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Spaces of the Local: Chief Officers and the New Municipalism

The Study

Broad Findings

- The rise of the super-directorate.
- Firefighting and the strategic.
- Moving across multiple geographies.
- The value of resilience.
- A new municipalism.

‘A rediscovery of self-belief[...] councils still have muscle’.

Moving across multiple geographies

- Inhabit a multiplicity of spatial and temporal 'worlds'; increasingly moving up and down different scales of government.
- Temporally, they are similarly pulled in different directions; 'firefighting' and strategic, working to different rhythms or timescales.

Moving across multiple geographies

- Three primary dimensions to what we call the spatial work of officers:
 - 1. Different institutional arenas, from sedimented to emergent arenas;
 - 2. Temporalities, 'leaping in' and 'leaping ahead';
 - 3. Relational, moving between bonded and bridging relational spaces.

Serial adapters

- Now, dominant thinking is to portray officers as ‘boundary spanners’ who bring these different spaces together, speak across these.
- Evidence both supports and challenges this perspective. But...
- Move instead from compartment to compartment, quickly reading the script, gaining a sense of the rules, adopting new performances.
- Leadership as a process of serial adaptation.

The demands of serial adaptation

- Remaining anchored in a self-identity, or set of personal values or convictions.
- Ethos of critical self-reflection that cultivates an awareness of, and challenge to, one's own values, habits and default positions.
- 'Puzzling' – '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.'

Loosening the 'grip' of traditional frames?

- Generic versus specialist skills – It's all about the generic.
- Split responsibilities between department and council – but tension now between department, authority, and partnership or regional responsibilities and loyalties.
- Maintaining the political-administrative boundaries – but multiplicity of new governance spaces dragging chief officers into what might be seen as political roles of representation.

Moving forward

- Ensuring spaces to engage in reflective practice; to benefit from mentoring and peer review; and to scan for future challenges and alternatives.
- Revisiting and future proofing core competency frameworks for chief officers to align with the new municipalism.
- Investigating new ways of working - do established ways of working risk becoming increasingly unsustainable and less and less fit-for-purpose?

Moving forward

- Austerity has tested the resilience of all staff, including chief officers. How are strategies of retention seeking to build the resilience of chief officers and all staff?
- Organisational churn and staff turnover can deplete corporate knowledge and dilute organisational memory. How are local authorities banking their corporate knowledge and capturing learning and innovation?
- New forms of delegation, partnership working and collaboration have the potential to stretch traditional mechanisms and practices of accountability. How far are adequate mechanisms in place to ensure political oversight and accountability?