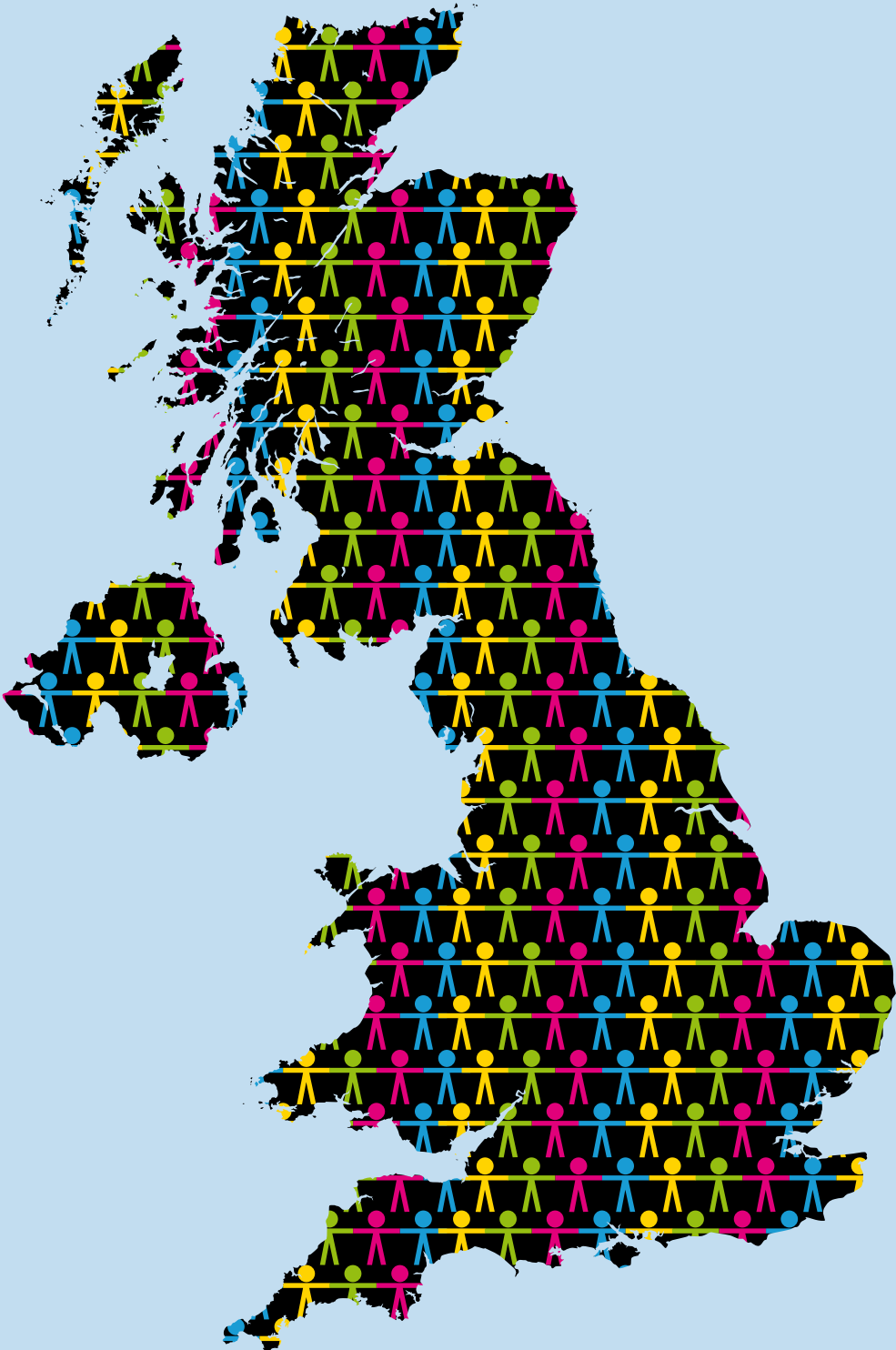# Two Tribes?

Exploring the future role of elected members

apse

Two Tribes?

Exploring the future role of elected members

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) 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 frontline service provision in areas such as waste and refuse collection, parks and environmental services, leisure, school meals, cleaning, housing and building maintenance and energy services. APSE leads a research programme exploring a range of issues which impact upon both local authority frontline services as well as strategic public policy issues.

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Contents

Executive summary

More than 10 years ago, the then New Labour government's local government modernisation agenda put its faith in a new set of political management structures to renew local political leadership. Its modernisation agenda replaced the existing committee system in England with a formal cabinet and overview and scrutiny system. This institutional re-design, it was argued, would allow for swifter and more transparent decision-making where those responsible for decisions - the cabinet and leader (or mayor) – could be clearly identified and held to account by councillors acting in scrutiny committees, and communities acting in neighbourhood arenas and through the ballot box. Local authorities in Wales moved towards such cabinet systems, whilst councils in Scotland, like those in Northern Ireland, retained the committee system, although a number of local authorities in Scotland have recently adopted cabinet-style executive systems.

This study examines local political structures in local government across the UK, seeking to evaluate long-term changes in the practices and attitudes and values of councillors towards local political leadership. It repeats the 2003 survey undertaken by APSE in conjunction with the Centre for Local and Regional Research in Cardiff Business School, offering longitudinal data on the changes to the practices of elected members over the last ten years or so. The 2014 online survey was conducted during January and February 2014. It was sent to over 20,000 elected members' email addresses across the United Kingdom. It received 2577 responses, a response rate of 14.5 per cent.

Local political leadership in 2014: Key lessons

Attempts to diversify the body of elected members have yet to bear fruit

Local councillors, the survey suggests, remain collectively in 2014 unrepresentative of the wider population, pejoratively dismissed in some corners as the 'usual suspects', that is to say, middle-aged, white, men. The average age of the councillors was 60 years old; only 29 per cent were women; and only 4 per cent classified themselves as being from an ethnic minority. More importantly, the demography of local councillors has been somewhat 'frozen in time' over the last ten years, despite recent attempts to foster the broader engagement of different social groupings in local politics. Councillors themselves are at best pessimistic as to the opportunities to recruit new members to stand in local elections.

Elected members spend on average 27 hours a week on council business. They continue to embrace their role as community patch representatives and leaders. Social media has made councillors increasingly accessible, which risks placing over time increasing demands on elected representatives. When these time commitments and demands are considered in conjunction with the age profile of elected members, it would appear that public service in elected local government is increasingly difficult, but not impossible, for those who are economically active or have family responsibilities.

Uncertainty over the capacity to deliver service improvements in the future

Local authorities have experienced radical cuts to their funding since 2010. Over four years into this programme of austerity politics, it is thus hardly surprising that elected members are circumspect as to the capacity of local authorities to continue to deliver service improvement. Whilst almost three-quarters of councillors believed that their authorities were committed to service improvement, only half of councillors agreed that current service improvement plans in their authorities would produce improvements to council services. Perhaps more damning only half believed that they would be personally able to contribute to such efforts to improve services.

The experience of existing political structures continues to divide elected members

The political structures put in place by the Local Government Act 2002 have become more embedded over the last ten years in local practices. But, when asked if the separation of cabinet and scrutiny roles has worked well, less than half of elected members responded positively. In addition, some 55 per cent of elected members agreed that changes to political structures have reduced the influence of non-executive members. While this reduction of the influence of non-executive members might have been for some part of the modernisation agenda, the 2014 survey suggests that non-executive members are experiencing a degree of dis-engagement from local decision-making.

Scrutiny committees do not work for all

This perception of dis-engagement and waning influence among non-executive members cannot be divorced from elected members' perceptions of the effectiveness of scrutiny committees. Just over a third of elected members do not believe that scrutiny committees are an effective means of holding the executive to account. Indeed, just over half of local councillors believe that decision-making has become less transparent since the separation of cabinet and scrutiny functions.

There is declining support for neighbourhood working

There is declining support for the effectiveness of neighbourhood or area working as an instrument to engage communities. Just over a third of elected members agreed that area committees were an effective mechanism for members to engage local communities. Some 30 per cent disagreed, while approximately a third did not express a viewpoint either way. Indeed, this questioning of neighbourhood working or area committees was the single issue, which united executive and non-executive members across local authorities.

The need to consolidate the democratic anchorage of partnership working

In contrast to neighbourhood working, partnership working continues to exercise a hold over elected members, as much as for its promise of service improvement as for its access to new funding. Approximately three quarters of councillors expected local authorities to engage in more partnership working in the future, while almost two-thirds agreed that partnership working had increased recently. However, the democratic anchorage of partnership working poses concerns for elected members, particularly in terms of the public accountability of public-private partnerships. Paradoxically, only a minority of elected members spend a high proportion of their time representing their local authority on other public bodies, or working in partnership with other agencies suggesting that this task is often allocated to a minority of elected members or to officers.

Elected local government is a world of two tribes

Apart from neighbourhood working, executive and non-executive members hold different viewpoints on the effectiveness of the modernisation agenda and its impact on local democracy. Almost two-thirds (64.6 per cent) of executive members agreed with the statement that the modernisation agenda had worked well, whilst 58.3 per cent saw it as having increased transparency (see Table 7). In contrast, non-executive members tended to refute such claims, with only 36.7 per cent agreeing that changes to political structure had worked well and only 29.5 per cent agreeing that the modernisation agenda had increased transparency. Indeed, the majority of non-executive councillors, 58.4 per cent, endorsed the claim that the modernisation agenda had led to the marginalisation of their role, while 38.8 per cent saw scrutiny as an effective mechanism to hold the executive to account.

It seems that local government has become increasingly structured by a polarisation akin to a tribal affiliation whereby executive and non-executive members hold different viewpoints and undertake different tasks. Indeed, some 11 years on from the 2003 survey, this particular cleavage remains as

strong now as it did in the immediate aftermath of the Labour reforms. The relative dissatisfaction with area or neighbourhood working stands out as an isolated point of consensus across these two tribes of local government.

Importantly, this divide cuts across party divides and political persuasion. It was replicated in the survey responses of shadow cabinet members. It crossed political parties. Those councillors that exercise executive decision-making powers, or those in waiting to occupy such roles, expressed persistently different views from what we might term 'backbench' members, regardless of political persuasion.

Power imbalances between members have always existed across local authorities. Checks and balances, not least personal networks, are in place to circumvent any institutional mechanisms. Indeed, in follow-up discussions with elected members, the party group was put forward as one such arena where executive and non-executive members sought each other's views and where any potential divisions were mediated and managed. However, the strength of the evidence of our returns for the existence of two tribes across local government leads us to question whether the party group is up to the task of restraining the institutional drivers of the modernisation agenda, which constitute the different experiences of the 'two tribes' in local government. The fact that shadow executive members have more in common, in terms of their survey responses, with executive members than they do with backbench councillors suggests that it is not.

An agenda for re-connecting political leadership and local democracy

More than ten years on from the Local Government Act 2002, it is time to re-consider the impact of the modernisation agenda on local political leadership. The 2002 reforms may well have 'designed in' the falling influence of frontline or backbench councillors in return for the benefits of more effective decision-making and open lines of accountability. However, the lessons of this study suggest that there is a demand for a new agenda of institutional change that begins to reconnect all elected members with decision-making across the multiple arenas of local governance.

Any collective dialogue in the future has to be grounded in a set of principles and an ethos of local government that advances local political leadership. In other words, it needs to move beyond narrow discussions of political structures and consider the purpose of local government. The vision of the Ensuring Council offers one path to trigger such a renewed dialogue over the future of local political leadership. The ethos of ensuring tasks local councils to act as stewards of local communities. The Ensuring Council thus acknowledges its responsibilities to advance social justice through the strategic mobilisation of in-house services, public employment and civic entrepreneurship. It puts democratic political leadership and the generation of public value over and beyond the individual rationalities of so-called market democracy. This survey is one contribution to the dialogue over how we might begin to advance such an ethos of ensuring across local authorities.

The modernisation agenda: Local political leadership twelve years on

The changing demands, requirements and expectations of the office of the councillor, like those of local government, are once again under scrutiny. This is nothing new: the contradictory pressures of the office are well-known, be it representing and advocating on behalf of communities, directing and leading policy, or scrutinising and regulating local performance.[1] However, in the current economic and political context, these pressures have arguably increased as local councillors face up to the 'tough choices' over how to balance rising demands for services with reductions in public spending and calls for local democratic renewal.

Traditionally, local political leadership and decision-making in local councils was formally undertaken through a committee system, often it has to be said after party groups had decided upon a particular strategy to pursue. Labour's modernisation agenda, however, replaced this existing committee system in England with a formal cabinet and overview and scrutiny system.[2] This institutional re-design, it was argued, would allow for swifter and more transparent decision-making where those responsible for decisions - the cabinet and leader (or mayor) – could be clearly identified and held to account by councillors acting in scrutiny committees, and communities acting in neighbourhood arenas and through the ballot box. Local authorities in Wales moved towards such cabinet systems, whilst local councils in Scotland, like those in Northern Ireland, retained the committee system, although a number of local authorities in Scotland have recently adopted cabinet-style executive systems.

This study examines local political structures in local government across the UK, seeking to evaluate long-term changes in the practices and attitudes and values of councillors towards local political leadership. *The Future Role of Elected Members*, the Association for Public Service Excellence's (APSE) 2003 report[3], found that councillors across the United Kingdom broadly welcomed much of the modernisation agenda. However, the study also identified emergent divisions between elected members based on the, then new, distinction between executive and non-executive members. Overview and scrutiny bodies had, it was suggested, the potential to replace traditional party group fault-lines in local authorities.[4]

Against this background, this 2014 study surveys the beliefs and attitudes of elected members towards local political structures some twelve years after Labour's Local Government Act 2002. In so doing, it repeats the 2003 survey undertaken by APSE in conjunction with the Centre for Local and Regional Research in Cardiff Business School, offering longitudinal data on the changes to the practices of elected members over the last ten years or so. The 2014 online survey was conducted during January and February 2014. The survey was sent to over 20,000 elected members' email addresses across the United Kingdom.[5]

Of course, any lessons on the changing attitudes of elected members over time cannot be viewed in isolation from significant shifts in the political and economic context within which local councils operate, as well as from other elements of the modernisation agenda, be it partnership working or increased participation through neighbourhood working and community engagement. These shifts, often captured in the narrative of the shift from local government to local governance, have altered understandings of local political leadership, creating new challenges and new roles for elected members.[6] More importantly, at the time of delivering the survey, elected members were firmly entrenched in the management of austerity, addressing the radical reductions to local authority spending implemented by the coalition government in 2010.

Mirroring the 2003 study, the survey was divided into four main areas of investigation, each reflecting aspects of the modernisation agenda. The first set of questions relating to the demographic profile of

councillors, be it age, gender, ethnicity, party affiliation and length of public service. Elected members were then asked to evaluate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements to do with political structures, scrutiny, area committees and service improvement (ranked on a Likert scale from plus to minus five). All statements were imported from the 2003 study. The third section of the survey examined the activities of elected members, asking respondents whether they spent a high or low proportion on tasks such as acting as a first point of call, communicating council decisions or representing the authority on other public bodies. Finally, elected members were asked a set of questions concerning the prospects for the office of councillor and the different forms of communication with which they engage.

Let us now turn to the analysis of the findings of the 2014 survey and its lessons for the state of political leadership compared to 2003.

Elected members: your voice

It is very much up to individual members to develop their role and the opportunities are there for them to do so. There are occasions when the public they represent have little awareness of how much time members spend on their behalf, resolving local problems and issues.

Politics is not an area that is ever likely to be 'flavour of the month' and members often have a hard task convincing their electorate about the efforts they make to resolve local problems - mainly because they depend on officers and higher authorities and organisations to help them achieve what needs to be achieved. In other words, they are very often not 'masters' of their own destiny in what they wish to achieve for those who elected them.

Many a new councillor will have great ambition to change many things (if not the World) only to find that is not as easy as first thought. Much change for the better is achieved by constantly championing small improvements - there is no 'magic wand'!

Anonymous survey responses 2014

The future of elected members 2014: Survey findings

Reading the survey analysis

This analysis of survey returns is divided into four inter-connected parts. The first examines the demographic profile of councillors across the United Kingdom in 2014. The second explores the attitudes of elected members towards local political structures, partnership working and service improvement, whilst the third investigates the work and activities of local councillors. The final section undertakes a two-fold comparison, analysing the different perspectives of executive and non-executive members and how these different perspectives, attitudes and beliefs have changed between 2003 and 2014. In so doing, it brings to the fore one of the primary lessons of this survey: the emergence and strengthening since the modernisation agenda of 'two tribes' of executive and non-executive members across local government.

Part One: The demographic profile of UK councillors in 2014

Councillors were asked a series of questions concerning their age; gender; length of service; political affiliation; and official responsibilities as members (or not) of the executive. The position of 'executive councillor' was broadly interpreted to be an elected member who is typically a council leader, cabinet member or committee convenor or office-holder in the council majority (or alternatively an elected member who fulfils leadership roles for opposition parties in the case of a 'shadow executive' councillor).

Age

The average age of the councillors responding to our 2014 survey was 60 years old.

Like all averages, this masks significant nuances in the age profile of councillors. More than a third of elected members, 38 per cent, were between 60 and 69 years old, whilst approximately 10 per cent were between 40 to 49 years old. But, as Chart 1 demonstrates, the age of respondents falls overwhelmingly in the middle to later age groups, with those below 40 or over 80 years of age in the minority. Indeed, this age distribution has changed little since 2003, when a third of elected members who responded to the survey were aged between 56 and 65 years old.

Chart 1: Elected members by age (2014)
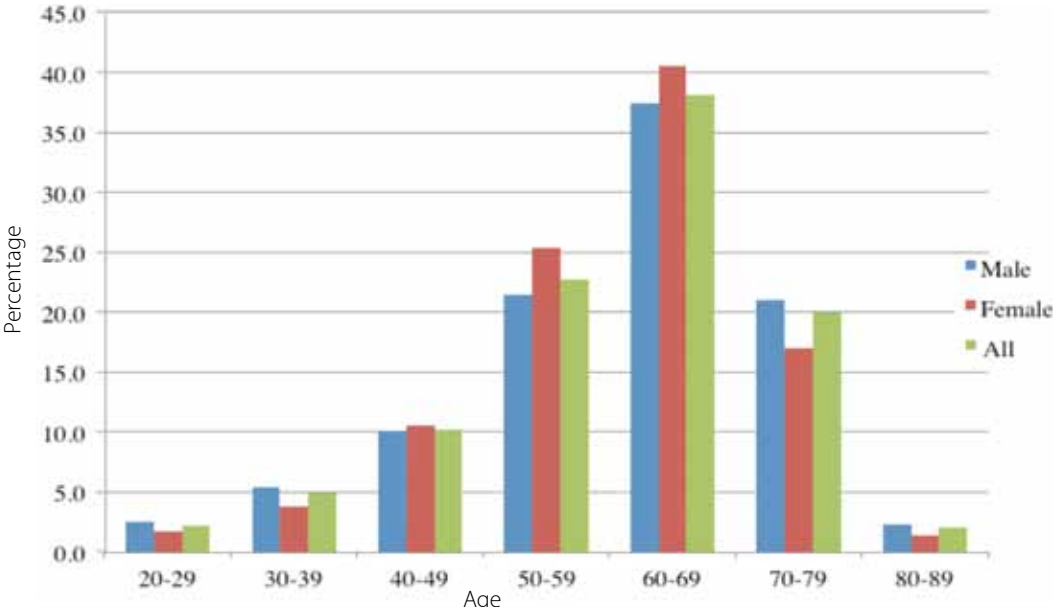
Age and length of service

On average, respondents have served 12 years as councillors. Over half of female respondents, 56 per cent, have served less than 9 years as an elected member; in contrast to 46 per cent of male councillors (see Chart 2). But, as one would imagine, there is a relationship between the age of elected members and their length of service, with those older elected members who responded to the survey having served more terms as councillors.[7] While 29 per cent of our respondents were in their first electoral cycle, 25 per cent of councillors have been through five or more electoral cycles. Significantly, while members of the executive had longer service than their non-executive colleagues, they were, on average, younger than non-executive members.[8]

Chart 2: Elected members by length of service (2014)
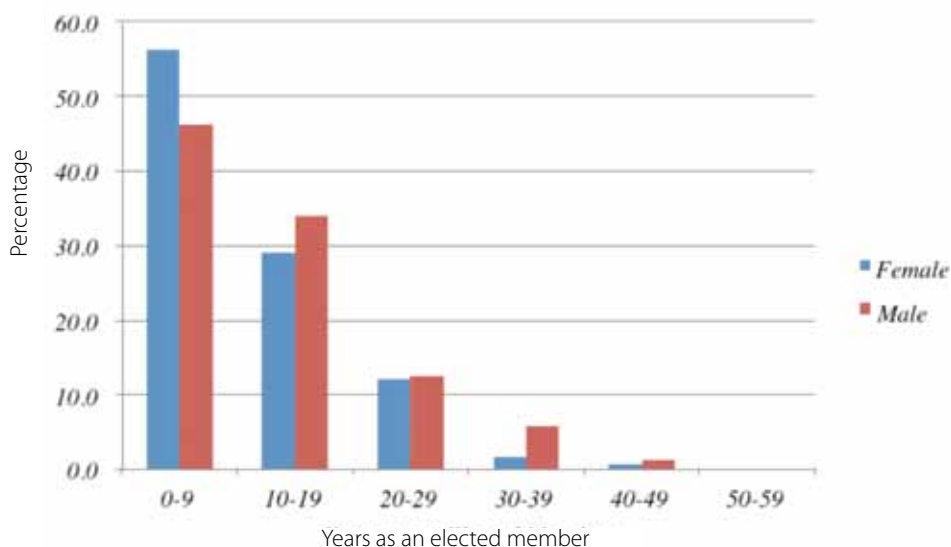

Age and political affiliation

There were interesting differences in the age of respondents according to political affiliation.[9] The age profile of Green Party, DUP and Sinn Féin councillors was lower than the average age of respondents, while that of UKIP and Alliance councillors was older. Conservative councillors were on the whole older than their Labour counterparts.

Gender

In 2014, local government remains dominated by male councillors. Approximately 71 per cent of respondents were men and 29 per cent were women (see Chart 3). This equated to an overall ratio of 2.5 male respondents for every female respondent. Taking account of political affiliation, the Green Party and the Alliance Party, while still represented in the majority by male councillors, were the closest to having parity between men and women. A number of other parties in our sample had no female respondents. The ratio between male and female councillors in the Labour Party was 2 to 1; for the Conservative Party, it was 3 to 1.

In the 2003 survey, the ratio of male respondents to female respondents was 5 to 1. However, claims that the representation of woman councillors has improved should be treated with some caution. If we examine the proportion of executive and non-executive members[10] responding to the survey, more than half (58 per cent) of respondents in 2003 were executive members; a proportion which drops to just under a quarter, 23 per cent, in the 2014 survey. This lower representation of executive members in our 2014 sample may be explained by local government reorganisation and the move towards larger authorities reducing the number of leadership positions. Nonetheless, it may have biased responses in terms of the representation of women, given the under-representation of female councillors on the executives of local councils; an issue to which we now turn.

Chart 3: Elected members by gender (2014)
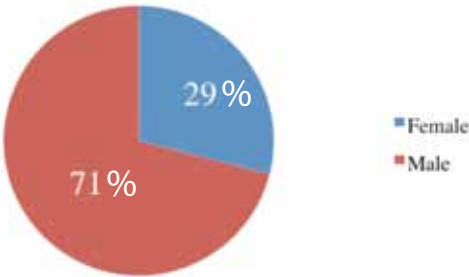
Women councillors on the executive

Some 26 per cent of executive councillors who responded to the survey were women, which was less than their representation in the overall sample of councillors. In addition, women councillors on the executive were, on average, older than their male counterparts and female non-executive members (which was the reverse of the broad finding that members of the executive were younger than their non-executive counterparts).

Ethnicity

Approximately 96 per cent of councillors who responded to the survey classified themselves as 'white'. In the intervening ten years between the two surveys the proportion of non-white elected members thus remains unchanged, standing at only 4 per cent of all councillors. It is still the case that elected members are 'almost all' white British.[11]

Key findings

Overall, the demographic profile of councillors appears to have remained relatively stable over the last 10 years or more. Councillors remain unrepresentative of the broader population, with an under-representation of women and black and ethnic minorities. This is not a new concern nor is it an issue restricted to local government. Our findings remain broadly in line with other surveys, for example the 2013 LGA Census of Local Authority Councillors, which also reported an average age of 60 years old for councillors, with roughly 30 per cent of returns from woman councillors and 4 per cent of returns from councillors who identified themselves as 'non-white' (findings which further suggest that our 2014 sample is representative of councillors as a whole).[12] However, our longitudinal data brings to the fore the notable lack of impact of the measures undertaken in the last ten years to address the thorny issue of the representativeness of local councillors – an issue to which we return in the conclusion to this report.

When considering the issue of the age of councillors, our survey reveals a more mixed picture. There is a long held chimera that elected members are too old and that councillors should be younger. However, our 2014 survey identifies what we might call 'first term victors' and 'repeat term achievers'. 'Repeat term achievers' may be 'older' councillors, but they have contested multiple electoral cycles, and when they first stood for office, they were often the younger councillors demanded.

Part Two: Attitudes towards local political structures, partnerships and service improvement in 2014

Replicating the previous study's approach in 2003, we posed a series of questions to councillors relating to the impact of changes to the political structures in local government, neighbourhood working and partnerships, and attitudes towards service improvement. Here, we set out our aggregate findings for the overall body or population of councillors who responded to the 2014 survey.

Changes to local political structures

Elected members remain in 2014 relatively divided over the effectiveness of the modernisation agenda and recent changes to local political structures (see Table 1). Asked if changes in council structures have worked well, 43 per cent of respondents responded positively, whilst some 31 per cent disagreed. In fact, a significant population of these councillors (approximately 40 per cent) doubt that changes in council structures have improved the transparency of decision-making. Less than half of our respondents also agreed that scrutiny committees were an effective means of holding the executive to account, while some 55 per cent asserted that changes in council structures have reduced the influence of non-executive members.[13]

Table 1: Elected members and political structures (2014)

	Agree	Disagree
Changes in council structures (e.g. the separation of cabinet and scrutiny roles) have worked well	43.1	31.5
Decision-making has become more transparent as a result of these changes	36.1	40.3
Scrutiny committees are effective mechanisms for holding the executive to account	40.7	36.9
Area committees enable members to engage with the local community	38.9	31.3
Overall, recent changes in council structures have reduced the influence of non-executive members	55.1	22.1

Area working and partnerships

Area or neighbourhood working was a central plank of the modernisation agenda, becoming akin to a policy panacea to address the 'wicked issues' facing local government. However, councillors were found in 2014 to be somewhat ambivalent towards the effectiveness of area or neighbourhood working (see Table 1). Just over third of elected members agreed that area committees were an effective mechanism for members to engage local communities. Some 30 per cent disagreed, while approximately a third did not express a viewpoint either way.

These reservations, however, were not mirrored in the patterns of support among elected members for partnership working, which was arguably the second foundation of the modernisation agenda (see Table 2). Approximately three quarters of councillors expected local authorities to engage in more partnership working in the future, while almost two-thirds agreed that partnership working had increased recently. Importantly, over half of councillors, our survey suggests, recognised that partnership working can deliver service improvements, although this belief in the effectiveness of collaboration was accompanied by majority support (approximately 59 per cent) for the claim that partnership working was driven by the desire to access additional funding. In fact, despite the continued support for partnership working, close to 45 per cent of respondents also agreed that increased public-private collaboration weakened public accountability.

Table 2: Elected members and partnerships (2014)

	Agree	Disagree
Partnership working between my authority and other bodies has increased recently	63.9	14.1
I expect there to be more partnership working between my authority and the other bodies in the foreseeable future	75.6	9.0
I expect partnership working to lead to improvements in the services my authority is responsible for	56.3	16.6
Increased public-private partnership working leads to a decrease in public accountability	44.2	30.7
Public-private partnership is motivated mainly by the need for councils to access new funding	59.4	15.2

Service improvement

There was widespread agreement among elected members that local authorities were strongly committed to improving services (see Table 3). Almost three-quarters of respondents believed that their authorities were committed to service improvement, while almost two-thirds agreed that their authority had a clear service improvement plan in place. Yet, councillors appeared more circumspect as to the effectiveness of such plans and their own capacity to contribute to such efforts to improve council services. Whilst over half of our respondents expected there to be improvements in services and that they would be able to make a contribution to service improvement, roughly a quarter disagreed with such claims and a further quarter did not express a viewpoint either way.

Table 3: Elected members and service improvement (2014)

	Agree	Disagree
My authority is strongly committed to improving the services it is responsible for	73.1	10.7
My authority has a clear action plan to improve services	63	16.2
I expect the action plan to lead to significant improvements in the services my authority is responsible for	51	23.2
As an elected member I will personally be able to contribute to efforts to improve council services in the foreseeable future	53.2	23.6

Key findings

In general, elected members remain relatively divided over the effectiveness of recent changes to local political structures. Notably, there is a significant belief that the influence of non-executive members has fallen as a result of the modernisation agenda across local authorities. There is matched by a degree of uncertainty as to how far scrutiny committees are able to hold the executive to account. Significantly, the two policy drivers of the modernisation agenda, partnership working and area or neighbourhood working appeared to have fared differently in the eyes of councillors in recent years (see below). Partnership working continues to exercise a hold over elected members, even if there are significant numbers who believe that the motivation for collaboration cannot be divorced from the need to access new sources of funding, and that collaboration itself may bring with it concerns over the transparency of local decision-making. In contrast, the effectiveness of neighbourhood working or area committees as an instrument to engage communities appears to be currently more questioned by elected members.

More troubling however, from the perspective of the localism agenda and how local authorities are addressing reductions in public spending is the apparent lack of confidence among councillors that the actions plans that authorities have in place will lead to significant improvements in services. Indeed, only approximately half of councillors judged this to be the case, while similarly only half believed that they would be personally able to contribute to such efforts to improve services.

Part Three: What councillors do in 2014

Elected members are spending on average twenty-seven hours per week on their duties and responsibilities as a councillor. Here we report on our findings in relation to how councillors divide their time between non-executive activities and executive activities, before turning to their perceptions of the effectiveness of different mechanisms of service improvement, their use of different forms of communication, and their understanding of the prospects for the future of the office of councillor.

Non-executive activities

Councillors continue to exercise activities associated with their broad role as community representatives (see Table 4.1). They thus strongly interpreted their role as one of representing all sections of the community, with only 12 per cent devoting a high proportion of their time to representing particular sections of the community in their ward. Approximately half of respondents also acknowledged spending a high proportion of their time acting as a first point of call and as a source of ideas and proposals for people in their ward, as well as feeding community views into policies. Interestingly, despite their relative indifference towards the effectiveness of area working as a means of engaging communities, and indeed towards scrutiny as a means of holding the executive to account, councillors continued to devote a high proportion of their time to such activities. In contrast, dealing with complaints appeared to split elected members into two camps, with approximately 40 per cent spending a high proportion on their time on such activities and just below a third spending a low proportion of their time on such activities.

Table 4.1 Elected members and proportion of time spent on non-executive activities (2014)

	High Proportion	Low Proportion
Dealing with complaints	39.8	32.1
Acting as a first point of call	50.2	21.0
Representing sections of the community	12.9	65.5
Feeding community views into council policies	49.4	16.1
Acting as a source of ideas and proposals for your ward	52.6	14.8
Scrutinising council services	53.2	22.3
Working with area / neighbourhood committees	46.1	26.5

Executive activities

Approximately two-thirds of councillors (63 per cent) spent a high proportion of their time matching services to community needs, while just over half spent a similar proportion of time communicating and explaining council decisions (see Table 4.2). Only a minority of councillors devoted a high proportion of their time to the outward facing activities of communicating to the media, representing the authority on public bodies and working with national or regional government agencies (22 per cent, 20 per cent, and 8.8 per cent respectively). The lack of time devoted to working with national and regional agencies cannot be divorced from the localism of the Coalition government and the decline of regional government. However, almost a third of councillors admitted that working in partnership accounted for only a low proportion of their time. And, perhaps more significantly for our analysis, almost 40 per cent of councillors acknowledged that they spent only a low proportion of their time giving advice to council officials.

Table 4.2 Elected members and proportion of time spent on executive activities (2014)

	High Proportion	Low Proportion
Communicating and explaining council decisions	50.9	15.7
Ensuring services match the community needs and aspirations	63	8.9
Communicating with the local media	22	50.9
Giving advice to council officials	29.6	40.2
Working in partnership with other agencies	39	32.2
Working with regional and national government agencies	8.8	79.8
Representing the authority on other public bodies	20	58.1

Mechanisms of service improvement

In general, councillors tended to support mechanisms of service improvement which matched what they spent their time doing (as one might expect). Dealing with complaints, acting as a first point of call, and acting as a source of ideas and proposal for wards were therefore perceived as the most effective ways of councillors improving services (see Table 5). In contrast, giving advice to officials, representing sections of the community, communicating with the local media, and most notably, working with regional and national agencies drew relatively less support. Other measures such as working in partnership, scrutinising council services, and working with area/neighbourhood committees tended to divide councillor opinion as to their effectiveness.

Table 5: Elected members and mechanisms of service improvement (2014)

	Effective	Not Effective
Dealing with complaints	71.9	7.5
Acting as a first point of call for local people	74.1	7.3
Representing sections of the community	37.2	21.7
Feeding community views into council policies	57.4	13.7
Communicating and explaining council decisions	57.7	13.2
Acting as a source of ideas and proposals for your ward	60.6	12.4
Ensuring services match community needs and aspirations	59.8	11.8
Communicating with the local media	34.8	33.5
Giving advice to council officials	38	26.3
Scrutinising council services	51.1	22.3
Working with area / neighbourhood committees	48.6	24.2
Working in partnership with other agencies	51.2	17.4
Working with regional and national agencies	20.9	50.6
Representing the authority on other public bodies	42	26.8

Communication and social media

Technological changes have made members more and more, if not constantly, accessible. Elected members exploit an array of different forms of communication: they use blogs, personal websites and contact from council websites; they have a presence on social networking sites such as Linkedin, Instagram, Skype, Yammer and Whatsap; and they continue to use traditional modes of communication such as surgeries, newsletters, newspapers, public meetings and local radio. New technology, our survey suggests, has not therefore replaced previous methods of contact with constituents. Indeed, there appears to be little, if any, replacement of conventional modes of contact. It is simply the case that technology has augmented conventional methods of communication. For example, while 98 per cent of members have had email contact with their constituents, face-to-face and telephone contact are still important modes of communication.

Chart 4: Elected members and forms of communication (2014)
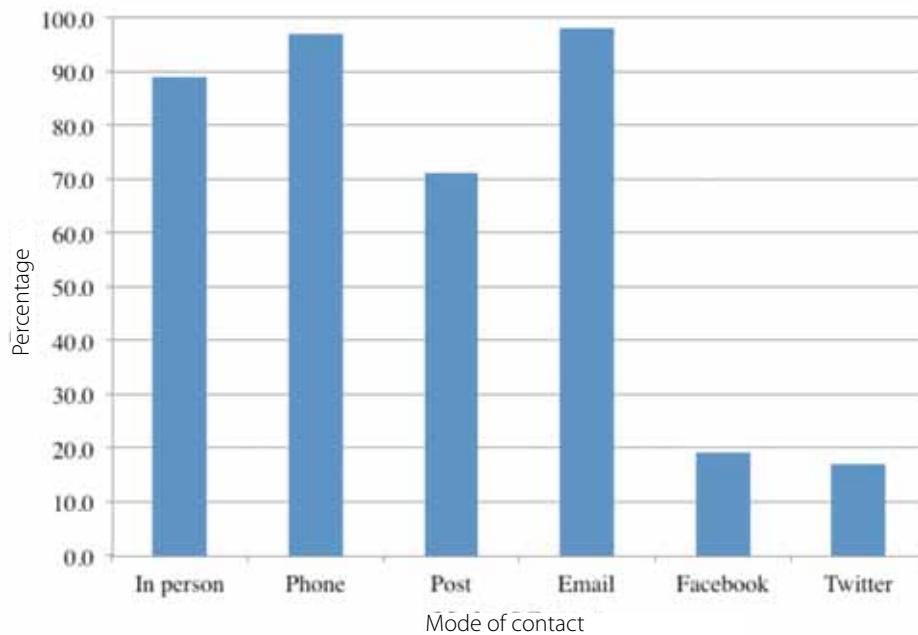
Future prospects

Our findings suggest a relatively pessimistic outlook among local councillors (see Table 6). Over two-thirds agreed that it is increasingly difficult to attract new people to stand as councillors, and almost half expected the number of local councillors in their authority to decline. There was also some uncertainty over whether authorities were taking effective steps to increase voter turnout, with over a third of elected members thinking that was not the case.

Finally, devolution was not seen as having a detrimental impact on the role of elected members. Members in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales will arguably have a stronger grasp of what devolution has meant to their role. In all three countries a minority of members agree with the statement. In Northern Ireland 38 per cent agree with the statement, in Scotland 27 per cent agree while in Wales there is 43 per cent agreement.

Table 6: Elected members and future prospects (2014)

	Agree	Disagree
It is becoming increasingly difficult to attract new people to stand as councillors in my authority	64.5	17.2
The number of elected members in my authority is likely to be reduced over the next 5 to 10 years	47.1	27.8
My authority is taking effective steps to increase voter turnout at local elections	32	35.4
Devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales is having a detrimental impact on the role of elected members	14	51.9

Key findings

Elected members spend on average 27 hours a week on council business. They continue to embrace their role as community patch representatives and leaders. Social media has made councillors increasingly accessible, which risks placing over time increasing demands on elected representatives. When these time commitments and demands are considered in conjunction with the age profile of elected members (see Chart 1), it would appear that public service in elected local government is increasingly difficult, but not impossible, for those who are economically active or have family

responsibilities. Indeed, current elected members are pessimistic as to the capacity to attract new people into its ranks, with one respondent suggesting that 'far from having fewer councillors we will need more as the population increases and expectations grow.'

Significantly, relatively few councillors devote significant proportions of their time to outward facing collaboration with other public bodies, agencies or partners. Only a minority of elected members spent a high proportion of their time representing their local authority on other public bodies, working in partnership with other agencies or working with regional or national agencies. Putting aside the decline of regional government agencies, these findings raise questions as to the reality of the democratic governance of collaborations, particularly given the expectation among councillors that partnership working by local authorities has increased and is likely to increase in the future. In fact, our findings suggest that representation on collaborations is concentrated in the hands of a narrow band of elected members or delegated to officers. Delegating the area of partnership working to officers suggests it own tensions, for only a minority of councillors devote a high proportion of their time to giving advice to officers, and equally the value of this advice as a means of improving performance is disputed. But, if representation on collaborations is concentrated in the hands of a narrow band of elected members, this is not itself without potential contradictions, as we go on to discuss in our analysis of the 'two tribes' within local government and the changes to the attitudes and values of councillors since 2003.

Part Four: The emergence of 'two tribes'

The initial 2003 survey pointed to the emerging cleavage between executive members and non-executive members.[14] In this final section, we re-examine this finding, analysing responses to the 2014 survey in relation to whether elected members were members or not of the executive, and then comparing such responses to the findings of 2003.

Political structures, partnerships and service improvement

Almost two-thirds (64.6 per cent) of executive members agreed with the statement that the modernisation agenda had worked well, whilst 58.3 per cent saw it as having increased transparency (see Table 7). In contrast, non-executive members tended to refute such claims, with only 36.7 per cent agreeing that changes to political structure had worked well and only 29.5 per cent agreeing that the modernisation agenda had increased transparency. Indeed, the majority of non-executive councillors, 58.4 per cent, endorsed the claim that the modernisation agenda had led to the marginalisation of their role, while 38.8 per cent saw scrutiny as an effective mechanism to hold the executive to account. Again, it is worth noting that the single issue that countered this division between executive and non-executive members was the effectiveness of area or neighbourhood working.

This cleavage should not mask how support for elements of the modernisation agenda has grown or solidified. There has been an increase between 2003 and 2014 in the proportion of elected members who believe that changes to council structures have worked well, that decision-making is more transparent, and that scrutiny committees are effective in holding the executive to account (see Table 7). For example, the proportion of executive members who agree with the claim that changes to council structures have worked well has increased by 3.7 per cent from 2003 to 2014 (the accompanying increase in non-executive members was 14.2 per cent). Equally, there has been a concomitant reduction in the proportion of councillors who think non-executive members have been marginalised (a fall of 4.1 per cent for executive members and 6.8 per cent for non-executive members). However, the perception among elected members of the declining influence of backbench councillors remained significantly high in 2014. In addition, support for the effectiveness of area or neighbourhood working had declined (by almost 10.3 per cent for executive members and 16.3 per cent for non-executive members between 2003 and 2014).

Table 7: Political structures and executive/non-executive members (2014-2003)

	2014				2003			
	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx
	Agree		Disagree		Agree		Disagree	
Changes in council structures (e.g. the separation of cabinet and scrutiny roles) have worked well	64.6	36.7	14.5	36.5	60.9	22.3	18.1	53.2
Decision-making has become more transparent as a result of these changes	58.3	29.5	19.4	46.4	55.3	21.9	26.8	60.5
Scrutiny committees are effective mechanisms for holding the executive to account	47.1	38.8	28.3	39.4	38	28.7	32.8	45.7
Area committees enable members to engage with the local community	38.5	39	33.1	30.8	48.8	55.3	26.4	22.3
Overall recent changes in council structures have reduced the influence of non-executive members	43.6	58.4	31.1	19.5	47.7	65.2	29.8	25.3

Partnership working, as we argue above, continued to command strong support from councillors. However, elected members on the executive were more optimistic than their non-executive colleagues towards the benefits accruing from partnership working. Just over three quarters of executive members, compared to half of non-executive members, believed that partnership working would lead to service improvements in their authority. Executive members were also more convinced that partnership working had increased in local authorities and would continue to do so in the future (see Table 8).

In fact, although there has been in general a weakening of support in favour of partnership between the two surveys, the support of non-executive members has on average declined faster than their executive counterparts. The belief among executive members that partnership working could deliver service improvements fell by just over 1 per cent between 2003 and 2014, compared to a fall of 10.3 per cent among non-executive members. At the same time, the belief that public-private collaborations were primarily concerned with the need to access new sources of funding had grown among non-executive members (60.6 per cent in 2014 compared to 45.3 per cent in 2003). Their executive colleagues, however, had moved in the opposite direction (55.1 per cent in 2014, compared to 76.4 per cent in 2003). Where executive members had moved closer between the two surveys to non-executive members was in concerns over the accountability of public-private partnerships. Here, there was a four per cent swing for executive members, with 41.5 per cent agreeing in 2014 that public-private partnership lead to a decrease in public accountability, compared to 37 per cent in 2003. The belief amongst non-executive members, however, remained stable at approximately 45 per cent.

Table 8: Partnership working and executive/non-executive members (2014-2003)

	2014				2003			
	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx
	Agree		Disagree		Agree		Disagree	
Partnership working between my authority and other bodies has increased recently	81.1	58.8	5.2	16.7	94.2	72.2	0.7	7.2
I expect there to be more partnership working between my authority and the other bodies in the foreseeable future	90.8	71	3.5	10.6	94.2	79.2	1.5	5.2
I expect partnership working to lead to improvements in the services my authority is responsible for	76.8	50.3	5.9	19.7	77.9	60.6	7.3	8.5
Increased public-private partnership working leads to a decrease in public accountability	41.5	45.1	36.7	29	37	45.3	34.8	26.3
Public-private partnership is motivated mainly by the need for councils to access new funding	55.1	60.6	19.3	14.1	76.4	45.3	12.5	26.3

In addition, executive members were more positive than non-executive members towards the prospects for service improvement, whether it was the commitment of local authorities to service improvement, or the likelihood of local plans delivering significant service improvements (see Table 9). For example, 77.3 per cent of executive members expected local service plans to deliver significant improvements, compared to only 43.1 per cent of non-executive members. Yet, the most notable difference between the two groups was their differing perceptions of the ability of an individual councillor to contribute to an improvement in services. Twice as many executive members as non-executive members (87 to 43.3 per cent) thought that they could contribute to service improvement. Notably, scepticism as to the ability of the local authority to impact on service improvement has grown stronger in non-executive members between the two surveys. Between 2003 and 2014, there was a 90 per cent increase in the total numbers of non-executive members challenging the commitment to, and prospects for, service improvement, or the capacity of individual councillors to contribute to agendas. The concomitant reduction in support from executive members was only 13 per cent, although once again this falling support should not be dismissed.

Table 9: Performance improvement and executive/non-executive members (2014-2003)

	2014				2003			
	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx
	Agree		Disagree		Agree		Disagree	
My authority is strongly committed to improving the services it is responsible for	93.3	67.1	1.9	13.3	97.8	80.4	0	9.3
My authority has a clear action plan to improve services	88	55.7	3.1	20.1	94.8	72.1	0	11.4
I expect the action plan to lead to significant improvements in the services my authority is responsible for	77.3	43.1	5.3	28.6	93.4	55.7	3	12.4
As an elected member I will personally be able to contribute to efforts to improve council services in the foreseeable future	87	43.3	4.4	29.3	94.1	59	2.2	21

What executive and non-executive members do

As we noted above, on average, members spend 27 hours per week on councillor-related activities. Those fulfilling an executive role spend, on average, over ten hours per week more on council duties than their non-executive colleagues. Executive responsibilities do not appear to simply substitute for the 'patch' responsibilities of all elected members. Rather they are additional to the functions and responsibilities associated with the role of an elected member. For example, almost a half of executive and non-executive members reported spending a high proportion of time acting as a source of ideas and proposals for their ward and feeding community views into council policies.

But, there were also subtle differences between the activities prioritised by executive and non-executive members. Firstly, as might be expected, over half of non-executive members, 57.6 per cent, spent a high proportion of their time scrutinising council services (in contrast to 38.2 per cent for executive members). Secondly, over half, 53.4 per cent, of non-executive members also spent a high proportion of their time acting as first point of call for their constituents, whereas this figure fell to only 39.3 per cent for executive members. Similarly, more non-executive members devoted a high proportion of their time to dealing with complaints and working with area or neighbourhood committees (some 42.4 and 48.4 per cent respectively, compared to 31.1. and 38.5 per cent). Finally, executive members tended to attribute more time to giving advice to council officers (57 per cent of executive members signalling that they spent a high proportion of their time on this activity, compared to 21.4 per cent of non-executive members).

Importantly, in keeping with our earlier analysis, both executive and non-executive members did not appear to prioritise the outward facing collaborative tasks of local authorities. Indeed, the most precipitous decline in responses between 2003 and 2014 all involved working or engaging with outside organisations, be they partners, government agencies or other public bodies. Non-executive members, 85.2 per cent, devoted little time to working with regional and national government agencies. Almost two-thirds, 63.6 per cent indicated that they spent a low proportion of their time representing their authority on other public bodies. Similarly, executive members appeared not to prioritise such activities, with 61.9 and 39.4 per cent respectively spending a low proportion of their time working with regional and national government and representing their authority on public bodies.

Table 10.1: Executive and non-executive members and the proportion of time spent on non-executive activities (2014-2003)

	2014				2003			
	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx
	High Proportion		Low Proportion		High Proportion		Low Proportion	
Dealing with complaints	31.1	42.4	41.1	29.4	43.5	66.3	21.4	9.5
Acting as a first point of call	39.3	53.4	27.9	19	52.3	67.1	20.5	9.9
Representing sections of the community	12.8	12.8	64.2	65.8	13.3	28.8	52.3	48.9
Feeding community views into council policies	51.3	48.8	11.6	17.4	60.4	62.7	10.4	12.7
Acting as a source of ideas and proposals for your ward	50.3	53.4	13.9	15.1	69.7	68	11.1	5.4
Scrutinising council services	38.2	57.6	36.4	18.1	44.6	67	26.9	18.1
Working with area / neighbourhood committees	38.5	48.4	30	25.4	45.1	62.8	29.3	13.8

However, partnership working with other agencies presented a relatively mixed picture when analysed from the perspective on executive and non-executive members. While over half of executive members, 51.6 per cent, spent a high proportion of their time working in partnership with other agencies, this

fell to just over a third, 35.3 per cent, as far as non-executive members were concerned. But, the number of elected members who attributed a high proportion of their time to partnership working with other agencies had fallen since 2003, from 60.8 per cent for executive members and 48.9 per cent for non-executive members. Once again, given the apparent significance of partnership working to local authorities, these responses would appear to suggest that representation on partnerships is either the monopoly of a relatively restricted cohort of councillors, or has been delegated or even deferred to officers.

Table 10.2: Executive and non-executive members and the proportion of time spent on non-executive activities (2014-2003)

	2014				2003			
	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx	EX	NEx
	Very High Proportion		Very Low Proportion		Very High Proportion		Very Low Proportion	
Communicating and explaining council decisions	57.2	49.1	11.1	17.1	68.9	50	8.9	17
Ensuring services match the community needs and aspirations	70.4	60.8	4.8	10.2	85.1	75.8	2.2	2.1
Communicating with the local media	35.4	18	31.3	56.8	44.4	26.3	22.2	41.1
Giving advice to council officials	57	21.4	13.6	48	63.4	32.7	11.2	36.8
Working in partnership with other agencies	51.6	35.3	21.3	35.4	60.8	48.9	14.9	19.1
Working with regional and national government agencies	19.4	5.6	61.9	85.2	45.2	30.8	33.3	54.2
Representing the authority on other public bodies	31.8	16.6	39.4	63.6	55.3	44.2	17.4	38.9

In fact, it is such outward facing collaborative activities that have experienced the biggest falls in the proportion of time devoted to them between the two surveys. Thus the proportion of councillors indicating that they spend a low amount of time working with regional and national governments rose from 54.2 in 2003 to 85.2 per cent in 2014 for non-executive members and from 33.3 to 61.9 per cent for members of the executive. Equally, the amount of time spent representing the council on other bodies appears to have fallen in relative terms, with 39.4 per cent of executive members indicating that they spend a low proportion of their time undertaking such responsibilities in 2014, compared to just over 17.4 per cent in 2003. For non-executive members the figure has risen from 38.9 per cent in 2003 to almost 63.6 per cent in 2014. However, this should not detract from significant changes in the relative time since 2003 devoted to dealing with complaints, acting as a first point of call and as a source of ideas and proposals for the ward. For example, the number of executive members indicating that they spent a low proportion of their time dealing with complaints doubled between the two surveys. For non-executive members, however, the number almost tripled. Indeed, the number of non-executive members spending a high proportion of their time working with neighbourhood or area committees also fell, from 62.8 per cent in 2003 to 48.4 per cent in 2014.

Mechanisms for service improvement and future prospects

Members of the executive were in general more optimistic about the effectiveness of different mechanisms of service improvement (see Table 11). This optimism was consistent with their confidence in the prospects for service improvement, and their distribution of activities. Thus, executive members were more confident than non-executive members in the effectiveness of feeding community views

into policy; ensuring services match community needs; scrutiny; giving advice to officers; working in partnership with other agencies and representing the authority on other public bodies. As few as a sixth of non-executive members, 16 per cent, believed working with regional and national agencies contributes to performance improvement, while this rose to 36.9 per cent for members of the executive.

Table 11: executive and non-executive members and activities contributing to performance Improvement

	2014				2003			
	EX	Nex	EX	Nex	EX	Nex	EX	Nex
	Effective		Not effective		Effective		Not effective	
Dealing with complaints	74.1	71.1	6.1	7.9	81.8	87.3	4.4	3.2
Acting as a first point of call for local people	74.2	74.1	6.5	7.5	83	85	4.2	7.5
Representing sections of the community	42.3	35.6	20.2	28.7	45.2	74.8	19.3	5.5
Feeding community views into council policies	71.8	53.2	5.4	16.1	72.8	62.1	3.7	7.4
Communicating and explaining council decisions	67.8	54.7	8.6	14.6	56.2	46.8	12.4	18.1
Acting as a source of ideas and proposals for your ward	68.4	58.2	6.2	14.2	69.1	59.1	5.1	7.5
Ensuring services match community needs and aspirations	75	55.3	4.5	13.9	74.3	57.4	2.9	9.6
Communicating with the local media	47.5	31	20.1	37.4	40.1	35.1	16.8	34.1
Giving advice to council officials	60.2	31.4	7.8	31.8	63.7	35.5	11.9	24.7
Scrutinising council services	59.1	48.7	14.2	24.7	53	49.5	21.2	22.6
Working with area / neighbourhood committees	49.5	48.3	22.2	24.7	58	50	24.4	23.8
Working in partnership with other agencies	63.2	47.6	10.3	19.5	62.3	53.7	10.3	12.9
Working with regional and national agencies	36.9	16	36.2	57.5	53	31.5	20.9	35.9
Representing the authority on other public bodies	53.5	38.6	16.6	29.8	64.1	47.9	7.7	25

However, over time, there were few activities where the perception of elected members towards the effectiveness of mechanisms for service improvement had strengthened. One exception was communicating and explaining council decisions where support for its effectiveness increased for both executive members (67.8 per cent in 2014 as opposed to 56.2 per cent in 2003), and non-executive members (54.7 per cent as opposed to 46.8 per cent). Communicating with the local media also saw an increase for executive members, 47.5 per cent in 2014 as opposed to 40.1 per cent in 2003, although it fell among non-executive members to 31 per cent in 2014 from 35.1 per cent in 2003. However, somewhat worryingly, there was a fall in the confidence attributed to dealing with complaints where 74.1 per cent of executive members recognised its effectiveness in 2014 compared to 81.8 per cent in 2003. The concomitant decline for non-executive members was from 87.3 per cent in 2003 to 71.1 per cent in 2014. The same pattern emerges when looking at acting as a first point of call for local people. In 2014, some 74 per cent of all elected members thought this contributed to service improvement, a fall from 83 per cent of executive members and 85 per cent of non-executive members in 2003. But consistent with our earlier findings, the sharpest falls between surveys are found in the effectiveness of working with regional and national government, and representing the council on public bodies (see Table 11).

There was broad agreement between executive, 59.4 per cent, and non-executive members, 65.9 per cent, on the difficulties of attracting new people to stand as councillors (see Table 12). There was also little variation between executive and non-executive members as far as their attitudes towards whether the number of elected members in their authority would be reduced in the next decade and whether devolution was having a detrimental effect on the role of councillors. In fact, taking into account the view of councillors in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as we did above, our findings suggest that for those directly involved in devolution, there has been little change in attitudes since 2003. However, non-executive members were less convinced that their authority was taking effective steps to increase turnout, 27.7 per cent compared to 46.8 per cent of executive members. Over time, both executive and non-executive members have become more pessimistic as to the capacity to encourage 'new' people to stand as councillors, although executive members have become more confident in the steps taken by local authorities to increase voter turnout (see Table 12). Indeed, pessimism as to the capacity to attract 'new' elected members to stand for office has increased since 2003 by 15 per cent among executive members and 17 per cent among non-executive members.

Table 12: Future prospects and executive and non-executive members (2014-2003)

	2014				2003			
	EX	Nex	EX	Nex	EX	Nex	EX	Nex
	Agree		Disagree		Agree		Disagree	
It is becoming increasingly difficult to attract new people to stand as councillors in my authority	59.4	65.9	19.9	16.5	44.4	48.9	36.8	28.2
The number of elected members in my authority is likely to be reduced over the next 5 to 10 years	41.9	48.6	32.5	26.3	70.6	51.1	8.1	17.7
My authority is taking effective steps to increase voter turnout at local elections	46.8	27.7	20.2	39.9	24.8	26.9	40.5	45.2
Devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales is having a detrimental impact on the role of elected members	17	13.2	49.2	52.6	36.7	43.6	39.7	35.6

Key findings

The 2014 survey confirms the existence of two tribes within local authorities: executive and non-executive members. Some 11 years on, this particular cleavage remains as strong now as it did in 2003. As might be expected, non-executive members tend to spend their time undertaking different duties, spending in particular less time than executive members giving advice to officers and working with external bodies. But, there was in 2014 across all areas (apart from neighbourhood working) statistically significant differences[15] between the attitudes and views of executive and non-executive members. For example, if executive members are more likely to support recent changes to political structures, non-executive members are more likely to doubt the effectiveness of such changes. Equally, if executive members are likely to be more optimistic about their capacity to impact upon service improvement, non-executive members are on the contrary more pessimistic about their capacity to bring about change, and drive forward service improvement. Indeed, the relative dissatisfaction with area or neighbourhood working stands out as an isolated point of consensus across these two tribes of local government.

Importantly, this divide cut across party divides and political persuasion. It was replicated in the survey responses of shadow cabinet members. It crossed political parties.[16] Those councillors that exercise executive decision-making powers, or those in waiting to occupy such roles, expressed

persistently different views from what we might term 'backbench' members, regardless of political persuasion. In short, there was a polarisation akin to a tribal affiliation between elected members, such that executive members held a different viewpoint of the world of local government to their non-executive counterparts. We now consider the implications of this survey, and importantly, this critical disjuncture between the 'lived experience' for executive and non-executive members, for the future of local political leadership.

Conclusions: Political leadership and the ensuring council

Ambitious political leadership and the grounding of decisions in the local stewardship of place sit at the heart of the Ensuring Council.[17] The ethos of ensuring tasks local councils to act as stewards of local communities. It puts democratic political leadership and the generation of public value over and beyond the individual rationalities of so-called market democracy. The Ensuring Council thus acknowledges its responsibilities to advance social justice through the strategic mobilisation of in-house services, public employment and civic entrepreneurship.

But, translating such principles into practice is never straightforward. 'Wicked' policy problems do not often lend themselves to 'quick fix' policy solutions.[18] Building coalitions for change brings into play multiple demands across different political arenas, each infused with combinations of market, participatory or collaborative democracy.[19] In fact, politics cannot always produce the highly sought after positive sum games through which everyone benefits from a decision or programme.

Yet, whatever the difficulties, political leadership matters. It matters to how localities understand and respond to the changing needs of communities, to shifting social, economic and environmental demands, and to external challenges.[20] Indeed, faced, as authorities are, with reductions in public spending and rising demands for services, local political leadership remains a key factor in the formulation of strategic policies to tackle austerity[21] Not least, it is the art of political leadership that can forge universal, if contestable, settlements between competing sectional demands, judge the merits of rival and ambiguous evidence bases, and prioritise complex policy objectives.

With this in mind, this conclusion considers the key findings of the survey and their implications for practices of political leadership across local authorities. The survey data provides an analysis in 2014 of the attitudes and values of elected members across the United Kingdom. Unlike many other studies, it offers however important insights into how attitudes have changed over time, examining specifically how the fundamental principles of the modernisation agenda have evolved over the last 10 years or so. Here we summarise such shifts, pointing more to the broad lessons that have emerged in the study.

Local political leadership in 2014: Key lessons

Attempts to diversify the body of elected members have yet to bear fruit

Local councillors, the survey suggests, remain in 2014 unrepresentative of the wider population, pejoratively dismissed in some corners as the 'usual suspects', that is to say, middle-aged, white, men. More importantly, the demography of local councillors has been somewhat 'frozen in time' over the last ten years, despite recent attempts to foster the broader engagement of different social groupings in local politics. Councillors themselves are at best pessimistic as to the opportunities to recruit new members to stand in local elections.

Uncertainty over the capacity to deliver service improvements in the future

Local authorities have experienced radical cuts to their funding since 2010. Over four years into this programme of austerity politics, it is thus hardly surprising that elected members are circumspect as to the capacity of local authorities to continue to deliver service improvement. Only half of councillors agreed that current service improvement plans in their authorities would produce improvements council services.

Perhaps more damning only half believed that they would be personally able to contribute to such efforts to improve services.

The experience of existing political structures continues to divide elected members

The political structures put in place by the 2002 Act have become more embedded over the last ten years in local practices. But, when asked if the separation of cabinet and scrutiny roles has worked well, less than half of elected members responded positively. In addition, some 55 per cent of elected members agreed that changes to political structures have reduced the influence of non-executive members. While this reduction of the influence of non-executive members might have been for some part of the modernisation agenda, the 2014 survey suggests that non-executive members are experiencing a degree of dis-engagement from local decision-making.

Scrutiny committees do not work for all

This perception of dis-engagement and waning influence among non-executive members cannot be divorced from elected members' perceptions of the effectiveness of scrutiny committees. Just over a third of elected members do not believe that scrutiny committees are an effective means of holding the executive to account. Indeed, just over two quarters of local councillors believe that decision-making has become less transparent since the separation of cabinet and scrutiny functions.

There is declining support for neighbourhood working

There is declining support for the effectiveness of neighbourhood or area working as an instrument to engage communities. Indeed, this questioning of neighbourhood working or area committees was the single issue, which united executive and non-executive members across local authorities.

The need to consolidate the democratic anchorage of partnership working

In contrast to neighbourhood working, partnership working continues to exercise a hold over elected members, as much as for its promise of service improvement as for its access to new funding. However, the democratic anchorage[22] of partnership working poses concerns for elected members, particularly in terms of the public accountability of public-private partnerships. Paradoxically, only a minority of elected members spend a high proportion of their time representing their local authority on other public bodies, or working in partnership with other agencies suggesting that this task is often allocated to a minority of elected members or to officers.

Elected local government is a world of two tribes.

Apart from neighbourhood working, executive and non-executive members hold different viewpoints on the effectiveness of the modernisation agenda and its impact on local democracy. For example, executive members are more likely to support recent changes to political structures and to be more optimistic about their capacity to impact upon service improvement. It seems that local government has become increasingly structured by a polarisation akin to a tribal affiliation whereby executive and non-executive members hold different viewpoints and undertake different tasks.

Power imbalances between members have always existed across local authorities. Checks and balances, not least personal networks, are in place to circumvent any institutional mechanisms. Indeed, in follow-up discussions with elected members, the party group was put forward as one such arena where executive and non-executive members sought each other's views and where any potential divisions were mediated and managed. The survey data does not allow us to comment on the effectiveness of the party group as an arena of mediating between the two tribes. However, the strength of the evidence of our returns for the existence of two tribes across local government leads us to question whether the party group is up to the task of restraining the institutional drivers of the modernisation agenda, which constitute the different experiences of the 'two tribes' in local government. The fact that shadow executive members have more in common, in terms of their survey responses, with executive members than they do with backbench councillors suggests that it is not.

Two tribes: The voice of non-executive members

- Executive members without ideas allow officers to put forward and implement policy without reference to members.

- The Cabinet system removes democracy and strongly limits the role of non-executive members.

- More partnership working with other public bodies, particularly the NHS must happen and ordinary Members of the Council need to be involved in this not just the Executive

- Need to find better ways of involving non-executive members. But in practice that is extremely difficult hence smaller councils to give non-execs more influence.

- There should be a return to committee structure. But once you have an executive the last thing they will do is give up power. They treat the rest of us as voting fodder.

- Disbanding of Executive/Scrutiny format with a return to a system wherein ALL members can bring their knowledge and talents to a meeting that will be making executive decisions.

- I would like to see the executive system disbanded so that the decision making process is devolved to all elected members

- Members not on the Executive need to be made more inclusive

- Move to more accountable, and democratic committee based systems, rather than Leader & Cabinet

- A more effective role for those who are not executive members

- Forget the Cabinet system and make all Councillors equal. Localism should be truly local with members working and taking decisions with Town and Parish Councils.

Anonymous survey responses, 2014

An agenda for re-connecting political leadership and local democracy

More than ten years on from the Local Government Act 2002, it is time to re-consider the impact of the modernisation agenda on local political leadership. Indeed, it is only too easy to draw up a pessimistic audit of the impact of the reforms. Frontline councillors believe that they are less able to influence policy agendas. Scrutiny committees are still not fully convincing as a means of holding cabinet members to account. Partnership working often remains 'outside' of the remit of many elected members. The effectiveness of neighbourhood working appears more and more contested. And finally, the modernisation agenda appears to have led to the development of two tribes within local government.

Arguably, such findings have to be understood in a much broader policy context. They cannot be divorced from moves towards the 'enabling authority' and the contracting out of service delivery, local government re-organisation and unitary authorities, devolved government and so on. Equally, the 2002 reforms may well have 'designed in' the falling influence of frontline or backbench councillors in return for the benefits of more effective decision-making and open lines of accountability. But, the lessons of this study suggest that it is now time to reclaim local democracy and consider a new agenda of institutional change that begins to reconnect all elected members with decision- making across the multiple arenas of local governance. Such reconnections with local political leadership may go part of the way towards enticing new people into standing as elected members and investing in the space of local government as a driver of change across communities. But, any collective dialogue in the future has to be grounded in a set of principles and an ethos of local government that advances local political leadership. In other words, it needs to move beyond narrow discussions of political structures and consider the purpose of local government. Here the Ensuring Council with its principles of political leadership offers one such path to trigger a renewed dialogue over the future of local government.

Endnotes

1 Accounts Commission (2014) An Overview of Local Government in Scotland 2014, prepared by Audit Scotland, Edinburgh: Audit Scotland, p.13.

2 Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions (DETR) (1998) Local Democracy and Community Leadership, London: DETR; DETR (1998) Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People, London: DETR; DETR (1999) Local Leadership: Local Choice, London: DETR; Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) (2001) Strong Local Leadership: Quality Public Services, London: DTLR; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (2004) The Future of Local Government: Developing a Ten Year Vision, London: ODPM; ODPM (2005) Vibrant Local Leadership, London: ODPM.

3 Ashworth, R., Entwistle, T. and Martin, S. (2003) The Future Role of Elected Members, Manchester: APSE.

4 Leach, S. and Copus, C. (2004) 'Scrutiny and the Political Party Group in UK Local Government: New Models of Behaviour', Public Administration, 82(2): 331-354.

5 The online survey was conducted during January and February 2014. The survey was sent to over 20,000 elected members' email addresses in the UK. The email lists were manually taken directly from local authority websites and as such deemed to be in the 'public domain'. The only exception to this policy was where individual authorities used web-based email responses to contact members rather than contacting members directly through their email address. Where local authorities had adopted this approach, its elected members were not contacted. In

addition, three websites were not functional and could not be navigated and these were omitted from the survey. In total, members in 410 local authorities out of a population of 431, not including the City of London and the Isles of Scilly, were contacted. Of the initial mailing 2483 emails 'bounced back' as a result of incorrect or no longer functioning email addresses, which resulted in a sample of 17,576. We received 2577 responses, a response rate of 14.5 per cent.

6 See Griggs, S., Norval, A.J. and Wagenaar, H. (2014) 'Introduction: Democracy, Conflict and Participation in Decentred Governance' in S. Griggs, S., Norval, A.J. and H. Wagenaar (Eds) Practices of Freedom. Decentred Governance, Conflict and Democratic Participation, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-37.

7 The relationship is identified through the use of a Pearson's correlation coefficient.

8 Statistical significance is obtained from an Independent-Samples T Test.

9 In the case of the Alliance, Green Party, DUP, Sinn Féin and UKIP, we have treated these claims with some caution because sample populations are arguably too small to draw any firm conclusions.

10 Executive members had the following political allegiance: Conservative, Green, Independent, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru, Scottish National Party, Sinn Féin, and Social Democrat and Labour Party.

11 Ashworth, R., Entwistle, T. and Martin, S. (2003) The Future Role of Elected Members, Manchester: APSE, p. 9.

12 Kettlewell, K. and Phillips, L. (2014) Census

of Local Authority Councillors 2013 (LGA Research Report), Slough: NFER.

13 We recognise here that our sample includes more non-executive than executive members.

14 Ashworth, R., Entwistle, T. and Martin, S. (2003) The Future Role of Elected Members, Manchester: APSE, p.16.

15 Statistical significance is obtained from an Independent-Samples T Test.

16 With the exception of two of the smaller groups represented.

17 APSE (2013) The Road to 2020: A Manifesto for the Ensuring Council, Manchester: APSE.

18 Rittel, H.J.W. and Webber, M.M. (1973) 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning', Policy Sciences, 4: 155-69.

19 Sweeting, D.W.J. and Copus, C. (2012) 'Whatever happened to local democracy?', Policy & Politics 40(1): 20-37.

20 Collinge, C., Gibney, J. and Maybe, C. (2011) 'Introduction' in C. Collinge, J. Gibney and C. Maybe (eds.) Leadership and Place, Abingdon: Routledge, pp.1-12.

21 Grint, K. and Holt, C. (2011) 'Leading Questions: If "Total Place", "Big Society", and local leadership are the answers, what are the questions?', Leadership 7(1): 85-98.

22 Sørensen, E. and Torfing, J. (2014) 'Assessing the Democratic Anchorage of Governance Networks' in S. Griggs, S., Norval, A.J. and H. Wagenaar (Eds) Practices of Freedom. Decentred Governance, Conflict and Democratic Participation, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 108-36.

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