

## **PRESS NOTICE**

**For release 28 November 2002**

### **How are the new constitutional and political management arrangements of local government working?**

**The results of a survey led by a team from Manchester University**

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**A team led by Prof Gerry Stoker, as part of a the five year 'Evaluating Local Governance' Project run by Manchester University, has produced the first major comprehensive assessment of the constitutional and political managements changes for English local government introduced by the 2000 Act. The research constitutes one of the first outputs of the newly established Institute for Political and Economic Governance (IPEG) at Manchester University**

Following a survey of all English local authorities in the Summer of 2002 into the implementation of new council constitutions and ethical frameworks, the ELG team have presented their findings to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in a report published 28 November. The survey reveals a snapshot of where councils stand at the very beginning of the process of change in constitutional, political management and standards arrangements. It provides a baseline against which future change can be mapped. All of our findings will need to be explored further in qualitative work in visits to local authorities.

The survey had a very good response rate of 74.5% and many thanks go to those who took the time and trouble to fill in and return the questionnaire. Over 82% of our respondents were from leader cabinet councils - reflecting the national picture - and some of our key findings relate to the workings of these new executives.

#### **For leader-cabinet councils the main findings were:**

- The average size of cabinets was 8.5 - near to top of the maximum permitted, the average age of leaders is 55 and the average age of cabinet members is 48.5.
- There has been concern that the new arrangements might lead to the marginalisation of women in executive positions. Our survey found that seventeen percent of leaders and 23% of cabinet members are women, which is close to the proportion of women councillors. This suggests that there has to date been no major shift in representation as a result of the 2000 Act.
- A key aim of the Act was to streamline decision making and cut the number of meetings. We found the average number of committees to be five reflecting a cut from an average of 10 in 1997. The frequency of executive meetings is quicker compared to committee meetings in 1997. We cannot draw firm conclusions about whether decision making has speeded up, as we cannot judge the flow through the executive and the extent of deliberation of each item. Qualitative work will need to contextualise these findings and look at the length of meetings, and at the extent of other informal meetings.
- Area committees are established in 50% of councils although they may have preceded the 2000 Act, these committees are more likely to have decision making powers in Conservative and Liberal Democrat authorities than in Labour controlled authorities.
- We asked who takes executive decisions which showed that over a third of councils reported that some decisions are taken by the leader alone. In one third of councils it was the leader that selected executive members and over half indicated it is the leader who chooses portfolios.

Taking these three indicators together we found that there were emerging differences in leadership styles in different authorities. In sixteen per cent of authorities the leader had all three freedoms – what we describe as a ‘concentrated’ form of leadership which in some ways is closer to the mayoral model. Moving down a continuum towards what we describe as a ‘de-concentrated’ form of leadership, in a quarter the leader had two of the three freedoms and in a third one freedom with just over a quarter reporting the leader had none of these freedoms. We found these differing leadership styles to be related to party with Conservative authorities most likely to give their leaders more formal power and Labour and Liberal Democrats much less likely to give leaders these formal powers.

#### **Findings for mayoral authorities:**

Findings for the Mayoral authorities operating at the time of our survey showed similar responses in terms of the age of leaders and cabinet members and proportion of women cabinet members, and the frequency of meetings.

#### **Findings for authorities operating alternative arrangements:**

Over two thirds of alternative arrangements authorities indicated they had undergone substantial change as a result of the Act and there is some indication from qualitative analysis of responses to the question of how they had changed to suggest that alternative authorities have also reduced the extent of committee style working and a small sub group appear to have sought to introduce executive style working.

#### **Findings on overview and scrutiny:**

We asked questions of all councils about the working of overview and scrutiny. The average number of scrutiny committees was 3.7 with an average number of members of 12.8. Two thirds are chaired by the majority party and nearly 40% reported pre-party meetings with another 9% indicated the use of party whips. Nearly a third of councils have a special officer unit indicating a high level of commitment to scrutiny and oversight. Some councils only provide support for meetings only. Most committees review service outcomes and some are involved in more innovative activities such as reviewing non-local authority providers.

#### **Findings on Standards:**

On standards of conduct 85% had adopted the model code. Half of the standards committees were chaired by independent members although the length of term of office given to independent members was only 2 years in 50% of cases.

#### **General Judgements of the Change Process**

We asked some questions about the change overall and implementation process. Respondents indicated that roughly a third of councils said they implemented very easily or easily, nearly two thirds reported implementation with some difficulty and only 5 councils reported great difficulty. These findings were related to the type of authority with unitaries reporting the greatest difficulty and alternative arrangement authorities reporting the least.

Respondents were asked for their views of the advantages and disadvantages of the changes and the open-ended responses were very clear. The main advantages were more efficient or quicker decision making mentioned by 111 authorities followed by more accountable and clearer decision making mentioned by 64 authorities and more focussed leadership by 41 authorities. Twenty five authorities indicated there were less or shorter meetings or few committees.

The main disadvantages were also clearly outlined. One hundred and nine authorities raised the issue of backbench disengagement and confusion over the scrutiny role was mentioned by 34 authorities. Nineteen authorities felt there had been no reduction in the number of meetings.

Finally only half the authorities had firm plans to review the new arrangements.

An executive summary and the full report are available at [www.elgnce.org.uk](http://www.elgnce.org.uk)

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## **NOTES TO THE EDITOR**

Evaluating Local Governance: New Constitutions and Ethics (ELG) is the name of a research project which is conducting a five year evaluation of the new council constitutions and ethical frameworks for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

The project involves a collaboration between the Department of Government, University of Manchester with Birkbeck College, Goldsmiths College and the SURF Centre at Salford University. The members of the research team are Professor Gerry Stoker and Dr Francesca Gains (University of Manchester), Professor Peter John (Birkbeck College), Professor Nirmala Rao (Goldsmiths College) and Professor Alan Harding (Salford University).

Further details about the project and current activities can be found on our website [www.elgnce.org.uk](http://www.elgnce.org.uk)

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