



# Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda

## **The State of Local Democracy: The Impact of Policy Changes on Accountability and Public Confidence**

Executive Summary



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Modernisation Agenda

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Changes on Accountability and Public Confidence**

Executive Summary

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The findings and recommendations in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or proposed policies of Communities and Local Government.

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# Introduction

The research reported in this summary has been conducted as part of a long-term Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda; the 20-plus policies that followed the 1998 and 2001 white papers. The aim of this evaluation has been to assess the cumulative impacts of the individual policies over the 1998-2007 period, identify the initiatives that have been key enablers of desired change, and highlight synergies and conflicts between the policies. This work was commissioned by Communities and Local Government (then the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister) in 2002 from a research team led by the Centre for Local & Regional Government Research at Cardiff University.

This summary paper builds on previous work published in 2005<sup>1</sup> and analyses the impact of central government policies upon local democracy over a ten year period between 1997 and 2007. Local democracy is analysed in terms of changes in:

- local accountability and
- public confidence

Our analysis of evidence from a wide range of sources including individual evaluations of policies and our own national survey of local government and in-depth case study data leads us to the following conclusions on the state of local democracy:

## Improving local accountability

- local authority officers perceive that their council has been becoming increasingly accountable to the public, although for many authorities the focus is on service users rather than citizens
- there are very high levels of engagement with a range of public bodies and the voluntary and community sector but the extent to which the views of the voluntary and community sector are taken into account in the decision-making process is unclear, as is the extent to which the sector is able to hold councils to account for their actions or lack of them. There are lower levels of engagement with the private sector
- the mechanisms for complaining about the council are effective and most local authorities are not experiencing increases in complaints, with the vast majority of officers reporting that local councils now give greater priority to resolving complaints and do so more effectively

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<sup>1</sup> *Ashworth and Skelcher (2005), Accountability: a progress summary from the Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda, CLG.*

*Cowell, Downe, Leach and Bovaird (2005), Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda: Progress Report on Public Confidence in Local Government, CLG.*

## External drivers of local accountability

- the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) has been one of the most important drivers shaping local authority accountability, as the CPA score has become a key focus of attention. However, the improvement in accountability caused by CPA has been towards central government, not the local community
- central government drivers of accountability change were having less of an impact by 2006, although the CPA was still perceived as a key driver of accountability
- there is a mixed picture on the effectiveness of scrutiny in holding the executive to account

## Confusing lines of local accountability

- there is a strong perception that partnership working compromises local accountability. This is demonstrated through evidence of confusion 'on the ground' regarding accountability roles and relationships when different governance arrangements may apply across public bodies

## Future local accountability

- there is some uncertainty around the likely impact of neighbourhood working on accountability
- there is a danger that, unless there is further clarification around accountability after the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007), it might create greater complexity
- increased accountability has uncertain consequences for public confidence. While councils have become better at 'giving an account' of their actions, the public show no greater capacity to hold councils to account. While increased openness makes it more likely that failures will be uncovered, in a media-saturated and hostile political environment, this can also invite compromise and evasion, giving further grounds for mistrust

## Improving public confidence

- while the public do not appear to be especially trustful of local government, there is no clear evidence for a major crisis of trust, across the public as a whole. The Government's Citizenship Surveys have shown a steady increase in the level of public trust in local government, from 52 per cent in 2001 to 60 per cent by 2007; indeed local councils are the only public institution to register such a consistent increase. There appears to be more trust in local government than in some other institutions, notably central government and 'politicians'
- council officers believe that the conduct and competence of council personnel have a major influence on public confidence in their council, along with service quality, responsiveness to complaints, and the mass media. Facets of openness and democracy - such as the transparency of decision-making processes, public engagement and scrutiny - are seen as less important drivers

- there is little sign that apparent mistrust is leading the public to support a reduction in the scope and powers of local government. Indeed, a degree of dissatisfaction with local government, or healthy scepticism, is one motivation for participation, at least for some social groups
- there has been no change in the proportion of people who feel they can influence local decisions – despite an expansion in the opportunities to get involved and express a view. One might expect this eventually to reduce levels of public confidence
- recent government statements give less explicit attention to public trust in local government than in the 1998 and 2001 white papers. Nevertheless, many councils still see public trust as important, though not necessarily as a distinct issue from wider concerns about service improvement, legitimacy and public engagement

## Drivers of public confidence

- the quality of services is seen as a driver of public trust by councils and service quality – especially for very visible services, associated with the ‘liveability’ agenda – is seen as a vital cue influencing the public’s views about their council. However, because these services are not weighted heavily in official indicators of service improvement, such as CPA scores, improvement in these indicators has not been associated with any increase in public trust. CPA scores mean little to the public and are not seen as information on which judgements about trust might be based

## Central government policies and public confidence

- there is little evidence that central government policies have had a marked effect on public trust, except indirectly, in so far as these policies have encouraged local authorities to improve services and become more responsive. Indeed, some of the major influences on public trust lie in wider societal changes that cannot easily be influenced by any policies
- other major causes of mistrust lie in the political nature of local government, with decisions that often benefit some groups more than others, and not in the managerial actions promoted by central government policies
- trust is unlikely to be directly increased by improvements in the competence, trustworthiness and democratic responsiveness of local authorities, although governments – local and national – will no doubt wish to promote such changes for their own intrinsic merits

## Recommendations

- our research demonstrates that there is no simple solution for improving the state of local democracy. However, it also suggests that the following initiatives, if pursued effectively over a sustained period of time, are likely to have a beneficial effect on the health of local democracy, by improving accountability and encouraging public confidence in local government:

### *Improving accountability*

- achieving greater visibility for the key community leaders within the local authority, eg Leader, cabinet members, Chief Executive, etc
- building up the capacity of the voluntary and community sector to input more effectively into local authority decision making processes
- providing more powers for the public and other organisations to hold local authorities to account
- developing mechanisms by which local authorities can more effectively challenge the effects upon local communities of decisions made by private sector operators of services eg bus operators
- reducing the level of micro-management of local authorities by central government departments, so that councils could pay more attention to increasing accountability to local stakeholders
- increasing the consistency of governance arrangements applying across public bodies, to avoid accountability being compromised by the complexity arising from partnerships between different types of public body
- instituting clear mechanisms for the public to gain redress if services are not delivered to an appropriate standard

### *Encouraging public confidence*

- improving basic, visible council services
- extending public understanding of council responsibilities and capacities
- Improving dialogue with citizens and providing feedback for those who participate in decision-making processes
- cultivating a positive identity for the area and its citizens
- communicating more effectively with the public, including better management of press relations.

For further information on this research, and a copy of the full report, contact:

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