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County Councils and Public Service

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This book has described the contribution that County Councils can make to the provision of public services over the next decade and leaves the reader in no doubt, on a service by service basis, as to the relevance and quality of what is on offer.

I would like to tackle a somewhat wider set of issues:

- how can the counties deliver what is promised for services?
- what can the counties contribute to local democracy as a whole?
- where does all this stand in relation to the wider debate about counties in the future?

The wider debate about counties

To dispose of the last issue first, these essays are not intended to be read as either advocacy or defence of the present structure of County Councils. The propositions most of them make about service delivery are as relevant to a local government system based on unitary authorities as to a two-tier system. What they show is that *any* structure of local government, if it is to be efficient, effective and responsive, must contain and reflect certain *core elements* which are found in County Councils at the present time. These are described in the paragraphs which follow.

Given this, there is every reason for County Councils to welcome and participate fully in public debate about the future of local government and its structure. Such debate, responsibly conducted and factually based, can serve to strengthen local democracy and enhance its status.

How can the counties deliver?

This question falls into two parts. First, have the counties lived up to the expectations of them in 1974 when the present system of local government was created? Secondly, do the counties have the qualities necessary to perform effectively over the next decade? In practice, these two aspects are indissolubly joined. The future contribution of the counties depends largely on where they are now.

The current state of the counties

Where then do the counties stand in 1990? Many commentators suggested that the 1974 reorganisation was of itself a vindication of the principle of 'county government'. Not only were many counties largely unchanged, new counties were established in both shire and metropolitan areas. That was, however, only part of the picture. The new County Councils had new responsibilities. Many had new boundaries. All had to establish new relationships with the district councils working alongside them. Has it all worked in practice?

First, and most important, counties are in general carrying out their service responsibilities well and effectively, given the resources available to them. Surveys suggest that some county services demonstrate very high levels of consumer satisfaction, others somewhat less. Over 16 years there has been no serious suggestion that responsibilities should be removed from counties because they were being discharged inadequately. Nor has any convincing case been made that counties' duties could be more effectively carried out elsewhere. In practice, changes in county responsibilities have been at the margin. Even the way in which services were provided changed little before the advent of compulsory competitive tendering and local management of schools. In service terms, therefore, the record is one of relative stability and considerable achievement.

Secondly, give or take one or two continuing arguments about boundaries, the shire counties established in 1974 have proved to be viable and resilient units of local democracy. The three completely new counties have each developed a clear identity. Other counties with major boundary changes have adjusted well to their new geography. There may be an argument as to whether local government should be based on counties, districts or a completely new set of authorities, or whether some large districts should be taken out of counties. That is not the point at issue here. The question is whether those entrusted in 1974 with establishing the effectiveness of one key element in a new local government structure have succeeded in the task. The evidence would suggest that they have.

So what, it might be said. One would expect large units of local government with significant resources to deliver a reasonable standard of public service. A better test might be whether or not they have worked properly with their colleague district councils in delivering services. This essential quality of good local government was always going to be the hardest part of the new system to put in place, given the imbalance of size between the two tiers. It would be wrong to claim that all is well everywhere. Yet much effort has been made up and down the country by both county and district councils. There are countless examples of practical co-operation in service planning and delivery, often across party political lines, in the interests of local communities. County Councils must now play their part in bringing relationships everywhere up to the standards of the best. The blame for a poor relationship should not be attributable to the County Council. The key is surely to look at the two tiers of local authority on a horizontal rather than a vertical plane, as partners with joint and several responsibilities for their communities.

Looking to the future

County services have developed – and prospered – over the last 16 years by dint of the commitment, foresight, careful planning and hard work of their members and officials. Success has been earned. To deliver in the future will mean even harder effort given the new challenges and uncertainties facing counties spelt out in the preceding essays.

County Councils will have to play, for all they are worth, to their strengths:

- the power and influence that County Councils can exert because of their position in the community
- the managerial competence of the people in charge of County Councils
- the ability of County Councils to take a strategic view of the needs of their varied communities and to design and deliver an integrated pattern of services.

Power and influence

The responsible exercise of political power lies at the heart of today's local government. County Councils have power in plenty, because of their geographical size and service responsibilities. Collectively, they are the dominant element in local government measured by spending power. Locally, the County Council is the dominant organisation in every county area. More and more counties are using this power in an assertive yet controlled way to stake out a clear policy for, and profile in, their local communities. Every County Council ought to do the same, according to its political complexion and judgment of local circumstances. It is not necessarily dependent on resources, but is absolutely dependent on the attitude of mind of those in

charge. For county government there should be a distinctive and positive style of action in all 47 counties. If national government and business behave in this way, so should local authorities.

In a quieter, but equally important way, County Councils have always had 'influence' in their communities. The continuing evolution of the enabling council must considerably increase the scope of County Council influence, for it provides a philosophical basis on which counties can properly take an interest in the whole economic and social structure of their areas. Where they do not wish to or cannot act directly, their dominant local position enables them to try to ensure that other parties do so act. The challenge to County Councils is to demonstrate that they are indeed the natural enabling authorities of the 1990s.

Managerial competence

Everywhere in local government, management styles and attitudes are changing rapidly. The County Councils have some claim to be at the forefront of this process. It shows in the quality of their response to externally imposed changes including local management of schools and compulsory competitive tendering. More important, there is much self-generated fresh thinking and initiative in individual councils. The essays again demonstrate this. New management structures, at both political and official level, have been introduced. New management philosophies distinguishing service planning from service delivery have been developed. New approaches have been taken to the relationship with service users. When the changes in community care are fully implemented, there is little doubt that County Councils will amply prove that local government is the right home for this important task.

In the 1990s the context and climate in which County Councils manage will change. Continuation of present national policies, in relation to local government, may produce a very different type of local authority. An alternative government will have its own priorities for local government to which an effective response will be needed. The financial background may well become even tighter as the ratio of dependent to working population increases. The counties have strength in depth in management skills. The challenge of the 1990s will be to retain those skills, to add to them and to put them to effective use in changing circumstances.

Strategic thinking and integrated services

Counties are mixtures of town and country, in varying proportions in different areas, as was the intention of the 1974 settlement. This key feature of counties will continue to give them the opportunity – and indeed the duty – to think strategically about the development of services to meet the needs of their

particular mix of communities. The essays show that this will be true of every county service. Developments during the next decade are likely to reinforce this particular quality of County Councils.

Strategic thinking will of course have little purpose unless it is matched by an appropriate package of integrated local services. The County Councils' service responsibilities are greater than those of any other public body operating at a local level, rivalled only by those of health authorities. To produce the best mix of county services will be the task. A particular challenge will be to show that the large-scale buying power of counties can be used to 'purchase' services from a range of suppliers, which are both value for money and properly linked to strategic thinking.

The local government setting

These, then, are the foundations on which the counties can deliver what they have to offer and the particular challenges they must meet. But County Councils only exist, because as a country we have chosen to have local democracy as part of the governmental system. The counties must also be able to show, therefore, that they do contribute to the health and strength of local democracy, and will continue to do so. How can this be judged?

It is worth recalling the Widdicombe Committee's assessment of the value of local government. This, said the Committee, flows from its three interlocking attributes of

- Pluralism – the dispersal of power within the organs of the state
- Participation – the quality of democracy within local government
- Responsiveness – the provision of services in a sensitive and co-ordinated way.

This assessment has stood the test of time well. County Councils must expect to be judged by how far their performance measures up against these characteristics.

The present verdict might be: a reasonable record, but can do better! On *pluralism*, County Councils obviously have an important role as independent decision-makers on behalf of their local communities, and are seen in that light by the people who live in those communities. The words 'local authority' are well chosen. This is true despite increasing central control in recent years. The strong historical basis of the counties will have helped to secure the counties' position in the overall government structure. For the future the challenge is to hold on to this position and to resist further intrusion into local autonomy. The best way of securing this will be for counties to take every opportunity to *assert* their autonomy and independence, by using to the full the powers they possess.

On *participation*, County Councils provide ways in which people can express community views and take part in the actual delivery of services. This happens both through the electoral process and through opportunities to influence council decisions by consultation and lobbying. There is, however, more to be done. The proportion of people voting in local elections must be raised. Consultation processes need to be improved. New approaches to decision-making need to be developed. This is a field in which the ground is moving constantly, and counties need to be ahead of the game.

On *responsiveness*, County Councils have always recognised the need to look after ‘customers’, even if that has not always been part of the language used in County Halls. More recently, counties have done good work in developing ‘customer care’, as a separate ACC publication will show. Many people believe that local elections are no longer enough to measure user satisfaction. Counties will need to put in place sensitive and imaginative arrangements to respond to user needs and wishes, and so enhance their accountability to their local communities.

Conclusion

County Councils are public service organisations. Public services are different from other services. They are not simply a matter of individual relationships between service users and service providers, important though those are. Public services minister to and reflect a wider public interest. They are provided by democratically elected and accountable bodies whose duty is to ensure that the needs of communities are properly identified and met; that there is equity in the allocation of resources and the treatment of individuals; and that there is effective public participation in decisions about services. The job of County Councils, along with other public authorities, is ultimately to serve the common good. Whether they do so is the ultimate test to which they should be put. This book has hopefully shown that, to this transcendental issue, the County Councils will continue to make a shining contribution.