

The 21st Century Councillor

The challenge is now for Local government leadership and professional development, believes John Atkinson, of the Leadership Centre for Local Government...

In six months in 2009, we incurred a level of public debt equivalent to what took six years to grow in World War II. Those in senior public sector positions may never again work in a time of spending growth. Gordon Brown's 'golden rule' is forecast not to be achievable again until 2031. Not long ago, these statements were completely shocking; they've now become almost commonplace. Anyone working in the public sector is painfully aware that we face a dramatic change in the way public services are funded and delivered. These times call for a boldness of approach. They demand local innovation that can create better services for less.

The scale of the challenges will demand strong leadership at all levels across the public sector. Leaders will need to move beyond the boundaries of their designated authority and look to lead on behalf of their place. The 'Total Place' approach has been applying this across 13 pilot places in England. The pilots' report to the Communities and Local Government department and HM Treasury fed into Budget 2010, and includes commitments made by a range of Whitehall departments to help support and implement a wider implementation of Total Place principles. This included a promise to develop the current development offer to public sector leaders to better fit with a whole area approach to service delivery.

As the only democratically elected public bodies, councils are best placed to lead local services on behalf of their place. Local government has been at the forefront of developing partnership working skills in its leaders, but there is still much room for improvement nationally. To this end, Public Service Leadership is commissioning a leadership development programme for leaders across public services. The programme will address the challenges of working in partnership, across physical, organisational and at times psychological boundaries to deliver tangible changes in public services and make a real difference to the lives of local communities. It will build in part on the Leadership Centre's flagship Leeds Castle Leadership Programme for local government leaders and chief executives, which is about to enter its seventh cohort.

The unique challenge that defines local government is that it deals not just in managerial, but also political leadership. Local councillors and council leaders will be critical links with communities as public services adapt to meet the changing fiscal landscape. The Leadership



Centre is working with other members of the Local Government Association Group and Communities and Local Government to support member development and recruitment through the 'Be A Councillor' and '21st Century Councillor' programmes. We believe that a reinvigorated local democracy will play a key role in creating a more engaged and resilient society that can better withstand potential cuts in public services.

The future of local government and public services is subject to much debate, but we can be certain of one thing: the challenges we face are too big to overcome alone. We need to seek out multiple perspectives, talk to our partners and listen to our citizens. Together we can create shared aspirations for our communities and together we can bring them to life.



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