that acknowledge the interactions or 'dynamic dependency' between chief officers and elected members.⁸ Yet, to the extent that chief officer roles have been officially considered over the intervening years, it has been in some way to resolve the tensions embedded in the roles of chief officers in the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps then, as we suggested in the introduction to this report, it is time for a reframing of the core challenges in the work of chief officers. It is to this question of reframing that we now turn. We begin by analysing the everyday practices of chief officers and what it means to be a chief officer, before concluding as to the extent the traditional challenges attributed to the role of chief officers still hold, if indeed they ever did.

The continued rise of the super-directorate

Chief officers sit at the head of what we might call 'super-directorates', responsible for an amalgam of services and functions across a wide breadth of portfolios and policies. Their very job titles reflect this widening of responsibilities and remits, typically occupying, as they do, posts entitled 'director of place', 'director of resources', or 'director of service delivery'. As directors of place, they can oversee all services from environmental health, parks, street scene, housing and operational property, through to waste management, regeneration projects, and economic planning and growth, as well as city deals and corporate project leadership on for example asset legacy and IT, not forgetting the chairing of

strategic committees within and outside the council. One officer summed up such broad oversight by saying that 'everything that isn't adult and children's services falls into my directorate', or as another put it: 'if you take away adults, children and financial resources, I am responsible for everything else: from neighbourhood management to housing, transport, street lightning, waste collections, parks and open spaces, cemeteries, assets and land management, school meals...to name just a few.' For one officer, it was just simpler to say that the directorate covered: '75% of what the council does.'

'I oversee planning, building control, economic development, to employability support workshops, a property portfolio, [...] statutory planning, strategic planning engagement. I also have a building services operation/property services, waste collection, an arms-length company [...] also...catering for schools, nursing homes, there's something else, parks...I had housing until 2015...so it is 5000 staff, £350 million.'

In part, chief officers associated such amalgamations with the quest for organisational efficiencies, which were allegedly attributed to cross-cutting 'flat' decision-making and joined-up governance. Re-organisation was widely justified as 'good' management, part of the new culture towards tackling cross-cutting 'wicked policy issues' and enhancing collaboration. One officer thus explained that the expansion of her remit had mainly been the result of a heightened corporate focus on public health, such that a diverse range of services were now seen through the 'lens' of public health, including economic generation, job creation, and housing. Alternatively, one officer argued that 'flattened structures' and 'getting rid of hierarchy' was interpreted in his authority as a necessary response to the practical regionalisation of local government working, which was driven in turn by the uneven agenda and demands of emergent city-regions and changes in central funding. Regionalisation, the officer continued, called upon local authorities to reconsider 'a different type of structure and person to engage at the management level.' In such contexts, structural rationalisation was interpreted as a means of improving communication channels across the strategic apex of the authority.

In fact, the rise of the super-directorate has, officers declared, driven forward collaboration across the strategic apex of local authorities, at least between senior management teams. This push towards collaboration has, officers insisted, transformed the working environment, pushing back on financial pressures that might be expected to increase division and conflict. Thus, one chief officer referenced the support he gleaned from being part of a 'tight' group of chief officers across the authority, who were 'very solid' and followed a 'collegiate approach' rather than the 'adversarial approach of old.' Similarly, another officer emphasised how under austerity 'we have to be far more collaborative with other chief officers [...] and this means having more solid relationships, more trust.' Such sentiments were indeed broadly supported, with collaboration repeatedly presented as a crucial asset for chief officers, such that 'sticking together' was often perceived as the only way to 'get on with business.'

Firefighting and the everyday

Yet, significantly for how chief officers exercise their everyday duties, reorganisations and amalgamations have not been limited to the senior leadership of councils. The posts of heads of division or head of services have also been amalgamated or collapsed into 'tighter' structures. One officer thus acknowledged how in his authority senior management posts had been cut as part of efforts to protect frontline services, pointing to how 'we used to be 5 directors [in the senior management team], and in the department I run, there used to be 3 directors and there used to be 9 assistant directors. Now, there's me and two assistant directors. So, we've taken out from the top management tier to try and protect frontline services.' Another confirmed such reductions in the line-management of councils, claiming that the reduction in heads of service was 'quite dramatic. If you go back to a 2005 structure for all activities [in the directorate] through to the structure now, you're probably down a good 20 senior officers.'

Importantly, such churning of senior management has transformed the strategic working environments

of chief officers. On the one hand, the turnover of personnel has arguably reduced the institutional knowledge, memory and networks of councils as officers have left their posts, while also undermining (potentially) the consistency and coherence of strategic leadership. As one officer was keen to point out, despite budgetary pressures and austerity, 'it's not necessarily [and only] cuts that have thwarted the strategic direction [...] it's more changes in terms of individuals and leadership which have a fundamental impact on the strategic direction.' On the other hand, chief officers reported being increasingly drawn into what they saw as 'firefighting', called upon to resolve everyday operational issues of frontline service delivery. Typically, therefore, in the words of officers, they experience 'definitely more fire-fighting in [the] role...', with officers speaking of increasing demands to be 'available', or ready to respond to 'emergency calls' and 'critical issues' that could pop up at any time.

Such firefighting has arguably narrowed the distance between operational and strategic issues. Indeed, one director remarked how on driving into work and spotting a fallen tree, she immediately telephoned the grounds maintenance manager to report the incidence. But, she added that 'once upon a time, I would just have walked in the door and told somebody somewhere in the system that I'd noticed that a tree had been brought down. So, we are also doing the operational and technical stuff when we are also doing the strategic direction of the local authority.' Here, her explicit concern was that increased firefighting came ultimately at the expense of space and time for strategic policy development and leadership. In fact, one chief officer neatly summed up the tensions in everyday firefighting, arguing that 'because of cuts to senior management [...] because there is less capacity and more agendas, then you get drawn into more things (...) you often deviate from your normal job [...] so yes, there's probably more fire-fighting than there should be.'

'Austerity has required us to focus more on what really makes a difference, being strategic – but that goes with losing the ability in the sector to stand back, to value the reflection time that we need to look at innovative approaches...it has made us [senior officers] more focused because reduced resources mean you can only do X and not Y and so (...) you have to keep the focus on what you're setting out to do while you know you do get deviated all the time.'

The strategic and the limits of processual governance

Against this background, the demands of firefighting were seen to be amplified by the pressures of austerity cutbacks which have, chief officers argued, heightened the need to act strategically, and to foreground the strategic vision of the authority in everyday decision-making. For one chief officer, austerity had obliged senior officers since 2010 to become 'more focused because reduced resources mean you cannot do everything and so you need to focus on what will deliver the outcome that is required [...]'. The rationale of the officer was that 'lack of resources means that you can do less but actually it also pushes you to focus on what will have a real impact.' In other words, in everyday practice, the responsibility of the chief officer to tie together the delivery of outcomes and the strategic vision of the authority has heightened, requiring chief officers to be 'resolute... holding steady to values' in their everyday decision-making.

As such, the demands of governing under austerity have effectively 'shrunk' how chief officers conceptualise the distance between what they perceive as the short, medium, and long-term. The immediacy of everyday decision-making has dissolved into the long-term, producing practices of what officers characterised as 'strategic salami-slicing'. Part of the role of the chief officers has thus become 'build[ing] confidence that focusing on the immediate is actually a way of building towards strategic outcomes [...] so you have to] keep the focus on what you're setting out to do while you sometimes deviate.' Put alternatively, officers are increasingly asked to balance a mode of strategic development in which 'thinking strategically about the big picture, where we want to go, [and] agreeing that' sits alongside the constraints of 'considering uncertainties of austerity in the [formulation of] tactics.'

In fact, as this officer suggests, the task of building of confidence and grounding the strategic in the

immediate, amplified under conditions of austerity, is hampered at the same time by the uncertainty produced by conditions of austerity. As one other officer put it, delivering the 'here and now and [at the same time as] the 20-year strategy' poses a set of 'intellectual challenges'. For some, this intellectual challenge can also be wrapped up in new forms of processual governance as elected members and officers seek to guard against risk, uncertainty, and exposure to public outcry from cuts to public services. Officers recognised such processes as a response to austerity, providing further democratic budgetary oversight and dialogue between elected members and officers. But, they also raised concerns as to how new internal processes of financial oversight have the potential to threaten the capacity of authorities to respond to local demands as and when they emerge.

Moving across spaces and navigating multiple geographies

Chief officers recognized the demands of partnership working and new forms of collaboration in the guise of regionalization and cross-boundary working. Emergent combined authorities, city deals, regionalisation collaborations and/or shared services have added, it was argued, new layers to the everyday work of chief officers. But, more significantly, such novel forms of collaboration have arguably accelerated changes to the strategic apex of local authorities. It is in this strategic leadership and decision-making arena of councils that chief executives, political leaders and chief officers make sense of the shifting policy environment and the current and future demands facing the authority. Yet, for chief officers, this strategic apex is no longer situated narrowly 'within' local authorities. Rather, it now exists 'in fragments' across different arenas. As such, like the landscape within which councils operate, the strategic apex of any authorities has become more or less a 'hybrid space' that encompasses a wide range of different forums from city-region and local enterprise partnership boards to newly created combined authorities, city and devolution deals, service boards, and partnerships with other private and public actors.

'On a typical day I have leadership roles across the council, corporate meetings, I chair various bodies within and outside the council, have to carve out time to do 'ward walks' (...), then governance related meetings (...) for example with the combined authority, but also meetings with partners we deliver services with...and they are a very wide range.'

In such hybrid strategic environments, one of the key skills of chief officers is the capability to adapt to the rules, norms and performances of different spaces, with each arena bringing into being its own distinct geography and ways of being. It calls upon chief officers to recognise the plurality of spaces, agendas and processes within which they work, and to juggle different roles at different times; to accept and work with uncertainty; to communicate risk in non-defensive forms; and to accept the need to concede some ground on decisions with benefits for the partnership, whilst ensuring the transparency of such choices and strategies.

All in all, stewardship for senior officers thus relies on working in and across boundaries, recognising multiple narratives in and across different spaces, and acting at times as a sense-maker for others not engaged in these spaces. Indeed, as one chief officer pointed out, the corporate identity of senior officers has to evolve to meet the shifting spaces of collaboration. This requires officers to recognise strategically that 'it is ok to be in different teams. It is not monogamy. [...] You have to think about that, about how you are engaging', while 'at the same time still remembering what you've got on at the ranch agenda.' Such balancing of multiple agenda speaks to the skills of 'scalecraft' in which officers couple issues to different scales of policymaking (neighbourhood, local, regional or national) as a means of bringing into play different actors and transforming roles and responsibilities.⁹

More importantly, in navigating these emergent arenas, chief officers are engaging in everyday institutional building, not least putting in place new norms and practices of decision-making and relations with other authorities and regional bodies. Internally, in relation to the council, this demands that senior officers redesign roles within the council to enable colleagues to better 'feed in' to regional

dialogues, while aligning initiatives, policy and channels of accountability and communication. As one officer elaborated: 'we have had to create structures within the council to bring people together to assist them to understand the shifting landscape, so we are developing policy, strategies, initiatives... checking in that it aligns with what others are doing.' At times, officers are often having to stand in for traditional lines of accountability, reporting back to elected members on developments in newly emergent collaborative spaces. Such reporting can be 'quite confusing because they [councillors] are not touching [dossiers] regularly enough... [some] councillors in the room, they haven't had any update for nine months.'

Externally, chief officers tend to be operating in 'arenas without rules'¹⁰, given the informality and ambiguity of the new collaborative arenas in which officers are increasingly operating. Typically, one officer pointed to the fluid demands and relational skills of collaboration from 'leadership' through to 'diplomacy' and on to 'helping others to take the lead'. Another who defined himself as 'quite risk-orientated' declared that traditional patterns of accountability and delegation do not match the demands of these new emergent cross-boundary structures. Indeed, given his attitude to risk, he was 'happy to drive things forward' if decisions matched the general direction of travel of the authority and to seek post hoc informal endorsement by the leaders of his council. He continued that 'you can do a lot in collaboration without making a formal decision.'

In fact, chief officers drew attention to how such multiplicities of interests, mandates and accountabilities obliged them to adapt continuously, taking on different roles and grasping different rules and norms as they moved from meeting to meeting, from arena to arena. Such multiplicities thus led one officers to consider one of the primary challenges of everyday practice to be to determine 'which guise are you speaking in? There are minefields all over the partnership game.' Similarly, one officer pointed to the fluid demands and relational skills required to move from competition to collaboration and back again, often with the same partners. Such demands challenge established practices and norms of collaboration, which tend to be aimed at bringing organisations together and lessening silo-working or compartmentalisation. Rather, across these multiple geographies, the collaborative deficit, officers argued, is best understood as working with loosely-defined fragments. And, therefore officers have 'need to think a bit differently: how do we deal with fragments? Wherever there is a ragged edge, focusing on that [...] to position [ourselves] wherever there is a noise and a gap.' The problem is that identifying and working with such fragments requires the building of relationships and trust, which requires time, and as one officer emphasised, there is 'no time to work on the niceties,' or put alternatively, 'there's less time for small talk, so you have a range of partnerships, but time for actual relationships is limited and you have to make the most out of each meeting, getting on with business mainly because of other commitments...so many commitments, and the pressure of our diary.'

Engaging the political world of elected members

For many chief officers in the study, engaging with or entering the world of elected members distinguished the role of directors from that of heads of service and middle managers. This engagement was not merely conceptualised in terms of physical meetings and relationship building with elected members, although this was significant. Rather, the political was repeatedly characterised by chief officers as one of the dominant frames through which they necessarily made sense of the world. Chief officers are, it was explained, 'dealing with the political, [...] thinking of the political angle [...] how do we need to package that for the leader of the council?' Yet, politics was not always narrowly associated with the realm of political parties, but understood in terms of organisational politics, such that officers were seen to be 'in the political environment, but not of the political environment [...] having to think politically, not party political, but political around who can get nailed here.' Indeed, one officer argued that taking account of the political implications of decisions was best summed up as 'having eyes in the back of your head'.

Significantly, chief officers did not perceive any deteriorations or conflict in their working relations with elected members as a consequence of budgetary cutbacks and austerity. Broadly speaking, chief officers declared that relationships with councillors had remained stable or had even become clearer in recent years. However, this is not to say that building relationships with elected members in the context of austerity had not placed new demands on chief officers nor provoked intermittent tensions in their relations with elected members. Typically, one officer who stated that relations with councillors remained 'good', did nonetheless underline how, in the context of budget cuts, officers had to invest further in relationship management by 'trying to move [councillors] from delivery to strategic [which] has been a challenge, especially because now they cannot any longer do or change things quickly in their communities.' Indeed, echoing the rationale for new forms of processual governance, the officer continued that councillors themselves are seeking rightly under austerity to scrutinise advice given by officers, arguing that 'elected members want to interrogate the decision-making process more robustly. It's a difficult journey to navigate. You have to trust each other.' Similarly, one officer thus reflected that cuts to services under austerity meant in practice that 'elected members are called in [...] to make hugely sensitive, difficult decisions (...) it's not easy, but you have to work together to do what needs to be done.'

As such, chief officers have, it was commonly stated, devoted increasing resources and support to help members through decisions that would not have been taken or considered outside the demands of austerity governance. As one officer stated, 'there are no open conflicts with councillors [...] But in the current context you have to be clear about what can and *cannot* be done [...] everybody is under pressure, and that's when you have to be clear about relationships...and conversations have to be based on evidence and facts (...) because given the scale of cuts on a continuing basis you will have to make tough calls, and elected members don't want to hear that, because the public doesn't like cuts in services.' In fact, budget cuts and the new landscape of local authorities have driven demands for chief officers to 'moderate a two-way dialogue' with elected members, backwards and forwards between officers and elected members, short and long-term needs of communities, and everyday tactical measures and the strategic visions of the authority. Under such conditions, the framing of policy options by chief officers, which was always a key tool in their grasp, has become increasingly significant, as one officer revealed 'if presented this way [in the language of place] they [councillors] are prepared to take hard decisions.' However, such dialogue faces increasing pressures, which have arguably shrunken the time for dialogue, for as widely affirmed by officers: 'we [authorities] can't play those games anymore... we haven't got time for that.'

Valuing resilience and balancing the public and private self

Increasing pressures on services under austerity governance, as well as the recourse to social media, have also heightened and shifted how officers experience the boundaries between their private and public selves.¹¹ Austerity has arguably brought chief officers more firmly into the public domain. Many chief officers recognised the increasing public scrutiny of their role, arguing that 'senior officers [are] under much more public scrutiny than in the past – from the media and through social media, from communities and from councillors.' This increasing scrutiny was repeatedly interpreted as a consequence of austerity, with cutbacks to local services demanding that officers invest more in communication and relationship building with local communities (and, as we discussed above, with elected members). Indeed, some officers perceived the need to make themselves more visible on the ground, for given, in the words of one officer, that 'people in the community do not like the change brought in by austerity [...] it is even more important now that we [officers] are seen in the wards, I have to find the time for that, you have to be seen...to be out there.'

Importantly, our respondents did not challenge such public scrutiny, viewing it as an appropriate response from local communities to service cutbacks. As one officer typically asserted: 'there's huge pressure, huge expectations, huge vulnerability at organisational and individual level [...] public

scrutiny has increased...but so it should be, because of the impact that the reductions in services due to cuts is having.' Yet, chief officers did recognise the emotional labour of such public scrutiny, as well as the potential contradictions emerging from defending in public cuts to services that they would not endorse in private. One officer encapsulated the demands of such emotional labour, setting out how he was 'more exposed, and social media really doesn't help in this sense... you end up getting messages on Twitter and so on that really look like personal attacks. The public doesn't like cuts. And in their view, we're responsible for this.'

Under austerity, therefore, many of the everyday interventions of chief officers have been targeted at the 'hard emotional labour' of balancing the potential tensions between the public and private self. As one officer commented on his discussions with councillors: 'it is just degrees of unpalatableness [telling councillors] you can have unpalatable, really unpalatable, or impossibly unpalatable.' However, at the same time, the demands of such emotional labour have emerged out of the need to adapt to different 'display rules' of the multiple arenas in which officers work. The expectations of the role of the professional chief officer vary from context to context and from citizen group to citizen group. Knowing such rules, showing appropriate behaviours and generating such behaviours from others takes emotional labour.¹² In fact, there has often been an unrealistic expectation that those working in these types of roles can develop 'hybrid' identities. However, having to work in this way adds another source of pressure, for reconciling sometimes contradictory rules and roles requires officers to engage increasingly in 'identity work' as they try to reconcile for themselves these contradictions. It is of course 'part of the job' of chief officers, but importantly, it is a dimension of the job which has arguably grown in significance, and it is a role for which chief officers were not necessarily appointed – making its demands all the more challenging for some. In recognising this, we have to remember that chief officers enter these different settings with their own identities, formed through their biographies, backgrounds and personal histories; these will be important factors in determining the ease with which officers can adapt to 'hybrid' roles and will be important factors in how the roles are enacted.¹³

The capability to meet these demands cannot be divorced in the views of chief officers from the capacity to cultivate resilience. Officers referred, for example to being 'stretched mentally' by the 'intellectual challenge' to 'balance out competing demands', not least the 'schizophrenic' pressures resulting from working within 'fuzzy' networks where officers can well end up 'speaking against [their] own role' in the interests of the collaborative good. Indeed, one officer spoke of a 'sustained onslaught' which meant that in practice he was constantly having to 'demonstrate his worth.' In this context, collaboration and partnership working was targeted as a source of increasing demands, with one officer claiming that the partnership working was 'now at breaking point' in terms of pressure and stress of servicing and managing the cluster of networks across authorities. As with other professions, chief officers have indeed experienced the 'shrinkage' of time, due to expanding roles, duties and networks, as well as technological change which has accelerated the communication process. Significantly, much of the daily communication of chief officers with their team takes place on the road via phone and email as they travel between meetings.

'In practice, I am on call 24/7. My portfolio spans such a wide range of responsibilities that in practice there's always something coming up – my diary is just an indication of what I have to do, but, on an average day, other things will come up. I work ridiculous hours.'

But, on the other hand, officers repeatedly endorsed what we might term a resilient logic of 'just getting on with it'. One officer thus stated that 'it's not a job for the faint-hearted', adding that 'I like being busy, who doesn't. It's the life I've known.' Managing ambiguity and change, and being able to plan but also to adapt and (re)act fast and effectively, were presented as a vital and indeed established part of a senior officer's role. As explained by some respondents, 'those still standing know how to adapt and adjust', or alternatively 'you just have to deal with it and find a way... it has been a challenge, (...) but if you have the core skills, you just grow a bit and learn to do some new things quickly.'

Typically, one officer aligned the capacity to generate resilience to the core skills of leadership, arguing that 'chief officers have always been under pressure...you have to get used to pressure, and you do get used to pressure. Resilience is one of the key skills needed. You've got to accept challenges, it's part of the job [...] the responsibilities have always been huge, but now there is less time and capacity and so you have to use time and capacity more effectively – you have to lead, focus on strategy, plan well, develop external networks and relationships, and get elected members on side.'

The new municipalism

The demands of working under conditions of austerity dominate, as might be expected, the policy agenda and everyday working practices of chief officers. As one chief officer was quick to remark that 'so much time is taken up saving money'. These demands on chief officers have arguably increased with each successive round of budgetary cutbacks: 'it is harder, because the budget gets ever more difficult.' Indeed, austerity, it was widely accepted by research participants, generates increasingly difficult choices over service provision; heightened risks; public contestation of service cuts and increased visibility as chief officers are called into the public arena to defend the decisions of councils; all of which comes with the growing emotional labour of delivering cutbacks. One chief officer thus bemoaned that 'a host of new challenges are brought in by the austerity mantra "cut services, cut services, cut services." Another underlined how austerity has transformed understandings of the responsibilities of local authorities, while reducing the organisational capacity and staffing numbers to deliver on these responsibilities: 'budget cuts are huge and affect the number of staff [...] services have to be delivered by the community, there's no other way.'

Importantly for this study, austerity governance was repeatedly invoked by research participants as part of 'what is in practice the new normal' or one of the new constants in their working environment. Indeed, for some of our participants, their careers as chief officers began under austerity, and will, they suggest, continue under austerity. Put alternatively, cuts to public spending since 2010 have over the course of time been incorporated into the policy and leadership narratives that chief officers deploy to make sense of the world around them. And, in the process of incorporation, the demands of budgetary cutbacks on established patterns of service provision have typically been re-articulated as a driver of innovation and service redesign, a set of demands which 'we [local authorities] learnt to deal with and to get on with business.' Reproducing such claims, one chief officer typically argued that 'austerity is here to stay. Over the years, it has pushed us [chief officers] to think differently, focusing on a commercial perspective to compensate for government cuts [...] completely different solutions, things that would have been unthinkable 8 years ago.'

In fact, chief officers framed such claims as part of an emergent discourse of new municipalism in which entrepreneurship and commercialisation are increasingly seen as the primary means through which local authorities will meet the future needs of local communities. The work of chief officers, it was recognised, has strategically re-focussed on service efficiencies, re-design and innovation, commercialism and capital investment opportunities. One officer thus remarked how under austerity, as well as a heightened focus on marginal costs and finance, there has been an attempt to shift the organisational culture of authorities away from one in which budgetary processes dictate the provision of services to one in which the service needs of community determine budgetary processes and strategies of income-generation.

With this in mind, chief officers pointed to the dynamics of creativity and change being central to working in local government. One chief officer emphasised that 'either you [the local authority] fail, or you look for alternative delivery models', continuing that 'there are alternative delivery models emerging in local government that you would have not seen or even imagined in the past.' Indeed, for this chief officer, local government has 'been pushed so much to the edge [by austerity] that it has become a very dynamic business', arguing that 'when you're close to extinction you're at your most

creative and innovative.' In fact, chief officers picked up on this innovation in response to austerity, linking it to a belief in the agency of local authorities. One officer referred to the 'pride in not doing what everyone else is doing', while another described the experience of austerity as a 'rediscovery of self-belief' that councils 'still have muscle'. Of course, this was not necessarily interpreted as an endorsement for austerity, with one officer arguing that 'it's about managing decline (...) and this pushes you to generate income in new ways, need to be more creative, more commercialising of services'; neither should it be seen as necessarily new, with one officer suggesting that 'huge pressure, managing the delivery of cuts...adaptation in role of chief officers...yes, but it's always been like that...no change, but [austerity means that it is] more intense in terms of what you have to do, due to limited capacities and resources.'

The overall picture(s)

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the work of chief officers is the multiplicity of spatial and temporal 'worlds' which they inhabit and across which they ply their craft. Spatially, chief officers sit at the apex of super-directorates which amalgamate an increasing number of different services, teams and responsibilities. In managing across these directorates, they operate in both administrative and political worlds, with the latter's calculations and rationalities repeatedly framing their thinking and decision-making. But, at the same time, they move in and out of different decision-making arenas, internal and external to their authorities, representing, as they do, the council in new collaborations, partnerships and quasi-regional bodies. Indeed, chief officers are, our research suggests, increasingly moving up and down different scales of government, thereby moving in and out of different geographies, while navigating the increasingly hybrid landscape of local government.

Temporally, they are similarly pulled in different directions. Take for instance, the demands of austerity governance. Budget cutbacks have increasingly led chief officers to 'live' in the short-term or present, with chief officers repeatedly recognising the daily challenges of 'firefighting'. But cutbacks have simultaneously demanded a focus on the strategic, a realm of managerial thinking which is often more closely associated with the long-term or future visions. As such, chief officers work to different rhythms or timescales, typified by the temporal pressures of reconciling the strategic and the everyday. Such pressures have been amplified by the transformation of how officers experience time, with officers arguably recognising an 'acceleration' or 'shrinkage' of time. This transformation comes in part, we suggest, from the speed of information communication technologies and social media, which have placed increasing communication and administrative demands on officers, particularly in the context of austerity governance (although we note that such demands are not necessarily negative; they can generate increased transparency or accountability of decision-making for example).

Significantly, this study underlines that the traditional ways of seeing chief officers no longer exhaust the challenges that they face in their work, if they ever did. Firstly, the rise of super-directorates has in practice put an end to the dilemma over whether to privilege technical or generic skills. All chief officers have to be generalists if they are to oversee the amalgam of services under their responsibilities. Secondly, the image of the Janus-faced chief officer looking at one and the same time to her department and to the broader strategic of the authority fails to capture the multiplicity of spaces within which chief officers move. The tension, at the very least, is no longer between department and corporate responsibilities, but between department, authority, and partnership or regional responsibilities and loyalties. It is this competing assemblage of interests and accountabilities that chief officers have increasingly to navigate. Finally, the myth of political neutrality may well be repeated and 'grip' the *corps* of chief officers, but the nuances of the divide between the so-called administrative and political worlds are well known. The worlds of chief officers intersect with those of elected members, as chief officers operate in the political domain both directly and indirectly through how they frame their advice and policy practices. But more importantly, our evidence suggests that the multiplicity of

new governance spaces across local government, many of which may be characterised as relatively informal arenas without rules, may well translate into chief officers being dragged into what might be seen as political roles of representation. By default, they risk standing in for practices of accountability, having to give an account of developments across such fora to elected members and indeed fellow officers. So, how are we now to make sense of the work of chief officers? It is to this challenge that we turn in the conclusion to this report.

3: Conclusions - supporting the work of chief officers

In this concluding chapter, we reflect on the key findings of this study and its lessons for the policies and practices of local authorities. In so doing, we guard against any overly-general claims or universal statements. Such claims, which typically advance the dawning of a 'new' managerial epoch and concurrent skillset for officers, quickly run up against the hybridity of local landscapes and the plurality of managerial and political logics that officers work with and against. That said, the drawing of lessons requires us nonetheless to avoid descending too far into the particular, in ways that over-privilege the individual and micro-experiences of chief officers to the exclusion of what might be common to their work across different local contexts. Thus, whilst we are careful not to impute universalising forms of change onto chief officers, we nonetheless identify and characterise a set of coalescing elements, be it understandings, demands and practices, that can be seen to shape the everyday worlds of chief officers. Such emergent patterns of coalescing elements help us to make sense of what it means 'to be a chief officer', while recognising that these elements are brought together in specific combinations and bundles across different contexts. Indeed, the generation of strategies and recognition of demands owes much to the economic, political and social contexts of local authorities, as well as the backgrounds, styles and training of chief officers themselves.

Five lessons

1. It is all about moving in and across different spaces!

So, how are we to read these multiple worlds of chief officers and the challenges that they face? We argue that reading the different accounts of public management articulated by chief officers through the lens of space opens up new ways of understanding the challenges and opportunities that they currently face. Importantly for us, the construction of different spaces of work is highly significant, for the constitution and production of space 'gives form to and orders how this world appears' while making possible 'distinctive gatherings of beings – things and people – that establish relationality and open new spaces'.¹⁴ The politics of space-making or spatialization is thus in many ways the primary work of chief officers. Put alternatively, the primary challenge facing chief officers is moving across and in different spaces as they bring into being and 'manage' different organisational logics and demands.

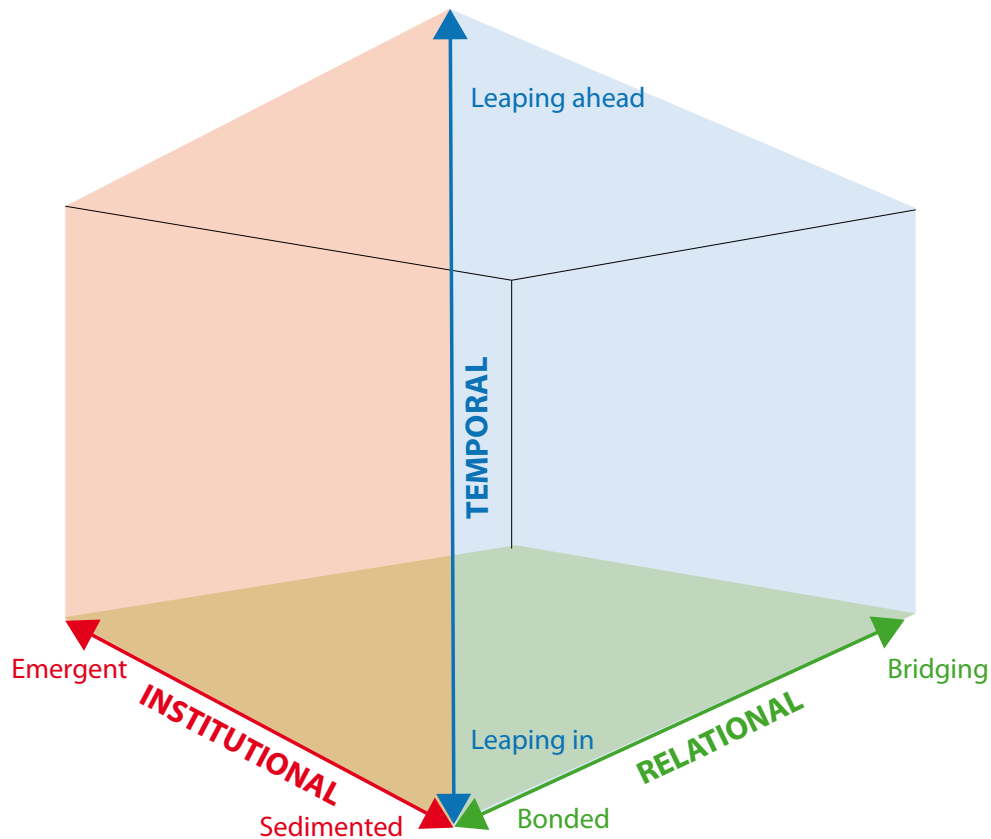
With this in mind, we identify three primary dimensions to what we call the spatial work of officers. First, they traverse different institutional arenas, from sedimented to emergent arenas. Sedimented arenas are relatively rule-bound, with clear modes of decision-making and well-defined performative roles and scripts. In contrast, emergent arenas are more fluid, highly political in that the rules and norms of decision-making, and indeed roles and membership of the arena, are in the process of being defined and remain more open to question and challenge.

Second, chief officers move between two forms of leadership: 'leaping in' and 'leaping ahead'.¹⁵ This dimension speaks to the complex temporality of the different spaces in which chief officers operate. 'Leaping in' bring officers firmly into the immediate and the present, requiring them in a logic of substitution to intervene in, and at times take control of, a situation. 'Leaping ahead' follows a logic of empowerment, obliging officers to 'move' into the future, opening and facilitating future possibilities and alternatives.

Third, chief officers move increasingly between bonded and bridging relational spaces. Here we draw on the work of Putnam and social capital. Bonding relates to closing down spaces, to building the identification of actors with spaces, to drawing boundaries or incorporating actors and demands into existing spaces. Bridging refers to opening up spaces, to working across different communities, to

drawing equivalences across different groups and potentially across different spaces to forge new relations and ways of working.

Figure 1: Moving across spatial dimensions - interpreting the changing world of senior officers



Against this background, the work of officers becomes, we suggest, that of navigating between the different dimensions of the alternative spaces which they inhabit. They are constantly working across multiple institutional arenas, juggling different balances of temporal leadership, and forging boundaries through recourse to bonded and bridging relations. Much of this work is not the domain of 'either-or' choices. Take for example, 'leaping in' and 'leaping ahead'. Effective 'leaping in' cannot be confined to the present, but rests on an understanding of the past and the future. 'Leaping ahead' is not merely about future visioning but has to be grounded in the present and the past. Indeed, in practice, this temporal dimension is often collapsed as officers seek to bring the strategic into the everyday. Put alternatively, the everyday world of chief officers is not that of stark dichotomies, but the pragmatic messiness of 'puzzling' and grounded expertise across multiple dimensions.

This is not to deny the need to maintain the 'core skills' of leadership. Chief officers spoke repeatedly of the skills of strategy formation, effective influencing, good communication, political awareness, networking and relationship management. Such core skills remain part of the armoury of chief officers, for to 'lead, [is] to have a vision, to be able to lead a team, to be able to communicate really well, to be the interface between the politicians and the project'. However, the key question, we suggest, is how this skill set is mobilised to navigate the different dimensions of the spaces in which chief officers move, and to what end.

2. Chief officers have to be serial adapters.

With this question in mind, it is tempting to conceptualise the work and skills of chief officers as being intimately related to how they hold together the different spaces which go to make up the local landscape. Accounts of new public governance and managing across networks thus tend to endorse visions of senior public managers as weavers of different narratives or holders of different geographies. They often privilege practices of boundary-spanning, in which senior public officials translate across the different networks and arenas, acting as a nodal actor capable of bringing multiple institutions into dialogue and coordinating policy responses across different spaces of governance.

Our research supports such roles of boundary spanning. But, importantly, it also challenges them. For whilst such models offer important insights into the work of chief officers, we suggest that they also risk imposing a bias towards unity on the roles and responsibilities of chief officers. In other words, they risk following a managerialist quest to impose a form of singularity or overarching coordination on the hybrid landscape of local government. They hold on to the possibility of imposing order on a fragmented system, which in many ways constantly escapes such attempts to be ordered, remaining riven by boundaries and contingencies, despite there being partial points of fixity and temporary settlements.

Importantly, being more open to the impossibility of any such totalising order draws attention to the compartmentalisation of the different spaces in which officers work. It suggests that it is not always possible to bring spaces together or to translate across different spaces so as to ensure a certain fluidity or flow across different arenas. Rather, certain spaces remain highly fixed and bounded, with officers moving into them and adopting different roles and responsibilities. In short, officers might well have recourse to an alternative set of practices, not always spanning boundaries, but taking on different roles, registers and performances as they move from space to space. They might not join-up spaces or hold them together, but they may well have to live with rupture and disassociation. They may have to operate as serial adapters, entering different spaces, speed-reading scripts, grasping alternative rules and roles, and transforming their leadership appropriately.

3. The demands of serial adaptation

Such serial adaptation across multiple spaces poses a number of challenges for chief officers. One primary challenge is that of shape-shifting, whereby officers act instrumentally to adopt multiple roles, but in so doing, they lose any claims to legitimacy. Indeed, leadership interventions across different spaces need to remain anchored in a self-identity, or set of personal values or convictions. This is not to advocate a particular leadership style. Instead, it is to support visions of leadership that foreground the importance of leading from conviction, from lived experience while demonstrating integrity, particularly in the consistency of actions and expressed beliefs.

However, for us, appeals to such authenticity should be married to an awareness of, and challenge to, one's own values, habits and default positions.¹⁶ This ethos of critical self-reflection is a key component of defining life stories and experiences, for to 'know' yourself or to 'tell our stories, we have to see ourselves as others see us; taking distance from one's own identity or 'seeing oneself as an other'.¹⁷ Equally, the self is always constructed in relation to others. As Sparrowe points out, the constitution of the self involves experimentation with different plot lines, alternative futures and pasts, which 'are often derived from the "plots" of others'. This is not 'a mark of inauthenticity. Rather, it is a hallmark of narrative authenticity'.¹⁸

In fact, challenging embedded habits through processes of 'puzzling' means that chief officers should at times be wary of default established routines and being too grounded in the everyday. Any blinkered perspective risks losing the capacity to see alternatives, or other ways of knowing. Take for example the tactic of 'leaping in' or what we might call 'firefighting'. 'Leaping in' cannot follow a logic of substitution whereby lead officers take control of a situation; it has also to incorporate a logic of

empowerment whereby followers are opened up to new ways of working and alternative strategies. Such logics of empowerment rest on recognizing difference and maintaining the capacity to see alternatives and question established values. Similarly, 'leaping ahead' is not typified by imposing solutions, but opening up potential alternatives, recognising that whilst lived experiences tells you one story, there are other stories to be told and engaged with.

Finally, it is difficult to avoid the normative justification of certain values. In other words, is it appropriate to make claims to a set of values which might for example not advance social justice? Here we argue in support of a set of values associated with the ensuring council and the new municipalism. The ensuring council endorses the ethos of stewardship, entrepreneurship and innovation, collaboration, social justice and sustainability. But, such values, as we argue, cannot be seen as a straightjacket. They too need to be challenged, subjected to critical evaluation by other ways of knowing. To coin a phrase, they are a means of 'way-finding' where the end state itself may not itself be set in stone.¹⁹ As one officer argued: 'the smart thing is not trying to get to answers. I think we need to find out what are the smart questions to ask and what are the propositions to test.'

4. Supporting the resilience of chief officers

Faced with such multiple demands and skillsets, one of the primary skills of chief officers is that of resilience. Indeed, chief officers themselves value resilience as a key skill in the delivery of their responsibilities. Resilience can be seen in many ways as dealing with ambiguity or the emotional labour that uncertainty can produce. In part, calls for resilience respond, we suggest, to the tensions for chief officers in reconciling their public and private selves. Here, the experience of chief officers under austerity is arguably little different from that of other members of the local government workforce. The private self, or the personal identity, emotional commitments and identification with public service, can come into tension with the public self, or the professional roles or institutional responsibilities, particularly the demands for budgetary cutbacks. In this context of austerity governance, the evidence suggests that resilience is becoming an increasingly important skill: senior officers need to be resilient to deal with the growing complexities and pressures they face in the current environment, and with the emotional labour which these demands entail. Significantly, a recent 2018 survey reported that 48 per cent of senior officers believed their workload had increased to an 'almost unmanageable level', while 12 per cent claimed that their workload was already 'unmanageable'. The majority of senior officers also admitted that they had considered leaving their role in the past 12 months.²⁰

5. 'Leaping ahead' and the discourse of the new municipalism

Finally, our evidence suggests that the demands of austerity governance are increasingly incorporated by chief officers into an emerging discourse of what we name 'the new municipalism' or the investment in the agency of local authorities and new ways of working to bring about change. In the first instance, we found chief officers regarded austerity and budgetary reductions as the 'new normal', part and parcel of their everyday practices. This may well be seen as another process of adaptation to the new environment of local government as chief officers have adjusted over time to the stark reality of cutbacks. But, our evidence suggests that we cannot simply read off from this process of adaptation an acceptance by chief officers of austerity and its logics of cutbacks and service reductions. Opposition to austerity was voiced by the majority of our research participants, if to the dismay of many (particularly outside local government) this did not result in any collective voicing of opposition and direct mobilisation against centrally-imposed cuts. But neither could this opposition be reduced to Do-It-Yourself politics of incremental resistance at the frontline, pushing at the margins of what is possible, although we are not in a position to deny that this occurs.

Rather, this report suggests that after some ten years of austerity, chief officers articulated the demands of austerity through a discourse of new municipalism. This new municipalism privileges forms of public entrepreneurship and commercialisation for the public purpose. In making such

claims, chief officers attributed local government with new forms of agency to engage in place stewardship and transform local ways of working and centre-local relations. Again, this should not be seen as an endorsement of austerity. At the heart of this discourse there sits a rejection of austerity, but it is married to an acceptance of the need for transformation, and a growing belief in the agency of local authorities to deliver new forms of stewardship. Indeed, although somewhat atypical, one officer claimed: 'the current environment forces local government to take more a strategic, creative, long term, collaborative approach', continuing that local authorities 'are not "reacting"; we need to be more innovative, creative, dynamic in the way in which we do business...this is the most exciting, liberating dynamic I've operated in my 25 years in local government.'

Of course, this new municipalism is emergent. Our research did not address its capacity over time to generate effective outcomes (although this has been discussed in other fora). Equally, we recognise the risk that appeals to new municipalism might in practice be a way for officers and authorities to displace the harsh realities of cuts on communities and mask over the everyday tensions of delivering austerity; a sort of 'have your cake and eat' narrative that squares off cuts to local budgets and continued investment in local services. However, such outcomes and ideological functions of new municipalism remain to be seen. Here, however, in capturing the voices of chief officers, we have identified a certain buy-in for a discourse of new municipalism and a continued belief in the agency of local authorities to bring about change, a discourse which opens up new opportunities and challenges for local authorities moving forward.

Recommendations

1. The strategic leadership capabilities of local authorities will wither on the vine *unless* chief officers have the opportunity and spaces to engage in reflective practice; to benefit from mentoring and peer review; and to scan for future challenges and alternatives.
2. Local authorities should revisit and future proof core competency frameworks for chief officers. The skills and capabilities required of chief officers have changed since 2010. And, looking ahead, local authorities should have in place the workforce development plans to drive forward the skills and capabilities associated with serial adaptation, municipal entrepreneurship and place-shaping.
3. Local authorities should investigate new ways of working which take account of the broader responsibilities of chief officers, as well as the declining numbers of staff employed by local councils. Traditional ways of working, which often means in practice a default recourse to meetings, boards and processual governance, risk becoming increasingly unsustainable and less and less fit-for-purpose.
4. After almost 10 years of austerity, local councils are facing organisational fatigue, if not, exhaustion. Like all local government staff, austerity has tested the resilience of chief officers. Local authorities, as part of a strategy of retention, should re-assess how they can further build the resilience of chief officers and all staff.
5. Organisational churn and staff turnover can deplete corporate knowledge and dilute organisational memory. Local authorities should audit their internal in-house organisational capabilities, evaluating how they are banking their corporate knowledge and capturing learning and innovation.
6. New forms of delegation, partnership working and collaboration have the potential to stretch traditional mechanisms and practices of accountability. Local authorities should review how far adequate mechanisms are in place to ensure political oversight and accountability; if not, chief officers risk becoming a 'stand-in' for established accountability procedures across local authority landscapes.

Notes

- 1 Dickinson, H. (2016) 'From New Public Management to New Public Governance' in Butcher, J. and Gilchrist, D. (eds.) *The Three Sector Solution*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, pp. 41-54.
- 2 New practices of commercialisation and revenue-raising, particularly the setting up of limited companies has been characterised as a 'field-level change' in local governance, with the number of local authority limited companies rising by over 50 per cent from 200 in 2010/11 to 300 in 2016/17. See Ferry, L., Andrews, R., Skelcher, C., and Wegorowski. P. (2018) 'New Development: Corporatization of Local Authorities in the Wake of Austerity, 2010-2016', *Public Money & Management*, 38(6): 477-80; for a discussion of local authority housing companies, see Morphet, J. and Clifford, B. (2017) *Local Authority Direct Provision of Housing*, London: University College London.
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- 14 Dikeç, M. (2017) *Space, Politics and Aesthetics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 1.
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